

of rich, labyrinthian syncretic history lived in scores of countries" (p 272). Homi Bhabha's insight, that colonialist and Orientalist discourse strategically places within itself its dominating as well as dominated subjects, is convincingly borne out by this study.⁶ It can only be hoped that future studies will be as successful in interrogating the similar limitations of other national cinemas closer to the global centre. In different ways, they may well turn out to be as clearly trammelled and riven with the unnecessary strain of policing narrow borders with peripheries as this one is.

Martin Stollery

Notes

1. Dossier: Amos Gitai, *Framework*, 29 (1985), pp 96-115.
2. This is explored in Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *The Cinema after Babel - Language, Difference, Power*, *Screen*, vol 26, nos 3-4 (May - August 1985), pp 35-58.
3. A broad survey of Zionist discourse concerning Sephardim is given in Ella Shohat, *Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of its Jewish Victims*, *Social Text*, 19-20 (Spring - Summer 1988), pp 1-38.
4. See, for example, Kobena Mercer, *Third Cinema at Edinburgh*, *Screen*, vol 27, no 6 (November - December 1986), pp 95-102; Richard Dyer, *White*, *Screen*, vol 29, no 4 (Autumn 1988) pp 44-64.
5. The implications of this for the wider question of political representation in the Middle East are profound. It helps to make clear that even those groupings

within Israel such as *Peace Now*, which are actively and courageously seeking dialogue with Palestinians, are, to adopt Homi Bhabha's terms, prepared to pursue negotiations between but not (yet?) around and within identities. See Bhabha, *The Commitment to Theory, New Formations*, no 5 (Summer 1988), pp 5-23.

6. Homi Bhabha, *The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse*, *Screen*, vol 24 no 6 (November - December 1983), pp 18-36.

REALISM AND TINSEL: CINEMA AND SOCIETY IN BRITAIN 1939-1948

Robert Murphy (Routledge, London and New York, 1989)

Given the upsurge of interest in British cinema in recent years it is clearly no longer appropriate to describe the British cinema, as Alan Lovell once did, as an *unknown* cinema. *Realism and Tinsel* by Robert Murphy provides, in this regard, a valuable survey of British filmmaking in the 1940s and is a welcome addition to the growing amount of work devoted to making the British cinema better known.

The book itself is loosely divided into two parts, the first dealing with the war period and the second with the period 1945-50 (the appearance of 1948 in the book's sub-title represents something of a mystery). Of the two, it is the first part which is the least satisfying. As Murphy acknowledges in his introduction, there are now a substantial

number of studies of the British cinema during the war and, while he succeeds in providing a serviceable enough overview of the period, he also fails to significantly add to or advance beyond this already existing material. It is with his discussion of the ensuing period, however, that the book really begins to come into its own. As Murphy points out, not only were there more films made during the period 1945-50 than there were during the war, but they are also, on the whole, much less well-known. He, therefore, sets about the task of exploring the types of film which this period of British cinema produced (loosely categorised as costume pictures, contemporary melodramas, gangster films, morbid thrillers and comedies) and offering what often amounts to the first serious discussion of many of the films concerned.

There is, of course, a polemical intention underpinning this strategy. The conception of British cinema in the forties as a *golden age*, Murphy argues, is premised upon a particular critical predilection for films which adopt a *realistic* approach to *authentically British* subject-matter. This, in turn, he contends, has led to a failure on the part of the critics to fully appreciate those British films of the 1945-50 period which do not meet these requirements. The book's title derives from a 1943 lecture given by Michael Balcon called "Realism or Tinsel?" (and not, as it is described in Murphy's book, "Realism and Tinsel") in which he explained his new-found commitment to a type of filmmaking which sought to combine the techniques of documentary (*realism*) with the conventions of the entertainment film (*tinsel*). Al-

though Murphy now regards those films (such as *The Foreman Went to France* and *San Demetrio London*) which Balcon identified as exemplifying this rapprochement as examples of the cinematic *realism* typically favoured by the critics, he, nonetheless, adopts Balcon's terminology in order to make the case for the importance of cinematic *tinsel*. His arguments, in this respect, draw upon and link to a more general trend in British film writing which has been concerned to query the pre-eminence of a realist aesthetic within British film criticism and to critically rehabilitate those films (such as the work of Powell and Pressburger and Hammer horror) which have characteristically defied the norms of social realism.

While this has proved an important and necessary corrective, it is no longer the subordinate strain of film criticism which it once was. Indeed, there has been an increasing tendency in some recent writing on the British cinema to simply invert the old critical orthodoxy and routinely disparage works of realism and almost automatically praise works of fantasy or stylistic excess. There is an element of this in Murphy's book which is often in danger of presenting films as in some way important on no grounds other than that they are *not* works of conventional social realism. What is, of course, necessary in addition is some kind of conceptual framework, or underlying critical perspective, in terms of which the significance of particular films could be assessed and the case for their qualities argued. It is this, however, which Murphy does not, on the whole, supply.

