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Negotiating National Identity in 1930s and 1940s British Cinema

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Introduction

The growing popularity of British films made prior to and during the Second World War is well reflected in both the academic attention this era has received and the ever-increasing number of DVD-releases of classical cinema. The fascination film/cultural historians and contemporary audiences show towards these motion pictures has elevated them to a cult status. However, 'cult film/cinema' is a low-specificity umbrella term, thus its application requires careful consideration. Cult films – as we understand them today – rely heavily on self-reflexive uniqueness, unusual visual or acting styles, oddball topics, eccentric narrative techniques or anything that breaks with mainstream conventions. These are not the features of mainstream productions but are constitutive of the peripheral cinematic output. Eric Schaeffer in his book on the origins of exploitation film, for example, shows how early censorship of topics related to sexual hygiene created a cult cinema that departed from Hollywood standards and norms.[1] This process of detachment from the mainstream may be a motor behind the birth of new genres and/or the refinement of generic representation, still the cult following of certain types of films does not necessarily overturn the mainstream logic of cinematic production and consumption.

Cult in the original sense of the world refers to ritual behaviour and a set of practices of worship, and as such, it has rich religious connotations. Manifesting itself in rituals, ceremonies and liturgy, cult conserves and rigidifies a certain frame of mind, manners, values and morality. It is this capacity to mummify which Friedrich Nietzsche criticised (most notably) in the *Twilight of Idols*, denouncing the cult of authority as the sign of decadence in culture. A similar reading of cult is offered by Harry Allan Potamkin, who in the early 1930's studied and denounced the cult status of melodrama, a genre in which "it is the treatment and not the material that counts" (28). He writes: "[t]his attitude must be fought as a form of intellectual selling out. The movie is more than a 'passing amusement'. And deceptive platitudes limiting it to the snobbery or laziness of

[1] See Eric Schaeffer, *Bold! Daring! Schocking! True: A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

the cultist must be exploded" (28).[2] Simply put, Potamkin stresses the overt anti-intellectualism and escapism of melodrama, something comparable to blind idolisation: "cults are never self-critical, they are never objective. So that when they do turn on the idol of their creation, it is not a progressive act, but an act of treachery" (28). What Potamkin describes as cinematic cults are those stylistic, narrative and content-based mummies, clichés which seem timeless and authoritative: a (passively) received, oversimplifying and escapist formula.

Either understood as a divergence from or a convergence with the mainstream, cults and specifically cinema as a cult is closely connected with the cultural forces it connects with. In this paper I will analyse the state of the British film industry from this double perspective and discuss (1) how it both rejected and accepted the cult of Hollywood, (2) how it became a mirror of social change and national unity, and last but not least (3) how it came to articulate a symbolic image of Britishness, an image that has been a point of reference ever since and is responsible for the enduring popularity of films from this period.

I.

Potamkin described cinematic cultism as a modern worship that goes far beyond the single genre of the melodrama. As a cultural commodity of overwhelming magnitude on both side of the Atlantic, the moving image had unprecedented influence on public opinion both as a vehicle of ideological populism and as a means of disseminating normative and uniform lifestyles and standardised social values. The Hollywood studios could not have managed to strengthen their positions in Europe had they not employed models of identification that were appealing to audiences of different nationalities. The unique position their films enjoyed in the period is definitely linked to the powerful visions these movies offered of the American past and present, identity and national character. The emergence of the western and gangster genre was instrumental in strengthening the consensual understanding of what values, beliefs and ethical principles America as a culturally diverse community should foster. In order to understand the full impact of Hollywood on Europe, one has to consider the nationalist discourse wrapped up in high production values and glamour. What arrived from the new world were not just endless reels of celluloid dreams but uncompromisingly monumental testimonies of the unbound American spirit, glorious accounts of national dignity which unquestionably spellbound audiences. Moreover, opposed to this sense of optimism, most of the countries involved in the Great War still carried deep wound and traumas and saw a threat in overt nationalism.

[2] Harry Allan Potamkin, "Film Cults," *The Cult Film Reader*, eds. Mathijs, Ernest and Xavier Mendik (Open University Press: Berkshire, 2007).

The popularity of American films was overwhelming in Britain, as suggested by the figures Robert Murphy gives: “[b]y 1926 thirty-seven British films competed with over five hundred American imports” (47). European companies with their less efficient or non-existent vertical system of production, distribution and screening had a major handicap. Although the Cinematograph Films Act of 1927 resulted in an increase in the number of British films made up until the end of the thirties, the annual audiences of just under one billion[3] ensured comfortable American market dominance. To counterbalance this supremacy, UK production companies sought to satisfy domestic audiences by putting on screen real British topics. Parallel with legislature and the industry, the critical establishment also lashed out against Hollywood and the complex nature of its influence on British life – be that linguistic, manners-related and cultural. Yet it was the conservative MPs, public administrators and local authorities who condemned American films most vehemently. The incident Jeffrey Richards recalls[4], when officials reproached cinemas for playing an active role in the Americanisation of the English language, is only the tip of the iceberg. Lawrence Napper’s summary illuminates the situation in a concise manner: “[c]inema became the symbolic focus, both economically and culturally, of fears of the American threat to Britain’s national life and her international status” (38). The cult of Hollywood among cinemagoers might have been threatening in the eyes of cultural politics, yet the power of film to strengthen national cohesion was something of an asset Britain could use.

