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Windows on the world: Memories of European cinema in 1960s Britain

Memory Studies

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Abstract

During the 1960s, European cinema became increasingly available to British audiences. The expansion of university film societies and art-house cinemas meant that domestic and US productions, which made up the vast majority of films screened in this country, were now in competition with the work of directors such as Bergman, Fellini and Truffaut. Using responses from nearly a thousand participants in an investigation of cultural memory and British cinemagoing in the 1960s, this article explores how these encounters with European cinema are now remembered. While audiences tend to characterise these films as innovative, unusual and cerebral, they are also often thought of as obscure and baffling. This article argues that, however the films are now remembered, British cinema audiences sensed that they were having their eyes opened to new perspectives on the world through their exposure to films from other countries.

Keywords

1960s, Britain, cinema memory, cinemagoing, ethnohistorical research, European cinema

This article is based on a 3-year ethnohistorical research project, financed by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, entitled ‘Cultural Memory and British Cinemagoing of the 1960s’.¹ When the project began gathering material through questionnaires and interviews at the beginning of 2013, very little scholarly work had appeared dealing with how people remembered what going to the cinema had been like during the 1960s. Helen Richards’ (2003) fascinating study of recollections of cinemagoing in Bridgend, South Wales, ended in 1960. Margaret O’Brien’s and Allen Eyles’ edited book on South London cinemas and cinemagoing from the 1920s to the 1960s contains relatively few reminiscences of the 1960s (O’Brien and Eyles, 1993). Trevor Griffiths’ recent study of Scottish cinema and cinemagoing ended in 1950 (Griffiths, 2013), while Andrew Martin’s work on Scottish memories of twentieth-century cinema devoted only part of one chapter to the 1960s (Martin, 2000: 113–118). Ian Breakwell’s and Paul

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Hammond's (1990) collection of reminiscences of cinemagoing around the world included only a tiny number of impressionistic accounts from Britain in the 1960s (Norden, 1990; Smyth, 1990). Christine Geraghty (2000) endeavoured, in the first chapter of her book *British Cinema of the 1950s*, to use a variety of cinematic and written sources (journalists and sociologists in particular) in order to shed light on the experience of going to the pictures in the 1950s and early 1960s, but the focus fell predominantly on the earlier period and the later 1960s fell beyond her project's scope (pp. 1–20). Janet Thumim, exploring the experience of female cinema audiences between 1945 and 1965, analysed the ways in which selected groups of popular films represented women. In her thoughtful study critiquing the heavily theorised female spectator, Thumim (1992) referred to contemporary discourses in popular magazines and fanzines, but specifically declined to engage in 'an oral history enquiry which would attempt to reconstruct through interviews and questionnaires some traces of the audience' (p. 34).

Our own objective, to recover and analyse the memories of cinemagoing in 1960s Britain that have remained largely absent from this body of literature, was designed from the beginning around questionnaires and interviews. In this respect, it sought to build on the work, in particular, of Helen Taylor (1989), Jackie Stacey (1994) and Annette Kuhn (2002). It was intended to extend knowledge of both cinema history and British history during the 1960s by shedding light on how films were received and on the social experience of cinemagoing. In pursuing these aims, we wondered, more speculatively, whether the project might have implications for the controversy between historians over whether Britain was passing in the 1960s through a period of transformative change or changed much more slowly, with many features of 1950s society and culture enduring.² As the findings reported below indicate, the memories we have recorded do indeed have relevance to this debate, not least since they show Britain to be a society that was, at least in some sections, more open to European ideas and cultural products than perhaps has been widely recognised. While cinema's social significance was eroded to some extent throughout the 1960s due to the ongoing decline in attendance, our data suggest that sizeable portions of the audience that remained expanded their cinematic horizons during the 1960s with some enthusiasm.

Research design and general findings

In designing the project questionnaire, we were much influenced by the work of previous researchers. The questionnaire itself had five sections. The first consisted of basic personal information. Since the project was conducted on the basis of guaranteed anonymity, this section was separated from the rest of the questionnaire and the information encrypted. The main sections (Parts A–D) dealt with 'Your cinemagoing', 'Film preferences', 'Remembering 1960s cinemagoing' (encouraging respondents to reflect on how they looked back on the films they watched) and 'Details about you'. We encouraged members of the public to complete the questionnaire through publicity in various printed sources, social media and a nationwide programme of screenings and talks. Ultimately, 893 questionnaires were received and 80 interviews conducted. Since Part D of the questionnaire asked respondents about personal details, including the area(s) they lived in during the 1960s, ethnic background and sexual orientation, we have been able to ensure that our final sample of nearly a thousand is broadly based in terms of gender, class, region and sexual orientation. Our initial survey struggled to attract ethnic minority respondents, so to address this issue, half of the 80 subsequent interviews conducted were with members of such groups, identified through community-specific social clubs.

When we launched our project, we assumed that most people's memories of film itself would focus on US and British movies. However, work by Sue Harper and Vincent Porter and by Roy Stafford had already suggested that there was an audience for European films in Britain in the

1950s (Harper and Porter, 1999: 69–72, 2003: 246, 251; Stafford, 2001: 100, 103–105, 108). Yet there was frustratingly little evidence on how spectators had responded to such films. Film editor Tony Sloman (born in 1945), for example, recalled being aware of ‘talk of a [French] film called *The Wages of Fear* [Henri-Georges Clouzot, 1953]’ and remembered his ‘parents getting a babysitter in to go and see *La Ronde* [Max Ophüls, 1950]’. Yet he himself had no personal memory of ‘Continental films’ (quoted in O’Brien and Eyles, 1993: 77). To try to find out how important European films were in respondents’ memories of 1960s cinemagoing, we asked a two-part question in Part C (‘Film preferences’): ‘Did you watch continental European films during the 1960s? If so, can you remember any examples?’ Another question in this section asked respondents to rank in order four of their favourite types of films and gave ‘European art cinema/Nouvelle Vague’ as one of 12 possible types.

To our surprise, we discovered that at least a quarter of our 973 respondents had recollections of international cinemas. There were fairly frequent references to the work of Satyajit Ray in India and Akira Kurosawa in Japan, for example. There were also occasional mentions of other Japanese directors and, more generically, of Russian and Australian cinema. But many more memories than expected revolve around what, in broad terms, we can think of as ‘continental’ or ‘European’ cinema of the 1960s. Such memories found expression throughout the questionnaires (e.g. in discussions of favourite films, directors and stars or recollections of special memories or of cinemagoing in general) as well as in answers to the questions cited above. What our research appears to suggest is that those who liked European films in the 1960s belonged to a fairly clearly defined ‘taste public’ of like-minded people sharing specific aesthetic tastes, as defined by Pierre Bourdieu (1984). Often identifiable by social class or educational background, these ‘taste publics’ appear in memories to have been sites at which the opening of Britain to European cinema and, for some, European culture itself began.

Many memories of this kind are analysed in this article. But there are two important qualifications to make beforehand. The first is that all the respondents to our questionnaire are self-selected, which means on the whole that they are people who probably already have some interest in cinema. Many of them may know more about cinema than their contemporaries. So, the sample we are working with cannot – despite our efforts at diversification – be regarded as a truly representative cross-section of the British cinemagoing public of the 1960s. Second, it is worth pointing out that to many sections of the British population in the 1960s, the word ‘continental’ was synonymous with ‘pornographic’. One of our correspondents comments that ‘Continental films [were] a bit “racier” than mainstream British and Hollywood films’ (Respondent 360).³ A second respondent noted that there was a local cinema ‘that showed continental and nudist films (which seemed to go together then) including stills from the films in its outside display, a magnet for pubescent boys’ (516). Others recalled that the Paris cinema in Coventry ‘showed foreign language films in its double bills, usually programmed for the nudity they included’ (236) and that ‘the Classic [in Portsmouth] ran a mixture of soft porn and subtitled continental films’ (182). As such, while our focus here is on mainstream European cinema, the boundaries between this and more explicitly pornographic cinema remain permeable in memory and consequently perhaps in our data too.

Despite these qualifications, there are still very impressive numbers of our respondents who have memories of more serious European films. Their engagement with such films is all the more striking because it often took some effort to see them. As several of our correspondents note, local cinemas associated with two of the main chains, Odeon and ABC, rarely if ever screened European films (166; 409; 458). To watch continental films, there were a number of options, some of which depended on where people lived. From 1952, there was the National Film Theatre in London; in 1957, it transferred from the Telekinema to a permanent new building. One of our respondents still recalls ‘the frisson of seeing a new foreign film at the NFT’ (481). From 1967,

as an initiative of Harold Wilson's Labour government, there were similar Regional Film Theatres showing a wide array of old and new films in Birmingham, Manchester and Newcastle.

Many cities also had much-loved independent or art-house cinemas. 'The Cambridge Rex', writes one respondent, 'always used to show classic films or new French films'. 'Many good memories', reminisces another, 'of seeing French and Italian new wave films at the Academy in Oxford Street [London], encouraged by a school friend who was studying languages, and insisted on dragging us all along with her'. 'The fleapit in Leicester', according to a third, '... was cheaper than a shilling in the meter, but also showed all the great French and German films' (60; 177; 274). There were also a number of local film societies. One respondent recalls 'the Avart Garde Film Club in Hillingdon' where 'we sat in deck chairs and watched a lot of continental (European) films'. A second has memories of the club in Hull that met in a room upstairs at the Central Library. Membership was 'very affordable' and the clientele 'middle class respectable'. A third went to the Tyneside Cinema Club to see films by Ingmar Bergman and François Truffaut's *Les Quatre cents coups/The 400 Blows* (Truffaut, 1959) – 'all', he notes, 'very well made and provocative films' (548; 467; 340).

