

'Pungent Sex' and 'Room at the Bottom': Reframing British Exploitation Films of the 1960s

MICHAEL AHMED, *independent scholar*

ABSTRACT

Eric Schaefer, in his exploration of the American exploitation industry, has argued that exploitation cinema developed in opposition to mainstream Hollywood products. Furthermore, the topics and subject matter presented in early American exploitation films dealt with subjects Hollywood were unwilling to produce. As a result, the production, distribution and exhibition strategies developed by exploitation filmmakers differed markedly from the American mainstream film industry. However, in Britain (amongst critics and scholars) the exploitation film has no similar defining characteristics and is a term that has been applied to a wide variety of British films without regard to their industrial mode of production, distribution or exhibition. As a result, the cultural currency of the British exploitation film, as it is now understood, has no connection to the films they now describe, and often fails to take into account how these films were originally produced, marketed, distributed and exhibited.

In the British film industry during the 1960s, the term 'exploitation' was used by the industry to refer to a wide variety of films which are now viewed differently by contemporary critics and academics. In other words, the currency of the term exploitation has changed from its original meaning. Therefore, this article is an attempt to reframe the debate around the meaning of the British exploitation film from the 1960s onwards, and to re-evaluate our understanding of the development of British cinema during this period.

KEYWORDS

1960s, British Cinema, Exploitation Cinema, marketing.

Introduction: What is a British Exploitation Film?

The term exploitation film is derived from the practice of exploitation, advertising or promotional techniques that went over and above typical posters, trailers, and newspaper ads. (Schaefer 1999, 4)

In Eric Schaefer's seminal study on American exploitation cinema, he argued that exploitation films 'functioned as an alternative to Hollywood while also shedding light on the mainstream motion picture business' (ibid., 14). Schaefer declared that between 1919 and 1959, American exploitation cinema developed alongside mainstream American cinema: a period marked at a time when Hollywood was 'constructing its image as the world's premiere manufacturer of wholesome entertainment' (ibid., 2). According to Schaefer, American exploitation developed to challenge the

hegemony and dominance of the mainstream industry. Schaefer's argument is an important starting point for this article because it raises the question of how we can talk about a British exploitation cinema. Although I will cover the 1960s, it is important to discuss whether there was an historical equivalent to the industrial practices within the British film industry. In other words, was there a similar developmental process for British exploitation cinema to the American model? Moreover, if the American mainstream film industry 'depended on the contrast of exploitation to construct its own image' (ibid., 14) did a comparable structure evolve in the British film industry?

What is meant when we refer to British exploitation films? The definition of a British exploitation film, as described in *The Encyclopedia of British Film* by the scriptwriter and film critic David McGillivray, refers to a small group of films and filmmakers associated with 'a large number of poor quality soft-core sex comedies and a handful of intense horror films' (2007). Moreover, unlike the American model, the British exploitation era is described as being 'at its height in the 70s' (ibid.). However, it is unclear how this era developed, how British exploitation cinema might be different from American exploitation cinema, and what precisely is the difference between exploitation and mainstream British cinema (if, indeed, there is one).

McGillivray also describes filmmakers such as Robert Hartford-Davis, Stanley A. Long, Derek Ford, and Pete Walker as producers of exploitation films, and in terms of production studios, the Compton Cinema Group has been referred to on numerous occasions as producers of exploitation films (see McGillivray 1992, 52; Mellor 2007; and Murphy 1992, 78). However, the description of these filmmakers is confined primarily to the end product, and does not take into account methods of production, marketing, exhibition, or distribution. Are the horror exploitation films of, for example, Pete Walker different from the horror films produced by Hammer Studios or Amicus? If they are different, then why and how are they different? In addition, if the British exploitation film was at its height in the 1970s, then how did the exploitation film develop? In other words, what existed before the 1970s?

Schaefer argues that

during the post-war years, the designation of exploitation film was gradually expanded to include almost any low-budget movie with a topical bent. During the 1960s and 1970s, the term [as applied to the American industry] was modified to indicate the subject that was being exploited, such as for 'sexploitation' and 'blaxploitation' movies. (1999, 4)

Schaefer's description is not the only one; in 1963 the scriptwriter Frank Ferrer, in an article for the American cinema journal *Film Comment*, noted that the American film industry, 'defines an exploitation film in this way: a low budget film that deals with sex, rape, murder, corruption, drug addiction, perversion, and any other distorted emotion that will attract large audiences capable of paying an average of one dollar and fifty cents per seat' (1963, 31).

