Middlebrow Cinema

Edited by
Sally Faulkner

MIDDLEBROW CINEMA

Middlebrow Cinema challenges an often uninterrogated hostility to middlebrow culture that frequently dismisses it as conservative, which it often is not, and feminized or middle-class, which it often is. The volume defines the term relationally against shifting concepts of 'high' and 'low', and considers its deployment in connection with text, audience and institution.

In exploring the concept of the middlebrow, this book recovers films that were widely meaningful to contemporary audiences, yet sometimes overlooked by critics interested in popular and arthouse extremes. It also addresses the question of socially mobile audiences, who might express their aspirations through film-watching, and traces the cultural consequences of the movement of films across borders and between institutions.

The first study of its kind, the volume comprises of 11 original essays that test the purchase of the term 'middlebrow' across cultures, including those of Europe, Asia and the Americas, from the 1930s to the present day. *Middlebrow Cinema* brings into view a popular and aspirational – and thus especially relevant and dynamic – area of film and film culture. Ideal for students and researchers in this area, this book:

- remaps 'popular' and 'arthouse' approaches;
- explores British, Chinese, French, Indian, Mexican and Spanish 'national' cinemas alongside Continental, Hollywood, queer and transnational cinemas;
- analyses biopic, heritage, historical film, melodrama, musical and sex comedy genres.

Sally Faulkner is Professor of Hispanic Studies and Film Studies at the University of Exeter, and author of *Literary Adaptations in Spanish Cinema* (2004), *A Cinema of Contradiction: Spanish Film in the 1960s* (2006) and *A History of Spanish Film: Cinema and Society 1910–2010* (2013).

REMAPPING WORLD CINEMA: REGIONAL TENSIONS AND GLOBAL TRANSFORMATIONS

Series Editors: *Rob Stone, Paul Cooke, Stephanie Dennison* and *Alex Marlow-Mann*

Remapping World Cinema: Regional Tensions and Global Transformations rewrites the territory of contemporary world cinema, revising outdated assumptions of national cinemas, challenging complacent views of hegemonic film cultures and questioning common ideas of production, distribution and reception. It will remap established territories such as American, European and Asian cinema and explore new territories that exist both within and beyond nation-states such as regional cinemas and online communities, while also demarcating important contexts for global cinema such as festival circuits and the discipline of film studies itself.

This book series is jointly coordinated by *B-Film: The Birmingham Centre for Film Studies* based at the University of Birmingham, the *Centre for World Cinemas and Digital Cultures* at the University of Leeds and the *Centre for Film and Media Research* at the University of Kent.

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Film titles in languages other than English are given in the original and in English on first mention; on subsequent mention the English title is used. Translations are taken from the International Movie Database (www.imdb.com); where none are available authors have offered their own and indicated this with an asterisk in the text. Significant quotations in languages other than English are given in English translation in the main text and in the original in an endnote.

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INTRODUCTION: APPROACHING THE MIDDLEBROW

Audience; text; institution

Sally Faulkner

This volume challenges what has become a far too settled – uninterrogated and automatic – hostility to middlebrow culture. 'Middlebrows . . . are betwixt and between', wrote an irate Virginia Woolf in 1932, summarizing views circulating in Literary Studies since the 1920s. 'If any human being, man, woman, dog, cat, or half-crushed worm dares call me "middlebrow" I will take my pen and stab him, to death' (Woolf 1942, 119). Almost one hundred years later, film scholar Adrian Martin would summarize the field of Cinema Studies as one in which 'critics who are truly cinephiles . . . often champion extremes. They go for the highest and the lowest . . . At both extremes, [they] look for excess and intensity. What such critics usually do not like, on principle, is a certain middle-of-the-road, middlebrow cinema' (2008). Between Woolf's tirade[1] and Martin's assessment lies the best part of a century when the middlebrow has been the straw man for many cultural commentators, both inside and outside of the academy. With such powerful detractors, it has become too easy to go with the grain and criticize a cultural category that is frequently dismissed as suspiciously conservative, which it often is not, and frequently dismissed as suspiciously feminized, or middle-class, which it often is.

There are three principal reasons why this volume defends a new approach. First, the middlebrow as a taste category – I will be arguing that it is an adjective that might attach to audience, text or institution – is bound up with issues of identity. If there is a critical tendency to avoid the middlebrow, or if critics do not question their own automatic tendency only to 'champion extremes' (Martin 2008), those identities explored and represented by middlebrow culture are overlooked. As commentators on middlebrow literature have noted (Humble 2001; Brown and Grover 2012, 9–10; Driscoll 2014; Holmes forthcoming, chapter 1), texts may have been excluded from the canon owing to their association with the feminine. Contributors to *Middlebrow Cinema* also observe this overlap. Studies of

middlebrow culture therefore have common cause with feminism's drive to recover and re-evaluate, which has led to work such as Nicola Humble's 2001 *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel* and Diana Holmes's forthcoming *Reclaiming the Middlebrow*, and is a point explored by Sally Faulkner and Will Higbee in this volume. In some cases, middlebrow texts, like those analysed by Humble, have been enjoyed by predominantly female audiences; in others, they have been perceived to be consumed by predominantly female audiences; or, alternatively again, they have circulated in institutions perceived as feminine, like the book club, regardless of who consumed them.

I foreground both this actual female association, or perceived feminization, to highlight the ways Middlebrow Studies may draw on the energies and insights of feminism, and not to insist that the middlebrow is a feminine category, which studies of the masculine middlebrow (MacDonald 2011), or middlebrow queer (Perriam 2013, chapter 5, and Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover's chapter in this volume), have refuted. Elsewhere, Janet Galligani Casey notes that the recovery of the middlebrow also finds common cause with that of other texts excluded from the canon for regional, ethnic or racial reasons, though she rightly cautions that this potentially productive close overlap has often, in fact, been to the detriment of recovering the middlebrow: 'Texts have typically been recuperated through the efforts of feminist scholars, or scholars of race/ethnicity, while the middlebrow as a concept unto itself remains largely an uninvestigated "other"' (2012, 26). By foregrounding middlebrow, this volume aims to contribute to rectifying this.

It is also the case that the middlebrow, which is an area that is in fact, or in perception, associated with class aspiration, overlaps significantly with the middle-class. The assumption that the adjective 'middlebrow' is synonymous with 'middle-class', which imprisons audiences in a double bind of fixed class and fixed taste patterns, should not be automatic, however. While, for native English speakers at least, the middlebrow might be intuitively understood as an area of culture that is staid and stolid, what this volume demonstrates is that this category is in fact marked by dynamism and mobility, an observation made by Lawrence Napper in his important 2009 study of interwar British cinema (9), and reaffirmed in his study of 1940s British culture here. It is in this more subtle twin sense of cultural dynamism and social mobility that we might perceive the overlap between middlebrow and middle-class. *Middlebrow Cinema* then does not haughtily dismiss aspiration, but rather takes seriously the cultural choices of the socially mobile, defending a reading of the middlebrow as itself especially dynamic.

A second reason for the urgency of our task is a facet of this dynamism: the especial ability of this cultural category to negotiate historical change. TV historian John Ellis coined the phrase 'to work through' (2002, 2), which usefully, for our purposes, stresses process rather than product. For middlebrow culture tends to be the culture that 'works through' after the event, or, occasionally, the culture that anticipates before the event, rather than the culture of the event itself. Although it is not the nation in which the term was coined, I suggest that the case of 1970s Spain is exemplary. If postmodern auteurs like Pedro Almodóvar and Iván Zulueta provide the heady films of Spain's transition from dictatorship to democracy in that

decade, it is the middlebrow film (and, increasingly, TV), enjoyed by wide audiences, which anticipates change in advance and works through its impact in the aftermath. Middlebrow culture, then, may tend to rehearse before and revise after. To use a metaphor of war and its aftermath (key for the chapters on Hollywood, French, British and Spanish cinemas here), middlebrow is the culture of the ricochet, rather than the culture of the shot.

Third, *Middlebrow Cinema* hopes to contribute to the writing of film history. As self-reflective analyses of the field attest, Film Studies as a discipline is much indebted to Adrian Martin's 'true cinephiles'. Thomas Elsaesser, for example, has shown that cinephile reverence for an arthouse canon of films (especially those of the new waves of the 1950s–60s) allowed the smooth introduction of film to the academy in the 1970s, for, if the established discipline of literature had its roster of revered classics, then so did film (2012, 34). Is Film Studies perhaps still partly trapped by this comparative recentness of the development of our discipline? For, as we will see, while literary critics from the 1990s have increasingly embraced the middlebrow, stressing its value in the classroom to alert students to the 'standards and practices of canon formation and preservation' (Galligani Casey 2012, 28), is there perhaps more at stake for Film Studies, as its introduction unsettles a far more recently settled canon?

Definitions

As a cultural category that is so intimately intertwined with shifting definitions of identities, shifting class alignments and shifting processes of working through, the middlebrow is always contingent. Rather than try to stabilize this inherent instability – which this volume aims to show is in fact highly productive for cultural analysis – this section adopts a diachronic and synchronic approach to draw out recurrent tendencies. It charts the history of the use of the term 'middlebrow' since its appearance in print in 1924, then considers its appearance across media to look forward to the foregrounding of the cross-cultural translation of the term in the following section.[2]

With an unsavoury origin in the racist Victorian pseudo-science phrenology (whereby intelligence is said to equate to the level of the brow), the first recorded use of 'middlebrow' was in the Irish *Freeman's Journal* in 1924, though the term is most frequently associated with interwar Britain and America. Among modernist novelists like Woolf (1942), or literary critics like Q.D. and F.R. Leavis (1932), attacking this category may be interpreted today as a means of articulating the threat to the elite posed by widespread literacy and the commercialization of culture (Hess 2009, 330; Brown and Grover 2012, 8). Elsewhere in the Anglophone world, the derogatory associations attached to it by British commentators translated fairly directly to their North-American counterparts (Rubin 1992, xiii), like Clement Greenberg (1948) or Dwight MacDonald (1960) (Chris Cagle explores MacDonald's views alongside those of the somewhat more sympathetic Russell Lynes [1949] in Chapter 1).

In her pioneering 1992 *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, Joan Rubin argues that such dismissals were so powerful that they 'licensed the scholarly neglect of

middlebrow efforts in the past' and entrenched a focus on the 'avant garde . . . figures who have viewed themselves as alienated' (1992, xv). Writing on American literature of the 1920s–40s some twenty-five years ago, it was the discipline of History, for Rubin, that had thus far partially redressed this neglect with studies on popular culture; though she rightly cautions that this welcome redress nonetheless 'reified and perpetuated the conventional dichotomy between "high" and "popular" culture' (1992, xv). As we will see, Film Studies' focus on popular cinema, following the initial cinephile enthusiasm for the arthouse, has likewise tended to cement a 'high' and 'low' divide, and thus neglect the middlebrow in-between.

Cross-cultural translations

Anglophone Middlebrow Literary Studies have addressed further questions such as memory and middlebrow writers in interwar Britain (Bracco 1993), the American Book-of-the-Month Club in the twentieth century (Radway 1997), and a defence of the term to analyse twenty-first-century literature (Driscoll 2014), though recent and forthcoming publications are increasingly attending, like this volume, to the matter of cross-cultural translation. While there are important differences between the US and British cases, like the earlier implantation of mass culture in America (see Cagle in this volume), the divergent development of universities on either side of the Atlantic (Brown and Grover 2012, 11), and the threat posed by Hollywood cinema and the Americanization of native culture for the island nation (Napper 2009, 8), a shared language, a broadly similar experience of the rise in literacy levels and a broadly similar Allied-power experience of the Second World War mean that similar meanings attach to the middlebrow in British and North-American cases. However, alternative nuances adhere to its translation in further contexts. Jonathan Hess notes the neglect of the middlebrow in the German case owing to the long tradition of 'a rigid dichotomy between "high" and "low" culture. . . . [F]rom the emergence of doctrines of the autonomy of art in the late eighteenth century through the establishment of *Germanistik* as a discipline in the nineteenth-century research university' (2009, 331). In addition to the Frankfurt School's influential critique of mass culture, such as Siegfried Kracauer's 1927 'The Little Shop Girls Go to the Movies' and Walter Benjamin's 1935 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mass Reproduction', for Germany, like other countries that experienced totalitarian fascism in the 1930s, propaganda also led to a deeply held mistrust of popular culture among cultural theorists.

This entrenchment of a dichotomous view of culture as high or low has meant that an exact equivalent of the Anglo-American term 'middlebrow' was not coined in other linguistic contexts, although contributors to this volume investigate alternatives. The most well-known of these to date is Pierre Bourdieu's use of 'culture moyenne' in his 1984 *Distinction: A Cultural Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (and previously elaborated in *Photography: A Middlebrow Art* of 1965), which rebuts late eighteenth-century German thought on innate taste (Immanuel Kant's 1790 *Critique of Judgement*) and shifts the debate from the Frankfurt School's critique of mass culture, which masks class inequalities, to an analysis of the interweaving of class and

culture. Middlebrow Studies have seized on Bourdieu's analysis of the cultural choices, aspirations and mistakes ('good will' and 'allodoxia' in his terms) – or 'culture moyenne' – of the petit bourgeoisie or lower middle class, defending its transfer-ability despite its rooting in the context of the sociologist's data from 1960s France. Bourdieu's English translators Shaun Whiteside and Richard Nice's rendering of 'art/culture moyenne' as 'middlebrow' also meant that his work entered into specific dialogue with the Anglophone history of that term. Elsewhere I have argued for the usefulness of Bourdieu's work for the analysis of examples beyond 1960s France, especially his pinpointing of the 'confusion' of high and low cultural spheres, pun-ning on 'fusion', as a defining characteristic (Bourdieu 1999, 323) (Faulkner 2013, 5; 10 n.14); contributors to this volume illuminatingly deploy his further insights like allodoxia in non-French contexts (e.g. Cagle). However, as Deborah Shaw also stresses in these pages, *Distinction* is a restrictively negative analysis. What this volume as a whole shares is an ambition to test 'middlebrow' similarly, examining both its fit and the purposes it serves in new contexts. For Will Higbee, for example, weighing the meanings of 'middlebrow' in a contemporary French context allows him to trace the risks and benefits of the movement of directors into the mainstream.

As Higbee points out, his chapter thus performs an opposite operation to that of Caroline Pollentier's comparison of Bourdieu's 'moyenne' and English 'middle-brow' cultures. For Pollentier, Bourdieu's 'moyenne' is revealed to be a 'restrictively negative assessment of middlebrow practices' and an 'agonistic conception of culture' when applied to the English context, concluding that 'it is perhaps by engaging in cross-cultural thinking that one can best map and criticize Bourdieu's *art moyen*' (2012, 38). This volume does not trace one concept defined by a single theorist in new contexts (as Pollentier does), but nonetheless makes a parallel move in testing the applicability of an idea, to which certain definitional tendencies adhere, in multiple contexts. Pollentier's transfer of a single concept leads in fact to a limited defence of exploring ideas within specific contexts using the theoretical tools developed in those contexts: thus for her it is English J. B. Priestley's account of 'middleness', 'rooted in an English context', that is best suited for an account of English culture (2012, 38). Exploring a productively more open term, 'middlebrow', allows contributors to this volume both to take into account local articulations of similar ideas (for exam-ple 'refined' culture, explored by Ting Guo in the Chinese context) and test these against wider transnational ideas. We return, then, to the advantages of middlebrow's instability – an instability that makes it ideally suited to redefinition in multiple con-texts, and, importantly, an instability that operates in the context in which the term was coined. 'Middlebrow' refuses essentialism as it may only be located relationally to 'high' and 'low', which are themselves categories that shift – and, for all her vitriol, Virginia Woolf herself stresses this semantic slipperiness (1942, 115).

Definitions for cinema: text; audience; institution

The instability of 'middlebrow' is further compounded by the itinerant nature of the adjective itself, which may attach to readerships or audiences, to texts

themselves and to the institutions through which they circulate. However, this linguistic promiscuity has led to particularly dynamic writing on the subject thus far, as shown by the examples drawn from Literary Studies discussed above, which range from novels, to readers, to the history of the book (e.g. Radway 1997).

Middlebrow Studies in cinema complement and extend the heavily literary (and Anglophone) bias of the field as it has developed to date. A number of characteristics of Film Studies make this an especially fertile area of enquiry. While there are increasing attempts to think 'middlebrow' across borders in Literary Studies,[3] 'transnational' approaches already developed in Film Studies are particularly useful here, for film's very origins are those of a medium that crosses borders (intertitles in multiple languages could be inserted in silent films for viewing across territories). Middlebrow Literary Studies, as we have seen, also have to contend with 'the modernist prejudice'. I take this felicitous phrase from Holmes's survey of the role of high modernist culture in early twentieth-century France, but it also fits the ways scholars of other national literatures must lengthily, perhaps even guiltily, explain and justify their move away from the revered highbrow canon. As Holmes, again, notes, 'Literary history continues to pay sparse attention to market success as a criterion for inclusion' (forthcoming, 8). While, as I have indicated, film scholars may also be respectful towards film's equivalent of a modernist highbrow canon – the experimental arthouse film movements that cluster around the 1960s – there are important disciplinary differences to take into account. Why would Film Studies be anxious about the mechanical reproduction and mass distribution of texts (as literary commentators were about new mass-produced paperback editions) when the medium is always and already mechanically reproduced and mass-distributed? Indeed, while some areas of Film Studies borrow the formalist practice of textual close reading from Literary Studies (with adjustments, of course, for the different medium of movement, light and, later, sound), others are concerned precisely with audiences and institutions, as the shorthand descriptions of recent developments in the field, 'Audience Studies' and the 'Institutional Turn', demonstrate. It is fair to point out, however, that much of the energy surrounding these new developments has clustered around popular film. So while literary scholars tend to define and justify their focus on the middlebrow against the highbrow canon, film scholars may need to do so in fact against popular cinema.

The 'popular' is of course yet another unstable category, though most useful for our purposes are the definitions that have broadly settled around, first, films with a large audience (though a highbrow arthouse picture may of course also enjoy this success), and, second, films that are aimed at a large audience, often by employing genres, but may not necessarily achieve box-office success. However contingent the middlebrow text is, as an area of culture that usually connects intimately with context – aspirational audiences, or audiences working through change – the middlebrow attracts wide audiences. According to the first definition, then, middlebrow films might be seen as an important category within popular cinema. And, as we might expect of films that connect with audiences, middlebrow films tend to adopt recognizable genres, helpfully listed as 'historical films, social problem pictures

and . . . biopics' by Tom Brown (2013, 119) (see Dwyer, Napper, Faulkner and Vidal on these genres in this volume), though *Middlebrow Cinema* would extend this to include dramas (Cagle and Hayward's chapters), musicals (Dwyer and Napper), melodramas (Galt and Schoonover) sex comedies (Shaw and Guo) and heritage cinema (Dwyer and Higbee). According to this definition too, then, the middlebrow remains a category of the popular.

However, this inclusion of the middlebrow within the popular only has purchase if we limit the adjective to describing the text. Textual analysis is an important approach in the field, and has yielded, for example, Brown's study of 'middlebrowness as a textual operation' that is 'neither experimental nor innovative' in the contemporary biopic (2013, 119). Nonetheless, Brown's title 'Consensual pleasures' conjures up an implied middlebrow audience. Napper's monograph on interwar British cinema intertwines audience and text by stressing that middlebrow is both the taste (of the audience) and the aesthetic (of the text) (2009, 8); elsewhere I have attempted to weave the study of a middlebrow (and often, but not necessarily, newly middle-class) audience with the formal qualities of the middlebrow film through questions of social mobility in the Spanish case (2013, 4–5). Beyond national cinemas, scholars of transnational heritage film have also tackled a category that spills out of the methodology of textual analysis. The hallmarks of 'prestige and quality' in heritage film, writes Tim Bergfelder, 'encompass aspirations relating both to the films themselves and their audiences' (2015, 44). Thus, Bergfelder suggests heritage cinema might be better described as 'middlebrow' (2015, 42–45), a suggestion to which Higbee's chapter in this volume responds.

Recent scholarship on middlebrow cinema has also been attentive to middlebrow institutions, or those spaces – physical movie theatres, virtual online platforms, award-giving ceremonies, reviews in specific journals, or, dare we admit it, inclusion on university courses – that might confer a middlebrow status. Gillian Roberts, for example, argues that James Cameron's blockbuster *Titanic* (1997) acquired middlebrow status through awards at the Oscars, as the Academy Awards are middlebrow tastemakers (2003). Elsewhere, Antonio Lázaro-Reboll and Andy Willis have noted that the processes of canon formation may nudge films out of the popular and into the middlebrow, naming the Hollywood films of John Ford or Alfred Hitchcock, which were celebrated in the pages of *Cahiers du cinéma*, as well as popular cinema beyond Hollywood, like the works of Spanish director Luis García Berlanga, which become middlebrow through 'their elevation to the canon' and 'accept[ance] by cultural élites' (2004, 6). In this iteration of Middlebrow Studies the elasticity of the term is especially marked, but we must exert caution lest every film that wins certain accolades, is taught on a university course or is seen in an educational venue be middlebrow. In this volume Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover consider this argument: 'Films can pass in and out of the category of middlebrow depending on how a given exhibition context interpellates audiences. So middlebrow is a constellation through which texts, like planets, pass', but they immediately qualify this by rejecting the thesis that exhibition space is 'purely determinate' (page 199). The commentator on the middlebrow thus ideally traces

a mobile category that travels between matters of text, audience and institution. As a category that may respond variously to varying contexts, and that is always in a process of self-affirmation against both Martin's 'extremes' (2008) of high and low, middlebrow is thus distinct from popular cinema.

This volume

While much writing on middlebrow film, including many pieces here, fuses questions of text, audience and institution, this volume is nonetheless arranged in three parts that loosely correspond to these three areas. Following a chronological order within each part, the aim is to create a study that, taken as a whole, holds the instability of the term, and its slippage as an adjective that describes these three nouns, in tension throughout. Entertaining for a moment the work of highbrow modernist author Jorge Luis Borges, the volume recognizes that encyclopaedic coverage is a fallacy, and comprehensively charting the middlebrow is as futile an endeavour as Borges's cartographer's attempt to map the whole world in his 1946 'On Rigour in Science'. While *Middlebrow Cinema* includes chapters on world film's major filmmaking territories, it cannot be comprehensive. It is rather driven by the editor's belief that capturing, or rather attempting to capture, the middlebrow is both important, but a problem. Borrowing from Thomas Elsaesser, who in turn quotes Jean Monnet, the attempt to solve the problem is thus here to 'enlarge the context' (2014, 22) as a collaborative project that began in 2011 and has now given rise to this volume (see Acknowledgements).

Part I, 'Mapping middlebrow', brings together three chapters that survey shifts in audiences and their impact on film. Chris Cagle explores the overlaps between a middle-class and middlebrow film by taking an inductive sample of all the films produced by Hollywood in 1947 through which to weigh Hynes's 1949 view that all Hollywood is a middlebrow form against MacDonald's 1960 critique of the middlebrow as an exception to popular culture. Demonstrating that canonical film historiography has tended to neglect the middlebrow, Cagle reveals the complexities of the 1940s middle ground as a terrain that resists previous research agendas (for example, middlebrow prestige dramas are melodramas that fail to yield to earlier approaches to this genre). If, as Cagle shows, these films often staged textually their own relation to high culture and occupation of the middle, so accounts of film history may also benefit from locating these films within the reconfiguration of taste in the period and prior to the pop-sociological diagnoses that came later.

Taking as a starting point an article that came to be synonymous with the canonical film historiography of art cinema, François Truffaut's 1954 'A Certain Tendency in French Cinema', which was written against France's middlebrow films, Susan Hayward conducts an extensive investigation of 1950s French cinema and its audiences, to recover and re-evaluate this tendency. Paying particular attention to the contours of this post-war audience, Hayward reveals that middlebrow cinema not only reflected the images of the existing middle class back to themselves. As opposed to Bourdieu's view in *Distinction* that individuals are fixed

in their class *habitus*, Hayward also addresses a socially mobile working class, who would be located in the lower middle class by the beginning of the 1960s, and whose aspirations were also met by middlebrow films in the period.

It is to a society in flux that Rachel Dwyer also turns her attention in mapping a 'Mumbai middlebrow'. Moving forward from Cagle's 1940s and Hayward's 1950s to the period of the rise of the Indian middle classes from the 1990s, Dwyer likewise tracks the possible intertwining of class and taste in an often ignored category of cinema she defines as 'between the highbrow art cinema and lowbrow *masala* ("spicy", entertainment) films' (page 51). In the Indian case, to define middlebrow film is to define its differentiation from the Bollywood musical, and also to take into account the highbrow status of the English language in this post-colonial nation. While 1980s middlebrow trends like British heritage have been associated with earnestness, Dwyer identifies a more knowing 'upper middlebrow' tendency in her survey of five examples from the contemporary period.

In Part II, we shift to detailed case study approaches, which, while continuing to map the audiences considered in Part I, focus on textual analysis. These chapters reveal that an approach that focuses on the middlebrow has vital work to do in the areas of accounting for the ways societies work through trauma (Napper, Higbee, Vidal) and anticipate change (Faulkner), and reflect, and reflect upon, the effects of the emergence of a culturally aspirational middle class (Shaw, Guo). Arranged chronologically, Lawrence Napper reads mid-1940s Ealing comedies, Gainsborough costume dramas and musicals closely to argue that middlebrow film may accommodate contemporary ideas about non-linear time. He points out that, despite all the cultural gate-keeping by the Woolfs and the Leavises, 'For audiences of the period, middlebrow culture appeared to offer a way of transcending intellectual and cultural boundaries, no matter how circumscribed that movement might have been in reality' (page 74). This 'trespassing of boundaries' in the circulation and reception of texts was matched by the narrative focus of the texts themselves, which, he argues, were particularly suited to exploring ideas about time that enabled post-war audiences to work through very real losses. Sally Faulkner, in her study of a cycle of seven middlebrow period dramas of late-dictatorship 1970s Spain, makes a mirror argument that the films helped audiences anticipate and rehearse for change that lay in the nonetheless still uncertain future. Through a close reading of widely circulated press reviews of the films, she argues for the emergence of a middlebrow audience in the period, and reveals that the staging of justice and reconciliation in the films – though, surprisingly, given the feminocentrism of the original novels, not always gender equality – constitutes 'rehearsing for democracy'.

In her analysis of 1990s Mexican middlebrow, Deborah Shaw traces a parallel between the films' textual movement between high and low cultural registers and the audience's social movement into a new professional middle class. Notwithstanding this dynamism, Shaw shows that of *Sólo con tu pareja / Love in the Time of Hysteria* (Cuarón 1991) and *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas / Sex, Shame and Tears* (Serrano 1998), the two most commercially successful Mexican films of this period, betray also a surprisingly retrograde vision of gender. It is to a culturally aspirational, and culturally

anxious, new middle class that Ting Guo also turns in her analysis of Chinese middlebrow cinema of the 2000s and 2010s. In a parallel with Faulkner's analysis of pre-democratic Spain, the cinema of one-party state China may also rehearse questions of justice in an accessible form. Through a close analysis of of 非诚勿扰 / *If You Are the One* (Feng 2008) and 让子弹飞 / *Let the Bullets Fly* (Jiang 2012), Guo also pinpoints a response to China's new urban audiences' desire for wealth and social status and their anxiety about ongoing socio-cultural changes. She concludes that it is difficult to separate middlebrow culture from mass culture in China, and that this area of culture plays a mediating role in addressing the cultural anxiety of the new middle class, while providing a substitute for their pursuit of distinction.

Part II ends with questions of politics in Will Higbee and Belén Vidal's chapters. While retaining the insights of work on transnational heritage cinema, or what he terms 'counter-heritage', Higbee traces the move of the French director of Algerian origin, Rachid Bouchareb, to the middlebrow with *Indigènes / Days of Glory* (2006). Tremendously popular with audiences and award-giving bodies both nationally and internationally, recasting the film as middlebrow allows Higbee to track its interstitial position between auteur film and popular alternatives within French Film Studies. Higbee simultaneously addresses its textual operations of 'in-betweenness', especially 'narratological strategies of immersion, engagement and accessibility' (page 147), to provide a space for a film that, unlike the author's counter-example, *Vénus Noire / Black Venus* (Kechiche 2010), might be both entertainingly popular and earnestly political. It is to the potential rewards and risks of occupying a middle ground between popular accessibility and political effectiveness that Vidal also turns in her analysis of *Salvador (Puig Antich)* (Huerga 2006). For her, the presence of radical politics within contemporary middlebrow cinema dovetails with the generational discourse underpinning the re-articulation of politics as history in European (particularly German) cinema: 'The middlebrow film about radical politics seeks to forge a new consensus through the negotiation of traumatic national pasts within an international cinema emerging from (and for) a post-ideological moment' (page 157).

The question of the legibility of the middlebrow across borders thus emerges as increasingly urgent throughout Part II, and is addressed head-on in the final Part III, which is especially sensitive to the roles played by middlebrow institutions in taste formation. Through detailed archival work, Lucy Mazdon traces the reception of continental cinema and TV in the UK from the 1920s to contemporary TV, to demonstrate that films that may be popular genre pictures in their nations of origin become, through distribution in the UK and the addition of subtitles, middlebrow. Reviewing institutions such as the London-based Film Society and the Continental Picture Houses chain in the 1920s and 1930s, Mazdon explores middlebrow films that offer 'easy entertainment, yet, with their subtitles and art-house exhibition . . . simultaneously offer a veneer of cultural advancement' (page 184), and concludes that BBC Four plays a similar role in the transfer of continental TV series today.

Galt and Schoonover, as we have seen, are similarly attentive to the values conferred on film by processes of distribution and reception, and open out Mazdon's

focus on transnational traffic from the continent to the UK to a wider reflection on movements of the middlebrow in world cinema. The volume's concluding chapter, Galt and Schoonover's essay reminds us that while the middlebrow has tended to be located as taste formations within nations, it is today also a 'force' in world cinema.[4] Taking queer cinema not as a subset, but rather as a necessary category of world film, owing to the pioneering role of LGBT festivals and online platforms in the creation of international audiences, the authors return to textual analysis to probe a number of hypotheses that both throw into relief and query some of the tendencies in thinking about middlebrow film, even as the field itself is in the process of development. Thus if the middlebrow is a textual category, the presence of queerness in a film may make it middlebrow if it is depicted as a social problem (the social problem film is often taken as an example of the earnest middlebrow). Alternatively, when a queer film addresses an international audience it may not follow the generic tendencies of the straight, nationally rooted middlebrow film (like the literary adaptation or the biopic) but locate its accessible-yet-challenging subject matter in areas such as worldliness and cosmopolitanism. In a concluding reading of Peruvian *Contracorriente / Undertow* (Fuentes-León 2009), Galt and Schoonover intertwine questions of text, audience and institution to spell out the risks of middlebrow queer: the increased visibility attained by a film that partakes in the neoliberal market may be won at the price of narrowing the focus of what may be represented. While *Middlebrow Cinema* queries the development of a field that has overlooked the category by 'champion[ing] extremes' (Martin 2008), we cannot be reminded often enough that an automatic valorization of the middlebrow is as problematic as its previous automatic neglect.

Notes

1 The quotation is taken from 'Middlebrow', a letter written but not sent to the *New Statesman*; it was published posthumously in 1942.
2 In their excellent recent collection on middlebrow literary cultures between 1920 and 1960, Erica Brown and Mary Grover also settle on 'instability and historical contingency' as central to the category (2012, 2).
3 For example, the 'European Middlebrow Cultures, 1880–1950: Reception, Translation, Circulation', organized by Kate MacDonald at the Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Science and the Arts, Brussels, Belgium, January 2014.
4 Bergfelder has a similar take on this by noting the especial international transferability of middlebrow European films like *Das Leben der Anderen / The Lives of Others* (von Donnersmarck 2006) (2015, 45).

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PART I

Mapping middlebrow

1

HOLLYWOOD MIDDLEBROW

A dialectical approach to 1940s cinema

Chris Cagle

Is classical Hollywood primarily a middlebrow cultural form? In his influential taxonomy of high, middle and lowbrow culture for *Harper's Magazine* in 1949, Russell Lynes remarks, 'If the lowbrow reads the comics, the highbrow understands; he is a frequent connoisseur of the comics himself. But if he likes grade-B double features, the highbrow blames that on the corrupting influence of the middlebrow moneybags of Hollywood' (1949, 25). Tongue-in-cheek, Lynes is nonetheless observing that in comparison to lowbrow culture, even the lower-status genre pictures are too respectable and too sure in their morality to qualify as working-class culture. As Joan Shelley Rubin notes, Lynes' article fixed the terminology in the popular usage in the United States (1992, xiv). However influential his analysis, though, other critics have not shared his assessment of Hollywood. Dwight MacDonald offhandedly states in his famous 1960 essay on 'Masscult and Midcult' that in contrast to the middlebrow 'Midcult', 'the enormous output of such new media as the radio, television and the movies is almost entirely Masscult' (1960, 204). Lynes and MacDonald were two of the most prominent post-war American writers to try to theorize middlebrow culture in response to the widespread emergence of a middlebrow culture over the post-war years. As a later commentator, John Guillory, writes, middlebrow culture is 'the ambivalent mediation of high culture within the field of the mass cultural' (1995, 87). As a major mass medium and entertainment form in the first part of the twentieth century, Hollywood cinema undoubtedly provoked a crisis for the status of high culture, but Lynes and MacDonald have opposing appraisals over whether Hollywood represented middlebrow or mass culture.

