

# Contemporary British Film



These notes will provide you with an overview of contemporary film production, distribution and consumption in relation to UK audiences, two case studies on specific films and two institutional case study starting points.

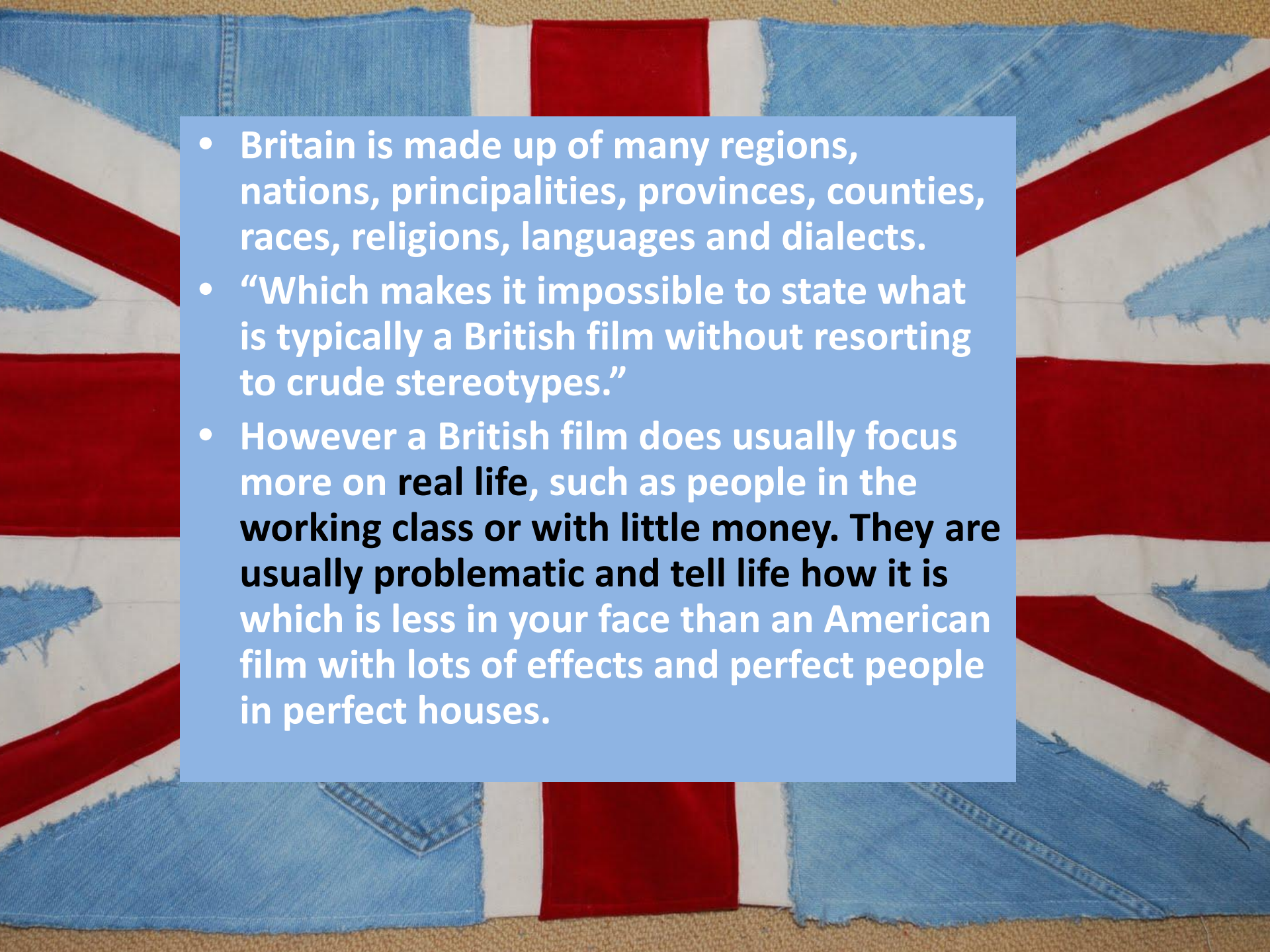
You will need to complete similar case studies on London to Brighton once we have watched it





# What is a British Film?



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- The background of the slide is a collage of fabric. It features several pieces of light blue denim with frayed edges, interspersed with horizontal stripes of red and white fabric. The overall appearance is that of a patchwork or a collection of textile scraps.
- Britain is made up of many regions, nations, principalities, provinces, counties, races, religions, languages and dialects.
  - “Which makes it impossible to state what is typically a British film without resorting to crude stereotypes.”
  - However a British film does usually focus more on **real life**, such as people in the **working class or with little money**. They are **usually problematic and tell life how it is** which is less in your face than an American film with lots of effects and perfect people in perfect houses.