Ferrer's views were dismissed a year later by the American producer and director, Barry Mahon. Mahon was closely associated with the American exploitation industry during the 1960s, and was responsible for movies such as Errol Flynn's last film, *Cuban Rebel Girl* (1960), as well as *Violent Women* (1960), *Pagan Island* (1961), *1,000 Shapes of a Female* (1963), as well as many others. Mahon refuted 'almost every paragraph that was written' of Ferrer's article (Hitchens 1964, 5). Furthermore, Mahon used 'the term "exploitation" to describe the sexual-attraction type of film, as

distinct from the “nudie,” [...]. However, both types of picture are referred to commonly as exploitation pictures because the advertising generally oversells what you see when you get inside’ (ibid., 1). Mahon may have dismissed Ferrer’s article, but both men recognised that exploitation described a type of film that was different from pictures made in Hollywood (many of Mahon’s films contained exactly the type of subject matter Ferrer described as exploitation). Although Ferrer and Mahon may have disagreed, the separation between exploitation and Hollywood was very clear, as Schaefer later cogently explained.

Although the differentiation between the two industrial models may have started to break down during the 1960s, in Britain, as this article will show, there was no tradition of an exploitation industry existing alongside the mainstream industry. Furthermore, the term exploitation was used by both small low budget independent studios as well as larger film production companies in the UK.

According to David McGillivray (2009a, personal communication), Robert Hartford-Davis’ first feature film *The Yellow Teddybears* (1963) was Britain’s first sexploitation film. Nonetheless, he now acknowledges it was a term he and other filmmakers rarely used at the time. McGillivray declared:

I can’t be sure about the word exploitation but I’m pretty sure we didn’t use it. I don’t know how we would have termed the films we made. But they were very different as far as I was concerned. Often they wouldn’t play the major circuit so they were deemed by the circuits to be low class. (2009b, personal interview)

McGillivray’s statement highlight some of the confusion that surrounds the definition of exploitation films when applied to British cinema. For example, he argues that the type of films he made with Pete Walker (mainly low budget horror films) were relegated to being played in independent cinemas, in a climate dominated by the two largest British film production companies; the Rank Organisation and Associated British Picture Corporation (ABPC). The duopoly position these two companies had within the British film industry, and the links Rank and ABPC had with Hollywood studios, meant that independent film producers had to either find another way of distributing and exhibiting their films, or make the type of film that might have appealed to these companies. This is a different situation when compared to the American model because although exploitation cinema and Hollywood cinema existed alongside each other, they produced, distributed and exhibited films in different ways – as Schaefer has argued (1999, 14).

In sixties British cinema, the term exploitation had a different currency to that of the American film industry. For example, Nat Cohen and Stuart Levy (owners of Anglo Amalgamated, a British production and distribution company) referred to exploitation as a way to announce the release of the company’s new double feature package – *13 Steps to Death* (also known as *Why Must I Die?*; Roy Del Ruth, 1960), and *Liane—White Slave* (*Liane, Die Weiße Sklavin*; Herman Leitner, 1957). *13 Steps to Death* was made by the independent production company, Viscount Films, and was a low budget imitation of Robert Wise’s death-row drama, *I Want to Live* (1958), *Liane—White Slave* (despite the films’ title) was an action-adventure story, featuring a female version of Tarzan. These films were described in Cohen and Levy’s publicity campaign as a ‘new action-packed “exploitation special” double-feature programme’ (Anon. 1960d). As far as Cohen and Levy were concerned (and this applied to the rest of the British film industry) these films were mainstream

entertainment, whereas in America, a film described as exploitation was commonly associated with disreputable entertainment, and marginalised from the distribution and exhibition strategies of the mainstream American industry. Anglo Amalgamated also promoted the following U-rated war films, *Through Hell to Glory* (also known as *Jet Attack*; Edward L. Cahn, 1958), and *Suicide Battalion* (Edward L. Cahn, 1958), as ‘Another Dynamic “Exploitation Special”’ (Anon. 1958).

In Britain, exploitation was also used by the trade press to describe a range of different genres. For example, *Cover Girl Killer* (Terry Bishop, 1959), a film about a serial killer, was described by *The Daily Cinema* as a ‘sound thriller’, an ‘exploitation attraction’, and ‘its subject has exploitation possibilities’ (Anon. 1960a). The horror film, *The Flesh and the Fiends* (John Gilling, 1960) was a ‘strong horror thriller with exploitable X certificate’ (Anon. 1960b). Exploitation was not confined to low budget genre films or X films. Warner-Pathé, the British distribution arm of Warner Bros., heavily promoted the Cliff Richard musical *Summer Holiday* (Peter Yates, 1962), and told *Kinematograph Weekly* that the stars and director of the film appeared ‘on virtually every magazine and light entertainment programme on radio and television in every region of the British Isles’, this also included the ‘biggest and most effective exploitation items in the whole campaign’ (Anon. 1963a). The London Routemaster Bus which featured prominently in the film, was also a ‘key item in the exploitation campaign [...] seven advertising spaces on the front, back, and sides of the bus were taken by BEA, BP Petrol, Remington Electronic Shavers, Dolcis Shoes, Rentavilla, Vespa Scooters and Fidelity Radio’ (ibid.).