Film Studies has replicated this divide. The prevailing view has seen middlebrow films as occasional exceptions to the mainstay of Hollywood's popular cinema. Hollywood in its studio years developed a storytelling language that matched the exigencies of industrial production with mass taste. Thus genre played a prominent

role in these years, and even 'serious' filmmaking activated the narrative formulas of 'lower' popular genres. Andrew Sarris used his categories of 'less than meets the eye' and 'strained seriousness' as foils for cinema that is properly art (1996, 11). Sarris valued the auteurs who managed to give a vision to lower genres like action films, westerns and thrillers, and was suspicious of prestige or literary material. '[W]ho except Huston himself is to blame', he wrote, 'for the middle-brow banality of *Freud*, a personal project with built-in compromises for the "mass" audience' (1996, 156). Even if film scholars now (usually) have a different stance towards evaluation than Sarris, they often locate the 'middlebrow' within films that have a particular aspiration for seriousness: Tom Brown (2013, 119) mentions the biopic, the historical film and the social problem film as privileged middlebrow genres, to which one could add adaptations of canonical novels and plays in genres like the costume drama and heritage film. Whether occurring in particular genres or individual films, the middlebrow would in these models work through a cultural difference from the mainstay of popular cinema.

This view of middlebrow films as exceptions to Hollywood's genre film machine may be so familiar that it can be hard to recognize another, seemingly opposite, view that holds Hollywood in general to be a middlebrow product. Historians of American cinema in the transitional period have charted how a shift from the mostly working-class nickelodeons to the movie palace involved not only the development of classical film language as a storytelling rule-system, but also the hegemony of an absorbed middle-class spectatorship (Uricchio and Pearson 1993). In this account, a film like *Birth of a Nation* (Griffith 1915) was important not only for popularizing proto-classical storytelling, but also for upgrading the cultural status of cinema and the exhibition space itself. This bourgeoisification of cinema serves as the backbone of what Miriam Hansen formulated as an early cinema-late cinema thesis: both early cinema and postclassical cinema have offered robust public spheres of contestation, whereas classical cinema was a long but finite period of a bourgeois culture grafted onto a popular one (1993, 210). Even accepting the elasticity of the term 'middle-class' in American usage, the historical account shows that cinema by the 1920s had consolidated its appeal as a petit-bourgeois entertainment form.

In short, one view sees middlebrow as a limited variation of Hollywood's formula (MacDonald's thesis), whereas another sees the formula itself as inherently middle-brow (Lynes'). This chapter will not adjudicate between these conflicting views of middlebrow cinema. Rather, it will argue that a critical tension characterizes entertainment cinema's relationship to middle-class culture during the studio era. Like other related critical dichotomies (drama/melodrama, men's pictures/women's pictures or writer/director), the definitional problems of middlebrow cinema/popular cinema were in fact built into Hollywood's complicated place in American taste formations. In the 1940s, these tensions became more acute and rose to the surface of the films and their reception. Whereas middlebrow culture had antecedents in earlier decades, as Rubin's examples of Alexander Woollcott or the book-of-the-month club suggest, in the 1940s there emerged a self-conscious attempt to identify and name the phenomenon. Lynes' essay itself is an important marker of this shift, but so

too are the films of this period. Although a discourse on the middlebrow is some-times considered to be primarily a phenomenon of post-war and in particular 1950s culture (Staiger 1992, 92; Conroy 1996), already in the 1940s, films were wrestling with the problems of the 'middle' of taste stratification. This chapter will use the example of one year, 1947, as an inductive sample, in conjunction with examples from throughout the 1940s. A fuller examination of the decade challenges the static conceptualization that Film Studies often has of popular and middlebrow taste in classical cinema. To reappraise the middlebrow in 1940s cinema is a two-fold opera-tion: first, it connects the critical ambiguity of the middlebrow to the complexity of 1940s cinema; second, it addresses the class self-reflexivity of Hollywood without simply reading past it. It may be difficult to analyse middlebrow cinema without the weight of class condescension the term carries with it, but the complexity and para-doxes of 1940s Hollywood give a good reason to try.

Middlebrow/middle-class/*moyen*

One of the greatest difficulties with assessing the role of the middlebrow in Hollywood is the term itself. To proclaim a film 'middlebrow' is to invoke a posi-tion of class superiority, and critiques of the term focus on its pejorative baggage. To use the example of Andrew Sarris, 'middlebrow' is clearly an insult in much criticism and popular usage, yet even when the analysis of taste is carried out with a more neutral aim, the label 'middlebrow' must call out the middlebrow's cul-tural 'mistakes' to analyse them. In his study *Distinction*, Pierre Bourdieu offers an identification of middlebrow, or, more precisely, petit-bourgeois taste as a 'cultural allodoxia . . . the mistaken identifications and false recognitions which betray the gap between acknowledgment and knowledge' (1984, 323). 1940s Hollywood films even depicted this allodoxia in their narratives. In *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (Kazan 1945), for example, Francie Nolan (Peggy Ann Garner) is characterized as a voracious reader who works her way alphabetically through the books in the library, to the bemused surprise of a librarian who eventually gives her guidance. Francie's desire to read every book represents the limit case of a cultural consump-tion without discrimination, or acknowledgement without knowledge, and the librarian's guidance figures for the kind of cultural authority comparable to that important middlebrow institution, the book-of-the-month club. As such, Francie could allegorize a film industry itself trying to edify itself through the values of literature. At the same time, the adult spectator recognizes the folly of Francie's attempt while perhaps sympathizing with her desire for edification. The elasticity of the concept of middlebrow lies in its ability to encompass both the narrowest of middlebrow 'cultural goodwill' (Bourdieu 1984, 318) and the earnest desire to 'correct' cultural mistakes.

    A Tree Grows in Brooklyn therefore shows how both the spectator's and the crit-ic's superior cultural taste and knowledge constitute the middlebrow. Mistakes are only mistakes to the extent someone can recognize them. For instance, Marianne Conroy considers Tennessee Williams to function as a middlebrow marker in

Imitation of Life (Sirk 1959): 'The possibility that Lora might audition for a Williams play is no sooner proffered than it is dropped' (1996, 119). This reading usefully opens up *Imitation of Life* for a reading as middlebrow culture, but it also invites the scholar to assume a position of superiority in comparison to an assumed lack of knowledge on the part of the middlebrow spectator. The implicit spectator's first mistake would be to consider Tennessee Williams to be good theatre when in fact this spectator does not really know or prefer the kind of legitimate drama that Williams represents. The second is that Williams himself represents a crowd-pleasing strain in American drama, for which more appropriate reading formations are possibly available – notably camp ones. As Conroy notes, MacDonald and other critics saw Broadway legitimate theatre as one of the worst offenders of middlebrow culture. Critics who seek to read the 'status panic' that C. Wright Mills (1956) identified in the mid-century middle classes may simply be reinforcing the status stability of the bourgeois intellectual position.

To avoid negative connotations, literary historian Gordon Hutner prefers the term 'middle-class' to 'middlebrow' in his analysis of the serious realist fiction that circulated in book-of-the-month clubs. Arguing that the notion of the 'brow' carries with it the heritage of older racist, classist and xenophobic anthropological discourses, Hutner claims the label of middlebrow 'lazily mystifies class-based values in the name of intellectual distinction' (2009, 7). While the adjective 'middle-class' imprisons readers or audiences in their class and does not address textuality (see the Introduction for a defence of 'middlebrow' as opposed to 'middle-class'), for the purposes of this discussion there are some advantages to its use. 'Middle-class' is a relatively descriptive adjective, since it does not rely on an intellectual distinction for its recognition, and it usefully pinpoints the class constituency of readers or audiences. Hutner's example of the books published in hardcover and located culturally somewhere between popular genre fiction and canonical modernist literature works as an illustration of what he calls the 'middle-class novel', in part because the middle class was its primary readership, and because the literary public of the novels themselves invoked the experience of middle-class life. These novels dominated American public literary culture in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, and served as the source material for many Hollywood films. Thus the middlebrow refers not just to cultural mistakes and misrecognitions, but also a wide range of culture that appeals to the middle class in a positive, not simply negative, way. Indeed, much of the productive work on the middlebrow draws a connection between cultural forms and the 'new middle classes' that Mills describes: professional-managerial and clerical white-collar classes. Considering 'middle-class' and middlebrow in conjunction can therefore provide a more expansive scope for 'in-between' tastes and cultural formations.

However, for all of the benefits of the non-pejorative term 'middle-class', something gets lost. The inexactitude of 'middle-class' can be a problem, since it refers variably to bourgeois and petit-bourgeois taste and each includes different taste factions. Moreover, a broader conception of middle-class culture does not capture the generating aesthetics of many works placed in between 'low' and 'high' cultural forms. As Sally Faulkner argues in relation to Spanish cinema:

The denomination 'middle-class film' foregrounds the audience at which such films were aimed, but I argue that the pursuit of this new audience also transformed the films' aesthetics. Textual analysis reveals that these films charted an original terrain that was in-between previous 'art' and 'popular' alternatives: I argue that the best way of analysing this in-betweenness is with the term 'middlebrow'.

(2013, 4)

The case for a similar conception of middlebrow cinema is borne out by the 1940s films that also inhabit the in-between terrain. They are not simply films about the middle class or geared towards white-collar audiences; they circulated in a receptive context that compared them to higher literary forms.

As with much middlebrow culture, 1940s films often thematized their relation to high culture. Not every middlebrow representation partakes of a status anxiety, yet there is a palpable ambivalence in Hollywood films of the 1940s about the status of high culture in cinema. Nowhere is this truer than in films that portray or adapt 'highbrow' literature and culture. In *A Double Life* (Cukor 1947), Ronald Colman's character is a thespian who confuses his role in *Othello* with real life, and the film uses the medium reflexivity as the basis for its thematic exploration of the intersection of art and life.

Dudley Nichols' adaptation of *Mourning Becomes Electra* is even more radical in its cross-medium aesthetics, with a script that remains faithful to the text of the play, and stages action in a theatrical style resistant to some of the conventions of analytical editing. Fidelity came at the expense of a conventional feature running length, however. Even with a script that added no new lines of dialogue and with post-production editing that deleted half the filmed footage (in consultation with the

FIGURE 1.1   Realist treatment of the backstage drama in *A Double Life* (Cukor 1947)

playwright), the film still runs three hours long (Orlandello 1982, p. 105). As *Life* magazine touted, '*Electra* is a thrilling film which sustains an assault on the emotions as no movie has ever done. [B]ecause—without being highbrow—it indulges no cheap caperings for the sake of "mass entertainment", *Electra* stands as an artistic triumph and a landmark in the development of cinema artistry' (anon. 1947, 63). It is easy to dismiss contemporary reviews for their hyperbole or misguided aesthetic priority, but, in this case, there is a keen awareness of the distinctiveness of Nichols' experiment and of the stakes of entertainment cinema's attempt to recreate high culture; the review ends with an acknowledgement that 'intellectuals will probably like it' (66) but that other audience factions may not.

As a potential compromise between 'middlebrow' and 'middle-class', Pierre Bourdieu offers a third term, *moyen*, which is translated as middlebrow (for example, in Richard Nice's 1984 translation of *La Distinction. Critique sociale du jugement*). As literary scholar Caroline Pollentier points out, 'Unlike its English translation, the adjective *moyen*, meaning average, does not function on its own as a cultural keyword in France, and rather points to an average standard'. She adds, 'The concept of *culture moyenne* therefore retains a certain semantic fuzziness, all the more so as Bourdieu never reflects on its problematic pejorative connotations' (2012, 38). On the one hand, *moyen* potentially provides a non-pejorative alternative to 'middlebrow', while still capturing the doubly relational nature of middle-class taste: defined against both intellectual (or haute bourgeois) and working-class taste. On the other hand, *moyen* has intimations of 'averageness' and in Bourdieu's model is always an impoverished and anxiety-ridden cultural position. As Pollentier argues – and literary scholar James English (1999) makes a similar point – Bourdieu's model of class distinction is a useful heuristic for analysing taste culture, but the *moyen* has an almost entirely negative conception of 'middle' culture. The French '*moyen*', like the English 'middlebrow', thus both tend to dismiss middlebrow culture.

The competing terms middle-class, middlebrow and *moyen*, then offer complementary but incomplete ways of understanding the 'middle' of taste formations. This analysis uses 'middlebrow' despite its problems, but seeks to open up the term from its most narrow meaning. The stakes for the middlebrow ultimately may be different for cinema than for literature or other arts. Writing on literature, Janice Radway (1997) suggests that there was a 'scandal of the middlebrow' caused by the economic culture of literary marketing and promotion – but Hollywood has always circulated as a cultural commodity. To the extent that there is a 'scandal' in Hollywood middlebrow, it is either in reducing other established arts to this commodity form, or in somehow compromising another art form by imprisoning it within film. The stakes of Dwight MacDonald's complaint about middlebrow (as corrupter of high culture) differ from those of Andrew Sarris, who denigrates middlebrow as a detriment to a properly mass-cultural art form. So, too, does the American context provide different stakes to Bourdieu's France or the British literary debates of the early twentieth century. As John Guillory notes, mass culture undermined high culture early in the rise of the white-collar classes in the United States. For this reason, the middle-class novels that Hollywood adapted signify as both 'high' and 'middle': highbrow because they had a prestige and aesthetic

complexity that many at the time considered at odds with Hollywood's dominant formula, and middlebrow because they themselves were caught between modernist and genre fiction. 'Middlebrow culture does have a location in our society, but it is not exactly in the middle', Guillory succinctly states, yet the relation between the two changes historically (1995, 88). Whereas for 1940s Hollywood much cinema qualified in some fashion as middlebrow, by the early twenty-first century, the middlebrow formation of the new white-collar classes had become more beleaguered – a centre that does not hold.

Canonical/non-canonical film history

The increasing availability today of older films has made more apparent the limitations of canonical historiography. For historians of classical Hollywood, home video, cable networks like Turner Classic Movies and bootlegs of old 16mm, VHS or TV broadcast movies have each made the studios' products more easily available than ever before. The ready availability of films can unsettle prior assumptions of the field and in turn generate new questions. Methodologically, an inductive approach can look at a familiar decade by setting aside many of the a priori expectations of what 1940s Hollywood represents. Film history is different when it starts from the vantage point that Hollywood might reflect a 'middle' rather than a 'low' culture, and Richard Maltby has argued that Film Studies has systematically excluded middlebrow films in favour of both genre film traditions and auteur bodies of work. 'What is certainly true of the history of classical Hollywood as presently written', he writes, 'is that the industry's prestige product has been excluded from the critical canon as criticism seeks to construct a Hollywood cinema worthy—thematically, aesthetically, ideologically—of study' (1998, 40). Not all middlebrow works are prestige films; that is, films that the studios offer as culturally elevated, with some combination of 'important' content, lavish production values and special promotion. However, prestige films played a privileged role in Hollywood's attempt to wed high culture with mass culture. Despite some more recent attempts to look at 'serious' Hollywood more closely, such as Kyle Edwards's historical study of David O. Selznick's literary adaptations (2006), Maltby's assessment still largely holds. Inductive history can resist the critical exclusions that render the middlebrow less visible.

One year, 1947, serves as a useful sample not because of its distinctiveness but because of its typicality. It was an important year in some respects: the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) began the era of the anti-Communist blacklist, domestic attendance began to crest from its all-time peak of over 65 million weekly admissions in 1946 (Schatz 1997, 291) and, ideologically, films began to pivot from immediate post-war readjustment to something more forward-looking. Mostly, though, the year is the antithesis of the *annus mirabilis*, and few canonical films were released in it. As such, 1947 gives a good opportunity to examine Hollywood beyond the constraints and expectations of the auteurist and Film Studies canons. One partial exception would be the large number of film noirs: James Naremore (1998) notes that 1947 was a watershed for the genre, with only twelve per cent of features shot in colour. There are a few prominent noir

films from 1947, but in general the sample of the whole year gives a well-rounded sense of Hollywood's output across genres.

Any inductive look at 1947 suggests the prevalence of middlebrow output, with numerous examples of half-forgotten dramas and literary adaptations, such as *So Well Remembered* (Dmytryk), *Life With Father* (Curtiz) and *Green Dolphin Street* (Saville). In Hollywood circa 1947, the studios seemed to love everything serious: Schubert (*Song of Love* [Brown]), concert halls (*Carnegie Hall* [Ulmer]), historical novels (*Forever Amber* [Preminger]), Pulitzer Prize-winning writers (*Cass Timberlane* [Sidney]), 1930s documentaries (*Sea of Grass* [Kazan]) and even other social problem films (*Romance of Rosy Ridge* [Rowland]). These cultural markers are broadly within a 'middle' range of 1940s taste formations, if not in the same position in that middle range. One might consider them 'middlebrow' mostly because they add markers of other, more elevated cultural forms to cinematic genres putatively seen as distinct from high culture.

The middlebrow impulse was more widespread than is commonly recognized. Some studios posed an exception: Columbia, for instance, with its specialization in B films, or Paramount, which, in the late 1940s, retrenched into cautious genre film-making. But much of MGM and 20th Century Fox's output consisted of films in three categories: prestige dramas, class-A melodramas and other generic material that invoked aspects of the prestige film. Even in a popular year for film noir, the dramatic and middlebrow genres compare favourably in number to crime films and light comedy. MGM, for example, released twenty-seven feature films in that year, with a heavy emphasis on A-class pictures. Of those, twelve were unqualified genre films (musicals, noir thrillers or comedies), five were prestige dramas and ten might be classified somewhere in between, as having a middlebrow sensibility (often an overall tone) combining elements of prestige film and elements of genre film.

MGM genre films released in 1947

The Arnelo Affair
Fiesta
Good News
High Wall
It Happened in Brooklyn
Lady in the Lake
Living in a Big Way
Merton of the Movies
The Mighty McGurk
Song of the Thin Man
This Time for Keeps
Undercover Maisie

MGM genre films with middlebrow sensibility, released in 1947

The Beginning or the End
Cynthia
Dark Delusion
Desire Me
High Barbaree
The Hucksters
Killer McCoy
My Brother Talks to Horses
The Romance of Rosy Ridge
The Unfinished Dance

MGM prestige dramas released in 1947

Cass Timberlane
Green Dolphin Street
If Winter Comes
The Sea of Grass
Song of Love

This closer view of MGM shows that there was a continuum between prestige films and films that might be identified more properly as genre films (with stronger and more recognizable genre conventions). While prestige films constituted only a handful of MGM's features, the studio made many dramas combining the cultural uplift of the prestige drama with the showmanship and conventions of the genre film. For instance, *High Barbaree* (Conway) is part adventure film, part novelistic coming-of-age story, and *The Hucksters* (Conway) is part satirical comedy akin to the middle-class novels of John Marquand, part romantic comedy. One can argue that MGM skews the sample, and indeed the studio specialized in prestige drama and melodrama in these years. However, 20th Century Fox had a comparable mix of prestige, genre and mixed (prestige-genre) productions, and a similar cultural upgrading was in effect at RKO, Warner Bros, United Artists and even Universal. An adequate history must make sense of house style and genre specialization at each studio, but also of a cross-studio middlebrow sensibility.

Screenplay/direction

To see how the canon can be recast in light of a broader context, we may take, by way of example, a film firmly located in the auteurist canon and associated with

a 'low' popular genre, Alfred Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943). The film is a thriller that arguably served as a mature expression of Hitchcock's stylistic approach and marked the director's continued transition from being branded as an émigré director of Anglophone films to one suitable for distinctly and self-consciously American subject matter. Thematically, *Shadow of a Doubt* suggests the moral dark side of 'normal' respectable society. Through the doppelgänger pairing of Uncle Charlie (Joseph Cotton) and Young Charlie (Theresa Wright), it provides another instance of the 'transference of guilt' that auteurists read in Hitchcock (Rohmer and Chabrol 1979). Robin Wood's reading of the film is canonical; he interprets the idealization of small-town life as reflecting a larger American ideology, which, in his view, is subverted only by Hitchcock's 'skepticism and nihilism' (1977, 50).

However, *Shadow of a Doubt* is also a Thornton Wilder film, based on his script and adopting a typically Wilderesque approach. Much like his play *Our Town* (1938), Wilder's script for *Shadow* both idealizes small-town life and offers a dramatic conceit that asks the spectator to reflect allegorically upon the middle class as a sociological entity. For this, he earned the ire of Dwight MacDonald as the 'final statement of the midbrows' nostalgia for small-town life'. MacDonald elaborates:

> *Our Town*'s combination of quaintness, earthiness, humor, pathos and sublimity (all mild) is precisely [lowbrow Norman] Rockwell's, and the situations are curiously alike: puppy lovers at the soda fountain, wives gossiping over the back fence, decent little funerals under the pines, country editor, family doctor, high-school baseball hero, all running in their well-worn grooves. What gives the play class, raising it into Midcult, are the imaginary props and sets and interlocutory stage manager, devices Mr. Wilder got from the Chinese theater (he always gets them from somewhere).
>
> *(1960, 43–4)*

Much of this description of *Our Town* could apply to *Shadow of a Doubt*, with its idealized small-town setting; the narrative features at various points a soda fountain date, an avuncular police officer directing traffic, a solemn mainline Protestant service in a whitewashed wooden church and family members spending evenings on their front porch. Where the film lacks the faux-Brechtian dramaturgy of Wilder's plays, it applies elements of a prestige realist film style to comment on the small town.

Two narrative strands suggest the middlebrow portrait of small-town Americana. The father, Henry Newton (Henry Travers), loves to discuss crime magazines with his friend Herb (Hume Cronyn). They debate detective fiction; Herb prefers complicated plotting, Henry prefers realism, and both take satisfaction in following the case of the Merry Widow Murderer. Their appreciation of murder stories forms an ironic commentary on the thriller genre of the film. Moreover, their taste is a lowbrow counterpart to the middlebrow aspirations of Emma Newton (Patricia Collinge), who worries about the refinement of her house and feels a distinct inferiority to her Easterner brother Charlie (Joseph Cotten). Emma wants to show her brother Charlie off to the women's club in town (portrayed as predictably stuffy and full of

shallow characters), and the film suggests that Emma is misguided in trying to revisit the forgotten class aspirations of her youth. (In an earlier scene, her daughter chastises her for wearing an old hat downtown.) Young Charlie says that Uncle Charlie's visit is just the thing the family needs to shake it out of its rut, but, over the course of the movie, his visit leads both mother and father into daydreams of a sort – Henry's absorption in true crime, and Emma's in an imagined city life.

Shadow of a Doubt's ironic stance can be read alternately as springing from a Hitchcockian vision, from Wilder's contribution or more broadly from 1940s literary culture. The canonical understanding of the film chalks up the social critique in the film to Hitchcock, with his thematic preoccupations and British humour. However, much of the self-critique lies within the Wilder script. In fact, it can be difficult to parse out one from the other. More to the point, though, the film's irony raises an important question: why is ideological critique only external to the script? For Robin Wood, the film's surface ideology is clearly the valorization of small-town America and middle-class ideals. After all, Charlie's guilt shows the Newton family how wrong they were to doubt their own small-town middle-class (petit-bourgeois) lifestyle, and the ideal of a bourgeois, college-educated East-Coast sophistication is just a false dream. But if Hitchcock's subversion of this ideology shows the small town itself compromised, then ideological critique looks less like subversion than a restatement of a highbrow disdain of the middlebrow. The ultimate interpretive dilemma of *Shadow of a Doubt* might not be whether it supports or subverts hegemonic American ideology, but rather whether it is a middlebrow text that ironizes petit-bourgeois culture (without transcending it) or a highbrow text that undermines the middlebrowness of its script.

This interpretive dilemma structures so many 1940s films, especially ones that critique American class culture from the vantage of the 'writerly' film. Joseph

FIGURE 1.2   *A Letter to Three Wives* (Mankiewicz 1949): radio as a middlebrow spectre

Mankiewicz is the most famous writer-auteur working in this vein, with his adaptation of John P. Marquand's satire of Boston Brahmins, *The Late George Apley* (1947), and with his original scripts. *A Letter to Three Wives* (1949) depicts women from three social classes (moneyed upper middle class, professional middle class and working class) as a kind of refractory narrative, with each woman facing a complementary class anxiety. Rita's (Ann Southern) radio-writing career is at odds with the ideals of her husband, a high school teacher (Kirk Douglas). One extended scene tracks the argument that ensues from a dinner with Rita's boss, Mrs Manleigh, who interrupts dinner to listen to serial-narrative radio programmes (with banal titles like *The Confessions of Brenda Brown* and *Linda Gray, Registered Nurse*).

Their discussion of 'quality writing' sends George into a rage:

> MRS MANLEIGH: Radio writing is the literature of today, the literature of the masses.
> GEORGE: Then heaven help the masses.
> RITA: They just serve a different purpose, that's all.
> GEORGE: The purpose of radio writing, as far as I can see, is to prove to the masses that a deodorant can bring happiness, mouthwash brings success, and a laxative attracts romance.

The film's script is similar in tone to Russell Lynes' flippant satire, while also voicing, through George's character, the trenchant highbrow critique of the middlebrow that Dwight MacDonald would articulate. 'Think of the good you can do', Rita exhorts her husband, '. . . raise the standards'. Her call for middlebrow uplift is in vain, though, since the final track in, and frontal shot of Rita as the scene ends, reinforce the film's ultimate siding with George.

A Letter to Three Wives could be classified as a film by Mankiewicz the literary highbrow (or aspiring highbrow) auteur. The script, though, owes equally to co-writer Vera Caspary, who also wrote the source novel for *Laura* (Preminger 1944) and maintained a thematic preoccupation with the intersection of class, taste and gender throughout her work. Moreover, Hollywood in the late 1940s made many similar satires of advertising; the most sustained was in *The Hucksters*, but other incidental satire appeared in the light comedies of the decade, including Ginger Rogers' *It Had to Be You* (Hartman and Maté 1947), Deanna Dubrin's *Something In the Wind* (Pichel 1947) and the political comedy *The Senator Was Indiscreet* (Kaufman 1947). If none of these rose to a truly highbrow class position, they did provide a broad and at times structural critique of a massified middle-class culture. In fact, these depictions show the difficulty of separating a naïve middlebrow cultural position from middle-class autocritique.

Drama/melodrama

There is an affinity between light comedy and social satire as genres, and the conflicted middlebrow position of films like *Shadow of a Doubt* (a thriller with satirical elements) and *A Letter to Three Wives*. The main interpretive confusion of the middlebrow, though, comes from the collision of 'drama' and 'melodrama' as generic and critical

categories. Each term has a long history that precedes cinema, and in some instances each has a critical specificity. By the 1940s, however, what counts as drama in Hollywood and what counts as melodrama is not so clear-cut. The wide range of 'A' pictures that studios put out in the decade were just as likely to be dramas/melodramas as they were comedies, action films, thrillers or other A genres. These corresponded most to an impulse of cultural uplift within Hollywood and were the ones tailored most to petit-bourgeois and bourgeois aesthetic sensibilities.

If Winter Comes is a good example of the definitional difficulty. Directed by Victor Saville and released by MGM in 1947, the film adapts British writer A.S.M. Hutchinson's best-selling 1922 novel. The narrative centres on a Walter Pidgeon character, Mark Sabre, who marries out of magnanimity and convention rather than romantic love and comes to find the compromise impossible. The Angela Lansbury character Mabel is the antagonist of the film, but is also justified in resenting Mark's lack of love. Nearly everyone has culpability in the suicide of Nona (Deborah Kerr), a former love interest of Mark's. This love triangle in its most basic form could belong to many genres, but in *If Winter Comes*, even Marc is a compromised hero, and even Mabel's actions are understandable as the result of Marc's lack of affection. As such, the narrative fulfils what Lea Jacobs calls the 'situation' behind melodrama. In melodrama, she writes, situation meant the 'narrative construction in terms of striking impasses or confrontations between characters – whether or not those moments were accompanied by pictures' (1993, 129). The film has a villain, but all characters have a comprehensible moral position and motivation. Both the multi-focus narrative and the emotional excess of the film mean that most critics would identify *If Winter Comes* as a melodrama.

All the same, *If Winter Comes* is an unusual kind of melodrama. Whereas film scholars characterize melodrama as excessive in its aesthetic, *If Winter Comes* has a restrained, downbeat tone. It adopts a realist cinematographic style marked by a relative lack of diffusion. Director Saville and cinematographer George Folsey used indirect lighting to achieve a 'soft' realism. 'Instead of the spots and arcs beating down on the scene', Saville recalls, 'their beams were directed at huge frames of white linens that reflect the more gentle light onto the object to be photographed . . . it was a bold experiment with satisfying results' (Moseley 2000, 172–3). The result is its finely variegated greyscale, in which grey tones hover in the mid-grey but without the washed-out medium-diffused look of many 1930s A pictures. In its visual register, *If Winter Comes* achieves a double differentiation, from the 'soft style' of 1930s and the harder, higher-contrast look of noir and hyperrealist work in some 1940s genre films.

If Winter Comes is not alone in fitting some aspects of melodrama and not others. *Cass Timberlane*, or *The Green Years* (Saville 1946), or *The Razor's Edge* (Goulding 1946) all have elements of melodrama without the clear moral universe of early melodrama or the excessive style of studio-era melodramas. A gap thereby opens up in the reception history of melodrama. Scholars have wrestled with cinema's long heritage from nineteenth-century theatrical melodrama, which as Ben Singer (2001) has argued formed a direct imprint on transitional and early-classical film melodrama. However, the work of 1970s film theorists and later feminist film

theorists privileged other subgenres for their analysis, namely the 1930s maternal melodrama, the 1940s women's film and the 1950s family melodrama. These subgenres have different genre conventions but all group around a variation of drama more akin to the realist novel and legitimate theatre than to melodramatic theatre. The label of 'melodrama' did not change significantly until the 1940s, since, as Steve Neale (1993) points out, trade press usage consistently reserved the label for action-oriented films related to the sort of earlier film melodramas Ben Singer analyses. However, a cultural and aesthetic form that later critics, audiences and scholars would label as melodrama had developed and departed considerably from silent melodrama.

The trajectory of melodrama as both an aesthetic form and cultural label has broader implications. What started out as a popular theatrical mode became in the studio years a mode associated with the cultural straight (realist) drama that was often distinguished from genre film-making. This convergence of melodrama and drama is notable even in the 1950s family melodrama, since scholars classify a film like *Picnic* as melodrama for its stylistic excess, whereas contemporary viewers were likely to see the film as a straight drama akin to legitimate theatre (Byars 1991, 171). Many 1940s middlebrow films lack stylistic excess, and therefore could be read as a combination of melodrama and something else, yet there is no stable genre category of the 'drama' with which melodrama could combine. The prestige film as a meta-genre, or a production category, does privilege drama over competing genres. The category suggests specificity along the above lines, as a synthesis of melodrama with elements from the realist novel, but there are no recognizable conventions of this genre, nor is this label widely used.

Prestige dramas fail to match the research agenda that Film Studies has for melodrama. Feminist film theorists have explored melodrama both as the locus of representational problems (emblematic of the definition of 'woman' in patriarchy) and as an aesthetic that potentially provides an alternative to patriarchal cinema (Mulvey 1981; Gledhill 1987). The 1940s drama/melodramas, though, are striking for how frequently they centre on either male or childhood subjectivity. *The Green Years*, for instance, adapts a *bildungsroman* about a young man coming of age in Scotland, and *The Razor's Edge* follows the disaffection and ultimate spiritual salvation of an American living abroad. Yet these films are not 'male melodramas' in the sense that Film Studies often means, with narratives charting a crisis in male subjectivity, often around the ability or inability adequately to forge the father-son bond (Mercer and Shingler 2014). Rather, they contain multifocal narratives and the 'situation' that Lea Jacobs describes as constitutive of melodrama, without the crisis narratives of later male-oriented melodrama (Cagle 2012). Significantly, many examples like *Sea of Grass* or *Valley of Decision* (Garnett 1946) focus on both male and female characters and subjectivity. The convergence of melodrama and legitimate realist drama in Hollywood's middlebrow prestige and near-prestige productions raises the spectre of gendered taste culture while not mapping neatly onto a bifurcation of men's and women's genres.

Conclusion: then/now

This chapter has presented a number of conceptual oppositions around the middlebrow, many of them based on the difference between inclusive and exclusive definitions. For Hollywood in the 1940s, the middlebrow is both everywhere and nowhere. None of the above binary pairs or critical dilemmas is irreconcilable. It is possible, for instance, for a film with some middlebrow elements not to contain others, or for a non-middlebrow film to have a middle-class audience. Indeed, an adequate history of an individual film or group of films should begin to account for the historically specific receptive context of the film, and the potential ways that a middle-class aesthetic might map or not map onto a presumed middle-class audience. Nonetheless, the critical indeterminacy of the 'middlebrow' speaks to the difficulty of importing everyday terms into critical practice. The fact that 1940s Hollywood films so often provided their own discourse on class and taste formation means that a conceptualization of them as naïve instances of status panic is inadequate. A dialectical relation between inclusive and exclusive definitions, or between 'middlebrow' and 'middle-class', can read beyond the aesthetic middle, and beyond status panic, while acknowledging that these cultural products did define themselves relationally in opposition to higher and lower tastes.

As suggested from the outset, cinema's class reflexivity makes middlebrow an unwieldy if at times unavoidable term for describing 1940s cinema. The stakes of this can be seen in the MGM musical *On the Town* (Donen 1949), which features two narrative threads about middle-class taste and identity after World War II. The main characters have a 24-hour leave from a Naval ship to explore New York City; Chip (Frank Sinatra) has an overloaded tourist itinerary culled from guidebooks, whereas Gabey (Gene Kelly) falls in love with a model he sees on a 'Miss Turnstiles' advertisement on the subway. Each has a kind of middlebrow misrecognition. Chip mistakes the New York City of the tourist guidebook for the real city, and Gabey mistakes the throwaway advertising culture for genuine markers of class sophistication. The narrative trajectory requires each to overcome this misrecognition: Chip learns to give up his sightseeing, and Gabey is able to find romance with Ivy/Miss Turnstiles (Vera-Ellen). Even the floor shows that the sailors attend are presented as a running gag of middlebrow sameness, in which the same 'sophisticated' show number is repeated with slight variation across nightclubs. Eschewing the contemporary New York the 'realist' location might suggest, the film situates the spectator as both the middlebrow consumer of musical spectacle and the person able to see the middlebrow for its cultural misrecognition. Even at the heart of Hollywood's canon of genre filmmaking, we can find the kind of status anxiety typically posited for those films distinguishing themselves against the genre film.

