

'VICTIM': TEXT AS CONTEXT

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¹ Barbara Klinger, 'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism Revisited: The Progressive Text', *Screen*, Jan-Feb 1984, vol 25 no 1, p 44.

² Alan Sinfield, 'Four Ways with a Reactionary Text', *Literature Teaching Politics*, no 2, 1983, p 93.

³ Andrew Higson, 'Critical Theory and "British Cinema"', *Screen* July-October 1983, vol 24 nos 4-5, pp 80-95. See also Vincent Porter's letter and Higson's reply in vol 25 no 1, pp 86-88.

⁴ I agree with recent theories of sexuality which would see homosexuality as an historical construct rather than an essentialist quality, but it is nonetheless an historical construct within which many people, myself included, live, and as such open to analysis. I should also state that

The relation of text to context is decisively important to a theoretical and critical construction of the cinema/ideology relation.¹

Locating the text specifically lays it open to question. It also encourages us to perceive it on the level of everyday political strategy, which is where our own interventions must be conceived.²

IN THE STRUGGLE to establish itself as a distinct and dynamic body of knowledge, film theory in the 1970s made enormous gains. It achieved a radical break from the varieties of crude determinism and lavish aestheticism that occupied positions of dominance, but, as in any struggle, there were also losses. Most regrettable among these was any sense of the film text as social object. In order to gain more rigorous insights into their internal workings, texts were wrenched out of history, given autonomy, cast adrift from context into a sea of signficatory interplay which need never be referred back to the historical specificities of the moment of production.

That situation is now, thankfully, in the process of changing, but it is still necessary to stress the social dimensions of texts to prevent a slipping back into extremes of formalism or idealism. Such a slippage was recently evidenced in the pages of *Screen* in Andrew Higson's article on recent work in British cinema³, and so in the belief that no reputable study of a text can be made without a detailed consideration of the cultural, historical and social formations operative at the moment of its production, I want to use a British film as a case study in proving the necessity of looking beyond the confines of the text itself. The film I shall be looking at is *Victim* (1961), the first British film to centre its narrative around male homosexuality, and I want to consider it in relation to two broad problematics: conceptualisations of homosexuality⁴

and British film culture's general attitudes to sexuality at that time. First, some prefatory remarks on critical approaches to British cinema:

by 'homosexuality' in this article I am referring only to male homosexuality.

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Methodology, 'Sociology' and British Cinema

It was, I suppose, inevitable that the recent and long-overdue rise in critical engagement with British cinema would resuscitate the methodological controversy over the application of 'sociological' models in film analysis. Text-centred film theory has always used 'sociological' as a term of abuse, and British cinema has always been superficially excavated by sociologists and historians in search of data. Thus a social historian like Arthur Marwick can use film texts as pieces of bald, simple 'evidence' of particular social trends.⁵ Such a process is absurdly reductive, displaying a total disregard for textual complexity and contradiction. On the other hand, works of great distinction, like Charles Barr's book on Ealing⁶, could also be labelled 'sociological' inasmuch as they carefully and illuminatingly tease out levels of meaning from texts by, among other methods, references to contemporary social discourses. The problem with 'sociological' approaches to British cinema, then, is precisely one of loose terminology.

'Sociology' is a word with satisfyingly scientific overtones, and as such was bound to appeal to a field of study so anxious to flex its credentials in order to be admitted into the staid constellation of respectable academic disciplines. The vast majority of work in film studies that has been labelled 'sociological', however, is nothing of the kind: it is social history, not sociology. Such a designation may sound less precise, but given that film studies is dealing with constantly shifting codes, discourses and ideologies, this release from quasi-scientific expectations should be welcomed. Unhelpfully rigid sociological notions of determinants and effects can only do harm to film analysis (the damage has been even greater in television studies), as Andrew Higson has pointed out⁷. I would, however, like to take issue with Higson's overall critique of the *British Cinema History* volume, not in order to offer an unnecessary re-review, but to try and head off his hegemonic attempt to capture British cinema for precisely the type of analysis I began this article by criticising. If I lapse at times into a caricature of Higson's arguments, I can only plead the constrictions of brevity and also put forward the observation that his own critical method is not exactly averse to incorporating such a mode of address.

Higson does not so much review *British Cinema History* as attempt to rewrite it. Using the twin extremes of 'sociological' as the ultimate condemnation and the name of Christian Metz as a genuflection towards the ultimate patriarchal wisdom, he expends little time or patience on the details of the arguments offered by the contributors to the volume in question – dismissing their entire methodology and substituting his own. (The contributors come, in fact, from a variety of perspectives, but each is close enough to Higson's amorphous notion of 'sociology' to earn

⁵ See, as a typical example, Marwick's *Class: Image and Reality in Britain, France and the USA Since 1930*, London, Fontana, 1980.

⁶ Charles Barr, *Ealing Studios*, London, Cameron and Tayleur/David and Charles, 1977.

⁷ Andrew Higson, *op cit*, *passim*.

