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# 1 BRITISH TRASH CINEMA

This film is quite blatantly directed at a certain type of audience which, unfortunately, does exist.<sup>1</sup>

I seldom go to see British films for pleasure. I go out of duty, and invariably regret it.<sup>2</sup>

What is your idea of a *proper* British picture? A stiff upper-lipped romance in a railway station? A sturdy black-and-white war film with John Mills or Richard Attenborough? Something historical, perhaps, with floppy-haired Englishmen in white flannels and Keira Knightley looking soulful in crinoline? Or one of the great crowd-pleasers: Gainsborough, Ealing, Bond, *Carry On*, Hammer and Harry Potter?

It has been truthfully said that ‘British cinema, with the best will in the world, is more a carefully constructed illusion than a serious industry’, but the ‘brand’ of British cinema continues to have purchase on the popular imagination.<sup>3</sup> A 2012 Film Policy Review paper on the future of the industry after the abolition of the UK Film Council (UKFC), at a time when British films were more successful than for many years, quoted British respondents as citing humour (‘a sort of dark humour’) and authenticity (‘gritty, more like real life’) as the key ‘British values’ that marked a film as British and thereby pleasingly ‘non-Hollywood’.<sup>4</sup> In the global marketplace, meanwhile, British films seem firmly identified with classy nostalgia, realism and modest literary ambition. In 1999 the British Film Institute came up with an uncontroversial list of the 100 ‘best’ British films, topped by *The Third Man* (1949) and *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) and weighted towards the 1960s.<sup>5</sup> Consensus was that Britain could be proud of its numerous world classics, most of which were indeed, as you might expect, literary adaptations, ‘heritage films’ and realist dramas in the kitchen-sink tradition. Yet there still clings to British cinema a sense of disappointment, of being, on the one hand, in Hollywood’s shadow and, on the other, subordinate to and even oppressed by the great achievements of British theatre and the novel (for, as a current Waterstones promotion insists, ‘The book is always better’). British cinema for all its triumphs remains awkwardly stranded between art and populism, a nubile Cinderella – to borrow a line from *If... (1968)* – sparsely clad and often interfered with.

Debate rolls on about what is meant by a proper British picture. Controversy is sharpest over what kinds of films to support financially so as to promote both commercial success and the national culture. The Eady Levy, which channelled box-office takings back into film production from 1950 till its abolition in 1985, encouraged the international investment that underpinned the sex and horror film boom of the 1960s to



*Sex Lives of the Potato Men*: not a proper British film?

the 1970s; and in recent years the doling out of Lottery money through the late UK Film Council led to the funding of a number of barely released, low-budget comedies, horror films and thrillers, such as *Sex Lives of the Potato Men* (2004) and *Straightheads* (2007), which, given the heterogeneity of the films supported by the UKFC, earned the Council an undue amount of negative attention.<sup>6</sup> The *Daily Telegraph* in 2004, after the disastrous release of *Sex Lives of the Potato Men*, which concentrated critics' minds on the funding and profile of British cinema, complained that, unlike the Arts Council, whose role the UKFC took over in 2000, the Film Council tried to second-guess the market and fund 'commercially minded' films, and cited 'wan little British films that disappear quickly from cinemas'.<sup>7</sup> Examples included *Bodysong* (2003), *This Is Not a Love Song* (2002), *Emotional Backgammon* (2003) and *Suzy Gold* (2004), none of which recouped their budget. *Emotional Backgammon* sold 209 tickets and grossed £1,056. Needless to say, a film like *Sex Lives of the Potato Men* is somewhat at odds with a definition of British cinema that rests on *Harry Potter* (2001–11) and Oscar-bait like *The King's Speech* (2010) (also backed by the UKFC). British cinema today ranges from *Wuthering Heights* (2011) and *Skyfall* (2012) to *Stag Night of the Dead* (2011) – all of them, in one way or another, expressive of contemporary Britain, but who is to say which is more properly 'authentic'? Which represents the 'true' British cinema that projects 'our' culture to the world?

