

Post-war British Cinema: Constructing an Imagined Community Through National Cinema

Gegen

*Gower Street, London WC1E 6BT, United Kingdom
gegen1996@126.com*

Keywords: National Cinema; Post-war Britain; Anglo-American Culture

Abstract: Benedict Anderson's masterpiece *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* has influenced the discipline of national cinema greatly since its publication. This paper aims to decode British national cinema from the late 1940s to early 1960s to rediscover the situation of British society at that time through Anderson's conception of "imagined communities". Through reading closely on two representative British films *A Matter of Life and Death* (Emeric Pressburger, 1946) and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Karel Reisz, 1960), the paper portrays the great changes happened in Britain from the end of the the Second World War to the beginning of the 1960s.

1. Introduction

When Andrew Higson defines the term 'national cinema', he brings up the concept of 'imagined community'. He concludes that the experience of belonging to a nation, is actually a feeling of being part of an imagined community, although the social experiences of one nation could be various, but the imaginative process can transform those experiences into one 'singular experience of a coherent national community' to hold the peoples of a nation together [3]. He further states that 'the imaginative process must be able to resolve the actual history of conflict and negotiation in the experience of the community' [3]. Cinema as one of the cultural products which can naturalise existing national identities and produce new representations of the nation, it can reflect the imaginative process of that time, it can indicate the social and political conditions at that time at the same time, offering new possibilities to the nation's future. This essay will use Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946) and Karel Reisz's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) as examples of British national cinema, to explore the changes of British. This paper is going to start with the historical background when two films were made, and the later part of the paper exams the different relationships between cinema and reality in those two films.

2. Historical Background of Post-war Britain

A Matter of Life and Death was initially conceived as a wartime propaganda, but it could not be made until the end of the war. The year which the film was made was an optimistic time in Britain, the war just ended, and Labour Party's victory of 1945 general election came with the commitments to full employment and the welfare state. However, the historical circumstance failed to live up to the hope and promises. The victory of Allies came with the economic crisis, and Britain's reconstruction was

heavily depended on loan from American and aid provided by the Marshall Plan. There was a clear tendency that America was becoming the global super-power, Britain had to abandon its dominant global position to secure its special relationship with the US. At the same time, although the employment rate and earning had raised, with the continued rationing, there was little to buy. As Andrew Moor states, with the genuine hardship at home and Britain's slow adjustment to the reality of its world status, 'the utopianism of welfare state could be seen to cushion the deprivations of the late 1940s' [4]. Welfare State did not only aim for changing the material condition, but also promised equality of opportunity, it was a commitment to the individuals in the nation that they would be taken care of by the government, and the Labour Party intended to create a socialist utopian. What followed by was the prosperity of the 'boom period' in the 1950s. John Hill argues that the idea of 'affluence' is critical to understand Britain in the 1950s, the nation moved forward from post-war austerity and rationing to a state of prosperity [5]. With the uninterrupted full employment from 1951 to 1964, the industrial productivity, average earning and personal consumption all increased dramatically. However, the affluence did not come with economic equalities, as Hill points out, increases in income and shifts in occupational structure only located movements within classes, the class relations remained intact, furthermore, as Hill summaries, British economic seemed impressive in isolation, but it looked deadly poor compared with other industrial nations [5]. Therefore, the real utopia of equality which promised by the welfare state for the working class had not yet arrived, and that was the time when *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* was made. This essay will argue that two films generate nation's fears, anxieties, pleasure and aspirations about changes in class, sexualities and popular cinematic forms which may be caused by the reconstructions of politics, society and economy.

3. The conception of the nation in films

In *A Matter of Life and Death*, the characters from different nations are knitted together by their shared value systems and lifestyle, a sense of trans-national collectivity is portrayed through class, whereas *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* emphasises the individual experience in working-class. The shift from expressing collective experience to focusing on the individuals themselves indicates that the nation started to realise that the impossibility of escaping one's class in the 1960s, indicting a sense that British class divisions were fixed. *A Matter of Life and Death* draws attention to the insignificance of nation states, a special Anglo-American relationship is emphasised through a class-bound partnership between Peter D. Carter (David Niven) and June (Kim Hunter). The film opens with a grand shot of the universe, with the monologue saying "This is the universe. Big, isn't it?". Then the camera zooms into the earth, an American woman's voice emerges asking for an English pilot's position in the air. As Maroula Joannou suggests, the photo of the earth from the space could be the most influential image of the twentieth century, and it was the first time that people could envisage their existence on a global rather than a local scale [6]. The opening sequence establishes its ambition of depicting a utopian, borderless world, and the film particularly focuses on Anglo-American relation. *A Matter of Life and Death* offers discussions to what is typical British and what is typical American. The trial scene offers debates about Britain's historical encounters with other countries and its relationship with the U.S.