## A film can be called British if it meets at least 3 of the following;

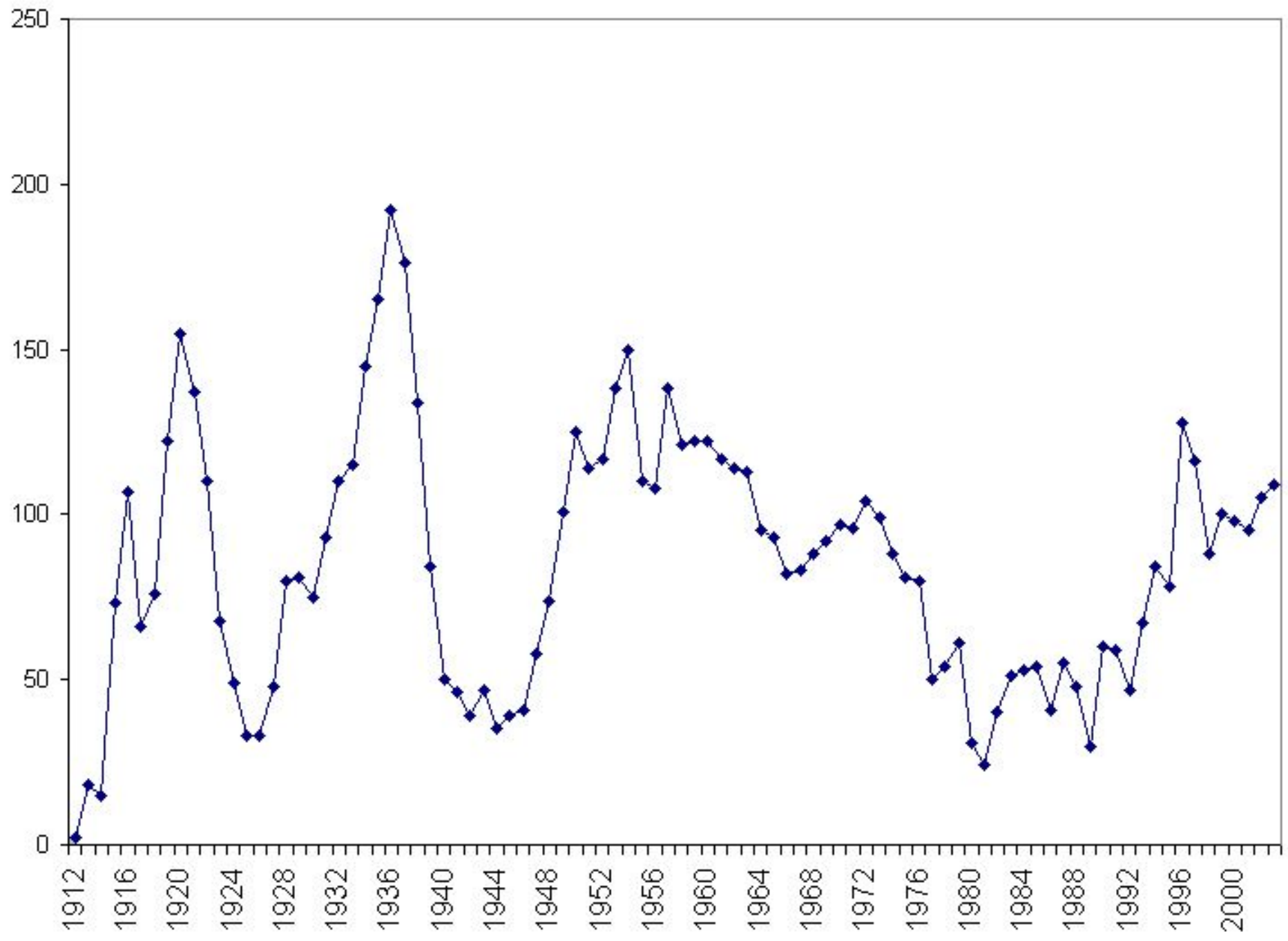
- Has a British producer
- Has a British production team
- A British director
- A predominately British cast
- A subject matter that informs the British experience
- A British identity as defined by sight and sound magazine in the review section

## Which then leads it into a category;

- Category A: An entirely British film
- Category B: Majority UK funded
- Category C: More common co-funding scenario
- Category D: Describes a US film with some creative input from the UK

### **For example;**

'Brick Lane', would be in category B because it's a British film but lacks a few of the things to make it fully British, it doesn't have a predominate British cast. However there is sometimes a Bollywood connection into British films like 'Brick Lane' and 'Bend It Like Beckham'



# The Current Boom

- UK film production experienced a crisis in 2005 and early 2006. Investment in the making of films dropped largely due to the rate of the English pound against the American dollar and the availability of low cost studios in eastern Europe.
- A new government policy in **tax relief** allows producers to be exempt from certain tax payments. Previously there had been a compulsion for films to be mainly shot in the UK for them to qualify for the avoidance of tax, but in March 2006 this was revised to **allow for more overseas filming**, an attractive amendment for investors.

British TV investment + American Film distribution companies =  
success for British Film



# Television Company Co Funding



British films experienced a boom in 2006 largely due to television companies involvement in production and distribution. The **BBC** and **Channel 4** have both invested in film. If the TV licence fee increases, as is planned, then the BBC will have more money to invest in domestic film production, another example of cross media political/institutional events being hugely important in cultural developments.

BBC films are co funded with an overseas investor usually American. The most successful of these in 2006 was **The Queen**, produced without major Hollywood finance. '**The History Boys**' adapted from the quintessentially English Alan Bennett's play and '**The Wind that Shakes The Barley**' from social realist director Ken Loach. All grossed over £3million at the box office in the UK and went on to attract international audiences.



# BBC Film

- BBC Films is the well-known film-making support of the BBC and are part of the BBC family, of which work with major international and UK distributors. which have produced or co-produced some of the most successful British films of recent years, including 'Stage Beauty', 'A Cock and Bull Story' and 'Match Point'. But are also responsible for creating films like, 'Nativity', 'The Duchess', 'Billy Elliot' and 'Street Dance'.
- They currently produce approximately eight films per year.

“BBC Films aims to make strong British films with range and ambition. We are committed to finding and developing new talent, as well as collaborating with some of the foremost writers and directors in the industry.”

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfilms/about/>

★★★★ ESQUIRE "..."FIENDISHLY CLEVER..." THE TIMES ★★★★★ TOTAL FILM

LIONSGATE

**"THE BEST FILM EVER, EVER, EVER..."**

**A COCK AND BULL STORY**

STEVE COOGAN

ROB BRYDON • STEPHEN FRY • GILLIAN ANDERSON

Flipping back and forth between the 18th Century and the hapless efforts of 21st Century film makers, *A Cock and Bull Story* is an unorthodox adaptation of the English literary masterpiece, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, written by Laurence Sterne.

The story begins with Tristram Shandy (Steve Coogan) narrating his life story as he sees it. Crammed with literary jokes and dark humour, Shandy's warped childhood tales are constantly interrupted by his family and household, inadvertently revealing far more about himself than any conventional autobiography.

A clever, post-modern take on the construction of a film, from an intricate, hilariously complex autobiographical novel.

**"BRILLIANTLY INVENTIVE, SMART AND VERY FUNNY"**

**SPECIAL FEATURES**

COMPLETE TONY WILSON INTERVIEW WITH STEVE COOGAN • DELETED SCENES  
SCENE EXTENSIONS • BEHIND THE SCENES FOOTAGE  
AUDIO COMMENTARY WITH JOHN BIRTON  
PREMIERE FOOTAGE • THEATRICAL TRAILER

15 Contains strong language and moderate sex

LIONSGATE

KEIRA KNIGHTLEY

RALPH FIENNES

**THE DUCHESS**



# Film4

- Film4 is a free digital television channel available in the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland, owned and operated by Channel 4, that screens films.
- Film four is an independent film company part of channel four. They showcase different titles including, best of British film-making, US independent films, Hollywood blockbusters, mainstream drama and comedy, foreign films and cult cinema. They also include special features and in-depth interviews and exclusive programming.
- Film4 have backed films such as Slumdog Millionaire and the recent hit 'The Iron Lady'