⁹ See John Hill, 'Some Theses on the British "New Wave"', in James Curran and Vincent Porter (eds), *British Cinema History*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983.

banishment.) The most revealing instance of this comes when he writes of texts which contain 'moments of apparent "progressiveness" (moments of excess)'⁸. Here a political reading of films is both shrugged off (the inverted commas) and rewritten into the correct discourse, which is, needless to say, psychoanalysis. There may indeed be a correlation between progressiveness and excess, but to imply that one is merely an erroneous critical affectation while the other is Truth is rather dubious. The elevation of psychoanalysis above politics is the structuring principle of the whole article, the social disappears beneath the psychic. Desire, pleasure, rapture, rupture, 'thrilling tension' – these, it would appear, are all cinema has to offer. In which case, what chance has a book like *British Cinema History*, when all it can offer is thorough research and concrete information? Little to set the pulses throbbing there.

Higson's heady, tremulous discourse of spectating-as-rapture collapses all aspects of the viewing experience into a single blissful surrender to some nebulous 'jouissance'. In Higson's defence of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* this surrender assumes the concrete form of swooning into the beefy arms of Albert Finney – a pleasant prospect, undeniably, but hardly a cogent argument against John Hill's criticism of the film's sexual politics⁹.

It is, finally, not the actual details of Higson's methodology that alarm. They are, in the right hands, valid and valuable. It is his attempt to impose them as a monolith, erecting certain essential criteria as the only criteria of analysis, smothering at birth the variety of critical approaches offered by *British Cinema History*. British cinema has been too long excluded from serious critical debate for us to stand by and see it engulfed in a swamp of sub-Barthesian grandiosity. It must be opened up to the widest possible number of analytic methods.

Victim, then, could be studied from any amount of perspectives, but I intend to concentrate on the social historical aspects of the film, its status as a pivotal moment within discourses of homosexuality in recent British history. I want to make such an emphasis for personal, which is to say political, reasons: namely that the construction and position of homosexuality in this culture are matters of greater urgency to me than the intricacies of textual mechanics. And if that sounds like a wilful dismissal of cinematic specificity, a blindness to the processes of signification, I can only respond by suggesting that there might on occasions be more important things in life than films.

Situating *Victim*: Conceptualisations of Homosexuality

Victim is not a film that makes us dig very deep to unearth an ideological project; it is a film with a specific social intention, as its producer, Michael Relph, wrote:

The film puts forward the same point of view as the Wolfenden Committee, that the law should be changed. . . . the film shows that homosexuality may

be found in otherwise completely responsible citizens in every strata of society.¹⁰

The Wolfenden Report was published in 1957, and recommended the partial decriminalisation of male homosexual acts; the law was eventually changed in 1967. *Victim* was explicitly conceived of as part of a public debate on homosexuality which had been going on since the early 1950s. This had been instigated by the Burgess and Maclean scandal in 1951, when the two spies who had fled from Britain to Moscow were revealed to be homosexual. The scandal established a parallel between sexual and political deviance which was one of the central tenets of the ideologies informing the Cold War. In the United States, the virulent paranoia of McCarthyism insisted on this connection to the extent that the government officially forbade the employment of 'Homosexuals and other Sex Perverts'.¹¹ (In May 1982, Margaret Thatcher issued a directive banning the employment of homosexuals in the British Diplomatic Service – old Cold War ideologies for the new Cold War.) Homosexuality was 'exposed' by the popular press, led by the *Sunday Pictorial*'s series called 'Evil Men'. There were a number of sensational trials, some involving public figures, and it was one of these (the trial of Lord Montagu, Michael Pitt-Rivers and Peter Wildeblood) that was a major catalyst in the setting up of the Wolfenden Committee.

The Montagu trial has a particular importance as an index of the prevalent constructions of homosexuality. Debate centred not on the morality or immorality of homosexual practices, but on whether the basis of the law forbidding them was in any way just – was it the function of the legal system to prohibit individually chosen behaviour? As Peter Wildeblood recalls in his autobiography¹², he and his co-defendants received a great deal of public sympathy, with sympathy being the operative word. Homosexuality was conceptualised as a disease which was incurable – thus its sufferers could not 'help' the way they were. This theory, offensive as it now seems, was at least a step forward from the hatred of homosexuality expressed by organised religions. Discourses of illness and treatment thus replaced those of sin and damnation.

A leading advocate of the disease theory stated that:

*The homosexual is not just a man with a wicked or perverse wish to behave differently from others. He is not someone offered the loveliness of women and by sheer cussedness spurning it; he is ill inasmuch as a dwarf is ill, because he has never developed.*¹³

The same writer comes to this perfectly sincere conclusion:

*Possibly the greatest importance of homosexuality is that it causes so much unhappiness. If happiness is of any value (and the writer regards it as having the greatest human importance) then homosexuality should be eliminated by every means in our power.*¹⁴

¹⁰ Letter to Films and Filming, May 1961, p 3.

