



The Overlooked, the Side-Lined and the Undervalued: BFI Flipside, Cult DVD Labels and the Lost Continents of British Cinema

In *Cult Cinema: An Introduction*, Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton consider the contemporary processes through which films are being framed as cult. As they note, “‘cult’ is now being used by the industry as a term by which to promote and/or to categorize films,” including by DVD and home media companies (Mathijs and Sexton 238-239). One of the key examples they provide of the latter is the Flipside series of DVDs and Blu-rays produced by the British Film Institute. Over the last ten years, Flipside has released thirty-seven titles, all British and all produced between the late 1950s and the late 1970s, stretching from Richard Lester’s 1969 satire *The Bed Sitting Room* to their latest title, Pierre Rouve’s *Stranger in the House* (1967), starring James Mason. In line with Mathijs and Sexton’s arguments, the existence and longevity of the Flipside series illustrates the broad usefulness of ‘cult’ in order to categorise a group of (in this case) quite obscure films and foreground their potential commercial appeal to a range of niche audiences. However, there are also other factors at play here, which relate to the label’s link to the British Film Institute, a body which (among its many functions) oversees the BFI National Archive, whose central remit is to preserve and restore British films in order to ‘ensure Britain’s “film heritage is widely accessible in cinemas and in the home” (BFI National Archive).

In a 2017 piece on British cult cinema, published in *The Routledge Companion to British Cinema History*, I related Flipside’s activities to a broader project within British film culture - a new focus, by DVD companies and British writers and academics, on expanding the canon of British cult cinema beyond long-established titles such as *Performance* (1970), *The Wicker Man* (1973), *Quadrophenia* (1979) and *Withnail and I* (1987)

to encompass forgotten titles within British cinema. In turn, I argued that this process extends conceptions of what constitutes British cinema and British film heritage more broadly, in what I. Q. Hunter has called “a new wave of revisionism” in British film studies and film culture (10). These processes clearly relate to the long-term impact of a canonical piece of academic writing with British film studies – Julian Petley’s 1986 piece “The Lost Continent”. In this essay, Petley critiques dominant cultural institutions in British cinema – most prominently institutions of British film criticism which he terms “the writing machine” – for their privileging and celebrating of the canon of British realist films at the expense of a “lost continent” of films which foreground fantasy or which possess “an allegorical or poetic dimension” (Barr qtd. in Petley 98), from the work of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, Ken Russell and Peter Greenaway to Gainsborough melodrama and Hammer horror. For Petley, these films constitute the “repressed side of British cinema, a dark, disdained thread weaving the length and breadth of that cinema, crossing authorial and generic boundaries” (Petley 98).

It is arguable that, since 1986, many of the films Petley cites in this piece have received more attention and appreciation, through a range of academic studies and high-end DVD releases, not least, in the case of Powell and Pressburger, through their championing by Martin Scorsese and the restoration and release of their work by the high-end DVD label, The Criterion Collection. However, what is striking, when surveying and analysing promotional material and DVD booklets accompanying Flipside’s releases, is the extent to which this DVD label draws on similar discourses as employed and foregrounded in “The Lost Continent” piece. As with Petley’s “dark disdained thread” of cinema, Flipside

is presented, on its website, as a label dedicated to releasing a broad and diverse range of films:

Taken as a whole, the collection covers many types of film. There are a number of ‘genre films’, such as Pete Walker’s *Man of Violence* (action-adventure), Gerry O’Hara’s *That Kind of Girl* (exploitation), Richard Lester’s *The Bed Sitting Room* and Clive Donner’s *Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush* (both comedies). There are more ‘difficult’ or personal films, including Don Levy’s *Herostratus* and Chris Monger’s *Voice Over*, which show signs of having been influenced by a European sensibility. (Dunn)

