

# From *In Which We Serve* to *Last Orders*: the Cinematic Representation of the Cockney<sup>1</sup>

Robert Cross

**Keywords:** British cinema, Cockney, London

**Abstract:** This paper surveys the cinematic representations of Cockneys from 1940 to the present day. Beginning with feature films made during the Second World War, I examine how the image of the Cockney has undergone a radical transformation during the second half of the 20th century. My analysis follows the major social upheavals in British society—the austerity of the 1940s, the affluence of the 1950s, the Swinging London scene of the 1960s, the social strife of the 1970s, Thatcherism in the 1980s, and the aftermath of the Thatcher years in the 1990s—and looks at how the image of the Cockney in films has been shaped by and responded to these changes. I look in particular at the impact of the shift from communality to individuality. The Cockney, I shall argue, does not have any essential or fixed way existence but is a constantly reinvented identity that has been, as it were, up for grabs as social and political exigences change and shift.

## Introduction

Different film genres and a dramatically changing society in Britain

---

*Doshisha Studies in Language and Culture*, 5(4), 2003: 517 – 537.

Doshisha Society for the Study of Language and Culture,

© Robert Cross

during the past half-century and more have together constructed and projected a diverse array of Londoners from the lower social classes onto the cinema screen. Certain actors, associated with these different representations, have become identified as iconic Cockneys in the public consciousness. One thinks, for example, of Tommy Trinder, Alfie Bass, Sydney Tafler, Stanley Holloway, Michael Caine, Barbara Windsor, Bob Hoskins, Steven Berkoff and Ray Winstone. In this paper, I propose to examine the ways in which Cockneys have been represented in British cinema in the period from the Second World War up to the present. My approach, given the breadth of the subject, will be to move through the period chronologically and discuss certain landmark films, developments and characters. My particular interest will be in exploring how screen Cockneys have been constructed in response to the polar demands of communality and criminality. Most of the films discussed or mentioned here, mainstream rather than art-house, are set in the Cockney heartland of the East End. Others, though, are located in other districts of the capital, so I should explain that I use the term *Cockney* in a generalised sense here to refer to the ordinary Londoner from the working or lower-middle classes and not just to somebody who was born “within the sound of Bow Bells.”

### **Soldiers and sailors**

My point of departure is the Second World War. My reason for taking this event as my starting point is two-fold. Firstly, the 1939-45 conflict is, by common consent, held to be the great watershed in modern British social history, ushering in an era of inclusive, consensual politics symbolised above all else by the creation by Clement Atlee’s Labour government of the welfare state. Secondly, the World War II is generally held by cinema historians to be a ‘golden age’ in British cinema (Chapman 2000: 193-7). And the year 1942, in particular, is seen as an important moment when the

so-called ‘wartime wedding’ between studio-made feature films and the techniques of the documentary movement took place.

Feature films in the early years of the war, melodramas such as *Convoy* (1940) and *Ships With Wings* (1941), focused disproportionately on the urbane and gentlemanly officers and their the Boy’s Own exploits. As Lindsay Anderson observed archly in his essay “Get out and push,” the working-class characters in such films,

make excellent servants, good tradesmen, and first-class soldiers. On the march, in slit trenches, below deck, they crack funny Cockney jokes or think about the mountains of Wales. They die well, often with a last, mumbled message on their lips to the girl they left behind them in the Old Kent Road, but it is up there on the bridge that the game is really played, as the officers raise binoculars repeatedly to their eyes, converse in clipped monosyllables, and win the battles.

(quoted in Wesker 1994: 461)

The fight against Fascism would not be achieved by these ‘Bulldog Drummonds’ in uniform alone, however, but by the concerted effort of the British population as a whole, from all classes and regions. As the wartime government quickly realised, a new and collective sense of national identity would have to be constructed in order to fight the good fight. To this end, the Crown Film Unit of the Ministry of Information was charged with the creation of a series of documentary films that would convey the communal wartime effort of the common people to the common people. *London Can Take It!*, a short documentary made by Humphrey Jennings in 1940 that focused on the fortitude of ordinary Londoners during the Blitz, marked a key moment in the cinematic reconfiguration of the Cockney. The American narrator, an outsider whose perspective on the population of

London is implicitly unburdened by the baggage of social class, declares in the weary voice of the frontline war correspondent:

I have watched the people of London live and die ever since death in its most ghastly garb began to come here as a nightly visitor five weeks ago, and I can assure you there is no panic, no despair in London Town. There is nothing but determination, confidence and high courage among the people of Churchill's island.

