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Introduction: Revisiting the British New Wave

David Forrest and Melanie Williams

The British New Wave has a legitimate claim to be one of the most influential and critically contested cycles in British cinema history. Its outputs are a mainstay of Film Studies courses, used to illuminate debates on national cinema, authorship, stardom, class, landscape, and realism. They act as orientation points for navigating contemporary film and television, offering a lens through which emergent realist traditions are perceived. Crucially, the films play a powerful role in constructing and maintaining the iconography of ‘the North’, their landscapes and characters operating as familiar reference points and repositories of feeling of and about class and region in England. While celebrated in certain quarters, the films of the British New Wave have also been criticized for their perceived shortcomings, disparaged for representing conservative or even reactionary English culture, or conversely mourned as monuments to lost radical potential.

We were reminded of the centrality of the New Wave within the study and popular appreciation of British media history when in April 2023 we hosted a conference at the University of Sheffield, ‘Revisiting the New Wave’, which sought to re-contextualise and re-assess these culturally pivotal texts. The event attracted a range of scholars exploring a variety of topics via diverse approaches: the British New Wave’s influence on other media, from television drama to popular music; innovative perspectives on established readings and understandings of the films, illuminating new concepts of space, location and regional specificity, as well as gender and sexuality; drawing on archival methods to bring particular historical contexts into dialogue with text-based analytical approaches; opening up the New Wave by reflecting on both its origins and its afterlives. This special issue is one product of that forum of re-visitation, debate and exchange.

A recurring theme at the conference was the continuing influence of frequently cited critical readings of the British New Wave, particularly those of Andrew Higson (1984) and John Hill (1986) whose work continues to be both the touchstone for critical engagements with the New Wave, but also for wider historical and theoretical accounts of realism. As editors, we were particularly keen to acknowledge and account for this persistence within the scholarly discourse, and so John Hill opens this issue with a reflection on his foundational book *Sex, Class and Realism* almost forty years after its publication. The best scholarship represents the start rather than the end of a critical conversation, and is porous, reflective, and dynamic; Hill's contribution to this issue exemplifies that ethos. Hill reopens his book and many of the dialogues that have emerged from it, responding to scholars who have acknowledged but also sought to depart from his work. In so doing, his article reflects on the historical and theoretical traditions from which the original research emerged, on its hybrid methodological approach, and on re-imagining the debates on realism and ideology that shaped its conception. Hill's revisitation also points towards fruitful new potential readings of the films in relation to gender, sexuality, and stardom, areas that have come to the fore as especially productive sites of inquiry in our disciplines in the decades since his book's publication. In many respects, the subsequent articles in this special issue might be read as following on from Hill's suggested directions.

Cecília Mello's contribution steps back from the conventional period and medium specific frames through which the British New Wave has been understood, to consider it in a longer timeframe, thinking through its deeper historical origins as well as its strong relationship to allied art forms (the borrowing of a term originated in art criticism, 'kitchen sink', to apply to and make sense of this group of films as well as other analogous drama and writing of the period is instructive). Mello situates New Wave aesthetics within wider frameworks of realist art, and links these films to the idea of the demotic. Cross-referring to the poet William Wordsworth, Mello locates the New Wave within a poetic tradition of everyday lyricism grounded in British working-class culture and popular struggle.

In so doing, Mello attends to the class dynamics and relations that were represented on screen in the New Wave but which also underpinned the collaborations that formed it, and destabilises auteurist

frameworks (with their attendant class and gender dimensions). This theme is picked up by a number of our contributors and is developed in productive ways in Hollie Price's article. Here, Price compels us to 'pay attention to Brenda and Doreen', in arguably the New Wave's most prominent film *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. Usually read as a tale of male rebellion foregrounding a star-making central performance by Albert Finney, Price shifts focus to Rachel Roberts and Shirley Ann Field who are acknowledged as vital creative agents whose performances and contributions open up complex and rich points of (re)engagement with the film as itself an archive of experience for working-class women's work, pain, pleasure, and hope. Price thus redefines New Wave stardom as located at the intersection of glamour and working-class lived experience.

This acknowledgement and analysis of alternative kinds of creative labour in filmmaking enables a move beyond auteurism as primary explanatory framework is further explored by David Forrest, who, like Price, adopts archival methods, in this instance to explore the previously undervalued artistic contributions of the writer to the New Wave. Forrest takes as his case study David Storey, screenwriter of *This Sporting Life* and author of the novel on which it was based (1960), and traces the complex collaboration between author and director, Lindsay Anderson, challenging assumptions about the New Wave's conjoined treatment of place and class, exemplified by the trope of 'That Long Shot of Our Town from That Hill' critiqued so persuasively by Higson.

Like Forrest, Melissa Oliver-Powell focusses on space and place as a way to revisit and challenge existing readings of the New Wave. Here, the home is a space for revealing the films' queer and trans possibilities. Oliver-Powell acknowledges but moves beyond *A Taste of Honey* as the primary New Wave text engaging with no-heteronormative sexuality and gender, and thus suggests the potential to disrupt and even dismantle the rigid demarcation of masculinity and femininity in critical readings of the films.

The queer affordances of the New Wave and a challenge to the cycle's apparent coherence is also taken up in our final article, from Claire Monk. Echoing historian Arthur Marwick's 'long sixties' (2005: 780), Monk maps out the concept of a 'Long New Wave', identifying it as a cinema of unorthodox adaptation, creative collaboration, and queer sensibility. Monk's strategy of taking a longer view on the

New Wave unmoors it from the fixity of its associations with Northern realism and in so doing offers further ways of seeing this cycle beyond the constraining paradigms of genre, authorship, and one sole historical moment spanning the end of the 1950s and the first few years of the 1960s.

A long New Wave disrupts the usual chronologies and forces us to think about, and make connections to, what its creative personnel, and what British cinema, did next, beyond 1963, the year usually deemed to be the cycle's cut-off point. Although this special issue does not take up the arguments about the parameters of the cycle and what gets included or excluded on grounds of genre, mode or setting as seen in previous scholarship (Hutchings 2009, Chibnall 1999), it continues in the same spirit of enquiry and seeks to open up rather than close down the British New Wave as an entity and object of study. It also acts as a barometer of current academic engagement with it: it is clear that *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, *A Taste of Honey* and *This Sporting Life* are the New Wave films which are uppermost in scholarly interest, while *Room at the Top*, the film widely regarded as the first of the New Wave, was absent. *A Taste of Honey* aside, Tony Richardson's New Wave oeuvre (his John Osborne adaptations *Look Back in Anger* and *The Entertainer*, and film version of Alan Sillitoe's short story *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*) also slips through the net, suggesting possible lines of enquiry for further revisitations of the New Wave.

The contributions to this special issue are, in varying ways, united by a focus on class. While early influential critiques of the New Wave perhaps too readily dismissed the films as middle-class projects which enshrined an outsider's view on their working-class subjects, we instead position them, through textured archival and theoretical frames, as rich and vibrant examples of working-class culture. Viewed today, the films reveal themselves as striking illustrations of a (fleeting) moment in British popular culture which saw creative workers from working-class backgrounds given a platform to make art from their lived experiences. That such a prospect now feels so retrospectively precious prompts some sobering reflections on the state of the creative industries in 2024, in which moves towards class and regional diversity feel at best tokenistic, and at worst consigned to the past. This nostalgic dimension is a

further reason why the films remain - perhaps more so than ever - a matter of ongoing and pressing critical interest.

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