



**Alfred
Hitchcock
and the
British
Cinema**

TOM RYALL

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Introduction (1996)

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The Author

Tom Ryall is Principal Lecturer in Film Studies in the School of Cultural Studies, Sheffield Hallam University. Amongst his publications is *Blackmail* (British Film Institute, 1993).

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Alfred Hitchcock and the British Cinema

with a new introduction

TOM RYALL



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Introduction

Alfred Hitchcock and the British Cinema although originally published in 1986 still remains one of only two books devoted specifically to the director's crucial formative years as Britain's premier film maker.¹ It is also one of a small handful of books that deal with the British cinema during the interwar period² and these two dimensions – author and context – were the focus of the book generating its two interrelated aims. The first was to redress the balance in Hitchcock scholarship that had tended to neglect and, on occasion, dismiss the early part of Hitchcock's career in favour of his American films. Whilst the considerable achievement of Hollywood films such as *Notorious*, *Rear Window* and *Vertigo* had been acknowledged by numerous critics and formed the basis of Hitchcock's considerable critical reputation, the earlier British films such as *The Lodger*, *Blackmail* and *The Thirty-Nine Steps* had not really received the attention they merited as significant films in the history of cinema as well as important elements of the Hitchcock *œuvre*. The second aim was broader but possibly somewhat disguised by the book's title. 'The British cinema' was intended to have equal prominence in the study as the set of interrelated structures within which Hitchcock worked and by which his artistic horizons were both formed and constrained. Accordingly the book examines both the structure of the British film industry of the period with its system of stars and genres and characteristic stylistic features together with the specifics of the film culture which shaped the intellectual environment within which Hitchcock's films were made and received by audiences of various kinds. In terms of conceptual stance, the study is based upon two assumptions. Firstly, that an understanding of Hitchcock was derivable from a study of the film industry and culture within which he worked; secondly, and equally important to the book, that an understanding of the British cinema of the interwar period was derivable from a scrutiny of the ways in which Hitchcock negotiated its evolving and changing structures. As a recent writer on British cinema has observed,³ the book can be seen as a contribution to the revision of 'orthodox' British film history, an

intended corrective to those many influential accounts of British cinema which stress 'realism' and documentary above genre cinema and fantasy, and an account of Hitchcock's British films which sought to align them with what Charles Barr has identified as the 'strong under-life' of British cinema focused on sexuality and violence.⁴

The original text is presented here unrevised. However, since its publication there have been a number of books and articles both on Hitchcock in particular and on British cinema in general which relate to the concerns of the book including further work of my own on *Blackmail* and *The Thirty-Nine Steps*.⁵ Some of this work is textually based and concerned with Hitchcock as an author, embedding critical commentary on the British films within specifically focused critical analyses of his work in general. For example, discussion of selected British films has been incorporated into Lesley Brill's study of Hitchcock as director of 'romance' films and into a feminist analysis of his work by Tania Modleski.⁶ However, the major episode in Hitchcock studies in the late 1980s was undoubtedly the appearance of a new edition of Robin Wood's influential and pioneering book *Hitchcock's Films* under the title *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*.⁷ Wood's book, first published in 1965, was a critical reading of selected American Hitchcock films and although the 1989 edition printed the original text unrevised it also included new material from the 1980s amongst which were essays on some of the British films. One of the new essays – 'The Murderous Gays: Hitchcock's Homophobia' – dealt with the presence of homosexual themes in the director's work and this dimension is the subject of an exhaustive study by Theodore Price – *Hitchcock and Homosexuality* – which traces such elements back to the British silent films.⁸ British Hitchcock was also given significant space in *A Hitchcock Reader*, a substantial collection of essays which includes studies of *The Lodger*, *Blackmail* and the 1936 version of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*.⁹ The major academic journals also reflected this growing interest in British Hitchcock with *Screen*, the influential British journal, publishing a lengthy essay on *Blackmail*, positioning it in relation to postmodernism,¹⁰ and the American *Cinema Journal* carrying a piece on politics in Hitchcock focused on *The Man Who Knew Too Much* and *The Thirty-Nine Steps*.¹¹ Finally, in terms of critical work, *Hitchcock The Making of a Reputation* by Robert Kapsis¹² merits attention as an impressively argued thesis presenting a painstakingly detailed history of the director's 'biographical legend' which traces the ways in which Hitchcock has been constructed critically as an author and serious artist reaching back to his early days as a film maker in 1920s Britain.

