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Newland, P and Hoyle, B

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Introduction: post-millennial British art cinema

Paul Newland and Brian Hoyle

In recent years a number of new British filmmakers have emerged with feature length works that overtly reject the style and story-telling methods seen in mainstream British and Hollywood cinema, but instead demonstrate high levels of artistic sophistication and ambition. These filmmakers, their films, and the cultural and industrial spheres that have helped produce and sustain them, we would like to call 'post-millennial British art cinema'. The articles in this special issue of the *Journal of British Cinema and Television* engage with some rich examples of post-millennial British art cinema, but they all show that the work of contemporary artists working with film in Britain does not always sit comfortably within most extant histories of British national cinema or film genre, including art cinema. Indeed, at the outset, we would like to point out that post-millennial British art cinema is not easily definable or classifiable, but is instead characterised by industrial and formal fluidity, and, often, by an ambivalence towards borders, be they generic, formal, aesthetic, cultural, industrial, technological, or, indeed, national. While we acknowledge the difficulties inherent in producing catchall terms for groups of films produced during specific historical periods and in often similar circumstances, a number of films and filmmakers have nevertheless emerged that deserve our critical attention, and it makes sense to look at these films and filmmakers within the contexts of British cinema history and within the remit of the broad concept of art cinema.

Recent scholarly work by the likes of Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover (2010), Mark Betz (2003; 2009), David Andrews (2013) and Andrew Tudor (2005) has re-assessed the nature of art cinema, often taking account of the problems inherent in trying to treat this as a stable category of films, while at the same time nevertheless acknowledging the ways in which film cultures have sprung up, nourishing and nurturing experimental or intellectual

work, in specific nations, and across national boundaries. Yet, with the exception of Brian Hoyle's 2006 PhD thesis, 'British Art Cinema, 1975-2000: context and practice', comparatively little substantial scholarly work has been done to historicise, categorise or indeed attempt to define contemporary British art cinema in any sustained way. Our forthcoming edited collection, *British Art Cinema* (Manchester University Press), will aim to open up this area of British cinema history to a new level of critique. In the meantime, however, we want to turn our attention to recent developments.

Writing in a 2009 *Guardian* article, the journalist Andrew Pulver argued: 'Quietly, with little fuss, and almost no critical fanfare, it looks as though we are in the middle of a British art-cinema bonanza, the likes of which we haven't seen for decades.' (Pulver 2009) Pulver was reflecting on the then recent release of the films *sleep furiously* (Gideon Koppel, 2008), *Hunger* (Steve McQueen, 2008), *Unrelated* (Joanna Hogg, 2007), *Better Things* (Duane Hopkins, 2008), *Soi Cowboy* (Thomas Clay, 2007), and *Of Time and the City* (Terence Davies, 2008). Pulver was also anticipating the then future UK releases of *Fish Tank* (Andrea Arnold, 2009), and *Katalin Varga* (Peter Strickland, 2009). Although disparate in terms of the production strategies and formal and aesthetic qualities, all of these films have met with considerable critical praise. In a subsequent, similarly gushing celebration of contemporary British cinema, which reiterates his desire to celebrate an outpouring of interesting, 'arty' films in Britain, Pulver wrote: 'whisper it – British cinema is going through a golden age, a renaissance we have hardly noticed we are living through.' (Pulver 2011) To the lists of what Pulver has seen as a golden age in British art cinema we might also now add wide-ranging and often very impressive work by Jonathan Glazer, Ben Wheatley, Ben Rivers, Clio Barnard, Sarah Turner, and Sam Taylor-Wood, among many others, and recent work by more seasoned filmmakers such as Patrick Keiller, Andrew Köttling, Lynne Ramsay, and Terence Davies.

Pulver also noted that films such as *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (Tomos Alfredson, 2011), *A Dangerous Method* (David Cronenberg, 2011), *Wuthering Heights* (Andrea Arnold, 2011) and *Shame* (Steve McQueen, 2011) were successful at the 2011 Venice Film Festival, and that *Two Years at Sea* (Ben Rivers, 2011) won a prize in the experimental Orizzonti section (Pulver 2011). While it may be tenuous to call some of these films British, and the familiar critical difficulties with categorizing national cinema in any straightforward way evidently remain, it is nevertheless difficult to disagree with Pulver's broad celebration of the high levels of creativity being demonstrated by a seemingly revitalized British film industry in recent years.

In part, the emergence of this new breed of filmmakers, with their stylistic and transnational innovations, might be explained by key industrial changes; specifically, at the level of funding for filmmaking available in Britain. In 2000 the Labour Government dissolved both the British Film Institute Production Board and British Screen, and made them part of the UK Film Council. This organisation ran a Development Fund, a New Cinema Fund (to back and develop new talent), and a Premier Fund (designed to back more mainstream productions). Films backed by the UK Film Council included the Academy Award-winning *Man on Wire* (James Marsh, 2008), *In the Loop* (Armando Iannucci, 2009), *Bright Star* (Jane Campion, 2009), *Fish Tank* (Andrea Arnold, 2009), *Rage* (Sally Potter, 2009), and Ken Loach's *Palme d'Or*-winning *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* (2006). While the UK Film Council offered some opportunities for funding, it also led to innovation for those whose work required financial backing from other sources. For example, *Of Time and the City* (2008), Terence Davies' highly personal meditation on his birthplace, Liverpool, secured its £250,000 budget by entering Digital Departures, Liverpool's micro-budget film funding initiative; while Patrick Keiller's 2010 addition to his "Robinson" series, *Robinson in Ruins*, was funded as part of an Art and Humanities Research Council project on the Future

of Landscape in the Moving Image. In 2011 the UK Film Council was dissolved by the Tory and Liberal-Democrat coalition government, and the BFI was subsequently given control of the pool of National Lottery money allocated to Film Funding. The new BFI Film Fund is a rather different organisation from the old BFI Production Board, however, which had been designed purely to support filmmakers working outside the mainstream. The new BFI Film Fund, on the other hand, has a far wider remit and supports more commercial products, such as Stephen Frear's *Philomena* (2013), as well as more unusual, experimental art films such as Andrew Köttling's *Swanown* (2012).

Recent commentators on the phenomenon of art cinema, such as David Andrews, have noted that 'the past decades have witnessed the decline of the art-house circuit' (2010: 63). Indeed, independent and so-called 'art house' cinemas are no longer able to sustain themselves solely on art films, and have come to rely on more mainstream fare and other kinds of specialist programming, including the live transmission of live theatre and opera performances, or re-releases of classic and cult films to balance the books. Despite their films often receiving only limited theatrical runs, the filmmakers of post-millennial British art cinema, however, have benefited from some new innovations in film distribution and exhibition. In terms of film distribution, the current crop of British art films has primarily been sustained by two companies: Optimum, an independent distributor formed in 1999, and Artificial Eye, a more established distributor, founded in 1976. While both companies continue to release films theatrically and on DVD, both have taken advantage of the growing video on demand market. For instance, Optimum (or StudioCanal UK as it is now called following a merger with the French company StudioCanal in 2006) announced a deal in 2011 with the on-line film rental company, Lovefilm, which gave subscribers access to a large number of Optimum titles, therefore allowing viewers to access recently released art films at home. Artificial Eye, on the other hand, was bought by the Curzon World group in 2006 and,

under the new branding Curzon Artificial Eye, has invested even more heavily than Optimum in video on demand. Indeed, Curzon Home Cinema now makes certain titles available for on-line streaming the same day it goes on general release in cinemas. This not only gives audiences the option of by-passing queues and saving on ever increasing ticket prices, it also allows potential viewers who do not live near an art cinema immediate access to a film.

The articles in this special issue of the *Journal of British Cinema and Television* explore work by several key figures in this recent upsurge in art filmmaking in Britain, in an attempt to start to understand how far such films and filmmakers represent a noticeable shift in film culture (especially in terms of production, distribution, exhibition) and cultural production more widely, in, and indeed beyond, Britain. It should be noted again that these filmmakers cannot and should not be pulled together in any simple historical narrative, or, indeed, any simple understanding of a coherent contemporary, post-millennial British art cinema. For example, as James Leggott notes in his article on the work of Chris Cunningham, directors such as Ben Rivers and Duane Hopkins have produced work for art galleries and cinemas, whereas artists such as Steve McQueen, Sam Taylor-Wood, Douglas Gordon, Tracey Emin and Banksy, have crossed into commercial film-making. Moreover, it is worth noting that other artists have had varied training and varied careers. Leggott argues that Chris Cunningham remains one such ‘troubling, elusive figure within British visual culture’, having produced short films, advertisements, art gallery commissions, installations, music production and a touring multi-screen live performance. Leggott makes a claim for placing Cunningham within discourses of British art cinema, effectively proposing that the contradictions that define Cunningham’s *oeuvre* work ‘are also those that typify a particular terrain of British film culture that falls awkwardly between populism and experimentalism’. But Leggott also notes Cunningham’s associations with UK electronica music culture, and the Warp label in particular. Such associations can also be seen with British artists such as

Gideon Koppel and Peter Strickland, whose film *Berberian Sound Studio* is the subject of an article by Paul Newland here. Newland argues that while conforming to many commonly held understandings of the key traits of British art cinema, *Berberian Sound Studio* effectively operates as ‘art film as alternative film history’; that is, the film foregrounds the cine-literacy of its director, Peter Strickland, just as it encourages us to consider cinema history in new ways. Newland also notes that just as the concept of national cinema has become increasingly contested and strained, and does not always work when applied to *Berberian Sound Studio*.