The slippage here is the point that is worth emphasising. Ordinary Londoners, far from being the under class, have now become representatives of the British people, fighting with tenacity on what, during the Blitz, had become the home front. "Brokers, clerks, peddlars, merchants by day," the narrator declares, "they are heroes by night." Thus heroic Cockneys stand metonymically for heroic Britons.

Ealing Studios, influenced by the Crown Film Unit documentary dramas, began to make features which downplayed melodrama, presented characters and settings in a more realistic way, and balanced the screen time and characterisation of the different ranks and classes. The result was a shift away from the melodramatic Boys Own-type exploits of an exclusive, posh officer class as in *Convoy* and *Ships With Wings* towards more democratic and inclusive films like *In Which We Serve* and *The Foreman Went to France* (both 1942), and *San Demetrio, London* (1943). As the film historian Roger Manvell observes, "the 'war story' with a patriotic slant began to give way to the 'war documentary', which derived the action and to a greater extent the characterization from real events and real people." (Manvell 1974: 101)

The politics of consensus were beginning to create cross-class alliances in the struggle towards the common goal of victory. Consequently, working-class characters were portrayed in greater depth than before. Shorty Blake,

the Cockney ordinary seaman played by John Mills in the naval drama *In Which We Serve* (1942), for example, is a far more rounded character than the two-dimensional wise-cracking Cockney in *Convoy*. We do not only witness Blake going about his duties on board ship but also in extended scenes at home on leave and with his fiancée. Such is his presence in the film, indeed, that he becomes the proletarian counterweight to Noel Coward's upper-class Captain Kinross. Blake, like Jennings's blitzed Cockneys, is constructed in such a way as to embody the cheerful pluck of the ordinary British people. Michael Balcon, the head of Ealing, was very concerned, however, to keep an expanded Cockney role such as this within tight bounds. Blake and his fiancée evidently know their place on the social ladder, even to the extent that they quite happily accept some marital advice from the paternalistic Kinrosses, during a chance encounter on a train as they head off on their honeymoon. A more three-dimensional and realistic construction Blake may have been, but he still tugged away at a metaphorical forelock. Mills reprised his Cockney ordinary seaman role in Noel Coward and David Lean's *This Happy Breed* (1944), a film that focused solely on working-class characters.

More light-hearted by far, the actor Tommy Trinder specialised during the war years in playing the morale-boosting Cockney Everyman, a comic counterpart to John Mills. With his broad grin, gift of the gab, and tendency to break out into song, Trinder's screen characterisations drew upon the rich traditions of the music hall. Indeed, this link was later made explicit in Cavalcanti's *Champagne Charlie* (1944), a film in which Trinder played George Laybourne, a music-hall 'swell', "the knowing working-class dandy, a parody and appropriation of gentility and masculine display which celebrated proletarian success." (Spicer 2001: 23) A typical example of Trinder's 'war' films is *The Foreman Went to France* (1942), in which he plays a chirpy private who, one senses, would need only a gentle nudge to be pushed into some act of mischief. The warmth and energy of Trinder's

roguish character, however, are harnessed in the communal struggle. This is clear in the scene in which he selflessly entertains the refugee children with songs in the back of the army truck as he and his fellows escape across France.

From these few examples it is possible to gain a sense of how the roles given to Cockney characters in wartime feature films evinced greater depth yet continued to be circumscribed by the structure and discipline of the armed services, the traditional limitations of class, and by the greater need of communality. Already, though, the Cockney rogue, glimpsed benignly in Trinder's on-screen persona, was starting to pull at the leash of respectability.