Two things are worth picking out from this range of critical interpretation. Firstly, Robin Wood's book included a number of reflections on his original text and, of particular interest in this context, a revision of his original judgement of Hitchcock's British films as 'little more than 'prentice work, interesting chiefly because they are Hitchcock's'.¹³

Hitchcock's Films Revisited included a self-critique of this virtual dismissal of British Hitchcock together with an acknowledgement that 'the major elements of Hitchcock's mature style are already present in the British work'.¹⁴ The new material included essays on *Blackmail*, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* and *Young and Innocent* written from a much more sympathetic standpoint compared to that of the original book. Secondly, one of Wood's key concerns was to rethink Hitchcock's work in the context of feminist film criticism and to challenge the post-Mulvey reading of his films as *simply* patriarchal and misogynist. This interweaves with Tania Modleski's *The Women Who Knew Too Much* which analyses a selection of films including *Blackmail* and *Murder!* from a feminist perspective. Her arguments sought a middle ground between critics who wrote Hitchcock off as a misogynist and those for whom Hitchcock's films presented a critique of patriarchy. Both Wood and Modleski treat Hitchcock's work from both periods of his career with a certain parity of esteem for the purposes of critical analysis and this contrasts with the previous critical relegation of the British work.

Alfred Hitchcock and the British Cinema contains incidental passages of critical interpretation but is predominantly concerned with positioning Hitchcock and his films in an historical and cultural context and developing a detailed profile of that context. In that sense it relates more closely to some of the recent writing on the history of British cinema rather than the interpretative criticism cited above. Work on the history of British cinema is only at a relatively infant stage in the sense that the basic empirical contours of that history are still being assembled and the hidden precepts that have governed attitudes to that cinema are still being excavated, understood and replaced by more nuanced positions. In both areas – the empirical and conceptual – the work of Charles Barr stands out and his edited essay collection – *All Our Yesterdays*¹⁵ – published in the same year as *Alfred Hitchcock and the British Cinema* indicates the intellectual context in which the latter was written. It is a book that mixes critical interpretation and empirical history, with many of the contributors sharing the 'revisionist' position on British film history that is broadly anti-realist and pro-a cinema of fantasy. Such a position owes much to the work of the editor and Barr's various writings on British cinema constitute a formidable and evolving set of conceptual frameworks within which most of the interesting research on British cinema is now conducted. His introductory essay to *All Our Yesterdays* synthesises and develops the ways of thinking about British film history adumbrated in his previous work.¹⁶ Hitchcock's films had slid easily into conventional accounts of British cinema as the work of a talented director capable of technical flourishes and stylistic 'touches' but lacking in seriousness and despite incidental 'realist' qualities not really part of the orthodox realist/documentary traditions which embodied, to quote critic Richard Winnington, 'the true business of the British movie'.¹⁷ Barr's essay proposed alternative strands and tendencies in

British cinema and particularly those which highlighted the cinema's capacity for interiorisation, fantasy and self-reflexivity i.e. a modernist strand of meta-cinema to set beside the realist tendencies venerated by orthodox film historians. It is within that strand that Hitchcock's British films achieve a considerable significance though firmly within generic and cultural traditions that link his work with that of other British film makers.

Finally, with the publication of Jane E. Sloan's *Alfred Hitchcock: a filmography and bibliography*¹⁸ students of Hitchcock's work have acquired a substantial guide to his work containing extensive and detailed information on both films and bibliographic resources and covering his British as well as his American career.

Notes

1. The other is Maurice Yacowar's *Hitchcock's British Films* (Archon Books, Connecticut, 1977). However, a number of general works on Hitchcock including Rohmer and Chabrol, Durnat and Spoto incorporate comprehensive accounts of the British films.

2. Others would include M. Landy, *British Genres Cinema and Society, 1930-1960* (Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1991) and R. Low, *Film Making in 1930s Britain* (Allen & Unwin, London, 1985).

3. A. Higson, *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995), p. 18.

4. C. Barr, 'A Conundrum for England', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, Aug. 1984, p. 235.

5. T. Ryall, *Blackmail* (British Film Institute, London, 1993); 'One Hundred and Seventeen Steps Towards Masculinity', in P. Kirkham & J. Thumim (eds.), *You Tarzan* (Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1993).

