Celebrating British cinema of the 1950s

IAN MACKILLOP AND NEIL SINYARD

To counterbalance the rather tepid humanism of our cinema, it might also be said that it is snobbish, anti-intelligent, emotionally inhibited, willfully blind to the conditions and problems of the present, dedicated to an out of date, exhausted national idea. (Lindsay Anderson)

Who will ever forget those days at Iver when, cloistered in the fumed oak dining room (reminiscent of the golf club where no one ever paid his subscription), frightened producers blanched at the mere idea of any film that contained the smallest tincture of reality? (Frederic Raphael)

THE ORIGIN OF this book is an event which took place on Saturday, 5 December 1998 at the British Library in London. It was a study day consisting of lectures about British cinema in the 1950s: most of these are printed here, with an equal number of new essays which have been written since. In the evenings of the week preceding the study day, seven films were screened. They appeared under the headings of 'Festive Fifties' (*The Importance of Being Earnest*, in a sparkling new print), 'Community Fifties' (*John and Julie* and *The Browning Version*), 'Tough Fifties' (*Women of Twilight* and *Hell Drivers*) and 'Women's Fifties' (*My Teenage Daughter* and *Yield to the Night*).

I am Professor of English Literature at the University of Sheffield. I am the author of two books on British intellectual life: *F. R. Leavis: A Life in Criticism* (Allan Lane, 1995) and *The British Ethical Societies* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), and a book about François Truffaut and Henri Pierre Roché, author of *Jules and Jim* and *Two English Girls and the Continent*. Ian MacKillop

I have written over twenty books on film, including studies of Richard Lester, Nicolas Roeg and Jack Clayton. I am the co-editor of the ongoing series of monographs, 'British Film Makers', published by Manchester University Press. I grew up in the 1950s and my love of cinema dates from a childhood which has left indelible filmgoing memories: of a cinema within walking distance of seemingly everyone's home, of copies of *Picturegoer* and the *ABC Film Review*, of usherettes, and choc ices before the main feature, of continuous programmes that permitted you to stay in the cinema all day and see the main feature more than once, of the undignified scramble at the end to get out before the striking up of the National Anthem. Neil Sinyard

Why the 1950s? After all, as the prefatory remarks of Anderson and Raphael show, this is perhaps the most derided decade in British film history. It is commonly characterised as the era in which the national cinema retreated into quaintly comic evocations of community or into nostalgic recollections of the war. (It was Brian McFarlane who suggested that Lewis Gilbert's stereotypical war film of 1953, *The Sea Shall Not Have Them*, could be more aptly retitled *The Sea is Welcome to Them*.) Coming after the golden period of the immediate post-war years (with Olivier's rousing Shakespeare, Lean's compelling Dickens, the passionate opuses of Powell and Pressburger, a trilogy of masterpieces from Carol Reed and much else besides) and before the mould-breaking New Wave of the early 1960s (Richardson, Reisz, Schlesinger and others), British cinema of the 1950s has commonly been stigmatised as conservative and dull. It is a judgment ripe for reappraisal, and the films of the decade invite a closer consideration not simply as social documents (which hitherto has generally been the approach, apologetically undertaken) but also as aesthetic artefacts.

It would not do to over-state the achievement: after all, it is a period in which directors such as Alberto Cavalcanti, Thorold Dickinson, Carol Reed and Robert Hamer (as Philip Kemp persuasively demonstrates in this collection) for the most part failed to deliver on the promise they had shown in the late 1940s. It is also a period which sees a migration to Hollywood of some of its most luminous acting talent: James Mason, Deborah Kerr, Stewart Granger, the inimitable Audrey Hepburn and the irreplaceable Jean Simmons. At the same time, this is a period in which British cinema was connecting with its home audience more successfully than at any time in its history, culminating in the quite extraordinary statistic (almost inconceivable today) that the top twelve box-office films of 1959 in Britain were all actually made in Britain. The legacy of the 1950s is being felt to this day. The modest and genial mayhem of comedies like *The Parole Officer* (2001) and *Lucky Break* (2001) recall the filmic material of stars like Norman Wisdom, Tony Hancock and Peter Sellers in their 1950s heyday, just as Hugh Grant's bumbling comic hero in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) is essentially the Ian Carmichael 'silly ass' transmogrified for a more permissive era. It might be recalled that two of the most progressive directors of the modern cinema, Mike Figgis and David Mamet, have seen fit to remake Terence Rattigan classics of around that era, respectively, *The Browning Version* (1994) and *The Winslow Boy* (1999); and who could really argue that either made a better fist of it than the Anthony Asquith versions of half a century ago? (The chapter by Dominic Shellard in this volume offers a powerful contribution to the continuing re-evaluation of Rattigan.)