The major debates between Abraham Farlan (Raymond Massey) and Doctor Reeves (Roger Livesey) are presented to the people from other nations, but there are no emeries like Italians, Germans and Japanese. Farlan concerns that the mixed romance between Peter and June would not work because of the past history and differences between two nations, and he stresses that the slow, old-fashioned and stultifying life in England would suffocate June. He implies that American life is new fast-paced and modern, he says "should the swift tempo of her life be slowed to the crawl of a match at cricket." Here, cricket is represented as a typical English game which can be seen as the class-bound symbol of English culture. The heavenly staging and the reunion of the couple at the end

of the scene all suggest the nation difference could not affect the love affair between two nations, in Joannou's view, the trial scene suggests what audiences assume they know about a national culture is "often fantasy" [6]. What bond Peter, June and Dr. Reeves are the common values they share and class background they come from, rather than geographical accidents of birth. The idealised universality is implied through the trial scene, suggesting the nation hoped to build a utopian world and Britain attempted to build a special relationship with the U.S.

As Hill writes, in contrast to British wartime cinema which projects a sense of collectivity on screen, British new wave films emphasise more on the individuals through illustrating more tightly wrought narratives and dominant central characters [5]. *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* emphasises the individual's experience by underlining the separation between work and personal leisure time of the working-class protagonist. Arthur (Albert Finney) is shown momentarily at work at the beginning of the film. The camera moves and zooms into Arthur working in the factor, before it cuts to close-ups, the film shows workers in one frame, whereas they all focus on the machines in the front of them, a sense of working-class men work together but they are disconnected is implied. Followed are shots showing Arthur's fragmented body parts operating the machines as if they are parts of the devices. The position of working-class in the capitalist society is exposed in the sequence; it is work which defines working-class as a class, they function as one link of the production chain. The claustrophobic framing suggests the workplace is isolated from the outside world, and also separates the workers from their personal lives and the individuals can only enjoy during leisure times rather than at work. There are conflicts between young and old within the class.

Even in the social place like the pub, Arthur has little friendly interactions with other people from his class, as a new working-class man he can not fit into the old working-class community. The separation between him and other people suggests the blame of Arthur's situation is attached to himself rather than the society. I suggest the shifts from emphasis collectivity to the individual experience indicate the promised utopian world of equality-for-all did not come true, showing the affluence brought by the welfare states could not break the class barriers.

Both films centre on masculinity, female sexuality is portrayed as something for male desire, female characters presented in two films suggest from post-war time until the 1960s, the dominant ideological tendency was to play down the significance of women's role in the labour force. June's identity in *A Matter of Life and Death* is exclusively associated with her sexuality, she is both object and subject for desire. The objectification emerges in Peter and June's first encounter through the radio at the beginning of the film, Peter falls in love with June's voice immediately, the objectifying continues in the rest of the film. June is frozen during the first meeting between Conductor 71 (Marius Goring) and Peter. The first frozen sequence begins straight after Peter and June's kiss, Conductor 71 shows up and suspends the time and freezes June, she becomes an object for desire as Conductor 71 admires "she is ... charming", and there is no shot given to June when he is saying so. Then Conductor 71 leaves, in the following scene where June questions Peter's hallucination, there is a subjective point of view of Peter's, June is obscured by the haze, later she also appears in Dr. Reeves camera obscura. When Conductor stops the time for the second time at Dr. Reeves' place, the scene starts with her and Dr. Reeves been frozen, and there is a close-up of her followed. As John Ellis argues, in those two sequences, 'June is reduced to immobility, to pure objecthood', however, the moment of objecthood is not the primary definition of her sexuality, she makes a transition from 'being the object of desire to becoming an active, desiring subject' when she cries in the last frozen sequence [7]. Same as the second frozen sequence, the third one starts with a frame of June, then Peter, Dr. Reeves, Conductor 71 and Bob (Robert Coote) come around her looking for evidence of love, as the only frozen and female character in the shot, June centres in the frame. Because of her active desire, she produces a tear which becomes the only evidence. Then finally when the court comes to the earth and she comes alive and plays an active role, it is her wilful action of dying for

Peter saves Peter and proves their love. Although the film ends with two shot of her and Peter and she becomes active in the end, however she is primarily defined by her sexuality,

As Hill notes, in the new wave films, the association of women with consumerism is highlighted by the plot structures, therefore they are desired not for themselves, but for the economic advantage they present, they can become something of a commodity, a measure of a 'false' goal which the hero is pursuing [5]. In *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, Brenda (Rachel Roberts) who comes from a lower-middle-class suburban home has an affair with the affluent working-class hero.

As Hill states, young men in new wave films who feel trapped by the class background, in search of an affluent lifestyle which will enable them to forget about class barriers [5]. In this sense, Brenda could be read as one of the consumer products Arthur is chasing after to escape the class trap. Her willingness to have a sexual liaison with Arthur strongly contrast to Doreen's (Shirley Anne Field) passiveness, she is able to vocalise her desire and pleasure, however, as Robert Murphy note, "when it comes to the consequences the price she has to pay is immeasurably greater". She fails in terminating her pregnancy and shows her guiltiness to the affair near the end of the film, she is punished because of her sexual activeness. On the other hand, as Samantha Lay suggests, the forces of consumerism are also associated with women[8]. Doreen tells Arthur she wants a new house with new fixtures in the final scene. It implies only by toiling in the factory could he keep Doreen in the lifestyle she aspires to, by doing so he could marry the 'right' woman from his class at the same time, his commitment to her also fixes his class identity. In general, both films fail in sending out progressive messages about female sexuality, and it could be read as a symptom of masculine anxieties which might be caused by the feminist movements during the wartime.

4. Cinematic Reality in Films

A Matter of Life and Death and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* take different cinematic approaches to reflect the historical moments and British identities in different times. *A Matter of Life and Death* challenges the realist aesthetic, draws audience's attention to the film-making process to state that the film is an illusion, it invites the spectators to think, to form opinions, whereas *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* uses conventions of realism to unfold the social problems. Cinematic realism never refers to an unmediated reflection of reality, it is conventional and ideological, it can be understood as one of the cinematic effects. *A Matter of Life and Death* constantly contrast the reality to illusion. It foregrounds the question of what is real. Heaven scenes are shot in black and white which offer a documentary quality, and the earth is shot in artificial technicolour; Peter has hallucinations however they are accompanied with smells of fried onions which implies his sense is real; Dr. Reeves' observations suggest Peter sees illusion whereas we can see Peter's diegetic visions. Those contrasts create an effect that the spectators could not just believe what they see in the film, they are reminded of the artificial nature of the film medium that the cinema is also an illusion.

In comparison, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* takes a more conventional realistic approach to explore the relationship between the cinematic world and life. As Hill summaries, the realism of the British 'new wave' stood "opposed to the 'phoney' conventions of character and place characteristic of British studio procedure by opting for location shooting [5] and using relatively new talent with regional accents. I would juxtapose different landscape shots in two films to illustrate that through location shooting, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* provides a sense of viewing a 'slice of life'. The morning after Arthur is beaten in the back street, there are two shots showing the view of the northern industrial town. The first shot shows a dim view of the town with freight trains and the factory at the background; then it is an establishing shot shows the neighbourhood where Arthur lives, then it cuts to his bedroom. Lay points out that the shots remind audiences that the film is about Arthur but he belongs the working class community, at the same time, the sequence distances the audiences from the narrative which can provide a seamless sense of viewing a 'slice of life' [8]. Those

two shots slow down the pace of the narration, creating a sense of viewing the life itself. In contrast, *A Matter of Life and Death* uses the landscape for creating dramatic effects. There are shots of spectacle after Peter landing on the earth. There is a long shot showing Peter taking off his uniforms and leaving them behind on the beach, the technicolour and emptiness of the ocean make the familiar location looks peculiar, the sidelong shot extends the cinematic space which makes the spectacle seems heavenly. The landscape shot in *A Matter of Life and Death* blurs the boundaries between heaven and the earth, suggesting there might be an intermediate zone. The mainstream cinema shifted its focus from fantasy to realism from the post-war period to the 1960s, I suggest it partly reflects the utopian fantasy brought by the warfare state and the victory of the Second World War terminated after the post-war period, Britain remained a country characterised by class divisions, mass audiences turned their interests to explore the real-life crisis.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, the essay started with introducing historical backgrounds of the makings of *A Matter of Life and Death* and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. Then it argued *A Matter of Life and Death* portrays a utopian world that nationality is insignificant and people can be bonded together by class rather than geographic accidents of birth, whereas *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* focuses on individual working-class experience. Followed by that, the essay argued both films focus on portraying the dominant masculinity; female characters are presented as something for male desire. Then it showed that *A Matter of Life and Death* indicates the cinematic truth that film is an illusion through a fantastic approach, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* portrays its theme through realistic conventions. Overall, the essay argued the cinematic changes from *A Matter of Life and Death* to *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* general are caused by the changing attitudes toward the welfare state, and it did not deliver the promise of equality-for-all, class divisions reminded clear.

References

- [1] Powell, Michael and Pressburger, Emeric. *A Matter of Life and Death. The Archers*, 1946.
- [2] Reisz, Karel. *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. Woodfall Film Production, 1960.
- [3] Higson, Andrew. *Waving the Flag*. Clarendon Press, 1995.
- [4] Moor, Andrew. *Powell&Pressburger: A Cinema of Magic Spaces*. I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2005.
- [5] Hill, John. *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956-1963*. Palgrave Macmillan, 1986.
- [6] Joannou, Maroula. 'Powell, Pressburger, and Englishness'. *European Journal of English Studies*, 8:2, 2004, 189-203.
- [7] Ellis, John. 'Watching Death at Work: An Analysis of *A Matter of Life and Death*'. *Powell Pressburger and Others*, edited by Ian Christie, BFI, 2007, pp.79-104.
- [8] Lay, Samantha. *British Social Realism: From Documentary to Brit Grit*. Wallflower Press, 2002.