6. L. Brill, *The Hitchcock Romance* (Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1988); T. Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much* (Methuen, London, 1988).

7. Wood, R., *Hitchcock's Films Revisited* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1989).

8. T. Price, *Hitchcock and Homosexuality* (The Scarecrow Press, Inc., Metuchen, N.J., 1992).

9. M. Deutelbaum & L. Poague, *A Hitchcock Reader* (Iowa State University Press, Ames, 1986).

10. S. Eyüboğlu, 'The authorial text and postmodernism: Hitchcock's *Blackmail*', *Screen*, 32:1, Spring, 1991.

11. I. R. Hark, 'Keeping Your Amateur Standing: Audience Participation and Good Citizenship in Hitchcock's Political Films', *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 29, No. 2, Winter, 1990.

12. R. E. Kapsis, *Hitchcock The Making of a Reputation* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992).

13. Wood, *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*, p. 73.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 240.

15. C. Barr (ed.), *All Our Yesterdays* (British Film Institute, London, 1986).

16. See Barr, *Ealing Studios* (Cameron and Tayleur, London, 1977) and 'A Conundrum for England', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, Vol. 51, No. 607, 1984.

17. Quoted in Barr, *All Our Yesterdays*, p. 15.

18. Sloan, J. E., *Alfred Hitchcock a filmography and bibliography* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1995).

Introduction — Hitchcock and Criticism

Any study of Hitchcock has as its departure point the substantial textual entity — ‘Hitchcock’ — produced by the numerous critical studies of the director that have appeared since his films were accorded a privileged place in the revaluation of the American cinema initiated by the *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics of the 1950s. Much of this criticism has concentrated upon defining the stylistic and thematic identity of Hitchcock as an *auteur* but many recent critics and writers more concerned with theoretical problems than with authorial identity have used Hitchcock’s films as reference points for studies of cinematic narration and psychoanalytical film criticism.¹ A diversity of Hitchcocks has emerged from the last three decades of critical activity and these will inevitably leave their mark on the present study. One of the study’s aims is to supplement existing work on the director by examining the films of his British period, which have usually been neglected in favour of his American work. However, another aim is the construction of a contextual framework for the British films to allow of their analysis from an historically sensitive vantage point. The ‘historicising of textual analysis’², as David Bordwell has called it, is an urgent task for criticism if textual study is to break free from the endless process of open reading based upon ‘the sterile notion of the self-sufficient text’.³ *Auteur* criticism has wrenched films and their directors from the historical circumstances of production and has defined the expression of the author’s consciousness as responsible for the shape, form and meaning of a text. The individuality and uniqueness of the authorial *oeuvre* has often been an assumption based upon a self-contained study of a director’s work rather than a quality requiring demonstration through comparison with, for example, the norms and conventions of film making during the period of the author. If Hitchcock’s British work does display such qualities of individuality the activity of returning the films to their historical context will reveal this more certainly. This study whilst focusing on a film author with a substantially defined identity also depends upon a range of contextual critical terms, in particular, ‘film culture’ and ‘national cinema’. It is the purpose of this introductory chapter to indicate the numerous nuances

of such terms which will be taken up during the course of the study.

'Film culture' entered the critical vocabulary of cinema in the early 1970s as a term referring to the limited and specifiable sphere of intellectual and cultural activity centred on the production of films. A film culture — 'an intermingling of ideas and institutions into recognisable formations'⁴ — is constituted by the ideologies of film that circulate and compete in a given historical period and the forms in which such ideologies are institutionalised. The ensemble of practices captured by the idea provides a crucial determining framework for the production and consumption of films. The term embraces the immediate contexts in which films are made and circulated such as studios, cinemas and film journals, and those contexts which have to be constructed from the material network of the culture, the philosophies and ideologies of film. The various elements of a film culture constitute a complex non-monolithic entity containing within itself a set of practices and institutions, some of which interact in a mutually supportive fashion, some of which provide alternatives to each other, and some of which operate in a self-consciously oppositional fashion.

