

Introduction – British art cinema: creativity, experimentation and innovation

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What is art cinema?

Definitions of art cinema have long been contested, but the generic term ‘art cinema’ has generally come to stand for feature-length narrative films that are situated at the margins of mainstream cinema, located somewhere between overtly experimental films and more obviously commercial product. Whether it is through a modernist, drifting, episodic approach to storytelling; a complex engagement with high culture; the foregrounding of a distinct authorial voice; or a simple refusal to bow to normal commercial considerations, at its heart the term ‘art cinema’ has come to represent film-making which is distinct from – and often in direct opposition to – popular narrative film. But for Steve Neale, writing in a seminal article published in the journal *Screen* in 1981, the term ‘art cinema’ applies not just to individual films and film histories but also to patterns of distribution, exhibition, reception and audience engagement.¹ Moreover, art cinema, in its cultural and aesthetic aspirations but also its audience, relies heavily upon an appeal to ‘universal’ values of culture and art. This is reflected in the existence of international festivals, where distribution is sought for these films, and where their status as ‘art’ – and as films ‘to be taken seriously’ – is confirmed and re-stated through prizes and awards.

Writing in 2013, David Andrews argued that art cinema should be considered a ‘sprawling super-genre [like] mainstream cinema or cult cinema’.² He elaborates, writing that this super-genre comprises all ‘traditional art films and (all) avant-garde movies, *plus* (all) the movies that have gained a more qualified and fragile high-art status by untraditional means at the cultural level, or, more usually, the sub-cultural level’.³ While Andrews may be correct, and popular perception has come to view art films as films exhibited in arthouse cinemas for serious, intellectual, culturally sophisticated audiences, ‘including small-budget but artistic foreign films, avant-garde films, and older classics’,⁴ such a definition is perhaps too broad to be helpful. Andrews tellingly alludes to the notion of a ‘traditional art film’, which implies that such a thing exists and can be defined. This, however, is not necessarily the case.

In his 1979 article 'The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice' David Bordwell argues that merely '[i]dentifying a mode of production/consumption does not exhaustively characterise the art cinema, since the art cinema also consists of formal traits and viewing conventions'.⁵ These traits and conventions are what separates the art cinema from both classical narrative cinema and the avant garde. So, in addition to being an 'institution',⁶ art cinema might indeed be considered a kind of film genre. Yet it has rarely been referred to as such. The reasons for this are both cultural and practical. On the one hand, as Andrews notes, 'cinephiles speak of art cinema as if this category could be recognised by its form, thus suggesting that it *is* a traditional genre, [yet] they seem reluctant to call it that, for in cinephile discourse the term "genre" smacks of commercialism'.⁷ At the same time, there is no immediately obvious criterion for what constitutes an art film. Other notable film genres (such as the western) contain numerous tropes and traits that can make them instantly classifiable by a viewer. One would however be hard pressed to find any obvious generic similarities between, say, Jean-Luc Godard's *A Bout de Souffle* (1959) and Federico Fellini's *8½* (1963). This fact is also acknowledged by Bordwell, who argues that any attempt to call art cinema a genre will 'invite the criticism that the creators of such films are too inherently different to be lumped together'.⁸ Yet despite this lack of familiar plots, character types, settings, techniques and themes typical of more obviously generic film forms, Bordwell nevertheless argues that in art films, 'the overall *functions* of style and theme remain remarkably constant [...] as a whole'.⁹ Moreover, despite the variety of concerns unique to individual nations and cultures and the highly individual nature of their film-makers, Bordwell argues that 'we can usefully consider the "art cinema" as a distinct mode of film practice, [with] a set of formal conventions, and implicit viewing procedures'.¹⁰ In order to establish generic criteria to identify a certain film as an art film, then, one must look beyond the conventional notions of genre that operate on the surface of a film – horses, six-shooters and the like – and instead look to the manner of the film's construction in terms of style, narrative, structure and themes.

For many commentators, art cinema does represent a distinct form of cinematic practice and can be identified by several stylistic, structural and narrative conventions and underlying themes. Perhaps most importantly, art films are art films because they do not conform to the model of dominant mainstream filmmaking – as historically typified by Hollywood – in several ways. Firstly, art films define themselves in terms of directorial authorship, or auteurism. Although European cinema does not lack a star system, in art cinema the director is essentially the star. Indeed, each subsequent film by an art cinema auteur can often be seen within a growing *oeuvre*, and might feature recognisable stylistic trademarks and develop its maker's favourite themes. As Ian Breakwell puts it, art films demonstrate that certain film-makers 'made films, just as authors wrote novels and artists painted pictures' and that films 'could be personal creative statements [...] by Bergman, by Fellini'.¹¹ Secondly, art films tend to be structured around psychological

problems and intellectual themes, or what Neale called 'the interiorisation of dramatic conflict',¹² as opposed to classical Hollywood's preference for following the actions of goal-orientated characters. The third related characteristic is art cinema's approach to narrative. As Peter Greenaway, one of the doyens of contemporary British and European art cinema, provocatively put it: 'most cinema is built along 19th-century models. You would hardly think that the cinema had discovered James Joyce sometimes. Most of the cinema we've got is modelled on Dickens and Balzac and Jane Austen.'¹³ But if classical narrative cinema typified by Hollywood is, as Greenaway suggests, still built along the model of the nineteenth-century realist novel, with its linear narrative, cause-effect logic and clear resolution, the art cinema has discovered Joyce. Indeed, art films like *8½* (Federico Fellini, 1963), *L'Avventura* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1960) and *Last Year at Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961) stand as the cinematic equivalents of the work of modernist writers such as Joyce, Franz Kafka, Virginia Woolf and Marcel Proust, with less clearly defined characters; episodic, fragmented narratives; and ambiguous, often unresolved endings. Finally, European directors often understood that a rejection of the narratives of Hollywood cinema equally required a rejection of its formal techniques, and new aesthetics had to be found to complement their new modernist concerns. Hence, Fellini's fantasy sequences, Godard's jump cuts, Resnais's unannounced flashbacks, Truffaut's freeze frames, and Jancsó's sequence shots.

