Isn’t What It Used to Be

Looking at two films from very different eras in British cinema, BRIAN MCFARLANE traces the changes in the nation’s portrayal of ‘real’ lives on screen. How much has our idea of realism on film changed, he asks, and how much has the ‘reality’ that realism represents changed with it?
It was seeing two films in close proximity, one made in 1945 and the other in 2010, that brought home to me that realism isn’t what it used to be – in British cinema, at least. They were David Lean’s classic Brief Encounter and Mike Leigh’s classic-in-the-making Another Year, and it was the last shots of these two remarkable films that caused me to think about them in tandem – about how what we accept as realism in films has changed, and about how far such changes are intricately connected to the way we lived then and how we live now. And I don’t just mean superficial things like the liberal language use in Another Year – though maybe that’s not really superficial so much as a sign of a more general cultural relaxation. I mean, nobody swears in Brief Encounter!

There has been a good deal of theoretical discussion of realism as a mode of representation, and I don’t want to duplicate or even comprehensively canvass this. Equally though, I do want to stress that it is a mode of representation (as distinct, say, from fantasy or melodrama or romance), and not, as it is sometimes loosely used, a term of critical evaluation. In a good deal of writing about British cinema in particular, ‘realistic’ often seems to be used as an approving assessment rather than an appraisal of how the film goes about its business. As Christopher Williams wrote several decades ago, ‘realism – however inescapable – can never be the only, or even the principal, mode of film criticism.’ And in the same volume, VF Perkins astutely claimed that ‘we make sense of the movie image by relating it to our common knowledge and experience of the visible world’, but added wisely that ‘The relationship cannot be one of simple correspondence.’

In wanting to focus on some of the ways in which concepts of realism have mutated in British cinema, I need to specify what I have in mind when I use the term. What interests me especially here is how our concept of film realism appropriates and depends on widespread acceptance in relation to social mores, to prevailing moral stances, to matters such as work and sexuality – to the way people live at particular times. With its relentless mimesis, film can quite easily capture the surfaces of the ‘real world’, and this no doubt gives it immense historical value. If you watch a film such as Ealing’s Hue and Cry (Charles Crichton, 1947), you can see what one of its young stars, Harry Fowler, meant when he said forty years later: ‘Part of its classic status is that it has actual film of London as it was in the immediate post-war years, when the bomb sites were still evident.’

That is one kind, or aspect, of ‘realism’: we can accept that what we are seeing on the screen is an ‘authentic’ image of a real-world physical phenomenon. (And that was certainly not always the case with prewar British cinema, except in its documentary arm.) Still photography can reproduce such surfaces up to a point, that point being prior to when movement and sound are required to play their parts. What concerns me more on this occasion is how far the techniques of film can go in rendering realities beyond the surfaces: how far can – does – film, in this...
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case British film, go in signifying social structures and inner states, for instance?

Two endings

It is this sort of question that came to mind as I thought about the endings of the two films named above. Brief Encounter ends with Laura Jesson (Celia Johnson), tempted to the very edge of an adulterous precipice, returning to her kind, rather dull husband Fred (Cyril Raymond). The film has been told in flashback as Laura sits reflecting unhappily in their living room. ‘You’ve been a long way away,’ says Fred. ‘Thank you for coming back to me.’ There is undoubtedly a sort of realism in Laura’s choice, in relation to which Sue Aspinall has claimed:

Laura rejects her lover out of fear of the unknown and because her middle-class sensibilities are offended by the sordiness of adultery; she chooses social approval and security because the alternative seems to offer no clear role in life.

There is a ring of cultural reality in this ending – for this woman at this time – but mention of ‘this time’ also makes me wonder if this kind of compromised ending is as much realism as 1945 would allow. It came at the end of a long war in which many people had made sacrifices and had found their happiness cruelly blighted. Perhaps the ending is an example of TS Eliot’s insight that ‘Humankind cannot bear very much reality’, maybe 1945 audiences could not have borne any more. As it is, the concluding sequence rings utterly true – and, for all its element of comfortableness, utterly heartbreaking.

Could a commercial film of sixty-five years ago have risked the appalling bleakness of Another Year’s final moments? While her happily married, comfortable and supportive friends, Tom and Gerri (Jim Broadbent and Ruth Sheen), talk with their other guests around the dinner table about trips they have taken, Gerri’s motormouth colleague Mary (Lesley Manville) is for once silenced. The camera has kept us from observing her while the others talk, then gradually it settles on her face, blank
with misery, as the sound of the conversation and the colour
and liveliness of the scene are drained out of the image. We are
left with Mary’s face in close-up for what seems to be minutes.
Part of the film’s realism is in its insight that some people are
just luckier than others, an insight more pertinent than pro-
found. Mary for once has to look into herself, and what she sees
there seems not to offer much in the way of consolation.

I think it’s much more likely in 2010 than in 1945 that a film
would dare to end on a note of what looks like unambiguous
bleakness. So perhaps the idea of what is regarded as accept-
able realism in a commercial film has undergone a major
change. It is hard to imagine a film even twenty or thirty years
ago ending on such a note. In the case of Brief Encounter, the
prospect of Laura going on with her marriage and family life
with people who love her doesn’t do away with the pain but it
helps; in Mary’s case her fantasy life has left her utterly unpre-
pared. Yet when I made such a point in a lecture, one of those
present offered the provocative suggestion that perhaps this is
the first time Mary has stopped talking long enough to think, to
come to some sort of terms with herself, and that, if this is the
case, there are vestigial grounds for optimism. Perhaps self-
knowledge is not out of the question for Mary. Even so, there is
a fierce bleakness in that last image that I suspect the earlier
film wouldn’t have dared, and realism is today allowed to be
harsher in emotional matters, at least in their surface repre-
sentations.

What I’m interested in pursuing here is not that notion of real-
ism at work in classical Hollywood cinema – where it essen-
tially referred to a suppression of the apparatus of filming,
the aim of which was, through our temporary suspension of
disbelief, to make us feel we were getting an unmediated pur-
chase on some aspect of the real world. My concern at present
is more to do with the way changes in widely accepted mores
have impacted on what we take for realism in film. Imagine, for
instance, how remote the insistent use of such words as ‘fuck’
in modern cinema, including Another Year, would have been
from the thinking of those making Brief Encounter (or at least
from their capacity to act upon such thinking, censorship being
what it was then). If this seems a trivial example, it may well
resonate to take in some serious shifts in what we regard as
matters of grave infraction of acceptable behaviour. My claim,
not a particularly original one, is that this will have crucial
implications for what we will accept in film as realism.

The way things were

To appreciate fully the kind of realism represented by Brief
Encounter in its time, it may be useful to consider briefly what
British cinema of the 1930s was like. It was not often closely
allied to the day-to-day concerns of ordinary, everyday lives. Its
staples included film versions of West End plays, especially of
the famous Aldwych farces, which look pretty stiff and stagy on
screen; numerous crime thrillers, about thirty of them adapted
from the popular fictions of Edgar Wallace; musicals set in
mythical European kingdoms; and, on a larger scale and at the
prestige end of production, Alexander Korda’s imperial adven-
tures and the witty thrillers of Alfred Hitchcock. As for realism,
it was largely a lost cause: the films of music hall stars Gracie Fields and George Formby, hugely popular at the time, were among the few that placed working-class lives at the centre of their plots, but their appeal was demotic rather than realist. Otherwise, the plots of 1930s British films reveal an extraordinary preoccupation with the doings of the wealthy and the titled. It’s hard to be certain to whom these films were meant to appeal, but there seems to be evidence that Hollywood films, much more democratic in spirit, were more popular than the homegrown variety.

The other nonfictional aspect of 1930s cinema was the documentary film movement, led by John Grierson, and dedicated to putting on screen authentic pictures of life as it was lived by ‘ordinary’ people. This movement, concerned with matters such as housing problems and coalmining, addressed aspects of life remote from the world of so much fictional British cinema of the decade. During the war, these two strands, previously having little to do with each other, became intertwined to produce some of the most notable films of the war period and to give a new lease of life to British film production. In the process, many would claim, they created the finest hours in the history of British cinema.

_Brief Encounter_ isn’t a prime example of how documentary strategies and ethos infiltrated the fiction film during the war – at least not in the way that such films as _Millions Like Us_ (Frank Launder & Sidney Gilliat, 1943), _Nine Men_ (Harry Watt, 1943) and _The Way Ahead_ (Carol Reed, 1944) are. Nevertheless, it evinces interest in the more prosaic aspects of everyday life: of taking a train journey into the nearest provincial town where Laura changes her library book, has lunch at the Kardomah Café, goes to a film and later waits for her return train in the station buffet. Into these quotidian realities an unsought passion makes its disruptive way when a doctor, Alec Harvey (Trevor Howard), removes from her eye a speck of coal grit caught when looking for her train. The inner reality impresses us with its authenticity partly because the context for it has been recreated with such verisimilitude in relation to matters like its middle-class settings and routines.

A good deal of it was filmed on location, with street scenes in Beaconsfield, the station in Carnforth, the cinema interior in an actual cinema, the boating sequence in Regent’s Park and so on. Location shooting is now so much taken for granted that we need to be reminded that this was not necessarily the way things were in British film before the wartime influence of documentary made itself felt. And merely going on location is no guarantee of other kinds of reality following as the night the day. In fact, at least one aspect of _Brief Encounter_ always seems to me at odds with the truthfulness of Laura and Alec’s central drama. By this I mean the comic byplay of bantering station porter Albert Godby (Stanley Holloway) and railway buffet manager Myrtle Bagot (Joyce Carey), forever primping her hair and speaking with false refinement. These two belong intransigently to the prewar film scene, whereas in the main story there is a quiet, acutely sensitive reading of two people trying to behave decently in a difficult situation.

Sixty years on, the 1940s still looks like British cinema’s creative apogee and much of the prestige of that period derived from its more direct contact with the indocile facts of real life than had been the case before the war.
It is not only the comic relief, though, that is at odds with the pervasive realism of the rest. There are aspects of the film’s noir stylistics that lift it out of the category of pure realism. Compare the daytime footage of Laura walking about the streets of the town as she does her messages with the nighttime shots of her aimless, distraught wanderings as she tries to come to terms with her situation. Robert Krasker’s overhead camera creates a more than merely realist recording of Laura’s plight: by choosing to view her from above, in the wet, dimly lit square dominated by the war memorial, he is making a statement about the turmoil of her inner life, and using means more commonly associated with the poetic than with prosaic everyday reality. Film noir in 1945 aimed to intensify reality rather than directly mirror it.

Along the way

I’m not planning a potted history of ‘realism’ in British cinema, but want only to note that in its chequered history it seems to keep rediscovering realism in one form or another every decade or so. Sixty years on, the 1940s still looks like British cinema’s creative apogee and much of the prestige of that period derived from its more direct contact with the indelible facts of real life than had been the case before the war. That’s an oversimplification of course, and the literary strand of the national cinema was also very important – think of Henry V (Laurence Olivier, 1944) or David Lean’s Dickens films, Great Expectations (1946) and Oliver Twist (1948). After the relative stasis of the 1950s, with the Rank Organisation and the Associated British Corporation generally settling for more conventional fare, 1959 brought a new burst of realism, ushered in by Jack Clayton’s Room at the Top. This film had something of the same effect in cinema as John Osborne’s groundbreaking play Look Back in Anger (1956) had had in the theatre. Both were marked by a new candour (by which I mean a regard for the way things actually were) in matters relating to class and sexuality; they seemed to break radically from, respectively, an unadventurous approach to genre filmmaking in the cinema and a middle-class domination in theatre. Room at the Top challenged the intransigence of the class system in narrating the rise of Joe Lampton (Laurence Harvey) from a poor working-class background to marrying his boss’ daughter, suffering snobbish put-downs along the way. He discards a woman he really loves in his pursuit of material and social success and ends with the bitter realisation that life at the top may not be all he has hoped. The film’s last moments, eschewing the happy ending of conventional genre expectations, close in on Joe’s clamped-down face, his eyes brimming with tears for that part of himself he has denied in his drive to the top.

The batch of films that came in the wake of Room at the Top is now remembered as constituting Britain’s ‘New Wave’, the name derived from the French nouvelle vague which, in perhaps more crucial ways, was breaking with its national filmmaking traditions. (A recent article by Graham Fuller has somewhat glibly dubbed these films and their heirs as ‘Misery Cinema’, which sounds more like someone looking for a catchphrase than exhibiting an openness to what is actually on the screen.) Directors new to cinema brought an invigorating freshness to bear on their material (most adapted from literary sources), took film away from the Technicoloured purlieus of the Home Counties, and found that there was serious life going on in the more rugged north. Films such as Look Back in Anger (Tony Richardson, who had also directed the play on stage, 1959), the
very popular Saturday Night and Sunday Morning (Karel Reisz, 1960), A Taste of Honey (Richardson again, 1961), A Kind of Loving (John Schlesinger, 1962) and The Sporting Life (Lindsay Anderson, 1963), all in black-and-white, took working lives with a seriousness of purpose that was pretty much new in British cinema. The wartime films were, by and large, motivated by an urge towards social consensus; these ‘New Wave’ titles were more apt to employ realist techniques in the interests of dissent from outmoded social norms, even if, as one critic noted, the films acquired their own kinds of orthodoxy. Writing of how ‘Each of the New Wave films has its shots of canals, street scenes, the pub, the fairground, the bus journey, the visit to the nearby countryside’, Terry Lovell claims that ‘This repertoire of images soon staled into cliché.’ There is certainly some truth in this account of the physical realism of these films as seen now, but at the time they represented an important break with much of British commercial cinema of the 1950s, and questioned some accepted mores.

Since then

The ‘New Wave’ more or less foundered in the latter 1960s when ‘swinging London’ films such as The Knack (Richard Lester, 1965) and Georgy Girl (Silvio Narizzano, 1966) commanded attention, if not lasting respect. But it is as if social realism (along with the literary adaptation/’heritage’ film) was always going to be British cinema’s trump card, and filmmakers such as Ken Loach, Shane Meadows, sometimes Michael Winterbottom, and, with major qualifications, Mike Leigh have kept the realist flag flying. Of these, Loach has held most tenaciously to his social-realist credentials: his films, from the days of Cathy Come Home (1966, a realist milestone, made for TV) and Kes (1969) to new-century jobs like The Wind That Shakes the Barley (2006) and It’s a Free World… (2007), have never lost their political edge as he investigates lives often lived on the margins of society. That is not to say that his films lack variety of tone and mood, but that they are consistently committed to rendering the way things are for large sectors of society.

Meadows began filming thirty years later than Loach, whom he somewhat resembles in his concern for difficult and/or underprivileged lives and his general preference for largely unknown casts. It might also be said that what the New Wavers had done in bringing the north to wider audience attention, Meadows did for the Midlands, where he grew up. The film that brought him to notice was Twenty Four Seven (1997), which at first promises to be yet another somewhat grim picture of urban life in decay in 1990s Britain, but is in fact a genuinely inspiring film. Not a feel-good movie, but one that challenges the values people hold, and in this respect Meadows goes further than the New
Wave films which, in retrospect at least, seem primarily com-
mitted to setting out the territory, to making audiences privy to
kinds of life with which most would be unfamiliar. Thirty-odd
years later, Meadows could take for granted that viewers had
some basic grasp of the territory and could press harder to
see what sorts of possibilities and manageable goals it might
throw up.

Meadows and screenwriter Paul Fraser had been encour-
gaged as teenagers by a man who set up a football club to
give the local layabouts something positive to do with their
energies. In the film, Darcy (Bob Hoskins), middle-aged and
lonely, persuades the local kids to help him to reactivate a
run-down boxing club. There may be a touch of *Going My Way*
[Leo McCarey, 1944] about this – remember Bing Crosby as
the priest and a bunch of what passed for urban delinquents
back in the innocent 1940s? (Delinquents have come a long
way since then.) But this film is decidedly not sentimental as
it shows Darcy working with genuine (albeit naive) enthusiasm
to instil some sort of self-respect in the lads he has tried to
whip into shape. The film provides just enough sense of their
backgrounds for us to accept them as individuals rather than
just stand-ins for Disadvantaged Youth.

Meadows has since gone on to acutely chronicle life in
Midlands settings of varied disorderliness, most notably
perhaps in *This Is England* (2006). With this film, he again
draws on his own experiences to record how a young boy,
Shaun (Thomas Turgoose), gets drawn into a gang of skin-
heads who become a surrogate family for him. The film is
uncompromising in its dealings with racism, mass unemploy-
ment in the 1980s, and the effects of the Falklands War on
the national psyche. In a 2010 miniseries also called *This Is
England*, Meadows expands on Shaun’s life as he is about to
leave school with no certainty as to what he will make of his
future. He has continued such British realist traditions as
location shooting, focusing on important social issues,
especially as they affect those with least control over them,
and using unfamiliar actors, presumably to increase the sense
of actuality.

Now and Another Year – and Brief Encounter again

To return to my starting point: Mike Leigh’s latest film, *Another
Year*, just as realism in *Brief Encounter* is qualified by its lower-
orders comedy and its intermittent film noir touches, so the
kind of realism on display in Leigh’s films has always had to...
embrace an anarchic, sometimes ferocious comic element, as well as certain elements of style that draw attention to themselves. Nevertheless, I want to draw attention briefly to his continuities with the British realist tradition.

One of this great film’s many triumphs is its beautifully detailed evocation of the middle-class, professional, long-married contentment of marine engineer Tom and his counsellor wife Gerri (who, unlike 1945’s Laura, has a full-time job). In unobtrusive realist detail, the film articulates their sense of comfortability in each other’s company, whether quietly at home preparing a meal or working in their vegetable patch at the allotment. Without resorting to cliché or schematism, Leigh positions these two as the constant in the film: they know each other well enough scarcely to need words; they are not perfect and in the film’s painful last moments they are unaware that good nature can be insensitive. Structurally, though, they are the means of bringing to the fore the problems of assorted friends and colleagues. For instance, their son Joe (Oliver Maltman) is a worry in the background, and Gerri’s chattering colleague Mary is welcomed into their home, however tiresome she may be. But sentimentality is warded off by allowing Gerri understandable impatience when Mary turns up unannounced on one occasion. Then there’s Ken (Peter Wight), Tom’s old friend, now overweight and more or less alcoholic; and finally Tom’s taciturn brother Ronnie (David Bradley), whom they take in when he is widowed. This could sound as if Gerri and Tom are too saintly to be believed, but Leigh is too aware of their – and everyone else’s – fallible humanity for the film to degenerate into predictable contrasts of character and circumstance. The film accepts the fact that some people are luckier than others; that it may be easier to be kind if you’re one of the lucky ones; that life seems to deal dud cards to some people. Its overall tone is compounded from tolerance and compassion and never allowed to become mushy or miserabilist. It is not, as Fuller claims when he too easily writes off All or Nothing (2002), ‘uncompromisingly depressive’.9 There’s too much zest in the filming for that.

It was how audiences’ expectations of realism had altered so radically over the decades that struck me in relation to these two films. What I mean by realism in each case is the film’s aim to be taken as a serious reflection of some aspect or aspects of everyday reality and how this is achieved through physical and psychological/emotional verisimilitude. There’s obvious attention in each to the details of everyday life, and, in psychological or emotional terms, they each give unflinching attention to the kind of pain that won’t go away.

In Brief Encounter, Laura tries to tell herself that the ache in her life will go away; it can’t last forever, she tries to believe, but in the end, though she accepts Fred’s consoling embrace, we aren’t meant to think that all is now well and that the pain has now gone.

