New Perspectives on British Cinema: Going Beyond the ‘Crisis’ in Masculinity.

E. Anna Claydon

In this paper I shall discuss how British cinema and its study, when it focuses upon men, centres upon the articulation of British masculinity as one which is a position of ‘crisis’. I argue that this approach, as a form of cultural determinism, has manufactured a place for British masculinity in between, to mix my metaphors, an academic rock and a hard place, which has meant that, with the exception of works which have only incidentally confronted British films, the analysis of masculinity in the British cinema has been limited to a socio-historical perspective and has not ventured into other methodologies such as narratology or psychoanalysis. I am not, I should state, arguing against the many valuable properties of the socio-historical approach but rather for a technique of analysis which requires a wider interrogation of the text rather than the film as a cultural ‘artefact’. The key activity of this paper, therefore, will be to present a new perspective on how British masculinity can be analysed within film and argue for a positioning of the make, in relationship to the British national cinema, which is not wholly dependent upon the techniques of the cultural historian. I shall draw upon films which will bring us from the earlier wartime movies discussed by Andrew Moor and Jeffrey Walsh to contemporary British films and, as I am offering an avenue for a ‘New Perspectives on British Cinema’, hopefully into a projected future.

Firstly, I want to begin by discussing what exactly it is British cinema studies has described as a ‘crisis’ in masculinity.

What we are seeing here is ‘crisis’ as male hysteria, an acting out of discontent and a projection of that dissatisfaction onto others. Crucially, the discontent is not necessarily one of masculinity as a psychological construct but of British male social identity. The difference is that it is not the psychosexual which is being challenged but the patriarchal, the power structure upon which the identification of Britishness hinges for male subjectivity, as Richard Collier and Arthur Brittan would phrase it, the difference is between masculinity and ‘masculinism’ - the ‘ideology of patriarchy’ (Brittan, Masculinity and Power, 1989, p4 quoted in Collier, Masculinity, Law and the Family, 1995, p6-7). Therefore, what British cinema articulates is not the ‘crisis in masculinity’ but the dilemmas of ideology and identification for modern British men.

British film studies has reader halfway into a discussion of British male identity on the screen but it has only just broached the more complex psychoanalytical ramifications of the power and the subject debate in our national cinema. More typically, writing on British cinema has, in my opinion, centred on a descriptive account which has reiterated the socio-cultural perspective of British cinema.

There are three problems with this methodology as the sole techniques of analysing men in British movies; firstly that it weakens the case for studying British films within the same parameters as other cinemas because it emphasises the contextual rather than balances with the textual, making it secondly, an uncritical ‘anti-cinematic’ national expression (hence Truffaut’s famous criticism of cinema in Britain) and thirdly, that it reinforces and perpetuates the mythology that British cinema is a cinema by and for men.

Now, there is always a grain of truth in any myth. Compared to other cinemas, particularly classical Hollywood cinema, it is notable that rather than melodrama
being the backdrop of the ‘woman’s film’ it is, rather, the dramatic basis for those films which centre upon the discontent of men - and consequently to thin of the ‘crisis’ of British men on film as male hysteria is an apt comparison. However, if it is true that British cinema has entered a post-national era where the watchword is Andrew Higson’s ‘hybridity’ (as he set out in ‘The instability of the national’, British Cinema: Past and Present, 2000), where the cultural input for modern Britain is reflected in a balanced manner in contemporary films, it is important that those of us who focus our studies on British cinema, reconsider both the way in which we examine British films and how others perceive those texts; to encourage that contemporary British cinema, in production and analysis, is seen as less of a cinema by and for Britain’s pro-establishment men and rather a cinema by and for those who make today’s British society - to move beyond the imperial identity.

We just have to consider those British films which achieved popularity in Britain over the last 6-8 years to see the dichotomy in action. Films such as Four Weddings and A Funeral (Mike Newell, 1994), Sliding Doors (Peter Howitt, 1996), Bridget Jones’ Diary (Sharon Maguire, 2001) and Notting Hill (Mike Newell, 2000) cater for an audience which is primarily American, they provide, as modern variations of Jane Austen’s novels, for an audience ready to invest in the sugary sweetness of ‘UK PLC’. Which is not to say that British audiences have not enjoyed the films, but that the profile of the spectators has been more narrowly upper and middle-class. They are fantasias upon an ideal of modern Britishness. More widely popular films, both, in many cases, at the cinema and on television, have been films about working-class people from all backgrounds. From Bhaji on the Beach (Gurinder Chadha, 1992), Brassed Off! (Mark Herman, 1996), The Full Monty (Peter Cattaneo, 1997), Nil By Mouth (Gary Oldman, 1997), Secrets and Lies (Mike Leigh, 1998), Billy Elliot (Stephen Daldry, 2000) and East is East (Damien O’Donnell, 1999) this is the common factor.