While the definitions of art cinema proposed by the likes of Bordwell and Neale over three decades ago remain invaluable, they have their limitations. For example, Bordwell argues that art cinema is "a realistic cinema" which either shows us "real locations" or "real problems" (contemporary alienation, lack of communication), [and] "realistic" – that is psychologically complex characters'.¹⁴ Yet he does not recognise the fact that a classical narrative film such as *On the Waterfront* (Elia Kazan, 1954) can also deal with real locations, real problems and psychologically complex characters. There are other inconsistencies. For instance, Bordwell argues that a film like *Bicycle Thieves* (Vittorio De Sica, 1948) is an art film by virtue of its realism, but he ignores the fact that the film's protagonist is as goal-orientated as any in a Hollywood film, whereas works like *Last Year in Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961) or *The Round Up* (Miklós Jancsó, 1966), which are indisputably art films, do not offer anything approaching psychologically complex characters. Moreover, the emphasis that both Bordwell and Neale place on auteurism does not make allowances for anti-auteur directors such as Jacques Becker, Louis Malle and others 'who delight[ed] in adopting different themes and styles in each of their films'.¹⁵

If, as Bordwell puts it, art cinema exists somewhere between linear, classical narrative films with cause-effect logic and goal-orientated characters, such as Howard Hawks's *Rio Bravo* (1959), and experimental, avant-garde works typified by Stan Brakhage's four-minute abstract film, *Mothlight* (1963),¹⁶ not all art films are situated directly at the midpoint between these two poles. Indeed, different films should be placed at different points on

this continuum. Take, for instance, a Hollywood film like John Boorman's *Point Blank* (1967), which was made at a time when even major studios were not above funding innovative, director-led projects. The film's avenger protagonist, Walker (Lee Marvin), is goal-orientated to the point of being single-minded, and the film borrows many of the trappings of the American gangster film genre. At the same time, however, Boorman structures his film in a non-linear fashion, which betrays the influence of Resnais and other innovative European directors. He also gives it an open ending, and fills it with ambiguous hints that Walker, who is shot in the film's opening minutes, may in fact be dreaming the entire film as he lays dying. The result is a fascinating hybrid of American genre cinema and the art film, and would be situated closer to the *Rio Bravo* end of the art cinema spectrum. On the opposite end would be a work like Derek Jarman's *The Last of England* (1987) which, as one of the chapters in this book will explain in more detail, comes close to being an avant-garde film in several ways, not least its use of amateur Super8 equipment, its lack of a shooting script, and its experimental structure. At the same time, the film's length, and the way it was funded, distributed and exhibited, conform to the comparatively conventional model of art cinema. One could go on and place films such as Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966), Nicolas Roeg's *Don't Look Now* (1973), Wim Wenders's *The American Friend* (1977) and Neil Jordan's *Angel* (1982) at various points on the more conventional end of the spectrum, and works like *Last Year at Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961), *Red Desert* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1965) and *Hitler: A Film from Germany* (Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1977) on the more experimental end, with 'classical' art films such as *Wild Strawberries* (Ingmar Bergman, 1957), *A Bout de Souffle* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1960), *Jules et Jim* (François Truffaut, 1962), *8½* (Federico Fellini, 1963) and *If ...* (Lindsay Anderson, 1968) all located somewhere near the middle.

As useful as it might be to think about art cinema existing on this continuum between the mainstream and the avant garde, the complexities of art cinema as a form eventually make this idea problematic. Indeed, it is not unusual to find works that have strong ties to both Hollywood genre cinema and avant-garde experimentalism. Take, for example, Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), with its combination of big-budget special effects sequences, its episodic and often ambiguous plot (which is redolent of art cinema), and the avant-garde 'stargate' sequence which recalls an abstract film by Jordan Belson. Similarly, a film like Nicolas Roeg and Donald Cammell's *Performance* (1970) was, as Michael O'Pray notes, 'funded, distributed and exhibited through the Hollywood-based film industry with a budget of hundreds of thousands and used rock stars as major actors, but formally it shared many of the concerns of the European art film [...] with its radical montage, complex time patterns and desultory plotting'.¹⁷ At the same time, *Performance* also betrays the influence of American underground film-maker Kenneth Anger in 'the rich colours and textures of the *mise-en-scène* for the drug scenes'.¹⁸ Films like *2001* and

Performance make it clear that there is no such thing as ‘pure’ art cinema, and as this introduction will demonstrate below, definitions of art cinema must resist notions of purity and should instead remain inclusive and flexible, taking into account simultaneous crossovers with more conventional and experimental traditions of filmmaking. Before doing so, however, it is important to address the marginalised place that art cinema occupies in Britain, and the internal resistance to it.

