Looking Back at the British New Wave

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The evolution of what has come to be called the British New Wave offers an intriguing case of the critics' mediating and constitutive role in the forming of a movement, school or trend (Zarhy-Levo 2001). This particular instance, however, illustrates a case of 'second-order mediation', namely that of the film critics voicing their perception that a new phase had begun in the cinematic domain by relying on and exploiting the 'ready-made' critical discourse already constructed around the literary and theatrical developments that had taken place a few years earlier, most notably the designation of the Angry Young Man (AYM) phenomenon and the prevailing judgements surrounding the Royal Court Theatre's productions, particularly that of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (Zarhy-Levo 2008). To this extent, I suggest, the discourse constructed by literary and theatre critics not only provided the film critics with a ready-made means to promote a new wave, but also seemed to have inspired them to advocate their perception of progress in the cinematic domain. Moreover, the film critics' reliance on this discourse can also account for the somewhat puzzling elements in their definition of the British New Wave, namely the date of its beginning and the films which it encompasses.

The British New Wave is commonly perceived as comprising nine particular films released between 1959 and 1963: *Room at the Top* (1959), *Look Back in Anger* (1959), *The Entertainer* (1960), *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1961), *A Taste of Honey* (1961), *A Kind of Loving* (1962), *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962), *This Sporting Life* (1963) and *Billy Liar* (1963).[1]

Over the last three decades historians and critics of British cinema, reassessing the New Wave, have been engaged in an ongoing debate not only about whether these films should be seen as a distinct group (Hill 1986; Higson 1996) or as in fact very different from each

other (Hutchings 2001:147), but also about the extent to which they contributed to subsequent developments in British cinema (McFarlane 1986). Whatever the case, these controversies – in themselves evidence of the significance attributed to these films as a major axis in the evolution of British cinema – do not address specifically the process through which the films have come to be seen as a definite group. Tracing the initial critical reactions to the films labelled as the British New Wave can serve to illuminate not only those factors that contributed to the shaping of the critics' views, but also the evolving process that resulted in the critics' perception of this particular group of films as marking a new wave in the British cinema.

The enquiry into this process links (albeit indirectly) with yet another intriguing issue: the relation between the Free Cinema enterprise and the New Wave films within the larger context of the evolution of British cinema. This issue, particularly as emerging from various historical views of the development of British cinema, is worthy in itself of a separate discussion; however, here I relate it only briefly to several of those aspects relevant to the present enquiry. Free Cinema, one of many collaborations between Lindsay Anderson, Tony Richardson and Karel Reisz, was launched in February 1956 (the fourth founder was Lorenza Mazzetti).[2] In recalling the somewhat pragmatic founding of Free Cinema – starting a movement and publicising a manifesto in order to attract the critics' attention and get the films reviewed – Anderson stressed that 'we *did* all feel the same, that mainstream British cinema was unadventurous, class-bound and uninteresting' (quoted in McFarlane 1997: 10).[3] Between 1956 and 1959 six programmes of documentary films were screened at the National Film Theatre under the banner of Free Cinema. The Free Cinema manifesto, the articles published by the members of the group and the series of documentaries screened at the National Film Theatre, all generated considerable media interest in the enterprise. However, its film-makers made little headway in the commercial film industry at that time.

The beginning of the British New Wave as such has come to be associated with 1959, which marked the appearance of the films *Room at the Top*, directed by Jack Clayton, and *Look Back in Anger*, directed by Tony Richardson. What is intriguing about these developments – the emergence of Free Cinema and the appearance of the so-called New Wave films – given their temporal proximity, is that they can be seen to suggest a gradual process of evolution, whereby the important breakthrough had actually occurred in 1956 and the New Wave films were largely the outgrowth of Free Cinema's new documentary

offerings. Despite the distinct difference between documentaries and feature films, such continuity is further suggested by the Free Cinema film-makers having consciously defined themselves as a group, while three of the four founders of the enterprise (Anderson, Richardson and Reisz) were eventually also directors of six of the New Wave films, with their feature films having much in common with their documentaries. Nonetheless, the initial critical responses to the films that have come to be called the British New Wave prove otherwise as they relate not to 1956 as the breakthrough date, but rather to 1959, and do not include the Free Cinema documentaries in their grouping together of the New Wave films (though, as will be shown, they do acknowledge the contribution of the Free Cinema film-makers in other ways). The film critics' perception of 1959 as marking the turn is all the more intriguing considering that 1956, which is seen as the beginning of a new era in the theatrical domain, is a year that could have also lent itself to marking a breakthrough in the cinematic domain. Instead, the film critics largely exploited the views relating to the 1956 breakthrough in the theatrical domain, as well as drawing on the aims of the Free Cinema enterprise, in their grouping and characterisation of those films that they labelled the British New Wave.