What makes *On the Town* different from the prestige film examples is its participation in camp. MGM musicals have often been read as expressions of a gay, camp sensibility (Dyer 1986, 21); Matthew Tinkcom (1996) has traced this sensibility to the production culture of MGM production units. MGM's camp subculture may be distinctive amid a largely serious middlebrow output, but examples like *Shadow of a Doubt* or the Joseph Mankiewicz films show that ironic commentary

on middlebrow culture can come in surprising places. The larger theoretical problem is that camp readings resignify 1940s middlebrow taste, away from the historically rooted reading formations. *On the Town* is a perfect example of a film that can be seen as both middlebrow (it invokes the 'real' New York without actually engaging with New York as a culture or place) and as not middlebrow (it is popular genre cinema without the distinctions of a prestige film). It both normalizes petit-bourgeois values in its celebration of a small-town ethos and ironizes those values. The film shows how much Hollywood could comment on its own class position – not necessarily in a manner that later critics would want, but in meaningful ways nonetheless. Films of the decade are so often both objects of study and commentaries on their class ecosystem. Critics and historians have underestimated the extent of Hollywood's self-reflexivity on middle-class identity. Paul Willemen dismisses classical Hollywood middlebrow for the 'smug, self-righteous and petit bourgeois world view paramount in the American melo-drama' (1991, 272), but a closer look at these films shows their self-reflection to be varied and complex.

The 1940s did not stand as an isolated decade or as the sole period for this kind of middlebrow cinema. The preceding decade had seen many middlebrow films, not least popular literary adaptations with prestige elements like *Romeo and Juliet* (Cukor 1936), *David Copperfield* (Cukor 1935) and *Dodsworth* (Wyler 1936). At the other side, many 1950s films drew upon the middlebrow theatre that MacDonald despised (the film adaptations of Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and Joshua Logan plays are all middlebrow texts) or featured self-conscious middle-brow content, such as the novelist in *Some Came Running* (Minnelli 1958). By the 1960s, sociologist Herbert Gans (1964) would analyse prestige films within a pop-sociological high/middle/lowbrow model. The 1940s are a particularly rich transi-tion between a period with many examples of middlebrow culture to one with an increasing pop-sociological diagnosis of social class and taste. Hollywood in this decade wrestled with a seismic change in taste formations that was only begin-ning to be named and discussed in the popular press. These films generally suggest how widespread the middlebrow was and how constitutive the 'middle' was for Hollywood, yet they also show how a simple labelling of middlebrow inadequately captures how these films expressed middle-class culture or occupied a middle ter-rain in mid-twentieth-century American culture.

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2

MIDDLEBROW TASTE

Towards a new middle class – a certain tendency of 1950s French cinema

Susan Hayward

When François Truffaut wrote his now famously trenchant 1954 article 'Une certaine tendance du cinéma français' (A Certain Tendency of French Cinema), he set in motion the ongoing debate as to what constitutes 'auteur', or what we might term highbrow cinema, as opposed to the more, supposedly, mediocre middlebrow, which he famously labelled the 'tradition de qualité' (Tradition of Quality).[1] Truffaut decried the French film industry as uninventively overloaded with literary adaptations, with scripts dominated by a few, long-established writers, like Jean Aurenche and Pierre Bost, and, similarly, with films made by directors now well past their prime, like Yves Allégret, Claude Autant-Lara, René Clément and Jean Delannoy. These scriptwriters and directors, he pronounced, produced a 'quality' cinema steeped in 'psychological realism' by serving up, 'under the cloak of literature . . . , a helping of gloom, non-conformism and facile audacity' (1954, 20).[2] The effect of Truffaut's claims has created a legacy, largely fostered by him and other young critics of the *Cahiers de cinéma* of the period, which largely dismisses 1950s cinema as 'cinéma de papa' (daddy's cinema). Furthermore, this dismissive rhetoric has meant that the relationship between the nation's key cultural artefact of the twentieth century, cinema, and a very important period of its political history has, by and large, been overlooked.

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate that lines cannot be so neatly drawn. The 1950s French film industry did indeed create a middlebrow cinema (based, in large part, on literary adaptations, and, to a lesser degree, historical reconstructions). However, as I shall argue, in doing so it did not just reflect back to the existing petite-bourgeoisie (the aspiring lower-middle classes) images of its own lifestyle and taste, for which Truffaut condemned it (as he put it: showing 'them life as it is seen from a fourth-floor flat in Saint-Germain-des-Prés') (1954, 28).[3] It also

met the aspirations of the working classes who, over the decade, would experience a better set of social conditions, which, by the beginning of the 1960s, would locate them in a new lower-middle class.

A new middle class

The trajectory of this new class was not that of the pre-existing petite-bourgeoisie of the *Belle Époque* and inter-war eras, whose wealth came from small businesses or civil-service posts, and which emerged as distinct from the bourgeoisie (itself largely emergent from the French Revolution). This new class emanated from the working classes in a France which itself was seeking to modernize on all fronts, and which – in terms of political culture – was seeking to make middle-class values more appealing to these working classes and, coincidentally, encouraging them to abandon their, till now, strong adherence to the Left and, in particular, the French Communist Party (Parti communiste français, PCF). Lest we forget, in the 1940s the PCF was the largest party on the Left. Since its foundation in 1920, the PCF's membership had doubled, not just in towns and cities, but also in rural areas, which was an effect of the significant role played by the Communists during the Occupation and of the Party's strong links with the leading union, the General Confederation of Labour (Confédération Générale du Travail, CGT). As a result, in the 1946 legislative elections, the PCF returned the greatest number of deputies (183), though it was unable to assume power because it lacked an overall majority and it fell to the Socialist Ramadier to form a government in which he included five Communists.

Post-war France was in dire need of reconstruction and urgently required America's offer of Marshall Aid. However, by 1947, relations between the Soviet bloc on the East, and countries of the West, had severely worsened and the Cold War was well underway. The Americans made it clear that Marshall Aid could only be fully guaranteed if the French government rid itself of the PCF cabinet members. As historian Maurice Larkin points out: 'The Communist exclusion from government in 1947 was largely the result of Ramadier's anxiety to placate America. When Blum had been to Washington in May 1946 to secure financial assistance for France, the Americans had gently hinted that there might be more aid if the cabinet no longer contained Communists' (1988, 154). Given France's dependence on Marshall Aid, Ramadier expelled the Communists. Over the next decade, the PCF's representation in the Assemblée Nationale fell from its zenith, in 1946, of 183 deputies to 40 by 1962. Other factors contributed to this decline, of course. First, the PCF's strict adherence to Stalinism and its refusal to speak out against the various purges and show-trials that took place in the Communist bloc countries (1947–53). Second, its refusal to condemn the USSR's incursions into Poland and Hungary; or indeed to acknowledge the existence of the USSR's labour camps. Third, the loss of the CGT's control over the majority of trade-union members so that, for the most part, the PCF's attempts at fomenting

labour strikes and political demonstrations proved counter-productive (Larkin 1988, 161). Most significant of all, arguably, was the fact that the PCF had lost touch with large sections of the working classes who, over the decade, gradually came to benefit from sustained economic growth and greater social mobility. Indeed, by the end of the 1950s, a new class was born; and it was this class that cinema, as a cultural artefact, both served to manufacture and endorse for its viewing audiences.

1950s film attendance

The 1950s were France's heydays of cinema-going. With yearly audiences of over 400 million, it is crucial also to note that spectators cut across all types and classes. In the post-war period, the rural population gradually moved to the cities, primarily to those in the north-eastern area including Paris, thanks to the expansion of services and industry and higher urban wages (Larkin 1988, 201 and 211),[4] and this greater urban population swelled spectator numbers. Other reasons for increased audiences included the refurbishment of theatres in the early 1950s, and the advent of colour and cinemascope in the mid-1950s, which made for pleasurable entertainment. Primarily, families and young couples made up the weekend audiences (the largest audiences of the week); weekdays consisted of students, singletons and youths; Thursday's audiences (with new film releases) tended to be a group social activity (Montebello 2005, 51). Turning to class ratios, proportionally speaking, the bourgeoisie and middle classes (including the petite-bourgeoisie) attended more frequently than the working classes, but, because this latter spectator group was demographically larger than the former, the working classes still constituted the greater number audience-wise.[5]

Demographics began to change towards the very end of the 1950s, when city-dwellers from the poorer and more insalubrious areas were re-housed in modern high-rise apartment buildings, often on the periphery of their city, where cinema was less accessible and the tendency was not to travel into city centres to the movie theatres. Along with the gradual impact of domestic television (beginning in the late 1950s thanks largely to hire purchase), this led to an increased decline in cinema-viewing in general. It is fair to surmise, therefore, that the decline in cinema attendance figures was due to the loss of working-class audiences. There is no small irony in the fact that the very dream of upward social mobility that cinema provided on screen would later become the reason for the decline in the film industry's fortunes.

Middlebrow

The term 'middlebrow' has been used both to describe a certain type of easily accessible art, usually literature, and to refer to a certain section of society (often the lower-middle classes) seeking to acquire a cachet of culture and class that is considered inaccessible to them. Unsurprisingly, it was a term first coined in mid-1920s

Britain when new technologies allowed for the mass reproduction of art, such as cinematic adaptations of literary classics, music recordings, posters of paintings and paperback publications. The Frankfurt School also bemoaned this new reproduction era, with Adorno leading the complaint that it diminished the aesthetic value of art. This position resonates with Truffaut's own objections to 1950s French cinema. As Lawrence Napper points out in connection to 1930s British film, 'unlike Modernism with its interest in formal purity and experimentation, middlebrow culture was engaged in blurring the boundaries of its media' (2009, 9). Viewed in this light, the implication is that middlebrow culture unquestioningly presumes that texts, including literary texts, when transferred to cinema, continue to 'carry their meanings (and also their cultural status) intact across the adaptation process' (Napper 2009, 9). And it is this blurring that the modernist position reproves.

Truffaut's accusations of a lack of inventiveness in the French 'Cinema of Quality' echoes this modernist resistance to the reproduction of aesthetic value and to the apparently utilitarian use of culture. However, this chapter will seek to demonstrate that the picture is more complex than this and that this middlebrow cinema produced a number of effects. First, it reinforced the image France was creating of itself as a nation that was in the throes of modernization, the effects of which would soon be of benefit to all social classes. In this regard, this cinema served hegemonic purposes. Nonetheless, and this is the second point, this cinema also offered some interesting deviations from the hegemonic norm, and thereby clearly had socio-political resonances. Third, even with the most conventional genres and literary adaptations, it was not just a case of blurring media in an asymptomatic way, but of fluidity between what are conventionally seen as distinct categories: highbrow and middlebrow cultures. This eassay offers a sympathetic re-consideration of the middlebrow that questions the sweeping generalization that has tended to dominate critical evaluation of France's cinema of the 1950s (a position largely influenced by Truffaut's essay). It will discuss its social relevance, and demonstrate that the audience's middlebrow practice of supposedly pursuing culture for the purpose of social advancement rather than intellectual integrity is a flawed argument.

As we shall see, as far as cinema as a cultural production is concerned, a great deal more blurring of boundaries occurs than the above class hierarchies (or snobbery) imply. If, as Bourdieu argues, educational institutions reproduce social inequalities (see Shiach 1993, 215), the same cannot be stated so categorically of what the French have called the Seventh Art. Middlebrow cinema, which Truffaut condemned as sclerotic, brought literature (both highbrow and middlebrow) to audiences in their millions and was enjoyed by all classes in 1950s France. This suggests far greater fluidity in matters of taste than the 1920s pejorative view of middlebrow culture, or Bourdieu's restrictive view that the working classes cannot access higher cultural capital because they are socialized into their distinct *habitus* (Bourdieu 1979). As I have already indicated, the 1950s represented the key moment when the working classes – thanks to a congruence of governmental planning and unprecedented economic growth – were able to form a new *habitus*, heretofore unknown. As we have seen, this was also the moment when there was

a shift away from their political roots (Larkin 1988, 152 and 294). Bearing all these points in mind, let us now turn to cinema proper.

1950s film: genres, stars, prizes

It would be useful to briefly delineate what sort of cinema was produced during this decade and give some indication of its reception. What dominates is a narrative cinema, with a considerable percentage of it falling into the category of middlebrow entertainment, especially the literary adaptations. Of the 982 films produced in 1950s French cinema, 266 were comedies, 260 dramas, 245 thrillers, 109 costume dramas, 60 social realist, and 36 war or resistance films (leaving six unclassifiables). These figures challenge the general perception of a cinema of comedies and thrillers alone (see, for example, Chirat 1985, 61). Clearly, there was a third dominant genre, drama, which refers to human condition narratives that deal, for example, with psychological and relational tensions.[6] Furthermore, there was an equal distribution between these three main genres, implying a more varied audience in terms of taste and consumption practices running the gamut of popular cinema (primarily comedies), through to middlebrow (mostly in the form of dramas and thrillers). But, as we will see, costume dramas, though fewer in number, were also extremely popular. They were usually literary adaptations, either of a French classic (by such authors as Hugo, Maupassant, Stendhal, Zola), thus representing a merging of highbrow with middlebrow (as detailed by Napper in the section above), or of a middlebrow author (such as Benoît, Cesbron, Hémon or Vilmorin).

One can well understand the need for laughter after the dreadful years of the Occupation, followed by the post-war material hardship which went on well into the 1950s, to say nothing of the colonial wars, first in Indochina and, subsequently, Algeria. But it seems that French audiences equally welcomed the more serious subject matter offered by dramas that often addressed complex human relationship issues. The presence of the thriller in equal numbers also suggests that there was audience demand for excitement that included violence and a chair-side view of the underbelly of society. Finally, the choice of which film to see was dictated as much by the named actors/stars as by the film's subject, rather than the film director (with one or two notable exceptions: Clouzot, Clair, Cayatte, Carné, Christian-Jaque and Renoir) (Montebello 2005, 53).

When it comes to stars, a further instance of evolved taste occurs. For, on the one hand, while certain stars are unanimously admired (e.g. Danièle Darrieux, Fernandel, Jean Gabin, Jean Marais, Michèle Morgan, Gérard Philipe), indubitably audiences tended to gravitate towards star bodies that more readily corresponded to their own perceived *habitus* (Montebello 2005, 52). We can see this in the enormous popularity with working-class audiences of Fernandel's farces (often achieving audiences of 5 to 7 million) or Luis Mariano's comic operettas (5 to 6 million); or, again, costume dramas with the swash-buckling Jean Marais or the tantalizing Martine Carol and Gina Lollobrigida flaunting their charms (4 to 6 million). Conversely, the actors Michèle Morgan, Danièle Darrieux, Pierre Fresnay and Gérard Philipe, for

the most part, appeared in more serious stories or classical literary narratives (with averages between 1 and 3 million audiences) and, in their display of tempered performance, elegance of movement and delivery (often as a result of classical training), were more immediately associated with highbrow culture. As such they matched the middle classes' view of themselves. However, on the other hand, these distinctions in spectator taste are far from fixed. Audience figures are not a one-to-one correspondence between genre/actor and class – after all, the middle classes went to see all types of films, as indeed did the working classes. Thus, when these more serious actors performed in costume dramas (or the occasional comedy) they garnered a far greater audience (with figures well over the 3 million mark; for example Gérard Philipe in *Fanfan la Tulipe / Fearless Little Soldier* [Christian-Jaque 1952], 6.7 million) – suggesting a swelling of audience numbers by working-class spectators as much as by the middle classes.

Similarly revealing in this context are the fans' letters and the voting patterns of readers of the popular culture fanzine *Cinémonde* for they show, yet again, how difficult it is to draw lines of distinction as to which class necessarily gravitates to which star. This weekly magazine (which ran from 1928–71) was entirely dedicated to news about the stars. Its readership reflected the general composition of cinema-going audiences (whereby the working classes numerically outstripped the middle classes). It published fans' letters in which they expressed their appreciation of actors' performances and gave evidence of discernment when evaluating the different stars' abilities on screen. Their critiques show that working and middle classes alike possessed a cultural disposition that they were not afraid to put in writing. Furthermore, during the 1950s, *Cinémonde* hosted a yearly ceremony in which the stars were awarded 'Victoires' statuettes (the French equivalent of the US 'Oscars'). There were two categories of awards: the spectators' choice (based on fans' votes) and the French film industry's choice. Often these choices coincided. But, given that, predominantly, the spectators' votes would be those of the working classes, what is striking is that, contrary to Bourdieu's concept of distinction/taste and *habitus*, by and large it is the more serious (highbrow) stars who won (see Table 2.1).

Let us now briefly consider the genres. Although numerically there are the three dominant genres, comedy, drama and the thriller, this did not necessarily mean that they attracted audiences in equal measure. If we consider the top-ranking ranking films of that period (that is, films with audiences of 3 to 3.5 million and above), the following generic division occurs:

comedies (37)
dramas (31)
costume dramas (27)
thrillers (10)
war and resistance (8)
social realist (3).

TABLE 2.1 1950s prize-winners

Serious/highbrow	Middlebrow	Popular
16	9	6
Of which 4 each for Morgan and Philipe; 2 for Darrieux	Of which 2 each for Marais and Gabin	Of which 2 each for Bourvil and Carol; 1 for Fernandel

Indeed, only comedies, dramas and costume dramas managed regularly to rank in the top twenty. In general, thrillers tended to garner audiences of 2 million and below (only rarely attaining the magic 3 to 3.5 million). Finally, on these generalities, war and resistance films ran close in audience figures to the thrillers. In the post-war era, war and resistance films were subject to stringent censorship rulings by the visa commission and it was difficult to get the scripts approved. But eight in all made it into the top twenty, six being serious in subject matter (averaging around 3.2 million), and two being comedies (dating from 1958, with big audiences of 5 to 9 million).

Literary adaptations

The concept of middlebrow, where cinema of this period is concerned, often refers to the practice of literary adaptations: of bringing literature to the screen for consumption. Of the 982 films produced during the 1950s, 404 were literary adaptations (341 French literary adaptations and 63 foreign literary adaptations).[7] This amounts to 41% of all production, which would seem to support Truffaut's complaint of an over-abundance of adaptations. Of these, I deem some 74 to be 'highbrow texts' and others, the majority, to be 'middlebrow' ones (including thriller texts written by well-respected authors). Here I'm using 'highbrow' and 'middlebrow' as terms to describe the aesthetic characteristics of literary narrative: a modernist tendency for plotlessness and resistance to realism in highbrow narrative, and, conversely, a more easily accessible tendency for plot-driven narrative and realist characteristics in the middlebrow.

Of the 341 French adaptations, 268 adapt middlebrow literature, including adaptations of Simenon (which number the most, at eleven novels).[8] The remaining 74 films are adaptations of literary classics (39) and modern classics (35). In percentage terms, then, 21% of the literary adaptations are highbrow (classical or modern); 79% are middlebrow. I am aware that this labelling is not unproblematic, but it nonetheless allows me to show that in middlebrow cinema there was fluidity in that its production combined apparently distinct literary categories of highbrow and middlebrow. This is something Truffaut appears to gloss over, but then his target was less the literary text (he was after all an avid bibliophile) than his view that French cinema was dominated by an old guard of scriptwriters and directors who diminished the original through their adaptation practices. The cinema attendance figures discussed in the section above make it clear that both categories have their appeal. In some ways

this should come as no surprise as French cinema has a strong literary tradition which dates back to the early 1900s, when the older art was deployed to bring middle-class respectability (in the same manner as classical composers were used to score films) and there was a perceived educative value to literary adaptations. Furthermore, this breadth of appeal may also be because many of the narratives are set within familiar contexts, even if the films' settings and décors over-ridingly provide the spectator with a *habitus* which, though not over-determined, can be attributed to an unspecified middle class. Despite the fact that this *habitus* was not yet available to a significant proportion of the audience (predominantly the working classes), as we shall see, this lack of over-determination allowed for boundaries to be blurred, which in turn endorsed the concept of class mobility that was a critical characteristic of the period. As we know, the state's project of modernization, especially of housing and modern utilities, was a well-publicized affair, both in the media (press and women's magazines in particular) and through physical evidence of new constructions in most of the major cities which, although slow in implementation, nonetheless gave hope for a brighter future.[9]

Adaptations of the classical literary tradition

The 39 adaptations in this tradition are dominated by the nineteenth-century novel, with 35 being adapted as costume dramas. While all the authors of the original novels are ranked among the canonized classics (via educational standards, consecration by the French Academy, literary awards or posthumous entry into the Pantheon, among others), a further complexity arises when we consider that some are canonized as 'auteurs du premier rang' (top-ranked authors); that is, authors who have pushed the boundaries of literature (what we can designate as highbrow 1, H/B1), and other 'auteurs du deuxième rang' (second-ranked authors), who have been exponential in their craft, developed generic types and contributed significantly to the furtherance of literature (for whom the label highbrow is still appropriate but which we can designate as highbrow 2, H/B2), as follows:

TABLE 2.2 Nineteenth-century classical literary authors adapted to screen (H/B1= highbrow 'greats'; H/B2= highbrow second rank)

7	5	4	3 texts each	2 texts each	1 text each
Maupassant[10] (H/B1)	Dumas Père (H/B2)	Zola (H/B1)	Feydeau (H/B2) Stendhal (H/B1)	Barbey d'Aurevilly Hugo Mérimée (all H/B1)	Balzac (H/B1) Daudet (H/B2) Dumas Fils (H/B2) France (H/B2) (de) Goncourt (H/B1) Musset (H/B1) Verne (H/B2)

From the above we can see that there was more taste for adaptations of the classic greats (23 H/B1 texts) than for second-ranking classics (12 H/B2). Furthermore, since we now know that any attendance figure over 3 million indicates a significant if not dominant proportion of the audience will be made up of working-class spectators (families and individuals), the fact that five out of the eight top-grossing films (over 3–3.5 million) are H/B1s seems to confirm the hypothesis that working-class audiences were perfectly capable of accessing higher cultural capital, as Table 2.3 further demonstrates.

These figures tell us that audiences enjoyed the spectacle as much as the 'lesson' in literature (a further twelve films in this category of highbrow adaptations garnered 2 to 2.7 million, which means that 60% of these particular costume dramas were well attended). On the issue of spectacle, the industry showed itself to be an outstanding master of the new technologies available (cinemascope, colour, new materials for décor and costumes), and was able, thereby, to renew the look of French cinema (Hayward 2010, 41–63). Furthermore, these costume dramas often allowed for the treatment of difficult issues and it could be argued (as I have done elsewhere [Hayward 2010]) that the narratives of denunciation and fortitude, cowardice and courage, betrayal and a desire for justice that are played out function as a displacement of more contemporary history and France's role during the Occupation.

Adaptations of modern classics

The same distinction considered above between two categories prevails among modern classics. The authors cited in Table 2.4 were part of the elite class of writers, but some were considered first-ranking (mostly the intellectuals) and others second-ranking (some of whom challenged literary tradition, but remained popular with the general reading public; others whose writerly style and social observation singled them out as part of the elite group).

Of these authors, what stands out – apart from the fact that philosophers, avant-garde writers and intellectuals are in the mix (Sartre, Kessel, Bazin, Giraudoux, Vailland and Vian) – is that when comparing the classic adaptations to the modern,

TABLE 2.3 Audience figures for adaptations of classic greats[11]

Author	Category	Film	Audience
Hugo	H/B1	*Les Misérables*	10m
Dumas Père	H/B2	*Le Comte de Monte-Cristo*	7.8m
Verne	H/B2	*Michel Strogoff*	7m
Hugo	H/B1	*Notre Dame de Paris*	6m
Dumas Père	H/B2	*Les Trois Mousquetaires*	5.4m
Maupassant	H/B1	*Le Rosier de Mme Husson / The Prize*	4.3m
Stendhal	H/B1	*Le Rouge et le Noir / The Red and the Black*★	4.3m
Zola	H/B1	*Gervaise*	4.1m

TABLE 2.4 Twentieth-century modern literary authors adapted to screen

6	5	4	3	2 texts each	1 text each
Aymé[12] (H/B2)	Colette (H/B2)	Sartre (H/B1)	Kessel (H/B1)	Bazin (Hervé) (H/B1) Bernanos (H/B2) Loti (H/B2) Pagnol (H/B2)	Daninos (H/B2) Giraudoux (H/B1) MacOrlan (H/B2) Mallet-Joris (H/B2) Moguy (H/B2) Queffélec (H/B2) Romains (H/B2) Vailland (H/B1) Vian (H/B1)

there is a reverse ratio of H/B1s to H/B2s (12:23). Furthermore, with regards the top-grossing films (over 3 million spectators), again the reverse pattern holds true with five out of the six films being H/B2 adaptations.

A further thirteen films (four H/B1 and nine H/B2) score 2 to 2.8 million (three of which are Colette's). This tells us that production companies assumed, first, that their largest target audience, the lower and working classes, were more likely to be familiar with the great classics from the past (see Table 2.3) that they had probably studied at school, and, second, that where contemporary texts are concerned, conversely, they are more likely to be familiar with authors whose reputation was more widespread than the intellectual elite. Still, this did not prevent producers from backing H/B1 authors, at times with success, as, for example, with two out of the four Sartre adaptations garnering a healthy audience (of 2.5 and 2.8 million), and the three Kessel adaptations hitting the 2 million mark or just below. In this context, it is worth mentioning, too, that several H/B1 authors also wrote screen adaptations of popular novels, showing that elite authors were just as capable of crossing boundaries – if indeed they saw them as such. Among them, the most notable is Jean Anouilh who wrote the dialogue for two of Cécil Saint-Laurent's *Carolinades* – slightly titillating costume dramas starring Martine Carol (*Caroline Chérie / Dear Caroline* [Pottier 1950]; *Un Caprice de Caroline Chérie / Dear Caroline's Whim*★ [Devaivre 1952]).

TABLE 2.5 Audience figures for modern classic adaptations

Author	Category	Film	Audience
Aymé	H/B2	*La Jument verte / The Green Mare's Nest*	5.3m
Aymé	H/B2	*La Traversée de Paris / Pig Across Paris*	4.9m
Moguy	H/B2	*Les Enfants de l'amour / Children of Love*	3.6m
Bernanos	H/B2	*Le Dialogue des Carmélites / The Carmelites*	3.5m
Vian	H/B1	*J'irai cracher sur vos tombes / I Spit on Your Grave*	3.5m
Pagnol	H/B2	*Manon des sources / Manon of the Spring*	3.2m

Adaptations of middlebrow texts: thrillers

Let us now turn to the greater preponderance of film adaptations, namely those of middlebrow novels, plays or operettas. Novels are the dominant source, with 208 titles. Authors include the already mentioned Simenon, and the equally (then) famous Maurice Dekobra, Auguste Le Breton, Jean Guitton and Cécil Saint-Laurent (all with six novels), Frédéric Dard and Jacques Robert (four). Theatre and operettas number 60, with Yves Mirande as leading adapted playwright (five titles). Of the 268 French literary adaptations, 239 are set in the contemporary era and 29 in the past (primarily the turn of the nineteenth century). In the overview that follows, I will focus only on the contemporary narratives to see what kind of social environment was on display for the millions of viewers for, as we shall see, this says a great deal about taste and aspirations.

Where contemporary narratives are concerned, what dominates, in order of numerical importance, are comedies (78); then thrillers (70); followed closely by domestic or psychological dramas primarily in the form of love triangles/infidelities (60); and then, quite some way off, social-realist films about the poor and disenfranchised (18); and finally, Resistance and World War Two films (13). The breakdown of these generic types in terms of actual narratives is revealing of the dominant discourses at the time. Where France was concerned, the 1950s was a period of tremendous political upheaval clouded as it was by its inability to confront the role it played in the Occupation, the moral impact of its current two colonial wars and the shifting roles of women, to say nothing of the instability of government (21 different prime-ministers and cabinets in 10 years). The war and resistance films would confirm this tendency through narratives that stressed the courageous heroics of those who engaged in war or fought in the resistance. However, since these films were subject to stringent censorship rulings by the visa commission, very few were approved.

A better measure of this inability to confront recent trauma is thus the thriller narratives. On the one hand, these films stage a displacement and containment of the blame for treacherous behaviour by placing it upon women; and, on the other, they offer a virtual endorsement of a people's justice (in which a criminal avenges his betrayal). The thriller represents women as driven by jealousy and cupidity to the point of criminal behaviour. At worst they are seen as denouncers – a particularly unacceptable thing to be in the wake of the Occupation and the many letters of denunciation written to the German/Vichy authorities. Indeed, it is not difficult to see in these narratives that demonize women a continuation of the post-Occupation distrust of women (whereby women were accused of sleeping with the German enemy and were severely punished). In a similar vein, the male-driven revenge narratives can be read in this light of the recent past. In each instance an individual wreaks (often murderous) revenge either on his gang or an individual who has betrayed him; the avenger is perceived as having the moral high-ground (even though his actions are criminal). This virtual endorsement of a people's justice, present in these narrative tropes, comes perhaps as no surprise when we consider

the injustice of the judiciary in its leniency towards many of the big players of the Occupation. For example, several high-placed Vichy ministers were only lightly reprimanded, post-war, by the Comité d'Épuration (Cleansing Committee) and, by the 1950s, they were either back in cabinet (e.g. the notorious cases of Antoine Pinay and Maurice Papon), or had highly successful business careers, remaining tightly linked with government (e.g. André Bettancourt of L'Oréal and René Bousquet in banking and the press).

But, as we shall see, there will be exceptions to this seeming refusal to confront the recent past, or indeed, to look at the present (Jeancolas 1979, 104). For producers and filmmakers did not always necessarily just want to entertain; they sought also to instruct, to bring people into polemical debates and to challenge the heterodoxy perpetrated by the great majority of films. For reasons of space I shall now focus on just three further generic types: comedies, dramas and social-realist films.

Adaptations of middlebrow texts: comedies

Comedies fall into three main narrative lines: courtship/young love wins out against stuffy elderly relatives or a scheming older seducer (24 films); bedroom/domestic/love story farces, where all ends well (21 films); and husband/wife/lover triangles that are finally resolved either by marriage, or by the formation of a new couple with the lover (17). The remaining sixteen comedy films that are adaptations of middlebrow literary texts are made up of an eclectic set of stories that range – very interestingly, given this is the 1950s – from a man who gets a sex change to fulfil his dream to become a cabaret artiste (*Adam est . . . Ève / Adam is . . . Eve*★ [Gaveau 1953]); a hard-nosed industrialist father who has to come to terms with and accept his effeminate son's desire to become a fashion designer (*Les Oeufs de l'autruche / Ostrich Eggs*★ [de la Patellière 1957]); through to the more predictable narrative line of difficult adolescents who amusingly disobey their elders. Finally, in this eclectic group, we have, on the one hand, misbehaving priests (*Mon curé chez les riches / My Priest Among the Rich*★ and *Mon curé chez les pauvres / My Priest Among the Poor*★ [both Diamant-Berger 1952 and 1956]) and, on the other, an elderly couple who, rejuvenated by twenty years (thanks to medical science), frustrate their niece and nephew (of their inheritance) by going off and spending their fortune (*Sacrée jeunesse / Sacred Youth*★ [Berthomieu 1958])!

Thus, in the adaptations of middlebrow literary texts in the comedy genre, what predominates is the concept of the domestic, primarily in the form of the family. The focus may be on its formation – young love – or on an established couple (thirty- to forty-something, a little older in the farces). Children or adolescents are present, albeit not to a great degree (one farce, *Des Quintuplés au pensionnat / Quintuplets in the Boarding School*★ [Jayet 1953], redresses this somewhat!). Only three narratives have cross-class issues and they all occur in the young-couple category. For the remainder, it is a middle-of-the-road class that prevails, which, in its lack of specificity, normalizes class lines. It stands, unquestioning, as a structuring naturalized presence – the perfect terrain of middlebrow taste (a social space that is the norm, and presumably

one to aspire to). Couples live in reasonably, or, indeed, nicely appointed apartments, a few in more classy environs. People go away to the Côte d'Azur or the provinces for their holidays. The cars they own are French models, recent, but unostentatious. And while, in reality, only individuals on a good salary could afford this, there is no sense within the films that this is a luxurious way of life. Yet we must recall that, by the mid-1950s, 54.8% of the active population was still in low-pay employment.[13] These films normalized a *habitus*, therefore, which was far removed from a considerable section of the film audience. Indeed, this *habitus* was unavailable to a significant percentage of the French population. Post-war, 45% of all housing was overpopulated; 48% had no running water and 80% had no bathroom or indoor WC. By the mid-1950s conditions began to improve, very slowly, with the first stages of social-housing construction (known as 'habitations à loyers moderés', HLM), although this was by no means enough, since overpopulation continued as a problem (at 40%) and over half the housing during the 1950s was still without a bathroom and inside WC (Larkin 1988, 211). What this display of ease on screen offered, in its understatedness, however, was a promise of what was in the process of being built for a new class of the French population. Those who had lived in unsanitary homes would, by the 1960s, be re-housed in clean, centrally heated apartments, with hot and cold running water and a bathroom with WC. The working classes' aspirations for better living standards were going to be fulfilled – the government had so decreed.[14]

Adaptations of middlebrow texts: dramas

When it comes to dramas/psychological dramas within film adaptations of middlebrow texts, there are four types of narrative: complex love stories (22), many of which are quite dark in tone; a second category centres around women either breaking with convention, taking risks, following their career ambitions and, for the most part, suffering the consequences (17); this category constitutes a morality tale of one sort or another. Third, and almost similar in number (14), are films about men risking all for love or financial gain, or being forgiven by their wives for their misdemeanours and reforming, or, finally, being totally ruthless in the pursuit of their ambitions (interestingly, in audience terms this is the most popular narrative; figures run from 3 to 7 million). Lastly, a small number (7) deal with male friendship in which a man acts courageously on behalf of his friend (taking the blame for a crime the latter either did or did not commit) or acts bravely on behalf of others (showing a social conscience towards fellow workers). In general, all 60 dramas are set within a similar middle-class setting to the comedies – so the pattern of naturalization continues. The drive to improve on one's impoverished status occurs in only three films with fairly mixed results: *Le Salaire de la peur / The Wages of Fear* (Clouzot 1953), in which two desperately poor truck-drivers risk death for a wage that will help them live a better life – neither one makes it; *La Meilleure part / The Best Part* (Allégret 1955), in which a dying businessman sets everything up to protect his workers; *Le Feu dans la peau / Fire in the Skin* (Blistène 1954), in which a woman married to a brutal peasant eventually escapes with her lover. One empathizes with

these impoverished and brutalized individuals whose life circumstances place them on the brink which can so easily work against social mobility.