Whereas the fears of cultural and economic hegemony were definite, Hollywood’s image of America was enlightening to most European countries feeling the pressing need to capture their national symbols and moments of national unity on screen. This need urged filmmakers to set out on a mission – as Napper writes – “to represent an *indigenous* and *unchanging* version of British National Identity” (38, emphasis added). The key-words – indigenous and unchanging – call for a cinematic memory fostering the untimely national heritage, a patriotic imagery that guides the audience towards positive identification with British values and way of life. What Hollywood taught to the rest of the world is that such an image is never self-evident but needs to be constructed through meticulous labour with cinema taking the lion’s share of the job.[5] It did not take long for policymakers and public administrators to realise,

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[3] The box-office figures of the analysed period which never fell below 900 million show the importance of cinema as a cult, and the sheer impact films had on cultural discourses. In comparison the 1980’s saw admissions drop to 50-100 million, that is by more than 90 percent. See British Film Institute, http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/facts/fact1.html.

[4] Jeffrey Richards, “The Cinema and Cinema-going in Birmingham in the 1930’s,” in James Walton and John K Walin (eds.) *Leisure in Britain 1780-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), 46

[5] American cinema of the 1910’s and Soviet cinema of the 1920’ are traditionally described along a set of antagonisms. If they have anything in common, it is the social role to actively produce a memory on which the unity of the group relies. The epic representation of the birth of American

that, as long as the consumption of images continues on such a massive scale, cinema will become a useful vehicle of controlling and disseminating attitudes, values, beliefs and cultural identities.

II.

With the emergence of mass culture, the scope of negotiating and representing national character has been broadened and deepened. The link between the strong regulatory function of cultural institutions and the different forms of control over cinema has also increased resulting from the insight that more institutional control over cinema ensures less ambiguous films. Any government, social group or ideological community aiming to impose their will and power over people will know that control over the institutions of politics and law is less effective than capturing the popular imagination and unconscious desires of the masses. The totalitarian regimes of the 20th century successfully managed to undermine one with the other, and used – amongst others – the promise of a higher race and the communist revolution to sweep politics and law aside. Cinema in The Soviet Union and Nazi Germany was "nationalised", whereas political art and cultural memory received a distressingly uniform shape. To a much lesser degree both of these came about in Britain, but not before the late thirties and the outbreak of the war.

Prior to WWII and especially in the first half of the interwar years, the situation was very different. The undefined guidelines of institutionalising various, often fundamentally discordant vehicles of cultural identification made it ever more difficult for cinema to come up with a positive image of Britishness. The fact that cultural consumption was class based made the situation of filmmakers ever more challenging. Emphasising the social struggle behind the British history of cinema, S.P. MacKenzie argues that in the interwar period "representatives of the elite society tended to view the mass culture of the lower orders with a mixture of incomprehension and disdain, despite – or because of – the evident growth in the power of those orders" (2). The section of the landed gentry and aristocracy who pursued military careers were especially hostile. Their contempt for cinema was not based on deep aesthetic considerations but part of their general repulsion for the working classes. They could easily dismiss cinema for the silly and sentimental treatment of life's problems (as seen in melodrama) or the irresponsible view of the different branches of the armed forces (in war drama), yet their real enemy were not cultural clichés, but the social class that cherished them.

This air of hostility was to change as the international political situation turned hopeless and the establishment of national unity gradually became the

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nationalism (D.W. Griffith) and the awakening and rise to power of the proletariat (S. Eizenstein, V. Pudovkin) signal the rise of political cinema with a strong ideological mission to repossess the past and substantiate the present in terms of images.

key to survival.[6] Much needed was a cinema that would refine and redefine the stereotypical views classes held of each other and establish a new perspective of everyday life that was neither marred by escapist dreaming nor by conservative fantasies of eminence. Why could cinema be successful in carving out a cultural middle ground and determining those values and ideals which all classes shared? Well, because it transcended traditional class conflicts and heavily relied on the socio-cultural middle ground, the middle-class which by this time had successfully managed to assimilate parts of the high and the lower classes. In the longer run it was this intermediary space of negotiation that helped to tune down the explicit nationalism of the pompous and ultra-conservative aristocracy and awaken the spirit of patriotism in the otherwise politically inactive and ideologically neutral working class. Before identifying and analysing how this "third", intermediary space came to shape the war years, I would like to discuss the components essential to its emergence.

