1 DEFINITIONS AND APPROACHES

Scholars of British cinema are far from alone in their struggle to define, analyse and measure the worth of contemporary filmmaking. Discussion of the quality and purpose of British film culture is not only sport for academics, but for journalists, government policy-makers, audience members and filmmakers themselves. Sometimes their various criteria of evaluation overlap, but often they do not. This is hardly surprising, given the divergent ways of assessing the effectiveness of the national cinema, which include indigenous relevance, creative accomplishment, the promotion of British culture and heritage (including the impact upon the tourist industry), the level of success in international festivals and award ceremonies, the scope it gives for complex and interesting performances, and the generation of revenue domestically and worldwide.

A contemporary snapshot

If the health of a film culture can be measured by way of its visibility, range and budding talent, then British cinema seemed to be in good shape in the early days of Gordon Brown's premiership. In late summer 2007, there was an impressive variety of home-grown product to lure the British moviegoer into his or her local multiplex or independent cinema.

Joe Wright's *Atonement* (2007), an epic visualisation of Ian McEwan's novel, was ideal for those who liked their drama prestigious and liter-

ary, with the added bonus of performances by rising young actors, such as James McAvoy and Keira Knightley, with international kudos, and the involvement of Working Title, arguably the UK's most successful production company. The Edinburgh-set *Hallam Foe* (2007) was another literary adaptation, but offered edgier fare, as well as confirmation of the blossoming careers of its director (David Mackenzie) and main star (Jamie Bell). More populist, but no less intriguing a proposition, was *Run, Fat Boy, Run* (2007), which boasted a central performance and script by Simon Pegg, part of the creative team behind the immensely pleasurable *Hot Fuzz* (2006). Throughout September 2007, *Run, Fat Boy, Run* remained top of the UK box office, pushing *Atonement* into second (and for one week third) place in an otherwise Hollywood-dominated chart.[1] There was also still a chance to catch *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* and, for those quick enough, *Rise of the Footsoldier*, a gangster film aimed squarely at the native audience.

Meanwhile, the high-profile DVD releases of films that had already gained prominence that year – the likes of *Venus* (2006), *This is England* (2006), *Becoming Jane* (2007), *28 Weeks Later* (2007), *Sunshine* (2007) and *Mr Bean's Holiday* (2007) – seemed proof enough that the British film industry was catering to diverse tastes, whilst the appearance of career-spanning box sets of work by Ken Loach and Shane Meadows reflected the esteem held for its social chroniclers. Furthermore, the BBC's heavily promoted Summer of British Film season of documentaries and screenings offered a celebratory survey of the national cinema, contextualising recent successes and fostering anticipation for forthcoming attractions such as *Sleuth* (2007), *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (2007) and *St Trinian's* (2007).

Despite the apparent buoyancy of the industry in 2007 – an impression bolstered in part by the Academy Award victories for *The Queen* and *The Last King of Scotland* (2006) – the year's releases provoked some all too familiar questions. Indeed, every optimistic sign stood the risk of negation by recurring anxieties about the direction of British cinema. If the tendency towards high-profile sequels and remakes was emblematic of a reflective turn in the wider culture, offering a space for some kind of interrogation of Britishness past and present, it also spoke of a lazy attempt to revive former glories.

With its budget of £20 million, unusually high for a UK production, *Atonement* had the clout to compete directly with Hollywood, but its evocation of a 'quality' tradition of exportable costume drama caused disquiet

in some quarters. In his review for *The Sunday Times*, Cosmo Landesman called to mind academic debates around so-called 'heritage' cinema (see chapter 3) by noting how the film 'ooz[ed] good taste, cultural refinement and what people call classiness' but was, in fact, merely a 'snobbish, middlebrow drama' (2007: 10). Although *The Queen* could be praised – together with other contemporaneous docu-dramas like *United 93* (2006), *The Road to Guantánamo* (2006) and *Ghosts* (2006) – for its willingness to engage with issues of political currency, doubts about its cinematic qualities were stoked by its speedy television premiere, a matter of months after its theatrical release.

It had also been some time since an independent film without US studio backing had performed as well as films of the last century like *The Full Monty*, and despite the eclecticism of the contemporary output, there was little that broke with established traditions of British filmmaking, and apparently 'no ground-breaking signature film such as *Performance* [1970] or *Trainspotting* about right now' (James 2007: 3).

