



# SIXTIES BRITISH CINEMA RECONSIDERED

EDITED BY DUNCAN PETRIE,  
MELANIE WILLIAMS AND LAURA MAYNE

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RECONSIDERED



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# INTRODUCTION

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Duncan Petrie and Melanie Williams

## REVISITING AND RECONSIDERING A 'FAMILIAR' DECADE

From James Bond to the Beatles, madcap comedy to unsettling horror, social realism to psychedelia, the 1960s witnessed a major resurgence in the creative vitality and international appeal of British cinema. An influx of Hollywood finance gave British films unprecedented access to global markets, boosting their visibility and earning power; the United Artists-backed James Bond series, initiated by *Dr No* (1962), provided the most conspicuous example of this new box office phenomenon. British films attained new levels of international critical acclaim, winning the Oscar for Best Film on no less than four occasions during the decade: *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), *Tom Jones* (1963), *A Man for All Seasons* (1966) and *Oliver!* (1968). Top prizes at the Berlin Film Festival went to *A Kind of Loving* (1962), *Repulsion* (1965) and *Cul-de-Sac* (1966). British productions also triumphed at Cannes, with three Palme d'Or wins during the 1960s for *The Knack . . . and how to get it* (1965), *Blow Up* (1966) and *If . . .* (1968), and *Accident* (1967) sharing the Grand Prix Award, while the previous year *Alfie* (1966) had picked up the Prix du Jury. These productions, running the generic gamut from historical drama to big-budget musical to art film, from the grim north to swinging London, suggest something of the diversity of Britain's film output during the decade. Although the impact of these films was immediate, their longer-term legacy was also significant. Thirty years later, one of the few scholarly overviews of the period's film culture, Robert Murphy's *Sixties British Cinema*, came to the conclusion that 'the 1960s saw



a greater number of significant and exciting films made in Britain than at any time before or since<sup>1</sup>

Yet despite that level of success and acclaim (or perhaps because of it), there has been surprisingly little academic engagement with 1960s British cinema in its entirety, Murphy aside.<sup>2</sup> Instead, the 1950s and 1970s, both more contentious decades in terms of their achievements and significance, have been the subject of numerous monographs and edited collections.<sup>3</sup> But while this surge in revisionist British film scholarship took place, a variety of new archival sources providing a deeper and more detailed account of British cinema during the 1960s became available, providing new information on financing and production, on film policy, on the interrelations between cinema and other creative industries and on the careers of individual practitioners. At the same time, the continuing debate over the symbolic relevance of the decade in relation to wider understandings of cultural and social history ensured that the 1960s remained a topic of fascination. How revolutionary and transformative was the decade beyond the bubble of ‘swinging London’? Did greater individualism signal the birth of the modern liberated citizen or a disastrous shift from class-based solidarity to a more atomised, marketised identity politics? Did Britain continue its decline as a global power or did it find a way to reinvent itself as a vital player in the contemporary world? Questions like these, and specifically how they were reflected through or influenced developments in British cinema, provided the impetus for revisiting the period afresh.

Our major research project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, *Transformation and Tradition in 1960s British Cinema*, culminated in a book of the same name, co-written by the project team and published in 2019.<sup>4</sup> This project explored the cinema of a decade most often characterised by modernity, novelty and innovation, its focus on youth culture, social mobility and experimentation in lifestyles and aesthetics reflected in the styles, content and youthful new directors and stars of British films. But the period was simultaneously marked by a remarkable degree of cultural continuity, represented in part by the ongoing centrality of veteran British filmmakers such as Launder and Gilliat, the Boulting Brothers, David Lean and Carol Reed. This was coupled with nostalgia for (seemingly) less volatile times, discernible in the music hall humour of the Carry On films, or the residual Victorian morality of Hammer Horror. In our study of British cinema of the 1960s, the twin concepts of transformation and tradition are deployed to help navigate some of the decade’s complexities and contradictions. The project and book focuses on three key areas. Firstly, the funding, production and distribution of films during the decade, a sphere in which the established, powerful but ultimately rather conservative film corporations such as Rank, Associated British and British Lion were forced to compete with smaller and newer independent companies that demonstrated greater entrepreneurial flair in the face of a changing society

and market. Meanwhile, the expanded activities of the Hollywood majors, with their financial muscle and international influence, made such a notable impact on the scale and style of ‘British’ films, boosting production values, enhancing the wholesale take-up of colour and creating new stars. Secondly, the contribution of key creative personnel – writers, directors, cinematographers, production and costume designers and editors – demonstrate how filmmaking craft was impacted by new ideas, themes, aesthetic styles, production techniques and technologies. But it also reveals the resilience and the continuity of creative practices and expertise transmitted by practitioners of different generations. Thirdly, the increasingly close interrelation between cinema and other creative fields that were booming during the 1960s, most notably television, advertising and pop music, represented a new moment of ‘convergence’ between different industries with the circulation of ideas, styles, techniques and, perhaps most significantly, creative personnel providing the essential connectivity.

In line with ‘new film history’, which has prioritised archival research over theoretical conjecture, our project made extensive use of a range of previously unavailable or under-explored collections. These include the British Film Institute and National Film and Television Archive, the Bill Douglas Cinema Museum at the University of Exeter, the National Archives, completion guarantee company Film Finances, the British Board of Film Classification, the History of Advertising Trust, and the BECTU oral history project, each of which provided fresh sources of knowledge and new insights into the period.<sup>5</sup> We also made extensive use of industry publications, trade union journals, newspaper reviews and commentary, and film magazines ranging from the highbrow to the populist. One of the project’s key achievements was the generation of a detailed dataset of British film production throughout the 1960s, enabling us to track fluctuations and developments in individual careers, in studio provenance and in genre across the decade and make original observations about the industry’s dominant trends and most prolific personnel.

Yet we were also acutely aware of the limitations inherent in a project encompassing a whole decade’s cinematic output but involving just four people with their own prevailing expertise, enthusiasms and blind spots. It was therefore important to open up discussion and bring in other perspectives, voices, and insights to engage fully with the multi-faceted terrain of British cinema in the 1960s. This led to the organisation of several symposia during the life of the project and two summative conferences held in September 2017, one at the University of York and the other at BFI Southbank. Both events invited proposals on a wide variety of relevant topics, and the corresponding papers given at these conferences then formed the basis of the chapters in this edited volume. The project website (<https://60sbritishcinema.wordpress.com/>) also generated a series of blogs from members of the project team and guest writers addressing a range of relevant topics. Collectively, this activity constitutes a

further exploration of the unusually rich territory of the British cinema of the 1960s, providing a wealth of new research and scholarship on the era from the vantage point of half a century's distance.

#### HOW THIS BOOK RECONSIDERS THE SIXTIES

The first of the book's four sections focuses on stardom, one of the most visible aspects of British cinema's resurgent status and international profile in the 1960s. Some of the British stars who emerged at that time have been extensively chronicled, but there are other neglected figures who challenge some of the assumptions around stardom and celebrity during the era. Andrew Spicer provides an opening overview of the impact made by eight key male actors from proletarian backgrounds – Alan Bates, Michael Caine, Sean Connery, Tom Courtenay, Albert Finney, Richard Harris, Peter O'Toole and Terence Stamp – who collectively changed the class politics of British cinema. Caroline Langhorst's chapter then provides a detailed examination of another important emergent male star of the period, Oliver Reed, whose Byronic qualities and compelling screen performances later became overshadowed by his off-screen excesses but who in the sixties exemplified some of the era's key contradictions. Reed's co-star in Michael Winner's underrated film *I'll Never Forget What's'isname* (1967) was Carol White, the subject of Margherita Sprio's chapter. Focusing on how White's working-class London background imbued her performances in the BBC dramas *Up the Junction* (1965) and *Cathy Come Home* (1966) and the feature film *Poor Cow* (1967) with a rare authenticity, Sprio explores how restrictions of class and gender prohibited the actress's ability to become a wider international star on a par with male counterparts like Caine or Connery, or more 'polished' middle-class female stars like Julie Christie. In complete contrast to the 'Battersea Bardot' (as White was labelled by the press), the subject of Clare Mortimer's chapter is a cohort of older character actresses with backgrounds in theatre, who nonetheless enjoyed conspicuous levels of transatlantic success during the long sixties: Edith Evans, Wendy Hiller and Margaret Rutherford. This triumvirate of venerable dames provide evidence for the continued presence and significant appeal of older established figures in a cinema more readily associated with youth, suggesting a greater complexity to the celebrity landscape of the 1960s than is sometimes assumed.