Their grouping of these films was unable to rely on any specific New Wave manifesto published by the film-makers themselves, nor on the film-makers' own definition of themselves as a group, for neither existed. However, other significant factors aided the critics by providing them with the film-makers' agendas or declared aims. One primary factor was that of the advertising campaigns of the companies which produced the films, in particular the Woodfall Company. There were also the explicit statements of intent by certain influential figures who were directly involved in the making of these films. For example, Tony Richardson, undoubtedly a key figure – one of the Free Cinema film-makers who became directly involved with the Woodfall Company – stated in 1959: 'It is absolutely vital to get into British films the same sort of impact and sense of life that, what you can loosely call the Angry Young Man cult, has had in the theatre and literary worlds. It is a desperate need' (1959: 9). It is notable that Richardson's statement referred to the theatrical and literary worlds, suggesting, by implication, the potential impact of utilising the 'ready-made' discourse.

Indeed, a weighty factor in shaping the initial critical responses to the films labelled as New Wave was the fact that all them were adaptations of either generally acclaimed novels or successful stage plays. The sources of the adaptations – either plays tagged as 'kitchen-sink dramas' or novels seen as conveying social protest – were all

associated with the qualities which caused the 1950s to become known, even at the time, as the Angry Decade (see, for example, Hewison 1988). Thus the screenplays (in spite of their new form), and in most cases the film-makers themselves as well, were not newcomers to the cultural scene but rather those already associated with rising trends, movements or schools. It is surely significant that the film company Woodfall, which produced five of the nine films associated with the British New Wave, was founded by Tony Richardson and John Osborne, following and relying on the success of Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger*. Richardson, director of four of the nine New Wave films and hence the most prolific of the five New Wave directors, had already made a considerable name for himself as the director of the English Stage Company (ESC) production of Osborne's play in 1956. Richardson had joined the newly founded ESC in 1955 as its first associate artistic director and his reputation as a stage director undoubtedly influenced the critics when his first feature film was released, especially considering that it was the cinematic version of *Look Back in Anger*. Lindsay Anderson, too, joined the ESC as an assistant director in 1957, making a name for himself as the director of such renowned ESC productions as Willis Hall's *The Long and the Short and the Tall* and John Arden's *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance* in 1959, well prior to the release of Anderson's first feature film in 1963. Moreover, both Richardson and Anderson as well as Karel Reisz had all, as previously noted, been formerly associated as film-makers with the documentaries and declared aims of Free Cinema, an association they further cultivated in their first feature films in which they pursued their Free Cinema conceptions with respect to their world view, to subject matter revolving around social issues and to location shooting, primarily in England's northern or midland industrial cities. Consequently, these three (of the five New Wave) directors were already seen as a distinct group.

The initial reviews of the films that have come to be known as the British New Wave, whether published in the 'quality' or popular press, reflect two critical tendencies: an attempt to present these films as forming a group that marked a new phase in the development of British cinema, while at the same time pointing out the singular, innovative contribution of each of the films.[4] These reviews also reveal the gradual consolidation of the critics' perceptions of the major characteristics shared by these films. This process entailed their wavering over several possible labels under which to unite the films. In their responses to the first three features the critics primarily employed the label 'kitchen sink' or the catchphrase 'angry young man', at

times alluding to the 'angry generation of film-makers'. The critics' handling of the film-makers, their works and their protagonists clearly resembled the media's earlier treatment of the AYM writers, namely packaging them and their works reductively under the same label and making their authors synonymous with the central characters of their works.

