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‘Swinging Realism’ : The Strange Case of *To Sir, With Love* and *Up the Junction*.

The phrase ‘gritty realism’ was one that found both common and academic currency through the work of the ‘Angry Young Men’ and associated New Wave British cinema in the postwar period. It was intended to convey a narrative commitment to voices and images made ‘realistic’ by an apparent reaction against the overt propaganda of the war effort, the cosiness of the Ealing Studios and the bourgeois images on the London Stage. Today, the terms tend to conflate—the ‘grittiness’ of a new television drama, Ken Loach film or Irvine Welsh novel carries an unspoken assertion of Realism. But are these terms really interchangeable? Setting aside for the moment the continuing debates over the genre characteristics of the latter term, the connotations of the former can be equally complex. Gritty here implies that reality (or at least its narrative representation) has to be at once painful and persistent, like the effects of a grinding wheel: yet also petty and annoying, like sand in the eye or gravel in one’s shoe. It also implies a stoicism, as one ‘grits one's teeth and gets on with it’ in a manner which combines

both endurance and determination with resignation and fatalism. The two senses together seem to consign the working classes (typically the subject of such narratives) to a mentality that can be explained through Althusser's notion of interpellation. One is simultaneously proud of one's ability to defy and survive the inequalities of life, yet also aware of a profound inability to alter them. It is part of a collective reconciliation with one's lot, and this is why the notion of grittiness is more appropriately applied to the neo-realism of the postwar Angry Young Men, than to the social realists of the previous century. Whilst the literature of the late 1950s sustained the traditional concerns of urban deprivation and squalor, it did not have the bourgeois reforming tendencies of its literary predecessors. Rather, it is noted more for accuracy than ideology: this was the work of the newly empowered post-Education Act working class writers reporting experience, rather than exhorting forbearance. All of which seems puzzling in the context of a period popularly associated with affluence.

affluence...[a]cademics such as Daniel Bell proclaimed 'the end of ideology', while politicians ... like Richard Crossman spoke of the dawn of a 'post-capitalist' society".[3] Whatever our ability retrospectively to identify impending recession and retrenchment in economic and social policy, this should not detract from the recognition of the combined impact of the material benefits of affluence and the rhetoric of a classless future upon the popular consciousness. The paradox re-emerges here of a series of literary and cinematic texts that chronicled, and in many cases emphasised, issues of class division, social entrapment and working-class deprivation. In essence there is a paradox between the Macmillan Age as one of great promise and its dominant cultural form as one of bleak disillusion; if you like, a contrast between economic affluence and literary true grit.

Standing in apparent contrast to this is the late 1960s, beginning with the election of Harold Wilson in 1964. This 'decade', in its popular conception, was neither gritty nor real—accuracy gave way to experiment in cultural and social life in a way that eschewed notions of endurance and stoicism: why 'look back in anger' when you can 'turn on, tune in and drop out'? There were now a number of alternative lifestyles (apparently) available that seemed to encourage a sense of liberation from a heritage of economic entrapment and prescriptive class and gender identities. In legislative terms, the late 1960s saw the enactment of a series of liberal reforms indicative of changes in popular attitudes towards sexuality and the family, some of which had been proposed by Wolfenden ten years earlier. In 1967, for instance, the Sexual Offences Act legalised homosexual practices between consenting adults in private. In the same year, the Abortion Act became law as did the National Health Service (Family Planning Act). The Theatres Act of 1968 ended censorship of the stage in London and in 1969 the law on divorce was also modernised.[4] In economic terms, too, personal wealth for the overall population continued to improve. Home ownership amongst householders rose to 50% by 1970 and there were similar increases in car ownership and the sale of domestic durables normally associated with the Macmillan age.[5]

These important factors aside, the notion of a contrast between the two periods is neatly summed up by Sked and Cook's formulation of the 1960s as "a decade of disillusion in a second age of affluence".[6] For these writers, the 1960s disillusionment—arguably leading to Wilson's defeat in 1970—was due to defeated expectations, rather than any widespread material deprivation. Thus the power of discourse reasserts itself. Macmillan's optimistic

'never had it so good' speech has its most meaningful analogue in this period in Wilson's more desperate 'pound in your pocket' speech after the 1967 Devaluation. For Sked and Cook, Wilson had discursively contributed to his own downfall with a particularly effective campaign on the Conservatives' mishandling of the country's finances during the 1964 election. While this safeguarded him from real electoral backlash in the opening years of his parliament (people continued to blame the Conservatives), it did create insecurity not only amongst global financiers but also amongst the electorate. Assertions of 'change for the good', classlessness or post-capitalism from the late 1950s must have seemed like empty promises in the spectacular economic freefall of Wilson's administration. A series of mishandled budgets—three in the first year of office alone—leading to devaluation in his second term of office, in conjunction with increasingly strained relationships with the unions constituted a very public loss of confidence in the future which had been a hallmark of the late 1950s.