### **Spivs and Teds**

The wartime emphasis on communal values was already under threat in the final year or two of the war, not from the Nazis but from the so-called spivs on the streets who tempted honest citizens off the straight and narrow path of shared austerity. These flashily dressed black marketeers flourished for two main reasons: first, they were perfectly positioned to meet the endless demand created by rationing with an endless supply of goods that tended to fall off the back of dockland warehouses; second, they easily escaped detection and capture due to the black out and an undermanned police force. During the nine long years of austerity and rationing that continued after the Peace, a great challenge facing the authorities was how to curb the activities of these dangerous individualists. It is no surprise, then, that when the Cockney spiv turned up in a number of British films from the mid-1940s on, he was constructed as a subversive presence that must be eradicated. Significantly, the spiv in these films, which were mostly produced by the community-oriented Ealing Studios, was often played by the character actor Sydney Tafler, whose Jewish persona further served to

demonise the spiv as ethnically and culturally ‘other’.

One of the spiv’s earliest appearances is in *Waterloo Road* (1944) in the figure of the flamboyant Ted Purvis, acted by Stewart Granger, whose tie is loud even in black and white. Pitted against him is the thoroughly decent Everyman Jim Coulter (played by John Mills), a Cockney soldier who has gone AWOL in order to check up on rumours of his wife’s infidelity. The conflict at the heart of *Waterloo Road* allows it to be viewed as a ‘state-of-England’ film. The narrator figure, played by the avuncular Alistair Sims, is Dr Montgomery, a local GP who metaphorically measures the temperature of an feverish nation. Bemoaning the activities of the spivs, he tells Coulter, “I sometimes think the remedy is in your hands . . . the hands of the people you represent. You make the sacrifices, you fellows in the services. You don’t want the Ted Purvises of this world to reap the benefits when it’s all over.” He then deliberately eggs Coulter on to put the spiv, whom he describes, continuing his medical discourse, as a “symptom of a general condition,” in his place. The climax comes when Coulter, the underdog, defeats Purvis in a fist fight. The film closes with Montgomery, the nation’s physician, having delivered Jim Coulter Jr. into the world, pondering darkly on the future. “We’ll need good citizens when this lot’s over,” he muses. “Millions of them.”

These good Cockney citizens appeared in a cycle of films which looked with an affectionate eye on the social tensions of the time. The Ealing Comedies, for all their humour and loveable eccentrics, had a serious intent, namely to help, like Jim Coulter, to stem criminality and promote communality. Good citizenship is the unequivocal message of *Passport to Pimlico* (1949). The Cockney inhabitants of Miramont Place, initially assert their right to independence after an ancient document is discovered in a bomb crater. Their tenacity in the face of governmental hostility consciously draws upon the still fresh memory of the fighting spirit of ordinary Londoners during the Blitz. These citizens, led by Arthur

Pemberton (played by Stanley Holloway) are presented in such a way as to represent the British population as a whole. When Pimlico is blockaded, for example, a *Sunday Express* headline announces: “World sympathy for crushed Cockneys.” However, as the relaxation of rationing threatens to turn this tiny piece of Burgundy into, as ‘Prime Minister’ Pemberton puts it, “a spivs’ paradise,” so the good citizens return patriotically to the communal fold. Better to endure austere Britain than enjoy affluent but morally lax Burgundy.

The short step from concern about black marketeering to panic about increasing criminality was reflected in the cycle of Hollywood-influenced *films noirs* which appeared around that time (Miller 1994). *They Made Me a Fugitive* and *It Always Rains on Sunday* (both 1947), *Noose* and *London Belongs to Me* (both 1948), *Night and the City* (1950), and *Pool of London* (1951), for example, sounded the alarm and depicted London as, in the words of film historian Jeffrey Richards, a “totally unregulated free-enterprise society where anyone can supply anything to anyone for a price, a society of human piranhas swimming greedily through shoals of shady deals and sudden turbulent eddies of violence.” (Richards 1997: 145) The jostling tension between communality and criminality, embodied in two very different types of Cockney, was the underlying theme of the classic law and order film, *The Blue Lamp* (1950) (Barr 1980: 82-92).

Like many of the wartime dramas put out by Ealing, *The Blue Lamp* employs a quasi-official discourse. It opens with an acknowledgement of the technical assistance provided by the Metropolitan Police, and newspaper headlines are used to create the atmosphere of a society buffeted by crime. The audience’s loyalty is implicitly solicited when the narrator asks in clipped RP tones: “What protection has the man in the street against this armed threat to his life and property?” This threat comes not from professional criminals who, we are assured, “live by a code of conduct” but from “restless and ill-adjusted youngsters.” All that stands between the



vulnerable public and delinquents like Tom Riley, the young armed robber played by Dirk Bogarde, are ordinary bobbies like PC 693 George Dixon, played by Jack Warner. When Dixon the rock-solid Cockney servant of the community is murdered by Riley halfway through the film, a sense of moral outrage towards delinquent youth is fostered. Significantly, Riley's eventual capture is achieved with the cooperation of the criminal fraternity at a site of working-class culture, the White City Stadium. Thus ordinary Londoners, on both sides of the law, uphold the good of the community by closing ranks in order to deliver up a dangerous deviant.

It was in the mid-1950s, amid growing prosperity, that the first full-fledged youth cult in postwar Britain emerged in working-class areas of London. The arrival of the Teddy Boys precipitated a moral panic (Cross 1998). Their outrageous Edwardian style of dress was a provocation aimed at the stoical older generation that had endured nearly a decade of postwar rationing in its drab and patched clothes. This was the moment, as official discourse had it, that the baton of criminal individuality was passed from the spiv to the juvenile delinquent. The new phenomenon of youth supposedly on the rampage now became the theme of a cycle of so-called social problem films such as *Cosh Boy* (1953), *Secret Place* (1957), and *No Trees in the Street* (1959). Significantly, the British Board of Film Censors was quick to discourage new scripts that in any way glamorised the delinquents. But it was a losing battle, as youth culture, on the threshold of the Sixties, gathered a head of steam.

The cycles of films about flashy spivs and Teds paved the way for the emergence in the sexually and socially liberated mid-1960s of the actor who, for most people, was to become *the* iconic screen Cockney, namely Maurice Joseph Micklewhite, or as he is better known, Michael Caine. For the first time in the Sixties it was hip to be working-class and cool to be Cockney. It was even cooler, of course, if you were the real thing. Unlike Mick Jagger and photographer David Bailey, with their *faux*-Cockney

accents, Caine had a genuine pedigree, with his Billingsgate fish porter dad and charlady mum. His performance as cool and ironic spy Harry Palmer in *The Ipcress File* (1965) bristled with the new confidence of the Metropolitan working class. John Mills's Shorty Blake had known his place and, for all his wise-cracking, kept to it. Caine's Palmer, by contrast, displayed a very different relationship with superiors whose only lever of control over him was the threat to send him back to military prison. In every other way, though, even down to his preference for champignons over mushrooms, he outclassed them—and they knew it. As Spicer notes, “Palmer is imbued with traditional working-class certainties: bosses are vile, work awful and the only response is to look after Number One.” (Spicer 2001: 77)

But it was Caine's portrayal of the title role in *Alfie* (1966) that announced that the New Cockney had arrived. As one commentator has suggested, Alfie is a “Jack-the-lad whose promiscuity coincided with Caine's own star persona and reported lifestyle.” (*Ibid.*: 118) The genius of director Gilbert Lewis was to allow Caine/Alfie to create a direct relationship with his audience through conspiratorial asides, nudges and winks. This ploy created the feeling that here was a real and recognisable Cockney of his times speaking in his own witty voice. Amoral Alfie, with his Mod dandyism, his fiddles at work, and his serial womanising, was a stylish spiv for the Sixties. With the parallels between his off-screen rags-to-riches success story and his on-screen cocky arrogance as Alfie, Caine stood as the very symbol of the socioeconomic and cultural progress made by the Cockney in the twenty years that had passed since 1945. Richards Jeffreys notes that: “As a self-made Cockney, Caine was proud of his success, keen to play up to his celebrity, identifying himself as part of a new generation of meritocrats who refused to be self-deprecating.” (*Ibid.*: 78) Still, as the pessimistic edge to *Alfie* and other Swinging London films such as *Darling*, *The Knack* (both 1965) and *Georgy Girl* (1966), indicated, the

Sixties party would end some time soon, and a different Cockney would be constructed.

### **Gangsters and geezers**

Swinging Sixties London was not only a great centre of liberationist youth culture, it was also the hunting ground of organized criminals epitomised by Ronnie and Reggie Kray (Pearson 1972). Any consideration of the cinematic representation of Cockneys cannot sidestep their brooding and menacing presence in the 1960s social landscape. The mythologisation of the Krays has long been an essential element in the construction of a rose-tinted East End. A typical expression of this, bordering on Pythonesque parody, is found in the memoirs of the actress Barbara Windsor. “To me,” she writes,

the Krays were always charming and gentlemanly, typical East Enders . . . I looked upon them as sort of Robin Hood figures, taking from the rich to give to the poor. In their manor, Bethnal Green and Mile End, there would be no muggings or street crime. The brothers were the first in to help children, families and old folk who were down on their luck; there were always stories of their generosity to people in need.