### CINEMA IN THE RAW

Beyond the heritage of official British cinema, there has always been, for want of a more precise term, British trash cinema – a long tradition of cheap exploitation and *improper* entertainments that has shocked, appalled, frustrated and delighted in equal measure.

Into this makeshift category are grouped all manner of critically and often popularly despised offences against what British cinema *ought* to be, offences even more blatant than Bond, Hammer and the *Carry Ons*, which by some standards are quite trashy enough.

Trash represents what Charles Barr emphasised was a key component of British cinema – a ‘strong under-life – represented most powerfully by the horror film’.<sup>8</sup> Here are weird, obscure, haphazardly surreal and marginal films, compellingly bad and entrancingly bizarre, the sort of films that mainstream critics disdain or simply never see but which cultists seek out (or rather nowadays click to purchase on amazon.com or download as torrents). Much of this is ‘psychotronic’ cinema, as Michael Weldon called it, condemned by critics ‘for the very reasons that millions continue to enjoy them: violence, sex, noise, and often violent escapism’.<sup>9</sup> They especially appeal to that category of film fan, the ‘trash cinephile’ who revels in films exiled from the mainstream and ‘is far too cynical to sit through whimsical romantic comedy, or a big budget event movie’.<sup>10</sup>

This book outlines some of the key modes of British trash cinema, and their reception by their original intended audiences, but it is also, and in many ways more fundamentally, about the contemporary cult of trash cinema. Many of the films are *not* cult films – or at any rate not yet, though the field of British cinema as a whole is certainly the object of cult interest. But the reasons for getting interested in these films, and the pleasures they afford viewers today who watch them in a generous and receptive spirit, are absolutely informed by cult. There is then a dual perspective on the films – on the one hand, a neutral view which summarises the history of trash, and on the other, a cult view, not the same as that of the intended audiences, which addresses the films’ particular attractions and, more important, uses for a certain kind of excessively committed viewer.

Most obviously trash cinema includes exploitation and sexploitation films – low-budget horror and science fiction, shoestring sex comedies and softcore pornography, which are typically dismissed as the lowest, most formulaic and sometimes most dangerously corrupting manifestations of film production.<sup>11</sup> From the 1950s to the 1980s over 400 exploitation films were made in Britain, ranging from international hits, such as Hammer’s *Dracula* (1958), to eternal outcasts little seen outside specialist cinemas, such as the sex films *Come Play with Me* (1977) and *Erotic Inferno* (1975). They count as trash because they are or were regarded as worthless, disposable and ephemeral junk; in short, not so much bad but disgraceful, and consequently the target of harassment by censors and moral guardians, who in Britain have long been suspicious of cinema’s delinquent energy and popular reach. Cultists have of course revived interest in the margins of cinema, especially horror and sex films, and it is cultists with a taste for low genres, bad taste and bad films, kitsch and the frankly sub-cinematic who are the main enthusiasts nowadays for British films which, however popular at the time, have since fallen by the canonical wayside.

But British trash cinema is arguably distinct from the disreputable cult cinemas of the US and continental Europe. It is less well known, for one thing. Hammer apart, British trash remains a niche cult among cults. It is true that the most celebrated of all cult films, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), is indeed British, but how many fans of that unique prefabricated trash movie went on to explore *Devil Girl from Mars*

(1954), *Psychomania* (1973), *Toomorrow* (1970), *Vampyres* (1974), *Big Zapper* (1974), *Dirty Weekend* and the unforgettable kitsch of *Boom* and *Can Heironymus Merkin Ever Forget Mercy Humppe and Find True Happiness?* (1969)? Most *Rocky Horror* fans, I suspect, kept their virginity as regards such obscure gems. Yet each of those films can boast a select following of connoisseurs. Many times I've witnessed eyes light up in disbelieving recall at the mention of *Psychomania* – zombie bikers! Beryl Reid turning into a frog! As *Fangoria* sardonically remarked, that film 'is an artefact of post-mod British kitsch, admired with irony and worshipped by millions, perhaps thousands, even dozens of cult movie fans around the globe'.<sup>12</sup> For, alas, its cultists are few indeed, even in Britain, compared to those of the Italian horror maestro Lucio Fulci, the inept American auteur Ed Wood and, attracting the largest cohort of fans of British films, James Bond.