The first of the New Wave films, *Room at the Top*, was based on John Braine's novel, published in 1957, and was directed by Jack Clayton (by no means a newcomer to the industry). The novel, seen as depicting a new working-class materialism and affluence, was highly acclaimed by literary critics, and both the author and his protagonist were categorised as Angry Young Men. The novel had become a best-seller and Braine was widely regarded, together with Kingsley Amis and John Osborne, as a leading member of the new 'school' of young writers. John and James Wolf produced the film for the Remus Company. The press book for the cinematic version of *Room at the Top* cites 'best-seller' John Braine, who states that 'British films come of age'. The book also introduces the film as 'a powerful adult drama . . . the characters are not mere pen-and-ink figures. They have flesh and blood. Each one of them really lives and breathes.' The hero, Joe Lampton, 'as played by Laurence Harvey', is presented as 'a modern Angry Young Man'.[5]

However, if the reviews of the film reflected the press publicity to some extent, it is also noticeable that the critics utilised this material by adding or emphasising specific issues that served to announce a change, a new phase in the cinematic domain. Thus in their initial responses to *Room at the Top* the critics tended to place it with other films rather than deal with it entirely independently. In fact, although *Look Back in Anger* was released several months after *Room at the Top*, its presence in critical discourse about *Room at the Top* is apparent from the outset. Thus, for example, the review in the *Financial Times*, 1 January 1959, begins with the statement:

> The notorious reluctance of the British cinema to consider the contemporary scene seems to be weakening. *Room at the Top* is only the first of a series of adaptations from works all vigorously concerned with aspects of life here and now which may very well revolutionise the absurd escapist philosophies which have deadened our film industry for so long. *Look Back in Anger* will soon follow; *The Entertainer* is being prepared; and the screen rights of *Live Like Pigs* and *A Taste of Honey* have been purchased.

Meanwhile Leonard Mosley, in a review titled 'The raw adult revolution' in the *Daily Express*, 3 April 1959, highlighted what

he perceived as the revolutionary aspect of *Room at the Top* – the introduction of subjects hitherto taboo in British cinema – proclaiming:

> I believe . . . that a little revolution in the cinema has taken place . . . The crisis of films-versus-TV has been met – and the cinema has grown up at long last . . . *Room at the Top* was the real eye-opener for me – the real proof that something had happened in the cinema. For here was a British film which, at long last, got its teeth into those subjects which have always been part and parcel of our lives, but have hitherto been taboo subjects on the prissy British screen – male ambition in all its ruthlessness, and sex in all its earthy compulsion. It is savagely frank and it is brutally truthful.

Mosley's emphasis on the film's 'revolutionary' aspect (its introduction of hitherto taboo subjects) in order to point out the change that was taking place calls to mind the reviews of the original stage version *Look Back in Anger*, particularly Kenneth Tynan's celebrated review in the *Observer*. In the monthly periodical of the film union, *Film & TV Technician*, the veteran director Maurice Elvey (1959: 60) referred to the critical responses to the film, noting that 'superlative praise comes also from the *Telegraph*, *The Times*, *Daily Worker*, *Star*, *Standard*, *Daily Herald*, *Sketch*, *News Chronicle*, the provincial press, and practically all the high-brow weeklies'. Indeed, the success of the film with critics and audience alike boosted the sales of the paperback edition of the novel (which carried on its cover a picture of Laurence Harvey as Joe Lampton).

If *Room at Top* was an adaptation of a highly successful novel, *Look Back in Anger* was a cinematic version of an especially influential play. Publicity put out by Woodfall called it 'an electrifying adult experience . . . from the sensational play by John Osborne that shocked the world'.[6] And again the critics not only highlighted its innovative qualities but related it to the AYM phenomenon in the theatre. In order to present this film as offering a significant contribution to the cinema, the reviewers not only needed to highlight the different, innovative qualities of the new form, but also to relate to its role in the new cinematic phase. Thus the review in *The Times*, 27 May 1959, stated:

> There are all too few people nowadays who are not familiar with the term 'angry young man', but there may still be a sizable proportion of the population which does not connect it with Mr. John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger*. That proportion will doubtless shrink now that the play has been turned into a film.