Art cinema in Britain

Film history has generally tended to view British film-makers as aesthetically conservative and Hollywood-centric in their outlook, when indeed they have been mentioned at all. The lack of attention given to British cinema by international critics has been well documented. To give one example, Gerald Mast, an American, reserved a mere six pages for British cinema in his 1971 book *A Short History of the Movies* (one-fifth of the space dedicated to D. W. Griffith alone). However, Mast is not alone in perpetuating this bias. British critics have often seemed to concur with François Truffaut’s infamous dictum that there is a certain incompatibility between the terms ‘cinema’ and ‘Britain’.¹⁹ Indeed, as Lester Friedman notes, most ‘British critics who penned influential books or essays usually drew upon American rather than British films [...] to support their theories’.²⁰ This neglect has been doubly felt when it comes to discussions of art cinema in Britain. While the existence of an art cinema in a European country such as France, for example, is rarely if ever contested, such claims have very rarely been forcefully made about Britain.

In his important essay, ‘The Last New Wave: Modernism in the British Films of the Thatcher Era’, Peter Wollen argues that British cinema only developed a modernist, auteurist art cinema, or a ‘New Wave’ in the continental tradition, when Derek Jarman and Peter Greenaway emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s. For Wollen it was ‘both inappropriate and misleading’²¹ to label the British New Wave of the 1960s as a true ‘New Wave’. A New Wave must be modernist in outlook, director-led, and must put ‘film first and not subordinat[e] it to literature or theatre’.²² He saw the British New Wave as running counter to all these things. For Wollen, the movement privileged realism over modernism, was writer-led and ‘plainly put film second’²³ to its literary influences. At the same time, however, B. F. Taylor has noted that critics argued that films like *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (Tony Richardson, 1962) ‘relied too heavily on the kind of stylistic traits evident in the films of the *nouvelle vague*’,²⁴ with what Penelope Houston called its ‘self-consciously cinematic emphasis’.²⁵ Clearly there is something contradictory going on here, with one critic arguing the films of the British New Wave were too self-consciously cinematic, while the other argues that they are not cinematic enough. Similarly, one critic wants to argue that they are too influenced by European trends, while

the other seems to imply that they are too clearly aligned with the British cinematic traditions of realism and literary adaptation. What neither seems able to admit is that the British New Wave was not a mere cinematic offshoot of the 'Angry Young Men' writers, nor were the films of its directors slavish imitations of their French *nouvelle vague* counterparts. Rather, as Duncan Petrie points out in his chapter in this book, the British national film industry was 'increasingly more complex and transnational' by the 1960s, and the British New Wave was an art cinema that was both realist *and* modernist, cinematic *and* literary, inward looking *and* open to foreign influences. Moreover, it is worth pointing out that the reservations of British critics towards the British New Wave were not shared by film-makers like Alain Resnais, who greatly admired Karel Reisz and considered Anderson's *This Sporting Life* (1963) 'to be a masterpiece' (figure 1).²⁶

It is also worth noting Wollen's assertion here that 'nobody has made a serious claim for the auteurist credentials of Reisz, Richardson, Schlesinger and others'.²⁷ This kind of dismissal of British film-makers has been disappointingly commonplace. Despite being a truly international phenomenon, art cinema has often been viewed as an exclusively continental tradition, typified by the work of a small group of auteur directors. The names of British film-makers have rarely if ever been included on such lists, even when they were compiled by British critics. For example, in his copy of Alexander Walker's *Hollywood England: British Cinema in the 1960s*, Lindsay Anderson highlighted a sentence that reads 'where in the period under review does one look for the British equivalent of Bergman, or Forman, or Rohmer, or Antonioni?'²⁸ and wrote the word 'thanks' in the margin beside it. A similar sentiment was expressed by Derek Jarman in the early 1980s when he wrote:



I *This Sporting Life* (dir. Lindsay Anderson, 1963)

The cinema I love hardly exists in this country, and where it exists it is fragmented and discontinuous [and] largely ignored by the mainstream [...] In continental Europe this cinema is called THE CINEMA, and you've all heard of its exponents. They are Godard, Antonioni, Pasolini, Rosi, the Tavianis, Fassbinder, Schroeter and a host of others, but here it is quite likely you may not have heard of Peter Watkins, Bill Douglas, Robina Rose, Terence Davies, Chris Petit, Ron Peck – and forgive me if I include myself – who are their counterparts.²⁹

British art cinema: Creativity, experimentation and innovation largely agrees with the sentiments expressed by Anderson and Jarman. This book seeks to help redress the critical neglect of British art cinema by arguing that it is a highly significant strand of the nation's film culture. But this has not been a universally held viewpoint. As Nina Danino argued in a 2014 essay on the place that visual artists such as Steve McQueen occupy in the British film industry, 'the film world is still quite suspicious of art as film, film as art, artists' films and other varieties of this relationship'.³⁰ But film industry insiders are not alone in harbouring this suspicion, and many critics and viewers also characterise art cinema as 'aesthetic, inauthentic and self-indulgent'.³¹ This is brilliantly illustrated in 'Sunday for Seven Days', an episode of Ray Galton and Alan Simpson's much loved television comedy *Steptoe and Son* from 1964. In it, the son, Harold, who has social and cultural aspirations, wants to go to the cinema to see Fellini's *8½*. But his father, Albert, who would prefer to see the fictitious *Nudes of 1964*, counters by asking, 'eight and a half? Eight and a half what? [...] Maybe it's his hat size.' It is a wonderful joke, which exposes the potential pretentiousness of Fellini's nonsensical title. At the same time, however, Albert also mocks the pretensions of Harold, who views the cinema as 'an art form, not a tawdry peepshow', and presents him as an elitist *pseud*. Albert, on the other hand, seems to speak for the majority of mainstream filmgoers who think that *Last Year in Marienbad* is a 'load of old boots' and prefer the pleasures provided by Hollywood.

