

“There is no such thing as British cinema,” François Truffaut once said, never at a loss for provocative exaggeration. Well, well! Who would have thought that our François suffered from historical amnesia? Let’s look at the evidence... Not only has Great Britain spawned filmmakers of the stature of Chaplin and Hitchcock (Hitchcock’s career in Britain before going to Hollywood produced such masterpieces as *The Lady Vanishes* and above all *The 39 Steps*). In addition, England became a second home to such eminent filmmakers as Kubrick, Losey, Lester, and even intermittently welcomed Antonioni (*Blow-Up*), Polanski (*Repulsion*) or Skolimowski (*Moonlighting*).

The fact is that as early as the 1930s, British cinema created a school of documentary filmmaking (Grierson) with a reputation for excellence that was carried on for decades, right up to Free Cinema (in the 1950s) and to the BBC of today. Then with the emergence of Laurence Olivier, David Lean and Carol Reed, not to mention Noel Coward, British cinema was unequivocally established. The famous question that had echoed around the world, “To be or not to be, that is the question”, was no longer apropos, other than much later to bring a smile to the lips of Ernst Lubitsch in his film of that name. With *The Third Man*, *Brief Encounter* and *Henry V*, British cinema had taken on an international dimension and brought several unforgettable masterpieces to the film archives. *The Third Man* dealt with the Cold War, the sewers of Vienna and Orson Welles in an Expressionist fashion; *Henry V* brought to life the illuminated manuscript of the *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, while *Brief Encounter*, the story of an ordinary man and woman who were too sensible to give everything up for love, ends with the smouldering ashes of a furtive love affair in the chilly atmosphere of an English train station at tea time.

If Laurence Olivier (followed much later by Kenneth Branagh) is intimately associated with Shakespeare, David Lean is Charles Dickens reincarnated as a filmmaker, as the films *Oliver Twist* and especially *Great Expectations* demonstrate; but that was before he indelibly transformed his art with the portrayal of a prisoner held by the Japanese (*The Bridge on the River Kwai*) or an epic desert hero in *Lawrence of Arabia*, both of which bear comparison to *A Passage to India*. But then British comedy films came into their own: *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, *Passport to Pimlico*, *Whisky Galore*, all hilarious comedies where phlegmatic irony and the banter of wry humour triumph completely over conventionality. In Robert Hamer’s *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (voted the 6th best film of all time, in a referendum held by the British film Institute in 1999), the humour is dark and the cynical tone perfectly suits Dennis Price, the hero who eliminates, one after another, all those who stand between him and his ambition to hold the title of Duke. As for Alec Guinness, his flowing discourse and the comic brilliance of his disguises enable him to play no less than eight roles as members of the Ascoyne family, including a woman... a delightful inspiration that he was very proud of. In this tour de force, he was a worthy precursor of Peter Sellers, another comic genius and one of the most inventive actors of all times, with his extraordinary talent for metamorphosis, his mock awkwardness and his highly physical acting under an imperturbably mobile physiognomy.

Throughout its history, British cinema has had reason to be proud of its pantheon of great actors, whose origins were often the stage: Rex Harrison, Robert Newton, Margaret Rutherford, Valerie Hobson, Joan Greenwood, Alastair Sim, Trevor Howard, John Gielgud, Jean Simmons, John Mills, Dirk Bogarde, James Mason, David Niven, Richard Burton, Vanessa Redgrave, Terence Stamp, Robert Morley, Alan Bates, and Richard Harris, to mention only a few.

British cinema is also about creative duos: Launder and Gilliat (best film *The Rake’s Progress*, a Lubitsch-style satire about a debauched cad inspired by Hogarth), and the Boulting brothers. However, Powell and Pressburger are by far and away front-runners in the history of cinema. If David Lean is the Dickens of British cinema, Michael Powell is its Swift. Most of his films, made with his friend Emeric Pressburger, are notable for their liveliness, the inventiveness of their mise en scène and rich, sparkling direction of the actors. In a remarkable series, they brought us *The Life and Death*

of *Colonel Blimp* (about the glories and absurdities of an ageing colonel under the British Raj – perhaps their best film), but also *A Matter of Life and Death*, *Black Narcissus*, *The Red Shoes*, *The Tales of Hoffmann*: all major works that blend genres, styles and successes. Powell also created another classic on his own: *Peeping Tom*.

For the horror film also haunted the British Isles and its famous studios: The Hammer Studio took on Peter Cushing and Christopher Lee with a mission to resuscitate Frankenstein and Dracula, Jekyll and Hyde, in the competent hands of filmmakers like the gifted Terence Fisher, Val Guest, Michael Carreras and Freddie Francis.

British cinema is also shows empathy for a working class that, contrary to the title of the Italian Elio Petri's famous film, rarely goes to paradise: with Tony Richardson (*A Taste of Honey* but also *Tom Jones*), Karel Reisz (*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, but also *Morgan: A Suitable Case for Treatment*) and Lindsay Anderson (*This Sporting Life* but also *If...*, which won the 1969 Palme d'or).

In 1973, thanks to Sarah Miles, Alan Bridges (*The Hireling*) was awarded the Palme d'or.

The years went by. In the 1970s and 1980s, one of Britain's greatest producers, David Puttnam, set his sights on achieving victory at the Festival de Cannes. He succeeded, with works as varied as *Bugsy Malone*, directed by Alan Parker (a musical comedy in which the gangsters are twelve years old), *The Duellists*, directed by Ridley Scott (the wager of a duel that lasts an hour and a half), *Midnight Express*, also directed by Alan Parker (a film recounting the mishaps of a drug-runner in Turkish prisons, in which the daring mise en scène presents a damning portrayal of brutal treatment), and then *Chariots of Fire*, directed by Hugh Hudson. Finally, he reached his goal by carrying off the Palme d'or in 1986 for *The Mission*, directed by Roland Joffé, thereby demonstrating that in most of his films, the producer played a central role, so obstinate was he in his desire to share his vision.

Over the course of these two prestigious decades, great British filmmakers have come onto the world stage with even more exciting works. In this regard, we can cite Ken Loach, one of the most assiduous "Cannes" directors and an untiring opponent of social injustice and political turmoil; the refinement of a director like John Boorman, successfully navigating between the "film noir" genre, Arthurian legend and the most personal intimacy (*Hope and Glory*); Mike Leigh, the uncontested master of compassion (*Naked, Secrets & Lies*, Palme d'or 1996); James Ivory, the most British of the American film directors, who portrays the uncompromising twilight of the British aristocracy (*A Room with a View, Howards End, The Remains of the Day*); Peter Greenaway, filmmaker, digital-multimedia artist, encyclopaedist (*The Draughtsman's Contract, The Belly of an Architect*) whose hyper-acute intelligence delights in transporting his aestheticism and his passion for numbers from one art form to another; the uproarious Monty Python with the two Terrys (Jones and Gilliam)*; the prolific Michael Winterbottom (*Jude*); and last but not at all least, Stephen Frears, with his debonair self-mockery and vengeful humour, from whom at least three films – *The Grifters, Dangerous Liaisons* and *The Queen* – will take their place in the annals of film history as absolute models of subversive charm, stylistic effect and heart-felt elegance .

What new works does tomorrow have in store for us from directors like Andrea Arnold, Lynne Ramsay, Steve McQueen, Peter Mullan, Shane Meadows, Emily Young, and Thomas Clay?

As Rudyard Kipling would say, that is another story.

Gilles Jacob

*In Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life*, for example, we delight in seeing fish with human heads greet each other politely in an aquarium, or the famous discomfiture of young executives with their attaché-cases who are being exterminated by old anarchistic employees hitting them with the blades of ventilation fans.