Intimate stranger: the early British films of Joseph Losey

NEIL SINYARD

In Hollywood you're still one of the bad boys. (*The Intimate Stranger*)

He doesn't like the world. It's a good beginning. (*The Damned*)

EVER AN EMOTIONAL soul, Dirk Bogarde confessed to being reduced to tears by the rave review in *The Times* when *The Servant* was premièred at the end of 1963. For Bogarde, this prestigious endorsement of his extraordinary performance as Barrett, the man-servant who brings the life of the aristocrat he serves crashing down about his ears, was a career turning-point, the fulfilment of his ambition to be recognised as a major screen actor and not simply a matinee idol. It marked a similar culmination for its director, Joseph Losey, who, after seeking work in England following his blacklisting in Hollywood during the McCarthy period, had struggled for a decade with, as he saw it, indifferent scripts, philistine producers and studio conformity. In an interview in *Films and Filming* in October 1963, he had declared: '*The Servant* is the only picture I have ever made in my life where there was no interference from beginning to end, either on script, casting, cutting, music or on anything else. The result, whether the film succeeds or not, whether one likes the film or not, at least it's something I can defend as being mine. It is all of one piece.'

As a film-struck teenager, I saw *The Servant* when it was first released and can recall being utterly bowled over by it. At that time, infected by a fashionable disdain towards British cinema in comparison with the panache

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 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*

of Hollywood and the passion of Europe, I was stunned by the film's make-over of Bogarde as a great screen character actor, and mesmerised by a Harold Pinter screenplay that seemed to set new standards for film writing in Britain. (Even a line like 'I'm afraid it's not very encouraging, Miss, the weather forecast,' as delivered by an insinuating Bogarde to a startled Wendy Craig, seemed to crackle with all kinds of underlying menace and cheek.) Above all, in a British cinema dominated by words and a ponderous visual imagination, here at last was a real film, full of sinuous and suggestive camera movement and visual symbolism, notably of décor, bars and mirrors, which I came to recognise as part of Losey's visual signature. It was that rare thing: a sexy British film. Indeed it was an even rarer thing in British cinema: a self-conscious art movie that combined prescient social criticism (it was *the* film that anatomised the Britain of the Profumo era) with a teasing density and ambiguity of theme and detail that one associated more with foreign directors such as Fellini or Resnais. Coming out of the auditorium, I became involved in an earnest conversation with an usherette who was puzzled by the moment towards the end of the film when Bogarde offers a befuddled James Fox a drink: what was in it? Whatever it was, its effect was devastating, reducing Fox to a state that seemed almost prophetic of the mental degeneration he would experience in Nic Roeg and Donald Cammell's similarly mind-blowing movie, *Performance* – perhaps the one other British film of this era to match up to Losey's art house audacity.

At the time, I knew something of Losey's reputation. I certainly remember seeing *Blind Date* (US: *Chance Meeting*) of 1959 because the predatory eroticism of Micheline Presle's socialite had burned deep in my youthful imagination, as had (for different reasons) Stanley Baker's brusque police inspector with a head cold, a characterisation some distance from the avuncular law officers of Jack Warner and Jack Hawkins one was accustomed to in British film and surely an anticipation of Stratford Johns's great Inspector Barlow in BBC-TV's classic *Z-Cars* series. I could also remember *The Gypsy and the Gentleman* (1957) for its unusual foreignness and the way this seemed to connote passion, particularly in Merlina Mercouri's devastation of the aristocrat's home ('I will smash everything you've got, everything you've got,' she shrieked in this strange accent), and I have no doubt that I later made the thematic connection with *The Servant*. However, I suspect Losey's name first really registered with me when listening to a feature on the making of *Eve* (1962) in the BBC radio magazine, *Movie-Go-Round*. I am sure people of my generation would remember this Sunday afternoon programme and its endearing routine of familiar ingredients: the theme tune from *Carousel*, the suave introductions of Peter Haigh, the star-struck news report of a breathy

Peter Noble, the excellent edited highlights of current releases, Stanley Black often being contentious on film music, Gordon Gow invariably being astute on the new films. In this particular programme featuring *Eve*, I was startled to hear Jeanne Moreau describing Losey as one of the greatest of contemporary film-makers. I was probably unaware then that what Moreau was doing was contributing to a debate that was actually one of the most heated critical issues about British cinema at this time: namely, the status of Joseph Losey.

