Introduction

> Haunting can be seen as intrinsically resistant to the contraction and homogenization of time and space. It happens when a place is stained by time, or when a particular place becomes the site for an encounter with broken time. (Fisher 2012: 19)

To commence on a reasonably self-indulgent note, during the 1970s most provincial towns contained at least one tatty bingo hall that had once been the local ABC or Odeon picture house. As for the handful of cinemas that still existed in town centres, they were often in a profoundly sorry state of repair. For many of my background, a birthday visit to the pictures meant passing through peeling mock Ionic columns, buying strange brands of confectionery that any discerning child would otherwise avoid and settling into plush red seats that exuded clouds of dust. The bill of fare would usually commence with cigarette advertisements promising a jet-set world that was entirely at odds with the surroundings both in and outside of the venue. The next part of the ritual was the promotions for local businesses,[1] regularly enhanced by still photographs that appeared to be a decade out of date.

You would not have to be supernaturally observant to appreciate, however dimly, that these venues were fast becoming ghosts, for all the billboards promising thrills, excitement and Dave Prowse sporting what appeared to be a coal scuttle on his head. When my own cinemagoing commenced, a visit to the Odeon on Above Bar Street was an occasional treat on par with a visit to the Little Chef,[2] but even so, Southampton's picture houses seemed just as much a relic of a recent but unattainable past. They seemed akin to the red and cream Corporation Guy

[1] All of which were advertised as being 'just five minutes from the cinema.'

[2] Lower-middle-class life in the Solent region of the 1970s still had Tony Hancock and Sid James levels of enjoyment expectation.

Arab double-deckers or those ageing Teddy boys who frequented the Marlands bus station café. As for the stars who once provided the highlight of the week, along with the B-feature and the newsreel, they could now be found as flickering images on a twenty-inch TV screen, providing visions of the day just before yesterday.

Some of the actors in this book have screen careers that commenced in the 1930s, a few were making films well into the twenty-first century, but my focal period is their pictures of the 1950s. Their major productions of the 1940s, 1960s and 1970s will be included, but for each of the actors, it was this decade that arguably served as a fulcrum of their film work. During this period images of 'Britishness' – including those actors born overseas – appeared to be serving as a virtual defence mechanism at a time of seismic change for the film industry. Regular picturegoing declined into an occasional treat akin to a visit to the theatre. In 1950 some 1,396 million people in the UK 'visited 4,483 cinemas. By 1959 this had diminished to about 600m[illion] attendances and only 3,414 cinemas' (Armes 1978: 239). The older members of the 'family audience' increasingly preferred television; John Sparos argued in his survey of the British film industry that one reason for the medium's popularity was 'that each visit to the cinema has a price whereas "switching on" is virtually costless' (1962: 29). Another was that the surviving venues were increasingly ill-maintained and as early as 1958 an editorial in *Films and Filming* complained, 'Many of Britain's remaining 4,100 cinemas are obsolete, poorly equipped and badly managed shells' (In Camera 1958: 16).

This was also the decade when the Rank Organisation and the Associated British Picture Corporation (ABPC) maintained a stable of artists. Such traits, according to Pinewood and Elstree studio public relations (PR), encompassed jollity and good manners and when Laurie Lee visited the 1957 Cannes Festival, he came across an array of poles that bore the images of the 'cosy pantheon of Pinewood stars – brother, sister, scout-leader, and nurse' (1957: 16). The studio's twenty-first-anniversary brochure of the same year listed some thirty-one artists under contract to the Rank Organisation, but within three years the future of the British cinema was one of independent actors and directors using the studio facilities. The 'Britishness' of such actors, including overseas-born stars, was emphasised in newspaper advertisements and studio publicity at a time when US investment within the UK film industry was ever-increasing. The Eady Levy[3] of 1950 included US-backed productions (Stubbs 2009: 5) and between 1954 and 1956 the proportion of British films distributed by US firms doubled (Harper and Porter 2003: 30).

[3] A production fund derived from a cinema ticket levy – 50 per cent for the exhibitor and 50 per cent for British-based film-makers.