However, what is evident within this promotional material is that what unites these diverse British films is their shared status as lost or marginalised cinema. Flipside, as indicated on their website, “favours the overlooked, the sidelined and the undervalued” (‘Flipside – Cult British Cinema’); so *Stranger in the House* is presented as ‘ripe for rediscovery’, and it is noted that (as with many of the Flipside titles) *Red White and Zero* (1967) was “previously unavailable on DVD or Blu-ray”, meaning that the film “is a major rediscovery” (“BFI Flipside”). As foregrounded in this material, the Flipside’s aim, through the restoration and release of these titles, is not just their retrospective appreciation and rehabilitation as cult, but to ensure that “with each new release, a fuller, alternative history of British cinema emerges” (Dunn). Indeed, in an interview included as part of a standalone DVD which functions as a guide and introduction to the Flipside label, influential British film writer Kim Newman not only refers to the applicability of Petley’s “The Lost Continent” to Flipside and its ethos but once again equates the label and its cultification activities with discourses associated with the process of archiving, preserving, digging out and recovering British film titles. As he notes,

the point of the Flipside is to dig up those British movies that not even I am familiar with. They’re not famous, and don’t have an inbuilt audience that Hammer Horror or even *Carry On* might have. They’re so far into what my colleague Julian Petley has called the lost continent of British cinema that even Julian hasn’t seen them. (Newman)

In this sense, the BFI and its agenda to promote

and foreground British film heritage has expanded substantially since the publication of Petley’s piece, which, notably, criticised the BFI’s Film Archive for rejecting, at that point, Michael Reeves’ landmark British horror film, *Witchfinder General* (1969). Indeed, the dovetailing of the BFI’s National Archive’s activities with Flipside’s project to build “an alternative history of British cinema” was particularly evident in their release of the Spanish director José Ramón Larraz’s British horror film *Symptoms* (1974). As outlined in the accompanying DVD booklet, *Symptoms* had been included in the BFI National Archive’s 2010 list of ‘Most Wanted’ films, which were deemed lost and, in the case of *Symptoms*, had been solely “circulating among enthusiasts on poor VHS copies” (Weir 15). In 2014, an original negative of the film had been found in Belgium, leading to the film’s eventual restoration by the Belgian Cinematek, and the housing of a digital copy at the BFI Film Archives and subsequent DVD release by Flipside in 2016. As noted in the accompanying DVD booklet, Larraz’s status as a filmmaker “is marginal at best, his filmography a side note in the history of European horror”, but the DVD booklet mounts a case for the – previously unappreciated – artistic and cultural value of *Symptoms* as part of the tradition of horror and gothic cinema in Britain, noting that, with this film, Larraz “willingly traded sleaze for a more stylish approach to Gothic suspense” and that the film “stands comparison to Roman Polanski’s *Repulsion* (1965)” (Celis 1). Indeed this focus on “a great British film by an outsider” is also echoed in the promotional material accompanying Flipside’s 2011 release of Polish director Jerzy Skolimowski’s coming of age film, *Deep End* (1970), which is presented as joining “that illustrious list of classic titles made by foreign directors, which includes Joseph Losey’s *The Servant* (1963) and Roman Polanski’s *Repulsion* (1965)” (Thompson 1) – directors and films which had been prominently championed in Petley’s “The Lost Continent” essay.

What these examples illustrate is what James Kendrick has called the “legitimizing function” of high-



Red White and Zero (1967)

end DVD companies like the British Film Institute's Flipside label or, to cite a US equivalent, The Criterion Collection (126). Distinct from specialist cult labels like Arrow Video or Tartan's Asia Extreme, these home media labels can be seen to function in an equivalent way to "legitimate forums like film festivals, museum archives" and "repertory theaters" (Andrews 108) and, through their status as key cultural arbiters of film art, to, arguably, culturally elevate these lost, underappreciated or marginalised titles to the status of what David Andrews has termed "cult-art cinema". For Andrews, "a cult-art movie seems to have, or to aspire to, two kinds of distinction: cult value and high-art value. It is thus found in the overlap of cult cinema and art cinema" (102). Beyond the automatic legitimisation bestowed on their titles through their selection, preservation and restoration by the BFI, the paratextual material produced by the BFI Flipside seems to work to foreground cultural overlaps and present their titles as examples of "cult-art".

Indeed, Flipside's paratextual material seems concerned, in a number of cases, with elevating the cultural status of films and directors that are putatively associated with exploitation filmmaking. The 1959 youth film *Beat Girl*, for instance, is presented as "a bizarre British exploitation piece of the highest order" (Pratt "Beat" 5) but the film's director, Edmond T. Greville is described as a "little-known figure" who deserves reappraisal, with the accompanying DVD booklet noting that *Beat Girl's* release "may at least go some way to encouraging a reconsideration of his career" (Botting 13). Equally, the material accompanying the 2009 release of the 1965 Mondo-inspired film, *Primitive London*, features an article on the film's producer, Stanley A. Long, which foregrounds his career as a producer of striptease and nudist films but also his collaborations on the lighting and cinematography for Polanski's *Repulsion* and Michael Reeves' *The Sorcerers* (1967). Indeed, the article notes that "Reeves considered Long's lighting of a scene as akin to 'a painting by Reubens'"



Beat Girl (1959)

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(Pratt "Stanley" 18), and, consequently, that it's not a stretch to claim that Long and his director Arnold L. Miller "feed on traces" of "European art cinema" in their shaping of *Primitive London* "as a film about voyeurism, for voyeurs" (Sinclair 4). In line with David Andrews' arguments on "cult-art cinema", then, the rehabilitation of directors as cult-art auteurs is key to the establishment of these films as possessing artistic credentials, and such auteurist discourses are prevalent throughout the promotional discourses employed by Flipside to frame and contextualise their releases. In turn, the connections made between these titles and more culturally established filmmakers and films work to slot these titles into a web of alternative British film history exemplified, for Petley in 1986, by the work of Polanski and Reeves, the directors here employed by Flipside, in their promotional materials, as key legitimising figures.

As illustrated in the example of *Beat Girl* and Greville, Flipside's broad project of rehabilitation seems, in many cases, particularly focused on the rediscovery and appreciation not just of particular film titles but on their directors' entire oeuvre. Other existing markers of quality and art status are emphasised where relevant, particularly when films, whilst since falling into obscurity, had featured at major film festivals on initial release – as was the case, for instance, with Barney Platts-Mills' *Private Road* (Locarno International Film Festival), *Deep End* (Venice Film Festival) and *Symptoms* (Cannes International Film Festival) – or featured legendary British actors in early or lesser-known roles (for instance, Oliver Reed, Helen Mirren, James Mason, Vanessa Redgrave and John Hurt). However, Flipside material frequently emphasises the label's aim to offer the consumer "rare films from directors who merit attention" ("Flipside – Cult British Cinema") by including other short or feature-length films by the same filmmaker as extras on the relevant DVD release. So, for instance, the DVD release of David Gladwell's folk horror film, *Requiem for a Village* (1975), is accompanied by three

short Gladwell-directed films and Gerry O’Hara’s relationship drama, *All the Right Noises* (1969), features his *The Spy’s Wife* (1972), a “rare and little-seen short film” (“BFI Flipside”). While the inclusion of such rare short films is clearly related to the BFI Archive’s aim to preserve and circulate British film heritage in all its forms, it also, interestingly, works to potentially expand conceptions of British cult film culture by incorporating – through discourses of auteurism – a range of short films, including experimental and documentary shorts, into such terrain.