III.

Film production in 1930s Britain was dominated by the so-called "quota quickies", low-cost films of the second-feature class, the largest proportion of which were comedies. These films often featured the star singers of music hall and variety shows and meanwhile "spoke to working-class audiences of community, solidarity and longing" (Street 46). The other relevant genre was the crime picture (the so-called whodunit) and its popularity peaked among lower middle-class audiences. These two dominant genres of the quota quickies – despite their rather modest stylistic innovations and emphasis on voyeurism, exhibitionism and cheap attractions – were desperately different from American products. As Andrew Higson states in *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain*, the films identified as quota quickies of working-class interest had a strong consciousness for local cultural identity and maintained a strong sense of regionalism. The research of Jeffrey Richards and John Sedgewick affirms this view and also points out that star cults in working-class neighbourhoods differed significantly from middle-class preferences. Whereas Gracie Fields and George Formby served as working-class role models of honesty, decency and hard work and, consequently, could be admired and

[6] MacKenzie gives a detailed analysis of how the value of cinema changed in the eyes of the military elite. According to the author, the ice seemed to have first cracked in 1915, when the Admirality was persuaded about the benefits of cinematic propaganda (4-5). After the war the public demand for stories with patriotic sentiments disappeared but on the eve of the Second World War the armed forces began to recognise once again the benefits of the favourable image cinema was capable of creating for them. As MacKenzie observes "all three services…had in the course of the 1930's learned the value for recruiting and general publicity purposes of cooperating with the commercial film industry in the making of feature films" (25).

identified with[7], middle-class audiences preferred Continental and Hollywood actors, stars of costume melodramas. In both cases star personalities provided an invaluable service to the Establishment by making people (almost unconsciously) aware of the accepted and socially beneficial modes of behaviour. Napper's research into whodunits reveals a strong element of resistance to the American influence. He concludes that "in their thematic concerns 'quota quickies' dramatise the fears of a threat to indigenous British cultural values. This 'threat' is characterised as being to do with the modernity, classlessness and instability implied by the impetus towards social mobility" (43).

A key player of the British film industry – London Films Productions – reacted to the American influence in a way that strongly shaped the future of cinema in the country. None of the histories of British cinema miss to point out that Alexander Korda's *The Private Life of Henry VIII* from 1933 single-handedly conquered the American and international markets. Its key to success was the adaptation of high production values partly underlying Hollywood's success. Korda had a keen eye for the narrative, generic and scenic models a film has to follow in order to reach international cult status. The films Korda would later produce (and in a few cases direct) in the upcoming years – including *The Rise of Catherine the Great*, *The Private Life of Don Juan*, *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, *I, Claudius* – follow in the footsteps of *Henry VIII*; they are all historical biopics or costume melodramas. Like most historical adventure films these generically uniform products appealed to the middle-classes. Their strengths lay in their deep understanding of quality entertainment and slapstick-free humour which was combined with seriousness and prudence regarding the treatment of national themes.

IV.

Is it at all relevant to ask to what extent the above mentioned Korda-films follow Hollywood-formulas. They clearly did as far as production values are concerned, nevertheless, the situation is more complex as the following quote suggests:

> I might put it epigrammatically and say I believe that international films are what good directors make… But perhaps the phrase 'international film' is a little ambiguous. I do not mean that a film must try to suit the psychology and manners of every country in which it is going to be shown. On the contrary, to be really international a film must first of all be truly and intensely national. It must be true to the

[7] Discussed in detail by Jeffrey Richards in *Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain 1930-39,* 155-156.

> matter in it…In my case, if I may say so, it is because *The Private Life of Henry VIII* is English to the backbone I feel it. [8]

Besides spectacle and a straightforward (but never naive) dramaturgical structure the Kordaesque international film was universal in appeal but national in spirit. In marketing terms Korda offered authentically British topics to foreign markets. However, this also meant that his films – and *Henry VIII* is essential in this regard – transcended class-awareness exactly by offering an image of the nation as a happy family, the members of which express their love for their country in distinct but sincere ways. I should add that although this image was apolitical and idealised, it did offer (in a very consciously constructed manner) identification with national stereotypes regardless of class and rank.

After the success of *Henry VIII*, Alexander Korda's London Film Productions came up with a series of films that deal with historical figures. It was not until *This England* (1941) and later *That Hamilton Woman* (1941) that the nation's past was openly compared to its present, that the narratives came to fully embrace a parabolic mode of address. Never has 'the family of Britain' looked more dignified than in the films of this period, never has cinema been a more sincere mirror of national unity than in 1941. Yet, in a sense, 40s cinema began during the mid 30s. For this wartime unity to emerge, major transformations needed to take place, a key element of which involved the alteration of the group's self image, an image no longer drawn up within the framework of reference to the global Empire but in terms of the insular nation. Films directed by Zoltán Korda (known as the Empire-films) are especially important in this regard.

The first of the cycle, *Sanders of the River* (1935), starred Leslie Banks in a story of an officer of the empire who maintains order and peace in the dark corners of Nigeria. Being a film that mirrored both the political conservatism characteristic of Kipling's prose and the colonial ideology with its racist vocabulary, it served as a model-narrative for later films addressing the struggle between reason and savagery. In *The Elephant Boy* (1937), *The Drum* (1938) and *The Four Feathers*[9] (1939) it is within the framework of colonial policies that the upper and lower classes came to form a special alliance. They can do so,

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[8] Quoted in James Chapman, *Past and Present. National Identity and the British Historical Film*, 19.

[9] *The Four Feathers*, adapted from A. E. W. Mason's novel of the same title is counted as one of the more classic adaptations. Altogether six versions of the story exist three of which was made between 1915 and 1929. Mason was also responsible for writing *The Drum* and *Fire over England* (1937), the latter title being one of the first historical biopics to be read as a parable, a story openly drawing comparison between the conflict of Elizabeth I and King Philip II of Spain and the Spanish Civil War, a conflict of republicans (supported by many Brits) and the nationalists (supported by the Axis powers, most notably Nazi Germany). Lines from the film, like "Spain is the prison of freedom. Spain is horror…" or "Spain is the land of ghosts" clearly carry this double meaning.

since the stories are set in the care-free decades the Empire enjoyed during the Victorian era. The evidently nostalgic tone of these films called for positive identification with Victorian values natural to those members of the Establishment who actively participated in sustaining the system of colonialism (either in military or administrative ranks). Interestingly enough this included both the middle-class (which in the second half of the 19th century saw increased possibilities either in the professional fields or the administrative branch) and the working-class (many members of which enjoyed upward social mobility by joining the army).

Emphasising its nostalgia and glorious rhetoric, Marcia Landy compares the generic model of the Empire-films to the Hollywood western film and its reconstruction of the ideologically biased frontier experience. In classical westerns the conquering of the land involves the taming or defeating of natives, a motif also present in the films of Zoltán Korda (especially in *The Elephant Boy*). The 'western message' offers reassurance and implies that rebellions are useless, that control will be regained and colonial rule strengthened. In the late thirties such reassurance was vital, after all, the visible disruption of the international balance of power and the impotence of European governments to stop German expansion worried many. Bearing this in mind, it is by no means surprising that the retrieval of order and the defeat of untrustworthy natives and constantly plotting aggressors is a recurring motif in these films. Contemporary audiences must have had no difficulty in understanding (even if unconsciously) that despite the geographical and temporal dislocation, these stories were parables emphasising the familiarity between the evil shiftiness of subaltern groups and the moral corruptness of Nazism.[10] Yet, the caution and indirectness of the parabolic address also suggests that a large proportion of people still felt uncomfortable to openly embrace the idea of war. The bitter moment of disillusionment for pacifists would soon arrive but so would a renewed sense of patriotism. This time, however, the new national consensus relied more than ever on middle-class values.

[10] Korda's *The Thief of Bagdad* (1940) makes similar use of parabolic mode of address, as it portrays Bagdad captured by fear of the evil Jaffar (a character impersonated by the German emigrant Conrad Veidt). Given the historical context, Bagdad is used as synonym of Berlin or any German-occupied city. The political parable applies to almost every aspects of the film. The main characters and their mentalities call into play a rich network of associations and symbolic identifications. Along this line of argumentation one may discover in the character of the power-thirsty Jaffar (the eliminator of the Sultan) Hitler who overthrows the politically modest era of Hindenburg. In similar fashion Prince Ahmad may stand for post-Chamberlain England, Abu for the British colonies and the Princess (the character who makes Ahmad see again the moment she is enslaved by Jaffar) may symbolise Poland in the German occupation of which put an end to the blind policy of appeasement. The most enigmatic element of this parabolic narrative universe is the Old King, who gives Abu the weapons to defeat Jaffar. His quite passive, yet decisive role may be likened to that of the US, following the policy of non-involvement in the war, yet assisting the British war effort with shipments of weapons and other economic aid.

V.

The Empire-cycle specific to London Films Production Company saw the strengthening of the epic cinema of attractions and a rather conservative topic treatment. Spectacular visual effects, but a surprisingly fresh socialist-pacifist vision unfolds in London Films' big budget adaptation of H.G. Wells' *Things to Come* (dir. William Cameron Menzies, 1936). The film looked into the future with the challenges of the contemporary situation in mind, proving once again the merits of the parabolic address. Apart from its reliance on parabolic narration, *Things to Come* seriously deviated from the tone set down by other films, especially in its queries about the state of international politics. It predicted the eruption of a worldwide conflict and sought to find out which political ideology can best represent the future of 'the social animal'. The answer proposed by Menzies and Wells is unambiguous: they pled for a more effective collaboration between nations while rejecting the idea of the nation state. In *Things to Come*, the safeguarding of international peace is embodied by the world-government called "Wings over the World", a technocratic and efficient organisation which deals with tyrants in a more successful manner than its real-life equivalent, The League of Nations. For Wells and Menzies, the war is the natural outcome of nationalist policies. The local warlord of Everytown, called "The Boss", exemplifies how xenophobia – a common feature of both nationalism and nativism – leads a community into the dark pool of moral decay, militarism, aggression and finally back to the stone-age.[11] The film arrives at the concept of the collectivist idea through its commitment to pacifism and the disavowal of social/racial discrimination and pro-war sentiments.