In the recent edition of the *Journal of Popular British Cinema* (Flicks Books 2001), Roy Stafford quotes some representative views of British cinema of the 1950s: ‘timid’, ‘complacent’, ‘safe’, ‘dim’, ‘anodyne’ are the adjectives used, with the judgment being that this is the ‘doldrums era’. British cinema at this time consists of parochial comedy – what one might compositely call the ‘Carry On Doctor at St Trinian’s’ school of mirth – weary transpositions of West End successes, and bland World War II heroics designed to steel us against the loss of the Empire. But is this really true? For example, Anthony Asquith’s stage adaptations have often been dismissed as unimaginative filmed theatre, but to see his version of *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1952) with an appreciative audience is to recognise how meticulously it has been edited, with every cut timed to the second to ensure that each laugh is given its due, but without covering the following line and therefore without disrupting the verbal flow. Similarly with the war films, as Fred Inglis argues passionately in his chapter, there is a lot more going on than nostalgia. What home audiences might have been responding to in these films was a proud but restrained Englishness that made a welcome contrast to American brashness. (There is a separate book to be written about the depiction of Americans in British films of that time: some way from a special relationship.) In any case, is it not an oversimplification to recall the service portrayal of, say, Jack Hawkins, Richard Todd and Kenneth More as icons of wartime heroism, and imply that the evocations of World War II were always offered in a spirit of nostalgia and as demonstrations of national cohesion where everyone knew his place? This hardly fits the madness of David Lean’s *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) or the cruelties of Asquith’s *Orders to Kill* (1958) and Jack Lee’s *Circle of Deception* (1960). John Mills’s justly famous performance of masculinity in crisis in *Ice Cold in Alex* (1958) is the absolute reverse of stiff upper-lip: he is as tremulous, sulky, simpering and vulnerable as James Stewart on a bad day, and indeed foreshadows Stewart’s performance nearly a decade later in *The Flight of the Phoenix* (1965), where, like Mills, he almost cracks up at the indignity of being bested by German superiority. Nor does nostalgia and nobility fit the impudent opening of a war film like Don Chaffey’s *Danger Within* (1958), when what at first looks like a dead body tragically stretched out on the ground after battle is actually revealed to be a sunbathing prisoner of war. (The deception is exposed when he begins to scratch his behind.) ‘What do you think this place is, a holiday camp?’ asks Bernard Lee of Dennis Price, and it is a fair question: as well as its extended homage to the plot situation of Billy Wilder’s 1953 hit, *Stalag 17* (‘Who is the traitor in our midst?’), *Danger Within* is also not afraid to seek an emulation of that film’s wicked and sometimes transgressive comedy. Dennis

Price (as Hamlet!), Michael Wilding and Peter Jones have a whale of a time. The film seems less about war than an extended metaphor on the concept, in all its forms, of camp.