The notion of a 'film culture' provides the critic with an overarching sense of a context for cinema, an indication of the options available in principle to a film maker at a particular point in time. A more immediate context is that of 'national cinema', a common term in critical discussion but again one with a range of nuances. It can be thought of in at least two distinct though interrelated ways. Firstly, the term can connote the institutional framework within which a body of films is produced including patterns of production, distribution and exhibition and the significance of the industry to the social, political and economic life of a country. Secondly, and perhaps more usually, the connotation is the body of films produced by a national film industry, or the critical construction of those films as some kind of a coherency in terms of subject matter and theme. There is a long tradition of looking at films as a 'reflection' or 'expression' of a nation's preoccupations based on the idea that films, especially popular commercial films, are connected with the national psyche in rather more intimate ways than are other artistic and cultural forms. Siegfried Kracauer, for example, suggests that this is so because the collective character of film production provides a check on 'individual peculiarities in favor of traits common to many people'⁵ and because films are directed at a large undifferentiated audience they can be 'supposed to satisfy existing mass desires'.⁶ Approaches such as Kracauer's have been heavily criticised for their reductionism and their disregard of form and style yet the relationship between the social and ideological character of a nation and its cinematic output must constitute part of the definition of a national cinema.

Recent film theory has located the discussion of film in the social and national context within larger debates about ideology and its role as a source of social cohesion. Ideas of direct and simple 'reflection' or 'expression' have been discarded and there has been an acknowledgement of the

active role that cinema can play both in the construction of ideology and in the critical dismantling of dominant ideological tendencies. The terminology of 'reflection' and 'expression' implies a channelling function for the cinema in relation to ideology whereas recent discussion has stressed the dynamic role of cultural production in the arena of ideology. A central concept is 'representation' and although one important sense of the word corresponds to Kracauer's notion of 'reflection', another of its senses stresses the activity of representation as an important element in the ideological work of social definition. Richard Dyer has pinpointed these distinctive senses in the following terms:

Thus representation may mean the representing — the presenting over again — of reality, or it may be presenting-as, making reality out to be such-and-such. In the first definition, reality is taken as being unproblematically known, whereas the second definition stresses the construction of a sense or image of reality whose relationship to reality itself is always problematic.⁷

The film and ideology relationship is especially relevant to the discussion of British cinema because ideological considerations have played a major role in government attitudes towards the cinema since the introduction of state protection for the industry in the late 1920s and in the 'arm's length' system of censorship employed by the state as a means of controlling the social potential of the medium.

National cinemas have also been defined in ways other than those of social reflection. Some writers have used traditional critical approaches such as authorship and genre to construct a 'critical profile' of a national film industry. On the face of it, an approach based upon authorship and a concern with the individual and the unique is at odds with the logic of a national cinema study with its search for common qualities linking films on the basis of a shared national origin. Yet, critics such as Andrew Sarris and Roy Arnes have written valuable accounts of the American and British cinemas respectively from such a perspective.⁸ Sarris, indeed, has characterised the '*auteur* theory' as 'a critical device for recording the history of the American cinema'.⁹ It was, however, the perceived shortcomings of an authorship approach to writing about American cinema that led a number of critics to investigate the concept of genre as an alternative to, or an important modifier of, the definitions of Hollywood films offered by *auteur* critics. In the late 1960s, critics such as Jim Kitses and Colin McArthur wrote about the major generic traditions in the American cinema in order to provide a more detailed context for the analysis of Hollywood films and as a method which drew attention to the genuinely national characteristics and traditions of Hollywood film making which remained untouched by *auteur* critics.¹⁰ It was argued that the idea of genre enabled a more precise and accurate appraisal of the work of American film makers to be made, and this study will suggest the relevance of the idea of genre for the British

cinema in similar terms. Another approach to the problem of defining a national cinema concerns matters of form and style in film. Indeed, a cursory glance at the conventional compendium histories of cinema confirms the frequency with which stylistic trends have been used to mark off one national cinema from another. For example, the German cinema of the 1920s is often discussed in terms of its characteristic *mise en scène* and cinematography, its visual style, whilst the Soviet cinema of the same period is discussed in terms of its particular form of editing — the 'montage' style. Although the precise definitions of the narrative and stylistic norms that might constitute national cinematic tendencies is not a well-developed area of film studies, it does seem correct, in principle, to assume that highly organised national film industries will develop conventions of form and style as they develop the thematic and iconographic conventions of a genre system. In terms of the British cinema during the interwar years when American films dominated the British screen, it was the classical narrative system that exercised a major influence on the stylistic evolution of the British film.

The above discussion has indicated the extent to which the field of reference conventionally termed 'the contextual' in relation to a film maker is both extensive and complex, endlessly ramified and abutting a variety of distinct areas of study such as economics, politics, aesthetics and so on. 'The British cinema' can mean a number of distinct though interrelated things. The other dimension of the study — Alfred Hitchcock, film maker — poses similar problems of definition. Again, some degree of sub-division is necessary for when we utter the words 'Alfred Hitchcock', we can intend different things. On the one hand there is the real human being, now deceased but still a biographical fact — the commonsense Hitchcock of everyday discourse. On the other hand, there is the critical construct, the 'Alfred Hitchcock' mentioned earlier as a product of the analysis and criticism of the films directed by the biographical individual. Much of this critical activity emerged from a framework of traditional *auteurism* with its sense of film maker as creator, as visionary and as moralist. In this way the biographical Hitchcock plays an important role in the critical activity which can be construed as a tracing of textual evidence back to its biographical source, working from the film to find out something about the person. Claude Chabrol wrote of a 'Hitchcockian universe' which the director made public through his films and through his responses to interviewers. In fact, *Cahiers du Cinéma* and its followers attached great importance to supplementing the work of critical analysis — the main focus of the journal — with extensive interviewing of film authors in order to corroborate the critical readings. The most straightforward and uncomplicated version of *auteurism* crosses freely from biography (the life of Alfred Hitchcock) to text (the films of Alfred Hitchcock) on the assumption that the latter were channels through which the particular preoccupations of the film maker — 'the Hitchcockian universe' — were communicated to the audience.

There is another side to the *auteurist* project which, though still dependent to some extent upon the creative consciousness of Romantic aesthetics, nevertheless defines the artistic universe in terms of the public world of the film text rather than the private world of the artistic mind. The stress in this dimension of auteurism is on the 'objective analysis of distinguished thematics and traits of style' and 'the hard core of basic and often recondite motifs which, united in various combinations, constitute the true specificity of an author's work'.¹¹ The stress on close textual analysis, on cinematic *mise en scène*, has been described by John Caughie as:

the most important positive contributions of auteurism to the development of a precise and detailed film criticism, engaging with the specific mechanisms of visual discourse, freeing it from literary models, and from the liberal commitments which were prepared to validate films on the basis of their themes alone.¹²

And, it was such a stress on 'objective analysis' of the film text that brought the anti-Romantic intellectual influences of structuralism and semiology into the discussion of film authorship. Peter Wollen, for example, has argued for a radical separation between biography and text, suggesting that 'Fuller or Hawks or Hitchcock, the directors are quite separate from "Fuller" or "Hawks" or "Hitchcock", the structures named after them, and should not be methodologically confused'.¹³ With this structuralist version of authorship the biographical individual is left behind and the artistic universe is presented as a product of the analytical encounter between critic and text. Yet, it is a difficult move to make resting upon a distinction which is not easy to sustain in the course of critical practice. As Geoffrey Nowell-Smith has pointed out, the two poles of the *auteur* theory are frequently difficult to disentangle in critical discussion:

In practice, however, some sort of intentionality is always assumed, and *auteur* criticism tends to veer uneasily between the two poles of a statement of what the author, as self-reflecting consciousness, is supposed to have put into the film and the analysis of what can be shown to be objectively present in the form proper to the work of a particular artistic personality.¹⁴

Structuralist versions of authorship attempt, albeit unsuccessfully, to more or less jettison biography in order to make coherence and unity of the authorial oeuvre a function of critical analysis. Yet, for a critical practice which wishes to maintain some hold on history and context, the excision of biography is a problem. As John Caughie has put it, the author is 'the most accessible point at which a text is tied to its own social and historical outside'.¹⁵ The notion of the 'biographical legend' developed within Russian Formalist criticism has been proposed as a way of considering relationships between text, author and biography with its suggestion that

'the authorial personality be considered a construct, created not only by the art works themselves but also by other historical forces'.¹⁶ The 'biographical legend' mediates between the empirical life history of an artist or film maker and the artistic texts themselves. The artistic image of a film maker can have a key role in decisions about production and can explain the particular trajectory of an artistic career. It can also function as a guide for audiences in their reading of individual works. Such an image is the end product of a range of 'historical forces' which include the public utterances of the artist concerned together with a variety of discourses such as those of journalism, academic criticism, publicity and marketing, all of which work together to produce 'the biographical legend'.

This study of Alfred Hitchcock's British films is concerned with critical analysis and definition but it is also concerned with history and context as a grounding for such analysis. In taking the basic terms of the study — a national cinema and a film author — and subdividing them into a range of connotations, my intention was to indicate the complexity of a field of determinations for any given film or body of films. The remainder of the study is devoted to an examination of several different contexts for the films that Hitchcock made in Britain during the interwar period prior to his departure to Hollywood in 1939 including the minority film culture of the 1920s, the British film industry and its films, and the artistic contexts of genre and classical film form.

Notes

1. For example, the work of Raymond Bellour, Stephen Heath, Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen.
2. D. Bordwell, 'Textual Analysis etc.', *Enclitic*, no. 10-11 (1981/82), p. 125.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 135.
4. A. Lovell, 'Notes on British Film Culture', *Screen*, vol. 13, no. 2 (1972), p. 13.
5. S. Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1947), p. 5.
6. *Ibid.*
7. R. Dyer, 'Introduction' in R. Dyer *et al.* *Coronation Street* (British Film Institute, London, 1981), p. 6.
8. A. Sarris, *The American Cinema* (Dutton, New York, 1968); R. Arnes, *A Critical History of British Cinema* (Secker and Warburg, London, 1978).
9. A. Sarris, *The Primal Screen* (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1973), p. 48.
10. J. Kitses, *Horizons West* (Thames and Hudson, London, 1969); C. McArthur, *Underworld USA* (Secker and Warburg, London, 1972).
11. G. Nowell-Smith, 'Cinema and Structuralism', *Twentieth Century Studies*, no. 3 (1970), p. 133.
12. J. Caughie, *Theories of Authorship* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1981), p. 13.
13. P. Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, 3rd edn (Secker and Warburg, London, 1972), p. 168.
14. Nowell-Smith, 'Cinema and Structuralism', p. 132.
15. Caughie, *Theories*, p. 3.
16. D. Bordwell, *The Films of Carl-Theodor Dreyer* (University of California Press, California, 1981), p. 4.

Chapter Two

British Film Culture in the Interwar Period

Hitchcock worked within the entertainment film industry making pictures which were aimed at a mass audience. Yet many of his films, particularly those of the 1920s, display clear relationships with the European 'art' cinemas of the period which constituted the focus of interest for the minority film culture in Britain that was centred on the film society movement and the specialised journal. This chapter offers an anatomy of the intellectual film culture of the 1920s and, in particular, draws attention to the influential role of the documentary film movement. It also examines two of Hitchcock's films from the 1920s — *The Lodger* (1926) and *Blackmail* (1929) — from the point of view of their specific links with the 'art' films of the minority film culture.

Film Art in Europe

The 1920s was a crucial decade in the development of specialised minority film cultures in the major European film-producing countries as well as in Britain. It was a period of self-conscious artistic experiment in the cinema in which the key artistic revolutions of the early twentieth century — Expressionism, Cubism, Futurism, Dadaism and so on — found an outlet in the cinematic experiments of film makers in Germany, France and the Soviet Union. Whereas the development of the cinema previously had been dominated by the concerns of a popular narrative art, the 1920s see the emergence of cinemas which bear the imprint of 'art' and 'high culture' attracting the attention of the educated classes who had previously scorned the medium. There had been, prior to this, some attempts to create a form of 'art' cinema in France and Italy. Firms such as the French *Le Film d'Art* and the Italian *Série d'Or* had been formed just before the First World War to film adaptations of stage classics and historical epics, and condensed versions of Shakespeare and Dante, with a view to attracting an educated middle class audience into the cinema. This familiar attitude towards the cinema, which treats it as a convenient reproductive channel for the

presentation of the established cultural media of literature and drama, however, must be firmly distinguished from the attitudes towards cinema of the emerging film cultures of the 1920s. Film makers and theorists alike began to reflect upon the medium as an art form in its own right. Indeed, one marked tendency in this context was the urge of many film makers to disassociate their films from the conventions of literary and dramatic art forms and to ground their practices in the specific qualities of film alone — a form of aesthetic purism. The German film maker F.W. Murnau declared that film 'ought, through its unique properties, to tell a complete story by means of images alone; the ideal film does not need titles'.¹ And, in addition, the 1920s also witnessed an interest in 'pure cinema' represented by the experiments of artists such as Hans Richter, Viking Eggeling and Marcel Duchamp in which total abstraction was seen as freeing the film from what were sometimes perceived as the artistically debilitating constraints of narrative. The relationship between traditional art forms and the cinema had previously been confined to considerations of the suitability of the medium for the translation of literary and dramatic works and the 1920s saw the development of a more introspective attitude towards film. It was a period marked by intense reflection on the very nature of cinema as an art form and a period in which many film makers sought to explore the possibilities of film form in the richly experimental context of artistic modernism. Such theorising and film making, however, were not conducted in a spirit of scientific neutrality for these were also the years of the film manifesto, the period of committed film makers and theorists whose observations and practices implied conclusions about the ways in which films should be made and, by the same token, the ways in which films should not be made. Soviet film makers such as Kuleshov, Pudovkin, Eisenstein and Vertov, French film makers such as Epstein and Delluc published analytical and theoretical speculations on cinema, they made films and proclaimed aesthetic allegiances to this or that type of film. Film societies and cine clubs of one sort or another sprang up in one European country after another, facilitating the spread of ideas about cinema and film making on an international rather than a regional basis.

Such a fermentation of film culture did not occur in a vacuum. One of the primary determinants of the development of the various national film cultures of the 1920s was the American cinema which had moved into a position of dominance in the international film market. As Chapter 3 examines in more detail, the First World War saw the interruption of the European film industries and the rapid development of Hollywood as a mass producer of the long feature film which had only just begun to appear in the immediate pre-war years. By the 1920s the cinemas of Britain in particular but also of France, Germany, the Soviet Union and the Scandinavian countries were dominated by the American films of companies such as Paramount, First National and Fox which had set up distribution agencies in many of these European countries. The development of the European 'art' cinemas can be seen as a form of cultural defence against

the hegemony of the Hollywood cinema. This defensive posture had both an economic and an artistic face. The European countries developed forms of film funding that differed in certain respects from the orthodox commercial financial methods through banks and investment companies that were developing in capitalist America. In 1915 a judgement in the American Supreme Court had defined motion pictures as a 'business, pure and simple, originated and conducted for profit'² and the development of Hollywood reflected the market economy of the United States. In Europe, business considerations whilst still important were accompanied by an interest in the artistic and propagandist possibilities of cinema which led to several countries enacting legislation to protect the development of their indigenous cinema. In Germany, for example, the state intervened in a number of ways. The best known and the biggest of the German film companies, the gigantic UFA company, was set up towards the end of the First World War with a mixture of government and private capital. Although 'the golden age of German cinema' was based on the efforts of a number of private companies and although the government relinquished its holding in UFA at the end of the war, the presence of the state signalled a rather different attitude towards the medium than was the case in America. Perhaps a more significant move by the German government was the introduction of quota legislation to limit the import of foreign, especially American, films and thus protect the German film industry. The state also passed legislation which granted tax concessions to exhibitors who screened films which were deemed to possess artistic and cultural merit and thus stimulated the development of an 'art' cinema and of producing units such as Decla-Bioscop which specialised in 'art' films. The development of an indigenous 'art' cinema was seen as an important weapon in the battle for a share of the growing international film market. The Americans were clearly leading the field in terms of a popular cinema addressed to an international mass audience but it was thought that there might also be an international audience who were not particularly interested in the typical Hollywood film but who might be interested in an internationally marketed 'art' cinema defined precisely by its difference from the typical Hollywood film. Perhaps an index of the success of the German cinema of the period and a vindication of the encouragement of 'art' film lies in the fact that Hollywood began to invest in the German cinema during the middle of the decade and then proceeded to lure the cream of German talent, actors, directors and technical personnel to Hollywood. The Soviet cinema was, of course, run by the state as a propaganda machine and film makers were recruited to work on behalf of the newly established socialist society. This did not preclude artistic experiment and indeed the 1920s is a period in the history of Soviet cinema that is marked by a diversity of aesthetic and political responses to film conceived of as a documentary and propagandist medium capable of playing a key role in the political and cultural development of a socialist state. In France, the avant garde film makers were dependent to some extent upon private finance although the modest