¹¹ See Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out*, London, Quartet, 1979, p 160. My historical generalisations about this period are greatly indebted to Weeks' invaluable book.

¹² Peter Wildeblood, *Against the Law*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1957 (first published 1955).

¹³ Clifford Allen, *Homosexuality: Its Nature, Causation and Treatment*, London, 1958, p 34.

¹⁴ *ibid*, p 54.

¹⁵ *ibid*, p 73.

¹⁶ Report of the Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution, London, HMSO, 1957, p 11.

¹⁷ *ibid*, p 22.

¹⁸ Richard Hauser, *The Homosexual Society*, London, 1962, p 25.

¹⁹ Gordon Westwood, *A Minority*, London, 1960, p 198.

The fact that such unhappiness might be due to the social situation of homosexuals rather than their sexuality lies entirely outside this writer's vision. That the idea of a contented homosexual is anathema to him is shown by his typology of deviants, in which Type 3 is the 'homosexual in whom inversion is accepted as part of his personality. . . . One must accept that Type 3 is too ill, too grossly deviated and lacks the urge to be cured.'¹⁵

The Wolfenden Report rejected the idea of homosexuality as a disease, but saw it as 'a state or condition'.¹⁶ The law ought to be changed, argued the Report, because other, equally repugnant, forms of behaviour were not proscribed by the criminal law: to penalise homosexuality alone was unfair. Wolfenden was in no way a validation of the homosexual option, but a logical, utilitarian acknowledgement of an injustice that should be rectified. The nuclear family was still written of as 'the basic unit of society'¹⁷, leaving homosexuality as an unfortunate, implicitly inferior condition.

Much of the debate that followed Wolfenden aspired to some kind of sociology, and homosexuals were transformed from laboratory specimens into statistics. Books about the homosexual subculture began to appear, blending charts and tables with prurient reports from intrepid sociologists who ventured into gay clubs and pubs. Their conclusions tended to show little advance on the disease theory:

*society should help (but not force) its citizens to live a full and happy family life. . . . It is worth making an effort to try to bring this about . . . since there are many who are not completely homosexual but may be deflected from normal heterosexual pursuits or at least may be hampered by homosexuality. . . . On the other hand, those who are true homosexuals should be advised and helped to live with their social underdevelopment as a handicapped minority without any false glamour and yet without victimisation.*¹⁸

although others were compassionately post-Wolfenden:

*The present social and legal methods of dealing with the problem are irrational and tend to create more social evils than they remedy. This emotional hostility affects many thousands of individuals and reflects upon the community as a whole.*¹⁹

These quotations ought to indicate the range of heterosexual notions of homosexuality; what remains to be examined is how homosexuals saw themselves.

Obviously a marginalised social group only constructs a self-image as a result of dissatisfaction with the images of it constructed by others, and those imposed images continue to set the parameters. The homosexual self-image of the 1950s, then, was entirely bounded by heterosexual paradigms. Even Peter Wildeblood can only see his sexuality in these terms:

*I am no more proud of my condition than I would be of having a glass eye or a hare lip. On the other hand, I am no more ashamed of it than I would be of being colour-blind or of writing with my left hand. . . . I am attracted towards men in the way in which most men are attracted towards women. I am aware that many people, luckier than myself, will read this statement with incredulity and perhaps with derision; but it is the simple truth. . . . I know that it cannot ever be entirely accepted by the rest of the community and I do not ask that it should. . . . If it were possible for me to become like them I should do so. . . .*²⁰

²⁰ Peter Wildeblood, op cit, p 8.

²¹ *ibid*, p 59.

²² Richard Dyer, *Stars*, London, British Film Institute, 1979, p 36.

Despite the anger, or more likely sadness, that such words are liable to produce in any modern gay reader, it must be remembered that in the context of 1955 an autobiography containing the phrase 'I am a homosexual' was a major intervention. Wildeblood's book also contains a number of remarks echoed or even repeated in *Victim*. Henry the barber's 'Tell them there's no magic cure for how we are' comes from page 185 of Wildeblood, while Calloway's quotation from Oscar Wilde about 'the rage of Caliban seeing his own face reflected in the glass' also appears in Wildeblood. Most importantly, the crucial exchange between Melville Farr and his wife,

Farr: I believe that if I go into court as myself I can draw attention to the fault in the existing law.

Laura: Knowing it will destroy you utterly?

Farr: Yes.

is not at all dissimilar to the way Wildeblood describes his reasons for openly declaring his sexuality in court:

*I could see what I must do. . . . I would be the first homosexual to tell what it felt like to be an exile in one's own country. I might destroy myself, but perhaps I could help others.*²¹

Before handing out labels like 'progressive' or 'reactionary' to a text (and if that smacks of evaluation, all I can say is that non-evaluative analysis is a self-deluding myth unhelpfully fostered by certain critical tendencies), it must be precisely situated within the circulating discourses, the flux of ideas (to borrow Richard Dyer's useful phrase²²) informing its moment of production. *Victim* is a point of intersection, a site of confluence between two such fluxes. One of these is the contemporary range of constructions of homosexuality, as indicated above, and the other is the contemporary range of positions on sexuality taken up within British film culture. This latter topic is clearly immense and intensely problematic. As a way of illuminating the issues involved without losing myself in textual micro-analysis, I want to look briefly at the critical reception of *Victim* in the context of the ideological stances and value-systems mobilised at that point in history by dominant critical discourses. What attitudes did those discourses adopt towards sexuality?

²³ Charles Barr, op cit, p 76.

²⁴ William Whitebait, *International Film Annual* no 2, London, 1958, p 11.

Situating *Victim*: Sexuality and British Film Culture

Charles Barr, with characteristic accuracy, has written of Ealing films' 'suppression of a dark world'²³ as being a major structuring force in those particular texts, and this perception can be extended across the whole range of post-World War II British film production. This suppression, this clamping down of desire, can be seen at work in films as varied as *Brief Encounter*, *The Dam Busters*, and *The Belles of St. Trinians*. However, the relentlessly middlebrow parlour game that goes under the name of British film criticism (in newspapers and non-specialist magazines) can never perceive the presence of sexuality in texts unless it is made blatant, discussed and/or enacted on screen. In the context of film criticism in the late '50s and early '60s, this is made plain in the adulation given to the social realist, angry-young-men films, like *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*.

It was these films' treatment of sexual matters that was a crucial part in their being acclaimed as some kind of artistic renaissance. Key words in the discourse of acclamation were 'maturity' ('when will British films grow up?'), asked an impatient critic in 1958²⁴) and 'frankness'. Thus the sight of June Ritchie's naked back in *A Kind of Loving* was seen as a step forward, even a breakthrough, in the quest for a 'relevant' and 'contemporary' national cinema. Obviously this attitude has its roots in the omnipresent hegemony of 'realism' that still dominated conceptions of cinema in Britain at that time, and that hegemony also helps to explain the hostility towards particular other areas of film production expressed by the same critics who rushed to welcome the naturalistic impetus. Furthermore, when one reads that hostility through a perspective of sexuality, all sorts of things fall into place.

The two specific areas of film production that I am referring to are the Hammer and *Carry On* films. Both were major commercial successes, both were dismissed or attacked by contemporary critics, and both are centrally concerned with sexuality. Hammer's early horror films are clearly informed by displaced eroticism, and the *Carry On* comedies base their humour on a contempt for bourgeois propriety and a grinning awareness of desire. The critical consensus, with its prescriptive commitment to a narrowly realist aesthetic serving as the vehicle for a vapidly liberal social awareness, could not be expected to cope with either coded sexual fantasies or dirty jokes – any film which dealt with sexuality outside a fundamentally moralistic framework was simply not acceptable.

One more, now infamous, case should be mentioned here. The critical reception of *Peeping Tom* crystallises the attitudes I have been sketching. Michael Powell's films had long been distrusted by the critical consensus, principally through their (clearly interdependent) stress on visual excess and eroticism (*Black Narcissus* is probably the best welding of the two). That distrust became, with the release of *Peeping Tom*, genuine ostracism. The critical reaction was nothing short of hysteria, a fascinating case study of the psychopathology of the English middle classes, and it centred precisely on the text's implications regarding sexuality and

cinema. The film flushed the dormant puritanism of the critical consensus into the open, with, for example, the *Daily Worker* accusing it of 'befouling the screen', and hurling adjectives like 'perverted', 'debased', 'diseased', 'pornographic' and 'depraved'²⁵.

How can *Victim* be placed in such a context? Its very choice of topic puts it in some ways under the rubric of 'frankness', but its visual and narrative modes are those of melodrama, not social naturalism. It can in fact be linked to a series of earlier 'problem pictures' which had dealt with issues like racism (*Sapphire*, made by the same team responsible for *Victim*, and its twin in many respects) and juvenile crime.²⁶ The people involved in its production ensured that it was seen as part of the 'old school' of British film-making rather than as part of the supposed renaissance. Its use of the thriller genre is explained by the dominant notion of homosexuality as a social issue, a problem that had to be discussed rather than depicted; but since audiences would not pay to watch a discussion, the issues are mediated through generic codes. (The two 1960 films about Oscar Wilde utilised codes of costume drama and fictional biography to similar ends.)

Many reviews remarked upon this use of genre, with the *Monthly Film Bulletin* claiming that the film 'dressed up . . . male inversion in a cleverly-designed Crime Club dust-jacket'²⁷. The notices were of course determined by each writer's attitude to homosexuality, and these range across the variety discussed above. Some were openly hostile:

Make private association lawful, it pleads, and blackmail will cease. But will homosexuality?

Sunday Telegraph, September 3, 1961

The most anti-homosexual review of all came when the film opened in the United States:

Everybody in the picture who disapproves of homosexuality turns out to be an ass, a dolt, or a sadist. Nowhere does the film suggest that homosexuality is a serious (but often curable) neurosis that attacks the biological basis of life itself. 'I can't help the way I am', says one of the sodomites in this movie. 'Nature played me a dirty trick'. And the scriptwriters . . . accept this sick-silly self-delusion as a medical fact.

Time, February 23, 1962

Most British reviewers were more informed by the debates around Wolfenden, and took up a position of liberal concern:

it does invite a compassionate consideration of this particular form of human bondage.

The Times August 30, 1961

a serious and sympathetic study of men in the grip of a compulsion beyond their control. . . a sobering picture of the way homosexual inclinations make a permanent nightmare of private lives.

Daily Worker, September 2, 1961

²⁵ See Ian Christie, 'The Scandal of "Peeping Tom"', in Ian Christie (ed), *Powell, Pressburger and Others*, London, British Film Institute, 1978, pp 55-56.

²⁶ Director Basil Dearden and producer Michael Relph collaborated on many films, including *The Blue Lamp* (1950), *The League of Gentlemen* (1960), as well as *Victim* and *Sapphire*. See Richard Dyer, "'Victim': Hermeneutic Project", *Film Form*, 2, 1977, for further information on the 50s 'problem picture'. I'd also like to state here how influential Dyer's article on *Victim* has been on my work, however our conclusions may differ.

²⁷ *Monthly Film Bulletin*, October 1961, p 141.

29 Lord Arran speaking in the House of Lords, quoted in H Montgomery Hyde, *The Other Love*, London, 1970, p 274.

The critical consensus could be summarised as regarding *Victim* as a well-intentioned piece of special pleading, successful in making its social point, but in the process of doing so becoming schematised and propagandist and therefore aesthetically unsatisfactory. Two particular points shared by almost every review are firstly a direct reference to Wolfenden, and secondly specific praise for the acting. According to the *Monthly Film Bulletin*, despite the plot's 'glibness',

*The performances, on the other hand, have a definite passion . . . a dignity, a sobriety, an impression of really caring.*²⁸

The use of the word 'passion' sits rather uneasily in this context, and potentially opens up another way of reading the film. Dignity, sobriety, caring, compassion, sympathy – reviews which use words like these are clearly situated in a post-Wolfenden ideology, connoting a tone of self-congratulatory benevolence to one's unfortunate inferiors, but 'passion' is a term of a different order, an index of a different code. An opposition of dignity/passion could usefully be employed as a way into the text, for if *Victim* holds to the former, stays within the bounds of liberal tolerance asked for by Peter Wildeblood and granted by Wolfenden, then its only real interest is as a piece of cultural history. If, however, it transgresses so as to incorporate passion, refute sobriety and expose sympathy as oppressive 'condescension', it might still have a use in terms of modern gay politics. Michael Relph's remarks indicate the intention behind the making of the film, and that intention would seem to have succeeded in terms of critical reception, but I would argue (and hope to show in the next section) that *Victim*'s moments of passion, as the *Monthly Film Bulletin*'s reviewer unwittingly described them, subvert the hegemonic drive to dignity and tolerance and hint at what could be called a genuinely gay discourse, a discourse of homosexual desire.

The affirmation of homosexual desire is, of course, exactly what the opponents of Wolfenden feared would happen if the laws on homosexuality were altered. By its mobilisation of concepts of compassion and tolerance, Wolfenden (and *Victim*) attempted the balancing act of advocating legal change without being seen to 'approve of' homosexuality. Even as the 1967 Sexual Offences Act was passing into law, belatedly implementing Wolfenden's proposals, one of its strongest parliamentary advocates showed his trepidation over the possible consequences:

*I ask one thing, and I ask it earnestly. I ask those who have, as it were, been in bondage and for whom the prison doors are now open to show their thanks by comporting themselves quietly and with dignity. . . . Any form of ostentatious behaviour now or in the future, any form of public flaunting, would be utterly distasteful and would, I believe, make the sponsors of the Bill regret that they have done what they have done.*²⁹

Locked doors, continence, and humble gratitude – these were what was expected of homosexuals after 1967. As Tom Robinson's song *Glad to be*

Gay acidly put it, 'the buggers are legal now, what more are they after?'

What we were after, and what we are still after, depended on precisely what the liberal heterosexual consensus was so afraid of—ostentation, flaunting, coming out. I base my belief in the comparative radicalism of *Victim* in the view that it is a film that, against the grain, advocates coming out. I don't want to offer a long and detailed analysis, as my methodological intentions in writing this article are founded on providing the necessary socio-cultural and historical information that would make an informed reading possible—in other words, I don't want to set up my reading as anything unique or special. Given the knowledge of the relevant debates and discourses, I think my conclusions would seem fairly standard.³⁰ Instead, I want to indicate those moments in the text when the maintenance of its inscribed liberalism fails, and when what I see as the discourse of homosexual desire (an acknowledgement of which is the prerequisite for any notion of gay politics) emerges.