British film of this period is not often credited with that kind of audacity or comic cheek. The comedy is often characterised as postcard or parochial, with the likeable but limited registers of, say, Henry Cornelius's *Genevieve* (1953) or Basil Dearden's *The Smallest Show on Earth* (1957) being typical of the range. Actually there is a surreal quality to the latter film, exemplified by Margaret Rutherford's imperious observation, as the person in charge of the of the Bijou cinema's finances, that 'you could hardly send a third of a chicken to the Chancellor of the Exchequer!' (The context of such a statement seems quite superfluous.) It also has its cutting edge, as when someone remarks that 'she was as pretty as a picture' before adding the mortifying modification, 'a B-picture, mind you'. In his contribution to this book, Dave Rolinson, particularly in his recovery of the neglected *The Horse's Mouth* (Ronald Neame, 1958), aptly draws attention to a sharper edge to 1950s British film comedy than is always acknowledged. This edge sometimes comes through in a performance like Peter Sellers's hatchet job on Wilfred Pickles in *The Naked Truth* (Mario Zampi, 1957), or even in Sellers's plaintive last line in Alexander Mackendrick's *The Ladykillers* (1955) when confronted by a former friend, now frenzied assailant (Danny Green), who is about to kill him: 'Where's your sense of humour?' The darkness of that film has been generally recognised and celebrated, but this is not the case with Mackendrick's previous and most underrated comedy, *The Maggie* (1954), about an American businessman (Paul Douglas) who, trying to transport some cargo to a nearby Scottish island, has the misfortune to run into the crew of an old puffer who offer to help him – at a price. Often characterised as a light piece of Scottish whimsy, *The Maggie* is actually closer to the ferocity of something like *The Wicker Man* in its study of the progressive humiliation and torture by wily locals of its naive, outsider hero. After a series of adventures more harrowing than humorous and where the hero is almost killed by the young boy in the crew, the film builds to an extraordinary moment when the American decides to sacrifice his cargo (symbolically, materialism) in order to save the boat (symbolically, tradition). At this point, Douglas turns to the old skipper, who has given him such grief, and, with the utmost logic and sincerity, utters what must be one of the most remarkable lines of any screen comedy. 'I want you to understand something – I'm serious,' he says. 'If you laugh at me for this, I'll kill you with my bare hands.'

The screenplay for *The Maggie* was the work of the American, William Rose, one of the best screenwriters of this (or any other) period. His

contribution is a reminder of the truism that one of the limitations of British film at this time was that it was a writer's and an actor's cinema: the director's presence was nebulous to the point of invisibility and there was a poverty of visual style. The point tended to be underlined by the curious statistic that, during the 1950s, no fewer than eleven British films were Oscar-nominated in the writing categories, which was by far its best representation in any Oscar category. Between the Oscar-winning writing successes of *Seven Days to Noon* (1950), *The Lavender Hill Mob* (1951) and *Room at the Top* (1959) came nominations for *The Man in the White Suit* (1951), *The Sound Barrier* (1952), *Genevieve* (1953), *The Cruel Sea* (1953), *The Captain's Paradise* (1953), *The Ladykillers* (1955), *The Horse's Mouth* (1958) and *Separate Tables* (1958). These remind us that the literateness of British film of the decade is something to be treasured, but pictorial skill must be recognised too. After all, visual reticence is an appropriate correlative to a reticence of temperament: when Anthony Asquith shoots the emotional breakdown of the repressed schoolmaster Crocker-Harris (Michael Redgrave) in *The Browning Version* from behind his back, one senses a perfectly appropriate visual respect for the character's private pain, for the man's sense of shame at this ungentlemanly release of tears that must be hidden from view. (Corin Redgrave discusses this moment sensitively in his moving recollection of his father in this book.) In a different vein, J. Lee Thompson's heightened style can also be absolutely in harmony with its subject: Melanie Williams's discussion in this volume of the expressive appropriateness of his *mise-en-scène* in *Woman in a Dressing Gown* (1957) silences forever Jean-Luc Godard's vituperation against its so-called excrescences.

Indeed there is more visual bravura in the British cinema of this time than is often recognised. Think of the virtuoso scene in Lean's *Hobson's Choice* (1953) when a drunken Charles Laughton is mesmerised by the reflection of the moon in a gleaming Manchester puddle; or, in the same film, the wonderful Victorian self-parody of the opening, the grim atmosphere deflated when the dark shadow of Laughton appears at the doorway, wobbles and then emits a rotund belch. The stricken close-up of Claire Bloom in Carol Reed's *The Man Between* (1953), as she sees her lover shot in the snow, resonates long after the film is over: it affected Andrew Sarris more deeply, he said, than the whole of *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*. Charles Frend's *The Long Arm* (1957) has a teasingly deceptive flashback in the manner of Hitchcock, and a poignant use of subjective fades to black to suggest the 'dying of the light' as a mortally injured Ian Bannen tries unavailingly to attend to what a policeman is saying to him. In Charles Crichton's *Dance Hall* (1950), the crosscutting between dance hall and train

