

Auteur or consummate professional?
A historical study of the film career of John Schlesinger

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Contents

Abstract	1
Acknowledgments	2
Introduction	3
Chapter 1 The 1960s; The rise of an auteur	16
Chapter 2 The 1970s; From auteur to metteur-en-scène?	81
Chapter 3 The 1980s; ‘Mandarin of the movies’?	129
Chapter 4 The 1990s; Director for hire? The ultimate decline of artistic reputation	181
Conclusion	222
Filmography	230
Bibliography	237

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Abstract

The career of the British film director John Schlesinger (1926-2003) spanned a period of forty years and was distinguished by a number of notable films made in Britain and the United States. Throughout the 1960s he would be increasingly appraised as a key director, culminating in the critical and commercial success of the Academy Award-winning *Midnight Cowboy* (1969). From the 1970s, however, critics frequently disapproved of his more commercial and genre-based projects, with a consensus emerging that Schlesinger had made artistic compromises and consequently declined.

In the thesis, a more nuanced and balanced account of Schlesinger's career and its fluctuations is presented by means of a detailed consideration of historical production and reception conditions. The varied production contexts within which Schlesinger worked, including British filmmaking of the early 1960s, the Hollywood Renaissance and big-budget studio production, are examined for the ways in which he was subject to a range of opportunities, constraints, collaborations and conflicts. Similarly, a recognition of film reviewing as historically situated and subject to ongoing change permits an examination of the ways in which conventions and shifting preferences in criticism influenced particular critical representations of Schlesinger.

Throughout the study, Schlesinger's agency and contemporary representations of it emerge as subject to a range of specific industrial and critical practices. Despite critics' intimations that Schlesinger made artistic compromises in the latter part of his career, an examination of actual production and reception contexts indicates that he was consistently subject to particular limitations and that various changes occurring throughout his career would limit his opportunities for making the kind of films with which he had made his name. Inattentive to such realities and attached to the evaluative criteria that had earlier seen Schlesinger appraised as an auteur, film reviewing would work to enhance the sense of Schlesinger's decline.

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Introduction

The career of John Schlesinger (1926-2003) was notable for a significant degree of variety, with the British director's work spanning over four decades, encompassing a range of genres and including films made in both Britain and the United States. His feature film career would see him direct films as diverse as the British social realist films *A Kind of Loving* (1962) and *Billy Liar* (1963), an early American renaissance feature, *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), the big-budget American thriller *Marathon Man* (1977) and comedies such as *Honky Tonk Freeway* (1981) and the Madonna vehicle, *The Next Best Thing* (2000). He also directed several television plays, again on both sides of the Atlantic, as well as a number of theatrical and operatic productions, primarily in Britain. His career would be distinguished by many awards, including the Best Director Academy Award for *Midnight Cowboy*, as well as an honour in the form of Commander of the Order of the British Empire for services to film. Schlesinger's extensive output and the frequent recognition of his work was attended by a particular public persona, with the director adept at the promotion of his films and contributing to a variety of discourses within the media. His affinity with actors and promotion of new talent, such as Julie Christie and Jon Voight, would enhance the perception of his authority and Schlesinger would continue to enlist quality actors. While such recognition and visibility recurred throughout Schlesinger's forty-year film career, his oeuvre would also be notable for its critical and commercial failures, with his artistic reputation consequently declining at various points in his career, sometimes dramatically, as in evidence upon the release of the 1981 comedy road movie *Honky Tonk Freeway*. Overall, Schlesinger's reputation as a key filmmaker would be most secure in the late 1960s and early 1970s, with the films *Midnight Cowboy* and *Sunday Bloody Sunday* (1971) garnering the most consistent critical approval. Thereafter, his feature film output – frequently more generic and largely undertaken in the United States – would be framed in terms of compromise and a capitulation to commercial concerns.

The highly varied reception of the films upon their release – from critics’ extensive plaudits for films at the height of Schlesinger’s artistic reputation, to the derision of reviewers upon the release of *Honky Tonk Freeway* and *The Next Best Thing* – is reflected in commentators’ overall, retrospective evaluations of his career, whereby Schlesinger emerges as a director of a number of culturally significant films, as well as some of questionable quality. For Robert Shail, the 1965 film *Darling* represented a ‘key moment in the development of British cinema’,¹ *Midnight Cowboy*, again for Shail, the director’s greatest achievement,² while for the critic George Perry, *Sunday Bloody Sunday* was Schlesinger’s ‘most mature’ film,³ one which ‘confirmed him as one of the most powerful forces in modern British cinema’.⁴ A sense of Schlesinger’s decline then emerges, with Roy Armes finding the films of the 1970s to show no development or progress⁵ and David Thomson pronouncing Schlesinger’s last film, *The Next Best Thing*, ‘a contender for the worst film ever made’.⁶ While some commentators have noted a stylistic or thematic consistency in Schlesinger’s contribution to the cinema, such as Robert Shail’s identification of ‘a cynicism towards wider society with a real humanity for the individual’ in his work,⁷ a distinctly more negative picture emerges overall, as in David Thomson’s noting in the films ‘anecdotes that are shy of thematic coherence’, ‘gimmicky stylistic imitations’, and ‘more lapses in mise-en-scène than most other directors could offer’.⁸ Roy Armes, would seem to concur with Thomson’s negative assessment of Schlesinger’s work, finding it ‘derivative’ and claiming that ‘his progress shows a willingness to adapt to the fashions of the moment that is difficult to reconcile with his reputation as a major director’.⁹ While critics such as Shail and Perry have, to varying degrees, placed and hence partially justified Schlesinger’s seemingly uneven oeuvre within the context of

¹ Robert Shail, *British Film Directors: A Critical Guide*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2007, p.193

² *Ibid.*, p.194

³ George Perry, *The Great British Picture Show*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1974, p.278

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.277

⁵ Roy Armes, *A Critical History of British Cinema*, Secker and Warburg, London, 1978, p.248

⁶ David Thomson, *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film*, 5th Edition, Little, Brown, London, 2010, pp.782-783

⁷ Shail, *op. cit.*, p.195

⁸ Thomson, *op. cit.*, p.782

⁹ Armes, *op. cit.*, pp.246-248

particular industrial and commercial constraints, his apparent artistic decline, on the whole, emerges in terms of personal inconsistency and fallibility.

A difficulty in properly evaluating Schlesinger's career would appear to lie in its heterogeneity and incompatibility with categorisation and the subsequent failure to account for its nuances. Erik Hedling has alluded to this in his observation that 'Schlesinger's disparate output has attracted only limited appreciation'.¹⁰ Armes', Perry's and Shail's assessments are all contributions to overviews of British cinema or British directors, an orientation that, overall, obviously attends more to Schlesinger's British output than to his American work. Schlesinger's liminal position regarding particular genres, cycles and cinemas is also in evidence in surveys such as of British new wave cinema, the Hollywood Renaissance and queer cinema, modes to which he can fruitfully be seen as having contributed. Similarly, the heterogeneity of Schlesinger's work in the 1970s - the small-scale British drama *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, the Hollywood Renaissance epic adaptation *The Day of the Locust* (1975), the big-budget thriller *Marathon Man* and the World War Two romantic drama *Yanks* (1979) - with their diversity of genre, period, location and budget, appears to deter a consistent attention to Schlesinger's output in critical studies of the period. His appearance across such a range of surveys testifies to the range of his work, but the focus on specific contexts or on individual films serves to minimise his output, making it appear somewhat peripheral.

While critical appraisals of Schlesinger tend to be fleeting or at least rather brief references within wider studies, his career has attracted more sustained attention in the form of book-length studies, namely *John Schlesinger* by Gene D. Phillips (1981), *Edge of Midnight: The Life of John Schlesinger*, an authorised biography by William J. Mann (2005) and *Conversations with John Schlesinger* by Ian Buruma (2006).¹¹ Each of these, however, were written by authors acquainted with the director and all to

¹⁰ Erik Hedling, 'John Schlesinger' in Robert Murphy, *Directors in British and Irish Cinema: A Reference Companion*, British Film Institute, London, 2006 p.541

¹¹ Gene D. Phillips, *John Schlesinger*, Twayne Publishers, Boston, Massachusetts, 1981, William J. Mann, *Edge of Midnight: The Life of John Schlesinger*, Arrow, London, 2005, Ian Buruma, *Conversations with John Schlesinger*, Random House, New York, 2006

some degree demonstrate a deference, both to the director and to a particular conception of Romantic authorship. While they contain useful information and in places point to productive ways to approach further study of Schlesinger, they all evidence some lack of critical engagement and lack of attention to contextual detail.

The conception of film authorship informing these individual studies derives in large part from the notion of the auteur, or 'la politique des auteurs', as proposed in the pages of the French film magazine, *Cahiers du Cinéma* in the 1950s, itself deriving from interpretations of Romantic creative work in the world of film explored by critics such as André Bazin and Alexandre Astruc. François Truffaut and other fellow critics and future filmmakers, such as Jean-Luc Godard, Eric Rohmer and Claude Chabrol, proposed that the best directors were the key creators of their films, able to surpass industrial constraints and mark the films with a discernible signature. This personal vision, evident in the work of European directors such as Roberto Rossellini and Jean Renoir, as well as Hollywood directors including Howard Hawks, Orson Welles and Alfred Hitchcock, could be observed in the films' mise-en-scène, or composition of visual elements of the frame. Variations of such a conception would influence critics beyond France, with Andrew Sarris drawing on the notion of the auteur in an American critical context, and the editors of British film magazine *Movie* incorporating *Cahiers'* formal approach to mise-en-scène in the early 1960s. Although inflections would vary, as will be noted, a form of critical assimilation of auteurism had, by the end of the 1960s, come to characterise mainstream reviewing.¹² Critics such as Shyon Baumann have located such shifts within a wider intellectualization in the world of film occurring after the Second World War and accelerating significantly between the late 1950s and early 1970s.¹³ Drawing on theoretical developments in the sociology of art, Baumann identifies key shifts both within and outside of the film world, such as the rise in post-compulsory education, the adoption of television as the primary form of entertainment and the rise in institutional resources such as film festivals and academic publications,

¹² Robert E. Kapsis, *Hitchcock: The Making of a Reputation*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992

p.13

¹³ Shyon Baumann, 'Intellectualization and Art World Development: Film in the United States', *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 66, No. 3, June 2001, pp.404-426

as well as distinct changes in intellectual and critical discourse, in evidence in the writing of the *Cahiers*' critics, Sarris and *Movie* magazine.

While a slow but steady adoption of auteurist conceptions has been identified as characterising 1960s criticism and reviewing and will be traced in the critical reception of Schlesinger's films of that decade, the auteurist position would be regularly challenged. From André Bazin's reservations expressed in the 1957 essay 'On the politiques des auteurs',¹⁴ to the more vociferous objections of Pauline Kael to Andrew Sarris¹⁵ and Penelope Houston to the *Movie* critics,¹⁶ auteurism has been charged with being overly schematic and formalist. Shifting positions emerging from wider theory would also have implications for the conceptualisation of films' authorship. Structuralism, entailing an attention to conventions of structural organisation, including genre, would have implications for the notion of directorial agency, just as psychoanalytic theory, both Freudian and Lacanian, would complicate readings of direct, intentional authorship. Challenges to the figure of the author, a stable figure unambiguously transmitting meaning to the reader, would be issued by both Roland Barthes¹⁷ and Michel Foucault,¹⁸ challenges that would be explored further across poststructuralism. Meaning would be found to be varied and contingent, situated in the interaction between text, reader and context.

Such interrogations of the Romantic figure of the author provide some methodological tools with which to study a director and enable an avoidance of a particular assumed transcendent creativity. Deficiencies in a proper attention to contextual issues in studies of Schlesinger's career, such as those in evidence in the book-length studies of Schlesinger, as well as the representation that recurred in film reviews of Schlesinger as a largely freely creative agent, would invite a more detailed consideration of the production and reception contexts pertaining throughout his career.

¹⁴ Jim Hillier (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma: The 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1985, pp. 248-259

¹⁵ Pauline Kael, 'Circles and Squares', *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Spring 1963), pp. 46-54

¹⁶ Penelope Houston, 'The Critical Question', *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1960, pp. 160-165

¹⁷ Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image-Music-Text*, translated by Stephen Heath, Hill and Wang, New York, 1978, pp. 143-148

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, Donald F. Bouchard (ed.), Cornell University Press, New York, 1977, pp. 113-138

Appraisals of his rise as a filmmaker and his subsequent decline will, in the thesis, be examined against actual prevailing production and reception conditions. Varied and transitional production contexts will be examined in order to assess the ways that Schlesinger's creative agency was both enabled and curtailed. During his long career, the institutional frameworks of the British and American film industries underwent significant changes, rendering both industrial contexts quite distinct from those within which Schlesinger had launched and consolidated his career. Varying funding opportunities and the intervention of other agencies will be surveyed, as will collaboration and conflict with other personnel. A consideration of the conditions of the films' receptions will also indicate the various ways in which critical institutions evaluated the films and Schlesinger's artistic status. Rather than viewing fluctuations in his reputation as issuing purely from an objective and transcendent analysis of the films, the practice of reviewing will be viewed as situated and contingent, necessarily culturally and historically located. The long course of Schlesinger's career would see key shifts within critical institutions and highlight reviewing's response to transformations within a perpetually changing film industry, ones to which Schlesinger would have to repeatedly adapt.

Reception studies, a key methodology in assessing the production of meaning and in evidence in the work of writers such as Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery,¹⁹ Charles J. Maland,²⁰ Janet Staiger²¹ and Robert E. Kapsis,²² will inform the study in a significant way. Rather than seeing meaning as fixed in the text, its true nature to be discerned by the careful reader or viewer, meaning is instead viewed as produced in the interaction between text and reader, thus making the various conditions and institutions of meaning production and consumption of key significance. Consequently, a variety of contextual factors require exploration, as indicated by Janet Staiger; 'What kinds of meanings does a text have? For whom? In what circumstances?

¹⁹ Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice*, McGraw-Hill Higher Education, New York, 1985

²⁰ Charles J. Maland, *Chaplin and American Culture: The Evolution of a Star Image*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1991

²¹ Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1992

²² Robert E. Kapsis, *op. cit.*

With what changes over time? And do these meanings have any effects? Cognitive? Emotional? Social? Political?'.²³ The consequence of such interrogation is the foregrounding of the constructed nature of canons, taste and literary and cultural histories.²⁴ Directorial studies such as Charles J. Maland's *Chaplin and American Culture: The Evolution of a Star Image*,²⁵ Robert E. Kapsis's *Hitchcock: The Making of a Reputation*²⁶ and Barbara Klinger's *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture and the Films of Douglas Sirk*²⁷ have used reception theories to examine the formation of a film director's status within cultural, often specifically critical, institutions, thus enabling detailed contextual and non-evaluative assessments. Rather than viewing a director's reputation as proceeding unproblematically and directly from the qualities of the films themselves, such an approach points to the significance of specific and shifting critical contexts mediating the films and the figure of the director. A consideration of Schlesinger's films' productions and receptions emanating from a historical and reception studies approaches can thus enable a detailed analysis of the films' historically and culturally contingent character and more accurately delineate transformations in the critical perception of Schlesinger's authorship.

In particular, *Hitchcock: The Making of a Reputation* by Robert E. Kapsis provides a focus and methodology that points to the benefits of applying such an approach to Schlesinger. In his study, Kapsis traces the evolution of Hitchcock's reputation, particularly his elevation from director of entertainment films to the role of artist or auteur in the late 1960s and 1970s, achieved by way of self-promotion, the sponsorship of individual critics, such as François Truffaut²⁸ and, most significantly, 'changing aesthetic codes ... particularly the rise of auteur criticism'.²⁹ Drawing on the sociological art-world approach, whereby agents in the film world become key in the consensus building where reputations emerge and transform,³⁰ Kapsis is able to

²³ Janet Staiger, *Media Reception Studies*, NYU Press, New York, 2005, p.2

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.3

²⁵ Maland, *op. cit.*

²⁶ Kapsis, *op. cit.*

²⁷ Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, 1994

²⁸ Robert E. Kapsis, *op. cit.*, p.2

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.243

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 4-6

delineate the key role of shifting critical contexts. Hence, for example, the preference for realism characteristic of newspaper reviewing from the 1930s giving way in the 1960s to critics more receptive to genre films, such as Andrew Sarris and Pauline Kael, is found to be of importance in tracing changes in Hitchcock's reputation.³¹ The continued critical attention issuing from academic critics, even from those working outside 'author-centred criticism',³² have ensured his canonisation.

The career of Hitchcock is clearly, in many ways, at odds with that of Schlesinger's. Hitchcock's reputation is, as outlined by Kapsis, assured, with the director widely celebrated and his film work consistently subject to critical and popular analysis, as evidenced by the 2015 documentary *Hitchcock/Truffaut* (dir. Kent Jones). By contrast, Schlesinger's reputation has fluctuated considerably. Hitchcock's work was principally in the thriller genre; subsequently, as noted by Kapsis, transformations in Hitchcock's reputation had consequences for the reputation of the thriller genre itself.³³ Unlike Hitchcock's, Schlesinger's career would be distinctly varied with regards to genre. Despite such differences between the two directors, the study undertaken by Kapsis, as well as other director studies within reception studies, points to the usefulness of such an approach in a study of Schlesinger. It permits an attention to the specific contexts of the films' receptions unfettered by the evaluative, Romantic tendencies of more auteurist influenced perspectives and invites an attention to contexts of production, significantly those highlighting conflicts with and constraints to a director's agency. As a historical study, the thesis will consider the films and Schlesinger's status by way of the approach characterised by the New Film History, whereby:

... films are shaped and determined by a combination of historical processes (including, but not limited to, economic constraints, industrial practices, studio production strategies and relationships with external bodies such as official agencies, funding councils and censors) and individual agency...³⁴

³¹ *Ibid*, p.12

³² *Ibid.*, p.112

³³ *Ibid*, p.2

³⁴ James Chapman, Mark Glancy and Sue Harper, 'Introduction' in Chapman, Glancy and Harper (eds), *The New Film History: Sources, Methods, Approaches*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, Hampshire, 2009, p.6

A consideration of Schlesinger's films' productions and receptions emanating from a reception studies approach can thus enable a detailed analysis of the films' historically and culturally contingent character and more accurately delineate transformations in the critical perception of Schlesinger's authorship.

Critical models elaborated by Kapsis, Barbara Klinger and Charles J. Maland, therefore, would appear to point to a useful methodological approach to Schlesinger, despite his lacking the secure artistic reputation of Hitchcock, Sirk or Chaplin. His variance with these figures, however, would actually seem to offer opportunities for interrogating or testing such approaches. His often generically, thematically and stylistically disparate output in terms of films, in addition to his extensive work in other mediums and frequent Atlantic crossings, provides a different perspective on prior approaches to matters such as the identification with genre, form and national cinema.

Existing directorial studies emanating from a contextual perspective point to key areas of investigation which will constructively illuminate shifts in Schlesinger's reputation. Firstly, the issue of fluctuating aesthetic codes and their negotiation within criticism and reviewing will be of continual relevance throughout the study. The rise of Schlesinger's critical reputation in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a period which saw the increased assimilation of notions of the auteur will be examined, with the critical climate explored for its degree of receptivity to a director such as Schlesinger. Such an examination will of necessity also consider the shifting artistic potential of work in particular genres, an important factor in the study of a director who worked in a wide variety of generic modes. Another factor, beyond the direct critical receptions of the films but significantly informing them, will be found to lie in self-promotion. An educated, erudite man, Schlesinger would prove to be particularly adept at the promotion of his work. Schlesinger's biographical legend, or his public persona in the wider media, in evidence in various appearances on television and radio and in the press, would also see Schlesinger commenting on happenings in the arts and in culture generally or, on occasion, taking a particular political stance. Work in media other than film, such as opera, television plays and commercials, would similarly generate attention not directly related to his work in film. Informing all such considerations of

Schlesinger's reputation, finally, will be an ongoing and detailed attention to the changing industrial landscape of filmmaking, both in Britain and the United States. Schlesinger's career spanned over four decades, with the institutional framework of the British and American film industries undergoing deeply significant changes, rendering both quite distinct from those within which Schlesinger launched and consolidated his career. The shifting constraints and the possibilities that these presented to Schlesinger provide the structure to which he would be bound and against which his work would be continually evaluated.

Throughout, primary sources, such as archival material held in the John Schlesinger special collection at the British Film Institute and reviews and articles appearing in Britain and the United States will be assessed in order to gauge all relevant aspects of production and reception. The study will consider the trajectory of Schlesinger's varied film career by assessing it by decade. While any such division of a career will be necessarily somewhat arbitrary, the specific and chronological organisation allows a clear route through an extremely varied career, as well as offering the advantage of considering overarching trends and shifts in industrial and reviewing practices. While alternative ways of organising the study may suggest themselves, artistic reputation, necessarily dynamic and accumulative in nature, would seem to require a clear and chronological approach to its study.

While Schlesinger worked extensively in theatre, opera and television throughout his long career, it will be his feature film career that will be the primary focus of the thesis. A detailed study of his theatrical work, as well as his television dramas, would provide a valuable opportunity to explore Schlesinger's achievements in these mediums, as well as the particular opportunities and challenges that these contexts presented. Variations, however, in the taxonomies of feature films, documentary, television drama and theatre, as well as the constraints of the length of the thesis, point to the value of focussing on one of these mediums, in this case, feature films. Schlesinger's work in television will be surveyed, however, principally for the way in which, for reviewers, it informed the reception of the feature films. It will also

emerge that the television dramas sometimes assisted in the maintenance of Schlesinger's reputation when his film work was less well received.

Throughout the study of Schlesinger's feature film career, the emphasis will be upon, as indicated, agency and the opportunities and challenges that industrial and critical conditions presented. Limitations upon the length of the thesis will result in an examination of Schlesinger's identity, including nationality, religious background and sexual orientation, being less emphasised within this particular study. Being from a Jewish background, a gay man and an Englishman frequently working in the United States, Schlesinger's identity would elsewhere provide a fruitful area of investigation for how it informed and shaped his creativity as well others' responses to him and his work. Within the thesis, however, matters of identity will be considered only where they directly impact upon the production or the reception of the films and where commentators and reviewers directly refer to aspects of Schlesinger's identity. A status as some sort of outsider, as will be noted, would recur throughout Schlesinger's career and issues of his sexuality, cultural and religious background and nationality would most certainly inform his worldview, professional relationships and estimations of him as an individual and as a director. Definitively assessing such dynamics, however, can be difficult, particularly so as Schlesinger did not, for much of his career, refer to his sexual orientation or religious background (and commentators consequently followed suit). As will be seen, it would be his nationality that would be more overtly addressed, particularly so when working in the American film industry.

The first chapter of the thesis will consider the establishment and consolidation of Schlesinger's reputation in the 1960s. His work in feature films in the decade will be viewed against the context of filmmaking opportunities in Britain and the United States. Organisations regulating his agency and other collaborative relationships will be considered. Additionally, a survey of reviews and articles appearing in the general press and specialist film publications will consider critical readings of the films and their construction of Schlesinger's agency and authorship. Such readings will be interrogated for their recourse to longstanding reviewing conventions and notions surrounding the director's status. At the same time, these reviews and articles will be

assessed for the influence of emerging conceptualisations of film's potential artistic status and the accompanying rise of the auteur.

In chapter two, Schlesinger's diverse filmmaking activity in the 1970s is examined. Subject to fluctuating filmmaking opportunities, Schlesinger would move towards a more commercial, genre-based cinema which would be less well received critically but would, at certain points, be commercially successful, particularly the 1976 film *Marathon Man*. Schlesinger's former artistic credentials would operate as a horizon of expectations for the reviewers, who struggled to reconcile his more recent films to earlier, apparently more auteur-like ventures. Schlesinger would be suspected of having distinctly commercial motivations and a sense of his desertion from Britain, in the midst of a contracting British film industry, would only confirm suspicions of Schlesinger's transformation from artist to financially motivated metteur-en-scène.

Schlesinger's output in the 1980s, the subject of the third chapter, would continue to be extremely varied, from the 1981 road comedy *Honky Tonk Freeway* to the 1984 spy drama *The Falcon and the Snowman* and the 1988 horror thriller *The Believers*. At this point in his career, Schlesinger was seen by many as an establishment or 'old guard' figure, a designation that would often be confirmed by reviewers finding the director to be out of step with contemporary cinema. Schlesinger would continue to be suspected of having made artistic compromises, critics unable to reconcile his former status with his current filmmaking activity. The chapter will examine such conceptions of Schlesinger's agency against the realities of a changing industrial landscape and critical culture.

Schlesinger's films in the 1990s will be considered in the fourth chapter. He has been characterised as a 'director for hire' at this point,³⁵ directing big-budget genre films such as the thrillers *Pacific Heights* (1991) and *Eye for an Eye* (1994). The decade would end with his work on the Madonna vehicle *The Next Best Thing*, for the critics, perhaps the ultimate compromise and widely contrasted to earlier artistic achievements. This apparent decline will be examined in the light of an increasingly conglomerated

³⁵ Mann, *op. cit.*, p.515

industry and consequent reduced opportunities for Schlesinger to make the kind of films with which he had made his name. Evidence of tensions between his continued commitment to filmmaking and the constraints of an increasingly commercial filmmaking environment will be examined in order to assess the accuracy of Schlesinger as, at the end of his career, a director for hire.

The study will conclude with a survey of the findings to finally assess the significance of production and reception conditions in the formation and decline of Schlesinger's status. This will reiterate the contextually contingent nature of conceptions of Schlesinger's authorial agency as well as point to constructive ways to reconsider his contribution to the cinema.

Chapter 1

The 1960s: The rise of an auteur

The 1960s would see John Schlesinger working in, and in many ways exemplifying, key film movements of the period. The decade saw Schlesinger direct *A Kind of Loving* in 1962 and *Billy Liar* in 1963, both key British social realist films, the ‘swinging London’ film *Darling* in 1965, as well as the big-budget American-financed adaptation of Thomas Hardy’s *Far from the Madding Crowd* in 1967 and the early Hollywood Renaissance feature *Midnight Cowboy* in 1969. Schlesinger’s work would, on the whole, be met with increasing levels of critical approval across the decade, with his reputation as a leading film director apparently secure upon *Midnight Cowboy* winning three Academy Awards in April 1970, including the award for Best Director.

Despite the overall accruing consensus as to Schlesinger’s directing achievements in the 1960s, the trajectory of his success was not consistent, with the diversity of the films being met with a range of critical approaches and responses. In order to properly contextualise the course of Schlesinger’s reputation in the period, his output will be assessed, and significant industrial and critical conditions investigated. After a survey of Schlesinger’s work in short films and television in the 1950s, his first two feature films, *A Kind of Loving* and *Billy Liar*, will be investigated for the director’s agency – and constraints to it – in production, and the subsequent critical responses to Schlesinger as a creative agent. Such responses would be significantly framed by existing perspectives on the British new wave films made by former Free Cinema directors Lindsay Anderson, Karel Reisz and Tony Richardson. Schlesinger’s subsequent departure from the social realism of his first two films, the more glamorous and metropolitan *Darling* in 1965, would be met with success in the United States, winning three Academy Awards and significantly heightening the profile of its lead actress, Julie Christie. In Britain, however, the film would receive a somewhat more mixed response. Despite Schlesinger’s positioning the film in publicity as having much in common with European films such as those directed by Fellini and Antonioni, and some commentators seeing such a cinema as the way forward for British film, British

reviewers generally disapproved of the film's more foregrounded style as well as the main character's ambiguous morality. A critical attachment to particular evaluative frameworks such as realism will thus be examined alongside the emergence of specific notions of the 'cinematic' and subtle but distinct shifts in the potential status of both the filmmaker and film itself. The American success of *Darling* would enable Schlesinger to direct the MGM-funded 1967 adaptation of *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Although since subject to a degree of reappraisal, the film failed to fulfil expectations upon its release. As with *Darling*, the film was principally evaluated for its realism, and to a degree resisted for its stylistic flourishes, though a number of reviews were notable for their more pronounced degree of levels of interpretive analysis, indicating a more artistic evaluation. Such shifts in criticism would be more perceptible in the reception of *Midnight Cowboy*, a film which emerged from an American independent cinema exploring disaffection and outsiders by way of low budgets and a new wave of unknown actors and one which would confirm Schlesinger's reputation as a leading director. The reception of *Midnight Cowboy*, as well as of the 1971 film *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, would see the height of Schlesinger's celebration as a major director, with a significant number of the reviews utilising more extensive levels of interpretation and language and terms associated with the evaluation of art, as well as demonstrating a new attention to thematic continuity in Schlesinger's films to date. Such evaluations, instead of being viewed as directly and solely emanating from the films themselves, will be examined against emerging critical trends, most significantly those subscribing to the notion of the director as auteur, the primary creative force behind a film. Shyon Baumann has noted significant transformations in this period in the perception of the potential artistic merit of films, whereby 'a series of key events and actions in the late 1950s and 1960s, both inside and outside the film world, resulted in a shift in audiences' perception of film from a form of entertainment to a cultural genre that could properly be appreciated as art'.¹ First, Schlesinger's early work will be examined in order to contextualise his emergence in the field of documentary making.

¹ Shyon Baumann, 'Intellectualization and Art World Development: Film in the United States', *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 66, No. 3, June 2001, p.404

Early work in film and television

John Richard Schlesinger was born on 16th February 1926 to a middle-class, Jewish family. He was educated at Uppingham School, then spent a period serving in the British Army's Combined Services Entertainment Unit, acting alongside Kenneth Williams and Stanley Baxter, as well as performing as a magician. In 1947, Schlesinger commenced an English degree at Balliol College, Oxford, where he was an active member of the Oxford University Dramatic Society and president of the Experimental Theatre Club. While at Oxford, Schlesinger made two self-funded short films with his university contemporary Alan Cooke, *Black Legend* (1948) and *The Starfish* (1950). The former, based on a 17th century murder in Berkshire, was directed by Schlesinger, produced by Schlesinger and Cooke and made for approximately £200.² For a low-budget, amateur film, *Black Legend* received considerable attention. Its screening in February 1949 at the University of Oxford was favourably reported in *The Times*, whose correspondent reported that 'care had been taken in focusing the 400 shots, and the intimate individual acting showed promise'.³ A further screening took place in March 1949 at the House of Lords (enabled by a noble acquaintance of Schlesinger's father⁴) which was favourably reviewed by Dilys Powell in *The Sunday Times*. Powell, the newspaper's resident film reviewer from 1939 to 1976, praised Schlesinger's command of the camera, with its 'bold selection of image, angle and distance' and the imaginative flair in evidence in the enterprise, finding the film 'more interesting to students of the cinema than many a film which cost £200,000'.⁵ Such critical attention led to a screening of the film for the producer Michael Balcon at Ealing Studios, who was polite about the film but not sufficiently impressed by Schlesinger and Cooke's efforts to cultivate any further acquaintance.⁶ Schlesinger and Cooke's subsequent film, *The Starfish*, similarly centred on the macabre, this time in the form of three holidaying children and their encounter with Meg, a Cornish sea witch. Made with a

² Anon, 'An Underground Film', *The Times*, 7th February 1949, p.2

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ William J. Mann, *Edge of Midnight: The Life of John Schlesinger*, Arrow, London, 2005, p. 99

⁵ Dilys Powell, 'Brains not Money', *The Sunday Times*, 20th March 1949, p.2

⁶ Mann, *op. cit.*, p.100

small budget, it received a limited regional release and had negligible commercial success.

Upon graduating, Schlesinger spent some years pursuing a career as an actor, taking small parts in theatre, radio and television productions, as well as in the films *Single-Handed* (dir. Roy Boulting, U.S. title *Sailor of the King*, 1953), *The Divided Heart* (dir. Charles Crichton, 1954) and *Oh... Rosalinda!!* (dir. Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1955). Filmmaking aspirations persisted, however, and 1956 saw the television broadcast of Schlesinger's short film *Sunday in the Park*. Made at the suggestion of Schlesinger's agent, Basil Appleby,⁷ this documentary-style (yet largely staged) short would be broadcast by the BBC, to whose filmmaking training programme Schlesinger had earlier applied, without success. The fifteen-minute montage of scenes of visitors to London's Hyde Park met with considerable success after its initial television broadcast in August 1956, being screened at the Edinburgh Film Festival of that year and repeated on television in October 1956.

Invaluable filmmaking experience would be gained by Schlesinger in the early days of the BBC weekday magazine-style programme *Tonight*. Presented by Cliff Michelmore and running from early 1957 to 1965, the programme was a less formal approach to current affairs and topical subjects and largely consisted of interviews and short films such as those contributed by Schlesinger throughout 1957. Schlesinger's subjects would include London's Petticoat Lane (*Petticoat Lane*, 1957, prod. Donald Baverstock), Uppingham School (*Uppingham School at the Holidays*, 1957, prod. Donald Baverstock) and *Song of the Valley* (1957, prod. Donald Baverstock), featuring a former prisoner returning to his home in the Welsh valleys. The programme's reputation was such that it won the best factual television programme award from the Guild of Television Producers and Directors in both 1957 and 1958. Relations between Schlesinger and producer Donald Baverstock were apparently somewhat strained, however, hastening the director's departure from the show,⁸ later specifically attributed

⁷ Mann, *op. cit.*, p.128

⁸ Mann, *op. cit.*, p.138

by Schlesinger to tensions resulting from his own insistence on complete control of the films and their post-production.⁹

Schlesinger would recall his subsequent tenure at the BBC's *Monitor* in distinctly more favourable terms, later describing it as a 'terrifically creative' period, because 'no one was looking over your shoulder to see if you were going to come up with a hit or a miss when you completed your film, because the next one could always be better'.¹⁰ *Monitor*, the fortnightly arts programme which ran from 1958 to 1965, was edited and presented by Huw Wheldon, later Managing Director of BBC television, and was again characterised by a magazine format, deemed by one observer to be 'a somewhat higherbrow relation to "Tonight"'.¹¹ From February 1958 to April 1959, *Monitor* featured twelve short films made by Schlesinger, followed by two programme-length films of approximately forty minutes. The first of these, *Private View*, broadcast in May 1960, featured four young artists and their emergence onto the London art scene while the second, *The Class*, screened in April 1961, centred on the innovative teaching methods of Central School of Speech and Drama tutor Harold Lang. *The Innocent Eye*, a film about children's painting broadcast in November 1958 would win a Diploma of Merit at the 1959 Edinburgh Festival and be screened at the National Film Theatre in October 1960 as part of the National Film Archive Silver Jubilee celebration of pioneering work in film and television. Reviewing the film, Peter Baker at the *Sunday Express* remarked that 'John Schlesinger was practically unknown three years ago. Now his documentary films have the assurance and style of a master'.¹²

Schlesinger's early work, however, was not without its detractors. Criticisms of a tendency towards the excessive and obvious in Schlesinger's work would recur throughout his career, and they are certainly in evidence in appraisals of his early television work. Schlesinger's biographer William J. Mann has observed 'an urge toward the conspicuous' in the director's work that he traces back to this early period,¹³ and no doubt this tendency was closely related to the director's critically acclaimed

⁹ Gene D. Phillips, 'On Yanks and other films', *Focus on Film*, no.31, November 1978, p.4

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Southern Daily Echo*, 3rd February 1958, BFI collection JRS/2/3

¹² Peter Baker, 'Wonder in a Child's Eye', *Sunday Express*, undated, BFI collection JRS/2/3

¹³ Mann, *op. cit.*, p.15

ability to economically and succinctly convey a scene in a short period of time and with limited resources. *Cannes Film Festival*, broadcast in May 1958, was certainly divisive as to whether a parodic approach was appropriately employed. Both the communist *Daily Worker* and the *Church of England News* reviewed the film favourably, the former praising the use of documentary as ‘social instrument’¹⁴ and the latter deeming it ‘a biting comment on the sex-, cigar- and star-worshipping binge’.¹⁵ The *Glasgow Evening Times*, however found the piece ‘rather cynical’,¹⁶ while the critic at the *Yorkshire Evening News* was annoyed by ‘the smug smile on its face’.¹⁷

At the same time as directing films for *Monitor*, Schlesinger also gained experience working in television drama, working as second unit director on the series *The Four Just Men*, the Sapphire Films production for ITPC, or the Incorporated Television Production Company. On the series, Schlesinger worked with the British director Basil Dearden, director at Ealing of Will Hay comedy films and the police drama *The Blue Lamp* (1950), who would go on to make *Victim* with producer Michael Relph in 1961. Prior to more recent re-evaluations of Dearden’s work,¹⁸ the director’s work had frequently been somewhat denigrated, with Dearden designated a rather functional metteur-en-scène.¹⁹ Schlesinger’s biographer William J. Mann has written of Dearden’s paternal, formative influence upon the director,²⁰ while at the same time, the film historian and critic Robert Murphy has indicated that the association, while not perhaps significantly influencing Schlesinger’s reputation as a director, differentiates, and possibly diminishes him artistically from the new wave directors with whom he would be critically appraised alongside.²¹

¹⁴ *Daily worker* article, undated, BFI collection, JRS/2/3

¹⁵ K. Robinson, *Church of England News* article, undated, BFI collection, JRS/2/3

¹⁶ *Glasgow Evening Times* article, undated, BFI collection, JRS/2/3

¹⁷ *Yorkshire Evening News* article, undated, BFI collection, JRS/2/3

¹⁸ Brian McFarlane (ed.) *The Encyclopedia of British Film*, London: Methuen/BFI, 2003, London, p.168, Alan Burton and Tim O’Sullivan, *The Cinema of Basil Dearden and Michael Relph*. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2009

¹⁹ For example, see David Thomson, *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film*, 5th Edition, Little, Brown, 2010, London, p.213

²⁰ Mann, *op. cit.*, p.155

²¹ Robert Murphy, *Sixties British Cinema*, British Film Institute, 1992, London, p.25

1961 would see the release of Schlesinger's thirty-minute award-winning documentary film, *Terminus*. Impressed by Schlesinger's documentary work to date, Edgar Anstey, the documentary filmmaker associated with the British documentary movement inaugurated by John Grierson, and from 1949 head of British Transport Films, invited Schlesinger to make a short film celebrating the British national railway organisation.²² The subject of the film was London's Waterloo station, and the various activity therein, from the morning rush-hour until the relative quiet of the next day's early hours. With a musical accompaniment, limited dialogue and no commentary, the film shows the activity of those working in the station, such as the station master, announcer and lost property officials, as well as the station users, including a group of shepherded prisoners, a woman waiting in vain for an arranged meeting, and various hurried businessmen. While presented and promoted as a documentary, much of the seemingly spontaneous drama was in fact staged. *Kinematograph Weekly* did not entirely approve of the film's emphasis, noting 'too many personal attitudes',²³ but *Daily Cinema* apparently disagreed, finding it 'beautifully observed and composed', a 'skilful balance of drama and comedy'.²⁴ *Terminus* received recognition at awards ceremonies, including the documentary Grand Prix at the 1961 Venice International Film Festival, as well as a screening at the London Film Festival, where Schlesinger received a standing ovation.²⁵ Later in his career, a number of commentators would suggest that *Terminus* represents a kind of prologue to some of the themes found to recur in his work.²⁶

Schlesinger's early success in documentary, along with the prominence of the work of other documentarists at this period, demands consideration of the industrial context in which such films were produced. *Terminus* suggests certain parallels with the documentaries produced under the banner 'Free Cinema', the collective including the directors Lindsay Anderson, Karel Reisz, Tony Richardson and Lorenza Mazzetti.

²² Mann, *op. cit.*, p.167

²³ *Kinematograph Weekly*, review, 28th December 1961, BFI collection JRS/2/3

²⁴ *Daily Cinema*, review, 18th October 1961, BFI collection JRS/2/3

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ see Mann, *op. cit.*, p.171, Gene D. Phillips, *Major Film Directors of the American and British Cinema*, Associated University Presses, Inc., New Jersey, 1999, p.227

On 5th February 1956, three films, *O Dreamland* (dir. Lindsay Anderson, 1953), *Momma Don't Allow* (dir. Reisz and Richardson, 1956) and *Together* (dir. Lorenza Mazzetti, Denis Horne, 1956) were screened at the National Film Theatre, followed by five subsequent programmes, the last in March 1959. Anderson and Reisz had in 1947, with Gavin Lambert and Penelope Houston, founded the journal *Sequence*, where Hollywood films such as those directed by John Ford, along with the European films of Jean Cocteau and Jean Vigo, were infinitely preferred to a British cinema deemed to be artistically conservative, although the British 'poetic' documentarist Humphrey Jennings was revered.²⁷ The ideal of a personal cinema worked out in *Sequence* would be carried forward into the Free Cinema documentary manifesto accompanying the first screening, where it was declared that 'no film can be too personal'.²⁸ The emphasis in the films was on the everyday and ordinary, often in the shape of working-class subjects. Schlesinger's work in this period provides some contrast to the more pointedly 'ordinary' subjects of the early Free Cinema films, as well as the polemics associated with their critical writing, such as Anderson's exhortations to commitment from the critical establishment as expressed in his 1956 article 'Stand up, Stand up' for *Sight and Sound*, then edited by Gavin Lambert.²⁹ *Terminus* may be read alongside *O Dreamland* and *Momma Don't Allow*, however, as to some degree emanating from a lack of opportunity within a compromised and contracting film industry. In 1972, in an assessment of the shortcomings of British film, Alan Lovell claimed that the Free Cinema filmmakers, never enamored of the 1930s British documentary movement (with the exception of Jennings), were:

... forced into documentary because of the basic situation of the British film industry at that time. The feature industry was difficult to enter because it was contracting under the pressure of television and changing leisure habits. The documentary industry was conversely expanding as a result of increased industrial sponsorship for films.³⁰

²⁷ Terry Lovell, 'Landscapes and Stories in 1960s British Realism', Andrew Higson (ed.), *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema*, Cassell, London, 1996, p.170

²⁸ Cited in Charles Drazin, 'The origin, practice and meaning of the free cinema manifesto', *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 07/2014, Volume 11, Issue 2-3 Edinburgh University Press, pp.294-311

²⁹ Lindsay Anderson, 'Stand Up, Stand Up', *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1956, pp.63-69

³⁰ Alan Lovell, 'The Unknown Cinema of Britain', *Cinema Journal*, Vol.11, No.2 (Spring, 1972), p.7

The 1950s, with its compromised British film industry, has been described as ‘the most derided decade in film history’, one ‘commonly characterised as the era in which the national cinema retreated into quaintly comic evocations of community or into nostalgic recollections of the war’.³¹ Despite re-evaluations of achievements in 1950s British film,³² a reputation for ‘stagnant complacency’ is not, it has been argued, unwarranted,³³ with some lack of audacity and a recourse to convention attributable to a compromised industrial base, one which saw cinema admissions fall from 1396 million in 1950 to 501 million in 1960³⁴ and the withdrawal of Rank from major production towards the end of the decade.³⁵ The lack of opportunities for aspiring filmmakers in such a climate which, according to Alan Lovell, saw the Free Cinema directors working in documentary, certainly provides parallels with Schlesinger’s activity and would see him make a comparable entry into feature films.

A Kind of Loving

The contraction of the film industry in this period would conversely permit a degree of innovation in the form of small, independently produced films. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, several low-budget films were adapted from recently successful plays and novels featuring working-class characters and usually midland or northern settings. Frequently associated with the Royal Court Theatre’s 1956 production of John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* (directed by Free Cinema director Tony Richardson), the ‘angry young man’ protagonists highlighted social discontent and rebellion against a rigid yet faltering class structure. The critically acclaimed and commercially successful film *Room at the Top* (dir. Jack Clayton, 1959) has often, retrospectively, been deemed to herald the British new wave films produced over the

³¹ Ian Mackillop and Neil Sinyard (eds), *British Cinema of the 1950s: A Celebration*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2003, p.2

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Murphy, *op. cit.*, p.10

³⁴ Cinema admissions appendix (Department of Trade) in James Curran and Vincent Porter, *British Cinema History*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983, London, p.372

³⁵ James Park, *British Cinema: The Lights That Failed*, B.T. Batsford, London, 1990, pp.104-105

next four years or so, central to which would be directors previously associated with Free Cinema. The significance of the success of *Room at the Top*, itself directed by an industry veteran, was widely acknowledged in this period. Penelope Houston, writing of the ‘immediate and overwhelming public response’ to the film both in Britain and America, noted in 1963 that ‘the industry is still living in the shadow of this picture’.³⁶ The notion of a ‘new wave’ in British cinema would be consolidated by the success of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (dir. Karel Reisz, 1960), a film based on the 1958 novel of the same name by Alan Sillitoe, starring Albert Finney as Nottingham factory worker Arthur Seaton. Key to many of these productions would be Woodfall Film Productions, the independent production company set up by Tony Richardson, John Osborne and Harry Saltzman to produce the film version of *Look Back in Anger* (dir. Tony Richardson, 1959), financed by Warner Bros.

Prior to Woodfall’s production of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, the rights to a film adaptation of the novel had been held by Joseph Janni, a producer who had been established in British film since the late 1940s and who would play a key role in Schlesinger’s directing career, working intermittently with him over the next two decades. Unable to obtain backing for the film’s production, he sold the rights to Woodfall.³⁷ Janni then proceeded to acquire the film rights to Stan Barstow’s 1960 novel *A Kind of Loving*, a social realist work broadly in accord with the recent ‘angry young man’ literature, and approached Schlesinger to direct, having been impressed by the director’s documentary work.³⁸ The novel concerned a young draughtsman, Vic Brown, and his relationship with a co-worker, Ingrid. Their early relationship is depicted as faltering, with Vic unsure as to his feelings for Ingrid. Her pregnancy, however, speeds the couple to marriage, and the relationship worsens under the pressure of a housing shortage and living with Ingrid’s domineering mother. Ingrid miscarries and the couple separate. Vic, however, comes to see the importance of compromise and perseverance, so the couple reunite, committed to the notion of a kind of loving, imperfect as it might be. The film’s script was written by Keith Waterhouse

³⁶ Penelope Houston, *The Contemporary Cinema*, Penguin Books, London, 1969, p.117

³⁷ Geoff Mayer, *Roy Ward Baker*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2011, pp.71-72

³⁸ Mann, *op. cit.*, p.172

and Willis Hall. Financial backing and distribution for *A Kind of Loving* was provided by Anglo-Amalgamated, a distribution company founded in 1945 and headed by Nat Cohen and Stuart Levy. It was associated with lower budget, second features and popular, highly commercial films, their roster in the 1950s having featured *The Tommy Steele Story* (dir. Gerald Bryant, 1957) and several *Carry On* films. As such, despite *A Kind of Loving*'s association with other northern-based contemporary literature, the film's credentials, in terms of its production, appeared somewhat more conventional than those of films produced by Woodfall. Anglo-Amalgamated would provide all of the budget of *A Kind of Loving*, an usual arrangement at this point in time, when distributors would generally provide 70% of the budget, with the remainder coming from the National Film Finance Corporation, the producer and any deferments of profit.

The pre-production period of *A Kind of Loving* was distinguished by the lack of visibility that might be expected of a director beginning his career in feature films, despite the reputation earned in documentary. Early references to the production appearing in the press in the August and September of 1961 were concerned with Anglo-Amalgamated's involvement in project, as well as that of Alan Bates, the actor who had appeared as Cliff in the Royal Court's production of *Look Back in Anger* and in a lead role in *Whistle Down the Wind* (dir. Bryan Forbes, 1961). Schlesinger's comparative anonymity was commented upon at some length in an assessment of *A Kind of Loving*'s viability undertaken by the completion guarantor company Film Finances. The company, founded in 1950 and still in operation to date, provided assurances to backers that the films they financed, to be made by independent production companies, would be completed according to agreement, and that failing this, those backers would not be liable for costs exceeding the film's budget. In order to gain a completion bond, individual films would be subject to a stringent examination of the production proposal and ongoing monitoring of progress throughout production. In the period in question, the initial assessment of a potential production's viability was undertaken by the former Ealing and Rank producer John Croydon. In his detailed reports, Croydon would consider the experience of the personnel involved, the schedule and budget, as well as the story and script, and then identify potential problems.

Croydon would then make his recommendation as to whether Film Finances should provide a completion guarantee.

Throughout much of his report on *A Kind of Loving*, Croydon's tone is distinctly negative, and several reservations are outlined. As a production generally, Croydon was rather dismissive, seeing the project as, in its 'frankness', somewhat derivative of *Look Back in Anger*, *The Entertainer* (dir. Tony Richardson, 1960), *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and *A Taste of Honey* (dir. Tony Richardson, 1961) although, unlike these films, 'very conventional'. Concern was expressed about the extent of shooting due to take place on location, and the poor weather conditions to be expected during November and December in a northern location. Much of Croydon's reticence, however, centred on Schlesinger, whose inexperience was a source of concern. Fortunately, this was offset by a distinct confidence in Joseph Janni, who had co-produced *White Corridors* (dir. Pat Jackson) with Croydon in 1951. Right from the beginning of the report, Croydon's perspective on the production is clear:

I must confess to mixed feelings over this project. We are obviously dealing with a first class producing team, which has been associated with Janni on many occasions and for sustained periods. On the other hand, I understand the director will be handling his first major feature picture, and I am afraid that amongst the unit nominated in the budget I can recognise hardly any of the names. Under the set-up as it is presented, I would be inclined to say that this was as much a producer's picture as a director's. I know literally nothing about Schlesinger, but I cannot imagine him being a Tony Richardson, from whose work over the past few years, I imagine this project stems.³⁹

After detailing his concerns, Croydon went on to recommend a reserved assent to the project's guarantee, with a number of qualifications, concluding that 'I think we can place our trust in the producer and his staff, and go into this guarantee with our fingers crossed'. Croydon was clear in his recommendation to Robert Garrett, Managing Director of Film Finances that 'you must make it clear to Janni that he must personally

³⁹ John Croydon's report on *A Kind of Loving*, dated 14th October 1961, held at Film Finances Ltd, London

supervise the speed at which this picture is shot. If the schedule is not, by and large, maintained then the final result, cost-wise, could be disastrous'.⁴⁰

A Kind of Loving started shooting on location in Lancashire on 3rd November 1961, moving on to Shepperton studios on 6th December, with production finishing in early February 1962. It was shot by cinematographer Denys Coop. As well as starring Alan Bates as Vic Brown, the unknown RADA-trained local actress June Ritchie appeared as Ingrid Rothwell, the more familiar Thora Hird as Ingrid's mother, with the rest of the cast composed of relatively new faces. Schlesinger afterwards spoke of feeling the pressure of his own inexperience, particularly his early difficulties in judging how to break sequences and his consequent reliance on experienced members of the crew.⁴¹ Janni's close supervisory involvement, as urged by John Croydon, was also a significant factor in the production, and Schlesinger's following account is indicative of both Schlesinger's growing confidence and the collaborative approach which would go on to define the Schlesinger-Janni partnership. Speaking of Janni, he recalled:

When we shot *A Kind of Loving*, he was convinced I was directing the film too slowly, and he was in the sound truck listening to the tapes and said: "I'm sure this should be faster". And I said, "No, Joe, it's the right speed. If it's faster, it will look as if they've learned their lines too pat. I want it less pat." He accepted this, and I was right – I'm not always right.⁴²

That Schlesinger was growing in confidence and Janni was increasingly deferring to the director's creative input is perhaps to a degree indicated by the fact that the film would run over budget and over schedule, though some time was lost, as predicted by Croydon, due to poor weather conditions.⁴³ The schedule would overrun by approximately nine days, with the budget of £148,000 being exceeded by around £8,000, Anglo-Amalgamated providing the excess rather than calling upon any guarantees.⁴⁴ While departures from the shooting script may have resulted from a

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Ian Buruma, *Conversations with John Schlesinger*, Random House, New York, 2006, pp.64-72

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.66

⁴³ Letter from Bernard Smith of Film Finances to Jack Hanbury, associate producer, dated 13th November 1961, held at Film Finances Ltd, London

⁴⁴ John Croydon's report on *Billy Liar*, dated 6th October 1962, held at Film Finances Ltd, London

number of factors including some re-written dialogue negotiated between Schlesinger and the scriptwriters⁴⁵ and the actors' improvisations encouraged by Schlesinger,⁴⁶ John Croydon would later, in a viability report on Schlesinger and Janni's next film *Billy Liar*, identify Schlesinger as having taken creative liberties in the direction of *A Kind of Loving*, writing:

...this is the same team which produced 'A Kind of Loving', and the papers indicate that it is – to some extent – a similar type of picture, and I would say that there are quite definite indications in the script that Schlesinger is to be given considerable latitude in the manner in which he directs. If you will remember, the mode of shooting 'A Kind of Loving' bore little or no resemblance to the indications given in the script; immediate advantage was taken of location conditions, and what was written in the script "bent" to those conditions. I am quite certain the same is going to happen here.⁴⁷

A Kind of Loving was released in Britain on 12th April 1962 to a generally positive critical response. Before considering the terms of such a response, one which praised the film's realistic representations and its participation in the style of films now termed 'new wave', it is useful to consider the critical institutions and practices in place at this point. Criticism in this period can be characterised as consisting simultaneously of reviewing appearing in newspapers and magazines, alongside a tradition of film criticism in specialist magazines and other periodicals, themselves, according to Charles Barr, consisting of an orthodoxy and 'an articulate opposition (which may become the next orthodoxy)'.⁴⁸ While such a broad range of reviewing positions in popular reviewing and film criticism might deter generalisations regarding overall positions on British film with the divide within criticism between an orthodoxy and its opponents pointing to the existence of division and debate, widely-held positions on the British film industry and its output, and some broad critical preferences, have been widely noted. Of particular significance amongst these is a negativity towards British cinema and a preference for a realist mode or aesthetic.

⁴⁵ Mann, *op. cit.*, pp.210-211

⁴⁶ Gerard Garrett and Margaret Cleave, *Evening Standard* article, 2nd January 1962, BFI collection JRS/2/3

⁴⁷ John Croydon's report on *Billy Liar*, *op. cit.*

⁴⁸ Charles Barr, Introduction, Charles Barr (ed.), *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema*, British Film Institute, London, 1986, p7

A worldwide denigration of British achievement in cinema has been frequently cited, particularly François Truffaut's observation of an incompatibility between British film and 'cinema'⁴⁹ and Pauline Kael's designation of British film as a 'sad joke'.⁵⁰ Such hostility to British film, however, was also apparent within British film criticism itself, with an increasing preference for European cinema characteristic of the reviewing establishment from the late 1940s,⁵¹ compounded further by an inherent aversion to British cinema notable within more progressive debates occurring within film criticism, such as those worked out in the film magazine *Movie* in the early 1960s, as will be noted. Various explanations have been offered for the inferiority of British film and the critical preference for American or other world cinemas. Different aspects of the production system have been identified for their apparently adverse effect on British film, including an overreliance on literature and the theatre,⁵² an overly severe system of film censorship,⁵³ a rigidity within the production system more generally⁵⁴ and a limiting network of distribution.⁵⁵

A tradition of a critical preference for a socially realist cinema within the British mainstream reviewing tradition has been noted and found by various commentators to have been detrimental to British cinema's aesthetic development. The preference for humanist, socially-oriented films has been found to entail an emphasis upon content to the detriment of cinematic form, whereby 'aesthetic is reduced to morally prescribed social theory'.⁵⁶ The British documentary movement, headed by John Grierson, has been identified as key to the establishment of this aesthetic preference, with the merging of the socially-oriented documentary with narrative traditions in the 1940s resulting in a number of 'quality' films which would be widely critically celebrated, as noted by John Ellis in his essay 'The Quality Film Adventure: British Critics and the

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.1

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.1

⁵¹ John Ellis, 'The Quality Film Adventure: British Critics and the Cinema, 1942-1951', Andrew Higson (ed.), *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema*, Cassell, London, 1996, p.80

⁵² Roy Armes, *A Critical History of British Cinema*, Secker and Warburg, London, 1978, pp.277-279

⁵³ Julian Petley, 'The Lost Continent', Charles Barr (ed.), *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema*, British Film Institute, London, 1986, p.102

⁵⁴ Houston, *op. cit.*, p.124

⁵⁵ Armes, *op. cit.* p.3

⁵⁶ Andrew Tudor, *Theories of Film*, Secker and Warburg, London, 1973, cited in Petley, *op. cit.* p.100

Cinema 1942-1948'. Films such as *Millions Like Us* (dir. Sidney Gilliat, Frank Launder, 1943) drew upon the purposefulness, propagandist aspects of documentary, rendering the formerly suspicious entertainment aspect of narrative film respectable, whereby critics sought to promote the quality film 'as the valid way forward for British cinema in general'.⁵⁷ A subsequent legacy of these films has been identified, with Ealing, Free Cinema and the British new wave cited as being part of a continuity of respectable, critically acceptable, British social realist films.⁵⁸

Debates regarding the implications of the emphasis on content for cinematic specificity were certainly active around the time of the release of *A Kind of Loving* and were particularly visible in the hostilities between the film publications *Sight and Sound* and *Oxford Opinion*, and from 1962, between *Sight and Sound* and *Movie*. *Sight and Sound*, the film magazine published by the British Film Institute since the 1930s, was by the 1960s considered something of a critical establishment with distinctly liberal humanist preferences. In 1960, opposition to *Sight and Sound*'s critical position was expressed by Victor Perkins, Ian Cameron and Mark Shivas in the student magazine *Oxford Opinion*, whereby the former's 'pallid philanthropy'⁵⁹ was found to result in a neglect of the specific aesthetic dimensions of film. In its place, the *Oxford Opinion* contributors proposed a rigorous attention to the specificity of film style or *mise-en-scène*, of the kind promoted by the French critics at *Cahiers du Cinéma*. The attack occasioned a lengthy defence from Penelope Houston, formerly of *Sequence* and editor of *Sight and Sound* from 1955, who parodied the *Oxford Opinion* position, stating that for these critics:

There are no good or bad subjects; affirmation is a word for boy scouts; social significance is a bore; don't expect a film to present you with sympathetic characters; don't even, if one takes it far enough, look for character; don't have any truck with anything that smacks of literature. Cinema, by this definition,

⁵⁷ Ellis, *op. cit.*, p.67

⁵⁸ Barr, Introduction, *op. cit.*, p.13 and Andrew Higson, 'Britain's Outstanding Contribution to the Film: The Documentary-Realist Tradition' in Charles Barr (ed.), *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema*, British Film Institute, London, 1986, pp.88-95

⁵⁹ Ian Cameron, 'Films', *Oxford Opinion*, No.38 (30th April 1960), p.36

means first and foremost the visual image; and the critic's response is to the excitement it can communicate.⁶⁰

Contrary to *Oxford Opinion*'s position, Houston would assert that the cinema was 'about the human situation, not about spatial relationships'.⁶¹ In their editorial for the first issue of *Movie* in June 1962, Perkins, Cameron and Shivas would further condemn both British critical practice and British film itself. Responsibility for their deficiencies was found to lie with 'the general climate of opinion in Britain, and in particular ... the British concept of The Good Film', whereby cinema was deemed to be at its best with "a good story well told".⁶² While Perkins acknowledged recent attempts at renewal, a residual attachment to 'significant' storylines, involving class or specific societal issues, together with a persisting lack of imagination and conviction were found to render British cinema 'as dead as before'.⁶³ The *Movie* critics were distinctly critical of the new wave directors and, as will be seen, of Schlesinger's direction of *A Kind of Loving*.