Within adaptations of middlebrow texts that fall into the drama genre, we may perceive an effort to sustain social order by warning individuals (men and women alike) what will happen to those who transgress (sexually or socially). Career ambitions or marital discontentment in a woman and disloyalty (sexual or moral) in a man will not be condoned. If any striving for success is to be endorsed then it is in matters of love and marriage. Drama, for the most part, then, sets out a strong moral code (more so than the comedies, where transgression is more tolerated). This is particularly the case for defiant women who choose a career over marriage (they fail, get killed or maimed); women who scheme to fulfil their ambitions at the expense of their husbands also meet with a sticky end (death, disgrace or disfigurement); spurned girlfriends who derail (trying out drugs and lesbianism) are brought to their senses; finally, women who are bored in their marriage and take extreme action to escape will, for the most part, perish.

Overall, then, these socialized norms, merged with the fairly constant nature of the physical environment in which the narratives are set, constitute a *habitus* that guides the behaviour and thinking of spectators as they watch the stories unfold. Social aspiration, in the sense of social climbing, is virtually absent from these 60 adaptations. As with the comedies (and with the exception of the three films discussed above), it is as if the boundaries that give rise to unequal divisions in society have normalized to the point of invisibility to a neutralized environment of everyman–taste.

Adaptations of middlebrow texts: social-realism

The only genre where the heterodoxy outlined in the drama genre is challenged is in social-realist films. Of the eighteen social-realist films (in this cohort of adaptations of middlebrow literary texts), fourteen are set in the first half of the 1950s (1951–6). In this period, France was in the first phase of its economic recovery and living conditions for the poor were tough, as is evidenced by the four dominant narratives addressing social conditions of the time: the failure of institutions to protect the weak; homelessness; children at risk; illegitimate pregnancy and abortion.

Bearing in mind the comments above on the socializing of norms in the drama genre it is noteworthy that, in the socio–realist context, there are six narratives based on the theme of resisting institutions that oppress the weak. Nor do the other topics make for easy viewing: six are about poverty or homelessness; a further six deal with the topic of illegitimacy; two with abortion (illegal in France). Figures show that audiences did not run shy of this subject matter (all but three of the films were well attended, indicating a desire to deal with difficult social issues).[15] Two films placed in the top twenty of their year (*Chiens perdus sans collier / The Little Rebels* [Delannoy 1955], about young delinquents and the law, with a 4-million audience; and *Les Enfants de l'amour / Children of Love* [Moguy, 1953], about a single mother's home, 3.6 million). A further eight garnered audiences over 2 million; another five over 1 million.

In the film adaptations that addressed state institutions (prison, education, the law, orphanages), there are two dominant narratives. Either the institution oppresses, or an enlightened employee within the institution seeks to change the way things are done. In the former case, the hypocrisy of the civil servant functionary is exposed – be it the High Commissioner of Child Delinquency who fails to control his own children (*Les Fruits de l'été / Fruits of Summer* [Bernard 1954]) or the Minister for the Family who is under governmental orders to close single mothers' homes in the full knowledge that his son has impregnated both his secretary and his maid (*Lorsque l'enfant paraît / When the Child Appears* [Boisrond 1956]). Orphanages (run by the state) are seen as places to avoid at all costs because of the cruelty meted out to the children (*Poil de carotte / Carrot Top* [Mesnier 1951]; *Le Club des 400 coups / 400 Blows Club*★ [Daroy 1952]; *Les Fruits sauvages / Wild Fruit* [Bromberger 1953]). In the case of enlightened state employees, success in introducing change is not always a given. Thus, a prison governor attempts more lenient treatment, but fails (*La Joyeuse prison / The Happy Prison*★ [Berthomieu 1956]); a judge attempts to rehabilitate young offenders with mixed results (*The Little Rebels*, 1955); a teacher finally convinces others of his progressive teaching methods but only once he produces great exam results (*Le Naïf au quarante enfants / The Innocent with 40 Children*★ [Agostini 1952]). The two films about abortion are grizzly indeed, even if the narrative is sympathetic in tone to the lead characters. Both stories end in death, from a back-street abortion in the first case (*Des Gens sans importance / People of No Importance* [Verneuil 1955]), and, in the second, of suicide when the doctor kills himself once the police hunt him down for having given a young woman an abortion (*Les Mauvaises rencontres / Bad Liaisons* [Astruc 1955]).[16]

The questions around illegitimate birth, abortion, unwanted children and orphans dominate not just these literary adaptations but also over half the entire cohort of 60 social-realist films (two thirds, in fact). This suggests that bringing children into the world was a serious social issue at the time – and indeed it was, at least until 1956, when 'La maternité heureuse' (Happy Motherhood)[17] was set in place and began to address the problem (interestingly, this is when these film narratives start to die away). According to historian Maurice Larkin, although during the post-war period France witnessed a baby-boom (with around 800,000 births a year), there is evidence (thanks to sample surveys in maternity hospitals) that 'a third of the pregnancies were unwanted' (1988, 179). Furthermore, while it is not known how many abortions were practised, although the Institut National d'Etudes Démographiques (French Institute for Demographic Studies) suggests a figure of around 65,000 (Pingot 1997, n.p.), it is estimated that up to as 'many as 20,000 women a year died as a result' either of illegal abortions or attempts to self-abort.[18] Curiously, very few of these child-related films were prohibited to under-16s – only three films were proscribed, one dealing with a child murderer, the other two with criminal and unruly adolescents (one of which was Truffaut's *Les 400 coups / The 400 Blows* [1959]). There are no records to tell us if youngsters attended any of these films, but audience figures for the two films about abortion (mentioned above) indicate that spectators did not shy away from these dark

issues, nor indeed did top-ranking actors: *People of No Importance*, starring Jean Gabin, obtained 2.5 million, and *Bad Liaisons*, 1.2, starring jeune premier, Jean-Claude Pascal.

This, then, is the difficult world – the *habitus* of the poor, 'people of no importance' – which French cinema chose to address. So, at least in this context, Truffaut was wrong to suggest, in his 1954 tract, that literary adaptations were not daring and social issues glossed over (201). And, as we saw with the other genres, there are moments of resistance to hegemony. Furthermore, these social-realist films demonstrate that middlebrow cinema, both accessible yet also aspirational and sometimes educational, may be especially well suited to exploring these difficult issues. One might think that the social-realist film, with its total number of 60 films, does not amount to much when compared to the other, dominant genres, but this is to overlook the fact that these films were well attended. Furthermore, if we graph their popularity alongside the thriller, we find that their audience figures follow a similar pattern ranging from 1 to 2.5 million spectators, with just the occasional single film going beyond the magic top-grossing 3 million (three out 60 social-realist films and ten out of 245 thrillers).

Conclusion

The 1950s stands as a transitional decade for France, both socially and politically. Certainly, it was an in-between decade for a significant body of the French working classes, as they moved from their old social system (of communities, poor but often politicized) into a new technological and media age, driven by consumerism, in which, by the 1970s, they found themselves isolated (for the most part in high-rise project housing). This is the emergent society that Bourdieu worries about in his study *Distinction*, the one that has evolved from the 1950s – one that he considers is not only de-politicized but also pursuing false hopes of accessing a cultural capital it can never attain. Turning to cinema, as this chapter has endeavoured to show, middlebrow films brought considerable cultural capital to the various spectator classes: audiences showed discernment in what they chose to see. This cinema, much of it based in literature, met cultural aspirations of these classes through narratives (providing familiarity), identification (stars), environmental recognition (settings, décor) – but there was nothing in excess. This cinema did not attempt to sell a modern consumerist message based in greed and social climbing; hard-nosed materialism was not what drove the narratives (or if it did, one suffered). However, as we have seen, the effect of this cinema was to naturalize a middle-classness and to set out a strict set of moral codes (as if to compensate for the loss/lack of them during the Occupation). It could be argued that, in this light, the message was a conservative one, one that Truffaut's essay sought to reject, one aimed at preserving the status quo, while simultaneously imagining a *habitus* for the aspiring working classes on the move to better social conditions. Yet, on the other hand, this cinema was capable of addressing hard issues and, in this context, suggested the nation's need for a new consciousness. In this latter modality, malaise and dysfunctionality

prevail and immoral conduct goes on trial (albeit in a displaced manner). However, this darkness is balanced by a concept of relationship (family, coupledom, comradeship) that gave hope. France was on the cusp of radical change – modernization and industrialization on a scale heretofore unknown – and this cinema pointed to the complexities of this change, especially as the nation moved from a rural to a more urban society. Indeed, it hints at the paradox facing post-war French society: how can modernization be made to cohabit with the traditional values of a nation in the throes of morally and physically rebuilding itself? If France's ideological machine practised a culture of amnesia and selective memory, we should not be so hasty to judge all of its cinema in the same light.

Notes

1 For further discussion of this article, see Hayward (2010: 22–5).
2 'Sous le couvert de la littérature . . . on donne au public sa dose habituelle de noirceur, de non-conformisme, de facile audace'. Translations are my own.
3 'la vie telle qu'on la voit d'un quatrième étage de Saint-Germain-des-Prés'.
4 Furthermore, the migration was to the north-eastern half of France. By the 1960s two thirds of the country lived north of 'the diagonal line running from Le Havre to Grenoble' (Larkin 1988, 201).
5 For full details on audience attendance, see Montebello (2005, 50–3).
6 Drama is often considered a specifically French category (Chirat 1985, 29–55 and 61–2; De Comes and Marmin 1984, 135). Chris Cagle, in Chapter 1 of this volume, also shows its relevance to the Hollywood classic era.
7 Interestingly, a third of these 63 texts are popular American or British authors of 'pulp' fiction (Vicky Baum, James Hadley Chase, Peter Cheyney, David Goodis), a form of literature much espoused by Truffaut, with regard to his own filmmaking and other 'auteurs' of the 1960s French New Wave directors.
8 Simenon is counted in France as a French author, despite the fact that he is Belgian.
9 See Kristin Ross (1995) for an excellent account of this period of reconstruction and modernization.
10 Given that Maupassant's constant search for recognition in his lifetime was undermined by his self-doubt, there is no small irony in the fact that he is the most successful in terms of adaptations. Indeed, his nemesis (and master) Flaubert does not appear at all! Also within those figures it is worth noting that three of the Maupassant stories were updated into the twentieth century, as were Anatole France's *Crainquebille* and Zola's *Thérèse Raquin* (thus giving them all a modernist twist).
11 English translations refer to the film adaptations in this and following Tables.
12 One of Marcel Aymé's novels, *La Jument verte* (1958), was set in the Franco-Prussian war and adapted as a costume drama (5.3-million audience).
13 Larkin (1988, 206) gives the following statistics: farm workers 6%; industrial and service workers 38%; white-collar workers 10.8%.
14 Of course this was a very protracted process. Initiated in response to Abbé Pierre's call to help the homeless, a new 1% tax was imposed to help accelerate housing developments.
15 Indeed, according to Bourdieu, only 50% of the working classes believed abortion was murder (Bourdieu 1984, 312, citing the Institut français d'opinion publique [French Institute of Public Opinion, IFOP] 1971).
16 These last two films were based on novels by Serge Groussard and Cécil Saint-Laurent respectively. Both men were politically allied with the Right, which makes their compassionate views about abortion perhaps all the more striking. Groussard was a much-decorated military man (he fought in the Resistance and in Algeria) as well as a journalist for *Le Figaro*, and several of his novels won prestigious prizes (including *Prix*

Femina). Saint-Laurent was a prolific novelist (elected to the Académie Française). He wrote under several pseudonyms. As Saint-Laurent he mostly wrote historical novels (including the *Caroline chérie* series and *Lucrèce Borgia*). In the 1930s he was a member of the extreme right-wing Action Française, and during the war he worked in the Vichy government, joining the Forces française de l'Intérieur (French Forces of the Interior, FFI) just before the Liberation.

17 From 1960 it became the 'Mouvement Français pour le Planning Familial' (French Movement for Family Planning).

18 Larkin 1988, 180. Given the government's drive to implement a natality programme, all these figures are quite disturbing.

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3

MUMBAI MIDDLEBROW

Ways of thinking about the middle ground in Hindi cinema

Rachel Dwyer

The word 'middlebrow', associated with Victorian phrenology and cultural snobbery, is usually a derogatory term and may not seem useful as a way of understanding Hindi cinema, now usually known as Bollywood (Rajadhyaksha 2003; Vasudevan 2010). However, the social and economic changes of the last twenty-five years, which are producing India's growing new middle classes, a social group whose culture is closely linked to the cultural phenomenon of Bollywood (Dwyer 2000; 2014a), suggest that the term may usefully be deployed to look at the often ignored middle ground of Hindi cinema, which lies somewhere between the highbrow art cinema and lowbrow *masala* ('spicy', entertainment) films (Dwyer 2011a). I suggest that the term can be used for a certain type of contemporary Hindi cinema which can be traced back several decades, in parallel with the changes that have affected India's middle classes.

Defining the middlebrow

In academic discourse, commentators have turned to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'culture moyenne' (outlined, for example, in his study of photography), to describe the middlebrow as a cultural category that is imitative of legitimate, high culture, and makes art accessible in a popular form (Bourdieu 1996; 1999, 323). Beth Driscoll's study of middlebrow literature over the twenty-first century offers eight features of the category: middle-class, reverential, commercial, feminized, mediated, recreational, emotional and earnest (2014, 3). Sally Faulkner, on the other hand, defines middlebrow cinema as combining high production values, subject matter that is serious but not challenging and cultural references that are presented in an accessible form (2013, 8). The only use of the term to date in connection with

Indian cinema, to my knowledge, does not take into account these nuances and uses middlebrow as a synonym for small-town and middle-class (Chandra 2014).

This chapter defines the middlebrow as occupying the middle ground between the highbrow, the arts that elicit intellectual responses as they may be challenging and uncomfortable, and the lowbrow, or cultural texts that elicit emotional, basic or bodily responses. The middlebrow is also the area of culture that reflects middle-class self-improvement and auto-didacticism, associated with institutions like book clubs, reading groups, literary festivals and ticking off lists such as '10 best films', '100 best books' and 'films to see before you die'.[1]

Hindi cinema and its other brows

Popular, mainstream Hindi cinema used to be considered irredeemably lowbrow, a failed form of cinema, associated with the escapist fantasies of India's working classes who just longed to sit in comfort for three hours (Nandy 1981; 1995; 1998). Yet even a cursory look at some of the films made over India's century of cinema challenges this idea. Genres like melodrama, for all their spectacle and lack of realism, nonetheless show major artistic achievement in the areas of narrative complexity and aesthetics. Indeed, often within a Hindi melodrama, with its diffuse narrative and parallel tracks (to be discussed in further detail below), highbrow forms meet the lowbrow culture of the bazaar. However, anxiety about social status seems to have largely discouraged middle-class audiences from engaging with the form, who ridicule it instead in common parlance with tired epithets like 'bursting into song' and 'running around trees'. Some nonetheless enjoy these films as a 'guilty pleasure', especially the young, who revel in the lowbrow 'body genres' of action, comedy and pornography (or at least innuendo).

The study of Hindi cinema as an academic discipline, often in prestigious Western universities, where serious attention has often been focused on the lowest-brow films, was initially viewed with surprise by Indian scholars, who generally favoured the study of highbrow cinema, which Chidananda Das Gupta famously described as 'India's unpopular cinema' (2008, 4–6). This highbrow cinema is rarely made now, although Anand Gandhi's *Ship of Theseus* was acclaimed on its release in 2013. Art cinema began in the 1950s in Bengal with the work of directors Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen, and was then taken up from the late 1960s by avant-garde filmmakers such as Mani Kaul and Kumar Shahani; at the same time, a number of films made in different Indian languages – Girish Kasaravalli in Kannada, Aravindan in Malayalam – have created an Indian version of global cinematic language. In fact, this art cinema touches many areas of the middlebrow, as it is often adapted from literature, it is realistic and it avoids including songs – or at least lip-synched songs. In the 1970s and 1980s, a new wave of art cinema that also overlapped with the middlebrow developed, known as 'parallel' cinema, which was either funded through the government's National Film Development Corporation of India (NFDC) or was independently made by producers such as Shyam Benegal, who could hire his own stars.

Middlebrow and the middle classes: class and language

Before analysing a number of middlebrow cinematic examples, I turn now to the wider contexts of cinema-going and class change. Indian society underwent great transformation in the 1990s, following economic liberalization. On the international stage, India has become a major global player. Internally, the country has seen the rise of new social formations to dominant positions, notably the new middle classes, who make and consume Hindi cinema. New media practices, coupled with these other social and economic changes, transformed Hindi cinema into what we now know as Bollywood. Film budgets grew massively, and although exact figures are difficult to calculate given unregulated operations on the black market, these paid for higher production values and new stars, which in turn allowed new genres to develop. Movie halls were refurbished and multiplexes (favoured by new middle-class audiences) were built, while the overseas market became a major revenue source, generating vastly increased box-office returns. In 1998, the Indian government gave the industry formal recognition and began to deploy it as a form of soft power (Athique 2012). The films associated with the new middle classes range from the lower-brow but big-budget comedies to the glossy romances, notably those produced by Yash Raj Films and Dharma Productions. Other middlebrow genres were established such as the historical and the biopic, while 'multiplex' cinema and 'indie' (usually called Hindie) cinemas also emerged (Dwyer 2011a; 2013a; 2014a).

In his analysis of French culture of the 1960s, Bourdieu proposes that cultural value is ascribed by social groups (1999). Transferring this insight to the case of highbrow Hindi (and other Indian) cinema, we see that value is conferred upon it by the old middle classes and local elites. Without mapping class onto taste too closely, we may nonetheless propose that the rise of the new middle classes in the 1990s triggered the development of a new middlebrow cinema on which theses classes conferred value (Dwyer 2011a). These are not stable or static categories, of course, and contain sub-cultures such as the youth, who watch lowbrow films ironically, or the nouveaux riches industrialists, whose tastes remain lowbrow as they may be slow to seek cultural legitimacy.

As Indian society has changed, so its media landscape has altered. Some of these changes are those seen in the rest of the world, such as the impact of the Internet, but India has also seen the accelerated spread of television, from a limited reach and only a small handful of channels in the 1980s, to a massive industry that is four times bigger than the film industry today. The spread of publishing in English and other languages has also been significant. While film and television coexist closely in India, the small screen offers mostly lower-brow fare, with highbrow genres such as documentaries rarely broadcast. Film, however, is the major cultural product consumed (as well as made) by the new middle classes, depicting their aspirations and fears, hopes and ideas for a new India (Dwyer 2014a).

In India, the definition of brows is further complicated by the postcolonial status of English and the global culture associated with it. While India has many

officially recognized languages, it does not have a national language, although Hindi is the official language of the Union, and is thus often regarded as such, with English as the co-official language, according to the Constitution. English in India is associated with education (nearly all university education in India is in English) and cultural capital, as it is the language of the elite and the cosmopolitan classes, and is thus a means of acquiring economic capital and access to global culture. Sometimes the cultural status of English may lead to it being regarded as higher brow – such as English-language fiction – because of this borrowed prestige. However, the English-language film, in particular Hollywood, is not as popular in India as it is in much of the rest of the world, despite the number of English-language speakers in the country. Rather, a range of English-language films, from highbrow to lowbrow, is watched, and English-language films, or versions of films, are produced in India in small numbers (*Finding Fanny* [Adajania 2014] was released as separate Hindi and English films). Hinglish (a mixture of Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi and English) is also now widely used (Kothari and Snell 2011), while other language cinemas are associated with other brows, such as Bengali and Marathi, which are associated with middle to highbrows, and Bhojpuri, with the lowbrow. Hindi films use Urdu as a language of poetry and many aspiring middlebrows are admirers of Urdu poetry.

The history of the middlebrow in Hindi cinema

Although the current middlebrow cinema is closely associated with the new middle classes, middlebrow cinema is not new to India and earlier forms may be traced. While early silent Hindi cinema was largely about spectacle, the coming of sound in the 1930s allowed for more narrative films which dealt with social issues, especially about women, devotional films and literary adaptations, whose source material ranged from Shakespeare to modern fiction. There are many overlaps between these new genres and middle-class culture (Vasudevan 1995, 311).

The features of the Hindi sound film, including the mixing of genres (often combined in the 'social' film of the 1940s and 1950s, or the 'masala' film of the 1960s), where the fragmented narrative disrupted by thrills and spectacle often resulted in a mixture of address in a film, allowed them to appeal beyond the middle classes. Ravi Vasudevan notes that although the protagonist of the 'social' film is often middle-class, the deployment of the 'rhetoric of traditional morality and identity' addresses a lower-class audience (1995, 312). For example, Guru Dutt's films of the 1950s, though made within the mainstream, set an exceptional aesthetic standard for music, poetry, image and performance, but still include the lowbrow in the comedy track. In the classic *Pyaasa / Desirous*★ (Dutt 1957), the poet Vijay (Guru Dutt) moves between the comic lowbrow, mostly built around the story of a masseur (Johnny Walker), and the highbrow but money-obsessed world of publishing, with its poetry performances. The romance between Vijay and a street-walker is built on their love of poetry, and they both leave the materialistic world in which poetry – and humanity – becomes a commodity. The much-loved poet

Sahir Ludhianvi simplified the language of his Urdu poem 'Chakle' / 'Brothels' to use it as lyrics for the song 'Jinhe naaz hai Hind par' / 'Those who are proud of India' that features in the film, which again shows different forms of culture uniting audiences for a film, rather than dividing them.

A mainstream middlebrow cinema also evolved in the issue-based cinema of BR Chopra, and, during the 1960s, novels by Gulshan Nanda and other popular Hindi writers were adapted – often by the authors themselves – for films that frequently cast the first superstar of Hindi film, Rajesh Khanna. In the 1970s, Madhava Prasad (1998) suggests a segmentation of Hindi cinema took place, between 'state-sponsored realism', the 'middle-class cinema' and 'the aesthetic of mobilisation'. 'State-sponsored realism' includes art cinema, and its narrative content, as well its production and distribution practices, distinguish it from the mainstream, thus it is popularly known as 'festival cinema'. On the other hand, Prasad's 'middle-class cinema' approximates the middlebrow. This cinema, made by directors like Hrishikesh Mukherjee, generically mixes realism and melodrama, and deploys songs and stars but keeps their roles subordinate to the narrative. Mukherjee's films are thus mainstream if we consider consumption and reception, but also bridge the gap between realist cinema and popular mainstream cinema.

In the 1980s the rewards of transnational film circulation became more evident. On the one hand, the art films of Satyajit Ray circulated widely in the West and were seen to represent Indian cinema. On the other, screenwriter and Booker Prize-winning novelist Ruth Prawer Jhabvala worked with the masters of the middlebrow, Ismail Merchant and James Ivory, to make a series of international middlebrow hits that created a globally circulating image of India that focused on class, nostalgia and heritage in the face of a disorienting modernity and Westernization.[2]

The middlebrow in today's Bollywood

Returning to the domestic cinema, we might expect to see a growth in middlebrow in tandem with the rise of India's middle classes in the 1990s. This new domestic middlebrow cinema incorporates both the category of multiplex film and the indie cinema that is part of a youth culture that straddles art and middlebrow alternatives. Even art filmmakers have moved towards the middlebrow, raising social concerns through humour and entertainment, such as Shyam Benegal's *Welcome to Sajjanpur* (2008). Some mainstream Bollywood is also moving towards the middlebrow, through a combination of higher production values and accessible references to higher forms of culture in its romcoms about lifestyles and competence in knowing about consumerism and romance. These are typified by the big-budget mainstream movies of Yash Raj Films, which also engage with melodramatic moral dilemmas concerning love and family. For example, *Rab ne bana di jodi / A Couple Made by God*★ (Aditya Chopra 2008) uses a folk or fairy-tale motif of a woman not recognizing her husband in disguise so she can be 'adulterous' with him, and so fall in love with him once he learns how to be fashionable and dance to film music.

A style of film that developed in the mid-2000s became known as 'multiplex cinema', after the upmarket cinemas built in the country's new shopping malls (Athique and Hill 2010; Dwyer and Pinto 2011, Part Two). They are made on a smaller budget, though, often within the big Bollywood production houses. The films are more realistic in their locations, star performance styles and use of song, and often move closer to the art house (Wilinsky 2001). The group is only loosely defined, but would include the work of directors such as Vishal Bhardwaj, whose successful adaptations of Shakespeare, 'Macbeth', *Maqbool* (2003), 'Othello', *Omkara* (2006) and 'Hamlet' *Haider* (2014) feature major stars, big-budget production values and Bollywood music, but have social and political references, and thus their melodramatic elements are subsumed by realism.

This period also saw a rise in heritage films, in particular biopics and historicals (costume dramas), which also form the staple of British middlebrow. Cultural value was conferred on examples like the Indo-British production *Gandhi* (Attenborough 1982) through awards from BAFTA and the Oscars (Dwyer 2011b). In India, these films were aimed at the upper end of the new middle classes: those audiences who both possessed the economic capital to afford multiplex ticket prices and could enjoy the intertextual references to world cinema and Hollywood. The films often also refer closely to Bollywood, either as pastiche or tribute, rather than distancing themselves from it as a separate cinema, and in recent years, many of the multiplex filmmakers have begun to work in the major Bollywood studios.

This convergence in the middle, away from the ends of the cinematic continuum marked by the highbrow/art film and the lowbrow/mainstream film, is also typified by popular, performance-led films, which are also 'earnest' (Driscoll 2014, 3) in their focus on social issues, and whose deployment of restrained emotion and melodrama is still sufficient to encourage audience sympathy. These films may mock and distance themselves from the high and the low, but draw on both and show an awareness of them. They approve of, and indeed elicit, an emotional response from their audience; they reaffirm beliefs, rather than challenge, disrupt or make the audience feel uncomfortable. They also combine some aesthetic inventiveness, in genres such as literary adaptations, historical films and biopics, with accessible references to high culture like Shakespeare, music and poetry, and thus afford aspirant audiences a sense of acquiring cultural capital.

The upper middlebrow

The middlebrow is a vast category, and the term can be used in a derogatory way, thus the sub-category 'upper middlebrow', which is both part of this mainstream, yet distinct from it, is especially useful to analyse Bollywood film. William Deresiewicz (2012) describes this area of culture as one where 'sentimentality [is] hidden by a veil of cool. It is edgy, clever, knowing, stylish, and formally inventive'. The key difference between the middlebrow and the upper middlebrow is thus the shift from earnestness to knowingness. Upper-middlebrow Indian films are characterized by their narrative focus, which overwhelms the disruptive features of

the film. The films focus on characters that are goal-focused and rounded, and even though the films still contain elements of Bollywood, like the star, the songs and the fantasy sequences, these are mostly presented in an ironic manner.

For example, the films of Vidhu Vinod Chopra, a film director, producer and writer graduate from the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), appear to be popular genre films, but, I would argue, are middlebrow because of their technical qualities, especially in the Bombay gangster-themed *Parinda / The Bird*★ (1989), the historical film *1942 A Love Story* (1993), the political thriller *Mission Kashmir* (1998) and the Rajasthani royal drama *Eklavya: the Royal Guard* (2007). In recent years, Chopra has also found massive success as a producer with films directed by Rajkumar Hirani. The first two of these, *Munna Bhai MBBS* (2003) and *Lage Raho Munnabhai* (2006), starred a character called Munna Bhai as a thug whose love for a higher-class woman afforded him upward social mobility, his emotional skills giving him success as he failed in his attempts at education. The next two films, starring Aamir Khan, have been among the biggest hits in the history of Hindi cinema. *3 Idiots* (2009) is about the middle-class conflict between a parental view of education as a means to finding a good job, versus the children's desire to follow a vocation to find self-fulfilment. His next film, the biggest ever hit in India, is *PK* (2014), in which an alien's logical scrutiny of contemporary India reveals the absurdity of many religious practices and beliefs. These films all share the big-budget Bollywood features of top stars and song sequences, but are also middlebrow in their invitation to the audience to think about issues that are central to middle-class lives.

The actor Khan has also emerged as the quintessential middlebrow star. Despite not being educated beyond school, his own reputation for reading and independent learning has been showcased in several films that have engaged with social issues, such as education in *Taare zamin par / Like Stars on Earth* (Khan and Gupte 2007). His ongoing television show, *Satyamev jayate / Truth Alone Conquers*★ (2012–), engages weekly with a social issue. He thus uses his star power to reach out to a wide audience, with the intention of mobilizing them to take action. This chapter will now analyse five examples to map in further detail this upper middlebrow.

Example 1: Aamir Khan and *PK* – challenging beliefs

In addition to its position as the biggest box-office success of all time in India, *PK* has also hit the news for attracting formal protests by hardline Hindu groups who objected to the film's questioning of religion (PTI 2013; Hoad 2015). Set in contemporary urban India, *PK* is the story of an alien (PK roughly means 'drunk', as people assume he is a drunk human) who searches for his stolen transmitter, which he needs to return to his planet. He is told that 'God only knows where it is', and thus sets off in search of God. His transmitter falls into the hands of a godman, who is associated with Jaggu, a journalist and lead of the film's romantic track, though her faith is only love, and she will reconcile her family to her Muslim Pakistani lover. The alien represents prelapsarian man – he is naked and tells no lies. He finds

the different approaches to God confusing, and ends up convincing everyone that there is a difference between the God who made man and the God that men make. Comic sequences ensue as he confuses the practices of one religion with another.

Khan has become entangled in controversy with Hindu groups before, albeit not on the grounds of religion, though his name marks him as a Muslim, so the field for conflict was already laid. A recent film *OMG – Oh My God!* (Shukla 2012) did not attract the same controversy, perhaps because it had a small budget and a star who is allied with Hindu nationalists, but also because the film, despite attacking the godmen, shows the conversion of a non-believer and the presence of Krishna in the world today.

The character Khan plays, PK, is not an atheist but an idiot savant who sees that organized religion is about the external, in particular dress and ritual, rather than belief or *seva*, devotional service, to others. In the Bhagavad Gita, suggested by Hindu nationalist leaders as a national text, Krishna himself shows there are three ways of approaching God. One is through knowledge and study ('jnana-yoga'), one through practice ('karmayoga') and one through loving devotion to God ('bhaktiyoga'). In other words, PK is a kind of Hindu – his favoured term for God is 'Bhagwan' – and he is certainly not a follower of one of the Abrahamic faiths. It is not the scenes where the innocent alien queries certain practices that led to the protests, but the one in which a stage performer, dressed as the God Shiva, pulls a rickshaw.

Some of the film's huge success lies in its simple approach to religion. All differences between communities can be resolved by arguing that God is one but with many names and people just need to love each other. This earnest and emotional response to this and other issues would appear preachy were the alien not a major star like Khan, armed with good gags and songs. The success of the film in India and overseas also suggests a desire for a simple solution to serious religious, social and political issues.

Example 2: Sanjay Leela Bhansali and *Black* – addressing social issues

Bhansali, who worked as an assistant to Vidhu Vinod Chopra, has directed perhaps the most Bollywood of all Bollywood films, *Devdas* (2002), as well as the much-acclaimed *Hum dil de chuke sanam / My Heart's Already Given*★ (1999) and *Saawariya / Beloved*★ (2007). However, although still marked by his extravagantly glamorous style and successful song and dance numbers, many of his films are about disability: the deaf and dumb in *Khamoshi: The Musical* (1996) and *Black* (2005), and the quadriplegic in *Guzaarish / The Request*★ (2010). His *Goliyon ki raasleela Ram-Leela / A Play of Bullets, Ram Leela* (2013) was an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, set in the political context of rural, contemporary Gujarat, and he is now working on a historical drama. His films are middlebrow as they fuse popular Bollywood genres with social issues, and, through cinephilic references to art filmmakers, notably Satyajit Ray, betray middlebrow aspirations about accessing art cinema.

Black, for example, which was shot in Hindi and English, is based on the autobiography of Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life* (1902), and had a number of similarities to the Oscar-winning film *The Miracle Worker* (Penn 1962). The film mixed elements of Bollywood, such as casting the top stars Amitabh Bachchan and Rani Mukerji, but had only one song. Mukherji plays a blind and deaf girl, Michelle McNally, who is taught to communicate by Debraj Sahai (Bachchan). The film refers to historical film, being set in the summer capital of the British Raj, Shimla, and uses the old Viceregal Lodge (now the Indian Institute of Advanced Study) as the McNally home, alongside several studio recreations of the town. The exoticism of Shimla is emphasized by its memorable snow scenes, which are filmed around the colonial buildings, and the stars' costumes are authentic rather than glitzy. The film was seen as pathbreaking and won eleven Filmfare Awards (India's top film award).

Example 3: Anurag Kashyap and *Gangs of Wasseypur* – knowing intertextuality

Kashyap began his film career as a scriptwriter for Ram Gopal Varma, and was mostly known for his writing as his first films ran into problems with the censors. His debut film, *Paanch / Five★*, is still not censored, while his film about the Bombay blasts of 1993, *Black Friday* (2004), was held up for a long time. His subsequent films have been controversial for their violence, language, sex and drugs: *No Smoking* (2007); *DevD* (2009); *Gulaal / Vermilion★* (2009); *That Girl in Yellow Boots* (2011); *Gangs of Wasseypur I and II* (2012); and *Ugly* (2014). Kashyap's *Bombay Velvet* (2015), scripted (in part) by Princeton historian Gyan Prakash, is a 'neo-noir', a historical drama about a notorious murder in Bombay.