However, as noted earlier, these cultivation processes are concentrated and focused, in the case of all thirty-seven Flipside releases and their accompanying extras, on films and filmmakers from the late 1950s to the late 1970s. While the reasons for this are not explicitly stated in Flipside’s paratextual material, discourses employed on their website and in their DVD booklets point to and draw upon the cult appeals of this period. In his influential book on British cult cinema, *Withnail and I*, Justin Smith focuses primarily on the more established and canonical examples of British cult film (from *Performance* to *Withnail and I*) and identifies the 1960s as a key moment in the commencement of the “production of a new kind of [British] film which is later considered cult” (214). This was a time of “the rise of a predominantly youth-orientated counter-culture” associated with sexual experimentation and liberation, subcultural grouping and movements (Smith 87), and “the associated tension between hedonism and conformity” (Egan 287). Flipside’s paratextual material consistently foregrounds the ways in which their titles offer previously underappreciated films which are imbued with value (regardless of their genre or cultural status) because of the ways in which they tap into this tension, and document and reflect the cultural and social uncertainty underpinning this much-mythologised period of British cultural history. Thus, *Primitive London* is presented as “a potent reminder of a curious time and place in the British consciousness” in 1965 when “jackets were cautiously unbuttoned, ties were loosened”, “hair began to creep dangerously towards the collar” but Britain was “still struggling to emerge from austerity” (Pratt “Welcome” 6-9). While – even more explicitly emphasising tension, transition and ambiguity – *Deep End* is presented as a film appearing “at a time of transition in British gender culture”, an era of uncertainty encapsulated by the character of Susan (played by Jane Asher) who is sexually free, energetic and liberated but also a manipulative, cynical character who is frequently exploited, objectified and eroticised by those around her. The articles on the film in the



The Spy’s Wife (1972)

accompanying DVD booklet present the film as an ambiguous portrait of “public sexual culture”, gender relations and sexual freedom in London at the turn of the decade, as disorientating as it is fascinating for Mike, the film’s protagonist (Tasker 8-10). In both these cases, the key discourse around which these films are seen to pivot is the mythology of the Swinging Sixties and Swinging London, with both films being presented, in many ways, as a “seedy counterpoint” (or, indeed, a flipside) to the “frothy fixed grin joviality” of other, predominant conceptions of Swinging London and its associated appeals (Pratt “Welcome” 8).

Indeed, Flipside titles are frequently presented as not only offering no-holds barred portraits of the transitional sexual and gender cultures of the period but, in many cases, as offering records of the subcultural movements inextricably associated with the era. Depicting cultures associated with mods, rockers, beatniks or suedeheads, films such as *Beat Girl*, *Bronco Bullfrog* (1969) and *The Party’s Over* (1963) are presented as “countercultural curios” whose narratives are, in the case of *Beat Girl*, for instance, “set against an intoxicating Beatnik backdrop” (“BFI Flipside”) and which therefore gain additional cult value as objects that capture the energy of the wider cultural scenes and locations within which the individual film narratives play out. As Kim Newman notes, in a way which dovetails with discourses of a “lost continent” of cinema, “you uncover a kind of hidden social history of Britain in these movies” (Newman), and, in a number of Flipside releases, this appeal is further foregrounded and contextualised by the inclusion of short documentary features on juvenile delinquency, nude modelling or the towns and cities that serve as backdrops to the dramatic action in these films – for instance, the Flipside release of the coming of age comedy, *Here we Go Round the Mulberry Bush* (1967) features a documentary on Britain’s first New Town, Stevenage, where the film’s narrative is set. Further to this, many of the releases foreground the importance of the central employment of pop music in many of these films, highlighting the ways in which a range of British films capitalised

on the distinct role and appeal (both nationally and internationally) of music culture in Britain during the period, from the John-Barry composed soundtrack to *Beat Girl*, to *Deep End's* employment of a specifically commissioned song and score by Cat Stevens.

Conclusion

At the close of his “The Lost Continent” essay, Julian Petley notes that “if the institution of the British cinema could be radically reconceptualised”, the range of titles identified in his essay “would look less like isolated islands revealing themselves, and more like the peaks of a long submerged lost continent” (118). Over thirty years later, the legitimate forums associated with British film culture have expanded and diversified, and the currency of ‘cult’ as a cultural and commercial category has not only increased exponentially but also become heterogenous in its meanings and uses, imbuing value and recognition on a much wider variety of types and forms of British cinema. The role of the British Film Institute in this process, through its archival and preservation strategies and its home media releases, has, I would argue, been crucial. As outlined in this article, the discourses employed to foreground and promote the titles on the BFI’s Flipside label provide an illuminating case study of the continued relevance and uses of the term and concept of cult to national film industries, their followers and audiences, with cult being increasingly employed as an umbrella through which understandings of national film cinemas, their traditions and their personnel are continuing to be productively explored, interrogated and expanded.

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Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush (1967)