From real time to reel time: the films of John Schlesinger: study of the change from objective realism to subjective reality in British cinema in the 1960s

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Description
Abstract

The 1960s was a period of change for the British cinema, as it was for so much else. The six feature films directed by John Schlesinger in that decade stand as an exemplar of what those changes were. They also demonstrate a fundamental change in the narrative form used by mainstream cinema. Through a close analysis of these films, A Kind of Loving, Billy Liar, Darling, Far From the Madding Crowd, Midnight Cowboy and Sunday Bloody Sunday, this thesis examines the changes as they took hold in mainstream cinema. In effect, the thesis establishes that the principal mode of narrative moved from one based on objective realism in the tradition of the documentary movement to one which took a subjective mode of narrative wherein the image on the screen, and the sounds attached, were not necessarily a record of the external world. The world of memory, the subjective world of the mind, became an integral part of the narrative.

As the decade began, the dominating phenomenon of British cinema was a small group of films made in the Northern provinces which were dubbed The British New Wave. Because of the depictions of working class life in these films and a tendency to portray sexual relationships with a hitherto unknown frankness the films appeared at the time to be entirely new. However as this thesis establishes, with hindsight they can now be seen as the last vestige of that form of social realism which had dominated British cinema since the rise of the documentary movement in the 1930s, under the influence of John Grierson. As the thesis points out, the theoretical orthodoxy of such as Bazin, Zavattini, Kracauer and others assumed that such documentary realism was essential to film as a narrative art. The directors of all the films which have been accepted into the canon of the British New Wave had backgrounds in documentary film. The two Schlesinger films of this period, A Kind of Loving (1962) and Billy Liar (1963), reflect the documentary nature of the movement while also revealing the desire to break away from the strictures of realism. The ‘New Wave’ rubric was in fact a commercial ploy initiated by one of the main production companies involved in these films – Woodfall Films.

This form of realism was rapidly overtaken by the major cultural phenomenon to appear in Britain in the decade: ‘Swinging London’. The epithet was a pop cultural reference promulgated by the press, but it did indicate a new aesthetic which was some distance from the Griersonian realist mode. These films most often emulated certain stylistic tics learned from the French Nouvelle Vague movement, the original ‘new wave’. The use of jump cuts, such fashionable characters as pop groups, models and their photographers, and a liberal rather than puritan attitude to sex made the films popular with a new, young and affluent audience if not with the critics. No major critical work has been undertaken on the films of this period, and as this thesis reveals, they are usually described as derivative. However the argument in this thesis is that these films are an important nexus between the straight realism of the past and the new, psychological realism that is established by the end of the decade. Schlesinger’s two films of this time are a Julie Christie diptych: Darling (1965) and Far From the Madding Crowd (1967). The former is an archetypal Swinging London film, full of ‘new’ social types and a tendency to disrupt the narrative realism; the latter reveals the use of ‘new’ stars and new music to enhance the historical mode in a new form of historical realism which, as this thesis points out, was adopted by several directors at that time.

As the decade drew to an end the films began to take on a darker, more considered tone. The sense of fun gave way to a more internalised form of cinema, one which used non-linear time to investigate the psychology of its characters. Memory and fantasy began to intrude into the realist world of British cinema. The image on the screen could no longer be assumed to be a reliable depiction of reality, but more often was a subjective image drawn from the mind of one of the characters in the film. Gilles Deleuze is the major analyst of the way film changed from ‘movement-image’ to ‘time-image.’ While this thesis does not totally agree with some of his conclusions it does concur essentially with his argument that the language of film, by the end of the 1960s, was able to convey a subjective reality which is quite different from the assumptions of Bazin, Grierson and such. The final two Schlesinger films examined in detail in this thesis, Midnight Cowboy (1969) and Sunday, Bloody Sunday (1971) reveal that the Griersonian documentary, with its assumption that the camera was an unblinking eye capturing only reality, was no longer the dominant form of narrative in British cinema. Film had become a subjective examination of a non-linear chronology investigating the internal world of its characters, not the external world in which they moved.

Keywords

cinema studies; British cinema; John Schlesinger

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Abstract

The beginning of the 1960s was marked by the appearance of a range of feature films which took up serious social issues and were placed within the contemporary cultural context. The films are described as social realist and described as a British ‘New Wave’. The description of these films as a ‘New Wave’ should not be confused with the contemporary French films that were coming out of France from the Cahiers du Cinema milieu of directors. Some commentators regard the British New Wave as being influenced by the French New Wave. This seems inappropriate as the period usually defined as In the time of Thatcherism, the films discussed will be widely varied in terms of style and form. The third and last part of the literature review will be the 1990s and thereafter, when Britain welcomed the innovation in the national and cultural image of Great Britain under a unified name of “Cool Britannia”. Here there appeared films which pushed the boundaries of social realist form, by integrating pop music and pop culture into films. Set in real locations of industrial towns, most of these films have young working-class men as the main characters, who, unsatisfied with their life, are seeking escape. As one can see from Tony Richardson’s film which was an adaptation of the same titled novel and theatre production, this cycle often. 5. Top Films of All-Time. Greatest Film Series-Franchises. Greatest Films - Criteria. Cinema in the 1960s reflected the decade of fun, fashion, rock ‘n’ roll, tremendous social changes (i.e., the civil rights era and marches) and transitional cultural values. This was a turbulent decade of monumental changes, tragedies, cultural events, assassinations and deaths, and advancements, such as: 1959 - Barbie Doll and the Microchip invented. 1960 - Introduction of the Twist dance by Chubby Checker. A new wave of grim, non-fictional, social realism in British cinema, dubbed or styled "Kitchen Sink" due to its angry, everyday working-class heroes, frank dialogue, and negative post-war themes, was exemplified in the grainy, powerful works of various directors in the late 50s and early 60s.