Kashyap reframes the lowbrow through a highbrow cinephilic mode, eschewing mass popularity through his extreme violence, while creating an intense largely bourgeois fan base, who see his films as Scorsese-style indies. They certainly reach into the middlebrow, confusing categories with their engagement with issues of abuse and social problems in lowbrow genres with highbrow cinematic language. Kashyap's masterpiece is his *Gangs of Wasseypur*, a two-part film set in the coal-mining town of Dhanbad, now in Jharkhand. It deals with a feud between two Muslim families in the orbit of a corrupt (Hindu) politician, who develop a fierce rivalry that lasts throughout the twentieth century. The film does not engage with any serious political or social issues, but is packed with knowing intertextual references to other media (including television, music and films), and is relentlessly cool in its portrayal of a bleak time in a non-metropolitan city in one of the poorest parts of India.

Example 4: Vikramaditya Motwane and *Lootera / The Robber** (2013) – heritage film

Motwane was assistant director to Bhansali for his *Devdas*, and co-wrote *DevD* for Kashyap, as well as working as a choreographer and producer. His first film as a director, *Udaan / Flight** (2010), was told through the eyes of a child with

an abusive father – said to be based on Kashyap's life – and was acclaimed for taking a bold look at a neglected social issue and declared a super-hit for the production house, Anurag Kashyap's Films. Motwane's second film, *Lootera*, was co-produced by Phantom Films, which is co-owned by Kashyap and Motwane with, among others, Ekta Kapoor, and her mother, Shobha Kapoor, who is best known for massively popular television serials such as *Kyunki Saas bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* (*Because a Mother-in-law was Once a Daughter-in-law*) (1999–), as well as several middlebrow films.

Lootera was released on 1,600 multiplex, rather than single, screens, which, as discussed, marked it as a middlebrow film in terms of its distribution. Despite its critical acclaim in reviews, and its many nominations for awards, it fared poorly at the box office, although the DVD box proclaims it as 'The most loved film of the year'. The film is what I am terming 'upper-middlebrow' in its narrative content too, and exhibits all the characteristics outlined by Driscoll above (2014, 3). It is a love story between Pakhi, played by Sonakshi Sinha, and Varun, by Ranveer Singh. These two major stars adopt a restrained performance style in this film, which contrasts with their usual star appearances. The film opens in 1953, where Varun is an archaeologist who is excavating a site on Pakhi's father's considerable estates in West Bengal. The interval is when they are about to marry but he runs away, as he is the 'lootera' (robber) of the title. In the second part of the film, Varun is on the run but takes refuge in Pakhi's house in the hills, where she is dying. He now sacrifices his freedom to care for her until she dies, but he is shot as he tries to escape after her death.

The film is very much in two parts, not just because of the interval, but also owing to the change in locations and shooting styles. The first half is more like a Bhansali film, with a mise-en-scène that is reminiscent of a British heritage film, in this case about the Raj, set in the 1950s Bengal of the zamindars (landowners). The film shows the elegance of the zamindari class – also displayed in Ray's *Jalsaghar / The Music Room* (1958) – as both guardians of culture, but also decadent and economically unproductive, and whose feudal nature means they cannot adapt to the modern world.

Unlike Ray's film, this first part does not focus on highbrow culture, but is a historical or costume drama that adopts the formal style of the heritage film, which, as a number of chapters in this volume demonstrate, is a classic middlebrow genre. Pakhi's association with the old world justifies the inclusion of traditional performances of the Jatra, and the Chau, which stresses the period authenticity often associated with heritage. These period details are thrown into relief by the fact that *Lootera*'s zamindars are shown to have adapted to some of the technology of the modern world: they install electricity, listen to Western classical music on the gramophone, learn about painting (see Figure 3.1), speak English and their home is furnished with Western products. The past is also underlined by the presence of the archaeologists, although they bring in the new world by playing Hindi film music on the radio (notably 'Taqdeer se' / 'From Fate', from Guru Dutt's *Baazi / The Gamble*★ [1951]), which perhaps metaphorically excavates the past of Bengal.

FIGURE 3.1   Pakhi Roy Chaudhary (Sonakshi Sinha), a writer, and Varun Shrivastav (Ranveer Singh), an archaeologist, romance while sharing their love of the arts, including painting. *Lootera* (Motwane 2013)

Varun and Pakhi also both know poetry by Baba Nagarjuna (1911–98), a Hindi and Maithili poet, who was both popular and recognized by the government as a leading figure. The film thus displays the Bengal that is seen in India as central to its intellectual history: Bengal as the home of great figures such as Tagore; as its academic centre; and with its elegant and traditional, though very anglicized, culture. Pakhi and Varun, however, are shown to be both inside and outside this culture: while Pakhi has studied at Tagore's Shantiniketan, knows Bengali culture and dresses in an upper-class Bengali style, Varun is clearly unfamiliar with Bengali and is baffled by a popular Bengali film.

However, in part two, this sunny and warm life is ended by independent India's introduction of the West Bengal Land Reforms Act (1955), popularly known as the Land Ceiling Act, which confiscated landowners' wealth. Varun is shown to be a thief, rather than a government archaeologist, who has conned the landowner out of his belongings. Film form is also deployed in this second half to stress difference. For example, the setting shifts to the bleak snowy location of Dalhousie – a former British hill station – as the tragedy unfolds.[3] By using this two-part structure, Motwane thus offers both a film that is middlebrow owing to its adoption of transnational heritage aesthetics, and a film that is self-reflective about its status as such owing to the shift in stylistic tone in part two. If middlebrow heritage aesthetics were appropriate to portray the anglicized old India of the zamindars, a bleaker realist aesthetic is more appropriate to portray the new.

Example 5: Karan Johar, Zoya Akhtar, Dibakar Banerjee, Anurag Kashyap and *Bombay Talkies* – self-reflectivity

A convergence of these various middlebrows can be seen in *Bombay Talkies*, a film made for the centenary of Indian cinema in 2013, which features short films by four leading directors. Each short refers closely to other films and each raises a key issue.

Karan Johar became famous for his big-budget family romances, which defined Bollywood in the 1990s and 2000s. He is now also a chat-show host, media celebrity and major producer. Johar's film, the first in the compilation, 'Ajeeb dastan hai yeh' / 'This is a Strange Story' (the title of a song from the film *Dil apna aur preet parai / My Heart is Mine But My Love Someone Else's*★ [Sahu 1960]), features mainstream to middlebrow actress Rani Mukherji, who plays a wife who finds that the problems in her marriage are caused by her husband being gay (see Figure 3.2). Johar, whose infamous trial by the controversial AIB in 2014 focused on his being gay, a widely assumed but unconfirmed view, has produced films which have raised the issue of homosexuality, mostly through humour in *Kal ho na ho / Tomorrow May Never Come*★ (Advani 2003) and *Dostana / Bromance* (Mansukhani 2008). Other films with gay characters exist, but there is little to challenge the heteronormativity of Bollywood, which is hardly surprising in the mainstream cinema of a country where homosexual acts are illegal. Johar's 'This is a Strange Story' uses old Hindi film songs associated with camp and queer readings in a knowing way, including the title song itself.

The second film, Akhtar's 'Sheila ki jawani' / 'Sheila's Youth', also deploys old Hindi songs knowingly, as it is named after a famous 'item' song,[4] 'Sheila's Youth', performed by leading star Katrina Kaif who appears in this film. It features a boy who wants to be a Bollywood dancer, rather than do things that boys are supposedly meant to do like play sports. When his parents refuse to pay for his sister to go on a school trip as they want to spend the money on his education, his sister dresses him up for a paying performance where he raises the money for her. The issue of choice, especially around gender norms, is again played out in this film, which is resolved happily, and, like Johar's, this short film self-reflectively plays tribute to the magic of the star and the Hindi film song.

In a similarly self-reflective way, the third director Banerjee's film, 'Star', is an art film, adapted from Satyajit Ray's short story 'Patol Babu, Film Star' (Ray 2012), in which the indie star, Nawazuddin Siddiqui, plays a failed actor who is asked by
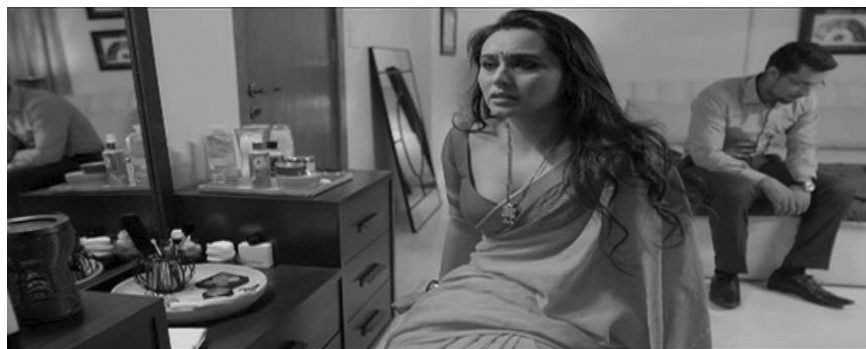
FIGURE 3.2   The breakdown of the marriage of Gayatri (Rani Mukerji) and Dev (Randeep Hooda) in 'This is a Strange Story', *Bombay Talkies* (Johar 2013)

chance to be an extra in a film where all he has to do is bump into the hero. The film is a reflection on the minor figure of the 'extra' in the industry and what this work means to him and to his relationship with his daughter.

Finally, Kashyap, who has also moved from a position as the angry young man of cinema to a more comfortable mainstream position as a major producer himself, and one who is close to the big production houses, now makes upper-middlebrow films in the style of Scorsese and American television serials; that is, films that are cinematic and engaging but do not challenge the audience's sensibility. His *Bombay Talkies* short film 'Murabba' / 'Pickle' has a son take a jar of pickle to Bombay to give half to superstar Amitabh Bachchan and bring the rest home to restore his father's health. The son does this but on the way home the remaining pickle is destroyed so he lies to his father. His father recognizes this, having done the same favour for his own father, when he took a jar of honey to Dilip Kumar. The film reflects on the other end of stardom to that of 'Star', showing generations of fandom and devotion.

Bombay Talkies ends with a song with a host of stars for its final tribute to the film industry. This demonstrates again the characteristics of an upper-middlebrow film, as it engages with issues such as alternative sexualities, celebrity culture and the wider cinephilia, but makes the audience feel comfortable rather than challenged. This film thus brings together directors from the mainstream and the Hindie to show that there is convergence between the film-makers and producers, as well as convergence within the texts of the films themselves, although each film is made in the style associated with the director rather than in a homogeneous manner.

Conclusion

As is well known, the term 'middlebrow' has been used to critique culturally aspiring classes. In India, the elite has been hostile to the country's new middle classes for many reasons including issues of language ('Hindi-medium types' is a scornful term, as is 'vern' or 'vernacular') and a perceived lack of cosmopolitanism ('dehatis', meaning 'hicks'). Yet the new middle classes are socially confident and, as they seek to claim the virtues of being middle class, they may also wish to promote their own forms of culture. This class confidence may allow the use of the term 'middlebrow' to mean a particular democratization of high culture as a form of emerging middle-class culture. The middlebrow cinema attracts the middle classes to cinema, introducing enough high culture and other forms of cultural capital to keep them interested, but making them feel good rather than threatened. Middlebrow Indian cinema thus emerges as a critical part of what I have argued elsewhere is the powerful imaginary that cinema is for the new India (2014a).

The term is not widely used in India, nor is there an obvious Hindi equivalent – at least meaning more than just 'middling', which is conveyed by 'madhyam' – although English is of course used widely for critical terms. If the term becomes accepted, then it allows cinema in India to be viewed as inherently low to middlebrow. Yet the film-makers and films analysed in the five examples above have developed a new way of

thinking about cinema, with the explicit aim of reforming the Hindi film industry and educating their audiences in cinephilia, which is itself a middlebrow project. Cinema itself thus becomes part of the idea of widening one's education through its portrayal of history, language, lyric poetry, music and dress.

Identifying and naming an Indian middlebrow cinema allow us to see a new form of Indian culture, with roots in global as well as vernacular cultures. This cinema distinguishes itself from different forms of Bollywood film, and is tied closely to the new middle classes and youth culture. I contend that an upper end of this middlebrow exists, and that in this area of culture some of the most important social changes are worked through. This middlebrow Indian cinema has a distinctive Indian taste although one that may bridge other cultures, taking some of the pleasures and vulgarity of the lowbrow but mixing it with the highbrow, although avoiding what to Indian audiences are its inaccessible and pretentious elements. It is thus challenging without being disturbing.

The growth of this upper-middlebrow segment in mainstream Hindi cinema is striking as it is attracting some of the biggest audiences for its films, which bring stories of self-improvement through issue-based narratives that are also a form of entertainment. The upper-middlebrow films that are located within the Bollywood circuit's films query, first, petit-bourgeois views on religion, so *PK* challenges godmen, the religious media and organized religion along with an anti-Pakistan rhetoric. Second, many of Bhansali's films ask for consideration of the disabled and look admiringly at non-metropolitan life. Kashyap's films, meanwhile, speak against abuse, especially of children, as in *That Girl with the Yellow Boots* and *DevD*, while also promoting sexual and romantic relationships between consenting adults. *Lootera*, on the other hand, shows self-awareness regarding any glamorization of the past. All these films smooth over these issues with melodramatic resolutions that are aided by the soundtrack and other elements of music. Their huge popularity may suggest that India's new middle classes, in particular their upper segment, are expanding rapidly.

Such films from the mainstream are perhaps converging in the category of upper middlebrow with other films that may be closer to the highbrow, such as those of Vishal Bharadwaj. Anand Gandhi's *Ship of Theseus*, with its challenging narrative and image track, is an art film that is far removed from Bollywood, and may have found that its new audiences were located in this upper middlebrow. Films that appeal to global audiences but are not highbrow, such as *Lunchbox* (Batra 2013), are also part of this upper middlebrow if we consider production (one of the producers is Anurag Kashyap), and find similar audiences in India. It seems that some of the most creative changes in Hindi cinema today are taking place around these upper-middlebrow films, which shows that change is taking place in the middle rather than at the margins, where different styles of filmmaking and different audiences are converging. It may also reveal that the new middle classes, who have been too easily dismissed as socially conservative and lacking aesthetic taste, are forming the audience for these films and thus revealing their greater cultural self-confidence.

Using the category of middlebrow allows us to re-examine these films to see not just the links between these new forms of cinema and the new middle classes, but also, by focusing on aspirational elements, how these new groups are creating a cinema that draws on other forms of culture such as the novel, or other kinds of foreign cinema such as the heritage film, to make a new form of culture where these forms converge. These middlebrow films stage key issues that are important to these classes, from lifestyle issues such as appearance and behaviour to moral and social dilemmas, and thus combine entertainment with addressing wider concerns that are so important in contemporary India.

Notes

1 For lists of Indian films, see, for example, Dwyer 2005.
2 David Lean's *A Passage to India* (1984) was part of this trend but did not involve Jhabvala, Merchant or Ivory.
3 This second half partly adapts O. Henry's short story of 1907, 'The Last Leaf'.
4 A spectacular song and dance routine in a Hindi film which is usually irrelevant to the story.

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PART II

Case studies

4

TIME AND THE MIDDLEBROW IN 1940s BRITISH CINEMA

Lawrence Napper

In Ealing Studios' popular wartime comedy *Fiddlers Three* (Watt 1944), Tommy Trinder, Sonnie Hale and Diana Decker are the victims of a cruel rupture in the otherwise linear structure of time. Caught in a storm on their way back from Navy leave, they take shelter under Stonehenge at midnight on Midsummer's Eve. A confluence of cosmic forces results in their spectacular but unwilling transportation back to the time of the Roman Empire. However, for all the togas and centurions populating the scenes that follow, the social mores of Roman times seem curiously similar to those of wartime Britain. On spying a Roman legion, Trinder remarks that 'it's funny how you can't get away from ENSA [Entertainments National Service Association]!' The commanding centurion (James Robertson Justice) tells them they have no right to be in a 'defence area', and consequently they are shipped to Rome in a packing case stamped 'British Druids: With Care'. The Empress (Francis Day) laments the fact that they will be victims of human sacrifice, especially given the 'manpower shortage', although apparently Gladiators have been declared 'a reserved occupation'. Trinder is able to divert the Roman court with an extended Carmen Miranda impression, and Nero (Francis Sullivan) upbraids his Empress for filling her bath with more than the regulation five inches of milk. Further variations of this gag form the leitmotif of the film which is, as Charles Barr complains, 'repeated *ad nauseum*' (1998, 196).

Despite Barr's crisp dismissal, I would argue that *Fiddlers Three* contains the germ of an idea about time that is surprisingly pervasive across a variety of cinematic, literary and theatrical texts produced in Britain during the mid-1940s, and which has particular significance for discussions of the 'middlebrow' in this period. Each of these texts flirts with the idea that time may not be a linear phenomenon in the way that we are used to thinking about it – with an increasingly unbridgeable gap

between the present and the steadily receding past. Instead, they conceive the connections between the present and the past to be closer and more permeable, and offer narratives where the past and present may influence each other in a variety of different ways, and where the reconciliation of elements of past and present may offer a pattern for the future. Mostly they do not take the straightforward time-travel route that is adopted by *Fiddlers Three*. Instead, and no doubt significantly given their production just around the end of the war, they often display an interest in the idea of the persistence of the human personality across generations and eras. In what follows I consider some of these narratives – films, but also the novels and plays from which they are adapted, as well as a play that was not adapted – to offer some wider observations about the relationship between non-linear conceptions of time and the 'middlebrow'.

Josephine Botting identifies *Fiddlers Three* as one of a trio of films released by Ealing Studios in 1944 which, in contrast to that studio's reputation for wartime realism, employed fantasy elements to 'comment on the war and its effects on British society' (2012, 176). The other two films are *The Halfway House* (Dearden 1944) and *They Came to a City* (Dearden 1944). Compared to the broad knocka-bout comedy of the Tommy Trinder vehicle, these two Basil Dearden films fit much more comfortably within accepted definitions of middlebrow culture, which I will explore below. They are both adapted from stage plays – the first from a 1940 play called *The Peaceful Inn* by Denis Ogden and the second from J.B. Priestley's play of 1943. Both films are earnest intellectual 'problem' pieces – a range of characters find themselves somehow outside time, come up against an unexpected conundrum (a ghostly inn and a utopian city, respectively) and must talk through the implications of their discovery with their fellows. As Barr, again, comments, both films are schematic, and 'do not conceal their theatrical origins' (1998, 185). These qualities caused him to judge them harshly in 1977, describing them as a 'dismal experience' (self-quoted in 1998, 185). However, in the revised edition of his *Ealing Studios* of 1993, he reverses this verdict, attributing it to a 'prejudice which recent historical/theoretical work on theatricality and melodrama in cinema has made . . . difficult to sustain'. The theatricality of the films now offers 'no obstacle', he suggests, and he can recognize them as 'bold, powerful and eloquent' (Barr 1998, 185).

The tendency of middlebrow culture to blur boundaries was one of the main charges levelled against it by critics in the interwar years. Virginia Woolf famously condemned the BBC in these terms, dubbing it the 'Betwixt and Between Company' (1942, 118). British film adaptations in particular came in for criticism as too literary or too theatrical – not cinematic enough. They blurred the boundaries between media, relying on literary and stage techniques such as dialogue and acting, rather than more purely cinematic effects like editing. Their audiences too were condemned for their naive assumption that cultural capital could be carried intact across the boundaries of media. It is perhaps this critical 'prejudice' that Barr alludes to when revising his initial condemnation of the Ealing stage adaptations.

As Barr's change of heart suggests, more recent discussions of the middlebrow have reclaimed this blurring of boundaries as a positive dimension of the category. But that blurring also makes a clear definition of the middlebrow itself extraordinarily difficult to express. Is it audiences that are middlebrow, or the texts they consume? I would suggest that rather than describing the cultural objects consumed by a particular class of audience, or that audience itself, the term expresses a dynamic relationship between class status and cultural taste – one that is essentially aspirational.

The term, after all, had originally appeared in England in *Punch* in 1925 to describe an audience for the BBC who 'are hoping that someday they will get used to the stuff they ought to like' (anon. 1925). In the hands of highbrow detractors, that definition was shifted to suggest both an audience and the cultural objects they consumed – an audience who mistakenly ascribed cultural value to works which (according to highbrow critics) did not have value, either because they were derivative of earlier cultural forms or because they drew on cultural capital acquired in other media (as adaptation did). This allegiance to a 'false' culture, rather than enabling the audience's aspirations for cultural improvement, simply exposed their lack of discernment and reconfirmed their class status. Middlebrow novels, for instance, in Q.D. Leavis's withering judgement, left their readers with 'the agreeable sensation of having improved themselves without incurring fatigue' (1932, 37). Such judgements were not the exclusive preserve of the literary elite – each reader, wherever they might be in the hierarchy of taste, might look down their nose at their neighbour and judge their taste to be falsely aspirational.

Thus a working-class or lower-middle-class cinemagoer may express a preference for the popular historical melodramas produced by Gainsborough in the 1940s as an example of their 'refinement' compared to Hollywood films: 'I definitely prefer a film in which I can listen to the perfect English diction which is so refreshing after the Yankee jarring effect', claimed one respondent to J.P. Mayer in 1948, citing *The Man in Grey* (Arliss 1943) in the same breath as *In Which We Serve* (Lean 1942) and *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (Korda 1933) as films for which she felt 'respect and admiration for a fine achievement' (1948, 227). Meanwhile, a middle-class cinemagoer may value the Ealing films mentioned above precisely because their theatrical associations give them an air of 'quality' distinct from the full-blooded melodrama of the Gainsborough films.

For their detractors, both of these figures might be condemned as 'middlebrow' because their cultural taste marks them out as aspirational – they value these films because of what they conceive a taste for them says about their own cultural status, rather than evaluating them according to more accepted and 'objective' critical criteria. These are the terms in which Graham Greene condemns a 'middlebrow' film-goer in 1936, who he suggests has a 'middlebrow intelligence . . . an intelligence which has grown up as little as her face, so that the books and art which once seemed to the very young woman so lively and cerebral still excite her' (Greene 1993, 397). For modern audiences, Greene's project looks suspiciously like intellectual and social gate-keeping. By contrast, recent re-evaluations of the

middlebrow have precisely celebrated its dynamic potential (Light 1991; Humble 2001; Napper 2009). For audiences of the period, middlebrow culture appeared to offer a way of transcending intellectual and cultural boundaries, no matter how circumscribed that movement might have been in reality.

The boundaries across which middlebrow culture trespassed were not limited to those of culture and medium; they were also to do with space and time. Since the 1930s, the suburbs have been widely understood to be the middlebrow space *par excellence* (Carey 1992; Hayes 1993; Medhurst 1997; Price 2015). Elsewhere I have argued that for some commentators the very notion of British cinema itself suggested a middlebrow, suburban blurring of boundaries through a sort of spatial determinism (Napper 2009, 25–7). Located in Europe, but sharing a language with America, British films were caught between two cinematic ideals and forced to compete with both. They offered neither the vigorous commercial populism of Hollywood films, nor the disinterested artistic experimentalism of the great European art cinema movements. Instead, partially protected from the market by the 1927 Cinematograph Act, yet attempting to compete commercially with Hollywood product, British films blurred the distinction between art and commerce, Europe and America, offering (according to their detractors) a bland hybrid of the two cinematic cultures.

While questions of space are thus critical for discussions of British middlebrow culture in this period, this chapter will turn to equally revealing questions of time, and, specifically, the representation of temporality. Indeed, perhaps it was the playful representation of temporality that proved most frustrating to the detractors of middlebrow culture. Highbrow intellectual culture in the 1920s and 1930s was, after all, more or less synonymous with Modernism. And Modernism, as its name suggests, had an investment in the idea of modernity as something – a state of consciousness, an experience of living, a cultural aesthetic – that is distinct from the habits of the past.

How frustrating then, for the writers and critics of the modernist movement, to observe the suburban audiences of the interwar years – the true beneficiaries of modernity – carrying on as though no discontinuity existed at all between their own lives and those of the past. To be sure, these suburban dwellers, and the middlebrow culture that they consumed, were an utterly modern phenomenon. The expansion of literacy after the 1870 Education Act had created a mass literary market that had not existed previously. Cinema, along with radio and television, were new technological inventions. The mass transport systems that facilitated the expansion of the suburbs were also a recent development. Along with the suburbs themselves, they enabled a large number of people to adopt a completely new kind of lifestyle – that of the commuter, travelling every morning to their place of work in town, and returning every evening to a separate realm of domestic bliss. Even the houses that made up the suburbs were modern – equipped with bathrooms, indoor plumbing, electric lighting and gas-fuelled kitchens. Oscar Deutsch's Odeon chain of cinemas built from 1928 onwards also emphasized the modernity of the suburbs in terms of their amenities, sited as they were explicitly

in suburban locations, and drawing on the popular modernity of Art Deco in their architectural design (Richards 1984, 38).

Despite these modern characteristics, though, much of the aesthetic of the suburbs, and the cultural tastes of their inhabitants, emphasized continuity with the past rather than a separation from it. Between 1919 and 1939, 4 million new suburban homes were built in England, converting 'what had been the most urbanized country in the world at the end of the First World War [into] the most suburbanized by the beginning of the Second World War' (Hollow 2011, 203). In their aesthetic style, these suburbs drew on the principles established by Ebenezer Howard and the garden cities movement in the 1910s. With their large gardens and semi-detached houses, the suburbs evoked a fantasy of a pre-industrial age – the country cottage and the smallholding. The estates containing them were arranged in a non-linear fashion, the houses clustered around small 'village greens' and along self-consciously winding streets. Their visual aesthetic also evoked earlier ages. Virginia Woolf complained of 'Queen Anne furniture (faked, but none the less expensive)' (1942, 118). The fake half-timbering and small leaded windows of the 'Tudorbethan' style referred back to the architecture of the sixteenth century, and the carriage lamps affixed to entrance porches suggested a Georgian inheritance.

This mish-mash of different historical references suggests a very different attitude to time from that favoured by the modernists, and elicited much derisive comment from them. Rather than the separation of past and present, in middlebrow culture we find that boundaries are blurred. The past and the present co-exist, the past conceived not as a vanished world to be researched meticulously by historians, but rather as a psychological and cultural resource – an imaginative space – close at hand, to be drawn on as needed. Historical accuracy is valued less than the notion of the past as a series of moods and images that serve to secure the consumer's present-day experience with a sense of continuity and inheritance.

Film offered a particularly potent medium for expressing this particular conception of time, and Sue Harper has pointed to the popular series of Gainsborough melodramas as embodying such attitudes (1994, 129). Later in this chapter I shall discuss the purposeful way in which *The Man in Grey* (Arliss 1943) argues for the past as an ever-present influence on the present, as I have suggested happens in the architectural aesthetics of the suburbs. Here it is worth noting the criticisms levelled at the most successful film of the series, *The Wicked Lady* (Arliss 1945), which closely follow the rhetoric outlined above. The review in *The Monthly Film Bulletin* characterized the film precisely as blurring the boundaries of taste and time, suggesting that it resembled a 'novelette on high-quality art paper' and complaining of its dialogue, 'which wanders un-certainly between seventeenth and twentieth century idiom'. The review concluded that the film's account of the past was 'as false as ye olde tea-shoppe' (anon. 1945c). Simon Harcourt-Smith in the *Tribune* also evoked the design style of the suburbs in his description of the film's 'tatty Merrie English Roadhouse atmosphere, with the bowls of "daffies" on the gate-legged tables' (quoted in Cook 1996, 55). Gavin Lambert simply remarked that it was difficult to take seriously because 'its notion of wickedness was so suburban' (quoted in Lovell 2001, 202).

Ealing films

I shall return to the Gainsborough costume cycle, but first I note the presence of similar ideas about time in the Ealing films already mentioned, albeit expressed rather differently. J.B. Priestley is a key presence here, and, of course, the importance of his association with middlebrow culture in this period would be hard to overstate. Dismissed as a 'tradesman of letters' by Woolf (1980, 318), Priestley was the epitome of social aspiration achieved through cultural production. His novels, dealing with modern life but written in a style that refused Modernism in favour of a gesture backwards to Fielding and Dickens, attracted the ire of Q.D. Leavis. Nevertheless, they were massive best sellers. *The Good Companions* (1929), in particular, helped to define the extent of the interwar market for middlebrow literature. His ability and willingness to traverse literary boundaries, writing not just novels but plays, journalism, film scripts, radio scripts and travel books, marked out both his versatility as a writer and his willingness to embrace both older and newer technologies for reaching an audience. In her scathing attack on 'The Middlebrow', Woolf reserved her *coup de grâce* for Priestley, imagining a utopian middlebrow-free world where (punningly) 'to be quite frank, the adjective "priestly" is neither often heard, nor held in high esteem' (1942, 119).

Wherever Woolf's utopia may have been, it certainly was not the British film industry, in which Priestley had been a key player since the adaptation of *The Good Companions* in 1933. His plays were adapted for cinema throughout the 1930s and 1940s, and he also wrote several original film scripts. He wrote the source play for *They Came to a City*, and he dominates the opening of the film, appearing on-screen himself to introduce the story as an explicit illustration of his own ideas about the challenges facing Britain at the end of the war. It is an illustration that is predicated on a curious re-configuration of temporality. A young uniformed couple are sitting by the roadside looking over a town, arguing about whether Britain can change as a result of the war. 'Can't you see there's got to be something like that,' says the young woman, 'or else all this will just have been a waste of time!' Priestley, passing along the road, stops to ask for a light and gets involved in the discussion, suggesting that they should take a 'good look' at the problem of post-war reconstruction. As the camera slowly moves in on him, he poses the problem as a story about a cross section of 'our people' all from different backgrounds, each of whom finds themselves 'out of their ordinary surroundings' – out of time, in fact. A series of short scenes follow, each establishing the backgrounds of the nine characters he has mentioned, and showing them each fed up for a different reason and wandering into a dark space where they suddenly 'vanish'. The 'vanishings' are marked only with the extra-diegetic sound of a gong indicating a metaphysical transition. They emerge indeed into a sort of metaphysical space – the ramparts of a mysterious utopian city, which in the course of the film they all have a chance to visit. Some – notably the businessman, the Lord and the bourgeois wife – are appalled at the vision they have been shown of a society where class barriers have been swept away and choose to return

to their old lives. Others – the elderly 'char' lady and the middle-aged spinster – choose to remain in the city. Finally, the key characters – Alice the waitress (Googie Withers) and Joe the politically disillusioned sailor (John Clements) – show a crucial ambivalence. They are inspired by the possibilities the city has revealed, but they recognize that it is not enough simply to remain there. They must return to the 'real' world and spread the news that utopia is possible and can be created in the post-war world. It is a remarkably powerful scene, a bold and uncompromising statement of the argument Priestley had been making repeatedly since his *Postscript* broadcasts of 1940. The war was being fought not to protect the vested interests of the establishment, or to preserve the Britain of the 1930s, but rather for the opportunity to rebuild society according to a new and more equable model – one where the boundaries of social class and taste are irrelevant.

The film received mixed reviews and some reports suggest that its distribution was patchy. George Elvin, of the Association of Cinematograph Technicians, claimed that it was not shown by the major cinema chains in Britain because they tended to avoid films that threatened their interests (quoted in anon. 1945d). Nevertheless, where it was screened it seems to have acted as a stimulus for debate and inspiration. It was accompanied by a 'Brains Trust'-style event at the Regal, West Norwood (anon. 1945e), and one Mass Observation respondent recalled weeping 'almost uncontrollably . . . because of the picture of what life might be like, instead of what it is' (Harper and Porter 1995, 5). It is also clear that the film was an important part of Ealing's export policy for the markets opening up in liberated Europe. It received its première not in London, but under the auspices of the ENSA in Caen, Normandy only three months after D-Day (anon. 1944).

It is a measure of Priestley's celebrity as a writer and broadcaster that his on-screen image is such a dominant feature of *They Came to a City*, and acts as a sort of guarantor of the film's purpose. We don't see the city itself when the characters go down to visit it, but instead cut back to the framing narrative where Priestley, pipe in mouth, faces directly into the camera and describes it – 'a place entirely owned and run by the people who live in it . . . [where] everybody has a reasonable chance but nobody has special privileges'. At the end of the film, again we return to Priestley. The last shot shows us his figure walking down the road away from the camera. *They Came to a City* – openly showcasing the work of a middlebrow writer, and making no attempt to conceal its theatrical origins – might also be understood to encode the promise of social and cultural dynamism that I would suggest was key to the appeal of middlebrow culture in this period.

Since 1934, Priestley had also become closely associated with a range of curious theories about the nature of time itself. The ideas of figures such as P.D. Ouspensky and J.W. Dunne are little known outside esoteric circles today, and when they are it is usually for their influence on Priestley as demonstrated by his series of 'time' plays, starting with *Dangerous Corner* in 1934, and continuing with *I Have Been Here Before* (1937), *Time and the Conways* (1937), *Johnson Over Jordan* (1939) and *An Inspector Calls* (1945). Each invites the audience to imagine time as acting in alternative ways to the rational conception of it as a linear phenomenon – characters

find that time repeats, operates according to a synchronous model or that future and past events can be predicted and altered. *They Came to a City* is not strictly speaking a time play, although its characters do find themselves in a space somehow *outside* of time – one of them worries about forgetting to postpone a friend's visit until 'the end of next week', and her daughter responds with the speculation that 'perhaps it *is* the end of next week *now*'. While Priestley was the most prominent advocate of the alternative time ideas, he was not the only writer in the mid-1940s to be influenced by them. Ealing's *Dead of Night* (Cavalcanti, Hamer, Dearden and Crichton 1945) offers a range of stories, several of which allude to non-linear conceptions of time, and all of which are contained in a framing narrative that emphasizes its cyclical nature. The characters are trapped in a repeating story whose ending is also its beginning, and several of the stories (notably 'The Hearse') are strikingly similar to the anecdotes used by J.W. Dunne in 1927 (e.g. 2001, 28) to illustrate his ideas in his long essay *An Experiment in Time*.