(Windsor 1991: 51)

And she adds: “They only harmed the people who were out to harm them.” (*Ibid.*: 52) ‘Virtual villain’ Steven Berkoff is another Cockney actor who has been keen to mythologise the Krays. Looking back in his autobiography at his youth in Stepney he makes the claim that: “To be beaten up by the Krays twins was considered a kind of badge of honour.” (Berkoff 1996: 42) One can only assume that he was never personally at the sharp end of such

recognition.

The public image cultivated by the brothers was of two smartly tailored East End businessmen who supported an array of causes, particularly boys' clubs, with unstinting generosity. Fastidious about their appearance, they hobnobbed with film stars and aristocrats at their West End clubs. Yet the other image, of course, was of two extremely violent thugs who resorted to blackmail, torture and murder in their bid to control London's underworld. Following their highly publicised trial at the Old Bailey, one of the beacons that marked the end of the Sixties party and the beginning of a long hangover, the cinematic image of the Cockney, already criminalised, became, darker and more violent, self-referential and narcissistic.

The fascination with the twins, especially the psychopathic Ronnie, spawned three notable Cockney gangster films at the outset of the 70s. Richard Burton's portrayal in *Villain* (1971) of East End gang boss Vic Dakin, a thinly disguised portrayal of Ronnie, showed the frighteningly unhinged and cruel quality of the violence, pathologised as resulting from his homosexuality, of which this man was capable. The second, Donald Cammell's complex and groundbreaking film *Performance* (1970) starred Mick Jagger and James Fox in a drama of merged and confused identities and sexualities. This film drew on the disturbed psychology of Ronnie Kray to articulate the moment of confusion and darkness at the end of the Sixties (MacCabe 1998). The third film, *Get Carter!* (1971), offered Michael Caine his first crack at playing the type of role with which he is now synonymous, namely the East End gangster. As he writes in his autobiography,

For me it was a chance to show gangsters as they really are. The tradition in British films up until then, with the exception of Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock*, was that gangsters were either very funny or Robin Hood types, stealing from the rich and giving to the poor. Not a realistic portrait.

(Caine 1992: 322-3)

In contrast to the performances of the Old Harrovian Fox and the Shakespearean Burton which, for all their brilliance and intensity, were actorly, the realism of Caine's characterisation was inflected by the working-class street cred I have already discussed. What linked Caine's characterisation to the Krays, especially for contemporary audiences familiar with the revelations of the trial, was the way it combined dandyism, misogyny and calculated violence in a more realistic and believable way. The cinematic representation of the Kray twins culminates, of course, in the 1990 biopic *The Krays* (1990), directed by Peter Medak. This film, written by East End playwright Philip Ridley, set out to explore the pathology of the twins' violence, tracing it to their over-protective mother Violet and their weak and often absent father, but, as the novelist Iain Sinclair points out, it also perpetuated the nostalgic, romantised image of the villainous East End:

As cinema Medak's *The Krays* was pure Music Hall, a parade of turns, gaudy and saccharine, heritage stuff dipping into the collective dream with the same relish as that shown by the old hoods themselves. Historical revisionism on an Archer scale. Clipclop along the cobbles.

(Sinclair 1996: 22)

I turn my attention now to another tough individual who profoundly influenced the way that the Cockney gangster would be represented on the screen, namely Margaret Thatcher. The Iron Lady's impact on the life of Londoners during her tenure at 10 Downing Street was profound. The rate-capping of local government councils who opposed her market-driven approach to the slashing of public services, the silencing of local democracy

