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Barton R. Palmer

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WHAT WAS NEW IN THE BRITISH NEW WAVE?

Re-viewing Room at the Top

By R. BARTON PALMER

The recent critical and popular success of a number of British productions, such as *Chariots of Fire*, *The Draughtman's Contract*, and *Passage to India*, has aroused academic interest in an industry long considered aesthetically derivative, socially unresponsive, and intellectually bankrupt. Just as in the case of the Hollywood renaissance in the 1970s, the run of exciting present films has provoked curiosity about the past. In fact, a proliferation of critical studies during the last five years has been concerned with what could be reasonably identified as the principal achievements of previous decades.¹ Such lionizing has focused attention not only on a growing pantheon of auteurs (a group that

now includes many less widely celebrated names, such as Launder, Powell, and Hamer), it has also identified important individual films, especially those that offer complex constructions of historically significant discourses dealing with British social life.²

In its concern with both the re-evaluation of artistic accomplishments and the functioning of the cinema as the producer of social meanings, this new critical effort not surprisingly finds a suitable object of study in what has been termed the British New Wave.³ This short period of (at the time) critically acclaimed filmmaking in the late 1950s and early 1960s witnessed the emergence of a

group of innovative and iconoclastic directors, among them Tony Richardson, Karel Reisz, and Jack Clayton. It also saw provocative adaptations of fiction and drama that embodied a challenge to the status quo by according a prominent place to working-class characters and concerns.⁴ Films such as *Room at the Top* (1959), *Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962), and *A Kind of Loving* (1962) were made on the margins of an industry that had long before de-

failure of artistic innovation in the New Wave:

... the films have set out to investigate a social landscape rather than to make that discovery of a medium which a director such as Truffaut so rapturously communicates. Our film-makers travel as mass observers rather than as artists prepared to turn the landscape upside down if it happens to suit their purposes.⁶

New Wave filmmakers, it seems, failed to inaugurate a new formal tradition for British cinema. Did these directors, however, at least offer a new and challenging social vision? John Hill, for example, has attacked what earlier critics usually faintly praised: the movement's representation (however much dependent on novels and plays) of a social landscape that had, in the cinema, never previously been accorded a strong voice or telling image. Hill argues, however, that the New Wave, far from being revolutionary, remained firmly within the patriarchal constraints of the traditional British film; therefore,

the breakthrough was not as important as has often been suggested and certainly cannot be accepted as an unproblematically "Good Thing."⁷

With such criticisms in mind, we might well agree with Tony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards that, since "much of the heady optimism inherent in that era's strain of journalistic clichés has dissipated," it is "time to attempt a reassessment of . . . the 'new wave' in general."⁸

As Hill implies, the most important question that such a reassessment must pose and answer relates to the social functioning of the New Wave. How radical and innovative was the portrait of British life in these films? It is my intention here to offer a partial answer to this general question by discussing one of the movement's influential and acclaimed early texts: Jack Clayton's *Room at the Top*, an adaptation of John Braine's bestseller about social mobility and discontent in postwar Britain.

Observers at the time generally considered *Room at the Top* a break-

through in the transition of British cinema from its established position as a supplier of escapist entertainment to a new role as a more accurate mirror of social reality. A careful examination of the film's construction of social meaning, however, reveals that its radicalism is confined to a different concept of realism. On a deeper and more important level, the film proves conservative and traditional. For, although it deals with the issue of getting ahead in a society no longer ruled by a rigid sense of class demarcation, *Room at the Top* identifies as a transgression of proper behavior and, worse yet, a betrayal of authentic selfhood the success of its protagonist in abandoning the poverty of his working-class origins. Braine's novel presents Joe Lampton's rise to the top of *haut bourgeois* respectability much more positively, and thus serves as a useful background against which the film's quite different politics can be displayed. Before turning to a comparison of Clayton's film with its source, however, we need to consider briefly both the multifaceted relationship of a film text to the social discourses that form its constituent parts and the specific institutional constraints that affected the production of *Room at the Top* and whose functioning reveals much about the film's reception by a British audience in the late 1950s. These preliminary considerations will help us define the "newness" of the New Wave more precisely and also dismiss what has been often wrongly advanced as a reason for the movement's failure to be more innovative and politically radical: the presence of film censorship in Britain.

What is the role of media like film in modern culture? In an influential theoretical article Stuart Hall argues persuasively that media products such as films perform three related but distinct functions. The first task is "the provision and the selective construction of *social knowledge*, of social imagery, through which we perceive the 'worlds,' the 'lived realities' of others." But the cinema or television does more than select what is fit for representation; a second function is to

The New Wave films were often huge box office successes with an audience that, apparently, was eager for a different kind of cinematic experience.

veloped a very different concept of the well-made film. These productions violated the conventional wisdom of industry executives about the marketability of subjects such as social class, premarital sexuality, and the flouting of authority. When they were finally given a national release, however, the New Wave films were often huge box office successes with an audience that, apparently, was eager for a different kind of cinematic experience.