The utopian thrust of *They Came to a City* – its use of non-linear conceptions of time to suggest the possibility of change for the post-war future through the revisiting of a past that is not fixed, as well as its suggestion of a relationship between personal and public responsibility for the future – are also features of *The Halfway House*. The play from which this film was adapted had been described by its author Denis Ogden as 'based on a new angle of the Time Theory. In it Time stands still for a period and as a result, a collection of travellers are given the opportunity to take stock of themselves' (1948, 67). The original 1940 stage play did not mention the war at all. It was substantially re-written by the team at Ealing and the film is absolutely explicit about its wartime setting. Nevertheless, it retains the structure described by Ogden – one strikingly similar to that of *They Came to a City*. The film opens with a series of short scenes establishing the different characters and their individual problems before gathering them together in the mysterious 'Halfway House' which is said to have burned down, but at which they all arrive in due course, expressing surprise at the completeness and efficiency of the repairs. A famous conductor with a fatal disease (Esmond Knight); a divorcing couple and their daughter; a French woman, Mrs Meadows (Françoise Ronay), whose grief for her son killed in action is expressed in anger towards her husband (Tom Walls), who himself is struggling with his own guilt at having mistakenly ordered the abandonment of his ship; two black marketers; an Irishman and his English fiancée at loggerheads over Irish neutrality. All are welcomed by the mysterious innkeeper Rhys (Mervyn Johns) and his daughter Gwyneth (Glynis Johns). Gently prompted by these two to communicate with their loved ones, or to see things in a different light, all the guests find a way to work through their difficulties while in the enchanted atmosphere of the inn. But the puzzle of the inn itself remains – it appears not to have been damaged by a bombing raid that Rhys nevertheless describes in vivid and exact detail (see Figure 4.1). The newspapers in the bar are not faded or dusty, and yet they date from exactly a year previously. Gwyneth casts no shadow. The radio broadcasts programmes that are a year old. As with *They Came to a City* and *Dead of Night*, these peculiarities are increasingly debated by the guests until eventually it becomes

FIGURE 4.1   Guests at the Halfway House hear the air raid that a year ago destroyed the Inn in which they are staying. *The Halfway House* (Dearden 1944)

evident that Rhys and Gwyneth and the inn itself are caught in the past, destined to become destroyed again in a repeat of the air raid Rhys has described in such detail. 'When you go away,' he explains,

> you will have spent a night in an inn. But if you look back from the crest of the hill the Halfway House will not be here. Soon it will be as if you had never come at all. . . . It will be a picture before your eyes, gone before you realize it was there, or an echo in the hidden places of your mind. But you *have* been here, and your lives will prove the reality of the faded dream.

Perhaps the most powerful of the narratives in *The Halfway House* has to do with facing and coming to terms with death. Gwyneth – already identified as somehow returned from death – describes it to the dying musician as 'only a door open-ing . . . but it's better to walk up and knock bravely, than to be carried through'. The narrative of the Meadows and their struggle to express their grief is the prelude to the climax of the film. Mrs Meadows tries to arrange a séance – a practice to which her husband objects. Her ecstasy at hearing her son's voice 'from the other side' is cruelly undercut when it is revealed to be merely a radio broadcast of a forces greetings programme. Accepting the fact of death with dignity is offered as the correct response to grief, rather than looking to spiritualism to bring the dead 'clowning back, making tables dancing about rooms', as Mr Meadows puts it. It's a curiously prosaic position to take for a film whose central motif is an inn that

remains stationary in time. Nevertheless, in contrast to *Dead of Night*, the serial properties of time are offered as a release – an opportunity to take stock, restore relationships and re-visit bad decisions, rather than a trap that cannot be recalled or escaped. The figures of Rhys, Gwyneth and the Meadows, as well as the final sequence showing the bombing of the inn, make explicit a fact that is almost entirely suppressed a year later in both *They Came to a City* and *Dead of Night*: that sudden and violent death was an all-too-common experience during wartime. The opportunity to 'walk up and knock bravely' at the door of eternity was a luxury that audience members must have been only too aware may be denied to them. The film was in cinemas through the autumn of 1944, precisely the period of the doodlebug raids.

The films discussed above were all produced by Ealing Studios. As Jo Botting has argued, their fantastic elements mark them out as atypical of that studio's reputation for sober realism, and, with the exception of *Dead of Night*, they are among the least celebrated of the films produced there (*They Came to a City* remains the only title in the studio's entire output that is not available on DVD). Nevertheless, they retain elements of the studio's characteristic style under Michael Balcon. They start in contemporary settings, broadly endorse the ideals of the wartime consensus cycle, and, while they have moments of stylistic and emotional excess, these erupt from a set of visual, acting and editing codes that remain otherwise relatively restrained, drawn from the theatrical tradition of the well-made problem play. In each film, metaphysical experiences are openly queried and debated by characters who make various attempts to 'break the spell'. They test their situation against their understanding of the world as rational, rather than simply accepting it or taking it for granted.

Gainsborough costume cycle

The Ealing films, with their wordy emphasis on the rational discussion of time problems among collections of highly articulate but tweedily restrained characters, suggest a firmly middle-class version of middlebrow cinematic taste. The films of the Gainsborough costume cycle, by contrast, emphasize the non-linear nature of time through more visual means. It may at first seem surprising, then, to talk of the sober productions of Ealing and the flamboyant melodramas of Gainsborough in the same breath as 'middlebrow'. British newspaper reviewers treated the Gainsborough cycle with absolute contempt, as they were championing the realist version of British cinema embodied by Ealing. As we have seen, though, the terms of that dismissal were redolent of anxieties about the middlebrow and its tendency to blur taste boundaries ('a novelette on high-quality art paper'). Respondents to J.P. Mayer's survey in 1948 show none of this anxiety, frequently listing Gainsborough and Ealing productions together among their favourites (e.g. Mayer 1948, 205).

Harper has written eloquently on the visual style of the Gainsborough films, and their relationship to the historical periods they purport to represent. Her description

certainly evokes the attitude to the past which we have seen in the aesthetic of the suburbs. 'Each object', she suggests,

> is reproduced in a historically accurate way but it is placed in an unpredictable spatial relationship to other objects from different periods. The past is displayed not as a coherent whole but as a chaotic cornucopia of goods, whose meaning is uncertain but whose appearance is pleasurable. A Jacobean door, a baroque candleholder, an Elizabethan bed, a Puritan bible, a medieval firebasket combine to form a dense visual texture.
>
> *(1994, 129)*

Harper's emphasis here is on the design style of the films, but in many ways this sense of the past as placed in an 'unpredictable special relationship' to other periods extends to the psychological narratives of the films as well. This is most noticeable in the first of the cycle, *The Man in Grey* (Arliss 1943), whose curious portrayal of characters whose personalities persist across time is comparable with other popular middlebrow texts of the mid-1940s. One might compare it, for example, to the massively successful stage musical *Perchance to Dream* written by Ivor Novello and first presented in London in 1946.

    Both *The Man in Grey* and *Perchance to Dream* offer stories where the cyclical nature of time is presented as an article of faith rather than a conundrum to be debated. This is primarily achieved through casting, which emphasizes the theme of human consciousness lasting or recurring across different generations. *Perchance to Dream* is structured across three time periods – the Regency, the Victorian and the Modern. Each act tells the story of a love triangle that ends tragically in the first two stories, but happily in the third. The characters are connected across the ages by temperament and casting. *The Man in Grey* similarly sets up a parallel between the unhappy past and the more satisfactory present, offering a flashback structure in which the historical narrative is carefully framed by a prologue and epilogue that give it contemporary meaning. In the novel, the prologue is written by the wife of the modern Lord Rohan. He is absent, serving 'somewhere in France'. She is alone, awed by her husband's large house, servants and the weight of history and tradition to which she has only a tenuous claim. As in classic Gothic literature, she comes across some forgotten papers of her husband's ancestors and, in putting them in order, pieces together the historical story that forms the body of the text. By doing so, she finally achieves a sense of mastery and belonging over the house and the history it embodies. The novel then, on many levels, is concerned with legitimacy: its main narrative is set in the Regency period, and concerns a gauche heroine, Clarissa, who marries Lord Rohan – the 'Man in Grey' of the title. Cruel and selfish, he treats her with complete indifference, making it clear that her only function is to produce an heir. Both parties in this essentially dynastic union take lovers, although, even here, for Rohan, inheritance and duty take precedence over personal affection: he kills his mistress when he discovers she has dishonoured his family name by murdering his wife. The novel is replete with allusions to

the connections between past and present ages. Observing the Regency heroine's beauty, her lover reflects that it

> belongs to no particular time! Why should it? She belongs to the eighteenth century tonight; really she belongs to the nineteenth; but perhaps she also belongs to the twentieth century, to an age unborn.
>
> *(Smith 1942, 121)*

One might assume, given this emphasis on inheritance and continuity, that the novel would produce a defence of the aristocratic principle in the modern age, but it emphatically refuses such a conclusion. When we return to the modern heroine, we find her transformed into the negation of this principle. Her husband, the sole surviving member of the Rohan line, is missing in Dunkirk. Refusing to believe him dead, she lives more and more in the past:

> I deliberately shut my eyes to the present . . . in disgust and hatred of my own time, and of the war that has torn my husband from me, I became saturated in the past.
>
> *(Smith 1942, 189)*

She becomes so obsessed with the past that she starts to believe in ghosts, and on the morning that the telegram arrives confirming her husband's actual death, she too is found dead – killed by fright at what she imagined was the ghost of the malevolent mistress of Lord Rohan. In fact, the librarian who concludes the narrative prosaically confirms that her death is the result of a heart condition. 'The line is extinct now', he concludes, 'They are all gone; all dead; all crumbled into dust' (Smith 1942, 192).

The film adaptation retains this sense of past and present existing simultaneously, while remaining similarly ambivalent about the notion of a class inheritance. Harper has suggested that while the Gainsborough scripts tended to close down and regulate the layered effects of the original novels, the visual aesthetics produced by the sets and costumes triumphantly emphasized the past as a sensual experience, one not encumbered with ideas of authenticity or period accuracy (1994, 124–30). To emphasize this blurring of past and present, *The Man in Grey* replaces the multiple narrative voices of the novel with a series of objects, which are foregrounded in the prologue. This sees the modern equivalent of the Regency Clarissa (Phyllis Calvert in both roles) meeting the modern equivalent of Rokeby, her lover (Stewart Grainger in both roles), for the first time at an auction of the Rohan effects. In the film, the modern Clarissa is the sister of the last Lord Rohan, who has already been killed in action. Thus the 'end of the line' of inheritance is emphasized from the very beginning. The connections between the present and the past characters are also established immediately. A portrait of the Regency Clarissa is being auctioned at the moment they meet, and they strike up a conversation about it and the family history it is part of. The picture is unmistakably a

portrait of Calvert, thus foreshadowing her dual role in the drama, and establishing the theme of the film.

When an air raid interrupts the sale, the couple go off to dinner together. On their way out they pause over a box of trinkets – a fan, a needle-case, a snuff-box, a bird on a stick and a school prospectus. Attracted to them as a keepsake of the family, they nevertheless agree that 'It's all rather pathetic, isn't it, these bits and pieces. Although they must have meant something to somebody once' (see Figure 4.2). The past then is both devalued and accepted as a space charged with meaning. Each of the objects is displayed for the camera, which lingers over them after the room is deserted and a dissolve introduces the flashback of the main narrative. Of course, during the main narrative, each object dutifully reappears, punctuating the story at key moments with reminders of the connection forward to the modern day, and affirming exactly how 'they meant something to somebody once'. When we finally return to the modern couple at the end of the film, they are arriving late to the resumption of the auction. The box of mementos has already been sold, but it is immediately replaced by a series of other reminders that link the couple back to the historic narrative in a way that the audience are now equipped to recognize. They are late for the sale because the modern Clarissa insisted on stopping to have her fortune told by a gypsy – an echo of her historic predecessor's encounter with a gypsy fortune-teller. The modern Rokeby has a service badge for Jamaica sewn

FIGURE 4.2   Clarissa Rohan (Phyllis Calvert) and Peter Rokeby (Stewart Granger) inspect the box of trinkets belonging to their ancestors in *The Man in Grey* (Arliss 1943)

to the arm of his uniform, a reference to the origins of his historic predecessor. As they leave the house, the camera catches Clarissa at the top of a curved flight of steps at the entrance. She pauses to look up to the sunlight, declaring 'isn't it a lovely day?', and then the camera follows her down the steps in a smooth curving movement – a camera movement that exactly matches the one used previously for the Regency Clarissa when she descended the same steps after declaring it 'a lovely day' in a similar mood of romantic optimism. The sequence might be read as a sort of negative match to the hearse-driver's repeated line in *Dead of Night* – 'still room for one inside, sir!' Here, though, the motif suggests not an entrapment in the circular nature of time, but a release from it. The Regency Clarissa's romance had ended tragically, but the film suggests that by contrast the modern Clarissa's will not. The final shot shows the modern couple, unburdened by the social restrictions of their predecessors, running to catch a bus 'wherever it takes us'.

Musical

Perchance to Dream, written by and starring Ivor Novello, opened at the London Hippodrome in April 1946. I include it here partly to emphasize the point made earlier about the easy movement of middlebrow culture between media, blurring the boundaries between film, stage and novel, and partly because, like *The Man in Grey*, it demonstrates that an interest in new ideas about 'time' extended to the more populist end of the middlebrow cultural market. Novello had of course been Britain's biggest film star during the 1920s, but after the coming of sound he had concentrated on the stage, writing six massively successful musical shows between 1935 and 1951, of which *Perchance to Dream* was the most successful. It ran for 1022 performances in London before going on tour. Like other Novello shows, it exemplified a 'middlebrow' musical sensibility. The music is lush and romantic, drawing on the tradition of European Operetta rather than American Jazz. It refers back in style to the Gaiety shows of the 1890s in its self-conscious mix of spectacle and tableau-staging, and is heavily underscored by a massive orchestra and chorus. The music was modern enough to produce two wildly popular hit numbers at the time ('We'll Gather Lilacs' and 'Love is My Reason'), but old-fashioned enough to prove un-enduring in popular memory beyond the 1950s.

This blurring of old and new musical idioms, which is such a feature of Novello's musical style, is made part of the narrative in *Perchance to Dream*, which takes place across three time periods. As with *The Man in Grey*, an explicit connection is made between the characters in the modern period of the epilogue and those of previous ages, not simply through their characteristics and plot dilemmas, but also through casting. In each section, the lovers express the feeling that they have met before, and the hope that they will meet again, 'perhaps, in another time'. Again, the modern ending is offered as one of freedom of desire, in contrast to the tragic romances of the past, each thwarted by the morals of its age (inheritance in the Regency period, morality in the Victorian). The structure allowed Novello to write songs in the styles of the Georgian and Victorian ages, but also to celebrate

the continuity in style between those and the present, implying an English musical inheritance as the love song reprised in the modern section is unchanged from the Victorian one. Most importantly, though, like *The Halfway House* and *The Man in Grey*, the cross-time structure allows a series of intimations about immortality, without an expression of conventional faith. *The Theatre World* observed that 'a hint of reincarnation pervades the whole' (anon. 1945b). The critic for *The Stage* noted that the play is 'much "haunted" in the last scene by phantoms, representing other manifestations of an existence that may not be governed by our conceptions of time' (anon. 1945a). Indeed, he went on,

> Ivor Novello seems to have been studying the ideas of the space–time theo-rists . . . [he] is disposed (though not too much disposed) to be metaphysical. He suggests that Melinda (period 1818), Melanie (1843) and Melody (pre-war nineteen thirties) are not three different women but one and the same woman. 'I have been here before.'

This last comment is of course the title of J.B. Priestley's 1937 time play. But the comment is also a misquotation from the final scene of the show, where the modern Melody discussing the portraits of the ancestors of the previous acts, and musing on their histories, remarks: 'I don't think anybody ever stops, do you? I mean, we're *all part of those that have gone before*'. The comment is the culmination of a number of remarks, which have intimated a vague *déja-vu*-like consciousness of the forces of destiny working upon the characters, much as are evident throughout *The Man in Grey*. Her boyfriend's reply is typically flippant: 'Look, darling, we are still on our honeymoon. For God's sake don't go Priestley on me' (Novello 1953, 49).

Conclusion

While Priestley may have been the figure most readily associated with the 'ideas of the space-time theorists', the range of texts discussed above suggests that specu-lation about alternative models of time were remarkably embedded within the British middlebrow culture of the mid-1940s. The war is a key factor here. The texts offer a suggestion of the persistence of personality after death, and it perhaps is not too simplistic to suggest that such ideas may have given comfort to audiences dealing with bereavement. More strikingly, though, I would suggest that these films and plays articulate a series of aspirations about the future. The cyclical nature of time as presented in the films offers an opportunity for protagonists to learn from, regulate and resolve the intractable problems of the past. This is most didacti-cally presented in Priestley's own *They Came to a City*, where it is explicitly linked to the possibilities of the post-war settlement. Nevertheless, it is also a key factor in the other texts, as represented by the successful unions of the modern characters contrasting against the tragic unions of their predecessors in *The Man in Grey* and *Perchance to Dream* – resolutions that themselves are explicit about the moment of opportunity that the end of the war represents. Even a relatively conservative text

such as Herbert Wilcox's *Elizabeth of Ladymead* (1946), which stars Anna Neagle in a quadruple role as the successive wives of soldiers returning from the Crimean, Boer, First and Second World Wars, concludes on an optimistic note. Having 'met' all of her predecessors, the 'modern' heroine declares that she does not want to forget her 'ghosts' because she has learnt from them that 'our past shapes our future, and . . . my generation of women aren't doing too badly'.

Middlebrow culture emerged in Britain during the interwar years as a result of a particular confluence of key factors – the extension of literacy, the widening opportunities presented by a growth of the tertiary economy, the relative availability of new housing, the technological developments that enabled the growth of the suburbs and the development of the mass media. The generation who moved into those new suburban houses understood the nature of the opportunity presented to them. But, in the act of moving, they also understood the restrictions of the old culture they left behind. The aspirational nature of middlebrow culture was, I would argue, closely bound up with an understanding of the way that 'our past shapes our future'. The design style of the suburbs, as well as the experience of social movement and aspiration that was such a feature of middlebrow sensibilities of the interwar years, reflected this sense of a modernity that is always conscious of its debt to the past. Towards the end of the Second World War the question of the future again became urgent as the aspirations of interwar middlebrow consumers were extended to a much wider audience. The films, novels and plays discussed here represent a middlebrow attempt to respond to that urgent question through an interrogation of time itself.

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5

REHEARSING FOR DEMOCRACY IN DICTATORSHIP SPAIN

Middlebrow period drama 1970–77

Sally Faulkner

The unusual political and cultural contexts of the dying days of the Franco dictatorship in Spain gave rise to now long-admired arthouse hits, like Víctor Erice's *El espíritu de la colmena / Spirit of the Beehive* (1973) and Carlos Saura's *Cría cuervos / Raise Ravens* (1975), as well as the more recently acclaimed cult popular genre, horror, examples of which include Narciso Ibáñez Serrador's *La Residencia / Finishing School* (1969) and León Klimovsky's *La noche de Walpurgis / The Werewolf's Shadow* (1970). A cycle of middlebrow period dramas released in these years, which both responded to recent class changes and looked forward to what we now know to be the democratic change that lay ahead, has, in contrast, received little attention. Unlike the arthouse and cult horror alternatives, this cycle of seven period dramas had little significant international exposure. Even though foreign export was one of the producers' aims, and the films contained a number of transnational features – including foreign co-producers, actors and creative personnel, or addressing modernity in their plots through the disruption of domestic concerns by the arrival of cosmopolitan characters – they had limited success in this area. Instead, these period dramas, which adapted to film the work of canonical yet liberal nineteenth-century Spanish novelists, Benito Pérez Galdós, Leopoldo Alas and Juan Valera, were largely enjoyed by national audiences and worked through a number of national concerns which, I will argue, turn around questions of the middlebrow.

By naming these period dramas 'middlebrow', this chapter makes two interlinked arguments. First, the rise of the middle classes over the 1960s in Spain reconfigured the 1970s cinema audience to include a newly numerous middlebrow sector. While the key preoccupation of the industry in these years was state censorship, a group of producers, including José Luis Dibildos, José Frade and Emiliano Piedra, were also mindful of the existence of this new sector. The reconfiguration took place in the last few years before audiences shifted definitively to domestic TV viewership.[1] The appearance in TV series of the late 1970s and early 1980s of precisely the same

novels that were adapted as period dramas to film in the late 1960s and early 1970s suggests a shift of this audience to the small screen (for example, *Fortunata y Jacinta* was adapted to film by Angelino Fons in 1970, and to TV by Mario Camus in 1980). The second argument deploys textual analysis to propose that, far from the accusation of nostalgia often censoriously levelled at period drama, these films were focused not only on the equivocal present, but also on the uncertain future. The chapter will argue that, considered as a group, the cycle of films promotes both social justice and a politics of reconciliation that were essential for the hoped-for future restoration of democracy. Out of context, such causes may appear simply loosely liberal – there are certainly no specific scenes that promote universal suffrage, civic participation or representative decision-taking. Reconciliation also drove cultural initiatives under the dictatorship itself, like the '25 Years of Peace' events of 1964. However, given the context of the emergence of the films in the dying days of dictatorship, their liberal promotion of justice and reconciliation – as well as a more qualified promotion of equality – may be interpreted as rehearsing for democracy.

I choose the verb 'rehearse' and the gerund form here advisedly. If, from today's perspective, we know that the rehearsal of ideas in the early 1970s would be shortly followed by a final performance, there was no such sense of inevitability in the period. Indeed, Spain's twentieth century reminds us of the historical rehearsals that never led to a final performance, like the efforts to modernize under the dictatorship in the 1940s and 1950s. 'Rehearsing for Modernity' is the title of Eva Woods' brilliant analysis of these efforts and their scathing critique in Luis García Berlanga's *¡Bienvenido Míster Marshall! / Welcome Mr Marshall* (1952) – a film that significantly stages a rehearsal that is followed by no final performance (2008). Twenty years on, in the very different context of the early 1970s, I nonetheless echo this analysis in my own chapter title.

The 'dying days' captures the contemporary sense of a match between the evident deterioration of the physical body of the elderly Franco and that of the body politic of Francoism, subject to attack, especially from the 1960s onwards, by trade unions, students, grassroots 'movimiento vecinal' (neighbourhood movements) and Christian groups, and, increasingly in the 1970s, by Basque terrorists. It cannot be stressed often enough, however, that dictatorship was not a process of transformation from early brutality to eventual softening. While the 1960s has been dubbed a decade of 'dictablanda' (soft dictatorship) and 'apertura' (opening up), when the opening up of markets following the 1959 Development Plan was followed by a tentative opening up in the cultural sphere, the period 1969–75 was characterized by a return to hardline repression. (This period is reviewed in Manuel Huerga's portrayal of imprisonment and execution in the 2012 biopic *Salvador Puig Antich*, discussed by Belén Vidal in this volume.)

These conflicting circumstances gave rise to a highly politicized art cinema. *Spirit of the Beehive* and *Raise Ravens*, for example, nuance their critique of the military and patriarchal origins of the regime by stressing the burden of dictatorship on the young, and on women, as the country inched towards a post-Franco future. But film historians have increasingly questioned the valorization of what might be termed this 'cinema of charisma', to the exclusion of other trends. Exemplary of this revision is the reappraisal

of horror. Beyond the cinema of charisma, the industrial context for producing films in late-dictatorship Spain was apparently not propitious. The tentatively liberalizing 'aperturista' attempt to foster a Spanish art cinema to rival the New Cinema movements of Spain's (democratic) North-European neighbours in the 1960s (the 'Nuevo Cine Español' [New Spanish Cinema]) had yielded one-off arthouse hits, but, unsurprisingly, largely failed to generate significant box-office returns. According to John Hopewell, 'only a few forms of film-life survived and festered in such an economic climate' (1986, 80). Writing in 2004 of the significant commercial success of comedy and horror in the period, Antonio Lázaro-Reboll and Andrew Willis seize on Hopewell's colourful description to query the neglect of these genres (2004, 12–13), and, in further studies, question their omission from the Spanish 'cinematic canon' (Lázaro-Reboll 2005, 129). In the context of the formation of a canon in which politically interested forces sought to stress a democratic cinema for democracy (Triana-Toribio 2003, 108–11), Lázaro-Reboll's work salutes the role played by cult movie fandom and their circuits of exchange in maintaining the interest in, and availability of, films that might otherwise have been ignored and lost (2005, 129–30; 2012, 1–7).

The examination of middlebrow cinema in this period nuances this account of a dictatorship lurching from the liberalization of the 1960s to the repression of the 1970s, and a film industry lurching from charismatic exceptions to genre cinema. Beyond questions of politics and industry, a third context raises further issues: the rise of the middle class. While the very limited freedoms allowed by the regime's 'apertura' in the cultural field could be taken away (for example, the relaxing of censorship that occurred under José María García Escudero's Director-Generalship of Film and Theatre [1962–7] was reversed when hardline Alfredo Sánchez Bella took over from Manuel Fraga as Minister of Information and Tourism in 1969), the significant upward movement of individuals into the middle class (according to criteria like disposable income, car ownership and university attendance) (Payne 1987, 463–88) was not wholly reversed. While rejecting a formulaic connection between social class and culture (which I discuss in the Introduction to this volume), this chapter argues that the reconfiguration of the early 1970s Spanish film audience opened up new opportunities for film practitioners. The new middlebrow cinema that followed, while modest in relation to the number of features produced, was popular with audiences, middle-class or otherwise, and, as I have argued elsewhere in connection with 'Tercera vía' (Third Way) films (2013, 7; 119–23), would go on to provide a blueprint for the ways both middlebrow Spanish television and film would develop at the end of the decade.

If consideration of the middlebrow audience aims to bring into view a previously overlooked filmgoing sector, my argument that the middlebrow films rehearsed this audience for democracy finds common cause with recent historiography of the Spanish Transition. As part of a wider defence of the analysis of social movements (Palgrave Studies in the History of Social Movements 2013–), Tamar Groves, for example, notes that rather than attribute the success of Spain's Transition to the political elite, or to the popular protests that influenced the decisions of the elite, the role of often informal social movement in civic society might also be considered. Groves focuses on primary-school teachers of the end of the dictatorship

period, some of whose activities, she argues, constituted a 'Rehearsal for democracy' (2013, chapter 3) in the classroom. While their procedures and practices are difficult to capture for subsequent analysis (as in many film audience studies, oral history is a key source), such informal movements nonetheless contributed to the gradual change of 'society's discourses and day-to-day practices. . . . These changes eventually aided the political transformations by disseminating democratic values and procedures throughout society as well as official institutions in all levels' (2013, 4). Noting that the adoption of democratic practices in the workplace among other white-collar professionals, like lawyers, doctors, psychiatrists and architects, has thus far received little scholarly attention (2013, 8), Groves concludes that 'the middle class was slow to oppose the regime, and when it did so, it avoided taking part in actions openly considered a threat to order and peace [and] found alternative ways' (2013, 221).[2] The cinema is not a classroom, but it is nonetheless productive to place the middlebrow films under discussion alongside such informal social movements in an attempt to capture a historical moment when a nation rehearsed for democracy – for the imposition of democracy on an unrehearsed society may fail. In a context in which more overt protest films were banned (under Sánchez Bella *Canciones para después de una guerra / Songs for After a War* [Patino 1971/6] was banned in 1971, for example), the unthreatening middlebrow film takes its place as an 'alternative way' for audiences to oppose the regime and tentatively imagine political change.

Cycle of middlebrow period drama 1970–77

Liberal nineteenth-century authors like Galdós were marginal figures in Franco's Spain until the late 1960s. However, the combination of the approaching fifty-year anniversary of the novelist's death (1970) and the new liberalization of the 'apertura' allowed their partial return via theatre, TV and film adaptations.[3] If this return of Spanish authors through Spanish TV and performance arts sounds like a wholly domestic matter, we might recall that the Francoist 'apertura' was a matter of window-dressing and surface appearances – windows and surfaces to be gazed upon from outside Spain. Side-stepping the inconvenient fact of the maintenance of a repressive 1930s dictatorship forty-odd years on, Franco's Spain sought to appear liberal to the outside world through advances in culture, and therefore be a destination for foreign investment and tourists, and a candidate for membership of the European Economic Community (EEC).[4]

Second, for all the focus on the nation through adapting the national canon and casting national stars, two of the cycle were co-productions, and thus included foreign actors in secondary but important roles, including Liana Orfei as Jacinta in *Fortunata y Jacinta* and Pierre Orcel as Pablo in *Marianela*. Other films included foreign actors thanks to the producer's contacts. For example, after co-producing Orson Welles' adaptation of Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, *Campanadas a medianoche / Chimes at Midnight* (1965), which was shot in Spain, Piedra secured for *La Regenta* the British Shakespearean actor Keith Baxter for the role of Fermín, in addition to Nigel Davenport as Álvaro (see Table 5.1). Just as scholars have seen early co-production

TABLE 5.1 Period dramas 1970–77

Title[5] / Director / Date / Author of novel / Date of novel	Production companies	Transnational / Cosmopolitan actors or characters	Countries released and release dates	Audience figures	Awards
Fortunata y Jacinta (Fortunata and Jacinta) / Angelino Fons / 1970 / Benito Pérez Galdós / 1886–7	**Co-production:** Emiliano Piedra Producción (Spain); Mercury Produzzione (Italy)	Italian actors: Bruno Corazzari (as Maxi); Liana Orfea (Jacinta)	Spain: 6 April 1970; Portugal: 27 October 1971	1,467,250 (Spain)	**Screenwriters' Circle Awards, Spain** 1970: Won Best Actress: Emma Penella **Fotogramas de Plata, Spain** 1971: Nominated Best Spanish Actor: Terele Pávez **National Performers' Guild, Spain** 1969: Won Best Director: Angelino Fons; Won Best Female Star: Emma Penella **Sant Jordi Awards, Spain** 1970: Won Best Spanish Film: Angelino Fons; Won Best Spanish Film Actor: Emma Penella
Marianela / Angelino Fons / 1972 / Galdós / 1878	**Co-production:** Cámara Producciones Cinematográficas S.A. (Spain); Société d'Expansion du Spectacle (France)	French actor: Pierre Orcel (Pablo); worldly outsider character: Teodoro Golfín	Spain: 30 October 1972	957,766 (Spain)	
La duda (Doubt) / Rafael Gil / 1972 Title of original novel *El abuelo (The Grandfather)* Galdós / 1897	Coral Producciones Cinematográficas (Spain)	Cosmopolitan Spanish actor Fernando Rey plays worldly outsider the Count of Albrit	Spain: 11 July 1972 (San Sebastián Film Festival); Spain: 7 September 1972	552,488 (Spain)	**National Performers' Guild, Spain** 1972: Won Best Film; Won Best Music: Manuel Parada; Won Best Technical Achievement **San Sebastián International Film Festival, Spain** 1972: Won Best Actor (Tied) Fernando Rey

Film / Director / Year / Author / Date	Production company	Character	Release	Box office	Awards
Tormento (Torment) / Pedro Olea / 1974 / Galdós / 1884	José Frade Producciones Cinematográficas S.A. (Spain)	Cosmopolitan Spanish actor Paco Rabal plays worldly outsider Agustín Caballero	Spain: 2 September 1974	2,044,876 (Spain)	**Screenwriters' Circle, Spain** 1975: Won Best Actress: Concha Velasco **Fotogramas de Plata, Spain** 1975: Won Best Spanish Actor: Concha Velasco **National Performers' Guild, Spain** 1974: Won Best Female Star: Concha Velasco; Best Supporting Actress: Amelia de la Torre; Best Music: Carmelo A. Bernaola **San Sebastián International Film Festival** 1974: Won Best Spanish Language Film: Pedro Olea
La Regenta / Gonzalo Suárez / 1974 / Leopoldo Alas / 1885	Emiliano Piedra Producción (Spain)	British actors Keith Baxter (Fermín de Pas); Nigel Davenport (Álvaro Mesías)	Spain: 19 December 1974; Soviet Union (Moscow Film Festival) July 1975	674,512 (Spain)	**National Performers' Guild, Spain** 1974: Won Best Actress: Charo López **Moscow International Film Festival, Soviet Union** 1975: 'Golden Prize': Gonzalo Suárez
Pepita Jiménez / Moreno Alba / 1975 / Juan Valera / 1874	Emaus Films (Spain)	British actors Stanley Baker (Pedro de Vargas); Sarah Miles (Pepita Jiménez)	Information unavailable	967,269 (Spain)	**National Performers' Guild, Spain** 1975: Won Best Actor: Pedro Diéz del Corral; Best Cinematography: José Luis Alcaine; Best Set Decorator: José Antonio de la Guerra
Doña Perfecta / César Fernández Ardavín / 1977 / Galdós / 1876	Azor Films (Spain)	Worldly outsider character: Pepe Rey	Spain: 24 October 1977	309,562 (Spain)	

Sources: www.imdb.com and the 'Base de datos de películas calificadas' at www.mcu.es; consulted 4 June 2015.

arrangements, such as those made between France and Italy in the 1940s, as precursors for European integration,[6] it is tempting also to interpret Spain's co-productions with European partners in this period as a rehearsal for joining the EEC. Such co-productions enjoyed a 'Golden Age' in the 1960s (Dapena 2013, 26–7), precisely the decade in which negotiations to join the EEC began (1962) (this did not occur until democracy was restored, with final accession in 1986). Beyond the space available in this chapter, the day-to-day collaborative practices between co-producing creative teams might also be considered.[7]

Middlebrow audience: 'raising up a dejected Spanish cinema'

This section proposes the emergence of a new middlebrow sector within a reconfigured Spanish viewership with some caution. In 2002, Annette Kuhn, writing on British cinema of the 1930s, outlined four approaches to audience studies:

> a text-centered focus on the spectator-in-the-text addressed or constructed by the film; contextual analysis of film reception based on information derived from historical sources, primarily contemporary film reviews; quantitative media research designed to identify attitudes, trends, and behaviours among audience groups; and smaller-scale ethnographic studies carried out through in-depth interviews with individual spectators.
>
> *(Summarized by Vernon 2013, 465)*

Given that the period dramas do not self-reflectively explore spectatorship, and without ethnographic studies for this period, what follows is therefore a speculative attempt to capture some traces of audience response through a quantitative analysis of audience attendance figures[8] and a contextual analysis based on contemporary film reviews. Written by a small group of male critics, some of whom were themselves also film censors, and published in the still censored press, these reviews constitute a compromised sample;[9] nonetheless, the newspapers examined include those with the largest readership in late Francoism (*Ya*, which ran from 1935 to 1996) and they were written in an era when the film reviewer still played a role in reflecting and shaping audience taste.