Debates such as these have now become firmly embedded within commentary on contemporary British cinema in the UK. Industrial and creative developments have been closely monitored by the British print and broadcasting media, as well as by the academic community. In recent times, the conflicted nature of this commentary will have done much to disorientate the impartial observer. In July 2007 many newspapers reported the claims by John Woodward, the chief executive of the UK Film Council, that the 'British film industry seems to be firing on all cylinders' (Higgins 2007). Proof of an economic upturn was offered by the Council's statistical study of 2006, which trumpeted how the industry contributed over £4 billion to the economy (up 39 per cent on 2004) and noted the UK share of worldwide box-office takings was 8.5 per cent, 'equal to approximately five hundred million admissions'.[2]

But talk of revival was met with scepticism. Stephen Frears, director of *The Queen*, described the British film industry as 'leaderless' without the support of cultural impresarios to lobby on its behalf (see Brooks 2007), and Geoffrey Macnab used the absence of British films in competition at that year's Cannes Film Festival (the first time this had happened since 2001) to lament a cinema that was increasingly 'producer-led rather than director-led' (2007a) and unsupportive of bold, original voices working in the cultural sector. Like many commentators, Macnab took issue with both

the 'selective use of statistics' and the perpetual grumblings of producers, coming to the conclusion that the picture remained more 'muddied' (see 2007b) than either would suggest.

Whilst the UK Film Council's published study indicated how nearly all UK studio films gained an international theatrical release in 2006, it also noted that this was only the case for 57 per cent of independent UK films. The revelation that the 'strongest UK film at the worldwide box office' that year was the Hollywood blockbuster *The Da Vinci Code* (2006) – only partly set in Britain – also seemed at odds with the praise elsewhere in the same document for films that projected 'strong images of cultural and national identity', with characters that 'help define Britishness for a wide audience'.

What is a British film?

The question of what exactly constitutes a British film continues to bother politicians, journalists and academics, but it has been a particularly pressing concern for filmmakers wishing to take advantage of UK funding schemes and tax relief strategies. According to the Films Act of 1985, which set out provisions to determine whether or not a film was 'British' enough to qualify for certain grants, 92.5 per cent of the running time had to be created in the UK, the production had to employ a labour force largely made up of UK citizens and the film had to be made by a company registered in the UK.

In 2007, this was superseded by the government's Cultural Test, which established more stringent criteria.[3] This set out a points system, divided into four sections – cultural content, cultural contribution, cultural hubs and cultural practitioners – across which a film had to score 16 out of a possible 31 available points. Almost half of the points were concentrated on the cultural 'content' section, with four points awarded each for a UK setting, British lead characters, British subject material and dialogue recorded mainly in English. The other sections rewarded the representation of 'diverse British culture, British heritage or British creativity', the filming or basing of the production in the UK and the involvement of British creative personnel (director, actors, key staff and so forth).

Writing in the *Telegraph* newspaper, then-MP Boris Johnson expressed the befuddlement of some politicians at this convoluted piece of legislation:

> You might have assumed that a 'British film' was a relatively straightforward concept. A British car is, broadly speaking, a car made in Britain. A British cheese is a cheese made in a British dairy. A British film is therefore a film made in the UK. (Johnson 2006)

Taken out of its immediate, industrial framework, the Department of Culture, Media and Sport's points system does indeed appear to be an absurd and unhelpful act of institutional over-complication, only confirming the point – taken for granted by most filmgoers and critics – that quantifying Britishness is a pointless endeavour. Nevertheless, it does draw attention to the problems of assessing cultural relevancy.

A case could be made for including Hollywood blockbusters such as *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005), *Nanny McPhee* (2005), *The Saint* (1997), *The Avengers* (1998), *King Arthur* (2004), *Beowulf* (2007) and the Harry Potter series (2001–) under a generous umbrella of British cinema. They are taken from British source material (history, novels and television shows), feature British performers and many were partly filmed in the UK. But whilst their claim to Britishness may have been integral to their promotion and appeal, it is a moot point whether any of these have any relevance to contemporary British society in the manner of, say, *This is England*, Shane Meadows' film about Midlands skinhead culture in the 1980s. It is perhaps fanciful, for example, to make a claim for the Harry Potter films as an exploration of the British class and school system, and far more useful to discuss them, along with other adaptations of British fantasy novels like the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001–2003) and *The Golden Compass* (2007), as manifestations of global trends in the entertainment industry. The definition of a British film is further complicated by the proliferation of Hindi- and English-language Bollywood productions making use of British locations, and addressing both nationally specific and diasporic audiences (including some in the UK).