station as the heroine (Natasha Parry) is taken almost to the point of suicide eloquently forges a connection between the deceptive illusions of the former setting ('You're Only Dreaming' is its theme song) and the heroine's current desperation: considering the film thirty years later in the December 1981 issue of *Films Illustrated*, the critic Brian Baxter had no hesitation in declaring Crichton, on this evidence, as a greater director than Bernardo Bertolucci. No less memorable is a begrimed and tormented Rod Steiger finally destroyed by his one human weakness – his love of his dog – as he tries to cross the border in Ken Annakin's extraordinary *Across the Bridge* (1957). This is one of the finest of all Graham Greene adaptations, a masterpiece in Mike Leigh's eyes (see his foreword to Annakin's autobiography, *So You Wanna be a Film Director*), one of Quentin Tarantino's top ten films, and a British film that, in theme, ambience and atmosphere, even looks ahead to Orson Welles's noir masterpiece of a year later, *Touch of Evil*. No visual impoverishment there.

Far from being cinematically backward, 1950s British film had dashes of imagination that outdid more famous or prestigious examples from the cinematic canon. Lewis Gilbert's *The Good Die Young* (1954) has a doomed fatalistic narration over a planned crime that becomes a rendezvous with death which anticipates the similar mode of narrative presentation in Stanley Kubrick's *The Killing* (1956). For shock effect, the star heroine of *The Ship that Died of Shame* (Basil Dearden, 1956), played by Virginia McKenna, is killed off even sooner than Janet Leigh in *Psycho*. The wail of a car horn in Seth Holt's *Nowhere to Go* (1958), in its context, is an imaginative trope of tragedy and death in a manner that looks forward to *Chinatown* (1974). Even Guy Hamilton's film of J.B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls* (1954) makes one think ahead to Luis Buñuel's *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972) with its similar ingredients of interrupted meals and ghosts, and its critique of a self-serving, uncaring bourgeoisie who believe there is no such thing as society. Of course, one is not chauvinistically arguing that these British films are on the same level of artistic accomplishment as the films they recall: in some cases, far from it. But it does suggest that British cinema of the time was more formally and thematically adventurous than it is sometimes given credit for.

The national cinema of the decade was, then, shot through with sometimes unexpected variety and interesting contradictions. It has been described as insular and parochial, but, in fact, a number of foreign voices added a more complex colouration. The case of Joseph Losey is discussed elsewhere in these pages, but one might also cite Jacques Tourneur, whose British horror film *Night of the Demon* (1957) has the spooky suggestiveness of his best work for Val Lewton, or Hugo Fregonese, whose *Harry Black and the Tiger*

(1958) is one of the finest safari movies ever made, or Robert Parrish, whose film *The Purple Plain* (1954) is a war film with a difference, pitting a quest for survival alongside a fascination with death and featuring the finest ever screen performance of one of our most dependable supporting actors, Maurice Denham. A special case is the blacklisted Cy Endfield, who, like Losey, came to England from Hollywood to restart his career, and who was to find his alter ego in Stanley Baker and fulfil his promise in *Zulu* (1964). *Hell Drivers* (1957) is particularly interesting for the way Endfield uses the material to suggest an allegory of his own situation (a hero trying to shake off his past and make a new start) and injects an unashamed melodrama into the action that is redolent of the radical American cinema of the late 1940s. Patrick McGoohan's black-leather villainy in the film seems almost like a conscious aping of Marlon Brando's performance in *The Wild One* (1954), which, for many of us at that time, would have been the nearest we could get to seeing it: *The Wild One* had been banned from public exhibition for alleged excessive violence by the British Board of Film Censors, whose operation then is astutely discussed below by Tony Aldgate.