The audience figures in Table 5.1 show that middlebrow period dramas connected with the public. By way of comparison, we may note that two of the most successful box-office horror hits (Lázaro-Reboll and Willis 2004, 13) attracted nearly 3 million (*The Finishing School*) and 1 million (*The Werewolf's Shadow*) respectively.[10] With the exception of the comparative failure of *Doña Perfecta*, which demonstrates both that the cycle had run its course and that there was a shift of the audience to TV by 1977, every period drama attracted over half a million spectators, with *Fortunata y Jacinta*, *Marianela* and *Tormento* matching, and even surpassing, these audience figures for horror hits.

Contemporary reviews of the first five films of the cycle praise the pictures' quality and craftsmanship (especially through high production values, performance

style and a respectful treatment of the literary original). Reviews of the final two films, *Pepita Jiménez* (1975) and *Doña Perfecta* (1977), are negative, conveying not only the comparative drop in quality, but also that the success of the cycle was rooted in the particular liberalizing-yet-tightening circumstances of the early 1970s discussed. The positive reviews refer to quality ('calidad'), sobriety ('sobriedad'), restraint ('mesurado'), integrity ('probidad') and dignity ('dignidad') – words that stress the films' distinctiveness from the often crude excesses of contemporary genre cinema. Comedy – along with horror, the other key popular genre of the period – with its wordy dialogue and enthusiastic gesticulations seems to be the unspoken 'other' cinema of many accounts. This review of *Fortunata y Jacinta* by Antonio de Obregón, published in the conservative though relatively open-minded *ABC* (founded in 1903 and still a major Spanish daily today), is typical:

> In this production we like: the sobriety and respect that have guided the filmmakers; the conversations in the Madrid salons, which adopt a normal, measured tone, and thus make this a film that avoids excessive shouting and gesturing; the way so many chapters of the original literary narrative have been summarized, without detracting from the characteristic essence of our nineteenth century; the choice of actors; the care taken over historical recreation. . . . All this has been captured by Angelino Fons, which shows he has integrity and craftsmanship.
>
> *(1970)*[11]

Rather than hint at superiority to contemporary alternatives, Félix Martialay of the pro-Franco *El Alcázar* pinpoints *Fortunata y Jacinta*'s quality, or 'artistic dignity', as follows: 'a film of great artistic dignity, a high level of production quality, fidelity to a crowning example of Spanish literature, and to the spirit and period it describes, and with first-class performances' (1970).[12] Pascual Cebollada in the – of course – also conservative and Catholic *Ya*, the most popular daily of late Francoism, we recall, repeats the positive stress on mise-en-scène and fidelity to Galdós's original (1970).

This mix of quality and craftsmanship is echoed in reviews of *Marianela*, *La duda / Doubt*, *Tormento* and *La Regenta*. Writing of *Marianela* in *ABC*, Lorenzo López Sancho (1972) salutes the performance of Rocío Dúrcal in the title role in terms that recall the way Emma Penella was celebrated for her Fortunata: the seriousness, dignity and drama of performances that contrast with the stress on surface beauty in the actresses' earlier appearance in comedies and musicals. (Dúrcal was a child star in *Canción de juventud / Song of Youth* [Lucia 1962] and while Penella is best known today as the executioner's daughter in *El verdugo / The Executioner* [Berlanga 1960], contemporary audiences would have associated her star persona with the more widely available comedies and musicals.) This was especially the case with *Marianela*'s Dúrcal, who, in this title role for Fons as director and Luis Sanz as producer, allowed wardrobe and make-up to transform her (up to a point) into the deformed urchin of Galdós's novel. This transformation was admired as 'worthy of respect' by López Sancho, though he points out that the beauty of the Asturian landscape captured in cinematography and mise-en-scène

compromises a plot that denounces society's treatment of an outsider. (This observation anticipates the main objection to what would be called, from the 1980s, 'heritage' cinema: allowing surface spectacle to override narrative critique.) Cebollada, again, writes of the 'worthiness' of Dúrcal's performance (1972), while an anonymous reviewer in *Informaciones* comments 'I add my applause to those given to Dúrcal by the audience at the film's première . . . with its cinematic value, its formal beauty and Rocío Dúrcal's admirable performance, [*Marianela*] departs from the dejected Spanish cinema and rises up to more worthy ventures' (1972).[13] Reviewers' responses to Dúrcal's career trajectory allow us to perceive the shift from the genre cinema of her early career to Spain's new quality, middlebrow trend.

ABC's López Sancho also saw Rafael Gil's *La duda / Doubt* as 'raising the level of the national cinema' (1973), with *Ya*'s Cebollada stressing the director's 'excellent craftsmanship' (1973) and an anonymous reviewer in Pueblo saluting Fernando Rey's 'sensational' performance (anon. 1973). Reviews of *Tormento* likewise stressed quality markers like 'respect' for literary originals (García de la Puerta 1974) and 'excellent craftsmanship' (Demian 1974) – even though the pro-regime press fixated on this more daring film's inclusion of a swear word (Arroita Jauregui 1974; Ramos 1974). A few months later, the last film of the cycle to attract both audiences and positive press reviews, *La Regenta*, was saluted as a work of 'undoubted quality' (Rubio 1974) and 'an essential reference in any study of Spanish cinema' (Martialay 1975), though misgivings were aired about the presence of foreign actors Baxter and Davenport.

As Sue Harper pointed out in 1992 when interpreting quantitative audience data for 1930s British film, there is no 'automatic fit' between class and taste. 'We must beware', she argues,

> of imposing a false homogeneity upon audience taste. An appropriate metaphor for both cinematic culture and taste might be that of the patchwork quilt. The whole is composed out of different political colours and different cultural / historical orientations. There may be a dominant colour in any one period; but the quilt is held together by fragments of earlier modes of perception.
>
> *(1992, 103–5)*

Many factors influenced audience response to films in this period, but the overlap between the historical evidence of a new middle class and the insistence on 'quality' in the press is suggestive. The overlap also needs to be placed in the context of gradual change in exhibition. At the end of the 1960s, 'the average Spanish film was a cheap pot-boiler made for the Spanish poor who couldn't afford television' (Hopewell 1986, 79). As economic conditions painstakingly, and patchily, improved, cinema prices were allowed to rise in 1971 and 1972 (Hopewell 1986, 82). The press reviews thus also show that this new sector wanted a promise of quality and craftsmanship in return for their increased ticket price.

Progressive film critics in the period, like Diego Galán and Fernando Lara, writing in the weekly magazine *Triunfo* (1946–82; critical of the regime from 1968), are nicely sceptical about this tendency in film reviewing. Lara summarizes responses to *Marianela*, for example, as 'the description of the external characteristics of a product, as if it were a pretty object in gift wrap' (1972).[14] However, if we read press reviews symptomatically, they are especially revealing of the middlebrow. As standards of living gradually improved and educational levels soared, especially in university attendance among women (Longhurst 1999, 114), we see a cycle of period dramas that was characterized by high production values, especially the performances of actors like Dúrcal and Penella (who seem to be redeemed in these dramas from their previous association with genre cinema),[15] historical recreation in mise-en-scène and respectful treatment of canonical literary originals. It seems reasonable to propose, then, that the period witnessed the emergence of a new middlebrow audience, which enjoyed these middlebrow period dramas.[16]

Middlebrow film and its pedagogical role: 'a mirror for today's realities'

'Middlebrow' is always contingent. In the particular circumstances of late-dictatorship Spain, when, on the one hand, a new middle class had come into existence to become a new audience sector, and, on the other, the film industry was in a process of renewal following the failure of the New Spanish Cinema, the formal characteristics of the middlebrow film cluster around quality and craftsmanship. As we have seen, reviewers were able to measure and quantify these with some precision through references to film form. With less precision, fidelity to literary originals was also stressed. It is in fact in the very vagueness of the references to the original novels that we can pinpoint the operations of Bourdieu's cultural field. Rather than call on facts to demonstrate literary quality, reviewers may appeal to a cultural value that they do not need to prove, as participants in the field already agree that it exists. Vagueness in reference to the literary canon had the further advantage of enabling reviewers writing in the censored press to gloss over elements that dissented from Francoist ideology. In this context, the description of *Tormento* by *ABC* reviewer López Sancho as a 'good Galdosian mirror of past events for today's realities' (1974) is therefore relatively daring. The literary originals thus play a dual role: as the older art they bestow cultural capital on film; by holding up a mirror to the present, they also tutor audiences in lost liberal values. In the context of censorship it would have been impossible to stage – even in the safe genre of period drama – Spain's most recent experience of democracy, the Second Republic. In addition, as we have seen, when the middle class did become politicized in the late dictatorship, there is evidence that those in employment avoided direct confrontation. However, novels set in the late nineteenth century, a period when conservative, liberal and democratic ideals jostled, were ideal. Doubly safe as both distanced in time and contained within the apparently anodyne genre of period drama, directors and their creative teams in these films could elude

censorship and rehearse the very ideas that we now know would ensure the Transition to democracy that lay in the country's near future, though the final performance of those ideas was far from inevitable in the period.

Promoting social justice

That a portrayal of the hardship and injustice suffered in the mining villages of Asturias should have passed the Franco censors is remarkable; that it should have been seen by nearly a million Spaniards while the dictator remained in power is more remarkable still. In 1934, Franco, then Major-General under the Second Republic, and acting as unofficial advisor to the Minister of War, repressed revolutionary miners in the region with such brutality that he earned the nickname 'the butcher of Asturias' (Preston 1993, 123). More recently, Asturian miners rose to prominence again when in the early 1960s illegally striking workers constituted the main source of protest against the regime – some of those detained in the 1964 strikes remained in jail as late as 1970 (Faustino Miguélez, quoted in Preston 1993, 716). Among those who signed a protest letter in 1963 in defence of the miners, and later supported a demonstration against their treatment, was the director of *Marianela*, Angelino Fons.[17]

The reason that Fons could hold up this 'Galdosian mirror' that linked 'past events' to 'today's realities' in this politically sensitive area has everything to do with the middlebrow. First, as the press reviews reveal, the critique of injustice in Asturias could be smuggled past the censors under cover of quality and craftsmanship and a loose acknowledgement of Galdós's canonical status. A second feature of middlebrow cinema in this context is its 'pedagogical' role: the film portrays social injustice to teach audiences to condemn it, which, although the future was far from clear to those audiences, we might now interpret as a rehearsal for an egalitarian, democratic future.[18] It is easy to criticize middlebrow *Marianela* for the vagueness of this message, but an overt political treatment of poverty and the ill treatment of the destitute would not have passed: indeed, Florentina's allusion to 'identifying with the communists' was cut in the Censorship Board's revision of the script (Navarrete 2003, 109). Accessibility is also key. Galdós fans may regret director Fons and scriptwriter Alfredo Mañas's omission of the novel's ironic narrative frame, through which the narrative becomes a retrospective riposte to the erroneous assumptions made about Marianela by a group of tourists (Pérez Galdós 1960, 755–6), which may have overlapped interestingly with Spain's contemporary tourist boom. However, this period drama, which retains instead the sentimental melodrama of the original, struck the balance of passing censorship and securing an audience.

As a rehearsal for democracy, the achievement of *Marianela* is its championing of social justice by condemning, like the original novel, the treatment of orphan outcast Marianela, and, in a daring departure from the novel (Navarrete 2003, 116), by condemning the hardships suffered by the working-class miners of this politically most significant of regions. However, in stressing this suffering, the film makes a further, odd departure from the novel. In the original, the reader discovers

that Marianela suffered an accident as an infant owing to a moment of neglect by her father, a street-lighter (Pérez Galdós 1960, 692). In the desire to stress the hardships of mining, Fons and Mañas transform this account into one where the baby is neglected and injured in the mines – but they also make Marianela's drunken mother responsible. The film thus offers a critique that is more direct than the novel, but in doing so, unlike the novel, it misogynistically apportions blame on the bad – first drunken, then suicidal – mother.

Two years later another Galdós novel of the hardships suffered by an orphaned girl allows director Pedro Olea to hold up a further instructive Galdosian mirror to audiences. If the downtrodden Marianela was the vehicle to explore poverty and neglect (as well as unfit mothers) in the Asturian mining villages, in *Tormento*, the still poor but wage-earning and Madrid-based Ámparo (Ana Belén) allows Olea, who co-wrote the script with Ricardo López Aranda, producer José Frade and Ángel María de Lera, to explore other injustices. A surface appraisal of the plot of both novel and film – Ámparo's comfortable future as the wife of wealthy Agustín is threatened by her past love affair with the priest Pedro Polo, who calls her his 'Torment' – might lead audiences to expect that this was one more example of the early 1970s vogue for films that timidly explored the heterosexual love affairs of priests. In fact, *Tormento* treats tormented Polo (Javier Escrivá) sympathetically (unlike, stresses Olea in interview, the novel [Lara y Galán 1974, 33]), locating its critique of injustice instead in the prejudiced behaviour of Ámparo's bigoted employers and family relations: the petit-bourgeois Bringas family.

John Hopewell offers an excellent summary of the relevance of *Tormento*'s plot to 1974 Spain:

> a maid (the oppressed Spaniard?) is courted by a Spanish nabob back from the Americas (liberal capitalism?), despite the opposition of the nabob's staid and reactionary Catholic cousins (Francoist petit-bourgeoisie?) and the maid's past affair with a priest (Spain's compromising past endangering its capacity for change?)
>
> *(1986, 96)*

For Hopewell, 'these parallels are hardly exploited [and] diluted into an anecdotal period piece' (1986, 96), but I suggest this is because he measures them against arthouse standards of political critique. If measured as a middlebrow film, however, whose quality period aesthetics targeted a reconfigured middlebrow Spanish audience, and whose social critique is fused with an accessible pedagogical role, *Tormento*, with its audience of over 2 million, is a success. No trenchant critique of the kind that Hopewell admires in contemporary arthouse alternatives here. Instead, the middlebrow occupies the middle ground that avoids incisive condemnation (for example, of the clergy) and favours instead the promotion of a loose critique of social injustice. There is no explicit promotion of a welfare state in the film, but it does ask why orphans Ámparo and her sister were at the mercy of a series of potentially corrupting parties: the Catholic church; hypocritical relations;

and wealthy men seeking mistresses. The press reviewers, as we have seen, fussed over Rosalía (Concha Velasco), calling Ámparo a 'whore' (puta) at the end of the film, which seems to have caused them to miss its final words, Agustín (Paco Rabal)'s extraordinary defence of male superiority, overlapping with a racial supremacy he no doubt learned in the colonies from which he has just returned. He observes to his new mistress: 'Let them say what they want. What do social order, morality and the family and all of that matter to me? I'm done with principles. To hell with the consequences. What does it matter if we don't get married, if we can love each other, don't you think?'[19] The film ends, so we never find out what Ámparo thinks. Condemning social injustice here apparently comes at the misogynistic price of silencing the female protagonist.

A similar operation is at work in Suárez's *La Regenta*, which was produced by Piedra, with a script by Juan Antonio Porto. In the social milieu of original author Leopoldo Alas's provincial aristocracy, Suárez's film is a rehearsal for democracy as it condemns an abusive Catholic church – and the hypocritical society that sustains it. Like all of the films in the cycle, temporal displacement and the safe genre of period drama allow muted critique. First, it seems plausible that audiences may have read the clichéd adultery plot as a straightforward allegory, whereby Ana Ozores (Penella again) is fought over by two competing lovers. To echo the interpretation of *Tormento* that Hopewell moots, *La Regenta* might be read as a lesson in how an ill-educated wife, played by a popular Spanish star (Spain?), lacking effective guidance from her senior spouse (Franco?), is prey to the self-interested advances of a lecherous priest and local playboy, both played by foreign actors (the Church? foreign capitalism?). However, if the film uses Alas's novel as a mirror in which contemporary audiences may perceive the corruption of the church, as in *Tormento*, it does so by silencing its female protagonist. Like the famous climax of the original novel, Ana ends up husbandless, loverless and rejected by the church in a swoon on the floor of Oviedo cathedral (though the film spares her the novel's profanation of her body, embraced by an altar boy which Ana perceives as the kiss of a toad [Alas 1995, 700]). Above all, she is voiceless.

Promoting reconciliation

Taken together, *Marianela*, *Tormento* and *La Regenta* – alongside the less successful *Pepita Jiménez* and *Doña Perfecta*, which also condemn an abusive church through the portrayal of female victims – make up a cycle of films that tentatively promote social justice in the areas of welfare, education and working conditions through the experiences of women of all classes in the face of class hypocrisy and clerical abuse. In tandem, a complementary, compensatory tendency may also be perceived in the cycle, which promotes reconciliation.

Doubt, for example, directed by Rafael Gil, with a script by Rafael Silva based on Galdós's *El abuelo* (*The Grandfather*), promotes such reconciliation through its plot. The Count of Albrit (veteran Fernando Rey) returns from the Americas,

like *Tormento*'s Agustín, on the death of his only son to discover that one of his granddaughters is illegitimate. Resolving to discover and oust the impostor, Albrit is thrown into 'the doubt' of the title over which child to reject. Falling victim to the charms of both girls, he resolves to accept both; love triumphs over honour when he then decides to end his days with the child that is in fact revealed to be illegitimate. The film's promotion of reconciliation is highly significant, for it rehearses – at a temporal distance, and within a period drama – Spain coming to terms with the destructive legacies of the past to secure its future (of course today that process of 'coming to terms' with Civil War and dictatorship has been sub-jected to much critique, in particular for its neglect of Republican memory during the Transition). However, though Albrit may lay aside the besmirched honour of his cuckolded son, and the new generation represented by his granddaughters may move towards the future untainted, the adulterous wife and mother of the girls, Lucrecia (Analía Gadé), may not be forgiven.

If the promotion of social justice and reconciliation is undercut by a retrograde, if not misogynist, treatment of female characters in these films, I end this chapter by returning to the first example of the cycle, *Fortunata y Jacinta*, as it offers an alterna-tive vision. Like other examples, Fons, with another script by Mañas, portrays a nineteenth-century world of male ineffectuality, which is so suggestive in a Spain ruled by a fading dictator. Along with the blind Pablo (*Marianela*), the hopeless Francisco de Bringas (*Tormento*), the risible elderly husband Víctor (*La Regenta*) and the deceased father and husband of *Doubt*, *Fortunata y Jacinta* offers the spoilt play-boy Juanito (Máximo Valverde). The narrative of both novel and film thus turns instead around the strength, resilience, enmity and eventual partnership between the two rivals for Juanito's affections, his fertile working-class mistress Fortunata (Penella), and his childless bourgeois wife Jacinta (played by the Italian Liana Orfei) (see Figure 5.1).

FIGURE 5.1   Rivals Fortunata (Emma Penella) and Jacinta (Liana Orfei) share the frame. *Fortunata y Jacinta* (Fons 1970)

Fortunata y Jacinta is best described as middlebrow, not only for the quality and craftsmanship admired in it by contemporary critics, but also for its pedagogical address. Four years before Víctor Erice made the child as metaphor for post-Franco Spain famous in *Spirit of the Beehive*, Fons's Fortunata makes the following address to her unborn child. As she prepares for her confinement in Cava de San Miguel street, precisely as the restored monarch King Alfonso XII parades on horseback outside her window, she coos to the unborn infant 'you'll get to know this world . . . it may not be as good as everyone might want . . . I'm sure that now it will change with your arrival. The world will fill with joy when you arrive'.[20] Made in the year that Franco named Prince Juan Carlos his successor, Fons uses Galdós as a mirror in which audiences might perceive Spain's future restoration of the monarchy, with democracy represented by the unborn child: '[the world] will change with your arrival'.

The film furthermore rehearses audiences by promoting reconciliation. Unlike *Doubt*, reconciliation does not take place in spite of female adultery, but, extraordinarily, because of it. In what constitutes a hymn to sisterly solidarity, both novel and film end with Fortunata, who is dying of postnatal complications, entrusting her illegitimate newborn son Juanito to the care of Jacinta, her former rival. Jacinta's portrayal by dubbed Italian actress Orfei, playing opposite star Penella who dubs her own instantly recognizable deep voice, adds another layer of meaning, as the reconciliation could be read as one between nations as well as classes. The lessons for a democratic future are clear: the rewards of reconciliation will be a stable future for the new generation. Thus Fons, via Galdós, moves away from the tired metaphor of the Spanish Civil War as a fraternal conflict between the 'Two Spains' to retrieve the importance of sisterhood to narrate the nation (see Figure 5.2).[21]

FIGURE 5.2   Sisterly solidarity: dying Fortunata bequeaths her newborn son to Jacinta in Madrid's Cava de San Miguel Street. *Fortunata y Jacinta* (Fons 1970)

Conclusion

This chapter has offered a reading of middlebrow culture as a result of the recon-figuration of the cultural field triggered by the expansion of the middle classes, but has also argued that, in the particular circumstances of late-dictatorship Spain, mid-dlebrow films played an important pedagogical role in tutoring future democratic citizens. While a new middlebrow audience seems to be addressed by the reviews that stress quality and craftsmanship, this censored press could not comment on the ways the films' promotion of social justice and reconciliation constituted what we may now understand as a rehearsal for democracy – a rehearsal that recent historical accounts have also uncovered in contemporary social movements.

It is striking that every narrative in this cycle of period dramas explores the consequences of a lack of a strong father figure, which suggestively overlaps with Spain's contemporary rule by a fading patriarch. In the film narratives, this absence allows strong alternative figures to emerge, which tentatively looks forward to equality as a pillar of the future democratic constitution (1978). Yet many of the films undercut this promotion of equality with an unsympathetic, and occasion-ally misogynist, treatment of female characters, which sometimes even reverses the proto-feminism of the original novels. That this was accepted by audiences that may have contained a majority of women is also surprising (see note 16). From a feminist perspective, the rehearsal for democracy in Fons's *Fortunata y Jacinta* is therefore most acute. It stages a reconciliation between sisters that looks to the future and thereby counters the familiar narrative of the past Civil War as a conflict between brothers. As Spain's peaceful Transition to democracy remains the major achievement of the modern nation today, even as some of its legacies are now questioned, films like *Fortunata y Jacinta* show that middlebrow cinema played its part in rehearsing the nation for this protagonist role.

Notes

1 From 1973–83 the number of film screens dropped from 5632 to 3510 and ticket sales from 278 to 141 million; between 1966 and 1969 TV ownership had doubled from 1.5 to 3 million sets (Smith 2011, 202).

2 Groves makes this point in connection with employment. I am grateful to Maria Thomas for pointing out that the oppositional student movement was largely middle-class.

3 The return was partial as 1969 was the year Sánchez Bella took over as Minister of Information and Tourism. So while Buñuel's *Tristana* and Fons's *Fortunata y Jacinta* were allowed, Piedra's proposal for a *La Regenta* adaptation by Buñuel was rejected (Galán 2004). José Luis Borau adapted *Miau* for Televisión Española (TVE, Spanish state TV) in 1968, but was so enraged when the censors cut half of his material that he withdrew the project and refused to work for TVE again for twenty-five years (Martínez de Mingo 1997, 104).

4 As the 1970 anniversary approached, and after the prestigious and still active academic journal *Anales Galdosianos* had been established at the University of Kentucky in 1966 (Palacio 2012, 319), the now *aperturista* regime reversed its previous rejection and allowed Buñuel to film *Tristana* as what Luis Navarrete calls a 'symbol of the *apertura* that the regime wanted to present to the outside world' (2003, 76). All translations from Spanish are my own.

5 Though Buñuel plays an important role in pushing the censors to allow Galdós adaptations – his *Tristana* was the first, approved at script stage in 1969 – and thus in inspiring the cycle of nineteenth-century novel adaptations, I have excluded this film owing to its exceptionality as the work of a fêted international auteur. Although *Fortunata y Jacinta* and *Marianela* were co-productions, I have been unable to trace their release outside Spain.

6 Anne Jäckel notes the commercial success of Franco-Italian co-productions before 1957, the year that the Treaty of Rome was signed (2003, 234–5).

7 Questions might include whether there is evidence to suggest that the film set, like the workplaces analysed by Groves, was a space for a rehearsal for democracy.

8 Box-office statistical data collection began in 1966.

9 Pascual Cebollada and Marcelo Arroita Jaúregui, for example, were censors (Lázaro-Reboll 2012, 48, n. 17). Press clippings consulted are those held at the Filmoteca Española, Madrid; most lack page numbers. *Triunfo* is currently available online.

10 *The Finishing School*: 2, 942, 805; *Werewolf*: 1, 021, 900. 'Base de datos de películas calificadas' at www.mcu.es, consulted 4 June 2015.

11 'De esta producción nos gustan: la sobriedad y el respeto que han guiado al realizador, las conversaciones en los salones de Madrid, en tono normal y mesurado de modo que no es una película ni gritada ni gesticulada; la manera de resumir tantos y tantos capítulos de la narración original sin desvirtuar la esencia tan característica de nuestro siglo XIX; la elección de intérpretes, el cuidado de la ambientación. . . . Todo ha sido captado con probidad por Angelino Fons, con una buena técnica'. This quote also appears in Navarrete 2003, 104.

12 'Film de gran dignidad artística, de un nivel de producción elevado, de gran fidelidad a una obra cimera de nuestra letras y al espíritu y tiempo descritos en ella, y con una interpretación de primerísimo orden'.

13 'Uno mi aplauso a los muchos que el público le dedicó la noche del estreno . . . con sus valores cinematográficos, su belleza formal y el admirable ejercicio de actriz que realiza Rocio Dúrcal [*Marianela*] se despega del alicaído cine español actual para alzarse a zonas más estimables'.

14 'La descripción de las características externas de ese producto, como si de un bonito objeto envuelto en papel de regalo se tratase'.

15 Núria Triana-Toribio reads Alfredo Landa's star trajectory similarly, from genre cinema to more 'dignified' performances (2003, 128).

16 There is also a potential connection between the rise in female education levels in the 1960s and this cycle of period dramas based on the literary canon in the 1970s: with the exception of *Doubt*, these are all feminocentric dramas owing to their strong female protagonists.

17 I am extremely grateful to Antonio Lázaro-Reboll for alerting me to this point. The letter, addressed to the Minister of Information and Tourism, Fraga, titled 'Intellectuals Against Torture and For Democratic Freedom', and published in Rome, can be found at: http://www.filosofia.org/hem/196/96311re.htm. Consulted 28 July 2015. Alfredo Mañas, scriptwriter of *Marianela* and *Fortunata y Jacinta*, was another signatory.

18 I take 'pedagogy' from Manuel Palacio's influential study of television in the Transition (2001, 91–121).

19 'Que digan lo que quieren. ¿Qué me importan el orden, la moral, la familia, ni nada de eso? Se acabaron los principios. Me pongo el mundo por montera. ¿Qué importa que no nos casemos si podemos amarnos, verdad?' Galán and Lara quote this speech in the title of their Olea interview (1974).

20 'Conocerás a este mundo que no será todo lo bueno que uno quisiera . . . . Estoy segura que ahora cambiará con tu llegada. La tierra se tiene que llenar de alegría cuando tú llegues'. Through the unborn child Fons may also be making reference to Alfonso XII's succession by his own unborn son. Alfonso died in 1885, and his son became Alfonso XIII on his birth the following year.

21 I am inspired to recuperate Galdós's portrayal of sisterhood for later generations by Jo Labanyi's interpretation of a similar moment in Luis Lucia's *De mujer a mujer / From Woman to Woman* (1950) (2007, 39). If Labanyi's pioneering 2000 study of the nineteenth-century Spanish Realist novel demonstrated in detail its role in the formation of the modern nation, this chapter hopes to suggest that those novels contributed again to modernization a century later.

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6

THE MEXICAN ROMANTIC SEX COMEDY

The emergence of Mexican middlebrow filmmaking in the 1990s

Deborah Shaw

The middlebrow and Mexican film culture: an introduction

This chapter charts the rise of a new genre in Mexican cinema in the 1990s: the romantic sex comedy, a middlebrow cultural form that was born from changes in a national cinema culture that saw the development of the multiplex in Mexican cities and the development of a new professional bourgeoisie working in new mediascapes. This, together with a funding landscape that was moving away from a state-sponsored national arts cinema, resulted in more commercial forms of filmmaking that created a new cinema-going middle class. In the light of these social and cultural shifts, this chapter reinterprets Bourdieu's notion of the middlebrow ('culture moyenne') as a 'second rate imitation of legitimate culture' (1999, 323). It argues that what constitutes the middlebrow is not fixed, and can and has changed as the nature of the middle classes themselves changes, and the national context to which it is applied shifts.

Mark Jancovich, in an article on pornography and the middlebrow, has suggested that new configurations of the petite bourgeoisie create new forms of middlebrow culture (2001), and I argue that this is the case in a series of films released in the 1990s in Mexico. Jancovich writes this in relation to pornography and the middlebrow, yet it is very apposite to the Mexican context in which new middlebrow cinematic identity formations are located in the realm of 'quality' romantic sex comedies. This chapter examines the two most commercially successful Mexican films of this period, *Sólo con tu pareja / Love in the Time of Hysteria* (Cuarón 1991) and *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas / Sex, Shame and Tears* (Serrano 1998), and considers the ways in which high and low cultural registers are mixed together to form a new Mexican middlebrow. I examine the representations of gender, class and ethnicity

in this new cinema for the middle classes, and argue that these films present this class on screen for the first time. The films both mock and admire the aspirational lifestyles of the male protagonists; create new post-feminist female characters; and erase the social reality of the majority of working-class mestizo Mexicans.

For Pierre Bourdieu in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979; English translation 1984), the middlebrow ('culture moyenne') creates an accessible version of high culture for the aspirational middle classes. Copying and imitation are central to this formulation: he refers to sub-substandard copies of high culture; accessible versions of 'pure art'; 'film adaptations of classical drama and literature'; and 'popular arrangements of classical music' or 'orchestral versions' of popular music (1999, 323). The suggestion is that the petite bourgeoisie engage in a misreading, taking the copy for the original, as they do not have the cultural capital to know otherwise. Another central conception of Bourdieu's middlebrow is the bringing together of expressions of high and low culture to create a middle – a mainstream version of high culture. Middlebrow culture for Bourdieu is 'entirely organized to give the impression of bringing legitimate culture within the reach of all, by combining two normally exclusive characteristics, immediate accessibility and the outward signs of cultural legitimacy' (1999, 323).

Most critics writing on the middlebrow see it as a mode that borrows from both high and low cultural spaces, and, following Bourdieu, both makes the difficult accessible and intellectualizes the popular. Sally Faulkner, in her book on the history of Spanish film from its inception to 2010, uses it as a dominant category in assessing Spanish cinema. She writes of a tranche of filmmaking being characterized by the middlebrow and her work 'highlights the in-betweenness of the middlebrow film, which often fuses high production values, serious – but not challenging – subject matter, high – but not obscure – cultural references, and accessible form' (2013, 8).

Turning to reception, the key concept is that the middlebrow audiences are always aiming upwards to impress and enhance their cultural capital and legitimacy as cultural subjects. However, as Bourdieu has also theorized, culture and *habitus* are interconnected with social structures rooted in class, regulating taste, thoughts, feelings and 'bodily postures' (Reed-Danahay 2005, 107). When these social structures change so too will cultural expressions of the category. While it has traditionally been a top-down concept, middlebrow culture can also find its expressions in traditionally 'low' cultural forms as class identities are redefined. This has, this chapter argues, been the case in Mexican cinematic culture beginning in the 1990s. My notion of the middlebrow in relation to domestic Mexican popular films of the 1990s corresponds to this mixing of traditionally high and low cultural forms in a bid to create new middle-class audiences for Mexican films. However, rather than making difficult, elitist culture more accessible, Mexican middle-class romantic sex comedies of the 1990s have infused easily consumed popular culture with some carefully selected high-cultural references, and have added intellectual content through their philosophical musings on the nature of relationships. Thus, they are middlebrow, but they come to the middle from a reverse position to that which is theorized by Bourdieu.

In his article, 'Naked Ambitions: Pornography, Taste and the Problem of the Middlebrow', Jancovich argues that the habits of the old petite bourgeoisie, which informs Bourdieu's theoretical framework, and was developed in response to 1960s French society, have been replaced by a new distinct breed of professionals 'involving presentation and representation (sales, marketing, advertising, public relations, fashion, decoration and so forth) and in all the institutions providing symbolic goods and services' (2001, 359). With a focus on mainstream soft porn, Jancovich explains new cultural forms openly embraced by this new class:

> The old petite bourgeoisie tried to avoid being judged through a tactic of respectability and restraint through which they hoped to pass unnoticed, but the new petite bourgeoisie, on the other hand, tries to avoid judgment by rejecting the values of the old petite bourgeoisie. In an attempt to avoid being identified as petite bourgeois, it rejects the ethic of respectability and restraint and defines this ethic as 'outmoded' and 'fuddy-duddy'. In its place, it therefore adopts an ethic of fun, which is defined as 'modern' and sophisticated in opposition to the tastes of the old petite bourgeoisie.
>
> *(2001, 359)*

Jancovich's explanation is useful in understanding the popularity of Mexican romantic sex comedies for domestic middle-class audiences from the 1990s. He identifies a new middlebrow that finds one of its cultural expressions through a pornographic mainstream and magazines such as *Playboy* (1953–). Here I follow Jancovich to argue that in Mexican film of the 1990s we witness new middlebrow expressions of culture through romantic sex comedies, expressions that have emerged through a new petite bourgeoisie working in fields such as marketing, the media and public relations.

According to Bourdieu's original formulation, 'Middle-brow culture is resolutely against vulgarity' (1999, 326).

> The denial of lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, servile – in a word, natural – enjoyment . . . implies an affirmation of superiority of those who can be satisfied with the sublimated, refined, disinterested, gratuitous, distinguished pleasure forever closed to the profane. That is why art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences.

Thus, as Bourdieu also acknowledges, social identity is relational and is forged by distinguishing itself from the tastes and behaviours of others (1999). As with the middle-class consumers of soft porn, the new Mexican middlebrow that emerged in the 1990s finds a cultural expression in representations of sexuality that are resolutely in favour of vulgarity. In contrast to lowbrow sex comedies, such as the Carry On Films in England of the 1970s, the pornochanchadas popular in Brazil during the 1970s and 1980s, the Spanish sex comedies of the early 1990s and the

US teen sex comedies of the late 1990s and early 2000s, these are films with intellectual and artistic pretensions. These mainstream romantic sex comedies helped reinvigorate Mexican cinematic culture in the 1990s and created a new class of cinemagoer. In line with Jancovich's formulation of a new professional middle class, a number of the lead characters in both the case studies here (*Love in the Time of Hysteria* and *Sex, Shame and Tears*) work in advertising and the media.

Mexican film culture of the 1990s

The domestic success of a number of films in the 1990s, including *Love in the Time of Hysteria* (Cuarón 1991), *Como agua para chocolate / Like Water for Chocolate* (Arau 1991), *Entre Pancho Villa y una mujer desnuda / Between Pancho Villa and a Naked Woman* (Bermán and Tardán 1996) and *Sex, Shame and Tears* (Serrano 1998), heralded a commercial turn in Mexican filmmaking through a focus on identity, eroticism and humour (Zavala 2011). *Sex, Shame and Tears* is a good example of this new commercial filmmaking targeted at the middle and upper classes. Its profits were in excess of 118 million pesos (around $11.8 million) and it had a recorded audience of 5 million (Vargas 2002). Sergio de la Mora (2006, 171) observes that the film made more profit than *Star Wars: Episode I − Phantom Menace* (Lucas 1999). This success of a new type of film can be attributed to the films themselves and the development of new multiplexes that provided new viewing conditions more suitable for young, wealthy audiences. De la Mora notes that there was 'an explosion in the construction of multiplex cinemas' in shopping malls, with 2800 screens owned by four major companies: Cinepolis, Cinemax, Cinemark and Organización Ramírez (2006, 177).[1]

There was a conscious aim to forge a cinematic culture for the middle classes and to create a more commercial cinema for them which both succeeded in reinvigorating film-going in Mexico and in further accentuating class divides. As Ignacio Sánchez Prado notes, cultural policy under the neo-liberal regime of President Salinas de Gortari's Mexico of the 1990s resulted in a new mediascape and the further segregation of classes.[2] Sánchez Prado discusses the emergence of a new upper- and middle-class spectator in the 1990s, able to take advantage of cable subscriptions to US channels offering situation comedies and romantic comedies, and multiplex cinema tickets priced at three times more than the daily national minimum wage (2014a, 3). He notes that 'the working classes unable to afford such products remained tied to telenovelas, popular music genres such as norteño and cumbia, and other genres available to them at no extra cost' (2014a, 3).[3] Yet, as class divides were strengthened by these changes, divides between high and low culture were weakened by the new commercialization of Mexican cinema. Film production prior to the 1990s could be characterized by traditional separations of lowbrow and highbrow culture. Highbrow culture was the preserve of the national film institute (Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía, IMCINE) that funded art cinema productions not expected to be profitable. Lowbrow culture found its expression in low-budget popular films, exploitation cinema that featured crude

sex comedies and border films with a focus on drug trafficking (de la Mora 2006, 140; Rashkin 2001, 14–15; Vargas 2002). Changes of policy for IMCINE helped shape a new middlebrow commercial cinema; referring to films such as *Cabeza de vaca* (Echevarría 1991), *Like Water for Chocolate*, *Cronos* (del Toro 1993) and *Danzón* (Novaro 1991), de la Mora notes that 'the "new cinema" of the 1990s showed that the Mexican film industry was able to produce quality films with national prestige and popular commercial appeal' (2006, 140).

   This was part of a deliberate national film strategy, whereby IMCINE embraced a mixed economy of private and public funding, and selected more commercial projects to support. The state-funded institute began to follow a co-production model, insisting that films applying for support had secured at least 40% private funding (de la Mora 2006, 139), a model that encouraged a more commercial type of filmmaking. First-time filmmakers were fully supported under the nationally funded first director scheme (Zavala 2011), yet this support was given to films with commercial potential, and the fact that both *Love in the Time of Hysteria* and *Sex, Shame and Tears* were produced under this scheme demonstrates this shift away from traditional forms of art cinema.[4] The decade then saw a new form of commercial cinema watched in new multiplexes to reflect the changing cultural tastes of a new professional middle class accustomed to US imports. This explains the emergence of what had been a non-Mexican form, romantic sex comedies, seen in films like *Sex, Shame and Tears*, *Between Pancho Villa and a Naked Woman* and *Cilantro y perejil / Recipes to Stay Together* (Montero 1998).

Case study 1: *Love in the Time of Hysteria*

This commercial turn led the way for the transnational impact of later films such as *Amores perros / Love's a Bitch* (2000) and *Y tu mamá también / And Your Mother Too* (2001), as the directors Alejandro González Iñárritu and Alfonso Cuarón learnt to tell stories in a way that would appeal to both domestic and international audiences. Nonetheless, new middlebrow films of the early 1990s characterized by the Mexican sex comedies were primarily intended for, and consumed by, domestic audiences. While some films, *Like Water for Chocolate* in particular, did manage to break through to US markets, neither *Love in the Time of Hysteria* nor *Sex, Shame and Tears* was a global success. This was for a number of reasons, but primarily because non-English-language films are usually aimed at cinephile audiences expecting to see examples of art cinema, and the romantic sex comedy genre into which these films fit meant that there was no place for them within the global art film market.[5] Thus, Mexican middle-class audiences hungry to see exaggerated and comic representations of themselves on screen in formats borrowed from US televisual situation comedies or romantic comedies have very different expectations to bourgeois film audiences in the US or Europe when watching 'foreign' language films. It may be argued that the middlebrow as a mainstream cultural category primarily exists in the audience's first language, as the 'foreign film' principally occupies high culture (or exploitation cinema in the case of cult viewing habits).[6]

Alfonso Cuarón's first film, *Love in the Time of Hysteria* (1991), predates the rise in multiplexes by a few years, with the US company Cinemark opening its multiplexes in Mexican cities from 1994 (Sánchez Prado 2014b, 79).[7] Nonetheless, it can be seen as providing a formula for national multiplex films, and it was the film credited with bringing the middle classes back to the cinemas (Zavala 2011; Sánchez Prado 2014b, 67–75). It is also interesting to note that the choice of title for the English-language release references Gabriel García Márquez's *El amor en los tiempos de cólera* (1985) / *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1988) in its English translation. This is a neat marketing device that attempts to connect audiences to a well-known, globally successful Latin American novel and film, and also provides a further example of the mixing of high and low cultures.[8]

Love in the Time of Hysteria is a modern Mexican take on the screwball comedy and features Tomás Tomás (Daniel Giménez Cacho) as a serial womanizer. The approach to sex is conservative in gender terms and is rooted within the popular, with Tomás shown to be bedding numerous attractive women. It appears to raise a serious issue, in that Tomás is diagnosed as HIV positive; however, HIV/AIDS is very insensitively mined for its humorous potential. It is used to present a narrative joke: the protagonist does not really have the condition, but is tricked into thinking that he does by a doctor's assistant, who is one of his jilted lovers, and this leads him to the 'comic' decision to kill himself by putting his head in a microwave. Much of the humour is also generated by farcical scenarios, such as when Tomás attempts to juggle a sexual encounter between two women, one with his sexually demanding boss Gloria (Isabel Benet) and the other with Silvia (Dobrina Liubomirova), the assistant of his best friend, a doctor. Audiences see him cross between two apartments while naked via a window ledge, in an attempt to pleasure them both without being discovered, while also secretly admiring his new neighbour in his journey across the ledge. Tomás mends his ways when he falls in love with this new neighbour Clarisa (Claudia Ramírez), a glamorous flight attendant, but not before titillating the audiences with numerous scenes of his sexual conquests. A romantic comedy ending ensues once Tomás discovers that his HIV diagnosis is a deception and the pair decides to get married instead of committing suicide by jumping from the famous Torre Latinoamericana (Latin American Tower).[9]

As seen in this brief plot summary, this film appears to fit comfortably in the category of the lowbrow, with the story of Tomás's conquests and situation-comedy-style mishaps and romantic comedy ending. Yet the film takes great delight in mixing cultural and social registers. The lowbrow sexual antics are carried out by bourgeois characters and take place in modern, urban and wealthy locations. Tomás is paradigmatic of the new petite bourgeoisie, and viewers are encouraged to envy his lifestyle, while simultaneously mocking him; he is comfortably off, a bachelor living in a desirable apartment and a publicist who has to write witty jingles to sell products (in the film he is struggling to find the right slogan for a 'jalapeños Gómez' advert). As Sánchez Prado (2014b, 170) notes, the publicist is a new figure in Mexican cinema from Cuarón's *Love in the Time of Hysteria* onwards, and a publicist features in films such as *Amores perros* and the rom-coms *Ladies' Night* (Tagliavini 2003) and

Cansada de besar sapos / Tired of Kissing Frogs (Colón 2006). All the characters in *Love in the Time of Hysteria* are, in fact, middle class: his best friends are a doctor and his wife, and his lovers include a doctor's assistant, a flight attendant and his boss, who works in advertising. The characters are light-skinned Mexicans of European origin and the women conform to Western ideals of beauty, best illustrated in Clarisa, who embodies European notions of classical beauty. The majority mestizo population are almost entirely absent from this image of the country, and the only foreigners seen are Japanese doctors who are mined for their comic potential and do not escape their condition of cultural stereotypes (Shaw 2013, 165).

   The film is, then, careful to present a Mexico that is recognizable to its middle-class audiences, and the bawdy sex scenes take place principally in carefully managed interiors where the harsh realities of Mexico City's poverty and pollution can be filtered out. *Love in the Time of Hysteria* was the first film in Cuarón's 'green' period, followed through in *A Little Princess* (1995) and *Great Expectations* (1998) (Shaw 2013), and it is in the mise-en-scène that we see the fusion of popular sexual antics with auteurist ambitions that comes to define this Mexican middlebrow. Cuarón's style in his green period, developed with his cinematographer Emanuel Lubezki, is classical and stylized, and stamps an auteurist seal on his early production in both this, his first Mexican production, and his follow-up US films. This is well illustrated in the scene in which we see his boss Gloria seated at the piano at the apartment of Tomás's best friends (see Figure 6.1). The shot of a seated Gloria is really an excuse to display a luxurious mise-en-scène, whose purpose is to give the film artistic quality. Everything in the scene can be categorized as classical opulence, from the piano, the Romanesque statue, the rugs and animal skins to the furniture, fittings, green-painted walls and carefully arranged matching indoor foliage. At the centre of this scene is the pale-skinned Gloria, cast as classical

FIGURE 6.1   Gloria (Isabel Benet) plays the piano while waiting for Tomás to appear in *Love in the Time of Hysteria* (Cuarón 1991)

seductress, tastefully playing the piano. In this way a scene that in narrative terms is no more than the prelude to a sexual encounter is given, via mise-en-scène, a stamp of quality.

This mixing of high and low cultural registers is apparent in both the mise-en-scène and the use of a classical soundtrack featuring Mozart, which scores instances of sexual farce throughout. In another central scene Carlos attends a wedding party at which he has sex with the new bride. This is clearly a base act, yet the way it is filmed exudes privilege and status. Classical music accompanies the scene and there are shots of the banquet and Mexico's privileged classes dressed in all their finery. The setting is a rural one and sophisticated cinematic techniques are employed to raise the artistic status of what is a crude sexual encounter: some children discover Carlos and the bride in the act in one of the first examples of cinematographer Lubezki and Cuarón's trademark use of the long take, which provides the opportunity to present a rural forest scene in a film otherwise set in urban interiors. Throughout *Love in the Time of Hysteria*, this technique of the long take is employed in tandem with a detailed mise-en-scène and classical score, all of which work to reproduce a middle-class aspirational lifestyle that communicates wealth and privilege to create a middlebrow status for what would otherwise be a bawdy sex comedy.

The film does, then, demonstrate the deceptions at the root of the institution of marriage, yet the clichéd phallic popping of the champagne cork of the following shot as the bride returns and the guests toast the married couple indicates that the lifestyle and trappings of wealth will prevail over infidelities. Humour, then, is more important than social critique, a balance that tipped in favour of the latter in Cuarón and Lubezki's next Mexican film, *And Your Mother Too* (2001). *Love in the Time of Hysteria* does counter the Don Juan myth, or, in this case, the Don Giovanni myth (Shaw 2013, 164; 174), as it mocks the stereotype of the Latin lover by placing Tomás in farcical situations and ensuring that he does not get away with his deceptions of women.[10] Nonetheless, along with his doctor friend, the audience is encouraged to enjoy his success with women and their function in the narrative is to desire Carlos. Thus, as with much post-feminist popular culture, although the female characters occupy a series of professions and are of independent means, their world revolves around a heterosexual male object of desire. Overall, the film presents a conservative gendered message common to the romantic comedy in its sexual politics of the promiscuous Tomás, and in the way that he embraces the monogamous heterosexual ideal, leaves behind his womanizing ways and settles down with Clarisa. HIV/AIDS is no longer a threat as Tomás abandons his risky sexual practices. It was indeed only ever a spectre and can perhaps be seen as an unconscious metaphor for the poorer classes who threaten to spoil the party, but never appear in this film.

Case study 2: *Sex, Shame and Tears*

Sex, Shame and Tears has a number of points in common with *Love in the Time of Hysteria* and its success is also due to the way it turns the romantic sex comedy into a middlebrow cultural form. Thus, we have plenty of instances of sexual encounters between middle-class, attractive, fair-skinned heterosexuals; comic situations arising

from infidelity between these characters and the creation of love triangles; and scenes that take place mainly in the interior spaces of desirable apartments that could belong to any young comfortably off city resident from around the world. Another way in which the film occupies the territory of the middlebrow can be seen in its harbouring of intellectual ambitions, with characters philosophizing about the nature of relationships and sex while they engage in relationships and sex.

As is the case with *Love in the Time of Hysteria*, this film also places bawdy sex scenes in carefully constructed interiors and edits out the harsh realities of Mexico City, and here too characters are light-skinned Mexicans. While in the first case study the majority mestizo population is simply edited out of the picture, in *Sex, Shame and Tears* they only feature as bystanders in the few street scenes in the film and as servants in the interior scenes.

Like *Love in the Time of Hysteria*, *Sex, Shame and Tears* is a romantic sex comedy that is fairly explicit in its representation of sexuality, albeit in a mainstream form that stays clear of anything resembling pornography: the characters are mainly clothed or semi-clothed throughout their encounters. Nonetheless, like its predecessor, it is conservative in its gender representations in that while the characters reflect on what love and sex mean in modern Mexico, they do so within traditional expected gender constructs of Mexico in the 1990s in an era of post-feminism and the questioning of machista stereotypes. The story and character types aim to present the faces of contemporary middle-class Mexicans, exaggerated for comic effect. Carlos (Víctor Huggo Martin) is a frustrated writer whose frequent philosophical discussions of sex and his empowered wife have, he believes, rendered him semi-impotent. He is married to Ana (Susana Zabaleta), a highly sexed photographer employed by a marketing company, who is frustrated by her husband's apparent lack of sexual interest in her. Miguel (Jorge Salinas), who is both handsome and the most machista of the male characters, works in advertising, and is unfaithfully married to the high-maintenance Andrea (Celia Suárez), an infertile glamour model. The two unattached characters are there to create new love triangles between the characters: they are Tomás (Demián Bechir), a hedonistic traveller, and María (Mónica Dionne), an international zoologist. As the two intellectuals of the group María and Carlos are there to elevate the diegesis to include a treatise on the nature of love for this new Mexican bourgeois class.

Sex, Shame and Tears' main premise and source of humour is the battle between the sexes. The characters shift from cheating on each other to a failed attempt at chastity when the men and women move into two separate apartments after both the male and female characters decide that they cannot live together, such are their differences. While many examples of contemporary Latin American art cinema are focusing on the fluidity of gender and adopting new queer strategies (*XXY* [Puenzo 2007] and *El último verano de la Boyita / The Last Summer of La Boyita* [Solomonoff 2009], to name a couple), the Mexican romantic sex comedy appears to demonstrate that popular, mainstream films work by maintaining the gender divide. As with *Love in the Time of Hysteria*, the female characters can be seen to fit within post-feminist models.

Rosalind Gill explains that post-feminism is best understood as a 'distinctive sensibility, made up of a number of interrelated themes' and outlines that:

> [t]hese include the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; an emphasis upon self surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline; a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; and a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference.
>
> *(2007, 147)*

The women in both films are professionals who earn their own living, and are of independent means. Yet the attainment of a man is their main goal, and the film is, as is expected of the genre, explicit in its thesis that women need a man. Gill explains well the ways in which post-feminism has contradictory and complex articulations of female gender constructs, both repudiating and co-opting elements of feminism:

> On the one hand, young women are hailed through a discourse of 'can–do' girl power, yet on the other their bodies are powerfully re-inscribed as sexual objects; on one hand women are presented as active, desiring social subjects, yet on the other they are subject to a level of scrutiny and hostile surveillance that has no historical precedent.
>
> *(2007, 163)*

The women in *Sex, Shame and Tears* question their relationships with their male partners, and their acceptance of their partners' womanizing ways, or lack of attentiveness, but they never question their own essential femininity, the importance of being sexually alluring, or their need for a man to complete them. Andrea does leave Miguel, but the suggestion is that he is not the right man for her, and the romantic comedy ending is provided through the reconciliation between Ana and Carlos.

It can be argued that post-feminism has become the dominant mainstream form of representation of women in popular culture (McRobbie 2004; Tasker and Negra 2007), and not just in the Anglo-American context in which it is usually discussed. Post-feminism also suits this Mexican middlebrow cultural vehicle, as it inhabits a middle position that allows for the continuation of a heterosexual consensus, where the control of women takes place in the realm of women's ability to attract men. It is telling that the academic zoologist María has a breakdown towards the end of the film as it is revealed that she cannot live without men and is insecure about her ability to attract them. She asks the womanizing Miguel to take her back (they were once lovers), and when he rejects her, she phones her ex-husband to ask him if they can get back together. Her desperation is rather pathetic and the film seeks to bring into question the whole feminist project through the double standards of this feminist, needy academic. To be the same as men is to go against one's very nature, according to the arguments of Ana, when trying to reassure María. Ultimately, then, essential gender distinctions lie at the root of these filmic representations.

Yet despite the rigid gender dichotomies, to create a middlebrow romantic sex comedy, there is simultaneously also fluidity in the merging of high and low cultural forms. The film mixes registers and thus, on the one hand, traditional lowbrow pleasures are located in the portrayal of the infidelities, the intense

verbal fights between the couples and the excessive performances of the actors, particularly the women, who are often hysterical. Yet, on the other, the highbrow is found in the philosophical interrogation and intellectual questioning of what constitutes modern heterosexuality. There is thus a double discourse: viewers can enjoy laughing at the lowbrow antics of the characters and the light sexual representations, while simultaneously enjoying the highbrow, if rigid, thesis of love in the modern world. This fusion of registers thus works to interpellate an implied middlebrow spectator who can enjoy both intellectual and sensual pleasures.

The early part of the film is pure farce: loud arguments, sexual partner swapping, jealousies and humour dependent on essentialist gender stereotypes and sexist jokes. Gradually, a more serious approach is revealed when men and women move in together and decide to adopt a life of chastity (this inevitably fails, as the rules of the genre demand). Antonio Serrano seeks to enhance the cultural standing of the film by making it a meditation on new configurations of relationships in contemporary Mexico. Carlos has been asked by a magazine to write an essay about love and this provides a pretext for a more serious approach to the topic. Towards the end of the film Carlos finally publishes his article on love, which he titles 'Sexo pudor y lágrimas'. In this way, the film again seeks to inject elements of high art (the literary essay) into a popular art form. Another serious element is provided by Tomás, who refuses the rules of middlebrow culture (as the film articulates them) and can only remain in the lowbrow spaces of promiscuous sex and alcoholism. Unwilling or unable to engage in self-reflection or change to embrace the ideal of heterosexual monogamy, after a failed and desperate drunken attempt to seduce women at a club, Tomás kills himself by walking into an empty lift shaft. This interruption of tragedy disrupts both the comedy and the expectation of the genre, albeit momentarily.

Sally Faulkner has pointed out that while critics working on middlebrow culture may stress 'its potential to be formally interesting and politically oppositional' (2013, 7), 'it is crucial to point out, however, that [they also] often explore formal mediocrity and political conservatism' (2013, 7–8). This 'political conservatism' is certainly evident in both *Love in the Time of Hysteria* and *Sex, Shame and Tears*. They, like many Mexican movies that will follow their model through the 2000s, construct their love stories upon a disavowal of the social conflict and class diversity that defines contemporary Mexico City. While *Sex, Shame and Tears* intellectualizes the nature of relationships, there is an interesting lack of any class or ethnic consciousness. The fact that most of the action occurs within two apartments in Polanco, one of Mexico City's exclusive neighbourhoods, allows for a 'whitening' of the landscape. As Sánchez Prado notes, Serrano's *Sex, Shame and Tears* follows the way that in Cuarón's *Love in the Time of Hysteria* 'most of the film takes place in indoor spaces, which, in turn, allows the plot to develop in a decidedly middle-class space that puts under erasure the social diversity of the city' (2014a, 4).

This is seen in the fact that the servant classes in the film are precisely only that, and are never seen to have any agency or desires of their own. They are there to serve their apparently more interesting masters and mistresses. In a telling lack of irony and class awareness from both screenwriter and director, the character Ana, who has left Carlos to move in with her girlfriends and is celebrating her newfound liberation,

FIGURE 6.2 The female servants carry Miguel's possessions to Carlos's apartment in *Sex, Shame and Tears* (Serrano 1998)

says to the maid who brings them snacks: 'Oh, Clarita, with you, and without my husband, life's going to be much easier.' This follows the previous shot where María introduces the photos she has taken of the three female friends by saying 'trio of emancipated women overexposed'.[11] This lack of awareness that their emancipation is built on the oppression of the servant classes is also apparent in the previous scene when Carlos asks Miguel if he would like to move in with him, following the latter's separation from Andrea. There is no dialogue, but the female servants are seen carrying Miguel's furniture with the three male friends walking in front of them with no sense that they should carry their own belongings (see Figure 6.2).

Conclusion

Both *Love in the Time of Hysteria* and *Sex, Shame and Tears* present us with examples of a new middlebrow cultural form, the quality romantic sex comedy. These films indicate areas of interest in the question of monogamy versus promiscuity; the place for romantic love in a socially permissive culture; and the forms of expression of male and female (hetero)sexuality. Yet, despite the focus on sex, both films are conservative regarding their representations of gender and sexuality: homosexuality is absent; there are no signs of love across ethnic or class divides; characters are not seen fully naked, and the missionary position is preferred. Thus, the identities of the new petite bourgeoisie are endorsed by mainstream cinematic forms that carefully avoid images of poverty and ethnic diversity, and celebrate new social and sexual freedoms while warning against their excesses.

While there is no necessary correlation between a middle-class audience and a middlebrow film, the present case studies suggest such a correlation between characters and implied audiences in films targeted at a new class of men and women

finding professions in PR, marketing and sales. *Love in the Time of Hysteria* and *Sex, Shame and Tears* entertain middle-class audiences without challenging them to question their privileged status: the Mexican romantic sex comedy allows audiences to laugh, find mild sexual titillation in soft-core representations of promiscuous sex, and see cinegenic actors with disposable incomes in desirable surroundings. All the while, audiences are given enough edifying elements to gain the sense that they are receiving something of cultural value. Thus, the films feature classical scores, an artistic mise-en-scène in the case of Cuarón's film, and philosophical musings on relationships in the case of Serrano's.

Perhaps for these reasons, the genre helped to revive the domestic film industry in the 1990s and it has continued to exert a hold over the Mexican box office in the following years. In the following decade it is significant that the biggest domestic hit was *No eres tú, soy yo / It's Not You, It's Me* (Springall 2010), a romantic comedy star vehicle for Eugenio Derbez, who plays a doctor seeking to get back with his wife, who has rejected him, and then trying to find new love. The Mexican trailer, without naming him, highlights the fact that it was made by the same producer as *Sex, Shame and Tears* (Matthias Ehrenberg), and clearly attempts to emulate Serrano's film. It achieved this, and its success shows the persistence of the appetite for romantic comedies in Mexico: it was the fourth most commercially successful film in Mexican history at the box office, and was exhibited in 34% of screens in the country (Caballero 2010). This period also saw the popularity of light comedies with a female focus that have also followed in the tradition of the romantic sex comedy, as witnessed by the success of the screenwriter and occasional director Issa López, whose films include *Efectos secundarios / Side Effects*★ (2006), *Niñas mal / Bad Girls*★ (2003), *Casi Divas / Almost Divas*★ (2008) and *Ladies' Night* (2007). Another female-centric romcom is the Valentine's Day release *Cásese Quien Pueda / Get Married if You Can* (Constandse 2014), the only non-English-language film to be in the top twenty of the Mexican box office for 2014, coming in at number twelve (Mexico Yearly Box Office). These films, while little known outside Mexico, have proven very popular at the domestic box office. Meanwhile, *Nosotros los nobles / The Noble Family* (Alazraki 2013), another hugely successful commercial hit, did seek to address the class divides as the spoilt grown-up children of a wealthy Mexican businessman attempt to live without money, though this is shown from the point of view of the privileged family. All of these films have a comic take on middle-class, or aspirational, lifestyles, and feature romance and sex. They reveal that the types of films popular with Mexican audiences, and with little transnational reach beyond Latino audiences in the US, have very little in common with Mexican films in the global or art cinema film circuits. Elsewhere I have written about the way in which Cuarón learnt how to appeal to the global film market in addition to the domestic market with *Y tu mamá también* by shedding the politically incorrect elements of *Love in the Time of Hysteria* and embracing a more sophisticated approach to gender and class relations, while showing a tourist-friendly vision of Mexico (Shaw 2013, 176–200). Yet, for the domestic market, the formula of his first film has continued to be followed.

In another market segment, critically acclaimed festival art films by directors such as Carlos Reygadas, Fernando Eimbcke and Julián Hernánez, among others, which have had little domestic success or exhibition, are known for the ways in which they critique bourgeois society, and represent new forms of sexuality in non-conventional narrative forms. It is clear that class constituencies and markets for Mexican film cultures are conspicuously demarcated. Mexican markets are still dominated by US blockbusters and the national cinema is largely represented by sex comedies and romantic comedies that were initiated by middlebrow romantic sex comedies of the 1990s, like *Love in the Time of Hysteria* and *Sex, Shame and Tears*, which few outside of Mexico or US Latino audiences have heard of. Conversely, the auteurist, award-winning films that receive critical attention in cinephile circles have made very little impact on Mexican screens.

Notes

1 Miriam Ross also notes this phenomenon in her book on South American cinematic culture where she charts the rise of the multiplex across Latin America in the 1990s (2010, 74–85).
2 Carlos Salinas de Gortari's six-year term in office lasted from 1988–94.
3 Sánchez Prado further develops this argument in his book *Screening Neoliberalism: Mexican Cinema 1988-2012* (2014b). For more on the importance of *Love in the Time of Hysteria* in forging a new commercial film culture in Mexico, see Shaw 2013, 159–70.
4 For other films made under this scheme, see Zavala (2011).
5 This is an argument I develop in Shaw 2013, 167–70.
6 See Chapters 10 and 11 in this volume for a re-consideration of this argument in connection with continental cinema and TV in the UK (Lucy Mazdon's Chapter 10) and middlebrow queer cinema (Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover's Chapter 11).
7 In his fascinating study, Sánchez Prado highlights the working conditions in the multiplexes and also notes a new widening of class structures with new young non-unionized staff employed on an hourly rate with lower rates of pay and fewer rights. This 'became an example of Mexico's quick transition from the welfare State to the service economy' (2014b, 79).
8 The film, however, was not successful in overseas markets, a point I discuss in Shaw 2013, 167–70.
9 Clarisa's suicidal feelings are due to the fact that she discovers her fiancé has been cheating on her.
10 Cuarón tells audiences in 'Making Sólo con tu pareja', available as part of the DVD extras menu, that he takes the idea from Mozart's comic opera about a promiscuous nobleman.
11 'Ay, Clarita, contigo y sin marido la vida va a ser mucho más fácil . . . trío de emancipadas sobreexpuestas.'

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7

WEALTH AND JUSTICE

Contemporary Chinese middlebrow cinema

Ting Guo

Introduction

In the past decade, the theme of the middle class in Chinese cinema has attracted considerable attention from critics and scholars in China, focusing on the middle class either as the dominant narrative of contemporary Chinese films or as the main audiences of Chinese cinema (see Duan 2007; Yang 2011; Zhang 2011). However, despite this increasing interest in this newly emergent middle-class culture in Chinese cinema, the term 'middlebrow' (中眉 *zhongmei* or 平眉 *pingmei* in Chinese)[1] has been seldom discussed or used. I will argue that the caution that Chinese film scholars have shown in applying the concept of middlebrow to the Chinese context is partly related to the porosity between the concepts of middlebrow culture and middle-class culture, and partly related to the ambivalent position that the new middle-class taste has in current Chinese cinematic culture, as this taste has itself been fostered in part by the state.

However, before we think middlebrow across borders, it is important to revisit the use of the term in its original context. Since its origin in Britain and Ireland, 'middlebrow' has been persistently identified by literary critics, from F.R. Leavis and Q.D. Leavis (1932) to Virginia Woolf (1942) and Dwight MacDonald (1960), as a pejorative label for intellectually inferior cultural production that vulgarizes and devalues high culture. Since the 1990s, this early hostility on the part of literary critics has been identified as an expression of contemporary anxieties about cultural authority and fear of cultural change (see Baxendale and Pawling 1996; Rubin 2002; Brown and Grover 2012). As Erica Brown and Mary Grover also point out, 'as a product of contested and precarious assertions of cultural authority, it (the middlebrow) is itself unstable' and hard to define (2012, 2).

Moreover, the interpretation of so-called middlebrow tastes is often ambiguous and associated with a particular class or social group. As Lawrence Napper argues, in Woolf's well-known but unsent letter to the *New Statesman*, she 'displays in her contempt an interesting slippage between the aesthetics of middlebrow taste, and that section of the population who are deemed to possess it' (2000, 117). Although Woolf (1942, 119) does not spell out who this middlebrow population is, her definition of middlebrow as being 'betwixt and between' and 'neither art itself nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power or prestige' implies the link between middlebrow tastes and wealth and social class, particularly the emerging middle class in English society in the twentieth century.

This link between taste and class is later reinforced in Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of taste. In his influential *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984), he analyses how taste is socially constructed and practised to differentiate one's class from others. By analysing how the petite bourgeoisie attempts to distance itself from the working class, and the elite from both middle and working classes, through their cultural choices, Bourdieu highlights a symbolic hierarchy in the French cultural field as well as the relation between class and the formation of tastes. For Bourdieu, 'what makes middle-brow culture (*la culture moyenne*) is the middle-class relation to culture – mistaken identity, misplaced belief, allodoxia' (1984, 327). Whether the English translation 'middlebrow culture' is the equivalent of '*la culture moyenne*' may still be debatable (Pollentier 2012, 38–41), but Bourdieu's emphasis on the hierarchy of cultural legitimacies echoes Woolf's definition of the middlebrow's in-between position, and his configuration of the middlebrow as produced by a relationship to class encourages a vision of middlebrow tastes as a struggle for legitimacy carried out exclusively by the aspirant middle class. However, at the same time, this relational approach also suggests that tastes are not universal and the division of 'high' and 'low' culture may be blurred and challenged when existing class relationships in a society are transformed by social mobility. The connections between social mobility, taste and culture have been noted and discussed in the context of film by scholars such as Napper (2000; 2009) and Sally Faulkner (2013), who explore how the emergent new middle class influenced film in European contexts.

This chapter will discuss how middlebrow as a Western category can be reconceptualized in a Chinese context, as well as whether it may help us understand how Chinese film professionals address the new Chinese middle-class audience and what kind of discussions Chinese middlebrow cinema might open up. Due to limitations of space, this chapter will only focus on middlebrow cinema in mainland China, although it is undeniable that both Hong Kong and Taiwanese cinemas have exerted significant influence on its development, and it is sometimes hard to divide them due to the increased collaboration among film professionals in the three territories.

Film as a mass entertainment

The earliest application of the term 'middlebrow' to the Chinese context is Liu Ts'un-yan's discussion of Chinese fiction in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.[2] Ts'un-yan discusses the problems of applying the term middlebrow to the analysis of Chinese fiction. He argues that it implies 'a scale of judgment of both book and reader, evolved within the Western literary context', and is problematic to apply to Chinese examples without adjustments, particularly given the fact that novels and fiction were not considered as a literary genre by traditional Chinese intellectuals before the late nineteenth century (1984, 2). He even suggests its application might devalue 'