

## **Revisiting *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956-63***

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### **Abstract**

This article looks back at the context in which *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956-63* was written, the issues it addressed and some of the influences on it. It then considers some of the criticisms it has received and assesses its contribution to the study of British cinema of this period.

It is somewhat unexpected that *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956-63* should now be regarded, at least in some quarters, as critical orthodoxy. It certainly wasn't at the time it was written and, even though it was well-received by some reviewers, it was also criticised by others. This was hardly surprising as the book was openly revisionist in character, challenging many of the existing perceptions of the films of this period as well as the dominant analytical prism through which they had been viewed. It did so by endeavouring to explicate the workings of a range of films from the period 1956-63 in terms of an analysis of not just the film themselves but the social and economic contexts in which they were produced. Since the book itself grew out of a specific cultural and intellectual context, it may therefore be appropriate to begin with an explanation of some of the factors that shaped it.

The book began life as a PhD in the 1970s when the academic study of British cinema was in a relatively embryonic stage and the choice of British film as a research topic was still unusual. When I began my research there were relatively few books on British cinema and only a handful that related directly to my topic (Manvell 1968; Durgnat 1970; Lovell and Hillier 1972; Walker 1974). Raymond Durgnat's *A Mirror for England* provided a particular spur given its wide-ranging, and often provocative, discussions of postwar British films. However, its conception of films as a 'mirror' of society was clearly problematic and many of the book's

accounts of individual films came across as idiosyncratic rather than fully convincing, or sufficiently grounded in either textual or contextual evidence. The aim of the research, therefore, was to explore the relationships between film texts and socio-cultural contexts in a more complex way than had previously been the case. In doing so, the research also sought to focus on the operations of the film industry as way of accounting for some of the pressures and constraints involved in film production and identifying how these had impacted upon the films that were made.<sup>1</sup> However, in doing so, the analysis also aimed to preserve the aesthetic specificity of the films themselves; the aesthetic features of the films, it was argued, were not reducible to, or fully explained by, social and industrial influences but maintained their own materiality and effectivity. In this respect, the project was influenced by broader materialist debates of the time within media and cultural studies concerned with the relationships between 'ideology' and 'economy'. As such, the analysis sought to steer a path between the 'determinism' associated with approaches indebted to political economy, on the one hand, and the 'autonomous' explication of meaning to be found in various forms of 'textualist' interpretation and deconstruction on the other (for an early discussion of this, see Hill 1979).

The research was also motivated by an interest in the politics of realism. My undergraduate dissertation had focused on Glasgow Unity Theatre and its efforts, during the Second World War and after, to build a specifically Scottish 'people's theatre' (Hill 1977 and 1982). The company's championing of new forms of realist drama anticipated some of the upheavals in English theatre in the mid-1950s and stimulated my interest in the modes of working-class realism associated with the 'new wave' in British cinema. At this point, I didn't have a clear 'thesis' regarding the significance of this movement and it was only after a sustained period of viewing that I began to think more systematically about the specific representations of the working class to be found in these films and how these were interlinked with representations of gender and sexuality (and, to a lesser extent, ethnicity) (Hill 1983).

These concerns were, in turn, influenced by the political currents associated with the period in which I began writing. Recently characterised by Michael Hardt as 'the subversive seventies', this was a period in UK history when industrial action not only achieved a certain crescendo but class politics increasingly co-existed with emergent forms of 'multiplicity in action' associated with the politics of gender, sexuality and race (Hardt: 5).