He writes, for example, that the Gainsborough melodramas seem to him "valuable

because they visceral, garish (p 56). This, tion, not a cri to be argued i boyance migh main lines of ate in this res tic openings a and stylisatio the ways in v may permit th of otherwise r Murphy does on Gainsbor dramas migh it remains an i a perspective fact, only a fe to revert to a fantasy as a realities whe films such as to Pimlico.

This lack perspective, or fra discussion of i most at ease of the film in minating, con industrial an with the film servations b guarded. He cally consists from contem tion of its ma istic remarks ver Fleet, f

because they represent a rich tradition of visceral, garish, flamboyant popular cinema" (p 56). This, however, is simply a description, not a critical defence. What still needs to be argued is why visceral and garish flamboyance might be regarded as valuable. Two main lines of argument might be appropriate in this respect: one to do with the artistic openings and possibilities which fantasy and stylisation create, the other to do with the ways in which these same conventions may permit the expression, in displaced terms, of otherwise repressed desires and anxieties. Murphy does, indeed, refer to feminist work on Gainsborough to indicate how the melodramas might be read in such a manner but it remains an isolated observation rather than a perspective informing the work overall. In fact, only a few pages later, Murphy is happy to revert to a *commonsense* notion of film fantasy as a temporary *escape* from social realities when making a quick reference to films such as **Another Shore** and **Passport to Pimlico**.

This lack of a clearly argued critical perspective, or framework, also characterises the discussion of individual films. Murphy seems most at ease when explaining the workings of the film industry or drawing, often illuminating, connections between films and their industrial and social context. When faced with the films themselves, however, his observations become more cautious and guarded. Hence, a discussion of a film typically consists of a plot summary, a few quotes from contemporary reviews, the identification of its main themes and some impressionistic remarks regarding technique. **The Silver Fleet**, for example, is described as

"competently directed" (p 20) while **Madonna of the Seven Moons** is apparently directed "unsurely"; it is, however, as "equally stylish visually" as **The Man in Grey** and **Fanny by Gaslight** (p 51). The problem is that with this apparent acceptance of a simplistic division between form and content (whereby a film's *themes* are seen as more or less successfully communicated according to directorial *technique*), Murphy is not only in danger of relapsing into precisely the type of film criticism his book is otherwise claiming to have superseded, but also of failing to do justice to the aesthetic and ideological complexities of the films which he is championing (and hence satisfactorily substantiate his thesis).

There are two aspects to this. In the first case, Murphy is, probably correctly, reluctant to make exaggerated claims for the artistic merit of some of the films which he is describing. By the same token, however, he is almost equally reluctant to make claims on behalf of films which might legitimately merit them. Thus while a film such as **Night and the City** is recommended for its "marvellously evocative impression of London at night" (p 164), its clearly superior level of achievement compared to other *spiv* films of the period is barely registered let alone accounted for. Moreover, despite the book's polemic, there is still a certain conservatism in the way in which judgements are arrived at and a timidity about recasting the terms in which films might be analysed and evaluated. Murphy argues, for example, that **No Orchids for Miss Blandish** is not "a film which stands up to detailed critical scrutiny" (p 188). What he means by this is that he

finds it "irritatingly shoddy". This may be so, but it does not follow that the film would not then reward further critical investigation, especially given its immense popularity, its peculiar hybridisation of British and American cinematic traditions and apparent provision of an outlet for attitudes and emotions normally suppressed in other British films.

Ultimately, I feel that Murphy would have been better served had he written rather more about rather fewer films. As it is, his book remains a valuable guide to British filmmaking in the 1940s which is to be recommended for its diligence in drawing our attention to often forgotten or unjustly neglected films. If it has not necessarily exhausted the field, it has, nonetheless, laid a solid foundation for future critical inquiry.

John Hill

Not many people will have seen his film in Europe and even time screenings at the Add to the structure of films which require distribution of film theatre chains and television. All these films speak will be different, these films are organised in a situation is established and oppositions gained unresolved. Except most of the Third World the west. But Aravind to many western eyes into passages of multianalytical, detective in the Third World audiences and projects Europe or North America.

It seems clear to pace from cinema. a way of viewing, perhaps Aravindan's have seen them will haunting images of tives can keep print

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Paulo Antonio Paranagua

EDITORS:

Claire Andrade-Watkins

Liz Kotz

Laura U. Marks

Alok Rai

Laleen Jayamanne

Stéphan Levine

Robert Cruz

Hamid Nacify

June I. Givanni

Martin Stollery

John Hill

Satti Khanna

EDITORS:

Robert Cruz,
Jim Pines

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EDITORIAL ADDRESS:**

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