In an interview-article on Losey in 1961 in *Sight and Sound*, John Gillett and Penelope Houston drew attention particularly to the contrasting response to him in Britain and France, where he (surely alone amongst film-makers in Britain at that time, albeit an American) was gathering a cult reputation. Gillett and Houston tellingly illustrated this contrast by quoting six critical opinions on Losey's *The Criminal* (US: *The Concrete Jungle*) of 1960, the first three hailing the lucidity and intelligence of the film's style, the next three finding that same style hysterical and discordant in relation to its material. As Gillett and Houston drily observed, the nationalities proclaimed themselves, so no prizes were offered for guessing that the first three views were French and the next were British. The implication of this went much further than a director's reputation, however: it seemed in some way to go to the root of film aesthetics, of what a good film was, of 'what film was for', of the relation between form and content. The debate was considerably intensified by the appearance of the magazine *Movie* in June 1962 as an aesthetic counterblast to what it saw as the insufferable and uncommitted refinement of *Sight and Sound*. Bursting with *Cahiers du Cinéma*-type aesthetic and auteurist polemic, *Movie* began with a sustained assault on what it claimed was the irredeemable aesthetic poverty of British film, the only significant exception, in its view, being Joseph Losey, left in splendid isolation as the only director working in Britain deserving of *Movie*'s accolade of 'brilliant'. If Losey is a fascinating case, then, it is not only because of the particular quality of these early films: it is also because their making and their reception have so much to say about what was going on at the time in film criticism. As Losey was having his titanic struggles with studios and actors and applying his outsider's perspective on English mores (notably, sex and class), the films were also providing a focus and indeed a battleground for conflicting critical ideas about the cinema in general and British cinema in particular.

The Servant could be seen as the completion of the first phase of Losey's English period, which had begun in 1954 with his first film in England, *The Sleeping Tiger*. Here also we had Dirk Bogarde in the leading role as a

sinister guest (in this case a hardened criminal whom a psychiatrist is attempting to reform) let loose in an ostensibly respectable household of self-deceiving people, notably the psychiatrist (Alexander Knox) and his wife (Alexis Smith). The progression is similar to that in *The Servant*: the interloper causes havoc or, more precisely, brings to the surface weaknesses and dissatisfactions that were lurking in that household to begin with. Losey landed the assignment through the good auspices of fellow blacklisted American exile, Carl Foreman, who co-authored the screenplay under a pseudonym with another blacklisted screenwriter, Harold Buchman (brother of the more famous Sidney Buchman). Initially duped into thinking he was to be directed by Victor Hanbury, which was to be Losey's pseudonym on the credits, Bogarde at this stage knew nothing of Losey's previous work and rather crossly insisted on seeing a sample. Twenty minutes of *The Prowler* (1951) were enough to convince him that here was a director who, to say the least, knew what he was doing. The making of the film had its fraught moments, notably when Losey had to be spirited out of the hotel where he was staying when it was discovered that one of the other guests was the rabidly anti-communist Ginger Rogers, who was in England to make a thriller with David Miller called *The Beautiful Stranger* (one hostile word from her could have jeopardised the entire production). But from it came a close bond between actor and director that was to have a profound effect on both of their careers.