In other areas relating to a cognitive map of Britain, violent division seemed predominant. Patrick Gordon-Walker's successive defeats at Smethwick in the 1964 election and again at the Leyton by-election in 1965 at the hands of racist campaigning, were clear precursors to Enoch Powell's infamous intervention into the Kenyan Asian 'Crisis' of 1967

To Sir, With Love stands in both periods. It was published as a novel in 1959 as part of the literature which had emerged from the Caribbean dealing with the experience of emigration to the metropolis including George Lamming's *The Emigrants* (1954), Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) and Andrew Salkey's *Escape to an Autumn Pavement* (1960). Such writing is not usually regarded as the work of the Angry Young Men, but in its register, setting and content should be regarded as conforming and contributing to the neo-realism which is typical of the period. For most critics, however, *To Sir, With Love* is not accepted as typical of the genre. Kenneth Ramchand states, "Not only is *To Sir, With Love* not a work of fiction. It differs startlingly in temper from those fictional works with which it has been indiscriminately associated".[7] Where the other texts dealt with issues of an emergent West Indian identity, this text is regarded as avoiding the need for a reappraisal of the self and emerges instead as "a sordid demonstration of the author's vanity".[8] Arguably, whilst occupying the same social and economic terrain of the neo-realists, it already exhibited the characteristics of social naivety which will be associated later in this discussion with the 1960s cinema adaptation. In this respect one might say that it was before its time. Its production as a film in 1967, however, contains sufficient modifications to dramatically alter even the rather pallid politics of the written text.

Up the Junction, by contrast wa

include a foregrounded music track—Lulu and the Mindbenders in the former and Manfred Mann in the latter. The use of popular music was also a characteristic of the New Wave cinema of the 1950's, but—apart from the foregrounding of Jimmy Porter's taste for jazz in *Look Back in Anger* (1958) as an assertion of social rebellion—it remained largely as part of the backdrop to the action. Here the music, both in terms of its lyric content and its performance, forms a substantial part of the narrative in a period when the role of music—and popular culture in general—was being used to both challenge and interrogate the indices of class structure. Before dealing with these texts in more detail, however, a brief consideration of some of the dominant aspects of 1950s realism is necessary.

John Osborne's drama, *Look Back in Anger* (1956) is the paradigmatic text which, for John Russell Taylor, "started everything off".[10] In terms of its stage setting, subject matter and tone, it marked a breakthrough for the genre and provided a timely challenge to a largely stagnant British theatre. Significantly, its initial, rather moderate success at the Royal Court Theatre was boosted by the performance on television of one act from the play, and it thus entered a wider cultural and public domain in which it took on a metonymic force with which other writers, taken to be antithetical to the discourse of affluence, could be associated. It was also the first of the texts to be adapted to the cinema in 1958 by Tony Richardson and Woodfall films. Richardson, together with Karel Reisz and Lindsay Anderson had formed the 'Free Cinema' documentary movement in the mid-fifties. Their subsequent 'new wave' films produced by independent companies such as Bryanston and the Allied Filmmakers Group—of which Woodfall was the foremost—are absolutely crucial to the popularisation of gritty realism which is central to this discussion.

Richardson's *Look Back in Anger* in some ways also 'started everything off'. As the film goes beyond the bedsit stage setting of the original play, additional scenes at the jazz club, market place, cinema and elsewhere are written into the screenplay. These are images of the working classes at work and at play in ways that will find correspondence in later films such as *Room at the Top* (1959), *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) and *This Sporting Life* (1961). What is significant about the market scene is the inclusion of the Asian trader Johnny Kapoor. As the genre of neo-realism progresses in this period, so arguably does a sort of one-upmanship in terms of the images and events which signify grittiness. Abortion or failed pregnancy is established here as an essential part of the genre; the arrival of an immigrant

underclass is also introduced as a further genre characteristic. One can certainly argue that Kapoor's inclusion has a real narrative function—the additional scenes and dialogue were written by Osborne probably to provide Jimmy with his own 'good, brave cause' and identify him with another disinherited figure in the British social landscape with appropriate reference to a continuity of social oppression. But it is the precedent that is important. Jimmy's stage persona of alienation is supplemented in the film by a visual signifier for disinheritance—the immigrant figure—and by the jazz music scenes which similarly suggest a sense of individualism in the improvised and potentially anarchic form of the music.

At the other end of the genre—chronologically—is Stan Barstow's *A Kind of Loving*, published in 1960 and filmed in 1962 by John Schlesinger. The screen success of that year, however was the first Bond movie, *Dr No*, signalling, arguably, the transition from popular realism to popular escapism in the period. Where *Look Back in Anger* adds material to the original script, Schlesinger's adaptation operates through exclusion. In Barstow's novel, Vic Brown's increasing disdain for popular culture—as it is exemplified by commercial television—is accompanied by his growing taste for classical music, as he leaves his job as a draughtsman to work in Van Huyten's music shop. Part of his rite of passage in the novel is to progress from a set of class bound horizons to a recognition of a set of ideologically imposed boundaries which include the central issues of sexuality and the family. The film adaptation removes this aspect of the narrative, and concentrates instead on a rather more conventional storyline of unwanted pregnancy, forced marriage and Thora Hird's mother-in-law character.

In the intervening period between *Look Back in Anger* and *A Kind of Loving*, the genre

1960s self-consciously engaged with the social issues of their time. The issue of 'race' had become a "new source of open social conflict" in Britain since 1958, and its continued significance to working class life would reasonably ensure its inclusion in narratives which typically dealt with this aspect of British life.[11] Similarly, the social position of women in regards to emqR -812 SŽd /Gn

meant to be rampant, neo-realism was trading in images that gestured backwards in a fetishised and voyeuristic manner to a static society still characterised by deprivation and depravity amongst the working classes. 'Looking back' remains the key term. If Jimmy Porter was angry because nothing had changed and Arthur Seaton had only the weekly cycles of Sunday mornings, or the annual cycles of Goose Fair, Christmas and National Service to look forward to, it is because change does not really exist in these texts. Just as Joe Lampton's character in *Room at the Top* operates from the narrative viewpoint of a ten-year-old retrospective, so all of these texts, and particularly the films, seem to describe a way of life that was in the past. Arguably, they found popular success precisely because they were not reflecting life as it is, but *how it was*. Just as Richard Hoggart could look back nostalgically to the working class virtues of the pre-war years in *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), so audiences could voyeuristically look back at images that the rhetoric of affluence had assured them were never to return.[14]

to these encounters, and to Braithwaite's characterisation of Ricky, is the romance between Ricky and Gillian Blanchard—a fellow teacher at the school distinguished by her wealthy parents and flat in Chelsea.

The textual marriage between Ricky and Gillian is a rather asexual union based upon a shared appreciation of high culture and the mutual priggishness of outraged and outspoken respectability. In effect, it is a union based around class signifiers. Ricky has already identified himself in the opening scenes with a 'superior woman' who refuses to sit next to him on the bus. While the other working class occupants despise her for her prejudice, Ricky finds his own initial anger "surprisingly tinctured by a certain admiration for her fearless, superior attitude": she was, he thinks, "more than a match for the people around her".[15] Gillian is similarly aloof as Ricky shares her confidence in "the assurance of her own poise and breeding to keep her inviolate".[16]

The intention here is not to play down the aspect of race in this novel, but rather to show how Braithwaite used the British class structure and its indicators as a means of responding to racist mythologies which associated the black population with drugs, prostitutes and squalid housing. Just as Ricky displays all the virtues of the privileged classes—the colonial classes—so the Eastenders are, as he mentally notes, "thick armed and bovine with gaudy headscarves and solid legs and large feet which seemed rooted in the earth. They were of the city, but they dressed like peasants, looked like peasants and they talked like peasants".[17] It is from this class economy that the narrative operates. The working-class location and population of the school provides the generic material for economic deprivation and moral depravity essential to the realism of the time, with racism as a central theme. The difficulty most critics have with the text in this regard is with the solutions that it seems to offer. Racism is apparently not acceptable where the victim displays such self-evidently superior qualities, and class barriers are given similar treatment as Ricky quickly gives up on the task of educating his pupils towards school qualifications, and concentrates instead upon issues of deportment, social behaviour and personal morality. The promise of the Macmillan age in this regard seems to relate less to economic activity and more to the dissemination of bourgeois sensibilities in a manner that smacks suspiciously of Matthew Arnold's nineteenth century educationalism.