Again a classic image from 1950s British cinema would be Jack Hawkins in *The Cruel Sea*, the epitome of quiet English integrity. But during this decade, Hawkins is also the permanently irascible Police Inspector Gideon of *Gideon's Day* (John Ford, 1958), possibly a forerunner of David Jason's Frost; or the Hentzau-like suave political villain in Sidney Gilliat's *State Secret* (1950) who, having made a hurried getaway, even has the cheek to pop back and enquire of the hero if he knows of any good vacant Chair of Political Science. Dirk Bogarde is, archetypally, Simon Sparrow of the Doctor films and Rank's resident self-sacrificing romantic of *The Wind Cannot Read* (1956) and *A Tale of Two Cities* (1958); see Robert Giddings's piece for a careful historical placing of the latter film in the British film history of the decade. But Bogarde is also the exotic ('homoerotic'?) Spanish hero of *The Spanish Gardener* (Philip Leacock, 1956) and the notorious bandit in *The Singer not the Song* (Roy Baker, 1960), which is the closest the British cinema has got – or might want to get – to *Duel in the Sun*. A dual role in *Libel* (Anthony Asquith, 1959) allows Bogarde to give his screen image a thorough going over, as if he is already looking forward to *The Servant*: he does a hilarious, mocking impression of his 'good' self and even makes the simple phrase 'in Darlington' sound like the height of decadence and degeneracy.

If the British cinema of the decade has been characterised as a complacent cinema, then the cracks in that complacency are discernible some time before the appearance of the New Wave, with its new priorities, its new order of things, its new social configurations. The old class hierarchies are

breaking down along with the remembered comradeship of the war. ‘Gentleman’s agreement, old boy?’ says Roland Culver’s peacetime Major (a superb performance) to Richard Attenborough’s post-war spiv in *The Ship that Died of Shame* (1955), to which Attenborough replies: ‘Don’t be silly’. It seems a logical progression from that to *The League of Gentlemen* (Basil Dearden, 1960), where the kind of military expertise that was formerly put to the service of the nation is now applied to bank robbery, the ultimate statement of post-war disillusionment. And, as Alison Platt argues later in these pages about *The Spanish Gardener*, if the moral health of the country can be gauged by the way it treats its children, then the British cinema of the time was giving off some quite ambiguous signals. Films like Alexander Mackendrick’s *Mandy* (1952) and J. Lee Thompson’s *The Yellow Balloon* (1952) both convey a troubled sense of the vulnerability of children in an era of post-war demoralisation where the scars of battle are still visible on the landscape.

In his essay on Raymond Durnat Robert Murphy points out how film criticism can become outdated and its authors be time-bound. The academic manner aspires to a universality which time will show to be pitiful. As editors we do not think we can escape being locked into the period in which these essay were written and we freely confess it. We have tried to admit our time-determined nature by the small device of giving biographical notes on contributors which are more personal than is customary, pointing up the generations (several) to which we belong. Just as criticism and commentary belong in time, so do the films themselves on which we write: for them existence in time implies deterioration. Of course film is prolifically available in the theatres, not to mention TV, video and DVD, but there is actually no reason to be optimistic about the survival and preservation of the medium, a subject dealt with here by Bryony Dixon. Even landmark films are not reliably available. One such is the subject of Dave Rolinson’s essay: *The Horse’s Mouth* (Ronald Neame, 1958), with Alec Guinness who partly wrote it. Dixon tells us that it is held at the British Film Institute, but only in a colour positive acquired from a major American distributor which was clearing out its vaults. As this is the only element archivally existing, it is unavailable for screening or research in the United Kingdom. There *may* be 16mm prints somewhere, dating from the time when many films were reprinted for non-theatrical use and there is an American VHS tape available, but it cannot be said that there is a proper original-format 35mm print preserved in any UK collection. We hope this book will draw attention to such problems.

Although not intended as a comprehensive survey of the decade (film historians such as David Pirie and Peter Hutchings, for example, have dealt with the 1950s phenomenon of Hammer horror in some detail), this collection

