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LONDON BELONGS TO US:
STREET-LIFE AND NEW WAVE BRITISH CINEMA OF THE 1960S
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This is the final lecture in my short series about how London has been represented on the screen. I began with ‘Gothic London’, looking at how cinema picked up a tradition of seeing London as essentially sinister, which had started in literature during the Romantic period, and had then become part of the new wave of popular writing in the late 19th century, with stories like *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* leading into the origins of ‘true crime’ fiction – and of course into early cinema. Next, I focused on Robert Paul, the pioneer London filmmaker of the 1890s and how he portrayed the city he’d grown up in a bustling, modern city at the turn of the last century. Now we reach what has become an almost mythic, even more modern vision of London – the Sixties. And perhaps inevitably it’s much more complex and varied than it has sometimes been made to seem.

Let’s plunge in, with the opening of a film that proved really controversial in 1960: PEEPING TOM. Michael Powell’s film was in many ways ‘modern gothic’ – a continuation of Stevenson in contemporary Soho, or Fitzrovia, and it scandalised at least the critics because it linked the filmmaking impulse with other dangerous impulses, including voyeurism and pornography. We might say it ‘crossed the line’ between pandering to an audience’s baser instincts and confronting them – that is us, as film-viewers - with our ‘unhealthy’ interests. Of course, that’s a rather modern rationalisation of why the film created such a scandal in 1960, before the *Lady Chatterley* trial, before the Profumo scandal, before Mary Whitehouse... really before most of what the 60s have become famous or notorious for.

But let me remind you of another aspect of the film: *where* that opening scene was filmed. It’s Newman Passage, just north of Oxford Street, running between Newman St and Rathbone Place. Did the film’s director, Michael Powell, choose the location? I suspect he did, since he knew the area well, having started his filmmaking career in the 1930s, using some locations around Charlotte Street in his early films. Later, we’ll see Newman Passage in daylight, when the young cameraman goes to visit the scene of his crime in daylight – because he still needs an establishing shot for the strange film he’s making. We’ll see more of Fitzrovia too: a newsagent’s and a studio where pin-up photography supplies what Soho had long been famous for. And later still, we’ll see the house which he grew up in, and owns, but lives in like a tenant – a house haunted by his father’s cruel experiments, making this truly ‘modern gothic’.

We don’t see much of London’s streets in PEEPING TOM, but the brief glimpses are carefully chosen to convey a sense of the modern city that’s also steeped in tradition – like that 18th century passageway at the beginning, a Soho-style ‘art pictures’ shop, and a grand Kensington mansion, now divided into flats. Let’s take another near-contemporary example, again a modern twist on a traditional tale, of a woman driven over the edge of insanity. This is REPULSION, co-written and directed by the emigré Polish director Roman Polanski in 1965, and also largely set inside a London mansion flat. Again, there are few exterior scenes, since the drama is claustrophobic, as Catherine Deneuve retreats into a private world of terrors. But what we do see of the streets around South Kensington carefully avoids what’s been termed ‘landmark London’. It may be blandly ‘modern’, but the disturbed heroine is still capable of projecting her own anxiety onto it – as in the famous crack she sees in the pavement: a disturbing image that I think can stand for a distinctively 60s way of portraying ‘cracks in the façade’ of London.



If we step back at this point to look at the wider picture, I want to suggest that the history of British cinema has tended to give priority to three trends in the Sixties that gave it a new international success. One of these was the move northward, away from London, that gave us films adapted from a new generation of novelists. John Braine's *ROOM AT THE TOP*, filmed by Jack Clayton in 1959; Alan Sillitoe's *SATURDAY NIGHT AND SUNDAY MORNING*, filmed entirely on location in Nottingham in 1960; Stan Barstow's *A KIND OF LOVING*, set in Manchester and filmed by John Schlesinger in 1962. Another new trend was the reinvention of the musical, with films built around popular new groups, from the Beatles (*A HARD DAY'S NIGHT*) to the Dave Clark Five (*CATCH US IF YOU CAN*). And a third – which overlapped with the second - was what quickly became known as 'swinging London': films that showcased the new music, fashion and youth lifestyles of the mid-60s.

What's especially interesting about these in terms of the image of London is how they created a kind of montage of the old and the new. 'Swinging London' took place amid the Victorian foundations of the city, often finding creative ways of making this seem new and interesting, as in the vogue for recycling vintage clothing and retro imagery. A classic example of this 'montage' would be the film that has come to epitomise 'swinging London', *BLOW UP*, especially in the sequence of its opening scenes.

We start in what was then one of London's newest architectural features, the Economist Plaza, in St James, opened 1964 - a montage of jeep, hippy-student types, and modernist buildings. Then a 'typical street', with the unexpected punctuation of nuns, and so to our meeting with the central character, Thomas, seen emerging from an Orwellian hostel for the homeless beside an old railway arch in Peckham, before stealthily departing in an ostentatiously open Rolls-Royce that will transport him to a space that characterised the novelty and appeal of 'swinging London': a (genuine) fashion photographer's studio-cum-apartment.

It was in fact, the glamour of London at this time, as portrayed by its photographers, models and designers that had attracted Michelangelo Antonioni to make his first film outside Italy. And what he would do with mid-60s London was essentially a continuation of his reimagining of Rome in *L'ECLISSE* – a Rome devoid of any familiar tourist landmarks – and his first bold use of colour in *THE RED DESERT*. I was lucky enough to know the film's art director, Assheton Gorton, near the end of his life, and enjoyed hearing him describe how he took Antonioni around London, showing him a range of different kinds of location – some of which the director then proceeded to change, either by re-painting, or by showing them in an unfamiliar way.

The most famous of these is probably Maryon Park, in Woolwich, which I visited for the first time when thinking about this lecture. And with Oliver Endersby and James Bull, we made a short film about this remarkably unchanged location for *BLOW UP*. What strikes the visitor, I think, is how the park seems to retain something of the same 'emptiness' we see in the film, nearly fifty years later. There's a famous line from an interview with Antonioni, when he was asked to explain the puzzling business of the apparently disappearing figures in the park, and the concluding mimed game of tennis, which Thomas seems to accept as 'real'. He said: "I'm not trying to show reality, but to ask what it is".

This was a theme that ran through a fair amount of Sixties cinema, from Antonioni's own *L'AVVENTURA* and Alain Resnais' and Alain Robbe-Grillet's *LAST YEAR AT MARIENBAD*, through to a film that seemed to mark the end of the 'long Sixties', Nicholas Roed and Donald Cammell's *PERFORMANCE* (1970). What these and other films of the period were doing, it seems, was cutting loose from the contract that had underpinned much of mainstream cinema, that we are being shown a series of 'real places', irrespective of how they have actually been created for the screen. In *BLOW UP* and *PERFORMANCE*, the setting is certainly contemporary London, and both films made considerable use of carefully chosen, largely unfamiliar, parts of its built environment. But their aim was not to convey an overall impression of 'London'; it was to take us on a metaphysical journey that leads viewers to question the coordinates of 'reality'. And it's certainly significant that both were strongly influenced by the teasing self-consciousness of the Argentinian writers Julio Cortazar and Jorge Luis Borges.

Now there are other London-set films that do something similar, although in different registers - *THE KNACK*, for instance, also designed by Gorton and another icon of 'swinging London' style. Also, a film that seemed to epitomise the shallowness of an era devoted to style, *DARLING*, which could be described as a neo-Hogarthian



parable of the folly of amoral careerism. Joseph Losey and Harold Pinter's *THE SERVANT* (1963) cast a Chelsea house as the epitome of a changing world, as master and servant roles were exchanged. And *THE IPCRESS FILE* (1965), a film that followed in the wake of the early popular success of the Bond franchise, and made by some of the same personnel (including the production designer Ken Adam), but much influenced by the kinds of concerns that interested Antonioni. With its themes of alienation and brainwashing, this was much more a 'metaphysical' thriller than a crowd-pleasing Bond caper.

However, what I'm calling the 'metaphysical' trend in a number of Sixties London films didn't go unchallenged at the time. Because the mid-Sixties also saw a counter-movement emerge, which rejected 'swinging London' and tried to show the grim economic and social reality that lay behind the period's glamour. Interestingly, this impulse didn't come from cinema, but from television, then becoming increasingly ambitious with the arrival of a second BBC channel. Through a number of television 'plays', as they were described, a new critical urban realism appeared, which would eventually infiltrate and transform British cinema. The best-known example is certainly Ken Loach and Tony Garnet's *CATHY COME HOME* (1966), based on research into homelessness by Jeremy Sandford. Loach and Garnett's earlier *UP THE JUNCTION* was eventually remade as a cinema film, and Loach would take his first step into cinema with *POOR COW*, written by the author of *UP THE JUNCTION*, Nell Dunn, and very much a critique of the damage cause by the 'swinging London' era.

I've only had time here to comment briefly on a handful of 60s British films, so wouldn't want this to stand as a definitive verdict on the cinema of the decade. But what I wanted to show was the tremendous variety within the cinema of this period, and that London as a backdrop is also being portrayed in radically different, even contradictory ways. None of these was a 'landmark' film, trading on the city's familiar monuments – and on the occasions when a recognisable landmark appears, like the Albert Hall in *IPCRESS FILE*, it's likely to be cheekily upstaged by a fake phone box in the foreground. What these films were demonstrating, I suggest, is one of the fundamental cultural functions of cinema, which is to revise and revive our sense of space. Of course, films are built around stories and characters, which are often considered the key elements. But I maintain that picturing and navigating spaces is just as important. And the London of Sixties British cinema (and 'filmic' television) forms a crucial chapter in the long history of imagining of this city.

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Further reading and reference

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