Movie's response was at variance, however, with the generally positive critical response to *A Kind of Loving*. In the mainstream British press, praise in the reviews was primarily directed at the naturalistic representation of the story and its milieu, indicative of the critical preference whereby significations of realism are 'necessarily and essentially positive and laudatory'.⁶⁴ A number of reviews highlighted the film's authentic, true to life aspect. For Paul Dehn at the *Daily Herald*, the realism in evidence in the film was such that 'the screen, here, almost ceases to seem a screen. It becomes a window through which one eavesdrops on actuality'.⁶⁵ Thomas Wiseman compared the film to 'a magnifying mirror: this is life with its pores open'.⁶⁶ The moral role of such authentic representation emerges in some reviews, recalling John Ellis's description of the moral imperative urged upon filmmakers by the 1940s 'quality' film

⁶⁰ Penelope Houston, 'The Critical Question', *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1960, p.163

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² V.F. Perkins, (on behalf of the editorial board), 'The British Cinema', *Movie*, June 1962, pp.2-7

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Petley, *op. cit.*, p.98

⁶⁵ Paul Dehn, *Daily Herald*, 14th April 1962, BFI digital clippings

⁶⁶ Thomas Wiseman, *Sunday Express*, 15th April 1962, BFI digital clippings

critics promoting the evocation of the ‘real’.⁶⁷ Accordingly, Alan Dent in *The Sunday Telegraph* pointed to the recognition of the “eternal verities” by knowing married couples amongst the film’s audience,⁶⁸ just as the *Daily Mirror* critic wrote of ‘a story ... that could so easily happen to any boy or girl’.⁶⁹ The sense of a fresh take on a familiar situation was also praised in the reviews. The rather ordinary circumstances that make up the story were acknowledged, but so was the way in which they were rendered ‘fresh and unfamiliar’.⁷⁰

A significant factor in the critical approval of the film was its less inhibited representation of sex. Andy Medhurst has noted such a response to the new wave films more generally, stating that ‘the treatment of sexual matters in these films played a crucial part in their being acclaimed as some kind of artistic renaissance’.⁷¹ The critics’ enthusiasm for a more candid approach to sexuality was located by Medhurst within ‘the omnipresent hegemony of ‘realism’’, one which served ‘as the vehicle for a vapidly liberal social awareness’ and in which ‘any film which dealt with sexuality outside a fundamentally moralistic framework was simply not acceptable’.⁷² Consequently, *A Kind of Loving*’s themes of reunion and compromise may be seen as permitting an appreciation of the film’s ‘frankness’ in *The Daily Telegraph*,⁷³ and in the *Evening News*, its ‘outstanding maturity’.⁷⁴ The critical enthusiasm for more adult themes was reflected in articles reporting the film’s release, such as that appearing in the *Daily Express* on 31st March 1962 detailing the co-operative, liberal attitude of the censor John Trevelyan to the project.⁷⁵ The B.B.F.C., British Board of Film Classification, had demanded certain amendments to Hall and Waterhouse’s script, in terms of what was deemed crude language and the dialogue in the scene where Vic

⁶⁷ Ellis, *op. cit.*, p.79

⁶⁸ Alan Dent, review, *The Sunday Telegraph*, 15th April 1962, BFI digital clippings

⁶⁹ Dick Richards, *Daily Mirror*, undated, BFI digital clippings

⁷⁰ Dehn, *op. cit.*

⁷¹ Andy Medhurst, ‘Victim: Text as Context’ in Andrew Higson (ed.), *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema*, Cassell, London, 1996, p.124

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Patrick Gibbs, review, *The Daily Telegraph*, 14th April 1962, BFI digital clippings

⁷⁴ Felix Barker, review, *Evening News*, 12th April 1962, BFI digital clippings

⁷⁵ Michael Wale, ‘With the censor’s approval’, *Daily Express*, 31st March 1962, BFI digital clippings

intends to buy contraceptives, but Trevelyan's visit to the set on 8th December 1961 and subsequent viewing of certain scenes from the film had allayed any concerns.⁷⁶

While most reviews celebrated the film's authentic, detailed realism, some critics expressed concerns that the film was too objective and impersonal. In his essay on the 'quality film' critics, John Ellis detailed the earlier reviewers' requirement that narrative and documentary strands be very carefully balanced, that audiences should be made to think, while at the same time, be sufficiently involved in and entertained by the story,⁷⁷ with detachment disapprovingly identified if the documentary aspect was overemphasised. Such disapproval is certainly evident in Nina Hibbin's *Daily Worker* review where she acknowledged Schlesinger's powers of observation but commented, 'observation isn't the same as revelation. When it comes to individuals, with feelings and emotions, the documentary approach only skims the surface'.⁷⁸ While enthusiastic about many aspects of the film, *The Times* reviewer also noted a 'curious anonymity'.⁷⁹ In his review for *The Tribune*, Boleslaw Sulik found that the film's characters remained one dimensional, a result of Schlesinger regarding realism as 'a formula not an attitude'.⁸⁰

Sulik's discontent with a formulaic approach to realism is indicative of a complex and varied attitude to new wave films in the reviews of *A Kind of Loving*, with the value of the cycle, and Schlesinger's relation to it, highly contested. As noted, *Room at the Top* had been positively received; *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* had also been favourably reviewed and commercially successful. By 1963, however, with the release of *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner* (dir. Tony Richardson, 1962) and *This Sporting Life* (dir. Lindsay Anderson, 1963), the films would often be considered to have become formulaic and to have lost much of their appeal.⁸¹ At the point of *A Kind of Loving*'s release in April 1962, a degree of discontent with

⁷⁶ Anthony Aldgate, *Censorship and the Permissive Society: British Cinema and Theatre 1955-1965*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995, pp.147-148

⁷⁷ Ellis, *op. cit.*, p.75, p.85

⁷⁸ Nina Hibbin, review, *Daily Worker*, 14th April 1962, BFI digital clippings

⁷⁹ Anon, review, *The Times*, 13th April 1962, BFI digital clippings

⁸⁰ Boleslaw Sulik, review, *Tribune*, 20th April 1962, BFI digital clippings

⁸¹ Murphy, *op. cit.*, p.23, p.283

convention and cliché within the new wave was certainly apparent, whether Schlesinger's film was aligned with the cycle or not. Notably, allusion to the films generally or, more usually, direct reference to *Room at the Top*, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and *A Taste of Honey*, was made in the vast majority of the *A Kind of Loving* reviews. A sense of the films as vital and innovative was still apparent in places, the *Daily Mirror* finding in *Room at the Top*, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and *A Taste of Honey* evidence of a 'new, gutsy approach to British pictures'.⁸² In an article 'All our own work', *The Times* celebrated the films' innovation in their focus on previously overlooked people and places.⁸³ *The Times* contributor, however, recognised that 'any language soon develops its clichés'⁸⁴ and it is this concern regarding the films' formularisation, an innovation having become conventional, that recurs in the reviews of *A Kind of Loving*. Consequently, Thomas Wiseman in the *Sunday Express* remarked 'Saturday Night and Sunday Morning was fine. But Monday and Tuesday and Wednesday and Thursday and Friday is too much'.⁸⁵ Whether *A Kind of Loving* participated in this formularisation was far from agreed upon. Penelope Gilliatt's pronouncement in *The Observer* that the film was 'already creaking with other people's weight'⁸⁶ would be somewhat at odds with *The Times* critic's praise for a lack of cliché and absence of 'tiresomely irrelevant trips to funfairs'.⁸⁷ In a commentary similarly praising the film's lack of cliché, David Robinson at the *Financial Times* noted in *A Kind of Loving* a direct realism which he found less self-conscious than the picturesque quality in Tony Richardson films and the more lyrical realism of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*.⁸⁸ This poetic rendering of reality would concern *Movie* some weeks later, the editors complaining about the poor integration of character in landscape, and the consequent unmotivated, artificial style of the films, although, for the *Movie* writers, Schlesinger would be as guilty as the other directors of such an approach. A forced, superfluous emphasis upon the establishment

⁸² Dick Richards, review, *Daily Mirror*, undated, BFI digital clippings

⁸³ 'All our own work', *The Times*, 28th April 1962, p.9

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Thomas Wiseman, review, *Sunday Express*, 15th April 1962, BFI digital clippings

⁸⁶ Penelope Gilliatt, review, *The Observer*, 15th April 1962, BFI digital clippings

⁸⁷ Review, *The Times*, 13th April 1962, *op. cit.*

⁸⁸ David Robinson, review, *Financial Times*, undated, BFI clippings

of landscape was noted in the new wave films, whereby Richardson ‘tarts up A Taste of Honey with his street games’ and Schlesinger ‘landscape-mongers in the most blatant and inept fashion’.⁸⁹

By the end of the 1962, *A Kind of Loving* had become the sixth most popular film at the British box office, after *Dr No* (dir. Terence Young, 1962).⁹⁰ Its profile was significantly enhanced by being awarded the Golden Bear award at the Berlin Film Festival in July 1962, the first Anglo-Amalgamated film to have been entered for such an event.⁹¹ On 1st October 1962, *A Kind of Loving* was released in the United States, distributed by Governor Films.⁹² American film criticism in the early 1960s would witness critical debates about the status of film, namely those between key emerging figures in American cinephilia, Andrew Sarris and Pauline Kael. These conflicts, however, were enacted on more peripheral ground, with mainstream, popular criticism at this point in the decade represented by establishment figures such as the *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther, a notable advocate of socially attuned, realist cinema.⁹³ While the British new wave films were exhibited on the art house cinema circuit and did not fare particularly well in terms of box office receipts in the United States, they received considerable critical praise, as noted by Sarah Street, who identifies their social engagement and basic adherence to an orthodox moralistic framework as attractive to American critics.⁹⁴ Certainly, critics were attentive to the realist style of *A Kind of Loving*, generally approving of a situation perceived to be true to life and relevant. Archer Winsten at the *New York Post* found it a film ‘of extraordinary truth’ that would inspire compassion and understanding in the viewer,⁹⁵ while Bosley Crowther pronounced it ‘kind of touching’ and ‘never sensational’.⁹⁶

⁸⁹ Perkins, *op. cit.*

⁹⁰ ‘Money-making films of 1962’, *The Times*, 4th January 1963, p.4

⁹¹ *Kinematograph Weekly* article, 12th July 1962, BFI collection JRS/2/4

⁹² ‘‘Loving’ set big for USA in October’, *Daily Cinema*, 15th August 1962, BFI collection JRS/2/4

⁹³ Robert E. Kapsis, *Hitchcock: The Making of a Reputation*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992, p.27

⁹⁴ Sarah Street, *Transatlantic Crossings: British Feature Films in the USA*, The Continuum International Publishing Group, London, 2002, pp.172-175

⁹⁵ Archer Winsten, ‘‘A Kind of Loving’ at the Fine Arts’, *New York Post*, 2nd October 1962, BFI collection JRS/2/4

⁹⁶ Bosley Crowther, ‘Screen: A Kind of Loving Arrives’, *The New York Times*, 2nd October 1962, p.46

Billy Liar

In autumn 1962, production began on *Billy Liar*, another property secured by Joseph Janni who would again act as producer. It was adapted from an original novel by Keith Waterhouse and scripted by Waterhouse and Willis Hall. The narrative concerns a young man, Billy Fisher, who escapes from his feelings of entrapment and discontent through fantasies of fame and power. The film has in the years since its release achieved an iconic status and is considered to signal a departure towards the London-based British films characteristic of the mid-sixties.⁹⁷

In its deviations from what might be considered the conventions of the new wave social realist narrative, *Billy Liar* represents a parallel with the work of other British new wave directors at this point in the 1960s, with Tony Richardson directing the period comedy *Tom Jones* in 1963 and Karel Reisz directing the crime thriller *Night Must Fall* in 1964. Although *Billy Liar* retains some of the features of the earlier realist films; a northern setting and an emphasis on male youth, individualist discontent and generational conflict, the main character Billy Fisher might be said to embody a new spirit emerging in cinema, one seeking escape through fantasies, particularly those centred on life in London. Billy (Tom Courtenay), a grammar school-educated young man living in a northern town with his lower middle-class family, works as an undertaker's clerk, but dreams of being a comedy writer. His dreams, however, are not only of living a creative life in London; he fantasises about being the great military leader of an imaginary state, Ambrosia. In his real life, Billy is shown as indecisive and dishonest, particularly so in his complicated relationships with women, being engaged to two women, although neither has provoked Billy's genuine interest. Instead, it is free spirit Liz (Julie Christie) who Billy genuinely feels an affinity with. Ultimately,

⁹⁷ Philip French, 'Alphaville of Admass or how we learned to stop worrying and love the boom', *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1966, pp.106-111 and Alexander Walker, *Hollywood, England: The British Film Industry in the Sixties*, Orion, London, 1974, p.167

however, Billy lacks the conviction to accompany Liz to London, electing instead to remain both at home and in the security of Ambrosia. For the film, the narrative was opened up to show Ambrosia and other fantasy scenarios, with the real-life catalyst leading seamlessly into the subsequent fantasy situation.

Filming of *Billy Liar* would commence after contractual negotiations, consultation with John Trevelyan and the issuing of a completion guarantee by Film Finances. John Croydon's report to Film Finances director Robert Garrett was necessarily prudent, as befitted Croydon's role, but indicated a certain reticence as to Schlesinger's reliability. As noted, he was particularly concerned about the 'latitude' that had been given to Schlesinger during the filming of *A Kind of Loving*, and speculated as to the repetition of such an approach:

If the film does not hold the same sort of promise as 'A Kind of Loving', will the financially interested parties descend on Schlesinger to force him to keep to schedule, or will Schlesinger's attitude be that regardless of everything, his penchant for over-running was tolerated on his previous picture and therefore he will do the same on this one? ⁹⁸

Croydon's concerns about location shooting conditions and 'more production hazards than was the case with *A Kind of Loving*', as well as his clear distaste for the subject matter render the report distinctly negative in tone. He concluded by recommending that the contingency budget be increased and further documents be submitted before a guarantee could be issued.⁹⁹

A warmer, diplomatic tone is in evidence in the written communication from B.B.F.C. Secretary John Trevelyan. Although, having read the script, Trevelyan identified a number of possible threats to propriety including the overuse of the word 'bloody' (sixty-four times, reduced in the final script to thirty-one), reference to 'passion pills' and contraceptives and a fight between two of Billy's girlfriends, his tone indicated ultimate faith in Schlesinger, with Trevelyan expressing concerns about

⁹⁸ John Croydon, report on *Billy Liar* dated 6th October 1962, held at Film Finances Ltd, London

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

a sex scene but adding ‘I do not imagine that John will shoot this in a censorable way’.¹⁰⁰

Filming was set to take place from mid-October until the end of December 1962 at various locations around West Yorkshire and at Shepperton Studios in London, with the budget of £217,600 again being provided entirely by production and distribution company Anglo-Amalgamated.¹⁰¹ The film would again be photographed by Denys Coop. While Julie Christie would rise to fame as Liz, to be consolidated by her role in Schlesinger’s next film, *Darling*, the actress Topsy Jane had initially been cast as Liz, opposite Tom Courtenay with whom she’d starred in *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner*. Jane’s withdrawal due to illness, however, at the end of November, some six weeks into filming, would considerably disrupt the filming schedule, necessitating a number of re-shoots. The filming schedule and budget were consequently put under pressure, although a policy insuring the actress was claimed upon, of a value of £17,582.¹⁰² By 11th December, Julie Christie had been given the role, one of several actresses to have initially auditioned for it.

Billy Liar was released in Britain on 15th August 1963. In many ways, the film was evaluated in similar terms to *A Kind of Loving*, with an appreciation of its realist attributes and an interrogation of Schlesinger’s – and the film’s – association with the new wave. But in many ways, the film was read subtly differently, being read more in terms of its universally resonant themes and its value as an entertainment.

The realism of *Billy Liar* was acknowledged, with the film’s portrayal of the reconstruction then taking place in northern cities praised, Philip Oakes of *The Sunday Telegraph* noting Schlesinger’s recreation of ‘a world of change, where new flats sprout from the rubble of back to backs’.¹⁰³ Appraisals of the film’s realism, however, tended to be focused on the film’s moral realism and its sense of a true to life resonance. In *The Spectator*, Isobel Quigley found that the film ‘has the sort of universality that

¹⁰⁰ Letter from John Trevelyan to Joseph Janni dated 10th October 1962, BFI collection JRS/3/5

¹⁰¹ Contract dated 12th December 1962, held at Film Finances Ltd, London

¹⁰² Cited in letter dated 1st January 1963 from Film Finances to Joseph Janni, held at Film Finances Ltd, London

¹⁰³ Philip Oakes, review, *The Sunday Telegraph*, 18th August 1963, BFI digital clippings

makes you sit up and recognise a moment or a gesture as if you had been there before, for we all have seen, or have known Billy Liars to some extent at some time',¹⁰⁴ while Leonard Mosley in the *Daily Express* asserted that 'Billy is not just a character in a film. He is a projection of our own human problems for I suspect that we are all in one way or another, Billy Liars at heart'.¹⁰⁵

Much of the film's appeal was found to lie in its humour and entertainment value, Bryan Buckingham in the *News of the World* finding it 'sad, comical, sometimes hilarious',¹⁰⁶ indicative of such evaluations. In places, however, the film's lightness appears to have limited its appeal, with its 'entertainment' aspect appreciated with some qualification. In the *New Statesman*, John Coleman found the film to be 'a tremendous entertainment in the sense in which Graham Greene made the word available. Without satisfying any finer demands, it makes a magnificent best of ambiguous material'.¹⁰⁷ The consensus, however, was that the film was appealing in its humanity, pathos and humour, and it was these qualities which were found to differentiate Schlesinger and *Billy Liar* from other films and directors associated with the new wave. 'Clichés',¹⁰⁸ 'picturesque squalor',¹⁰⁹ and 'the easy poetry of the north',¹¹⁰ were felt to have been avoided; in their place was noted 'a tender irony'.¹¹¹ In *The Spectator*, Isobel Quigley referred to a 'social posturing' in the work of Karel Reisz, Tony Richardson and Lindsay Anderson that she found 'rather squirm-making', stating a preference instead for Schlesinger's 'fresh, very quiet, almost transparent (as opposed to an effusive, aggressive) talent' that was 'all too easy to underrate'.¹¹² John Coleman at *The New Statesman* would similarly contrast Schlesinger's position with that of other directors associated with the new wave, stating that 'John Schlesinger is a creative world away from Reisz, Anderson, Richardson', adding that 'to stroll your

¹⁰⁴ Isobel Quigley, review, *The Spectator*, 16th August 1963, BFI digital clippings

¹⁰⁵ Leonard Mosley, review, *Daily Express*, 16th August 1963, BFI digital clippings

¹⁰⁶ Bryan Buckingham, *News of the World*, 18th August 1963, BFI digital clippings

¹⁰⁷ John Coleman, review, *New Statesman*, 16th August 1963, BFI digital clippings

¹⁰⁸ Buckingham, *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁹ Thomas Wiseman, review, *Sunday Express*, 18th August 1963, BFI digital clippings

¹¹⁰ Oakes, Philip, review, *The Sunday Telegraph*, 18th August 1963, BFI digital clippings

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Quigley, *The Spectator*, 16th August 1963, *op. cit.*

camera through Bradford needn't commit you to a profound social comment'.¹¹³ Such differing approaches would be confirmed by Schlesinger much later, the director stating that the new wave directors 'were political, and I never regarded myself as particularly political'.¹¹⁴ While the lack of engagement with the political on the whole was not an issue, with critics responding positively to the film's more affective and moral aspects, Patrick Gibbs at *The Daily Telegraph* would complain that the social comment of the film was inadequately developed,¹¹⁵ indicating some investment in what Andrew Higson has termed realism's 'commitment to the exploration of contemporary social problems in relation to realistic landscapes and characters'.¹¹⁶

While critics generally found much to commend *Billy Liar*, objections were directed at the film's fantasy scenes. Although a small number of the British reviewers approved of these sequences, an overall hostility to them is unmistakeable, inviting consideration of the apparent aversion in reviewing of this period to non-realist modes. The dominance of realism in British film culture that formed part of an allegiance to a social, humanist agenda for cinema has been found to have resulted in an emphasis on theme and content and a film culture that Andrew Higson has described as 'profoundly mistrustful of anything other than a particular de-dramatised naturalistic form'.¹¹⁷ Such hostility does not mean that a distinctly cinematic, visual style was not prized, but that it was largely felt to be the remit of European directors, with Raymond Durgnat saying in 1970 that 'if a clearly marked personal style is one's criterion of interest, then few British films reward the concern given to such directors as Dreyer, Bunuel, Franju and Renoir'.¹¹⁸ A resistance to the excessive certainly pervades the reviews of *Billy Liar*, where the fantasy scenes were found to 'suffer from over-illustration'¹¹⁹ and

¹¹³ Coleman, *op. cit.*

¹¹⁴ Buruma, *op. cit.*, p.41

¹¹⁵ Patrick Gibbs, review, *The Daily Telegraph*, 16th August 1963, BFI digital clippings

¹¹⁶ Higson, "Britain's Outstanding Contribution to the Film": The documentary-realist tradition', *op. cit.*, p.95

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.76

¹¹⁸ Raymond Durgnat, *A Mirror for England*, Faber and Faber, London, 1970 p.4, cited in Julian Petley, 'The Lost Continent', Charles Barr (ed.), *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema*, British Film Institute, London, 1986, p.98

¹¹⁹ Gibbs, *The Daily Telegraph*, 16th August 1963, *op. cit.*

‘monotonous exaggeration’.¹²⁰ David Robinson at the *Financial Times* was typical in his objections:

But the cinema, with all the marvellous possibilities it offers for fantasy, is also the enemy of imagination. Sometimes, there is a sense that the director, presented with a hundred extras, felt that he must build up a whole scene with them, rather than use them in an off-hand flash shot. The fantasy is sometimes overweight.¹²¹

For some critics the sense of the fantasy scenes as overdone arose from Schlesinger’s effort to impart a cinematic quality to the adaptation, an ‘attempt to turn verbal values into visual’ which, for Patrick Gibbs at *The Daily Telegraph* was ‘too determined’.¹²² Ian Wright at *The Guardian* apparently agreed, claiming that:

...an unfortunate aspect of Schlesinger’s drive to escape from the shackles of literariness is his great fascination with visual detail. Frequently the screen is filled with far too much and the camera is restive. He seems to be saying ‘this reality is a film, you know, even if some of the dialogue does sound a bit stagey’.¹²³

While some critics disapproved of *Billy Liar*’s forays into uncharacteristic visual spectacle, the attractions of a more visually distinctive and personal cinema were being debated elsewhere in the press at this time and suggested as preferable to conventions in British film, a discussion to which Schlesinger himself would contribute. The period was distinguished by Schlesinger’s recurring appearance in the British monthly film magazine *Films and Filming*, the director featuring in two separate articles in February 1963, one in July 1963 and, notably, a lengthy opinion piece in the May 1963 issue, in which he discussed the state of the British film industry and its future. Such articles would function to reinforce Schlesinger’s standing as a forward-looking, artistic director, in tune with the ‘cinematic’ qualities of European cinema.

Schlesinger’s opinions on the shortcomings of the British industry, along with those expressed in John Ardagh’s February 1963 article ‘What’s wrong with British

¹²⁰ Dilys Powell, review, *The Sunday Times*, 18th August 1963, BFI digital clippings

¹²¹ David Robinson, review, *Financial Times*, 16th August 1963, BFI digital clippings

¹²² Gibbs, *The Daily Telegraph*, 16th August 1963, *op. cit.*

¹²³ Wright, ‘Billy Liar at the Warner, Leicester Square’, *op. cit.*

films?’ and by Penelope Houston in her book of the same year, *The Contemporary Cinema*, point to some common complaints. The organisation of the British film industry emerges in Ardagh’s and Houston’s accounts as well as in the *Films and Filming* Schlesinger articles as too rigid and unadventurous, with producers and distributors unwilling to take risks with untried material,¹²⁴ as well as hampered, for Ardagh and Schlesinger, by inflexible union organisation.¹²⁵ For Ardagh, any freedom that small-scale productions might have recently gained was countered by the two largest film production companies, Rank and Associated British Picture Corporation, also dominating British exhibition.¹²⁶ Against the deficiencies of the British model, European, principally French practices were held up as distinctly superior. For John Ardagh, the lower production costs, smaller crews and more flexible unions specific to France rendered the French cinema more creative, while for Penelope Houston, it was opportunities in France for the production of short films, ‘a prerequisite of an experimental feature industry’, that contributed to the French industry’s greater resilience.¹²⁷ Schlesinger also expressed approval of the French cinema at this time, rating it as ‘fresh’.¹²⁸ A more general turn to European cinema would be reported in January 1963 by David Robinson in the *Financial Times*. Although, according to Robinson, European cinema remained on the whole ‘a minority taste’, he stated that the said minority was growing, for reasons connected and unconnected to the conventional nature of the British film industry:

In the first place the fashion for things Continental – whether bread, clothes or holidays – and the desire for themes more adult than the British cinema offered in the old days, began to open up the market. Subsequently film-goers have come to discover that sub-titles are not too great a barrier to enjoyment.¹²⁹

¹²⁴ ‘Blessed Isle or fool’s paradise’, *Films and Filming*, May 1963, pp.8-9, ‘How to get into films by the people who got in themselves’, *Films and Filming*, July 1963, p.13, John Ardagh, ‘What’s wrong with British films?’ *The Observer*, 3rd February 1963, p.13, Penelope Houston, *The Contemporary Cinema*, Penguin Books, London, 1969, p.124

¹²⁵ ‘How to get into films by the people who got in themselves’, *Ibid.* and Ardagh, *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ Ardagh, *op. cit.*

¹²⁷ Houston, *The Contemporary Cinema*, *op. cit.*, p.124

¹²⁸ ‘Blessed Isle or fool’s paradise’, *op. cit.*, p.8

¹²⁹ David Robinson, ‘The New Approach to Realism’, *The Financial Times*, 24th January 1963, p.4

Also featuring in commentary at this time were complaints regarding the British reliance upon adaptation and dialogue and a subsequent disregard for the visual, or cinematic aspects of film. Joseph Janni would complain of this in a *Films and Filming* article previewing *Billy Liar*.¹³⁰ Similar sentiments would be expressed by Schlesinger in May 1963, where he would state the importance of a director's early involvement in the development of a script in permitting a film to be more satisfactorily cinematic.¹³¹ Bound up with this idea of the specifically cinematic and the higher incidence of this in European cinema was the notion of film as a vehicle of personal expression, promoted by some commentators as the way forward for British film. For Ardagh, such continental ideas had begun to filter through to the latest generation of filmmakers, a contrast with the more traditional old guard of directors.¹³²

The commercial performance of *Billy Liar* in Britain is difficult to ascertain. Distributors' receipts for the film are not available, though as it did not appear in the annual top ten box-office attractions compiled by *Kine Weekly* it is reasonable to assume that it was less successful than *A Kind of Loving*. Details of the film's box office impact upon its American release in December 1963¹³³ are similarly elusive but, as noted in the discussion of *A Kind of Loving*, the British new wave films did not generally generate substantial box office receipts. Critical plaudits were forthcoming, however, with the appreciation of *Billy Liar*'s emotional truth also featuring in the film's American reception, one which in general mirrored the evaluative terms in which the film was appraised in Britain. For Margaret Harford at the *Los Angeles Times*, one of the film's strengths was the way in which it 'hits a responsive note in most of us',¹³⁴ while Richard L. Coe at *The Washington Post* remarked that 'Billy Liar is funny, yes, but the way life itself is funny... ironic, dry, absurdly impossible and to be swallowed with a tear'.¹³⁵

¹³⁰ Peter Cowie, 'Fantasies up north', *Films and Filming*, February 1963, p.68

¹³¹ 'Blessed Isle or fool's paradise', *op. cit.*, p.8

¹³² Ardagh, *op. cit.*

¹³³ Distributed by Continental Film Distributors

¹³⁴ Margaret Harford, 'Courtenay shines in Billy Liar', *Los Angeles Times*, 21st January 1964, p.6

¹³⁵ Richard L. Coe, 'Tom Courtenay as Billy Liar', *The Washington Post*, 19th February 1964, p.5

In its departures from the social realism associated with the new wave, *Billy Liar* would in a number of ways appear as transitional, with its narrative conventions largely approved of by its reviewers, even if its more foregrounded style, one pointing to new modes within filmmaking, would be resisted by some. Schlesinger's exploration of an increasingly visual, cinematic approach to filmmaking would continue with his next film, *Darling*, one which Schlesinger would specifically frame within a cinema as much 'European' as 'British'. Such a departure would, as will be noted, present particular challenges to the British critical establishment.

Darling

Darling would represent a considerable advance in Schlesinger's reputation. It has been viewed, along with a number of other films of the mid-sixties period such as *Morgan – A Suitable Case for Treatment* (dir. Karel Reisz, 1966) and *Alfie* (dir. Lewis Gilbert, 1966), as significant in a definitive departure from social realism, a departure itself attributed to the success of the film *Tom Jones* (dir. Tony Richardson, 1963).¹³⁶ The shift was also, by 1966, found by Philip French to have been symbolically represented in *Billy Liar*, whereby 'when Liz caught the midnight train to London at the end, the camera may have remained to follow Billy on his lonely, elegiac return to the family semi-detached, but spiritually the film-makers had a one-way ticket to ride south with Julie Christie'.¹³⁷ Additionally, *Darling* has been found to specifically epitomise the cycle of films termed 'swinging London', those films of the period based in more southern and affluent settings and concerned with the negotiation of identity in a changing world of artifice and consumerism. *Darling*'s story is certainly representative of such concerns, centring on an ambitious, model who attains levels of celebrity and recognition but ultimately fails to achieve personal satisfaction. While Schlesinger would later express a dislike for the film, finding it, in retrospect, 'finger-

¹³⁶ Philip French, *op. cit.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

wagging',¹³⁸ its appearance in the 1999 BFI poll of 100 greatest British films of all time is indicative of its status.¹³⁹ Such recognition should, however, be read alongside less salutary appraisals, such as David Thomson's claim that *Darling* 'deserves a place in every archive to show how rapidly modishness withers'.¹⁴⁰

The plot concerns an aspiring model, Diana Scott (Julie Christie) who, by way of ambition and her relationships with television presenter Robert Gold (Dirk Bogarde) and successful advertising executive Miles Brand (Laurence Harvey), achieves fame and fortune. Her moral deficiencies and lack of authenticity, however, undermine any genuine connections she might have with others, and she is shown at the end of the film to be unhappily married to an Italian prince, materially comfortable but essentially alone.

The initial idea for the script that would become *Darling* was suggested by Godfrey Winn, the journalist and radio presenter who had played himself in *Billy Liar*, and concerned a prostitute maintained by a circle of wealthy men.¹⁴¹ This idea was subsequently revised a number of times by Schlesinger, Janni, and the film's final credited scriptwriter, Frederic Raphael, the novelist and scriptwriter of *Nothing But the Best* (dir. Clive Donner, 1964). The original idea's similarity to the 1963 Profumo affair would prompt Schlesinger, Janni and Raphael to make significant revisions.¹⁴² Much inspiration for early drafts was gained from Schlesinger and Janni's interviews at this point with a particular high society woman, whose apparent social ambition and lack of moral integrity provided a number of interesting episodes and scenarios. The woman in question became apprehensive at the prospect of so much of her life appearing on screen that she threatened to issue legal proceedings, again necessitating revisions.¹⁴³ Differences between Schlesinger and Raphael's approach to the story would soon

¹³⁸ Buruma, *op cit.*, p.85

¹³⁹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/455170.stm>

¹⁴⁰ David Thomson, *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film*, 5th Edition, Little, Brown, London, 2010, p.783

¹⁴¹ Mann, *op. cit.*, p.234

¹⁴² Anon, 'What we set out to do was to destroy the female principle', *Daily Mail*, 14th September 1965, BFI digital clippings

¹⁴³ Letter from John Schlesinger to Maximilian Schell, dated 10th June 1964, BFI collection JRS/4/8 and Buruma, *op. cit.*, pp.83-84

emerge, Schlesinger later speaking of his preference, largely resulting from his documentary background, for fact-based scenarios, in contrast to Raphael's ultimate preference for invention and imagination.¹⁴⁴ Varying motivations and creative differences would beset the film until late in production. An opening scene involving the first meeting of Diana Scott and television journalist Robert Gold at Lord's cricket ground – later termed by Schlesinger 'an awful scene of untold stupidity'¹⁴⁵ – was discarded late in production, with new scenes featuring an alternative meeting provided by writer Troy Kennedy Martin.¹⁴⁶ Additional writing input was contributed by the writer Edna O'Brien.¹⁴⁷ The numerous changes in the script's direction and the varied creative approaches of those involved clearly took their toll on relations between Schlesinger, Janni and Raphael. In a letter to Schlesinger dated 13th August 1964, Raphael would enquire after Janni, referring to the producer's 'insolent ways', though begrudgingly admitting 'he's taught me a great deal and contributed who knows how much to the whole thing'.¹⁴⁸ By February 1965, the bitterness of recent difficulties had subsided, Raphael writing to Schlesinger:

I hope all the ructions and schmuptions can be left behind in the 1964 file and that the future won't be entirely blighted by the tiresome carry on of the recent past. Doubtless we all think we were all right about everything and probably were. That's the hell of it.¹⁴⁹

Early difficulties with the script had been apparent to John Croydon at Film Finances upon his examination of the project's viability in August 1964. Croydon found the script to be 'long and rambling', stating that, 'it is obvious that a great deal of tightening is needed from a creative point of view'.¹⁵⁰ Doubts, as previously, were allayed by the presence of familiar and capable personnel, such as Janni, associate producer Victor Lyndon and director of photography Ken Higgins, Croydon

¹⁴⁴ Buruma, *op. cit.*, p.83

¹⁴⁵ Buruma, *op. cit.*, p.82

¹⁴⁶ Jim Clark with John H Myers, *Dream Repairman: Adventures in Film Editing*, Landmarc Press, Texas, 2010, p.63

¹⁴⁷ Memo from Victor Lyndon to Schlesinger dated 12th August 1964, BFI collection JRS/4/6

¹⁴⁸ Letter from Frederic Raphael to Schlesinger dated 13th August 1964, BFI collection JRS/4/8

¹⁴⁹ Letter from Frederic Raphael to Schlesinger dated 12th February 1965, BFI collection JRS/4/8

¹⁵⁰ John Croydon, report on Darling, 15th August 1964, held at Film Finances Ltd, London

concluding that ‘provided the director does not over-complicate his shooting, it will be a feasible proposition within a shooting period of 14 weeks’.¹⁵¹

Production commenced in September 1964, with filming taking place in London, Paris and Capri, and at Shepperton studios. Finance had been sought from a number of potential backers who each turned the project down;¹⁵² assistance was again provided by Anglo-Amalgamated, with an additional contribution from the National Film Finance Corporation. The figure provided by the N.F.F.C. is unidentified but would usually be in the region of 25% of the budget. Janni also provided some of the budget; Dirk Bogarde would later write of Janni’s having mortgaged almost everything he owned to help finance the production, and Janni’s request that Bogarde accept a smaller salary and ‘defer your deferments’.¹⁵³ Film Finances would provide a completion loan to alleviate the film’s strained finances. Difficulties in financing *Darling* would finally be greatly eased when the distribution rights outside the United Kingdom were sold to Joseph Levine of Embassy Pictures, for approximately \$1 million.¹⁵⁴

A further significant impact upon the film would be in the form of the intervention of the British censor. Relations between Schlesinger and Janni and John Trevelyan, Secretary of the British Board of Film Censors had, during the production of *A Kind of Loving* and *Billy Liar*, been cordial, the director and producer working diplomatically in negotiations. Upon reading the script for *Darling* in September 1964, some short time after filming had commenced, Trevelyan noted potential difficulties, primarily centering on possible censorable nudity and a Paris-set voyeurism scene where Diana Scott and Miles Brand form part of a party who watch a couple have sexual intercourse in a hotel room. In a letter to Janni, Trevelyan stated that ‘these scenes may present a serious problem’, but, indicating the thus far good working relationship, concluded that ‘with you and John making this film I would not expect any lapses in taste’.¹⁵⁵ In filming the scene, the pair would, Trevelyan hoped, ‘take

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² ‘Julie Christie – The Men in her Life’, *Pictorial Living*, 10th April 1966, BFI collection JRS/4/12

¹⁵³ Dirk Bogarde, *Snakes and Ladders*, Phoenix, London, 2006, p.244

¹⁵⁴ Mann, *op. cit.*, p.255

¹⁵⁵ Letter from John Trevelyan to Joseph Janni, 29th September 1964, BFI collection JRS/4/8

refuge in obscurity as Losey did in the final scenes of “The Servant”¹⁵⁶ (dir. Joseph Losey, 1963). An insufficient degree of obscurity, however, was employed in the filming of the scene to satisfy Trevelyan, who upon viewing the reels in question, wrote to Janni that:

We cannot accept even the suggestion that the group of people in Paris are watching a couple copulating. It is true that the actual copulation is not seen, but there is absolutely no doubt about what is happening. we are prepared to consider any alternative that you wish to put to us, but I must make it clear that we shall not accept anything which suggests the nature of the “entertainment”.¹⁵⁷

While attentive to the censor – Schlesinger would later speak of Trevelyan ‘lik(ing) to be flattered and to be asked down to the studio for his advice’¹⁵⁸ – the director was increasingly frustrated by such infringements upon his project, writing to the sound recordist Peter Handford in April 1965 that due to ‘constant toadying for fear of the film’s being cut, we have now led him to consider himself the Executive Producer of the film industry, and its arbiter of taste’.¹⁵⁹ On 13th June 1965, Schlesinger wrote to Trevelyan, claiming that without the scene’s nuances, Diana’s character development would be compromised and that the ‘transition in the girl’s feelings from what at first appears to be quite a larky experience to the actual confrontation by something which is embarrassing and alarming to her’ would be lost. Even Schlesinger’s own ‘strait-laced’ parents had apparently been unshocked, finding the scene ‘highly diverting’.¹⁶⁰ The censor would, however, remain adamant that the ‘nature of the “entertainment”’ be obscured, though he admitted that such cuts rendered the scene ‘rather incomprehensible’.¹⁶¹ In an interview many years later, Schlesinger would speak of the impact of the cuts, remarking ‘There were scenes that they wanted out or changed which upset me terribly because in the end I think it damaged the film’.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ Letter from John Trevelyan to Joseph Janni, 26th May 1965, BFI collection JRS/4/82

¹⁵⁸ Buruma, *op. cit.*, p.87

¹⁵⁹ Letter from Schlesinger to Peter Handford, 21st April 1965, BFI collection JRS/4/10

¹⁶⁰ Letter from Schlesinger to John Trevelyan, 13th June 1965, BFI collection JRS/4/8

¹⁶¹ Letter from John Trevelyan to Joseph Janni, 22nd June 1965, BFI collection JRS/4/8

¹⁶² Buruma, *op. cit.*, p.86

The film's status as original was emphasised in early publicity, with the film presented as providing a contrast to a British cinema dependent upon the adaptation of literary sources, being more aligned with European auteur cinema. In an article for *The Observer* in May 1964, John Ardagh considered the importance of contemporary, original scenarios in British films, such as *Darling*, then in production. Schlesinger and Raphael were said to find such treatments of key importance, 'if films are to be a medium of personal artistic expression' as in those of the French new wave, Antonioni, Fellini and Bergman. Clive Donner, director of *Nothing but the Best*, concurred with this perspective, though Lindsay Anderson and Karel Reisz were quoted as retaining enthusiasm for the adapted film, citing the artistic success of *Jules and Jim* (dir. Francois Truffaut, 1962).¹⁶³ *Darling* was also found by Ardagh to represent a potential advance for cinema in its frank presentation of the middle classes, in contrast to the previous emphasis upon lower classes typical of the realist film. Raphael emphasised the film as atypical of British films, stating "There'll be much less of an obvious plot and storyline than in most British films – in this, it will be more like a French or Italian film",¹⁶⁴ indicating a move towards the cinematic and away from the strong linear narrative found to be characteristic of the British film. Such perspectives were again foregrounded in the February 1965 article 'Mod to the bitter end', which appeared in *The Observer*. Again, the forthcoming film was aligned with current Italian cinema, though Schlesinger described it as 'more objective, less "interior mood" than Antonioni'. *Darling* was said by Schlesinger to be 'different from any other film ever made in Britain', and deemed by the article's uncredited writer to be 'very strong stuff...of a frankness hardly conceivable in British film'.¹⁶⁵

Upon the film's release in Britain on 16th September 1965, *Darling*'s critical reception would again indicate a persistence of particular critical frameworks and terms of evaluation. Reviewers would continue to be invested in a realistic representation of contemporary society and a morally coherent and convincing presentation of character and story. Certain moral ambiguities in *Darling* would, however, present challenges to

¹⁶³ John Ardagh, 'In the picture: John Ardagh reports on a new trend in films', *The Observer*, 31st May 1964, p.25

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ Anon, 'Mod to the bitter end', *The Observer*, 21st February 1965, BFI digital clippings

the critics, resulting in a reception that was ‘not so much mixed as it was contradictory’.¹⁶⁶ A bolder approach to style, in evidence in *Darling* as well as in other recent films, would similarly provoke a variety of responses. Despite a lack of consensus amongst the critics, the film would meet with commercial success, particularly in the United States.

Darling again drew considerable praise for its well-observed, realistic representation of a contemporary setting. For David Robinson in the *Financial Times*, the film was ‘a serious and conscientious attempt to isolate a wholly contemporary character born of post-war Britain and moulded by some of its pressures’,¹⁶⁷ while *The Times*’ reviewer wrote that ‘the barrenness and triviality of a certain way of life is expertly caught’.¹⁶⁸ For others, however, the film’s realism was deemed to have failed due to generally poor characterisation and inadequately defined motivation. Thus, Ian Wright at *The Guardian* would complain ‘character, particularly the girl’s, is at times distorted to the point at which one wants to cry out ‘people don’t behave like that!’’.¹⁶⁹ Consequently, a certain detachment was felt by some reviewers, who were left wondering at the film’s raison d’être. Hence George Angell at *Films and Filming* would complain:

You can’t get emotionally involved, can’t identify with the characters. Diana is not a credible person. As a result you are charmed, intrigued, amused by parts of the film, but you are never engrossed or captivated by the whole of it. I was certainly not shocked or disturbed, as I should have been, by a film which I presume sets out to indict the empty way of life of London’s smart set.¹⁷⁰

For Alexander Walker in the *Evening Standard*, the film’s moral ambiguity constituted the film’s ultimate failing:

Films that set out to expose the truth about people with no values ought to be very sure in advance of where their own values lie. *Darling* is one that isn’t. The

¹⁶⁶ George Garrett, O.B. Hardison and Jane R. Gelfson (eds), *Film Scripts, Volume 4*, Applause Theatre Book Publishers, New York, 2013, p.297

¹⁶⁷ David Robinson, ‘The Light Girl’, *Financial Times*, 17th September 1965, p.24

¹⁶⁸ Anon, ‘The Sexual Ladder to Material Success’, *The Times*, 16th September 1965, p.16

¹⁶⁹ Ian Wright, *The Guardian*, 17th September 1965, BFI digital clippings

¹⁷⁰ George Angell, ‘Darling...’, *Films and Filming*, October 1965, p.24

result is that for all its accomplished direction, excellent acting and entertaining caricatures of contemporary Top People, it is morally out of focus all the way.¹⁷¹

While for some critics, the film may have been ambiguous with regards to the filmmakers' position on the story's morality or to not have been sufficiently condemning of Diana's way of life, others did not hesitate to provide their own indictments, condemning Diana as wholly immoral and representative of the moral decline of the contemporary woman.¹⁷² Further dissatisfaction with regards to character was tangible in observations of Diana's apparent discrepancy with the sympathetic persona of Julie Christie, with Kenneth Tynan, reviewing *Darling* for *The Guardian*, finding the actress's 'niceness' to be at odds with the character's cynicism,¹⁷³ a sentiment echoed by William Hall at the *Evening News*¹⁷⁴ and Leonard Mosley at the *Daily Express*.¹⁷⁵

The film's use of foregrounded stylistic techniques such as freeze frames and jump cuts, often associated with the French nouvelle vague, would similarly confound critics upon *Darling*'s release, with the more general departure in films from the plainer style of new wave social realism towards a more visual, cinematic form frequently resisted by reviewers.¹⁷⁶ In *Sight and Sound* in 1966, Philip French would cite *Billy Liar* and more significantly, *Tom Jones*, as ushering in more modish approaches in film. In the new breed of films, which French found to include *Darling*, he recognised some attractions, namely, 'a feeling for the medium, a drive, a sense of style, a freewheeling vigour, for which there are few previous parallels', but found that ultimately:

These gains can be seen as unassimilated, or only partially understood, influences from the younger French directors and the cinema verité movement; as well as from TV commercials on which most British directors spend the greater part of their time. The feeling for the medium is often only a concern for stylishness and

¹⁷¹ Alexander Walker, review, *Evening Standard*, 17th September 1965, BFI digital clippings

¹⁷² For example see Dick Richards, , 'Darling...you're a bitch', *Daily Mirror*, 17th September 1965, p.23

¹⁷³ Kenneth Tynan, review, *The Observer*, 19th September 1965, BFI digital clippings

¹⁷⁴ William Hall, 'Julie .. A Darling to be proud of', *Evening News*, 16th September 1965, BFI digital clippings

¹⁷⁵ Leonard Mosley, review, *Daily Express*, 14th September 1965, BFI digital clippings

¹⁷⁶ Murphy, *op. cit.*, pp.276-278

fashion, a vigour, a desperate energy that seeks to conceal a lack of content behind a battery of tricks.¹⁷⁷

Neil Sinyard has complained of such sentiments characterising reviewing, writing of the negative critical response to the 1964 film, *The Pumpkin Eater* (dir. Jack Clayton) that, ‘when British filmmakers are not being attacked for a lack of ambition ... they are berated for pretentiousness or artiness when striving to be more experimental and difficult’.¹⁷⁸ Certainly, a negative reaction to the apparent excesses of *Darling* was evident upon its release. At the *Financial Times*, David Robinson found that Schlesinger ‘becomes too enamoured of technical tricks, like the freeze shots, which are used to excess in *Darling*’.¹⁷⁹ Such a position was echoed by Margaret Hinxman at *The Sunday Telegraph*, who wrote, ‘it isn’t the subject of the film that bothers me. It’s a conman’s movie, brandishing selling techniques as flashily as the advertising, publicity and show business characters it pillories’.¹⁸⁰ Others, however, were more receptive to the film’s inventiveness, such as William Hall at the *Evening News*, who wrote, ‘using the cameras expertly and with slick deft cutting, Schlesinger brings rare visual excitement to every reel without falling into the trap of making the techniques obtrusive’.¹⁸¹ Ian Wright at *The Guardian* appeared to agree, writing that the film was ‘the work of a director who understands the cinema more than most, is painstakingly observant, and has bravely striven for a free-wheeling and truly cinematic film’.¹⁸² As such, the lack of consensus as to the film’s stylistic excess would be as apparent as the dissatisfaction with the film’s position on its protagonist’s moral status.

The period is also notable for a sense of Schlesinger’s growing artistic stature, both in the *Darling* reviews and in articles appearing around the time of its release. On 8th July 1965, the article ‘Schlesinger at Stratford’ appeared in *The Guardian* profiling Schlesinger’s forthcoming direction of *Timon of Athens* for the Royal Shakespeare

¹⁷⁷ French, *op. cit.*, p.109

¹⁷⁸ Neil Sinyard, *Jack Clayton*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2000, p.111

¹⁷⁹ Robinson, *Financial Times*, 17th September 1965, *op. cit.*

¹⁸⁰ Margaret Hinxman, review, *Sunday Telegraph*, 19th September 1965, BFI digital clippings

¹⁸¹ Hall, *Evening News*, 16th September 1965, *op. cit.*

¹⁸² Ian Wright, *The Guardian*, 17th September 1965, BFI digital clippings

Company. From journalist Gareth Lloyd Evans, a distinctly artistic Schlesinger persona emerges:

He says he hates cant, the Establishment, “ungenerosity of feeling,” the fickleness of the film industry, and he loves food and making films. You might guess that he was an intelligent film director who gave the money-moguls ulcers because he has artistic standards – and you would be right.¹⁸³

Schlesinger as a Romantic artist appears throughout, both by way of Evans’ summation and Schlesinger’s own discourse; the difficulties of obtaining backing for *Darling* due to its status as original are referred to, as is ‘Schlesinger’s strongly visual imagination, with the director emerging as a type who must ‘live on risk’. Schlesinger is cited as hating ‘the whole middle-class ‘beige’ image of this country which stops vigorousness and freedom of thought and expression’.¹⁸⁴ Although not as forcefully, a similarly artistic figure was in evidence in the reviews. Despite the critics’ reservations regarding characterisation and stylistic excess, Schlesinger would still frequently be positioned as a director of considerable ability. Reviewers at *The Times* and the *Evening Standard* noted his considerable ‘authority’,¹⁸⁵ while the *Sunday Express* designated him ‘undoubtedly the most talented man currently working in British films’, with *Darling* attaining ‘a stature that is hard to surpass’.¹⁸⁶ His authority would be further enhanced by his being cast in the role of ‘starmaker’,¹⁸⁷ the discoverer of Julie Christie, a nomination that would be repeated during the production and release of *Far from the Madding Crowd*.

Shyon Baumann has considered transitions in the conventions of reviewing in his study of shifts in the perception of film between the 1950s and the 1980s.¹⁸⁸ The 1960s were found to be notable for distinct changes in the language used by reviewers, with a marked increase in the incidence of words and terms more conventionally

¹⁸³ Gareth Lloyd Evans, ‘Schlesinger in Stratford’, *The Guardian*, 8th July 1965, p.8

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ Anon, *The Times*, 16th September 1965, *op. cit.*, Alexander Walker, review, *Evening Standard*, 17th September 1965, BFI digital clippings

¹⁸⁶ Clive Hirschhorn, ‘It’s devastating – and Julie proves she’s the tops’, *Sunday Express*, 19th September 1965, BFI digital clippings

¹⁸⁷ Ann Pacey, *The Sun*, 14th September 1965, BFI digital clippings

¹⁸⁸ Baumann, *op. cit.*

associated with the evaluation of high art. With their intimations of Schlesinger's authority, the reviews of *Darling* indicate some shift towards such an evaluation, with a more distinct artistic evaluation occurring later in the decade, as will be examined. Baumann has also noted an increase in the levels of interpretation and analysis in the reviews of the period, whereby films are taken to be artistic phenomena and thus considered in the light of an increasingly perceived artistic complexity. Some degree of interpretive reviewing might be said to have occurred in reviews of Schlesinger's earlier films, whereby nuances of subject were discussed¹⁸⁹ but *Darling* would arguably occasion the first review of Schlesinger's work whereby its status as in some way difficult or artistically complex was celebrated. In her first of two reviews of *Darling*, Nina Hibbin at the *Daily Worker* had been somewhat negative about the film, admiring Schlesinger's powers of observation but finding *Darling* too detached and slightly incoherent.¹⁹⁰ Two months later, however, Hibbin's evaluation was distinctly more positive, the critic having had 'more time to chew it over',¹⁹¹ a revision that recalls the decade's shift to the notion that 'real art requires effort to be appreciated and cannot be enjoyed on a superficial level', as noted by Baumann.¹⁹² At the point of her second review, Hibbin viewed the film as a 'masterpiece' having 'layers within layers', indicative of the 'complexity and subtlety' which would be foregrounded by critics displaying increasingly auteurist inclinations.¹⁹³

As indicated, the film's American release was secured when Joseph Levine of Embassy Pictures purchased the worldwide distribution rights.¹⁹⁴ Compared to British receipts of approximately £250,000 in Britain,¹⁹⁵ the film would generate rentals in North America of \$3.5 million.¹⁹⁶ Again, Schlesinger would be forced to make cuts to the film, re-editing a scene in which Julie Christie appeared naked.¹⁹⁷ Despite

¹⁸⁹ For example, see Eric Rhode, 'A Kind of Loving', *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1962, p.917

¹⁹⁰ Nina Hibbin, *Daily Worker*, 'The British Dolce Vita', 16th July 1965, BFI digital clippings

¹⁹¹ Nina Hibbin, review, *Daily Worker*, 18th September 1965, BFI digital clippings

¹⁹² Baumann, *op. cit.*, p.416

¹⁹³ Baumann, *op. cit.*, p.416

¹⁹⁴ Mann, *op. cit.*, p.255

¹⁹⁵ Interview with Richard Gregson in Brian McFarlane, *An Autobiography of British Cinema*, Methuen, London, 1997, p.248

¹⁹⁶ Street, *op. cit.*, p.170

¹⁹⁷ Buruma, *op. cit.*, p.86

‘arguments’ with Levine over these cuts,¹⁹⁸ Schlesinger would approve of the extensive publicity financed by Levine who, according to Schlesinger’s agent Richard Gregson, ‘publicised the hell out of it’.¹⁹⁹

That Joseph Levine should publicise the film so extensively points to the popularity at this point of British films in the United States. With fewer American films released and declining cinema admissions, American distributors were more inclined to release foreign films, while incentives to explore production opportunities abroad, such as Britain’s Eady fund, were also significant in fostering links between British and American film production.²⁰⁰ The success of *Tom Jones*, *A Hard Day’s Night* (dir. Richard Lester, 1964) and the James Bond films *From Russia with Love* (dir. Terence Young, 1963) and *Goldfinger* (dir. Guy Hamilton, 1964), accruing rentals in North America of \$17m, \$6.2m, \$9.9m and \$22.9m respectively, confirmed the potential of a film such as *Darling*. At the same time, the popularity of such films points to the wider cultural attraction of Britain at this point. While *Time* magazine’s article on ‘swinging London’ would not appear until April 1966, the sense of Britain, and particularly London, as an exciting, dynamic and fashionable cultural centre was by then established.²⁰¹

Possibly partially attributable to this context, American critics were generally more positive in their reviews of *Darling* than the British critics had been. *Time* found the film ‘irresistible’,²⁰² while for the *Newsweek* reviewer it delivered ‘the finest kind of goods’, with Schlesinger’s pace deemed to be ‘unflagging’.²⁰³ Philip T. Hartung in *Commonweal* was similarly admiring, noting ‘brilliant filmmaking’,²⁰⁴ just as Richard Schickel in *Life* remarked upon a ‘bravura direction’.²⁰⁵ Negative appraisals again focused on issues with characterisation. For Dwight MacDonald at *Esquire*, Diana’s

¹⁹⁸ Letter from Schlesinger to Dorothy Bannen, 20th August 1965, BFI collection JRS/4/10

¹⁹⁹ Interview with Richard Gregson in Brian McFarlane, *op. cit.*, p.248

²⁰⁰ Street, *op. cit.*, pp.169-71

²⁰¹ Robert Murphy, *op. cit.*, p.140, re Piri Halasz, ‘London: The Swinging City’, *Time*, 15 April 1966

²⁰² Anon, ‘Playgirl’s Progress’, *Time*, 13th August 1965, p.74

²⁰³ Anon, ‘Temptress in Purgatory’, *Newsweek*, 16th August 1965, p.66

²⁰⁴ Philip T. Hartung, *Darling* review, *Commonweal*, 20th August 1965, p.82

²⁰⁵ Richard Schickel, ‘Johnny’s Daring Darling’, *Life*, 27th August 1965, p.59

motives were inadequately conveyed, resulting in identification difficulties.²⁰⁶ Philip K. Scheuer in the *Los Angeles Times* claimed that the film left him ‘as emotionally unsatisfied as the girl’.²⁰⁷

In *The Village Voice*, Andrew Sarris would mount a defence against such positions, an uncharacteristic response in view of Sarris’s observation in 1963, having watched *A Kind of Loving* and *Billy Liar*, that ‘everything (Schlesinger) does is so wrong that the accumulation of errors resembles a personal style’.²⁰⁸ For Sarris, critical disapproval of *Darling*’s apparent moral vacuum and Diana’s seeming personal amorality were indicative of the fact that ‘we are lagging behind in our conception of what is normal and what is abnormal in sexual behaviour’.²⁰⁹ Pauline Kael also suggested a possibility beyond judgment and condemnation of Diana’s ambition, suggesting that one might feel “‘Well, if she’s going to be unhappy, rich is better’”.²¹⁰ While Kael was generally negative about the film, ultimately finding it ‘empty of meaning and mind’,²¹¹ such a possibility of audience sympathy and identification with Diana and her lifestyle has been found to have been a factor in the film’s success. Julie Christie suggested this, stating:

Here was a woman who didn’t want to get married, didn’t want to have children like those other kitchen-sink heroines; no, *Darling* wanted to have everything. Of course at the time, this was seen as greedy promiscuity and she had to be punished for it. But there was an element of possibility for women, of a new way of living, which is why the film was such a success.²¹²

The possibilities for a less condemnatory reading of Diana Scott, and the pleasures and identification available for *Darling*’s viewers have been explored by both Carrie Tarr²¹³ and Christine Geraghty.²¹⁴ For Tarr in her 1985 essay “‘Sapphire’, ‘Darling’ and the

²⁰⁶ Dwight MacDonald, *Darling* review, *Esquire*, November 1965, p64

²⁰⁷ Philip K. Scheuer, ‘Julie’s *Darling* Role an Oscar Contender’, *Los Angeles Times*, 29th October 1965, p11

²⁰⁸ Andrew Sarris, ‘Films’, *The Village Voice*, 19th December 1963, p.17

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p.15

²¹⁰ Pauline Kael, ‘*Darling*, “rich is better”’, *Vogue*, October 1965, p.168

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

²¹² Quoted in Murphy, *op. cit.*, p.124

²¹³ Carrie Tarr, ‘Sapphire, *Darling* and the boundaries of permitted pleasure’, *Screen*, 01/1985, Volume 26, Issue 1, pp.50-65

²¹⁴ Christine Geraghty, ‘Women and Sixties British Cinema: The Development of the ‘*Darling*’ Girl’, in Robert Murphy (ed.), *The British Cinema Book*, British Film Institute, London, 1999

Boundaries of Permitted Pleasure', more enlightened positions such as those taken up by Sarris and, to some degree, Kael, were testament to 'the headway made by liberal/progressive thinking in the mid-60s'.²¹⁵ While many reviewers, particularly in Britain, did not hesitate to criticise *Darling*'s ethics, the appeal of the film for the public would be unmistakeable, namely in the film's final commercial success, press interest in the Diana Scott 'look'²¹⁶ and the ensuing interest in Christie and her apparently bohemian and liberated lifestyle.²¹⁷ Just as the American reception varied from that of Britain in the degree of latitude permitted to the film's lead character, so attitudes to the visual style of *Darling* would differ, with few signs of hostility to stylistic excess in American reviews.

Far from the Madding Crowd

1967 would see the release of the MGM-backed adaptation of Thomas Hardy's novel *Far from the Madding Crowd*, a departure from the very contemporary *Darling*. Accounts of *Far from the Madding Crowd*'s origination clearly point to one grounded in very commercial considerations, although these would only emerge some time after the film's release. According to Gene D. Phillips, a variety of ideas for Schlesinger and Janni's next film were being considered during the making of *Darling*. A member of the crew was reading *Far from the Madding Crowd* and Schlesinger felt that its period, pastoral setting would be a welcome relief from the contemporary stridency of *Darling*.²¹⁸ He would also stress his attraction to the themes and human perspectives of Hardy.²¹⁹ Although such emphasis upon the personal and artistic aspects of filmmaking was characteristic of Schlesinger, Janni's later comments regarding the lure of big-budget filmmaking²²⁰ are telling. The film, a \$2.75 million MGM co-

²¹⁵ Tarr, *op. cit.*, p.59

²¹⁶ Melanie Bell, *Julie Christie*, BFI published by Palgrave, London, 2016, p.34

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.36

²¹⁸ Gene D. Phillips, *John Schlesinger*, Twayne Publishers, Boston, Massachusetts, 1981, p.79

²¹⁹ Gene D. Phillips, *The Movie Makers: Artists in an Industry*, Burnham Inc, Chicago, 1973, pp.204-205

²²⁰ Walker, *Hollywood, England: The British Film Industry in the Sixties*, *op. cit.*, p.361

production with Anglo-Amalgamated, was made at the height of the decade's American investment in British film,²²¹ with the American success of *Darling* pointing to Schlesinger as a potentially sound business prospect. A number of American-backed, British period films were released at this time and included *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (dir. Tony Richardson, 1968), *Alfred the Great* (dir. Clive Donner, 1969) and a remake of *Goodbye Mr Chips* (dir. Herbert Ross, 1969). As indicated by James Chapman, however, the expense of these films, particularly in a period of declining cinema attendance, worked to negate their potential commercial success, caught up as they were, according to Alexander Walker, on a 'production escalator' propelled by American investment in British films.²²²

The film's production would be notable for its continuity with *Darling*. As well as Schlesinger's and Janni's participation, Julie Christie starred as the main character, Bathsheba, and the script was again undertaken by Frederic Raphael. The adaptation was a faithful one, with the sense of authenticity and adherence to the original spirit of the novel extended to its shooting, with the filming, between August 1966 and February 1967, undertaken entirely on location in Dorset.

Far from the Madding Crowd is the story of Bathsheba Everdene, a young country woman who inherits a farm from a relative. Not only must she learn how to manage a large farm, she also has to negotiate relationships with three suitors – Gabriel Oak (Alan Bates), Sergeant Francis Troy (Terence Stamp) and local landowner and farmer William Boldwood (Peter Finch). It is Sergeant Troy who attracts Bathsheba's interest and marries her, though he proves to be a gambler and in love with Fanny Robin (Prunella Ransome), a young woman he had deserted, who is carrying his child and goes on to die in poverty. Troy's disappearance and apparent death causes the impassioned Boldwood to pursue Bathsheba, but Troy's return and subsequent death at the hands of Boldwood sees Bathsheba alone and grieving. It is finally the reliable

²²¹ Alan Burton and Steve Chibnall, *Historical Dictionary of British Cinema*, Scarecrow Press, Lanham, Maryland, 2013, p.xxxi

²²² James Chapman, *Past and Present: National Identity and the British Historical Film*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2005, p.253, Walker, *Hollywood, England: The British Film Industry in the Sixties*, op. cit., p.443

Gabriel Oak who proves to be the suitable and steadfast suitor, and the two finally marry.

Archive material again points to the collaborative nature of Schlesinger, Janni and Raphael's working relationship. A note from Janni to Schlesinger suggests the former's significant influence, in both practical and creative terms:

I am absolutely convinced – and Fred does share my view – that the elimination of the Malthouse would be very useful to:- a) the construction of the script and b) the characterisation of Bathsheba. ... In fact, I am dead certain that this is one of these cuts which will give the impression that practically an hour has been cut out of the film. I really do think it is vital. ... In normal circumstances, one could afford to shoot it but when we are already £125,000 over budget, and likely to go over the new budget I have negotiated with Metro, we really must not behave like lunatics.²²³

Such overrunning, presumably, might have been attributed by such as John Croydon to a lack of discipline on Schlesinger's part, though variabilities in weather conditions would be a significant factor in schedule difficulties, as explained by Schlesinger to the *Los Angeles Times*' Charles Champlin.²²⁴ The collaborative nature of the production would be further underlined in Schlesinger's later acknowledgement of the contributions of other film personnel, including those of production designer Richard Macdonald and editor Jim Clark.²²⁵ At some points, a collaborative creative approach was suggested by the press. The phrase 'the Darling team' recurs, sometimes including Christie,²²⁶ but usually denoting just Schlesinger, Janni and Raphael.²²⁷ Julie Christie would herself emphasise a collaborative relationship with Schlesinger, stating "You don't work 'for' him, but 'with' him. I tell him what I think and he tells me what he thinks – very much so, sometimes. It's a kind of two-way contribution, although he's

²²³ Memo from Joseph Janni to Schlesinger, 29th November 1966, attachment to *Far from the Madding Crowd* final script, BFI collection

²²⁴ Charles Champlin, 'The Man From 'Madding Crowd'', 8th November 1967, *Los Angeles Times*, p.E17

²²⁵ Mann, *op. cit.*, p.279

²²⁶ Patrick Gibbs, review, *Daily Telegraph*, 20th October 1967, BFI digital clippings

²²⁷ Anon, 'Darling' team again in production', *Daily Cinema*, 26th September 1966, BFI collection JRS/4/12, Anon, 'Julie Christie gets three leading men', *Oldham Evening Chronicle*, 1st October 1966, BFI collection JRS/5/9

always a step ahead of me and that draws me along”.²²⁸ More typically, however, Schlesinger would appear in a more authoritative role. He tended to be presented as the film’s author and manager, ‘a kind of genial Svengali to Julie Christie’s Trilby’,²²⁹ who did not hesitate to assert his authority during the filming process, stating in February 1967:

Then there was Darling. Oh, I know I got the reputation of being an ogre on that film. Perhaps Julie cried, but we had to drive her hard because she was an essential character. What people forget is that making films is jolly hard work and not the glamorous profession that people believe. I was an actor myself once, so I know what I can ask of them. I always work them hard; they are highly paid, and therefore there to be worked hard.²³⁰

Publicity appearing at the time of *Far from the Madding Crowd*’s production would also be notable for an artistic representation of its director. Nina Hibbin, whose reviews of Schlesinger films to date had been generally positive and who had read an artistic complexity in *Darling*, would be one of the first to trace common concerns in Schlesinger’s oeuvre to date and to connect these to his preoccupations, when in an interview for the *Morning Star*, she ‘suggested that a possible link between his three previous feature films, “A Kind of Loving”, “Billy Liar” and “Darling” and the Hardy novel, was fatalism. “Oh yes,” he agreed. “I’m a fatalist”’.²³¹ Schlesinger would himself present his role as an essentially artistic one, underplaying any sense of commercial compromise, and highlighting authenticity, stating in November 1966; ‘I hate the idea of doing just a simple box-office film; it seems a waste of energy. I always work as if each film will be my last’.²³²

Far from the Madding Crowd received a royal premiere in London on 16th October 1967. A New York premiere followed on 18th October, one which would represent a low point in Schlesinger’s career and would frequently be cited as such by the director in subsequent discussions of his work.²³³ Washington and Hollywood

²²⁸ Nina Hibbin, ‘This film seems to be among friends’, *Morning Star*, 14th January 1966, BFI collection JRS/5/9

²²⁹ *What’s on in London* article, 10th October 1965, BFI collection JRS/5/9

²³⁰ Peter Howell, ‘Far from the Madding Crowd’, *Photoplay*, February 1967, BFI collection JRS/5/9

²³¹ Hibbin, *Morning Star*, 14th January 1966, *op. cit.*

²³² Anon, ‘Production Wise’, *Daily Cinema*, 9th November 1966, BFI collection JRS/5/9

²³³ Phillips, *Major Film Directors of the American and British Cinema*, *op. cit.*, p.231

premieres were cancelled and cuts to the film requested by MGM. Schlesinger and Clark made some alterations but disagreed with MGM who believed that the film would benefit from the removal of the ironic final scene featuring Bathsheba, newly wed to the reliable Gabriel Oak (Alan Bates), which ends on a shot of the musical box given to her by the errant Sergeant Troy (Terence Stamp).²³⁴ Seasoned editor Margaret Booth would undertake such an edit at MGM's request, leaving audiences on the more positive note of Bathsheba and Gabriel's wedding.²³⁵

Again, reviewers attended to issues of realism, unsurprising in appraisals of an adaptation of a classic literary source much concerned with rural life. In the American reviews, there was praise from critics for the film's evocation of Hardy's Wessex, with *Variety* noting 'some of the most thrilling atmospheric footage seen on the screen in some time'²³⁶ and *BoxOffice* claiming that 'the location work is some of the best ever'.²³⁷ While the film's authentic atmosphere was praised, its fidelity to the novel was not so well received, with the script's faithful adherence to the novel found to be at the cost of a more appropriately 'cinematic' film. This would, for *Variety*, have consequences for Schlesinger's authorship, its reviewer 'Hawk' claiming that 'scripter Frederick (sic) Raphael has perhaps hewn too closely to the original. Thus he has allowed director John Schlesinger only occasional – and principally mechanical – chances to forge his own film'.²³⁸ Schlesinger would himself admit to some displacement of his own authorship, telling Charles Champlin at the *Los Angeles Times* that 'we wanted to make a Hardy film, not a film based on Hardy. We had to mirror his way of looking at things, not our way of looking at him'.²³⁹ Such a dispersal of authority would have consequences for Schlesinger's own perceived agency and status as distinctive or innovative. Bosley Crowther in *The New York Times* claimed that 'Schlesinger has committed nothing fresh or even contemporary in the way of

²³⁴ Phillips, *John Schlesinger, op. cit.*, pp.88-89

²³⁵ Mann, *op. cit.*, p.292

²³⁶ Hawk, 'Far from the Madding Crowd', *Variety*, 27th September 1967, p. 6

²³⁷ Don Mesereau, 'Far from the Madding Crowd', *Boxoffice*, 2nd October 1967, p.13

²³⁸ Hawk, *op. cit.*

²³⁹ Charles Champlin, 'Far From Madding Crowd' – Visual, Aesthetic Beauty', *Los Angeles Times*, 15th October 1967, p.D14

cinematic story-telling in this film, except for some rather handsome and slightly self-conscious photographic and editing techniques'.²⁴⁰

The faithful adaptation of the source novel would also be a concern for British reviewers. Although some praised Frederic Raphael's 'telescoping' of the novel,²⁴¹ more were concerned that the film had not evaded the story's literary character, possibly indicating an increased critical preference for the specifically 'cinematic' than in evidence in reviews of the earlier films. At *The Times*, it was felt that 'to film (Hardy), one must first dramatize him: seize the essential and re-create in film terms. The one thing one cannot do is what Frederic Raphael, the scriptwriter here, does: passively drift along in his wake'.²⁴² Similarly, Penelope Mortimer stated that 'to be a valid success, a film has to escape from the climate and geography of the novel; it must create its own terms, its own language. Merely to photograph a novel ... is not writing a screenplay'.²⁴³

Such fidelity to the source novel would again have consequences for perceptions of Schlesinger's creative agency. For John Russell Taylor in *The Times*, 'some of the blame for the picture's shapelessness and frequent dullness must clearly go to Mr Schlesinger for not taking a stronger line with his material and imposing some sort of unity'.²⁴⁴ Instead, it was other crew members, namely cinematographer Nicolas Roeg and production designer Richard MacDonald, who were deemed by Taylor to be 'responsible for practically everything that makes the film worth seeing'.²⁴⁵ A further aspect of the film deemed to be unsatisfactory was Julie Christie's apparent miscasting, with critics finding the role of Bathsheba incompatible with an actress viewed as 'the embodiment of the swinging sixties',²⁴⁶ 'an inescapably modern type'²⁴⁷ and 'a

²⁴⁰ Bosley Crowther, 'Screen: Far from the Madding Crowd at Capitol', *The New York Times*, 19th October 1967, p.59

²⁴¹ John Coleman, 'The Wessex Set', *New Statesman*, 20th October 1967, BFI digital clippings, James Price, 'Far from the Madding Crowd', *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1967/68, pp.39-40

²⁴² John Russell Taylor, 'Hardy film looks marvellous', *The Times*, 17th October 1967, BFI digital clippings

²⁴³ Penelope Mortimer, *The Observer*, 22nd October 1967, BFI digital clippings

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁵ Taylor, *The Times*, 17th October 1967, *op. cit.*

²⁴⁶ Cecil Wilson, 'Darling Julie is sexy even in those Victorian skirts', *Daily Mail*, 17th October 1967, BFI digital clippings

²⁴⁷ Taylor, *The Times*, 17th October 1967, *op. cit.*

swinging 1967 girl'.²⁴⁸ The effect of this seeming miscalculation, together with the film's other purported shortcomings would, at this stage at least, constitute something of a setback to Schlesinger's reputation. *Far from the Madding Crowd*'s disappointing reception, however, would be followed by what would be Schlesinger's most commercially successful film, *Midnight Cowboy*.

Midnight Cowboy

Midnight Cowboy, Schlesinger's 1969 film about hustler Joe Buck and his relationship with fellow outsider Ratso Rizzo, would bring the director the greatest success of his career to date, and remain the film with which he is most associated. An early example of the Hollywood Renaissance period, following successes such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (dir. Arthur Penn, 1967) and *The Graduate* (dir. Mike Nicholls, 1967), *Midnight Cowboy* would perform extremely well at the box office. Academy Awards for Best Director and Best Adapted Screenplay would be forthcoming, as would the Oscar for Best Picture, *Midnight Cowboy* being the only X-rated film to win the award in the twenty-two years of that particular adult rating's existence, from 1968-1990. Ground-breaking in its frankness and depiction of dislocation in the midst of an inhumane urban America, it has been hailed as 'one of the most daring Hollywood films ever made',²⁴⁹ in 1994 admitted to the United States National Film Registry and in 1998 placed 34th in the AFI's top 100 American films of all time. Despite the film's subsequent canonisation, however, the initial reception of the film would be somewhat mixed, particularly in the United States, prior to its endorsement at the box office by a largely youthful audience, seeking a new kind of film experience. The range of responses on both sides of the Atlantic would be, it will be argued, symptomatic of critical tastes caught between established preferences and the increasingly assimilated

²⁴⁸ Alexander Walker, 'What's a swinging 1967 girl doing in Hardy's Dorset?', *Evening Standard*, 19th October 1967, BFI digital clippings

²⁴⁹ Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner, *Hide in Plain Sight: The Hollywood Blacklistees in Film and Television 1950-2002*, Palgrave, New York, 2005, p.208

notion of the 'auteur' as well as indicative of the mainstream reviewing establishment's resistance to a new cinema of disaffection and sensation, one which young filmgoers were more responsive to. The critical reception of the film will, again, be examined alongside Schlesinger's appearance in interviews and profiles, where he would increasingly appear as a non-compromising, artistic figure.

Midnight Cowboy was based on the 1965 novel of the same name by James Leo Herlihy and concerns a young Texan, Joe Buck, who decides to seek his fortune as a prostitute in New York. Upon his arrival, however, Joe finds New York to be hostile, and his dreams of success are soon thwarted. However, Joe finds companionship with a lowlife conman, Ratso Rizzo. After a series of unsuccessful and demoralising encounters, Joe undertakes to take Ratso to Miami, where they believe that a more comfortable life awaits them. Ratso, however, dies on the journey, leaving Joe desolate but having benefitted from his meaningful connection with another human being. The novel was suggested as a possible project by Schlesinger to the American producer Jerome Hellman, who had earlier approached Schlesinger with a view to working with him.²⁵⁰ Schlesinger's long-term producer, Joseph Janni, had been unenthusiastic about the American setting and the frequently sordid nature of the material.²⁵¹ The formerly blacklisted screenwriter Waldo Salt (*The Flame and the Arrow*, dir. Jacques Tourneur, 1950, *Taras Bulba*, dir. J. Lee Thompson, 1962) was engaged to write the script.

Finance would prove particularly difficult to obtain, with potential backers wary of the uncompromising material.²⁵² David Picker, a key figure at United Artists and its president from 1969, would finally offer a budget of \$1 million, enthusiastic about the project but mindful of the reservations of older, less forward-looking personnel at the company.²⁵³ Picker's caution would be understandable during a period in Hollywood that saw the continuing decline in cinema-going, with figures for weekly

²⁵⁰ Mann, *op. cit.*, p.270

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.269

²⁵² *Ibid.*, p.271

²⁵³ Peter Biskind, 'Midnight Revolution', *Vanity Fair*, 8th April 2010, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2010/04/midnight-revolution-200503>, retrieved 17th October 2016

attendance at just of quarter of those recorded in 1946²⁵⁴ and the bigger studios on the verge of collapse.²⁵⁵ Picker was no doubt cognizant, however, of a climate amenable to more daring subject matters, as well as being accustomed to backing British talent, United Artists having been an enthusiastic supporter of British filmmaking in the 1960s. As noted by Michalis Kokonis, the Production Code, the industry guidelines introduced in the 1930s restricting potentially unacceptable film content, had been subject to strain since the 1950s, due to increased audience differentiation, the rise of television, rulings against studio vertical integration and the rise of the independent producer²⁵⁶ and would be revised in 1966 and abandoned in 1968, when a new ratings system would be introduced.²⁵⁷ The importation of foreign films from the 1940s and the subsequent rise of art-house cinema,²⁵⁸ as well as the increase in American co-productions with European companies in the 1950s and 1960s²⁵⁹ would at the same time accustom audiences to a film content and style often more diverse than that generally characteristic of classical Hollywood. Such a climate of industrial uncertainty offered spaces for opportunity and risk taking and enabled certain freedoms for filmmakers. Informed by codes associated with European film and offering younger audiences narratives concerning outsiders negotiating a conventional society and potential new ways of being, the Hollywood Renaissance, an early cycle within, or precursor to, the period termed New Hollywood²⁶⁰ would finally help significantly in averting the impending bankruptcy of the studios.²⁶¹

As the European director of *Darling*, an Academy Award-winning film, Schlesinger was a viable director in a climate of industrial uncertainty. As such, even when the initial budget increased to \$2.3 million, then finally in excess of \$3 million,²⁶²

²⁵⁴ Michalis Kokonis, 'Hollywood's Major Crisis and the American Film "Renaissance"', *Gramma: Journal of Theory and Criticism*, Vol.16, 2008, p.176

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.193

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.191-192

²⁵⁷ Richard Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2013, p.177

²⁵⁸ Kokonis, *op. cit.*, p.176

²⁵⁹ Kokonis, *op. cit.*, pp.179-180

²⁶⁰ See Kokonis, *op. cit.*, pp.170-171 on critical definitions of and distinctions between 'Hollywood Renaissance' and 'New Hollywood'.

²⁶¹ Kokonis, *op. cit.*, p.194

²⁶² Biskind, *op. cit.*

United Artists continued to give Schlesinger full creative freedom.²⁶³ The finance arrangements included a final profit share of 60% for Schlesinger and Hellman,²⁶⁴ which would prove to be highly beneficial to the pair in view of the film's commercial success. The film would star newcomer Jon Voight as Joe Buck and Dustin Hoffman as Ratso. Hoffman, like Voight, was relatively unknown at the time of his being cast, and better known for his theatre work. During preproduction, however, *The Graduate*, in which Hoffman starred in the lead role of Benjamin Braddock, was released and achieved commercial success, leading to salary renegotiations and the increase of Hoffman's fee from \$150,000 to \$250,000,²⁶⁵ as well as increased media attention for *Midnight Cowboy*.

The writing process emerges as considerably collaborative with, after Salt's initial draft, Salt, Schlesinger and Hellman working on the script for a four-month period, with further developments issuing out of Voight and Hoffman's rehearsals and improvisations, the results of which Salt would subsequently incorporate into the final script.²⁶⁶ Schlesinger's final assertion of his authority, however, would emerge, at least in articles appearing at the time of the film's release. Refuting the analogy attributed to Alfred Hitchcock, of actors being like cattle, Schlesinger would add, in an interview in the *Los Angeles Times*, 'though of course the director finally does with an actor as he wants'.²⁶⁷ His authority on set more generally was also addressed, Schlesinger stating, 'if I'm crossed, woe betide you!'.²⁶⁸ Filming took place in the spring and summer of 1968, on location in New York, Texas and Florida. Adam Holender acted as Director of Photography, Richard MacDonald as production designer and Ann Roth as costume designer.

²⁶³ Kevin Thomas, 'John Schlesinger – English Director Looks at U.S.', *Los Angeles Times*, 29th June 1969, p.R22

²⁶⁴ Leonard Sloane, 'Anatomy of Movie: Still Risky', *The New York Times*, 3rd August 1969, p.F1

²⁶⁵ Marion Dougherty and Robert Roussel, *My Casting Couch Was Too Short*, Xlibris, Bloomington, Indiana, 2015, p.19

²⁶⁶ Thomas, *op. cit.*

²⁶⁷ Thomas, *op. cit.*

²⁶⁸ Thomas, *op. cit.*

The time of *Midnight Cowboy*'s American release, on 25th May 1969 was, as noted by Robert E. Kapsis²⁶⁹ and by Shyon Baumann in his study of shifts in American mainstream reviewing,²⁷⁰ notable for the widespread assimilation in mainstream reviewing of the conceptualisation of the director as a possible auteur and of films as potentially artistic. In his study of shifting attitudes to films' artistic worth between 1925 and 1985, evidenced by a detailed analysis of film reviews appearing in the same period, Baumann traced distinct shifts in American reviewing across the 1960s, attributable to a number of factors. Developments outside the world of film such as the rise of television²⁷¹ and the post-war increase in post-secondary education²⁷² as well as changes within the film world such as the rise of the film festival,²⁷³ the academicization of film study²⁷⁴ and the shift from studio to independent production²⁷⁵ were found to have had a profound effect upon mainstream film criticism. Significant transformations took place in the sixties, particularly the latter part of the decade, which saw a distinct rise in the use of high art terminology and conceptualisation, increased levels of interpretation and lengthier reviews.²⁷⁶ An examination of specific approaches within the reviews between 1965 and 1970, for example, saw a 16.7% increase in a director being compared to another director, a 13.9% rise in a film being compared with another film (a 25% rise since 1960) and a 27.7% rise in incidences of interpretation. These latter interpretive 'attempts to find an implicit message in films as a whole or in certain aspects of films' are deemed by Baumann to be attributable to increasingly 'academic-minded critics'.²⁷⁷ Certainly, the rise of the auteurist critic at this point is in evidence in the profile of critics such as Andrew Sarris, the key American proponent of 'the auteur theory', film reviewer at *The Village Voice* and author of *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968* (1968) and *Confessions of a Cultist* (1970).

²⁶⁹ Kapsis, *op. cit.*, p.13

²⁷⁰ Baumann, *op. cit.*

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.407

²⁷² *Ibid.*, pp.407-408

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp.408-409

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.409-410

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.410-411

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.411-414

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.417

While mainstream American reviewing was increasingly inclined to view film as artistic and suitable for intellectual appreciation, such an appraisal had not initially extended to *Midnight Cowboy*'s Hollywood Renaissance forerunner, *Bonnie and Clyde*, indicating a degree of resistance or uncertainty within reviewing at this point to the innovative approach in such a film to subject and style. (Although *Bonnie and Clyde*'s critical and commercial success would be assured, partly attributable to the influence of its primary advocate, Pauline Kael).²⁷⁸ Thus, Hollywood's compromised economic status, together with the shifting dynamics of the reviewing mainstream rendered the potential fortunes of *Midnight Cowboy* uncertain upon its release. The instability of the situation was underlined by Leonard Sloane in *The New York Times*, with Sloane writing that despite 'business men moving into the movies', it was nevertheless 'difficult to predict a success'.²⁷⁹ Hence, upon the release of *Midnight Cowboy*, early trade publication reviewers pointed out that the film's success was difficult to predict. The *Boxoffice* reviewer wrote that it was 'difficult to say how audiences will react'.²⁸⁰ They were confident to predict, however, that the film 'looks set to become one of the cinematic sensations of the year'.²⁸¹ *The Independent Film Journal* was similarly uncertain but declared the film 'highly exploitable in today's anything goes market', though adding that it potentially 'looms as an adult attraction of truly blockbuster proportions'.²⁸²

Midnight Cowboy's American reception would be rather divided, with critics highly praising certain aspects of the production, but frequently expressing distinct reservations. The performances of its two leads would be extremely well received. Voight's performance as Joe Buck came in for particular praise, described as 'one of those sensational film debuts'²⁸³ and 'what may well be the most impressive motion picture debut in history'.²⁸⁴ The actors' performances, and the film as a whole, were

²⁷⁸ Raymond J. Haberski, *It's Only a Movie! : Film and Critics in American Culture*, The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky, 2001, pp.175-178

²⁷⁹ Sloane, *op. cit.*

²⁸⁰ Anon, 'Midnight Cowboy', *Boxoffice*, 26th May 1969, p.60

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*

²⁸² Anon, 'Midnight Cowboy', *The Independent Film Journal*, 26th May 1969, Volume 63, No.13, pp.1009-1010

²⁸³ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁴ *Boxoffice*, 26th May 1969, *op. cit.*

found to be moving, with Vincent Canby at *The New York Times* and Charles Champlin at the *Los Angeles Times* praising its emotionally affecting qualities.²⁸⁵ Gary Arnold at *The Washington Post* would also welcome the film's affective aspect, in a way that indicates a preference for the more conventional characteristics of the film. For Arnold, the film was, at heart, 'a traditional tearjerker', albeit 'in a new style'. He welcomed 'the revival of sentimental drama', but was ultimately alienated by what he termed Schlesinger's 'stylistic jam', an overly exuberant and cluttered approach to style that saw the director 'hustl(ing) the material' and 'on shaky ground when he tries to show his stuff'.²⁸⁶ Such comments would be broadly typical of criticisms of the film in the American press. *The Independent Film Journal* complained that, despite the strength of the performances, the film was too 'flashy', noting a tendency in Schlesinger to 'overdo his effects'.²⁸⁷ The most vociferous objections to Schlesinger's stylistic approach were voiced by Roger Ebert, who wrote that Schlesinger had 'dropped' Voight's and Hoffman's 'magnificent performances', 'into an offensively trendy, gimmick-ridden, tarted-up, vulgar exercise in fashionable cinema'.²⁸⁸ Andrew Sarris similarly noted a 'messy' mise-en-scene.²⁸⁹

Just as the stylistic aspects of the film were resisted by many critics, so the film's gritty realism and uncompromising approach to the material in terms of tone were disapproved of by a number of reviewers. Hence, the film was found variously to be sleazy,²⁹⁰ sadistic²⁹¹ and, for Vincent Canby at *The New York Times*, exploitative in its treatment of the subject matter for 'sensational' effect.²⁹² Reviewers would also object to what was perceived as the film's hostile and satiric approach to the presentation of New York and America more generally. For *Variety*, America was mocked in the film, from 'every sign along the road the camera picks out' to the 'frolic-

²⁸⁵ Vincent Canby, 'Film: "Midnight Cowboy"', *The New York Times*, 26th May 1969, p.54, Charles Champlin, 'Midnight Cowboy' Rides Manhattan's Lower Depths', *Los Angeles Times*, 27th July 1969, p.1, p.23

²⁸⁶ Gary Arnold, 'Midnight Cowboy', *The Washington Post*, 31st July 1969, p.C1

²⁸⁷ *The Independent Film Journal*, *op. cit.*

²⁸⁸ Roger Ebert, review, *Chicago Sun-Times*, 5th July 1969

²⁸⁹ Andrew Sarris, 'Films', *The Village Voice*, 29th May 1969, p.47

²⁹⁰ *The Independent Film Journal*, *op. cit.*

²⁹¹ Robert J. Landry, 'Midnight Cowboy', *Variety*, 14th May 1969, <http://variety.com/1969/film/reviews/midnight-cowboy-review-1200421996>, retrieved 4/4/18

²⁹² Canby, *The New York Times*, 26th May 1969, *op. cit.*

some channel-skipping to spoof American television'.²⁹³ Similarly, it was Pauline Kael's position that Schlesinger 'keeps pounding away at America, determined to expose how horrible the people are'.²⁹⁴ For Andrew Sarris, the film's 'implied social criticism' was 'facile', with Sarris contending that 'all the luridly neonized flora and fauna on 42nd Street don't necessarily foreshadow the decline and fall of American Civilisation'.²⁹⁵

Such objections to the film at this stage would deter any real designation of Schlesinger as an auteur by critics in their reviews, though the lengthy, detailed analysis apparent in many of the reviews indicates an openness to the film's artistic potential. Certain techniques identified by Baumann in reviewing at this point would be apparent, including numerous comparisons to other films, by Schlesinger or otherwise,²⁹⁶ other directors²⁹⁷ and increased levels of interpretation, particularly evident in the longer reviews of critics such as Sarris, Ebert and Denby.²⁹⁸ A more auteur-like Schlesinger would be presented in the *Los Angeles Times* article by Kevin Thomas appearing on 29th June 1969, with Schlesinger characteristically employing a discourse highlighting his authority and artistic credentials. Deemed by Thomas 'an artist of tenacity, whose painstaking is evident in all his films', Schlesinger emerges as a forward-looking director, determined to make *Midnight Cowboy* despite various obstacles and objecting to the poor standards in the industry that permit inferior theatre conditions and prints of substandard quality. His freedom as a creative artist appears as paramount, Schlesinger stating, 'the most important thing about success is to use it for maximum freedom', adding that 'I don't like the idea of being a 'hired director'. I'd do it only under very special circumstances'.²⁹⁹ The authority ceded to Schlesinger by United

²⁹³ Landry, *op. cit.*

²⁹⁴ Pauline Kael, 'The Bottom of the Pit', *The New Yorker*, 27th September 1969, pp.127-128

²⁹⁵ Sarris, *The Village Voice*, 29th May 1969, *op. cit.*, p.48

²⁹⁶ References to *Darling* in Canby, *The New York Times*, 26th May 1969, Judith Crist, *The Independent Film Journal*, 26th May 1969, *Boxoffice*, 26th May 1969, all *op. cit.*, references to film versions of Camille in Sarris, *The Village Voice*, 29th May 1969, *op. cit.* and Gary Arnold, 'Midnight Cowboy', *The Washington Post*, 31st July 1969, p.1, p.4, references to *Scorpio Rising* (dir.Kenneth Anger, 1963) in *The Independent Film Journal*, Sarris, *The Village Voice*, 29th May 1969, Ebert, all *op. cit.*

²⁹⁷ Reference to Jean-Luc Godard in Sarris, *The Village Voice*, 29th May 1969, *op. cit.*, to Richard Lester in Denby, *op. cit.*, to Luis Bunuel in Denby, *op. cit.*

²⁹⁸ Sarris, *The Village Voice*, 29th May 1969, *op. cit.*, Ebert, *op. cit.*, Denby, *op. cit.*

²⁹⁹ Thomas, *op. cit.*

Artists is consequently stressed with the statement that ‘if there was any pressure from United Artists it never reached me, and we were over budget and over schedule ... We were six months on the cutting alone’.³⁰⁰

The decision by United Artists to grant Schlesinger such freedom would appear to be justified when *Midnight Cowboy* was met with substantial commercial success upon its release. This success would become a media event in itself, with the queues of fashion-conscious young people the focus of a report by *The New York Times* investigating the new young cinema-goer.³⁰¹ The appeal of the film for an increasingly cine-literate youth, increasingly disenfranchised and socially aware has been noted by Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner, in their conclusion that:

In short, there was a new audience for whom cultural issues, at least in popular culture, were often only slightly less important than political issues. With the continuing military draft, these issues could be a matter of life and death. Struggles over that generation’s mass art were a struggle for control of politics and culture, including one’s own life and limb. In *Midnight Cowboy*, then, this audience understood the representation of the dark side of the U.S. society...³⁰²

A familiarity with a new film culture, consisting of film societies, independent film publications and a wider underground press would pave the way for such sympathies, ones ‘not yet at odds with but somehow different from the often covertly hostile attitudes of mainstream film critics’.³⁰³

That such critical hostility had to some degree softened, if not subject to quite the same revision as was the case with *Bonnie and Clyde*, is indicated by the film’s recognition subsequent to its initial release. *Midnight Cowboy* would feature in the National Board of Review’s top ten films of 1969, as well as Vincent Canby’s personal top ten of the year, though he would attribute this to the strength of the two lead performances.³⁰⁴ Schlesinger would also win the Directors Guild of America Award

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁰¹ Marilyn Bender, ‘There’s a Show outside too’, *The New York Times*, 28th August 1969, pp.34-35

³⁰² Buhle and Wagner, *op. cit.*, p.211

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.210

³⁰⁴ Vincent Canby, ‘The Ten Best of 1969’, *The New York Times*, 28th December 1969, p.12

for outstanding directing. A significant vindication would be the film's winning three Academy Awards in April 1970, including that for Best Director.

By the time of the film's British release on 25th September 1969, *Midnight Cowboy*'s American box office success had been widely reported in the British press.³⁰⁵ A certain pride in the achievement of a British director was evident in the reporting, with David Lewin of the *Daily Mail* stating 'in America, they are saying only an Englishman could have made it',³⁰⁶ a position not widely evident in the reviews considered, though certainly expressed by Charles Champlin of the *Los Angeles Times*.³⁰⁷ Such success may partially explain what would be a more positive critical response to the film in Britain.

While British reviewing at this point would be less distinguished by polemics and British reviewers would lack the higher profile of American critics such as Andrew Sarris or Pauline Kael, a similar assimilation of auteurist ideas would be apparent. Leading mainstream critics would, as will be indicated, employ the sort of techniques described by Shyon Baumann in his analysis of the reviewing discourse of the period. Book-length publications by these same critics also point to their reviewing orientations; *The Times*' John Russell Taylor would publish *Cinema Eye, Cinema Ear: Some Key Film Makers of the Sixties* in 1964, Peter Cowie *The Cinema of Orson Welles* in 1965 and Eric Rhode, in 1966, *Tower of Babel, Speculations on the Cinema*, an examination of 'how cinema can become art'.³⁰⁸ A different assimilation of auteurism in British criticism has been noted, however. In 1985, Colin McArthur stated that in Britain, again, content would be prized above form:

...British reviewers ... took only one side of the concept and that, in retrospect, the least interesting side, the recurrence of certain themes in the work of

³⁰⁵ Article, *Evening Standard*, 27th June 1969, BFI digital clippings, David Lewin, 'The sad and lonely life of the midnight cowboy', *Daily Mail*, 10th July 1969, BFI digital clippings, Victor Davis, 'Enter Jon – 'son of Brando'', *Daily Express*, 5th August 1969, p.5

³⁰⁶ Lewin, *op. cit.*

³⁰⁷ Champlin, *Los Angeles Times*, 27th July 1969, *op. cit.*

³⁰⁸ John Russell Taylor, *Cinema Eye, Cinema Ear: Some Key Film Makers of the Sixties*, New York Hill and Wang, New York, 1964, Peter Cowie, *The Cinema of Orson Welles*, Zwemmer: Barnes, London, 1965, Eric Rhode, *Tower of Babel, Speculations on the Cinema*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London, 1966

particular directors. The substantial concern with mise-en-scene which informed that struggle was not taken up.³⁰⁹

The British reception of *Midnight Cowboy* certainly indicates such an assimilation, particularly in its attention to the thematic continuity judged to be in evidence in Schlesinger's work.

In terms of characterisation and identification with the protagonists, however, the British reviewers were as positive as American reviewers had been. The lead performances were again highly praised, with the story of Joe and Ratso markedly affecting the critics. For Nina Hibbin at the *Morning Star*, it was 'tremendously sad and distressing'³¹⁰ and for Margaret Hinxman at the *Sunday Telegraph*, it induced a 'grief' and afterwards left 'a physical ache that goes beyond the usual adult reactions in the cinema'.³¹¹ The film emerges in the reviews as having a very human dimension and a profound moral realism. For Alexander Walker, it was funny, sad and ultimately moving, 'a contemporary parable' about human value,³¹² just as Nina Hibbin found that it 'call(ed) up complex, many levelled – and always positive – responses both from the mind and from the heart'.³¹³

A feature of the British reviews distinctly at odds with the American reception was the widespread praise and admiration for a realistic depiction of New York. The uncompromising depiction of the city and a wider contemporary America had, as noted, been badly received in the States. As outsiders, however, British reviewers were distinctly approving of the depiction of a New York rendered, according to the reviews, as 'a concrete hell',³¹⁴ an 'urban wilderness',³¹⁵ 'a nightmare world inhabited by

³⁰⁹ Colin McArthur, 'British Film Reviewing: A Complaint', *Screen*, 01/1985, Volume 26, Issue 1, p.81

³¹⁰ Nina Hibbin, review, *Morning Star*, 24th September 1969, BFI digital clippings

³¹¹ Margaret Hinxman, 'Sadly memorable', *Sunday Telegraph*, 28th September 1969, BFI digital clippings

³¹² Alexander Walker, 'The wages of sin in the Big City, plus a daring bonus of love', *Evening Standard*, 25th September 1969, BFI digital clippings

³¹³ Nina Hibbin, 'Innocence and corruption', *Morning Star*, 27th September 1969, BFI digital clippings

³¹⁴ Clive Hirschhorn, 'A country boy finds no joy in the cruel city', *Sunday Express*, 28th September 1969, BFI digital clippings

³¹⁵ David Robinson, review, *Financial Times*, 26th September 1969, BFI digital clippings

fornicating ghouls'.³¹⁶ Fellow British directors who had produced good work in America were cited, such as John Boorman, Alexander Mackendrick³¹⁷ and Peter Yates,³¹⁸ the latter director of *Bullitt* (1968) suggested as someone who, like Schlesinger, had shown 'the Hollywood experts...how to project their own country from the screen with a staggering impact'.³¹⁹ As an outsider, Schlesinger was found by a number of critics to bring a fresh perspective to the story³²⁰ and by John Russell Taylor at *The Times*, to have in turn been invigorated, 'making a film far, far in advance of anything he has done here'.³²¹

Although praise for *Midnight Cowboy* was expansive in the British press, the film was still found to be somewhat marred by an excessive style. Although objections to this were not as widespread as in the States, with reviewers tending to focus more on issues of story and character, a dissatisfaction with this aspect of the film was still tangible. Such criticisms, however, were frequently framed almost apologetically, with reviewers reiterating their overall approval of the film. Such positions recall Baumann's identification of the increased incidence of reviewers finding 'merit in failure', whereby a 'multifaceted approach is typical for high-brow art, which relies on resolving tensions between beauty and harshness to achieve its effect'.³²² Thus, for Derek Malcolm at *The Guardian*, 'occasionally the use of flashbacks is insecure and the film, *though expertly made*, is not without its self-indulgences,' (my italics)³²³ and for Margaret Hinxman, 'when Schlesinger takes off fleetingly into psychedelic orgies and an imaginary paradise where Ratso and Joe live in glamorous peace and plenty, the

³¹⁶ Felix Barker, 'Cowboy on the big city range', *Evening News*, 25th September 1969, BFI digital clippings

³¹⁷ John Russell Taylor, 'Schlesinger's best', *The Times*, 25th September 1969, BFI digital clippings

³¹⁸ Taylor, *ibid.*, Penelope Mortimer, 'Schlesinger released', *The Observer*, 28th September 1969, BFI digital clippings, Cecil Wilson, 'Lone cowboy rides the bus to New York', *Daily Mail*, 24th September 1969, BFI digital clippings

³¹⁹ Wilson, *ibid.*

³²⁰ Felix Barker, *Evening News*, 25th September 1969, *op. cit.*, David Robinson, *Financial Times*, 26th September 1969, *op. cit.*, Derek Malcolm, review, *The Guardian*, 25th September 1969, BFI digital clippings

³²¹ Taylor, *The Times*, 25th September 1969, *op. cit.*

³²² Baumann, *op. cit.*, p.415, referencing Lorenz Eitner, *Introduction to Art: An Illustrated Topical Manual*, Burgess Publishing, Minneapolis, 1961

³²³ Malcolm, *The Guardian*, 25th September 1969, *op. cit.*

necessary intensity is in danger of being destroyed. *But never wholly*³²⁴ (my italics). Stronger objections to modishness and vulgarity were voiced by David Robinson at the *Financial Times*³²⁵ and Jan Dawson at *Sight and Sound*³²⁶ the latter also noting a certain incoherence to the film, one which recalled the shortcomings of *Darling*. On the whole though, the impression is that although Schlesinger may have faltered, he was ultimately redeemed by the overall quality and power of the film as an entirety.

Midnight Cowboy was widely felt to be a significant advance for Schlesinger, an evaluation which would see the height of his critical reputation in Britain thus far. Praise was effusive for the advance he was felt to have made. For Cecil Wilson in the *Daily Mail*, the film was ‘a masterpiece, a milestone and a ‘must’’,³²⁷ while for Clive Hirschhorn in the *Sunday Express*, ‘John Schlesinger’s absolutely superb achievement *Midnight Cowboy*’ had attained ‘a level of perfection seldom encountered in the cinema’ and was consequently ‘among the ten best films I have ever seen’.³²⁸ Nina Hibbin at the *Morning Star* similarly noted a ‘masterly film which places British director John Schlesinger firmly where I have always thought he belonged – among the front rank of world film directors’.³²⁹

As well as Schlesinger’s heightened profile, his increasingly auteur-like reputation would emerge from an increased incidence of critics relating aspects of the most recent film to earlier ones and noting a continuity of theme in his work to date. Such methods are integral to the auteurist project, with its requirement of the director’s personal vision and the coherent and consistent expression of this vision across a body of work³³⁰ and, for Colin McArthur, predominated in the British context.³³¹ For Eric Rhode at *The Listener*³³² and David Wilson at *Monthly Film Bulletin*,³³³ Joe Buck was

³²⁴ Hinxman, *Sunday Telegraph*, 28th September 1969, *op. cit.*

³²⁵ Robinson, *Financial Times*, 26th September 1969, *op. cit.*

³²⁶ Jan Dawson, ‘Midnight Cowboy’, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1969, pp.211-212

³²⁷ Wilson, *Daily Mail*, 24th September 1969, *op. cit.*

³²⁸ Hirschhorn, *Sunday Express*, 28th September 1969, *op. cit.*

³²⁹ Hibbin, *Morning Star*, 24th September 1969, *op. cit.*

³³⁰ Janet Staiger, ‘Authorship Approaches’, David A. Gerstner, and Janet Staiger (eds), *Authorship and Film*, Routledge, London, 2003, p36

³³¹ McArthur, *op. cit.*

³³² Eric Rhode, review, *The Listener*, 2nd October 1969, BFI digital clippings

³³³ David Wilson, ‘Midnight Cowboy’, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, January 1970, p.7

reminiscent of the crying boy in Schlesinger's first film, the documentary *Terminus*, with his 'accusatory stare of injured innocence as the human zoo stampedes past him and no one wants to know'.³³⁴ John Russell Taylor noted parallels between *Billy Liar* and *Midnight Cowboy*, noting that 'again the theme is a confrontation of the ever-hopeful young hero and the grimy reality of his everyday life'.³³⁵ The notion of recurring concerns and thematic unity would be addressed in publicity appearing around the time of *Midnight Cowboy*'s release. In an article appearing in September 1969 in *The Guardian*, Lee Langley connected all of the feature films made to date thematically and to Schlesinger in turn, writing 'in all of them one finds the self-deluding fantasy people use as a protection – either from the world outside or from themselves. Schlesinger is fascinated by untruthfulness and deceit'.³³⁶ In interview in *Films and Filming*, Schlesinger would also stress the concern with loneliness in his films and his personal identification with it, stating that 'solitude, I think, is one of the major problems that people face – including myself'.³³⁷

Appraisals of *Midnight Cowboy* – and of Schlesinger's achievement as a director – would be characterised by an increased incidence of specifically artistic terminology and associations. Words associated with high art evaluation identified by Baumann as increasingly occurring in the period, such as 'master' and 'brilliant',³³⁸ recur throughout the British reviews, with 'master', 'masterly' or 'masterpiece' appearing in reviews in the *Morning Star*,³³⁹ *The Sun*,³⁴⁰ the *Daily Mail*³⁴¹ and *The Guardian*³⁴² and variations of 'brilliant' appearing in the *Sunday Express*,³⁴³ the

³³⁴ *Ibid.*

³³⁵ Taylor, *The Times*, 25th September 1969, *op. cit.*

³³⁶ Lee Langley, 'Midnight mirage, Lee Langley interviews John Schlesinger', *The Guardian*, 4th September 1969, p.10

³³⁷ Gordon Gow, 'A Buck For Joe: John Schlesinger talks to Gordon Gow about his *Midnight Cowboy*', *Films and Filming*, November 1969, p.5

³³⁸ Baumann, *op. cit.* p.413

³³⁹ Hibbin, *Morning Star*, 24th September 1969, *op. cit.*

³⁴⁰ Ann Pacey, 'Beauty in two unlovely fakes', *The Sun*, 24th September 1969, BFI digital clippings

³⁴¹ Wilson, *Daily Mail*, 24th September 1969, *op. cit.*

³⁴² Malcolm, *The Guardian*, 25th September 1969, *op. cit.*

³⁴³ Hirschhorn, *Sunday Express*, 28th September 1969, *op. cit.*

Morning Star,³⁴⁴ *The People*,³⁴⁵ the *Evening News*³⁴⁶ and *The Observer*.³⁴⁷ The technique of indicating a film's complexity was also apparent in the reviews. Baumann points to an increased intolerance for overly accessible films, with the more widespread evaluation of film as art seeing an increased attention to and preference for complexity and subtlety. Such an approach very much characterises Nina Hibbin's review of the film in the *Morning Star*. For Hibbin, 'Midnight Cowboy is a film to see over and over again. It has that rare quality of wholeness and integrity that endows a work of art with a life of its own, much greater than the sum of its parts', the film provoking 'complex, many-levelled' responses.³⁴⁸ Similarly, the comments of Derek Prouse in *The Sunday Times* indicate an enjoyment of the film's complexity, with Prouse writing, 'one welcomes it all the more warmly in that it is no easy triumph. The subject bristles with difficulties that the slightest wrongful emphasis could expose'.³⁴⁹ Schlesinger's own artistic authority would be emphasised and further enforced in articles appearing around this time. High art associations and preferences would be repeated, such as Schlesinger's passion for classical music and opera,³⁵⁰ his work with the R.S.C.³⁵¹ and his preference for world directors such as Kurosawa, Satyajit Ray and Fellini.³⁵²

The enthusiastic critical reception of the film in Britain would be confirmed at the 23rd British Film Awards ceremony in 1970, with *Midnight Cowboy* winning awards for Best Film, Best Direction, Best Actor in a Leading Role (Dustin Hoffman), Most Promising Newcomer to Leading Film Roles (Jon Voight), Best Screenplay and Best Editing.

³⁴⁴ Hibbin, *Morning Star*, 27th September 1969, *op. cit.*

³⁴⁵ Ernest Betts, 'Sordid, yes, but honest', *The People*, 28th September 1969, *Morning Star*, 27th September 1969, BFI digital clippings

³⁴⁶ Barker, *Evening News*, 25th September 1969 *op. cit.*

³⁴⁷ Mortimer, *The Observer*, 28th September 1969, *op. cit.*

³⁴⁸ Hibbin, *Morning Star*, 24th September 1969, *op. cit.*

³⁴⁹ Derek Prouse, 'Cowboy rides in', *The Sunday Times*, 28th September 1969, BFI digital clippings

³⁵⁰ Sydney Edwards, 'The 6 a.m. watcher in Needle Park', *Evening Standard*, 27th July 1968, BFI digital clippings, Gow, *op. cit.*

³⁵¹ Langley, *op. cit.*, Gow, *op. cit.*

³⁵² Gow, *op. cit.*

Conclusion

The 1960s would see John Schlesinger's entry into filmmaking after a period working in documentary. Throughout the decade, Schlesinger's reputation would become increasingly secure and he would be widely praised for the range of films that he directed; from social realist features at the beginning of the decade, through to the swinging *Darling* and the early Hollywood renaissance film *Midnight Cowboy*. Although the trajectory of Schlesinger's artistic reputation would not be entirely even over the course of the 1960s, a consensus emerges by the end of the decade of the director as a key filmmaker, more assured upon his winning an Academy Award for the direction of *Midnight Cowboy*.

John Schlesinger's filmmaking activity and the subsequent formation of his reputation as a key director of the 1960s have been demonstrated to have been significantly subject to the industrial context of the period. His activity was, to a notable degree, determined or enabled by emerging and shifting filmmaking opportunities arising throughout the decade. The rise of independent production in Britain in the early 1960s, American financing of British films and the opening of space for smaller, independent production in late 1960s America would all provide Schlesinger with important filmmaking opportunities. The production process, influenced as it was by organisations such as the British Board of Film Classification and the guarantor company Film Finances, would also involve a regulation of Schlesinger's agency, as would the potentially fruitful, sometimes conflictual factor of collaboration with other key personnel such as producers, scriptwriters and actors. Cognisance of this is not to minimise Schlesinger's own creative contributions. His authority emerges clearly, both in the production process (hence accusations of 'latitude') and in the active promotion of the films and his ideas in publicity throughout the decade.

Schlesinger's status was also subject to the critical context of the decade. Conventions in criticism and reviewing, and shifts occurring therein throughout the 1960s, would appear to have to some degree worked to position Schlesinger as a notable director, with appraisals of his work largely coinciding with existing evaluative

traditions as well as particular changes in reviewing that would characterise the rise of auteurism. The language of the film reviews as the decade progressed indicates an increased absorption of the notion of the director as the artistic author of the film, pointing to the significance of auteurist conceptions in the framing of Schlesinger's agency. Ever erudite, Schlesinger's estimations of his work and his persona as an artistic and uncompromising filmmaker, would coincide neatly with emerging notions of the director as auteur.

While film reviewing would be a significant influencing factor in the reception of Schlesinger's 1960s films, wider cultural dynamics should also be considered. The commercial success of films such as *Darling* and *Midnight Cowboy* point to the films' engagement with new social, societal forms and experiences which would have a particular resonance with audiences, sometimes more than for the films' reviewers. As will be seen in the study of Schlesinger's standing in the 1970s, his work in that decade would be increasingly subject to divided commercial and critical responses, as shifting industrial contexts and critical landscapes presented new challenges and opportunities.

Chapter 2

The 1970s: From auteur to metteur-en-scène?

The 1970s would see Schlesinger continuing to work in a variety of industrial and generic modes, in both Britain and the United States. While the critical reception of *Sunday Bloody Sunday* (1971) would further consolidate the auteur status attained with *Midnight Cowboy*, the decade would see a gradual decline in Schlesinger's critical reputation. Amidst the contraction of the British film industry in the early 1970s, Schlesinger would attempt to develop film projects in Britain, then turn in the mid-seventies to work in the United States with Paramount on *The Day of the Locust* (1975) and *Marathon Man* (1976), returning to Britain for the 1979 film *Yanks*. Despite mixed critical responses in the 1970s, Schlesinger's reputation as some sort of auteur would remain tenacious, with the director continuing to represent his films in publicity as artistic and continuous with his earlier work, and with critics evaluating his increasingly commercial, genre-based films against such a horizon of expectations. The effect of this tenacity of the auteur nomination will be examined. While Schlesinger's auteur-like reputation sometimes worked in his favour in terms of opportunities, it would at the same time operate negatively in the films' receptions, contributing to a sense of a personal decline and creative compromise. Rather than seeing shifts in Schlesinger's reputation in this period in terms of such a personal, creative decline, his filmmaking activity will be located in a context of the constraints – and opportunities – within the British and American film industries. A survey of the industrial changes, such as the funding difficulties that would accompany the downturn in the British film industry, and, across the Atlantic, attempts to revitalise an industry by way of the blockbuster and independent production, deters a characterisation of Schlesinger as a director whose creative powers had merely diminished.

Sunday Bloody Sunday

Schlesinger's first film of the decade, *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, would be critically acclaimed upon its British release in July 1971 and in evaluations of the director still stands as one of his greatest achievements.¹ The portrayal of a gay man and heterosexual woman, both in love with a younger bisexual man, it has been cited as a breakthrough in the portrayal of homosexuality in the cinema.² It has also been praised for its evocation of a sense of disillusionment and an awakening to the realities of the new decade after the sense of liberation and optimism of the 1960s, with Alexander Walker terming it 'an epilogue for sixties' people'.³ Upon the film's release it would, in critical terms, be viewed as a consolidation of, even an advance upon, the reputation that Schlesinger secured with the Oscar-winning *Midnight Cowboy*. Despite such enthusiastic reviews, however, the film would fail to attract the audiences that had flocked to *Midnight Cowboy*. An examination of the production, release and reception of the film will point to the way that the film functioned with regards to Schlesinger's standing, in both positive and negative ways. While the film's authorship emerges as multiple, collaborative and, at times, conflictual, publicity would see Schlesinger positioned as the film's ultimate author, a designation that would largely be echoed in the film's positive critical reception. A certain displacement of Schlesinger's authorship would at the same time be discernible in the film's reception, one which would be enhanced by other such displacements and destabilizations throughout the decade.

While, as will be noted, the actual authorship of the screenplay would go on to be contested, the original idea for the film's plot was conceived by Schlesinger, then developed by Schlesinger with Joseph Janni and Penelope Gilliatt (former critic at *The*

¹ George Perry, *The Great British Picture Show*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, Massachusetts, 1974 pp.277-278 and Jonathan Hacker and David Price, *Take ten: contemporary British film directors*, Oxford Paperbacks, Oxford, 1991, p.395

² Raymond Murray, *Images in the Dark: An Encyclopedia of Gay and Lesbian Film and Video*, Plume, London, 1996, p.120 and John Forde, 'John Schlesinger' in David Gerstner (ed.), *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Queer Culture*, Routledge, London, 2006, p.506

³ Alexander Walker, *National Heroes: British Cinema in the Seventies and Eighties*, Orion, London, 1985, pp.17-18

Observer and, from 1967, critic at *The New Yorker*, sharing film reviewing duties with Pauline Kael) during the filming of *Far from the Madding Crowd*.⁴ The narrative, set in the liberal, middle-class environs of Hampstead, London, centres on Daniel, a middle-aged gay doctor, who shares a lover, Bob, a carefree kinetic sculptor in his twenties, with Alex, a divorced recruitment consultant in her thirties. Both Daniel and Alex are each aware of the other and tolerate the situation, but are ultimately dissatisfied with it, particularly Alex. Daniel, a more stoic person, registers the pain he feels upon Bob's eventual departure for America, but reflects that, in life, sometimes something is better than nothing, a compromise that Alex had finally been unwilling to make. The plot was based upon a similar incident experienced by Schlesinger.⁵

Although conceived some considerable time prior to its production, funding was not secured until after the commercial success of *Midnight Cowboy*. Schlesinger told David Spiers in interview in 1970:

It wasn't until Cowboy came out and was a great success that everybody said O.K. I don't know, perhaps I'm being unfair, but that's the order of events as I saw it. Once Cowboy was a success, everybody seemed to think: 'Oh yes, you know, if he's interested, let him do it'.⁶

Thus, the success of *Midnight Cowboy* permitted not only the funding for the film (approximately \$1.5 million⁷), but also significant control for Schlesinger, with no interference from United Artists during the production period.⁸ A further factor in United Artists agreeing to finance *Sunday Bloody Sunday* appears to have been a continuing unpredictability as to what kind of films would be successful. Reporting in February 1970 on falling attendances, concerns about the British and American industries and the surprise success of relatively low-budget films such as *Midnight*

⁴ John Russell Taylor, 'Bloody Sunday', *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1970, pp.200-201 and John Coleman, 'Filming Bloody Filming', *Nova*, September 1971, BFI digital clippings

⁵ William J. Mann, *Edge of Midnight: The Life of John Schlesinger*, Arrow, London, 2005, p.349

⁶ David Spiers, 'John Schlesinger interviewed by David Spiers', *Screen*, 07/1970, Volume 11, Issue 3, p.16

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.15

⁸ Elaine Dundy, *Finch, Bloody Finch: A Biography of Peter Finch*, Michael Joseph, London, 1980, p.309

Cowboy, David Haworth in *The Observer* wrote that it was ‘difficult to navigate the way forward during such times’.⁹

Schlesinger was not exceptional in his receiving American funding at this point. As pointed out by Sian Barber, although the withdrawal of American financing from Britain was underway at this point, it was still common practice for the films of established directors and producers to be financed by Hollywood.¹⁰ The effects of the withdrawal of American finance, together with the insecure British national economy and the lack of a sound infrastructure in the British film industry, would be felt increasingly throughout the decade. However, despite Schlesinger’s comparative insulation from the difficulties of financing at this point in the early 1970s, his commitment to the British film industry was apparent. He would appear as a signatory on a petition regarding proposed curbs on the National Film Finance Corporation¹¹ and worked towards setting up a British version of the French Film Directors Society.¹² Although American funding was more available to Schlesinger at this point, he still clearly wished to pursue a career in Britain, as underlined to Spiers in the 1970 interview, Schlesinger stating; ‘I think America’s a very exciting place to work in, though it wouldn’t be the place that I would choose’.¹³

Production of the film, in its early stages called ‘Bloody Sunday’, commenced in early 1970 on location in London and at Bray Studios in Hertfordshire. It would be the last film in production at the studios prior to their closure,¹⁴ a victim of a contracting national film industry. The film starred Glenda Jackson, recently successful in *Women in Love* (dir. Ken Russell, 1969) as Alex, Peter Finch as Daniel and newcomer Murray Head as Bob. As detailed by Sian Barber in her study of the production of *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, the rehearsals and filming process were marked by Gilliatt’s long absences from the set, a situation protested by Schlesinger and Janni, who would

⁹ David Haworth, ‘Cinema’s super colossal crisis’, *The Observer*, 8th February 1970, p.14

¹⁰ Sian Barber, *The British Film Industry in the 1970s: Capital, Culture and Creativity*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2013, p.78

¹¹ Sue Harper and Justin Smith, *British Film Culture in the 1970s: The Boundaries of Pleasure*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2012, p.13

¹² Derek Malcolm, ‘The counter to Cannes’, *The Guardian*, 2nd July 1970, p.13

¹³ Spiers, *op. cit.*, p.16

¹⁴ ‘Dame Sybil finds nudes depressing’, *The Times*, 3rd September 1970, p.2

subsequently engage writers David Sherwin and Ken Levinson to undertake script revisions.¹⁵ Janni's prominent role in reconceptualising the script¹⁶ and significant improvisations by the actors¹⁷ led to further amendments to the original script. Underpinning such activity, according to Barber, was Schlesinger's directorial approach which allowed and encouraged such suggestions and input. Such conditions would be to the ultimate benefit of the film, whereby 'the intense detailed collaboration between Gilliatt, Schlesinger and Janni created a text which benefited immensely from such detailed, often conflicting input'.¹⁸ Other key creative collaborators on the film would include director of photography Billy Williams and production designer Luciana Arrighi.

The conflictual nature of the production with its decidedly varied authorship would reach a more hostile stage with the publication of the screenplay. Upon receiving an advance copy, Janni would write the following to Penelope Gilliatt:

I have just received a copy of the book of Sunday Bloody Sunday and I am flabbergasted at the note at the back which says that you "first thought of this film script on a train in Switzerland". You have gone out of your way to want to create in everybody's mind the impression that the subject and the subsequent script were entirely your creation and it would appear that you wish to give the impression that a script entirely conceived by you was delivered to John Schlesinger and myself to be made into a film.¹⁹

Reminding Gilliatt of the origins of the story, Janni asked that:

... any statement made about this work should correspond to the truth as I have stated it above and the reason for my writing this letter is to ask you to do so, so that we should not be forced, especially when coming to America for the opening of the film, to have to deny certain statements or make declarations which will conflict with yours and which ultimately will not be pleasant for any of us.²⁰

While the film's authorship was in many ways multiple, Schlesinger's particular agency would be apparent in the management of the film's publicity. Archive

¹⁵ Barber, *op. cit.*, p.80

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Barber, *op. cit.*, pp.82-83

¹⁸ Barber, *op. cit.*, p.92

¹⁹ Letter from Joseph Janni to Penelope Gilliatt, 20th August 1971, BFI collection JRS/7/14

²⁰ *Ibid.*

material indicates Schlesinger's strategic management of this and his care to guard against any sensational reporting of the film's subject at the production stage. In a letter to Edna Tromans, the unit publicist on *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, a United Artists executive confirmed that, further to a conversation with Schlesinger:

John makes good sense when he says that for a film as personal and special as this one, no publicity approach is valid until he emerges from the cutting room with a finished picture. I also agree with John's concern that to try to verbalize *Bloody Sunday*, at this point, runs the risk of seeming portentous. Throughout this production, you have skilfully managed to achieve what we discussed with John way back last January – a continuity of press interest in *Bloody Sunday*, without sensationalizing or overstating the nature of the film. Equally important, this has been accomplished with minimal interference with production.²¹

Similarly indicating Schlesinger's careful management of the film and his reluctance to highlight the potentially sensational aspect of the film, is correspondence with Jean Nachbaur, at Les Artistes Associés, the French distribution office of United Artists. The potential poster produced by Les Artistes Associés showed Glenda Jackson exclaiming in shock, apparently at Peter Finch and Murray Head, pictured together. In the actual scene from which the still was taken, Alex was in fact reacting to the death of a dog. On 11th August 1971, Schlesinger wrote to Nachbaur that 'both Joseph Janni and I reacted pretty violently to your proposed poster... This is so against the nature of the picture that we cannot in any way support you on this proposed advertisement'.²²

Prior to the release of *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, journalists would position Schlesinger very firmly as the film's ultimate author. An article appearing in *The Sunday Times* in April 1970, early in the film's production, stated that 'the film's already been shot – in Mr Schlesinger's head'.²³ An article by John Coleman in *Nova* magazine, based on interviews with Schlesinger, Gilliatt and Glenda Jackson on the set of the film at Bray similarly indicates confidence in Schlesinger's status. Jackson was clear as to Schlesinger's authority, stating, 'John is an actor; he wants you to say the lines the way he wants them'.²⁴ Even Gilliatt, at this point conceding Schlesinger's

²¹ Letter from Mike Gray, United Artists, to Edna Tromans, 15th July 1970, BFI collection JRS/7/24

²² Letter from Schlesinger to Jean Nachbaur, 11th August 1971, BFI collection JRS/7/24

²³ Kenneth Pearson, 'News in the Arts', *The Sunday Times*, 19th April 1970, p.27

²⁴ Coleman, *op. cit.*

creative primacy, stated 'it's a very personal film, very much John's thing in the first place'.²⁵ Coleman would reiterate this, writing 'just whose film was it anyway? Schlesinger's'.²⁶

Despite the relatively daring subject matter of the film, it would receive approval from the British Board of Film Classification. For John Trevelyan, it was a 'beautiful and sensitive film'.²⁷ The British critics' reactions to the film at a Leicester Square press screening on 28th June 1971 were also very enthusiastic²⁸ and were confirmed in reviews appearing upon the film's release on 1st July. In addition to extensive praise for the performances of Peter Finch and Glenda Jackson, the film was widely lauded for its restrained, understated nature and consequently emerges as something of an advance upon *Midnight Cowboy*, marred as it was for some critics by a certain stylistic excess. Jan Dawson at *Sight and Sound* praised Schlesinger's new-found restraint, having disliked what was felt to be overstatement in earlier films, such as 'the fantasticated imaginings of the hero in *Billy Liar*, the brittle immorality of the heroine in *Darling*, the neon dazzle of New York in *Midnight Cowboy*', and finding that such elements 'effectively precluded the emergence of tender feelings'. In *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, however, 'Schlesinger has at last discovered the virtues of understatement and the wisdom of making no statements at all'.²⁹ The film's adult intelligence was cited as one of the film's strengths,³⁰ with Christopher Hudson at *The Spectator* embracing the film as a welcome release amidst the vulgarity of numerous other, generic releases, writing:

... hundreds of reels of homicidal maniacs, sexual sadists, psychopaths, lunatics and assorted kinks stifling incipient hysteria with a stream of Yiddish wisecracks – and then, suddenly these real people walk on to the screen, behaving intelligently and logically in situations not totally removed from the world we live in.³¹

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Mann, *op. cit.*, p.367

²⁸ Telex from Joseph Janni to Schlesinger, undated, BFI collection JRS/7/15, telegram from Joseph Janni to Schlesinger, 9th June 1971, BFI collection JRS/7/15

²⁹ Jan Dawson, 'Sunday Bloody Sunday', *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1971, p.164

³⁰ John Coleman, review, *New Statesman*, 2nd July 1971, BFI digital clippings

³¹ Christopher Hudson, review, *The Spectator*, 3rd July 1971, BFI digital clippings

The film's quiet understatement extended to a matter of fact representation of the homosexual relationship between Daniel and Bob, an approach particularly admired by the British reviewers and one which, in Nina Hibbin's words, helped to 'substantially to push back the frontiers of prejudice'.³² The merit of the relationship, for Thomas Wiseman at *The Guardian*, lay in the natural rendering of a relationship formerly deemed difficult in films; 'What was previously unmentionable is now not considered worth mentioning. The film's supreme aplomb lies in the fact that the subject just doesn't come up'.³³ Echoing Hibbin's and Wiseman's sentiments, John Russell Taylor saw the film as an advance in representation which extended similar breakthroughs in portrayals of working-class and black characters, stating 'it was about time that gay liberation should move at least this far: to be depicted with elementary credibility not as some sort of extravagant special case, is after all surely not asking too much?'.³⁴

The critics' estimation of *Sunday Bloody Sunday* as a careful, intelligent film for adults is also evident in the discussions of its complexity and the reviewers' consequent engagement in interpretation. Viewed against Baumann's analysis of the intellectualization of a significant number of films of the late 1960s and early 1970s, whereby critics were found to be increasingly attentive to the artistically complex aspects of films,³⁵ *Sunday Bloody Sunday*'s reception is clearly identifiable as participating in such evaluation. Comparisons to other esteemed cultural artefacts and the use of literary or artistic terminology certainly abound in the *Sunday Bloody Sunday* reviews. The symbolic status of the film's recurring shots of the telephone system's mechanical infrastructure were admired by John Coleman at the *New Statesman*, who found them to be 'a kind of mechanical refrain or rengaine',³⁶ just as George Melly writing for *The Observer*, noted how the film 'fixes on various symbols – the answering service that links the three lovers; the financial crisis that echoes the older couple's

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Thomas Wiseman, 'Thomas Wiseman on the implications for art of Schlesinger's coming film', *The Guardian*, 15th June 1971, p.8

³⁴ John Russell Taylor, 'Sunday Bloody Sunday', *The Times*, 29th June 1971, p.18

³⁵ Baumann, *op. cit.*

³⁶ Coleman, *New Statesman*, 2nd July 1971, *op. cit.*

emotional crisis – and makes them work brilliantly’.³⁷ For Melly, the film, ‘like all real works of art ... works simultaneously on several levels’.³⁸ Many critics mused upon the film’s ultimate message. For Gordon Gow at *Films and Filming*, the film was ‘an essay on happiness and freedom, and impediments thereto’.³⁹ A number of others reflected upon the metaphor suggested in promotional material, that half a loaf was better than none, that, for John Coleman in the *New Statesman*, ‘not that we must love one another and/or die, but that we ought to accommodate the difficulties of life, our fugitive natures, or short span: make the best out of our confusions’.⁴⁰

Such evaluations of the film’s complexity and artistic status would, overall, be matched by corresponding evaluations of Schlesinger as its ultimate author, as might be assumed in view of the then dominant notions of film authorship. An examination of the critics’ estimation of Schlesinger’s – and Gilliat’s – role, however, indicates a somewhat more complex attribution of authorship, particularly, as will be noted, in the American context. It is possible to view such dynamics, which entailed something of a destabilization of Schlesinger’s agency, as signalling a weakening of his perceived authority that would continue throughout the decade.

For the most part, British critics posited Schlesinger as the film’s ultimate agent. For John Coleman,⁴¹ as well as Jan Dawson at *Sight and Sound*,⁴² it was the director’s best film to date, rendering Schlesinger, for Derek Prouse at *The Sunday Times*, ‘among the top flight of international directors’.⁴³ For Dawson in *The Financial Times* and Derek Malcolm at *The Guardian*, the film emerged as Schlesinger’s by way of its common themes with his earlier films.⁴⁴ Writing for the *Evening Standard*, Alexander Walker encapsulated such a view, writing ‘How much will you settle for? This has been (Schlesinger’s) theme since his first feature, *A Kind of Loving*’.⁴⁵

³⁷ George Melly, ‘Topical Triangle’, *The Observer*, 4th July 1971, p.27

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Gordon Gow, ‘Sunday Bloody Sunday’, *Films and Filming*, August 1971, pp.50-51

⁴⁰ Coleman, *New Statesman*, 2nd July 1971, *op. cit.*

⁴¹ Coleman, *New Statesman*, 2nd July 1971, *op. cit.*

⁴² Dawson, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1971, *op. cit.*

⁴³ Derek Prouse, ‘End of the affair’, *The Sunday Times*, 4th July 1971, p.21

⁴⁴ Jan Dawson, ‘Half a love’, *Financial Times*, 2nd July 1971, p.3, Derek Malcolm, ‘Always on Sunday’, *The Guardian*, 1st July 1971, p.10

⁴⁵ Alexander Walker, review, *Evening Standard*, 1st July 1971, BFI digital clippings

Penelope Gilliatt was frequently cited as the film's screenwriter, with the film's script widely praised, but Gilliatt rarely supplanted Schlesinger as the final creative figure. A contrast to the consensus, however, was Margaret Hinxman's interpretation of the film's authorship:

The screenplay by Penelope Gilliatt, manages to be both pungent and poignant without either quality humiliating the other. And I imagine that Schlesinger's accurate representation of this enclosed, pointedly cultured, supposedly progressive, reasonably affluent London society, whose lifeline is the telephone, must have come straight off her printed page.⁴⁶

Such sentiments would be more widespread in American reviews of the film, as will be discussed.

Upon its release in the United States on 8th September 1971, *Sunday Bloody Sunday* was met with highly positive reviews. A notable exception was that by Polly Devlin in American *Vogue* who disliked the film and went on to discuss its particular appeal for British critics:

Sunday Bloody Sunday is about style. It doesn't appeal to mass audiences one little bit. They are bored and baffled by it – and this anticlimactic reaction isn't generated by the inevitable grudging tendency to deprecate anything already praised but rather by a very proper bewilderment. The film is happily lost in a world of its own, nudging itself eclectically, splashing solipsistically, like a baby in bathwater. It's full of coded messages, jokes, signals, and jargon, wholly recognizable only to the initiated, who are, however, legion and include nearly all London's film critics.⁴⁷

While such factors may have played a part in the film's poor commercial performance, as will be detailed later, the American critics' responses to the film indicate that they were also in tune with an 'enclosed, pointedly cultured, supposedly progressive' milieu similar to that of the film.

As in the British press, the film's subtle maturity was welcomed. In *The Village Voice*, Molly Haskell enjoyed the 'tact' of Schlesinger's direction,⁴⁸ while Gary Arnold

⁴⁶ Margaret Hinxman, review, *Sunday Telegraph*, 4th July 1971, BFI digital clippings

⁴⁷ Polly Devlin, 'Sunday Bloody Sunday', *Vogue*, October 1971, Vol.158, Issue 7, p.102

⁴⁸ Molly Haskell, review, *The Village Voice*, 30th September 1971, p.67

of *The Washington Post* welcomed with ‘relief’ a drama featuring older characters.⁴⁹ *The New York Times*’ Aljean Harmetz identified with the film on a personal level, writing ‘John Schlesinger’s “Sunday Bloody Sunday” is my reality, an adult picture in the best sense of that badly misused word, nourishment for those of us who are bored with the movies’ staple fantasies of perfect love and/or perfect violence’.⁵⁰ The advance in evidence in the film’s sensitive representation of homosexuality was similarly acknowledged, with Gary Arnold deeming Daniel ‘the most sympathetic homosexual character in the history of film’⁵¹ and Pauline Kael suggesting that Daniel was ‘a movie first – a homosexual who isn’t fey or pathetic or grotesque’.⁵²

Sunday Bloody Sunday was again analysed in terms of its complexity and its shared status with high cultural artefacts. Charles Champlin at the *Los Angeles Times* found it a ‘mosaic of revelations’,⁵³ ‘a surpassing work of art, a fine, Swiss watch among bulldozers’.⁵⁴ The film’s resonance for Champlin emerges clearly in his statement that the film was:

... finally about love and its central place amongst the desperate and irreducible needs of all our lives. And if it is impossible not to be touched by Finch and Miss Jackson, it is because the slow grayness of their Sundays is a metaphor for the chill, damp apprehensions of loneliness which none of us can warm away forever.⁵⁵

A sense of Schlesinger’s central creative agency was again perceptible. Champlin’s observation of *Sunday Bloody Sunday*’s genealogical relation to the director’s films to date, the way in which it was ‘linked with Schlesinger’s others in its concern with the quest for some quantity of love as a consolation prize amidst the loneliness and the unyielding surfaces of modern urban life’,⁵⁶ again positions

⁴⁹ Gary Arnold, ‘“Sunday Bloody Sunday”: A Real Achievement’, *The Washington Post*, 4th November 1971, page C1

⁵⁰ Aljean Harmetz, ‘‘Bloody Sunday’ is my reality’, *The New York Times*, 28th November 1971, page D13

⁵¹ Arnold, *The Washington Post*, 4th November 1971, *op. cit.*, C3

⁵² Pauline Kael, ‘A movie classic is not nothing’, *New Yorker*, 2nd October 1971, pp.93-97

⁵³ Charles Champlin, ‘Triangle of Love Theme Featured in ‘Bloody Sunday’’, *Los Angeles Times*, 3rd October 1971, p.22

⁵⁴ Charles Champlin, ‘‘Sunday’: Love in Real Life’, *Los Angeles Times*, 29th September 1971, p.F11

⁵⁵ Champlin, *Los Angeles Times*, 3rd October 1971, *op. cit.*, p.22

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.1

Schlesinger as demonstrating the consistent signature of the auteur. Also significant, however, were reviews usurping Schlesinger from his central role and positing Gilliat as the primary author. The delicacy of the film was, for Pauline Kael, Gilliat's colleague at *The New Yorker*, 'inspired one may assume, by the delicate substance of Penelope Gilliat's screenplay'.⁵⁷ Vincent Canby at *The New York Times* went further in attributing the film to Gilliat, writing:

Screenwriting, it has always seemed to me, must be the most unrewarding, ego-bending of literary pursuits since, if it is successful, it has to be almost invisible, becoming, as it does, property legally expropriated by the director and the actors, and subject to all sorts of vagaries... Occasionally, however, there are screenplays that simply cannot be mistaken as the works of anyone except the people who wrote them.⁵⁸

William J. Mann stated that in the general response to the film 'there appeared to be a concerted effort to dislodge John from any claim to authorship'.⁵⁹ Although this may be somewhat overstated, the film's performance at the sixth annual awards of the National Society of Film Critics would seem to indicate a disregard for the director. Participants in the voting included Arnold, Canby, Haskell, Kael, Schickel and Zimmerman, as well as figures such as Hollis Alpert of *Saturday Review* and Andrew Sarris of *The Village Voice*. Gilliat won the Best Screenplay award, Peter Finch won Best Actor, while Glenda Jackson, Murray Head, and Peggy Ashcroft received votes for their performances, and the film itself was placed 9th in the Best Picture of 1971 category. Notable for his lack of any votes whatsoever in the Best Director category, however, was Schlesinger. The award was won by Bernardo Bertolucci for *The Conformist* (1970). While Schlesinger and Janni may have initially, as described by William J. Mann, 'considered that hitching up with an intellectual critic might work to their benefit and give them a leg up when it came to time for reviews',⁶⁰ such a strategy would, with regards to Schlesinger's reputation within the National Society of Film Critics, appear to have been somewhat futile.

⁵⁷ Kael, *New Yorker*, 2nd October 1971, *op. cit.*

⁵⁸ Vincent Canby, 'Sunday without tears', *The New York Times*, 3rd October 1971, pp.1, 13

⁵⁹ Mann, *op. cit.*, p.379

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.352

Sunday Bloody Sunday received Academy Award nominations for Best Director, Best Actor, Best Actress and Best Screenplay, though no actual Oscars were forthcoming. The film fared better at the British Academy awards, winning the awards for Best Film, Best Actor, Best Actress and Best Director. Despite its critical successes, the film did not perform well commercially, with good initial metropolitan box office figures failing to be matched in the provinces, both in Britain and the United States.⁶¹ The reasons for this are various. Firstly, as pointed out by Polly Devlin, the film portrayed and presumably appealed to a select demographic, one which included many film critics, hence much of its critical success. Schlesinger himself would claim that exhibition issues, attributed to the film's London exhibitor, Rank Leisure Services, were a factor in the film's disappointing performance, with the director claiming that Rank had not made 'a serious attempt to market it beyond the city limits' of London.⁶² Sian Barber has identified the U.S. marketing campaign as counterproductive in its use of publicity material indicating, in some images, that the Glenda Jackson character was the lover of both Bob and Daniel or, elsewhere, that it was a 'gentle, domestic comedy'.⁶³ According to Alexander Walker in *National Heroes*, the commercial failure of *Sunday Bloody Sunday* would be a significant factor in Schlesinger's electing to subsequently work primarily in America.⁶⁴

The Day of the Locust

While *Sunday Bloody Sunday* would, on the whole, be a critical success and be cited retrospectively as one of Schlesinger's best films, the 1970s has just as frequently been associated with his American films of that decade, namely *The Day of the Locust* (1975) and *Marathon Man* (1976), both made for Paramount Pictures. These films would be met with distinctly mixed receptions and significant revisions to Schlesinger's, thus far, relatively secure reputation. The ambitious, expensive and

⁶¹ Mann, *op. cit.*, pp.369-70

⁶² Mann, *op. cit.*, p.369

⁶³ Barber, *op. cit.*, p.92

⁶⁴ Walker, *National Heroes: British Cinema in the Seventies and Eighties*, *op. cit.*, p.19

visually arresting *The Day of the Locust* would be resisted by critics, with its scale and apparently hostile tone widely negatively received. Although considerably successful commercially, *Marathon Man* would also be widely criticised, with its generic position as a thriller found to be at odds with reviewers' expectations and its violence opposed for its seeming gratuity. As the decade progressed, Schlesinger's reputation would be repeatedly subject to an interrogation of his apparent artistic decline and capitulation to commercial filmmaking. However, *The Day of the Locust* and *Marathon Man*, read against a detailed consideration of the conditions in which they were made and received, indicate the films as significantly contained within their specific contemporary contexts, and Schlesinger as subject to a particular range of constraints to his agency.

The period between *Sunday Bloody Sunday* and the release of *The Day of the Locust* in 1975 appears as somewhat incongruous, marked as it would be by appraisals of Schlesinger as a key world filmmaker and, at the same time, the difficulties that he experienced getting film projects off the ground. Despite his nomination as one of the five most important filmmakers in the world⁶⁵ and inclusion in publications such as *The Movie Makers: Artists in an Industry* by Gene D. Phillips⁶⁶ and *50 British Film Makers* by Peter Cowie,⁶⁷ the early 1970s would be marked by a succession of disappointed aspirations and subsequent compromises. Projects that would not come to fruition would include film adaptations of Evelyn Waugh's *A Handful of Dust*,⁶⁸ Luke Rhinehart's *The Dice Man*⁶⁹ and the Peter Luke play, *Hadrian the Seventh*, based on the Baron Corvo novel, a production to be financed by Columbia from which they ultimately withdrew.⁷⁰ The development of these productions would be undertaken alongside that of *The Day of the Locust*, plans for which would be reported in the press as early as March 1970.⁷¹ Schlesinger would complain about the lack of opportunity in

⁶⁵ Peter Cowie in Peter Cowie (ed.), *International Film Guide 1973*, The Tantivy Press, London, 1972, pp.49-52

⁶⁶ Gene D. Phillips, *The Movie Makers: Artists in an Industry*, Burnham Inc., Chicago, 1973

⁶⁷ Peter Cowie (ed.), *50 Major Film-makers*, The Tantivy Press, London, 1975

⁶⁸ Jan Dawson, 'Day Out', *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1972, pp.189-190

⁶⁹ 'John Schlesinger leaving Britain for Hollywood', *Evening Standard*, 15th December 1972, BFI digital clippings

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ A.H. Weiler, 'After Midnight, a Dark 'Day'', *The New York Times*, 1st March 1970, p.103

the face of diminishing opportunities in the British industry, brought about by the withdrawal of American finance and an inadequate remaining infrastructure, positing this as a motivation for work in the theatre, such as the musical *I and Albert*, withdrawn after previews at the Piccadilly Theatre in 1972, and Shaw's *Heartbreak House*, a National Theatre production which would be staged in 1975. He would tell *The Times* in early 1974:

It just is not possible to get a British picture of any ambition off the ground. I love England, I love working in England, and I have always regarded myself as an English director. But at present the only way I can keep even one foot in England is to work in the theatre ... but in the cinema I find I am forced to regard myself as mid-Atlantic.⁷²

The British exodus in this period which would see a number of directors working in the United States, with John Boorman directing *Deliverance* (1972) Peter Yates, *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* (1973) and Karel Reisz, *The Gambler* (1974), would be accompanied by rumination in the press as to the actual necessity of such activity. In an article for *Sight and Sound* in 1974, John Russell Taylor defended such directors, stressing the history of British filmmakers working in the United States as well as the lack of alternatives in the current domestic climate, asking 'what kind of British film could a British director of the standing we are talking about hope to make?'.⁷³ Others, such as Lindsay Anderson, would however argue that sufficient, if less well-financed opportunities existed at home.⁷⁴ Such elements of indignation in the press with regards to a British exodus would certainly contextualise Schlesinger's apparently defensive position, the director repeatedly justifying his work in America throughout the decade.

While Schlesinger complained of a lack of opportunity in Britain, his dissatisfaction extended to limited options more generally in filmmaking. In 1973, the constraints of an increasingly commercial industry would be bemoaned, Schlesinger stating that 'one spends a ridiculous amount of time going cap in hand to potential

⁷² John Russell Taylor, 'John Schlesinger's homage to Hollywood past', *The Times*, 9th February 1974, p.9

⁷³ John Russell Taylor, 'Tomorrow the world, some reflections on the unenglishness of English films', *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1974, p.81

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

backers It's really easier to get something mediocre off the ground than something artistic and intelligent'.⁷⁵ The following year, the studios' aversion to risk would be complained of, Schlesinger telling *The Times* that 'just as a year or two ago everybody thought the salvation of the industry lay in cheap exploitation pictures, now you can't get money for a modestly budgeted picture, because everyone has decided that the only films that go are superproductions'.⁷⁶ Industry conservatism had extended, according to Schlesinger in the same *Times* article, to reservations about *The Day of the Locust*, found by potential backers to be a pessimistic, 'subversive anti-Hollywood satire', and ultimately a risk due to its status as a modern American classic novel. Such reservations would prove to be prescient, in view of the eventual reception of the film.

Schlesinger's first film work subsequent to *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, however, would be his contribution to the 1973 anthology documentary *Visions of Eight* (prod. David L. Wolper), a film about the 1972 summer Olympics which had been held at Munich and had seen nine Israeli athletes taken hostage and killed by a Palestinian terrorist organisation. Other directors contributing segments to the film included Miloš Forman, Claud Lelouch and Arthur Penn. Schlesinger's contribution, *The Longest*, concerned the British marathon runner Ron Hill, though it finally incorporated some footage of the aftermath of the terrorist massacre. The film was screened at the 1973 Cannes Film festival, subsequently receiving a limited distribution, though it would go on to win a Golden Globe award for the best documentary. Reviews of the films were lukewarm, with *The New York Times* finding a variable degree of quality between the contributions⁷⁷ and Penelope Houston in *Sight and Sound* writing that 'one has an impression of film-makers who have perhaps under-trained for the occasion', though Schlesinger's segment was deemed 'a brave try'.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ 'Schlesinger – back to TV?', *The Sunday Times*, 12th August 1973, p.28

⁷⁶ Taylor, *The Times*, 9th February 1974, *op. cit.*

⁷⁷ Roger Greenspun, 'The Screen: New 'Visions of Eight' Studies Olympics', *The New York Times*, 11th August 1973, p.25

⁷⁸ Penelope Houston, 'Festival 73: Cannes', *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1973, p.143

The development and production of *The Day of the Locust*, would be particularly protracted and difficult, with *Variety* in May 1975 describing it as ‘a story of the filmmaking process today’:

The scenario includes years of preparation, major studio abandonment and turndowns, ego conflicts, collapsing tax shelter investment deals, budget problems, top management ousters and booking hassles. Virtually the whole dirty dish kitchen sink of contemporary big-budget filmmaking.⁷⁹

Subsequent to the success of *Midnight Cowboy*, Warner Bros had invited Schlesinger to direct a film of his choice for them. Schlesinger nominated an adaptation of Nathanael West’s 1939 novel *The Day of the Locust*, itself suggested to Schlesinger by the producer Lewis M. Allen.⁸⁰ Warners ‘dropped the project’, according to Schlesinger, without explanation.⁸¹ Jerome Hellman was then approached and became involved, after a period of estrangement from Schlesinger. In the May 1975 *Variety* article, Hellman would complain of, after *Midnight Cowboy*, a ‘bruised ego’, the article’s author Addison Verrill stating that Hellman ‘feels he was never properly credited with his contributions to the pic and “resented bitterly” some published remarks by Schlesinger in which the director took credit for things Hellman had done’.⁸² With Schlesinger and Hellman’s differences put aside, the project was taken to Paramount. Differing accounts as to Paramount’s enthusiasm for the film of *The Day of the Locust* would appear in the press in the run up to the film’s release. In May 1975, Schlesinger would state that it was the ‘energy and enthusiasm’ of then Paramount Studios President Frank Yablans which ‘finally got (The Day of the Locust) made’,⁸³ with Yablans himself stating in 1974 that he had been encouraged to take on the film by Schlesinger having made a success of *Midnight Cowboy*, another seemingly pessimistic and alienating story.⁸⁴ Elsewhere, however, it would be reported that

⁷⁹ Addison Verrill, ‘Jerome Hellman gets ego balm’, *Variety*, 14th May 1975, p.3

⁸⁰ Tom Buckley, ‘The Day of the Locust’: Hollywood, by West, by Hollywood’, *New York Times Magazine*, 2nd June 1974, p.50

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Verrill, *op. cit.*, p.64

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Buckley, *op. cit.*

Paramount had reservations and concerns about the adaptation⁸⁵ and that Robert Evans, executive vice president in charge of production and then also engaged at this point on the production of *Chinatown* (dir. Roman Polanski, 1974), a period film similarly set in Los Angeles, was ‘against it’.⁸⁶ Schlesinger would later discuss Evans’ hostility to the film, stating that Evans ‘absolutely hated the idea of *The Day of the Locust* and said so forcibly and did anything that he could to prevent the film being made’, Schlesinger going on to discuss industry opposition to the ‘downbeat, critical’ attitude of the novel.⁸⁷ Paramount nevertheless provided a budget of \$4.2 million, on condition that Hellman could find a further \$1.5 million. This funding was raised by way of Canadian tax shelter money, but subsequently fell through, upon which Paramount obtained outside investment.⁸⁸ As indicated by Tom Buckley in June 1974, Paramount’s financial status was relatively secure at this point, due to the recent commercially successful *The Godfather* (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) and the Internal Revenue Service reforms, which permitted off-setting risks to external investors.⁸⁹ Also part of the deal was the agreement that Schlesinger and Hellman would not take salaries, but ‘a large percentage’ of the profits.⁹⁰

A further motivation for Yablans backing the project, according to the *Variety* article, was that it fitted into the ‘cycle of interest in films set in the period from 1920 to 1945, and movies about Hollywood itself were often highly successful’.⁹¹ The cycle would include films such as *The Wild Party* (dir. James Ivory, 1975), *Hearts of the West* (dir. Howard Zieff, 1975) and *The Last Tycoon* (dir. Elia Kazan, 1976). David Cook, in his discussion of this ‘allusionist’ cycle, has noted how the films invoked ‘the audience’s unprecedented awareness of film history, which it shared with the rising generation of directors’, or ‘Hollywood brats’, those directors who would be significant within the wider New Hollywood movement as it developed further throughout the

⁸⁵ John Higgins, ‘John Schlesinger’s two fascinating dreams’, *The Times*, 25th February 1975, p.13 and Verrill, *op. cit.*, p.64

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Ian Buruma, *Conversations with John Schlesinger*, Random House, New York, 2006, p.122

⁸⁸ Verrill, *op. cit.*, p.64

⁸⁹ Buckley, *op. cit.*

⁹⁰ ‘Locusts’ Negative Cost \$4-Mil-Plus’, *Variety*, 28th November 1973, BFI digital clippings, Buckley, *op. cit.*

⁹¹ Buckley, *op. cit.*

1970s. A film consciousness emerging from auteurism, the broadcast of classic films on television and the rise of academic film studies were also cited by Cook as significant in the emergence and popularity of the allusionist cycle.⁹² More cynical was Stephen Farber's contemporary interpretation of the profusion of such films, writing in 1975 that the cycle might be 'a sign of the increasing insularity of American films', with Farber adding that:

... over the last several years Hollywood has begun to feed on its own past, concentrating on sequels and remakes of past successes. The logical next step is making movies about people who makes movies. Sometimes it seems as if Hollywood writers and directors are terrified of venturing out of their own back yards.⁹³

In *The New Hollywood Historical Film, 1967-78*, Tom Symmons has written of the allusionism of these 1970s films and their particular negotiation of nostalgia and American mythology. New Hollywood itself is found to have participated in a contradiction, demonstrating a certain radical impulse yet ultimately contained by an inherent conservatism and recourse to traditional heroes and genres. For Symmons, a degree of success potentially for such films was in their careful negotiation of such polarities; presenting new, renovated versions with contemporary appeal, while retaining a nostalgia for institutions such as classical Hollywood.⁹⁴ The source material of West's satirical novel, together with Schlesinger's impulse towards social criticism and satirical detachment might, initially, point to a possible lack of sufficient nostalgic deference. Schlesinger's potentially hostile interpretation of the narrative's milieu would certainly be met with a wariness in the industry, with the project touted as 'Schlesinger's great Hollywood put-down' in the autumn prior to *The Day of the Locust's* release.⁹⁵ A confidence in Schlesinger's abilities, however, was also palpable, with the director continuing to be presented as a leading filmmaker of some artistic

⁹² David A. Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam 1970-1979*, University of California Press, Berkeley, California, 2002, pp.283-289

⁹³ Stephen Farber, 'Film Notes: Hollywood Focuses on Hollywood', *The New York Times*, 13th July 1975, p.93

⁹⁴ Tom Symmons, *The New Hollywood Historical Film, 1967-78*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2016, pp.30-34

⁹⁵ Tom Burke, 'The Day of the Locust, futility and failed dreams, with a cast of hundreds, directed by John Schlesinger', *Esquire*, September 1974, pp.122-126, p.175

standing. Joyce Haber of the *Los Angeles Times*, for example, would prove to be an advocate of Schlesinger's work, in 1973 deeming him a 'genius', one 'whose pictures, frame-by-frame, can be favorably compared to the detailing classics of El Greco, Hieronymus Bosch – or Will and Ariel Durant'⁹⁶ and in 1974, 'one of, if not the finest technicians and directors today'.⁹⁷ Publicity would see Schlesinger himself continuing to present his latest film as continuous with his work to date and his particular outlook and preoccupations. The pre-production stage would see Schlesinger tell *The New York Times* that 'the characters are related to those in 'Cowboy' ... they're all desperately searching for some kind of identity',⁹⁸ while the production period would again see the director stress; 'it's in the same vein as the other things I've done. It's about people trying to cope with failed lives'.⁹⁹ A 'central theme', according to Schlesinger, was 'trying to make the best of whatever one's lot is, which I firmly believe in'.¹⁰⁰ Confidence in Schlesinger would also at this time appear to be shared by the actors starring in *The Day of the Locust* who, according to Jerome Hellman, 'made a considerable financial sacrifice' to be in the film.¹⁰¹ A more nuanced, less effusive representation of Schlesinger would appear in the September 1974 issue of *Esquire*, however, with Tom Burke pointing to a less relevant, less contemporary figure, somewhat at odds with emerging American directors. A resistance to Schlesinger is tangible in terms of his appearance, nationality, sexuality and the overall tone of his films:

Those directors for whom little dinners are given – Peter Bogdanovich, Billy Friedkin, Francis Coppola, Sydney Pollack, the Pointer Sisters of contemporary filmmaking – are not only the correct age, a sort of perpetual thirty-eight, and the correct size, also thirty-eight, but they make correct movies, appropriate products to represent our nation at foreign film festivals. Their work is regarded, in Hollywood, as intelligent without being intellectual, and sensual while remaining

⁹⁶ Joyce Haber, 'Schlesinger to direct West work, *Los Angeles Times*, 19th December 1973, p.D12

⁹⁷ Joyce Haber, 'John Schlesinger – Eager observer of humanity', *Los Angeles Times*, 14th July 1974, p. W19

⁹⁸ 'Schlesinger plans day of the locust', *The New York Times*, 19th August 1973, p.52

⁹⁹ Haber, *Los Angeles Times*, 14th July 1974, *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ 'Locusts' Negative Cost \$4-Mil-Plus', *Variety*, *op. cit.*

heterosexual, whereas Schlesinger's themes are held to be dank, anti-American, too thoughtful, and rather too kinkily British.¹⁰²

Filming of *The Day of the Locust* would begin in October 1973, with William Atherton starring as Tod, a designer new to Hollywood, Karen Black as Faye, an aspiring actress, and Donald Sutherland as Homer, a repressed retired accountant. The production would be reported in the press as an expensive one, lovingly undertaken by Schlesinger and approached with a meticulous eye for detail. Extensive research conducted by Schlesinger with Richard Macdonald, production designer of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, would be reported in the American press,¹⁰³ as would the expensive set pieces such as those featuring the collapse of a filmset for a period film about the battle of Waterloo and the final scene depicting a film premiere which descends into a riot outside a film theatre. The latter scene featured nearly a thousand extras¹⁰⁴ who would also be the subject of articles in Britain.¹⁰⁵ Schlesinger appeared in reports of the film's production, filmed mainly at Paramount studios, as particularly meticulous, with Tom Burke at *Esquire* stating that 'Schlesinger is notoriously painstaking and will not be hurried, not by anybody's budget'.¹⁰⁶ The film would exceed the budget, finally costing \$6.5 million and running over schedule.¹⁰⁷

The narrative of *The Day of the Locust* concerns a young set designer, Tod Hackett, who falls in love with his neighbour and aspiring starlet Faye Greener. Faye is shallow and ambitious, however, and enters into a relationship with Homer Simpson, a shy, repressed man similarly fascinated by Faye's beauty and charisma. As the story proceeds, the cynicism and superficiality of Hollywood and many of its inhabitants become apparent to Tod. Faye and Homer are finally shown to be irretrievably flawed, Faye by her vanity and inauthenticity and Homer by his impotence and anger. The film

¹⁰² Burke, *op. cit.*

¹⁰³ Mel Gussow, 'Director defines duality of Hollywood', *The New York Times*, 8th May 1975, p.48

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* and Buckley, *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁵ Andrews Meyer, 'The Day of the Waivers', *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1974/75, pp.39-41 and Valerie Wade, 'The Day of the Extra', *The Sunday Times*, 25th May 1975, pp.28-29

¹⁰⁶ Burke, *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁷ Tom Shales, 'After a 40 year delay, 'Locust' Descends on Try-Anything Land', *The Washington Post*, 4th May 1975, p.169

ends with a riot scene outside a film premiere and Homer's murder of a taunting child; Hollywood society has degenerated to such a degree that order is no longer possible.

Despite the scale of *The Day of the Locust*, Schlesinger would claim that Paramount were supportive and did not interfere in the production, stating in February 1974, 'I always feared it rather: front office watching you every step of the way. But it hasn't turned out like that at all. No one interferes here: we show them what we want to, when we want to',¹⁰⁸ though Jerome Hellman would later in the same year complain that Robert Evans, then engaged on the production of *Chinatown*, had taken rushes of *The Day of the Locust* home for viewing without permission.¹⁰⁹ Some reticence on Paramount's part would continue to exist, however, with Schlesinger stating at the time of the film's release that 'Paramount was divided among itself whether to make it. They are still divided, for that matter'.¹¹⁰

During the post-production period in 1974, Frank Yablans, the film's 'chief backer', left Paramount subsequent to a disagreement with Gulf + Western, the conglomerate that had bought Paramount in 1966¹¹¹ and was succeeded by Barry Diller. Although both Hellman¹¹² and Schlesinger¹¹³ would both claim that Diller was enthusiastic about the film, it was suggested by Tom Shales in *The Washington Post* in May 1975 that the transition had negative consequences for the film's promotion, Shales writing that 'a Paramount publicist says the company has nothing special in mind to promote the film'.¹¹⁴ In addition to Yablans' departure, the poor reception in America of the adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*, directed by the British director Jack Clayton and released in March 1974, had negative implications for the response to *The Day of the Locust*, it was suggested. Found to be too long, lifeless and ultimately failing in its interpretation of its classic source novel, *The Great Gatsby* had, prior to its release, been associated with the West adaptation, as detailed by Tom Burke in *Esquire*:

¹⁰⁸ John Russell Taylor, 'John Schlesinger's homage to Hollywood past', *The Times*, 9th February 1974, p.9

¹⁰⁹ Buckley, *op. cit.*

¹¹⁰ Shales, *op. cit.*

¹¹¹ Verrill, *op. cit.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Shales, *op. cit.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Before the film of *The Great Gatsby* was launched on East Egg Bay, Paramount flacks never tired of pointing out that Scott Fitzgerald and Nathanael West had been great friends, had died on practically the same day, and had written the only two “acknowledged classics” about Hollywood, *The Last Tycoon* and *The Day of the Locust*, as if these associations lent credence and respectability to West, the black sheep, and proved that if one bit of popular literary Americana could be turned into a profitable film, so could another obscure one. After *Gatsby*’s release, this line of reasoning was abruptly dropped and an alternative one sought without success.¹¹⁵

An invitational preview of the film took place, which Schlesinger presented as having been met with a warm and attentive reception,¹¹⁶ though *The Washington Post* reported ‘at least a dozen walkouts’.¹¹⁷ Schlesinger would acknowledge the challenges that the subject matter and its treatment presented, predicting mixed responses,¹¹⁸ but typically framing such a reception in terms of the conventionality of current filmmaking and his own fearlessness in making uncompromising films.¹¹⁹

The Day of the Locust was released in the United States on 7th May 1975 and in Britain on 12th June 1975. Responses to the film would be generally negative, though some reviewers deemed it to be an impressive achievement. Praise for the film typically centred on its strong visual impact, with renowned cinematographer Conrad Hall sometimes specifically acknowledged.¹²⁰ The British reviews would generally be briefer and less detailed than those appearing in the United States, the latter country’s film criticism at this point since regarded a ‘golden age’, distinguished by the public profile of critics in the media, a profusion of books, film magazines and the increased formalization of film studies in universities.¹²¹

In America, a minority of reviews of *The Day of the Locust* would see Schlesinger continue to be appraised as a distinctly artistic director, responsible for a

¹¹⁵ Burke, *op. cit.*

¹¹⁶ Wayne Warga, ‘Locust on a flagpole, waiting to see who salutes’, *Los Angeles Times*, 4th May 1975, p.1, p.28

¹¹⁷ Shales, *op. cit.*

¹¹⁸ Shales, *op. cit.*, Warga, *op. cit.*

¹¹⁹ Warga, *op. cit.*

¹²⁰ Charles Champlin, ‘Day of Locust a love that labors’, *Los Angeles Times*, 7th May 1975, p.28, Murf, ‘The Day of the Locust’, *Variety*, 30th April 1975, p.19

¹²¹ Jerry Roberts, *The Complete History of American Film Criticism*, Santa Monica Press, Santa Monica, California, 2010, pp.198-199

characteristically great film, one which negotiated recurring themes and concerns. Critics evincing this perspective were Rex Reed of the *Chicago Tribune*¹²² and Judith Crist of the *Saturday Review*.¹²³ For Reed, the film was Schlesinger's 'masterwork' and 'one of the greatest motion pictures America has produced in my experience as a critic',¹²⁴ while for Crist it was 'the finest film of the past several years', one which 'stands beyond comparison'.¹²⁵ Reed stressed throughout his review the film's artistic status, contrasting it to the 'junk' produced by most other directors at this point. He acknowledged the film's complexity and the difficulties that this might represent, stating 'it is not a pretty canvas. At times, it looks like Picasso's *Guernica*. But it is art'. The question was, according to Reed, 'Does the public really want art, or do they just want to talk about it?'.¹²⁶

More representative of the reception of the film, however, would be criticisms of an inadequate adaptation of West's novel, one which inflated and distorted the book's nuances by way of overblown and expensive spectacle. John Simon's lengthy review in *Esquire* would be indicative of hostility to the scale of the production which would be perceptible throughout the reviews. Simon was highly critical of the film's 'inflationary methodology' and 'vulgar gigantism', approaches which turned incidents in the novel, such as the Waterloo film shoot scene, into 'dramatic spectacle', the film relentlessly operating on 'one simplistic level; obvious grandioseness, obvious sleaziness, or obvious obviousness'.¹²⁷ Such apparent inflation and scale were found to distort the personal drama. Simon proposed that such a dynamic was in evidence in the scene in which Faye's father dies, comparing the incident in the novel with that in the film:

So when Harry, Faye's father, dies unbeknown to the girl tracking down a pimple on her face in a nearby mirror, West makes this a mere absurd, painful fact of

¹²² Rex Reed, 'A movie masterpiece! One of the greatest motion pictures America has produced', *Chicago Tribune* reprinted in *The New York Times* as advertisement, 11th May 1975, BFI digital clippings

¹²³ Judith Crist, 'Movies', *Saturday Review* reprinted in *The New York Times*, 11th May 1975, BFI digital clippings

¹²⁴ Reed, *op. cit.*

¹²⁵ Crist, *op. cit.*

¹²⁶ Reed, *op. cit.*

¹²⁷ John Simon, 'Nightmare of the locust', *Esquire*, August 1975, BFI digital clippings

life. In the film, it is spelled out in an ugly, insistent shot suggestive of callous female narcissism.¹²⁸

Charles Champlin was similarly critical of the film's scale, noting the ambition of the film's climax, the riot scene, but finding it 'impressive only as spectacle'.¹²⁹ Vincent Canby took a contrasting position, admiring the film's scale and emotional detachment, positing the film's approach as admirable and brave in its conviction and claiming that 'its grossness – its bigger-than-life quality – is so much a part of its style ... that one respects the extravagances, the almost lunatic scale on which Mr. Schlesinger has filmed its key sequences'.¹³⁰ Such concessions were not much in evidence elsewhere. Schlesinger's tone was generally found to be morally superior,¹³¹ condescending,¹³² and by Pauline Kael, 'contemptuous'.¹³³

Although it had been posited that the film of *The Day of the Locust* might be anti-Hollywood in tone,¹³⁴ direct reference in the reviews to the film's potential hostility to Hollywood was not widespread, though wider negativity to the film might be said to indicate such feeling. Vincent Canby was unambiguous in his assessment, however, finding that the film 'uses Hollywood as a metaphor for nothing less than the Decline of the West'.¹³⁵ A sense of Schlesinger's unsuitability for the project emerges in the Dallas publication *D Magazine*, where Charles Matthews wrote 'I suspect that the major trouble with *The Day of the Locust* is that John Schlesinger has no real feeling for Hollywood in the Thirties' and wondered what the film might have been in the hands of a director 'more directly attuned to what Hollywood once was'.¹³⁶ In view of the necessity for reverence for nostalgic representations of Hollywood noted by Tom Symmons, Schlesinger's version of *The Day of the Locust* emerges as not sufficiently

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ Charles Champlin, 'Day of Locust a love that labors', *Los Angeles Times*, 7th May 1975, p.1

¹³⁰ Vincent Canby, 'Day of Locust' Turns Dross into Gold', *The New York Times*, 8th May 1975, p.48

¹³¹ Jay Cocks, 'The 8th Plague', *Time*, 19th May 1975, BFI digital clippings

¹³² Gary Arnold, 'The Day of the Locust', *The Washington Post*, 21st May 1975, p.B4

¹³³ Pauline Kael, 'The Darned', *The New Yorker*, 12th May 1975, p. 110

¹³⁴ Shales, *op. cit.*

¹³⁵ Canby, *The New York Times*, 8th May 1975, *op. cit.*, p.48

¹³⁶ Charles Matthew, 'The Day of the Locust is the Classics Illustrated version of a fine novel', *D Magazine*, August 1975, www.dmagazine.com/publications/d-magazine/1975/august/the-movies-seen-the-book-now-read-the-movie/

respectful, in Tom Burke's terminology too 'dank', 'anti-American', and Schlesinger possibly 'too kinkily British'.¹³⁷

The film's excessive qualities, enhanced by an apparently hostile detachment, occasioned a number of references to the film's financial cost, with its expense noted by Canby and Kael.¹³⁸ Charles Champlin at the *Los Angeles Times* and Gary Arnold at *The Washington Post* both pointed to the riot scene's cost of \$1 million, the latter aligning the film with other expensive productions of the time and writing 'perhaps the only excuse for building a \$1-million set these days is the intention to destroy it by and by'.¹³⁹ For Arnold, the film's two major set-pieces, the Waterloo film scene and the climactic riot scene, specifically recalled two recent films, *Earthquake* (dir. Mark Robson, 1974) and *The Towering Inferno* (dir. John Guillermin, 1974).

Comparisons with the disaster films in reviews of *The Day of the Locust* were rarely complimentary to any of the films involved, though Vincent Canby was relatively neutral, citing the common images and scale of spectacle, but eventually reconciled to what for him was *The Day of the Locust*'s ultimate power and conviction¹⁴⁰. Generally though, comparisons to the disaster films were more damning, with negative implications for *The Day of the Locust*'s status. As pointed out by Justin Wyatt, the production of the disaster films that were so commercially popular in the early to mid-1970s can be located in efforts of the studios, recently overtaken by conglomerate organisations, to reduce risk by making films with guaranteed appeal by resorting to traditional genres and foregrounding the spectacular.¹⁴¹ While the critical reception of disaster films of this period would widely vary, Pauline Kael's evaluation of *Earthquake* as 'Universal's death wish for film art', and her statement that 'these destruction orgies are the only way it knows to make money',¹⁴² indicate a recognition

¹³⁷ Burke, *op. cit.*

¹³⁸ Clive Barnes, 'Playing pat-a-cake', *The Times*, 24th May 1975, p.7, David Robinson, 'The slide area', *The Times*, 13th June 1975, p.9

¹³⁹ Arnold, *The Washington Post*, 21st May 1975, *op. cit.*

¹⁴⁰ Canby, *The New York Times*, 8th May 1975, *op. cit.*, p.48

¹⁴¹ Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood*, University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas, 1994, p.80

¹⁴² Pauline Kael, 'Decadence', *The New Yorker*, 2nd December 1974, reprinted in Pauline Kael, *Reeling*, Marion Boyars, London, 1992, p.385

of the disaster films' origin in motivations that were commercial rather than artistic. Such a perspective is apparent in the reception of *The Day of the Locust*. For John Simon, it was the film's absence of subtlety in its approach to its final 'cataclysm' that made it 'the definitive disaster movie', Simon concluding that it 'certainly is a disaster of a movie'.¹⁴³ Gary Arnold wondered if the film's excesses might be a cynical appeal to audience familiarity with films such as *Earthquake* and *The Towering Inferno*, asking:

Could this be the only way to make commercial sense of a multi-million dollar version of "The Day of the Locust" in 1975? Audiences who find West's outlook impossible to grasp or enjoy may exit with the slightly consoling misimpression that "Locust" is just another of those flashy disaster spectacles, with weirder-than-average victims.¹⁴⁴

The sense of excess and inflation perceptible in the reviews would have consequences for estimations of Schlesinger's artistic authority. While a minority of critics, most notably Rex Reed and Judith Crist,¹⁴⁵ continued to present the director as artistic and authoritative, Schlesinger's command of the film was otherwise widely questioned. For Pauline Kael, Jay Cocks and John Simon, Schlesinger lacked the necessary mastery of the project.¹⁴⁶

As indicated, the reception of *The Day of the Locust* in Britain was broadly comparable to the film's American reception. Again the film had its advocates; just as Vincent Canby had been, Dilys Powell was won over by the film's stark power.¹⁴⁷ There was a sense of the film being marginally less derided, possibly attributable to fewer suggestions of an anti-Hollywood or anti-American tone. A sense of a certain superiority was palpable nonetheless, with the reviewer at *The Sun* finding Schlesinger to have adapted the book with a 'cool, cruel, lazy eye'.¹⁴⁸ In *Sight and Sound*, Philip French suggested that the film was continuous with similar tendencies in Schlesinger's earlier work, writing that the director had previously 'evidenced a sharp, rather gloating

¹⁴³ Simon, *op. cit.*

¹⁴⁴ Arnold, *The Washington Post*, 21st May 1975, *op. cit.*

¹⁴⁵ Reed, *op. cit.*, Crist, *op. cit.*

¹⁴⁶ Kael, *The New Yorker*, 12th May 1975, *op. cit.*, Cocks, *op. cit.*, Simon, *op. cit.*

¹⁴⁷ Dilys Powell, 'Ruling Passions', *The Sunday Times*, 15th June 1975 p.33

¹⁴⁸ Fergus Cashin, review, *The Sun*, 12th June 1975, BFI digital clippings

eye for the grotesque, the mean, the vulgar, disguised beneath an increasingly thin coating of compassion'.¹⁴⁹ British reviewers also remarked on the film's scale and cost, again calling forth comparisons to recent disaster movies.¹⁵⁰ Again the accumulative effect of such criticisms would have negative implications for Schlesinger's standing, his new film effectively deemed to have been for *Sight and Sound*, 'botched'.¹⁵¹

As well as being largely critically reviled, *The Day of the Locust* would be a commercial failure, grossing approximately \$2,300,000.¹⁵² Its failure has been compared to the success of *Chinatown*, released some eleven months earlier in June 1974. For Robert von Dassanowsky, a reason for *Chinatown*'s greater popularity was its more successful negotiation of the Hollywood myth,¹⁵³ recalling Tom Symmons' position on the necessity for nostalgic deference. As a 'anti-Golden Age film',¹⁵⁴ *The Day of the Locust* would appear to have been rather too irreverent.

Marathon Man

Schlesinger's next film, *Marathon Man* (1976), would represent a significant departure for the director from the broadly personal dramas characterising his career to date. Firmly located in the thriller genre, the film has been viewed as marking a decisive break in Schlesinger's career, his film work thereafter primarily consisting of studio-led genre films. Based on the best-selling William Goldman novel¹⁵⁵ and starring Dustin Hoffman and Laurence Olivier, the story of the pursuit of student Babe Levy (Hoffman) by Nazi war criminal Christian Szell (Olivier) is famous for a dental torture scene, whereby Szell inflicts extreme pain on Levy in order to extract information

¹⁴⁹ Philip French, 'Day of the Locust', *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1975, p.189

¹⁵⁰ Clive Barnes, 'Playing pat-a-cake', *The Times*, 24th May 1975, p.7, David Robinson, 'The slide area', *The Times*, 13th June 1975, p.9

¹⁵¹ 'The Day of the Locust', *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1975, p.198

¹⁵² Mann, *op. cit.*, p.416

¹⁵³ Robert von Dassanowsky, , 'You wouldn't even believe what your eyes can see: Cinema's messianism and fascist reflection in John Schlesinger's *The Day of the Locust*', *Senses of Cinema*, 39, 2006, http://sensesofcinema.com/2006/feature-articles/day_locust/, accessed 1/6/17

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ William Goldman, *Marathon Man*, Delacorte Press, New York, 1974

regarding the security of his stash of diamonds. *Marathon Man*'s reception was varied, the film eliciting a range of responses to Schlesinger's change of direction, the majority disapproving or at least uncertain of the director's entry into the thriller genre. The shift from a cinema deemed to be to some degree personal and artistic to one largely studio-led, a reversal of a common trajectory within the career of directors evaluated overall as auteurs, was accompanied by a persisting evaluation of Schlesinger as the film's ultimate agent, unfettered by structural and industrial factors. This would detrimentally affect the director's reputation, with Schlesinger's involvement perceived as cynical and calculating, particularly in the presentation of violence widely deemed gratuitous. A consideration of film production at this point and its consequences for directorial agency will indicate the boundaries within which Schlesinger was working, disregarded though they would be by reviewers upon the film's release.

Marathon Man had been developed initially by Robert Evans in partnership with William Goldman and producer Sidney Beckerman, and thereby constituted Schlesinger's first film for a significant period in which he had not been actively involved in the origination. Having recently stepped down as head of Paramount and now working as an independent producer primarily in partnership with Paramount, Evans, despite his earlier antipathy to *The Day of the Locust*, approached Schlesinger to direct. Evans' appointment of Schlesinger appears as typical of a producer deemed to be adept at making films that were 'both commercially viable and artistically impressive'¹⁵⁶ and 'reconciling notably "cinematic" directors ... with the needs – and rewards – of a "movie" audience'.¹⁵⁷ In a wider context, Evans and Schlesinger's collaboration is illustrative of shifting dynamics in 1970s Hollywood. As indicated in the earlier discussion of the disaster film cycle, rising production costs would be attended by the rise of the blockbuster; a pre-sold property in a generically recognisable form, 'usually supported by bankable stars ... and director'¹⁵⁸ – a definition which might reasonably applied to the *Marathon Man* project. As pointed out by Justin Wyatt,

¹⁵⁶ Charles Champlin, 'Schlesinger picks em up, lays em down in Marathon Man', *Los Angeles Times*, 3rd October 1976, p.36

¹⁵⁷ James Monaco, 'John Schlesinger makes a killing in thrillers', *The Village Voice*, 1st November 1976, p.50

¹⁵⁸ Wyatt, *op. cit.*, p.78

the finances for these films were commonly diverted from small, more personal films.¹⁵⁹ Such shifts in production would clearly have consequences for Schlesinger in terms of available, viable work. As well as the benefits for Evans of Schlesinger's name and experience, the director's powerful visual imagery, criticised as excessive in *The Day of the Locust*, may have been considered a potential asset in the direction of a thriller. *The Day of the Locust*'s cinematographer Conrad Hall would again be engaged on *Marathon Man*, as would production designer Richard Macdonald.

Marathon Man concerns Babe Levy (Dustin Hoffman), a postgraduate student and distance runner who unwittingly becomes involved in dangerous dealings between a former Nazi officer, Szell (Laurence Olivier), who lives on the proceeds of an illicit stash of diamonds, and a government agency which employs Babe's brother, Doc (Roy Scheider). Alarmed at the potential loss of his diamonds, Szell comes out of hiding to secure them, leading to the death of Doc and Szell's pursuit of his innocent brother, who in the meantime has become romantically involved with Elsa (Marthe Keller), an associate of Szell's. The latter's interrogation of Babe, involving an infamous dental torture scene, is finally succeeded by Babe's eventual escape and the killing of Elsa by a government agent. The climactic scene sees the confrontation of Babe and Szell, with the latter finally falling on his own knife in a last dive for his diamonds.

After the disappointing reception of *The Day of the Locust*, the comparatively secure nature of the *Marathon Man* project would seem to offer Schlesinger an opportunity to revitalise his career and provide the commercial success achieved with *Midnight Cowboy*. The continuing lack of opportunity within British film would also limit opportunities, as would the failure of other ventures pursued by Schlesinger in this period, such as the cancellation of *Alive*, a planned feature film about the survival in 1972 of the Uruguay rugby team following a plane crash in the Andes mountains. The project was cancelled upon another film version of the incident being made.¹⁶⁰ Schlesinger would also withdraw from plans to direct *Coming Home*, which was to be made with Waldo Salt and Jerome Hellman. Schlesinger's statement that 'I felt quite

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.79

¹⁶⁰ Gregg Kilday, 'Schlesinger back to his roots', *Los Angeles Times*, 22nd September 1976, p.11

strongly that the subject needed an American director'¹⁶¹ may indicate a certain lack of confidence in such an American subject as the film's, that of the Vietnam war, subsequent to implications of an anti-Americanism in *The Day of the Locust*. The film would be directed by Hal Ashby and released in 1978.

Unlike in publicity surrounding earlier films, where Schlesinger had stressed the current film's thematic continuity with earlier ones, this time he presented the project as a refreshing change, telling Fiona Lewis in the *Los Angeles Times*; 'I wanted to do something totally different. To come out of another bolt hole, something with less responsibility to an author or a theme that's trying to be meaningful'.¹⁶² Instead of entirely abandoning an auteur-like discourse, however, a continuing personal investment was also apparent, Schlesinger stating in a promotional film for *Marathon Man* that he:

... wanted to see, as well as doing something that was truly suspenseful, whether I could get my own kind of interest, which is largely concerned with character and with detail, into a film of this nature. I mean, obviously a thriller is first and foremost perhaps concerned with plot which was one of the problems I found perhaps in making it something that was personal to me.¹⁶³

Such a 'problem' in reconciling Schlesinger's interests and the demands of a commercial genre venture such as *Marathon Man* would be evident, in both the film's production and reception.

Production, budgeted at \$6.5 million, commenced in the autumn of 1975, with studio and New York location shooting ending early in 1976. Divisions between old and newer methods would distinguish the production, both in front of and behind the camera. Laurence Olivier's difficulty comprehending Dustin Hoffman's method approach to acting, occasioning his question to Schlesinger, "Why can't he just act?",¹⁶⁴ is indicative of the two actors' different acting styles. Such contrasting approaches similarly emerge in the distinct methods of Schlesinger and Evans.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² Fiona Lewis, 'John Schlesinger parts the waters', *Los Angeles Times*, 11th April 1976, p.43

¹⁶³ *Magic of Hollywood: Making of Marathon Man*, featurette, DVD, 2002

¹⁶⁴ John Schlesinger, 'Reflections on working in Film and Television', in Bob Franklin (ed.), *Television Policy: The MacTaggart Lectures*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2005, p.103

Although the director's advocate, critic Gene D. Phillips, would claim that Schlesinger ensured that, upon accepting the project, 'he would be involved in every phase of the production', resulting in a film that would be as 'permeated with his own personal style as any of his other pictures had been',¹⁶⁵ Schlesinger would later claim that the film represented the point when he began to yield control, such as over the final edit.¹⁶⁶ William J. Mann would also later write that 'Evans was impatient with discussions about character, and the little directorial touches so typical of John that completely befuddled him'.¹⁶⁷

The release of *Marathon Man* in the United States on 8th October 1976 would be met with a range of critical responses, with reviewers responding in a variety of ways to Schlesinger's entry into commercial genre cinema. While a minority of reviewers did not present his involvement in the film as incongruous, instead evaluating the film purely in terms of its success as an effective and enjoyable thriller, most, to some degree, specified or implied a tension, dissonance or some incompatibility between the requirements of a successful thriller and Schlesinger as a director. Schlesinger's apparent efforts at elevating the film with detailed realism and social significance were found to be inconsistent and unconvincing, causing the film's violence to appear gratuitous and Schlesinger's involvement in the film judged to be commercially motivated. While the power of the film's visceral, thrilling sequences was acknowledged, such sequences were frequently viewed as emerging from cynical, calculating commercial motivations.

As indicated, a small number of critics approached the film apparently without requiring it to fulfil any criteria other than that of functioning effectively as a thriller. According to Vincent Canby at *The New York Times*, it was 'a film that you won't want to miss', a compelling thriller that 'just wants to scare the hell out of you – and it does',¹⁶⁸ while for Judith Crist at the *Saturday Review*, the film was 'a potential neo-classic of the genre'.¹⁶⁹ Others saw a certain elevation of the thriller in *Marathon Man*

¹⁶⁵ Gene D. Phillips, *John Schlesinger*, Twayne Publishers, Boston, Massachusetts, 1981, p.148

¹⁶⁶ Buruma, *op. cit.*, p.134

¹⁶⁷ Mann., *op. cit.*, p.434

¹⁶⁸ Vincent Canby, 'Marathon Man', thriller of a film', *The New York Times*, 7th October 1976, p.60

¹⁶⁹ Judith Crist, review, *Saturday Review*, 3rd October 1976, BFI collection JRS/9/20

due to Schlesinger's direction. Charles Champlin at the *Los Angeles Times* wrote that 'never, I imagine, has a thriller been so elegantly enacted', adding that Schlesinger 'shows again his ability to control the resources of a very large movie while evoking characterizations of some depth and performances of considerable sensitivity and interest'.¹⁷⁰ Although some degree of qualification appeared in Champlin's review with his statement that '(Schlesinger) may not feel most at home in the genre picture', Champlin concluded that nevertheless, Schlesinger was able to impart 'an unhackneyed and individual touch'.¹⁷¹ For Arthur Knight in *The Hollywood Reporter*, Schlesinger imbued the film with 'intellect', rendering the film 'as complex and intricate as an expensive jigsaw puzzle'.¹⁷²

For more reviewers, however, Schlesinger's approach to the film, found to emphasise socially significant themes and incidents and emphasise gritty realistic detail, operated to its detriment. For Gary Arnold at *The Washington Post*, Schlesinger was 'kidding himself about this material's potential for self-improvement',¹⁷³ just as, for Frank Rich writing for the *New York Post*, the film was 'a mean chamber of horrors and (Schlesinger) should know it'.¹⁷⁴ Intricacies, detail and ambiguities in the plot, settings and characterisation were found not only to slow the action¹⁷⁵ but to confuse regarding the narrative's unfolding,¹⁷⁶ or to disguise its lack of substance.¹⁷⁷ In the film's emphasis on detail, Molly Haskell at *The Village Voice* noted an unpleasant, hostile impulse, one she deemed characteristic of Schlesinger, with Haskell claiming that 'Schlesinger seems to have carved a career out of making New York look even worse than it is, and that takes some doing'.¹⁷⁸ She felt that the 'overwrought vignettes', such as when Babe's apartment appears to the viewer to have been ransacked, only for it to emerge that it in fact hasn't, 'are not part of a master plan, but are simply

¹⁷⁰ Champlin, *Los Angeles Times*, 3rd October 1976, *op. cit.*, p.36

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² Arthur Knight, review, *The Hollywood Reporter*, 29th September 1976, BFI collection JRS/9/20

¹⁷³ Gary Arnold, 'Marathon Man: Beyond Endurance', *The Washington Post*, 16th October 1976, p.B5

¹⁷⁴ Frank Rich, 'Marathon Man', *New York Post*, 7th October 1976, BFI collection JRS/9/20

¹⁷⁵ S.K., 'Marathon Man', *The Independent Film Journal*, 11th October 1976, p.2893

¹⁷⁶ Murf, 'Marathon Man', *Variety*, 29th September 1976, Arnold, *op. cit.*, Howard Kissel, review, *Women's Wear Daily*, 5th October 1976, BFI collection JRS/9/20

¹⁷⁷ Molly Haskell, 'He Makes New York Look Even Worse than It Is', *The Village Voice*, 18th October 1976, BFI collection JRS/9/20, Rich, *New York Post*, 7th October 1976, *op. cit.*

¹⁷⁸ Haskell, *ibid.*

excrescences in an extra layer of rot that Schlesinger is applying to the skin of New York'.¹⁷⁹ For *Marathon Man* reviewers such as Haskell, Schlesinger's characteristic attention to such incidental detail appeared as superfluous and obscure in the realm of the thriller. Certain serious themes in the film, such as Babe's late father's loss of reputation in the advent of McCarthyism and the Nazi past of Schell, were also widely resisted, judged to be insufficiently explored and consequently found to cynically imbue the film with a superficial seriousness.¹⁸⁰

A sense of Schlesinger's apparent cynicism in his approach to the story pervades the reviews, particularly with regards to the presentation of violence. For a number of reviewers, the violence was excessive and, due to what were seen as weaknesses in the plot, not sufficiently motivated. Gary Arnold found the story to have been 'manipulated' for thrills and 'portentous, fussy effects',¹⁸¹ while Molly Haskell suggested that Schlesinger 'exploits our everyday fears'.¹⁸² Frank Rich pointed to commercially cynical motivations with his statement that Schlesinger 'knows how to grab an audience, and he'll hit you with anything to keep your attention – illogical histrionics, baffling plot gimmicks, disorienting editing and, most of all, extravagant violence',¹⁸³ adding that 'even as you're titillated by this film, you can't escape the feeling that you're being had for cheap'.¹⁸⁴ It was not film violence per se that worried Rich – he wrote of his admiration of the power of the climactic scenes in *Taxi Driver* (dir. Martin Scorsese, 1976) and stated that the violence in *Bonnie and Clyde* (dir. Arthur Penn, 1967) was integral to its status as art¹⁸⁵ – but he bemoaned what he saw as the exploitative gratuity of *Marathon Man*, whereby 'if you throw enough blood on the screen, an audience won't have time to appreciate that there's very little else going on in the movie dramatically, emotionally or intellectually'.¹⁸⁶ Rich concluded by

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ Kissel, *Women's Wear Daily*, 5th October 1976, *op. cit.*, Rich, *New York Post*, 7th October 1976, *op. cit.*

¹⁸¹ Arnold, *The Washington Post*, 16th October 1976, *op. cit.*

¹⁸² Haskell, *The Village Voice*, 18th October 1976, *op. cit.*

¹⁸³ Rich, *New York Post*, 7th October 1976, *op. cit.*

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ Frank Rich, 'From Gore to Bore', *New York Post*, 9th October 1976, BFI collection JRS/9/20

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

advising that Schlesinger and Evans should, in the future, ‘be more responsible in their choice of projects’.¹⁸⁷

Schlesinger would object to claims that the film’s violence was gratuitous, though he would agree that it was strong, telling James Monaco in an interview for *The Village Voice*; ‘Obviously it’s a violent film ... deliberately so! It’s *unpleasant* violence, and *that* is deliberate. I don’t want violence to be glamorized in any way. I feel that everything that’s in the film now is justified’.¹⁸⁸ For Monaco, critical resistance to the film appeared to lie in Schlesinger’s defiance of expectations, writing:

Why haven’t the reviewers agreed with this rationale? It may be because they were expecting “cinema” from Schlesinger and he gave them a “movie”. More important, perhaps he is a victim of his own success. Whatever you think of its implications *Marathon Man* is such an effective piece of manipulation that it may take a more rigorous sensibility than any daily critic possesses to breach the façade of the film’s violence and burrow through to the logic beneath.¹⁸⁹

Marathon Man was released in Britain on 17th December 1976. Around this time, Schlesinger would attempt to justify the film’s violence as appropriate in articles appearing in the British press¹⁹⁰ and continue to justify his opting to pursue film work in America. The film’s critical reception would again be mixed, but in certain respects, reviewers tended to be more enthusiastic, more receptive to the film’s thrills and, in some instances, more inclined to view it as a successful elevation of the thriller genre, making the film appear more continuous with Schlesinger’s earlier work. There were dissenters, however, with a number of reviewers broadly objecting to aspects of the film in similar terms to the American critics.

Reviews by David Robinson at the *Financial Times* and, to some degree, Patrick Gibbs at *The Daily Telegraph* indicated a willingness to, in James Monaco’s terminology, breach the film’s façade, with both critics noting an ambiguity in the film

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁸ James Monaco, ‘John Schlesinger makes a killing in thrillers’, *The Village Voice*, 1st November 1976, p.50

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ Brian Vine, ‘The director with blood on his hands’, *Sunday Express*, 1st November 1976, p.10, Sydney Edwards and Michael Owen, ‘Schlesinger sounds off’, *Evening Standard*, 3rd November 1976, BFI digital clippings

rather than the obscurity that reviewers in the United States had complained of. Robinson's review in particular is highly interpretive, with the critic noting a high degree of ambiguity and reading the film's symbolism and allusions in order to uncover their meaning. The film emerges in the review as highly complex and ambiguous, recalling an interpretive approach more common to reviews of *Midnight Cowboy* and *Sunday Bloody Sunday*. Noting how the film 'looks different how you look at it', Robinson suggested that it was not Schlesinger's intention for the film to be read purely as a thriller, rather, 'Schlesinger's purpose, it seems to me, has been to treat this material not at the level of realistic thriller, but to interpret it as an essay in nightmare'.¹⁹¹ Instead of viewing the treatment of themes such as McCarthyism and Nazism as insufficiently developed in the film, for Robinson, 'vague, elusive, only half articulated, at the centre of the vision is the great communal nightmare of the twentieth century, oppression of man by man – the ineradicable memories of the concentration camps and the McCarthy years'.¹⁹² The film similarly appears as subtle and ambiguous in the review by Patrick Gibbs, the critic stating that 'no film I can recall has seemed so likely, afterwards, to give rise to discussion and differences of opinion as to what happens' and adding that the label 'thriller' was insufficient for a film 'which manages to comment, interestingly, on the activities of such spy organisations as the FBI and CIA in America, the effects, still being felt there, of the McCarthy witch hunts of Communists in the 50s and the continuing presence of important Nazis hiding in South America'.¹⁹³ In addition to such reviews as Robinson's and Gibbs', where the film was presented as in some way surpassing the conventions of the thriller, *Marathon Man* also received praise from critics content to see a successfully executed thriller which fulfilled the requirements of the genre. Although Arthur Thirkell at the *Daily Mirror*, Ian Christie at the *Daily Express* and Richard Barkley at the *Sunday Express* all confessed to having been somewhat confused at points in the unravelling of the narrative, the film was nevertheless found to be highly enjoyable.¹⁹⁴ It was designated

¹⁹¹ David Robinson, 'Schlesinger's long-running dream', *The Times*, 17th December 1976, p.15

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

¹⁹³ Patrick Gibbs, review, *Daily Telegraph*, 10th December 1976, BFI digital clippings

¹⁹⁴ Arthur Thirkell, 'Lord Larry runs away with it...', *Daily Mirror*, 13th December 1976, p.13, Ian Christie, 'This one will run and run', *Daily Express*, 13th December 1976, p.12, Richard Barkley, 'A Nazi walks again – in the streets of New York', *Sunday Express*, 19th December 1976, p.16

‘the most enthralling mystery since *The Third Man*’ by Margaret Hinxman at the *Daily Mail*, who praised its ‘pace and blazing action’.¹⁹⁵

Other reviewers, however, were less enthusiastic about *Marathon Man*, seemingly immune to both its suspense and its depth. Attempts to elevate the conventions of the thriller were identified by Russell Davies at *The Observer*, but found to be uneven, with the ‘literary resonances this director has habitually brought out in his material’ giving way after the first hour to ‘a great deal of blood’.¹⁹⁶ For Tom Hutchinson at the *Sunday Telegraph*, the film was not without its strengths, particularly when it functioned as a straightforward thriller. It was marred, however, by ‘(attacks) of social significance’, incidental details regarding political unrest and industrial action not cogent to the plot, which struck Hutchinson as didacticism.¹⁹⁷ Similarly, and recalling Molly Haskell’s comments, Clancy Sigal at *The Spectator* regretted the film’s approach to its locations. Sigal claimed ‘from his early English films like *Darling* to *Midnight Cowboy* and *The Day of the Locust*, Schlesinger’s satires on the pitiless emotional grime of the cities have been overwrought – and downright inaccurate. *Marathon Man* is no exception’.¹⁹⁸

The film’s violence would again be criticised by reviewers, its apparent gratuity once more positioned as emanating from Schlesinger’s cynicism. Benny Green at *Punch* strongly objected to what he saw as ‘a thoroughly pernicious piece of work’, one which took ‘an indecent pleasure in showing people in the extremities of physical agony’.¹⁹⁹ Schlesinger’s skill as a director, for Green, made the ‘hideous butchery’ even more ‘distasteful’, hastening the reviewer’s departure from the screening after ninety minutes.²⁰⁰ Green mused upon the motivations for such a project, claiming that ‘one is forced to wonder whether it is a piece of work by a bunch of moral defectives, idiots, or people looking to turn a fast buck’.²⁰¹ Gavin Millar, writing for *The Listener*,

¹⁹⁵ Margaret Hinxman, ‘The most enthralling mystery since *The Third Man*’, *Daily Mail*, 13th December 1976, BFI digital clippings

¹⁹⁶ Russell Davies, ‘X is for Schlesinger’, *The Observer*, 19th December 1976, p.21

¹⁹⁷ Tom Hutchinson, ‘Thrills are enough’, *Sunday Telegraph*, 19th December 1976, BFI digital clippings

¹⁹⁸ Clancy Sigal, review, *The Spectator*, 18th December 1976, BFI collection JRS/9/18

¹⁹⁹ Benny Green, ‘Marathon Nausea’, *Punch*, 15th December 1976, p.1151

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

similarly saw the film as emerging from a calculating shrewdness, writing that Schlesinger, 'looking for a hit after the failure of *The Day of the Locust*, has gone all out for thrills'.²⁰²

Despite the significant reservations of the reviewers, *Marathon Man* would be commercially successful, earning a U.S box office gross of nearly \$22 million²⁰³ and performing well in Europe.²⁰⁴ The film would fail to receive any significant recognition in the way of awards, though Laurence Oliver would win a Golden Globe award for Best Actor in a Supporting Role. The film's commercial success paired with its lack of critical plaudits would represent a contrast to Schlesinger's earlier career, working to re-position his directorial status. His next film, *Yanks*, though in some ways a seemingly more personal project would, as will be seen, do little to restore Schlesinger's formerly more esteemed profile.

Yanks

Schlesinger's next feature film, *Yanks* (1979), has received little recognition in retrospective appraisals of his work, indicating negligible revision of the film since its largely indifferent critical reception. For William J. Mann, it marks the second phase of the director's career, one which would lack the innovation and significant artistic merit of his earlier career.²⁰⁵ Critical appraisals appearing upon the film's release would be somewhat in accord with this evaluation, indicated, for example, by Derek Malcolm's pronouncement that *Yanks* was disappointing for the way in which it 'refuses to commit itself',²⁰⁶ possibly implying a corresponding lack of artistic investment on Schlesinger's part. A closer look at details of the film's production, however, indicates the film's continuity with much of Schlesinger's earlier work. The

²⁰² Gavin Millar, 'Rural Relic', *The Listener*, 16th December 1976, p.793

²⁰³ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0074860/>

²⁰⁴ Mann, *op. cit.*, p.441

²⁰⁵ Mann, *op. cit.*, p.466

²⁰⁶ Derek Malcolm, 'How a generation got its marching orders', *The Guardian*, 1st November 1979, p.11

-muted critical response to the film, however, would confirm the continuing ambivalence regarding Schlesinger's status.

Although the press would later attribute to Schlesinger a greater role in the origination of *Yanks*, his involvement in the project emerges as having come about almost accidentally. In an interview with *American Film*, Schlesinger spoke of the film's conception in some detail. Referring to the actor and scriptwriter Colin Welland who had co-starred with Dustin Hoffman in *Straw Dogs* (dir. Sam Peckinpah, 1971), Schlesinger stated:

Colin said, "I've come to see Dustin". I said, "Well, you have to wait for a bit because this isn't one of his best days". Then I said "What are you doing?" He said "I've got this idea for a film". And he just told me the idea, and I said there and then, "It's terrific. It's what I want to make. I'll do it next".²⁰⁷

Schlesinger would re-unite with Joseph Janni for the film, who would forward Welland's script to Schlesinger, expressing great enthusiasm for it, writing, 'I remember you telling me how much you had to do while shooting *Marathon Man* to cover the weakness of the story. Well, I feel that here it is the opposite; after the necessary re-writes to the script you will simply have to shoot it brilliantly, which obviously you will do'.²⁰⁸

A number of studios and other prospective financiers, however, did not share Janni's enthusiasm, and obtaining funding for the film would prove to be particularly difficult. Schlesinger told Diane Jacobs at *The Washington Post* that he had experienced 'more trouble getting backing for *Yanks* than for *Midnight Cowboy* or *The Day of the Locust*, both of which were very difficult to finance'.²⁰⁹ Producers were found to be uncertain of what Jacobs described as 'its limited scope, nostalgic tone and frankly sentimental treatment'.²¹⁰ Although it is difficult to ascertain which financing organisations were approached first, certain British options were explored at some stage. Schlesinger told James Cameron-Wilson at *What's on in London*:

²⁰⁷ James Powers, 'Dialogue on Film: John Schlesinger', *American Film*, December 1979, p.41

²⁰⁸ Letter from Joseph Janni to Schlesinger, dated 21st April 1977, BFI collection JRS/10/15

²⁰⁹ Diane Jacobs, 'The Sentimental Warrior', *The Washington Post*, 21st October 1979, p.K8

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

We went to a lot of British distributors to raise money for Yanks, and only one out of the three majors had the politeness to reply in a friendly fashion, while the others either took us for a long ride and dumped us or didn't even bother to reply. If that's the way we're treated in this country, there is little reason to remain.²¹¹

A letter from Barry Spikings of EMI, writing from near the Burmese border where filming of *The Deer Hunter* (dir. Michael Cimino, 1978) was taking place, suggests that this was the aforementioned friendly reply. Spikings set out his concerns about what appeared to be a narrow story, claiming that it:

... relies on a nostalgic atmosphere for its effect. That nostalgia exists for many British and Americans, I believe. But for most other areas the special circumstances created by the Yanks being based in the English countryside will not be readily recognised. An additional problem is that the picture's nuances of dialogue are likely to prove an obstacle in many territories outside of the USA and Britain.²¹²

The film, budgeted at \$6 million, would finally be backed by United Artists, Universal and finance from a German tax shelter scheme.²¹³ Universal would have exploitation rights in the United States while United Artists would have exploitation rights in the United Kingdom. Later, in January 1979, Schlesinger's exasperation at the difficulties of setting up the project were clear, and indicative of changes then underway in Hollywood. He told Rex Reed, 'Paramount was supposed to do it, then David Picker left, and Barry Diller couldn't have cared less. Then United Artists picked it up, and everyone left that company after the deal was made'.²¹⁴ Schlesinger made more general complaints about the corporate, artistically unadventurous nature of Hollywood at this time, telling Reed 'they only want sequels, remakes and rip-offs in America, with an absolute guarantee of a hit. And you can't give them that'.²¹⁵ He would similarly complain to Diane Jacobs at *The Washington Post*:

Today you have to deal with committees of musical-chair executives who are looking over their shoulders to some satellite company of questionable origin. We're working for many frightened people, and I think those people have

²¹¹ James Cameron-Wilson, 'Change of Wind', *What's on in London*, 9th November 1979, BFI digital clippings

²¹² Letter from Barry Spikings to John Schlesinger, 18th October 1977, BFI collection JRS/10/19

²¹³ Letter from Schlesinger to Ahmed Hussain, 13th December 1977, JRS/10/19

²¹⁴ Rex Reed, 'Yanks', *Datebook*, 28th January 1979, BFI collection JRS/10/20

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

become greedy about what constitutes a success. They aren't satisfied with films that cover their costs; they want the blockbuster.²¹⁶

The specific arrangements for the funding of *Yanks* would bring particular strains and constraints, with Schlesinger lamenting in a letter to assistant Mary Peck, that the 'usual problems' of film production were enhanced by 'being financed in triplicate'.²¹⁷ Pressure was also brought to bear on the project when it was felt by the film's backers that, as Barry Spikings had suspected, its British setting rendered it too narrow in appeal. According to Schlesinger, 'there was a man at Universal who said that nothing English goes in America any longer, which I think is possibly true', Schlesinger adding that 'we were asked by worried American executives to make *Yanks* less English, but I said I couldn't pretend it was all happening in upstate New York, but that I would try to make it as 'understandable' as possible'.²¹⁸ Such anxieties may have been eased by the employment of American scriptwriter Walter Bernstein, engaged 'to help get the American side of things'.²¹⁹ The American Lester Persky was also appointed to co-produce with Janni.

Yanks is the story of the arrival of GI troops in the Lancashire area, the romance that blossoms between three of the soldiers with three local women and the concomitant pressures of displacement, miscommunication and divided loyalties. Richard Gere, recently of *Looking for Mr Goodbar* (dir. Richard Brooks, 1977) played Matt, who falls for a local woman, Jean (Lisa Eichhorn), who is engaged to her childhood sweetheart, Billy (Derek Thompson). Despite their mutual attraction, there is hesitation, particularly from Matt, who fears being irresponsible and is mindful of local opposition to the relationship, particularly from Jean's mother. William Devane, who had starred in *Marathon Man*, played John, who pursues the upper-middle class Helen (Vanessa Redgrave). Older and wiser, this couple is more philosophical about the short span of their time together. A less prominent pairing was Danny (Chuck Venera) and Mollie (Wendy Morgan). Finally, the latter pair marry, John and Helen wistfully part

²¹⁶ Jacobs, *op. cit.*, p.K9

²¹⁷ Letter from Schlesinger to Mary Peck, 3rd May 1978, BFI collection JRS/10/19

²¹⁸ Cameron-Wilson, *op. cit.*

²¹⁹ Buruma, *op. cit.*, p.144

and Matt and Jean say a dramatic farewell at the station upon Matt's eventual departure. The viewer is left uncertain as to whether they will reunite, their fate seemingly dependent on the vicissitudes of war.

Upon surveying production papers held at the British Film Institute, a highly collaborative approach to the project emerges. Characteristically, Janni's input regarding the development of the narrative was significant, with his communication of ideas to key personnel regarding the unfolding of the story resulting in subsequent re-writes by Bernstein.²²⁰ In a 1979 interview, Schlesinger would tell the journalist Donald Chase that the writing inputs of Welland and Bernstein were 'virtually a collaboration, with Walter often taking a scene that Colin would be the first to admit he couldn't handle with security because it was so totally American in its speech or point of view. Other scenes, Walter would say, 'Let Colin do that'.²²¹ A less harmonious collaboration, however, would later be recalled by Schlesinger, with the director telling Ian Buruma that 'It wasn't the happiest of collaborations' and stating that Welland disliked revisions expanding the public school and upper-middle class aspects pertaining to the Vanessa Redgrave storyline.²²² Certainly, the archives are evident of disagreements between Welland and Bernstein regarding whose name should appear first in the credits for the screenplay. The matter was referred to the Writers' Guild of Great Britain, though Bernstein did not pursue his claim for primary credit.²²³ Despite the often-troubled nature of the production, the ultimate authority, for Schlesinger, lay with himself, the director telling Chase that 'no matter how many collaborators you have and how gifted they are, the director has the final say'.²²⁴

Articles appearing during the film's production and at the time of its release would also position Schlesinger as the ultimate author, a designation partly enabled by the director's discourse regarding his role in the film's production. The film's continuity with Schlesinger's oeuvre to date was emphasised, with its themes presented

²²⁰ Memo dated 8th August 1978 from Joseph Janni to John Schlesinger and Jim Clark, BFI collection JRS/10/15

²²¹ Donald Chase, 'Yanks', *Horizon Magazine*, November 1979, BFI collection JRS/10/20

²²² Buruma, *op. cit.*, p.144

²²³ Letter dated 11th April 1979 from Elaine Steel, General Secretary of the Writers' Guild of Great Britain to Otis Blodget, International Creative Management Ltd, BFI collection JRS/10/19

²²⁴ Chase, *op. cit.*

as an almost inevitable expression of Schlesinger's interests. The director stated in July 1977, 'in a sense, I have always been working up to a point where in one film I could express my roots and my deep affection for both England and America'.²²⁵ The primacy of Schlesinger's role emerges so strongly in a *Los Angeles Times* article appearing at the time of the American release that Schlesinger almost emerges as the film's originator, with the statement, 'After the war more than 70,000 GI brides left Britain to settle in the United States. It was this factor alone that sparked Schlesinger off on his saga of romance and drama, heartbreak and happiness'.²²⁶ The lack of reference to Colin Welland in the article further enhances the impression of Schlesinger's authority.

While Welland's wartime experiences as a child were detailed in some of the film's publicity, especially his having been given a large handful of loose change by a G.I. – an incident also featured in the film²²⁷ – the personal nature of the film for Schlesinger would be featured to a greater extent. In an interview for *The New York Times*, Schlesinger identified with the character Tim, the son of Vanessa Redgrave's character, Helen.²²⁸ In October 1979, Diane Jacobs at *The Washington Post* wrote, 'Schlesinger's own past is reflected in a number of characters and events in the film. His family was much like Vanessa Redgrave's', Schlesinger adding, 'though not as grand as that. We lived in London, my father was a doctor, my mother – like the Redgrave character – played in an amateur orchestra. I was very much that young son who runs away from public school in Yanks, though I never physically ran away'.²²⁹

A sense of Schlesinger's authority would also emerge in publicity centring on the film's female lead, Lisa Eichhorn. Again, Schlesinger's association with featuring new talent was drawn upon. His earlier 'discovery' of Julie Christie was cited, with Eichhorn designated 'another likely find'.²³⁰ Schlesinger would himself concede such

²²⁵ George Waldo, 'John Schlesinger's cure for UK ills – 'take more risks'', *Screen International*, 9th July 1977, p.17

²²⁶ William Hall, 'Schlesinger has Vanessa for Tee', *Los Angeles Times*, 28th May 1978, pp.46-47

²²⁷ Charles Champlin, 'Mad Yanks and Englishmen', *Los Angeles Times*, 20th September 1979, p.C1, Charles Champlin, 'The 'Yanks': Courtship and calamity: The 'Yanks' is coming, *Los Angeles Times*, 16th September 1979, p.N1, p.29

²²⁸ Tom Buckley, 'At the Movies', *The New York Times*, 28th September 1979, p14

²²⁹ Jacobs, *op. cit.*

²³⁰ Sydney Edwards, 'Re-creating wartime Britain for Yanks', *The New York Times*, 9th July 1978, p.13

a designation, telling Donald Chase, ‘there’s a special reward – a Svengali-type thing, I suppose – in surprising an audience with a previously unknown face’.²³¹ The story of how Eichhorn gained the part of Jean - the American actress presented herself as British in her initial audition with Schlesinger - also formed the basis of a number of articles appearing in the press.²³²

Yanks was released in both Britain and the United States on 19th September 1979. As befitted a film about the union of Britons and Americans, reviewers on both sides of the Atlantic were widely in agreement in their evaluations, declaring the film to be slow,²³³ excessively sentimental²³⁴ (while at the same time, emotionally uninvolved²³⁵) and too invested in detail,²³⁶ or, as *Cineaste* magazine put it, ‘overlong, overly sentimental and overwrought’.²³⁷

The American release of the film would be notable for a degree of praise, however. *Yanks* was found by Charles Champlin of the *Los Angeles Times* to be ‘a mature work of art’²³⁸ and by Gary Arnold of *The Washington Post* to be the ‘classiest tear-jerker in recent memory’.²³⁹ The cast’s performances were praised, and a minority of critics resisted the consensus, enjoying an appropriate degree of sentiment and nostalgia.²⁴⁰ More representative, however, would be assessments pronouncing the film to be ‘too neat’ and ‘overfed’,²⁴¹ or ‘as passionate as a tin of spam’.²⁴² The American reception of *Yanks* would also be marked by a sense of Schlesinger’s compromised or reduced reputation. For the critic at *Texas Monthly*, Schlesinger was

²³¹ Chase, *op. cit.*

²³² Roderick Mann, ‘A Yank Who Couldn’t Tell a Lie?’, *Los Angeles Times*, 23rd August 1979, p.E25, Brian Vine, ‘New York acclaims the Yanks from Oxford’, *Daily Express*, 19th September 1979, p.3, Judy Klemesrud, ‘Why Heroine of Yanks Is as English as Apple Pie’, *The New York Times*, 21st September 1979, p.C6, ‘Lisa, the last star of the Seventies’, *Daily Express*, 1st November 1979, p.5

²³³ Paul Hyman, ‘Yanks’, *Boxoffice*, 1st October 1979, p.16, Tom Arnold, ‘Yanks for a memory’, *The Washington Post*, 26th October 1979, p.D1

²³⁴ Richard Fuller, ‘Haunting Onion Field’, *Cincinnati Magazine*, November 1979, p.156, L.R., ‘Yanks’, *Cineaste*, Vol.10, No.1, Winter 79/80, p.68

²³⁵ ‘Yanks’, *New York Magazine*, 8th October 1979, p.19

²³⁶ Vincent Canby, ‘Yanks’ and British Girls’, *The New York Times*, 19th September 1979, p.C17

²³⁷ L.R., *Cineaste*, Vol.10, No.1, Winter 79/80, *op. cit.*

²³⁸ Champlin, *Los Angeles Times*, 16th September 1979, *op. cit.*

²³⁹ Arnold, *The Washington Post*, 26th October 1979, *op. cit.*, p.D1

²⁴⁰ George Morris, ‘Over there’, *Texas Monthly*, November 1979, p.218

²⁴¹ Jack Kroll, ‘When Johnny came marching in’, *Newsweek*, 24th September 1979, p.102

²⁴² *New York Magazine*, 8th October 1979, *op. cit.*

pronounced a 'mediocre director' with an 'inflated reputation', one who 'lets the different threads of the story sprawl for almost two and half hours without ever tying them together'.²⁴³

The British reception was also not without praise, with some critics lauding the film's period detail²⁴⁴ and gentle nostalgia.²⁴⁵ Less positive evaluations, however, worked to position *Yanks* as in some way meagre. The *Daily Mail* reviewer pronounced it 'Coronation Street in khaki', finding the film's 'homelier moments' suggestive of the long-running soap opera.²⁴⁶ For Derek Malcolm at *The Guardian*, *Yanks* was compared to the Bill Douglas Trilogy (*My Childhood*, 1972, *My Ain Folk*, 1973 and *My Way Home*, 1978) set around the same time as *Yanks*. For Malcolm, the Douglas films were 'an historic achievement in the chequered history of British independent film-making',²⁴⁷ while:

Yanks seems to me exactly what the Douglas trilogy is not, and that is wasteful of its sometimes stunning effects. It refuses to do what Douglas does in every frame. It almost never commits itself. It is so carefully understated that, in the end, you wonder what exactly it is all about.²⁴⁸

Schlesinger's artistic status, as a director at the helm of 'the most romantic kind of soft-focus fiction', was consequently affected, with Gavin Millar at *The Listener* stating that *Yanks* 'can hardly raise Schlesinger's reputation as a serious filmmaker'.²⁴⁹

In his biography of Schlesinger, William J. Mann indicates that Schlesinger felt that the film's timing was unfortunate, with Mann pointing to the negative reception just months prior to *Yanks*' release of *Hanover Street* (dir. Peter Hyams, 1979),²⁵⁰ a World War Two Anglo-American romantic film deemed a 'risible disaster'.²⁵¹ As indicated by Mann, the period would see considerably more commercial success for

²⁴³ Morris, *Texas Monthly*, November 1979, *op. cit.*

²⁴⁴ Dilys Powell, 'Over here', *Punch*, 7th November 1979, p.851, Cecil Wilson, 'It's Coronation Street in khaki', *Daily Mail*, 2nd November 1979, p.28

²⁴⁵ Arthur Thirkell, 'Yanked into the hidden war', *Daily Mirror*, 2nd November 1979, p.23

²⁴⁶ Wilson, *Daily Mail*, 2nd November 1979, *op. cit.*, p.28

²⁴⁷ Malcolm, *The Guardian*, 1st November 1979, *op. cit.*

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁹ Gavin Millar, 'Cinema', *The Listener*, 8th November 1979, p.635

²⁵⁰ William J. Mann, *op. cit.*, p.466

²⁵¹ Geoff Brown, 'Americans in Wigan', *Financial Times*, 2nd November 1979, p.21

Vietnam films such as *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now* (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, 1979).²⁵² Also suggestive of the film's poor timing is the success of comparable British wartime-based films later in the 1980s, of which *Yanks* may be seen as a precursor. Amy Sargeant has written of the success of these 'intimate' depictions, films presenting 'an individual perspective as an antidote to or alongside Big History'²⁵³ and found to include *Another Time, Another Place* (dir. Michael Radford, 1983), *A Private Function* (dir. Malcolm Mowbray, 1984) and *Hope and Glory* (dir. John Boorman, 1987).²⁵⁴ The popularity of such films has been associated with the values advocated by right-wing ideologies more securely in place by the 1980s, such as 'thrift, industry and entrepreneurial ingenuity in the face of hardship and austerity'.²⁵⁵

Yanks' commercial performance would be disappointing, the film's lifetime American domestic gross being in the region of \$4 million.²⁵⁶ Schlesinger claimed that the film would have performed better if it had been marketed more efficiently.²⁵⁷ Archive material points to Schlesinger's marked frustration with marketing machinations, with the director fearing in March 1978 that, with a particular Universal employee's engagement on *Jaws 2* (dir. Jeannot Szwarc, 1978), 'all hopes of co-ordinating the publicity of *Yanks* between U.A. and Universal recedes into the nebulous future'.²⁵⁸ Schlesinger would continue to complain, asking Ned Tannen, an executive at Universal in October 1979, 'How in the world can Universal have expected this special film to do well with such minimal advertising support?'.²⁵⁹ Shortcomings in distribution have also been noted, with the critic and historian George Perry

²⁵² William J. Mann, *op. cit.*, p.466

²⁵³ Amy Sargeant, *British Cinema: A Critical History*, BFI Publishing, London, 2005, p.300

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁵ Jonathan Hacker, 'The Cinema and the Home Front: *Yanks*, *Hope and Glory* and *Chicago Joe and the Showgirl*', *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol 2, No.2, 1991, p.176

²⁵⁶ IMDb, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0080157/>

²⁵⁷ Phillips, *John Schlesinger, op. cit.*, p.171

²⁵⁸ Memo from John Schlesinger to Joseph Janni dated 23rd March 1978, BFI collection JRS/10/15

²⁵⁹ Letter from John Schlesinger, Joseph Janni and Lester Persky to Ned Tannen dated 23rd October 1979, BFI collection JRS/10/16

commenting upon a 'singularly inept performance' by the film's American distributor.²⁶⁰

Conclusion

Unlike the previous decade, the 1970s would not see Schlesinger's continued ascent. The films received distinctly mixed responses, resulting in a certain destabilisation of the director's standing. *Sunday Bloody Sunday* would be very well received critically, but it would fare less well commercially, a disappointment after the wide success of *Midnight Cowboy*. *The Day of the Locust* would be a key point in Schlesinger's career in the 1970s, with negative reviews and a poor box office performance representing the lowest point in Schlesinger's standing to date. This would be followed, however, by *Marathon Man*, a film that would once again bring Schlesinger a commercial hit. However, it would not be matched by positive reviews. In view of such varied projects, uneven critical receptions and uncertain commercial fortunes, Schlesinger's standing had distinctly altered by the end of the decade, the director no longer so assured of auteur status.

The production context of the 1970s would present challenges to Schlesinger, while at the same time offering some opportunity. With the withdrawal of American finance throughout the decade, and the remaining insecure industrial infrastructure in Britain, Schlesinger would turn to the United States in order to continue working on productions of a significant scale. Shifts taking place within the American film industry in order to find an appropriate response to ongoing uncertainty would see a number of dynamics occur in the film world, such as the rise of the independent producer and a recourse to the spectacular and the security of pre-sold properties which would lead to the rise of the blockbuster. Such shifts would see reduced opportunities for smaller-scale, more intimate dramas. Collaboration and conflict with key figures and organisations would again be of primary importance. Working relationships with producers such as Jerome Hellman and Robert Evans, as well as figures such as

²⁶⁰ George Perry, *The Great British Picture Show*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, Massachusetts, 1985, pp.286-287

cinematographer Conrad Hall and production designer Richard MacDonald, would be of great significance, as was creative conflict with individuals such as Penelope Giliatt and Colin Welland.

Schlesinger's earlier nomination by critics and commentators as a kind of auteur would remain tenacious, sometimes to his detriment. While critics would continue to conceptualise his output as in some way auteurist – enhanced by Schlesinger's discourse in publicity – his transition to a more commercial and generic cinema would be met with some resistance, leading to a sense of a compromised reputation by the end of the decade. Schlesinger's participation in diverse, generally big-budget projects, would appear as incongruous to reviewers, occasioning a questioning of his motivations, questions that would continue for the rest of his career. A further significant factor that would emerge in the reception of his work in the 1970s would be tensions surrounding his status as a British director often working in the United States. Concerns in Britain regarding an exodus of talent, and some discomfort amongst reviewers regarding Schlesinger's apparently critical representations of America would further operate negatively. With the failure of *Yanks* at the end of the 1970s to make any major impression critically or commercially, Schlesinger's reputation stood in stark contrast to his standing at the beginning of the decade.

Chapter 3

The 1980s: ‘Mandarin of the movies’?

In the 1980s, Schlesinger’s film work would continue to be highly varied. 1981 would see the release of the comedy *Honky Tonk Freeway*, 1984 the spy drama *The Falcon and the Snowman*, a horror, *The Believers*, in 1988 and in 1989, *Madame Sousatzka*, a drama about a piano teacher and her protégé. Schlesinger would also direct the television plays *Separate Tables* (1983) and *An Englishman Abroad* (1983), as well as the Richard Strauss opera *Der Rosenkavalier* at Covent Garden in 1984. His reputation would continue to fluctuate and to operate in complex ways. His status as an artistic director of quality films would in many ways continue to remain tenacious throughout the decade, his name continuing to have some appeal within the film industry. In the 1980s, his reputation would in some ways appear to become more secure, with commentators citing Schlesinger’s versatility and the journalist Bryan Appleyard declaring him a ‘mandarin of the movies’,¹ with Schlesinger often emerging as a senior, establishment figure within film culture. A concurrent estimation, however, which recurred in reviews of his films in this decade, was that Schlesinger was out of step with contemporary film and that his more recent films continued to seem incongruous when viewed against his earlier work. In this chapter, conditions in the British and American film industries will again be considered in order to contextualise Schlesinger’s involvement in seemingly unlikely ventures and critical responses will be examined for the terms in which the films were, frequently negatively, received. Shifts in American film culture, such as the rise of industry conglomeration and of the high concept film will be examined for the ways in which they were potentially at odds with a formerly artistically respected director, one who had become established in the distinctly different climate of 1960s film culture. Schlesinger’s continued interest and investment in serious adult drama, often inflected with a satiric perspective, would widely be found to be at odds with the generic films that he directed in the 1980s. Such

¹ Bryan Appleyard, ‘Shared fascination with English ironies’, *The Times*, 14th November 1983, p.8

an approach would be met with critical incomprehension in a decade which saw the rise of high concept filmmaking and an ideologically conservative shift. A degree of persistence of the notion of Schlesinger as artistically capable, in conjunction with the often negative reception of the films, would continue to see Schlesinger positioned as personally uncommitted and commercially motivated.

Honky Tonk Freeway

By the early 1970s, after a decade of filmmaking, John Schlesinger had been widely considered to be a director of some distinction, the artistic merit discernible in his films frequently appraised in terms characteristic of an increasingly prevalent auteurist criticism. However, Schlesinger's subsequent films, *The Day of the Locust* (1975), *Marathon Man* (1976) and *Yanks* (1979), notable for their heterogeneity in terms of genre, style and location, appeared as more difficult to reconcile with earlier work and were accompanied by a certain destabilization of Schlesinger's nomination as an auteur. *Honky Tonk Freeway*, Schlesinger's first film of the 1980s, would be a significant addition to such discontinuity, as a highly commercial British project made for the American market and Schlesinger's first foray into comedy. Such a context, together with the film's disastrous critical and commercial reception, would presumably distance Schlesinger further from the designation of 'auteur'. As a key, pivotal film in Schlesinger's career, the film's production and reception will be considered at length.

Honky Tonk Freeway was conceived in 1979 by British director and producer Don Boyd. After graduating from the London Film School in 1970 and subsequently directing a number of commercials, Boyd's early career in films attracted significant attention in the press, both positive and negative. Boyd's confidence and energy in the late 1970s saw his production of the commercially successful *Scum* (dir. Alan Clarke, 1979) and the critically well-received *The Tempest* (dir. Derek Jarman, 1979), as well as the establishment of the production company Boyd's Co, causing him to be

championed in parts of the press as potentially significant in the revival of the British film industry.² However, Boyd's directorial debut *Intimate Reflections* (1975) and the subsequent *East of Elephant Rock* (1977) had not been particularly well received, the latter judged as 'badly lit, badly edited and badly acted'³ and lacking any 'imagination or conviction'.⁴ Boyd was also deemed by some critics to be somewhat audacious, an assessment seemingly not undermined by the questions asked of the inventive tax management schemes devised by Boyd's business partner Roy Tucker which enabled the financing of Boyd's films at this time – question marks around Tucker culminating in two articles by Lorana Sullivan in *The Sunday Times* in 1979 and 1980.⁵

The hostile critical reaction to *East of Elephant Rock* had elicited a letter of support from director Bryan Forbes to *The Times*⁶ and it was while working as second unit director on Forbes' *International Velvet* in 1979 that Boyd conceived the project that would become *Honky Tonk Freeway*, initially conceived as a low-budget road movie set around Florida's highways. For the script, Boyd enlisted the services of Edward Clinton, a young, little-known playwright from Illinois. Boyd's account of the early development of the project with Clinton, as it appears in Alexander Walker's *National Heroes: British Cinema in the Seventies and Eighties*, is interesting for the indication it gives of factors that would become key in the film's ultimate failure. The very breadth of the concept, with its scores of characters and multiple locations, was unwieldy, for some time resisting arrangement into a coherent narrative and soon becoming incompatible with Boyd's initial projection of a two to three-million-dollar budget.⁷

Boyd's concept of a small movie that could be shot 'wherever we stopped out the back of a truck' that he himself would direct,⁸ would be somewhat revised during

² Anon, 'Sweet Don', *The Financial Times*, 7th October 1978, p.17, Derek Malcolm, 'Phoenix of our film industry', *The Guardian*, 31st March 1979, p.14

³ Philip French, 'Poisonous Ivy', *The Times*, 13th January 1978, p.9

⁴ Geoff Brown, 'Lang's belated retribution', *The Financial Times*, 13th January 1978, p.13

⁵ Lorana Sullivan, 'The multi million pound tax dodge', *The Sunday Times*, 18th November 1979, p.62, Lorana Sullivan, 'How 'Scum' exposé aided tax avoiders', *The Sunday Times*, 3rd February 1980, p.72

⁶ Bryan Forbes, 'East of Elephant Rock', *The Times*, 20th January 1978, p.15

⁷ Alexander Walker, *National Heroes: British Cinema in the Seventies and Eighties*, Orion, London, 1985, p.159

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.159

negotiations with the film producer Barry Spikings. A co-owner with Michael Deeley of British Lion Films from 1972, Spikings was employed by EMI Films upon their takeover of British Lion in 1976. The relative critical success of *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (dir. Nicolas Roeg, 1976), co-produced by Spikings, and the more substantial commercial success of *Convoy* (dir. Sam Peckinpah, 1978), produced by EMI Films, boded well for EMI at this point, as did optimism about the soon to be released *The Deer Hunter* (dir. Michael Cimino, 1978). This optimism would be seen to have been well-founded, the film winning five Academy Awards at the ceremony in 1979. By the end of the 1970s, EMI was committed to making films with American themes, locations and actors, in order to compete with U.S. productions and reap the benefits of the worldwide market in a way that only American features had thus far been capable. In 1980, an article in *The Guardian* stated that ‘EMI doesn’t make international pictures; EMI makes American pictures’, identifying EMI as ‘the world’s largest film company outside America’.⁹ EMI’s position appeared to be further strengthened at this time with the establishment of Associated Film Distribution, a company recently set up by EMI and ITC heads Bernard Delfont and Lew Grade, to capitalize on the success of the companies’ projects and divert the profits made by EMI and ITC films previously lost to American distribution companies. While the establishment of A.F.D. may have bolstered EMI’s confidence at the end of the 1970s, its vulnerable position would have significant repercussions for the fate of *Honky Tonk Freeway*.

The script for *Honky Tonk Freeway* was enthusiastically received by Barry Spikings, who envisaged the script’s realization as on a somewhat larger scale than that initially conceived by Boyd, namely as a big-budget feature, to be directed not by Boyd, but by an established name.¹⁰ Boyd would instead act as producer. A projected budget, however, was not specified in early negotiations; according to Alexander Walker, Boyd stated that there was an ‘atmosphere’ apparent at this stage that the budget would be in the region of ten million dollars.¹¹ Spikings’ flexible attitude to the film’s financing

⁹ Bart Mills, ‘If a film chews gum, it’s American’, *The Guardian*, 5th July 1980, p.9

¹⁰ John Higgins, ‘Interview – Pictures of a cottage industry’, *The Times*, 12th October 1981, p.9

¹¹ Walker, *op. cit.*, p.160

would still be in place well into the filming stage, with Spikings telling the *Los Angeles Times* in July 1980 that no firm ideas about the budget had emerged until a week prior to the commencement of filming.¹² According to the article, EMI was ‘betting’ ‘as much as \$23 million at this point.

At Spikings’ suggestion, Schlesinger was sent the script, apparently being first choice to direct the film.¹³ Schlesinger had enjoyed some commercial and critical success and had experience in working with American actors and themes in *Midnight Cowboy* and *Marathon Man*. His generic versatility may also have encouraged Spikings to see him as a potentially capable director of film comedy. In addition to Schlesinger’s successes, the popularity of comedies such as *National Lampoon’s Animal House* (dir. John Landis, 1978) and the success of recent car-themed films such as *Smokey and the Bandit* (dir. Hal Needham, 1977) and EMI’s *Convoy* also pointed to the viability of the concept of *Honky Tonk Freeway*. *The Day of the Locust*, however, might have indicated that Schlesinger was not an entirely safe bet, the film having been poorly received by the critics and failing to make an impact commercially. The estimation of the tone of the film as ‘superior’¹⁴ and as an unpleasantly and cynically satirical rendering of Hollywood and the American Dream was seemingly discounted in EMI’s calculations. Also, despite some comic moments in *Billy Liar*, Schlesinger was untested in comedy, being identified with more serious drama.

The filming of *Honky Tonk Freeway* commenced in Los Angeles in February 1980. The story features a recurring, central story about the residents of Ticlaw, a small town in Florida disadvantaged by being deprived of an exit from a recently constructed highway. Undeterred by law and government, the residents vie to attract visitors to the area and publicity for their campaign for an exit by such extreme means as painting the town pink and expanding their safari park, complete with a water-skiing elephant. The film also features a variety of separate narrative strands concerning freeway journeys, including those of two ill-matched nuns, an unhappy holidaying family and a pair of bank robbers on the run. The film’s climax would see the individual narratives

¹² Clarke Taylor, ‘Carnage of fun... It’s a real blowup’, *Los Angeles Times*, 20th July 1980, pp.32-34

¹³ Walker, *op. cit.*, p.160

¹⁴ Jay Cocks, ‘The 8th Plague’, *Time*, 19th May 1975, BFI digital clippings

converging in Ticlaw, with mayhem ensuing in the confrontation between all of the characters and the non-human inhabitants of the safari park. In early publicity releases, the film was billed as a ‘coast-to-coast’ comedy, a ‘comic and affectionate look at contemporary America as mirrored in its Car Culture’,¹⁵ the gentleness of its satire indicated by its description as ‘one big comic valentine’.¹⁶ It would be filmed at locations including Los Angeles, New York, Utah and Florida and would feature over one hundred speaking parts, the cast including a number of established names, such as Jessica Tandy, Hume Cronyn and Geraldine Page and some emerging names such as Beau Bridges, Deborah Rush and Howard Hesseman. The ensemble nature of the cast and the multiplicity of the narrative strands were highlighted in parallels drawn in studio publicity with the 1932 film *Grand Hotel* (dir. Edmund Goulding), with *Honky Tonk Freeway* designated ‘a “Grand Hotel” on wheels’.¹⁷

The filming of *Honky Tonk Freeway* attracted the interest of the press, mainly American. Many articles, taking their cue from studio publicity material, positioned the filming as an event, with publications such as *Variety* writing of local interest in Mount Dora, Florida, in the filming of scenes featuring Bubbles, the water-skiing elephant that featured in the Ticlaw scenes.¹⁸ Additionally, a number of articles were concerned with the apparent incongruity of Schlesinger’s direction of the film, many asking how a director previously associated with serious, dramatic films had come to be involved in such a comic, commercial venture. In a *Los Angeles Times* article appearing in February 1980 reporting the film’s launch party, Schlesinger spoke of having wanted to direct a comedy film for some time. In fact, in a somewhat ambiguous account of events, Schlesinger is reported as having ‘called in a friend, English producer Don Boyd’, the article indicating that Schlesinger himself initiated the project.¹⁹ Schlesinger’s inherent suitability for comedy was underlined in an article appearing on 11th April 1980 in the *Evening Standard*, where he recounted that ‘friends

¹⁵ Honky Tonk Production Notes, British Film Institute digital files

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ ‘Look ma, no hands!’, *Variety*, 23rd July 1980, BFI digital clippings

¹⁹ Lee Grant, ‘“Freeway” detours to Barney’s Beanery’, *Los Angeles Times*, 9th February 1980, p.5, p.7. It should also be noted that Don Boyd is, in fact, Scottish.

have often told me I have a sense of humour and why not do something like this' and pointed to an element of comedy in his previous films, particularly *Billy Liar*.²⁰ The film's production notes are significant for their efforts to allay any potential doubts regarding Schlesinger's involvement. Schlesinger, apparently, 'was completely taken with the spirit and the humour of the story' and, as a 'meticulous craftsman who chooses his projects with infinite care', selected *Honky Tonk Freeway* with as much artistic sincerity as his previous projects.²¹

While Schlesinger's suitability and enthusiasm for the project are apparent in the production notes and were reiterated in other publicity, other motivations for undertaking the project also emerge in the early articles. Although these motivations do not contradict the aforementioned incentives, they indicate the more practical attractions of *Honky Tonk Freeway*. In the April *Evening Standard* article, Schlesinger was quite frank, stating 'after the struggle to get Yanks made I was ready to start a film that was bit easier and EMI committed themselves very quickly'.²² He repeated such sentiments in October of the same year, telling *Screen International* that:

It was such a relief to find something that a company (EMI) was actually enthusiastic about. In the past I've spent endless time here (Hollywood) trying to raise money, or waiting for a project to go. In those circumstances this town is a very depressing place. There are few single gamblers left in this business.²³

Schlesinger would later address this tension between seemingly artistic personal motivations and commercial realities, telling Ian Buruma:

I wanted to continue to work, and in order to do that I sometimes had to choose something that wasn't quite as personal to me as some of my earlier work. And if one was going to work within the studio system – whatever that might be – then commercial considerations in some way had to count.²⁴

²⁰ Michael Owen, 'Honky tonk time at the morgue', *Evening Standard*, 11th April 1980, BFI digital clippings

²¹ Honky Tonk Production Notes, BFI digital files

²² Owen, *op. cit.*

²³ Jenny Craven, 'A mirror image of America – John Schlesinger talks about Honky Tonk Freeway', *Screen International*, No 264, 25th October 1980, BFI microfiche

²⁴ Ian Buruma, *Conversations with John Schlesinger*, Random House Trade Paperbacks, New York, 2006, p.134

William J. Mann, in his biography of Schlesinger, has reflected on the degree to which the director's confidence had been shaken by the failure of *The Day of the Locust* in 1975. The box office success of the more commercial *Marathon Man*, according to Mann, thereafter motivated Schlesinger to pursue safer projects, which, certainly at its inception, *Honky Tonk Freeway* represented.²⁵

Although Schlesinger's aptitude for comedy was stressed, articles appearing during the shooting of the film and prior to its release actually saw Schlesinger simultaneously underplaying aspects of the film's comedy and highlighting the seriousness of the endeavour. In July 1980, Schlesinger spoke of the universal nature of some of the themes of *Honky Tonk Freeway*, calling the film 'a kind of modern parable', one which dealt with issues of bribery and corruption.²⁶ Rather than a comic caper, he stressed the script's originality, stating that 'there had to be a note of seriousness underpinning it all, or I don't think I could have entered the enterprise'.²⁷ In May 1981, three months prior to the film's American release, Schlesinger would again emphasise the film's substance, this time also minimizing the physical aspect of the film's comedy. He criticized the emphasis in publicity upon the stunt sequences, saying, 'Oh please don't talk to me about the stunts' and stating that 'the film is about a lot of people, and incidentally it has some stunts which are quite spectacular'.²⁸ He was also dismissive of what he saw as a recent strain of overdone, stylized comedy, which Schlesinger described as 'the kind of 1941 comedy where everyone is mugging so much you actually stop laughing'.²⁹

While of less interest than the incongruity of a 'serious' filmmaker directing a comedy, Schlesinger's status as a British director at the helm of an American-themed project was also addressed in early publicity. The production notes stated that Schlesinger's direction of the film provided yet more proof that 'he is clearly at home

²⁵ William J. Mann, , *Edge of Midnight: The Life of John Schlesinger*, Arrow, London, 2005, p.474

²⁶ Taylor, *op. cit.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Lynn Hoffmann Keating, 'Directing Honky Tonk Freeway – An interview with John Schlesinger', *Filmmakers Film and Video Monthly*, Vol 14, No 7, May 1981

²⁹ *Ibid.*

directing films on either side of the Atlantic'.³⁰ The ability of the outsider to perceive more clearly is pointed to in the notes, with Miloš Forman's work on *Hair* (1979) and *One flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), and Schlesinger's own earlier success with *Midnight Cowboy* invoked.³¹ At this time, Schlesinger expressed great enthusiasm for working in America, praising the *Honky Tonk Freeway* crew and the creative environment.³² In April 1980, Schlesinger told the *Evening Standard* that there were some films for which he had felt unsuited, having turned down both *All the President's Men* (dir. Alan J. Pakula, 1976) and *Coming Home* (dir. Hal Ashby, 1978), feeling that 'they really were the province of an American director. But there are others I feel within my grasp'.³³ The article is also interesting for Schlesinger's defensive position regarding a perceived British hostility to his working in the States once again. With apparent exasperation, Schlesinger stated 'Oh god, I suppose they will all say I've left England again', and later in the article asserted that 'I feel absolutely no guilt or shame about making this. If anyone takes the attitude that I've left Britain when I should be working at home then my answer is frankly, f... 'em'.³⁴ Schlesinger clearly located his career choices here in the context of the difficulties and limitations of the British industry at this point, underlining the difficulty of finding funded 'indigenous products', again making reference to the fruitless attempts to find British funding for *Yanks* and even expressing criticism of EMI's policy, stating that 'it is regrettable that EMI have not found a way of making certain kinds of films possible to be made in England. They say they will but they haven't yet'.³⁵

The *Evening Standard* article indicates the increasing numbers of British directors working in Hollywood at this time, a fact widely reported in the spring and summer of 1980, both in Britain and the United States. The *Los Angeles Times* article 'A Boom in British Accents'³⁶ and *The New York Times*' 'The British Colonization of

³⁰ Honky Tonk Production Notes, BFI digital files

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Owen, *op. cit.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Charles Schreger, 'A boom in British accents', *Los Angeles Times*, 20th February 1980, p.1, p.3

the Hollywood Film Industry'³⁷ both reported the exodus of British directors and other personnel to Hollywood, while *Sight and Sound*'s 'Finance for Local Talent',³⁸ the *Daily Mail*'s 'How we flagged in the mad movie show',³⁹ and *The New York Times*' 'Are British Films Finished?'⁴⁰ clearly contextualized this exodus within the difficulties and shortcomings of the British film industry. A 'once brilliant and successful British film industry' was now deemed to be in a 'sad state', underlined by the Rank Organisation's recent withdrawal from production, and a current lack of identifiably British genres or films.⁴¹ There was a palpable sense in the articles of Britain losing out to America creatively. In *Sight and Sound*, Simon Perry reported head of the National Film Finance Corporation Mamoun Hassan's fears of 'a soul drain' in the exodus of British directors, while the director Norman Jewison asked 'How is it that the hot group of directors in Hollywood right now are all British, and yet there are virtually no British pictures? Why don't EMI and Lew Grade finance the local talent?',⁴² positioning EMI's policy as detrimental to the health of the British industry and echoing the sentiments that Schlesinger expressed in the *Evening Standard*. A sense of Britain's disadvantage in its relations with the American film industry also appeared in the reporting of American activity in British studios. Writing for the *Daily Mail*, David Lewin complained of the advantages gained by U.S. producers in filming big-budget films such as *Superman* (dir. Richard Donner, 1978) in England due to the Eady tax concession.⁴³ Throughout, the British-American exchange was presented as detrimental to the health of the British industry, a sentiment that would re-emerge in *Honky Tonk Freeway*'s reception.

While American commentators reporting the British activity in Hollywood wrote of the anxieties of the British observers, such as Sandra Salmans of *The New York Times* quoting the producer Michael Relph's fears about losing talent to

³⁷ David Lewin, 'The British Colonization of the Hollywood Film Industry', *The New York Times*, 31st August 1980, p.D1

³⁸ Simon Perry, 'Finance for local talent', *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1980, pp.144-148

³⁹ David Lewin, 'How we flagged in the mad movie show', *Daily Mail*, 15th May 1980, p.32

⁴⁰ Sandra Salmans, 'Are British films finished?', *The New York Times*, 13th July 1980, p.D1

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Perry, *op.cit.*, p.144

⁴³ Lewin, *Daily Mail*, 15th May 1980, *op. cit.*, p.32

Hollywood,⁴⁴ equivalent American fears about the encroachment of British directors onto Hollywood territory were not apparent. However, Schlesinger's status as non-American would be seen to have a distinct effect on *Honky Tonk Freeway* which would negatively influence the reception of the film, as will later be examined. Even in the early stages of filming, an external, outsider's perspective would be apparent in the film's production notes. Throughout, the film is repeatedly presented as an observation of America, along with its 'eccentricities'. Although it is described as 'a comic and affectionate look at contemporary America', a certain superiority emerges in the description of 'American Madness'.⁴⁵ The notes recount how Schlesinger and Boyd 'encountered plenty of quirks, characters and bits of idiomatic Americana' while scouting locations for the film, with Schlesinger adding that 'we're working in some of the more delightful extremes of American life'. Schlesinger's statement in the *Los Angeles Times* article 'Carnage or fun' that 'if you are at all an observer, you see that America is extremely fertile, full of character; full of things one likes and dislikes, finds funny and boring'⁴⁶ further compounds the sense of an outsider's perspective.

Aside from any potential difficulties emerging from Schlesinger's national perspective, his involvement in *Honky Tonk Freeway* clearly helped attract significant publicity, and his status as a respected, serious director was important in securing confidence in the project's viability. The production notes and various press releases which were produced in the early stages of shooting certainly clearly indicate the value of Schlesinger's artistic status. EMI-generated publicity consistently attended to Schlesinger's artistic credentials, citing the various awards bestowed on his earlier films, his work for the National Theatre, and his C.B.E., which had been awarded in 1970. Schlesinger's meticulous approach to filming was also highlighted, the production notes stating that he worked for nearly ten months on preproduction, scouting locations and contributing to the revised versions of the script. Auteurist credentials such as continuity recurred throughout the publicity material, with similarities between earlier Schlesinger films and the current project stressed. The

⁴⁴ Salmans, *op. cit.*

⁴⁵ *Honky Tonk* Production Notes, British Film Institute digital files

⁴⁶ Taylor, *op. cit.*

concept may have seemed ‘an unlikely subject for Schlesinger’, the production notes reported, ‘until you remember that his most recent success, ‘Yanks’, was also set and made in another small town – in the north of England’,⁴⁷ indicating a somewhat tenuous continuity between *Honky Tonk Freeway* and Schlesinger’s previous film. *Honky Tonk Freeway*’s parallels with Schlesinger’s earlier films were again emphasised in interviews given by the director prior to the film’s release. Such a discourse was characteristic of Schlesinger, who was given to regularly discussing his films in terms of such thematic cohesion. Discussing *Honky Tonk Freeway*’s highway-based narrative in August 1980, Schlesinger insisted that ‘all my films are about voyaging in one way or another’,⁴⁸ while two months later, Schlesinger emphasised the film’s concern with dreams and wish-fulfilment, stating that fantasy ‘has been a part of a lot of my films, certainly my American films’.⁴⁹ Such consistent attention to recurring themes seems to indicate a commercially motivated employment of an auteurist discourse, and or at least some awareness of its value in the arena of publicity.

Schlesinger’s professional standing certainly emerges as having inspired the confidence of the film’s cast. Beau Bridges, playing photocopier repairman and aspiring writer Duane Hansen, spoke of the ‘privilege’ it was to work with Schlesinger; ‘a man of taste and intelligence’, while Howard Hesseman, playing vacationing dentist Snapper Kramer, professed to be ‘honoured’ to be working for Schlesinger, stating ‘I can still hardly believe it’s true – that it’s really happened to me’.⁵⁰ Such enthusiasm was seemingly matched by the conviction of Geraldine Page, the actress playing Sister Mary Clarise. Saying that the film’s script was ‘the funniest script that I’ve seen in a long, long time’, Page added that Schlesinger would ‘surprise everybody with this movie. He’s going to show sides of his talent that nobody even imagined before’.⁵¹

The production notes then, demonstrate a consistent portrayal of Schlesinger as a versatile, established, serious director, highly compatible with the comic, thoroughly American themes of *Honky Tonk Freeway*, a portrayal which would frequently be

⁴⁷ Honky Tonk Production Notes, British Film Institute digital files

⁴⁸ Lewin, *The New York Times*, 31st August 1980, *op. cit.*, p.D1

⁴⁹ Craven, *op. cit.*

⁵⁰ Honky Tonk Production Notes, British Film Institute digital files

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

reiterated in newspaper articles reporting the shooting of the film. Elsewhere, however, a more nuanced, less positive picture appears, indicating a number of misgivings about the project. A key article exploring some of the uncertainties of the project was published in the *Los Angeles Times* on 20th July 1980. In ‘Carnage or fun....It’s a real blowup’, journalist Clarke Taylor wrote of the film, at this point in the later stages of filming, as something of a gamble, in terms of a ranging script and the lack of a principal ‘bankable’ star.⁵² The conviction of the actors as to the quality and the humour of the project, seemingly so secure in the production notes, appeared as distinctly less certain in the article. While Geraldine Page continued to be enthusiastic, praising the comedy of the scenarios, Jessica Tandy and William Devane spoke of having had misgivings on initially reading the script, only Schlesinger’s reputation tempting them to take part in the venture. Tandy underlined the significance of Schlesinger’s participation, saying; ‘Judging from what I saw on the page, I would have said ‘No’ to any other director’. Devane apparently concurred, stating ‘John’s obviously not going to make a silly movie, which is what I read’. Clearly, concerns had not by this late stage of filming been allayed, with Hume Cronyn reported as musing that, if the film should fail, ‘...the question will be, why did all these actors get involved in this silly project?’.⁵³ Other accounts of the script’s humour, (or lack of it) are telling. The script in its early form garnered significant approval; both Boyd and Spikings said that the script was one of the funniest that they had read.⁵⁴ The production notes attest to the appeal of the script for Schlesinger, which he reiterated in interviews.⁵⁵ The script’s initial positive reception by these individuals can be contrasted with the reactions of Americans Howard W. Koch Jr (the film’s co-producer) and Schlesinger’s partner Michael Childers, both men having expressed reservations as to its humour.⁵⁶ While apparently initially enthusiastic about the script, some lack of confidence on the part of Schlesinger himself was indicated in the *Los Angeles Times* article ‘Carnage or fun’. While, in interview, he stressed the significance of the story, with its universal themes

⁵² Taylor, *op. cit.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Walker, *op. cit.*, p.159

⁵⁵ Craven, *op. cit.*, Judy Klemesrud, ‘At the movies’, *The New York Times*, 4th September 1981, p.C6

⁵⁶ Mann, *op. cit.*, p.476

of survival and fantasy, as well as its continuity with his earlier work, some lack of conviction is also apparent. Taylor referred to 'Schlesinger's many reservations', quoting Don Boyd's statement that 'John was very concerned that all the characters be based on reality... he wanted to be assured that a town like Ticlaw and the problems it faced could exist'.⁵⁷

Whether emanating from misgivings or the meticulousness that had helped ensure his reputation, Schlesinger's assertion of control over the filmmaking process continued to appear in publicity. His extensive involvement in pre-production was reported, as was his strong influence on script re-writes.⁵⁸ In Taylor's article however, such authority was implicated in the already spiralling costs of the film, with reference made to the 'immense costs required to gain Schlesinger the complete control over the freeway systems he demanded'.⁵⁹ Boyd similarly indicated a certain excess in the authority that Schlesinger was exercising at this point, the director apparently pointlessly over-researching characters' backgrounds.⁶⁰ Schlesinger would justify himself with regards to the overspending which had begun to occur, arguing in October 1980 that 'my canvasses tend to be large, so more costly'.⁶¹ Reports of extravagance had, however, appeared in very early publicity, and were not restricted to the costs of actually shooting a film. 'Freeway' Detours to Barney's Beanery', the *Los Angeles Times* article reporting the film's launch party in February 1980, had implied Schlesinger's association with high spending. It was claimed that the cost of the party, to be paid by EMI, was estimated to be in the region of \$7,500, while a party to celebrate the completion of *Yanks*, held at Schlesinger's Beverly Hills house, had reportedly cost Universal more than \$60, 000.⁶²

Schlesinger's assertion of his authority at this point, it seems, tipped over into a number of occasions when he lost his temper on set. While he stated that 'tempers have been good. I occasionally blow my top at things which I know could have been

⁵⁷ Taylor, *op. cit.*

⁵⁸ Craven, *op. cit.*, Keating, *op. cit.*

⁵⁹ Taylor, *op. cit.*

⁶⁰ Walker, *op. cit.*, p.160

⁶¹ Craven, *op. cit.*

⁶² Grant, *op. cit.*

avoided',⁶³ Schlesinger's editor and *Honky Tonk Freeway*'s second unit director Jim Clark noted a distinctly more volatile presence on set, writing that 'John's tantrums were another feature of the shoot. He'd have screaming rows if things weren't exactly as he wanted them'.⁶⁴

While Schlesinger's assertion of authority may have entailed expense, a variety of other factors contributed to dramatically rising costs. Following the shooting of sequences in Utah and New York in the spring of 1980, filming was due to commence in Florida, around Sarasota and Mount Dora, the small town where the Ticlaw scenes would be filmed. Torrential rain, however, and subsequent delays in the construction of a highway to be used in the film, meant that the shooting of interiors in Los Angeles had to be brought forward, inflating already rising costs. Clarke Taylor's *Los Angeles Times* article carefully outlined these delays and their associated costs, as well as the expense of particular sequences, such as the \$1 million that the finale's crash scene was said to have cost. Interviewed on set, Barry Spikings stressed the necessity of a large-scale production, with a correspondingly large budget. As to the management of the production finances, a rather liberal approach to their management was apparent, with Spikings confirming that a definitive budget hadn't been set until a week before filming began, and that the budget had since increased by 25%, bringing EMI's investment to the region of \$23 million.⁶⁵ While Spikings' relative autonomy in decision-making had been greeted with relief and enthusiasm by Schlesinger after his struggles getting backing for *Yanks* and would be similarly construed as an advantage in the August 1980 *New York Times* article, 'The British Colonization of the Hollywood Film Industry',⁶⁶ such independence seems, at least retrospectively, somewhat unsound. Doubts about the viability of *Honky Tonk Freeway* and EMI's foray into big-budget American-based filmmaking were also somewhat enhanced at this time by the poor reviews and box office figures for the EMI-produced *Can't Stop the Music* (dir. Nancy Walker, 1980), the Village People vehicle released in the United States one month

⁶³ Keating, *op. cit.*

⁶⁴ Jim Clark and John H. Myers, *Dream Repairman: Adventures in Film Editing*, LandMarc Press, Texas, 2010, p.122

⁶⁵ Taylor, *op. cit.*

⁶⁶ Lewin, *The New York Times*, 31st August 1980, *op. cit.*

previously, on 20th June. Made with a budget of approximately \$20 million, the film was, at the time of Taylor's interview, being derided in the press as 'thoroughly homogenized'⁶⁷ and a 'foolish', 'inexpert entertainment'.⁶⁸ Taylor's reference to the failure of *Can't Stop the Music* and the problems experienced in the production of *The Jazz Singer* (dir. Richard Fleischer, 1980), due to be released in December of that year, worked to further position *Honky Tonk Freeway* as a risky venture.

Editor Jim Clark's memoir is interesting for his account of the shooting of the film, and it gives an insight into a number of expenses and indulgences. There is a marked sense of money having been no object. The visual consultant responsible for many of the sets, Ferdinando Scarfiotti, who had previously worked with Bertolucci and Visconti, was, according to Clark, 'extremely expensive', his designs of such quality that 'you could have lived in the sets'.⁶⁹ Clark also wrote that Don Boyd, in Hollywood, 'had a sumptuous office and began playing the Hollywood producer in a big way'.⁷⁰ Clark claimed that there was extensive drug use on set, stating that 'it was rumoured that the cocaine used to come in from Technicolor with the rushes, though I have no proof of this', adding that 'the crew and the actors were not at all unfriendly toward this white powder'.⁷¹ The recreational aspect of the shooting which inflated the budget also, according to Clark, took the form of regular parties, 'all of which I assume went onto the budget along with the recreational substances'.⁷²

As filming neared completion and the film's vulnerability continued to be apparent, EMI's confidence in the project appeared to remain firm, with Barry Spikings thinking the film 'the funniest he'd ever seen' upon the initial, post-editing screening to a small number of EMI executives.⁷³ Something of an overconfident optimism on EMI's part was further indicated by Boyd's description of a resolve, upon his, Schlesinger's and Clark's return to England to edit the film, to 'come up with a film to

⁶⁷ Janet Maslin, 'Can't Stop the Music', *The New York Times*, 20th June 1980, p.C12

⁶⁸ David Robinson, 'A variation on the old routine', *The Times*, 1st August 1980, p.11

⁶⁹ Clark and Myers, *op. cit.*, p.123

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.120

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.122

⁷² *Ibid.*, p.123

⁷³ Walker, *op. cit.*, p.162

knock the world down – as Europeans’.⁷⁴ With Spikings having succeeded Lord Bernard Delfont in November 1980 as head of Thorn EMI’s film division, EMI’s big budget international film policy was apparently still seen as viable, despite the recent failure of *Can’t Stop the Music* and misgivings about the soon to be released *The Jazz Singer*.

Uncertainty about EMI’s recent and current films, however, became more discernible in the new year of 1981. In *Screen International*’s January article, ‘Spikings looks ahead after ‘rough ride’ in 1980’, Spikings admitted to journalist and critic Quentin Falk that certain errors had been made in the marketing of *Can’t Stop the Music*, though he insisted that EMI would not lose money on the film,⁷⁵ an optimistic projection, in view of the film’s eventual \$2 million box office performance against a \$20 million budget.⁷⁶ He also pointed to evidence of improving word of mouth publicity for *The Jazz Singer* which had performed disappointingly since its release in December 1980. Justifying the costs of *Honky Tonk Freeway*, which was at this point in post-production, Spikings assured Falk that ‘when you see the film on the screen, I’m sure you’ll think it looked like more than it cost’. He stressed the importance of EMI’s commitment to the project, the need for ‘confidence that it will work for the distributors, and for the exhibitors and, most importantly, for the people paying for their tickets’, adding that ‘I would be a very gloomy man indeed, with the most expensive film we’ve ever made, not to have that confidence’.⁷⁷ As well as pointing to EMI’s recent disappointments and *Honky Tonk Freeway*’s spiralling costs, Falk also alluded to the disappointing performance to date of A.F.D., the distribution company set up by EMI and Lord Grade’s ITC, which had handled the U.S. domestic distribution of *Can’t Stop the Music*, *The Jazz Singer* and *Raise the Titanic*, Grade’s \$40 million box office failure which had been released in August 1980. While the company had distributed some more successful films, such as *The Muppet Movie* (dir. James

⁷⁴ Walker, *op. cit.*, p.161

⁷⁵ Quentin Falk, ‘Spikings looks ahead after ‘rough ride’ in 1980’, *Screen International*, No 276, 24th January 1981

⁷⁶ IMDb, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0080492/>, retrieved 25/3/19

⁷⁷ Falk, *op. cit.*

Frawley, 1979), Falk at this point concluded that the company needed ‘a few more winners’.⁷⁸

A month after Falk’s article, it was announced that A.F.D.’s roster of films would be distributed by Universal Pictures, with the closure of nine regional A.F.D. offices. *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* both reported the development, reiterating the significance of the failure of *Can’t Stop the Music* and *Raise the Titanic* in the previous year.⁷⁹ The very formation of A.F.D., however, might be said to have been misguided. Set up in order to profit from the distribution of EMI and ITC films, the manoeuvre served to isolate the British companies, and, while potentially of financial benefit, deprive them of the partnership and cooperation with established U.S. studios which, as noted by Sarah Street, has been so productive for British production companies in America.⁸⁰ Michael Deeley confirmed that the establishment of A.F.D. had provoked hostility, stating that ‘when the Hollywood people heard of Associated Film Distributors being formed, all the majors with whom we had had a ‘relationship’ during my time at EMI got angry’.⁸¹

In the Falk article, Spikings also attempted to contextualize and justify other wider industry issues that were preoccupying commentators in 1981, namely the recent increases in the cost of filmmaking more generally, and the failure of a number of big-budget films, particularly *Heaven’s Gate* (dir. Michael Cimino, 1980). A *Sight and Sound* article appearing in the spring of 1981, ‘Hollywood’s crashing epics’,⁸² together with two articles published in *American Film*, June’s ‘The real crisis in American films’⁸³ and September’s ‘After the fall; post-Cimino Hollywood’,⁸⁴ addressed a number of developments in filmmaking, such as the recent rises in production and marketing costs, the production of ‘blockbusters’, and the inevitable failure of several

⁷⁸ Falk, *op. cit.*

⁷⁹ Gary Arnold, ‘Film Notes’, *The Washington Post*, 25th March 1981, p.B11, Aljean Harmetz, ‘Universal to market films from A.F.D.’, *The New York Times*, 24th February 1981, p.D6

⁸⁰ Sarah Street, *Transatlantic Crossings: British Feature Films in the USA*, Continuum, London, 2002, p.218

⁸¹ Walker, *op. cit.*, p.201

⁸² Alan Stanbrook, ‘Hollywood’s crashing epics’, *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1981, pp.84-85

⁸³ David Thomson, ‘The real crisis in American films’, *American Film*, June 1981, pp.41-45

⁸⁴ Michael Dempsey, ‘After the fall – post-Cimino Hollywood’, *American Film*, September 1981, pp.51-54

of these big-budget films, or a predicament where ‘fewer films were made, more of them cost more, and a fraction were profitable’.⁸⁵ The articles underlined the significance of the failure of *Heaven’s Gate*, found upon release, re-editing and re-release, to have lost in the region of \$43 million.⁸⁶ Consequences were found to be far reaching, with retrenchment and reorganization undertaken within most studios in order to avert other such failures. In ‘After the fall; Post-Cimino Hollywood’, Michael Dempsey stressed the implications of the failure of *Heaven’s Gate*:

Cimino is now less a filmmaker than a human benchmark, as in “Post-Cimino Hollywood”, the personification of the arrogant, profligate, irresponsible Young Movie Brat Director who has supposedly wrecked Hollywood’s prosperity.⁸⁷

For Alan Stanbrook in his article for *Sight and Sound*, the producers were as vulnerable to criticism as the profligate directors,⁸⁸ an observation that helps to explain Spikings’ defensive justifications in his interview with Falk. While agreeing that a tighter rein on finance was necessary, he argued:

However, it’s not fair to put the fault at the door of just producers and directors. The thing pervades the whole industry; everyone gets carried away when things are going well – cameramen get a lot more, drivers get a lot more.⁸⁹

Honky Tonk Freeway’s inclusion in the *Sight and Sound* article ‘Hollywood’s crashing epics’ as a film in production with ‘runaway costs’⁹⁰ would only confirm yet further the increasingly insecure nature of the film.

If, as Sarah Street has written in her account of the fortunes of British films in America, ‘effective distribution was, and still is, the cornerstone of a film’s profitability’,⁹¹ *Honky Tonk Freeway*’s unfortunate location in the transfer of A.F.D.’s films to Universal can be seen as representing a significant factor in an already uncertain situation. Universal’s inheritance of an already troubled production in which they had

⁸⁵ Thomson, *ibid.*, p.43

⁸⁶ Dempsey, *op. cit.*, p.51

⁸⁷ Dempsey, *op. cit.*, p.51

⁸⁸ Stanbrook, *op. cit.*, p.85

⁸⁹ Falk, *op. cit.*

⁹⁰ Stanbrook, *op. cit.*, p.85

⁹¹ Street, *op. cit.*, p.215

had no early involvement or creative investment rendered EMI's position particularly vulnerable. Boyd has spoken of a bitter relationship with Universal at this point, complete with disagreements and misunderstandings about marketing, subsequent further increases in costs, with 'confusion, indecision and hard feelings all round'.⁹² Again, national differences would appear to be significant, with Boyd conceding that a certain British arrogance entered into the negotiations between Universal and the EMI contingent.⁹³

Any discord between EMI and Universal in the initial stages would develop into something more akin to outright hostility, according to accounts of the first screening of the newly edited film to executives and other Universal staff at the Hitchcock Theatre. Accounts of the screening vary slightly in tone, but all indicate that no-one in attendance laughed, many walked out, and that when the film ended, Schlesinger was strongly rebuked for the irreverent tone of the film.⁹⁴ In his autobiography, Clark recalled the hostility towards Schlesinger of those left at the end of the screening, describing 'these people shouting at him in a pretty savage way', accusing the director of not only having made an unfunny film, but an anti-American one.⁹⁵ Recalling the screening years later, Schlesinger said that 'one executive said I had committed professional suicide. It was get-out-of-town time'.⁹⁶ Relations between Universal and *Honky Tonk Freeway*'s production team became further strained when Universal cancelled a preview which was to have been held the following evening. Undeterred, Schlesinger, with Koch and Clark, arranged an undercover preview of their own in Seattle, travelling under pseudonyms and retitling the film 'Stops Along the Way'.⁹⁷ For their efforts, the film received a lukewarm response from the university cinema's audience, and Universal, upon finding out about the preview, were alienated

⁹² Walker, *op. cit.*, p.163

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p.162

⁹⁴ Clark and Myers, *op. cit.*, p.126

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Stephen Pile, 'John's cold comfort success', *Sunday Telegraph*, 1st January 1995, p.7

⁹⁷ Clark and Myers, *op. cit.*, p.127

further.⁹⁸ The following weeks saw a series of re-edits and previews, the final version dubbed by Clark ‘a shadow of its former self’.⁹⁹

Universal’s hostility to *Honky Tonk Freeway* would significantly compound the difficulties which had been highlighted by increasingly negative reporting about the film’s production, EMI’s big-budget policy and the demise of A.F.D. Don Boyd has commented on the negativity palpable in the lead up to the film’s release, stating that media antagonism ‘predisposed the public to dislike the film before even a single ticket-buyer had set eyes on it’.¹⁰⁰ The film’s difficulties at this point were framed rather differently by Schlesinger who viewed opposition to the film in typically more auteurist terms. Speaking of the difficulties with Universal, he said, ‘They accused me of not caring whether I made a picture that would make money, that all I cared about was making a film that interested me... I stand guilty as charged’.¹⁰¹ While such a statement was typical of Schlesinger, with his frequently expressed hostility to the commercial dimension of the filmmaking process and his preference for the role of the outsider, such pronouncements of artistic integrity might have been poorly received in Hollywood, in view of growing industry hostility to the self-indulgence of the figure of the director.

Honky Tonk Freeway was released in the United States on 21st August 1981. A review that has been deemed to be of particular significance was that appearing in *Variety* on 19th August 1981, in which the film was evaluated in particularly negative terms. Headed ‘Won’t pay toll’, the review found the film to have failed in a number of respects, namely its lack of humour, an array of unsympathetic characters and a derivative approach in the writing and direction. For the reviewer, the film’s ‘long term commercial appeal’ appeared to be ‘almost nil’.¹⁰² Don Boyd has cited the influence of the *Variety* review’s negative tone,¹⁰³ and it was certainly raised in other appraisals of the film appearing around this time. While it is difficult to assess the influence of the

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Walker, *op. cit.*, p.163

¹⁰¹ Mann, *op. cit.*, p.11

¹⁰² ‘Berg’, ‘Honky Tonk Freeway’, *Variety*, 19th August 1981, BFI digital clippings

¹⁰³ Walker, *op. cit.*, p.163

review itself, other reviews appearing in the United States in the weeks following the film's release would evaluate the film in broadly similar terms. The American reviews would focus on Schlesinger's incompatibility with comedy and an apparent detachment from or hostility to the scenarios and characters emanating from his non-American status. The film was also found to be rambling as well as derivative and was compared unfavourably with a range of American films released in the late 1970s. While an occasional positive review appeared, such as Judith Crist's review for *The Saturday Review*,¹⁰⁴ most were highly negative in their assessment of the film.

Again, the incongruity of Schlesinger's involvement in *Honky Tonk Freeway* was raised in the American reviews, Gary Arnold in *The Washington Post* finding Schlesinger 'a curious choice to bring a semblance of order to such a diffuse American social farce'. Consequently, Schlesinger's direction of the material was found to lack authority, Arnold commenting that 'he doesn't so much direct *Honky Tonk Freeway* as allow it to run amok'.¹⁰⁵

The reviews were also notable for the frequent references to recent satiric films featuring an extensive cast and multiple scenarios. *Nashville* (dir. Robert Altman, 1975) was referenced, as was *Handle with Care* (dir. Jonathan Demme, 1977). The release of these films some years prior to *Honky Tonk Freeway*, together with the appearance around this time of an article pronouncing the passing of the 'car' cycle of films,¹⁰⁶ indicates that the film's timing, deemed to be so key in a film's success,¹⁰⁷ may have been unfortunate. Janet Maslin of *The New York Times* claimed that 'Mr Schlesinger has dusted off some old gags' and 'shamelessly borrowed some new ones', finding that he had 'combined *Nashville*, *Handle with Care* and other road films, and slapped the material together with no particular reverence or ingenuity'.¹⁰⁸ In his review for *New York Magazine*, David Denby also drew comparisons with the work of Altman and Demme, as well as that of Michael Ritchie, director of *Smile* (1975), while

¹⁰⁴ Judith Crist, 'Honky Tonk Freeway', *The Saturday Review*, September 1981, BFI digital clippings

¹⁰⁵ Gary Arnold, 'Freeway's' freewheeling frenzy', *The Washington Post*, 25th August 1981, p.B3

¹⁰⁶ Bruce McCabe, 'Car movies: the market's crashing', *Los Angeles Times*, 3rd August 1980, p.Q36

¹⁰⁷ Street, *op. cit.*, p.215

¹⁰⁸ Janet Maslin, 'Harsh view of America in 'Honky Tonk Freeway'', *The New York Times*, 21st August 1981, p.C17

also pointing to similarities between *Honky Tonk Freeway* and Schlesinger's own *Midnight Cowboy*. Denby seemed to find the spirit of 'the angry sarcasm and decorative bits of contemptuous 'color' that soured an otherwise affecting *Midnight Cowboy*' to persist in *Honky Tonk Freeway*, pronouncing it 'snobbish and sour'.¹⁰⁹ Janet Maslin similarly found that 'Sylvia Miles's poodle is alive and well, the one that appeared in 'Midnight Cowboy' wearing false eyelashes and yapping nastily at everything in sight. Not that particular dog, perhaps, but certainly its attitude'.¹¹⁰

Satiric detachment was found to extend to characterisation, with scant identification with the film's characters palpable in the reviews. *Variety*'s description of a film with 'so few sympathetic, witty or even moderately desirable people portrayed throughout the 107 minutes that it is easy to root for some road disaster to swallow up everyone travelling on or concerned with this freeway'¹¹¹ was representative of the reviews' evaluation of the film's characters. The approach to these characters was felt to be crude and contemptuous by Carrie Rickey in *The Village Voice*, who called the film 'a perfectly odious cloverleaf of condescension' which 'traffics in every conceivable stereotype: all women are bimbos, gays are interested only in bodybuilding and sex, religious piety is a mask of capitalism and all men are predatory. This is comedy?'.¹¹² In the *Los Angeles Times*, Sheila Benson detected 'genuine bile in the writing of Geraldine Page's Sister Mary Clarise', and a 'cool, misanthropic stridency'¹¹³ more generally. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* on 26th August 1981, soon after the first reviews, Schlesinger professed to being 'amazed' that the film should be found misanthropic, claiming that it had been 'misperceived'.¹¹⁴ Years later, he would continue to insist that the film had been intended as affectionate rather than harsh.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁹ David Denby, 'Dead End', *New York Magazine*, 7th September 1981, BFI digital clippings

¹¹⁰ Maslin, *op. cit.*

¹¹¹ 'Berg', *op. cit.*

¹¹² Rickey, *op. cit.*

¹¹³ Sheila Benson, 'Honky Tonk Freeway' – Americana graphic', *Los Angeles Times*, 21st August 1981, p.G1

¹¹⁴ Peter J. Boyer, 'Sigalert on 'Honky Tonk Freeway'', *Los Angeles Times*, 26th August 1981, p.H1

¹¹⁵ Buruma, *op. cit.*, p.133

The cool detachment perceived in the film was also interpreted as a superiority emanating from Schlesinger's non-American status. His objective eye was, on occasion, felt to bring a fresh perspective to the representation of the all-American scenarios; in *The Saturday Review*, Judith Crist felt that the story was 'brought to satiric flower by Schlesinger, who sees our country more than plain, as *Midnight Cowboy* and *Day of the Locust* indicated',¹¹⁶ and Sheila Benson, writing of a scene indicating Jessica Tandy's character's confusion in a fast food restaurant, suggested 'Perhaps it takes European eyes to see those details we slide by'.¹¹⁷ More typically, however, it was felt that the tone of the film was superior and anti-American. In a review titled 'Harsh view of America in *Honky Tonk Freeway*', Janet Maslin wrote that Schlesinger 'still thinks America is a crass, foolish, disagreeable place' and detected 'a smug hint of cultural superiority to the lot of dreamers and scramblers trying to find their niche in the American social landscape'.¹¹⁸ In his review of a film deemed to be a 'crude satire on American greed', David Denby felt that 'Schlesinger, an Englishman, comes to this country with murder in his heart', directing a 'picture of an America devoted to the junk culture of the freeway, an America so debased that it cries out to be put out of its misery'.¹¹⁹ Commentators have retrospectively speculated whether *Honky Tonk Freeway* was too incompatible with the political inclination of the United States at the time, the film's cynical tone judged to be at odds with the ideological climate that had seen Reagan take office in January of 1981.¹²⁰ William J. Mann has indicated that the political milieu worked to enhance the sense of Schlesinger having attacked, not only Hollywood, as had been suggested upon the reception of *The Day of the Locust*, but America itself.¹²¹

The hostility of the American reception to *Honky Tonk Freeway* would itself be commented upon in the British reception of the film upon its release in October 1981. While Mann's assertion that British reviewers were more interested in writing

¹¹⁶ Crist, *op. cit.*

¹¹⁷ Benson, *op. cit.*

¹¹⁸ Maslin, *op. cit.*

¹¹⁹ Denby, *op. cit.*

¹²⁰ Melvyn Bragg, 'Le boule cliché', *Punch*, 12th May 1982, p.79, Mann, *op. cit.*, p.482, Walker, *op. cit.*, p.164

¹²¹ Mann, *op. cit.*, p.481

about the American reception than judging the film on its merits may have been overstated,¹²² American reviewers' hostility was certainly of some interest. In a preview on the 11th October, *The Sunday Times Magazine* claimed that American critics were hostile to a negative portrayal of American institutions and highway culture by Boyd and Schlesinger, 'a pair of Limeys'.¹²³ In a profile of Don Boyd on 12th October, *The Times* referred to the 'mixed' American reception, alluding to the 'very special brand of vitriol'¹²⁴ which characterized the review in *Variety*, a review confirmed by Alexander Walker in the *Evening Standard* as containing 'some of the bitterest box-office comments ever to appear in *Variety*'.¹²⁵

A significant difference in the British reviews of *Honky Tonk Freeway* was the film's designation as an over-budget failure. Seemingly, negativity around EMI and A.F.D., compounded by the critical hostility to the film and its poor box office performance in the United States, confirmed the film as a 'flop'. *The Times*' David Robinson, who had appraised Schlesinger's 1960s films in distinctly positive terms, found the film incoherent, and concluded that perhaps 'the stuff of a light, throwaway, small-town comedy has simply collapsed under the weight of a multi-million production'.¹²⁶ So assured seemed critics of the film's status as a failure, that comparisons were made with *Heaven's Gate*. Derek Malcolm at *The Guardian*, writing of a film that 'goes in one eye and out the other', commented that 'at the price this film cost, it's like rushing headlong over a cliff marked *Heaven's Gate*'.¹²⁷ Richard Combs' review for the *Monthly Film Bulletin* was similarly negative, finding the film 'a weasely offering, having cost almost as much as *Heaven's Gate* and yet looking as if it could have been shot on anybody's backlot'.¹²⁸

Reviews and commentary accompanying *Honky Tonk Freeway*'s release were again critical of the international big-budget approach of British-funded filmmaking,

¹²² *Ibid.*, p.481

¹²³ 'Limey whitewash', *The Sunday Times*, 11th October 1981, BFI digital clippings

¹²⁴ John Higgins, 'Pictures of a cottage industry', *The Times*, 12th October 1981, p.9

¹²⁵ Alexander Walker, 'Journey to nowhere', *Evening Standard*, 15th October 1981, BFI digital clippings

¹²⁶ David Robinson, 'A bold and enthralling experiment in time', *The Times*, 16th October 1981, p.12

¹²⁷ Derek Malcolm, 'Schlesinger's last exit to Florida', *The Guardian*, 15th October 1981, p.13

¹²⁸ Richard Combs, 'Honky Tonk Freeway', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, October 1981, p.202

echoing the anxieties about the indigenous industry expressed the previous year. In the review of *Honky Tonk Freeway* for the *Evening Standard*, Alexander Walker represented EMI's policy as a 'plan for investing in American talents' and reiterated his 'often expressed distaste for committing huge amounts of British capital to compete with Hollywood on its own home stretch'.¹²⁹ Such statements were echoed by Michael Billington of *The Illustrated London News*, who concluded that EMI's latest venture 'does rather suggest the old Michael Balcon philosophy is true, that British films are best when they have modest budgets and local subjects'.¹³⁰

Such commentary aside, the British reviews echoed many of the American observations to a perhaps surprising degree, putting paid to any hopes of a humour more suited to British tastes. Apart from some different emphases and reference points, the film was evaluated in comparable terms. With only occasional exceptions,¹³¹ Schlesinger was felt to be unsuited to comedy. Both *The Listener*¹³² and *The Sunday Times*¹³³ concluded that such comedy was not Schlesinger's arena. Similarly, *The Daily Mail* asserted that 'it's no shame for a gifted director if crazy comedy isn't his forte. But it is a pity when he doesn't recognize the fact', going on to praise Schlesinger's direction of 'fine dramas'.¹³⁴ A consequence of such seeming inadequacy emerges in the reviews as resulting in either a crude style – 'the enormous wink and the painful dig in the ribs'¹³⁵ – or a lack of conviction. In a review setting out the film's 'unrelieved acidity' and lack of any nuance, David Castell of *The Sunday Telegraph* noted that 'the cold cruelty with which Schlesinger metes out ironic retribution to the characters suggests a man gladly washing his hands of a fundamentally misconceived idea'.¹³⁶ The concept of the film as half-hearted, and Schlesinger as lacking conviction recurs throughout Neil Sinyard's review of the film for *Films and Filming*. Ticlaw was found to be 'tepidly evoked', frenzy found to be 'trying to disguise a lack of conviction', so

¹²⁹ Walker, *Evening Standard*, 15th October 1981, *op. cit.*

¹³⁰ Michael Billington, 'Cinema', *Illustrated London News*, 28th November 1981, p.13

¹³¹ Richard Barkley, 'Honky Tonk Freeway' review, *Sunday Express*, 18th October 1981, BFI digital clippings, Dilys Powell, 'So fair and Fowles', *Punch*, 21st October 1981, p.76

¹³² Gavin Millar, 'Mr Fixit', *The Listener*, 22nd October 1981, p.484

¹³³ 'Limey Whitewash', *The Sunday Times Magazine*, 11th October 1981, *op. cit.*

¹³⁴ Margaret Hinxman, 'Honky Tonk Freeway', *Daily Mail*, 16th October 1981, BFI digital clippings

¹³⁵ Alan Brien, review, *The Sunday Times*, 18th October 1981, BFI digital clippings

¹³⁶ David Castell, review, *Sunday Telegraph*, 18th October 1981, BFI digital clippings

that 'long before the end, one senses that the actors, director and audience are similarly searching for an appropriate exit'. So 'lumbering' was the direction found that, referring to Bubbles the elephant, Sinyard concluded 'that one suspects the poor creature might have spent some time behind, as well as in front of, the camera'.¹³⁷

Schlesinger also appeared in the reviews as not only unsuitable for the comedy genre, but guilty of an actual resistance to comedy itself, or an unsuccessful attempt to wrest the material into a more serious form. A conflict between comedy and detached observation was found by Richard Combs in *Monthly Film Bulletin* to have characterised much of Schlesinger's earlier work, Combs going on state, 'Perhaps doubting the sagacity of what his script has to say about the American phenomenon of 'freeway madness', John Schlesinger is soon rerouting it as another commentary on the consumer society', a move whereby the director 'speeds the films disintegration into a ponderous collection of set-pieces'.¹³⁸ In the American reviews, David Denby had similarly noted a tension between the film's purported status as comedy, and the detachment of satiric observation. Attributing this 'contradiction' to Schlesinger and the screenwriter Edward Clinton, Denby felt that the pair wanted to make a film 'about a group of flaky, lost, outclassed Americans without feeling much warmth for any of them' and asking 'where is the humor in desperate, unsuccessful people disgracing themselves?'.¹³⁹ It is useful to read such criticism with Schlesinger's insistence upon the seriousness of the project and accompanying disavowal of broad comedy in mind.

As in the American reviews, *Honky Tonk Freeway* was compared to the work of other specific directors, with Robert Altman's name invoked a number of times.¹⁴⁰ *Honky Tonk Freeway* was compared unfavourably to *Nashville*, the former film's unstructured, ranging nature felt to emanate from a director lacking Altman's 'dexterity'¹⁴¹ or authoritative handling of large-scale material. *Honky Tonk Freeway* was again found to have drawn as much upon Schlesinger's own earlier work as upon

¹³⁷ Neil Sinyard, 'Honky Tonk Freeway', *Films and Filming*, December 1981, p.39

¹³⁸ Combs, *op. cit.*

¹³⁹ Denby, *op. cit.*

¹⁴⁰ Nigel Andrews, 'A tale of two centuries', *The Financial Times*, 16th October 1981, p.17
Brien, *op. cit.*, Castell, *op. cit.*, Coleman, *op. cit.*, Sinyard, *op. cit.*

¹⁴¹ Castell, *op. cit.*

any other film. Richard Combs wrote, ‘What is so consistently dismaying about this kind of ‘observation’ throughout Honky Tonk Freeway is not just its obviousness or lack of wit but the sense that it is derived at second or third-hand (it might easily have been based on *Midnight Cowboy*)’.¹⁴² Other, unfortunate parallels were apparent, the film being released around the time of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (dir. Karel Reisz, 1981) and the films being reviewed together in a number of publications.¹⁴³ In *The Times*, David Robinson pointed out that Schlesinger and Reisz had been born in the same year, as well as making their first films within a year of each other. Robinson found Schlesinger’s film to be ‘by no means as happy, however, as *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*’, which he pronounced ‘a singularly handsome and satisfying work’. Indicating the parallels between the careers of Schlesinger and Reisz, and finding the latter’s work to be significantly superior, Robinson deemed the timing of the films’ release to be ‘an awful coincidence’.¹⁴⁴

A survey of the reviews indicates that the British reviewers were almost as attuned to any anti-American sentiments as American reviewers had been. In a review titled ‘A prolonged snigger at quirky Americans’, Eric Shorter at *The Daily Telegraph* declared that:

Even if you didn’t feel culturally superior to most of the people and all of the attitudes in it as you first encounter them, the satire is so incessant and sometimes sharp that as you leave the cinema you would probably strike America off your list of countries to visit.¹⁴⁵

In *The Observer*, the film was designated ‘John Schlesinger’s latest un-American activity’,¹⁴⁶ while at the *New Statesman*, it was a ‘tawdry celebration of the freakiness of our friends over the Big Pond’.¹⁴⁷ For Philip French, reviewing *The Border* (dir. Tony Richardson, 1982) the following spring, such condescension that he felt

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ Andrews, *op. cit.*, Hinxman, *op. cit.*, Millar, *op. cit.*, Robinson, *The Times*, 16th October 1981, *op. cit.*, Walker, *Evening Standard*, 15th October 1981, *op. cit.*

¹⁴⁴ Robinson, *The Times*, 16th October 1981, *op. cit.*

¹⁴⁵ Eric Shorter, ‘A prolonged snigger at quirky Americans’, *Daily Telegraph*, 16th October 1981, BFI digital clippings

¹⁴⁶ Philip French, review, *The Observer*, 18th October 1981, BFI digital clippings

¹⁴⁷ John Coleman, review, *New Statesman*, 16th October 1981, BFI digital clippings

characterised Schlesinger and Richardson's depictions of small-town America was contrasted with films directed by Bob Rafelson, Martin Scorsese and Jonathan Demme, which were distinctly more 'generous' and 'unpatronising'. For French, 'the British visitors despise the world of country music, TV soap operas, backyard barbecue parties, tinned beer, blue-grass music, as much as they dislike the new working-class affluence in Britain'.¹⁴⁸

Two years after the release of *Honky Tonk Freeway*, Schlesinger referred to the difficulties and hostilities involved in the production and release of the film, saying:

It is only recently that I have been hearing the stories of what went on behind my back regarding that film and they would make your hair curl. The deceptions, the small acts of treachery by people around you.¹⁴⁹

Such a statement points to the complexity of key relationships in the production, but what is clear is that *Honky Tonk Freeway* received a limited release, no doubt as a result of Universal's lack of faith in its viability. The film's limited distribution in the United States was matched by poor box office receipts; the opening weekend saw a 'dismal' \$860,207 taken in 565 theatres,¹⁵⁰ a disappointing performance for a film estimated to have finally cost in excess of \$30 million.¹⁵¹ It was reported in the British press to be, in America, 'battling at 29th in the weekly box-office charts during the second week of its run'¹⁵² and 'playing to empty seats across the country'.¹⁵³ William J. Mann estimated that the film earned \$600,000 before Universal 'buried it as fast as they could'.¹⁵⁴ The film's limited distribution would be noted in the press, with David Hinds of the *Boca Raton News* complaining that the film was being shown at only two locations in the area and stating that 'nothing the movie criticizes is nearly as objectionable...as the distributor's determination to discourage people from seeing

¹⁴⁸ Philip French, 'Down Mexico way', *The Observer*, 25th April 1982, p.32

¹⁴⁹ Michael Owen, 'Schlesinger, still showing the scars', *Evening Standard*, 18th November 1983, BFI digital clippings

¹⁵⁰ Boyer, *op. cit.*

¹⁵¹ Aljean Harmetz, 'Hollywood is joyous over its record-grossing summer', *The New York Times*, 9th September 1981, p.C25

¹⁵² Michael Billington, 'Cinema', *Illustrated London News*, 28th November 1981, p.13

¹⁵³ 'Limey whitewash', *The Sunday Times*, 11th October 1981, *op. cit.*

¹⁵⁴ Mann, *op. cit.*, p.480

it'.¹⁵⁵ Such complaints were rare however, most critics presumably not sharing Hinds' exasperation at the film's limited distribution.

The failure of *Honky Tonk Freeway* would have significant repercussions for many of the key players. It led to what was later termed a 'boardroom revolution at EMI',¹⁵⁶ with various changes in personnel culminating in the appointment of Verity Lambert as Head of Production of EMI films in October 1982 and Barry Spikings' exit from the company two months later. The role that *Honky Tonk Freeway* had played in this development was clear when *Sight and Sound* reported that 'Spikings had gambled on pointing EMI production firmly towards the American marketplace, and with such expensive failures as *Can't Stop the Music* and *Honky Tonk Freeway*, he lost'.¹⁵⁷ The new, more frugal atmosphere would see Spikings' 'flamboyant personal style' replaced by Lambert's 'tight budgeting, creative drive and feeling for British subject matter'.¹⁵⁸ With the failure of *Honky Tonk Freeway* and *Raise the Titanic*, the end of Britain's foray into international filmmaking was pronounced in the press.¹⁵⁹ The failure of *Honky Tonk Freeway* would also see Don Boyd's return to more modestly budgeted filmmaking.

Despite subsequent degrees of success in his career, the reception of *Honky Tonk Freeway* would continue to beset Schlesinger, retrospectives of his career characterising the film as a benchmark between the higher quality films of the 1960s and 1970s, themselves varied but indicating some degree of directorial signature, and later, distinctly inferior ones which indicated a capitulation to commerce.¹⁶⁰ The statement in Schlesinger's *Times* obituary that 'the decline set in with *Honky Tonk Freeway*'¹⁶¹ represents well the decisive role of the film in perceptions of Schlesinger's career. In the years since its release, *Honky Tonk Freeway* has not been subject to any

¹⁵⁵ David Hinds, 'Honky Tonk Freeway suffers low visibility', *Boca Raton News*, cited at www.edwardclintonplaywright.com

¹⁵⁶ Owen, *Evening Standard*, 18th November 1983, *op. cit.*

¹⁵⁷ Anon, 'Verity', *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1983, p.111

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ Bart Mills, 'A blitz of Brits', *The Guardian*, 3rd July 1982, p.8

¹⁶⁰ Anon, 'Obituaries, - John Schlesinger', *The Times*, 26th July 2003, p.40, John Martland, 'John Schlesinger' (obituary), *The Stage*, 7th August 2003, BFI digital clippings

¹⁶¹ 'Obituaries, - John Schlesinger', *ibid.*

significant re-evaluation, unlike *Heaven's Gate*, notable for its reappraisal, particularly in evidence upon the release of a director's cut of the film in 2012. Despite widespread objections to the excess and apparent self-indulgence of Cimino, his seemingly artistically-motivated project has found a measure of critical acceptance that the satiric slapstick of *Honky Tonk Freeway* has failed to. Nevertheless, the film's significance remains, chiefly for the decisive role it was to play in Schlesinger's career. The trajectory of its production and reception attests to the subtle, accumulative effects of a wide range of dynamics working to influence a film's, and its director's, reputation, with ambitious commercial policies, wider anxieties about the British domestic film industry and international hostility to emerging, big-budget filmmaking all significantly contributing to the film's fortunes. The influence of Schlesinger's persisting status as an important director was also highly significant at this time, and indicative of the relative tenacity of such a reputation. Such status, while inspiring confidence amongst industrial figures, at the same time confounded critics' generic expectations, took on less favourable connotations with the reassessment of a 'director's' cinema and was, with the failure of *Honky Tonk Freeway*, decidedly compromised.

Hiatus

Honky Tonk Freeway was, in the 1980s, in many ways seen as decisive in the deterioration of the director's critical reputation. Reviews and interviews throughout the 1980s referred to its failure, including a 1985 article which described the film as having been 'roasted in London', with Schlesinger 'practically run out of town by British film companies'.¹⁶² Such evaluations, however, do not wholly represent critical perspectives at the time, with acknowledgements of a 'chequered career'¹⁶³ matched by appraisals of Schlesinger's versatility and status as an established 'name' within British cinema. A particular artistic status was implied in Schlesinger's being described

¹⁶² Michael Owen, 'Schlesinger: from a roasting to a toasting?', *Evening Standard*, 19th April 1985, BFI digital clippings

¹⁶³ Saskia Baron, 'An Englishman Abroad', *City Limits*. 12-18 April 1985, BFI collection JRS/12/18

in 1983 as ‘equally at home in the cinema, the theatre or the opera house’¹⁶⁴ and in his nomination in the same year as a ‘mandarin of the movies’.¹⁶⁵ Such a title would be borne out by various activity in the period, which saw Schlesinger involved in a number of projects and campaigns supportive of the British film industry. He acted as a consultant to director Michael Hoffman on *Privileged* (1982), a film made on location at the University of Oxford and starring current students, including actors Hugh Grant and James Wilby. In 1983, Schlesinger was active amongst other ‘notables’ in the film industry, such as Lindsay Anderson and Karel Reisz, in protesting cuts requested by the British Board of Classification to the Michael Winner film *The Wicked Lady* (1983),¹⁶⁶ as well as joining with ‘the biggest names in the British film industry’, including Sir Richard Attenborough, in demands by the Association of Independent Producers for the Department of Trade to impose a levy on recent feature films shown on television.¹⁶⁷ Additional activity, such as Schlesinger’s delivery in 1985 of the annual James McTaggart memorial lecture at the Edinburgh International Television Festival attests to a continuing presence and status in the arts.¹⁶⁸

Such associations, as well as his direction of the television plays *An Englishman Abroad* (1983, BBC) and *Separate Tables* (1983, HBO/HTV), and much of Schlesinger’s discourse at this point, positioned him as distinctly ‘British’. In November 1983, Schlesinger told *The Times* that the subject matter of *An Englishman Abroad*, Alan Bennett’s play about Guy Burgess and his lonely exile in Russia, ‘struck a chord’ and ‘drew on feelings of homesickness’.¹⁶⁹ In the same interview, Schlesinger identified with the British ironic humour that characterised the play, while also commenting Americans ‘don’t get’ the said humour, characteristically underlining perceived differences between British and American characters. Schlesinger’s enthusiasm for things British and support for the domestic film industry, however, did

¹⁶⁴ Owen, *Evening Standard*, 18th November 1983, *op. cit.*

¹⁶⁵ Bryan Appleyard, ‘Shared fascination with English ironies, *The Times*, 14th November 1983, p.8

¹⁶⁶ Derek Malcolm, ‘The lady who beat the censor’, *The Guardian*, 15th March 1983, p.17

¹⁶⁷ Dennis Barker, ‘Petition plan for levy on TV films’, *The Guardian*, 2nd April 1983, p.2

¹⁶⁸ The full text of Schlesinger’s lecture, ‘Reflections on Working in Film and Television’, appears in Bob Franklin (ed.), *Television Policy: The MacTaggart Lectures*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2005, pp.97-104

¹⁶⁹ Appleyard, *op. cit.*

not extend to the 'British renaissance' in film being reported in the press at this time. In an article appearing in *The Times* in November 1983, Schlesinger was presented as 'sceptical about the supposed renaissance in British films, pointing out that there was not so much as a single British penny in *Chariots of Fire* and that Gandhi took 20 years to get off the ground'.¹⁷⁰ His reservations would again be apparent in 1985, designated British Film Year, when Schlesinger would state that 'I think that British Film Year is a load of old rubbish, all this talk of a renaissance, I don't see it ... It would be lovely to say that the British cinema is booming, but I don't think it is; we lack good entrepreneurial talent'.¹⁷¹

The television plays *An Englishman Abroad* and *Separate Tables* would be well received, praised for their modesty and tastefulness. In the States, Schlesinger's direction of *Separate Tables* was found to be 'precise'¹⁷² and 'firm but unobtrusive'¹⁷³ and in Britain to be characterised by 'compassion and flair',¹⁷⁴ though *The Guardian* complained of the lack of 'the right full-blooded tone'.¹⁷⁵ Praise for *An Englishman Abroad* was effusive, the play's critical approval sealed by its winning numerous British Academy television awards, including those for Best Actor (Alan Bates), Best Actress (Coral Browne) and Best Single Drama. Julian Barnes in *The Observer* judged Schlesinger to have directed the play 'beguilingly',¹⁷⁶ while John Naughton in *The Listener* found Schlesinger to have directed with 'a deftness which was positively dazzling'.¹⁷⁷ The 'radiant little masterpiece',¹⁷⁸ deemed by the *Daily Mail's* reviewer 'the best thing I have seen on television this year',¹⁷⁹ was at least equally well received in the States, termed 'the best hour of TV I've seen in some time' by Howard

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ Baron, *op. cit.*

¹⁷² Cecil Smith, 'Commentary', *Los Angeles Times*, 27th March 1983, p.U6

¹⁷³ John J. O'Connor, 'TV: Bates and Julie Christie in "Separate Tables"', *The New York Times*, 4th April 1983, p.C18

¹⁷⁴ Elizabeth Cowley, 'Separate Tables', *Daily Mail*, 2nd January 1984, p.22

¹⁷⁵ Nicholas De Jongh, 'Separate Tables', *The Guardian*, 3rd January 1984, p.9

¹⁷⁶ Julian Barnes, 'Spy who stayed out in the cold', *The Observer*, 4th December 1983, p.48

¹⁷⁷ John Naughton, 'Englishmen Abroad', *The Listener*, 8th December 1983, p.36

¹⁷⁸ Elizabeth Cowley, 'Pick of the Day, An Englishman Abroad', *Daily Mail*, 29th November 1983, p.18

¹⁷⁹ Mary Kenny, 'A traitor's Iron Curtain call', *Daily Mail*, 30th November 1983, p.31

Rosenberg in the *Los Angeles Times*.¹⁸⁰ While *An Englishman Abroad* would bring Schlesinger praise, the profile of Alan Bennett at this point, and the status of the scriptwriter in television, frequently more noted and esteemed than that of the director,¹⁸¹ would entail a somewhat reduced profile for Schlesinger. The scale and restraint of the television plays also emerged as being a significant aspect of their attraction for reviewers, adjectives such as ‘little’ and ‘unobtrusive’ indicating the appeal of their economy, a factor underlined later in a review of *The Falcon and the Snowman*, where the latter’s ‘bloated’ nature was compared to the ‘tight, rich’ *An Englishman Abroad*.¹⁸²

The Falcon and the Snowman

Reports that it took Schlesinger four years to obtain finance for his next film,¹⁸³ *The Falcon and the Snowman*, indicate that the director continued to be committed to making feature films, despite any feelings of disillusionment regarding the failure of *Honky Tonk Freeway*. To some degree restoring Schlesinger’s standing after the failure of *Honky Tonk Freeway*, *The Falcon and the Snowman* would be something of a return to familiar territory, with its emphasis on characterisation and relationships. Like Schlesinger’s recent films, however, it would be met with a certain critical incomprehension. While a minority of critics noted a complex and subtle ambiguity and a refusal of polarised morality in the representation of this incident of American treason, most reviewers were impatient with what they found to be a directorial uncertainty, a lack of authority and a misguided sympathy for treasonous activity. As will be noted, the sensibility informing the direction of *The Falcon and the Snowman* would appear out of place in a film industry increasingly invested in high concept filmmaking and a political climate indicating a shift to the right.

¹⁸⁰ Howard Rosenberg, ‘Englishman Abroad Is Worth A Second Trip’, *Los Angeles Times*, 2nd November 1984, p.122

¹⁸¹ John Caughie, *Television Drama: Realism, Modernism, and British Culture*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004, pp.127-128

¹⁸² Angela Pope, ‘Cinema’, *The Listener*, 25th April 1985, p.32

¹⁸³ Baron, *op. cit.*

The Falcon and the Snowman, scripted by Steven Zaillian who would go on to write *Schindler's List* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 1993) and co-write *Gangs of New York* (dir. Martin Scorsese, 2002), was based on *The New York Times*' reporter Robert Lindsey's 1979 book, *The Falcon and the Snowman: A True Story of Friendship and Espionage*.¹⁸⁴ The book was an account of Christopher Boyce and Andrew Daulton Lee, two young Californian men from affluent families who, in 1977, were found guilty of having sold government secrets to the Soviet Union. Negotiations to fund the production, pursued by Schlesinger and Gabriel Katzka of Hemdale Film Corporation, were lengthy, with initial backers 20th Century Fox eventually choosing not to pursue the project. Stephen Rebello in the *Saturday Review* suggested in 1985 that the presence of Gerald Ford and Henry Kissinger on the board at Fox may have been a factor in this, though Robert Lindsey, with some foresight, cited the difficulty of selling a film about such a divisive issue.¹⁸⁵ The fledgling project was then taken up by the recently established Orion. It would be the first of his films that Schlesinger would produce, along with Katzka and with Schlesinger's partner, Michael Childers, acting as associate producer. Schlesinger's agency was apparently enhanced by what has been described as a highly collaborative writing partnership with Zaillian.¹⁸⁶ A budgetary cap in the region of \$12 million was put on the production, with economy aided by shooting on location in Mexico City¹⁸⁷ and Schlesinger himself responsible for any overages.¹⁸⁸ The film would star Timothy Hutton, winner of an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor for *Ordinary People* (dir. Robert Redford, 1980), as Christopher Boyce, and Sean Penn, of *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (dir. Amy Heckerling, 1982), as Andrew Daulton Lee. The soundtrack was co-written by jazz guitarist and composer Pat Metheny and featured the song 'This is not America', sung by David Bowie, which would chart in both Britain and the United States.

¹⁸⁴ Robert Lindsey, *The Falcon and the Snowman: A True Story of Friendship and Espionage*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1979

¹⁸⁵ Stephen Rebello, 'Spies like Us', *Saturday Review*, January/February 1985, BFI collection JRS/12/19

¹⁸⁶ Mann, *op. cit.*, pp.497-498

¹⁸⁷ Rebello, *op. cit.*

¹⁸⁸ Buruma, *op. cit.*, p.149

The Falcon and the Snowman begins with Christopher Boyce, an amateur falconer, getting a job at the CIA, dealing with classified documents. In the course of his work, he learns of measures taken by the government which he deems to be immoral, and consequently decides to pass secret information to the Russians. He is aided in this by his friend, Andrew Daulton Lee, though the latter's drug addiction and erratic behaviour endanger the young men. When their situation becomes more precarious, Boyce and Lee decide to cease in their dealings, though they are finally caught and convicted and sentenced to forty years and life imprisonment respectively.

After the seeming improbability of Schlesinger's involvement in *Honky Tonk Freeway*, his participation in *The Falcon and the Snowman* appeared more characteristic. His direction of two well-received television plays, including one about a spy, indicated that Schlesinger was on surer ground, as did the basis of the story in fact. For Saskia Baron, the subject appealed to Schlesinger's 'ex-documentarist instincts', as well as 'his love of characters pushed to the edge',¹⁸⁹ underlined by Schlesinger's attraction to the story's 'human elements touched with tragedy and black humour' and its basis in the particular political and cultural climate of America in the mid-1970s.¹⁹⁰ Schlesinger would also speak of the appeal of the complexities of the scenario, citing a certain identification with the dilemmas faced by Boyce, a formerly unquestioning patriot who discovered duplicitous government activity and subsequently misguidedly passed information to the U.S.S.R. He would later tell Ian Buruma that 'the cockamamie idealism of Chris Boyce, which he took seriously, made his act into something I could identify with. I don't condone what he did, which was treacherous, but I could recognise it as something worth studying'.¹⁹¹ For Schlesinger, complexities of political and cultural context complicated attributions of individual guilt or, as stated by Julia Prewitt Brown in her study of Schlesinger's spy-themed works, 'the personal betrayals cannot be separated from the failures of the cultures to impart a consistent idea of the state, or of the part the state might play in the lives of all

¹⁸⁹ Baron, *op. cit.*

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ Buruma, *op. cit.*, p.150

citizens'.¹⁹² Such failures, for Brown, were necessarily implicated in the policies which served to dichotomise notions of citizenry and state which characterised the leaderships of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher.¹⁹³ Schlesinger's attraction to the intricacies of a story such as *The Falcon and the Snowman* has been placed by William J. Mann in a continuity of challenges to norms and authority, Mann at the same time indicating that Schlesinger's 'anti-establishment worldview' was somewhat unfashionable in the political climate of the 1980s.¹⁹⁴ Schlesinger's assertion that Boyce and Lee were not 'normal criminals' and bemused observation that 'Americans take their spies so seriously'¹⁹⁵ are indicative of a potentially contentious approach to the subject.

The unfashionable ambiguities of the subject and treatment of *The Falcon and the Snowman*, potentially at odds with the political climates of Britain and the United States, can also be viewed as at variance with the rise of the high concept film, an approach in filmmaking found to increasingly distinguish Hollywood film in the period from the late 1970s.¹⁹⁶ Premised on an 'easily communicated and summarized' concept,¹⁹⁷ emphasising style and facilitating an integrated promotion,¹⁹⁸ the high concept film has been identified by Justin Wyatt as a highly market-driven form determined by industrial changes, including 'conglomeration, the development of new technologies and the rise in marketing and merchandising'.¹⁹⁹ The high concept film's status as one which 'can be summarized and sold in a single sentence',²⁰⁰ and which includes such films as *Flashdance* (dir. Adrian Lyne, 1983), *The Terminator* (dir. James Cameron, 1984) and *Beverly Hills Cop* (dir. Martin Brest, 1984), is clearly at odds with a film such as *The Falcon and the Snowman*. Amidst such industrial, commercial dynamics, auteurs of the 1970s would encounter challenges. Directors

¹⁹² Julia Prewitt Brown, 'An Eye for an I: Identity and Nation in the Films of John Schlesinger', *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 44:1, 2016, pp.14-28, p.16

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp.14-28

¹⁹⁴ Mann, *op. cit.*, p.496

¹⁹⁵ Lorenzo Carcaterra, 'Profile of the Week: John Schlesinger', *Daily News*, 20th January 1985, BFI collection JRS/12/19

¹⁹⁶ Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood*, University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas, 1994, p.21

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.8

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.7

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.15-18

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p.18

such as Robert Altman, Hal Ashby and Peter Bogdanovich failed to adapt to a commercial environment increasingly averse to risk,²⁰¹ while directors such as Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese were somewhat more successful in adapting to the demands of the marketplace by alternating between concept, style-driven films and more personal projects.²⁰²

Upon the release of *The Falcon and the Snowman* in January 1985 in the United States, its varied reception would see some reviewers praise the film highly, seeing it as a marked return to form.²⁰³ A continuity with earlier work was noted, with Roger Ebert at the *Chicago Sun-Times*²⁰⁴ and Gene Siskel at the *Chicago Tribune*²⁰⁵ reading the film's themes and characters as an extension and revision of those in *Midnight Cowboy*. An appreciation of the difficulties of the subject and its treatment was also apparent. Gene Siskel was accurate in observing that “‘The Falcon and the Snowman’ is certain to arouse criticism for seemingly romanticizing criminal treason. Some people will see this movie and ask why do we have to have a film made about anti-American felons?’”.²⁰⁶ Siskel continued:

But if those same people were to study “The Falcon and the Snowman”, they would find its politics subordinated to its portrait of behaviour. We see two young men venture into a situation that would appear to be well beyond their grasp, and yet there is so much slack in our democracy that they are allowed to go quite so far before they hang themselves. And during their treacherous journey, we really get to know their minds – of the young, misguided patriot and the young addict. We can't help but grow to like these boys.²⁰⁷

Desmond Ryan at *The Philadelphia Enquirer* also approved of the film's subtleties, comparing the film to the less ambiguous *Another Country* (dir. Manek Kanievskaya, 1984) and finding that:

²⁰¹ Wyatt, *op. cit.*, p.191

²⁰² *Ibid.*, p.192

²⁰³ Roger Ebert, ‘The Falcon and the Snowman’, *Chicago Sun-Times*, 25th January 1985, Gene Siskel, ‘John Schlesinger triumphs with first fine film of 1985’, *Chicago Tribune*, 25th January 1985, BFI collection JRS/12/19 and Iain Johnstone, ‘California Splits’, *The Sunday Times*, 21st April 1985, p.38

²⁰⁴ Ebert, *op. cit.*

²⁰⁵ Siskel, *op. cit.*

²⁰⁶ Siskel, *op. cit.*

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

The special appeal of (Schlesinger's) quirky and original piece lies in his assertion that there are no easy answers or pat explanations. Where Kanievska was intent on presenting an insurmountable argument, Schlesinger is content to suggest and force us to acknowledge the complexity of the material.²⁰⁸

Any subtleties in the film's execution, however, evaded a greater number of critics, with Schlesinger found to have lacked an authoritative, distinct position on the material, leading to a sense of uncertainty and a lack of clarity. Finding that the film had 'too many loopholes, unanswered questions, moral muddles', David Denby at *New York Magazine* asked of Schlesinger, 'does he know what his own movie is about?'.²⁰⁹ Pauline Kael found that the film suffered from the lack of conviction that had marred *The Day of the Locust* and *Marathon Man* and which resulted from Schlesinger's 'detachment from the events and the people, from the plain facts of the story'.²¹⁰ Difficulties accessing Schlesinger's intentions were related for some reviewers to their difficulties in understanding the protagonists' motivations for their treasonous actions. Paul Attansio in *The Washington Post* found that Schlesinger 'treats his characters' motivations like government secrets',²¹¹ just as Rita Kempley at the same publication concluded that 'Schlesinger really can't say what makes a traitor tick'.²¹²

Much of the difficulty found with Schlesinger's position on the material, however, clearly emerged from a more ideologically-based dissatisfaction with the representation of treason. An impatience with any degree of sympathy for the men or justification of their actions is palpable in the American reviews. Rex Reed's position was clear when he wrote:

... the movie leaves you feeling empty, cheated, hungry for some shred of decency you can identify with. If these guys disgraced their families, ruined their lives, and sullied their flag because one needed money for dope and the other had

²⁰⁸ Desmond Ryan, 'Film: Two young men who betrayed a nation', *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 25th January 1985, BFI collection JRS/12/19

²⁰⁹ David Denby, 'I was a luftmensch for the KGB', *New York Magazine*, 4th February 1985, BFI collection JRS/12/19

²¹⁰ Pauline Kael, 'Schoolboys', *The New Yorker*, 11th February 1985, pp.106-111

²¹¹ Paul Attansio, 'Falcon' Flies Into Trouble' 25th January 1985, *The Washington Post*, p.C1

²¹² Rita Kempley, 'Feeble Falcon and Snowman', *The Washington Post*, 25th January 1985, p.21

some kind of naïve prejudice against the CIA, then I'm not sure they're worth making a movie about.²¹³

Several reviewers objected to an anti-American stance that they detected in *The Falcon and the Snowman*'s location of the men's behaviour in a particular social and political context. Richard Corliss in *Time* remarked upon a tangible disdain for American values, with Boyce's treason 'pinned on mid-America, not so much for the evil of its ways as for the banality of its style'.²¹⁴ For Pauline Kael, such hostility resulted from Schlesinger's distance from the subject, stating 'the more he understands, the simpler he is (hence the lucidity of *An Englishman Abroad*) and when the material is alien to him, he goes for art and political thunder'.²¹⁵ A similar perspective was apparent in Rita Kempley's review in her observation that 'the director, a Brit, doesn't have a gut feel for his material' and hence was unable to adequately handle the narrative and characters.²¹⁶

In April 1985, Schlesinger discussed contrasting approaches to treason, stating that 'the most appalling act of violence is preferable to a lot of Americans than the act of a traitor. They can't see it in the same light that the British do. We're able to find a kind of humour behind it'.²¹⁷ The reception of *The Falcon and the Snowman* in Britain, however, did not accord with such a position, with British reviewers largely echoing the sentiments of the American critics upon the film's release in Britain in April 1985. The film's raison d'être was certainly questioned in *The Guardian*²¹⁸ and *Films and Filming*, the latter wondering 'why anyone thought it worth bothering to make an expensive film about',²¹⁹ indicating limited interest in the story and negligible sympathy for Boyce and Lee.

Again, an impatience with Schlesinger's particular satirical and critical location of the men and their actions in the social and political context of America in the mid-

²¹³ Rex Reed, 'Falcon film tells us how but not why', *New York Post*, 25th January 1985, BFI collection JRS/12/19

²¹⁴ Richard Corliss, 'The Hardy Boys Turn Traitor', *Time*, 28th January 1985, BFI collection JRS/12/19

²¹⁵ Kael, *The New Yorker*, 11th February 1985, *op. cit.*

²¹⁶ Kempley, *op. cit.*

²¹⁷ Baron, *op. cit.*

²¹⁸ Tim Pulleine, 'Laughter that takes you by the throat', *The Guardian*, 18th April 1985, p.21

²¹⁹ Tim Pulleine, review, *Films and Filming*, April 1985, BFI collection JRS/12/18

1970s was derided. Kim Newman in the *Monthly Film Bulletin* felt that the presentation of Boyce as ‘a man of conscience’ whose ‘betrayal is motivated simply by the shortcomings of his country’ was:

... informed by precisely the kind of slightly hypocritical anti-Americanism typical of the half-horrified, half-fascinated expatriate Schlesinger, as exemplified by films as different as *Midnight Cowboy*, *The Day of the Locust*, *Marathon Man* and *Honky Tonk Freeway*.²²⁰

For Peter Ackroyd writing in *The Spectator*, Schlesinger’s implied justifications in societal context were evidence of a ‘conventional imagination which seems to have got stuck somewhere in the more ‘liberated’ period of the Sixties or early Seventies’.²²¹ Schlesinger’s approach to espionage which, according to Ackroyd, rendered treason ‘in a relatively benevolent light’, deterred the director from imposing a sufficient authority to the material.²²²

After a strong box office opening,²²³ *The Falcon and the Snowman* would go on to a relatively disappointing commercial performance, accruing \$7.7 million in the year of its release.²²⁴ With regards to its critical standing, the film had, at least for some reviewers, gone some way in restoring Schlesinger’s standing as a director, despite more widespread reservations. His next feature film however, the horror thriller *The Believers*, would be met with the recurring critical incredulity at Schlesinger’s involvement with a decidedly generic film.

The Believers

After *The Falcon and the Snowman*, Schlesinger became actively involved in the development of *The Believers*, an adaptation of the 1982 novel *The Religion* by Nicholas Conde. The story concerns Cal Jamison (Martin Sheen), a psychiatrist

²²⁰ Kim Newman, ‘The Falcon and the Snowman’, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, April 1985, p.109

²²¹ Ackroyd, *op. cit.*

²²² *Ibid.*

²²³ ‘Falcon flies in at No.2’, *Daily News*, 30th January 1985, BFI collection JRS/12/19

²²⁴ Mann, *op. cit.*, p.506

working for the police who becomes involved in an investigation into a series of murders, apparently motivated by a ritualistic, witchcraft version of the Afro-Caribbean religion, Santeria. As Cal begins to uncover the network of supernatural forces, he realises that his own son is in danger. The seeming resolution to the story, which sees Cal's son saved and the cult exposed, emerges as ambiguous, however, with Cal's new wife apparently having been bewitched. For the script, Schlesinger sought the services of Mark Frost, previously a writer contributing to the television series *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987, NBC), who would go on to co-create the series *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991, ABC). Schlesinger would again produce with his partner Michael Childers, along with Beverly Camhe. Orion again agreed to finance the \$13 million project, on condition that the film be made in Canada, owing to a favourable rate of exchange.²²⁵ Although this stage of Schlesinger's career has been characterised as one of compromised agency, Schlesinger's role as producer on *The Believers*, and the account of the film's development as it appeared in the press around the time its release, deters, to some degree, such a representation. Schlesinger would tell *American Film* about his collaboration with Frost, saying:

I didn't think the original book for *The Believers* was very good, but it had some wonderfully cinematic, dark areas. Mark Frost and I worked on it a long time. The storyline for the book wasn't strong enough for a film, so we had to chuck it. We used index cards, laying the whole thing out on the floor and adding and subtracting certain scenes. I find that a very good way to shape, to edit, a film.²²⁶

Further contributing to a discourse of agency and auteurist creativity, Schlesinger characteristically positioned his latest venture within the continuity of his previous work, stating 'I'm intrigued by dark things, and certainly throughout all my work the characters are under some kind of extreme pressure or pushed to the edge'.²²⁷ His serious approach and commitment to the project would be apparent in an interview in *Film Journal International*, where he would tell Kevin Lally:

...we took Santeria perfectly seriously ... I decided the only way to do the film was not as a piece of hooey, but as if everybody believed in the emotional

²²⁵ Roderick Mann, 'Schlesinger trusting in believers', *Los Angeles Times*, 7th June 1987, p.K20

²²⁶ 'Dialogue on Film: John Schlesinger', *American Film*, 1st November 1987, p.17

²²⁷ Kevin Lally, 'Schlesinger Scares Up An Occult Thriller', *Film Journal International*, 1st July 1987, p.9

strength of what they were doing. The performances are very true and real, I think, even though we are dealing in melodramatic terms and sometimes in Grand Guignol – all of which are perfectly justifiable elements to use. They’ve been used for centuries in drama of all kinds.²²⁸

The director’s artistic status would again be underlined by the admiration for and confidence in him expressed by the film’s cast, with the film’s lead, Martin Sheen stating ‘I took this movie for one reason only – because John Schlesinger is a master film maker’.²²⁹

The representation of Schlesinger as a distinct creative artist would at the same time be accompanied by intimations of a more limited agency. Increasingly, the issue of Schlesinger’s varied, or inconsistent artistic activity would be raised at this stage in his career. Characteristically, he maintained that such variety emerged from individual preference rather than any practical or economic necessity, telling *American Film*, “I like the idea of varying the things I do ... I don’t want to come out of the same bolt (sic) every time. It’s tremendously important to actually try different things’.²³⁰ Displaying some impatience with the classifying tendencies of critics and journalists, Schlesinger would state, ‘What irritates me terribly about people who write about directors is that they really want to see them in the same groove all the time; they want an identifying trademark. The thing that interests me is having a go at all different kinds of work’.²³¹ One such critical perspective that would appear at this time was James Rampton’s account of the apparent thematic consistencies of Schlesinger’s career thus far. In a March 1988 article for *The Independent*, Rampton wrote of Schlesinger:

His first feature film, *A Kind of Loving* (1962) was a prime example of the “Kitchen Sink” school, but the range of his subsequent films, from a Hardy adaptation to Nazi War criminals confirms Schlesinger’s claims of resisting easy pigeon-holing. The only obvious theme uniting this varied body of work is that of “an ordinary person” thrown into an extreme situation; but, there again, how many interesting movies lack such an idea?²³²

²²⁸ *Ibid.*

²²⁹ Roderick Mann, *op. cit.*

²³⁰ ‘Dialogue on Film: John Schlesinger’, *American Film*, 1st November 1987, *op. cit.*, p.13

²³¹ James Rampton, ‘Old black magic’, *The Independent* 31st March 1988, p.11

²³² *Ibid.*

It is instructive to locate such uncertainties surrounding Schlesinger's status as a filmmaker and his motivations for undertaking a film such as *The Believers*, for Rampton, a 'potentially low-brow project',²³³ within a wider contemporary industrial context, one which would present particular challenges to directors identified as auteurs in the late 1960s and the 1970s. As indicated, industrial changes required former auteurs to in some way adapt to conditions at some variance from those in which they had made their names. Such shifts come into view in James Kendrick's study of the shifting artistic status of screen violence in 1980s film culture. In *Hollywood Bloodshed: Violence in 1980s American Cinema*, Kendrick traces a growing unease with morally complex approaches to violence in film, such as those often associated with the auteurs of the 1960s and 1970s, which had culminated in public protest and critical hostility to particular complex graphic films in the early 1980s, including *Cruising* (dir. William Friedkin, 1980), *Dressed to Kill* (dir. Brian de Palma, 1980) and *White Dog* (dir. Samuel Fuller, 1982).²³⁴ Such responses, resulting from an overall turn in society to the right, resulted in studios avoiding such ambiguous narratives, often centring on sexuality or race, channelling violent representation instead into more morally unambiguous narratives, often in the form of action movies. Less ideologically straightforward violent films would be relegated increasingly to the province of the independent sector. Despite such organisations having largely been taken over by the majors, the perceived distance functioned to distance the studios from more controversial or disreputable material. According to such a dynamic, previous auteurs were left dislocated from the hard-hitting adult-oriented arena in which they had established themselves, forced to either relinquish such themes and move towards more commercial material (Brian de Palma is cited as an example of this dynamic), alternate more commercial and personal projects, or continue (and largely fail) to find outlets for their previous approaches to filmmaking. With Schlesinger's insistence upon the serious nature of *The Believers* and emphasis upon the film's continuity with recurring themes and concerns, together with the decline of complex, socially-oriented

²³³ *Ibid.*

²³⁴ James Kendrick, *Hollywood Bloodshed: Violence in 1980s American Cinema*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, Illinois, 2009, pp.53-78

approaches to violent narratives, the space for such a project appears somewhat reduced.

Upon its release in the United States on 10th June 1987, *The Believers* was met with a negative critical reception. The film was widely found to be poorly executed, lacking in credibility and pace. For many critics, a sense of incompatibility between Schlesinger's capabilities and the genre within he was currently working – one which is contextualised by Kendrick – was noted. Thus, the *Film Journal International* reviewer, demonstrating an openness to the potential of the horror genre not characteristic of most of the reviews, noted an incompatibility between the requirements of the genre and Schlesinger's habitual explorations of human drama, finding that:

... the film sputters during prolonged character-establishing sequences which, rather than heightening our concern for the principals, produces the almost opposite effect: one grows impatient for action which will propel the story forward. Yes, we recognize Cal truly loves his son But for heaven's sake, get on with it! What should be a rollercoaster trip instead begins to feel like a bumper car ride – here a jolt, there a race, but otherwise a meandering journey.²³⁵

Schlesinger's involvement in such a project was widely questioned and tended to be interpreted as an artistic compromise. Hence, the *New York Magazine* reviewer, finding the film to be 'overwrought, tired nonsense', wrote that 'the director of Billy Liar, Midnight Cowboy, and Sunday Bloody Sunday brings less skill to such routine genre assignments as Marathon Man and The Believers than a hack director who might really believe in what he's doing'.²³⁶ Similarly, Hal Hinson in *The Washington Post* found Schlesinger to have directed the film 'half-heartedly, half knowing, perhaps, how routinely within its genre it sits'.²³⁷ While Michael Wilmington in the *Los Angeles Times* actually deemed the film to be 'one of the better-produced, more exciting and intelligent thrillers of the year', he still felt compelled to ask, 'what made the director of "Midnight Cowboy," "Sunday Bloody Sunday" and "An Englishman Abroad" settle on this oft-told shockfest...?'. Schlesinger's motivations were again reduced to purely

²³⁵ E.K., 'The Believers', *Film Journal International*, 1st July 1987, p.23

²³⁶ Anon, 'The Believers', *New York Magazine*, 13th July 1987, p.70

²³⁷ Hal Hinson, 'Schlesinger's Bizarre Believers', *The Washington Post*, 10th June 1987, p.C3

commercial ones, with Wilmington stating that '(Schlesinger's) talents, for intimate psychology and social detail, aren't suited to this kind of bloody extravaganza, any more than John Huston's were to "Phobia." Sometimes the market and its expectations demand too heavy a price'.²³⁸

The negativity of the American reception of *The Believers* would be mirrored in the film's British reception in April 1988. Again, Schlesinger's lack of commitment to the genre and his inclinations towards serious drama were found to clash, with Derek Malcolm at *The Guardian* suggesting that 'John Carpenter might have been more appropriate, since the harder Schlesinger tries to flesh out this creepy nonsense with believable characters ... the less believable becomes the mumbo-jumbo'.²³⁹ Another reviewer, however, Julian Petley, reviewing at *Monthly Film Bulletin*, provided a contrast to the critical dismissal of the film largely characteristic of its reception on both sides of the Atlantic. For Petley, the film's refusal to surrender wholeheartedly to the tropes of its genre, that is, its blend of the adult, human drama with which Schlesinger made his name with aspects of horror and violence resulted in a film that was 'both effectively scary and genuinely thought-provoking'.²⁴⁰ The film's apparent avoidance of the gruesome resulted in horror sequences being 'all the more striking', while its disavowal of easy moral categories rendered it more effectively subtle, with Petley concluding that it 'belongs with those horror movies which cast an uneasy glance at some of the values underlying family life and refuses any overly rigid or simplistic notions of good and evil, normal and deviant'.²⁴¹ While such an evaluation was, as noted, wholly uncharacteristic of the reviews, Petley's comments indicate that the persistence of Schlesinger's more ambiguous and complex approach, found by Kendrick to be at odds with the climate of the late 1980s, could, when paired with an otherwise increasingly simplified genre, still be recognised as having value. Such substance, however, failed to be recognised at the box office, where the film made a minimal impact.

²³⁸ Michael Wilmington, 'Father, son versus evil cult in the Believers', *Los Angeles Times*, 10th June 1987, p.G1

²³⁹ Derek Malcolm, 'TV? No sweat', *The Guardian*, 7th April 1988, p.34

²⁴⁰ Julian Petley, 'The Believers', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, January 1988, p.106

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Madame Sousatzka

Again, contrary to representations of Schlesinger's declining creative input and reduced agency later in his career, the 1988 film *Madame Sousatzka* would see Schlesinger co-write the film's screenplay, in addition to undertaking his habitual directing role. The film was initially the project of aspiring producer Robin Dalton, a London-based literary agent who had acted as agent to the original novel's author, Bernice Rubens. In the novel, Madame Sousatzka, a Russian émigrée, becomes piano teacher to a ten-year-old Jewish boy, in the process entering into an emotional struggle with the boy's mother. The narrative ends with each character having learned lessons about music, themselves and the needs of others. Dalton would experience difficulties in finding backers for the project for a number of years²⁴² before she gained Schlesinger's support, then the backing of Cineplex Odeon, the Canadian distributors and exhibitors who in the 1980s diversified into film production and home video. In Schlesinger's scriptwriting collaboration with the novelist Ruth Praver Jhabvala, long-term scriptwriter of the Merchant Ivory films, the ethnic origins of both Sousatzka and her pupil were changed, with the boy becoming the son of an Indian-born woman and Sousatzka having come to London via the United States, thus accommodating the film's star, Shirley MacLaine in her first leading role since her Oscar-winning performance in *Terms of Endearment* (dir. James L. Brooks, 1983). The \$5 million project²⁴³ was filmed over ten weeks in the latter part of 1987, on location in Notting Hill, London and at Shepperton Studios.²⁴⁴ Luciana Arrighi, who had worked on *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, was the film's production designer.

With its negotiation of such issues as coming of age and subtle interpersonal struggles, as well as additional plot elements dealing with the gentrification of London and the subsequent exclusion of outsider figures such as Sousatzka and her assorted

²⁴² Colin Brown, 'Schlesinger's Madame makes music', *Screen International*, 19th December 1987, p.31

²⁴³ Charles Champlin, 'MacLaine Says Her 'Madame' Is Way Ahead of Schedule', *Los Angeles Times*, 20th October 1988, p.G1

²⁴⁴ Colin Brown, *op. cit.*

fellow neighbours, the film, for Julia Prewitt Brown, constitutes a consistent episode in Schlesinger's body of work, one which has returned to themes of human fragility.²⁴⁵ In publicity appearing around the time of the film's release – October 1988 in the United States and March 1989 in Britain – Schlesinger would also, typically, emphasise the personal nature of the film, its subject centring on two things close to his heart – London and music – and involving an exploration of the subtlety of human relationships continuous with those featured in his earlier films.²⁴⁶ He would reiterate the different aspects of the narrative that appealed to him to Laurence Gelder at *The New York Times*, citing the film's representation of music, characters in extremis, and 'older people and sexual tension' as of particular interest,²⁴⁷ with both the director and Shirley MacLaine presenting the small, intimate film as a labour of love.²⁴⁸ Such representations of the personal aspect of the project, heightened by Schlesinger's first screenwriting credit, however, masked realities of a more commercial nature, with details of limitations upon Schlesinger's agency appearing distinctly less often, though still occasionally apparent. *Screen International* noted how Schlesinger's reputation did not ensure financial backing for the film, with Dalton and Schlesinger having continued to struggle to obtain finance for some time after deciding to collaborate, and Cineplex Odeon's stipulating that funding was conditional upon their approval of the casting of the lead role.²⁴⁹

The initial reception of the film, at the Venice Film Festival in September 1988, pointed to the film's potential success, with MacLaine winning the Volpi Cup for Best Actress (jointly with Isabelle Huppert for *Une Affaire de Femmes*, dir. Claude Chabrol, 1988). The film's reception upon its general release would be at variance with the critical response to Schlesinger's more seemingly generic and commercial feature films of the decade to date, which had appeared to reviewers as at odds with his earlier work. With its quieter tone, British location and melodramatic narrative, *Madame*

²⁴⁵ Julia Prewitt Brown, 'Sunday Bloody Sunday revisited', *Cineaction*, No.96, Summer 2015, p.53

²⁴⁶ Matt Wolf, 'Quiet Time For A Hard-Hitting Director', *The Associated Press*, 25th December 1987

²⁴⁷ Lawrence Van Gelder, 'At the Movies', *The New York Times*, 21st October 1988, p.C10

²⁴⁸ Champlin, *Los Angeles Times*, 20th October 1988, *op. cit.*, Hillel Italie, 'John Schlesinger looks for irony', *The Associated Press*, 26th October 1988

²⁴⁹ Colin Brown, *op. cit.*

Sousatzka's reception called forth a distinctly different response, one which often centred on the film's specifically indigenous character and, in places, saw the film as a kind of return to form for its director. As in reviews of *Honky Tonk Freeway*, *The Falcon and the Snowman* and *The Believers*, however, questions about Schlesinger's motivations and artistic commitment would recur.

Upon its release in Britain on 4th September 1988, *Madame Sousatzka* was met with a moderately positive critical response. The critic David Robinson, an advocate of Schlesinger's early in the director's career who had nevertheless become increasingly disenchanted with the 1970s and 1980s films, enjoyed the film's characterisations, dramatic tensions and use of music, finding *Madame Sousatzka* to belong to 'an older and honourable tradition of British cinema' while at the same time tackling contemporary issues.²⁵⁰ Margaret Walters in *The Listener*, noting a 'well composed comeback' and 'John Schlesinger's most interesting film for years', suggested that Schlesinger 'may be at his best on home ground',²⁵¹ indicative of the approach evident in a number of reviews celebrating the film – and Schlesinger – as irredeemably British. For Dilys Powell, writing in *Punch*, the film represented an actual advance for British cinema, demonstrating 'a definiteness which used not to be there in the cinema of this country. British movies used to be successful in smaller enterprises, but often failed in handling larger themes'.²⁵² *The Guardian* too suggested the film's potential success, stating that it 'may join *Scandal* and *A Fish Called Wanda* as a high flier'.²⁵³

However, interrogations of Schlesinger's commitment to the project and motivations for making the film were also prevalent in the British reception of the film. Derek Malcolm in *The Guardian* suggested that the film betrayed a lack of artistic ambition of Schlesinger's part, 'other than to provide a decently thought out piece of entertainment',²⁵⁴ just as Adam Mars-Jones in *The Independent* found that it was 'content with the cachet of an artistic subject and unwilling to make or meet the

²⁵⁰ David Robinson, 'Youth is not all', *The Times*, 9th September 1988, p.20

²⁵¹ Margaret Walters, 'Cinema', *The Listener*, 23rd March 1989, p.42

²⁵² Dilys Powell, 'Shooting the pianist', *Punch*, 31st March 1989, p.50

²⁵³ Derek Malcolm, 'The way they were', *The Guardian*, 23rd March 1989, p.31

²⁵⁴ Malcolm, *The Guardian*, 23rd March 1989, *op. cit.*

demands of actual art'.²⁵⁵ Other critics saw something more cynical in Schlesinger's motivations. Nigel Andrews at the *Financial Times*, who pronounced the film 'tosh', asked why Schlesinger had made the film, finding it to be 'a bid to capture the world market by being floridly imprecise about places, people and feelings' and 'a movie-novelette masquerading as big-screen international cinema'.²⁵⁶ The *Daily Mail*'s Shaun Usher also detected cynical motivations, beginning his review with the statement that 'sly old John Schlesinger might have fashioned his latest work as guaranteed choice for a Royal Film Performance'.²⁵⁷ The film ultimately annoyed Usher for failing to commit to the contemporary issues informing parts of the narrative, 'by flinching away to softer options after promising to address life as it is'.²⁵⁸

The film's American release on 14th October 1988 was met by a similarly divided response, though overall, *Madame Sousatzka* received more approval than disapproval. In the American press, the film was also viewed positively as British, with the *Los Angeles Times* seeing it 'in the literate Merchant Ivory tradition'²⁵⁹ and *The Washington Post* citing scriptwriter Ruth Prawer Jabvala as contributing to its 'old World charm'.²⁶⁰ Elsewhere, however, the film was deemed to be irredeemably outdated, the reviewer at *New York Magazine* finding *Madame Sousatzka* to be 'the kind of dear old thing that rightly went out of fashion some years ago'.²⁶¹

Madame Sousatzka would receive a limited release, being exhibited in only twenty cinemas on its opening weekend in the United States,²⁶² although some weeks later this was expanded to seventy-four screens.²⁶³ Despite the film's subdued commercial performance, it was predicted that the film and particularly Shirley MacLaine would perform well at award ceremonies, with Janet Maslin of *The New York Times* predicting that the actress would 'be laughing all the way to the Academy

²⁵⁵ Adam Mars-Jones, 'Five-finger exercise in a minor key', *The Independent*, 23rd March 1989, p.19

²⁵⁶ Nigel Andrews, 'The Red Shoes' for Ivory Pounders', *The Financial Times*, 23rd March 1989, p.27

²⁵⁷ Shaun Usher, 'Shirley's piano forte', *Daily Mail*, 24th March 1989, p.34

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁹ Kevin Thomas, 'MacLaine as the Grande "Madame"', *Los Angeles Times*, 12th October 1988, p.G1

²⁶⁰ Rita Kempley, 'MacLaine's Charming Despot', *The Washington Post*, 14th October 1988, p.B7

²⁶¹ 'Madame Sousatzka', *New York Magazine*, 14th November 1988, p.116

²⁶² <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=madamesousatzka.htm>, retrieved 25/3/19

²⁶³ William J. Mann, *op. cit.*, p.514

Awards'.²⁶⁴ Although Maslin found MacLaine's portrayal of Sousatzka to be 'quite a good performance', the critic based her projection upon the film being 'the sort...that wins prizes', that is, essentially sentimental.²⁶⁵ Although she would fail to win an Academy Award, MacLaine would win a Golden Globe for Best Actress, albeit tying with Sigourney Weaver for *Gorillas in the Mist* (dir. Michael Apted, 1988) and Jodie Foster for *The Accused* (dir. Jonathan Kaplan, 1988).

Conclusion

John Schlesinger's output in the 1980s would continue to be diverse. He directed features including the comedy *Honky Tonk Freeway*, the spy themed *The Falcon and the Snowman* and the nostalgic small-scale drama *Madame Sousatzka*. Additionally, he directed *An Englishman Abroad* and *Separate Tables* for television, well-received plays that would help, to some degree, to maintain his reputation as a director of quality productions. He began the decade with something of a 'old guard', or stalwart persona, due to his already lengthy career. This was accompanied by a recurring representation of Schlesinger as out of step with currents in filmmaking and somewhat removed from his former artistic standing. This perspective on his career would be furthered by the response to the feature films that he would make in the 1980s. Critics, on the whole, would judge the director to have declined, with – to them – seemingly incongruous choices of project indicating that Schlesinger was more motivated by commercial success, at the cost of artistic quality. Schlesinger's association with auteurism would continue, with reviewers continuing to view recent releases against the criteria which had informed the evaluation of his earlier work, though this would work to enhance the director's apparent decline. Despite such negative associations, Schlesinger would continue to demonstrate a personal investment in filmmaking, which would now include a role in production (*The Falcon and the Snowman* and *The Believers*) and scriptwriting (*Madame Sousatzka*).

²⁶⁴ Janet Maslin, 'Oh, Oscar, You're just an old softy', *The New York Times*, 30th October 1988, p.H1

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

The organisation of the film industry emerges as significantly determining which kinds of projects Schlesinger was able to undertake, as well as how they were received. At the beginning of the decade, and with the recent experience of struggles to finance *Yanks*, Schlesinger would be induced to direct *Honky Tonk Freeway*, a film financed as part of EMI's investment in American-themed films. However, the negativity surrounding such British forays into international filmmaking would have implications for Schlesinger's reputation, as would the fortunes of the distribution company A.F.D. Controversies surrounding directors' extravagance, in evidence in hostility to the inflated budget of *Heaven's Gate*, would further point to how industrial organisation and dynamics have their consequences for individual status. Limitations to the choices available to Schlesinger can be seen as a consequence of the move towards industrial conglomeration and the high concept film. Implicit in this, as indicated by James Kendrick and Justin Wyatt, was a decrease in the space for more ambiguous, personal, smaller-scale projects, leaving the auteurs of the 1960s and 1970s to renegotiate their places in the industry.

As has been seen, Schlesinger's involvement in the films he directed in the 1980s would often continue to appear somewhat illogical to reviewers. The significant failure of *Honky Tonk Freeway* and the limited impact of the subsequent films would see Schlesinger, persistently evaluated against his former auteur status, as having decisively declined. Matters of nation clearly played a significant role in the reception of the films. British critics' hostility to EMI's investment policies would have its effect, as would American reviewers' responses to Schlesinger's outsider, satiric inclinations. The reconciliation of recurring concerns, such as Schlesinger's characteristic emphasis on social and human complexity, with newer commercial modes, would also continue to present challenges. Ambiguity in *The Falcon and the Snowman*, for example, would be viewed as emanating from a lack of authority or irreverence, while in *The Believers*, ambiguity appeared as at odds with, or disruptive to, the film's generic character. Positive responses to Schlesinger's persisting emphases, however, such as Julian Petley's review of *The Believers*, point to alternative ways to read the films that are arguably more nuanced.

Chapter 4

The 1990s: Director for hire?

The ultimate decline of artistic reputation

The final phase of Schlesinger's career would see him direct primarily studio-led, big-budget films, such as *Pacific Heights* (1990), *Eye for an Eye* (1996) and *The Next Best Thing* (2000) as well as television dramas, such as *A Question of Attribution* (1991) and *Cold Comfort Farm* (1995). This period represents, according to William J. Mann, Schlesinger's 'director for hire' phase, whereby he ceased to be significantly involved in the processes of development and creative direction.¹ Although Schlesinger would be somewhat redeemed by the plays, the films would be met by a consensus as to a decline of his output, their generic and commercial nature contrasted to Schlesinger's previous artistic achievements. While some critics attempted to place these later works within a consistent body of work or read them as somehow artistic, most reviewers saw them in terms of a decline, often construed as emanating from personal compromises and calculated commercial motivations.

The chapter will attempt to assess Schlesinger's agency and shifting reputation within the changing industrial and critical environment of the 1990s. First, the filmmaking industry will be examined for the ways in which Schlesinger's agency was enabled or curtailed. The director's reputation permitted him to continue to work on high profile projects, though a changing environment would, it will be argued, steer him to increasingly commercial films and prevent his direction of more individual ones. The reception of the films will be assessed for the way that reviewers responded to Schlesinger as a director in this particularly commercial environment and how contemporary critical approaches to large-budget commercial and high concept filmmaking affected their evaluations. Although Schlesinger's creative agency would appear as reduced at points in the decade, an examination of the contexts in which he was working indicates a continuing personal investment in filmmaking, despite the

¹ William J. Mann, , *Edge of Midnight: The Life of John Schlesinger*, Arrow, London, 2005, p.515

challenges of an industry that was so markedly different from the one in which he had become established.

Pacific Heights

Schlesinger's first feature film of the 1990s, the thriller *Pacific Heights*, has been identified by the director's biographer William J. Mann as marking the beginning of Schlesinger's 'for hire' period.² Schlesinger's appointment by producer Scott Rudin (of the recently successful *Flatliners*, dir. Joel Schumacher, 1990) and his comparatively minimal input at the writing stage³ would appear to accord with this. Schlesinger would, however, claim to be personally committed to the project. His complaints about the increasingly commercial priorities of Hollywood would also enhance some persisting degree of artistic status, as would his continuing attempts to initiate smaller projects. However, the irredeemably commercial nature of *Pacific Heights* would present particular challenges in its critical reception. As an entry in the high concept, familial invasion cycle of thrillers, the film's generic status would appear at odds with artistic filmmaking, with the film's largely negative reception contributing further to perceptions of Schlesinger's decline and capitulation to commercial concerns.

Pacific Heights concerns a psychopathic tenant, Carter Hayes (Michael Keaton) and his intimidation of his landlords, a young married couple, Drake and Patty (Matthew Modine and Melanie Griffith). Initially charming, Carter persuades Drake to let an apartment to him in the large house recently renovated by Drake and Patty and in which they also live. Carter, however, is revealed to be a dangerous conman, determined to defraud the couple. Carter's increasingly menacing behaviour leads Patty to investigate his past, putting herself and her husband in grave danger. Finally the couple overcome Carter in a violent climax. Budgeted at \$18 million, produced by

² Mann, *op. cit.*, p.515

³ *Ibid.*, p.531

Morgan Creek Productions and distributed by 20th Century Fox, the film starred actors who had enjoyed recent success, including Griffith (*Working Girl*, dir. Mike Nichols, 1988) and Keaton (*Batman*, dir. Tim Burton, 1989). As such, it constituted a high-profile film and a potential box office success, despite its potentially uncertain critical credentials.

As indicated, the film's release would see Schlesinger characteristically employing a discourse of personal investment in the project, despite the seemingly contractual nature of his role. Whether emanating from artistic self-explication or motivated by a wish to promote the universal aspect of the film's narrative, Schlesinger emphasised his personal identification with *Pacific Heights*' themes. While the origination of the idea for the film's plot was widely credited in publicity to the screenwriter Daniel Pyne and his own experience of having had a hostile tenant,⁴ Schlesinger was also enthusiastic in relating it to his own experiences, telling the *Los Angeles Times*' Charles Champlin that the story 'will be familiar to anyone who aspired to have a house – especially one they can't really afford to keep. My house in London stretched me beyond measure'.⁵ Schlesinger similarly engaged in the interpretation of the film's themes in an article appearing in *The New York Times* in October 1990, explaining:

I think underlying it is the proviso: don't let possessions possess you. I've certainly been guilty of that in my life. The other thing it deals with is the invasion of one's own space. Most people in their lives have probably invited someone to stay who overstays their welcome. I've certainly had that experience, and I've had the experience of changing the locks.⁶

Although, in the promotion of the film, Schlesinger would identify with *Pacific Heights* personally, his involvement with the film should at the same time be viewed against a context of diminishing opportunities for the kinds of films with which he had made his name. The increased dominance in the decade of the 'Big Six' studios – Disney, Paramount, Sony, 20th Century Fox, Universal and Warner Bros – enhanced

⁴ Lawrence Van Gelder, 'At the Movies', *The New York Times*, 19th October 1990, p.C10

⁵ Charles Champlin, 'Schlesinger: An Englishman Abroad', *Los Angeles Times*, 27th September 1990, p.F8

⁶ Van Gelder, *op. cit.*

by their access to markets in television, the music industry and video and DVD sales,⁷ would render filmmaking an increasingly market-driven, commercial enterprise. Subsequently, as noted by Justin Wyatt, such dynamics in the Hollywood film industry which saw the rise of the high concept, big-budget feature was accompanied by fewer opportunities in the funding of smaller-scale, more personal projects.⁸ Schlesinger's development of a number of such projects, including an AIDS-themed film, would be thwarted throughout the decade, as will be detailed later. The constraints of an increasingly commercial, profit-oriented industry would certainly be apparent around the time of *Pacific Heights*' release, in Schlesinger's recurring complaints about the organisation of the film industry. As well as indicative of his frustrations, such complaints at this point served to enhance his ongoing identification as apart from the commercial machinations of Hollywood. In an interview with *American Film*, Schlesinger stated:

I think the climate is now extremely difficult. You take an idea to a studio, and they test it in the supermarket. Ridiculous. ... I didn't preview a film, with all this demographic slavery, until Marathon Man. It's so destructive to any kind of creative thinking and experimentation. I know that everything's more expensive and that everybody wants to make a buck. And you know, a good film is considered to be a film that makes money.⁹

Despite Schlesinger's representations of his artistic commitment to the film and his distaste for particular practices in contemporary filmmaking, *Pacific Heights* appears as a highly commercial project. The film has been considered part of a cycle of films of the late 1980s and early 1990s that are 'structured around suspense and articulating postmodern cultural anxieties about sexuality, femininity, masculinity, parenthood and family life', which also includes *Fatal Attraction* (dir. Adrian Lyne, 1987) *Cape Fear* (dir. Martin Scorsese), *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992) and *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* (dir. Curtis Hanson, 1992), films similarly centring on

⁷ Chris Holmlund, 'Introduction: Movies and the 1990s', in Chris Holmlund (ed.), *American Cinema of The 1990s: Themes and Variations*, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 2008, pp.2-3

⁸ Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood*, University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas, 1994, p.79

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.20

the theme of domestic and familial invasion.¹⁰ The film also has much in common with a broader cycle of films of the 1980s and 1990s portraying upwardly mobile characters and stylish interiors within the even broader category of films termed ‘high concept’, as detailed by Justin Wyatt in *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood*. Here, films including *St Elmo’s Fire* (dir. Joel Schumacher, 1985) and *Nine ½ Weeks* (dir. Adrian Lyne, 1986) are found to foreground style ‘as a way of life’.¹¹ Of Schlesinger’s films, *Pacific Heights* certainly seems to be the most ‘high concept’. With its tried and tested formula, reminiscent of *Fatal Attraction*, and its tagline ‘It seemed like the perfect house. He seemed like the perfect tenant. Until they asked him to leave’, *Pacific Heights* accords with Wyatt’s description of high concept as comprising an easily summarised narrative concept and an emphasis upon style.¹² Significant for the reception of *Pacific Heights* would be the way in which such feature films were commonly greeted with a degree of critical cynicism. Wyatt describes how:

Frequently the term is used as ammunition in an indictment against the contemporary industry, suggesting a bankruptcy of creativity within Hollywood.... As opposed to developing new ideas, critics describe high concept as relying heavily upon the replication and combination of previously successful narratives.¹³

Persisting uncertainties regarding Schlesinger’s engagement in commercial filmmaking in view of his earlier, more artistic reputation, would shift to greater degrees of cynicism in the face of his participation in such a high concept, apparently highly derivative film. Upon its wide release in the United States on 28th September 1990,¹⁴ *Pacific Heights* received generally unfavourable reviews, with its status as a high concept film widely noted and its narrative and stylistic affinity with *Fatal Attraction*, a film cited by Wyatt as a prime example of a high concept movie, alluded to in a number of reviews. For Rita Kempley in *The Washington Post*, *Pacific Heights*

¹⁰ Constanza del Río Álvaro, ‘Genre and Fantasy: Melodrama, Horror, and the Gothic in Martin Scorsese’s “Cape Fear”’, *Atlantis*, 1991, Vol. 26, No. 1, pp. 61-71

¹¹ Wyatt, *op. cit.*, p.25

¹² Wyatt, *op. cit.*, pp.16-17

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.13

¹⁴ Pat H.Broeske, ‘“Pacific Heights” Reaches Top’, *Los Angeles Times*, 2nd October 1990, p.F2

was “‘Fatal Attraction’ with mortgage payments’.¹⁵ The 1987 film was more negatively evoked, with both *Fatal Attraction* and *Pacific Heights* found to represent a debased and worthless generic mutation. In *New York Magazine*, David Denby saw the two films as representative of the debasement of the thriller, writing, ‘the low art of the thriller these days is all about giving ordinary people (Michael Douglas in *Fatal Attraction*, Modine and Griffith here) a justifiable reason to kill’.¹⁶ In his review of *Pacific Heights*, Peter Rainer in the *Los Angeles Times* found that ‘as with “Fatal Attraction,” the film’s high gloss and grade-A cast try to camouflage what is essentially a pulp yarn’.¹⁷ While such comparisons highlighting the film’s generic, derivative character were largely intended as criticisms in reviews, parallels were at the same time pointed to in publicity, for quite different purposes. Studio personnel would also position *Pacific Heights* generically alongside the highly successful *Fatal Attraction*, with executive producer James Robinson’s statement that the film was termed “Fatal Tenant” around the set’¹⁸ pointing to the benefits of aligning *Pacific Heights* with the successful predecessor, however much their similarities were scorned by reviewers.

The stylised look of the film, deriving from the high concept emphasis on affluent, aspirational style,¹⁹ was similarly derided by the critics. Labelling *Pacific Heights* a ‘yuppie shockfest’, Peter Rainer outlined the ‘yuppie ethos’ featured in both *Pacific Heights* and *Fatal Attraction*, whereby ‘you are what you acquire. Materialism is the true sex appeal’.²⁰ For Desson Howe at *The Washington Post*, the central premise of the film completely undermined any appeal the film may have had, with Howe stating ‘We’re talking a thriller about property ownership. This is a yuppie conceit; this is not interesting to human beings’.²¹ Pauline Kael echoed such sentiments, writing that

¹⁵ Rita Kempley, ‘Pacific Heights’: Tenant Terror in Yuppiedom’, *The Washington Post*, 28th September 1990, p.C7

¹⁶ David Denby, ‘Movies’, *New York Magazine*, 22nd October 1990, p.118

¹⁷ Peter Rainer, ‘Little Juice in Pulp Pacific Heights’, *Los Angeles Times*, 28th September 1990, p.SDF4

¹⁸ Bill Higgins, ‘Pacific Premiere scares up a crowd’, *Los Angeles Times*, 27th September 1990, p.E5

¹⁹ Wyatt, *op. cit.*, p.30, p.60

²⁰ Rainer, *op. cit.*

²¹ Desson Howe, ‘Pacific Heights Lowers Pulses’, *The Washington Post*, 28th September 1990, p.45

‘those of us who have had years of being pestered by stickler landlords or gouged by self-righteous ones may not work up much sympathy for the San Francisco lovers’.²²

While the film’s participation in the highly generic cycle of affluent domestic invasion was agreed upon, Schlesinger’s suitability for the direction of such popular thrillers was contested. In a relatively rare positive review of the film, Janet Maslin of *The New York Times* found *Pacific Heights* to be deserving of ‘credit for originality’, with Schlesinger filming ‘with slick, enjoyable efficiency, pausing only rarely for stylish distractions’.²³ *Film Journal International* also found the director to be sufficiently adept, claiming that ‘as he did in films like *Marathon Man* and *The Believers*, Schlesinger shows he knows how to deliver grisly shocks’, with *Pacific Heights* ‘overall suspense quotient acceptably high’.²⁴ Generally, however, Schlesinger was found unsuited to such popular generic work for a variety of reasons which recall criticisms of his direction of previous genre films. He was again found to be hampered by a serious approach unsuited to a film such as *Pacific Heights*. Peter Rainer noted a tension in the film regarding this, writing:

Schlesinger doesn’t have the low-down skills to pump up the pulp. He’s so concerned not to relinquish his credentials as a “serious” director that the film, instead of seeming serious, seems mostly silly – not scary enough to function as a crackerjack thriller and not complex enough to work as a psychological drama.²⁵

At some variance with such an evocation of a misplaced ‘seriousness’, accusations of a certain heavy-handedness would also surface, but would at the same time position Schlesinger as ultimately unsuited to such film work. Contrasting such films as *Pacific Heights* with ‘distinguished’ British features such as *Billy Liar* and *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, David Denby found Schlesinger getting ‘down and dirty in his American films’. For Denby, ‘Schlesinger shoots *Pacific Heights* as a horror thriller, with heavy shadows, a gyrating camera, and the standard shocks, and he doesn’t have

²² Pauline Kael, ‘Pacific Heights’, *Movie Love*, Marion Boyars, London, 1992, p.276

²³ Janet Maslin, ‘Neophyte Landlords and their Worst Nightmare’, *The New York Times*, 28th September 1990, p.C8

²⁴ Doris Toumarkine, ‘Pacific Heights’, *Film Journal International*, October 1990, p.56

²⁵ Rainer, *op. cit.*

the humor or the lyrical style for thrillers (as Brian de Palma, in his thriller days, did)'.²⁶ For Pauline Kael, such incompatibility was explained by calculation, or commercial motivations:

What we see isn't really a thriller – it's more like an executive decision to make a thriller. That appears to be how Schlesinger approached the material. He has his professionalism – it shows in the clean, efficient staging. And he gives the film an expensive look; he puts money on the screen.²⁷

Ultimately for Kael, however, Schlesinger was found to fail in his execution of the project and to finally himself be the film's menace, 'foisting his boredom on us'.²⁸ Here, as in criticisms of the film's insubstantial exterior gloss and stylised lifestyles, the film's foregrounded commercial nature appears to reduce the agency of the director as author, or as indicated by Justin Wyatt, the artifice and excess of such films is found to be the antithesis of 'personal vision', whereby 'the logic of the marketplace is clearly the author of the style'.²⁹

Despite the reservations of reviewers, the film was the most widely viewed film in its opening weekend, replacing *GoodFellas* (dir. Martin Scorsese, 1990), and accumulating \$5.4 million in ticket sales,³⁰ though the film would spend only one week in this top position and descend relatively rapidly.

Pacific Heights' British release in February 1991 was accompanied by a publicity campaign comparable to the American release, seeing Schlesinger interviewed in a variety of publications and stressing the artistic aspects of his role and his approach to the film.³¹ His identification with the themes of the film were again emphasised and complaints made about the film industry.³² In an article entitled 'The Outsider', Schlesinger told Tim Palleine of *The Guardian*:

²⁶ Denby, *op. cit.*

²⁷ Kael, *op. cit.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Wyatt, *op. cit.*, p.34

³⁰ Broeske, *op. cit.*

³¹ Adrian Turner, Shrewd player in the cinema game, *The Sunday Times*, 3rd February 1991, p.20

Tim Palleine, 'The outsider', *The Guardian*, 21st February 1991, p.28

³² Turner, *op. cit.*

Films cost much more to make and much, much more to publicise. You tend to get a very wide release if the studio thinks your film will be popular. And then you have just one weekend to prove it. If it fails, the studio withdraws its advertising and support because it would be throwing good money after bad.³³

Although publicity and interviews accompanying the British release of the film saw an attempt to foreground Schlesinger and consequently *Pacific Heights* as in some way artistic, British reviewers did not receive the film correspondingly, though, on the whole, they were more positive in their evaluations than the American reviewers had been. British critics such as Philip French at *The Observer*,³⁴ Derek Malcolm of *The Guardian*³⁵ and the *Financial Times*' Nigel Andrews³⁶ conceded the entertainment value of the film, though criticisms recurred as to its pace, with French, Andrews, Sheila Johnston at *The Independent*³⁷ and George Perry at *The Sunday Times*³⁸ all remarking upon some sort of deterioration in the second half of the film. Overall, Schlesinger's authorial role in the direction of *Pacific Heights* emerges in the British reviews as functional and diminished. Despite Derek Malcolm's enthusiasm for a film he stated was 'one of (Schlesinger's) most successful movies of recent years', it was all the same presented as 'by no means his most ambitious project'.³⁹ Similarly, George Perry deemed the film 'a conventional horror story which John Schlesinger handles capably',⁴⁰ while Geoff Brown at *The Times* more negatively found that 'Schlesinger matches his craftsman's skills to a slipshod script' having stated that the director 'makes films, but they neither light up the box-office, nor display personal commitment'.⁴¹

Such an interrogation of Schlesinger's authorial status and artistic commitment would also be perceptible in articles of the period. In Adrian Turner's article 'Shrewd

³³ Pulleine, *op. cit.*

³⁴ Philip French, 'Poignant sting of the Wasp', *The Observer*, 24th February 1991, p.62

³⁵ Derek Malcolm, 'Old age tension', *The Guardian*, 21st February 1991, p.27

³⁶ Nigel Andrews, 'The Pooters of Kansas', *The Financial Times*, 21st February 1991, p.13

³⁷ Sheila Johnston, 'Scenes from an American marriage', *The Independent*, 22nd February 1991, p.16

³⁸ George Perry, 'A dearth in the family', *The Sunday Times*, 24th February 1991, p.7(S4)

³⁹ Malcolm, *op. cit.*

⁴⁰ Perry, *op. cit.*

⁴¹ Geoff Brown, 'Ivory towers over cardboard Russian houses', *The Times*, 21st February 1991, p.21

player in the cinema game' in *The Sunday Times*, Schlesinger's varied activity in this period appears as somewhat commercially canny, Turner stating:

Schlesinger has shown himself to be quite a shrewd play in the Hollywood game. "I like to make a film for 'them' and then one for me," he says. "My last British film, *Madame Sousatzka*, was one for me....". His latest film, *Pacific Heights* – which opens in London on February 22 – is American and mainly, it seems, a film for "them".⁴²

As indicated by Justin Wyatt, such a partial accommodation of commercial filmmaking combined with smaller-scale projects was a feature of the careers of some auteurs of the 1970s period and their adaptation to the more commercial environment of the 1980s and 1990s, such as Scorsese and Coppola.⁴³ Turner's article, however, while to some degree cognisant of limited opportunities, has clear implications for Schlesinger's overall standing:

When that title comes up, "A John Schlesinger Film", it means he has directed it, that the story will be fluently told and that the performances will be good; but one doesn't always understand why he made the film – a symptom, possibly, of someone taking work when he is offered it. Perhaps his problem was to have been hailed as a great artist early in his career and to have turned out to be merely a consummate professional.⁴⁴

The reduction of Schlesinger's artistic agency and potential status as a 'consummate professional' might be said, to some degree, to characterise his standing as director of *A Question of Attribution*, a BBC television play broadcast in October 1991, some eight months after the British release of *Pacific Heights*. The play, about the Cambridge spy Anthony Blunt, was again scripted by Alan Bennett, writer of *An Englishman Abroad*. Critics reviewing *A Question of Attribution* generally judged the play to be a production of quality and sophistication, with the performance of Prunella Scales as Queen Elizabeth II attracting much critical approval. The warm reception of the play in Britain would be matched upon its broadcast in the United States, it being deemed 'first class upscale entertainment' by *Variety*.⁴⁵ However, in accordance with

⁴² Turner, *op. cit.*

⁴³ Wyatt, *op. cit.*, p.192

⁴⁴ Turner, *op. cit.*

⁴⁵ Dennis Harvey, 'A Question of Attribution', *Daily Variety*, 27th April 1992

the greater authorial prominence of the scriptwriter in television drama⁴⁶ and the high standing at this point of Bennett subsequent to the popularity of the BBC monologue series *Talking Heads* (1988), critical estimations of Schlesinger's agency were to some degree diminished, with much praise centring on the erudite and allusive script's exploration of issues of authenticity and artifice.

The Journey

The early 1990s would see Schlesinger's involvement in the direction of political broadcasts on behalf of the Conservative party; a party political broadcast in 1991 and an election broadcast in 1992. Press coverage of this activity would be notable for the way in which it repeated characterisations of Schlesinger which recurred through evaluations of his film work. Again, Schlesinger was found to fall short of an authentic commitment and to be susceptible to the temptations of the market. While reference to this work for the Conservative party would not be made in reviews of the feature films, it may be viewed as in some way contributing to perceptions of Schlesinger's failing artistic commitment.

Schlesinger's engagement to direct the broadcasts stands in some contrast to his public political orientation in the late 1980s, namely his visibility in protests against Clause 28 of the Conservative party-proposed Local Government Act 1988. Under the proposal, it would be unlawful for local authorities to 'intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality'. Fearing increased censorship, intolerance and homophobia, as well as the withdrawal or decrease of funding for gay organisations and support groups, a number of public figures in the arts had united as part of wider protests against the proposal. Schlesinger's name appeared as one of the many signatories, principally public figures

⁴⁶ John Caughie, *Television Drama: Realism, Modernism, and British Culture*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004, pp.127-128

working in the arts, on a petition warning against ‘the development of a climate of persecution’.⁴⁷

Schlesinger’s usual apoliticism⁴⁸ was again disrupted when he overtly identified as gay in January 1991 as one of eighteen artists publicly declaring their sexual orientation and their support of Ian McKellen’s receipt of a knighthood in the new year’s honours. In a letter to *The Guardian* on 4th January responding to the award, the director Derek Jarman had written of his ‘dismay’ at McKellen’s acceptance of the honour from ‘a government which has stigmatised homosexuality through Section 28 of the Local Government Act’.⁴⁹ In reply, Schlesinger and the other artists defended McKellen, writing that they viewed his knighthood as ‘a significant landmark in the history of the British Gay movement’. This response was subsequently deemed ‘one of the most remarkable examples of gay solidarity since homosexuality was decriminalised in 1967’.⁵⁰

The campaign leading up to the general election in April 1992 was designated ‘the most orchestrated and Americanised campaign Britain has ever seen’, whereby ‘parties devoted more resources to media advertising, public relations and marketing strategies than at any previous election’.⁵¹ Such developments were perceived with some hostility, as noted by *The New York Times*, who wrote of how ‘commentators and voters are blaming the nefarious influence of American politics and American political consultants for bringing Britain a campaign season that some describe as more theatrical, more contrived and more mean-spirited than anything they have seen before’.⁵² It would be against this backdrop that Schlesinger was approached by the advertising agency Saatchi and Saatchi to direct broadcasts for the Conservative party. Schlesinger’s involvement would be widely reported and commented upon in the press, and contrasted with that of Hugh Hudson, the director of the 1981 film *Chariots of*

⁴⁷ ‘A Sense of Alarm’, *The Independent*, 1st February 1988, p.10

⁴⁸ Buruma, *op. cit.*, p.41

⁴⁹ Derek Jarman, ‘An offer Sir Ian was honour bound to refuse?’, *The Guardian*, 4th January 1991, p.34

⁵⁰ Nicholas de Jongh, ‘Gay stars defend knighthood’, *The Guardian*, 9th September 1991, p.1

⁵¹ Sebastian Berry, ‘Party Strategy and the Media: The Failure of Labour’s 1992 Election Campaign’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, Volume 45, Issue 4, October 1992, p.565

⁵² William E. Schmidt, ‘By Jove! British Candidates, American Lingo’, *The New York Times*, 22nd March 1992, p.11

Fire, appointed by the Labour party to direct broadcasts on their behalf. The two directors were presented in the press as diametrically opposite figures. This was figuratively represented by the *Daily Mail* as ‘fighting for votes’; Schlesinger in the ‘Blue corner’ and Hudson in the ‘Red corner’.⁵³ The apparently contrasting motivations of the two were clearly set out by Valerie Grove at *The Sunday Times* soon after. In contrast to Schlesinger’s appointment by Saatchi and Saatchi, Hudson’s involvement with the Labour party came about as a result of ‘an unsolicited call’ from Hudson to director of communications, Peter Mandelson.⁵⁴ The political affiliations of the directors were also contrasted; ‘But while Schlesinger merely “admires” Major, Hudson, who gives his services free and donates to Labour funds, regards his films as a crusade’.⁵⁵ Hudson, Grove claimed, ‘has never gone to Hollywood ... except on quests for financial backing’.⁵⁶ The contrast between the two was also heightened, certainly as to these first party political broadcasts, with regards to directorial control. Hudson’s commitment and creative control was contrasted with Schlesinger’s more minimal involvement. Schlesinger stated:

It was not my idea, my script or my edit. So it was certainly not my film. I did a few shots ... But it’s the Saatchis’ film. They called me in and asked me to do these shots, and I did a professional job, and I’m not ashamed of it, because it was a very nice job.⁵⁷

The directors would be similarly contrasted in *The Guardian* on the 17th September 1991, two days before the broadcast of the Conservative film. While Hudson’s films for Labour ‘have transformed the political broadcast nearly to an art form’ (even if his post-*Chariots of Fire* career had disappointed), Schlesinger, who ‘had not had a hit for some time’, wasn’t ‘ever thought to be much of a Tory... He has also been a vociferous campaigner against Clause 28 – now Section 28 of the Local Government Act which prohibits the promotion of homosexuality. Still, business is business...’.⁵⁸ Schlesinger would underline his lack of political affiliation in October 1991 on the Radio 4

⁵³ ‘Hollywood heavyweights in battle of the broadcasts’, *Daily Mail*, 16th September 1991, p.2

⁵⁴ Valerie Grove, ‘Chariots of Votes’, *The Sunday Times*, 22nd September 1991, p.1

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Joanna Coles, ‘Oscar men battle for political minds’, *The Guardian*, 17th September 1991, p.2

programme *Desert Island Discs*, calling himself a ‘woolly liberal’ and stating that over the years, he had ‘voted for them all’.⁵⁹

Upon its broadcast, the first of the films - a collection of scenes of Britain’s pastoral beauty, ending with the birth of a baby, symbolic of new beginnings – would be noted for a decided lack of political content. The *Daily Mail* wrote that ‘John Schlesinger decided that politics had no part in a party political broadcast’ and that the director had ‘relied on an inexorable stream of up-beat statistics to produce a ‘feel good’ atmosphere’.⁶⁰ Elsewhere, the commercial slickness of television advertisements was invoked, with *The Independent* noting ‘the social realism of a Cadbury’s Flake commercial’⁶¹ and *The Sunday Times* ‘one of those InterCity commercials that depict the world as a comfortable, dreamy womb where all our troubles have been removed’.⁶²

Schlesinger would have a fuller involvement in the direction of *The Journey*, a ten-minute broadcast first televised on 18th March 1992. The film showed leader John Major going back to his roots in Brixton, London and, according to *The Independent*, was made ‘at considerable cost’.⁶³ While Schlesinger’s perceived commercial motivations may have been a factor in the film’s £250,000 budget, the Prime Minister’s own specific requirements occasioned re-shoots, subsequently inflating costs.⁶⁴ Despite the film’s budget, the final production would be understated. So much so, that it was judged to be ‘the ultimate in non-glitzy party political broadcasts’⁶⁵ and ‘a cool, mildly unsettling movie about the loneliness of social dislocation’.⁶⁶ The broadcast was

⁵⁹ ‘Desert Island Discs’, 18th October 1991, BBC Radio 4, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0093ysh>

⁶⁰ Peter Paterson, ‘United Colours of the Tories’, *Daily Mail*, 20th September 1991, p.9

⁶¹ Colin Brown, ‘Thatcher reduced to Tory ‘unmentionable’’, *The Independent*, 21st September 1991, p.6

⁶² Patrick Stoddart, ‘Times flies when you’re watching sex’, *The Sunday Times*, 29th September 1991, p.20

⁶³ Will Bennett, ‘Kippers star in journey to roots’, *The Independent*, 18th March 1992, p.12

⁶⁴ Philip Cowley, ‘Conservative Party Election Broadcast (18th March 1992), *BFI Screenonline*, <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/tv/id/1389782/index.html>, retrieved 7th July 2017

⁶⁵ Bennett, *op. cit.*

⁶⁶ Mark Lawson, ‘Lethal Weapon flags as ‘Kinnock VI’ goes one sequel too far’, *The Independent*, 20th March 1992, p.10

found to provoke a ‘largely indifferent reaction from viewers’ in a study of responses reported in *The Sunday Times*.⁶⁷

The Innocent

In 1992, Schlesinger undertook the direction of *The Innocent*, an adaptation by Ian McEwan of his 1990 novel about espionage and lost innocence in post-war Berlin. The film had previously been backed by Paramount and was originally to have been directed by Jon Amiel (*The Singing Detective*, BBC, November-December 1986). Paramount, however, withdrew funding due, according to producer Norma Heyman, to insurance difficulties following the start of the Gulf War.⁶⁸ Some months later, with additional German producers Wieland Schulz-Keil and Chris Sievernich in place and the \$16 million budget supplied by American company World Films,⁶⁹ Schlesinger was approached, and original cast members Kyle MacLachlan, Lena Olin and Willem Dafoe replaced with Campbell Scott, Isabella Rossellini and Anthony Hopkins. The casting changes were made by Schlesinger in agreement with the producers.⁷⁰ Previous collaborator Luciana Arrighi was engaged to do the production design and Richard Marden, who had edited *The Falcon and the Snowman*, also worked on the film. *The Innocent* was filmed at DEFA, formerly the renowned UFA, in Berlin, the first international feature to be filmed there since reunification in 1990. The studio had been in significant decline and the filming of *The Innocent* was part of wider plans to revive its national and international reputation. While conceding that the producers ‘came to me to do it’,⁷¹ Schlesinger would at the same time attempt to impose some authority, pointing to his role in the selection of the new cast⁷² and alluding to tensions with

⁶⁷ Michael Prescott, ‘Major’s ‘common man’ film flops on the voting meter’ *The Sunday Times*, 22nd March 1992, p.2

⁶⁸ David Gritten, ‘The Innocent Abroad’, *Los Angeles Times*, 19th July 1992, p.74

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Ed Kelleher, ‘Cold War Suspense, Comedy Via Schlesinger’s *The Innocent*’, *The Film Journal*, 1st April 1994, p.8

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

unnamed personnel regarding his insistence in making changes to the script in order to achieve the appropriate 'darkness' that the story seemed to require.⁷³ Schlesinger's role in Ian McEwan's rewrites was referred to in an interview with the novelist, Simon Hattenstone at *The Guardian* writing, 'he says that Schlesinger encouraged him to write up "the grand emotion more in the tradition of mainstream cinema', Hattenstone wryly adding 'which, roughly translated, means lay the schmaltz on thick, darling'.⁷⁴

The Innocent concerns a young British telephone engineer, Leonard Markham (Campbell Scott), who is assigned to work in Berlin for the British government. With the cooperation of the American forces, the project involves accessing Russian communications. One evening, Leonard meets Maria (Isabella Rossellini), an older local woman, and the two begin a relationship. It quickly becomes clear, however, that Maria has secrets, and soon Leonard is drawn into a web of intrigue and subterfuge, which also involves the enigmatic Bob Glass (Anthony Hopkins). Nothing is as it seems, and the situation results in Leonard being no longer an innocent. Although Leonard and Maria are parted, they are seen to reunite years later, at the time of the reunification of Germany, when the events of the past are finally revealed.

While Schlesinger would play a role in the adaptation of the novel, his reduced agency in the film world in this period nevertheless emerges in publicity appearing around the time of the film's production and release. A preoccupation with the difficulties involved in getting individual film projects off the ground was evident, as was his characteristic hostility to the Hollywood system, causing the *Evening Standard* to claim that Schlesinger had 'by now elevated his disdain for the jungle warfare of Los Angeles to an art form all his own'.⁷⁵ In July 1992, while filming of *The Innocent* was taking place, Schlesinger would tell David Gritten at the *Los Angeles Times* of various projects then in development; a film version of Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical *Aspects of Love*, an AIDS-themed film and a project about Christopher Marlowe, but would also speak of 'a patch where you can't get what you want to make off the ground, and that's frustrating. That's happened several times in my life. It's

⁷³ Michael Owen, 'An Innocent escapes from the jungle', *Evening Standard*, 27th May 1994, p.25

⁷⁴ Simon Hattenstone, 'Slaughter of the innocent', *The Guardian*, 23rd June 1994, p.10 (Arts)

⁷⁵ Owen, *op. cit.*

happened to a lot of other good directors, too'.⁷⁶ Schlesinger's pessimism would again be warranted, with none of these projects coming to fruition. Prior to the British release of *The Innocent* in June 1994, Schlesinger would again complain of difficulties encountered in gaining industry interest in new projects, stating in May that 'I've always enjoyed making films in America but it's becoming more and more difficult to make out-on-a-limb films'.⁷⁷ Such difficulties were contrasted with the different climate that had seen the release of *Midnight Cowboy*, whose 25th anniversary had seen celebrations in February 1994 organised by The American Film Institute's Third Decade Council,⁷⁸ Schlesinger telling *Film Journal International*, 'We would never be able to make that film now, even if we wanted to. ... Nobody was asking us to have previews and fill in forms with audiences, demographics, all that nonsense. *Midnight Cowboy* was just something we were all passionate about, and we went out and made it'.⁷⁹

Amidst such talk of the difficulties of filmmaking, Schlesinger acknowledged that he had made compromises, now designating his previous film *Pacific Heights* as such, saying:

I'm quite conscious that my taste is not the average taste," he says, "so there have been films in my life which I've taken on because I felt they had a chance of being popular. 'Pacific Heights,' for instance, came at a time when I had just done 'Madame Sousatzka'. The latter was a small British film, he says, that he made for himself. So, he says, is "The Innocent".⁸⁰

Schlesinger's appointment to a project some time into its development might, it could be argued, deter the film's designation as 'one for him'. It was certainly not reviewed as in any way personal or artistic by British critics upon its release on 23rd June 1994. Judged to be unremarkable and unconvincing, reviewers were unable to resist biblical allusions, two heading their reviews 'Slaughter of The Innocent'⁸¹ and

⁷⁶ Gritten, *op. cit.*

⁷⁷ Owen, *op. cit.*

⁷⁸ Susan Karlin, 'Third Decade reunites 'Midnight Cowboy' crew', *Daily Variety*, 18th February 1994, p.29

⁷⁹ Kelleher, *op. cit.*, p.20

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Hattenstone, *op. cit.* and Adam Mars-Jones, 'Slaughter of the Innocent', *The Independent*, 24th June 1994, p.24

one ‘Schlesinger’s massacre of ‘The Innocent’’.⁸² The casting of British Anthony Hopkins as an American, American Campbell Scott as British and Italian Isabella Rossellini as German was widely found to be inappropriate, Adam Mars-Jones in *The Independent* finding that while ‘there’s such a thing as casting against type’, there was also, ‘such a thing as casting against reason’.⁸³ A sense of Schlesinger’s decline was also palpable in Mars-Jones’ review, the critic observing that Schlesinger ‘these days seems like a rather tame, conventional director’.⁸⁴ Geoff Brown elaborated on the sense of Schlesinger’s decline, the director now emerging merely as a metteur-en-scène:

Thirty years ago, Schlesinger’s British films were sharp affairs, in tune with their times: but long years of being a director for hire have blunted his progress. As usual he gets the film shot on schedule; he conjures up a few good scenes and performances.⁸⁵

Quentin Curtis in *The Independent* on Sunday would similarly note:

There are good performances, a decent sense of place ... and moments of horror and macabre humour. But Schlesinger doesn’t draw them together or impose a visual style. It’s his fourth recent venture into espionage, and it’s easy to see something of the spy in Schlesinger himself – not so much a betrayal of his talent, as a refusal to reveal himself, a cautious evasiveness.⁸⁶

The American release of *The Innocent* was delayed until September 1995. In May 1994, Schlesinger had put ongoing issues with the American release date down to ‘legal entanglements between the studios and some cuts I’m resisting’.⁸⁷ When the film finally opened, it was without advance screenings or publicity, the *San Francisco Chronicle* reviewer Peter Stack suggesting that ‘even the distributor, Miramax Films, usually a big-hype operation, was embarrassed’ and adding that ‘the more or less dumping of “The Innocent” is all the more curious because it was directed by John Schlesinger, whose “Midnight Cowboy” is still a movie milestone. And it was written by Ian McEwan, the British novelist on whose big-selling book of the same name, the

⁸² Quentin Curtis, ‘Schlesinger’s massacre of the Innocent’, *The Independent on Sunday*, 26th June 1994, p.23

⁸³ Mars-Jones, *op. cit.*

⁸⁴ Mars-Jones, *op. cit.*

⁸⁵ Geoff Brown, *op. cit.*

⁸⁶ Curtis, *op. cit.*

⁸⁷ Owen, *op. cit.*

film was based. Talent, talent . . . but still no cigar'.⁸⁸ On the whole, American reviewers were as unimpressed by *The Innocent* as their British counterparts had been. *Boxoffice* and *Variety* found the film 'bland', just as they, together with *The Washington Post* critic Rita Kempley, noted an insufficient building of suspense.⁸⁹ Caryn James at *The New York Times* disagreed, however, finding that, despite a slow start, the film was finally a 'slowly satisfying thriller and a 'tense and suspenseful love story with Hitchcockian overtones'.⁹⁰

Eye for an Eye

Schlesinger's next feature film, *Eye for an Eye*, was released in the United States on 12th January 1996. Based on a novel by Erika Holzer and scripted by Amanda Silver and Rick Jaffa, writers of the successful thriller *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*, *Eye for an Eye* would again see Schlesinger directing a mainstream, distinctly high concept thriller, this time for Paramount. The film was produced by Michael I Levy and Michael Polaire. *Eye for an Eye* is the story of a middle-class Los Angeles businesswoman Karen McCann, who seeks justice for her daughter, raped and murdered by Robert Doob. When Doob is acquitted due to a forensic irregularity, McCann seeks to manage her grief, but her thoughts soon turn to vigilante-style revenge. When Doob kills again, McCann becomes determined to prove his guilt. In the climactic scene, Doob breaks into McCann's home and is finally shot by Karen. As Doob unlawfully entered the property, it is probable that Karen would not be imprisoned. The film featured a high-profile cast in the form of Academy Award-winner Sally Field (*Norma Rae*, dir. Martin Ritt, 1979, *Places in the Heart*, dir. Robert Benton, 1984), Ed Harris as Karen's husband and Kiefer Sutherland as the killer. Although most of the crew appear to have been new collaborators for Schlesinger, Peter

⁸⁸ Peter Stack, 'Film Review: Stars Can't Enlighten 'Murky' Innocent', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 4th September 1995, <http://www.sfgate.com/movies/article/FILM-REVIEW-Stars-Can-t-Enlighten-Murky-3025388.php>

⁸⁹ Jeff Schwager, 'The Innocent', *Boxoffice*, 1st September 1995, p.R50, Rebecca Lieb, 'The Innocent', *Variety*, 27th September 1993, p.40, Rita Kempley, 'Chaos on a Global Scale', *The Washington Post*, 2nd September 1995, p.D3

⁹⁰ Caryn James, 'Hopkins as a Brash Yank', *The New York Times*, 2nd September 1995, p.11

Honess, editor of *Madame Sousatzka* and *The Believers* was engaged to work on the film. While the film would have reasonable initial commercial success, being the third most popular film in its opening weekend⁹¹ and show long-term profit on its \$20 million budget,⁹² it would be critically dismissed, variously found to be ‘a nasty, incompetent piece of work’,⁹³ a ‘rabidly bad revenge movie’⁹⁴ and ‘a virtually worthless piece of filmmaking’.⁹⁵ Accordingly, *Eye for an Eye* would be read as a further instance of Schlesinger’s decline as a filmmaker. However, an examination of the details of the film’s production and reception will point to the particular contexts in which the film was made and received and indicate evidence of Schlesinger’s continuing commitment to serious filmmaking. However, tensions between the demands of highly commercial filmmaking and artistry would again prove difficult to resolve.

William J. Mann’s nomination of Schlesinger in the 1990s as a director for hire is certainly borne out in publicity of the mid-nineties period, where the director’s uneven oeuvre and previous apparent compromises were cited. In an article about the director appearing in *The Sunday Times* prior to the release of *Eye for an Eye*, Simon Fanshawe wrote that Schlesinger:

.... hasn’t made a film he hasn’t wanted to But they have not all been initiated by him. An Eye for an Eye was offered by Paramount and he took it, at the encouragement of his agent, despite its “not having the Oscar-winning script that perhaps one would like”. But he wanted to do a commercial movie. As he says quite rightly, “it’s a genre piece made for the general public and no apologies about that”. And he probably has an overdraft.⁹⁶

The last sentence is somewhat typical of the press’s representation of the director which had previously, and continued to, characterise him as lacking in economy. Mann has also written of the financial demands on the director in the 1990s, such as the healthcare

⁹¹ ‘Box-office charts’, *The Independent*, 18th January 1996, p.10

⁹² <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=eyeforaneye.htm>

⁹³ Desson Howe, ‘Field’s Eye: Put a lid on it’, *The Washington Post*, 12th January 1996, p.32

⁹⁴ Janet Maslin, ‘Get mad? Yes, then be sure to get even’, *The New York Times*, 12th January 1996, p.C10

⁹⁵ Tom Shone, ‘Eye for an Eye’, *The Sunday Times*, 23rd June 1996, p.8

⁹⁶ Simon Fanshawe, ‘Long running marathon man’, *The Sunday Times*, 9th June 1996, p.12

costs involved in his partner's medical treatment for H.I.V.⁹⁷ Whether to some degree motivated by financial considerations, the desire to continue to work and the frustrations of thwarted projects would necessarily result in some sort of artistic compromise, as Schlesinger would describe to Gene D. Phillips:

... because projects close to me were cancelled or didn't get off the ground, so in my anxiety to keep working, which provides me with my chief pleasure in life, I have perhaps accepted films which were wanting in some way just in order to keep going.⁹⁸

While commercial considerations appeared to be of significance in Schlesinger undertaking *Eye for an Eye*, he would at the same time defend his involvement, calling the film 'a work of genuine integrity', one which operated as 'exciting thriller, intimate human drama, social commentary'.⁹⁹ To Simon Fanshawe, Schlesinger would underline the continuity of the film with his earlier work, stating, 'My films have followed one individual, really ... I get a great deal of pleasure in observing the details of behaviour ... The journey of this woman to become an obsessive is very interesting'.¹⁰⁰ Fanshawe himself would concede Schlesinger's artistic investment. Although recognising that the film was 'torn between the obvious demands from the studio to produce a commercial hit ... and the desire to explore the effect the murder has on Field's character and on her relationship with her husband', Fanshawe concluded that Schlesinger's interest was ultimately in the dynamics of the latter.¹⁰¹

Such a reading is borne out in Mann's account of the film's production. Schlesinger's insistence upon various script re-writes and amendments with a view to heightening the film's psychological realism and complexity are indicated,¹⁰² with tensions between Schlesinger and the writers and producers causing hostility and resentment.¹⁰³ Script changes continued well into the film's production.¹⁰⁴ While in

⁹⁷ Mann, *op. cit.*, p.531

⁹⁸ Letter from John Schlesinger to Gene D. Phillips, quoted in Mann, *op. cit.*, p.550

⁹⁹ Jamie Portman, 'Sally wants an Eye for an Eye', *Calgary Herald*, 9th January 1996, p.B3

¹⁰⁰ Fanshawe, *op. cit.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p.13

¹⁰² Mann, *op. cit.*, p.543

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.544

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p.543

some respects, Schlesinger's agency would be in evidence, such as in his devising the opening sequence where Karen removes a moth from her younger daughter's bedroom,¹⁰⁵ thus introducing the theme of maternal protection, instances of his conformity would also be apparent, such as in his admission that studio pressure caused him to enhance the violent aspect of the film.¹⁰⁶

It was certainly *Eye for an Eye*'s violent aspects that would be emphasised in reviews, with attention to these overshadowing any consideration of nuance. The American release of the film, on 12th January 1996, would see critics find the film crudely violent, manipulative, and exploitative of contemporary fears regarding violence in society. Its release followed a peak in violent crime in the United States in the early 1990s,¹⁰⁷ as well as the much-publicised O.J. Simpson trial, a televised scene of which briefly appears in *Eye for an Eye*. Additionally, articles about the increased depiction of rape in films would appear in the mid-1990s period.¹⁰⁸ Against the background of such concerns, *Eye for an Eye* was deemed manipulative and exploitative in what was seen as its superficial engagement with social concerns. For the *USA Today* reviewer, it was 'a grimly distasteful revenge thriller masquerading as a serious social commentary',¹⁰⁹ just as *Daily News* noted 'a movie that exploits violence while pretending to deplore it'.¹¹⁰ The film's position was widely found to be conservative and reactionary, and to capitalise on current fears and justify acts of revenge, occasioning a number of comparisons with the vigilante film *Death Wish* (dir. Michael Winner, 1974).¹¹¹ For Rita Kempley at *The Washington Post*, *Eye for an Eye* was a 'blatant button-pusher (playing) upon our most primal emotions as well as the

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p.544

¹⁰⁶ Christopher Goodwin, 'Has Hollywood gone too far?', *The Sunday Times*, 10th March 1996, p.4

¹⁰⁷ Nathan James, 'Recent Violent Crime Trends in the United States', Congressional Research Service, 2018, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R45236.pdf>

¹⁰⁸ Bill Gifford, 'Movie Violations', *The Washington Post*, 11th February 1996, p.G5, Goodwin, *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁹ Susan Wloszczyna, 'Sally Field is a sore sight in Schlesinger's 'Eye for an Eye'', *USA Today*, 12th January 1996, p.4, Life section

¹¹⁰ Dave Kehr, 'When Dirty Harry met Sally: Field doesn't fly in 'Eye for an Eye'', *Daily News*, 12th January 1996, p.33

¹¹¹ Simon Rose, 'Revenge so sour for Sally: Eye for an Eye', *The Mirror*, 20th June 1996, p.3, William Russell, 'Caught at rock bottom', *The Herald*, 20th June 1996, p.15, Wloszczyna, *op. cit.*, Steve Persall, 'A family's anguish, a filmmaker's revenge', *St. Petersburg Times* (Florida), 12th January 1996, p.10, Kehr, *op. cit.*

increasing disdain for the criminal justice system'.¹¹² The film's denouement, which sees McCann kill her daughter's murderer, according to Steve Persall at the *St. Petersburg Times*, 'milks American's current crime fears for a big cheer to send everybody home nodding in agreement'.¹¹³ The actual scenes of violence were found by a number of reviewers to have been filmed in an excessively sensationalist manner. In his assessment of the scene of the girl's murder, Steven Rea at *The Philadelphia Inquirer* found that 'Schlesinger lingers a little too long on the scene', while also objecting to the shot of a subsequent victim's 'legs splayed wide on a table'.¹¹⁴

The film was also found to be reactionary in terms of its representation of race and class; the depiction of the neighbourhood of killer Robert Doob, for Janet Maslin at *The New York Times*, coming 'dangerously close' to overt racism, 'by laying on the rap and Latino music when Karen begins following Doob to his ethnically mixed part of town'.¹¹⁵ *Variety*, however, differed substantially in this, noting a more, albeit cynically motivated, even-handed approach to representation, one where equal representation becomes part of the film's manipulative agenda. To help indulge those liberals alienated by an otherwise conservative narrative, that is:

To keep from unduly ruffling anyone's feathers, the filmmakers work overtime to cover all their bases. If a white parent in Karen's support group reveals that a black man killed his child, you can rest assured that we get an equal sampling of black parents with their own tales of woe. In fact, one of those black parents (Charlayne Woodard) turns out to be a lesbian single mother. In all ways, the movie is intended to appeal to the broadest constituency possible.¹¹⁶

However, while some reviewers were preoccupied with the film's violence and cynicism, elsewhere there was some sense of the director's concerns with more subtle aspects of the story. For reviewers at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and *Variety*, *Eye for an Eye* was found to show some evidence of dramatic restraint.¹¹⁷ There was also

¹¹² Rita Kempley, 'Eye for an Eye: See it not', *The Washington Post*, 12th January 1996, p.D7

¹¹³ Persall, *op. cit.*

¹¹⁴ Steven Rea, 'Eye for an Eye: Gouging the Viewer', *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 12th January 1996, p.5

¹¹⁵ Maslin, *The New York Times*, 12th January 1996, *op. cit.*

¹¹⁶ Joe Leydon, 'Eye for an Eye', *Variety*, 15th January 1996, p.125

¹¹⁷ Harper Barnes, 'Modern Times: Violence, Injustice, Revenge', *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 12th January 1996, p.3E, Leydon, *op. cit.*

evidence of a more benevolent response to the ‘liberal’ approaches within *Eye for an Eye* than those criticised as cynical by *Variety*. For critic Gerry Kroll in the LGBT magazine *The Advocate*, the film’s portrayal of a lesbian couple was ‘unqualifiedly successful’, whereby ‘their relationship is easy, and neither the grim reaper nor a man threatens to pry them apart’,¹¹⁸ echoing the more natural, matter-of-fact representation of homosexuality and bisexuality for which *Sunday Bloody Sunday* had been praised.

Upon the film’s British release on 21st June 1996, British reviewers reviewed *Eye for an Eye* in broadly similar terms to their American counterparts. The film’s violence was widely criticised, and questions asked regarding Schlesinger’s motivations for making such a film. The sense of *Eye for an Eye* as a calculated, highly commercial venture would be enhanced in reviews by a recurring reference to ‘the filmmakers’, as evidenced in the above quotation from the *Variety* review of the film. In accordance with Justin Wyatt’s representation of the authorship of such films, whereby ‘the logic of the marketplace is clearly the author of the style’,¹¹⁹ the filmmakers appear in the reviews as responsible for the film, eclipsing Schlesinger’s contribution. For *The Independent*, the ‘filmmakers’ conspired to ‘embroider atrocity with details of excessive sadism’.¹²⁰ Alexander Walker was more explicit in indicating Schlesinger’s concessions to studio pressure, writing ‘Schlesinger does things his producers’ way – and those men are not going to leave any base instinct untapped, any nasty trick unplayed’.¹²¹ Where Schlesinger’s contribution was acknowledged, his motivations for getting involved in such a project were questioned, with the financial rewards again suggested as of primary importance. The critic at *The Independent on Sunday* wondered at ‘his willingness to take on such sorry stuff’¹²² and the Scottish newspaper *The Herald* deemed *Eye for an Eye* ‘journeyman, paying the rent work’.¹²³ Alexander Walker was particularly disapproving:

There comes a time, even to hardened critics, when you shake your head in wonder at the names who care to associate themselves with trash. When the script

¹¹⁸ Gerry Kroll, ‘The Mad Squad’, *The Advocate*, 20th February 1996, p.56

¹¹⁹ Wyatt, *op. cit.*, p.34

¹²⁰ Ryan Gilbey, ‘The worm turns’, *The Independent*, 20th June 1996, p.11

¹²¹ Walker, *Evening Standard*, 20th June 1996, *op. cit.*

¹²² Kevin Jackson, ‘A little shaken, but not stirred’, *The Independent on Sunday*, 23rd June 1996, p.7

¹²³ Russell, *op. cit.*

arrived, what did they see in it? A quick means to pay their tax bill is the most forgivable answer.¹²⁴

As in the United States, however, *Eye for an Eye* was not without its advocates who could see more subtlety in the film. For Geoff Brown at *The Times*, ‘Schlesinger makes a genuine attempt to bypass the horror show of most serial killer dramas’.¹²⁵ Along with the *St. Petersburg Times*, Brown also praised Schlesinger’s depiction of the psychological effect of crime on the family. A more sympathetic response to *Eye for an Eye* would also be in evidence some time after the film’s initial release. In February 1997 upon the film’s release on video, Philip French at *The Observer* wrote of a ‘modest, well-thought out thriller’, one in which Schlesinger ‘keeps up the suspense while never losing sight of his heroine’s emotional problems and ethical dilemmas’.¹²⁶ Heidi Rice at the *Daily Mail* seemed to concur with such a position in her 2001 review of the film, finding that Schlesinger used ‘character development rather than cheap shock tactics to deliver suspense’.¹²⁷ Although there was evidence in later reviews that the initial criticism of sensationalism persisted, such as *The Times*’ Stephen Dalton’s 2001 estimation that the film demonstrated little evidence of subtlety,¹²⁸ reviews such as those by Rice and French, viewed together with the more sympathetic appraisals appearing upon the film’s release, indicate some appreciation of the film’s more nuanced aspects, much as these were eclipsed by the apparent demands of high concept, highly commercial filmmaking.

Cold Comfort Farm

May 1996 would see the U.S. theatrical release of *Cold Comfort Farm*, a film initially made for broadcast on British television in the new year of 1995. Its transition from British television film, to its success on the American film festival circuit, to its

¹²⁴ Walker, *Evening Standard*, 20th June 1996, *op. cit.*

¹²⁵ Geoff Brown, ‘Between a Rock and a hard place’, *The Times*, 20th June 1996, p.33

¹²⁶ Philip French, ‘The week in reviews: Videos’, *The Observer*, 16th February 1997, p.10

¹²⁷ Heidi Rice, ‘Film Guide’, *Daily Mail* (Weekend), 30th June 2001, p.73

¹²⁸ Stephen Dalton, ‘Choice’, *The Times*, 6th July 2001, p.30

theatrical release in both America and Britain in 1996, would highlight some of the ways in which Schlesinger's status was contested; as an auteur in decline or experiencing some sort of comeback; one subject to the compromises of commercial ambition or in some way retaining the agency which had seen his earlier success. Shifting dynamics in film production will also be considered for their role in permitting the viability of such a project.

Cold Comfort Farm, an adaptation of Stella Gibbons' 1932 comic novel, was produced by the BBC with Thames Television for a budget of £1.8 million. Scripted by novelist and critic Malcolm Bradbury, the play concerned the socialite Flora Poste's sojourn with her quirky, provincial relatives in rural England and her Austen-like attempts to impose household order and domestic harmony. By the end of her stay with her relatives, not only have good relations been restored and personal fulfilment for all been attained, but Flora herself has found love and a stable future. It was made as part of a big-budget initiative by the BBC to compete with recent ITV successes such as *Sharpe*¹²⁹ (1993-1997, ITV) as well as the film output of Channel Four. The production, filmed over a period of six weeks on location in Sussex,¹³⁰ would be difficult according to Schlesinger, the director stating that those involved became 'very quarrelsome because we were on an impossibly tight budget. It was agony'.¹³¹ Broadcast on BBC1 on New Year's Day 1995, the film was generally well received by the critics. It was praised for its humour and the strength of the performances of such respected actors as Sir Ian McKellen and Eileen Atkins and for that of newcomer Kate Beckinsale in the lead role of Flora. Praise was not unanimous, with a lack of subtlety noted by *The Independent on Sunday* and *Daily Mail* reviewers.¹³² A recurring complaint in the British reviews was that the film betrayed signs of certain commercial compromises and indications of a pandering to the American market.¹³³ Such

¹²⁹ Neil Tweedie, 'BBC in £200m bid to win drama war', *Evening Standard*, 12th July 1994, p.5

¹³⁰ Valerie Grove, 'Guilt is a pointless emotion', *The Times*, 25th April 1997, p.20

¹³¹ Rita Kempley, 'John Schlesinger, Up on the 'Farm'', *The Washington Post*, 26th May 1996, p.G4

¹³² Ben Thompson, 'Cold Comfort for Yentob and co', *The Independent on Sunday*, 8th January 1995, p.25, N.A., 'Pick of the Day', *Daily Mail*, 31st December 1994, p.20

¹³³ N.A., *Daily Mail*, *ibid.*, David Flusfeder, 'To suit every taste, and none', *The Times*, 17th December 1994, p.2 (S1), Libby Purves, 'A comic classic to set you a-quiver', *The Times*, 31st December 1994, p.5(S1)

speculation was, according to Schlesinger's biographer William J. Mann, to some degree accurate, Mann writing that at the time of the initial broadcast, '(Schlesinger's) eye was already on an American distribution, something he was pressuring Thames Television to support'.¹³⁴ Mann states that Thames were unconvinced as to the viability of a theatrical release and would only finance half of the cost of the film's transfer to 35mm, Schlesinger providing the other half.¹³⁵

In publicity accompanying the television broadcast of the film, Schlesinger characteristically emphasised his contributions to the film's development, intimating a collaborative involvement in the development of the screenplay. He told Libby Purves at *The Times*, 'the first thing I did was go through the script and firmly put back a lot of the book',¹³⁶ a position somewhat undermined a day later in a *Sunday Telegraph* profile of the director and the film, Stephen Pile stating that '(Schlesinger) took on *Cold Comfort Farm* not because it has been a lifelong passion but because he was asked'.¹³⁷

The new 35mm print of the film was screened at the Seattle, Telluride and the Hamptons film festivals, the latter two also hosting tributes to Schlesinger.¹³⁸ The case for a theatrical release was aided by the popularity of the film at these festivals, and notices such as that by Emmanuel Levy in *Daily Variety*.¹³⁹ In this review, the film was again positioned as a specifically Schlesinger work, the director having 'admired the book since he read it as a youngster' and *Cold Comfort Farm* demonstrating a continuity with the high quality of *An Englishman Abroad* and *A Question of Attribution*. The film's specifically British qualities were admired by Levy, who wrote of the film's 'characteristically British combination of frivolity, eccentricity and wicked humor'. Such an appreciation of the film's purported national qualities would

¹³⁴ Mann, *op. cit.*, p.542

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ Purves, *The Times*, 31st December 1994, *op. cit.*

¹³⁷ Stephen Pile, 'John's cold comfort success', *The Sunday Telegraph*, 1st January 1995, p.7

¹³⁸ Greg Evans, 'Hamptons nod to Schlesinger', *Daily Variety*, 22nd September 1995, p.6, 'Schlesinger honored', *United Press International*, 25th September 1995, 'Cold Comfort Farm, *Boxoffice*, 1st November 1995, p.98

¹³⁹ Emmanuel Levy, 'Cold Comfort Farm' *Daily Variety*, 21st June 1995

similarly characterise the film's reception upon its American arthouse cinema release in May 1996.

In November 1995, Universal acquired the rights to *Cold Comfort Farm* in North America.¹⁴⁰ The film's festival popularity was clearly a factor in such a development, one that also needs to be located in the particular economic climate of film production at this time. As reported in the press, rapidly increasing production costs and actors' salaries entailed lower profit margins for studios, seeing a renewed investment in lower-budget films, productions that, if successful, could have more favourable margins.¹⁴¹ With the recent success of such films as *The Usual Suspects* (dir. Bryan Singer, 1995), *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (dir. Mike Newell, 1994,) and *Sense and Sensibility* (dir. Ang Lee, 1995), film production was found to be polarising into smaller-scale films and blockbusters. Subsequent to the success of British films such as *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and *Enchanted April* (dir. Mike Newell, 1992), the viability of a theatrical release of *Cold Comfort Farm* becomes apparent.

When the film was released on the American arthouse circuit in May 1996, it was met with a positive response and would perform well commercially, by April of the following year having made \$7 million in the United States, a good box office performance in view of its original budget of £1.8 million.¹⁴² Again, the film's humour was widely praised, with the *Los Angeles Magazine* designating it 'one of the funniest English comedies ever made'¹⁴³ and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* calling it the 'funniest movie to hit town this year'.¹⁴⁴ As indicated, what was deemed *Cold Comfort Farm*'s Britishness, or distinctly English quality, was widely appreciated. A certain English eccentricity was found to be appealing by a number of reviewers, with the *Los Angeles Magazine* reviewer finding the characters a 'photo album of grand-scale eccentricity; each is archetypal – and singularly funny', a characterisation that stemmed from

¹⁴⁰ Steve Clarke, 'Universal snags rights to Brit 'Farm'', *Daily Variety*, p.14

¹⁴¹ John Horn, 'Declining dollars: Filmmakers try to make ends meet with less', *Associated Press*, 24th May 1996, Emily Bell, 'This industry could self-destruct...', *The Observer*, 7th July 1996, p.16

¹⁴² Robin Stringer, 'Cold comfort, warm welcome', *Evening Standard*, 25th April 1997, p.6

¹⁴³ Peter Rainer, 'Nothing under its hats', *Los Angeles Magazine*, May 1996, p.141

¹⁴⁴ Harper Barnes, 'British comedy is long on style', *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 31st May 1996, p.3E

‘eccentricity in England’ being ‘more than tolerated’ but ‘cherished’.¹⁴⁵ Roger Ebert also found the ‘dour, eccentric and very funny’ film to ‘(depend) on the British gift for treating madness as good common sense’.¹⁴⁶ *Cold Comfort Farm*’s differences from other, more restrained recent British successes were also appreciated. In early May 1996, Schlesinger would complain about a number of recent British films, finding them ‘narrow, really narrow’, going on to say, ‘the Merchant-Ivory films and the recent spate of Jane Austen have been successful, but I don’t think one can subsist on that diet ... we used to make films that found a general audience’.¹⁴⁷ Such sentiments were echoed in the American reception of the film, with Hal Hinson at *The Washington Post* finding *Cold Comfort Farm* ‘a radical (and most welcome) departure from the polite, stodgy tales of the British aristocracy we’re used to seeing at the movies’.¹⁴⁸ Instead, its accessibility was welcomed. Stephen Whitty of the *San Jose Mercury News*, after summarising the book’s very literary influences and inspirations, wrote ‘you don’t need to be a fan of Jane Austen, however, to adore “Cold Comfort Farm.” You don’t even need to know much about English literature’.¹⁴⁹ Throughout the reviews, much of the film’s appeal seemed to lie in this accessibility and lightness, its ‘gleeful pace’.¹⁵⁰ Occasionally, however, the film’s high spirits were found to lack of subtlety. Dave Kehr in *Daily News* commented ‘never the most delicate of film makers, Schlesinger lets the acting range into the purely grotesque’ and concluded that often, ‘Schlesinger goes for the easy laughs’.¹⁵¹

Generally, however, Schlesinger’s direction was highly praised and *Cold Comfort Farm* seen as his best film for some time – ‘many years’ for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*¹⁵² and since *Sunday Bloody Sunday* for Mike Clark at *USA Today*.¹⁵³ For some reviewers, *Cold Comfort Farm* represented a comeback for Schlesinger, with reviews

¹⁴⁵ Rainer, *Los Angeles Magazine*, May 1996, *op. cit.*

¹⁴⁶ Roger Ebert, ‘Cold Comfort Farm’, *Chicago Sun-Times*, 24th May 1996

¹⁴⁷ Lewis Beale, ‘Long dry spell for ‘Midnight Cowboy’ director but ‘Farm’ might restore some of the heyday luster to Schlesinger’s career’, *Daily News*, 8th May 1996, p.37

¹⁴⁸ Hal Hinson, ‘Heart-warming ‘Cold Comfort’, *The Washington Post*, 24th May 1996, p.D1

¹⁴⁹ Stephen Whitty, ‘Getting the gothic giggles’, *San Jose Mercury News*, 31st May 1996, p.5

¹⁵⁰ Barnes, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 31st May 1996, *op. cit.*

¹⁵¹ Dave Kehr, ‘Cold Comfort Farm a chilly satire’, *Daily News*, 10th May 1996, p.68

¹⁵² Desmond Ryan, ‘Cold Comfort Farm: Literate, satirical fun in the country’, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 24th May 1996, p.3

¹⁵³ Mike Clark, ‘Congenial ‘Cold Comfort Farm’’, *USA Today*, 10th May 1996, p.4D

citing its superiority to past disappointments. The recent *Eye for an Eye* was cited amongst these,¹⁵⁴ as was the ‘terminally unfunny comedy’ *Honky Tonk Freeway*.¹⁵⁵ While the *Los Angeles Magazine* noted that Schlesinger ‘has not exactly been a comedy whiz’,¹⁵⁶ the qualities of *Cold Comfort Farm* enabled American reviewers to expand this particular horizon of expectations.

Cold Comfort Farm received a theatrical release in Britain in April 1997, an event that was accompanied by a lower key reception, due to it having been broadcast on television just two years previously. While American reviewers had enjoyed the unexpected merging of the literary with a broader comedy, this was generally not the case in Britain, with reviewers at *The Times*, *The Financial Times* and *The Observer* noting a certain coarseness and a lack of subtlety.¹⁵⁷ It was also found to be unsuited to the larger screen format, lacking a ‘satisfactory visual style’.¹⁵⁸ Again, Schlesinger’s earlier work was discussed, with Ryan Gilbey of *The Independent* claiming that *Eye for an Eye*, *Pacific Heights*, *The Believers*, *Marathon Man* and *Honky Tonk Freeway* had demonstrated a lack of sensitivity, an inability to sustain tension and a lack of talent for comedy.¹⁵⁹ *Cold Comfort Farm*, however, like *An Englishman Abroad* and *A Question of Attribution*, showed that ‘there is another side to this infuriating director, which knows how to shoot actors simply and elegantly’.¹⁶⁰

The success of *Cold Comfort Farm* would presumably encourage Schlesinger to embark on *The Tale of Sweeney Todd*, produced for U.S. cable network company Showtime in 1998 and starring Ben Kingsley and Joanna Lumley. According to *Screen International*, Schlesinger negotiated for a theatrical release for the film prior to its television broadcast, if an interested distributor could be found.¹⁶¹ These plans did not

¹⁵⁴ Kempley, *The Washington Post*, 26th May 1996, *op. cit.*, Beale, *Daily News*, 8th May 1996, *op. cit.*, Whitty, *San Jose Mercury News*, 31st May 1996, *op. cit.*

¹⁵⁵ Beale, *Daily News*, 8th May 1996, *op. cit.*

¹⁵⁶ Rainer, *Los Angeles Magazine*, May 1996, *op. cit.*

¹⁵⁷ Geoff Brown, ‘No challenger to Hitchcock’s dizzy heights’, *The Times*, 24th April 1997, p.37, Peter Aspden, ‘Caricature at the expense of nuance’, *The Financial Times*, 24th April 1997, p.29, Philip French, ‘Master of Suspense’, *The Observer*, 24th April 1997, p.C12

¹⁵⁸ Aspden, *op. cit.*, Ryan Gilbey, ‘Also showing...’, *The Independent*, 24th April 1997, p.8

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ Mike Goodridge, ‘The Main Event’, *Screen International*, 16th January 1998, p.23

come to fruition, and the film was broadcast in the United States on 19th April 1998 and in Britain, on Sky Screen 2 on 30th August 1998. Schlesinger's involvement in *The Tale of Sweeney Todd* testifies to the expansion and diversification of American cable television in the late 1980s and 1990s, following its deregulation by way of the 1984 Cable Communications Policy Act¹⁶² and mid-1990s investment in 'event' films, often featuring respected directors and actors.¹⁶³ The film was generally well reviewed, found to be 'witty and satisfying' by *The New York Times*.¹⁶⁴ Some otherwise approving reviewers, however, felt that the film's macabre register and use of graphic gore was somewhat challenging.¹⁶⁵ Despite its largely positive critical reception, without a theatrical release the impact of *The Tale of Sweeney Todd* was limited.

The Next Best Thing

Schlesinger's final feature film, *The Next Best Thing*, would for many commentators represent the one of the lowest points of the director's career. Viewed as a cynical commercial enterprise and a vanity project for its lead actress, Madonna, the film was deemed upon its release to be 'The Last Worst Mess' due to 'a stupid premise, a lousy script, a terrible waste of talent and gross misdirection'¹⁶⁶ and later, by David Thomson, to be 'a contender for the worst film ever made'.¹⁶⁷ Schlesinger's involvement in such a film was widely questioned, with reviewers concluding that he had directed the film purely for the financial reward, comparing *The Next Best Thing* with the heights of his artistic success, *Midnight Cowboy* and *Sunday Bloody Sunday*. Such a position again accords to some degree with that of William J. Mann and his view of Schlesinger in the later period of his career as a director for hire.¹⁶⁸ A closer

¹⁶² <https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/news-wires-white-papers-and-books/rise-cable-television>, retrieved 25/3/19

¹⁶³ Goodridge, *op. cit.*

¹⁶⁴ Caryn James, 'The Tale of Sweeney Todd', *The New York Times*, 17th April 1988, p.E33

¹⁶⁵ Sheri Linden, 'The Tale of Sweeney Todd', *Variety*, 13th-19th April 1998, p.26, David Bianculli, 'Sweeney cuts it: New world doesn't', *Daily News*, 17th April 1998, p.124

¹⁶⁶ Chris Hewitt, 'Mainly on the plain, *Saint Paul Pioneer Press* (Minnesota), 3rd March 2000, p.16E

¹⁶⁷ David Thomson, *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film*, 5th Edition, Little, Brown, London, 2010, pp.782-783

¹⁶⁸ Mann, *op. cit.*, p.515

examination of Schlesinger's actual agency during the production of *The Next Best Thing*, however, bound up as this was with collaboration and a conflictual multiple authorship, has surprising echoes of the production process of *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, a film that shares much in common with the themes of *The Next Best Thing*. Both films are concerned with modern and unconventional 'love triangles', arrangements which are ultimately untenable, with new approaches to relationships having been tested but found to fail, or at least require compromise. Parallels between the two films, in terms of theme, a conflictual production process and tensions regarding authorship, invite a consideration of diverging overall production and reception contexts. As indicated by Sian Barber¹⁶⁹ and as examined in the second chapter, the collaborative and conflictual authorship that characterised the production of *Sunday Bloody Sunday* can be viewed as to some degree productive, enriching the final film. Schlesinger's artistic reputation was also at this point in the ascendancy, secure despite evidence of American critics' apparent allegiance to screenwriter Penelope Gilliatt. With the distinctly commercial *The Next Best Thing*, identified with the agency of Madonna and released at a point in Schlesinger's career when an overall consensus had been reached as to his artistic decline, conflicting creative inputs would be read as producing a 'truly abysmal' film.¹⁷⁰

Produced by Lakeshore Entertainment and distributed by Paramount, *The Next Best Thing* concerns friends Abbie (Madonna) and her gay friend Robert (Rupert Everett) who have a child together. They struggle, however, to maintain their co-parenting relationship when Abbie finds love with Ben (Benjamin Bratt), leading to a custody battle, which Abbie ultimately wins. The original script was written by Thomas Ropelewski, the co-writer of *The Kiss* (1988, dir. Pen Densham) and co-writer and director of *Look Who's Talking Now* (1993). He was married to Leslie Dixon, who would co-produce of *The Next Best Thing*. In the mid-1990s, Ropelewski had intended to direct the film, at which point Everett was rejected for the role and the film was subsequently shelved. After Everett's success in *My Best Friend's Wedding* (dir. P.J.

¹⁶⁹ Sian Barber, *The British Film Industry in the 1970s: Capital, Culture and Creativity*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2013, p.92

¹⁷⁰ Fiona Sturges, 'Video reviews', *The Independent*, 7th April 2001, p.34

Hogan, 1997), he was approached by Sherry Lansing, head of Paramount and Tom Rosenberg, co-founder of Lakeshore Entertainment, with a view to reviving the project. Everett was cast, as was Madonna, with whom the actor was at the time sharing a well-publicised friendship. The two had been seeking a project on which to work together.¹⁷¹ The singer's previous acting roles had been met with a mixed critical response, including her most recent film, *Evita* (1996, dir. Alan Parker). With the film's budget of \$24 million (below the \$60 million average film production cost of the time¹⁷²), Madonna's high celebrity profile and Everett's renewed popularity following his role in *My Best Friend's Wedding*, the project appeared to be a viable one. With the two lead roles cast, Schlesinger was then approached to direct. In production terms, the presence of Peter Honess as editor provided some continuity with Schlesinger's previous work. Studio and location shooting took place in Los Angeles in April, May and June of 1999 and the film was released the following year, on 3rd March.

As was characteristic for Schlesinger, it was the appeal of the film's themes that were cited for his becoming involved in the production. The gay subject matter was of interest, he stated, as were the wider socially oriented themes.¹⁷³ Schlesinger claimed that he thought that 'this film was about something, which is more than one can say about the majority of films, and I think what it has to say is important, and one could identify with it'.¹⁷⁴ More practically, as a viable, funded production, *The Next Best Thing* would appear to have been appealing to Schlesinger, the director having consistently bemoaned the difficulties in securing finance for film projects and having had to abandon a number of films which he had sought to develop. Such difficulties were suggested as explaining why a number of veteran directors were at this point engaged in directing less artistically respectable films in a *New York Times* article appearing in April 2000. Critic Kenneth Turan examined why 'some celebrated directors have been making such weak and feeble films', referring in the process to

¹⁷¹ Janice Forsyth, 'Given that Rupert is openly gay, it's not surprising that Hollywood is eager to make a fast buck out of his fab butt', *The Herald* (Glasgow), 22nd June 2000, p.5

¹⁷² Chris Holmlund, 'Introduction: Movies and the 1990s', *American Cinema of the 1990s: Themes and Variations*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 2008, p.5

¹⁷³ David Noh, 'A fine romance', *Film Journal International*, March 2000, p.18

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

Schlesinger's direction of *The Next Best Thing*.¹⁷⁵ For Turan, this was largely attributable to the increasingly commercial orientation of the American film industry, in that:

...as the studios and even the independents become more and more a part of corporate America, unless you are a major star or attached to one it can get discouragingly difficult to get personal stories through a system that is increasingly indifferent to anything that does not guarantee a profit.¹⁷⁶

The desire to keep working, a justification offered by Schlesinger for undertaking less personal projects,¹⁷⁷ was also cited by Turan, the critic suggesting that 'while filmmakers may have lost their fervor for seeing a particular story up on the screen, they have not lost their passion for the satisfactions of the filmmaking process'.¹⁷⁸ Other justifications for formerly respected directors undertaking less respectable films had been suggested in an article appearing in the *New York Post* the previous month, Lou Lumenick claiming that 'formerly great directors' were 'done in by changing tastes, declining talent and studios that see them as washed up'.¹⁷⁹

In accordance with such positions would be the sense of Schlesinger's reduced agency in the production of *The Next Best Thing*. In early March 2000, just days after the film's American release, he would tell Manohla Dargis of *The New York Times*:

Now, everything is subject to greater control ... It's terribly sort of highly checked. It becomes irritating when you've got three producers with earphones looking at your every move on the set. I'm doing what I basically love, with more interference than I'm used to, but you just have to shrug.¹⁸⁰

The Advocate would similarly report that 'throughout the production, the veteran filmmaker says, he found himself in constant disagreement with Paramount Pictures, who urged him to water down the film for mainstream audiences'.¹⁸¹ According to the

¹⁷⁵ Kenneth Turan, 'Frailty, thy name is director', *Los Angeles Times*, 9th April 2000, p.7, pp.33-34

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.33

¹⁷⁷ Letter from John Schlesinger to Gene D. Phillips, quoted in Mann, *op. cit.*, p.550

¹⁷⁸ Turan, *op. cit.*, p.34

¹⁷⁹ Lou Lumenick, 'Fallen celluloid heroes: Are older directors automatically washed up?', *New York Post*, 19th March 2000, p.35

¹⁸⁰ Manohla Dargis, 'Getting past fabulousness to real life', *The New York Times*, 5th March 2000, p.30

¹⁸¹ Victoria Price, 'A life on the edge', *The Advocate*, 28th March 2000, p.69

Los Angeles Magazine, producer Tom Rosenberg sought to tone down the adult content, subduing the use of strong swearing in the script and removing a sex scene, with the objective of gaining a parental guidance certificate for the film.¹⁸²

It was not only Schlesinger who would be presented as having clashed with the film's producers. Publicity appearing around the time of the film's release is notable for Rupert Everett's claims to have significantly contributed to the film, particularly in the reconceptualization of the script. With writing partner Mel Bordeaux, Everett was said to have made 'considerable revisions' to the screenplay and to have pursued a screenwriting credit arbitration.¹⁸³ The actor did not succeed in getting credited, but reiterated that he and Bordeaux had made significant changes to the script, particularly pressing for changes to the Robert character. According to Everett:

The characters were originally very stereotypical. My character was a sort of fluffy, asexual queen who was an interior decorator, and everything was resolved comically by him spraying a tin of magic whip on everybody ... I didn't see why he needed to be a fluffy interior decorator or basically asexual. I wanted him to be a practising homosexual man. This was a huge issue with the studio ... and it became a big fight because people were afraid to make my character a practising homosexual. But I wanted to show that he could be that – and a good father.¹⁸⁴

Madonna would similarly emphasise her contribution to the film, aside from her performance. Such a representation would be consistent with her persona as powerful and innovative, known for her autonomy and commercial acumen. Her star power and subsequent influence on the project were indicated in *Daily News*, where she discussed her objections to her character's original occupation, a swimming instructor; "I made a big stink about that," she says, laughing. "I didn't want to be in a pool. Me, in a bathing cap. Yuck!"¹⁸⁵ She would make more general criticisms of the initial script, saying it was not sufficiently serious.¹⁸⁶ Mel Bordeaux, would also stress Madonna's input, saying 'She's really sharp' and adding 'she'd call at 9 at night

¹⁸² Margot Dougherty, 'Ascending Everett', *Los Angeles Magazine*, April 2000, p.72

¹⁸³ Karen Heller, 'Everett's the star, make no mistake', *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 27th February 2000, p.101

¹⁸⁴ Jamie Portman, 'Rupert's revenge', *The Vancouver Sun*, 3rd March 2000, p.D1

¹⁸⁵ Jim Farber, 'Mellow Madonna', *Daily News*, 27th February 2000, p.2

¹⁸⁶ Mark Lepage, 'Next Best Thing could be better', *The Gazette* (Montreal), 3rd March 2000, p.D1

having discovered some minor inconsistency. She had really good ideas for her character, and she certainly wasn't shy about them'.¹⁸⁷

Schlesinger would state his support for Everett's and Madonna's contributions to the story¹⁸⁸ and would be positioned in the press as united with the actors in opposition to the studio.¹⁸⁹ He would call Madonna a 'considerable dramatic actress' and Madonna would appear to have conceded to Schlesinger's authority, stating that while in the recording studio she assumes a directorial role, in film 'it's a much more submissive role, creatively. Which, by the way, I don't mind playing. It's just different'.¹⁹⁰ However, differences between the two would emerge some time later. When Schlesinger's correspondence was bequeathed to the British Film Institute subsequent to his death in July 2003, it emerged that there had been significant conflicts between himself and Madonna, which the director blamed for contributing to his heart attack in late 1999. Schlesinger claimed that Madonna, with the cooperation of producer Tom Rosenberg, attempted to influence the production in numerous ways, requesting that her shots be enhanced by computer generated imagery and that a scene be removed because it was 'too gay'.¹⁹¹ In a letter to Rupert Everett some weeks after his heart attack, Schlesinger wrote:

I have rather lost touch with what is happening with "The Next Best Thing"; there is still a decision to be made about the second cemetery scene which I very much want in. It is about you and brings some new colour into the story. I don't know if it is true that Madonna seems set against it (too gay, she said) and unfortunately Tom seems to be backing her up ... I don't know whether you have been consulted at all but I have never worked for a producer who has moved in such mysterious ways.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁷ Dougherty, *op. cit.*, p.71

¹⁸⁸ Liz Smith, 'Madonna's next', *New York Post*, 11th August 1999, p.14

¹⁸⁹ Price, *op. cit.*,

¹⁹⁰ John Millar, 'Why I love Rupert bare', *The Herald* (Glasgow), 22nd June 2000, p.2

¹⁹¹ Letter from John Schlesinger to Andrew Cannava dated 2nd December 1999, BFI special collection JRS/18/6, Chris Hastings and Roya Nikkah, 'Schlesinger blamed heart failure on Madonna's antics', *The Sunday Telegraph*, 11th July 2004, p.3

¹⁹² Letter from John Schlesinger to Rupert Everett dated 12th January 2000, BFI special collection JRS/18/17

Due to the producers' right to a final cut,¹⁹³ Schlesinger's protestations would have a limited effect.

The critical response to *The Next Best Thing* would be that it was extremely poor, with Madonna's performance, the quality of the script and the integrity of the film's position on its purported themes coming in for particular criticism. Madonna's then English-inflected American accent was widely derided,¹⁹⁴ as was her lack of dramatic range.¹⁹⁵ A principle weakness in the script for a number of reviewers was found to be the way in which it failed to negotiate an adequate blend of comedy and drama, with several critics noting the way in which the light comic tone of the first half shifted into a courtroom drama,¹⁹⁶ occasioning numerous references to *Kramer vs. Kramer* (dir. Robert Benton, 1979).¹⁹⁷

Upon the film's American release on 3rd March 2000, critics' objections frequently centred on what was felt to be *The Next Best Thing*'s cynically commercial orientation, one which compromised the film's coherence and credibility and resulted in compromises to the themes that it purported to explore. This emerged as seemingly resulting from the film functioning as a vehicle for its two principle stars, Madonna and Rupert Everett. Andrew Sarris, writing for the *New York Observer*, saw the film as pointedly exploiting Everett's persona in *My Best Friend's Wedding*.¹⁹⁸ More critics, however, detected Madonna's influence upon the film. For *Film Journal International*, it was Madonna who 'shows her hand', despite Thomas Ropelewski's screen credit,¹⁹⁹

¹⁹³ 1998 contract, BFI special collection JRS/18/17

¹⁹⁴ Jami Bernard, 'Madonna's 'Next Best' isn't enough', *Daily News*, 3rd March 2000, p.47, Dennis Harvey, 'Mild 'Thing' means well', *Daily Variety*, 3rd March 2000, Jonathan Foreman, 'Her 'Best' is bad', *New York Post*, 3rd March 2000, p.45, Ellen Flutterman, 'Madonna is not even close to The Next Best Thing in new dramedy', *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 3rd March 2000, pE3

¹⁹⁵ Jami Bernard, *ibid.*, Dennis Harvey, *ibid.*, Ellen Flutterman, *ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ Karen Hershenson, 'Next Best Thing' far from ideal', *Contra Costa Times* (California), 3rd March 2000, p.T28, Foreman, *op. cit.*

¹⁹⁷ Christopher Tookey, 'A star is porn', *Daily Mail*, 23rd June 2000, p.48, Cosmo Landesman, 'Not straight, but narrow', *The Sunday Times*, 25th June 2000, p.9, Peter Bradshaw, 'Maddening Madonna', *Guardian Weekly*, 5th July 2000, p.16, Jami Bernard, *op. cit.*, Foreman, *op. cit.*, Glenn Lovell, 'Extended family', *San Jose Mercury News*, 3rd March 2000, p.5

¹⁹⁸ Andrew Sarris, 'The Next Best Friend: Everett's new gal-pal pales', *New York Observer*, 6th March 2000

¹⁹⁹ E.M., 'The Next Best Thing', *Film Journal International*, March 2000, p.88

while for the *San Jose Mercury News* reviewer, there was a strong sense of all involved in the project ‘working hard to prop up a very limited actress’.²⁰⁰

The observation of Stephen Hunter at *The Washington Post*, that the ‘wan, wispy, almost criminally under-imagined’ film ‘manages to trivialize an issue of great complexity into a Madonna and child portrait, except the child is out of focus’,²⁰¹ is indicative of a criticism of *The Next Best Thing*, namely that it was irresponsible in its treatment of homosexuality and non-conventional families. This refusal to approach the subject in a more serious way resulted from a concession to more commercial considerations. According to *The Gazette*’s reviewer:

All concerned with *The Next Best Thing* know mass American opinion ... this is an attempt to make some socio-political medicine go down with a spoonful of sugar. *The Next Best Thing* is meant to combine the appeal star-vehicle with a portrait of changing family structures. Instead, the movie politics of mass appeal get in the way, soft-peddalling the entire climax.²⁰²

The overwhelming sense of *The Next Best Thing* as a commercially oriented film made with a view to mass appeal at the cost of a more adequate and responsible treatment of its subject had, unsurprisingly, consequences for the evaluation of Schlesinger as its director. Throughout the reviews, Schlesinger appears as having reduced agency, unable or unwilling to take control of the project and directing ‘mutedly’.²⁰³ Elsewhere, however, it was still Schlesinger who received credit, or rather blame, for the film, Stephen Rea at *The Philadelphia Inquirer* ultimately positioning the film as Schlesinger’s and writing of the ‘many tired movie conventions director John Schlesinger hauls out over the course of his tired movie’.²⁰⁴ Once again, financial gain was cited as a motivation for Schlesinger’s involvement in the film, which was designated as a ‘paycheck movie’ for him.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁰ Lovell, *op. cit.*

²⁰¹ Stephen Hunter, ‘Three movies stars and baby’, *The Washington Post*, 3rd March 2000, p.C1

²⁰² Mark Lepage, ‘Next best thing could be better’, *The Gazette*, 3rd March 2000, p.D1

²⁰³ Harvey, *op. cit.*

²⁰⁴ Stephen Rea, ‘Madonna and child and a dad who’s gay’, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 3rd March 2000, p.3

²⁰⁵ Jim Keogh, ‘Next Best Thing’ is Material Girl’s worst outing’, *Telegram and Gazette* (Massachusetts), 6th March 2000, p.C5

The film's British release was met with a similar critical response. Again, the representation of homosexuality in *The Next Best Thing* was disapproved of. For *The Herald*, the *Morning Star*, and the *Birmingham Post* the film rehearsed clichés and stereotypes regarding homosexuality and gay relationships,²⁰⁶ the reviewer at the last publication wondering at this in view of Everett's sexual orientation and Madonna's advocacy of gay issues.²⁰⁷ Again, compromises in the face of commercial appeal were suspected, with Cosmo Landesman at *The Sunday Times* positioning *The Next Best Thing* within 'the emergence of a new kind of gay in the cinema who is just hetero enough not to scare the horses or middle America'.²⁰⁸

A sense of Schlesinger's declining status in the face of such shortcomings emerges clearly in the British reviews. Unsurprisingly by now, monetary gain was cited as key, with Michael Wilmington at the *Morning Star* observing that 'once great directors have trouble paying those bills'.²⁰⁹ For Sebastian Faulks in the *Mail on Sunday*, Schlesinger's fall was set out:

John Schlesinger made his name with the young Northern English writers of the Sixties (A Kind Of Loving, Billy Liar) and went on from there to a position where he was regarded as Britain's premier film director. He was literate, playful and sensitive; but in *Darling* and *Midnight Cowboy* he showed that he also had an eye for the moment, for fashion and its undercurrents. The past 20 years have been less fruitful...²¹⁰

Instead, Schlesinger was reduced to 'playing nursemaid to the egos of Madonna and Rupert Everett'.²¹¹

²⁰⁶ Forsyth, *op. cit.*, Wilmington, *op. cit.*, Mike Davies, 'The Next Best Thing', *Birmingham Post*, 23rd June 2000

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁸ Landesman, *op. cit.*

²⁰⁹ Wilmington, *op. cit.*

²¹⁰ Sebastian Faulks, 'Next best forgotten', *Mail on Sunday*, 25th June 2000, p.70

²¹¹ Faulks, *op. cit.*

Conclusion

The 1990s would see a yet further decline in John Schlesinger's standing, with the nomination of him as a director for hire widely accepted amongst critics and commentators. His film output of the period would feature big-budget, studio-led projects, such as *Pacific Heights*, *Eye for an Eye* and *The Next Best Thing*. Film work would again be accompanied by the direction of television dramas, such as *A Question of Attribution* and *Cold Comfort Farm* – the latter providing a critical highpoint for Schlesinger upon its theatrical release in the United States. Overall, the decade would see the consolidation of notions of Schlesinger as having declined and surrendered his former authority. Apparent compromises would often be framed as personally and financially motivated, with negligible attention paid in reviews to industrial constraints.

However, changes in the film industry indicate a filmmaking environment less conducive to the development of more individual, personal films, one in which other former auteur or high profile directors were required to in some way accommodate a more commercial climate and fewer opportunities for the kind of films with which they had previously had success. Alternating more personal and commercial projects would characterise a number of careers, as would taking on lesser projects in order to keep working. An increasingly market-driven filmmaking context would see Schlesinger's authority challenged and ultimately reduced by producers, in evidence in the making of *Eye for an Eye* and *The Next Best Thing*. At other times, however, Schlesinger would benefit from shifting practices in the industry, such as when the theatrical release of *Cold Comfort Farm* coincided with a renewed investment in lower-budget films. While generally, the prevailing conditions meant that it was often impossible for Schlesinger to get personal projects off the ground, he would still be able to negotiate casting and script changes for much of the decade.

Critical evaluations of the films would be largely unfavourable, with Schlesinger's recent films compared negatively to his earlier work. Wider reviewing responses to trends in filmmaking such as high concept films and particular genre cycles would have their effect on reviews of films such as *Pacific Heights* and *Eye for*

an Eye, though there was some recognition of the difficulty in negotiating tensions between commercial constraints and personal interests, as well as some appreciation of the nuances discernible in the films. While the decade saw a contemporary consensus as to Schlesinger's artistic decline, a recognition of the reduced space for his agency in the production of the films, his ongoing commitment to and investment in filmmaking and his efforts to impart his mark upon the films deter a designation of Schlesinger as merely a director for hire.

Conclusion

Upon John Schlesinger's death in July 2003, obituaries appearing in the press indicated that some consensus had been reached as to his contribution to cinema. The significance of his work was widely noted, particularly the films made in the 1960s.¹ Schlesinger's role in early social realist cinema was to a degree overstated, with the *Daily Express* claiming that he 'practically invented the gritty Northern British New Wave genre'² and *The Guardian* stating that he was 'very much the leader' of the movement.³ His role in the discovery of new talent was also indicated.⁴ For *The Times*, he was notable for his productive working relationships with actors and for his attention to detail, but was ultimately found to have directed modish films, ones which 'perhaps lacked the personal stamp that marks the true cinema artist.'⁵ Clearly emerging in the reviews was the variable quality of the films that Schlesinger directed, with *The Telegraph*'s observation that the films 'were often erratic in quality and genre'.⁶ It was *Midnight Cowboy* that emerged as the high point of his critical and commercial success⁷ and *Honky Tonk Freeway* that represented his lowest point, one from which 'his cinema career never fully recovered',⁸ though the television plays *An Englishman Abroad* and *A Question of Attribution* were praised.⁹ A lack of agreement about some of the later individual films was apparent. For example, for Tom Vallance at *The Independent*, *The Believers* was notable as a 'truly unsettling account' of the father and son's experiences, while for Brian Baxter at *The Guardian*, the film was a 'dismal piece of hokum'.¹⁰ The two writers also disagreed about the merits of *Madame Sousatzka*;

¹ Robert Gore-Langton, 'The maverick who dared to be different', *Daily Express*, 28th July 2003, p.49, Brian Baxter, 'John Schlesinger', *The Guardian*, 26th July 2003, p.23

² Gore-Langton, *ibid.*

³ Baxter, *op. cit.*

⁴ Gore-Langton, *ibid.*

⁵ Anon, 'John Schlesinger', *The Times*, 26th July 2003, p.40

⁶ Anon, 'John Schlesinger', *The Daily Telegraph*, 26th July 2003, p.27

⁷ Baxter, *op. cit.*, Anthony Harwood, 'Goodnight cowboy; oscar-winning director Schlesinger dies aged 77', *Daily Mirror*, 26th July 2003, p.17

⁸ Baxter, *op. cit.*

⁹ Gore-Langton, *op. cit.*, *The Daily Telegraph*, 26th July 2003, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ Tom Vallance, 'John Schlesinger', *The Independent*, 26th July 2003, p.20, Baxter, *op. cit.*

for Vallance, it was Schlesinger's 'best feature of the last twenty years', but for Baxter, *Madame Sousatzka* was even worse than *The Believers*.¹¹

Though only in a minority of the obituaries, some contextual justification for the trajectory of Schlesinger's career was offered. For *The Independent*, it was 'the collapse of the British industry' in the 1970s that would lead Schlesinger to work principally in the United States.¹² In *The Guardian*, Schlesinger's statement that "I couldn't bear the idea of not working" was repeated, with Brian Baxter continuing that 'this attitude led to his acceptance of inferior projects'.¹³ The recognition of such historical and contextual factors is, I have argued, of great significance in properly assessing Schlesinger's career, enabling as it does a circumvention of the vagaries of conventional evaluative reviewing practices. Such critical processes have been investigated for the way that they positioned Schlesinger as a creative agent and author – or otherwise – of the films. By historically situating the production and the reception of the films, a number of primary factors influencing the situation and interpretation of Schlesinger's agency emerge.

Schlesinger's creative agency as a director emerges as very much located in, and dependent upon, the varying opportunities for filmmaking in the contexts within which he worked. The beginning of Schlesinger's feature film directing career was situated in the opportunities for independent filmmaking that characterised the British industry in the 1960s and industrial conditions would go on to be of primary importance throughout his career. For example, an industry more amenable to more daring subject matters, together with an uncertainty as to which kinds of films might be commercially successful, would help enable the production of *Midnight Cowboy*, just as the space for smaller productions in the mid-1990s would be a factor in the American theatrical release of *Cold Comfort Farm*. The film industry's recognition of the socio-cultural attractions of particular subject matters would also be significant, such as in the

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Vallance, *op. cit.*

¹³ Baxter, *op. cit.*

purchase of *Darling* by Joseph Levine and his active promotion of the film in the United States.

Schlesinger would also experience a lack of opportunity at different points in his career as a result of specific industrial conditions. Despite professing to wish to continue working in Britain, reduced opportunities for filmmaking in Britain in the 1970s would be a factor in his subsequently working primarily in the United States. The shift in the 1970s to bigger budget filmmaking in America and fewer opportunities for smaller, potentially more personal films would also have consequences for the types of projects available to Schlesinger, a dynamic that would, on the whole, continue to present challenges to Schlesinger and other established directors.

In addition to being subject to filmmaking opportunities, Schlesinger's agency would be regulated by agents and conditions within the film production process. Boundaries to authority would include the intervention of organisations such as Film Finances and the British Board of Film Classification. The intervention of studios and individual producers would also be significant. For example, the ambitions of EMI and the involvement of Barry Spikings in *Honky Tonk Freeway* would have particular consequences for the fate of the production. Studio regulation would continue to be exercised, apparent in producers' pressure to enhance the violent aspects of *Eye for an Eye* and to moderate the more adult aspects of the content of *The Next Best Thing*. Interventions in the editing of films would also be experienced and would in certain instances be particularly significant.

Also of key importance in the production process would be Schlesinger's collaboration with other film personnel. His relationship with individual producers in the 1960s and 1970s, such as Joseph Janni, Jerome Hellman and Robert Evans would be productive and have considerable consequences for the development of Schlesinger's career. Creative negotiations with writers such as Frederic Raphael, Colin Welland and Penelope Gilliatt would be similarly fruitful, if characterised by some conflict, particularly the case with the latter. The contributions of actors, heightened by the improvisation encouraged by Schlesinger, would also be evident in the film's productions. Productive working relationships with actors, heightened no

doubt by Schlesinger's own experience as an actor, would be a feature of his directing career. More conflictual contributions by actors, such as Madonna, would also have effects upon the agency exercised by Schlesinger.

Subsequent to the production of the films, processes of distribution, exhibition and promotion would have consequences for the reception of the films and consequently for Schlesinger's reputation. Apparent issues with the distribution or exhibition of *Sunday Bloody Sunday* and *Yanks* have been noted. Most notably, *Honky Tonk Freeway*'s intended release by A.F.D. and its subsequent transfer to Universal would have particular repercussions for the film's reception. Inappropriate or inadequate marketing has been cited as appearing for *Sunday Bloody Sunday* and *The Day of the Locust*, while the promotion of *Darling* in the United States was more satisfactory and extensive.

While collaboration and conflict with other people and organisations would be apparent in the films' productions, other evidence points to Schlesinger's personal contributions, located as they necessarily were in other determinants. His contributions to scripts and their revisions, his credits as producer on *The Falcon and the Snowman* and *The Believers*, as well as his role in securing the theatrical release of *Cold Comfort Farm*, point to some of the ways in which he assumed authority in the production of the films. While it is difficult to assess suggestions of the 'latitude' Schlesinger may have taken in the realisation of scripts, thus compromising budgets and schedules, it might be inferred that such departures, together with the re-writes and improvisations that he often encouraged, were evidence of his personal creative agency. Continuing aspirations to imbue later, more commercial and generic films with his interests in detail and character indicate a degree of persistence of Schlesinger's creative agency, despite such apparent incongruities being disapproved of by critics. Various, often unproductive efforts to get film projects off the ground similarly indicate a continuing personal investment.

The sense of his personal agency would be enhanced by Schlesinger in publicity and would coincide with and reinforce emerging notions of the director, and of Schlesinger himself, as an auteur. His discourse in the 1960s and into the 1970s about

himself and his relationship to the films, as well as his thoughts on filmmaking in both Britain and America, would augment the growing sense in reviewing of his increasingly artistic status. Such a status, together with the films' critical and commercial successes, would in turn have an effect on his filmmaking opportunities, securing the confidence of financiers, studios and actors.

The thesis has attempted to historically account for the ways in which Schlesinger's agency was located in industrial conditions and practices in order to correct the representation of Schlesinger's creative authority in the film reviews appearing in the press. Within the reviews, the broad consensus appeared that Schlesinger had, by the late 1960s and early 1970s, achieved the status of an auteur, but that the quality of his films gradually declined, with Schlesinger surrendering his artistic integrity and succumbing to the lure of a more commercial, less adventurous cinema. Just as actual conditions of production have been investigated throughout the thesis, the conventions and shifting dynamics of film reviewing have been considered as historically situated rather than as proceeding solely and unproblematically from a transcendent evaluative practice. Subject to the latter approach, the reviews would indicate that Schlesinger's apparent decline was a purely artistic and individual one. A contextual consideration of reception, together with the analysis of specific factors influencing production, allows for a more nuanced account of the conditions in which the films were made and received.

The appraisals of the films appearing in reviews in the 1960s largely coincided with existing critical conventions as well as with emerging tendencies towards increasingly artistic evaluations, a dynamic which would see a gradual assimilation of the notion of the director as auteur. The increased incidence of high art terminology, greater degrees of interpretation and attention to thematic continuity noted in the study of auteurist reviewing discourse was significantly reflected in the reviews appearing at the height of the assimilation of auteurist conceptualisations in the press, namely the late 1960s and early 1970s. Such a reflection is indicative of the historical location of reviewing and to some degree provides a context for the artistic evaluation of Schlesinger's work in the period. He would continue to be judged against such an

evaluative, individualist-centred criteria, against which Schlesinger's subsequent work would be met with some incomprehension and viewed as emanating from a personal decline.

Against such perspectives characterising the reviews of the films, some broad areas emerge that help contextualise representations of Schlesinger's activity. Firstly, Schlesinger's status as a trans-Atlantic filmmaker would have particular effects on the films' reception in the press. It would be this aspect of Schlesinger's identity – his nationality – that would surface in reviews and commentary. As noted in the introduction to the thesis, potential difficulties for industry figures and reviewers with Schlesinger's sexual orientation and religion would be distinctly less evident. While, at some points, accusations of Schlesinger's critical attitude to America and its values would issue from critics on both sides of the Atlantic, indicating a trenchant approach within the films, the critics' own wider national perspectives and concerns would also be of significance. For example, diverging appraisals of *Midnight Cowboy*, with British reviewers praising the representation of New York and American reviewers critical of it, point to the significance of the national perspective of critics and its influence on how films are received. British anxieties about an exodus of talent were also in evidence, as was an ambivalence regarding EMI's American-based big-budget approach to filmmaking, each potentially contributing to the critics' negativity.

Concerns regarding EMI's activity in the late 1970s and early 1980s also point to another factor affecting the reception of the films, namely reviewers' animosity to highly commercial approaches to filmmaking. Such positions would be tangible in the negative association of *The Day of the Locust* with recent disaster films, *Pacific Heights* with preceding high concept films, as well as the seeming commercial excess of *Honky Tonk Freeway*, associated as it would be with the failure of films such as *Heaven's Gate*. Viewed as a product of the marketplace rather than a potential film author,¹⁴ the

¹⁴ Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood*, University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas, 1994, p.34

reception of such films would provide a contrast with that of a smaller, consequently potentially more personal project, such as *Cold Comfort Farm*.

A further context working to influence the appraisal of films directed by Schlesinger would appear to relate to critics' generic expectations. Critics would consistently highlight the incongruity of Schlesinger's various changes of direction, finding him unsuited to the more generic film projects, such as *Marathon Man*, *Honky Tonk Freeway* and *The Believers*. A recurring difficulty for critics would be the apparent tension between the purported requirements of particular genre films and Schlesinger's continued attempts to imbue them with seriousness and his persisting interests in detail, social significance and nuanced human drama. For example, critics would generally be hostile to socially significant elements in *Marathon Man*, seeing in them a cynical attempt to infuse the film with superficial seriousness, while a more nuanced treatment of dramatic elements in *The Believers* would be similarly disavowed. While it has not been in the remit of the thesis to consider the validity of such dissonance in textual terms, alternative, or contextual, perspectives on such evaluations are however, available. As indicated, such criticisms can be read against generic expectations; Schlesinger's complaint about the reductive classificatory tendencies of film critics¹⁵ should be considered. It has also been noted that such a blend has at times been viewed as resulting from the tension between the requisites of commercial cinema and the persistence of Schlesinger's interests, indicating a recognition of the limitations within which Schlesinger was working. Additionally, more positive responses to the merging of broad generic features and more serious elements have been noted. Appraisals such as David Robinson's review of *Marathon Man* and Julian Petley's response to *The Believers* are indicative of a more receptive approach to such an otherwise derided synthesis.

While film reviewing has been investigated for the significant way in which it construed Schlesinger's artistic status, the limits of its influence in a film's – and a director's – success have been highlighted by divergences between the critical and

¹⁵ James Rampton, 'Old black magic', *The Independent* 31st March 1988, p.11

commercial successes of particular films, pointing to the importance of audience approval in a film's overall success. Audiences would seemingly approve of *Midnight Cowboy* even more than the critics had, while they failed to endorse its successor, *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, in contrast to the critics' consensus.

Despite such limitations to the influence of film reviewing, it would be the critics and commentators who would have the last word on Schlesinger's career, with their designations in the obituaries of the director as a 'maverick',¹⁶ 'erratic',¹⁷ lacking in individuality¹⁸ and having ultimately declined¹⁹ largely reflecting the appraisals that had appeared in his lifetime. However, contrasting positions appearing both upon the films' releases and posthumously, together with a recognition of the historically situated nature of the films' production contexts and the reviews themselves, would appear to invite a renewed consideration of the films and of Schlesinger's contribution to the cinema, one less tainted by intimations of commercial compromise and personal decline.

¹⁶ Gore-Langton, *ibid.*

¹⁷ *The Daily Telegraph*, 26th July 2003, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ *The Times*, 26th July 2003, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ Baxter, *op. cit.*

Filmography

Feature Films

A Kind of Loving (1962)

Vic Films, Anglo-Amalgamated

Producer: Joseph Janni

Screenplay: Willis Hall, Keith Waterhouse, based on a novel by Stan Barstow

Leading actors: Alan Bates, June Ritchie, Thora Hird, Bert Palmer, Gwen Nelson

Billy Liar (1963)

Vic Films, Waterhall Productions, Anglo-Amalgamated

Producer: Joseph Janni

Screenplay: Willis Hall, Keith Waterhouse, based on a novel by Keith Waterhouse

Leading actors: Tom Courtenay, Julie Christie, Wilfred Pickles, Mona Washbourne, Ethel Griffies

Darling (1965)

Vic Films, Anglo-Amalgamated

Producer: Joseph Janni

Screenplay: Frederic Raphael, from a story by Frederic Raphael, John Schlesinger and Joseph Janni

Leading actors: Julie Christie, Dirk Bogarde, Laurence Harvey, Roland Curram

Far from the Madding Crowd (1967)

Vic Films, EMI, MGM

Producer: Joseph Janni

Screenplay: Frederic Raphael, based on a novel by Thomas Hardy

Leading actors: Julie Christie, Terence Stamp, Peter Finch, Alan Bates, Fiona Walker

***Midnight Cowboy* (1969)**

Hellman/Schlesinger Production, United Artists

Producer: Jerome Hellman

Screenplay: Waldo Salt, based on a novel by James Leo Herlihy

Leading actors: Dustin Hoffman, Jon Voight, Jon McGiver, Brenda Vaccaro, Barnard Hughes, Sylvia Miles

***Sunday Bloody Sunday* (1971)**

A Vectia Film, United Artists

Producer: Joseph Janni

Screenplay: Penelope Gilliatt, David Sherwin (uncredited)

Leading actors: Glenda Jackson, Peter Finch, Murray Head, Peggy Ashcroft

***The Day of the Locust* (1975)**

Paramount

Producer: Jerome Hellman

Screenplay: Waldo Salt, based on a novel by Nathanael West

Leading actors: Donald Sutherland, Karen Black, Burgess Meredith, William Atherton, Geraldine Page

***Marathon Man* (1976)**

Paramount

Producers: Robert Evans, Sidney Beckerman

Screenplay: William Goldman, based on his novel

Leading actors: Dustin Hoffman, Laurence Olivier, Roy Scheider, William Devane, Marthe Keller

***Yanks* (1979)**

United Artists

Producers: Joseph Janni, Lester Persky

Screenplay: Colin Welland, Walter Bernstein, from a story by Colin Welland

Leading actors: Richard Gere, Lisa Eichhorn, Vanessa Redgrave, William Devane

***Honky Tonk Freeway* (1981)**

EMI, Universal

Producers: Don Boyd, Howard W. Koch, Jr

Screenplay: Edward Clinton

Leading actors: William Devane, Beau Bridges, Beverly D'Angelo, Hume Cronyn, Jessica Tandy, Geraldine Page

***The Falcon and the Snowman* (1985)**

Hemdale Film Productions, Orion

Executive Producer: John Daly

Producers: Gabriel Katzka, John Schlesinger

Screenplay: Steven Zaillian, based on the book by Robert Lindsey

Leading actors: Timothy Hutton, Sean Penn, Richard Dysart, David Suchet, Lori Singer

***The Believers* (1987)**

Orion

Executive Producer: Edward Teets

Producers: Michael Childers, John Schlesinger, Beverly J. Camhe

Screenplay: Mark Frost, based on the novel *The Religion* by Nicholas Conde

Leading actors: Martin Sheen, Helen Shaver, Harley Cross, Robert Loggia

***Madame Sousatzka* (1988)**

Cineplex-Odeon, Universal

Producer: Robin Dalton

Screenplay: Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, John Schlesinger, based on the novel by Bernice Rubens

Leading actors: Shirley MacLaine, Peggy Ashcroft, Twiggy, Shabana Azmi, Navin Chowdhry

Pacific Heights (1990)

Morgan Creek Productions, Twentieth Century Fox

Executive Producers: Gary Barber, David Nicksay, James G. Robinson, Joe Roth

Producers: Scott Rudin, William Sackheim

Screenplay: Daniel Pyne

Leading actors: Melanie Griffith, Matthew Modine, Michael Keaton, Laurie Metcalf

The Innocent (1993)

DEFA-Studio für Spielfilme, Miramax

Executive Producer: Ann Dubinet

Producers: Norma Heyman, Wieland Schulz-Keil, Chris Sievernich

Screenplay: Ian McEwan, based on his novel

Leading actors: Anthony Hopkins, Isabella Rossellini, Campbell Scott, Hart Bochner

Eye for an Eye (1996)

Paramount

Producers: Michael I. Levy, Michael Polaire

Screenplay: Amanda Silver, Rick Jaffa, from the novel by Erika Holzer

Leading actors: Sally Field, Ed Harris, Kiefer Sutherland, Joe Mantegna, Olivia Burnette

The Next Best Thing (2000)

Paramount

Executive Producers: Gary Lucchesi, Lewis Manilow, Ted Tannebaum

Producers: Tom Rosenberg, Richard Wright, Linne Radman, Leslie Dixon, Marcus Viscidi, Meredith Zamsky

Screenplay: Thomas Ropelewski

Leading actors: Madonna, Rupert Everett, Benjamin Bratt, Ileana Douglas, Malcolm Stumpf

Television Films

***Separate Tables* (1983)**

HBO, HTV, Primetime Television

Executive Producer: Colin Callender

Producers: Edie Landau, Ely A. Landau

Screenplay: Terence Rattigan (1958 screenplay)

Leading actors: Julie Christie, Alan Bates, Claire Bloom, Irene Worth

***An Englishman Abroad* (1983)**

BBC

Producer: Innes Lloyd

Screenplay: Alan Bennett

Leading actors: Alan Bates, Coral Browne, Peter Chelsom, Vernon Dobtcheff

***A Question of Attribution* (1991)**

BBC

Producer: Innes Lloyd

Screenplay: Alan Bennett

Leading actors: James Fox, David Calder, Geoffrey Palmer, Prunella Scales

***Cold Comfort Farm* (1995)**

BBC, Gramercy Pictures

Executive Producers: Richard Broke, Antony Root

Producer: Alison Gilby

Screenplay: Malcolm Bradbury, from the novel by Stella Gibbons

Leading actors: Eileen Atkins, Kate Beckinsale, Sheila Burrell, Ian McKellen, Stephen Fry, Joanna Lumley

***The Tale of Sweeney Todd* (1998)**

Showtime

Executive Producers: Gary Dartnall, Robert Halmi, Jr., Peter Shaw

Producer: Ted Swanson

Screenplay: Peter Buckman

Leading actors: Ben Kingsley, Campbell Scott, Joanna Lumley, Selina Boyack

Documentary Films

***Sunday in the Park* (1956)**

Face of London Productions

Directors, producers, writers: Basil Appleby and John Schlesinger

***Terminus* (1961)**

British Transport Films

Producer: Edgar Anstey

Writer: John Schlesinger

***Visions of Eight* (1973)**

MGM, EMI

Executive Producer: David L. Wolper

Producer: Stan Margulies

Directors: Juri Ozerov, Mai Zetterling, Arthur Penn, Michael Pfleghar, Kon Ichikawa, Claude Lelouch, Milos Forman, John Schlesinger

Schlesinger directed the final section of the anthology, 'The Longest'.

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