# Five Major Distributors dominate the UK film industry.

- United International Pictures
- Warner Brothers
- Buena Vista
- 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox
- Sony

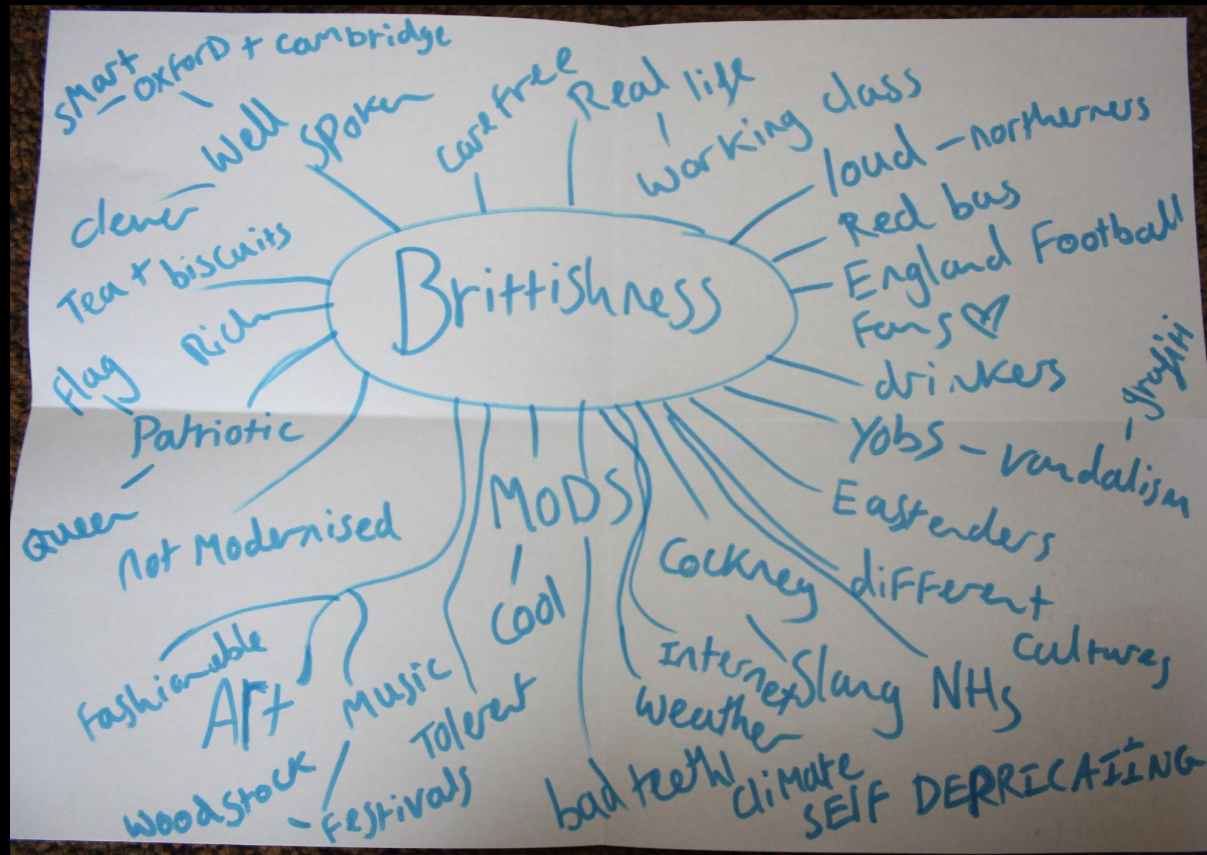
Roughly 9/10 films seen in the UK are viewed as a result of these distributors and are directly linked to the Hollywood production companies who make the films. Usually the blockbuster films we are familiar with are distributed via **blanket release**, so even if a small UK independent company manages to get its product into cinemas, it is usually competing for attention with one or more films that take on the status of **an event**. One of the outcomes of distribution arrangements outlined above is that half of the films released in Britain do not reach the whole country.



# Genre of British Social Realism



# British'ness



British film makers play off these things to represent Britain in quite a stereotypically way, Whereas American film makers take just a few of these things and represent British people as being posh, well spoken, perfect people. So the way we see ourselves is shown more fluently through British film as only a small percentage are actually how Americans show us.

# Conventions of British Social Realism:

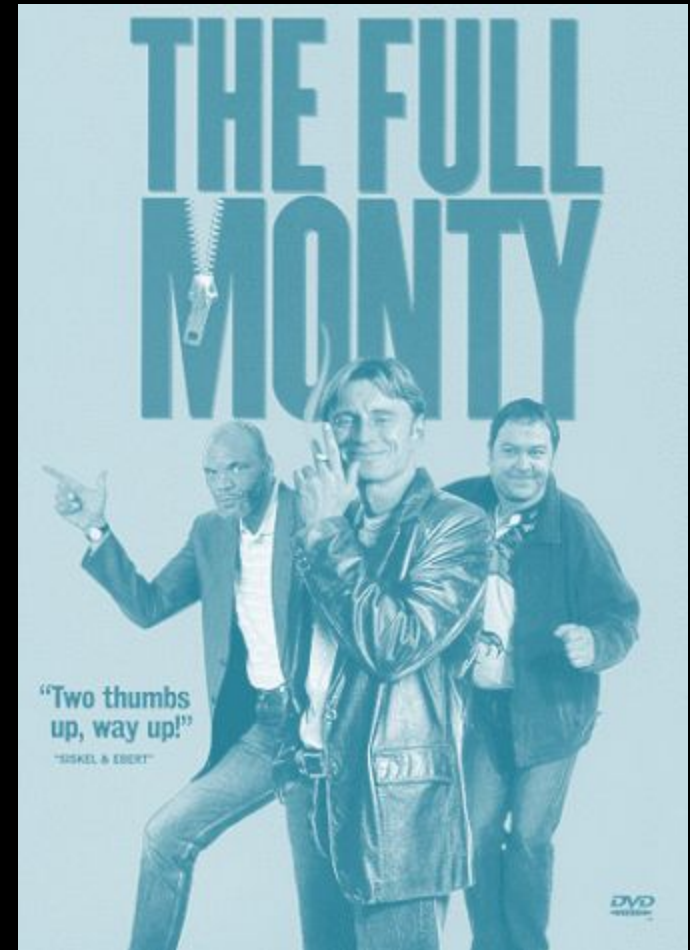
- Location shooting (not in a film set/studio)
- Wide Shots
- Non-professional actors
- Semi-improvised scripts (Mike Leigh)
- Humour and Seriousness
- The erosion of regional identities
- Wider social issues explored via emotional and dramatic individual stories
- Triumph over adversity



# New wave cinema

- The new wave films tended to address issues around masculinity that would become common in British Social Realism.
- The new wave protagonist was usually a **working class male** without bearings in society in which traditional industries and the cultures went with them in their decline.

The Full Monty (1997) addressed the erosion of regional and class identities amid a landscape rendered increasingly uniform by consumerism.