The rise of production studies has encouraged a greater emphasis on creative collaboration and the contribution of production personnel beyond the director in film history, and this provides the focus for the book's second section. With its emphasis on innovation and new ways of working, the sixties provide a rich terrain for investigating key creative relationships and for rethinking the ascription of 'authorship'. David Cairns offers an account of the screenwriting career of Charles Wood, whose scripts for directors as diverse as Richard

Lester, Peter Collinson and Tony Richardson, from *The Knack* to *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1968), suggest the existence of Wood's own distinctive and strong authorial voice. Victoria Lowe's chapter discusses designer Jocelyn Herbert's collaboration with director Lindsay Anderson on the production of *If . . .* Using documents from Anderson and Herbert's respective personal archives, Lowe tracks the development of design ideas from conception to execution, shedding light on the often neglected role of the production designer (particularly a woman working with a notoriously solipsistic male director) in the process. David Forrest and Sue Vice also challenge prevailing understandings of the creative provenance of another classic British film of the period, this time *Kes* (1969), through their chapter's consideration of the contribution of writer Barry Hines, who adapted his own novel for the screen and whose writing frequently anticipates the film's cinematic realisation. In thinking about collaborative work in film production, it is vital to acknowledge and explore how this always takes place within industrial structures and in the context of business imperatives. The final chapter in this section, by Llewella Chapman, draws on the files of completion guarantor Film Finances to demonstrate how the troubled late-1960s production of Joseph Losey's *Figures in a Landscape* (1970) provides an object lesson in how a promising project can be derailed by various factors, including a breakdown in the working partnership between director and producer.

No consideration of British cinema of the 1960s would be complete without some investigation of generic and stylistic innovation, the theme of the third section of chapters. This was a decade where bending and breaking rules became almost *de rigueur*, fuelled by novel technologies and new audience demands as well as the desire to represent different kinds of experience and sensation. Such innovation always had to take place within the framework of prevailing standards of censorship and regulation, and Paul Frith's chapter investigates not only how Hammer Films negotiated with the BBFC but also how, having established themselves as purveyors of X-certificated horror films shot in garish colour, the company subsequently adapted their product to accommodate more family-friendly adventure fare with box office potential, such as *The Sword of Sherwood Forest* (1960) and *The Pirates of Blood River* (1962). Steven Roberts visits the archetypally sixties generic terrain of the Cold War thriller in his chapter, with an emphasis on the widescreen innovations of North American émigré directors Joseph Losey and Sidney J. Furie in the black and white sci-fi chiller *The Damned* (1963) and the colour spy thriller *The Ipcress File* (1965) respectively. Style is foregrounded in both productions, with the properties of the widescreen frame pushed in ways that merit comparison with the virtuosity of Godard and Leone. Carolyn Rickards's chapter maintains the focus on questions of colour, which became increasingly ubiquitous as the decade progressed, through a consideration of two films that foreground an aspirational

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male protagonist in pursuit of wealth and status: Clive Donner's black comedy *Nothing but the Best* (1964) and Basil Dearden's supernatural thriller *The Man Who Haunted Himself* (1970). The shifts between the two, both thematic and aesthetic, suggest some of the broader changes in attitudes taking place over the course of the decade, from a cynical but breezy energy to a darker and more self-destructive mindset. The supernatural moves centre stage in Virginie Sélavy's chapter, which considers the brief oeuvre of talented director Michael Reeves, cut short by his tragic death at the age of twenty-five. *Revenge of the Blood Beast* (1966) (aka *The She-Beast*), *The Sorcerers* (1967) and *Witchfinder General* (1968) are all low budget horrors, but Reeves uses the themes and conventions of genre to interrogate the complexities of contemporary society. Linking witchcraft and the supernatural to the 1960s counterculture in a provocative way, these films collectively pose questions of power and conflict in relation to gender, generation and authority.

The fourth and final section of the book investigates British cinema's mediation of cultural transformation and social change, as films both reflected and contributed to the process of renegotiating what it meant to be British, what it meant to be young or old, male or female, black or white. Mark Fryers analyses a diverse group of naval-themed films that appeared during the decade, including *Billy Budd* (1962), *HMS Defiant* (1962) and *Carry On Jack* (1963). Whether dealing with resistance and rebellion, or emphasising tradition and continuity, their varying explorations of the key national institution of the British Navy share a common interest in cultural anxieties surrounding youth culture; at times signposting emergent attitudes towards gender and sexuality (especially homosexuality), and at times (often in the same scene) reinstating the social 'status quo'. Philip Drummond's chapter surveys changing narratives and discourses of race and ethnicity across the entire decade, beginning with the legacy of empire in films made depicting Afro-Caribbean characters, moving onto the first productions written and directed by black filmmakers in Britain and then gauging the impact of Hollywood and American race relations on the British scene. The chapter culminates in a detailed examination of the neglected curio, *Two Gentlemen Sharing* (1969), directed by Canadian Ted Kotcheff, in which a flat share between an English ad-man and a Jamaican solicitor leads to complex negotiations within the multicultural metropolis. The subculture of psychedelia and its infiltration into cinema is the subject of Sophia Satchell-Baeza's chapter, which considers ideas of alienation, brainwashing and the destructive side of the 'cult of sensation' that so exercised Christopher Booker in his apocalyptic study of the era, *The Neophiliacs*. The case studies here include Michael Reeves's *The Sorcerers*, Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow Up* and Peter Whitehead's *Tonite Let's All Make Love in London* (1967), each of which sheds light on the costs and limitations of so-called Swinging London.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

A film that crops up in two of the chapters, *The Sorcerers*, features an elderly couple (including one of the last screen appearances of British-born horror legend Boris Karloff) who attempt to defy decrepitude by vicariously experiencing transgressive sensations through their control of a brainwashed young man. This suggests a lethal vengeance to be enacted upon the liberated younger generation by the old and envious; the darkest possible interaction between the opposing forces of tradition and transformation. It also inverts the more familiar confrontation between the two: namely, the challenge to the established order posed by disaffected, rebellious or revolutionary youth, as featured in several of the films discussed in this volume from *The Damned* to *If . . .* However, in other cultural texts, practices and institutions in the 1960s, the balance between the two is more benignly productive, bringing about positive revision and reinvention, ushering British cinema out of what Jeffrey Richards refers to as the 'doldrums era of the 1950s' and towards 'the emergence of a flourishing and diverse film culture' and a moment of 'revitalisation'.<sup>6</sup>

The essays collected here represent the breadth of work and range of scholarly approaches undertaken in relation to numerous aspects of British cinema of the 1960s. They offer fresh engagements with familiar films of the period as well as drawing attention to those that are lesser known but equally worthy of attention. Through their archivally driven investigations, they present new discoveries on film production and the workings of the industry, creative collaboration, stardom, genre, changing aesthetics and the relationship between cinema and social change; all present important ways of rethinking 1960s British cinema. But given the still untapped wealth of the archives consulted here, and in the project monograph, this is only the beginning of a much greater opportunity for British film scholarship to provide a richer, more grounded, precise, and verifiable account of cinema as an artistic form, a cultural practice, a business and a (technologically dependent) creative process. The reconsideration of a particular 'well-known' decade in both this collection and in *Transformation and Tradition in 1960s British Cinema* offers a demonstration of how the increasing availability of information and data not only provides more detailed and empirical insights and understandings of the subject matter, but can equally stimulate new conceptual approaches and research agendas.

## NOTES

1. Robert Murphy, *Sixties British Cinema* (London: BFI, 1992), p. 278.
2. Other key book length studies of the decade include Alexander Walker, *Hollywood, England: The British Film Industry in the Sixties* (London: Michael Joseph, 1974); Terrence Kelly, Graham Norton and George Perry, *A Competitive Cinema* (London: Institute of Economic Affairs, 1966); and John Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism: British*

- Cinema 1956–1963* (London: BFI, 1986). For a more detailed contextual discussion of the field, see Richard Farmer, Laura Mayne, Duncan Petrie and Melanie Williams, *Transformation and Tradition in 1960s British Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019).
3. See, for example, Christine Geraghty, *British Cinema in the Fifties: Gender, Genre and 'the New Look'* (London: Routledge, 2000); Ian McKillop and Neil Sinyard (eds), *British Cinema of the 1950s: A Celebration* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003); Sue Harper and Vincent Porter, *British Cinema of the 1950s: The Decline of Deference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Robert Shail (ed.), *Seventies British Cinema* (London: BFI/Palgrave Macmillan 2008); Paul Newland (ed.), *Don't Look Now: British Cinema in the 1970s* (Bristol: Intellect, 2010); Paul Newland, *British Films of the 1970s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013); Sue Harper and Justin Smith (eds), *British Film Culture in the 1970s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012); Sian Barber, *The British Cinema in the 1970s: Capital, Culture and Creativity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
  4. Farmer et al., *Transformation and Tradition in 1960s British Cinema*.
  5. James Chapman, Mark Glancy and Sue Harper (eds), *The New Film History: Sources, Methods, Approaches* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
  6. Jeffrey Richards, 'New waves and old myths: British cinema in the 1960s', in Bart Moore-Gilbert and John Seed (eds), *Cultural Revolution: The Challenge of the Arts in the 1970s* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 218.