Anglo-American Relations on Film

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Any study of British society, particularly after the Second World War, must at some point come to grips with the massive influence of the United States in shaping so much of Britain's post-war destiny at home and abroad. In many areas of popular culture, dress, music, film, and TV, the USA has often been dominant. In terms of foreign policy British initiatives have become increasingly constrained by the global strategies of the USA. The more recent orientation to the European Union has done little to affect this relationship, particularly as a succession of politicians blow hot or cold on the question of 'Europe' or the 'Trans-Atlantic Alliance'. With the probable exception of the Thatcher years British governments have tended to oscillate between Brussels and Washington, with little coherent policy of their own.

One starting point for a study of the Anglo-American relationship could be the Second World War. In a sense, of course, this is arbitary; you could go back to the Pilgrim Fathers if you wished. What is important about the Second World War is that for the first time in history the British people came into close contact with a large number of Americans. It also marked the definitive world decline of Britain vis-a-vis its cousin-ally. By analysing some of the films which cover this period (made during the war or after) it may be possible to discern some underlying trends as well as important differences in the way developments were seen through either British or American eyes.

In his introduction to the BFI's National Fictions, Graham Dawson utilises the writing of the Popular Memory Group to call for a consideration of "all the ways in which a sense of the past is constructed in our society" (Dawson 1). In looking at the Second World War probably the major vehicle in which our sense of this particular past has been constructed is through film. Yet, the Second World War is a period rich in differing filmic perspectives: from the blatantly male heroics of John Wayne's *The Sands of Iwo Jima* (Dwan 1949), the cynicism and black humour of *Catch 22* (Nichols 1970), the comedy of British TV's *Dad's Army* through to the brutal and ultimately pointless slaughter of *Stalingrad* (Vilsmaier 1992), the average cinema-goer is offered a kalei-

doscope of points of view. Despite this, the relationship between the two main Western allies, the USA and Britain, has received less cinematic attention than may, at first, seem likely, particularly in light of the massive presence of US personnel in Britain during the second half of the war [**1**].

While British and American war films often make some perfunctory gestures towards the presence of the other, a number of films simply ignore their partner. In *Twelve O'Clock High* (King 1949), for example, the US airforce personnel seem to exist in a national vacuum; although set in England, the US airmen never appear to encounter any natives.

Films which really examine the often difficult relationship between the two allies are relatively few; during the war itself only three British films tackle this subject in depth [**2**]. Post-war films vary greatly. David Lean's *Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) features an American joining in (albeit reluctantly) with a British expedition to blow up the infamous bridge, while *Patton* (Coppola 1970) sees the fiery US General having some disagreements with 'Monty'. For British filmmakers the token American was often necessary in order to help box-office returns in the States; they also serve as 'commentators' (such as the American reporter in *The Battle of the River Plate* (1956), by Powell and Pressburger. (The phenomenon of the American reporter can also be seen in other British films such as *Gandhi* and *Lawrence of Arabia*). There was, of course, no such pressure on American filmmakers, and often US portrayals of Britons in the war polarise between the plucky Limey with his 'back to the wall' and the stuffy, bumbling aristocratic officer.

Despite this extreme uneveness, a discussion of Anglo-American relations in the Second World War, film—the most popular form of mass entertainment at the time—can provide us with a wealth of information, views, and representations. Often, for example, what is not represented is as significant, if not more so, than what is. But as well as being valuable texts, films are also the products of an industry which probably played the most dominant role in creating the mythologies of the Second World War.

Complicating this relatively straightforward proposition, however, is the relation between a dominant Hollywood and the much smaller British film industry. The differences between British and American films are not therefore just a reflection of the changing shifts in world power between the declining influence of Britian as against the rise of the USA. Institutional, financial, cultural, and technical considerations within the world film industry must also be taken into account.

By the end of the Second World War the dominance of the USA was evident for all who had eyes to see, though it was the events of the 1956 Suez crisis which finally convinced even the most wooden-headed British supremacists that it was now the US who were calling the shots internationally. The pretence of equality in the war, as Allies united against a common enemy, was soon replaced by an increasing affirmation of US military, economic, and political superiority.

Yet, it wasn't really until 1979 that a US film really examined Anglo-American relations in the Second World War. There could be a number of reasons for this. During the 1950s Americans were focussed elsewhere than on their relatively minor transatlantic ally. The Cold War, the Korean war, the affluence of the '50s (and some of its attendant problems) and the growing importance internationally of Japan, West Germany and Israel all provided subject matter which had few places for things British. There was also an ongoing process of re-evaluating American myths, particularly the Frontier. British actors continued to appear in Hollywood movies but they were still, often, playing the 'Duke and Duchess' roles which appeared to be the perennial lot of the exile 'Brit' on Sunset Boulevard (Deborah Kerr was one of the first to break out of this trap with her role in *From Here to Eternity*, Zinneman 1953).

Clearly we are dealing with shifting terrain, but one very useful way to focus a discussion is through comparison of particular films. In comparing a wartime film with one made later, it may be possible to trace changes in the way myths of WW2 are represented. This is particularly the case if the films under consideration deal with, roughly, the same subject matter. Two films which are especially useful in this regard are Anthony Asquith's *The Way to the Stars* (1945) and John Schlesinger's *Yanks* (1979). Both films share a number of characteristics: the same thematic material (the first meeting of the two allies), British directors and locations with mixed British and American casts. MGM/United Artists' *Yanks* was a major and much publicised production as well as, perhaps, an opportunity for Schlesinger to reinvigorate his uneven film career. For Asquith *The Way. . .* was the culmination of his wartime career. Winning the Daily Mail's "Most Popular Film of the War" award, it was his greatest box-office success. Both films clearly share some common ground over and above the 'Yank' meets 'Limey' theme.

The focal point of *The Way . . .* is an assertion that, whatever cultural differences there may be between the two allies, ultimately they can learn from each other and get along. Prior to the arrival of the United States Army Air Force (USAAF), the Royal Air Force (RAF) base and the nearby village hotel featured in the film are relatively quiet spots (or as quiet they can be in war time). The arrival of the 'Yanks,' however, soon gives rise to noisy baseball games and laments from the few RAF officers who stay behind about the lack of expertise in making tea. The quiet of the Red Lion Hotel is shattered as the USAAF, and the RAF boys, who soon get into the swing of things, evoke the observation of one of the waitresses that the Americans and the RAF are just as bad (i.e., noisy, rowdy and drunk) as each other.

Eventually the Americans and the British become united in death. Early on in the film we learn of the death of the Commanding Officer, David Archdale. His wife, 'Toddy' (the landlady of the Red Lion), then meets Johnny Hollis, an American pilot, and although they are obviously attracted to one another, the relationship is never allowed to de-

velop beyond friendship. Eventually Johnny too is killed. What is striking about *The Way . . .* is the relative ease with which the two groups cooperate. There are no fights or even any great tension between them. Mishaps occur—the Americans talk too loudly in the Hotel and one of the RAF mimics American braggadocio while, behind his back, the American Commanding Officer listens impassively (a similar scene is repeated, with the roles reversed, a few minutes later). But on the whole the film reinforces the phrase of an anonymous respondant to a BBC Research Report survey about attitudes to the Ameicans; for him they were "decent chaps when you got to know them" (Aldgate 290).

Historically, there was every reason for the film, jointly sponsored by the USAAF and the RAF, to take this conciliatory stance, stressing the communality of the peoples and downplaying or ignoring difference. Despite the use of words or phrases such as 'cousins' or 'transatlantic allies', past history was not particularly encouraging. Both governments and military hierarchies were anxious to avoid friction and *The Way. . .* must be seen as a contribution to this process, though it actually appeared in British cinemas after the war finished.

Obviously there were strong ties between the two countries. Between 1820 and 1914, 4.25 million Britons had immigrated to the USA, and the 1920s' boom in the US attracted more. Politically and culturally there was much in common, but there were also many conflicts. Britain and the US were rivals in the Pacific and continued to be so despite the Washington Conference of 1921-22 which agreed on reductions of naval power in the region. American business rankled at Britain's use of the Empire as a protected market, while British politicians grew increasingly uneasy about the growing influence and power of the USA. Leon Trotsky considered the rivalry so great that he even speculated that the Second World War would be between the USA and Britian.

There were few joint high level meetings in the 1930s, and there appeared to be little mutual trust. British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain once remarked that "it was always safest and best to count on nothing from the Americans but words" (Childs 32). The Americans, for their part were wary of being dragged into a European conflict, particularly as their particpation in the last war was often attributed to the effects of devious British propaganda. Within the United States there were two influential groups who were also particularly distrustful of the British. The Irish-American community traditionally regarded Britain (though to be strictly accurate we should talk of England, not Britain) as the embodiment of total evil, while the Jewish community was growing ever more uneasy about Britain's apparent reluctance to implement the Balfour Declaration of 1917 that would establish a homeland for the Jews in Palestine.

Amidst all this there was a widespread perception that Britain was simply not worth fighting for. It was seen as quasi-feudal, class riddled, and fundamentally undemocratic. Hollywood's representations of Britain in the 1930s merely perpetuated and reinforced an image of an aris-

tocratic elite more inclined to acts of gallantry rather than military efficiency, of a society whose total territory seemed to consist of Oxford, Cambridge, the West End of London, and the odd country house. Michael Curtiz's *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1936), *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* (1935), Jack Conway's *A Yank at Oxford* (1937), or Norman Taurog's silly *A Yank at Eton* (1942) were hardly designed to establish Britian as an open, democratic society.

For their part British filmmakers made very few films which touched on any kind of social problem at all, and it was rare to see a working class person (or a Scot or someone from Wales etc.) who wasn't there just for the laughs, usually playing a stupid servant or the most stereotypical forelock-tugging worker. The pervasive film censorship in Britan at the time must take major responsibility for this, but even so, most Britsh filmmakers were totally out of touch with the lives of the average Briton (one reason why the work of the documentarists of the 1930s is so important). It was significant that the first British film to achieve box-office success in the USA was Alexander Korda's *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933), which established a long-standing tradition of costume dramas in the States. Although the success was welcome, such films, again, did little to encourage perceptions of Britain as a modern society.