To this extent, it was the forms of 'visualisation' of class and gender relations in the realist films of the era that came to form the focus of the research and linked it to larger debates surrounding the conceptualisation and analysis of cinematic 'realism'. Film studies in this era had not only acquired a more politicised character in response to the social and cultural conflicts of the 1960s and 1970s but had also assumed a strongly theoretical character, particularly in the pages of the journal *Screen* (following in the footsteps of *Cahiers du Cinema*). A special issue of *Screen* on Brecht and cinema, which included an article on 'Realism and Cinema' by Colin MacCabe, proved particularly influential at the time (MacCabe 1974). The influence of the 'realism debate' was also evident in my own work, which was particularly drawn to questions of how far the conventions of realism, and their apparent dependence upon an epistemology of vision, regulated their capacity to render visible underlying social and economic 'realities' and social relations. At the same time, I was also critical of the relatively ahistorical and formalist accounts of realism that *Screen* theory had provided and sought to make the case for a historically-grounded understanding of specific forms of realist practice (such as the British 'new wave'). In this, I was also influenced by the work of Raymond Williams and his conceptualisation of realist movements - or 'breaks towards realism' - as 'revolts' against both prior aesthetic conventions and 'habitual' versions of 'dramatic reality' (Williams 1970: 497-8; see also Williams 1977).

There were two key aspects to this. First, it involved a recognition of the historical variability of realist practices and their relational character to pre-existing

conventions that had previously been regarded as 'realistic' by audiences and critics. In this respect, the argument laid stress on the intertextuality of realist forms and techniques rather than their relationship to a pre-existing external reality (however this might be understood). However, it also followed Williams in suggesting that significant moments of realist innovation were commonly underpinned by shifts in social vocabulary, or discursive regimes, that the films themselves could be seen to draw upon and 'work through' (rather than simply 'reflect'). It was in this sense that *Sex, Class and Realism* sought to address both the specific aesthetic workings of the films as well as their imbrication in more general socio-cultural shifts (and ideological conflicts).

In doing so, the book did not focus on the British 'new wave' per se but on what was referred to as a more general trend towards 'working-class realism'. The realist impulse extended beyond what became identified as the 'new wave' and *Sex, Class and Realism* considered a range of films that included comedies, crime films and melodramas. Many of these were gathered together under the umbrella term of the 'social problem film', which was itself conceived as a form of generic hybrid involving the mixing of social realism with elements drawn from popular genres (such as the crime film). Even the discussion of the films most closely identified with the 'new wave' – such as *Room at the Top* (1959), *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960), *A Taste of Honey* (1961), *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962), *A Kind of Loving* (1962) and *This Sporting Life* (1963) - was intermingled with references to other films less commonly discussed in this context, e.g. *Sons and Lovers* (1960), *The Kitchen* (1961), *Only Two Can Play* (1962), *The L-Shaped Room* (1962) and *The Leather Boys* (1963).

The title 'new wave' was, of course, a critical term applied *post hoc* to the films concerned and rarely employed by the filmmakers themselves. In this sense, the 'new wave' was a critical construct (influenced by the earlier identification - by journalists and critics - of a French 'nouvelle vague') rather than a specific movement

with a manifesto (as had been the case with the Free Cinema grouping that had preceded it). As such the book didn't belabour the definition of the 'new wave', or rigidly delimit its parameters, and this has, by and large, continued to constitute the strategy adopted by critics more generally. This is, however, a point worth noting given some of the complaints directed at *Sex, Class and Realism* subsequently that its analysis of the films did not sufficiently acknowledge the 'individuality' of - or 'variation' amongst - the films (Taylor 2006; Hutchings 2009). This is undoubtedly so but this would also be the case with any generic categorisation of films. Indeed, if the category of the 'new wave' is to possess any descriptive or explanatory power it must of necessity rest upon the identification of certain shared elements. As such, it was the explicit aim of the book to identify some of the aesthetic and representational features linking a range of realist films during this period. The virtue of this approach was that it was then able to bring out connections that often only became evident by virtue of looking at the films collectively rather than as individual films in isolation. However, this does not then mean that all the features of an individual film, and the uses to which they are put, will have been identified or that the meanings that they may be shown to generate have been exhausted.

