

London and the Cockney in British Cinema

Robert Cross, Doshisha University, Japan

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Abstract

This paper surveys the cinematic representations of Cockneys from the 1940s to the present day. Beginning with feature films made during the Second World War, it examines how the image of the traditional Cockney underwent a radical transformation during the second half of the 20th century. The 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. The discussion focuses in particular on the impact of the shift from communal to individual values and lifestyles.

Keywords: British cinema, Cockney, London

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Introduction

This paper examines some of the key ways in which Cockneys have been represented in British cinema in the period from the Second World War up to the present day. My approach, given the breadth of the subject, will be to move through the period chronologically and discuss certain landmark films, social developments, film characters and iconic Cockney actors. My particular interest will be in exploring how screen Cockneys have been constructed in response to the polar demands of, at one end of the societal value spectrum, communality and altruism and, at the other, individuality 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. I should explain, therefore, that I use the term Cockney in a generalised sense here to refer to the ordinary Londoner from the working or lower-middle classes.

Soldiers and sailors and the Communal Values of the ‘People’s War’

I take the Second World War as my starting point because this conflict is the great watershed moment in modern British social history, ushering in an era of inclusive, consensual politics symbolised above all by the creation by Clement Atlee’s Labour government of the welfare state. It is a period in which there was a tectonic shift as the working classes, emboldened by their wartime sacrifice and struggle, threw off pre-war subservience to take what they saw as their rightful place in a more equitable society. Feature films in the early years of the war—melodramas like *Convoy* (1940) and *Ships with Wings* (1941) are good examples—had focused disproportionately on the urbane and gentlemanly officers and their heroic exploits. As Lindsay Anderson observed archly,

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 . . . 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. (qtd. in Wesker, 1994: 461)

The fight against Fascism would not be achieved by these socially superior officers 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 documentaries that would convey the communal wartime effort of the common people to the common people. *London Can Take It!*, a short film 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 unburdened by any baggage of class affiliation, 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 underclass, now become representatives of the British people, fighting with tenacity on what, during the Blitz, has 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 of all stripes. 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 officer class as in *Convoy* and *Ships with Wings* towards more democratic and inclusive films such as *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)



Fig. 1 The thoroughly decent Billy Mitchell (played by John Mills) in *This Happy Breed*

The wartime 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 with greater depth and sensitivity than before. Shorty Blake, the Cockney ordinary seaman played by John Mills in the naval drama *In Which We Serve*, for example, is a far more developed 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 patrician Captain Kinross—a character modelled, incidentally, on Lord Mountbatten. 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 now young wife evidently know their place on the social ladder, as is seen in their (apparently) grateful acceptance of 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 an implied forelock. Mills reprised his Cockney ordinary seaman role as Billy Mitchell in Noel Coward and David Lean's *This Happy Breed* (1944) (Fig. 1), a film that focused solely on Cockney working-class characters, whilst referencing the heroism of the British people in its Shakespearean title.

Spivs and Teds and the Rise of Individuality and Criminality

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 by meeting the endless demand created by rationing with an equally endless supply of goods stolen from dockland warehouses. 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. One of the spiv's earliest appearances was in *Waterloo Road* (1944) in the figure of the flamboyant Ted Purvis, acted by the suave 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* identifies it as a 'state-of-England' film. The narrator figure, played by the avuncular character actor Alistair Sims, is Dr Montgomery, a local family physician who metaphorically measures the temperature of a 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 decent underdog, defeats Purvis in a fist fight. The film closes with Montgomery, the nation's doctor, having delivered Jim Coulter Jnr. 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 'Prime Minister' Arthur Pemberton (played by iconic Cockney comic Stanley Holloway) are presented in such a way as to represent the

British population as a whole. When Pimlico is blockaded, for example, a newspaper headline announces, in an echo of *London Can Take It!*, “World sympathy for crushed Cockneys.” However, as the relaxation of rationing threatens to turn this tiny piece of ‘Burgundy’ into, as Pemberton puts it, “a spivs’ paradise,” so the good citizens return patriotically to the communal fold. Better selflessly to endure austere Britain than selfishly 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).



Fig. 2 Delinquent Cockney youth personified by Tom Riley (played by Dirk Bogarde) in *The Blue Lamp*

In the style of 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 in the fight against crime 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 (Fig. 2), are ordinary bobbies on the beat 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 and the threat it poses to established values 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 dog racing

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 fully fledged youth cult in post-war Britain emerged in working-class areas of London. The arrival of the so-called Teddy Boys precipitated a moral panic (Springhall, 1998). Their outrageous Edwardian style of dress was a provocation aimed at the stoical members of the older generations who had endured nearly a decade of post-war rationing in their 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 Spicer suggests, 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 (Fig. 3). This ploy created the feeling that here was a real and recognisable Cockney of his times speaking in his own witty voice.



Fig. 3 On-screen/off-screen Cockney Michael Caine in *Alfie*

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. Jeffrey Richards 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.” (Richards, 1992: 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 soon, and a different Cockney would be constructed.

Gangsters and the Criminalisation of the Cockney

Swinging Sixties London was not only a great locus of liberationist youth culture, it was also the hunting ground of organized criminals epitomised by the notorious twins 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 mythologizing of the Krays into ‘folk heroes’ has long been an essential element in the rose-tinted construction of the East End. The public image cultivated by the brothers was of two smartly tailored Cockney 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 signs that the Sixties party was about to end, 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 1970s. 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 of which this man was capable. The second, Donald Cammell’s complex and ground-breaking film *Performance* (1970) starred Mick Jagger and James Fox in a drama of merged and confused identities and sexualities. This film drew again 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 opportunity to play the type of role with which

he is now already 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 in *Performance* of the Old Harrovian Fox and the Shakespearean Burton which, for all their brilliance and intensity, were 'stagey', the realism of Caine's characterisation was inflected by the working-class 'street cred' I mentioned above. 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, romantic image of an East End populated by loveable rogues:

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. Clip clop along the cobbles. (Sinclair, 1996: 22)

I turn my attention now to another individual who profoundly influenced the way that the Cockney gangster would be represented on the screen, former Prime Minister 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 yuppie greed Canary Wharf, to name three of her signature policies, showed her contempt for ordinary Londoners. Thatcherism and gangsterism, one could say, share a social Darwinist view of society, a dog-eat-dog world in which winners take all and losers go down. These parallels are explored in *The Long Good Friday* (1981), written by the left-wing East End 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.



Fig. 4 Gang boss Harold Shand (played by Bob Hoskins) delivering his Thatcherite speech in *The Long Good Friday*

Shand's Thatcherite dream—one which will unravel in the film 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 (Fig. 4):

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, by the Irish Republican Army.

The cinematic Cockney dinosaurs live on, though. The last five years has seen an outpouring of 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). It would be misleading to group all these films closely together under a single generic heading, however. *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*. These are tongue-in-cheek yarns. *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 so-called 'Essex Man' who voted Mrs Thatcher into power, depicts the extreme violence of the drug dealers.

Other films have offered a more redemptive perspective on ordinary life in the capital (Murphy, 2001). Stephen Frears's satirical *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), for example, which paints a searing picture of life in Thatcher's London, relates the gay love between Omar, a London-born, second-generation Pakistani immigrant, and Johnny, an ex-National Front skinhead. 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. Michael Winterbottom's *Wonderland* (1999) 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.

Conclusion

We have seen 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. With the traditional white Cockney being swept away with their communities in the East End and other working class neighbourhoods in London, and the changes in British society that have come with multiculturalism, it is clear that British cinema from now on will have to take account of the ethnic diversity of the Capital. To be sure, with films such as *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987), *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002) and *Brick Lane* (2007), this shift towards more diverse representations has already started and will gain in momentum.

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Contact email: rcross@mail.doshisha.ac.jp