At this point two questions arise. The first explores whether the denial of nationalism and the nation state means the rejection of the nation as a framework of identity. The second asks if the pursuit of the collectivist ideals mean abandoning traditions, national character and cultural memory. Wells and Menzies give a negative answer to both of these questions. The future society of *Things to Come* is made up of a collective of people unified by a common ancestry, language, institutions and mentality, furthermore, they share a belief in progress (both technical and social). To find an answer to the second question we have to consider one of the most disturbing recognitions of *Things to Come*. The film envisions a war generation that has forgotten why the war had erupted in the first place and why people fight. Consequently, it suggests that collective memory is the only weapon to overcome collective amnesia and ensure that a group proceeds towards a future without committing past mistakes. British cinema throughout the Second World War will do just that; filmmakers will go

[11] In this regard the film could not have been released at a better moment, at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, where thousand of ordinary Brits fought in the international brigades with well-known socialists (including George Orwell) supporting the Republican's cause, while the British government and the policy of appeasement practiced by prime minister Neville Chamberlain indirectly assisted the nationalist faction.

to great length to have people remember what they are fighting against and what they are fighting for. It is the popular-populist political cinema with a strong historical awareness that I will analyse in the next paragraph.

VI.

By the eve of WWII cinema had strengthened its position both as a form of art and mass entertainment, although the films took little interest in either pure aesthetic enjoyment or straightforward entertainment. This period saw the rise of political filmmaking. Or was it the rise of propaganda cinema? The scope of this essay does not allow me to analyse the complex set of relations between political art, political marketing, political propaganda and ideological indoctrination. Historically, mass society, mass media and propaganda emerged simultaneously and constituted an effective framework of producing and disseminating specific contents with the aim to serve and engage large numbers of people. It must be added that the term propaganda has a rather pejorative meaning in English, and is invariable used to refer to the selective and impartial presentation of facts, to emotional manipulation, conditioning of behaviour, even brainwashing. All these may be true for propaganda but not apply to British wartime cinema. The films I have seen never intended to make people believe things against their better judgement, never imposed a limit on individual freedom or altered the distinction between fiction and fact in a way as to consciously victimise certain individuals and groups. On the contrary, they respected the basic human rights of free speech, opinion and belief.

At the same time, it is also evident that British propaganda did fulfil its fundamental function of propagating certain values, patterns of behaviour and social practices. In order to address the new challenges posed by the war, propaganda aimed to mobilise the masses and guide them towards the sphere of public service. Propagandists have long realised that the effectiveness of action does not depend on the degree of individuality it is triggered by. Nevertheless, it is a dangerous wisdom, since it can be easily abused, as it happened in Nazi Germany, where self-sacrifice was glorified so openly and uncritically that it became a virtue. Self-sacrifice may have been recognised in the Third Reich as the most useful of action, it never came anywhere close to this in Britain. Why? Well, because the total subjugation of individuality to the sphere of communal interest (as a form of dehumanisation) would have undermined the greatest asset of British culture: the common sense of people, their instinctual rejection of power-worship and their likewise instinctual affirmation of law.[12] In a sense we

[12] George Orwell's essay entitled "England, Your England" catalogues the characteristic features of British civilisation and emphasises how power-worship never touched the ordinary people: "The goose-step, for instance, is one of the most horrible sights in the world, far more terrifying than a dive-bomber. It is simply an affirmation of naked power; contained in it, quite consciously and intentionally, is the vision of a boot crashing down on a face… Why is the goose-step not used in England? … It is not used because the people in the street would laugh. Beyond a certain

could say that propaganda is culture-dependent, it is a machinery of readjusting and supervising people how to adapt to new situations, yet its effectiveness is in positive correspondence with the respect it pays for national characteristics. In short: propaganda cannot radically alter what people believe in and what they detest. At the same time, values and beliefs often lie beneath the ground in an unconscious and raw state, the excavation and fine tuning of which required the kind of sensibility and commitment (the parabolic narratives of 1930s) cinema has already proved to possess.