The reviewer also compared the film with *Room at the Top*. A few days later, in his review of the film in *The Times*, 1 June 1959, David

Robinson also referred to the original play, claiming that 'it was so completely of its own time that three years after, it has already become something of an establishment itself, part of contemporary legend, a bit of history'. Robinson credited the director and scriptwriters for *Look Back in Anger*'s new form, which he found 'so completely vital and exhilarating', further commenting that it 'stands firmly as a first-rate piece of cinema'. Campbell Dixon in the *Daily Telegraph*, 27 May 1959, also highlighted the role of Tony Richardson, 'the stage director', whose successful transition to the cinema 'shows again that in film-making intelligence and flare are more important than long experience'.

William Whitebait began his review in the *New Statesman*, 30 May 1959, by contending that 'times are indeed changed when, with *Room at the Top* still running at the Rialto, an English film so vexed, adult, and intelligent as *Look Back in Anger* can take the screen at the Empire'. Noting that the author himself had collaborated in the screen adaptation, Whitebait stressed that the cinematic version 'has in fact the urgencies and contacts the British film has been drearily drifting away from ever since the War'. Pointing out the differences between film and play, evident from the opening scene, he judged the film to be on the whole an improved version of the play – 'the better work of art' – and credited Tony Richardson with the improvement. On the other hand, he also expressed a certain amount of regret that, 'for all its achievement and promise', this 'undoubted triumph for English films and English character . . . looks back to the theatre of three years ago'.

The film version of *The Entertainer*, directed by Tony Richardson, was based on Osborne's successful play staged at the Royal Court in 1957. Prior to the release of the film Woodfall published an advertisement headed 'Introducing a new movement in British films'. The opening sentence reads: 'The talking-point team which put *Look Back in Anger* onto the screen is at work again'. It went on to lay out the programme of films 'which draw on the best work of new English playwrights and novelists', describing them as 'striking a new direction in British films' and specifying that the 'men behind the programme are playwright Osborne, producer Harry Saltzman and director Tony Richardson'.[7] Woodfall's advertisement seems to draw on and, in turn, further cultivate the critics' observations, notable from their reviews of *Room at the Top* and *Look Back in Anger*, of a change on the cinematic scene. However, if Woodfall had now embarked upon a strategy of promotion that involved joining forces with the critics, it did not prove effective where *The Entertainer* was concerned.

The reception of the film was mixed and, unlike the two preceding films, the film version of *The Entertainer* elicited negative comment and critical controversy. For example, Isabel Quigly in the right-wing *Spectator*, 5 August 1960, commented that John Osborne was already 'tangled up in his own legend, already dated in the sense that his plays seem already (at the rate the world moves) period pieces, though the period was only a very short while ago'. She pointed out that 'in filming *The Entertainer* much the same policy applied as in filming *Look Back in Anger*', namely utilising the same cast and director as the stage play, involving the playwright and 'opening up' the play by means of a certain amount of location shooting. Although Quigly found the film 'disappointingly episodic', 'a bit conventional in attitude and tone' and 'maybe over familiar', she nonetheless contended that compared with 'pretty well anything the British cinema gives us these days it stands out'. Significantly, Quigly's review actually critiqued one of the ingredients of the film which Woodfall's promotional campaign cited as an example of its strengths, namely the use of the same production team 'which put *Look Back in Anger* onto the screen'. By contrast, Derek Hill, in his highly favourable review of the film in the left-wing *Tribune*, 5 August 1960, claimed that Richardson's second feature film demonstrated the director's 'new calm assurance'. Moreover, according to Hill, the film highlighted the play's ironies with respect to recent controversial events such as the Suez crisis. He also pointed out the influence of Free Cinema, in particular Anderson's *O Dreamland* (1953), while attributing the critical attacks to the critics' own shortcomings and contending that '*The Entertainer* is the most professionally handled production so far this year'. However, Hill's own review soon came under fire, eliciting furious responses from both critics and readers and provoking even harsher judgements of the film (*Tribune*, 12 August 1960).