To some extent, this resistance to the book's methodology relates to a broader objection to what is identified and the way in which its readings of the films rest upon an articulation of aesthetic and social meanings. At the time the research was undertaken, the orthodox view of the 'new wave' was that it represented a significant artistic and ideological break with traditional British cinema of the 1950s. There was nevertheless another dissenting view that this was not, in fact, the case. In an editorial on behalf of the board of *Movie*, the British film journal launched in 1962, V. F. Perkins castigated the films associated with the 'new wave', and the production company Woodfall in particular, for their lack of artistic intelligence and personality (Perkins 1972). In a similar vein, the film writer Peter Graham (1963) asked scornfully "Why are good British films so bad?" In both cases, British realist films were situated,

to their detriment, between the 'classical' aesthetics of Hollywood, on the one hand, and the modernist sensibility of contemporary European art cinema, on the other. In this regard, many of these films (especially those directed by Tony Richardson) were perceived to be employing an 'extraneous', and often modish, style that lacked the aesthetic integration, and authorial personality, characteristic of the *mise en scène* of classic Hollywood or the genuine innovation and personal expression identifiable in European art cinema. To some extent, *Sex, Class and Realism* picked up on some of the features identified in earlier critiques of this work but sought to re-think how such apparently obtrusive, or 'surplus', elements worked, both aesthetically and ideologically. It did so by locating these artistic devices in relation to recurring ideas about film 'poetry' and 'poetic realism' that stretched back to the documentary movement of the 1930s but which were particularly associated with the Free Cinema grouping of the 1950s. Such devices, it was suggested, could clearly be seen to perform a realist function, generating what Barthes (1978) refers to as 'the effect of the real' as well as a visual 'generalisation' of working-class experience. At the same time, this realistic 'surplus' could also be seen to mark the creative presence of the filmmaker by rendering visible the films' own artistry and pursuit of visual 'poetry'. More controversially, these techniques and devices were also seen to create an aestheticized distance between observer and observed that could be linked to a degree of class voyeurism (particularly with regard to the representation of working-class sexuality).<sup>2</sup>

This re-thinking of elements, previously regarded as a sign of artistic failure by the *Movie* critics, in terms of their socio-cultural meaning and ideological significance has, in turn, been queried by subsequent scholars. In doing so, however, they have, in large part, returned to the terms in which the films were previously understood albeit in order to arrive at different conclusions. Thus, in Taylor's (2006) work on the 'new wave', there is a conscious return to the *Movie* tradition of *mise-en-scène* analysis. On the basis of close readings of the inner workings of individual

films, he argues for a unity of style and meaning that *Movie* critics had previously proved incapable of finding. In Forrest's (2013) discussion, he also challenges earlier claims that the films' stylistic foregrounding was merely 'gimmicky' by locating the films more solidly within a European tradition of 'art cinema' and formal experiment. In both cases, there is a return to a primarily 'textualist' approach involving a desire to 'rescue' the films from socio-political readings related to historical context. However, while this focus on the aesthetic workings of individual films is welcome, and is able to draw attention to some neglected aspects of the films, both authors appear – somewhat unproductively - to set aesthetic and socio-political readings in opposition to each other rather than attempt to demonstrate how they interlink or to re-calibrate the relationship between the two.

This may also be linked to issues of evaluation. Although *Sex, Class and Realism* brought a new seriousness and level of attention to British realist cinema of the late 1950s and early 1960s, it has also been suggested that it has added to the devaluation of the films initiated by *Movie* and other early critics. In seeking to understand the aesthetic workings of the films within their socio-economic context of production, the primary objective had been to concentrate on analysis and explanation rather than evaluation. However, in bringing out aspects of the films' representations of class, gender and sexuality, there was inevitably a knock-on effect for how the films might then be judged. Given the influence of *Screen*, and its theoretical approach to narrative and realism, it has been suggested by some writers, such as Hutchings (2009), that some of its core arguments rest upon a disdain for commercial cinema and an implicit preference for what has subsequently been referred to as 'political modernism' (Rodowick 1994). However, given the historical focus of *Sex, Class and Realism*, this isn't a position to be found there. Indeed, one of the least-noticed parts of the book is the relative sympathy with which it addresses some of the most 'commercial' films to be discussed. The tensions at work in the 'exploitation film' are compared favourably with some of the more serious-minded

examples of the 'social problem film'. The emphasis upon the collectivity in the early *Carry On* films is contrasted with the individualising narrative logic of many of the 'new wave' films. The representation of gender in popular comedies such as *She Didn't Say No!* (1958) and *Petticoat Pirates* (1961) are also revealed to display qualities that differentiate them from the 'masculinism' embedded in a number of the British 'new wave' films of the same period.

To this extent, the book's critique of certain forms of realist filmmaking may be linked to an approach to popular American and British cinema that is attentive not just to their aesthetic features but also their ideological tensions (which may themselves become manifest in aesthetic terms). Prior to embarking upon my research, I attended the groundbreaking BFI summer school of 1975 on film noir. This, and the ensuing book collection, *Women in Film Noir* (Kaplan 1978), directly informed my initial attempts to explicate the sexual politics underpinning the 'new wave' (Hill 1983). So, while *Sex, Class and Realism* is sometimes criticised for replicating an orthodox version of British film history that privileges the realist tradition, the excavation of the films' 'masculinism' (and attention to films sitting outside this tradition) would seem to be more properly understood as a complement, rather than an alternative, to a feminist-informed recovery and re-reading of popular forms (as in the case of the attention given to Gainsborough melodramas in the early 1980s). Thus, in comparing the 'new wave' films to other films of the time, there was an attempt to demonstrate how alternative ways of representing class and gender could be found in the same historical period (rather than simply judging films by an external yardstick). However, while *Sex, Class and Realism* rests primarily on analysis, its emphasis upon gender might also be said, like studies of the Gainsborough films or film noir, to involve a certain shifting of the ground in relation to what was considered most valuable to examine and assess. In his account of what 'matters' in film studies, Richard Dyer (1998) distinguishes the 'formal-aesthetic' and the 'social-ideological' value of film and film study. However,



while there has been a desire on the part of some writers to set these in opposition, Dyer also indicates how the 'aesthetic dimension' of a film is never 'free of historical and cultural particularity' and that the aesthetic and the cultural must be understood together (1998: 9). This is substantially the argument of *Sex, Class and Realism*. Although it is not primarily concerned with evaluation, it does, complicate traditional conceptions of artistic 'merit' (or 'failure') by indicating how both aesthetic and ideological factors are involved in the arrival at critical judgements.

Although many of the arguments of *Sex, Class and Realism* may be seen to have been relatively iconoclastic at the time they were made, this has become less the case. Indeed, revisionist analysis of the same period along comparable lines, particularly in relation to the theatre, is now to be found in a range of works (e.g. Wandor 1987; Lacey 1995; Rebellato 1999). However, a number of specific ideas and arguments have become subject to particular scrutiny and refinement. One of the questions posed for my original analysis of predominantly male-centred narratives concerned the significance of those films – such as *A Taste of Honey*, *The L-Shaped Room* and *This is My Street* (1963) - in which women characters occupy a more narratively central position. My discussion devoted specifically to this issue is relatively short and, in retrospect, there was probably an over-eagerness to demonstrate that these did not significantly depart, in ideological character, from the other films under discussion. However, as subsequent writers have argued, *A Taste of Honey*, in particular, the only film of the group to be adapted from a play by a working-class woman writer, may also be seen to complicate the various arguments about the 'new wave's representation of gender, its mode of address and the relationship of women characters to the occupation of public space (Lovell 1990; Williams 2023). Similarly, I'd be inclined to tease out more fully the complexities of the 'unorthodox' households to be found in both *A Taste of Honey* and *The L-Shaped Room*. Although the book devotes relatively lengthy discussions to the negotiation of homosexuality and race in the case of the 'social problem' film, the consideration of

black and gay characters is relatively cursory in the case of these two films and would undoubtedly have benefited from a fuller analysis. This in turn might also have been accompanied by a greater emphasis on the significance of acting, star image and performance than the book provided (see, for example, Geraghty 1995).