Perhaps the most notable and vocal critics of British art cinema are those who believe that native film-makers should follow the model of Hollywood and aim their films at the American market. This is the direction that has generally been favoured by both Conservative and Labour UK governments since Margaret Thatcher terminated the Eady levy in 1985. For instance, in 2012 the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, visited Pinewood and told representatives of the UK film industry that:

Our role, and that of the BFI, should be to support the sector in becoming even more dynamic and entrepreneurial, helping UK producers to make commercially successful pictures that rival the quality and impact of the best international productions. Just as the British Film Commission has played a crucial role in attracting the biggest and best international studios to produce their films here, so we must incentivise UK producers to chase new markets both here and overseas.³²

There is no question that Cameron's remarks were inspired by the runaway success of Tom Hooper's *The King's Speech* (2010), which made a substantial box office return off a modest budget. Similar statements were made (and policies put into place) following the success of small productions like *Chariots of Fire* (Hugh Hudson, 1981), *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Richard Curtis, 1994) and *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1996). But in each case the attempt to compete with Hollywood eventually led to the production of expensive failures such as Hugh Hudson's *Revolution* (1985), Julien Temple's *Absolute Beginners* (1986) and Gillian Armstrong's *Charlotte Grey* (2001), which led to the collapse (or near collapse) of production companies such as Goldcrest, Virgin Films and Film Four.

Despite the boom–bust cycle that this approach clearly fosters, many important figures in British cinema still insist that filmmaking should be profit-driven and Hollywood-orientated. Many of them also feel the need to disparage art cinema at the same time. For example, Alan Parker, who was also the chairman of the UK Film Council from 1999 until 2004, has frequently attacked both Derek Jarman and Peter Greenaway, perhaps most notably when he said he would leave Britain if the man who made *The Draughtsman's Contract* (Peter Greenaway, 1982) got another film funded.³³ But Parker has also spoken out against the British Film Institute (BFI) and Film Four, arguably the two bodies most responsible for supporting contemporary British art cinema, before ironically being made Chairman of the Board of Governors at the BFI from 1998 to 1999. For Parker, the BFI 'represents the visually impaired, élitist and kill-joy cinema of the intellectuals'; while Film Four had a tendency to support 'talking heads cinema', which featured an aesthetic more suited to television than to the big screen.³⁴ If the BFI aesthetic was typified for Parker by Jarman and Greenaway, he might offer a film-maker such as Mike Leigh as an exemplar of a Channel Four film-maker. On his official website Parker writes that Leigh's films 'with regard to cinematic skills are stripped down to the essentials – two people talking in a room and then climbing onto a motor-bike to go and talk with two more people in another room – without even allowing us to see the imagined bike ride'.³⁵ The idea that Leigh's films are visually uninteresting is underscored by critics such as Geoff Andrew, who, despite their admiration for his work, argue that a film like *Naked* (1993) is 'by far his most cinematic'.³⁶ Andrew is damning Leigh with faint praise here and implying that films like *Bleak Moments* (1971) or *Life is Sweet* (1991) are somehow either theatrical, televisual, or whatever the opposite of cinematic is supposed to be. It is worth remembering, however, that several central figures in European art cinema (not least Ingmar Bergman and Eric Rohmer) have also been accused of making 'talking heads' cinema, while Andrew Sarris accused the former of having a 'technique [that] never equalled his sensibility'.³⁷ Michael Olesczyk comes far closer to the truth, however, when he observes that 'Leigh's films were never beautiful to look at, but their beauty was always private and inconspicuous: more Yasujiro Ozu and Jan Vermeer than David Lean and John Constable'.³⁸

If Parker's objections to British art cinema stem from what he sees as a lack of ambition and visual sophistication (strange things to accuse either Jarman or Greenaway of), as well as commercial viability, there is another school of thought that objects to both art cinema and Parker's preferred Hollywood gloss. Indeed, several critics who have championed British social realism have also argued that art cinema is an elitist form aimed at a privileged, educated audience. Indeed, there is strong sense that the appeal of art cinema rarely crosses class divides. For example, Andy Medhurst responded to the success of Leigh's *Naked* at Cannes (where it won both Best Director and Best Actor) by arguing that Leigh 'is likely to be applauded for breaking away from his reputation for small scale, nuanced, domestic English tragicomedies [...] but I do worry that *Naked* might give him an open passport to the European art cinema [as] British social comedy is far more important'.³⁹ Comparing both Andrew's and Medhurst's responses to Leigh's film is instructive. It not only echoes the opposing opinions about the British New Wave expressed by Wollen and Houston above, but also demonstrates that the debate about what critics think British cinema should be is still very much ongoing. One critic clearly longs for a more visually orientated, artistic British cinema, while the other places social relevance and realism over visual pleasure. These two visions seem hard to reconcile. Take, for example, the critical response to Terence Davies' *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (1988). On paper, Davies' film, which depicts working-class life in wartime and post-war Liverpool, sounds like a prime example of kitchen-sink drama; but Davies' elliptical, non-linear approach to narrative comes far closer to a work of high modernism such as *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (Alain Resnais, 1959). As Wendy Everett notes, 'any readings of the film as exemplifying social realism were forced to take account of both its extreme self-consciousness and its formal complexity, those very qualities that were traditionally used to define "art" film as the antithesis of realism'.⁴⁰ She goes on to note that the 'typical response was to view the non-realistic elements of *Distant Voices, Still Lives* as a fundamental flaw in its make-up'.⁴¹

It was not only those committed to social realism, or aping the Hollywood mainstream, who remained suspicious of art cinema. British film-makers working on the more experimental end of the spectrum have also had their objections. For example, during his time on the BFI Production Board in the late 1970s, the structural film-maker Malcolm Le Grice noted a general shift in the Board's policy. While the BFI had previously allocated most of its production budget to short films which ranged from experimental works, such as Peter Gidal's *Condition of Illusion* (1975), to more narrative-orientated outputs such as the three parts of Bill Douglas's *Trilogy* (1972–77), in the final years of the decade the Board's chairman, Peter Sainsbury, began moving 'towards longer and more complex productions'.⁴² This process culminated in Sainsbury's decision to allocate the lion's share of his annual production budget to funding a single narrative feature film, *Radio On* (Chris Petit, 1979). Sainsbury's intention, as Le Grice notes, was to move 'towards the possibility [of creating] a "British Arts Cinema" [...] in

the tradition of French art or Italian Art Cinema'.⁴³ Perhaps spurred on by the efforts of independent film-makers and producers such as Jarman and Don Boyd, Sainsbury, as James Park remembers, 'encouraged film-makers working with BFI Finance to cast their scripts within a narrative structure, use well-known names in the cast, and employ skilled technicians to secure the highest production values possible with a low budget'.⁴⁴ Even experimental films produced by the Board at this time, such as Sue Clayton and Jonathan Curling's *The Song of the Shirt* (1979) and Peter Greenaway's *The Falls* (1980), were feature-length works that made concessions to narrative. Moreover, film-makers like Greenaway were convinced to abandon avant-garde film in favour of making comparatively conventional and commercial works such as *The Draughtsman's Contract* and, as Christopher Dupin notes, there was a 'progressive amalgamation of avant-garde, oppositional and art cinema throughout the 1980s'.⁴⁵ While Park argues that Sainsbury's aim was 'to maximise the audiences for films which are innovative in the use of the film medium',⁴⁶ his policy was seen by some as a betrayal of Britain's experimental film culture.

What the critics of art cinema mentioned above have in common is a wish to maintain the purity of their preferred mode of filmmaking. Parker and his acolytes do not want to see commercial potential compromised by experimentation. The social realists see realism as an end unto itself and view modernist techniques as an unnecessary distraction, while Le Grice and the avant gardists do not wish to see purely experimental film watered down by commercial considerations such as narrative and feature-length running times. However, art cinema is never pure. Indeed, Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover have made a compelling case for the 'impurity' of art cinema. They argue that:

To be impure is not the same as to be vague or nebulous. Rather, we contend that art cinema always perverts the standard category used to divide up institutions, locations, histories, or spectators. Art cinema's impurity can be understood in a variety of ways. First, it is defined by an impure institutional space: neither experimental nor mainstream, art cinema moves between the commercial world and its artisanal other [...] Second, art cinema articulates an ambivalent relationship to location. It is a resolutely international category [...] Fourth, art cinema [...] troubles notions of genre [...] Lastly, art cinema constitutes a peculiarly impure spectator, both at the level of textual address and in the history of its audiences.⁴⁷

This impurity does not stop with our understanding of art cinema as a category. On the contrary, we argue that British art films themselves are always impure. They are often amalgamations of various styles, genres and voices, and often with origins not only in Britain but also from across the globe. For example, as we briefly mentioned above, works like Jarman's *The Last of England* bring together elements of the avant garde and art cinema in what Michael O'Pray called 'an eclectic, hybrid manner'.⁴⁸ *The Last of England* is not, however, an isolated case. Other critics have labelled films like *Distant Voice*, *Still Lives* and *Naked* as 'social art films', a 'new and more hybrid



2 *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (dir. Nicolas Roeg, 1976)

form which brings together traditional social realist discourse within the more self-conscious narratives of European art cinema'.⁴⁹ Similarly, a work such as Nicolas Roeg's *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976), which marries a provocative, intellectually challenging study of contemporary alienation (which Bordwell sees as the key theme of art cinema⁵⁰) with large-budget production values, could be classified as yet another kind of hybrid: the 'Hollywood art movie' (figure 2).

The Draughtsman's Contract is a costume drama, a murder mystery, a meditation on painting and a puzzle without a solution in the mould of *Last Year at Marienbad* and *Blow-Up*. *Radio On* is a road movie, a detective film, a celebration of European modernism and a musical.⁵¹ One could go on, but the point is well made. There is no such thing as a pure art film. Furthermore, we argue it is often the hybrid nature of British art films that makes them such rich, interesting and complex works.

Scholars besides Galt and Schoonover (2010), such as Mark Betz (2003, 2009), Andrew Tudor (2005) and David Andrews (2013), have begun to reassess the nature of art cinema. Collectively, their work has built on that of Bordwell, Neale and others and taken account of the problems inherent in trying to treat art cinema as a stable category of films. For instance, Andrews has called for a more 'inclusive' definition of art cinema, which 'avoids reducing the genre to the theatrical art film, the *avant-garde* movie, or any other textual area, [...] and] refuses to align the genre with any particular production practice [...] any distribution practice [...] or any particular exhibition practice'.⁵² Moreover, he calls for a definition of art cinema that is 'value neutral'⁵³ and breaks down the distinctions between high and low culture. This is especially important. Art films are generally perceived to be more artistically innovative and thematically serious than their mainstream counterparts, and their cultural prestige is further enhanced through participation in (and awards from) international film festivals. With this can come more than a hint of snobbery and a tendency to view art cinema as completely distinct from the mainstream. As the examples above prove, art cinema is in constant dialogue with the mainstream. Indeed, if art cinema

does define itself explicitly against the classical narrative mode it must be aware of and play on its conventions. But there is more to art cinema's engagement with mainstream cinema than simply knowing what one is reacting against. For most film-makers working in art cinema, the pleasures of mainstream cinema, especially Hollywood genre cinema, are very real. But these pleasures are never to be enjoyed uncritically.

As an example, let us return to Chris Petit's debut feature, *Radio On* (1979). This was a film that was self-consciously designed to help foster an art cinema in Britain. On its release, however, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith argued that it was 'a film without a cinema',⁵⁴ at least in national terms. For Nowell-Smith, if *Radio On* belonged to any tradition it was that of the existential road movie in the spirit of Wim Wenders, who acted as the film's executive producer. Richard Combs, however, was able to place the film in a wider context and saw it as a 'tentative starting point for a possible British cinema (American movies, remodelled in Europe then refitted here?)'⁵⁵ With this statement, Combs points to the complex relationship between American and European film, and Britain's precarious space in between, as well as the equally intricate interface between art cinema and genre films. After all, the road movie was a quintessentially American form before Wenders so skilfully reinvented it, and his films are self-consciously indebted to the work of Hollywood film-makers such as John Ford, Nicholas Ray and Arthur Penn. *Radio On*, then, is a British film in dialogue with the work of a German art cinema auteur whose own work is in dialogue with Hollywood. Moreover, Brian Hoyle has pointed out clear similarities between *Radio On* and a classic of British genre cinema, Mike Hodges' *Get Carter* (1971), noting that both films 'tell the story of a man leaving London to find answers about the mysterious death of his brother who, in each, was in some way connected to a local pornography ring'.⁵⁶ But as the films progress, their differences – and those between the classical narrative film and the art film – become all too apparent. Michael Caine's Jack Carter is a classical narrative anti-hero. Once he suspects foul play he investigates his brother's murder and then relentlessly pursues his killers. In contrast, Robert (David Beames), the protagonist of *Radio On*, finds no explanation for his brother's death and, like Claudia and Sandro in Antonioni's *L'avventura* (1960), he soon gives up the search and 'begins to wander aimlessly, unsure of where to go and what to do'.⁵⁷ *Radio On* therefore offers a textbook example of Bordwell's definition of an art film with a 'certain drifting episodic quality to [its] narrative'.⁵⁸ But while Terry Curtis-Fox correctly argues that Petit only 'gives us hints of a thriller' as 'an excuse'⁵⁹ to get the film's real story, that of protagonist's journey from London to Bristol, under way, the generic trappings of *Radio On* are far from incidental. Indeed, it is only through borrowing these conventions that Petit can subvert them and play with his audience's expectations of how a film's story should unfold (figure 3).

British art films have often developed complex, challenging and innovative representations of sex and sexuality, which often stand in stark contrast to representations in mainstream British films. As Annette Kuhn and Guy



3 *Radio On* (dir. Christopher Petit, 1979)

Westwell note, ‘art cinema’s “adult” themes became associated in the minds of audiences with sex and eroticism, with connotations of “quality” legitimising any risqué material’.⁶⁰ For example, Michael Winterbottom’s British production, *9 Songs* (2004), which has frequently been called the most sexually explicit film in the history of non-pornographic British cinema, offers a challenging fusion of art cinema and pornography. Peter Lehman, who discussed Winterbottom’s film alongside similarly provocative works by continental film-makers such as Catherine Breillat, noted that most ‘knowledgeable spectators would probably classify them as art films with some porn elements though some might call them porn movies dressed up with the trappings of art’,⁶¹ and the British reception of *9 Songs* largely bore him out. Indeed, a review of the film like the one by Jim White in the *Telegraph* is worth examining, as it speaks volumes about the British attitudes towards both sex and the cinema:

what is the point? We know what the purpose of pornography is, and this clearly does not share that end. Michael Winterbottom is a proper filmmaker, director of the wonderful *24-Hour Party People*, which, incidentally, includes one of the funniest sex scenes ever committed to camera, a hilarious moment featuring Peter Kay and Steve Coogan in the back of a van, a romp straight out of the *Carry On* tradition of robust British humour.

White’s reference to the *Carry On* films here is particularly telling. This popular series, despite its reputation for smutty innuendo, ultimately refused to break taboos, and the films seemed increasingly conservative, innocent and out of touch as the sexual revolution of the ‘permissive’ 1960s made its way towards the lives of the British working classes in the 1970s. As Barry Forshaw has noted, the approach to sex in the *Carry On* films and other British sex comedies was ‘a repressed, allusive one in which any real celebration of sexuality, or sophisticated humour, was hardly to be found. This contrasted with the way that foreign directors repeatedly tackled such

subjects – Jiri Menzel's *Closely Observed Trains* (1966), for example'.⁶² In short, there remains a school of thought, which critics like White perpetuate, which insists that the British (and British film-makers) refuse to take sex seriously and are notably repressed in comparison with their continental counterparts. Films like *9 Songs* should, however, stand as an important reminder that this is an unhelpful generalisation. Indeed, British art cinema has produced more than its share of controversial and taboo-breaking works, not least Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960), which offers an example of the crossovers between exploitation and genre films and modernist art cinema; Ken Russell's *Women in Love* (1968) and *The Devils* (1971), which still cannot be shown in the director's preferred version; Jerzy Skolimowski's *Deep End* (1970); John Schlesinger's *Sunday Bloody Sunday* (1971); Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971); Roeg and Cammell's *Performance*; Roeg's *Bad Timing* (1980); Jarman's explicitly homoerotic *Sebastiane* (1976); and Greenaway's *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover* (1989), which was cut by twenty-nine minutes to receive an 'R' rating in America and began debates leading to the abolition of the 'X' rating. Additionally, more recent films such as *9 Songs*; Tim Roth's incest drama, *The War Zone* (1999), which Gilbert Adair argued 'should never have been made';⁶³ Patrice Chéreau's *Intimacy* (2001), with its unsimulated sex scene; Ashley Horner's *brilliantlove* (2010); Andrew Haigh's *Weekend* (2011); and Peter Strickland's *The Duke of Burgundy* (2014) confirm the fact that British art cinema has not lost its taste for sex and its penchant for provocation.