In Brief Encounter, Laura tries to tell herself that the ache in her life will go away; it can’t last forever, she tries to believe, but in the end, though she accepts Fred’s consoling embrace, we aren’t meant to think that all is now well and that the pain has now gone. The film does signify a sort of basis for a life in which affection and honour may eventually outlast pain, or at least cushion its impact. In Another Year, on other hand, the way the camera homes in on Mary’s anguished
In *Another Year*, on other hand, the way the camera homes in on Mary’s anguished face at the end is Leigh’s way of saying that for some people maybe there are kinds of pain that won’t go away and can’t be assuaged.

face at the end is Leigh’s way of saying that for some people maybe there are kinds of pain that won’t go away and can’t be assuaged. Mary hasn’t the cushioning advantages of husband, children and home that Laura has. Gerri has said to Mary when Mary turns up unannounced once too often: ‘This is my family, Mary. You’ve got to understand that.’ It’s hard no doubt for Mary to understand about ‘family’, but it’s an astute (and realist) touch on Leigh’s part to suggest the limits of Gerri’s good-natured kindness.

Each film begins, too, on a note of pain. *Brief Encounter* begins with Laura’s restrained anguish at what she knows will be the last time she’ll see Alec, and the fact that this final meeting is ruined by silly chattering Dolly (Everley Gregg). *Another Year* begins with a big close-up on Janet’s (Imelda Staunton) face, raw with inarticulate unhappiness, her counsellor only seen in fragments as she asks the questions. Janet has nothing to do with the succeeding narrative in plot terms, but she presages the film’s concern for the unhappy people with whom the long-married couple will have dealings. So each film, in its own way, announces possibly harrowing emotional tensions in its opening moments, using the close-up to scrutinise the surface for hints of an inner life.

In each film there is a character who dreams of another kind of reality. More obviously, Laura, who sits in the train and sees reflected in its window a montage in which she and Alec are engaged in glamorous settings far removed from the reality of their everyday meetings in the provincial town. She imagines them in a gondola, or waltzing in a vast ballroom, or sitting in a box at the opera: scenes of romantic fantasy she is likely to have encountered in the middlebrow novels she reads. These images are her clichés, not the filmmaker’s. In *Another Year*, Mary’s life is an ongoing series of fantasies about a different, happier life, but her tragedy is that her self-indulgence (emotional as well as alcoholic) and her self-centredness make it unlikely her fantasies will ever be anything more than that. And, as I say, it’s much more likely in 2010 than in 1945 that a film will dare to end on a note of such bleakness. What is regarded as acceptable realism in a commercial film has undergone a major change. In the case of *Brief Encounter*, the prospect of Laura going on with her marriage and family life with people implies she will have support; in Mary’s case, her fantasy life has left her utterly unprepared.

*Brief Encounter* certainly achieves emotional and psychological realism, but its filming style is, as suggested above, often influenced by what would become a dominant postwar style – that of film noir, in which sharp contrasts of light and dark highlight emotional states, frequently underscoring a kind of postwar malaise and leaving conclusions ambivalent. By contrast, *Another Year* is filmed in widescreen and Technicolor, and, as well as some stunning close-ups (Janet, Mary), there are heart-lifting moments of beauty in lighting.
and composition (such as the vast long-shot of golfers on the horizon) that contrast with the intense interiority of most of the drama. In fact, each of the four seasons into which the 'year' is divided is introduced by a memorable shot. In each case, Leigh’s great cameraman of the last twenty years, Dick Pope, seems to have caught exactly the intentions of each section of the film, not just in the superbly evocative quality of the lighting but in introducing the character interest of what is to follow.

The latest book on Leigh, pretentious and convoluted as much of it is, is right to argue that ‘The balance between realism and artifice is remarkable’ in his work, claiming that it is a simplification of Leigh’s approach to label him with the mode of realism.\(^1\) The author pushes his case too hard, but just as Lean’s strategies deny Brief Encounter’s claim to realism in the purist sense, so too do the subtle structural parallels and contrasts and the stylistic boldness of Another Year sustain Leigh’s claim to a highly idiosyncratic version of the term. Between the two, it is possible to trace a realist lineage that has proved endlessly mutable.

Endnotes

2 Perkins in ibid., p. 70.
6 The latter two films were also the beneficiaries of the wartime injection of realism in matters such as setting or, on another level, the actualities of class, which for so long had merely been taken for granted.
7 Graham Fuller, ‘Misery Loves Company’, Film Comment, November–December 2011, pp. 36–43.
9 Fuller, op. cit., p. 42.
10 Sean O’Sullivan, Mike Leigh, University of Illinois Press, Urbana et. al., 2011, p. 5.