In relation to the degree of interest in European film during the 1960s one factor stands out: the rapid expansion in British higher education. Between 1958 and 1961, when the Robbins Committee was set up to enquire into higher education in the United Kingdom, seven new 'plateglass' universities opened (Committee on Higher Education, 1963). After Robbins reported in 1963, the numbers of young people entering higher education grew even faster. There were 108,000 going to university in 1960; by 1970, this had risen to around 228,000. The figures in tertiary education as a whole increased during the same period from 200,000 to 430,000 (Perkin, 1972: 111). Many of these colleges and universities had film clubs that, during the 1960s, introduced young people for the first time to continental European films. Moreover, since many universities were located in or close to major cities, students interested in film also swelled the audiences for local independent/art-house cinemas.

'Becoming a student in the 1960s', commented one respondent,

was a life changing experience and in many ways opened me to a new world. I could access things that were unavailable before in the chains of cinemas that were available. None of my family went to the cinema much. (538)

University life, including the films they watched, often differentiated students to some extent from the world they had known. 'Continental European films', observed another respondent, 'would not have been on my parents or school friends' radar in the 1960s' (317). Some respondents now regard their membership of university film societies with a degree of wry detachment. One former university film club member sardonically comments that 'a high proportion' of his fellow members were 'very earnest and rather humourless' (55). 'I think there was a hint of snobbishness', one writes, 'about liking foreign films once I reached university'. Preferring European over American and British films, another observes, was 'pretentious', but continental films were 'exciting and the aesthetics were different to Hollywood/Ealing' (172; 384).⁴ 'French, Swedish (Bergman), Italian' films, comments a further respondent, 'either dealt with real, everyday issues or were clearly trying to develop cinema rather than emphasising special effects or "melodrama"' (152). By general consent, continental films were regarded as 'more intellectually challenging' than their American or British counterparts (292). Knowledge of them signified the acquisition of 'cultural capital', a series of aesthetic choices that – as Pierre Bourdieu (1984) argued – helped differentiate those in possession of such capital from other social groups on the basis of judgements of taste.

Memories of European film directors

In contrast with the ways in which Hollywood and British films are often framed in memory, which sees emphasis placed on the social experience of cinemagoing rather than on the films and their stars, respondents tended to recall European cinema in relation to specific directors. Perhaps this is a result of the advertising strategies that surrounded European films in Britain, which often reflected the rise of the concept of the auteur in film discourse by giving particular prominence to the director. Alan Burton and Steve Chibnall have noted parallel trends in which 'European art films had begun to be more widely exhibited in Britain, and the notion of the auteur, the film artist, began to take greater hold in the national film culture' (Burton and Chibnall, 2013: 156). The impact of this on film advertising can be seen, for example, in British publicity materials for *Blow-Up* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966), particularly its posters, which frequently featured the name of the film's director in thick black letters, second in size only to the film's title. Alternatively, it is possible that the cinephilic culture of film clubs at British universities and art-house cinemas was directing audiences' attention towards the output of specific directors. Whether as a result of marketing patterns, film societies or other changes in circulation and exhibition contexts, a number of European and other international directors were named by respondents as holding a particular appeal in the 1960s.

Bergman

Of these directors, one of the most prominent is Ingmar Bergman. Memories of Bergman's films display several features observable in British memories of other types of European cinema. In particular, they are often recounted in relation to specific spaces and places of exhibition. Since access to European films, though perhaps easier than might have been anticipated, was still limited to particular cinemas, it is these venues that now frame and form the context of memories of the Swedish director's films. While these locations are sometimes places known for offering a broad range of films in a comfortable environment, such as the National Film Theatre, the Everyman cinema in Hampstead and the Academy and Continental cinemas in central London, not all are venues that would necessarily have reinforced the perception that Bergman and his European colleagues belonged to a rarefied and elite area of cinematic production. While one respondent describes the Academy as 'small and intimate', the use of the term 'fleapit' to describe a Leicester cinema which screened Bergman films alludes to a less pleasant experience (274). However, the differences between these venues seem only to have played a small role in the ways Bergman's films themselves are remembered.

