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BRITISH CINEMA INTO THE SIXTIES



BY JULIAN UPTON

For film exhibitors who'd been operating during the halcyon days of cinema-going in the 1940s (when, at their peak, UK cinema admissions had reached a high of 1,635 million¹), the dawn of the fifties — particularly from the moment when Queen Elizabeth II's coronation alerted almost everyone in Britain to the possibilities of television — instigated a long period of decline that no trend in film production could really counter.

It wasn't just television that was leading to plummeting cinema admissions (from 1,395 million in 1950 to 581 million in 1959²). The government-set quota demanding that thirty per cent of all exhibited first features and twenty-five per cent of all second features (B-movies) must be British was also helping to drive the punters away. British films, the exhibitors argued, were drab. They were shabby and amateurish; they couldn't compete with their slick Hollywood counterparts.

The immediate postwar Labour government tried to address the film industry's shortcomings with schemes initiated by the new Board of Trade President, Harold Wilson. In 1948 he instigated the National Film Finance Company (NFFCo) to offer state subsidy to ailing film companies. Soon after, this became the National Film Finance Corporation (NFFC), which had a five-year pot of £5 million with which to stimulate British film production.³ Wilson also proposed the establishment of a levy, named after Treasury official Sir Wilfred Eady. The Eady Levy was to be a tax on all UK cinema tickets sold; the tax would be divided up into a rebate for exhibitors and a fund for producers of British films, to be paid out relative to a British film's earnings at the box office.

Labour lost power in 1951, and the incoming Conservative government was more inclined to distance itself from the British film industry.⁴ But under the Tories' watch, the NFFC did become more commercial, and a more tolerant attitude towards American interest in British films developed. Indeed, the NFFC actually started co-financing films with American distributors. As a result, the proportion of British-made films distributed by American companies doubled between 1954 and 1956.⁵ This took off further when, in 1957, the Eady Levy was finally established on a statutory basis. With British-made films qualifying for ever more handouts and rebates, the Americans quickly resolved to make more films in Britain.

Although it had been an ongoing source of controversy, US influence over and participation in British films — both main features and B-movies — breathed much-needed life into the British film industry from the mid fifties onwards.

BOOM

1955-69

Milking the new 'X' certificate. *Horrors of the Black Museum*.



And enterprising companies such as Hammer were not slow to court their rich American cousins. They gratefully acquiesced to US distributors' demands, such as the casting of US 'stars' in lead roles (for example, the American leading man Brian Donlevy as Professor Quatermass) to maximise the film's market potential back home. And even when the cast and crews remained solidly British (and the narratives decidedly Mittel European), Hammer embraced a punchier, livelier, drive-in style of filmmaking. This paid off in droves with *The Curse of Frankenstein* (57) and *Dracula* (58), which became major box office draws on both sides of the Atlantic and set the studio on the horror path that was soon to define it.

Hammer also understood the power of the new 'X' certificate, which was introduced by the British Board of Film Censors in 1951 to replace 'H' (for Horror) and restrict certain films to the over-sixteens only. Where 'X' had an uncertain beginning, by the mid fifties film marketers were beginning to wear it like a badge of honour. It had actually been introduced to accommodate the increasing amount of non-horror films that were unsuitable for children — films that approached adult themes, not least sex, and social problems more head-on. But, ironically, the enterprising producers of horror films were the first to milk the 'X.' Hammer mischievously re-titled its first adaptation of the BBC *Quatermass* series as *The Quatermass Xperiment* (55), and the company pushed the boundaries of the new certificate with the unprecedented colour blood-letting of *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*.

US schlock, British style. *The Man Without A Body*.



Before long, British Gothic horror had become a mini-boom in itself and American producers were falling over themselves to get a piece of the action. Samuel Z. Arkoff hooked up with Britain's Anglo-Amalgamated for a trio of perverse, colour horror-fests that tried to steal Hammer's thunder: *Horrors of the Black Museum* (59), *Peeping Tom* (59) and *Circus of Horrors* (60). Even Roger Corman got in on the act with *The Masque of the Red Death* (64) and *The Tomb of Ligeia* (64).

At this time, the production of B-movies — still trundling along thanks to a government-set quota and the cinema-going public's refusal to accept less than at least three and half hour's worth of entertainment on one bill — was also enlivened by American interests. The cutback in US B-movie production was leaving provincial American theatres short of programme fillers, so US producers of low budget fare looked to Britain to fill the gap. The result was a spate of British-made but transatlantic-in-tone B-movies, usually starring waning or second-order American stars and tackling heady sci-fi and horror subjects: *Fire Maidens from Outer Space* (56), *The Man Without a Body* (57), *The Headless Ghost* (59).⁶ As cheap and cheerful as these were, they were often slicker-looking than previous British B-films (as budgets could rise as high as a dizzying £40,000, from the usual moth-eaten low of £15,000–£20,000⁷) and often a lot more fun.

