

British Social Realism Movement

In order to fully understand the origins and ideals behind the British Social Realism movement it is important to not only explore this period of cinema history but to also study the interrelationship between film and other Art forms. Social Realism, also known as Socio-Realism, is an artistic movement, articulated in the cinematic and other realist arts, which portray working class activities.

The ancestry of realism can be traced back to the 19th century art. With the decline of the Romantic Movement, artists looked to show the world in a more literal way and attempt to move closer to observation and away from the non-representational by creating objective representations of the world based on the observation of contemporary life, such as nature, society, the characteristics of the individual and the nation at large. Realism was independent, including in its subject-matter activities and social classes until that time considered unworthy of representation in fine art. The most articulate development of Realism was in French art, where it concentrated on the work of Gustave Courbet, who used the word realism as the title for a manifesto that accompanied an exhibition of his works in 1855. Ilya Repin, a famous Social Realist said that his art work was aimed "To criticize all the monstrosities of our vile society" although its influence extended into the 20th century its later manifestations are usually labelled as Social Realism.

The latter half of the 19th century is known as the positivist age. It was an age of belief in all knowledge which was driven from science and scientific objective methods.

Positivist thinking is obvious in the full range of artistic advancements after 1850 from the emphasis of light, to the development of photography and the application of new techniques in architecture and constructions.

The Fantasy of both the Classicism and Romanticism in the intellectual arts was collectively abandoned, in favour of the introduction of the contemporary to art was finding strong support. The idea was that ordinary people and everyday activities were valuable subjects for art. While the Realism in France appears after the 1848 Revolution and expressed a passion for democracy, at the same time in England, Realist artists came before the public with a reaction against the Victorian materialism and the conventions of the Royal Academy in London. Literary Gazette, described Social Realism as "the representation of the proletarian revolution".

By the 1840s both artists and scientists had come to value Realism's pragmatic observation of nature. It was partially this concentration in precise visual records that first led to the use of the camera obscura as an aid to drawing and the development of photography as a way of fixing its image. The idea of the camera as an instrument of knowledge is a powerful notion underlying many photographic practices, from 19th-century studies of criminality and mental illness to 20th-century documentaries.

With a common ideal uniting many Artists and Scientists you would imagine that you could draw a straight line between Realism, the invention of the photographic camera and Social Realism British Cinema but photography, which was developed to bypass the inaccuracies of the human hand, quickly became 'corrupted'.

"Jonathan Cray has argued that by the 19th century the camera was no longer understood as a model of objective knowledge, but had become part of a whole series of optical toys devised to stimulate subjective and embodied vision, now understood as an active and creative element of visual experience. Following Cray, Geoffrey Batchen argues that early photographers were motivated by romantic desires for traces of nature, as much as the need to know, classify, and possess it."

Dr Johnson would doubtless have dismissed such approaches as philosophical hair-splitting. Photographs, after all, seem to mirror the world, or at least a fragment of it in space and time. But the photographer's choices — lens, viewpoint, framing, timing — intervene between the object and its image, even when these seem natural or unwittingly made, as in snapshot photographs. Realist images are as much constructed as the most complex studio set; their illusion of transparency enhances their ability to construct and confirm conceptions of reality itself."

Patrizia di Bello

As we have seen Realism is a movement that crosses art forms, forming in painting, through the development of photography and emerging again in the developing visual art of cinema.

In Italy neorealism was a style of film that mirror the early French Realist ideas and told stories set amongst the poor and working class, filmed on location, often using nonprofessional actors. The films mostly depict the difficult economical and ethical conditions of post -World War II Italy, reflecting the changes in the Italian psyche and the environment they faced in everyday life: defeat, poverty, and desperation.

The neorealist style was developed by a circle of film critics that revolved around the magazine 'Cinema'. The group included Michelangelo Antonioni, Luchino Visconti, Gianni Puccini, Cesare Zavattini, Giuseppe De Santis, and Pietro Ingrao. The critics attacked the poor quality telefono bianco films of the time and felt that Italian cinema should turn to the realist writers from the turn of the century.

The most common attribute of neorealism was shooting on location and the dubbing of dialogue. The dubbing allowed for filmmakers to move in a more open mise-en-scène. Principal characters would be played a lot of the time by trained actors while supporting cast would more often be non -actors. The idea was to create a greater sense of realism through the use of real people rather than all professional actors. The rigidity of non -actors gave the scenes more authentic power and allowed the audience to connect more easily with the

characters. This sense of realism made Italian neorealism more than an artistic stance; it came to embody an attitude toward life.

The next development in the Realist movement was the French New Wave. This was a blanket term coined by yet another group of critics of the fifties and sixties. Although it was never an officially organized movement, the New Wave filmmakers were linked by their rejection of traditional cinematic style and their spirit of youthful iconoclasm. Many also engaged in their work with the social and political upheavals of the era, making their radical experimentation with editing, camera style, and story part of a general break with the conservative ideas.

Again, the socio-economic forces at play shortly after World War II strongly influenced the movement. A politically and financially drained France tended to fall back to the old popular traditions before the war. One such tradition was straight narrative cinema, specifically classical French film. The movement has its roots in rebellion against the reliance on past forms criticizing in particular the way these forms could force the audience to submit to a dictatorial plot-line.

Thanks to the ongoing development of film equipment the face of cinema was constantly evolving and in the same way that Cinema Verity became possible lightweight cameras and the development of lights and sound equipment that could easily be transported allowed the New Wave directors to shoot in the streets, rather than in studios. The fluid camera motion became a synonymous of the movement, with shots often following characters down the streets of Paris. The movies featured unique methods of expression, such as seven-minute tracking shots (like the famous traffic jam sequence in Godard's 1967 film *Week End*).

Many of the French New Wave films were made with low budgets, with directors often shooting in a friend's apartment and using the director's friends as the cast and crew. Directors often had to improvise and be creative with equipment (for example, using a shopping cart for tracking shots).

As with most a lot of film movements, the innovations of the New Wavers trickled down throughout the cinematic world. Social Realism in British films peaked during the 1960s when what is commonly referred to as the British New Wave. Directors such as Karel Reisz, and Tony Richardson had made a number of documentaries before moving on to make feature films, and many of these had been shown at the National Film Theatre event christened 'Free Cinema' in the 1950s. Like the film makers of Italian Neo realism and French New Wave, many of the British directors were knowledgeable and well known critics as well, associated with 'Sequence' magazine. This gave them more than enough opportunity to promote their agenda.

Free Cinema was described by Tony Richardson as "independent of commercial cinema, free to make intensely personal statements and free to promote the director's right to control the picture". Documentaries such as *O Dreamland* (Anderson, 1956) about an English coastal resort and *Momma*

Don't Allow (Reisz and Richardson, 1956) about a suburban jazz club put into practice the belief that these directors had in "the freedom and importance of the everyday."

The directors went on to introduce the themes and characters that they discovered in these documentaries mainstream cinema. The Free Cinema films were made without inhibitions, and led to the social realist aesthetic of putting ordinary people with problems onto the silver screen. It is for this reason that the term 'kitchen sink drama' originated, to describe the everyday lives of the working class population, and the term 'angry young man' to describe the rebellious protagonists.

The many films that emerged during the new wave of social realism are still inspiring directors and writers to this day, there are dozens of examples such as *Look Back in Anger*, *A Taste Of Honey*, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, *This Sporting Life*, *Billy Liar*, *Cathy Come Home*, *Up The Junction* and *Room At The Top*, just to name a few. Many of these films are based on literature and theatre productions. The movement also made way for a new wave of actors who embodied social realism in their use of colloquial mannerisms and accents. Actors such as Tom Courtenay, Rita Tushingham and Albert Finney held up a mirror to ordinary working class Brits.

"In the UK, the term "kitchen sink" derived from an expressionist painting by John Bratby, which contained an image of a kitchen sink. The critic David Sylvester wrote an article in 1954 about trends in recent English art, calling his article "The Kitchen Sink" in reference to Bratby's picture. Sylvester argued that there was a new interest among young painters in domestic scenes, with stress on the banality of life.