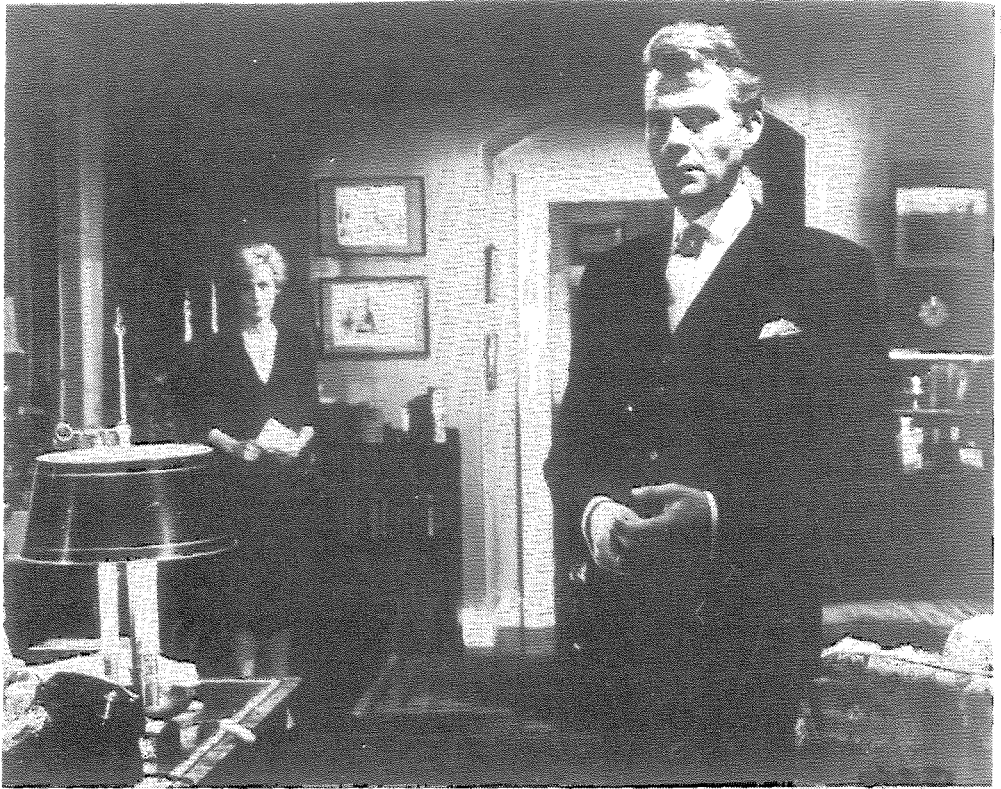
Reading *Victim*: An Indictment of Repression

Film analysis which attempts to tease out strands of meaning other than those signalled by textual mechanisms is usually compelled to locate contradictory elements of narrative and/or *mise-en-scène*, but with *Victim* this is especially difficult to do. Since the film was made primarily for extra-textual reasons, consciously to effect social change, it is in many ways propaganda, and as such is particularly careful at sewing together its various threads. Richard Dyer has already mapped out the intricacy with which every character and incident is bound tightly into the central narrative drive, but there still remain, as he says, 'hints of strain'³¹. If we want to identify where that strain is greatest, in terms of the liberal problematic being exposed and questioned, we must look at two adjacent scenes—Farr's 'confession' to Laura, and his visit to Mandrake's flat. It is here that the containment of desire breaks down.

In the 'confession' scene, Laura forces her husband to tell her the truth about his relationship with Jack Barrett. As she pleads 'Tell me everything, I want to know', it is easy to read her as the heterosexual audience inscribed into the text, with 'everything' meaning the physical details of homosexual love—so that Laura's desire for narrative elucidation becomes a kind of prurience. (The motif of the photograph which is the source of the blackmail and thus of the whole narrative, but which we are never allowed to see, serves a similar function of instigating a double-edged desire.) Farr's reply is that 'I stopped seeing him because I wanted him. Do you understand, because I wanted him.' Simply writing those words cannot convey the strength of Dirk Bogarde's delivery of them, and thus it is here that my reading is liable to slip into helpless subjectivism, for until we have some adequate account of film acting beyond the loose and impressionistic, it is impossible to pin down precisely how or why it is this exchange that shatters *Victim*'s carefully tolerant project. It

³⁰ Although, of course, not closed to dispute. Richard Dyer, in "'Victim': Hegemonic Project', op cit, reads the film in a different way, and Jeffrey Weeks, op cit, still sees it as the 'archetypal liberal "pity" film of the period' (p 174).

³¹ Dyer, "'Victim': Hegemonic Project', op cit, p 12.



Homosexual desire finds its voice: the confession scene in *Victim*.

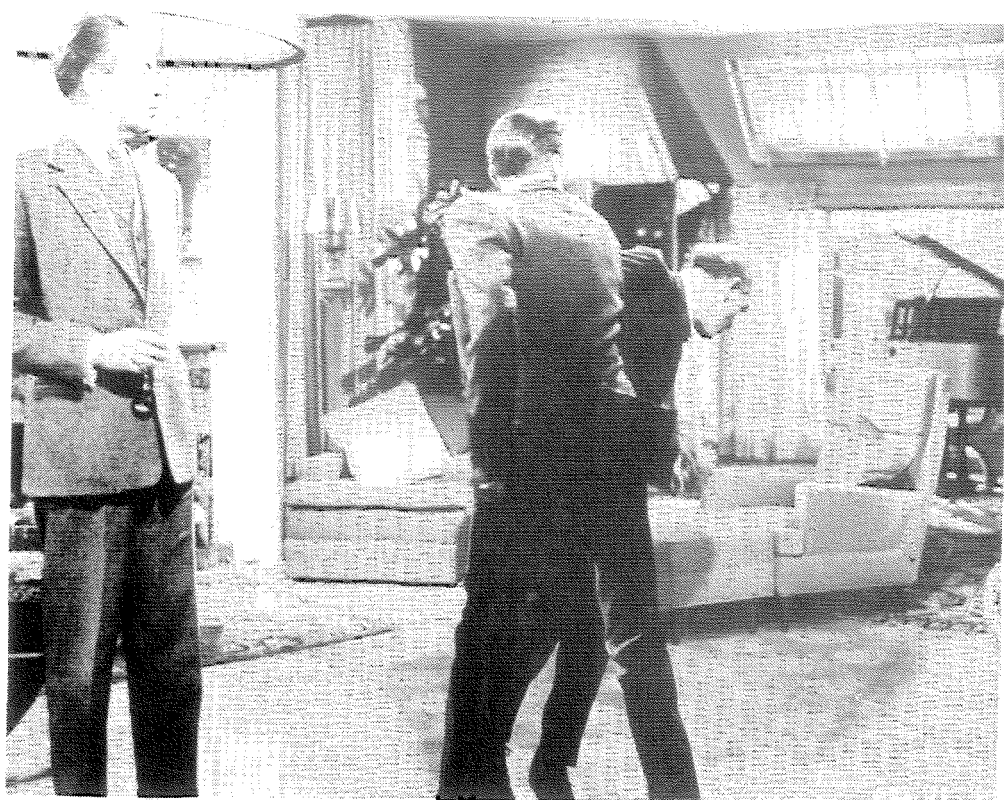
is the moment when irresistible sexual desire finds, literally, its voice. It is tempting to make grand claims for this instant in this text, since it is desire that British cinema fought so long to suppress, and here it becomes unanswerable, the text's project irreparable. In a heterosexual context the directness of these words, their deeper resonances, would be striking enough; as the unleashing of homosexual desire it borders on the revolutionary. Except, of course, that the film must now put all its efforts into the unravelling of the complex thriller plot, in an attempt to bury the radical break in the seductions of the hermeneutic resolution. Before that, however, there is the second of the two crucial scenes.

Here Farr is confronted by three other homosexuals who are also blackmail victims, and they attempt to dissuade him from continuing his search to find the blackmailer. They mention Farr's own homosexuality, at which point he tries one last piece of self-denial:

Farr: I may share your instincts, but I've always resisted them.

Mandrake: Yes, that's what cost young Stainer his life.

This refers to an incident some years previously when Farr's attempts at denying his sexuality had ended in his lover's suicide. Thus the link between repression and death, which has already been hinted at in Jack



Desire displaced into aggression: Farr punches the accusing Mandrake.

Barrett's suicide, is made explicit. The film becomes an indictment of repression, an attack on the refusal to acknowledge the desire that Farr/Bogarde has in the previous scene finally affirmed. As if to underline the centrality of this moment, the film flares into the one moment of violence in an otherwise very wordy text, as Farr punches Mandrake to the ground. This single assertion of physicality confirms the sudden presence of sexual desire, here displaced into aggression. The subsequent narrative twists cannot hope to erase what has gone before. The ending's move towards repositioning Farr as the bearer of timid Wolfendenism, its attempted recuperative strategy, seems both unworthy and risible.

I have chosen to stress the escape of desire into the text as its most important feature, and have insisted that the narrative resolution fails to achieve any convincing degree of closure. It might be useful to mention one of the more insidious ways in which the ideologies governing the text construct notions of sexuality. This returns us to the liberal reformists' fear of ostentation and flaunting, by which we can assume they mean camp.

I use camp in a purely descriptive sense, as designating the attitudinal and conversational theatricalised male femininity adopted by many gay men as a mixture of defensive parody and calculated shock tactics (it may also be a potent weapon of subverting ascribed gender roles, but that is a

³² Peter Wildeblood, op cit, p 13.

³³ Rodney Garland, *The Heart In Exile*, London, Four Square Books, 1961, pp 47-8 (originally published in 1953).

³⁴ On homosexuality and comedy, particularly television comedy, see Andy Medhurst and Lucy Tuck, 'The Gender Game', in Jim Cook (ed), *Television Sitcom*, London, British Film Institute, 1982.

difficult question I don't have the space to deal with). A major feature of the liberal tolerance of homosexuality centred around Wolfenden is its hostility to camp, which, given camp's inherent snubbing of codes of dignity and restraint, is hardly surprising. What is perhaps odd, and not a little unnerving, is the eagerness with which those few homosexuals who found a public voice as part of those debates sought to join the condemnation of their more flamboyant comrades. Peter Wildeblood was at great pains to differentiate himself, as a man labouring under a 'tragic disability', from 'the effeminate creatures who love to make an exhibition of themselves'.³² This tendency to court heterosexual approval by striving to project a 'normal' appearance is even more strongly shown in a 1950s novel called *The Heart In Exile*, where the suit-wearing, professional-classes homosexual narrator attacks

*pansies. . . I try hard to be understanding, but I shudder from them. It is not only that they give the game away, but it is my experience that such people are usually unintelligent, verbose, neurotic and generally tiresome. . . full of either self-pity or of that peculiar parody of self-righteousness which would be ridiculous if it were not so pathetic. . . Nature has been unkind to them and they try to restore the balance through the easier and less efficient of two ways. Instead of physical exercise, which could help, they resort to plucked eyebrows and an excessive application of the wrong shade of rouge.*³³

Since *Victim's* project depends on securing heterosexual audience sympathy (and nothing more), it must take pains to ensure all its homosexual characters are impeccably non-ostentatious. There is one slightly camp man, perhaps in the interests of social verisimilitude, but that is Mickie, whose involvement in the sub-plot of writing fraudulent begging letters removes him from the sphere of the pitiable into that of the reprehensible (in terms of narrative logic, at least; I find him among the most sympathetic characters, which may well have something to do with his campness). More importantly, there was a scene in the shooting script which did not reach the screen, in which Jack Barrett's friend Eddy is said to speak with 'a faint "camp" note in his voice'. Clearly the negative feelings campness was assumed to evoke in the heterosexual audience could not be risked. One of the prejudices *Victim* so stoically sets out to answer is the equation between male homosexuality and (to use the word which in itself contains a wealth of cultural/ideological meaning) effeminacy. Until *Victim*, after all, audiences were likely to have seen homosexuality on screen purely in terms of stereotyped queens, most often in comedies or as comic relief.³⁴ The text positions its assumed audience so that it will nod in agreement with Inspector Harris' talk of 'little people' and 'unfortunate devils', and comfort itself with the patronising remarks made by Frank to his wife about Jack Barrett – 'I feel sorry for him. He's very lonely deep inside. He hasn't got what you and I have got'.

So, the ideological project of *Victim* is clear enough, but I hope I have shown that it is still possible to snatch moments of radicalism from the text, moments which could still be of particular use to gay spectators. Those moments are also points of excess in the textual system, but,

unlike Andrew Higson, I would not want to push the political meanings one can adduce from such moments off the agenda.

Conclusion: Reasserting the Social Text

It is too easy and too lazy to keep fighting the old battles between textual and contextual analysis, labelling one idealism and the other sociologism. To make any kind of progress we must try to fuse the two, find a productive synthesis that avoids both a deterministic privileging of social force over textual productivity and its opposite number and partner in crime, an aestheticist fetishising of the undoubted pleasures of the text³⁵. It was heartening, then, to find two articles in a recent *Screen* that advocate just such a synthesis – the articles by Annette Kuhn and Barbara Klinger³⁶. I would, however, argue that given the massive predominance in recent years of pure textualism, the case for the social nature of cultural production still has to be made quite insistently. As Barbara Klinger writes,

*The text . . . is an intersection at which multiple and 'extra-textual' practices of signification circulate. . . . The 'law' of the text, then, has to be tampered with to exact a less streamlined and more socially-responsive theory of the cinema/ideology relation . . . thus more adequately attending to the constituent features of the multi-faceted phenomenon of ideological maintenance.*³⁷

The only problem with this comment is that, peeling away the rococo academicism of the prose, it is actually a statement of the extremely obvious, and the fact that it had to be made (and it certainly did) is something of an indictment of the damage done by certain tendencies in film theory.

I totally accept the critique of overly sociological models that impose a banal cause-and-effect determinism, but I also refuse to jettison history from cultural analysis. My reading of *Victim* roots itself in a careful study of the dynamics of an historical moment, but that does not mean that the text unproblematically 'reflects' the context. Besides, that very distinction is not valid. Texts and contexts are indivisibly interrelated discourses, each is a part of the other, and to conceptualise them as discrete is to render full analysis impossible.

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³⁵ This phrase is not intended as a slur on Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text*, a book which I find endlessly provocative and stimulating; it does worry me, however, that so many critics appear to take it perfectly seriously. . . .

³⁶ Barbara Klinger, op cit; Annette Kuhn, 'Women's Genres', *Screen*, Jan-Feb 1984, vol 25 no 1, pp 18-28.

³⁷ Barbara Klinger, op cit, p 44.