with the abolition of the Greater London Council and Inner London Education Authority, the replacement of the working-class community on the Isle of Dogs with that monument to yuppy greed Canary Wharf, to name three of her signature policies, showed her utter contempt for ordinary Londoners. Thatcherism and gangsterism share a social darwinist view of society, a dog-eat-dog world in which winners take all and losers go to the wall. These parallels are explored in *The Long Good Friday* (1981), written by the left-wing playwright Barrie Keeffe. It was this film that established the hard-man image of another celluloid Cockney, Bob Hoskins. Hoskins plays the gang boss Harold Shand, a figure who shares the desire for success and upward mobility of the Krays as well as the tendency towards psychopathic violence that ultimately thwarts that desire. Shand's Thatcherite dream—one which unravels before his eyes—is to make colossal profits from the redevelopment of the derelict Docklands. Drawing, like Mrs Thatcher, on a nostalgic view of Britain's imperial past—"Used to be the greatest docks in the world at one time, this," he tells a mafia guest from America—Shand positions himself as the man most fit for the job of revitalising the East End. Standing on the deck of his luxury cruiser, and framed by the heritage structure of Tower Bridge in the background, the Cockney gang boss addresses his guests from both sides of the Atlantic:

Ladies and gentlemen. I'm not a politician. I'm a businessman . . . with a sense of history. And I'm also a Londoner, and today is a day of great historical significance for London. Our country's not an island anymore. We're a leading European state. And I believe that this is the decade in which London will become Europe's capital. Having cleared away the outdated, we've got mile after mile, acre after acre of land for our future prosperity. No other city in the world has got right in its centre such an opportunity for profitable progress.

Despite Shand's attempted appropriation of history, this film underlines the fact that the tradition that he constructs is one that cannot be carried forward. Shand, like a tyrannosaurus rex, is supremely ill-equipped to deal with the changing circumstances of London. His refusal to accept the presence of Blacks is a clear indication of this. The irony of his tradition speech is that it is Shand himself who is outdated and must be cleared away. And so he is.

The dinosaurs live on, though. The last five years has seen an outpouring of Cockney gangster films aimed at the 18-25 laddish audience (Chibnall 2001). These include *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (1998) and its follow-up *Snatch* (2000), both directed by Guy Ritchie, *Gangster No. 1* (1999); *Essex Boys* and *Shiner*; *Love, Honour and Obey*; and *Rancid Aluminium*, all made in 2000, and *Sexy Beast* (2001). With the likes of actor Tom Wilkinson jumping on the villain bandwagon, as he did in *Essex Boys*, one might indeed agree with the *Daily Mirror* film critic's complaint that it seems "as if a sizeable section of British Equity had now capitulated to East End gangsterism". But it would be wrong to group all these films too closely together under a single generic heading. The villains in Guy Ritchie's two films, for example, not only whack each other but have a good laugh while they're doing it. *Lock, Stock* and *Snatch*, with their splatter violence, punchy one-liners and comic strip characterisation and plots, make no attempt to disguise their debt to American films like *Goodfellas* and *Reservoir Dogs*. *Gangster No. 1*, however, is a far darker exploration of the evil, cruelty and moral bankruptcy of gangsterism. And *Essex Boys*, the title of which nods at the values of the *nouveau riche*, neo-Conservative Essex Man who voted Mrs Thatcher into power, depicts the extreme violence of the drug dealers. To be sure, they are different films with different Cockney villains. Taken together, though, these 'hard men'—a phrase often heard these days thanks to Kate Kray's TV series and the proliferation of ghost-written memoirs from East End villains—have

done a smash and grab raid on the image rights of the Cockney. Hear a Cockney accent in a film now and one sits in expectation of violence and verbals.

### Other Cockneys

Since the Second World War, and especially during the past two decades, the Cockneys that have been projected onto the cinema screen have been overwhelmingly white, heterosexual males with violently criminal proclivities. They have little use for women, beating and abusing them like the Ray Winstone characters in Ken Loach's *Ladybird, Ladybird* (1994), Gary Oldman's *Nil By Mouth* (1997), and Tim Roth's *The War Zone* (1999), or driving them to suicide, like Reggie Kray's psychological abuse of his young wife Frances in *The Krays*. British cinema clearly has some work to do in terms of constructing more inclusive and representational images of the Cockney, images that would reflect the changing demographics, employment opportunities (or lack of them) and sexual orientations of contemporary working-class Londoners, and not just the closed, racist, and homosocial world of East End villains and thugs.