British trash also – how can I put this? – *feels* different from other trash cinemas (in ways not all cultists will respond to) thanks to the impact of restrictive censorship and the peculiar social, production and distribution contexts of British film. Although this book trolls through a cinema of transgression, not all of it is a wild ride into excess, subversion and lurid erotic defiance. British trash is also, and perhaps mostly, a cinema of routine underachievement, of stupid sub-B movies, austerity thrillers, unfunny comedies and failed grabs at naughtiness. Sometimes inspired, frequently weird, often sad and desperate – rather, in fact, like Britain itself – our trash cinema opens onto not only a world of exotic pleasures but also one of compromise and impoverishment, thwarted ambition, social embarrassment, silent erotic yearning and suburban boredom. That, being British myself, with a stereotypical fondness for unassuming mediocrity and gallant failure, is reason enough for me to love it.

## BEASTS IN THE CELLAR

Trash refers in large part to what Julian Petley in 1986 famously called, borrowing the term from Hammer's 1968 fantasy, 'the Lost Continent'.<sup>13</sup> Petley, in a foundational article for what I'll risk capitalising as the New British Revisionism in Film Studies, highlighted the crucial counter-tradition of romance and anti-realism in British cinema, which had been overlooked for reasons of class, aesthetic snobbery and hostility to popular cinema and even, you might say, to cinema itself: 'an other, repressed side of British cinema, a dark, disdained thread weaving the length and breadth of that cinema, crossing authorial and generic boundaries, sometimes almost entirely visible, sometimes erupting explosively, always received critically with fear and disapproval'.<sup>14</sup> This lost continent included not only trash but the saturated romanticism of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, and the Gothic tradition of Hammer and its imitators, as well as the ambitious hybrid art cinema of Ken Russell and Peter Greenaway. Emerging from deeply culturally embedded traditions of fantasy, nonsense and absurd humour, this was a heterogeneous cinema which challenged the subordination of cinema to literature and theatre. Visceral and 'visual', boldly mythic and erotic, it had been habitually overlooked by critics committed to realism and the literary. The films, from art house to horror, still challenge dominant conceptions of British cinema and expand its range and remit beyond what cultural gatekeepers allow. Kate Egan makes the crucial point that horror films, for example, and especially modern ones,

are not considered in relation to the idea that they are commercial ventures based around spectacle and fantasy, but are measured against a realist norm, where the logic and plausibility of narrative and characterisation always takes priority over the visual and spectacular.<sup>15</sup>

Consequently, reviewers tend to ‘view any deviation from the notion that a narrative should be convincing, logical and realistic as evidence of a “bad” film’.<sup>16</sup>

The keynote of the films of the lost continent was fantasy, even a strain of British surrealism. Many of the films Petley highlighted were popular genre films, which critical convention had overlooked or taken for granted – the horror films in particular. But beyond them is, as well as other genres, *unpopular* popular cinema – films catering to the wrong people (devotees of sex cinemas, for example), or films barely seen at all, or flops even in otherwise successful genres. Tom Ryall, referring to British cinema in the 1930s, highlights the importance of conceiving of national cinema as being as diverse as the nation it represents. British cinema has always been torn between art and entertainment, low culture and literary ambition, imitation and rejection of Hollywood, public-service realism and genre:

The notion of a sub-current or an alternative oppositional strand of national cinema is important in the analysis of the idea of national cinema itself. The term ‘national cinema’ is often locked into a form of essentialism which implies the possibility of a single unitary form of expression which can be designated as representative of a nation. A corollary of this is that there also exists a unitary national culture which can simply be mapped onto a set of cinematic signifiers to constitute the national cinema. Britain, however, as a political entity has been carved out of a variety of regions and nations, ways of life which can be differentiated from each other in terms of gender, class and race. National cinemas in their overall profile necessarily reflect such differences and, indeed, can be conceptualised as elements in the broader arena of ideology.<sup>17</sup>