Exploitation was also used to advertise competition tie-ins for films. For example, *The Daily Cinema* announced the ‘Greatest Competitive Exploitation’, following the release of the Boulting Brothers, *A French Mistress* (Roy Boulting, 1960) (Anon. 1960e). A £500 cash prize was offered for ‘the best (printable) description of Agnes Laurent’ the French star of the film, and the competition was predicted to be ‘one of the most successful pieces of promotion ever organised by British Lion’ – the postcard results included responses such as, “‘She’s all right, Jacques!’” and “‘Wrecker of Hommes!’” (ibid.).

There was also recognition by the British industry of the differences in exploitation between the UK and American market. For example, for the American release of *Beat Girl* (Edmond T. Gréville, 1960), ‘an Exploitation Manual that is somewhat different in form and make-up from that usually sent out by British companies’ was produced by the distributors (Anon. 1961a). The manual included ‘a series of Photostats depicting the explosive business done by the film in Britain [...] Advertising, front-of-house displays, street stunts’, as well as mention of the music by ‘John Barry and his Orchestra and Seven [*sic*]’ (ibid.).

It was not only feature-films that were described as exploitation. Exploitation was used to describe fictional documentaries as well as popular melodramas. For example, a *Kinematograph Weekly* advertisement for a double-bill at the British Film Institute referred to ‘The Exploitation Programme of the year!’ (1966) The two films featured in the advertisement were the controversial BBC television drama-documentary *The War Game* (Peter Watkins, 1965) and the mystery-drama, *Four in the Morning* (Anthony Simmons, 1965). Watkins’ *The War Game* is a dramatized documentary speculating about the effects of a nuclear attack on a British city. The film features horrific scenes of firestorms, radiation burns, and the execution of looters by the British army. Banned by the BBC, Watkins offered a serious critique of the effect of nuclear weapons, as well as the Cold War concept of Mutually Assured Destruction. Simmons’ *Four in the Morning* is a London based drama

following the lives of two couples and their connection to a woman's body found in the River Thames. Although *The War Game* and *Four in the Morning* contain some exploitative ingredients (specifically the terrifying effects of a nuclear explosion in the former, and a reference to unmarried sex in the latter) these films are unlikely to be described as exploitation films in the way the term is currently understood.

Throughout the 1960s, British exploitation became an integral part of the marketing, promotion, and publicity of a film released in the UK. Moreover, the successful exploitation of a film was viewed as a positive within the British film industry, as James Carreras, the chairman of Hammer studios, pointed out 'exploitation pictures are the key to it all' (Carreras 1960, 38). Hammer may have mainly produced horror films nevertheless the films were distributed on the lucrative and high profile ABC cinema circuit – an arrangement made possible by the distribution deal the company had with Warner Bros.

Nonetheless, it is worth pointing out that the pejorative connotations currently associated with exploitation films were not entirely absent from discourses within British cinema. In 1955, as Anthony Aldgate has noted, the British Film Producers Association (BFPA), an industry body that represented the interests of British film production, had deplored 'the increased exploitation in films of themes of brutality and violence for the purposes of sensationalism' (quoted in Aldgate 1995, 51).¹ However, the BFPA's concern was primarily directed at American horror films which attracted an X certificate (the rating had been introduced in 1951) which they felt was deterring families, as well as competing with British films. The release of American X-rated films had gradually increased in Britain following the introduction of the X category: 7 American films were rated X in 1951, in 1952 this figure rose to 10, and in 1953 the figure was 12 – for the same period British X films remained static at 2 a year for 1952 and 1953, with no X films released in 1951 (Anon. 1954, 518). Moreover, for the same period, the amount of U films far outnumbered the other categories – 320 U films in 1951, 376 in 1952, and 347 in 1953 (ibid.).