Some filmmakers, looking critically at the London bequeathed to us by Mrs Thatcher, have offered more diverse takes on the Cockney (Monk 1999). One of the most shocking of these is the nihilistic teenage skinhead Trevor played by Tim Roth in Alan Clarke's *Made in Britain* (1982) who can only hurl incoherent anger and hatred at society in a torrent of verbal filth and racial abuse. He steals cars and trashes the Job Centre he is sent to by his social worker. He breaks into the office of the detention centre where he is forced to stay and pisses on his confidential file. The grim film ends with Trevor, the embodiment of the hopelessness that was Mrs Thatcher's gift to London's working-class youth, eyeballing the audience with an unsettling, hate-filled rictus grin on his face.



Other films have offered a more redemptive perspective on ordinary life in the capital (Murphy 2001). Very often, as if to stake out a different territory from the East End ‘diamond geezers’, these films are set in the housing estates of south London—in other words, in real working-class London communities rather than the ‘Cockneyland’ of Whitechapel and Bethnal Green. Stephen Frears’s *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), for example, which paints a searingly satirical picture of life in Thatcher’s London, relates the gay love between Omar, a London-born, second-generation Pakistani immigrant, and Johnny, a skinhead and ex-National Front member. Their love, which creates a space of harmony between the divided Asian and white communities, and finds symbolic fruition in the establishment of the laundrette, provides a sense of optimism. This is also present in the 1996 film *Beautiful Thing*, which relates the gay love that unfolds between two teenage lads, Jamie and Ste, on a housing estate in south-east London. Both boys face troubles in their everyday lives. Jamie is a bright but introverted boy who regularly plays truant and argues with his mother. Next door lives Ste, popular and good-looking, who seeks refuge with Jamie and his mother from the beatings inflicted by his drunken father. During one such night, Ste sleeps in the same bed as Jamie, and gradually they discover their mutual affection. Two films, then, both foregrounding beauty in their titles, that offer redemption in the way they construct their Cockney protagonists in terms of ethnicity and sexuality.

Some films, drawing on the tradition of Ken Loach’s 1966 TV documentary-style drama *Cathy Come Home*, deal in a hard-hitting way with the difficult lives of Londoners who struggle just to get by and find themselves in the modern dystopian metropolis (Monk 2000). Gary Oldman’s *Nil By Mouth* (1997) and Michael Winterbottom’s *Wonderland* (1999), both more popular with arthouse rather than mainstream audiences, use real locations in south London to explore life at the bottom of the social heap. The latter film relates the interlocking lives of three sisters in their

respective searches for love. These south Londoners are emotionally battered warriors on the front line of urban life. Winterbottom remarks: “What appealed to me about the script was that it created a picture of London which I recognised, but hadn’t seen on film before. The sense of restlessness, of that constant battle which people have to keep their heads above water and, more importantly, to find some space and time in which to try and enjoy life.”<sup>2</sup>

### Conclusion

In conclusion, it is possible to see how the filmic representation of the Cockney has charted and illustrated some of the key social shifts in London and British life over the past half century and more. The grand narrative of a consensual community of Cockneys, constructed and propagated during the Second World War, fell apart at the very moment in which it lost its *raison d’être*. Individualism, at first driven by the consumerism of the affluent late-1950s and the greater social mobility of the 1960s, ate away at any remaining austerity-policed notions of community. Thus, in films, the spivs and Teds superseded the good citizens. For Alfie, there was no community, no family—only people and organisations to be ripped off. In these films, as Jeffrey Richards has noted, “the exaltation of the individual, the unrestrained self, in pursuit of gratification” are foregrounded (Richards 1992: 234). This shift from communality to individuality segued into the divisiveness of the Thatcher years. And as London and British society has become more and more diversified one scarcely speaks now of an overarching community based on geography and class—the traditional working-class East End community, for example—but rather of a plurality of communities created around such notions as shared ethnicity or sexual preference: the ‘gay community’, the ‘Asian community’ and so on.

Gareth Stedman Jones has written of the ‘death’ of what he refers to as

that embarrassing anachronism the Cockney, a term that for him conjures a past world in which the common people of London were white and predominantly Anglo-Saxon. He writes: “The ‘cockney’ has no legitimate place in the declassed and multiracial society that post-imperial Britain has become. The epoch of the ‘cockney’ is over.” (Stedman Jones 1989: 273) Certainly anyone watching the recent film *Last Orders* would think that the funeral rites for the white Anglo-Saxon Cockney—the so-called traditional Cockney—had been uttered. It is fitting that in that film it should be the ashes of the character played by Michael Caine—the actor more than anyone else who had ushered in the New Cockney on the silver screen—that are being taken to be scattered.

What kinds of Cockney will we see projected on the cinema screen from now on? That will depend, of course, upon the ever-changing circumstances of London and British society. What does seem certain is that films set in the capital will reflect more the increasing diversity of contemporary Cockneys rather than the narrowness of Harry Shand’s good old days when Cockneys were white and loved their mums.

### Notes

- 1 This is a revised version of a paper entitled “Celluloid Cockneys” read at the Literary London Conference, Goldsmiths College, University of London, 5-7 July 2002.
- 2 Quoted from the following website: [www.filmfestivals.com/cannes99/html](http://www.filmfestivals.com/cannes99/html).

### References

- Aldgate, Anthony & Jeffrey Richards (1986) *Britain Can Take It: The British Cinema in the Second World War*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Barr, Charles (1980) *Ealing Studios*. London: Cameron & Tayleur, Newton Abbot: David & Charles.

- Berkoff, Steven (1996) *Free Association. An Autobiography*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Caine, Michael (1992) *What's It All About?* London: Arrow.
- Chapman, James (2000) "Cinema, Propaganda and National Identity: British Film and the Second World War." In Ashby, Justine & Andrew Higson (eds.), *British Cinema, Past and Present*, London: Routledge, 193-206.
- Chibnall, Steve (2001) "Travels in Ladland: The British Gangster Film Cycle, 1998-2001." In Murphy, Robert (ed.), *The British Cinema Book*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: British Film Institute, 281-91.
- Cross, Robert (1998) "The Teddy Boy as Scapegoat." *Doshisha Studies in Language and Culture*, 1-2, 263-91.
- Hill, John (1986) *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956-63*. London: British Film Institute.
- Keefe, Barrie (1996) "Haunting Friday." *Sight and Sound*, August (Vol. 6, No. 8).
- MacCabe, Colin (1998) *Performance*. London: British Film Institute.
- Manvell, Roger (1974) *Films and the Second World War*. London: J. M. Dent.
- Miller, L. (1994) "Evidence for a British film noir cycle." In Dixon, W. W. (ed.), *Reviewing British Cinema, 1900-1992*. New York: SUNY.
- Monk, Claire (1999) "From underworld to underclass: crime and British cinema in the 1990s." In Chibnall, Steve & Robert Murphy (eds.), *British Crime Cinema*, London: Routledge, 172-188.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2000) "Underbelly UK: the 1990s underclass film, masculinity and the ideologies of 'new' Britain." In Ashby, Justine & Andrew Higson, *British Cinema, Past and Present*. London: Routledge.
- Murphy, Robert (1999) "A revenger's tragedy—*Get Carter*." In Chibnall, Steve & Robert Murphy (eds.), *British Crime Cinema*, London: Routledge, 123-133.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2001) "Citylife: urban Fairy-tales in Late 90s British Cinema." In Murphy, Robert (ed.), *The British Cinema Book*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: British Film Institute, 292-300.
- Pearson, John (1972) *The Profession of Violence: The Rise and Fall of the Kray Twins*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- Richards, Jeffrey (1992) "New Waves and Old Myths: British Cinema in the 1960s." In Moore-Gilbert, Bart & John Seed (eds.), *Cultural Revolution: The Challenge of the Arts in the 1960s*, London: Routledge.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1997) *Films and British National Identity: From Dickens to Dad's Army*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Sinclair, Iain (1996) "Smart Guys." *Sight and Sound*. August (Vol. 6, No. 8).
- Spicer, Andrew (2001) *Typical Men: The Representation of Masculinity in Popular*

*British Cinema*. London: I. B. Tauris.

- Stedman Jones, Gareth (1989) "The 'cockney' and the nation, 1780-1988." In Feldman, David & Gareth Stedman Jones, *Metropolis—London: Histories and representations since 1800*. London: Routledge.
- Wesker, Arnold (1994) *As Much As I Dare: An Autobiography (1932-1959)*. London: Century.
- Windsor, Barbara (1991) *Barbara. The Laughter and Tears of a Cockney Sparrow*. London: Arrow.