Very Un-British Films: Michael Winterbottom and the Cinema of Incompatibility

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Interviewing Alfred Hitchcock in the early 1960s, French critic and director François Truffaut asked Hitchcock, "Well, to put it quite bluntly, isn't there a certain incompatibility between the terms, 'cinema' and 'Britain'?" (Truffaut, 1986:170). Enquiring after the reasons why Hitchcock worked mainly for American film studios from 1940 onwards, Truffaut speculates that Britain is a particularly unsuitable context for a film-maker:

> This may sound far-fetched, but I get the feeling that there are national characteristics — among them the English countryside, the subdued way of life, the stolid routine — that are anti-dramatic in a sense. The weather itself is anticinematic. Even British humor — that very understatement on which so many of the good crime comedies are hinged — is somehow a deterrent to strong emotion. (170)

Truffaut concludes that with regard to international cinema, the only other historically significant British film-maker apart from Hitchcock was Charlie Chaplin. Predictably, Hitchcock agrees with Truffaut's assessment, comparing the insularity of British culture with the universality of other cultures, but he ascribes the anticinematic culture of Britain to a strong class system, suggesting that before 1925 "No well-bred English person would be seen going into a cinema; it simply wasn't done" (Hitchcock in Truffaut, 1986:171). Until the 1920s, he states, cinema was "held in contempt by the intellectuals" (171).

What is interesting about this exchange is not so much the accuracy (or inaccuracy) of Truffaut's characterization of Britain as geographically and culturally anticinematic, but the frequency with which Truffaut's question is referred to in critical discussions of British cinema by British academics and journalists. Truffaut's question, which is often taken out of context, or misquoted and rephrased as if it were a statement, is typically treated as a dismissive value judgement upon British films. This mildly provocative question, which was presumably calculated to encourage Hitchcock to respond with some reflections on British culture and the cinema, continues to provoke an indignant defence of British cinema and its unfairly overlooked strengths. For example, a recent article on British cinema opens with a

quotation from British director Stephen Frears in which Truffaut's question is slightly rephrased:

> The great French film-maker, François Truffaut, once famously said that there was a certain incompatibility between the words British and Cinema. Well, bollocks to Truffaut. (Lovell, 2001:200)

In paraphrasing Truffaut in this inaccurate way, Frears reframes Truffaut's comment not as a tentatively provocative question about a national cinema culture, put to a British director in the course of a conversation, but as a flat statement about the value of British films by a Frenchman. Frears's comment clearly suggests that Truffaut's disparaging comments about British cinema are motivated by national rivalry and professional competitiveness and Frears's comically abusive response to Truffaut's presumed slight invokes the nationalism that is almost always associated with discourses of national identity. The Frears quotation is the rubric to an essay by Alan Lovell that is concerned with the perception of British cinema both within and outside the country and Lovell's article concludes with an impassioned defence of the importance or worth of British films:

> Arguments can be made that comparable cinemas like the French or Italian have, over their whole history, been superior to the British cinema but the differences are only relative ones. British cinema isn't a special case. There isn't some fundamental British cinematic deficiency which needs to be accounted for. Bollocks to Truffaut, indeed! (Lovell, 2001:204)

In its aggressive response to a remark made nearly 40 years earlier, this article suggests that Truffaut's comment identifies a well-established anxiety or unease about precisely what constitutes British Cinema, what the term might mean. In its protestations, Lovell's article confirms that the idea of British Cinema still has to be argued for.

Rather than attempting to define a unified or coherent model of British cinema in defiant response to Truffaut's comment, what I want to suggest in this paper is that, taken seriously, the concept of incompatibility offers a provocative way of rethinking what contemporary British Cinema might be[1]. The idea of films produced and circulating within an anticinematic context is an intriguing one. For a classicist like Truffaut, "cinema" is implicitly defined with reference to Hollywood melodrama — strong emotion, high-key lighting, narrative integrity, and prominent mise-en-scène. However, such a concept of cinema is neither definitive nor necessarily desirable, and thus we need not see the incompatibility of "Britain" or "Britishness" with such a concept of "cinema" as a failure, or even a point to contest. Instead we might think of British cinema as a space of tensions, riven with political/cultural/aesthetic fault lines.

Indeed we might argue that those British films that explore such incoherence are far more fascinating and challenging than those that aspire to formal, narrative and ideological unities. Thus, Truffaut's passing remark might serve as the basis for rethinking British cinema that does not return us to limited, unitary categories.

The films of director Michael Winterbottom offer us a rich example of what such a cinema of incompatibility might consist of. The reason for this paper's title is to indicate that what I am interested in is not rescuing the category of "British Cinema" as a concept that has currency. Instead what is more interesting is to think about the ways in which we might reflect critically upon a singular definition of British cinema and think instead of a set of cinemas in dialogue with the idea of Britishness itself, or, more broadly, with ideas of national identity.

The concept of national cinema is a problematic one with regard to any country. As Andrew Higson observes, to refer to a national cinema implicitly invokes a national identity, but:

> national identity is by no means a fixed phenomenon, but constantly shifting, constantly in the process of becoming. The shared, collective identity which is implied always masks a whole range of internal differences and potential and actual antagonisms. (Higson, 1995:4)

Consequently, the related concept of a national cinema is necessarily unstable and fractured, and attempts to define a national cinema are necessarily implicated in a nationalist discourse. Higson suggests that discourses of national cinema commonly categorize national cinemas, such as British cinema, in four often overlapping ways, but, as I will argue, these are largely unhelpful and uninformative for understanding and analysing critically the work of a specific British film-maker.

A first important definition of national cinema is in economic terms, cinema as commercial system or industry. Thus to talk about British cinema might be to talk about an industrial infrastructure, relations of production and the distribution and exhibition systems. Duncan Petrie argues elsewhere that although periodically British studios receive large investments from international (and especially American) studios in general, beyond the scale of low-budget independent film-making, "there is no British cinema, there is only a British input into international (American) cinema" (Petrie, 1997,613). A film like *Aliens* (Cameron, 1987) remains an American film even though it was shot in London. We might conclude, therefore, that, like many other cinemas, at various points and to differing degrees throughout its history the British film industry has been characterized by transnational flows of capital and international audiences. The notion of an economically distinct national cinema subsisting in a period of postmodern capitalism is, to say the least, problematic.

A second, evaluative use of the category of national cinema is to distinguish between popular culture and quality cinema, identifying films considered as art or high culture rather than as mass-produced commodities. There is certainly a canon of British films that might correspond to such a category of suitable representatives of British culture. The sort of films, in fact, which an institution like the British Council might select as representative of the internationally acceptable face of contemporary British Culture. As Higson suggests, "From this perspective, popular cinema generally becomes something quite separate from national cinema, hardly worthy of critical attention" (Higson, 1995:5). However, a central concern of Michael Winterbottom's films is that they offer us new ways of seeing and thinking about popular culture and the everyday, banal aspects of British society and, in particular, "ordinary" working class experience. Also, while Winterbottom has directed three literary adaptations — a genre which is closely identified with "respectable" British cinema, just as it has been associated with "quality" cinema in other countries — the range of films on which he has worked is much more diverse, and his approach much more stylistically playful than is suggested by this somewhat conservative category[2].

A third use of the concept of national cinema is in relation to "exhibition and consumption" (Higson, 1995:5). This category is concerned with the provenance of the films watched by national audiences and very often such an area of discussion is anxiously concerned with the effects of imported or foreign films upon a national culture as well as on the vitality of the national industry. This has been a preoccupation from very early on in cinema's history and the object of exclusive business practices and protectionist legislation from attempts to reduce the quantity of French films distributed in the US at the end of the 19th century, through the "Lenin ratio" in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, to recent calls from French film-makers headed by Luc Besson for a restriction upon US imports. In Britain for example, the Cinematograph Films Act was passed in 1927, obliging cinemas to give at least 5% of their schedule over to British films. As Sarah Street notes, within this Act, "A British film was defined as one made by a British subject or company, but the definition did not specify that control had to be in British hands, only that the majority of the company directors should be British" (Street, 1997:7). By 1936 this share had risen to 20% and, as Sarah Street observes, the introduction of this Act emerged from recognition of the role of film as propaganda and a perceived need to contain the impact of American consumer culture upon British audiences. One of the consequences of this steadily increasing demand for British-made films led to a pressure on the industry and the production of low-budget, rapidly-shot "quota quickies". Many of these films are no longer extant.

A fourth use of the term national cinema defines films in relation to repeated themes — what the films are of or about. Higson suggests that when considering whether a group of films are categorizable as national cinema we might ask:

> Do they share a common style or world-view? Do they share common themes? How do they project the national character? How do they dramatize the fantasies of national identity? Are they concerned with questions of nationhood? What role do they play in constructing the sense or the image of the nation? (Higson, 1995:5)

These questions of representation might help to focus an analysis of Michael Winterbottom's films, although I would argue that while the narratives of Winterbottom's films are often set in Britain, it is a Britain that is relatively unfamiliar in cinematic terms. In so far as they're concerned with questions of nationhood it is through an insistence upon the inadequacy of national identities to legitimize and make comprehensible the experience of the characters within these films. Thus, the senses or images of the nation produced by these films are fractured and unstable — images of incompatibility and incompatible images.

One of the most strikingly apparent features of Michael Winterbottom's work is its diversity. He is a prolific director who has made 13 feature films in the last 10 years in addition to several episodes for UK TV dramas. These range from low-budget, partially improvised films shot quickly on digital video to lavish literary adaptations.

Winterbottom as auteur

One of the ways in which the diversity of his work might be understood is with recourse to the concept of the cinematic *auteur*, a concept, which, ironically, is also closely associated with Truffaut. Attacking the conservatism and regressiveness of ideas of quality French cinema, Truffaut argues in the early 1950s that certain directors of American films should be regarded as creative authors whose signature themes and style were visible in their work, regardless of the films' origins in the Hollywood film factories. Winterbottom is often referred to as an *auteur* and a recent article in the cinema journal, *Sight and Sound*, argues that no matter how uncomfortable Winterbottom might be with this category, "even anti-auteur directors must recognise that the buck stops with them. The director makes the decisions, and the decisions make the movie". (Gilbey, 2004:32)

Winterbottom himself dismisses the suggestion that he be regarded as an *auteur* since it misrepresents the improvisatory and collective conditions of film-making that are particularly important to his own practice[3]:

> I find that attitude ludicrous because film-making is either an industrial or a

collaborative process, whichever way you want to describe it. So to have this bourgeois, liberal-romantic idea of the creator seems to me like the ultimate perversion. (Gilbey, 2004:31)

To be sure there *are* a number of distinctive motifs that recur across Michael Winterbottom's films, which might be identified as authorial signatures. There is, for example, a recurrent use of contemporary British pop music both as non-diegetic sound and within the diegesis of the films. *Go Now* (1995), *I Want You* (1998), *With or Without You* (1999) and *24-Hour Party People* (2002) all take their titles from songs, demonstrating the thematic significance of music within the films. *I Want You* is the title of a song by Elvis Costello, which is played several times in the film and also provides the film with its central narrative theme of obsessive and violent desire. *24-Hour Party People* is an account of the music scene in Manchester after punk and centres on the story of the Factory record label, which released records by Joy Division, New Order and Happy Mondays among others. Winterbottom describes his most recent release, *9 Songs*, as a "concert film", and the film's episodic narrative of a sexual relationship between a couple is structured around their attendance of nine concerts (Winterbottom in Brown, 2004:7). Thus, music has a structuring role. In these films, music is treated not just as an incidental or subsidiary formal element that adds colour or provides dramatic punctuation. Instead, there is an insistence upon the significance of certain culturally and historically specific pieces of music.

Thus, among the problems with an author-centred approach to film criticism is that it "suspends" the films from their economic, social and historical contexts and these are contexts that are crucial to Winterbottom's practice.

What I am arguing, then, is that instead of employing conventional critical frameworks with which to understand Winterbottom's films — instead of scrutinizing his work for signs of the author's hand, arguing that his films are the embodiment of the best of contemporary British cinema, or even employing genre analysis — I suggest that, when considered as a corpus, Winterbottom's films demand a more lateral approach. This approach is informed by one central theme that recurs throughout his work, the theme of the border or the boundary. Tracing this theme and image through the structures, form and content of his work reveals much about Winterbottom's films, but also the way that these films pose and provoke critical questions about the idea of British cinema and national identity.

Border/boundary

One of the most important figures or motifs in Winterbottom's films is that of the border or boundary and it is this motif that allows us to return to the question of

national cinema and consider the ways in which Winterbottom's films rethink (and allow us to rethink) what British cinema might be. I use the terms "border" or "boundary" in several senses — to refer to physical or geographical borders, national borders, the delimitation of formal or aesthetic categories, and also conceptual boundaries.

1. Genre boundaries

An immediately evident feature of the films is a preoccupation with generic boundaries. The films range from costume drama through romantic comedy to documentary-style realism. Thus his work spans three genres with which recent British cinema is most closely associated internationally. However, the films rarely correspond in a straightforward way to these generic categories. For example, Clare Monk argues that *Jude* (Winterbottom, 1996), an adaptation of Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* should be classed as "post-heritage" cinema rather than heritage cinema since it is a film that criticizes or puts into play the conventions of the genre.

His second costume drama, *The Claim*, an adaptation of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is relocated from Wessex to the American frontier and its closest generic relative is Robert Altman's western, *McCabe and Mrs Miller* (1971). The film's *mise-en-scène* thus places it, literally and conceptually, at a distance from the heritage film. *I Want You* is shot like an American road movie, and tells the story of a convicted murderer returning to his home-town on his release from prison to try to woo the woman whose father he killed when the father tried to come between them. (Its generic allegiance is made clear from a scene in which a group of friends are shown watching the stylistically self-conscious contemporary film noir, *Romeo is Bleeding* (Medak, 1992)). However, the film is set in the small British seaside resort of Hastings. Winterbottom's first film, *Butterfly Kiss* (1994) is a road movie, and follows the violent journey of two women through provincial truck stops and petrol stations, A-roads and motorways[4]. However, it is a road movie set in the bleak, unromantic ("antidramatic") landscape of Lancashire in the north of England and, as with *I Want You* and *The Claim*, the setting of the film strongly emphasizes the sense of incompatibility or displacement explored by the narratives.

With or Without You is superficially the most anodyne of his films, a romantic comedy about a couple trying to conceive a baby. However, significantly, the film is set in Northern Ireland, an area that has been the focus of violent disputes about ethic and national identity for centuries. While this history is barely acknowledged by the film, Martin McLoone suggests that *With or Without You* is one of a number of films emerging from what he terms the "Celtic periphery" that are engaged with the project

of reimagining British identities as multiple. He argues that films such as *With or Without You* indicate

> that a process of internal decolonization is well underway and that peripherality has moved towards the cutting edge of contemporary cultural debate. (McLoone, 2001:190)

Thus, rather than simply reproducing commodified national stereotypes for international consumption, *With or Without You*, through its choice of location, forces us to recognize British identity as a matter of struggle, violent repression and resistance that is at once shocking and banal. As McLoone suggests, for example, for international audiences "the dominant images of Scotland and Northern Ireland are non-British, perhaps even anti-British" (Ibid.).

Some of the other films are simply difficult to categorize in terms of genre categories. *Welcome to Sarajevo* (1997), for example, has been described as a war film, depicting the siege of the city of Sarajevo in former Yugoslavia by the Bosnian Serb army. However the focus of the film is the experiences of Michael Nicholson, a real British TV journalist reporting from Sarajevo who smuggled one of the many orphans in Sarajevo out of the city and back to Britain where he adopted her. In this respect, while retaining the device of a character-centred narrative, the narrative trajectory of the film has little to do with conventional war films.

Thus, in their breaching of conventional genre boundaries through such strategies as displacement (of story and characters from one location to another), these films make visible such boundaries. The boundaries are foregrounded and, arguably, interrogated by the films. I would argue that this is not simply an example of gratuitous style, but is a means of representing or formally embodying the experience of dislocation or displacement (and uncertainty/danger) experienced by many of the characters in these films. For example, relocating the *Mayor of Casterbridge* to California reframes the story as a story of immigrant experience, of European settlers trying to establish a home for themselves.

This generic dislocation is reproduced at a graphic level in some of the films, whose incoherent, heterogeneous style lurches discontinuously from scene to scene or shot to shot. Thus, films mix black and white and colour film stock, video, 16 mm and 35 mm film. Coloured lens filters are used extensively in some films, such as *I Want You*, which is dominated by the use of a yellow filter that gives much of the film a sickly and "unnatural" appearance.

Other films, such as *Wonderland* (1999) and *Code 46* (2004), use natural light (rather than artificial lighting) to achieve a naturalistic effect. Infra-red cameras are used to shoot at night in *In This World* (2002) and *Welcome to Sarajevo*, and close-up

shots of TV screens and CCTV monitors are used regularly in a number of films and a particularly common device — one which appears in many of the films — is the insertion of a distorted or unfocused image.

Thus the films use a range of visual devices or textures that draw our attention consistently to the qualities of the film image, the image as a formal construction and, thus, to a film as a series of divisions, a montage of thousands of disjointed shots rather than a continuous unbroken flow of images[5].

2. Fiction/documentary boundary

A related boundary traced and re-crossed by the films is the generic/ontological boundary between fictional and documentary reality. Winterbottom's films have a complicated relationship to historical reality; *Welcome to Sarajevo*, as noted, is based on the autobiography of a British TV news reporter while *24-Hour Party People* is also a loosely historical account of the music scene in Manchester from 1976, when the Sex Pistols played there, through to the 1990s and centres on the story of the Factory record label. One of the ways in which the film deviates from the conventions of the biopic, however, is that the main character, Tony Wilson (Steve Coogan), who was the owner of Factory records and is a TV presenter, "steps out" of the diegesis of the film at certain points to address the spectator like an actor in Brecht's epic theatre or member of the chorus in an ancient Greek play. At the film's opening, for instance, he is shown filming a report on hang-gliding for a regional news programme and the scene ends with Wilson giving the viewer guidance as to how to interpret the film:

> You're going to be seeing a lot more of that sort of thing in the film, although that actually *did* happen. Obviously it's symbolic; it works on both levels. I won't tell you too much. I don't want to spoil the film, but I'll just say, "Icarus", okay? If you know what I mean, great, if you don't, it doesn't matter ... but you should probably read more.

In both films archival and documentary footage is interlaced with fictional recreations, but in *24-Hour Party People*, the confusion is exacerbated by the occasional inclusion of some of the historical figures that are represented in the film by actors. One scene shows Howard Devoto (Martin Hancock), singer with the punk band, The Buzzcocks, and Lindsay Wilson (Shirley Henderson), Tony Wilson's partner having sex in the toilet cubicle of a night club in the late 1970s. The camera then tracks around the room to show the real Howard Devoto dressed as a cleaner and mopping the floor. Devoto explains to the camera, "I definitely don't remember this happening" and the voice-over (by the actor playing Tony Wilson) then concedes that both people insist it didn't happen, and adds, "but I agree with John Ford, when you have to choose between the

truth and the legend, print the legend." Thus the film undermines its own authority as a plausible historical account, declaring its status as a cinematic narrative.

A similarly conceptually intricate device is employed in *Code 46* in which Mick Jones, singer with punk band The Clash, appears in the background of a scene, singing one of his band's most famous songs, "Should I Stay or Should I Go?", in a karaoke bar. In a film that explores anxieties around travel, mobility, passion and sexual infidelity, the song title has particular resonance. However, this insertion of real people (without explanation) into the diegesis of the film also has a disruptive or jarring effect, shattering the homogeneity of the fictional world portrayed by the films.

In This World is perhaps the most confusing of Winterbottom's films to date, with regard to the distinction between fiction and document. This traumatic film recounts the attempt of two Afghan refugees, Jamal and Enayatullah, to travel illegally from the Peshawar camp in Pakistan to Britain in search of asylum. The film was shot like a documentary using small, hand-held DV cameras, and much of the film was improvised as the film-makers followed the two non-professional actors (whom they indeed found in a refugee camp in Pakistan) along this route. Thus, Winterbottom has suggested, the film should be considered "a documentary of the journey we organized for Jamal and Enayatullah"[6]. His most recent release, *9 Songs*, blurs the border between fiction and reality, or between performance and authenticity, in a slightly different way as it features explicit sex between the two central characters. Winterbottom suggests that there is not a great distinction between conventional acting and having sex in front of the camera, observing that, "In general you are asking actors to be quite intimate, anyway. From everyday acting to having sex isn't as big a leap as it might be for someone else" (Winterbottom in Brown, 2004:6). The nature of this "leap" raises a question about the acceptable limits of what a film director can require of actors[7] and, more broadly, *9 Songs* invites us to reflect upon the extent to which performance extends beyond the frame of the film to everyday social interaction. However, it also raises the question of at what point the line between simulation and actual sex may be drawn and, indeed, whether a distinction can be drawn.

In another recent interview, discussing *24-Hour Party People*, Winterbottom suggests "I don't think there's a border between fiction and reality"[8]. This is somewhat disingenuous, however, since what is evident in these films is that, while the distinction between fiction and reality is unclear, this lack of clarity is essential to the discomforting effect that these films have. Rather than erase this distinction or simply disregard it, the impact of the films is partially dependent upon the ways that this distinction is put into play, encouraging our uncertainty about the status of the images on screen in front of us.

3. Thematic boundaries

Perhaps the most important boundaries or borders in these films are the literal represented borders — geographical and physical boundaries, national and social boundaries.

One of the most obvious visual motifs is the seashore, the edge of the land. This is rarely an idyllic comfortable place, although occasionally it offers characters a brief moment of escape. While Jude Fawley and Sue Bridehead enjoy a rare care-free interlude walking on the sands in *Jude*, in other films, the beach is the site of naked, drug-fuelled cavorting, a shooting, the disposal of corpses and the consensual murder of a woman by her lover. For the Afghan refugee, Jamal, having travelled across Asia and Europe, the beach at Calais marks the almost insurmountable boundary between France and Britain.

More explicitly, a theme running through several of the films is that of immigration and displacement. *In This World*, as noted, is a film about immigration and the difficulty of crossing national borders. At the beginning of the film, cousins Jamal and Enayatullah are stranded in the massive refugee camp in Peshawar and cannot return to Afghanistan. Nor can they legitimately travel to Britain and are forced to undertake a long and horrendous journey in which they are ripped off, forced to work in a sweat-shop or walking the streets selling trinkets and stealing to make money. In one stretch of the journey, referring to a recent atrocity in which a number of Chinese refugees while being smuggled into Europe, they are sealed inside a crate with a number of other refugees all of whom suffocate during the journey except for a baby and Jamal. For these characters borders are not permeable. Their experience of the world is not that of a borderless global village, but of a world of barriers, fences and checkpoints.

The violent disruption caused by the movement of — and the movement of people across — borders is a persistent theme across this body of work. *Welcome to Sarajevo* is a document of the ultimately genocidal chaos that followed from the redrawing of national and ethnic borders in former Yugoslavia while his subsequent film, *I Want You*, obliquely represents the repercussions of this conflict, taking as its central characters a boy and his sister, orphaned refugees from Sarajevo who have found themselves in coastal Britain.

Code 46, a science fiction film set in a technologically advanced future, also addresses the theme of immigration. In this imaginary future, passage between different places — countries or areas of countries — requires special travel permits or "cover". This "cover" is difficult to obtain (and it is implied that access to travel permits is related to class and privilege[9]) and therefore there is a thriving trade in

forged permits. The film follows the attempt of a corporate investigator to identify the forger. This future society has been restructured by immigration — it is multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and characters speak a polyglot dialogue that is primarily English but is littered with words and phrases form other languages. But this future world is not a multi-cultural utopia, but a divided world. Outside the hyper-modern, bustling and polluted city of Shanghai is desert, a non-specific place dotted with ruins and shanty towns and simply referred to as "outside". Most of the action on the film takes place in Shanghai, Seattle and Jebel Ali and between these places, it appears, is just vast, virtually empty borderland. Criminals or people that are stranded between borders without valid travel permits are relegated to exile in this space.

What I have argued is that to frame a discussion of films in relation to the category of British cinema is problematic. Michael Winterbottom's films are an interesting case study in this respect since there is a problematic fit between his films and such a category. What Winterbottom's films invite us to do instead is rethink the category of British cinema and perhaps consider how his films might correspond to a different international, supra-national, or un-British category. As I have suggested, the films are marked by a preoccupation with boundaries, borders and divisions. There is a relationship between the representations of borders and divisions, within the films, and the divided incoherent narrative structure and style of the films.

This is to argue that Winterbottom's films are also concerned with a politics of division or irreconcilability. This politics is manifested at the level of narrative themes, the level of the visual images that recur in the films, and at a structural level. It is for this reason that it is appropriate to rethink questions of national identity or cultural identity, specifically British national identity, through these films. To try to incorporate them into a unified homogeneous category of British cinema would be to misunderstand the films or disregard significant aspects of them, and the argument constituted by the films reveals how politically reactionary such a gesture of definition is.

As Andrew Higson observes:

> Nationalism is about drawing boundaries, about making an inside and an outside. The process of constructing national identity is thus a continual process of negotiating these limits. Film culture also seeks to identify and define others in relation to the ideal national cinema. (Higson, 277)

The challenge posed by Winterbottom's films is to recognise that the boundaries such nationalist discourse attempts to draw are necessarily unstable and impermanent. However, they are also at the same time sometimes impermeable and final and it does not follow that for the working-class Jude Fawley, desperately seeking access to the privileged spaces of Christminster University, or for any of the refugees in these films,

hampered by poverty, their race, or their ethnic identities, a recognition of the arbitrariness of these boundaries makes them any less uncrossable, or being in the borderlands of identity any more bearable. As Judith Butler argues, "the 'unliveable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life are, nevertheless, densely populated" (Butler, 1993:3). Winterbottom's films are evidence of this zone of abject beings whose exclusion operates as a constitutive outside against which we delineate our sense of national identity and our sense of freedom of movement. Indeed, just as *Code 46* shows us a press of bodies at the border checkpoint outside Shanghai, selling and bartering goods and services in exchange for money and cover, so the borders of "our" nations are marked by a dense layer of abjected bodies through which "we", the subjects who belong, form narcissistic fantasies of national identity (Tyler, 2004). In exposing the foundations and bodies upon and through which a normative sense of national identity is based, Winterbottom's films undermine the very idea of a singular, or homogeneous British cinema, challenging the uncritical idea that there could be a cinema that isn't always already more than national, incomplete, phantasmatic and incompatible.

And this returns us to Truffaut's question as to whether the terms, "cinema" and "Britain", are incompatible. The response to this question is a decisive "yes", but this response does not require us to attempt defensively or obstinately to reconstruct or recover a clearly bounded and reactionary category of British cinema. Instead it is an invitation to think expansively about what a critically incompatible cinema might be: fractured, shifting, playful, sometimes popular, politically challenging and engaged, with provisional borders that cut violently across physical, stylistic and visual spaces and conceptual categories rather than clearly, safely delimiting them. As I have argued, Winterbottom's films treat displacement or irreconcilability as a structuring force and central theme and in doing this they offer us a means of thinking through the implications of Truffaut's question and of visualizing a cinema of incompatibility.

Notes:

1. In any case, even a cursory reading of the Truffaut-Hitchcock conversation reveals that Truffaut is not simply drawing a comparison between French and British cinema or even British and American cinema since he argues in the introduction to the interviews that, as a cinematic stylist and *auteur*, Hitchcock exceeds any comparable international figures and any national categories: "If Hitchcock, to my way of thinking, outranks the rest, it is because he is the most complete film-maker of all [...] Because he exercises such complete control over all the

elements of his films and imprints his personal concepts at each step of the way, Hitchcock has a distinctive style of his own" (Truffaut, 1986:11).

2. Incidentally, the science fiction film, *Code 46* (Winterbottom, 2004) might also be understood as a loose adaptation of Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, preoccupied as it is with the incest taboo and featuring the motif of the Sphinx. See the promotional documentary, *Obtaining Cover: Inside Code 46* (Carson, 2004) for an account of the genesis of the film's themes.

3. For example, screenwriter Frank Cotrell-Boyce, who is credited as writer of six of Winterbottom's films, has a close working relationship with the director that progresses from the generation of initial story ideas through the production of the films. Winterbottom has also worked repeatedly with certain actors such as Shirley Henderson, Christopher Eccleston and Steve Coogan, who are attracted by, among other things, the director's improvisatory approach and the opportunity for creative input this affords them.

4. Notably, Winterbottom also says of a later film, "With *In This World* I took two real refugees and made their road movie", suggesting that this genre, or narrative model, has particular appeal for him (Brown, 2004:6).

5. Incidentally, one of the motifs that recurs in film after film of Winterbottom's is that of hair-cuts, with three of the films using a hairdressing salon as a major location. In one sense there is a recognition here of the role of the hairdresser's as an important social forum for women and working-class women in particular. However, more playfully, we might read this as a reference to the formal conditions of film as a medium whose signifying structure is organized around the cut.

6. Winterbottom in *In This World EPK*.

7. Concerned about the reception of her role in the film, for example, the lead actress, Margo Stilley, has asked that her name be not used in the publicity campaign for the film (Higgins, 2004).

8. *Michael Winterbottom: Profile of a Film-Maker* (Charles, 2002)

9. Although only touched on in this essay, class is an important theme running through Winterbottom's films, which make the violent boundaries of social class visible. As Julianne Pidduck writes, his first costume drama is exceptional in its treatment of this theme: "More than any other recent costume film, *Jude* reveals the hard labour of class mobility" (Pidduck, 2004:126).

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