Even at the time, however, some critics suggested that what the New Wave directors were offering was hardly new. Calling the movement an "abortive renaissance," Peter Graham, for example, declared that:

If one judges these films as films, rather than interpretations on film of certain themes in books, it soon becomes apparent that the British scene is scarcely more fertile than it was, say, at the time of the Ealing comedies some ten years ago.⁵

Echoing Graham's implicit comparison of British directors with their more radical French contemporaries, Penelope Houston also discovered a



Joe (Laurence Harvey) and Alice (Simone Signoret) are contained by the shabby homeiness of working-class existence.

unacceptable contradiction by the establishment of a utopian (or, sometimes, dystopian) space where the antinomies of a text's social raw materials may be effectively closed up or off.¹⁰ In short, if representation calls attention to *what is*, the narrative establishes *what it means*. Thus, as we shall see, the evolution of a different notion of "realism" does not necessarily signal any radical change in a text's relationship toward the "neutral and integrative coherence of public opinion." New discourses, such as the discontent of the working-class angry young man, can be readily accommodated within traditional orders of meaning through the evaluative dynamics of the storytelling process.

Hall's model, of course, makes no provision for the description of the mechanisms that give such evaluative dynamics their ordering force. We must remember that, in speaking of the "meaning" of a film, that "production and text are articulated through the 'machine' of social and historical cinematic conventions and constraints." The notion of authorship is of limited (but still important) use in any assessment of the shaping forces of such institutions, for these "cannot be seen necessarily to correspond to a maker's personality or 'intentions' nor likewise to his or her social and political beliefs."¹¹

As far as the New Wave is concerned, the most important institutional constraint was the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC), a quasi-official body whose stewardship of film production, while lacking the absolute authority of the true censor, did greatly influence what was made in British studios and shown on British screens during this period.¹² In particular, some film critics and directors called the BBFC to account at the time for the failure of the New Wave to break more completely with the middlebrow model of the British industry. Tony Richardson, for exam-

insure that this "social knowledge . . . is ranked and arranged within the great normative and evaluative classifications, within the *preferred* meanings and interpretations." At the final stages of this process "what had been made visible and classified begins to shape into an *acknowledged order*." This order, Hall suggests, never directly represents "real unities," such as class and exploitation, but is a construction similar to the "neutral and integrative coherence of public opinion," a representation, in short, of ideology in its global, Althusserian sense.⁹

Like the structuralist Marxism on which it is obviously based, Hall's scheme does present some drawbacks, most notably a monolithism that makes no room for a textual work that subverts the integrating force of public opinion. His analysis, however, is quite useful for our purposes here because, first, it theorizes the text's relationship to its raw material as a process and, second, it identifies that process as a series of stages congruent with various formal levels within the text itself.

Thus the "provision of social knowledge" relates to the text's evocation

of a world through representation, its intention to connect with the spectator's notion of the *vraisemblable*. What kinds of social knowledge are provided, moreover, furnish an important key to the text's rhetorical intent, its stance toward effects such as "realism" or "escapism." In other words, any alteration in the specific kinds of social knowledge made available by a textual tradition signals not only a different attitude toward the "real" (aspects of which are now included or excluded from representation), but also a different compact between producer and consumer about the purpose of such provision. As we shall see, the new "realism" of films like *Room at the Top* must be understood in this dual sense.

More important than a text's representation of social discourses, however, is its production of their interrelationships, a work that is carried on in fiction through the various chains of narrative. As Hall suggests, the principal task of the narrative work is to assign various aspects of the represented world their "preferred" meanings, a process that usually involves, as Frederic Jameson has demonstrated in great detail, the transcendence of

ple, accused the board of sabotaging a new realism that would allow spectators to find more immediate relevance in what they saw on the screen:

Audiences, it was implied, must not recognize their own world and must not relate what they see on the screen to their social experience. It would be too disturbing.¹³

As we will see, however, this view of the board's activities is mistaken; another explanation must be forthcoming for what Richardson identifies correctly as the failure of the movement, in which he was himself a principal force, to overthrow more tellingly the traditions of British filmmaking.