It is significant that many of the films mentioned above cannot be said to be straightforwardly British. Contemporary critics have acknowledged the ways in which film cultures have sprung up, nourishing and nurturing experimental or intellectual work in specific nations and across national boundaries. Indeed, it is no longer possible to view art cinema as simply a European institution bringing together several disparate national cinemas with their own systems of institutional funding and support. On the contrary, the prominence of figures as diverse as Satyajit Ray, Kenji Mizoguchi, Ousmane Senebene and Glauber Rocha, or more recently Hou Hsiou-Hsien, Abbas Kiarostami and Wong Kar-Wai has shown that art cinema is a distinctly global phenomenon. Certainly, if we are to think about art cinema as a transatlantic phenomenon at the very least, to this list we might add Joseph Losey, John Schlesinger, Nicolas Roeg, Steve McQueen, Lynne Ramsay and Andrea Arnold, among many others. The complexities of funding and distributing films, which often place artistic concerns over commercial viability, has led art cinema to become thoroughly transnational. Many art films are international co-productions, which rely on investment and talent derived from multiple nations and cultures. This is something Maria San Filippo sees as having 'long troubled the conceptual and industrial borders of national (or continental) cinemas'.⁶⁴ If the concept of a British national cinema is difficult to define, then, British art cinema becomes doubly difficult to pin down, due to art cinema's institutional reliance on these border-crossing co-productions, which are often the only

way by which small-scale, potentially uncommercial works can get made. Tim Bergfelder is surely correct when he argues, 'rather than focusing exclusively on separate national formations, a history of European cinema might well begin by exploring the interrelationship between cultural and geographical centres and margins, and by tracing the migratory movements between these poles'.⁶⁵

There are globetrotting British film-makers associated with art cinema, such as Peter Watkins and Ken McMullen, whose work is so international in character that it can become difficult to refer to them as British film-makers at all. Nevertheless, their work serves as a reminder that art cinema in Britain cannot – and should not – be divorced from the notion of the transnational. After all, many of the key figures involved in making intellectually stimulating, creative, experimental films in Britain have been émigrés and immigrants; and many 'British' art films have employed aesthetic innovations influenced by artists who have worked in Europe and elsewhere. Powell and Pressburger, for example, relied greatly on a number of important continental collaborators both in front of and behind the camera. Indeed, despite ending with the words 'Made in England', films like *Tales of Hoffmann* (1951) along with *The Red Shoes* (1948) and *Oh ... Rosalinda!!* (1955) perhaps feel more culturally European than British. Similarly, as Paul Newland has written, a film such as *Radio On*, which features characters speaking (unsubtitled) German, and was shot in a manner which makes the landscape between London and Bristol look decidedly alien, 'depicts a Britain in which ideas of Britishness, if not absent, are problematized at every turn'.⁶⁶

Another film-maker whose work demonstrates British art cinema's challenge to pre-conceived notions of the ontology of British cinema is Ken Loach. On the one hand, Loach serves as an exemplar of a director whom critics would almost unanimously label as British, but on the other he demonstrates how hard it has become to draw and maintain national borders in art cinema. If one examines Loach's films made after 1990, it is largely unproblematic to call the smaller scale films from the start of the decade, such as *Riff-Raff* (1991), *Raining Stones* (1993) and *Ladybird, Ladybird* (1994), British films. Despite the presence of multicultural actors and characters, each of these films is set in Britain and they were all funded solely by British companies such as Channel Four. However, as the 1990s progressed, and the scope of Loach's films became more ambitious, the British identity of these films became increasingly contestable. For instance, his Spanish Civil War drama, *Land and Freedom* (1995), is, as Ian Christie notes, 'truly European [...] in all respects'.⁶⁷ The film was funded with investment from companies in Britain, Spain and Germany; it was largely filmed on location in Spain; and the dialogue is distinctly polyglot, to reflect the nature of the International Brigade. Subsequent films, such as *Carla's Song* (1996) and *Bread and Roses* (2000), are also clearly transnational in terms of language, setting, character and finance. Even seemingly British works such as the Glasgow trilogy of *My Name is Joe* (1998), *Sweet Sixteen* (2002) and *Ae*

Fond Kiss (2004) are international co-productions collectively made with the financial assistance of over a dozen different companies from England, Scotland, France, Germany and Spain. Loach is hardly unusual in this respect, and notably British film-makers such as Mike Leigh, Derek Jarman, Peter Greenaway, Sally Potter and Terence Davies would not have been able to sustain their careers were it not for support from the Continent; and one must wonder if they will be able to continue benefiting from this investment after 'Brexit'.

As the contributors to *British art cinema: Creativity, experimentation and innovation* demonstrate, 'British art cinema' comprises competing and fragmentary discourses. It is the purpose of this book to demonstrate that the concept of a British art cinema should be inclusive, one which brings these seemingly disparate discourses together. Indeed, we argue that despite its reputation for being an elitist form, British art cinema as a concept is incredibly broad, if it encompasses all film production that clearly evidences creativity, experimentation and/or innovation. While it is not the purpose of this introduction to offer a straightforward history of art cinema in Britain, or to attempt to propose a canon, we would argue that the net of British art cinema can be cast wide enough to bring together, for example, the silent films of Alfred Hitchcock, Anthony Asquith and Kenneth Macpherson; the documentary tradition from Humphrey Jennings, to Peter Watkins, to Nick Broomfield and Patrick Keiller; the large-scale, Hollywood-backed, genre-inflected productions of directors like Ken Russell, Nicolas Roeg, John Boorman and Neil Jordan; social realists such as Tony Richardson, Karel Reisz, Ken Loach, Mike Leigh, Bill Douglas and Alan Clarke, amongst others; the flamboyant anti-realism of Powell and Pressburger; the more experimental work of Jarman, Greenaway, Isaac Julien and Steve McQueen; international productions by expatriates such as Stanley Kubrick, Joseph Losey, Richard Lester, Michelangelo Antonioni and Roman Polanski; the costume dramas of Merchant-Ivory; and films by directors as varied as Thorold Dickinson, Jack Clayton, Lindsay Anderson, Ken McMullen, Chris Petit, Sally Potter, Terence Davies, Michael Winterbottom, Peter Mullan and Lynne Ramsay, to name but a few; as well as the work of post-millennial film-makers such as Andrea Arnold, Peter Strickland, Ben Wheatley and Clio Barnard.

It would be impossible for a single volume to do justice to the work of all of these film-makers and assess their collective achievement. Nevertheless, *British art cinema: Creativity, experimentation and innovation*, in its attempts to show the full potential of the breadth and depth of British art cinema, provides examinations of films dating from the silent era to the present day, running the gamut from documentaries, to amateur films, to experimental films, to Hollywood-funded features. The authors in this collection demonstrate just how inclusive and how central a part of our national film culture British art cinema has been and continues to be. Tom Ryall begins this volume by exploring the notion of 'art cinema' in Britain during the 1920s, and considers the cultural context in which

British film-makers worked, the ideas and attitudes towards the medium, the intellectual atmosphere in which directors such as Alfred Hitchcock and Anthony Asquith began their careers. Owen Evans argues for the inclusion of the great documentary film-maker Humphrey Jennings in the history of British art cinema, as an exemplar of the 'expressive individual' that David Bordwell has argued is fundamental to art cinema. Katerina Loukopoulou's chapter explores the often overlooked link between the high aspirations held for film in 1940s Britain (especially within the realm of factual film) and the later flourishing of an Arts Council-sponsored art cinema in the 1970s. Ryan Shand examines the relationship between amateur and experimental filmmaking through an examination of the work of Enrico Coccozza in the 1940s and 1950s. Duncan Petrie provides a new critical overview of British art cinema in the 1960s.

David Forrest argues that the debate around the status of British New Wave films as art cinema texts should not simply be one of nomenclature. Rather, he makes the case that social realism – so central to British national cinematic identity – might be judged beyond its effectiveness (or otherwise) as a political medium. Peter Jameson argues that the collaboration between the American director Joseph Losey and the British dramatist Harold Pinter – which resulted in three feature films between 1963 and 1971 and the publication of their unfilmed adaptation of *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, *The Proust Screenplay* in 1977 – influenced British cinema and television in significant ways. Robert Shail provides a study of the work on John Krish, arguing that his *oeuvre* demonstrates a 'deep awareness of the darkest corners of human experience, often treated with mischievous black humour, which is offset by an abiding faith in the redeeming instinct for empathy'. Paul Newland explores the reputation of Nicolas Roeg, alongside those of two films, *Performance* (with Donald Cammell, 1970) and *Don't Look Now* (1973). Sally Shaw offers a case study of Horace Ové's *Pressure* (1976), arguing that it is 'more formally innovative than it is often given credit for', and these formal qualities should be considered alongside the film's historical significance and 'polemical' content. Paul Elliott explores the important work of Black Audio Film Collective, which was active from 1982 to 1998. He argues that the influence of the theorists and film-makers of Latin American Third Cinema allowed young Black and Asian British film-makers to find a 'way of cultivating their own cultural identity'. John Hill revisits the British art cinema of the 1980s from a contemporary standpoint. Jo George explores the work of Derek Jarman and argues that a more thorough understanding of the film-maker's interest in medieval literature and culture is required. Her chapter specifically examines two of Jarman's more experimental features, *The Last of England* (1987) and *The Garden* (1990), and places them within the traditions of medieval dream-visions and avant-garde 'trance films'. Phil Wickham looks at the career of the influential independent producer and director, Don Boyd, and specifically at his ambition to help foster a sustainable, commercially viable art cinema in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s. Brian Hoyle's chapter explores the

importance of both the composed film and the artist biopic as sub-genres of British art cinema. He argues that these 'twin traditions' notably converge in the work of Ken Russell and Peter Greenaway. Sarah Martindale looks at Shakespearean film as art cinema, paying specific attention to Richard Eyre's often misunderstood *Stage Beauty* (2004), which she sees as 'a cerebral retort to Hollywood'. Kim Knowles explores crossovers between art cinema and video art in her chapter on Sarah Turner's extraordinary study of identity and memory, *Perestroika* (2010).

These final two chapters bring this volume into dialogue with what Newland and Hoyle have elsewhere called 'post-millennial British art cinema'.⁶⁸ Indeed, if the focus of this book is mainly historical, the editors are keen to remind readers that British art cinema is not a closed canon. On the contrary, established figures such as Greenaway, Davies, Loach and Leigh, and a younger generation as varied in their styles and concerns as Andrea Arnold, Peter Strickland, Ben Wheatley and Steve McQueen continue to make important contributions to British art cinema. It is the ultimate purpose of this book to demonstrate to this and future generations of British film-makers, as well as critics and students, that Britain does indeed have a long, rich and varied tradition of art cinema to draw upon, appreciate and study.

Notes

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