Homegrown second features also benefited substantially when they were awarded double Eady fund payouts from 1959.⁸ The next few years saw a

BOOM

1955-69

glut of modest but inventive British Bs, many better than the features they were supporting. The B-movie didn't survive the sixties (double bills came to rely on two 'A' features, or else were abandoned in favour of a main feature and supporting shorts), but the early part of the decade certainly produced some of its best examples: *The Tell-Tale Heart* (60), *THE IMPERSONATOR* (61), *OFFBEAT* (61), *CASH ON DEMAND* (61), *UNEARTHLY STRANGER* (63).

The real US-led renaissance of British cinema, however, didn't take place until the mid 1960s, when a blossoming youth scene, a new Labour government (this time headed by Harold Wilson) and growing amounts of disposable income saw Britain basking in an apparent mood of optimism. The second-wave 'American invasion' was kickstarted by just a handful of films, all produced in Britain by a Hollywood major (United Artists). First, the James Bond outing, *Dr No* (62), British-made and showcasing a new British star in Sean Connery, became a big, sexy hit. But the Bond formula really took off with *From Russia With Love* (63), and by *Goldfinger* (64) had become an international sensation. This much, of course, had been hoped for, if not expected, by the Bond films producers. But the critical and commercial success of *Tom Jones* (63) — which established Albert Finney as a worldwide star, won a brace of international awards, including the Best Picture Oscar, and made more than \$17 million at the US box office (on a budget of \$1 million) — took even United Artists (UA) by surprise. A short time later, the Beatles' *A Hard Day's Night* (64), intended as an ephemeral cash-in on what was perceived (by UA at least) as the group's fleeting success, became a worldwide phenomenon and was lauded as an artistic triumph to boot. Suddenly, British films (importantly, films with a British identity) were not just doing major business internationally, but they seemed cooler and fresher and more vibrant than anything that was coming out of Hollywood's dying studio system.

Hollywood reacted by dispatching executives to London by the plane-load. Nineteen sixty-five became a key year for American film companies setting up operations in Britain. Joining those with established British arms like UA and MGM were Columbia, Universal, Filmways and Embassy.⁹ As Alexander Walker points out, by 1966 "American finance accounted for seventy-five per cent of 'British' first features or co-features given a circuit release." This figure was to rise to a staggering ninety per cent in 1967 and 1968.¹⁰ The new 'British Hollywood' films like *Catch Us If You Can* (65), *The Knack* (65), *Darling* (65), *The Ipcress File* (65), *Life at the Top* (65), *Georgy Girl* (66), *Blowup* (66), *Modesty Blaise* (66), *Kaleidoscope* (66) and *Alfie* (66) all grabbed the coat-tails of *A Hard Day's Night* and embodied the mood of 'swinging London' (in stark contrast to the 'kitchen sink' films of five years earlier, none were set outside the capital) and almost all were sizeable international hits.

But the hike in London-set films also gave rise to what Robert Murphy would later call ‘the anti-swinging London film,’¹¹ several examples of which we focus on in the pages that follow. These constituted the less attractive flipside to the idea that London life was one long, groovy happening. And as downbeat or even unpalatable as some of them were — PRIVILEGE, CHARLIE BUBBLES, THE STRANGE AFFAIR, OUR MOTHER’S HOUSE, BRONCO BULLFROG, DEEP END — they now serve somewhat more effectively as a ‘truer’ record of the times.

The rude health of mainstream British cinema in the mid sixties had a knock-on effect on lower budget and less artistically ambitious enterprises, and all manner of filmmaking outfits started riding the wave. Hammer’s horror films were of a lower quality than ten years earlier, but it didn’t stop the company churning them out profitably enough to win a Queen’s Award to Industry in 1968. Cut-price film producer Tony Tenser’s Tigon Productions was able to strike up alliances with better-resourced US outfits such as American International Pictures (AIP) and Avco Embassy and embark on a slew of exploitation films, one being Michael Reeves’ *Witchfinder General* (68). And the further breakdown of censorship barriers initiated by hip, youth-oriented smashes such as *Blowup* led to a wave of successful British ‘sex’ films, from ‘daring’ comedies like *Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush* (68) and PERCY (71) to the more salacious *School for Sex* (68) and *The Wife Swappers* (70).

So from the dour confines of mid fifties British cinema burst a blast of colour, sex and pop music. And it was paralleled with graphic violence, stark realism and a new preparedness to confront themes that were formerly taboo. By 1967, cinema attendances were still falling (down to 265 million¹²) but the buoyant mood, fervent activity and rising ticket prices more than made up for the decline.

If only it could have lasted.

1 The Cinema Exhibitors’ Association Ltd., <http://www.cinemauk.org.uk/ukcinemasector/admissions/annualukcinemaadmissions1935-2009/> [Last accessed 6 June 2010].

2 Ibid.

3 Sue Harper and Vincent Porter, *British Cinema of the 1950s – The Decline of Deference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.8.

4 Ibid., p.24.

5 Ibid., p.30.

6 Steve Chibnall and Brian McFarlane, *The British ‘B’ Film* (London: BFI, 2010), pp.56–57.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., p.58.

9 Alexander Walker, *Hollywood, England* (London: Orion, 2005 edition), p.288.

10 Ibid. p.339.

11 Robert Murphy, *Sixties British Cinema* (London: BFI, 1992), pp.139–60.

12 Cinema Exhibitors’ Association Ltd., op.cit.