The two main elements missing from *The Way. . .* that are prominent in Yanks are sexuality and racism. In *The Way. . .* we see no black servicemen and no romance between the American airmen and the British women around them. A major feature of the American presence in Britain is thus simply omitted, although an estimated 70,000 British women ended up as 'GI brides'. *Yanks*, on the other hand, takes as its narrative focus the sexual attraction of British women for American servicemen. Likewise, although there are no blacks in *The Way. . ., Yanks* highlights a racist attack by white American servicemen on blacks; the main characters, GIs Matt (Richard Gere) and Danny (Chuck Vennera), look on, either unable or unwilling to do anything. There is strong evidence to suggest that, generally speaking, ordinary British people were welcoming to black servicemen and shocked at the 'Jim Crow' segregation they saw in the American armed forces. Nor does this appear to be isolated to one historical moment. Ghandi was a revered figure to many in Britain if not to the colonialists in India, and Paul Robeson's close relationship with the miners of South Wales suggests that Britain was not, at that time, the racist society it later degenerated into [**3**].

If *Yanks* oozes passion, sexuality, and confidence, *The Way . . .* is a film of restraint. Reviews praised it for the manner in which the nearness of death was treated so casually, with fatalities dismissed as "a bad show". *Yanks* never directly confronts these issues. Despite their efficiency and professionalism the GIs see no action, and the only military fatalities are British. Yet the restraint of *The Way . . .* can't be dismissed as only English 'stiff-upper lippery'; when the Americans in the film look death in the face, their response is not that different.

In a sense *Yanks* is *The Way . . .* revisited. Although at the beginning of the *The Way . . .* the Americans have gone home and the aerodrome is abandoned, in fact US bases became a feature of the postwar landscape and were one element in a complex matrix which ensured British participation in the Cold War. At the end of *Yanks*, Matt shouts through the window of a departing train, "I'll be back!" In fact, the Americans never really left, and Britain became, in the blunt words of Nikita Kruschev, an aircraft carrier for the United States. The British, equals in *The Way. . .*, became subordinates in US global strategy (with the term 'special relationship' as an inadequate fig-leaf to cover this up). *Yanks* unabashedly upfronts the nature of this relationship.

The arrival of the USAAF in *The Way . . .* is orderly, with full RAF participation. In *Yanks* a small Lancashire town is swamped by Americans—the 'invasion' before The Invasion (D-Day). If *The Way . . .* is the product of an attempted or imagined partnership, a propaganda piece to show the allies 'getting along', then *Yanks* is equally a product of over 30 years of US cultural and politcal hegemony, where American superiority is depicted, at the least, as self-evident.

It may also be possible to locate *Yanks* as a post-Vietnem movie. It came out in 1979, only 5 years after the fall of Saigon, at a time when the American nation was still recovering from and debating the issues of its defeat. One of the first post-Vietnam filmic re-orientations came with Michael Cimino's *Deerhunter* (1978), and while *Yanks* obviously doesn't relate directly to Vietnam, it could be seen as some sort of 'feel-good' movie. It avoids the heart-searching and pain of *Deerhunter,* and instead occupies a 'safe' slot in US history. Here was the noble cause fought cleanly and won decisively. It triumphantly asserts US supremacy at a time when that supremacy had been severly dented.

Even the moments in *Yanks* when that supremacy is interrogated are only brief diversions from its almost continual assertion of US hegemony. Matt follows his British lover, Jean, into the local Cathedral. Jean is seen writing the name of her ex-fiancé, a British soldier killed in Burma, in the book listing the dead. Matt looks around and sees the military flags of past battles, signifying a history which goes far beyond the immediate world of the GIs; he appears momentarily humbled. But, outside we are back into the world of a Northern British town occupied, literally, by the US army. The flags may be the historical markers of bygone military glory, but the 'here-and-now' belongs to the US.

I remember seeing *Yanks* for the first time (actually in 1986) and feeling uncomfortable at what I perceived as its American 'colonialism.' Compared to this, *The Way. . .* appears as something which 'might have been': the good intentions of the RAF and USAAF High Commands who sponsored the film. At best this was just fleeting optimism, at worst Churchillian grand delusion. From this perspective, *Yanks* says as much about the last 50 years as it does of 1941-45.

Notes

1 *The Dressmaker* (Jim O'Brien, UK 1988) is one of the recent exceptions.
2 *A Canterbury Tale* (Powell & Pressburger 1944), *I Live in Grosvenor Square* (Herbert Wilcox 1945) and *The Way to the Stars* (Anthony Asquith 1944).
3 This comment is not to diminish racist British attitudes to the Irish or other ethnic groups which deserve separate and detailed consideration.

Works Cited

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