At the same time, there is a compelling argument for classifying the work of certain UK-based directors or screenwriters as British, even when connections to indigenous culture or geography are tenuous. Certainly within British film culture, and the commentary around it, there is a marked desire to bend the categorisation of British cinema so as to incorporate the likes of Paul Greengrass's *United 93*, Terence Davies's New York-set but Glasgow-filmed *The House of Mirth* (2000), Ken Loach's *Bread and Roses*

(2000), Michael Winterbottom's *In This World* (2002) and *Code 46* (2003), Kevin Macdonald's *The Last King of Scotland* and Danny Boyle's *Sunshine*.

In 2004, the British-born Asif Kapadia's feudal epic *The Warrior* (2001), set and filmed in Northern India, and with dialogue in Hindi, was named Best British Film at the British Academy of Film and Television Awards (BAFTA). However, in the previous year, when put forward by the Academy to represent the UK in the Best Foreign Language Film category at the Academy Awards, the film – a co-production between British, French, German and Indian companies, with funding from British Screen – was rejected for not being sufficiently 'British'.

Regardless of their funding, or the primary locations of filming, the inclusion of these films in an 'imagined community' (see Anderson 1991) of British cinema speaks of a desire to identify a cosmopolitan, auteur-led film culture, free from its former insularity of subject material and geographical focus, and a leader in formal and stylistic innovation.

Critical approaches

The upsurge of scholarly interest in contemporary UK filmmaking is in some respects illustrative of the robustness of British film studies as an academic field, as the plethora of journal articles, conferences, anthologies, monographs and PhD theses on the subject would attest. The journals *Screen*, *Cineaste* and the more recently established *Journal of British Film and Television* regularly carry articles responding to contemporary British film culture.

Furthermore, these responses have been more immediate than those to the filmmaking of previous eras. It was not until the early 1990s that rigorous evaluation of the output of the Thatcher period took place (see Friedman 1993), whereas monographs on the cinema of the Blair era by the likes of Paul Dave (2006) and Steve Blandford (2007) were published before the Prime Minister left office. Undoubtedly, British cinema's much-discussed renaissance of the late 1990s has been a generative factor. British film studies seems energised by the increasing number of texts with which to engage, and the intensification of the arguments around them.

Academic responses to contemporary British cinema have been broad-ranging and inter-disciplinary, underlining the diverse ways in which a national film culture might be understood and contextualised. At the

moment, work being carried out within the bustling arena of British film studies relating to modern developments tends to fall into one of four broad (and admittedly overlapping) projects.

Firstly, there has been a critical tendency to situate recent films and trends within the broader history of British cinema, as exemplified by chronological and thematic surveys by Street (1997), Leach (2004) and Sargeant (2005). Also part of this trend are the many books and anthologies focusing on the evolution of particular genres, such as the horror film (Chibnall & Petley 2001), the 'heritage' film (Monk & Sargeant 2002; Higson 2003; Pidduck 2007), the historical film (Chapman 2005), the comedy-drama (Mather 2006), social realism (Lay 2002), the crime film (Chibnall & Murphy 1999) and the musical (Donnelly 2007; Mundy 2007).

A different pathway through British film history is offered by the strand of criticism which acknowledges the role of its key creative personnel, and its directors in particular. This not only encompasses studies of the work of notable auteurs such as Ken Loach (Leigh 2002), Mike Leigh (Watson 2004; Whitehead 2007) and Michael Winterbottom (Sinyard & Williams 2002) but reference guides to British directors (Allon *et al.* (eds) 2001; Murphy 2006; Shail 2007).

An emphasis on the political, cultural and geographical applications of the national cinema defines a third critical approach. This area of study is particularly lively, and it dovetails with the recent interrogation of the 'national' in film and cultural studies more generally. As shall be discussed in the following chapter, the very notion of a coherent indigenous cinema has been thoroughly problematised within film studies, and the conversation about the validity of the national as a critical tool has been continued, rather than ignored, by studies of the cinematic output of the countries that make up the United Kingdom. This includes work by Dave (2006) on English cinema, McLoone (2000), Barton (2004) and Hill (2006) on Irish cinema, Petrie (2000) on Scottish cinema and Blandford (2007) on the significance of the regional 'break-up' of Britain on its contemporary film culture.

This scrutiny of regionalism and its political and industrial implications has often taken place within a broader European or international context. Case studies of British films and cities have been included in surveys of the continental cinema (see, for example, Mazierska & Rascaroli 2002), and the affiliation and exchanges between British and European film cultures have been the subject of a number of academic conferences that

have taken place in the UK and beyond in recent years. Scholars of the 'smaller' cinemas of the British Isles – in other words, Welsh and Scottish filmmaking – have compared these with equivalent 'peripheral' cinemas worldwide (see Hjort & Petrie 2007), and there has also been an interest in the specificities of 'space and place' within British film, such as Charlotte Brunsdon's study of cinematic London (2007).

A fourth area of academic attention is the workings of the British film industry itself (see chapter 2). Driven by a pressing need to historicise and contest the role of government-backed organisations like the UK Film Council, the analysis can sometimes be arid and speculative. But it also has a polemical quality often lacking in accounts of British cinema, and ranges from despair over the sorry state of British filmmaking to more practical suggestions about the future of the industry.

Although this amounts to a comprehensive resource for the study of contemporary British cinema, there are still areas where the film scholar seems reluctant to venture. Some critical gaps have been plugged, however, through research undertaken beyond the immediate terrain of British film studies. Literary and historical scholars have considered the implications of adaptation and historical recreation, particularly with regard to period or 'heritage' films. Insights have also come by way of those working primarily in the fields of sociology, geography and media theory who have used filmic examples of representation (for example, of sexuality, gender, ethnicity, class and of particular regions and cities) to illustrate their analyses of cultural identity or to consider the interrelationship between the film and tourist industries.

However, substantial work remains to be done on the symbioses between British cinema and other forms of media, most notably television and the Internet, as well as its relationship to (sub)cultural phenomena such as music, sport, fashion and videogaming. The convergence of media in the twenty-first century is producing new models of production and reception that have implications for the way that audiences engage with British cinema. Increasingly, web resources such as search engines, blogs, message boards, fan-sites, video-sharing sites, social networking sites and the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) provide an alternate means of gauging the impact of British films and filmmakers, as well as promoting them.

In an important article written in 1986, Julian Petley suggested that studies of British cinema thus far had valorised filmmaking in the docu-

mentary realist mode, and that films of a non-realist vein constituted a 'lost continent'. There has undoubtedly been progress since then, but the inclination to prioritise 'respectable' films over popular genre cinema may explain the relative lack of attention given, for instance, to the rebirth of the British horror cinema in the 2000s.

The quantity of films now being produced gives ample scope for the identification of representational trends, generic similarities and auteurist strategies. But the sheer volume of texts to consider only complicates the task of deciding what is significant and worthy of scrutiny. Responses to contemporary cultural phenomena inevitably lack the benefit of hindsight, and future considerations of the cinematic output of the Blair years may call attention to aspects not yet fully noted or processed by contemporaneous scholars (or audiences). It will also be easier, in due course, to position films of the era within the various oeuvres of their creative personnel. Furthermore, the canon of 'significant' texts that emerges from recent scholarship may also undergo adjustment with critical distance.

Whilst the current work on British film culture is undeniably wide-ranging, given the hazards of reacting to current developments, analyses so far of British cinema in the period between 1997 and 2008 have quickly established a consensus of opinion on what should constitute the corpus of study. Popular films like *The Full Monty* and *East is East* (1999), which happened to chime with the preoccupations of cultural critics and commentators, are rightly given due attention, but there are many intriguing examples of filmmaking, such as the rural-set *The Darkest Light* (1999) and the English road movie *Heartlands* (2002), that have mostly gone beneath the critical radar, presumably because they do not make a neat fit with established academic paradigms.

If critical work on British film history has often been reluctant to make explicit value judgements, the analysis of contemporary cinema has generally been more opinionated. Neutrality is less easy to observe when the film culture is in development, and the debates around it are still topical and divisive. However, there is still a tendency to contextualise and explain rather than to evaluate *cinematic* worth. Pertinent aspects that are all too often overlooked in studies of the national cinema include the creative deployment of genre, the level of artistic ambition, the ways in which the British landscape is rendered familiar or unfamiliar, and the distinctive qualities of performance, *mise-en-scène*, cinematography and sound.

Other than in the form of longer review essays, close textual responses to contemporary cinema are still frustratingly rare, no doubt because this approach is often deemed (wrongly) to be a denial of the multiple influences on modern film culture.

The academic significance now awarded to the study of contemporary British film culture is underlined by its permeation through all sectors of post-16 education in the UK, a situation unthinkable twenty years ago, and a testimony to the vibrancy and breadth of scholarly activity in the field. There are dozens of courses pertaining to current British cinema in colleges and universities in Britain and beyond, and a small industry of publications and online resources geared towards guiding teachers and lecturers through the terrain. Again, there is a danger that the immediate enshrinement of particular films as 'set texts', simply because they coincide with contemporary issues of cultural concern, may work to close off other avenues of critical engagement.