"Kitchen sink realism" was linked to the rise of the Angry Young Men, a category applied to a number of British playwrights and novelists from the mid-1950s. Their political views were seen as radical, sometimes even anarchic, and they described social alienation of different kinds. The authors included both "left-wing" and "right-wing" writers. They included John Osborne, Harold Pinter, John Braine, and Alan Sillitoe."

http://www.reference.com/browse/wiki/Kitchen_sink_realism

The new wave of British film-makers captured the atmosphere of the time, and made way for directors such as Mike Leigh, Stephen Frears and Ken Loach who continue to make films that shape the British film industry. Films such as *Naked*, and *My Beautiful Laundrette*, although these were made over 20 years later, they embody the same values and techniques that were a core part of the films of the new wave.

The British New Wave Cinema only lasted a few years, from 1959 to 1963. Only about half a dozen films were made. Even though they were so few made, the films were very influential and incredibly evocative, and enough to prompt critics of the time to talk of 'a renaissance in British cinema'. Coming

at the end of a decade that was extensively perceived as 'a doldrums era', based on a diet of lightweight comedies, gothic horror films and endless war vehicles the New Wave films were greeted by audiences as a breath of fresh air and paved the way for the transatlantic success that awaited British cinema in the Sixties.

The main directors of New Wave cinema were Karel Reisz, Lindsay Anderson, Tony Richardson, and John Schlesinger. The majority came from the theatre, predominantly from the Royal Court Theatre, Richardson had made a name for himself by directing the plays of John Osborne, such as *The Entertainer* and *Look Back in Anger* to great critical approval. The foremost production company behind British New Wave cinema, Woodfall films, was in fact set up by Richardson and Osborne predominantly to put these stage plays on to the big screen, which they did with the likes of Richard Burton and Laurence Olivier in the leading roles.

Woodfall's fortunes fared even better when Reisz and Richardson collaborated with northern realist authors and theatre writers such as Alan Sillitoe and Shelagh Delaney and took the unusual step for the film industry of those times of appointing them to write the screenplays for the films. Like with the French New Wave, taking the cameras out of the studio confines and engaging in much larger amounts of location shooting was another revolutionary idea for the industry, and was not welcomed by mainstream critics. But social realism was the vastly inspirational for new film-makers, scriptwriters, and a younger generation of actors, including Albert Finney, Rita Tushingham, Shirley Anne Field, Tom Courtenay, Alan Bates, Rachel Roberts, Richard Harris and the like.

Karel Reisz had the first big commercial success with *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960), while Tony Richardson made *A Taste of Honey* (1961) and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962) and Lindsay Anderson engaged David Storey to script his own book of *This Sporting Life* (1963), which effectively brought New Wave Cinema to an end.

The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner is a challenging and inventive film from 1962, produced and directed by Tony Richardson, and starring Tom Courtenay with Sir Michael Redgrave and James Bolam in support. *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* was the first British film to depict the brutality within the Borstal system later revisiting in the film *Scum* (1979).

The film caused outrage at the time and its anti-authoritarian agenda ran into problems with the British Board of Film Censors, which described its story as 'blatant and very trying Communist propaganda, and particularly worrying for us because the hero is a thief and yet is held up to the admiration of silly young thugs'.

Critics also commented on how the film explored the novel features of the camerawork and editing for its time, the originality of the musical score, and debated the borrowings from the French New Wave, as well as, finally, the

way in which the film continued to break new ground in British cinema of the day.

Saturday Night and Sunday Morning was adapted from Alan Sillitoe's first popular novel, and was about the new young working class. Directed by Karel Reisz and produced by Tony Richardson, Saturday Night and Sunday Morning stars Albert Finney, Rachel Roberts and Shirley Anne Field. The film was a revelation when it was initially released, not just for its realistic style, but also for its graphic portrayal of sex, extra-marital affairs, strong language, and, most contentious of all, abortion.

Once again The British Board of Film Censors urged a general toning down of all the language and sex scenes. In particular, it required that the successful abortion scene promised in the screenplay and evident in Sillitoe's original novel, be rendered ultimately ineffective and that the film-makers follow a policy of 'social responsibility' as far as possible.

In conclusion the social realism fostered by New Wave Cinema made an indelible and lasting impression on British film-makers for many years, and can even be seen in such recent films as Pater Cassano's, The Full Monty (1997), as well as Lynne Ramsay's art-house success, Ratcatcher (1999). The spirit of the British Social Realist movement extended way beyond its own period and, indeed, still flourishes in British cinema today in filmmakers such as Shane Meadows.

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