This notion of an alternative or ‘dark side’ of British cinema is a provocative and attractive metaphor, and I’ll exploit it ruthlessly throughout this book. But it can be criticised as an oversimplification, like the other handy binaries which bedevil mappings of British cinema, such as Michael Balcon’s phrase ‘realism and tinsel’, and which denote two opposing strands in British cinema.<sup>18</sup> For a start, it depends on what is meant by realism, which is an endlessly moveable feast; and also by what’s meant by alternative? The problem critics had, for example, with the horror films that sprang up in the 1950s was that they were too realistic by half in the sense of *explicit* – all that blood and cleavage – and that they left little to the imagination. Films like *Dracula* and *Horrors of the Black Museum* (1959), in which spring-loaded binoculars stab spikes into a young woman’s eyes, were an advance in their unprecedented directness; like the kitchen-sink films of the same period, they updated British cinema by splashing across the screen what had hitherto been politely left off it. The scandal of Michael Powell’s *Peeping Tom* (1960), that period’s key *film maudit*, was not that it depicted a surreal fantasy world but that it was too close to home, its monster too human, its violence too intimate and its depiction of Soho too seedily precise. British cinema has often prided itself on undercutting the

escapist fantasies of Hollywood, and the radical, influential novelty of such groundbreaking genre films as *The Quatermass Xperiment* (1954) was that it dragged horror into the terrors of contemporary life.

The same might be said of the nudist and sex films that proliferated from the late 1950s. They were realist films rather than exercises in make-believe and often disguised as documentaries. Their motives were not so different from the British New Wave's. They revelled in sexual openness, voyeurism, changing mores and the unconsidered lives and desires of ordinary people. It is true that the emphasis of such exploitation films on spectacle and their direct address to real-life peeping Toms worked against some of the self-effacing conventions of narrative cinema; but the appeal of exploitation and its unique promise to viewers was that it would show them the world naked – as nature intended. A similar revelatory impulse is at work in the sex comedies of the 1970s and even the hardcore films of contemporary pornographers such as Lindsay Honey (Ben Dover) and Anna Span, which, concretising homely fantasies in familiar domestic landscapes, document flabby white bodies in poorly matched cheap underwear exerting themselves in motel rooms, council flats and suburban kitchen-diners. The surrealism of *Psychomania* – zombies, frogs, Beryl Reid and all – lies not so much in its resurrected biker suicides but in seeing them do the ton on the M3 and rampage around supermarkets in nondescript Walton-on-Thames.

Stylistically, too, while the films of Powell and Pressburger and Ken Russell certainly blurred the worlds of dream and the everyday, their 'excesses' were arty authorial interventions. Most of the 'dark side' films in fact conformed to the usual rules of classical cinema, and were far from the subversive tradition of any strand of modernism and the avant-garde, whether surrealist, underground or the rigorously experimental abolitions of convention attempted by Jeff Keen, Peter Gidal and Laura Mulvey in the 1970s. In fact, if one is looking for a truly hidden and 'unknown' British cinema – to use Alan Lovell's memorable phrase – well, that better describes arty oddities such as *Herostratus* (1967) and *The Riddle of the Sphinx* (1977) rather than *Fire Maidens of Outer Space* (1956) or *Psychomania*, which, curious as they were, at least reached mainstream audiences and had an afterlife on late-night television.<sup>19</sup>

That suggests another problem with the 'dark side' or lost-continent metaphor: the popular cinema it describes may have been critically disregarded, but it was hardly invisible. Indeed, so far as critics were concerned, it was often *too* visible, cluttering up cinemas with censor-baiting rubbish like *Virgin Witch* (1971) and *Confessions of a Sex Maniac* (1974), which audiences were far too willing to consume. The films were not genuinely undiscovered, except by critics adrift from popular taste; the films were simply ignored, taken for granted and hidden in plain sight down at the local Odeon or Jacey.