Thus, the text achieves closure not through a change in the material circumstances of

the various characters, but through a tentative change in their attitude. The proposed marriage between Ricky and Gillian remains threatened by and subject to widespread racism beyond the environs of the school. This is ameliorated, however, by the arrival of the children at the Seales' home (a dual heritage household) which suggests the development of a new society that was the classless, integrated dream of the period.

One can hypothesise about the film which might have been made of this script by the British Free Cinema movement. Gillian would almost certainly have become pregnant in a mirror of the Seales' household, or one of the school children would have conceived with Ricky and lynch mobs would have roamed the streets, or laid siege to the school. The film adaptation was not made, however, until 1967 under the auspices of James Clavell (screen-writer, producer and director) and distributed by an American film studio, Columbia. While these factors may account for some of the narrative changes which emerge from the process of adaptation, they do not detract from the effect of the cinematic script—or from the box office appeal which the makers clearly thought was there in a society eight years beyond the original script.

Most strikingly, the central character becomes Mark Thackery—played by Sidney Poitier, and as a result Americanised. Thus, the early exchange with another teacher at the school, Grace Dale-Evans, which establishes his wartime service with the RAF in the novel, is used instead to emphasise his Americanness. In the novel, Ricky uses the term 'appointment' rather than 'job', which Dale-Evans takes to be "too highbrow" for the context of the school.[18] It is, however, a term which Ricky notes Gillian uses in the next scene, thus providing an early indicator for their compatibility. The same scene in the film emphasises Ricky's Americanisation. The debate over appropriate discourse now revolves around the use of the term 'majoring' in a subject—a term which (then at least) signified an American education, while Ricky's protracted job search prior to the teaching post is now less significant than his having come from 'spending some time in California'. And the exchange is between Thackeray and the now more common Grace Evans.

This absence of class signifiers continues throughout the film. The superior woman disappears from the bus, and the romance between Ricky and Gillian is removed altogether. What is established by these changes is that Mark cannot be easily identified within British class structures. As an Americanised character, he takes on an almost classless quality which

is enhanced by the fact that he has no British counterpart in the film. In removing this story line, and the external encounters with racism in the restaurant and with Gillian's parents, the film reduces the scope of the narrative almost entirely to the classroom, and thus the narrative becomes one of the opposition between authority and revolt.

To enhance this further, as well as limiting the focus of the film to the classroom, the classroom itself is reduced to two representative figures, Denham and Pamela Dare. Dare is the "hottest number in the class", and Denham is visually upgraded with his leather jacket, black T-shirt and jeans recalling Brando's Wild One.[19] In subduing these two figures, Mark effectively subdues the entire class. The narrative order of the novel is changed in the screenplay to accentuate this.

Denham becomes the significant figure in this. There are two crucial encounters in the

Two characters are thus radically altered in the film text, which in the novel provide a sense of location within society for the main character. Gillian is removed to absent the class distinctions: Seales is effectively sidelined to remove the Black British aspect. In fact, the only scene which is added to the film has Seales crying his hatred for his black father for marrying a white woman, and his continued misery with the death of the mother defines him as the unhappy product of a misconceived union. These two absences are drawn together in the closure of the film text. Where the appearance of the children at the Seales' home for the funeral in the novel is a strong image of hope for the future—racial integration being achieved by the younger generation—this romance is tempered by Ricky's subsequent meeting with Gillian's parents and their concerns over exactly the kind of situation that Seales has emphasised in the film. It is not an entirely unproblematised ending, and it does anticipate the sequels in Braithwaite's writing. In the film, by contrast, the appearance is followed simply by the school dance—a vehicle for Lulu and the Mindbenders—and the only real significance of these scenes is the appearance of two younger pupils whose behaviour suggests that the next academic year will be the same for Mark.

The effect of the absence of both class and race as themes in the film is to reduce Mark's role to one of his struggle for control over his pupils. By subordinating these themes to those of authority and rebellion, Mark is posited as outsider and in detaching him from any textual counterpart, Mark is offered as an individual unencumbered by traditional class associations. In this respect he provides—despite the continued moral and social convictions of the character—a sense of a rejuvenated social order. Thus, when Pamela Dare claims in the film, "We are the first generation to be free, to be really free", she is claiming a freedom from the past, a freedom to sport in a new social age. An old symbol of authority would not be appropriate to lead the class into the new meritocracy. Notably added to Mark's Americanisation is the idea that he has achieved his position of authority from a similar background of poverty—as one pupil puts it "You're like us, but you're not like us, if you see what I mean".

To summarise, then, in a period of heightened awareness of social conflict—for example the Race Relations Act was legislated in 1968 (itself a date, as noted above, redolent with public resistance and demonstration)—a narrative which initially tried to work through issues of racial prejudice through reference to British class identities, emerges as a swinging

She wants to be free to be honest rather than conform to apparently outdated identities and looks forward to a class merger which Booker describes as an encounter between the "crumbling of an old order and the rising new - each fascinated by the powerful image of the other: the insecure lower or less 'established' group longing for the style and 'stability' of culture and breeding; the insecure upper group mesmerised by the life and vitality of the arriviste".[23] By comparison, Peter wants only to change himself in order to progress within existing class positions. He lusts after the same fast car, large property and 'Grade One girl' that Joe Lampton aspires to in *Room at the Top*. Appearance becomes important in this regard. Where Lampton buys brogues and a silk dressing gown, Peter is a Mod. Michael Brake notes in *Comparative Youth Culture* that Mods attempted to "abstract themselves from their ascribed class location with a neat, hip image ... they emulate(d) the middle classes".[24]

There can be little other reason for importing a Mod into a narrative heavily dominated by Norton and Triumphs and bikers. Bearing in mind that the film was made during the heyday of seaside violence between Mods and Rockers, it seems odd that Peter is able to go to a bikers' party with a clearly apparent look of contempt and distaste in his face, with no actual fights ensuing. The film does not shrink from violence in other scenes, and as the opportunity was not taken to exploit that social situation, we must look elsewhere for the significance of his appearance.

Polly also changes her appearance in the film. Her flat and new boyfriend are accompanied by a hairstyle and wardrobe which allow her to pass into the local Battersea community and, by extension, into a national youth culture and period of fashion and styles

This last is perhaps the most telling aspect of the film. *Up the Junction* as a cinematic document does uphold most of the conventions of the postwar realist genre. There is a painfully detailed and protracted illegal abortion. There are also scenes of street markets, demolished houses and the blue-collar work place. These images, however, are dominated by an overall sense of a growing and vibrant culture that will ultimately overcome the class bound residue of the past. Like the film of *To Sir, With Love*, this narrative looks forward to a promising future in a manner which seems at odds with the enduring power structures that Peter's incarceration suggests. Together they contribute to an expression of swinging liberation and optimism which seems, in retrospect, in contrast to the political and economic reality of the day in much the same manner as the late 1950s insistence on realism contrasted with the age of affluence.

What conclusions can be drawn from this discussion? There can be little debate that, in

voyeuristic appeal is a main motor function of the genre development outlined above, the audience figures were too high to explain the popular success of these films in this manner. Rather they should be understood in terms of the popular structures of feeling—the discourse of affluence and change in this period—which suggests the difference Hill alludes to would *also* be experienced by the working-classes: for them, it would be the difference of 'then and now' rather than 'us and them'.

By extension, while the demise of gritty realism as the dominant cultural expression by the end of the 1960s can be explained through notions of genre fatigue, this tends to sever such narrative representations from the inverted paradox of affluence and disillusion identified by

[13] Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 184-5.

[14] Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957).

[15] Edward Ricardo Braithwaite, *To Sir, With Love* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1971), 8.

[16] Braithwaite, 87.

[17] Braithwaite, 5.

[18] Braithwaite, 16.

[19] Ramchand, "The Myth", 18.

[20] Braithwaite, 82.

[21] Braithwaite, 154-58.

[22] Braithwaite, 74.

[23] Christopher Booker, *The Neophiliacs* (London: Collins, 1969), 95.

[24] Michael Brake, *Comparative Youth Culture* (London: Routledge, 1985), 74.

[25] Terry Lovell "Landscapes and stories in 1960s British realism," *Screen*, 31.4, Winter 1990, 368. See also Andrew Higson, ed, *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema* (London: Cassell, 1996), and John Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism* (London: BFI, 1986).

[26] Hill, 136.

[27] Ibid.