Scholars such as John Hill and Andrew Higson have applied transnational and post-national thinking more specifically to historical approaches to the British film industry. For Higson, ‘The cinemas established in specific nation-states are rarely autonomous cultural industries and the film business has long operated on a regional, national and transnational basis.’ (Higson 2000: 61) And as Hill puts it, ‘it can be argued that the changed economic circumstances of the British film industry have led to a certain decline of ‘national’ cinema insofar as the national address which earlier commercial British cinema appeared to have is no longer evident.’ (Hill 2006: 104) Amy Sargeant has written (in this journal in 2012) about a contemporary British film culture in terms of a pattern of exchange involving a ‘decisive crossing of borders, to and fro, with all the territorial anxiety that activity implies, on either side, for artists and critics alike’ (2012: 503). Most of the contributors to this special issue of the *Journal of British Cinema and Television* notice how far such arguments increasingly ring true. This is especially the case with Clio Barnard’s *The Arbor* (2010), discussed by Beth here. It is also the case with Peter Strickland’s *Berberian Sound Studio* (2010), discussed by Paul Newland, and *American Interior* (Dylan Goch, Gruff Rhys, 2014), as Kate Woodward argues in her paper, where she reads this film within the contexts of a contemporary Welsh

film culture that developed around about the moment of the release of *Gadael Lenin* (1994), and subsequently on, through the period of devolution.

Towards post-millennial British art cinema

But how did we arrive at this recent outpouring of art films in Britain? In retrospect, the 1980s and early 1990s might also be seen as a golden age of British art cinema. Spurred on by social and political factors, not least a resistance to the policies of the Thatcher government, and funding from bodies such as the British Film Institute Production Board, British Screen and Channel Four, as well as numerous continental sources, filmmakers such as Derek Jarman, Peter Greenaway, Bill Douglas, Terence Davies, Sally Potter and Ken McMullen produced a spate of challenging, formally innovative, director-led films. Despite the disparate and idiosyncratic nature of their work, when taken together, this group of filmmakers might be seen as constituting a full-formed national art cinema comparable in some ways to the French New Wave of the 1960s and New German Cinema of the 1970s. By the early 1990s, however, there had been a notable shift. The British film industry, encouraged by the success of works such as *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Mike Newell, 1993) and *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1996), began to follow more commercial formulas and to court the American market in search of the next big hit. As a result, art cinema in Britain, with its more continental, modernist sensibility, was effectively pushed back towards the margins.

Jarman tragically died in early 1994 from AIDS-related complications, and the remaining filmmakers have consistently struggled to find funding and adequate distribution in the UK. After years of working with continental backers, in 1999 Greenaway relocated permanently to the Netherlands, where he has always found a more receptive audience. However, his recent work has sadly made little impact in the UK. *The Tulspe Luper Suitcases* (2003-4), a trilogy of European co-productions made back-to-back as part of a hugely

ambitious multi-media project, were only shown at a few festivals in Britain. Similarly, *Nightwatching* (2007), Greenaway's film about the painting of Rembrandt's *Nightwatch*, took over two years to find a UK distributor, despite being one of his finest and most approachable films. In his contribution here, however, Brian Hoyle argues that even Greenaway seems to be experiencing something of a late career renaissance. Much the same can be said for Davies, who despite working in a more accessible mode than Greenaway, and using Hollywood stars in award-winning films such as *The Neon Bible* (1995) and *The House of Mirth* (2000) also found himself marginalised for a time. Indeed, he found it impossible to secure backing for another feature film for the first decade of this century until the release of his Terence Rattigan adaptation, *The Deep Blue Sea* in 2011. Yet this and the recent success of his labour of love project, *Sunset Song* (2015), can again be seen as a welcome resurgence. Sally Potter faced similar problems. There was a five year gap between the success of her Virginia Woolf adaptation, *Orlando* (1992), and her next film, *The Tango Lesson* (1997). Since then, Potter has continued to make more experimental films such as *Yes* (2004), which was written entirely in verse, and *Rage* (2009) a digitally shot film comprised only of talking heads against coloured backgrounds. However, she has alternated these with two comparatively commercial ventures, *The Man Who Cried* (2000) and *Ginger and Rosa* (2012). It is a testament to Potter's reputation in the industry that all of these films have attracted big-name international actors for a fraction of their normal salaries.