'We thought the script itself was frightful,' Bogarde told the editors of *Isis* in February 1964, 'and it embarrassed us incredibly to do it. Joe had to embellish this rubbish, as he always has had to do, and in consequence it was much more exciting to do: one found reasons for doing dreadful dialogue and making it sound all right.' Maybe this came out of Losey's theatrical experience, because in *The Empty Space* (1967) Peter Brook describes a similar experience: faced with a dreadful script, the cast had commissioned another, only to find that, by the time the improved and revised script was ready, they had found ways of making the original work. One could draw another lesson from this kind of experience, which was something that David Deutsch, the associate producer on *The Gypsy and the Gentleman*, had concluded: that the film was awful but the direction was extraordinary, the film's awfulness somehow showing up the director's exceptional qualities in the way that a good film might not have done (because there it is more difficult to separate one contribution from another). 'Joe showed an absolutely sure touch rarely seen in England in those days,' Deutsch told Edith de Rham. 'For the first time I came into contact with someone who truly recreated the Regency period visually. And he did this within the framework

of a very conventional major studio. Joe was a lonely figure there [i.e. Rank], because they weren't used to people doing things that way.'

The characteristic that most distinguishes Losey's early films from other English films of their time is the energy of the visual style. With the exception of Michael Powell, British cinema of this time seemed mostly devoid of film stylists: form tended to be subordinated to content. Losey's films brought the form/content debate to the surface because the visual power and ornateness seemed, to many eyes, out of all proportion to the mundaneness of the subject matter. That, of course, begged the question of what the subject matter was. Ostensibly *The Sleeping Tiger* is a 'social problem' movie about a psychiatric experiment, which might seem to demand a clinical, objective approach. The sub-text, though, concerns a sterile marriage whose fissures are exposed by the arrival of a demonic, dynamic stranger and whose problems undercut both the motives and the validity of the psychiatrist's research. Like the philosophers in *Accident* (1967), he is a character who can pronounce loftily and smugly about the psychological problems of others without being fully in tune with his own emotions, the consequence being that his research is contaminated by his lack of self-knowledge. The noticeable self-consciousness of the style, then, operates in an almost Brechtian way to pull you out of narrative involvement into a more contemplative relation to the film. As with *Time Without Pity*, *Blind Date* and *Eve*, the plot is the weakest, or the least important, part of the film. In 1963, in *Films and Filming*, Losey remarked that the plot of *Blind Date* did not interest him at all, which is as well because, on the level of thriller, it is completely implausible. Similarly with *Eve*, he thought that the basic situation was so commonplace and classical that an audience could more or less take it as read, be trusted to tell that story for themselves, which in turn allowed Losey room to step back and use it as a frame to tell another story – a story within a story.

In *The Sleeping Tiger*, for example, the plot is merely a pretext for exploring different areas through means other than pure narrative – for example, expressive design, visual motifs, symbolism. Mirror shots predominate in a way that reflects the characters' narcissism, the brittleness of appearances, and the imminent reversals of power that will take place in the household. (For example, the psychiatrist is given six months for his experiment to work: towards the end, when his wife has started an affair with the criminal, she asks Bogarde for a trial period of six months for their relationship to work, a telling detail of how the power in the house has completely shifted.) Pictures are used to comment on character: the abstract in the psychiatrist's room says a lot about his dry, mechanical perception of personality, just as the total bafflement the picture induces from the policeman (Hugh Griffith)

shows that man's down-to-earth, unimaginative pragmatism. The wife's tormented progress through the film can be mapped through her symbolic association with flowers (another Losey trademark), from, for example, the decorous way she arranges them early in the film to the way she crashes into a vase of flowers near the end when her life is spiralling out of control. The film's most portentous symbol is in its title. 'There is a sleeping tiger in the dark forest of every human personality,' the psychiatrist has told his patient, little realising the statement's applicability less to the patient than to his own wife, whose repressed and anguished passion will destroy her through no less an act than crashing her car through an advertising hoarding featuring Esso's famous leaping tiger ('Put a tiger in your tank'). Even the most flamboyant of directors might have hesitated at the blatant symbolism, but Losey goes straight for it. We are a long way there from British understatement and that may be a good thing. As Gavin Lambert said at the time: 'There is a splendour about this film, which has one of the most absurdly extravagant plots on record, and never flinches from it.'

As well as the energy of the visual style, what also marks out Losey's English films at this time is what one might call his American 'baggage' – his background and early experience in American cinema, which is signalled quite overtly in these movies. He is not the only director in England to be using American actors of below top rank (Lance Comfort is doing the same), nor is he the only American director of the time compelled to work in England (there is the interesting parallel case of the blacklisted Cy Endfield, who was to make the frenetic *Hell Drivers* in a style that also ruffled the feathers of the more staid of English critics). But the Americanism seems closer to the surface in Losey's case. For example, perhaps as a kind of safeguard or reassurance, he surrounds himself with American actors in leading roles: Alexis Smith in *The Sleeping Tiger*; Richard Basehart and Mary Murphy in *The Intimate Stranger* (US: *A Finger of Guilt*); Macdonald Carey, with whom he had worked in his 1949 American film, *The Dividing Line* (US: *The Lawless*), and Viveca Lindfors in *The Damned* (US: *These are the Damned*). The American background is also reflected in the writers he uses, frequently blacklisted comrades: Carl Foreman and Harold Buchman for *The Sleeping Tiger*, Howard Koch for *The Intimate Stranger*, Ben Barzman for *Blind Date*. The film in which Losey's background is most obvious is *The Intimate Stranger* in which the hero (Richard Basehart) is a former American film editor who, partly through an advantageous marriage, has become an important executive producer in England. The plot concerns an attempt by a jealous employee (Mervyn Johns) to discredit him by concocting evidence of an affair he is supposed to have had with a young actress (Mary Murphy).

The real concerns of the film seem to be quite different from this, however: more to do with the exploration of the difficulties of an American film man in an alien English environment where he is regarded as showy and extravagant; and also of a man trying to escape from, and live down, a so-called shady past that has compelled him to leave his country (in this film it is sex rather than politics that has landed him in trouble). It has its filmic in-jokes, such as the moment when Basehart seems about to commit suicide by jumping from a high building, an allusion to his most famous role at that time as the similarly suicidal hero of Henry Hathaway's *Fourteen Hours* (1951). More pointed, though, is the revelation of the identity of the villain – a peevish, small-minded individual – and the description of him, at a key moment, as a 'scheming, spying informer'. The equation of the villain with the tactics of McCarthyism is explicit there, as is the idea of the hero as someone who has been falsely 'victimised' (though it is also suggested that his behaviour has made him vulnerable to that form of attack). Made with modest means in twelve days, the film remains essentially a crisp B-picture thriller, but with a striking style and an unusually dense sub-text.

There is another way of reading the 'American baggage' in Losey's early films and it is less biographical than psychological. One of Losey's favourite actors, Alexander Knox, who appeared in three of his films (*The Sleeping Tiger*, *The Damned*, *Accident*), alluded to that when he opined to Losey's biographer Edith de Rham that 'Joe could have been one of the very great directors, but he was carrying around too much negative psychological baggage from his early days, and from the blacklist, and from having to adapt to the "old school tie" style of movie making in England, and in the society as well.' As it developed, the career was to become full of the tensions and contradictions that emanated from the man himself. He became eminent enough to work with the biggest stars and the greatest writers, and yet he always seemed to pull back from commercial success, his films teetering on the borderline between profundity and pretentiousness.

A man who was to work with Brecht, Pinter, Stoppard, Mercer and Tennessee Williams was also, through the quirks of the British distribution system, to have one of his films released as second feature to a Hammer horror film. He directed two of the biggest screen stars, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, in one of their hugest commercial flops, *Boom!* (1968), a film widely dismissed as incomprehensible rubbish but championed by its screenwriter Tennessee Williams and hailed as a major artistic achievement by one of Losey's staunchest allies in his first years in England, the secretary of the British Board of Film Censors, John Trevelyan. A man who always proclaimed the importance of a film having a personal signature also

recognised that he was in an industry uniquely populated by people who ‘cavalierly hire specialists at vast prices only to devote themselves to hampering the work of the specialist they have hired’, as he said in *Films and Filming* in October 1963. The main creative contradiction in Losey is arguably something that was once asserted by Abe Polonsky about the Hollywood writer-director Robert Rossen (maker of such hard-hitting social dramas as *Body and Soul*, *All the King’s Men*, and later *The Hustler* and *Lilith*), who roughly shared Losey’s political orientation but who was to buckle under pressure from the House UnAmerican Activities Committee and name names: a tension between art house pretension and melodramatic propensity.

Was Losey ‘melodramatic’ or did he simply feel things deeply? Critics at the time certainly had to struggle with notions of ‘excess’ in relation to Losey’s work, but the argument was really about what that ‘excess’ might portend. Contrasting his work with the more conventional naturalist style of British directors, Penelope Houston was to remark that Losey ‘prefers something more high-powered: film-making in which, if one is not immediately aware of the horsepower under the bonnet, one is aware of nothing’. But this horsepower had several sources. It undoubtedly came from Losey’s own temperament, as someone who felt deeply about his craft in an industry and country where, as he remarked to Houston and Gillett in their *Sight and Sound* interview, ‘over here, I sometimes get the impression that they [the film executives] just don’t like films’. Losey really cares. Trapped within archaic narrative stereotypes – or maybe the narrative obviousness opens up different possibilities – are films of raw anguish from a hypersensitive man who may have felt, having to rebuild his career from scratch in middle age and in poor health, that time was running out.

Time Without Pity is the early film of Losey’s that particularly catches his peculiar qualities. Like its companion film of the same year, J. Lee Thompson’s *Yield to the Night* (1956), it is a plea for the abolition of capital punishment, as an alcoholic writer (Michael Redgrave) is given less than twenty-four hours to save his son (Alec McCowen) from being hanged for murder. However, unlike *Yield to the Night*, in *Time Without Pity* capital punishment is the backdrop to the drama rather than the theme. The theme is time itself: time as enemy, as insistent presence that mocks man’s attempt to get his life and relationships in order. The theme is sometimes conveyed through startlingly direct symbolism, such as the armory of alarm clocks owned by one character (Renée Houston) which at one stage all go off in unison, or the trial run of his new car by the actual murderer, the manufacturer (Leo McKern), where the race against time is an expression of his external power that is clearly compensating for inner insecurities. Leo

McKern's amazing performance is pitched somewhere between the extremes of Howard da Silva's crook in Nicholas Ray's 1948 film *They Live By Night* (like da Silva, McKern has an eye defect that carries symbolic overtones) and Rod Steiger's mogul in Robert Aldrich's *The Big Knife* (1954), whose gesture of hiding his head in his hands, as if warding off an invisible blow, is imitated by McKern, similarly a man of industrial power who feels emotionally impotent. The operatic turn is matched, in a different key, by Michael Redgrave, who comes lurching towards the camera in a paroxysm of self-torment as a disappointed character in desperate need of making up for lost time. For all their hostility and difference of circumstance, there is an eerie connection between the two men, both seeming driven by the Furies, both having contaminated blood (one by alcohol, the other by petrol), both being fundamentally isolated, insecure and self-destructive.

In his film dictionary Georges Sadoul remarks of *Time Without Pity* that 'this fevered film is a protest about the malaises of contemporary society'. It is true that Losey's films of this decade were sharply critical of British social institutions – one will see it also in the exposure of the 'old boy' network of the police in *Blind Date*, or the paralysing hierarchy of prison life in *The Criminal* that duplicates all that is wrong in the outside world. And certainly this film lays bare quite a number of contemporary malaises, which range from legalised execution, to irresponsible parenting, to a destructive combination of puritanism (Ann Todd) and philistinism (Leo McKern) that makes for a highly combustible marriage of elements in the English temperament. But what Sadoul calls the film's 'feverishness' is even more noticeable than the social criticism: it is as if Losey is making an Audenesque comment about a country in which nobody is well. A Goya bull looms in the background as McKern commits his murder of frustration; Tristram Cary's music comes in strident surges rather than unobtrusive accompaniment; and Redgrave's agitated gestures add up to a lexicon of his own guilt and failure, whether he be fiddling with a cat's cradle that reminds him of his son's imminent noose or thrusting away a drink with the jerky movement of a man who has just come into contact with vermin. If Losey has an edge on his English rivals of the time, it is precisely through this edginess, which gives the films their unusual visual attack and emotional energy.

Edgardo Cozarinski has a wonderful phrase for the core relationships in Losey's films: in his essay in Richard Roud's dictionary of cinema he calls them 'highly charged love-hate duets'. One can certainly feel this charge in the battle for masculine supremacy which takes place in the duets of Bogarde and Knox in *Sleeping Tiger*, Redgrave and McKern in *Time Without Pity*, Stanley Baker and Hardy Kruger in *Blind Date*, Bogarde and Fox in *The*

Servant: in all cases, the struggle for territorial advantage, physical and psychological, seems a working out of complex feelings of kinship as well as conflict. This is even true of Losey's short film *Man on the Beach* (1955), where the encounter between a transvestite criminal on the run (Michael Medwin) and a reclusive doctor (Donald Wolfitt) who is only gradually revealed to be blind seems an odd anticipation of early Pinter in its depiction of tense male confrontations. The heterosexual relationships seem even more tortured. It is quite remarkable in these films how often the lovers resort to physical violence with each other, as if it is only through manifestations of anger that love can be recognised or released: an attempted blow is often abruptly followed by a passionate kiss. This is reversed in one of the most famous moments of *The Servant*, when, at the orgy near the end, Wendy Craig kisses the servant who has systematically humiliated her, but then, in a last act of defiance as he is showing her to the door, lashes him across the face. What is going on here? Is this commingling of love and hate some expression of fear – of loss of power, identity? Of being in thrall to another, in a shameful form of servility? Losey seems to have been working out here a very personal and private attitude to relationships, which he alluded to in a desolate comment to Tom Milne, in his book-length interview with him, when he identified a key theme in his work as 'the particular destruction and anguish and waste of most sexual relationships'. Whatever the cause of it, there was not another film-maker around in England at that time whose characters went through such emotional turmoil. It reaches its climax perhaps at the end of *The Gypsy and the Gentleman* (which, with its critique of the gentry and its inverted power relationships, seems more than ever like a fancy-dress rehearsal of *The Servant*), when the aristocrat, who has first rescued the gypsy from drowning, drags her down to the depths with him when he realises she wants to run off with her lover: the impulses of love and hate there murderously intertwined.

Blind Date offered something of a generic departure for Losey: the opportunity to make a British *film noir*. Classically, the story is told mostly in flashback, a journey into a past dominated by a deadly female, and the action hinges around a criminal investigation. In the tension it generates between the three main characters – the vulnerable artist-hero, the promiscuous and irresistible heroine and the stern incorruptible investigator – the structure is similar to the Billy Wilder classic *Double Indemnity* (1944). Losey gives it a British inflection through the emphasis on class. Whereas the American *film noir* often took the form of a covert, subversive attack on capitalism, the British variety – as in Robert Hamer's 1940s masterpieces *It Always Rains on Sundays* (1947) and *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949) – more

often exposed the inequities of the class system and proposed a sinister connection between influence and corruption, wealth and depravity. Losey spoke to James Leahy of 'the degree to which the English class structure influences every Englishman's life, either in rebellion against it or acceptance of it, or simply through their being gotten at by it without realizing it, and sometimes whilst protesting that they're not'. In *Blind Date* the Inspector instinctively sympathises with the murder suspect because both seem at the mercy of the moneyed classes. Kruger is easily seduced by the elegant socialite and is framed, it seems, for her murder. Baker is hampered in his handling of the case by being instructed not to involve a highly respected and prosperous VIP who was dubiously associated with the murdered woman. 'I wanted to see what the soap smelt like,' explains Kruger when Baker asked why he washed his hands in the dead woman's flat. 'My father was a chauffeur,' says Baker when asked why he is so adept at distinguishing the givers from the takers. Both responses are very revealing about the social class and instincts of the two characters. The film's acute awareness of class tensions help disguise the occasional illogicality and awkwardness of the plot. Its expressiveness is on the level of style more than overt content: in its typical sensitivity to decor and to structural opposites; in the contrasting sets of the artist's studio and the woman's flat, which reveal so much about the personalities who occupy them; in the use of light and dark, as murky deceptions are brought out into the open. A cynical, social man (Baker) and an idealistic artistic one (Kruger) are brought into contact, as hunter and hunted, respectively, and discover a mysterious bond. Losey may have thought there was a message for him in that: a reconciliation between the cynic and the idealist, the realist and the artist.

His next two British films prior to *The Servant*, *The Criminal* (1960) and *The Damned* (1961), fall slightly outside the time-frame of this chapter; and as the films have been finely analysed by Robin Wood and by Paul Mayersberg, I will deal with them only briefly here. Suffice it to say, then, that *The Criminal* is arguably the finest prison drama made in Britain and that *The Damned* is one of the most distinguished examples of that offbeat and relatively neglected genre of the British cinema, the science fiction film. In the case of *The Damned*, a film that begins with curious anticipations of *A Clockwork Orange*, with its violent gangs and intimidatingly symbolic sculptures, surpasses even that film for future shock when it develops into an allegory of the nuclear age. The ending is particularly haunting as irradiated children, who for a scientific experiment are being schooled for assimilation into a post-atomic world, are heard crying for help in a heedless universe, and a hero and heroine, who have attempted to liberate them, are now dying

from contamination at their touch. *The Criminal* is similarly remarkable for its uncovering of the vulnerability beneath Stanley Baker's tough-guy image; for an extraordinary ending as a dying Baker gasps for absolution whilst his criminal cohorts slither around the frozen ground in an undignified scramble for the buried money; and for an incisive vision of a penal system where authority seems either sadistic or ineffectually liberal, which only perpetuates the endless cycle of crime and retribution. This vision is clinched by a final aerial shot of the prisoners exercising in the prison yard by just jogging around in a circle. This motif, incidentally, has an intriguing similarity to one in *The Intimate Stranger* in which Losey at one stage lingers noticeably on a shot of an empty spinning chair, and the blackmailing actress says that 'you go around in circles and either you break the circle or the circle breaks you'. Breaking the circle: there is a sense in which Losey in his films seems to see society as an endless repetition of hypocrisy and deceit, of destructive circles (the noose in *Time Without Pity* being perhaps the most extreme example) that can only be broken by an act of will from the inside or by an outsider's clear and critical perception of the way these circles strangle development. It might even have been a perception Losey had of his own development in the 1950s, which seemed to be going nowhere until critical recognition (notably the French response to *The Criminal*) ignited his career and the artistry of *The Servant* clinched his status.

By 1963 I think Losey had established for himself an unusual position in British film culture of some symbolic importance and one that no other English director at the time could precisely match. In one way, his career was symptomatic of certain fundamental flaws in the industry. Because of his experience with Hammer studios and their tawdry, delayed release of *The Damned*, and because of his difficulties with Rank and their obstructiveness on *The Gypsy and the Gentleman*, Losey was that classic victim figure: an artist among philistines, whose misunderstood genius was being mangled by the money men. He seemed, if you like, the British cinema's Orson Welles; and, like Welles, a director unusually articulate in interviews in giving his version of the way his vision had been compromised by petty commercialism. At the same time, however, the critics of *Movie* magazine, examining what they called 'the case of Joseph Losey', were finding something different. If most British films of the time were dully written and directed, Losey, by contrast, was an example of someone who could transcend the mediocrities of a screenplay and studio limitations through sheer talent: the evidence was films like *Time Without Pity*, *Blind Date* and *The Criminal*, which could stand comparison with films being made anywhere. After all, ideal conditions were not necessarily guarantors of great art: John Huston

had said that some of his worst films were made when he had most freedom. For *Movie*, what Losey had in abundance was something was almost entirely lacking elsewhere in British cinema of that time: namely, passion and style. The material was thus transformed through the intelligence and involvement he brought to it and through a style that was a vital dimension of that involvement, whether it manifested itself in visual bravura (like the kaleidoscope shot that introduces the Jill Bennett character in *The Criminal* and immediately suggests the woman's fractured personality) or even in Losey's stated dislike of dissolves, which seemed consistent with the edgy lucidity of his work. In the critical parlance of the time, Losey was the one auteur of the British cinema.

Of course, not everyone would have agreed with the *Movie* assessment of British film at this time, though it was undoubtedly influential. Nevertheless, in a period when cinema was entering what I would call its modernist phase and releasing an explosion of artistically challenging work from, for example, Antonioni, Resnais, Godard, Fellini, Buñuel and Visconti, it was clear that, for the critical intelligentsia in Britain, Losey seemed the only director who was capable of producing comparable work. Evidence of that attitude could be seen in the proliferation of critical monographs on directors that came out in the 1960s, as a result, no doubt, of the growth of film studies as an academic subject and the influence of the auteur theory. Two appeared in quick succession on Losey, by Tom Milne and by James Leahy; no other British director had that kind of representation. On the contrary, at this stage British cinema was struggling for critical and intellectual recognition. The perception was that Lean had gone Hollywood; Powell had gone bad, or mad; Reed and Hamer seemed in permanent decline, while Mackendrick had emigrated; and the New Wave lot were too literary. It was left to Losey to carry the artistic torch.

Today one would want to query that wholesale negative assessment of British film of the 1950s and 1960s, but, however one argues it, the figure of Losey will always loom large in the debate. The early English phase was a key stage in his career, just as the contribution he made to British film was invaluable. He was not easily assimilated, but he became one of the most fascinating film observers of the English scene. To be frivolous about it, there is not a better shot of someone pouring tea in the entire British cinema than in Losey's *Accident* (1967), nor can I think of any other film-maker who could have directed with such precision and sympathy Barry Foster's inflection of the line, 'He brewed a damn good cup of tea' in *King and Country* (1964), his character's poignant testimonial to a man about to be executed for an act of wartime cowardice.

As we began with him, perhaps Dirk Bogarde should be given the last word – or, more precisely, the last quotations. They give a flavour of what Losey meant to British film and the massive development he himself underwent while he was here. During the 1950s, after his exhilarating experience of working with him on *The Sleeping Tiger*, Bogarde had used his influence at Rank to land Losey a contract. It was not a happy association, because, as Bogarde put it, ‘Joe was highly suspect because he was unknown and an intellectual, which absolutely terrifies them.’ Nevertheless, through the association with actors like Bogarde and Baker, and writers like Pinter, and because of the foundation he had established with his 1950s films and the critical support they generated, Losey’s intellect did find expression in British film. It is at its finest, I think, in *The Servant*, *King and Country*, *Accident* and *The Go-Between* (1970). These are at the core of Losey’s achievement and, in my view, among the glories of British film. ‘I’m passionately English, but sometimes I don’t like the English,’ Bogarde told Margaret Hinxman in the *Sunday Telegraph* (22 February 1970): ‘They seem to resent success. I’ve never said this before, because it sounds so pompous. But I will say it now. When Joe Losey and I made those terribly difficult films which no British companies wanted to touch, we were doing it for Britain. We honestly wanted to make British cinema important, to lift it out of the domestic rut. And I think we did.’

Note

For this essay I have used: Dirk Bogarde, *Snakes and Ladders* (Chatto & Windus, 1975); David Caute, *Joseph Losey: A Revenge on Life* (Faber & Faber, 1994); Michel Ciment, *Conversations with Losey* (Methuen, 1985); Edith De Rhan, *Joseph Losey* (André Deutsch, 1991); Penelope Houston, *The Contemporary Cinema* (Penguin, 1963); James Leahy, *The Cinema of Joseph Losey* (Tantivy Press, 1967); Joseph Losey, ‘The Monkey on My Back’, *Films and Filming* (October 1963); Paul Mayersberg, *Movie* (May 1963); Tom Milne (ed.), *Losey on Losey* (Secker & Warburg, 1967); Richard Roud, *Cinema: A Critical Dictionary*, Volume 2 (Secker & Warburg, 1980); Robin Wood, ‘Losey’, *Motion* (February 1963).