The film *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* was adapted from Alan Sillitoe's novel, which had been published in 1958 and had attracted the attention of literary critics, several of whom claimed it to be as important as *Lucky Jim* and *Look Back in Anger* and its writer as one of the leading authors of the 1950s. Despite the favourable critical responses, however, the novel's public reception was low key, although its sales rose with the publication of Sillitoe's collection of short stories, *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, in 1959), and following the release of the film version in 1961.

In the press book for *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, a headline announces 'the most talked about film of the year: The New Wave

reaches British cinema'. Following a brief introduction to the *nouvelle vague*, the book continues:

> In England the movement never really took root. That is why a new British film called *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* is so interesting. For it is a British example of the 'nouvelle vague' . . .
>
> Probably because the New Wave was a reaction against the established order of the cinema in Italy and France, the movement was always tied up with new names. In fact it has become synonymous with new faces, with 'discoveries' . . . In the same measure, too, the makers of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* have not fallen short. Director Karel Reisz, who for ten years has been producing some of the best documentary films in the world, was asked to direct it for Woodfall Films. It is his first feature film. Practically all its leading players are either completely new to the cinema or here have their biggest roles.[8]

As illustrated by this press book, Woodfall at this time clearly pursued the strategy of promoting its films as marking a new movement, this time drawing on the *nouvelle vague* as opposed to the AYM. Moreover, in promoting the film thus, Woodfall relied simultaneously on presenting both the familiar and the new, referring to Reisz's already-known documentary films while also highlighting the 'discoveries' – the newcomers.

Indeed, the reviews of the film show clearly that at this stage the perception of a new phase in British cinema, deliberately cultivated by Woodfall's publicity campaign, had found a favourable echo in most of the critics. In the *Daily Mail*, 25 October 1960, Neil Shand put the film 'in the same category as Braine's *Room at the Top*'. Meanwhile Alexander Walker in the *Evening Standard*, 27 October 1960, pronounced *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* 'a breakthrough film'. He ascribed the film's innovative aims – 'to look at Britain changing, at the way people work and go after pleasure' – to both Karel Reisz, 'who comes tried and proven from documentaries', and to Alan Sillitoe, 'writing a first screenplay that is loyal to his novel's sex and working-class frankness'. He also credited the film's radical qualities partly to John Osborne (who had co-founded Woodfall with Richardson), noting that 'when rebellion is in the air, Osborne is pretty sure to be somewhere in the act'.

Like Walker, many other critics highlighted the role of the director. If Reisz's fame as a documentary film-maker was noted in the Woodfall promotional material, the critics further elaborated on his contribution to the film and, at times, linked it with the radical aims of the Free Cinema enterprise. For instance, William Whitebait in the *New Statesman*, 29 October 1960, raised specifically the impact of Free

Cinema, claiming that even though the effect was not immediate or direct (because 'documentaries and features are separate worlds'), the film-makers had aimed a revolution 'at the industry itself: and indeed, with *Room at the Top*, the first response came through commercial channels'.

A number of critics (for instance, Dilys Powell in *The Sunday Times*, 30 October 1960) commented on the characteristics shared by the protagonists of the films seen to belong to the new movement. In his review, in the *Telegraph*, 25 October 1960, headed 'Angry man not seeking the top', 'E. S.' added Arthur Seaton, the protagonist of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, to the group of 'lusty Midlands lathe-operators and the other protesting figures of contemporary mythology: Jim Dixon, Jimmy Porter, Joe Lampton and Billy Liar', all of whom come under the label of 'young angry'. Significantly, this review grouped the film's protagonist with literary and theatrical ones. However, the review in the *Guardian*, 29 October 1960, argued that 'the theme of the young and angry begins to be a formula.'

Although many film critics still seemed to rely on tags and labels previously employed by literary and theatre critics, the label 'New Wave' was introduced into their reviews for the first time. The review in *The Times*, 28 October 1960, headed 'Satisfying film from the New Wave in English cinema', called *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* 'one of those films, the product of a new generation of British writers and directors, which are dedicated to the work of bringing the cinema into closer touch with the lives of the mass of people'. Comparing it to *Look Back in Anger* and *Room at the Top*, the reviewer also wrote of Sillitoe, Richardson and Reisz that: 'The recitation of these names is enough to indicate the film's general slant and purpose.'