The term ‘crisis in masculinity’ is a weak phrase which was always too vague as applied to film and cultural studies and has becomes further confused by the its overuse in the popular press. When originally first used in the mid-eighties as a way of articulating the affect, upon men, of women’s gradual emancipation from the 1940s onwards, the term ‘crisis’ was being used in the specific sense of a psychological ‘crisis’ - that point at which the subject reaches a point of dis-identification with those around him, resulting in a collapsing of the ego. The psychological ‘crisis’ of masculinity contained a social origin within feminism, so male theorists such as Roger Horrocks argued, and consequently the debate surrounding the changing roles of men in the 1980s and ‘90s was framed within the concept of a ‘crisis’ as a configuration of the ‘war of the sexes’. The ‘crisis of masculinity’ became a useful tool to be used in the battle against the equality of the sexes - indeed it still is, with recent surveys keen to focus on post-feminist issues (such as the re-run of the latch-key child debate) rather than equal rights - but the label has been denuded of its original psychoanalytical meaning. The popular middle-brow tabloid press, torn between the debate for equality and the personal ‘crisis’ of every British man in the street, schizophrenically swings between applauding the house-husband and the working mother as exemplars of New Britain, with Tony (and his paternity leave) and Cherie Blair as its King and Queen, and slaughtering the ‘weak’ New Man and the Single Mother retaining the old Tory values it used to vocalise so easily when Thatcherism turned feminist power on its head by making the ultimate symbol of female intellectual power, Margaret Thatcher as prime minister, into a de-feminised parody, more drag queen that woman.
The ‘crisis’ of men in the post-war period is not necessarily a ‘crisis of masculinity’, it is a manifestation of the discontent of men in a changing political world. If it is a crisis of any sort, it is a crisis of British masculinism; the imperial patriarchal identity which has moulded how generations of young men have been brought up - and, if we look at writing on British masculinity covering the post-medieval period, it is easy to determine that there is a theme throughout British literature, history and art, of the patriarchal male identity at odds with the field of production. Consequently, the British culture of power, dominated by male manufacturers, can be understood as an attempt to reiterate masculine forms which society is already, even in the 16th century, trying to reshape; think of the way in which Shakespeare described his proto-feminist Kate as a shrew being tamed, and hoe Elizabeth I transformed England from the phallocracy of her father Henry VIII into the matriarchal state. Remember, Britannia is a woman.

Men have, in these terms, continually existed in a state of flux during the post-medieval period but as female power has become more explicit, via female participation in the public arena, so the change in male roles has also become explicitly part of how we represent society through Art.

I order to demonstrate how we can analyse men in British film as hysterically responding to the diminishing of masculinism, I shall end this by briefly considering the juxtaposition of two films which offer masculinities in the act of working through the movement towards a post-masculinist identity: The Full Monty (1997) and Bhaji on the Beach (1992). The latter film is conventionally discussed in terms of its representation of Asian women, as a ‘woman’s film’, and the significance of the male characters paired with the ‘sisters’ on the beach (‘bhaji’ mean sisters in Urdu), has been considered simply as the foil against which the women’s dramas are played. Therefore, given that Bhaji on the Beach is a classic example of Higson’s post-national ‘hybridity’ in action - although that is not to say that the notion of hybridity is not problematised within the hybrid films of the last decade - it is useful to examine how the masculinism of the male characters (Asian and Anglo) is played out in the film as opposed to its manifestation in The Full Monty.

Balbir (in tracksuit bootoms, a football shirt, trainers, holding a can of lager):
Can’t see a bloody thing. (To Manjit, in shirt, jumper, jeans, smart-casual) I said I can’t see a bloody thing!
Ranjit (in white shirt, black trousers, shoes, business wear): Bulbir... if you could, er, focus. You’d be more bloody helpless.
Balbir: I’ll tell you what’s wrong. Too much brains and not enough balls that’s your problem (Leans on Manjit). Look at him. Ranjit: fills in the forms and I drive the van; but he ain’t noting special, Manjit man, is he, eh? Look at him. your fancy cigarettes and your degree, they couldn’t keep her, eh?
Manjit: Bulbir, drop it, man.
Balbir: Eh?
Ranjit: Manjit.
Balbir: I ain’t the stupid one. I know what I am and I know what to do. And I’ve still got a wife. Ranjit looks up and punches Bulbir, a fight ensues. Manjit tries to stop them getting in between.
Balbir: Hang on... look they’re down there.
Wife -Ginder, son - Amrik.

Gary: Listen, ladies, we are strippers aren’t we?
Gerald: What? Here, now, in this hour? This is a good area this is.

Gerald: Fat, David, is a feminist issue.
Dave: What’s that supposed to mean when it’s at home?
Gerald: I don’t bloody know do I... but it is!
Dave: I try dieting, I do try... the less I eat the fatter I get.
Lomper: So stuff yourself and getthin.
Guy: Oh shut up saggy tits.
They discuss shrinkwrap.
The debt collectors arrive and find themselves faced with a room full of half-naked men.
Dave: Put down and piss off.
Man 1: Fuckin’ hell!
Gerald: Cheers lads.
Dave: It’s not bad this strippin’ lark is it?

In both *Bhaji on the Beach* and *The Full Monty* a key narrative thematic is the idea of being *seen* to do the right thing, what is ‘proper’ within the cultural context. At the heart of both films there is a concern with separated parents and their attempts to hold onto their children; in Cattaneo’s film this is witnessed from the point of view of the father, Gary (Robert Carlyle) - in Chadha’s film it is the mother battling to keep her son from her abusive husband, although a strength of the film is that the issue is not made into a good versus evil, mother versus father, diad; the love of the father for both his wife and child, despite its troubled paranoid manifestation, is made clear narratively.

The ‘crisis of masculinity; is something which British cinema studies should see beyond for the following reasons: a) the phrase has been misappropriated and misused by the dominant socio-historical methodology to articulate what is actually the hysteria of failed masculinism in the post-war environment; b) that, given this misuse, British cinema studies needs to reconsider how it discusses masculinity as a psychosexual condition of identity via addressing the way in which it offers an analysis of the national cinema as a whole; and c) that whilst the representation of men and masculinism is the main dramatic mode in the national cinema, the hybridity of the post-national must include not simply cultural or racial hybridity bit also a re-gendering of contemporary British cinema.