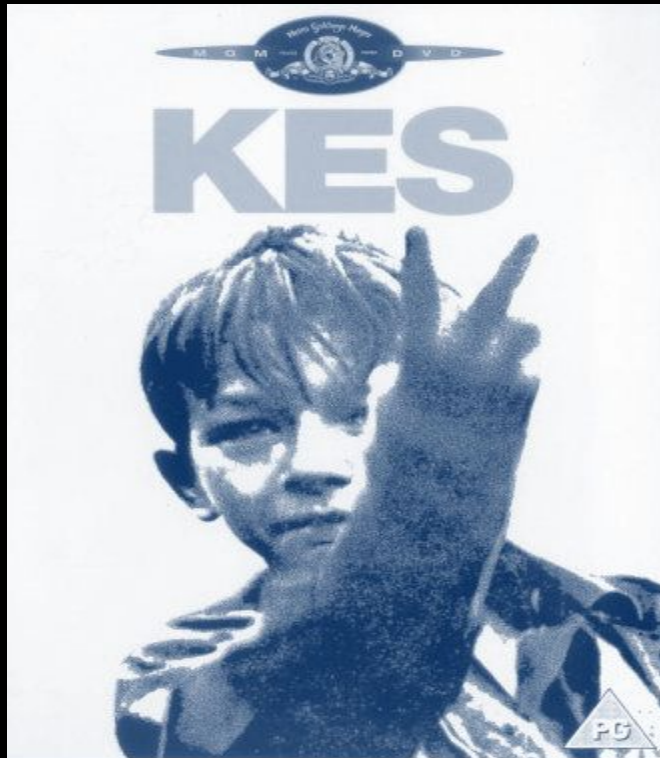




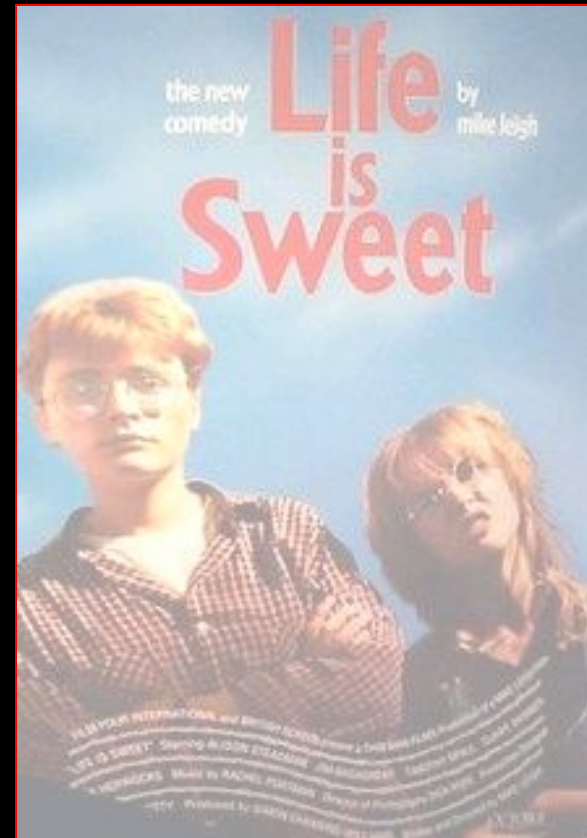
# Ken Loach and Mike Leigh

Assessed the impact of the consumer society on family life, charting the erosion of the welfare state and the consensus that built it.

Ken Loach's Film's



Reflected the shift from the collectivist mood of the war years to the individualism of the post-war decades in its very form. Loach's films went from the improvised long-take naturalism of 'Poor Cow' and 'Kes' to the social melodrama 'Rolling Stones' (1993) and 'Ladybird Ladybird' (1994), wider social issues now explored via emotional and dramatic individual stories.



Women in Loach and Leigh are often complex and powerful individuals.

The breakdown of the collective consensus in post-war Britain seems to be captured in the tragicomic exchanges of 'Life is Sweet' (1990), Naked (1993) and Secrets and Lies (1996). Leigh examined the fractures in domestic and social life wrought by divisive Thatcherite policies in an increasingly fragmented and multicultural Britain.

# 4 Case Studies

- The Last King of Scotland and DNA Films
- This is England and Working Title







## Case Study 1: 'The Last King of Scotland'

The last king of Scotland is described by Film Four's Tessa Ross as the film the company should be most proud of, because it was directed and written by home grown talent (Kevin Macdonald and Peter Morgan), has subject matter that is challenging political and hard-hitting and was the result of partnership with an American Major (Fox Searchlight) So for Ross this film seems to represent the current success story of British film and the newly found ability of producers to attract the current success story of British film and the newly found ability of producers to attract American investment for less commercially obvious projects.



The film was produced by 8 companies in collaboration (*dna films*, Fox searchlight, film Four, Cowboy films, Scottish Screen, Slate films, Tatfilm and the UK Film council) and distributed by 3 (Fox searchlight in the USA, Japan, Holland, Singapore, Argentina and Germany, Channel 4 films in the UK AND Fox-Warner in Switzerland) The writers, cast and crew were British and American. As these details and the views of the Head of Film at one of the production companies demonstrates, this is a good example of a co-funded British film with British cultural content. Despite the Ugandan setting and political context, the film portrays the fictional story of a Scottish visitor to Uganda who is taken in by the dictator running the country, but is based on real events, hence the title.



## Case Study 2: 'This is England'



This is England is directed by the midlands director Shane Meadows. The plot couldn't be more **indigenous**, but this is not the England of films like *The Queen*, *Notting Hill* or *Pride and Prejudice*. Instead the 1970's skin head movement, its uneasy relationship with West Indian culture and its distortion by the **racist national front** forms the backdrop for a story about the adolescent life of a bereaved boy. Meadows previously had box office and critical success with a range of other films all based on domestic life and relationships in the Midlands, including *Twenty Four Seven*, *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* and *Dead Mans Shoes*. In his films the presence or absence of fathers and older male authority figures and the effects of such on young working class men are depicted with a mixture of comedy and sometimes disturbing drama.

# 'This is England' continued.

Another major difference between the Meadows' output and the more commercially 'instant' British films from Working Title and similar companies, is the importance of cultural reference points – clothes, music, dialect – that only a viewer with a cultural familiarity with provincial urban life in the times depicted would recognise.

'This is England' was produced as a result of collaboration between no less than 7 companies – Big Arty Productions, EM Media, Film Four, [Optimum releasing](#), Screen Yorkshire, The UK Film Council and Warp Films. It was distributed by 6 organisations – IFC Films (US), Netflix (US). Red Envelope Entertainment (US) and IFC First Take in the USA, Madman Entertainment in Australia and Optimum Releasing in the UK.



# This Is England Continued...



The critical response to *This Is England* has largely been to celebrate a perceived 'return' to a kind of cultural reflective film making that was threatened by extinction in the context of Hollywood's dominance and the Governments preference for funding films with an eye on the US market, as this comment from Nick James, editor of the BFI's *Sight and Sound* magazine shows:

*"I forgot when watching Shane Meadows' moving evocation of skinhead youth This is England at the London Film Festival, how culturally specific its opening montage might seem: it goes from Roland Rat to Margaret Thatcher to the Falklands War to Knight Rider on television. What will people outside of Northern Europe make of the regalia of 1980's skinheads from the midlands? Hopefully they will be intrigued. This Is England made me realise, too, that some British films are at last doing exactly what Sight and Sound has campaigned for; reflecting aspects of British life gain and maybe suffering the consequences of being harder to sell abroad."*



## Case Study 3: Working Title Films

**Working title film** has the appearance of being an independent production company, but it is owned by **universal pictures**, who distribute its films. The most notable successes from Working Title are

- Four Weddings and A funeral
- Bridget Jones's Diary
- High Fidelity,
- Fargo and O Brother, Where Art Thou?



## An example of a recent major title from Working Title is Atonement.

Unlike many films produced by British companies, Atonement's sole production credits are held by Working Title. However, as a subsidiary of Universal, whether the film counts as a British film is a matter of debate. The film was distributed by 8 companies: Finnkino Oy Finland, Focus Feature in the USA, Hoyts Distribution in Australia, Studio Canal in France, TOOHO-Towa in Japan, United International Pictures in Argentina and Singapore, Universal pictures International in Holland and Universal Pictures in the UK.

The film was shot entirely in England and was adapted from a novel by British writer, Ian McEwan . The screenplay was by Christopher Hampton, also British, and the film featured a mainly British CAST. However, because Working Title is owned by a major US company, it is not entirely clear whether we can treat this film as 'British', using BFI categories.



# Case Study 4: DNA Films

- Andrew Macdonald's DNA films was bolstered greatly when it secured a distribution deal with Fox Searchlight in 2001, and is thus another example of a British film success story being dependant on collaboration with an American major. Prior to the merger the company had success with **28 Days Later**. Since the deal was struck it had had a run of success with such films as the **Last King of Scotland**, **Notes on a Scandal** and **The History Boys**, all finding an audience both domestically and internationally for a focus on British cultural issues.
- DNA films was a company with a 50/50 ownership split between The Film Council and Fox, and offers a great example of how the contemporary 'boom' in British film is contextualised by both Government backing and American confidence, as a result of the tax break policy . DNA films play different roles on different projects. For example, it was creative producer on new film Sunshine, but provided finance and distribution only for Notes on a Scandal. This flexibility is another feature of the contemporary film industry.

***“My theory of British film and TV business is that if there were no more British films in the cinema, nobody would care. But if you turned off Coronation Street and Match of the Day, they'd be rioting in the streets.”***





# References

- <http://www.film4.com/features/article/about-film4-productions>
- <http://www.bbc.co.uk/film/>