Film and Community in Britain and France. From La Règle du Jeu to Room at the Top

During the last 25 years, academic writing on film and the cinema has been dominated by two analytical systems. On the one side of the theoretical spectrum there have been structuralists, primarily working within the fields of visual and textual studies, who have taken as given responses to the film product. These scholars insist that a film's visual and narrative structure is always the last determinant. On the other side of the spectrum there have been culturalists, principally historians and sociologists, who jettison analyses of the artistic meaning of the text in favour of focusing exclusively on its social function. Whilst both theoretical approaches have significant merits, neither has helped to adequately define a film's meaning, nor fully explain why specific films are chosen by the cinema-going public. Neither structuralist nor culturalist, therefore, has sufficiently demonstrated what social and cultural tasks films, or indeed going to the cinema, perform.(1) What has been productive, though, is the rise in recent years of an interdisciplinary approach which combines the best practices of both structuralists and culturalists.(2) The most important advocate of such an approach is John B. Thompson. In his groundbreaking work, *Ideology and Modern Culture: Critical Social Theory in the Era of Mass Communication* (1990), Thompson identifies the production and consumption of cultural goods as an active and mutually constitutive relationship (pp. 303–313). Unlike structuralists and culturalists, then, Thompson does not give prominence to production or consumption, but instead begins to draw a map of the operation of agency in the cultural field. Whilst Thompson's work is wholly theoretical, such an approach certainly provides a way forward for the film historian. For, by understanding the importance of agency in the production and consumption of a film, the film historian can begin to discern what determinants influence these processes, and thus embark on an enquiry which is both academically rigorous and theoretically sound. Margaret Butler's *Film and Community in Britain and France. From La Règle du Jeu to Room at the Top*

is an important contribution to film history in this respect.

Film and Community in Britain and France examines British and French cinema during the 1940s and 1950s. Whilst the history of British film during the Second World War has been written extensively by Anthony Aldgate, James Chapman, Sue Harper and Jeffrey Richards, and whilst French film production during this period is only slightly less explored (André Bazin, Evelyn Ehrlich and Susan Hayward have researched French cinema during the war), the post-war cinemas of both countries have only recently begun to be surveyed in significant detail. Butler's choice of periodisation is thus extremely timely. It is also especially productive. By focusing on film production and consumption during these unstable and traumatic decades, Butler can demonstrate how markedly different the 1940s film product was from that of the 1950s and, more importantly, reveal how this shift was caused, in part, by the changing tastes of cinema audiences.

Butler's use of 'community' as a conceptual tool to demonstrate these differences is instructive. As she states, the way in which community was articulated in British and French cinema both during and after the Second World War was consistent with the distinctive socio-political environments in which both countries' film-makers were operating. Film-makers thus tapped into the wider social mindset and used the film medium to raise questions about social and national unity and disunity, stability and turmoil, and integration and segregation. In such ways, Butler contends, film-makers produced films in which 'representations of community were complex and perceived as reassuring and welcoming, but also threatening and alienating' (p. 10).

Butler's stance on the benefits of community as a conceptual tool is problematical, however. She argues that such an approach moves the focus away from the 'far too restrictive' concept of class (p. 4). Whilst Butler is right to draw on Jeffrey Richards's notion that people carry with them 'bundles of identities', her contention that class 'tends to prohibit a more objective, insightful analysis' is tricky (p. 5). Firstly, is class such a prohibitive concept? Surely one can use class as a conceptual tool whilst appreciating that individuals possess a number of identities? Moreover, whereas community is concerned with rank and status, there are discursive formations and practices which are class-specific. Second, is Butler arguing that notions of community are more objective and insightful? Community is a sociological category with, arguably, an inherent sentimentality and can be just as limiting a concept as class if used in a narrow sense, and no historian can really claim to provide an objective account of the period being investigated (even if they would like to think they are doing so). Despite these linguistic failings, Butler's conceptual approach is effective in drawing out the differences between the two countries' film cultures in this period. Focusing on community, then, enables Butler to explore 'the ways in which film captured two societies undergoing searing and contrasting experiences' (p. 180).

The book's comparative analysis is particularly fruitful in this respect. Butler's selection of Britain and France (and their markedly different experiences during the period under analysis) provides a much greater insight into the workings of agency in the film-making process than say, an account of the experiences of Britain alone. For example, she can describe how, between 1939 and 1945, many of Britain's film-makers (with considerable encouragement from the British government) endeavoured to make use of film to convey the notion of a national community. In Occupied France, on the other hand, the divided nature of French society was reflected in the film industry's struggles to conceptualise and project an image of a united nation, resulting in a cinema that was far more ambiguous in its depiction of community. In fact, by drawing attention to both countries' use of rural and urban imagery in both war-time and post-war cinema (chapters 3 and 4 are devoted to this), Butler can demonstrate how each country's distinct historical and political climate heavily influenced the film-makers' ability to incorporate such imagery into their films. In Britain, for example, rural imagery was used during the war to emphasise 'why we fight', but in France the fear of appearing to endorse Vichyite policies led many film-makers to concentrate primarily on depicting urban images (specifically Paris) in their 'rural' films to retain a semblance of unity between the city and the countryside. In the post-war period, Butler notes, the symbolic function of the rural and the urban was radically altered because of the pressure wrought by changing social conditions and raised expectations. Because the experiences of Britain and France were different, however, each country's film-makers had to incorporate notions of community in very different ways. It is Butler's skill at bringing such contrasting

accounts into sharp focus that helps us begin to understand the full extent of the various determinants placed upon the film-maker in all areas of the film-making process.

Of course, one of these determinants is the consumer. Films have to be pleasurable to watch if they are to be commercially successful. Film-makers, therefore, need to remain aware that they are part of a reciprocal relationship. Butler's assessment of the appeal of these films, as well as their meaning, situates her analysis at the very centre of this relationship. She can thus clearly demonstrate how the widely divergent experiences of British and French society during this period required equally different representations in film. Consequently, Butler can claim that in Britain films such as *In Which We Serve* (1942), *Millions Like Us* (1943) and *The Gentle Sex* (1943) encapsulated the dominant ideas of a united community. In France, however, she illustrates that through films like *L'Assassin habite au 21* (1941), *Le Ciel est à vous* (1944) and *Le Corbeau* (1943), the cinema of the occupation captured the multifarious tensions prevalent in French society. Significantly, then, Butler ably refutes orthodox assumptions which have posited that French cinema during this period simply bowed to the demands of the Vichy regime.

It is Butler's close analysis of the films themselves that allows her to challenge such assumptions. Indeed, it is this aspect of her work which is most productive. By paying considerable attention to the films' visual detail, Butler frees herself from the often limiting reliance on plot paraphrase. Subsequently, she offers a new appreciation of the meaning and appeal of the films she analyses. Moreover, her close reading of these films provides her with the material to challenge other preconceptions regarding the film culture in this, and indeed any other, period. An often-repeated indictment against the film medium which Butler rightly challenges is its provision of escapist entertainment. While Butler is less willing to challenge the term itself (although how can we do so when many cinema-goers claimed their primary reason for visiting the cinema was to escape the drudgery of daily life?), she refuses to use it as a blanket phrase. Indeed, Butler valuably problematises it, and thus recognises the many attributes of so-called 'escapist' texts. Throughout this book, then, Butler capably demonstrates that 'escapist' films can be viewed as active producers of specific ideological meanings. Moreover, through her assessment of the films' appeal, she can reveal how they were able to convey their messages extremely successfully.

Chapters 6 and 7, which focus on how film-makers responded to the changing expectations and aspirations of women after the war, best exemplify the benefits of this practice. Butler explores the manner in which Britain's film-makers eagerly incorporated newly-forming images of community, with women central to it, into their film discourses. Her close reading of films such as *Perfect Strangers* (1945), *The Loves of Joanna Godden* (1947), *Blanche Fury* (1948) and *Woman in a Dressing Gown* (1957) reveal that the British film industry's portrayal of women was not so rigidly defined as has often been argued, but was, in contrast, exceptionally diverse and complex. Butler agrees, however, that French film-makers struggled to incorporate the 'new woman' into a discourse of community. Women in French cinema, Butler observes, were 'casualties of outdated laws, attitudes and assumptions which ensured that identifying their place within society was a task of great complexity' (p. 174). None the less, Butler's careful reading of a film such as *Boule de suif* (1945) reveals how even stereotypical images of women, in this case a prostitute, could be seen to have shown women in a more assertive, independent and, therefore, positive light.