This kind of revision and re-thinking is, of course, to be expected. At the time the research was begun not all the films of the period were able to be viewed and the majority had to be watched at the British Film Institute on film.<sup>3</sup> It was only at the end of a lengthy writing-up period that some of the films became available to see on video (or record off-air), since when the capacity to view and re-view films of this period has grown exponentially. In the same way, new forms of historical material (such as private papers, diaries, censorship reports and business documents) have also become much more accessible, providing both new sources of information and enabling new kinds of insight. In this way, the increased awareness of the prominence of gay and bisexual directors – Lindsay Anderson, John Schlesinger and Tony Richardson – in the making of ‘new wave’ films has also opened up the possibility of generating new forms of ‘queer readings’ in relation to both the style and content of the relevant films. The history of the ‘new wave’, the subsequent circulation of the films and relationship to later forms of popular culture has also opened up questions of how the films have been recalled and invested with new meanings at different socio-cultural junctures.

Adding to our stock of knowledge and generating new ways of thinking about these films is therefore important and necessary. But there is something to be said in favour of the old as well. One of the underlying purposes of *Sex, Class and Realism* was not just to excavate and assess the practices and meanings of the ‘new wave’ but to do so in a way that connected the study of British cinema to the larger theoretical and critical debates of the time. At the time the initial research began, it was not only the case that the critical stock of British cinema was relatively low but

that analysis of it did not appear to be informed by, or feed into, the broader flow of ideas circulating within film studies in the way that work on, say, Hollywood and French cinema commonly did. Due to its interest in more general arguments about the understanding of cultural works in relation to their social and industrial contexts, the politics of realism and film form, the interrogation of representations of class, gender and ethnicity and the methodological underpinnings of reading film texts, the book succeeded in acquiring a readership that extended beyond film studies (even if some within film studies felt it to be insufficiently 'purist'). Clearly, many of the key questions and issues governing film and cultural studies have changed considerably since the 1970s and 1980s. However, in the wake of the financial crisis of 2009, and the emergence of films responding to its social and economic consequences, there has also been a return to many of the issues animating the book's genesis: the economic underpinnings of cultural production, the politics of form, the representation of inequality and capitalist social relations and the depiction of social class and economic 'precarity' (see, for example, Toscano and Kinkle 2014; Austin and Koutsourakis 2022; Cuter, Kirsten and Prenzel 2022). If so, it is to be hoped that whatever value *Sex, Class and Realism* possesses all these years later does not rest solely on what it has to say (or fails to say) about working-class realism and the 'new wave', but also upon the approach that it adopted and the type of questions it posed and sought to answer.

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<sup>1</sup> Although works such as Spraos (1962) and Kelly (1966) provided information on the British film industry during the relevant period, their analysis remained purely economic and did not attempt to extend their arguments to the characteristics of the films themselves.

<sup>2</sup> Elements of this argument may also be found in an influential article by Andrew Higson (1984). However, although the two works are often run together, this argument forms only a relatively small part of *Sex, Class and Realism* and is situated within a more historical and 'sociological' framework than Higson's more theoretically-driven account of space and place. It is also of note that Stuart Laing's (1986) excellent overview of representations of working-class life (1957-64) appeared in the same year as *Sex, Class and Realism*, possibly indicating a more general impulse to re-think the period of the 'new wave' at this juncture.

<sup>3</sup> Although, at the time, the National Film Archive held virtually all the films traditionally associated with the 'new wave', it did not possess, or hold viewing copies, of many other films of the same period such as *Serious Charge* (1959), *Passport to Shame* (1959) and *The Mark* (1961). This differential access to films did, of course, have consequences for the understanding of British cinema more generally.