The BFPA's concern for X films (not exploitation) was expressed again at a meeting on 3 December 1958, when they pressed the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) to reinstate the H certificate because of 'the current vogue for horror films and the danger of its bringing the industry into disrepute', as well as emphasising 'the importance of the family business to the industry' (quoted in Aldgate 1995, 51). The new secretary of the BBFC, John Trevelyan, resisted the request by the BFPA, primarily because Trevelyan believed the X certificate would help to raise the quality of British films by introducing more adult themes. Trevelyan felt justified by his decision following the critical and commercial success of *Room at the Top* (Jack Clayton, 1958), and pointed out that 'up to this time the cinema, with rare exceptions, had presented a fantasy world; this film dealt with real people and real problems' (Trevelyan 1973, 106). Trevelyan's stance was reinforced by the Cinema Consultative Committee (CCC) in 1959 when they decided not to support the BFPA's campaign (1959d, 104). In reply to the CCC, Arthur Watkins the president of the BFPA, agreed with Trevelyan that the X certificate 'should stand for truly adult films', however, Watkins also thought there was now 'a belief that the X meant something horrific and sensational' (ibid.).

¹ The BFPA had representatives from both large production companies like Rank and ABPC, and smaller companies like Monarch Productions, Nettlefold Studios, Somlo Films Ltd., etc. The *Kinematograph Year Book 1954* lists over thirty companies on the BFPA Executive Council for that year.

Despite Trevelyan's worthwhile intentions, filmmakers increasingly began to use the X certificate in promotional campaigns intended to exploit the most sensational features of their films (*Room at the Top* was no exception, as I will discuss later). Furthermore, the belief that X films were responsible for declining audiences, fails to reveal some of the more complex reasons behind the problems facing the British industry at this time. However, as the examples cited above show, from the late 1950s onwards, exploitation gradually shifted away from a description of mainly (American) X films, and was used as a marketing term, not only for X films but also U and A film categories. I would suggest that the real reason for the BFPA's concern was the desire to protect the British market from the increasing number of American horror films.

“Quota-Quickies” and the British Film Industry

Having shown how exploitation was used by the British film industry during the 1960s, I now want to examine Schaefer's argument further and try to understand if there was ever a period in Britain that mirrored his description of an 'American classical exploitation' era between 1919 and 1959 (1999). I will do this by analysing a period in the British industry that gave rise to a similarly maligned product: the 'quota-quickies'. It is important to understand that the 'quota-quickies' developed out of a specific set of industrial conditions and legislative protective measures, as the following will make clear.

The British film industry prior to World War I had flourished, and although, as Charles Barr has argued, 'there was no such thing yet as a "national cinema"'; the domestic industry was a viable competitor to other film producing countries (145). Nevertheless, a shortage of investment in British film, and the wide scale distribution of films from Hollywood, prompted a crisis within the industry. By the mid-1920s, the once vibrant British film industry was 'facing oblivion', the lowest point being 1926 when only thirty-six British films were made in comparison to the release of six hundred and twenty American films (Glancy 1998, 59). In a bid to protect the industry, the British government passed two Acts of Parliament: the 1927 Cinematograph Films Act, and the 1938 Cinematograph Films Act. Designed to stimulate production in the British industry, the 1927 Act stipulated that 'a certain proportion of films distributed and exhibited in Britain had to be British in origin', in effect a quota was established (hence it was subsequently known as the Quota Act) (Chibnall 2007, 1). Initially a quota of 5 per cent was set for exhibitors and 7.5 per cent for distributors, eventually rising to 20 per cent for both exhibitors and distributors within ten years.

'Quota quickies', as other scholars and critics have made clear, were often deemed to be of low quality and lacking 'any artistic or technical merit' (Glancy 1998, 58). Nevertheless, Steve Chibnall has defended these films, arguing that the 'quota quickie cannot be so easily disinherited and denied [...] the offspring may have been under-socialised and may have exhibited symptoms of disability, but its legitimacy was without question. It must be treated as part of the lineage of British popular film' (2007, xi). Furthermore, the Act unlocked, as Chibnall has pointed out, 'American finance for the uncertain business of British film production and stimulate a mushroom growth of indigenous film companies', nonetheless, these films were never marginalised in terms of distribution and exhibition (in the way American exploitation films in the US were) (ibid., 2). Moreover, the "quota-quickie" evolved from a specific set of industrial conditions that developed within the British industry, and although the "quota-quickie" possessed parallels to exploitation films, in terms of critical dismissal and low budgets, and often featured disreputable, exploitable subject matter, these films were primarily screened as support pictures alongside mainstream products; unlike the American exploitation film, which was 'segregated from the mainstream' (Schaefer 1994, 4).

The British film industry (during the late 1950s and 1960s) used the term exploitation differently from the way the word is understood by contemporary critical and academic orthodoxies. To refer to an American exploitation film is to call attention to a specific set of industrial conditions not found within the British industry. However, how did we arrive at a point where critics and academics can now talk about an era, or genre, of British exploitation films? Are there other industrial conditions within the British industry, during the 1960s, that subsequently led to the marginalisation of movies now referred to as exploitation films, and if so what are they? Furthermore, what questions does this ask of our current understanding of British film culture? If there is no difference between the films made at independent studios like the Compton Cinema Group and larger companies like the Rank Organisation, then what does this tell us about the orthodox critical consensus built around British exploitation films and the rest of the industry?

The British Film Industry: Mainstream and Independent

The Rank Organisation, the largest British film production company in the 1960s, and ABPC dominated the post-war domestic cinema industry, and like the steadily developing post-war critical consensus, these companies tried to create a framework for British cinema built on quality films and family-friendly entertainment. The director of the Rank Organisation, J. Arthur Rank, had started in the film business after forming the Religious Film Society, aimed at promoting religious education in Sunday Schools and Methodist Halls. Rank gradually built up the company until, by the mid-1940s, it owned five studios, a production company, a distribution company, and, through a takeover of two of the biggest cinema chains in Britain (Odeon and Gaumont-British), 650 cinemas. At its height, the Rank Organisation was one of the few British vertically integrated companies ‘with the muscle to match the Hollywood majors’ (McFarlane 2007).

In 1962, after the company began to experience significant financial difficulties, J. Arthur Rank left the running of the company to an ex-accountant, John Davis. The Rank Organisation’s filmmaking ethos was grounded in family and children’s entertainment, and heavily influenced by the personal preferences of both J. Arthur Rank and Davis. Rank’s Methodist background, as well as his fondness for children’s cinema – Rank had started the Odeon Children’s Clubs in 1943, and in 1944 financed Children’s Entertainment Film – combined with Davis’ commitment to family entertainment (and a dislike of X films) prescribed Rank’s output for most of the post-war period.²

ABPC was established by John Maxwell (head of the production company British International Pictures) in 1933, following the acquisition of British National Pictures and that company’s film studios at Elstree (just outside London). Along with the purchase of Associated British Cinemas (ABC) a chain of cinemas, Maxwell’s company gradually developed its production, distribution and exhibition facilities, committed to making quality pictures, and by the 1930s the company was one of the few serious competitors to the Rank Organisation. Following Maxwell’s death in 1940, the Hollywood studio Warner Bros. bought 25 per cent of the company; a transaction designed, as Vincent Porter has argued, ‘to ensure its American films were booked by the growing ABC cinema chain’ (Porter 2007, 32). By the 1960s, and following severe cuts in production budgets, ABPC were either making cheap comedies, or co-financing films with independent producers like Hammer Studios (33). However, the dominant position of the ABC cinema circuit (similar to Rank) resulted in a particular type of film, one that was unlikely to upset the critical consensus, or avoid problems

² For information on Rank’s involvement with children’s cinema see Agajanian 1998.

in terms of controversial content or clashes with the British censors.

Furthermore, ABPC and Rank constituted a powerful duopoly that other British independent producers had difficulty competing with. This was a position that came under frequent criticism by others in the industry, at a time when the British film business was struggling with declining cinema audiences. Independent producers found it increasingly difficult to obtain a release in either Rank or ABC cinemas, and often had to rely on the smaller chain of independently owned (but less lucrative) cinemas. The dominance of Rank and ABPC, and the effect this had on the distribution of films, was highlighted by a 1962 study from the economist John Spraos. Spraos emphasised the ongoing concern of cinema closures, as well as finding ‘an alternative to the Rank and ABC release outlets’ (1962c). A report by the Federation of British Film Makers (FBFM) published in November 1962, confirmed the findings of Spraos’ study, ‘before 1958 there were three major circuits, plus a number of independents, many of whom during 1956-58 were organised into a fourth circuit by Twentieth-Century Fox. Now there are two major circuits only and many fewer independents’ (Filson 1963, 5). The FBFM report pointed out that, with only two major circuits ‘except in the case of films which are made at an exceptionally low cost or which have prospects of exceptional overseas earnings, financial disaster results unless a booking is secured on either the Rank or ABC release’ (ibid.). Furthermore, the report found:

There is very little competition between the combines for films. A situation that has grown up whereby some of the major distributors are ‘Rank suppliers’ — such as the Rank distribution organisation itself, United Artists, Fox, Columbia and Disney— and some are ‘ABC suppliers,’ such as Warner Pathe and Anglo Amalgamated (both of whom are financially linked with ABC) and Paramount. British Lion and MGM, however, trade with both combines. Some minor groups may also trade with both combines, but they never have any negotiating strength. The result is that if, example, a UA film is refused a release by the Rank booker, it has no hope of being accepted by the ABC group. The combines do not poach on each other’s preserves, though exceptionally a major distributor may transfer from one combine to another. (ibid.)

Moreover, and despite the FBFM’s report, the dominance of Rank and ABPC was rarely challenged by other filmmaking organisations in Britain which resulted in the indirect support for the structure. Throughout the 1960s, independent filmmakers like Robert Hartford-Davis were frequently stymied by the structure of the British film industry. The choices faced by independent filmmakers was either to remain with production companies like the Compton Cinema Group (in Hartford-Davis’ case), where creative control of films was greater, as well as retaining any potential profit from a smaller cinema release; or negotiate, film-by-film, with either the Rank Organisation or ABPC. There were significant advantages of shifting into the mainstream. Rank or ABPC could offer a more lucrative and higher profile cinema circuit release nevertheless with this arrangement there was the possibility of a loss of creative control, and no guarantee of a nationwide circuit release. However, if the film was selected for distribution, then there was an opportunity of receiving a percentage of (potentially) larger box-office receipts, as well as an increased likelihood of international distribution and exhibition.

Kitchen-Sink Dramas: Social Realism with Sex, Nudity and Violence

As referred to earlier, the release of *Room at the Top* was the first of a cycle of films made during the late 1950s and early 1960s that are commonly referred to as ‘kitchen-sink dramas’. These films signalled a new approach to filmmaking typified, not so much by creating a ‘quality’ cinema, but by creating films that pushed taboos and moral boundaries. ‘Kitchen-sink dramas’ capitalised on controversial content offered as adult entertainment and exploited the commercial prospects of the new X rating category.

It was in publications like *Sight and Sound* that we frequently find an early celebration of a British ‘New Wave’, whereas the trade press often rejected the description. For example, Penelope Houston argued that *Room at the Top*, ‘has the impact of genuine innovation: a new subject, a new setting, a new talent [...] one of the real turning-points’ (1959, 58-59). The *Daily Express* enjoyed, ‘a British film which at long last, got its teeth into those subjects which have always been part and parcel of our lives’ (quoted in Sandbrook 2005, 192). The *Monthly Film Bulletin* noted ‘its uncompromising suggestion that life today in an English industrial town can be wretched, ugly and corrupt. Faintly deriving on the one hand from the French low-life directors, and on the other from the Italian realists [...] a rare departure in British film-making’ (1959b). By way of contrast, Bill Edwards in *Kinematograph Weekly*, during the making of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Karel Reisz, 1960), wrote about, ‘The posh film papers, those journals which generally recognise a film only when it is silent and well scratched, have been quick to find in Woodfall Productions the British answer to the French “New Wave”’ (Edwards 1960, 15). However, the cycle failed to live up to many of the British critics expectations. The cycle had barely begun before critics like Victor Perkins, in the highbrow journal *Movie*, argued that the artistic and commercial renaissance of British film was only a ‘change of attitude, which disguises the fact that the British cinema is as dead as before’ (Perkins 1962, 3).

Houston’s celebration of *Room at the Top* as something new and exciting signalled the beginning of a critical re-evaluation of British film. Peter Hutchings has stated that *Room at the Top*, which was based on the bestselling book by John Braine, part of the ‘Angry Young Men’ set, was the first film of the British ‘New Wave’, and its positive reception by critics and British audiences ensured similar films followed (Hutchings 2009, 305). *Room at the Top* was an instant success on both sides of the Atlantic, and was quickly followed by an adaptation of Alan Silitoe’s account of Northern England working class life, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. Other films in the cycle included a story of teenage pregnancy, and pre-marital inter-racial sex in *A Taste of Honey* (Tony Richardson, 1960), more pre-marital sex, and course dialogue in *A Kind of Loving* (John Schlesinger, 1962), and further pre-marital sex, violence and bad language in *This Sporting Life* (Lindsay Anderson, 1963).³ However, despite the successes of these films the cycle was pretty much over by 1965, having given way to the flamboyance and celebration of consumerism and affluence of films which celebrated ‘Swinging London’.

As these films were primarily adaptations of famous novels, or based on successful stage plays, they brought a literary and artistic integrity previously absent from pictures dealing with similar themes. These films included previously taboo subjects like abortion, illegitimacy, unmarried mothers, graphic violence, as well as a candid approach to the depiction of adult sexual

³ The cycle also includes *Look Back in Anger* (Tony Richardson, 1959), *The Entertainer* (Tony Richardson, 1960), *The L-Shaped Room* (Bryan Forbes, 1962), *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (Tony Richardson, 1962), and *Billy Liar* (John Schlesinger, 1963). However, this list is far from exhaustive.

relationships, nudity, and explicit language. Furthermore, the ‘kitchen-sink dramas’ took advantage of the liberalisation of censorship regulations in the late 1950s, a shift already reflected in plays, books and theatre productions.

The ‘kitchen-sink dramas’, signalled a new approach to filmmaking typified, not so much by creating a ‘quality’ cinema, but by creating films that pushed taboos and moral boundaries. ‘Kitchen-sink dramas’ capitalised on controversial content offered as adult entertainment and exploited the commercial prospects of the new X rating category. The independent film producer Harry Saltzman tried to point out this dichotomy.⁴ Saltzman argued, ‘that there is a place in Britain for realistic, hard-hitting films which take chances and show the well-trodden paths of stereotyped, purely-commercial, film-making’ (1960, 11). Moreover, Saltzman shrugged off ‘the comparison that he is consciously making arty rejoinder to the new foreign film-making schools’ (Edwards 1960, 16). Saltzman was wary of being associated with art cinema: ‘one thing I should like to point out is that we did not form Woodfall Productions from an arty-crafty point of view. We are extremely commercial-minded and we regard the properties we have as commercial properties’ (1960, 11). Saltzman’s viewpoint highlighted the tension that existed between the industry and the critical establishment. Saltzman’s commitment to ‘making commercial motion pictures with a high entertainment quotient’ and not to ‘selling messages’, was at odds with the critical establishment’s desire to elevate the aspirations of British national cinema (ibid.).

The promotion and marketing of ‘kitchen-sink dramas’ was similar to many of the films distributed by the low budget film distribution and production companies like the Compton Cinema Group and Anglo-Amalgamated, and artistic prestige was frequently muted in favour of highlighting the controversial elements of the films, as well as taking advantage of the disreputable connotations associated with the X certificate. For example, *The Daily Cinema* pointed out that *Room at the Top*, ‘in dealing with intimate situations, it recalls the best the Continent has to offer’ (Anon. 1959a), and highlighted the ‘provocatively uninhibited sex scenes, salty humour’ (Anon. 1962b) in *A Kind of Loving*; the ‘frankness towards sexual situations’ (Anon. 1960g) in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*; the ‘strong splicing of sex’ (Anon. 1960c) in *The Entertainer*; and the ‘sensationally uninhibited tale of the seamier side of North Country life’ (Anon. 1961b) in *A Taste of Honey*. *This Sporting Life* is ‘arrestingly filmed, with pungent sex angle [*sic*] [...] a demanding film, but it’s going to cause a stir that will reverberate in cinemas up and down the country’ (Anon. 1963c).

In *Kinematograph Weekly*, *Look Back in Anger* was described as ‘a highly provocative film and one that could be just as aptly titled “Room at the Bottom”’ (Anon. 1959c). *A Kind of Loving* ‘devastatingly and entertainingly mirrors life as it is lived in the so-called “affluent-state.” Put another way, the sexy, though salutary, distillation of stolen fruit, bottled on the spot, will be swallowed with avidity and savoured at leisure by all classes’ (Billings 1962, 9). *This Sporting Life* had an ‘unadulterated sex angle, authentic backgrounds and obvious exploitation possibilities’, (Anon. 1963b) and *The L-Shaped Room* possessed, ‘some genuinely moving sequences [...] but, for the most part, the film’s sex glands are more active and stronger than its heartbeats’ (Anon. 1962d).

However, in publications like the *Monthly Film Bulletin* and *Sight and Sound*, film critics struggled

⁴ Harry Saltzman, a Quebec-born entrepreneur, had settled in Britain after the war. Saltzman formed the production company Woodfall Productions in the late 1950s, with the television and theatre director Tony Richardson and the playwright John Osborne.

with the controversial aspects of “kitchen-sink dramas” which appeared to undermine the “quality” aesthetic found within their literary or theatrical origins. For example, in addition to comparing *Room at the Top* with ‘Italian realists’ the *Monthly Film Bulletin* also reluctantly noted the films ‘slightly self-conscious determination to bring sex to the British screen’ (1959b). *Look Back in Anger* was viewed as ‘something new in British cinema’, (Anon. 1959e) and the actors in *The Entertainer* ‘suggest the freshness and candid intelligence which—for all its shortcomings—this film frequently and then boldly displays’ (Anon. 1960f). The controversial aspects of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* – pre-marital sex, Brenda’s attempted abortion, the risqué sex-scenes, and explicit language – are significantly understated in the *Monthly Film Bulletin*’s review, in favour of stressing the ‘firm writing and close observation [...] the restraint and solidity’ (Anon. 1960h). Likewise, Peter John Dyer also noted in *Sight and Sound* that *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* lacked, ‘the sublimity [*sic*] and universality of *Pather Panchali* and *Tokyo Story*’ (1960, 33).

In the *Monthly Film Bulletin*’s review of *A Taste of Honey*, the controversial (for the time) sexual relationship between a black sailor and the schoolgirl Jo, her subsequent pregnancy, as well as the morally dubious sexual behaviour of Jo’s mother Ada, are all mentioned in the synopsis, but entirely absent from the review; it describes the film as ‘tart and lively around the edges and bitter at the core’ (Anon. 1961c). Similarly, their review of *This Sporting Life* downplays the brutal sex-scenes in favour of comparing the photography to the, ‘best Polish films’ and the ‘hypnotic, almost mid-European abstractness about several later scenes’ (Anon. 1963d). George Stoner, in *Sight and Sound*, referred to the inter-racial love affair in *A Taste of Honey* as a ‘hop, skip and a jump it’s all over’ (1961, 196). However, Houston was one of the few critics from the quality press to note that *Room at the Top* ‘may climb to the top partly on its X certificate, its heavy-breathing sales campaign and some dialogue calculated to jolt a few traditionalists used to the discreet reticence of sub-titles’ (1959, 58). This point was not lost on the distributors whose poster campaign for *A Kind of Loving* described the film as, ‘A Kind Of Loving That Knew No Wrong Until It Was Too Late!’ (1962a, 14-15)

Nevertheless, ‘kitchen-sink dramas’ could still create controversy, for example, as the Secretary of the BBFC, John Trevelyan points out, the sex scenes in *Room at the Top* ‘were regarded as sensational’, and there was ‘rather more frankness about sexual relations in the dialogue than people had been used to’ (1973, 106). Warwickshire County Council refused to allow *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, to be screened in local cinemas ‘unless cuts were made in the sex-scenes’, although the film had previously been passed uncut by the BBFC (ibid., 107). Furthermore, the ‘frank [...] dialogue about sex’, and ‘a sex-scene which had implications of nudity’ in *The L-Shaped Room* (Bryan Forbes, 1962), led to the studio consulting John Trevelyan at the pre-production stage of the film (ibid.).

The impact these films had (as well as the controversy these films could generate) on other production companies is revealed in the choice of the first three feature films produced by the Compton Cinema Group. *That Kind of Girl* (Gerry O’Hara, 1963), is a story about the dangers of promiscuous sex and venereal disease; *The Yellow Teddybears* (Hartford-Davis, 1963) featured teenage sex, an unwanted pregnancy, sex parties, drunkenness, and illegal abortionists; and *Saturday Night Out* (Hartford-Davis, 1964), a compendium of short stories, including sexual blackmail, homelessness, sexual abuse, as well as an exposure of the seediness and sordid life of Soho nightclubs and clip-joints. These films followed the freedoms to explore previously controversial subjects given to filmmakers after the early box-office success of films like *Room at*

the Top and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. Ultimately then, the success of the ‘kitchen-sink dramas’ proved to low budget production companies that X certificate films could not only be financially viable at the domestic and international box-office, but also give them increased respectability from within the industry, as well as assist in any plans for future growth.

Conclusion

Exploitation as a generic category to describe a British film was not used by the industry during the 1960s. Critics would, more often than not, describe such films as sensational, sleazy or salacious rather than as exploitation. Furthermore, an exploitation film in 1960s British Cinema included any film that could be exploited in terms of marketing and publicity. Therefore, the currency of exploitation, when applied to a British film, has shifted significantly from a marketing term to its current use as a generic term. In comparison to the American industry, there is no defined tradition of exploitation filmmaking in Britain. In America, the separation between the mainstream industry, as represented by Hollywood, and the producers now described as exploitation filmmakers, did not exist in Britain. Unlike the American model, whereby exploitation film was defined in opposition to Hollywood studio pictures, British low budget filmmakers competed in the same domestic market as the films produced by larger British film companies like Rank and Associated British Picture Corporation.

In terms of exploitation, the critical and cultural orthodoxy has created a generic description that has failed to examine the differences in the structure of low budget, independent filmmaking between America and Britain. Furthermore, labelling some films as exploitation, and therefore disreputable and non-prestigious, has led to the marginalisation of many films, as well as filmmakers associated with low budget production. Removing generic labels allows us to view more clearly these films as products of 1960s British filmmaking, as well as understanding how they were influenced by changes in British society and culture. These films may never be critically appreciated; nonetheless, analysis of how they were produced, distributed, and exhibited, contributes an additional narrative to our understanding of post-war British cinema.

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