Film and Community in Britain and France takes a concertedly historical approach to its subject, and places much emphasis on empirical evidence which is derived from a wide range of sources. However, there are a few problems with Butler's methodology. Many references are taken from secondary academic texts rather than directly from the archive. Additional problems arise when Butler skips over issues which remain highly contested. Her discussion of British society's experiences during the Second World War is a case in point. It takes rather too glib a perspective on an extremely complex issue. Whilst debates are duly noted, they are glossed over too easily. In chapter 1, for example, Butler refers to the 'communal experience of "the people's war"', and states that: 'During the first two years of the war in particular, people of all classes were suffering in equal measure.' (p. 6) There is a wealth of material (both archival and academic) which contradicts this view. Although Butler does later acknowledge that some inequality remained, particularly regarding evacuation, she none the less persists in drawing inspiration from the 'popular memory' of the war. It would appear that the sentimentality intrinsic to notions of community has led Butler to oversimplify

the complex historical evidence available, and thus neglect the class, gender and ethnic divisions that unquestionably prevailed throughout British society.

There are other problems to do with the oversimplification of the British film industry. It was not '[d]espite the monopoly held by Rank' that film-makers were able to 'produce ambitious and creative films' (p. 20), but rather *because* of it. As Sue Harper has noted, with such a large organisation at his helm, Rank was often too preoccupied to control everything that went on within it.(3) Similarly, Butler's contention that the 'serious dialogue about class relationships' evident in *Millions Like Us* (1943) 'would rarely have arisen in a pre-war film' (p. 47) ignores the significant number of films made during the 1930s which drew attention to this issue. *Hindle Wakes* (1931), for one, warned of the dangers of cross-class relationships. In fact, Mrs Jeffcote's remark concerning her son's working-class sweetheart Jenny ('that type of girl is beneath him') is not a million miles away from Charlie's comments to Jennifer ('The world's roughly made up of two kinds of people – you're one sort and I'm the other') that Butler employs as her example.

Another problem is the coverage of audience response. Throughout the book, Butler profitably insists that films 'are particularly revealing both in terms of the response they elicited from their audiences and in their reflections on the society which produced them' (p. 175). If audience responses are so revealing (which they undoubtedly are), why does Butler use them so infrequently? It would have greatly enhanced this book if more examples had been included and a more systematic approach used. Indeed, the real meaning of film texts can only be established when the popularity of a film is addressed. There is also the problem of using a reflectionalist model. A film can never reflect the period in which it was produced. Films are culturally constructed – they are produced, distributed, and marketed by a multitude of people – and are thus not one person's perspective but an accumulation of many. As such, the evidence presented is not a reflection of that past, but an interpretation of it. Nevertheless, by alluding to some of the visual codes at work in the film texts, Butler does marry together the textual and contextual analyses, and thus reveals something of the values of society in this period. They may fall short of an actual 'reflection', but they are essential additions to our understanding all the same.

This is a pleasurable book to read, and to equivocate about its shortcomings in no way detracts from its achievements. Writing in a fluid and very accessible manner, Butler takes the reader through the various intricacies of the British and French film industries during two tumultuous decades and skilfully explores their responses to the various pressures placed upon them. Moreover, in her close visual analysis of a vast number of film texts, some of which have long been ignored, Butler opens up for question some orthodox views of the film product and its uses during this period. Butler thus bestows a fresh and highly original account of British and French cinema history to the field.

Notes

1. For a detailed examination of these terms, and a discussion of key texts, see John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (3rd ed., 2001), pp. 37–81.Back to (1)
2. Tony Bennett charts this theoretical shift in his article 'Popular Culture and the "Turn to Gramsci"', in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. John Storey (1998), pp. 217–224.Back to (2)
3. Sue Harper, *Picturing the Past: The Rise and Fall of the British Costume Film* (1994), p. 119.Back to (3)

Other reviews:
[2]

Source URL: http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/461#comment-0

Links
[1] http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/2469
[2] http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews