

# Quota Quickies

—British B Movie's Narrative Style and the Problem of Nationality in the 1930s—

クォータ・クィッキーズ —1930 年代におけるイギリス B 級映画の語りの文体とナショナル  
テイの問題

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● Key Words: Quota Quickies, British National Cinema, Classical Hollywood Cinema, Narrative, Music Hall, Gracie Fields

## Introduction

This paper will explore the meaning and function of a narrative style in the 1930s British film culture constructing national consciousness. Around 1930, the British government and film industry tried to protect themselves from the excessive amount of Hollywood films imported from the United States, and to reconstruct the national film culture. The paper will reconsider the idea of national cinema, especially from cultural perspective, and examine the roles of narrative in the creation of nationally conscious films.

It is in the United States, or more precisely, in Hollywood, that the narrative “structure” (not “style”) of film was established in such a work as Cecil De Mille’s *The Birth of Nation* (1916), as David Bordwell later defined this as “classical Hollywood cinema.” Around World War I, Britain declined and gave way to Germany and the U.S. in cinema as well as in politics and industry. Especially, in 1920s, a surge of Hollywood films put British cinema industry and culture to the peripheral. Politically, economically and culturally, Britain had to recover herself.

From the perspective of cinema industry or government policy, how Britain managed to deal with such a critical situation has been studied so far; therefore, the paper will shed light on much more cultural aspect than industrial or political, especially in terms of the formation of national consciousness through the British-particular narrative “style” (not “structure”). The key to this argument is the “quota quickie,” which was accepted mainly by lower-middle class or senior citizens who were likely to feel nostalgia for the old, regional and national community. In the following, first, the historical background of the rise of the quickie is described, and

its cultural aspect is featured. Next, the roles of narrative for constructing national identity in terms of culture are reviewed. The last section examines the British-particular narrative style depending on its cultural tradition taking two representative quickies as examples, *Say It With Flowers* and *Sing As We Go!*

## 1. Quota Quickie as an Illegitimate Child: the Formation of a British National Cinema

Quota quickies are a series of films produced under the regulation of the 1927 Cinematograph Films Act, which assigned renters and exhibitors the minimum numbers of British native films they should deal with.<sup>\*1</sup> The minimum quota was 7.5 % for distribution and 5 % for exhibition. This means that before that Act, British native films shared less than 5 % in the British film domestic market.<sup>\*2</sup> It had been dominated by Hollywood major studios such as Fox, MGM, Columbia and others, since around 1920.

The Films Act was the first government intervention to the British film industry. It was introduced on the basis of economic protectionism; however, in reality, “many quota quickies were produced by American companies setting up in Britain to avoid the tacit restriction on American imports” (*Brandford, Grant and Hillier* 192). As a consequence, film companies including Hollywood major studios created and distributed films just to meet the obligations assigned by the British government, with relatively lower budget, in a short, limited period of time. It often led to the production of low quality films.

Thus, at least economically, it was hard for British cinema to get out of the influence of Hollywood, because the film industry at that time was already

globalized to some extent. Therefore, it is in the realm of culture that British cinema would find the possibility for establishing its national identity, representing “Britishness” in a film, in order to emulate Hollywood.<sup>\*3</sup>

Andrew Higson refers to the two forms of representation of culture in the formation of a national cinema:

The concept of national cinema when used in a cultural as opposed an economic sense, equally involves the assumption that a particular body of films shares a coherent and unique identity and a stable set of meanings, at the expense of other possible identities and meanings. This process of negotiation takes two forms. On the one hand, the potential coherence and unity of a national cinema depends upon an affirmation of self-identity: a cinema is national in so far as it draws on already existing, indigenous cultural traditions. Of course, this will very often mean that the interests and traditions of a specific social group are represented as in the collective national interest.

On the other hand, a national cinema only takes on meaning in so far as it is caught up in a system of differences; British cinema is what it is by virtue of its difference from American cinema or French cinema. A national cinema may appeal only to specific sections of the national community — that is, it may start to unravel that sense of a shared culture. But it can also be presented in the international arena as part of a strategy of cultural and economical resistance, a means of asserting national autonomy in the face of (usually) Hollywood’s international domination. (7-8)

The consciousness of nation is not given, but formed out of the tradition and difference from other nations. When representing a “national” culture in a film, the imagery of “already existing indigenous traditions” will be chosen to delineate the cultural area of national community. The “traditions” or other customary things that tend to be characteristically national would determine the film’s narrative style.

Documentary film movement in the 1930s and heritage cinema in the 1980s are two main genres for such a representation of national culture in the

British film history. The former represents the contemporary British, especially working class people, in a strictly realist touch that seems to succeed the traditional, British empiricist perspective. A story tends to be told in narrative form that is relatively loose, in comparison with the fixed frame of classical Hollywood cinema. Heritage cinema, on the other hand, takes the form of a fixed narrative, being close to that of Hollywood; however, it features the British traditional nature and culture, often in the setting with aristocratic or intellectual atmosphere, which can hardly be seen in the Hollywood entertainment films. A story is often based on classical novels by Jane Austin or E.M. Foster, or on the history of glory of the Elizabethan or Victorian age.

In similar to documentary films and heritage films quota quickies were one of the cinema genres, which represented culture specific to Britain to be distinctive from Hollywood with its own narrative style, and established the consciousness of nationality in British cinema, because, as will be described later, it drew “on already existing, indigenous cultural traditions” in Higson’s terms.

However, the quickie followed a different process from the above two genres to the formation of national consciousness. Both documentary film movement and heritage cinema were products of the British government protectionist strategies; the former was directed by GPO Film Unit, a government organization led by John Grierson, and the latter emerged in accordance with the “Heritage Industry,” Margaret Thatcher’s cultural policy based upon the slogan “go back to the Victorian age”. On the other hand, the quota quickie was an unexpected result from the 1927 Films Act. It was beyond the government’s intention that the low-budget, quickly taken films could be permeated through the nation so much; it can be even called an illegitimate child for the parental government, in the sense that, at least economically, and also culturally to a degree, it was still under the influence of another family, Hollywood.

Documentary film and heritage cinema, as Higson suggested, focused on the limited part of the society and represented it as a whole national characteristic. Their ways of establishing national imagery reflect the interests of the specific group of the society, such as the government or the bourgeois, capital holders,

who would like to protect their field of behavior as a safe district. It is therefore likely to be connected with such a paternalist view of popular education as Grierson had, or cultural elitism.

The quickies also “appeal only to specific sections of the national community,” but they were not really related with the interests of those sections. Of course, economically, they were means for the benefits of both British and American film studios, but in terms of cultural representation, making quickies was relatively far from political ideologies, economical interests, and cultural elitism.

As to the quota quickies, therefore, we should find the motive for a national cinema in the film’s discourse itself, especially, in its narrative style. Narrative “style” is different from narrative “structure”; while the latter refers to the relation or function of characters and events, the former focuses on how the author or director arranges and decorates them. Quickies, as well as heritage cinema, are similar to Hollywood in terms of narrative structure (and all the more similar than heritage cinema in that they are far from cultural elitism), but different in terms of its style.

Then, how is narrative style connected with the formation of national consciousness? Before proceeding to the survey of the quickies’ narrative style, the next section will quickly review the functions of narrative, based upon the study of narratology.

## 2. This Side of Narrative: Community Maintenance

Narrative is a type of discourse, which is based upon sequence and causality. It narrates events in a temporal order, and it also has a cause, which brings up the events, and some actions are taken to manage and conclude them. The situation would be different after the events and people engaged in them would change as a result of them.

Narrative is a term for an act of expression; it is often applied to create a world of fiction such as novel or film, and identified with a literary or art genre. In addition, historiography is largely dependent upon this narrative mode, so if things described are sequential, or causal, they can be called a narrative, even if they are not seen as a fiction. (Or epistemologically, history itself can be taken as a

“fiction.”)

This fundamental definition of narrative, sequence and causality, suggests that it has a common structure in any nation or region. Above all, it is universal especially within the modern Western type of epistemological scheme in which things are interpreted in the temporal or logical frame of reference. Roland Barthes or Tzvetan Todorov, as is well known, tried to bring this universal aspect of narrative to the foreground, based upon the formalist and semiotic views of Vladimir Propp or A. J. Greimas; Todorov integrated this genealogy into a comprehensive perspective and called it “narratology.” Afterwards, Seymore Chatman, Mieke Bal and others have contributed to the development of this study.

If narrative structure is universal, it is applicable anywhere, regardless of nationality. On the other hand, however, narrative is also used to establish national identity or protect national culture, typically seen in creation myths. Myth is also considered to have a universal structure, but no one insists that it is not concerned with nation, because it explains the birth of nation itself and provides the spiritual or ideal basis for a national community. It is only the structure that is universally common, but outside the structure, narrative works to maintain things particular to the community and its culture.

Frank Kermode’s view of narrative interpretation is suggestive about its “community maintenance” aspect. In his *Genesis of Secrecy*, Kermode refers to Mark’s episode of Jesus Christ’s use of parables.

And he said unto them, Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables. / That seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them. (Mark 4:11-12)

And with many such parables spake he the word unto them, as they were able to hear it. / But without a parable spake he not unto them: and when they were alone, he expounded all things to his disciples. (Mark 4:33-34)

This episode represents Christ's attempts to maintain a good community; those who tried to "perceive" and "understand" the word of God are only acceptable to it. Parables are used to screen the acceptable, or chosen, from those who cannot perceive and understand them, as Kermode states, "When Jesus was asked to explain the purpose of his parables, he described them as stories told to them without – to outsiders – with the express purpose of concealing a mystery that was to be understood only by insiders" (2). He continues: "The discovery of latent senses may appear to be a spontaneous, individual achievement, but it is privileged and constrained by the community of the ear, whether tertiary or circumcised. (5)"

Parables are told with the words that can be understood by the insiders of the community. They are often told in narrative form, with a certain structure of sequence or causality, but some elements beyond the structure prevent them from being universal: figures of speech such as metaphors known only to the members of the community or traditional thought and habits handed down to them; in other words, the interpretation of parables are highly contextually based.

Anthony Easthope's analysis of English national culture and discourse also discusses the similar issue from a different angle. He takes an example of driving a car to describe "a spontaneous, individual achievement" as "constrained by the community." Driving a car is possible with an "exceptional individual mastery." On the other hand, Easthope says:

...car driving is a stunning instance of the dependence of the self on other people. To drive means that every micro-second I consign my life to the rationality, competence and good intentions of the Other. I have to trust that they will read the signs, obey the rules and observe the conventions as much as they trust I will do the same, checking the mirror before pulling out, stopping at red lights, and so on" (4).<sup>※4</sup>

In order to drive, people have to understand the "signs," "rules" and "conventions" of the community. If they ignore those, they would be arrested and

punished, because they do not "perceive" or "understand" and their behavior is inappropriate for the community. In other words, the community needs specific codes — frequently composed of their own discourse — to allow those who perceive and understand them to be in, and reject those who do not.

In similar to the Christian parables or trusting others in driving, narratives have ever been created and told repeatedly to demarcate and maintain the community. This would be true of the 1930s British national cinema, which produced such community-based narratives to rebel against the surge of classical Hollywood cinema being already international, highly sophisticated, popular enough to be distributed anywhere.

As indicated above, there are some elements that cannot be reduced to the structure of narrative such as figures of speech, thought, habits particular to a certain community, or a nation state as an imagined community. In those elements, we may find some potentialities for a narrative style. In the 1930s British cinema, quota quickies as well as documentary films tried to be differentiated from Hollywood, by establishing their own narrative "style" resisting Hollywood's universal and international narrative "structure," which led to the formation of British cinema's national consciousness.

### 3. Shibboleth: the British 'Voice and Sound' Tradition

The idea of narrative as "community maintenance" can be reactionary to the creation of a new vocabulary or a work of art. Even if novelists or artists can create a world composed of new vocabularies, materials, or compositions, the new world, in turn, could be an "interpretative community," which is exclusive to those who have been used to the conventional scheme of reading or observation, as seen in some modernist, enigmatic works. When we see the function of narrative in terms of the formation or maintenance of national community or identity, we should be careful about this reactionary aspect and the excluded people outside the interpretative community.

Narrative style, however, opens the possibility for being distanced from the reactionary and exclusive aspect of narrative and could even deconstruct it. Style is defined as the individual characteristics of a

piece of work, so that, to some extent, the author or director can choose whether to be community-friendly or not, or both of them.

Although style is basically individual, as David Bordwell suggested in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, if many similar styles accumulate and seem to be common, they can also refer to a collective movement under the name of “group style,” such as German Expressionism, Russian montage cinema and French New Wave. The 1930s British “quota quickies” are not exactly a movement nor did they create any school, but they can be taken as having a group style with some common traits.

The group style as a collection of individual styles can be a source of a “genre,” so that discussing genre films might be a starting point to examine the quickie’s narrative style.<sup>\*5</sup>

The most popular and important genre of the quickies was comedy. According to Chibnall, from 1928 to 37, the total numbers of comedy films were 287, which is followed by 205 of crime films. Drama is ranked the third, whose number is 96 and musical and romance were 76 and 52 respectively (94).

These genres are of course common to those in Hollywood, where a huge amount of genre films have been produced because of mainly economical and industrial reasons; settings, costumes, and even actors can be re-used, and a story does not have to be creative, which means that genre films are easier to make with little time and money. Re-used actors can grow up to be stars, who make an effective advertisement possible by appealing to the mass audience, featured in the film company’s campaign. This somewhat repetitive process of genre-film (and money) making became possible by the establishment of a common narrative structure, which was to be called “classical Hollywood cinema.” It is certain that comedy was really popular with the 1930s audience, but it was not exclusive to British cinema.<sup>\*6</sup>

Therefore, what differentiated British genres from Hollywood ones should be considered in terms of “already existing, indigenous cultural traditions” expressed in a film. For instance, comedy and musical are in the genealogy of the nineteenth century British popular culture, music hall. Crime and drama are considered to take over some plots and ways of grotesque description from Victorian popular fiction

or melodrama.

Above all, comedy, the most popular genre in the 1930s Britain, was supported and reinforced by the arrival of sound cinema in 1929. Since it was based upon the music-hall tradition, songs and gags that could be directly perceived through actors’ voices made films lively, and it became easier for the audience to sympathize with them. Sarah Street describes as follows:

Comedy was the most popular and prolific genre in the 1930s. Its success depended on the longstanding tradition in film comedy of featuring music-hall/variety performers and well-known West End stage personalities. The arrival of sound encouraged exploitation of the comic opportunities presented by verbal repartee, singing and regional accents, as an addition to the slapstick and situational nature of silent comedy. (46)

It can be said that not only regional accents, but the overall British speech was helpful in creating national atmosphere in a film. Many film critics recognize how big the role of the speech was in the 1930s British cinema. According to Chibnall, West End actors’ delivery of the King’s English made British cinema different from American.

The stalwarts of the West End stage could usually be relied upon to deliver the King’s English as it should be spoken, and this, in itself, was enough to evoke the sympathy of many critics. Their elocution might be thought to give a degree of sophistication to British attempts to emulate American genres...(38)

That language functions to protect a community is also described in a much harsher tone in the Bible; The Book of Judges’ episode of Shibboleth reads: “Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth: for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan” (12:6). In film making, a director’s choice of language would be related with what kind of audience the film aims at; it is one of the important elements that determines the film’s narrative style. A director’s choice of the King’s or Queen’s English

means that the film would be targeted for the British, educated people.

As Sarah Street pointed out, in addition to such a standard language, regional dialects also made the 1930s British cinema variant from Hollywood. This is also supported by the music-hall cultural tradition, because it was much more popular in the northern, working class people.<sup>\*7</sup> This speech-influenced cultural environment could be called the British 'voice and sound' tradition.

The typical examples of films based upon this tradition would be *Say It With Flowers* (1933) and *Sing As We Go!* (1934). The former, directed by John Baxter, is considered homage to music hall culture; the story is too simple to say it has a fixed narrative structure. The old couple who sell flowers in the market get in health and financial troubles, and their friends plan to hold a benefit concert for them. The earlier part, almost one-third of the film describes various types of people from different backgrounds in the market, greeting, talking, selling and buying; the story does not make any progress, but people appear one after another and have different talks so that the film can keep drawing the audience's attention. The last 20 minutes are allocated to the concert sequence, where singers and dancers entertain the couple, and their friends who get together for them. The finale of the show is left to Florrie Forde, who was one of the actual, popular music hall stars and sang her own songs. In this way, *Say It With Flowers* is full of British traditional voices and sounds.

*Sing As We Go!*, directed by Basil Dean, also features a music hall star, Gracie Fields. It is composed of a series of episodes in which Fields as a main character talks, sings and moves, changing her jobs one after another. She looks for a job and works in Blackpool, a British seaside resort which would have appealed to the middle class, but her regional accent as a working class woman makes her distinctive, compared to a modern London girl, who, while winning a beauty competition, sometimes loses morality and politeness. This contrast would correspond to that of the country and the city; the former reminds people of good old days or a serene life, and the latter, industrialized with the sophisticated culture, contains the inferiority complex for or threat to Americanization. The film narrative's

preference for the regional accent of Gracie Fields seems to appeal to older, and mainly working class people, living outside the sophisticated culture of London, but still feeling the sign of a big wave of industrialization and Americanization. Gracie's accent works as a guard for such a regional community, which was the base for being against the American industrial and cultural invasion. The typical scene emphasizing the relationship between the regional community and the music hall culture is that of Gracie running away from a police officer in an amusement park, and disguising herself as a character animal, "Lancashire Spider." Although Matthew Coniam is critical about the film, which "unconditionally embraces modernity" and "exudes optimism," *Sing As We Go!* seems to have chosen a narrative style which evokes a regional sense of nostalgia particular to the British Isles, and confirms human bondage derived from that sense.<sup>\*8</sup>

Thus, the British 'voice and sound' tradition, in other words, "already existing, indigenous cultural traditions," contributed to making a British-specific narrative style of films, particularly functioning well in the formation of a characteristic comedy in the 1930s Britain. It can be taken as a birth process of a new British national cinema, derived from within the act of narration, in the condition that American film industry was expanding its share in the British domestic film market.

## Conclusion

The dependence on the 'voice and sound' tradition can be easily connected with conservative nationalism or regionalism as a political ideology. However, as to the quota quickie, it has little thing to do with such an "ideology," even though the director's choice of music-hall motifs could be called 'political' as a strategy of film-making; as described above, it emerged beyond the government's intention, being different from documentary films and heritage cinema.

Economically, even after the Films Act was carried out, the subsidiaries of Hollywood companies in Britain engaged in the production or distribution of British films. It means that the government's conservative, protectionist policy did not work well as a protection. Of course, the quota quickie was

constrained by the economical and industrial condition to a degree; however, it actually appeared outside the political intention, and large economic interests were not really expected of it. In such a situation, the quickie innovated a narrative act of film; it can be seen as an aesthetic movement differentiating itself from Hollywood, which already gained a formulated pattern or a fixed structure of narrative. Making use of the narrative's function as community maintenance, directors of the quickies looked to the traditional assets of British culture, such as melodrama, popular fiction and the West End theatre. Above all, music hall, which had been decaying because of the rise of film industry itself, provided good motifs, making the audience feel nostalgia for good old days and constructing national consciousness in a film; as a consequence, the quota quickie, while of course having been influenced by the Hollywood narrative structure, still created an own narrative style, which could be alternative to Hollywood and led to the birth of a British national cinema.

## Notes

- ※<sup>1</sup> The conditions that make a film British native are as follows: "A British film was defined as one made by a British subject or company, but the definition did not specify that control had to be in British hands, only that the majority of the company directors should be British. All studio scenes had to be shot within the Empire, and not less than 75 percent of the labour costs incurred in a film's production, excluding payments for copyright and to one foreign actor, actress or director, had to be paid to British subjects, or to persons domiciled in the Empire. The scenario had to be written by a British author, and the [1927 Films] Act attempted to abolish blind and block booking." (Street 7)
- ※<sup>2</sup> According to Dickinson and Street, in 1926, just a year before the Films Act was introduced, 83.5 % of British domestic film market was occupied by the U.S. companies, while British was only 4.8%. (42)
- ※<sup>3</sup> The argument about the relationship between British cinema and national identity is not so simple, of course. Alan Lovall criticizes John

Hills' support for constructing national identity through film production. "In discussions of British cinema it is taken for granted both that the link [of British film production with the question of national identity] exists and that it is a politically important one — it often seems as if the cinema is the key tool for the construction of British national identity. At present, the belief in the importance of the link seems to depend heavily on the unacknowledged acceptance of the old view of the cinema as having magical powers of expression" ("The British Cinema: The Known Cinema?" in *The British Cinema Book* 205). Another issue would be about British regional culture, with the rise of Scottish and Welsh films in the 1990s. Hill describes as follows, drawing on Paul Willemen's view: "...the idea of British national cinema has often been linked, virtually by definition, to discourses of nationalism and myths of national unity. However, this formulation of a national cinema underestimates the possibilities for a national cinema to re-imagine the nation, or rather nations within Britain, and also to address the specificities of a national culture in a way which does not presume a homogeneous or 'pure' national identity. Indeed, as Paul Willemen has argued, the national cinema which genuinely addressed national specificity will actually be odd with the 'homogenising project' of nationalism insofar as this entails a critical engagement with 'the complex, multidimensional and multidirectional tensions that characterise and shape a social formation's cultural configurations'" ("British Cinema as National Cinema" in *The British Cinema Book* 212).

- ※<sup>4</sup> The difference between narrative structure and style I present in this paper is equivalent to, in Easthope's terms, the difference between language and discourse, which corresponds to Ferdinand de Saussure's dichotomy "langue" and "parole." Easthope analyzes the relationship between identity and discourse, and insists that there is no way to avoid the "insiderism" in the construction of national identity, to the same extent as the process of the construction cannot be completed. "If identity is understood as an

effect of discourse, national identity in a national culture can never achieve the unified homogeneity it wishes for itself. It may be less heartening to admit that the same line of argument entails there can be no escape from identity (except into psychosis or death); and further that all identity defines itself precisely by establishing an inside and an outside so that *all* identity to a degree practises insiderism together with an exclusionary force” (24).

- ※<sup>5</sup> Todorov states: “Genres are the meeting place between general poetics and event-based literary history” (18). The former is “discursive reality”; the latter is “historical reality,” which can form some groups such as symbolists, without necessarily having exactly the same discursive style. In the light of this classification, the individual style would be the former, and the group style can be the latter. Concerning British genre cinema, Marcia Landy states: “British genres are more than an abstract system of formulas, conventions, and codes that are universally applicable. National identity, social history, and ideology play a central role in their formation” (11).
- ※<sup>6</sup> Street points out that British films were under the influence of other national cinemas as follows, although she seems not to separate structure from style. “As far as artistic structures are concerned, it is clear that British directors were influenced by international styles ranging from Hollywood to Soviet cinema. The latter’s tradition of montage was significant in the development of the Documentary style, while Hollywood contributed continuity principles and tightly organized narrative frameworks” (32).
- ※<sup>7</sup> Critics often refer to the influence of music hall on British cinema, or British culture. “Andy Medhurst has rightly concluded that ‘any history of British cinema that realizes the need to situate the cinematic institution within its shifting webs of social relationships needs to pay great attention to the legacies of music hall’” (Chibnall 95-6).
- ※<sup>8</sup> Matthew Coniam, “*Sing As We Go!* (1934)” in *BFI Screenonline*.

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