REPORT

British Culture and Society in the 1970s
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The 1970s is gradually returning from its long exile as the pariah of British cultural studies—tasteless, uninteresting, economically and artistically moribund—marooned between the vibrant 1960s and the entrepreneurial 1980s. Readers of this journal await with interest the forthcoming publication of two collections: 1970s British Cinema, edited by Robert Shail for BFI/Palgrave, and Don’t Look Now? British Cinema in the 1970s, edited by Paul Newland for Intellect, the latter arising from a conference at Exeter University in July 2007 that was reported on in these pages (JBCTV, 5: 1, 2008, pp. 162–4).

One of the great strengths of the Portsmouth conference—held under the auspices of the 1970s Research Group led by Professor Sue Harper and based in the School of Creative Arts, Film and Media—was to move outwards from a focus on film, or even film and television. The conference net was cast as widely as possible (forty-five papers that ranged from the high avant-garde to The Wombles), in order to capture something of the rich diversity of cultural practices that characterise this decade—if we take the trouble to peel away those layers of critical prejudice that have obscured a recognition and understanding of what was going on. This was the burden of Richard Weight’s opening keynote address, offering a historical overview that interrogated the conventional view of the decade. He argued persuasively that many of the innovations of the 1960s, shorn of the burden of that decade’s idealism, gradually permeated into the deeper recesses of British social and cultural life in the 1970s, as Britain ‘fumbled and stumbled towards a meritocratic post-imperial society’.

Developments in avant-garde practice, part of the remit of the Portsmouth 1970s group, were particularly well served. Gillian Whiteley focused on Welfare State International, a nomadic collection of artists, musicians and performers who pioneered the concept of a temporary, site-specific, multimedia performance (ephemeral but provocative), that offered a radical new way in which artists might work. Her paper was complemented by Kirsten Forkert’s on
Artists’ Union (1972–83), a group that also explored the political and cultural function of art and the artist, by forming a union and joining the Labour movement in order to work for radical change. Jack Newinger considered the work of Amber Collective, the first regionally based film workshop, whose ‘rescue recordings’ tried to document and celebrate the achievements of working-class culture in the North East, in a period of severe economic recession and the decline of traditional industries. In the process, Amber redefined the Griersonian documentary ethos and the role of independent film-makers. Duncan White demonstrated how British practitioners gave a particular inflection to the concept of ‘Expanded Cinema’ popularised by the American Gene Youngblood. He argued that film-makers such as Malcolm Le Grice or Tamara Krikorian sought to develop a materialist practice that disrupted the boundaries of conventional cinema in order to critique an increasingly commodified and institutionalised mainstream film culture. An analogous attempt to explore the relationship between technology and aesthetic expression was analysed by William Fowler who looked at the use of super 8 film during the 1970s by Derek Jarman, Anna Thew and Tina Keane, as well as DJ Don Letts’ *The Punk Rock Movie*.

Three further papers looked at how women artists/film-makers could try to reposition themselves through formal aesthetic innovation. Sean Kaye-Smith discussed Jane Arden, another radical artist whose work in film, television and theatre was challenging aesthetically and politically, exploring the different forms through which women’s liberation could be represented, as in her resonantly titled Arts Lab piece: *Vagina Rex and the Gas Oven* (1969). Catherine Fowler discussed Sally Potter’s early dance/film work as representative of a number of women artists who were drawn by the non-hierarchical nature of mixed media presentations that had a strong element of reflexivity. Patti Gaal-Holmes focused on Lis Rhodes’ *Light Reading* (1979) and Sally Potter’s *Thriller* (1979) and she was the programmer for a valuable early evening session in which a number of rarely shown avant-garde 16mm short films were screened. Introduced by David Curtis and Steven Ball of the British Artists’ Film and Video Study Collection at Central St Martins School of Art and Design, the selection included Lis Rhodes’ *Dresden Dynamo* (1971), Malcolm Le Grice’s *Berlin Horse* (1970) and Marilyn Halford’s *Footsteps* (1974).

There were equally rich pickings for those tempted by the tawdriness of popular culture. Steve Chibnall contributed a lively history of that neglected form, the travelogue, which, by the 1970s, had declined from its earnest ethnographic origins. He considered the work of the most...
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successful British practitioner, Harold Baim, complete with a screening of the (alas) unforgettable Telly Savalas Looks at Portsmouth. Equally engaging was Keith Johnson’s paper on The Wombles phenomenon, tracing its evolution from Elizabeth Beresford’s collection of short stories through the animated BBC series to big screen stardom in Wombling Free (1977), an extract from which became another unfortunately indelible memory of the conference. Peter Burleigh and Andrea Ochsner focused on the great British sitcom, at its zenith in the 1970s, and argued that there was a persistent theme of male entrapment in programmes such as Steptoe & Son, The Likely Lads and Rising Damp, which explored the vexed issue of upward mobility. Gavin Schaffer’s paper on another successful sitcom, Till Death Do Us Part, focused on race, exploring how the views expressed by Alf Garnett (Warren Mitchell) reflected broader social anxieties especially about immigration and race.

Gender issues were the focus of Peter Hutchings’ paper on Brian Clemens which centred on the television series Thriller (1973–6) for which he was the principal writer. Here, predatory males habitually stalk female victims but this structural predictability nevertheless had the power to unsettle gender representation through its bleakness, depicting a world in which the usual positive of heterosexual coupling had completely broken down. Adam Locks explored the equally disturbing world of low-budget gothic horror director Norman J. Warren, whom he dubbed the ‘Anglo Argento’. Esther Sonnet also focused on horror: a series of Anglo-American productions such as Persecution (1973), in which aging Hollywood actresses (in this case Lana Turner) functioned as symbolic markers of cultural, sexual and bodily decline. No such decline was visible in Peri Bradley’s paper on high camp comedy in both television – Are You Being Served? and The Dick Emery Show – and on film: the Carry On and Confessions Of series. She argued that such carnivalesque representations also have the potential to unsettle gender relations through a caricatured exaggeration of sexual differences. Similarly, Claire Hines explored parody and camp comedy in Roger Moore’s performances as James Bond, arguing that they facilitated the renegotiation of an outmoded machismo in order to sustain the series’ currency. Robert Shail also looked at the ways in which Moore’s persona was used to realign Bond’s appeal after Connery’s departure. Chris Martin offered an interesting overview of film music in the 1970s, moving across the innovative Clockwork Orange (Wendy Carlos), the classical The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes (Miklós Rózsa) and the generic: Roy Budd’s plangent, jazzy score for Get Carter.
Several papers discussed other forms of popular culture. Stephen Hill looked at *Smash Hits*, the popular music magazine launched in 1978 that was both visually innovative (A4 size in glossy colour) and introduced a more playful and ironic, postmodern sensibility into the discussion of popular music. He argued persuasively that this was an important moment, occluded in standard accounts, showing the work of Nick Logan before he went on to found *Face*. James Chapman also discussed an important moment in 1970s popular culture, the publication in 1977 of *2000 A.D.* – the birthplace of Judge Dredd and the popularisation of dystopian sci-fi – which showed the change from traditional adventure comics to more generically specific ones that had more violent content. Laurel Foster explored the ideological tensions at work in the representations of femininity in both mainstream women’s magazines (*Woman’s Own*) and in radical feminist ones (*Spare Rib*). She noted that these apparently antithetical publications had an overlapping readership and that both were preoccupied with the difficulty of depicting women as traditional home-makers and as working women with limited time for domestic arrangements.

Other papers looked at subcultures and broader movements in 1970s culture. Dave Allen questioned the class distinction between mods and rockers, as well as exploring the validity and the reliability of personal accounts of cultural phenomena, thereby setting off a hare that ran throughout the conference. Howard Batho and Rosemary Harden, drawing on the work contained in their retrospective exhibition in Bath in 2007, discussed 1977 Punk fashion with its do-it-yourself ethic that contained a surprising diversity of expressive designs. Claire Monk also discussed Punk, in particular its function as a subculture that was as liberating for young women. She argued that this was absent in most Punk films with the contrasting exceptions of *Jubilee* (1976) and the neglected *Breaking Glass* (1980). Sally Shaw focused on Afro-Caribbean communities, arguing that a gulf had opened up between the generations, with second generation rejecting Pentecostal religion in favour of secular ideologies: Rastafarianism and the Black Power Movement, a theme explored in *Pressure* (1979) and *Babylon* (1980). Gwilym Thear explored the little-known British Self-Sufficiency movement which cohered in the 1970s around a set of principles and political beliefs that influenced such diverse television programmes as *The Good Life* and the post-apocalyptic *Survivors*. Elizabeth Tuson analysed the failure of New Brutalism whose ethical building code in which the materiality of, say, concrete construction was openly and honestly expressed was vilified in the media as ugly and alienating. Tim Gough looked at an analogous reaction to the housing
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project at Alexandra Road in Camden made from pre-cast concrete. Turning to interior design, Jo Turney argued that, despite their bad press, 1970s styles demonstrated a 'maturation of permissiveness' through their progressive use of intimate social and personal spaces.

One would expect Ken Russell to feature in any discussion of the 1970s, and this conference was no exception, graced as it was by a talk from Russell himself, guided by his interlocutor Mark Kermode. Russell reviewed his films and television work, concentrating, perhaps inevitably, on the furore that surrounded The Devils (1971), undoubtedly one of the key works of the decade. Julian Petley returned to this controversy in his paper, arguing that the critical vilification of the film represented a backlash against 1960s permissiveness and liberalism. David Sorfa compared Russell’s film with a Polish version, Matka Joanna od Aniolów, made a decade earlier in black and white and with a very different idea of what events are important in this frequently revisited story. Adrian Garvey discussed Russell’s The Boy Friend (1971), expertly elucidating its complexities as a 1950s evocation of the 1920s seen through the perspective of the 1970s and thus a subversive take on the conventions of the Hollywood musical. Dennis Rothermel explored the lesser-known work of another auteur, Joseph Losey’s first four films after his collaboration with Harold Pinter: The Assassination of Trotsky (1972), A Doll’s House (1973), Galileo (1975) and The Romantic Englishwoman (1976). John Izod provided a fascinating insight into Lindsay Anderson’s O Lucky Man! (1973), using Anderson’s papers to elucidate the role and function of Alan Price in this seminal film. Raphael Thöne offered a detailed consideration of Malcolm Arnold’s score for a ballet, The Three Musketeers, which he worked on intensely in 1975 but never completed.

Film producers are rarely thought of as auteurs, but my own paper argued that Michael Klinger, the most successful independent British producer in the 1970s, could be considered in this light. I commented on the variety of Klinger’s films, but dwelt on his ambitious international action-adventure film Gold (1974). The previous evening, Sandy Lieberson had also, albeit implicitly, made the case for the producer’s importance through a discussion of his work during this decade. Lieberson produced Russell’s Mahler (1974) and Lisztomania (1975), but his central achievement came through his partnership with David Puttnam. This included feature films—That’ll Be the Day (1973) and Stardust (1974)—but also little known documentaries. His talk ended with a screening of Swastika (1973), an un-narrated assemblage of colour film from the American National Archive, which, alongside
Double-Headed Eagle: Hitler’s Rise to Power 1918–1933, was designed to show the banality of evil.

A number of papers explored the role of institutions. Sian Barber had delved into the British Board of Film Censors’ archives to examine its attitudes. Illuminatingly, she eschewed the familiar *causes célèbres* (*The Devils*, *Straw Dogs*) in order to focus on mainstream cinema, including sexploitation films such as *Confessions of a Window Cleaner* (1974). She showed the inherent inequalities in the Board’s tastes, particularly its double standards regarding male and female sexual pleasure. David McQueen argued that although both the BBC and ITV gave prime-time slots to their flagship current affairs programmes, *Panorama* and *World in Action*, this public confidence masked tensions and debates about their impartiality and balance. Julian Matthews neatly demonstrated how *John Craven’s Newsround* was introduced by the BBC in 1972 simply because there was a ten-minute gap in the schedules created by American programmes’ advertising breaks. However, this opportunity was used creatively, Matthews argued, to inform younger viewers about current events, contextualising stories in a way that was often absent in adult news bulletins. Sean Tunney’s paper explored how the Labour Party sought to counter what it saw as the problem of the British Press – its unrepresentative ownership by a few individuals or companies that were predominantly anti-Labour.

Although most papers had discussed methodological issues as well as content, three looked explicitly at Marxist theory and practice. Anthony Dunn used the contrasting views expressed in Raymond Williams’ *Marxism and Literature* (1977) and Herbert Marcuse’s *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1977) to explore the influence of Marxism in the academy at this time and its possible usefulness for contemporary critical writing. Rochelle Simmons approached Marxism through the lens of John Berger’s art criticism, fiction and film-making, including his work with the Swiss director Alain Tanner. Peter Billingham argued that Edward Bond’s *Lear* was a paradigm of the crisis facing revolutionary socialism in the 1970s. These issues were taken up by the final keynote speaker David Edgar, who offered a lucid account of the development of political drama during the 1970s, both his own work and that of his fellow left-wing playwrights. He identified the abolition of the theatre licensing act in 1968 as the catalyst for the explosion of radical drama, which had the capacity to be innovative and genuinely topical as well as the confidence to be political challenging, secure in the belief that fundamental social and cultural change was at hand. Edgar argued that the 1970s was a broken-backed decade, distinguishing between an early period in which the rebelliousness
of the 1960s was continued and a second half which saw the gradual ascendency of the values and attitudes that returned the Conservatives to power in 1979 under Margaret Thatcher.

Edgar’s incisive overview provided a stimulating introduction to the final plenary discussion whose remarkably full attendance testified to the way in which the conference had sustained and nurtured the participation of its contributors, a tribute to the organisational abilities, as well as the intellectual endeavour, of Sue Harper and the 1970s Research Group. Debate ranged widely over many of the key issues that had emerged. There was a shared sense that the sheer diversity of cultural practices—the manifest eclecticism, variety (and pervasive hybridity) of styles and forms—showed a malleable understanding of cultural values, that things were up for grabs in a way that was both bewildering and exciting. How to recognise and account for this diversity was a taxing methodological and critical challenge as no obvious metanarrative suggested itself. The caricatural 1970s invoked in my opening paragraph could be cast aside confidently, but what do we put in its place? Indeed, the whole process of carving up culture into decades was acknowledged as itself intensely problematic, fitting some cultural practices far better than others and perhaps obscuring certain slowly gestating processes altogether. However, what the conference demonstrated conclusively was the value of detailed and painstaking archival work in attempting to uncover those processes. Much had clearly been achieved, but much more remained to be undertaken, as shown in Dylan Cave’s presentation of the potential of the, as yet uncatalogued, collection of trailers for 1970s films held by the British Film Institute. Hopefully this intensely rewarding conference will find its fulfilment in the further work that it will undoubtedly inspire.

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