During the 1950s the general function and specific practices of the BBFC were in the process of changing from those of the 1930s and '40s; these had made evident an overt desire to keep controversial material away from the viewing public. Nicholas Pronay characterizes the BBFC's earlier activities as a thoroughgoing censorship:

The cinema audience . . . were effectively and successfully kept from being subject to the powerful impact of images and stereotypes designed to undermine their faith in the good intentions of their rulers and in the beneficial effectiveness of the political system under which they lived.¹⁴

This is an inappropriate account, however, of the BBFC's avowed aims and general practice during the period of *Room at the Top*'s production and release. John Trevelyan, secretary of the board during its period of transition, characterizes the censors' aims in a much different way:

The BBFC . . . cannot legitimately refuse to pass films which criticize "The Establishment" and films which express minority opinions.¹⁵

As Guy Phelps has outlined, the BBFC gradually evolved into an expression of public taste from its self-appointed shaper, and this meant that it "was forced to make a radical revision of its approach to cinema, and this Trevelyan was well-equipped to effect."¹⁶ Indeed, Trevelyan's predecessor had been forced to resign be-

cause he was insensitive to changes occurring in the area of public taste and had refused to accommodate a growing demand for a very different kind of cinematic product.

It thus seems fairly clear that the BBFC during the late 1950s and early 1960s was not an enemy of the new "realism" in cinema, but rather a fairly astute and conscientious judge of what in the new "realism" would be generally acceptable to a British audience. Audience expectations about the cinema experience were noticeably changing for a number of reasons. The most important of these was the fact that television in Britain, as in the United States, had largely assumed by this time the role of providing fictional entertainment for a mass audience. The success of art houses showing "highbrow" foreign films during the 1950s (especially in the Greater London area) had certified the commerciality of a different kind of filmic discourse—"adult," "sophisticated," and "realistic"—one that the native cinema soon began to adopt.

The new "realism" of these films was no more "realistic" than previous modes of representation had been. What was new was the drawing of a different boundary between the realms of "fiction" and "life": Such a process subverted, but only for a time, the fictional effects of narrative since it drew attention to the fact that narrative does construct the "real." Accounts of Trevelyan's reign at the BBFC suggest that the board was itself complicit in this redefinition of the institutional *vraisemblable*. Some involved in the censorship operations suggested that the BBFC was too slow in adapting to the expectations of a different British viewership, but insiders generally viewed Trevelyan as progressive.¹⁷

Unfortunately the actual working papers of the board's decisions are not available for general scholarly

The gentility of Susan's (Heather Sears) world seems to offer Joe no real comfort.





use; my own attempts to see the *Room at the Top* file were met with polite rebuffs. Jeffrey Richards and Tony Algate, however, were given access to the BBFC file on the New Wave film *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1961).¹⁸ The pre-production comments of the examiners on a working treatment center about the area I have termed representation; their criticism concerns itself mainly with language (*bogger* and other expressions were expunged) and theme (the discussion of abortion was deemphasized). If this case was typical (and we have no reason to expect that it was not), then we must discount the criticism of directors and others that the BBFC stifled their creativity and their aim to produce a more radical cinema. In fact, by passing New Wave films after only slight changes in language, theme, and image, the BBFC was actually facilitating the development of a different contract between the film industry and its consumers, one in which the relation of screen content to social experience played a much more important role.

Trevelyan was quite conscious at the time that the board was changing long-standing policies (especially those concerning sexual explicitness), but he believed that such changes were necessary if the cinema were to continue to occupy a central role in British culture. Reviewing his career, he observes:

... one can see that Jack Clayton's *Room at the Top* ... was a milestone in the history of British films and in a way a milestone in the history of British society.¹⁹

Trevelyan is correct, but only in a limited sense, for films such as *Room at the Top* only partially redefined the relationship between the cinema and the viewing public. Like most other New Wave productions, *Room at the Top*, in fact, offers a picture of reality that is controlled by "the neutral and integrative function of public opinion," a picture that does not challenge the status quo but rather reinforces it. The film's conservatism, however,

cannot be traced to institutional censorship, which concerned itself more with the area of filmic representation than that of storytelling. Rather, the film's politics result from other forces within the cinematic "machine" of meaning, notably certain elements of the narrative tradition that underlay the fictionalizing functions of cinema in late-1950s Britain.

These elements, of course, make their presence felt not so much in institutions such as the BBFC, though the censors were undoubtedly guided by some consensus about the well-made or "proper" story; instead they can be traced in the work of those involved in formulating the film narrative. In the case of *Room at the Top*, director Jack Clayton was responsible for the final shape of the story. Thus it is instructive to begin a consideration of the film's narrative with some discussion of his attitude toward the project. Clayton was attracted to Braine's novel because, he confessed, it was "indicative of that fascinating period which I personally lived through; it was about what happened to England when everybody came back from the war."²⁰ But more important for Clayton than its concern with social change was its love theme. George Gaston reports the director's feelings on this point:

... it was the love story and the perversion of love and innocence brought on by self-betrayal that stirred his imagination most of all.²¹

As we will see, in the novel the larger issues of postwar society (demands for equality, dissatisfaction with class hierarchies, a loss of patriotic feeling) are dealt with through the romantic triangle involving Joe, Alice Aisgill, the older married "loving friend" who initiates him into sexual joy, and Susan Brown, the young and inexperienced daughter of a wealthy industrialist. In Braine's version Joe's drive for upward mobility is made possible (and also legitimated) by his encounters with both Alice and Susan. For Clayton, however, the protagonist's drive for economic success is achieved at the cost of romantic and

sexual happiness; to find his room at the top Joe must violate the love he feels for Alice and make a bad marriage with Susan.