In 1962 Vincent Canby stated that, 'American investment in British production has made it almost impossible to define a "British film"' (quoted in Balio 2010: 229). As Geoffrey Nowell-Smith notes, 'Involve an American major in the package and certain other consequences will also follow' (2004: 53). One such was the use of a US lead, sometimes regardless of their relevance to the plot, from Shelley Winters in *Alfie* (Lewis Gilbert 1966) or William Holden's Sefton in *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (David Lean 1957).[4] By the mid-1960s Michael Caine, Sean Connery and Julie Christie featured in pictures where Hollywood monies shaped the national identity but, as with any form of history, periodisation in cinema is seldom rigid. MGM funded several 1960s black-and-white horse-brass strewn visions of 'quaint' English life; the UK was an important Hollywood sales territory and because of the Eady Levy's rewards to commercially successful productions, 'it was in the interest of Hollywood producers to make their British films as appealing as possible to British audiences' (Stubbs 2009: 7). John Russell Taylor cited the paradox that in the 1930s it was Michael Balcon who 'headed the most substantial attempt to bring American money into British films – financing the images of the national identity via Hollywood funds (1974: 80). Thirty years later the United Artists-funded 007 films featured a British Establishment figure – 'when Connery says that drinking un-chilled champagne is like listening to the Beatles without ear-muffs, the entire swinging sixties collapse' (Winder 2006: 201).

A further element in shaping the image and the memory of a film star is, of course, critics and I have included a cross-section from major newspapers to popular magazines to film journals from both the UK and the USA. One element that is highly notable across many titles is a palpable sense of disdain towards certain performers and another is a sense of ire at the very notion that cinema might be considered 'art'. In 1947 C. A. Lejeune, the film critic of the *Observer* from 1928 to 1960, wrote: 'If filmmakers would only stick to their province, which is to entertain, beguile and inform the largest possible number of people with the best mechanical means at their command, and leave all the pompous talk of art alone, how much happier they and we should be!' (1947: 2). Anger at American cultural influences on cinematic depictions of British life was another popular topic for certain critics and Freda Bruce Lockhart ranted that: 'The current arrangement by which a proportion of the profits from Hollywood films must be spent here seemed a fair enough makeshift. But it in turn is breeding at an alarming rate a more menacing monster

[4] Harper and Porter point out that Board of Trade regulations regarding the 'British' nature of a picture allowed for an overseas producer, director and as many as two stars (2003: 114).

than any [that] has yet threatened the cinema in these islands. I mean the Anglo-American film' (1950: 12).

Fan magazines initially appear far removed from those critics who reviewed a picture in the manner of an irate housemaster – 'Use of too many American phrases in the script. C-minus; must try harder' – but they were equally instrumental in shaping an actor's identity. Steve Chibnall points out of Britain's major fan titles *Picture Show* (1919–60) and *Picturegoer* (1921–60): 'The film press could not afford to antagonise Rank too severely because it relied, ultimately, on a steady and reliable stream of stories from the major domestic film producer' (2016: 247). ABPC's in-house journal the *ABC Film Review* commenced in 1950 and continued in production as *Film Review* until as recently as 2008. To read the average film fan title of the 1950s is to vicariously experience an overtly jolly realm in the same manner of certain titles of the 1990s over-relying on the term 'edgy' to the extent that some of the actors referred to therein seem positively rhomboid.

They were also a place where, in Richard Dyer's words, 'one can read tensions between the star-as-person and her/his image' (Dyer and McDonald 1998: 61) – the ingénue with Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) training or the celluloid 'war hero' who preferred comedy roles. In 1955 Guy Marshall, a writer for *Picturegoer*, stated that a producer 'would be crazy if you did not see to it that your stars did not parade the same personality over and over again' (1955: 9). Within a few years, several of the younger stars in this book such as Stanley Baker, Laurence Harvey and Peter Sellers wished to exert more control over their destiny and avoid the scenario of the previous decade as described by Alexander Walker: 'The British actor had no high pay, no tax advantages and no power of any kind in the industry at all' (1974: 93). That power included not being defined by studio PR.