Alongside this enduring association with screening venues, Bergman's films also tend to be presented as unusual experiences for British audiences, with various respondents recalling them being 'very unlike anything seen before', 'different to all the other films I had seen', 'unexpected and a revelation' and 'totally different from anything I'd seen before' (225; 157; 607; 158). This was sometimes framed as a response to his 'different style of film-making', which was felt to bring to the cinema 'new ideas' and 'different experiences, refreshingly so' (766; 659; 656). While Bergman's films may have struck audiences as being unusual, this is a relatively common description of the work of a wide range of European directors. Indeed, Bergman's name appears most often in respondents' questionnaires amid lists of names of other European filmmakers. These directors are often presented as collectively innovative or surprising, suggesting that this is not a trait specifically associated with Bergman. However, while he is certainly not alone in having his work described as unique, memories of his films also undermine some of the broader trends in memories of European cinema. For example, while one respondent remembers enjoying 'fun nights in the West End with a friend after seeing the latest Bergman (lots of sex)', another

notes that the Paris cinema in Coventry ‘showed foreign language films in its double bills, usually programmed for the nudity they included (though I did see Bergman’s *The Silence* there)’ (274; 236). While the first of these respondents locates Bergman in relation to the perceived association of sexuality and European cinema that existed in Britain, the second respondent’s memory, while reinforcing this connection in broad terms, holds Bergman outside of it. *Tystnaden/The Silence* (Ingmar Bergman, 1963) is seen as an exception to this tendency. As such, while Bergman fits into the landscape of distinctive European directors remembered by British audiences, he also occupies a unique space within it by being dissociated from the perceived sexual excess that continental films were known for.

This denial of the more basic pleasures that many believed other European films offered their audiences contributes to the perception that Bergman produced more intellectual films than many of his contemporaries. Whether seen as an intellectual treat or as a darling of the affected and snobbish, it is evident that Bergman came to be respected by many of his British audiences for his ability to challenge them intellectually and to offer something more than impressive visual imagery and sexuality. Indeed, such was the power of the intellectual appeal that Bergman had for some British fans that, although they ‘didn’t always enjoy or understand’ his films, they were still glad of the ‘food for thought’ (877).

Another way in which memories of Bergman sit apart from memories of other European directors is their focus on particular imagery from the films rather than, for example, themes, plots, characters or cinematographic techniques. These memories tend to be highly specific in terms of the imagery recalled, though less so in terms of other details about the films. For example, one respondent recalls seeing ‘the Swedish one about the murder of a young girl when a spring breaks through the ground. Bergman I think’ (135). The name of the film itself, *Jungfrukällan/The Virgin Spring* (Ingmar Bergman, 1960), and the details of its plot have been forgotten, while even the association with Bergman is only half-remembered, but the image of the spring survives intact.

By being intellectual, unusual and powerful in their imagery, Bergman’s films seem to have found a unique place in the lives, tastes and, in some cases, identities of respondents during the 1960s. For example, one respondent noted that ‘Bergman in particular challenged my way of seeing the world’ (340). Although this audience member does not elaborate on the nature of Bergman’s influence on his worldview, other responses indicate this might have been through a broadening of cultural horizons and an exposure to other ways of life. For some, Bergman’s influence is still ongoing, with his films maintaining a presence in these 1960s cinemagoers’ lives 50 years later. As one respondent noted, ‘DVDs are wonderful’ and have enabled Bergman fans to retain a sense of attachment to his clever, striking, haunting and, for some, baffling films over the passing decades (22).

Of course, these devoted Bergman fans do not necessarily represent the majority of the director’s audiences during the 1960s, and for many Bergman’s films were appealing, but not singularly so. For some their impact was not necessarily profound and was limited to a sense that Bergman’s characters were particularly ‘easy to identify with’ or that his films could be used to ingratiate oneself with ‘a Swedish University student who I was trying to impress’ (274; 330). For others, they were just one of cinema’s many charms. While one cinemagoer enjoyed ‘most of the early Ingmar Bergman films’, they also ‘had a great weakness for American musicals’ (255). As such, Bergman is an interesting figure in the memories of 1960s British cinemagoers, notable for his power to inspire some audiences through the intelligence and potent imagery of his films; but he was also understood by viewers in a variety of different contexts which often had more to do with less high-brow entertainment than the assumed artistry of continental cinema.

The Polish Film School: Polanski and Wajda

The Polish filmmaker Roman Polanski poses a problem for British memories of European cinema during the 1960s because he was frequently named in response to questions about European films but often only tentatively or hesitantly. One respondent remembered seeing his early movies *Nóz w wodzie/Knife in the Water* (Roman Polanski, 1962), *Repulsion* (Roman Polanski, 1965) and *Cul-de-sac* (Roman Polanski, 1966), but paused to question whether these films 'count' as continental European productions (197). While the latter two films are certainly open to question, the inclusion of *Knife in the Water* is revealing since it suggests that, despite having been filmed in Poland, this film's status as European has been compromised to some extent in memory through Polanski's later work in Britain and the United States. Similarly, it seems Polanski's nationality raises uncertainty around the Britishness of *Repulsion* and *Cul-de-sac*, films he shot in the United Kingdom. Having worked in Poland and France before making his most successful films in Britain and later the United States, Polanski troubles the distinction British audiences often recognised between the films of their own country and those of the broader European continent.

What memories of Polanski films do hold in common with memories of other European directors is his sense of otherness. As with Bergman, Polanski is framed through the language of exceptionalism and difference. He is described as having a 'unique authorial vision', making 'seriously good films that had depth', possessing a 'distinctive style', and having the 'ability to create an atmosphere' and 'push the boundaries' (182; 274; 437; 346). *Repulsion* is described by one respondent as 'a horror film, and yet it wasn't like other horror films, it wasn't like *Pit and the Pendulum* stuff' (894). Distinct from more classical gothic horror, such as Roger Corman's 1961 adaptation of Edgar Allen Poe's *The Pit and the Pendulum*, released by American International Pictures, which made a total of eight Poe adaptations during the 1960s, Polanski's horror was something that audiences felt that they had not seen before. As with other European film directors of this decade, Polanski was thought by British audiences to be 'totally different from anything on TV or mainstream cinema' (474).

In particular, this sense of distinction is attributed most frequently to Polanski's ability to unnerve audiences. One respondent found David Lean's films to be 'so beautiful', Hitchcock's to be 'so absolutely terrifying', but Polanski's to be 'so unsettling' (684). The contrast with Hitchcock is instructive since it casts Polanski not as a director who scared audiences, but one who disturbed them or, as one respondent put it, made 'you feel uncomfortable' (274). While many respondents seem to recall the social aspects of cinemagoing more clearly than they remember individual films or directors, Polanski's ability to unsettle audiences here resulted in a moment of shock that was shared by people across the auditorium, fixing his unusual, disturbing film in memory through the social experience of seeing it. It is perhaps unsurprising that such incidents enable him to stand out from his contemporaries in memory. Problematic though Polanski may be in relation to notions of national and continental cinema, for audiences his films share with the work of other European directors a powerful sense of difference and uniqueness.

Bergman and Polanski represent the exception rather than the rule in relation to directors from northern Europe. While memories of their work remain powerful, very few other directors from this region are recalled with any degree of specificity and their names appear in the responses much less frequently than those of directors from France, Italy, Britain and America. Even Andrzej Wajda, the most widely recognised member of the Polish Film School, which was active into the early 1960s, now stands out in memory for only a few respondents. While some felt that his Second World War trilogy, *Pokolwienie/A Generation* (Andrzej Wajda, 1955), *Kanal* (Andrzej Wajda, 1957) and *Popiół i diament/Ashes and Diamonds* (Andrzej Wajda, 1958), which participants recall seeing in Britain during the 1960s, were 'tense political dramas with historical

sensibility', or noted that Wajda was a 'fantastic filmmaker', most simply forgot him or incorporated him into long lists of other directors they admired (516; 696). These lists are themselves revealing, since Wajda sits in them alongside names such as Claude Chabrol, François Truffaut, Federico Fellini and Alain Resnais, as well as some directors from further afield, such as Satyajit Ray and Akira Kurosawa, and some closer to home, such as David Lean. Wajda fails to stand out in memory, as do all other northern European directors aside from Bergman and Polanski, but he represents part of a broad tapestry of cinema from across Europe and the world that was gradually making its way into Britain. While one respondent noted that they could not 'remember the name of the Polish director' that they liked, before taking a guess at Wajda, they still used his films as an example of how, through European and other cinemas, 'the world was opening up' for British audiences (9). In this sense, perhaps northern European directors were less significant in and of themselves but rather gained significance as part of a broader body of international filmmakers who were coming to the attention of British cinemagoers.

'The Italians': Fellini, Pasolini, Visconti, De Sica and Antonioni

A man who lived in Yorkshire during the 1960s recalled seeing a number of films several times: Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (Federico Fellini, 1960) and *8½* (Federico Fellini, 1963), Visconti's *Il gattopardo/The Leopard* (Luchino Visconti, 1963) and Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966). He looks back on these Italian films as his 'introduction to a new world' (76). Part of that new world was fantasy: Fellini was much admired by one respondent 'because of his imaginary world' (129). But Italian directors were also remembered for different reasons. Visconti's films were praised for evoking the past: 'his sense of history and accurate reconstructions of historical periods, costumes etc. and concentration on decline and decadence' (129). To others, it was his essential humanity ('compassionate, down to earth, earthy') (510) and the warm aesthetics ('richly splendid'; 'beautiful') of his films (239; 613). Pasolini was also lauded for the fact that, as one respondent remarked, his work was 'visually stunning – like looking at paintings' (248). Yet films such as *Edipo re/Oedipus Rex* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1967) and *Teorema/Theorem* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1969) also contributed to giving him a reputation as a critic of existing Italian society: one respondent 'thought he was political and daring' (172).

There is a general feeling on the part of many respondents that European films were harder to understand than their American or British counterparts. One writes of Bergman, Antonioni, and Resnais that 'their films [were] more intellectually challenging' (292). AQ2 Another confessed that *8½* was the first continental film he had seen but 'at sixteen I could make nothing of it' (325). Sometimes, respondents read into continental auteurs qualities that fitted with their own remembered youthful angst. 'Fellini, Antonioni, Bergman, Truffaut, etc.', according to one, 'fitted with my sense of alienation. Basically I dealt with not belonging by being as different as possible and being a film buff was part of that' (43). This idea that being a film buff – specifically a fan of continental European cinema – could contribute to identity formation is an interesting one. While knowledge of European cinema offered this respondent a means of coping with her sense of alienation, we have seen above how this was also utilised by some university film society members to signify their accumulation of significant cultural capital. Continental cinema was certainly used by Britons to produce and embody particular identities, but both the types of identities formed in this way and the reasons for their formation were seemingly very varied.

Over and over again, amid expressions of enthusiasm for the group of directors occasionally lumped together as 'the Italians', the name of Antonioni comes up. By contrast with Bergman, individual respondents *do* remember specific film titles. One enthused about *L'avventura* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1960) 'and anything by Antonioni' (4; cf. 172). There are of course

many reasons why individual films stay in the memory. 'I remember *L'avventura*', one writes, with a sense of remembered grievance, 'because I fell asleep for about 20 minutes and when I woke up nothing had happened!' (545). Another respondent was intrigued by *L'Eclisse* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1962), partly because the film 'showed a romantic Italy and it intrigued me' and partly because it starred Monica Vitti (28). Others also comment on the partnership between Antonioni and Vitti (e.g. 200). Yet another recalls seeing *Il deserto rosso/Red Desert* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1964), tersely noting 'couldn't understand it' (510).

Above all, perhaps predictably, there is one Antonioni film that stands out in many people's memories: *Blow-Up*, an English-language movie shot in London and released in 1966. It was a film that many found difficult to watch. '*Blow-Up* I probably didn't get', one respondent suggests, 'although I was entertained' (514). 'I found [it] hard to understand', writes another. A third, more ambivalently, comments that it was 'my introduction to enigmatic cinema' (458; 175).

Those who liked Antonioni did so for a variety of reasons. Some emphasised the quality and richness of the cinematography in his colour films (see e.g. 228). The novelty and freshness of his approach also appealed. *Blow-Up* 'was a completely new concept of filming', one remarks, 'so I suppose it may have been the novelty value' that accounted for the film's appeal (119). To another respondent, it 'seemed a completely new way of making films'. To this observer, the newness was a matter of narrative ('the disjointed, and mysterious story') and film technique ('the hand-held camera, the natural sound') (307). To other commentators, the lack of a traditional narrative was compensated for by other things. 'A negligible story but a great atmosphere', wrote one. According to another, the film was 'really stylish and cryptic quite unlike anything I had seen before' (43; 63).

There was a strong sense on the part of several respondents that *Blow-Up* succeeded because it was linked to elements of contemporary British culture. One commentator remarked that he liked it 'because of Antonioni, and it features a chair designed by a friend of mine' (4). Another points out, in terms of the film's music, that '*Blow-Up* had [British blues band] the Yardbirds' (26). Others underlined the idea that the film looked at London of the period very much from a European perspective. One commentator wrote praising the film 'especially for [its] London life view, which felt close (I moved to north London [19]65–67) and the European director'. The same respondent believed that it 'captures London lifestyle and period in a European context' (1).

The French New Wave: Godard, Truffaut, Resnais, Chabrol, Rohmer, Malle and Varda

One man from northern England explained that he 'went through intense period of love for the Nouvelle Vague', interestingly qualifying this as 'Left Bank, not more commercial Right Bank' (the directors he cites are Agnès Varda, Alain Resnais, Claude Chabrol and François Truffaut). He believed the appeal of such films was that he 'enjoyed having to concentrate, think, be open to ideas' (76). Other respondents wrote of their dedication in 'keeping up with the nouvelle vague' that they saw as 'so innovative and compelling' (4; 28).

Of the French New Wave directors, two had a particular appeal. Jean-Luc Godard, one man recalls, 'was particularly impressive and stands out' (897; cf. 55). Another man remembers 'making a study of Godard when I was an undergraduate and going to see every film he'd made at art cinemas. I was obsessed by him and his work' (283). A third, who had a poster of the director, regarded him as 'French and fascinating' (206). Godard, almost from the beginning, had a reputation of making films that were innovative. 'I thought that each of his new films was exciting and ground-breaking', wrote one respondent (434). They seemed to offer a new 'style of filmmaking' that, according to another respondent, 'made me think about cinema differently' (766;