This alteration works quite deliberately against the protests, albeit muted, that Braine's novel voices against the class system; Joe can rise above his station, but he must do so at the cost of his "authentic" self. Though a direct result of Clayton's reading of his source materials, this particular focus on romantic coupling is hardly idiosyncratic. Within the tradition of British as well as Hollywood filmmaking, the movement toward the constitution of the couple is a socially conservative one that confirms the hero's social rank or discovers his true place within a social hierarchy. Clayton's handling of the romance also constructs certain prominent and widespread discourses about the importance of "love" (these are stock-in-trade of cinematic storytelling as well). As part of its appeal to a middlebrow audience, *Room at the Top* offers the "adulthood" of a kind of popular Lawrentianism as its overriding personal value; as in *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, sex becomes for Clayton's characters the overpowering authenticating force that makes irrelevant such issues as class exploitation or inequality of opportunity. Unfettered sexual expression leads to personal fulfillment (though the mechanisms and precise nature of this character development are asserted, not explored). Braine's story thus becomes a morality play in which "being true to yourself" is opposed to upward mobility. In this way the film's radicalism, its departure from received modes of representation, becomes ironically compromised. Thematising sexuality in a new and shocking fashion (at least within the context of British film, if not that of the "art" film genre), *Room at the Top* makes romance the true end of human desire, thus sidestepping the social causes and consequences of the "angry young man's" desire for upward mobility.

In the novel the triangular romance functions as part of a utopian drive for transcendence that keeps the nar-

Alice's friend Elsbeth (Hermione Baddeley) warns Joe about using Alice.

rative working. Unlike John Osborne's Jimmy Porter, the archetypal angry young man whose dissatisfaction with the order of British society can only manifest itself in self-congratulating complaint, Braine's Joe Lampton is bound to achieve the success society would deny him. As the novel opens, however, he has gone as far as the mechanisms for advancement allow. Spending his years as a POW studying accounting, Joe has made the leap from working class to the petty bourgeoisie. His rewards include a ticket out of Dufton, the unbearably grim factory town of his youth, and a white-collar job with local government in Warnley, a city also in the industrial north but one with an affluent middle class and the attendant cultural amenities. As Joe himself recognizes, hard work will bring only limited advancement in the end. The creature comforts of *haut bourgeois* life lie impossibly beyond his grasp:

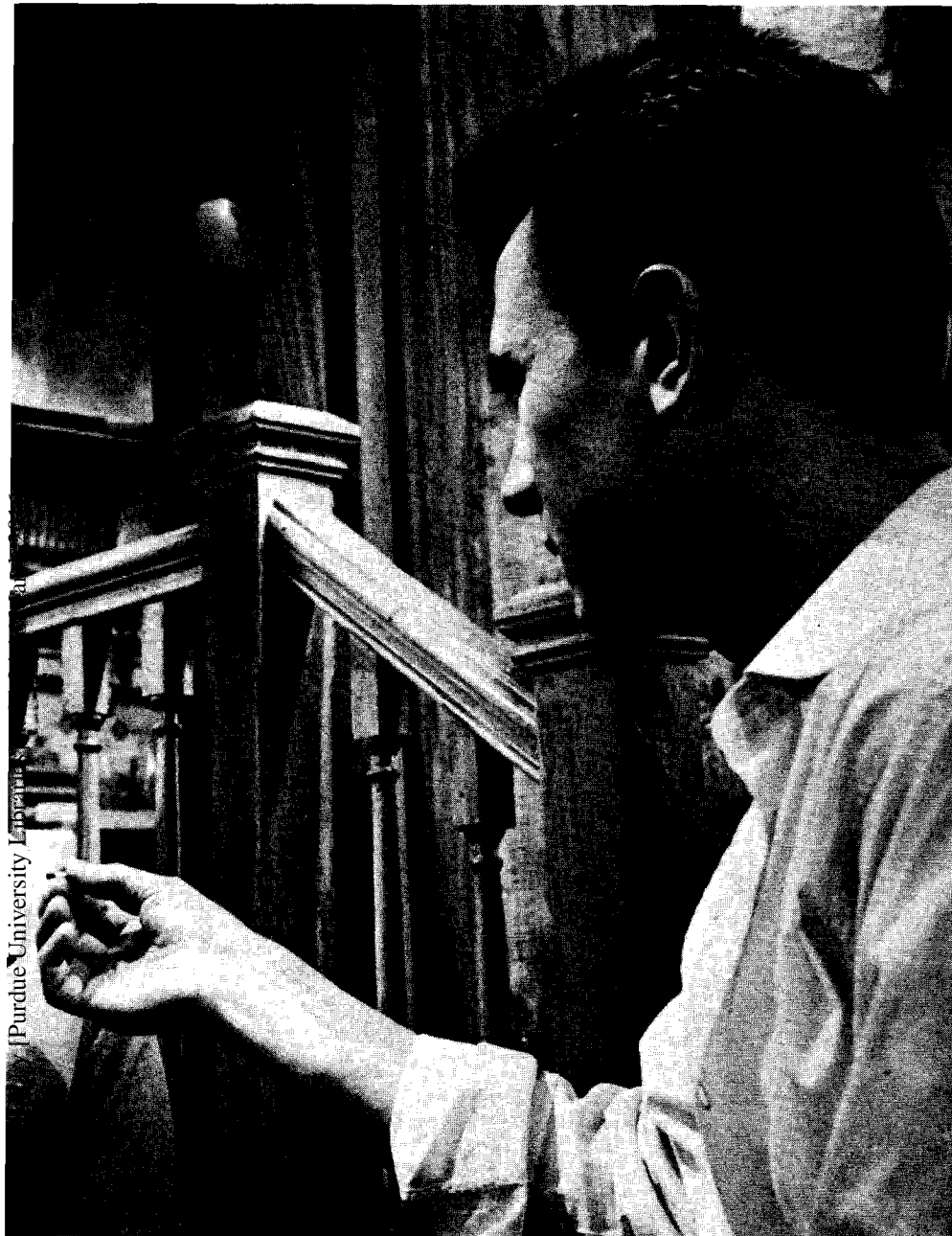
... he has not the capacity to succeed in our sense of the word. He lacks the necessary background, the poise, the breeding; in short, he is essentially vulgar, and possesses no talents which might compensate for this drawback.²²

In this way *Room at the Top* acknowledges the narrative dead end to which its social raw material takes it (i.e., the mechanisms for upward mobility are necessarily limited despite the war's promise of a new society more equal in its distribution of wealth). The novel, however, transcends the contradiction between Joe's legitimate desire and the social forces that contain it by formulating a personal rather than a social solution to his frustration. For Joe has one talent whose worth he does not recognize: his sexual power, something that gives him an advantage in his rivalry for Susan's affections with Jack Wales, a handsome and poised member of her own class. Like his obvious literary forebear, the picaresque hero, Joe transgresses social boundaries in the name of his own desire; and, once



again in traditional fashion, his success in so doing is ratified by a *crise morale* that exacts from Joe the appropriate self-examination and recriminations.

Joe eventually gets Susan's hand in marriage by a happy accident: She gets pregnant (this being the only reason her parents would accept Joe as a son-in-law). Surprisingly, however, Joe's pursuit of Susan and what she represents (a well-paying job in her father's company is part of the marriage deal) is not developed by an



ROOM AT THE TOP is notable for its absence of a father figure who would represent the traditions and power against which the son must struggle in order to define his own destiny.

opposition of Jack, the effete scion of privilege, and Joe, the powerful and hungry member of an oppressed class. Braine neatly sidesteps treating Susan's reasons for preferring Joe and why she would violate the social rule enunciated by Joe's Aunt Emily: "Money marries money, lad. . . . Get one of your own class, lad, go to your own people" (98). Instead the novel introduces the theme of "authenticity," though, once again, not in a way that would pose directly and forcefully the issues of class transgression.

As a bildungsroman, *Room at the Top* is notable for its absence of a father figure who would represent the traditions and power against which the son must struggle in order to define his own destiny (in this respect the book contrasts interestingly with Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, a novel to which, in other respects, it is obviously indebted). Joe's mother and father are dead, killed by the one bomb that fell on Dufton during the war. The improbability of the event that has removed his parents under-



lines the special circumstances of Joe's isolation; he is thereby freed to pursue unfettered his own desire. And what has been repressed by the "unlikely" absence of his father is the opposition to any mobility that violates the authenticity of class affiliation, an opposition that his father would surely voice: "He was a good workman; too good a workman to be sacked and too outspoken about his labour convictions to be promoted" (102).

Thus the contradiction between class loyalty and desire for advancement is another issue sidestepped by Braine's story. Like most popular fiction, the novel moves not toward the confrontation of social inequities but away from them, attempting in the process to formulate a utopian solution that would somehow transcend such anomalies. In this case that solution is to be found in the marriage to Susan which, as Joe himself recognizes, can only be envisaged as a "fictional" satisfaction of his desires: "Susan was a princess and I was the equivalent of a swineherd. I was, you might say, acting out a fairy story" (62).

As Frederic Jameson points out, popular fiction only works through to a transcendence of social contradictions by first somehow expressing them. And this is Alice's important role in the novel. For Alice becomes, in large measure, a representative of the authenticity that Joe's father would have urged upon him. The novel, however, accords the authenticity represented by Alice no legitimate social or material space, no room in the project of growth that catches Joe up. Hence she can be left behind and allowed to self-destruct in order to facilitate a satisfactory close to the story of Joe's success. Alice offers Joe love and attention but she is, as he says, "an inhabitant of a shut-in musty world, tatty as running grease-paint" (114). Because her husband refuses divorce and even threatens to ruin Joe in the courts, Alice can offer

him no permanent relationship. Alone on a week's vacation, they do achieve the emotional happiness necessary for a good marriage: "The security, the calm, the matter-of-fact tenderness which came from her—that is what was important; that, and talking to each other and having no dangerous corners or forbidden subjects" (184).

This happiness, however, is the product of temporary release from social and personal constraints. In the real world Alice is an older woman,

Clayton's postromantic rejection of the modern industrial city finds no equivalent in Braine's novel, whose characters, particularly Joe, accept the world they have been given and are eager only to make their way in it.

hopelessly married, with no financial advantages to bestow on Joe even if she were free to marry him. His friend Charles advises him to break with Alice, and Joe does so after learning that she had an affair with Jack Wales, his bitter rival. The sexual authenticity of his relationship with Alice thus functions as a metonymy for the forces that attract him to staying put in the social order. But since he and Alice can in effect share no social space, continuing with her is an option that Joe cannot choose. Alice's subsequent death after an alcoholic binge makes Joe regret his actions. The novel's interpretation of his choice, as enunciated by his friend Eva, is quite different: "You don't see it now, but it was all for the best. She'd have ruined your life. Nobody blames you, love" (256).

Joe pays an emotional price for rising to the top, but his deep sadness over Alice's death is yet another justification for this social promotion (for, unlike those around him, Joe

has a sense of moral responsibility). With Susan he gains a beautiful wife who offers him both love and money, for she is truly the princess able to make Joe's fairy story of upward mobility into a lived reality. Thus, with its avoidance of complex social issues and its reliance on romantic plotting, *Room at the Top* captures the emotional tone and utopian vision of postwar dissatisfaction with the class system if not the historical reality.

Clayton's film, in contrast, creates a harsher vision of the same world in which the protagonist's dream of transcending his background proves a false goal whose attainment means self-betrayal and moral failure. At the outset the film's high contrast black-and-white photography, consistent use of sharp/deep focus, avoidance of glamorizing lighting, and choice of real location exteriors evoke a harsh environment much unlike the Warnley of Braine's novel, which is meant to contrast favorably with the Dufton of Lampton's youth. With its atonal and unromanticized quality, even the film's background music suggests a lack of emotional or spiritual fit between the characters and the grim environment in which their lives are played out. This *mise-en-scène* finds no equivalent in Braine's novel except in the passages devoted to Dufton and constitutes an important alteration, for it creates a world incapable of supporting the wish fulfillment structures of Braine's story. Instead the cold exteriors, with their sharply focused plainness and inhospitality, are meant to contrast with the interior scenes shot in the apartment of one of Alice's friends, where the intimacy of the adulterous couple is cleverly conveyed by informal and often risqué dialogue and casual, asymmetrical groupings; in these scenes deliberate deglamorization suggests not inhospitality but rather an honesty upon which true love can be based. This honesty, however, implies denying any importance to the unpleasant, unchanging world without, a place of social realities with no real connection to the microcosmic couple within. In other words, Clayton's use of various

Although Alice loves him, Joe finally chooses Susan's youth and money instead.

cinematic codes whose meaning is “realistic” by convention (largely because they are opposed to other codes, such as soft focus, which conventionally connote idealization) is twofold. On the one hand, the “realistic” exteriors evoke a world opposed to the hero’s desire for transcendence, while, on the other hand, the “realistic” interiors in large part establish the narrative and thematic space for an escape from that harsher realm of class systems, economic imbalance, and bleak urban life.

Clayton’s postromantic rejection of the modern industrial city finds no equivalent in Braine’s novel, whose characters, particularly Joe, accept the world they have been given and are eager only to make their way in it. Significantly, the character most dissatisfied with her life in both novel and film is Alice, who is oppressed and humiliated by a bad marriage to a philandering and overbearing husband. In the novel, however, Alice has been beaten down not only by her circumstances but by time itself; her physical beauty is inexorably sagging into matronliness, and there is no question that Susan, though she lacks womanly experience, is the more attractive. In the film, on the contrary, Alice is played by the glamorous Simone Signoret, while Susan is played by Heather Sears, who is cute rather than beautiful and who lacks the star quality of Signoret. Eager at first to sleep with Susan, Joe falls into a profound postcoital depression after they finally make love; this sequence has no source in the novel and thus serves to underline strongly the contrast between Clayton’s and Braine’s differing views of the story. Alice becomes the center of the film because she represents something foreign and intriguing in its grim world of social types; her Frenchness signifies not only that she is out of place in provincial Warnley but that she has the right to speak more authoritatively about human experiences and values because of her wider, more sophisticated knowledge. Instead of a desperate, aging woman who would drain Joe of his urge for betterment, the film’s

Alice becomes the locus of protest against and difference from the social system, an emotional space where Joe cannot only take comfort but also deconstruct the false values that compel him to want more and more of the unsatisfying goods that the outside world has to offer.

Such a characterization of Alice, however, must take into account the fact that the film, for all its Lawrentian nostalgia and protest, never accords her an intellectual center to sup-

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port her emotional role. For example, when Joe rejects her she proclaims:

There’s something you’ve never understood, Joe. These people at the top, they’re the same as anybody else. But you had it inside of you to be so much bigger than any of them. You just had to be yourself . . . and with me you were yourself. Only with me. Don’t you understand what you’ve done?

Unfortunately, Alice’s plea for Joe to understand her key role in developing and maintaining an authentic sense of self lacks real force because she is still, in large measure, the hopelessly married and aging woman of Braine’s novel. In other words, Clayton’s film inevitably marginalizes her as well, accords Alice no real social space; from this point of view her foreignness becomes an index of the distance between her and the society she inhabits. What is interesting here is the fact that Clayton’s postromantic anti-modernism can, naturally, locate Alice only as difference, as a kind of protest against a world that inevitably swallows up the innocent young man and dooms him to a life of unsatisfying material goods and marital sex. Joe cannot stay

with Alice, and he therefore must betray that “real self” he has revealed in his relationship with her.

The film, however, is not satisfied with this deterministic end; the moral lesson of Joe’s experience must be pointed out, even if his rejection of Alice cannot legitimately express it. In the novel Joe is friends with a fellow clerk named Charles who, like himself, is anxious to get ahead. As we have seen, it is Charles who in fact convinces Joe not to continue with Alice. In the film, however, Charles’s role is quite different. In the opening sequences, Charles finds himself attracted to a fellow clerk named June, but he sees no advantage for himself in a serious relationship with her:

June’s a good kid. But she’s got an invalid mother, and they live off June’s salary, the pair of them. So whoever marries June marries an invalid mother too. What you and me should be looking for is a girl with no brothers or sisters and a nice family business in the background.

Later, having “fallen in love” with June, Charles changes his mind; these practical considerations are thus no longer important, but simply “don’t seem to matter much any more.” At film’s end Charles and June, barely able to hide their disapproval, form an appropriate chorus at the wedding of Joe and Susan. Also present is Alice’s friend Elspeth who, in the novel, accepted resignedly the death of her companion without blaming Joe. The wedding scene features reaction shots of Elspeth’s face, a visible reminder of her earlier condemnation of Joe’s action (“You filthy, rotten bastard; she was in your way, wasn’t she!”). In the novel Joe’s marriage to Susan is not represented; as a happy end, it will be spoiled, the reader is left to infer, only by Joe’s private regrets. In the film, on the other hand, the wedding is defined by the social disapproval that obliquely but tellingly accompanies it. In marrying for money, Joe violates the principle of being true to your feelings that Charles honors by choosing June in spite of the difficulties such a match will entail. Instead of a fairy story

come true, the film version of *Room at the Top* is ultimately a cautionary tale that identifies the dangers of pursuing upward mobility instead of emotional transformation. It argues that the unpleasantness of petit bourgeois and working-class life can be transcended but only by an escape from the outer world of social realities into the inner, personal world of sexual truth. In so doing, the film, unlike its fictional source, provides a powerful rejection of the angry young man's desire to express his dissatisfaction with the system by changing his place within it.

In other New Wave films the narrative works in a similar fashion to defuse or marginalize the angry young man's protests against the social order. In *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, for example, the social threat posed by Arthur Seaton's flouting of conventional sexual mores is sealed off by his marriage to a respectable girl. In two later films by Karel Reisz, the working-class hero is excluded from the social order altogether. *Night Must Fall* (1964) offers the angry young man as a psychopathic killer, whose sexual magnetism proves the downfall of the upper middle-class women he seduces; his anger, however, eventually self-destructs, and he is defeated at film's end by simply psychological rejection. *Morgan!* (1966) is also constructed around the rejection of the working-class hero, whose delusions prevent him from finding a place in an upscale London society devoted to the pursuit of material pleasure. Like *Room at the Top*, these films should make us question the received view of the British New Wave as a movement offering a radical and innovative view of British culture, especially class relations.