A key issue at the outset of the war was to change the public perceptions and sentiments about the necessity of military conflict. Films relevant in this regard employed identical strategies; they viewed history, its major figures and their achievements to convince people about the self-destructive effects of the policy of appeasement. Not surprisingly all the major features during this period rejected pacifist sentiments. Korda's *That Hamilton Woman*, Thorold Dickinson's *The Prime Minister* (1941) and Carol Reed's *The Young Mr Pitt* (1942) are all biopics that deal with passionate political visions and government policies at the time of past international conflicts. Korda's and Reed's films take the viewer back to the time of Napoleonic wars and neither fail to point out that signing a self-deceptive peace treatise with Bonaparte was a historical blunder Britain cannot afford to repeat. *The Prime Minister* follows through the political career of Benjamin Disraeli, a strong devotee of the empire and a close ally of Queen Victoria. Nevertheless, what makes Disraeli a model statesman is neither his official colonial policies nor the royal support he receives, but his personal determination and uncompromising will at the Berlin Conference. All three of these films use historical parables to convince people that only fighting till final victory will result in lasting peace. In a sense the militant tone of these films reflected the precise principles Churchill's coalition government followed.

David Lean's *This Happy Breed* (1944, based on Noël Coward's 1939 play by the same title), while looking back at the line of events that lead to the war, reaches a similar conclusion. The following dialogue between Frank Gibbons, a full-hearted patriot and Aunt Sylvia, portrayed as a hysteric and aggressive spinster takes place in the late 1930s:

> *Frank Gibbons*: We shall never have to find ourselves in a position when we have to appease anybody.
> *Aunt Sylvia*: […] I am a woman, I don't care how much we appease as long as we don't have war. War is wicked and evil and vile. Them that

point, military display is only possible in countries where the common people dare not laugh at the army … Here one comes upon an all-important English trait: the respect for constitutionalism and legality, the belief in 'the law' as something above the State and above the individual, something which is cruel and stupid, of course, but at any rate *incorruptible*…Everyone believes in his heart that the law can be, ought to be, and, on the whole, will be impartially administered. The totalitarian idea that there is no such thing as law, there is only power, has never taken root."

> live by the sword shall die by the sword. It is more blessed to give than to receive.
> *Frank*: I don't think it is more blessed to give than receiving a nice kick in the pants for doing it.
> *Sylvia*. You are a warmonger. That's what you are: a warmonger.

Frank is not simply the mouthpiece of the general wartime sentiment about the misdirected policies of the previous decade, but a voice of reason. What he calls a "nice kick in the pants" is none other than The Blitz, a moment in British history when popular resistance was a matter of life and death. No member of the audience would have forgotten this at the time of the film's release in 1943. In this sense Sylvia's stubbornness is depicted as a kind of blindness and pacifism as an ideology out of touch with reality. *This Happy Breed* takes sides with Frank, the "warmonger", not because there is anything joyful in violence and militarism but because wars are not won by negotiations and diplomacy but on the battle fields and on the home front. Although the story ends on the eve of the war, we can be sure that Frank, the elderly veteran, will not take part actively in the Blitz, yet as a member of the home front his spirit and vigour is an essential part of final victory. The characters in the film are all individualised and have strong personalities, still, the main protagonist of the story is the Gibbons family, a representative middle-class household and more importantly an allegory of the British nation. What forges the Gibbons into a family, something more than a group of people having the same name, is the profound recognition, that, despite their various, sometimes conflicting worldview, they can trust and rely on each. In the eyes of Coward and Lean, what applies to the family postcard is also valid for the big picture: Britain is forged into a nation, a "happy breed" by shared responsibility and not a uniform way of thinking.

VII.

The aforementioned films offer invaluable assistance in the field of mobilisation. In fact the necessity to offer one's service comes through as a central motif in cinematic propaganda. Clearly distinguished from servilism or servitude, the concept of service originated from neither an interior compulsion nor an exterior constraint. First and foremost it expressed the active will of the individual and the group to overcome inertia and act responsibly. It may be very much the case, that the only enemy in war is the passivity and numbness of people, the kind of disillusionment characterising Aunt Sylvia in *This Happy Breed*. The old spinster was clearly not the only person to awake to the horrors of war and want no part in it.

We see a similar confusion in the case of Clive Briggs, the character of the deserter in Anatole Litvak's *This Above All* (1942). Clive is a kind of modern everyman; his dismay over meaningless destruction puts him off from the line of duty and forces him to escape from responsibility of any sort. It is not that he

doubts the legitimacy of service, the origin of his paralysis is psychological. Briggs regains to the power to act after saving a child trapped in a house during the Blitz but only after he has regained self-control and learnt the importance of self-respect. *This Above All* articulates an insight shared by numerous other films, an insight which could be summarised in the following terms: there is no mental security without self-direction, self-respect and self-control and there is likewise no action without the peace of mind. This is the lesson Basil Deadren's *The Halfway House* (1944) teaches us, a film that depicts how a group of people from different classes escape to a country inn from the horrors of war. Acting as individuals rather than a community, the first half of the film portrays the disintegration of the Family. This pessimistic tone disappears altogether in the second half, as the two hosts – allegorising national unity – help the 'deserters' return home and regain the sphere of action. They achieve this by urging them to undertake self-examination. "What am I to do?" – asks the spiv with the faulty conscience at the end of the film. The answer, as the main moral of the film, is as follows: "You are the only one to answer that, look into your own heart".

Looking into one's heart is not always the easiest thing to do during wartime, in the general state of insecurity. The shared experience of anxiety however forges people into this new Family exemplified by such films of the social cross-section like *In Which We Serve* (Noël Coward and David Lean, 1942) and *Millions Like Us* (Sidney Gilliat and Frank Launder, 1943). Not a single character in these films loses his/her individuality despite the fact that the traditional contours of social identities have become blurred. This blurring is depicted most beautifully in the final scene of *Millions Like Us* when women of different social ranks sing together in the canteen. The community singing as a symbol of the newly forged Family and the recently found common ground of the rich and the poor also appears in the short films of Humphrey Jennings (most notably in *Spare Time* and *Listen to Britain*). Jennings embraced this newly founded Family of the British with an almost religious enthusiasm. As Charles Drazin argues: "the religious feeling, I think, stems from *not* knowing them as individuals. Unconcerned with the separate personalities, Jennings was able to focus on the humanity common to them all" (153). It is not that individuality did not count for Jennings; just the opposite. His camera was able to reveal the universality underlying individuality, the qualities of faith and courage, as in his short documentary *Family Portrait* (1950). Jennings understands individuality and community as terms inclusive to one another, in that they illuminate rather than undermine each other, a point also stressed by Aldgate and Richards: "[t]he family above all other images epitomises the ideal of diversity within unity" (228).

Neither of the abovementioned films questions the positive correlation between individual service and the national interest.[13] The strengthening of

[13] The minor character of Clive Seymour in *Fanny by Gaslight* (Anthony Asquish, 1944) is no exception. Although the sentence "I am a public servant not a private individual" suggests the

community consciousness left uncontested the belief in individuality, yet made it evident to the "individual that he is *not* altogether an individual" ("The English Revolution"), led to the reinforcement of public morale but also led to a specific socio-political doctrine taking root in Britain, namely middle-class socialism. "The war and revolution are inseparable" – wrote Orwell in his essay "The English Revolution", a claim he believed was underpinned by the fact that the "war turned Socialism from a textbook word into a realizable policy". At this point we must mention the role of the middle-class which is historically most closely linked to progress and social transformation. The middle-class, with its strong moral sense and economic independence, has always propagated the importance of family, education and public service. The Gibbons family in *This Happy Breed* is the closest wartime cinema comes to articulate the archetypal middle-class identity. They possess all the previously mentioned qualities and manage to successfully balance between the ideological extremities represented, on the one hand, by Reg Gibbons, who in his youth flirted with hard-line socialist ideals, and, on the other hand, Queenie, who is enchanted by elitist and aristocratic snobbery. Opposing both radicalism and bourgeoisie high-handedness, the Gibbons find the middle-road and start sharing values associated with ordinariness, tradition and respectability:

> *Queenie*: Seems to me all the spirit has gone out of him [Sam], he is just like everybody else now, just respectable.
> *Freddie*: What's the matter with that? […] We are as we are and that's how we are going to stay and if you don't like it well you can lump it. But one of these days when you know a bit more you'll find out that there are worst things than being just *ordinary* and *respectable* and living the way you've been brought up to live.

Decency, honesty and respectability are values of positive identification, they are attributes of middle-class identity worth embracing. They form the backbone of the slow-paced, yet unstoppable revolution associated with modern British history. The mistrust of the British towards explosive transformations does not mean that there are no moments when change is perceived inevitable. The Second World War was such a moment, a moment of revolutionary spirit that was heralded by the middle-class, which unlike the working-class and the upper class had real potential and affinity to propagate the egalitarian idea. The aristocracy lost its grip over society during the industrial revolution and has never been able to recover it. Thus its members clinged to outdated traditions and political power not out of sheer hypocrisy and vanity but because of the insecurity as to what their new role would be after the inevitable social

opposite, the narrative context resolves this contradiction. He uses the words to decline his social status for gaining undeserving advantages, thus relying on his good conscience instead of his class privileges.

transformation and modernisation occurred. At the same time the majority of the working-class had no positive self-image or class-memory and lacked any involvement and historical experience in reform. Only the middle class had both the accumulated knowledge and tools to function as social levellers, that is, to offer personal qualities, cultural mentalities, lifestyles, and patterns of behaviour as models to follow. Also, their attitude to create calculable political, economic and legal environments, their inclination to revise values with sufficient regularity and the readiness to integrate foreign influences (elements of other identity systems), made the middle-class the chief advocator and the catalyst of social reform. The combination of these factors paved a way for middle-class identity being transformed national identity.

The representation of women in wartime cinema is also middle-class biased. The two most memorable films with a female protagonist of this social background are *Mrs. Miniver* (William Wyler, 1942) and *Brief Encounter* (David Lean, 1945). Intended primarily for an American audience, Wyler's depiction of the Miniver family, their living standards and social contacts reflect the American perspective on the middle-class. Still, the character of Mrs Miniver – a courageous, strong-willed, charitable and attractive lady – occupies the centre of the local community and uses social intelligence to mediate between the lower and higher classes. Laura Jesson of *Brief Encounter*, on the other hand, is genuinely British and genuinely middle-class. Her fragile posture and angelic face, perfect manners and emotional self-restraint is complemented with bitter rationalism, convincing her that a family and home are more valuable than an adulterous fulfilment of her desires.

Other films, like *Millions Like Us* and *The Gentle Sex* (Leslie Howard, 1943), are not single-protagonist narratives but focus on female communities, the members of which undertake demanding and often dangerous physical labour without losing their feminine touch. The one thing these women of different social backgrounds lose is their class-cherished stereotypes. The motif of discovery is a key element in both narratives. Besides exploring the world of industrial labour, women also come to share a common ground and mutual respect for each other, both of which are the vital for social preconceptions about gender roles to shift. Even melodramas (often associated with Gainsborough Studios) articulate a similar message. The corresponding research of Aldgate and Richards reveals that, although the audience of the historical melodrama consisted of working-class woman, "[t]he clear implication of the films is that social change and a levelling of the barriers is needed" (163).[14]

Including the already mentioned titles, wartime films featuring woman protagonists or intended for women audiences propose an image of the gentle sex that could not be more different from the one heralded by prejudicious Victorian gender politics and traditional sexist representations. Contrary to these, they speak of sexual equality and criticise the conservative, male chauvinist

[14] See *Britain Can Take It*, 157-165.

view of gender and sexual differences. The fact that even melodrama – described at the beginning of this essay as an escapist genre – had a role in this "tender revolution" is significant; it proves that the spirit of social self-awareness and the general will to gradually evaporate class and gender barriers became part of the British psyché, giving rise to a model selfhood that was national because it was consensual, and it was consensual because it relied, more than ever, on the middle-class.

Conclusion

My essay has outlined the origins and evolution of national imagery, a decade-long process, at the end of which, cinema came to possess a patriotic and consensual representation of British values and character. I first described the often conflicting sets of influences Hollywood had on British cinema. Ona positive note, American popular films taught English filmmakers how to call up the community's past in glorious terms while also strengthening the spirit of national unity among audiences. Alexander Korda and London Films took a lion's share in adopting the Hollywood model with the introduction of such genres as the historical film and Empire-cycle. I identified three key areas where *London Films* had significant influence:

(1) it played an essential role in popularising films with high production values and consequently managed to reach a wider audience;

(2) its use of the parabolic mode of address ensured that the values and beliefs represented as part of the past can reflect upon the present and through strengthening or undermining the continuity between the two lay out the symbolic sphere of British identity;

(3) whereas the Empire-cycle of Zoltán Korda argued for national unity within the framework of reference to the global Empire, later films, like *Things to Come* put the emphasis on awareness towards the challenges posed by aggressive and xenophobic nationalism.

With the deterioration of the international situation in the late 1930s, filmmakers employed historical parables more consciously than ever before to denounce the policy of appeasement and the impotency of international diplomacy to cope with Nazi Germany. The outbreak of WWII soon made cinema into the most important ally of the political establishment with films serving as an effective medium of propaganda. Consequently, filmmakers abandoned films of pure aesthetic experimentation and pure entertainment. So much was at stake in the early months of the war that, in a sense, cinema was enlisted and given the mission to boost low public moral, but more importantly, to mobilise people and encourage them to joint the home front.

Propaganda or political cinema had the following characteristics:

(1) it highlighted the importance of public service, a virtue which runs through British history, and thus, is a key national characteristic;

(2) as opposed to the totalitarian and indoctrinating rhetoric, British propaganda never worshiped self-sacrifice but humanised and psychologised it, keeping it well within the sphere of common sense – as another British characteristic;

(3) the image of Britain as a family committed to individual freedom and mutual responsibility was popularised in a number of key films from the period,

(4) the chief propagators of these values were middle-class characters who either directly or indirectly argued for a higher degree of social and gender equality.

The realist view of the material, emotional and mental sacrifices of the people during the war has entered deep into the national unconscious and has had a lasting effect on the British self-image. This could not be truer for cinema which in the period in focus managed to rise to the rank of the people's cinema, becoming a cinema of national unity. It helped to achieve victory on two fronts, not only providing its full support to the war efforts but playing a remarkable role in diminishing social prejudices. It is for these socially purposive and reformist attitudes that war cinema has come to gain a cult status unlikely to melt away any time soon.

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