There is a final reason not to get too carried away with dramatic metaphors of dark side and lost continent. Reviewers and critics, with perhaps the exception of Raymond Durnat, overlooked these films simply because most of them weren't very good. They were in fact *trash*, and the thankless task of writing about them could be left to the trade press and *Monthly Film Bulletin*. And it is indeed true that many trash films engage us only to the degree that they are vaguely symptomatic of trends in British cinema and society; even the most partisan cultist would struggle to say much else about *Nudist Memories* (1959) and *Paul Raymond's Erotica* (1981). In any case the lost continent was

not uniformly transgressive and disturbing. Little attention was paid to *Not Now Darling* (1973), *The Slipper and the Rose* (1976) and *Wombling Free* (1977), but it was not because critics recoiled from them in bourgeois disgust. Innocuous minor films rather than exploitation, they could tell you something about popular entertainment and public taste, but it hardly seemed worth analysing them in detail or breaking the butterfly of their trivial significance upon the wheel of film theory.

## THE NEW BRITISH REVISIONISM

Since the 1980s Petley's lost continent has become increasingly familiar ground as well as a – perhaps *the* – presiding cliché of recent British film scholarship.<sup>20</sup> Vast tracts of the continent have been excavated in a spirit of cinephile curiosity. The 'systematic and creative process of rethinking British cinema', as Jeffrey Richards welcomed it, has been industriously pursued by film academics but crucially also by film fans and savvy video and DVD companies, such as Redemption, Jezebel, Odeon Entertainment and recently the BFI.<sup>21</sup> Films that, when I started getting into British trash back in the 1990s, were merely rumours, titles patiently reviewed in *Monthly Film Bulletin* or blurred fourth-generation copies of 'pre-cert' videos are suddenly available once more thanks to DVD and the internet. The BFI's Flipside series of DVD and Blu-ray reissues offers rarities like the mondo film *Primitive London* (1965), the first British sex film *Her Private Hell* (1968) and the Swinging London drama *Joanna* (1968) with elaborate notes and commentaries, and relocates them from low culture to specialist cult items. Odeon Entertainment's DVDs similarly present sex films, from *Take Off Your Clothes and Live* (1963) to *Come Play with Me*, and mislaid gems like the horror film *Mumsy, Nanny, Sonny and Girly* (1970) under the unlikely banner of 'The Best of British', which at least acknowledges that 'Britishness' may lurk in even the lowest cultural products. At the same time, maligned aspirational kitsch like *The Magus* (1968) and *Hammersmith Is Out* (1972) are newly available or can be watched in pirated snippets on YouTube. Even movies that were never released, such as *Queen Kong* (1976), or which embarrassed the inside of cinemas for merely days, as did *Toomorrow*, can be easily imported or downloaded by insatiable film fans. Moreover, new kinds of British trash continue to mushroom, such as straight-to-DVD comedy-horror films like *Kill Keith* (2012) and *Strippers vs Werewolves* (2012). Since 2000, legitimate British hardcore pornography on video and DVD has been passed by the British Board of Film Classification – a whole new category of British film production, albeit secreted away safely in sex shops. Although cultists may regret the loss in rarity value of their treasured pre-cert videos, this is plenty indeed. As I look at the piles of DVDs at home and in the office, I am dazzled by the sight of so many films I thought I'd never see, with even the most trivial of them afforded more lavish treatment on DVD than masterworks by Ozu and Bergman.

Exploitation, sex films, pornography, the work of 'sleaze artists' of all kinds – what was once the province of a handful of cultists is also the subject of an academic industry. Books by fan-scholars from small presses such as FAB Press and Headpress and academic imprints playing catch-up have provided detailed histories of not only Hammer but exploitation companies such as Tony Tenser's Tigon and once patronised genres such as the crime film, science fiction movie, 1930s 'quota quickies' and the British B movie.<sup>22</sup> Even the sex comedy of the 1970s, perhaps the low-point of British cinema's



creativity, has its superbly committed historians, who demonstrate that the films offer valuable insights into the tastes, values and frustrated desires of ordinary filmgoers at a period of rapid social and moral change, when sexploitation was one of the few thriving areas of indigenous cinema.<sup>23</sup> TV programmes on the sex film, the British SF film and the B movie have drawn on this work to explore the territory with enthusiasm and sympathy.<sup>24</sup> In short, a field of study once wholly beneath contempt is not only now visible but well served by both fandom and academia. The outlines of British film history have been revised and the canon of British cinema reordered.