At the same time that the careers of Greenaway, Davies and Potter seemed to be on the wane, the careers of Ken Loach and Mike Leigh, two filmmakers rooted in the British social realist tradition, began to experience a major resurgence. Both directors had spent much of the 1980s working in television, with Loach particularly focusing on politically motivated documentaries. However, in the late 1980s and early 1990s both returned to feature filmmaking, and have continued to make films, and win international awards, at an enviable

rate. Loach has been particularly prolific and if most of his films demonstrate a clear debt to the political concerns and humanism of the Italian Neo-realists. Following the release of *Jimmy Hall* (2014) Loach announced his retirement from feature filmmaking. This announcement comes at the end of an Indian summer, with films such as *Looking for Eric* (2009) and *The Angel's Share* (2012), showing a lighter side of Loach, and a move away from art cinema towards the Ealing comedy tradition. Mike Leigh's films have always been more varied than Loach's, and often less committed to naturalism. His career has therefore produced several welcome surprises, including the dark, Beckett-like odyssey of *Naked* (1993), and *Topsy-Turvy* (1999), his film about the first performance of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado*, which brought elements of costume drama, theatrical artifice and a meta-cinematic subtext about collaboration to bear on Leigh's usual realist style. His biopic *Mr Turner* (2014), starring Timothy Spall, was a critical and commercial success (drawing crowds to art house cinemas and multiplexes), and memorably placed British art at the centre of a successful contemporary British art cinema.

The 1990s also saw the emergence of some major new talents in British with feature debuts by Patrick Keiller, Andrew Köttling, Isaac Julien, John Maybury, Richard Kwietniowski, Christopher Newby, Lynn Ramsay and the Brothers Quay. The work of these filmmakers covers an eclectic range from personal documentaries and essay films, such as Keiller's *London* (1994) and *Robinson in Space* (1997), and Köttling's *Gallivant* (1996); to the austere, often world-less medieval drama of Newby's *Anchoress* (1993); to the poetic social realism of Ramsay's *Ratcatcher* (1999); to the suitably grotesque and violent imagery of Maybury's Francis Bacon bio-pic, *Love is the Devil* (1998); and the surreal hybrid of animation and live action in the Brothers Quay's *Institute Benjamenta* (1995). However, it is disappointing to note that, without exception, these filmmakers have only released films sporadically in recent years.

Several of these directors, including Keiller, Kötting and Julien, have enjoyed parallel careers in the fine arts. Others, however, have had to misfortune of having films cancelled, or have simply struggled to get funding for their commercially risky works. The Brothers Quay, for example, took ten years to make a second feature, *The Piano Turner of Earthquakes* (2005), which was produced by their ardent admirer, Terry Gilliam. John Maybury, after the cancellation of film about Christopher Marlowe, went to Hollywood where he made the muddled thriller *The Jacket* (2005) and a Dylan Thomas biopic, *The Edge of Love* (2008). Ramsay similarly followed up her debut with a slightly more commercial adaptation of Alan Warner's *Morvern Callar* (2002) but also had to wait nearly a decade before making her film of Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011).

Hunger, Steve McQueen's film about the death of IRA hunger-striker, Bobby Sands, was a particularly impressive stylistic achievement, which moved between almost silent expository and concluding sections, told in boldly evocative images worthy of a prize-winning artist and a talky mid-section filmed in heroically sustained takes. For his follow-up, *Shame* (2011), he moved to a more affluent New York milieu. If this depiction of a week in life of a thirty-something sex addict was more conventional than its predecessor, it was nevertheless visually distinguished. However, the American setting hinted at Hollywood ambitions, and his most recent work, *Twelve Years a Slave* (2013), which was a huge critical and commercial success, winning an Academy Award for Best Picture.

One should always be guarded about bandying about terms like renaissance, golden age or new wave, which are always best applied in retrospect. The last time that British cinema declared itself in the midst of a renaissance, in the mid-1980s, the bottom soon fell out and left the mainstream of the industry ruins. The British art cinema of Jarman, Greenaway, Loach and Leigh, did however, rise from the ashes of this disaster. So while we are keen to agree with the likes of Andrew Pulver and celebrate the sheer number of fine,

serious, innovative films currently being made in Britain we do not, in this special issues, wish to make any premature claims for a second British new wave. Rather, more cautiously, we would just like to draw attention to the fact that with a renewed focus on funding films that operate outside, or at least on the margins of the commercial mainstream, and the careful fostering of emerging talent, British art cinema is going through its most fertile period in over a decade.

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