The headline of the Woodfall promotional material for *A Taste of Honey* reads: 'A taste of brilliance', and, in line with the company's policy, the press book included short sections introducing the 'discoveries' in the cast – Rita Tushingham, Murray Melvin and Paul Danquah – while Dora Bryan, known previously as 'the queen of English comedies' is described as 'riding high on the "new wave" of film-making'. Significantly, however, the heading of the section devoted to the director, Tony Richardson, relates to his theatrical reputation: 'The Royal Court man does it again'.[9]

The film is based on Shelagh Delaney's play, directed by Joan Littlewood and staged by Theatre Workshop in 1958 to critical acclaim, eventually becoming a West End hit. The reviews of the film exemplify yet again the critics' tendency to point out the differences between the play and its screen adaptation, and in so doing to highlight the

innovative cinematic aspects of the latter. In fact, several press notices reported on the process of filming and the director's quest to create a film that would be faithful to reality. For example, Frank Herrmann's review in *The Sunday Times*, 7 May 1961, begins with a description of the rented house on Fulham Road that had served as the setting for the screen version of *A Taste of Honey*. According to Herrmann, Richardson 'adopted this course in an effort to place his actors against a realistic background, something which could not be accomplished in the artificial atmosphere of a studio'. 'Casting, too', the critic further commented, 'has followed the same lines'. David Nathan's review in the *Daily Herald*, 8 April 1961, as well as the notices in the *Evening News*, 8 May 1961, and in *The Times*, 24 April 1961, also referenced the 'broken down old house' rented from the local council.

However, Patrick Gibbs' review in the *Daily Telegraph*, 16 September 1961, marked a significant critical move. Gibbs introduced the film by cautiously commenting:

> In this country there doesn't exist exactly a new wave of film directors such as broke over France a few years ago; there is discernable, though, a new ripple, who work on un-romantic contemporary subjects in a realistic style. Tony Richardson is one of these, his *A Taste of Honey* being an exciting example of the new school.

By relating the film to the French *nouvelle vague*, Gibbs integrated into the critics' discourse another reference point (one that, as we have seen, had already figured in Woodfall's promotional campaign for *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*) to be employed in placing the 'new school' in British cinema, thereby suggesting a shift from the theatrical context to that of the purely cinematic domain.

A Kind of Loving was adapted by Keith Waterhouse and Willis Hall from a novel by Stan Barstow, which had been published in 1960 and categorised by literary critics as working-class realism. The film was produced by the Vic/Waterhall Company with Joseph Janni as producer. The director of the film version, John Schlesinger, was primarily known at the time for his work as a television director on the BBC series *Monitor* and for his prize-winning documentary about Waterloo station, *Terminus* (1961).

Most noticeable in the mainly favourable reviews of the film is the fact that the critics pointed out the film's antecedents, thereby attesting to the consolidation of their perception of that it belonged to a new movement. In his review, in the *Daily Herald*, 14 April 1962, titled 'Variation on an "X" theme', Paul Dehn contended that 'John Schlesinger has nipped up a fashionable British ladder whose

lower rungs were Reisz's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and Richardson's *A Taste of Honey*.' 'Now', he asserted, 'the new school of provincial realism has found its master.' However, this kind of approach was double-edged. Thus, for example, Penelope Gilliatt in the *Observer*, 15 April 1962, introduced *A Kind of Loving* as 'another *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*', but added: 'That is just the problem with it.' The review in *The Guardian*, 12 April 1962, similarly complained that 'these things begin to be repetitive'. On the other hand, referring to *Room at the Top*, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and *A Taste of Honey*, this reviewer, in line with Gibbs' review of *A Taste of Honey*, argued that:

> It could be claimed that the British cinema, too, had achieved 'a new wave' – less tumultuous and sensational, perhaps, than its Gallic counterpart, but still a development of some importance, testifying to the belated willingness of the British cinema to grapple with the British realities.

But, there again, the reviewer also admitted that:

> The trouble is, however, that we now begin to see signs that these revolutionary, newly realistic films of ours are losing their freshness; they are becoming the victims of their success and are becoming formulised . . . in *A Kind of Loving* we begin to recognise the landmark; we have been here before.

The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner was published in 1959 in a collection of short stories by Alan Sillitoe. This story – a monologue by a Borstal boy – attracted considerable critical attention, acclaim and awards.

Woodfall's promotional material for the film version, directed by Richardson, centred primarily on the cast: the established and renowned Michael Redgrave and the young newcomer to the screen, Tom Courtenay, who was described as a 'second Finney', and, according to Richardson, an actor who 'has all it takes to make another top-flight star'. Other leading roles were also given to young actors 'in line with [Woodfall] policy of giving new talent a chance . . . Many unknown and "little known" are being cast by the company which has already acquired a reputation for creating a new and different type of star'.[10]

Despite the renown of both author and story, and Woodfall's promotional campaign notwithstanding, the reception of the film was on the whole unfavourable. Although many critics praised Courtenay's performance, many also found fault with the film's direction, and it was frequently compared unfavourably with the preceding adaptation

of Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (for instance, in Derek Hill's review, 'Defiance and defeat', in *Tribune*, 29 September 1962). The majority of critics also pointed out that the rebel hero had now become a familiar screen figure. Indeed, the word 'rebel' cropped up in the headlines of several reviews, as in 'When a rebel fails to win' in *The Sunday Times*, 27 September 1962 and 'Rebel in our midst' in the *Daily Express*, 30 September 1962.

The film *This Sporting Life* is an adaptation of David Storey's first novel, published in 1960, which won the Macmillan Fiction Award.[11] Storey, like John Braine, Stan Barstow and Keith Waterhouse, came from the north of England and wrote about working-class characters. *This Sporting Life*, Lindsay Anderson's first feature film, produced by the Independent Artists company with Karel Reisz as the producer, was presented by its press book as 'possibly one of the most important, and certainly the most widely speculated'[12] films to have been produced recently in Britain.

In the reviews of the film the critics' association of *This Sporting Life* with the New Wave is clearly apparent. Most referred explicitly to the New Wave, judging Anderson's film within the context or in the light of the preceding films now grouped under this label. It is of significance, however, that the majority of reviewers also highlighted Anderson's prior reputation, referring to his Free Cinema documentaries, his critical essays on British cinema (notably, 'Stand up! Stand up!') and his stature as a theatre director at the Royal Court. Both Anderson and Reisz's previous achievements contributed to the critics' view of the film within the overall context of the perceived new movement, although in fact many critics also presented this film in particular as marking a breakthrough in British cinema. Thus David Robinson in the *Financial Times*, 7 February 1963, claimed: 'It is, for a start, no surprise that Lindsay Anderson's first feature film should be of a stature that the British cinema has very rarely achieved'. The review in *The Times*, 7 February 1963, stated: 'No one who knows his [Anderson's] earlier work will be surprised to find he has struck yet another blow for the Contemporary Cinema'. In the same vein was Peter Baker's review in the *Sunday Telegraph*, 10 February 1963, headed 'With *This Sporting Life* British movies achieve a major breakthrough'. Baker enthused: 'Make no mistake about it: after *This Sporting Life* . . . British movies will never be quite the same again,' and he further asserted: 'In a cinematic delta, puckered by scores of New Wavelets, it has an impact of an Atlantic breaker which knocks all hell out of the shallows.' The reviews of *This Sporting Life* thus seem to mark an important moment in the critics' shift from considering the literary and theatrical contexts

of these films to concentrating on their cinematic qualities, although of course it could be argued that this is largely because *This Sporting Life* is simply so striking as a film.

The film *Billy Liar* was based on Keith Waterhouse's second novel, published in 1959, which received immediate acclaim and was regarded among a number of other novels as following in Amis' *Lucky Jim*'s footsteps. It was adapted as a play by Waterhouse and Willis Hall, and the same team were responsible for the screenplay. The film, produced by Joseph Janni for Vic Films and directed by John Schlesinger, was received favourably by the majority of critics. Although *Billy Liar* has subsequently come to be seen as a New Wave film, the majority of its initial reviews made little mention of the New Wave. Thus Philip Oakes in the *Sunday Telegraph*, 18 August 1963, stated: 'Call it a comedy, if you insist, but – as a novel, as a play, and now as a film – *Billy Liar* belongs like heart and soul to the great tradition of escape stories.' And those critics who did bring up its connections with other contemporary British movies did not necessarily do so in a positive fashion. Thus Ian Wright in the *Guardian*, 13 August 1963, claimed that 'in some ways we've seen it all before – "A Taste of Loving on Saturday Night at the Top" '. And the sense that British cinema was moving on from the New Wave was actually encapsulated in the headline in *The Times*, 14 August 1963: 'Billy becomes a film star: move from realism', while the review itself argued that 'while it would be early to proclaim that realism is dead in the new British cinema, it is noticeable that during the last year or so most of our newer directors have shown signs that they no longer find it enough.' The reviewer referred to recent films by directors such as Clayton, Richardson and Anderson, contending that 'in his second feature film Mr. John Schlesinger joins the move away from realism'. In the light of the critics' responses to this film at the time of its release it is thus hardly surprising that *Billy Liar* has come to be seen as the last of the British New Wave films of the 1960s.

The feature films which were labelled New Wave were all based on acclaimed offerings in other cultural domains, namely novels and plays, works that had been hailed as key representatives of new cultural phenomena and were seen as reflecting the rapid social and cultural changes that were taking place during the era. To this extent, the already-existing discourses constructed around these works (not least the discourse of the Angry Young Man) provided film critics with a ready-made and easily understood repertoire of terms and concepts with which to express their perception of these films as marking a significant and visible change – a New Wave – in the cinematic domain.

Furthermore, the prior emergence of the Free Cinema documentaries also played a definite role in the emergence of the New Wave discourse, enabling critics to cite these documentaries as important and radical precursors of the New Wave films in the purely cinematic domain. Both of these processes were also aided by the promotional strategies of the companies which produced these films, most notably Woodfall.

It thus appears that in presenting a sequence of films as a defined and representative group, by exploiting the critical repertoire already constructed around these major works in either their literary or theatrical forms, the film critics transmitted and extended into the cinematic domain the already well established view that a significant cultural transformation was taking place in Britain. In this respect, the case of the British New Wave illustrates a more general phenomenon – the 'behind the scenes' mechanisms of what can be loosely called 'the spirit of an age', that is the role and influence of critical agents and their discourse, constructed around developments taking place in certain cultural domains, in the subsequent emergence and shaping of critical judgements surrounding the developments in other cultural domains.

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Notes

1. Several film historians have also added the film *Darling* (1965) to the list.
2. The three directors had collaborated in the past. Reisz had contributed to the film journal *Sequence* that Anderson co-founded (with Peter Ericsson) in 1946. When *Sequence* was discontinued in 1952, Anderson, Reisz and Richardson became involved with the journal *Sight and Sound*, which was edited by Gavin Lambert who had also co-edited *Sequence* with Anderson.
3. See also the interview conducted with Karel Reisz in McFarlane (1997: 475–9). The interviews with both Anderson and Reisz are parts of a collection of interviews with actors and film-makers of British cinema which is dedicated to the memory of Anderson, who died in 1994.
4. I do not examine in this article the differences between the various publications from whose reviews I quote, as it is my contention that such differences are irrelevant to the case in question. Noting the differences between reviews in different publications could indeed have served to account for divergences in views, had these actually emerged. However, all the reviews share in common specific tendencies and agendas, and this convergence and its accumulated affect are, in fact, integral to my argument.

5. The press book of *Room at the Top* is located in the library of the British Film Institute (BFI), London.
6. The press book of *Look Back in Anger* is located in the BFI library.
7. The press book of *The Entertainer* is located in the BFI library.
8. The press book also includes short sections: on the lead actor ('Albert Finney to stardom'), the director ('Reisz wears them all out') and the lead actresses Shirley Anne Field ('Who is laughing at Shirley now?') and Rachel Roberts ('Stardom for the preacher's daughter'). The press book of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* is located in the BFI library.
9. The press book of *A Taste of Honey* is located in the BFI library.
10. The press book of *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* is located in the BFI library.
11. David Storey's plays *The Contractor* (1969), *In Celebration* (1969) and *The Changing Room* (1971) were first performed at the Royal Court Theatre.
12. The press book of *This Sporting Life* is located in the BFI library.

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