As I have shown, it is true, of course, that these films manifest a new aesthetic of representation, making room for unfamiliar discourses that, either obliquely or directly, raise social issues such as that of class. It is important to remember, however, that the narrative work in these films is much more conservative and traditional, that it constitutes, in effect, a

working through and closing off of these social threats that these "new" discourses, by their very presence, pose to the established social order as usually represented. A thoroughgoing examination of New Wave films will, I believe, reveal the movement's unquestioning endorsement of the traditional fictionalizing function of British cinema: to provide "closed texts" that preserve the goal of entertaining a mass audience by processing effectively any challenges to the "neutral and integrative function of public opinion." In any case, we can certainly affirm that *Room at the Top*, one of the New Wave's early and daring explorations of new cinematic "territory," is this kind of film.

NOTES

1. Among the most important of these studies have been James Curran and Vincent Porter, eds., *British Cinema History* (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble Books, 1983); Jeffrey Richards and Anthony Aldgate, *British Cinema and Society 1930-1970* (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble Books, 1983); Don MacPherson, ed., *British Cinema: Traditions of Independence* (London: BFI, 1980); and Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain 1930-1939* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984).

2. Recent studies devoted to British directors have often made use of both auteurist and sociocultural approaches. See, for example, Ian Christie, ed., *Powell, Pressburger and Others* (London: BFI, 1978), and Geoff Brown, *Lauder and Gilliat* (London: BFI, 1977).

3. Somewhat surprisingly the standard history of the movement remains the outdated and superficial book by Roger Manvell, *New Cinema in Britain* (London: Studio Vista, 1969).

4. For an account of the fictional and dramatic movements that supplied the New Wave with much of its material see Blake Morrison, *The Movement: English Poetry and Fiction of the 1950s* (London: Oxford University Press, 1980), and John Russell Taylor, *The Angry Theatre: New British Drama* (Revised and Expanded Edition: New York: Hill and Wang, 1969).

5. Peter Graham, *The Abortive Renaissance: Why Are Good British Films So Bad* (London: BFI pamphlet, 1963), p. 2.

6. Penelope Houston, *The Contemporary Cinema 1945-1963* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 123.

7. John Hill, "Working Class Realism and Sexual Reaction: Some Theses on the British 'New Wave,'" in Curran and Porter, p. 304.

8. Richards and Aldgate, p. 131.

9. Stuart Hall, "Culture, the Media, and the 'Ideological Effect,'" in James Curran et al., eds. *Mass Communication and Society* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), pp. 337, 338-339, 342.

10. Frederic Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," *Social Text*, 1 (Winter 1979), pp. 141ff.

11. John Hill, "Ideology, Economy, and the British Cinema," in Michele Barrett et al., eds. *Ideology and Cultural Production* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), p. 115.

12. See Paul O'Higgins, *Censorship in Britain* (London: Nelson, 1972), and Guy Phelps, *Film Censorship* (London: Gollancz, 1975) for useful histories of the BBFC.

13. Richardson's comment appears as an addendum to Derek Hill's article, "The Habit of Censorship," *Encounter*, July 1960, p. 65.

14. Nicholas Pronay, "Film Censorship in Liberal England," in K. R. M. Short, ed., *Feature Films as History* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981), pp. 124-125.

15. Quoted in Phelps, p. 43.

16. Phelps, p. 44.

17. See, for example, the complaints of Enid Wistrich, who served on the London County Council, and who believed that Trevelyan did not move quickly enough in allowing more sexual explicitness on the screen. Her book is entitled "*I Don't Mind the Sex, It's the Violence*": *Film Censorship Explored* (London: Boyars, 1978).

18. See Richards and Aldgate, pp. 131-145.

19. John Trevelyan, *What the Censor Saw* (London: Joseph, 1973), p. 41.

20. Quoted in George M. A. Gaston, *Jack Clayton: A Guide to References and Resources* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981), p. 4.

21. Gaston, pp. 9-10.

22. John Braine, *Room at the Top* (London: Methuen, 1957), p. 161. All future quotations will be to this edition and will be noted in the text.

R. BARTON PALMER teaches courses in English at Georgia State University and is co-editor of *Studies in the Literary Imagination*. His articles on film have appeared in such journals as *Cinema Journal*, *Wide Angle*, *Mosaic*, *Canadian Review of American Studies*, *Film Criticism*, and *Persistence of Vision*.