tries to give new perspectives on areas and personalities hitherto neglected: for example, Charles Barr's investigation of the post-*Western Approaches* work of Pat Jackson; Brian McFarlane's heartening tribute to that staple diet of the double bill, the British B-movie; Stephen Lacey's analysis of the close interaction between theatre and film in the British cinema of this decade; Kerry Kidd's reading of *Women of Twilight* that fascinatingly reconstructs the sexual politics of the time. As well as revaluing large areas of British cinema, the book offers surveys of other cinematic features of the decade. Archivist Bryony Dixon shows her expertise on how these films are preserved; Sarah Easen recalls the impact of the Festival of Britain on the British film industry; Eric Hedling and Robert Murphy pay homage to two of the most valuable film commentators of the period, Lindsay Anderson and Raymond Durgnat. Isabel Quigly sharply evokes the life of the national film critic during this time, in so doing recovering something of the quality of the whole cinema-going experience in the 1950s, which, memory tells us, is so different from our present multiplex days. (As Terence Davies's films lovingly show, there was still a magic and an innocence attached to the cinema in those days, which one can rediscover in reading through fan magazines and old film annuals: a reader wins 10s 6d from *Picturegoer* for observing that 'no screen actor has whiter teeth than Audie Murphy'; a *Preview* film annual (1960) has an article by Rock Hudson with a title that would now take on a retrospective irony: 'Leave My Private Life Alone'.)

We would have liked to include more. We have Isabel Quigly, Erik Hedling and Robert Murphy on film criticism of the 1950s, but we would have liked something on Paul Dehn, on Kenneth Tynan as film critic and on the underrated Richard Mallett of *Punch*, admirably disinterred by Richard Chatten in a 2001 essay in the *Journal of British Cinema*. We would have liked reference to foreign views of British cinema, say, Stanley Kauffmann's from New York. We are always hearing that Truffaut said 'Britain' and 'cinema' are incompatible terms. But less known is his clear-sighted appraisal of *Doctor in the House*.

This is a historical documentary – hardly romanticized – about British medical schools. It has no plot, no suspense, no drama, but a series of gags and of characters, calm good humour, and excellent actors – especially Kenneth More, one of the drivers in *Genevieve*, playing the role of a student who deliberately fails his exams because his grandmother has bequeathed him £1000 a year for as long as his studies last. All lovers of English humour have to see this movie. It has lots of spirit. (*Arts*, December 1954)

Every word of this is true. The first 'Doctor' film has some of the quality of the first 'Carry On' film; an accuracy in showing what an actual work

situation is like (medical school, army national service), which in any case is a particular strength of British cinema. Of course, the 'Doctors' and the 'Carry Ons' degenerated into raucousness and camp, but at the beginning they were unpretentious observant comedy – and *Doctor in the House* is actually observant in an area in which the 'Doctors' are supposed to be weak (or, worse, 'misogynist'): note the place of Muriel Pavlow in it. Following through Truffaut's review, we might have had something to say about *Genevieve* with its enchanting score, and about Kenneth More, who was indeed an interesting actor, as realised by Peter Hall when he offered More the part of Claudius in *Hamlet* (More modestly declined). We would have liked more on cinemas themselves (the multiples like the emerging Granadas and State movie theatres, the aptly named Classics, and the best London cinemas, like the Curzon and the Academy). We are aware that we have nothing on the Film Society movement or on the *avant garde*, or on art films (though Sarah Easen mentions the 'Poet and Painter' films made for the Festival of Britain).

Nonetheless our contributors give unprecedented coverage to the decade and help us understand interrelationships between past and present, two in particular. First: a past period can help us see the present more clearly, by supplying a standard for judging the new. If we know X of the past, we are less likely to be bowled over by Y in the present. So Alison Platt's essay about the old *Spanish Gardener* makes the new *Billy Elliot* look less than impressive. Second: our present can alert us to unrecognised felicities of the past. Thus, Platt also shows that we who have *The Sixth Sense* now are the better placed for observing how good the 1950s was at showing children, especially children old before their time (whatever that is).

Our contributors also show what it was like to see films in the 1950s, by trying to account for the experience of a generation of filmgoers whose enduring fondness for the films is bound up with recollections of the circumstances and conditions under which they were shown. A new era was undoubtedly coming. 'Change was the keyword for the end of the fifties,' said Patricia Warren, seeing on the horizon the films of the British New Wave and first-rate movies like *Room at the Top* (Jack Clayton, 1959), *Peeping Tom* (Michael Powell, 1960) and *Tunes of Glory* (Ronald Neame, 1960) which portended a different direction. We hope this book demonstrates that these later achievements came out of the rich soil of the 1950s.