889). To some, Godard was one of the directors who greatly encouraged the idea of the ‘auteur’ (see, for example, 450). At the same time, several of our respondents agree that Godard was ‘difficult’ (283). ‘I was avid for films by Godard’, one man asserted, ‘but I can’t say I “got” them, I just knew I had to try’. ‘I saw Godard’s *Le Gai savoir* in the very late 60s at the ICA [Institute of Contemporary Art, London]’, one woman writes, ‘and although I didn’t really understand it, I thought it looked very beautiful’ (182; 566). More so than other ‘New Wave’ directors, Godard’s films – people in our survey mentioned *À bout de souffle/Breathless* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1960), *The Soldiers* (probably *Le Petit soldat*, Jean-Luc Godard, 1960), *Vivre sa vie* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1962), *Une femme mariée* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1964) and *Alphaville* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1964) in addition to *Le Gai savoir/Joy of Learning* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1969) – often expressed a strong interest in ‘politics’ (185). Unlike other directors associated with the French New Wave, moreover, respondents associated Godard with particular stars: Anna Karina (his wife from 1961 to 1965) (e.g. 283) and Jean-Paul Belmondo. One woman liked *À bout de souffle* because ‘I was in love with Belmondo’, and a Francophile man offers an almost poetic description of ‘Jean-Paul Belmondo’s eyes screwed-up in the smoke of a Gauloise fag-end’ (199; 597).

The second French ‘New Wave’ director who stands out in recollections of 1960s British cinemagoers is François Truffaut. One woman confessed that she had liked ‘about everything by Truffaut’ who was the ‘best of the New Wave (in my opinion)’ (618; also see 105). A male respondent liked ‘most Nouvelle Vague films’ but ‘especially Truffaut’. Others claimed that Truffaut had been their ‘favourite French director’ or had been the one directing ‘my favourites’ (707; 228; 326). Many expressed considerable personal affection: ‘Loved Truffaut’, was one woman’s succinct comment (413). To some extent, Truffaut was admired for the same reasons as other European directors of the time: like Bergman, Fellini and Antonioni, what he did ‘was so different from commercial US and UK cinema’. He and his ‘New Wave’ colleagues ‘looked at things another way without the Hollywood gloss’ (43; 267). There was a general style and depth of characterisation in his films that made him comparable for some respondents, as noted above, to Bergman: a woman wrote that ‘their films were always innovative and intelligent. The protagonists were easy to identify with’. One man, indeed, praised Truffaut specifically ‘for creating Antoine Doinel the anti-hero’ (274; 182).⁵ A woman wrote that she ‘loved the way he probed character and relationships’ and his ‘sense of humour, too’ (413). Other respondents paid tribute to Truffaut for what they perceived as ‘his humanity/humanism’ and his choice of ‘humane and sensitive subject matter and technique’ (608; 374). He was seen as especially characteristic of the ‘sheer exuberance in shooting and playing’ of the French New Wave, the man who – with *The 400 blows* and *Jules et Jim/Jules and Jim* (François Truffaut, 1962) – played a particular part in pioneering the notion of ‘the director as auteur’ (661; 707).

Of other directors associated with the French New Wave, Alain Resnais in particular remains a considerable focus of debate among respondents. One links him in personal memory with Godard and Truffaut as directors he considered were on his own personal wavelength (‘I “spoke their language”’) (332). Another equates him with Bergman and Antonioni as producers of ‘more intellectually challenging’ films (292). A third links Resnais’ *Hiroshima mon amour* (Alain Resnais, 1959) and *L’année dernière à Marienbad/Last Year in Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961) with Varda’s *Cleo de 5 à 7/Cleo from 5 to 7* (Agnès Varda, 1962) for making him ‘concentrate, think, be open to ideas’ (76). But, as respondents’ comments indicate, *Last Year in Marienbad* in particular prompted both bafflement and incomprehension. ‘What was that about?’, asked one woman. A man recalled viewing the film, ‘wondering what it was about – and talking about it for hours afterwards’ (177; 676). It clearly challenged established conventions of film-making: one respondent writes of the ‘mysterious, eerie soundtrack, voice-over, repeated phrases, moving shots’ (635). Some people regarded it as influential despite – or because – of its unconventionality: one saw it as ‘strange and compelling’, another admitted it ‘wasn’t my

favourite experience but its strangeness made a long lasting impression' (434; 416). Serious film fans often seem to have convinced themselves that the 'New Wave' films of directors such as Resnais would become more comprehensible with subsequent re-viewings: 'I got more each time I saw them', claimed one man, 'especially "difficult" films like *Last Year in Marienbad*'. 'I've rewatched it recently', notes another, 'and understand it a little more' (332; 206). By contrast, a woman dismisses it now with just one word: 'pretentious!' (557).⁶