Towards the end of the 1950s cinema audiences 'were in decline and an ever-increasing proportion of them were under-16s' (Harper and Porter 2003: 231). As filmgoers were increasingly likely to opt for a picture featuring Tommy Steele, the latter days of *Picturegoer* saw it billed as *Picturegoer with Disc DATE*; and in 1959 Margaret Hinxman, the review editor of *Picturegoer*, wrote a spirited defence of the genre: 'The dictionary defines a "fan" as an enthusiastic devotee and an ardent admirer. And if there were a few more such picturegoing "devotees" and "admirers", the Rank Organisation wouldn't be turning cinemas into bowling alleys and Laurence Olivier probably wouldn't have to shelve Macbeth for lack of funding' (quoted in Slide 2010: 183). But after April 1960, the magazine was billed as *Disc DATE with Picturegoer.*

At the opposite end of the spectrum of film magazines, there was *Sight & Sound*, under the editorship of Gavin Lambert and Penelope Houston. In 1947, together with Karel Reisz, Peter Ericsson and Lindsay Anderson,

they formed *Sequence* and two years later Lambert was appointed editor of *Sight & Sound*, succeeded by Houston in 1955. Erik Hedling saw one of the major influences of *Sequence* as quickly writing off 'most of the British cinema of the 1940s, particularly the influential documentary doctrines of John Grierson, and his belief in the utilitarian aspects of film, which had permeated much of British film criticism up to that date' (2003: 26). The Autumn 1956 edition of *Sight & Sound* included Lindsay Anderson's famous essay 'Stand Up! Stand Up!' that heaped an abundance of ire on the Lejeune approach to criticism: 'To a remarkable extent, in fact, denigration of cinema, denial of its importance and significance has become common (Anderson 1956: 64). Houston's belief, as expounded upon in her 1960 article 'The Critical Question' was that: 'If cinema is the art we think it is, then it is entitled to the kind of critical analysis that has been traditionally devoted to the theatre and the novel; and the principles which seem to be most likely to be constructively useful remain liberal ones' (1960: 165). A further indispensable resource is *Films and Filming*, which commenced in 1954 and occupied the middle ground between glossy fan titles and the world of *Monthly Film Bulletin* and *Sight & Sound.* James Morgan of the latter title referred to the new publication's 'attempt at succinct popularisation' (1955: 161). This approach also encompassed an appreciation of major actors and an indispensable legacy of *Films and Filming* is the tenure of Raymond Durgnat to whom virtually every scholar of British cinema owes a debt for his *A Mirror for England: British Movies from Austerity to Affluence.* In 1992 he argued that 'the actor is the character's auteur' and how 'the fine details of gestures, stances and intonations exposes individual attitude and their recombinations in specific situations, thus going deeper than mere typology' (1992: 24).

And so, the sixteen subjects of this book have been selected for their power to 'summon up, evoke, a particular historical period through their personae; thus through their personae, stars come to stand as signifiers of the time in which they achieved their greatest popularity' (Thumim 1992: 56).[5] The screen career of Jack Hawkins illustrates the sense of ambiguity within the patriarchy of post-war cinema. Kenneth More, at the height of his screen stardom, mirrored aspects of the social optimism of his 1950s audience; *The Comedy Man* (Alvin Rakoff 1964) illustrates the price of maintaining the 'decent fellow's' public face. During the Second World War, the screen image of John Mills was that of a reliable working- or lower-middle-class Englishman stoically coping with life's vicissitudes. By the late 1950s, his ostensibly stable senior authority

[5] One could have also included such luminaries as Kay Kendall, Anthony Steel, Robert Morley, Kathleen Harrison, Trevor Howard or Joan Greenwood; indeed, they merit a separate tome.

figures often have a tolerance of subordinates and circumstance that is strained and glacial; Matthew Sweet contended that Mills's forte was in portraying 'the fatigued, the self-disgusted, and the men who stayed behind or who ran away' (2005: 244).

Of the younger 'leading men' Stanley Baker became the first blue-collar leading man in British cinema, a decade before Michael Caine or Tom Courtenay achieved international fame. His first significant role of Lieutenant Bennett in *The Cruel Sea* (Charles Frend 1953) was a melange of swagger, deep insecurity and class envy and even in the stereotyped parts of his Rank Organisation career, Baker's heavies had the quality of stillness. Virtually from the earliest days of cinema, there have been those leading players to whom their work on-screen was less important than their publicity, and for much of the 1950s, this would seem to apply to Laurence Harvey before *Room at the Top* (Jack Clayton 1959). The role of Joe Lampton deployed his seldom exploited talent for ambitious outsiders while his performance singing and dancing spiv in *Expresso Bongo* (Val Guest 1959) is akin to one liberated from a filmic, and partially self-created, straitjacket.

In the 'leading ladies' section, Diana Dors was the 'bad blonde', with a screen image that was a fusion between the publicity department of the Rank Organisation, her then husband and the actress herself. Her world was one of gin and tonics in a roadhouse somewhere in the Home Counties, with a two-tone Ford Zephyr-Zodiac parked outside and Dennis Lotis singing from the jukebox – affluent but certainly far from genteel. Sylvia Syms was, for many years, the 'nice blonde' of ABPC, whose genteel expression masked insight and festering anger. With the 'comics', Norman Wisdom's characters are figures that hail from the traditions of Victorian live entertainment battling with the social hypocrisies of Macmillan-era Britain. Charlie Chaplin regarded him as his 'favourite clown', *A Stitch in Time* (Robert Asher 1963) was so successful behind the Iron Curtain that it was screened in football stadia and in the early 1960s, the comic's Rank films outsold James Bond pictures in world markets. As for Leslie Phillips and Terry-Thomas, they were the perfect embodiment of the wartime 'temporary officer' attempting to adapt, with various degrees of success, to the 1950s and 1960s.

Pauline Kael once argued that 'movies dictate what the producers thought people would pay to see – which was not always the same as what they would pay to see' (1996: 100), and this applies to the members of the Rank and ABPC studio rosters. A select number of character actors became stars by public demand, such as Sidney James, one of the greatest support actors of British cinema, and James Robertson Justice, the finest embodiment of post-war 'soppy-stern' male authority. I will refer to the personal background of each actor only in so far as it shaped their career, but those of Margaret Rutherford and Hattie Jacques are

especially crucial in the formation of images that, especially regarding the latter, became their prisons.

Finally, I have devoted chapters to two actors whose fluidity of talent often defied conventional casting. The Australian-raised Peter Finch was, quite simply, one of the finest exponents of British cinema in evoking the flaws, the human vanity and the fragility of an authority figure. His patriarchs and senior officers often conveyed a vulnerability in their fatherliness, a need to be loved more than a requirement that their rank and uniform be respected. Peter Sellers derived some of his fame from 'internationally funded' comedies such as *A Shot in the Dark* (Blake Edwards 1964), but the best use of his talents was in the exploration of the ambiguities of the British class structure. From his deluded trade union leader of *I'm All Right Jack* (John Boulting 1959) to the frustrated librarian of *Only Two Can Play* (Sidney Gilliat 1962), Sellers's characters were often adrift in a world they did not fully comprehend.

These actors simultaneously forged and deconstructed the fable of an almost mythical country where, as Gavin Stamp put it, 'cars are always black, there are no plastic signs, and Georgian terraces are properly grimy with dark-painted joinery' (quoted in Lewis 1994: 385). Police cars were always black, actors' hair was Brylcreemed, suits were sober and telephone boxes disgorged 4d on pressing button 'B'. Roger Manvell wrote in *The Film and the Public* of how actors could reveal 'on the international screen of the world's cinemas the finer qualities of temperament and feeling and thought and spirit proper to the nations to which they belong', and that within this ostensibly reliable and secure celluloid environment audiences were offered a presentation of the 'national character' by stars with the equal power to reassure and to challenge (1955: 85).

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