British Realist Cinema

Dr David Forrest
What is realist cinema?
Social realism is a discursive term used by film critics and reviewers to describe films that aim to show the effects of environmental factors on the development of character through depictions that emphasise the relationship between location and identity. Traditionally associated in Britain with a reformist or occasionally revolutionary politics that deemed adverse social circumstances could be changed by the introduction of more enlightened social policies or structural change in society, social realism tends to be associated with an observational style of camerawork that emphasises situations and events and an episodic narrative structure, creating ‘kitchen sink’ dramas and ‘gritty’ character studies of the underbelly of urban life. Hallam and Marshment (2000: 184)
Better than any other genre, social realism has shown us to ourselves, pushing the boundaries in the effort to put the experiences of real Britons on the screen, and shaping our ideas of what British cinema can be. While our cinema has experienced all the fluctuations in fortune of Hollywood's first export territory, realism has been Britain's richest gift to world cinema.

Richard Armstrong,
http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/1037898/
realism, even after all these years of realist films. Such people still think of realism as something external, as a way out into the fresh air, not as the contemplation of poverty and misery. To me realism is simply the artistic form of truth. If you re-establish truth you give it expression. If it’s a dead truth, you feel it is false, it is not truly expressed. With my views of course I cannot accept the ‘entertainment’ film, as the term is understood in some business circles, especially outside Europe. Some such films may be partially acceptable, to the extent that they are capable of giving partial expression to reality. […] It has no love of the superfluous and the spectacular, and rejects these, going instead to the root of things. It does not stop at surface appearances but seeks out the most subtle strands of the soul.
Wartime and Postwar Realism

- Documentary Realism, Propaganda in wartime

- Rejection of realism in immediate postwar period

- *It Always Rains on Sunday* - post-war fragmentation; loss; masculinity in crisis; the family in crisis; the erosion of community
The Social Problem Film

- Social (‘realist’) issues explored in conservative formal and narrative patterns

- The ‘fear’ of youth; race as ‘problem’; early explorations of sexuality; the family in crisis

- *Woman in a Dressing Gown*: morality; the family; femininity in focus; restoration of order; J Lee Thompson, artistry within a conservative context...
- ‘Angry Young Men’ - The British New Wave

- Where are the women?

- Art cinema (stylistically adventurous, ambiguous narrative and thematic patterns)

- Lyrical and poetic approaches to place

- Memory/subjectivity

- Motifs of isolation and loss
Ken Loach

- Naturalistic performance

- 1960s: Radical experiments in form

- Didacticism

- Narrative focus on the victims of capitalist society; tragic arc of realist - ‘bad to worse’

- ‘Critical naturalism’ - to show and explain
Mike Leigh

-Theatrical performance

- Static frames, long takes - the poetry of the mundane

- Authorship and control

- The Crisis point/boundary situation
Alan Clarke and 1980s realism

- Realism in the 1980s: Experimentation with form; interrogation of nationhood

- Alan Clarke: steadicam, characters moving through space; ‘victims’ of Thatcherism; self-conscious approach to realism, and cinema more broadly
‘Things Can Only Get Better’

- Social Realist Comedy

- Class as a backdrop? Individual vs collective salvation? A very 90s thing...

- Blairite Utopia after Thatcherite dysytopia?

- Narrative conservatism

- Community and masculinity in crisis
Shane Meadows

- ‘Image led narration’

- Underclass; ‘native insider’; community is disrupted; the gang as family; the family in crisis; defective motherhood, the absent father

- the poetics of space, the non-place

- Genre hybridity
Contemporary Realism

- Radical approaches to theme and form
- Class and socio-economic issues less explicitly emphasised
- Rootless, goal-bereft protagonists within poetically charged landscapes - The New Wave

- Female filmmakers