The New Wave films of Chabrol – especially *Le Scandale/The Champagne Murders* (Claude Chabrol, 1967) and *Le Boucher/The Butcher* (Claude Chabrol, 1970) (4; 585; 885; 469) – are recalled with affection by many. One respondent paired him with Truffaut for making films that 'looked at things another way without the Hollywood gloss' (267). Another described him as 'cool, controlled – a Gallic Hitchcock' (347).⁷ Rohmer was appreciated by others, but actual films by him that were mentioned date from the very end of the decade: *Ma nuit chez Maud/My Night at Maud's* (Eric Rohmer, 1969) and *Le genou de Claire/Claire's Knee* (Eric Rohmer, 1970). One woman commented that *Claire's Knee* 'was a favourite, set on Lake Annecy which I knew and loved' (e.g. 4; 437; 27; 89). Several people refer to Malle, but the only film title remembered was *Viva Maria!* (Louis Malle, 1965), a historical spoof set in Central America starring Brigitte Bardot and Jeanne Moreau (2; also see 34; 157; 264; 582; 743). The French 'New Wave', as these illustrations suggest, was almost entirely male. 'Not really many female directors from the time', noted one respondent, 'except [Agnès] Varda' (905). Several respondents also mentioned Varda, but only two referenced specific films by her: *Cleo de 5 à 7* and *Le bonheur* (Agnès Varda, 1965) (89; 332).

Conclusion

Although the directors discussed above originate from a range of different European countries, they are connected by a number of themes that recur across our cinemagoers' memories. Several were thought to be innovative, experimental or unique, an opinion that has been expressed in relation to, for example, Bergman's shocking imagery and Godard's artistry. This created the impression that while British and American directors may have made many films that were widely enjoyed and admired, it was their continental European peers who were pushing the boundaries of cinema and producing the most exciting work during this decade. While many enjoyed such experimentation, a number of people recall being baffled by these films, though few failed to be struck by their cerebral and visual qualities. These characteristics helped to differentiate, in the minds of their audiences, continental European films from the domestic and American productions that were routinely screened in most British cinemas. In turn, this differentiation helped to produce in Britain a sense that European films represented a new and exciting perspective on the world that had not necessarily been widely encountered in this country before.

Many people now assess the European films they viewed in the 1960s as having considerable influence on their outlook towards life. 'I became aware', wrote one thoughtful observer, 'that my cinemagoing was shaping me and my taste in many things. There was always the element of escapism, but foreign language films brought a new seriousness' (236). Viewing European films, one man commented, had provided him with a 'sense of the world opening out both in terms of locations – and subject matter and film styles' (141). 'We could go and get an experience beyond what we were strongly feeling were our narrow lives (well, that was certainly true for me)', recalled someone else. 'So cinema was an aperture to a huge other world. And it just made me curious about how many things I didn't know about' (23). 'I think I liked foreign films', explained another, 'because they were so different and opened up new worlds to me' (172). The belief that watching continental European films had somehow broadened attitudes and offered them 'new ways of looking at the world' is a common view among those who have filled in our questionnaire or been

interviewed (63; also see 9; 76; 348). In the 1960s, through the films they chose to watch, a significant minority of British people were becoming more ‘European’ in terms of their attitudes and cultural affiliations. In relation to the argument between historians over whether the 1960s in Britain were a time of change or continuity, the enthusiasm of many of our respondents for what they saw as the innovative work of continental European directors helps point towards a growing openness towards outside influences and increasing readiness for change.

Notes

1. Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) project AK/K000446/1, ‘Cultural Memory and British Cinema-going of the 1960s’. Available at: http://digitool-b.lib.ucl.ac.uk:8881/R/JC52XDFXE56G8B4KR4K66IT1JYRS8TAKRCBCMK561GAXKM981E-11357?func=collections&;collection_id=5453 (accessed 28 May 2016).
2. For the change thesis, see, for example, Arthur Marwick (1998); for the more conservative hypothesis, see Dominic Sandbrook (2005, 2006).
3. This and subsequent numbers refer to specific questionnaires and interviews with individual subjects generated by the project. The originals can be consulted in paper form in the University College London (UCL) Library and in digital form at the URL in Note 1, where transcripts are searchable by four-digit numbers beginning with 0 (e.g. for 8 search, 0008; for 228 search, 0228).
4. Also see 77.
5. Doinel, played by Jean-Pierre Léaud as an alter ego of Truffaut himself, was the principal character of three films produced before the end of the 1960s: *Les Quatre cents coups/The 400 Blows* (1959), one of the pioneering films of the French New Wave, *Antoine et Colette* (short, 1962), and *Baisers volés/Stolen Kisses* (1968).
6. For other references to *Last Year in Marienbad*, see 8; 22; 34; 46; 137; 172; 238; 292; 326; 379; 528; 542; 582; 589; 593; 614; 647; 659.
7. For another comparison with Hitchcock’s ‘intriguing mysteries’, see 126. Other references to Chabrol occur in 4; 8; 27; 34; 55; 76; 89; 228; 516; 562; 597; 599; 610; 649; 656; 691; 743.

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