This canon has edged, thanks partly to generational change among critics and ‘academics’ (academics who also identify as fans), towards populism, genre cinema and cult favourites whose transgressive and stylised realism caught the imagination of youth audiences. This is of course not a phenomenon restricted to British cinema. Interest has shifted generally in Film Studies to complement cultists’ enthusiasm for the low and exploitation cinema of many countries. Cultists have long valued the energy and combative artistry of American trash films by exploitation directors such as Roger Corman and the badfilm chaotician Doris Wishman and the gory extremism of Italian exploitation cinema from the 1960s to 1980s. Indeed, the last twenty years has seen the flourishing of Cult Film Studies as an academic field of its own, and a wealth of publications specifically devoted to trash, sleaze, exploitation and pornography.<sup>25</sup>

Moya Luckett, dating British canonical revisionism to the 1990s and the influence of lad-centred magazines like *Loaded* and its swaggering take on Cool Britannia, comments on ‘the formation of a new British film canon that counters traditional heritage-centred ideas of British cinema ... this “alternative” canon focuses on violence, style and sexuality as well as more traditionally reified traditions of British horror and comedy’.<sup>26</sup> British cinema is now as closely identified with its cult films, such as *Get Carter* (1971), *The Wicker Man* (1973) and *Withnail and I* (1987), as with its literary, realist and heritage traditions, though the cult films are caught up in those as well. Few of the most celebrated of these newly canonised cult films find their way into this book, but their qualities – eccentricity, dubious taste, allegorical significance – are often shared by the films that do. But other kinds of films have emerged as central to our understanding of British cinema, inspired by a renewed interest in auteurs committed to outrage, offence and tastelessness, such as, pre-eminently, Ken Russell, who infiltrated low genres with a radical style and an enthusiasm for vulgarity and excess, and who was at once inimical to British film tradition and deeply embedded in British Romanticism, low comedy and simple eccentricity. It is not petty nationalism either to reclaim our heritage of trash. The links between British cinema and American and continental European talent and money work against any easy notions of trash films representing more ‘authentic’ versions of national identity. As Andrew Higson remarks, ‘English cinema has been hybrid from the very start’ and contemporary British cinema, from Harry Potter blockbusters to straight-to-DVD trash, is more transnational than ever.<sup>27</sup>

The symbolic centre of that revision, and indeed of the lost continent itself, is the aforementioned *Peeping Tom*. It is now regarded as a classic, and – since this is an argument about aesthetics and critical preferences as well as definitions – one of the greatest British films ever made. Its passage from trash to classic, though a familiar tale, remains exemplary and instructive.



*Peeping Tom*: the greatest British film maudit

*Peeping Tom* was greeted with an appalled critical reaction in 1960, Derek Hill in *Tribune* saying, 'The only satisfactory way to dispose of *Peeping Tom* would be to shovel it up and slush it swiftly down the nearest sewer. Even then the stench would remain.'<sup>28</sup> The film was beyond trash; it was abject and excremental. The critical reaction to *Peeping Tom* – though it was actually a modest commercial hit<sup>29</sup> – ended Powell's film career in Britain. It was in France that its merits (like those of Hammer director Terence Fisher) were first recognised. As Peter Wollen notes, French critics 'concentrated on the issue of sadism, probably because the French critics who first praised the film, in *Positif* and *Midi-Minuit* were heavily influenced by Surrealism and hence by André Breton's own fascination with the Marquis de Sade'.<sup>30</sup> The film has since been recuperated by academics for its self-reflexive discourse on film, voyeurism and pathology – useful, twinned with *Psycho* (1960), for illustrating the male gaze in seminars – and by cultists of Powell, who also appreciate it as a film about film, a genre cultists often warm to. The film, full of the kind of in-jokes that please cinephiles, such as Powell's playing Mark Lewis's (Carl Boehm) sadistic father, is also very knowing about pornographic subcultures in Britain at the end of the 1950s, and uncomfortably links the world of cinema to that of exploitation – Lewis takes photographs, for example, for a character based on the glamour photographer Harrison Marks.<sup>31</sup> Though released as an exploitation film by Anglo-Amalgamated, *Peeping Tom* also works as an intense art film, transgressing boundaries between high and low culture, not least by focusing on psychoanalysis rather as Hitchcock did, and the film's cult is partly a response to this boundary crossing. It was influential especially on Martin Scorsese: the 'neon-expressionism' of *Taxi Driver* (1976) owes much to its sordid and saturated realism. If *Peeping Tom* is a new centre of gravity for understanding British cinema – if its most excremental film becomes its pivotal and

perhaps greatest one – then this revision, founded on 1960s auteurism (the same impulse that elevated *Psycho* into the ultimate film) and backed up by cultists, has implications for rethinking British cinema entirely.

### REVISIONISM TRIUMPHANT?

In part this revisionism involves a drive towards completism, a desire by fans and academics to map the whole of the territory in a kind of panoptic frenzy that allows no film to go uncollected, unlabelled and unaccounted for. This utopianism will end, perhaps, only when every last film, and every last person who made it, saw it and wrote about it has been accounted for by the recording angel of British film criticism. But revisionism is also a modest shift towards taking account of the films that audiences, especially working-class ones, actually watched at cinemas – an astonished acknowledgment, for example, that *On the Buses* was the most successful British film of 1971 and grossed over £1 million in domestic rentals in the first six months of release. Revisionism investigates the persistence of the sex comedy, from *Confessions of a Window Cleaner*, the top British film of 1974, to *The Inbetweeners Movie*, similarly successful in 2011, rather than regarding it as evidence of the recidivist hopelessness of public taste. Revisionism encourages us to take seriously films few people saw and fewer still liked, or which, like sexploitation and hardcore porn, virtually no one even admits to watching.

As well as films, this revisionism pays homage to the lived experience of cinema-going and to forgotten audiences of the past, from the proverbial ‘man in a mac’ to the *habitués* of rep cinema clubs like the Scala in London. Revisionism asks such questions as who went to sex cinemas in the 1960s and 1970s, with their teasing visions of continental plenty and suburban wickedness. What was it actually like to sidle furtively into the Jacey Piccadilly and enjoy time out from everyday suburban life? How did one anticipate the visit and cope afterwards with the disappointment of yet another film that promised so many thrills and delivered so few?

This new wave of revisionism, inspired equally by scholarship and cult enthusiasm, is, in the end, a defence of British cinema and its unruly multiplicity. It is a reaction against the negative definitions of the ‘Britishness’ of British cinema, that disappointment I mentioned at the start of the chapter – the idea that it is theatrical, staid, over-literary and generally lives down to François Truffaut’s much quoted comment about the incompatibility of British and cinema and the contempt expressed thus in the 1960s by the British auteurist journal *Movie*: ‘The British cinema is as dead as before. Perhaps it was never alive.’<sup>32</sup> Revisionism wrenches the canon away from middlebrow and middle-class critical preferences, and takes seriously the commercial aims of the industry, changing contexts of reception and the unpretentious tastes of real audiences.

Insofar as taste judgments go, revisionism may involve a critical animus against official definitions of British cinema, such as the irritated boredom that has bubbled up since the 1980s against the reactionary and nostalgic British cinema represented by Merchant–Ivory, *Chariots of Fire* (1981) and *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994). One catches that in David Thomson’s comment (though he is appreciative of *The Remains of the Day* (1993)) that ‘The loveliness of Merchant–Ivory gives me the creeps ... . Merchant–Ivory is *Masterpiece Theatre* moviemaking: prestigious, well furnished,

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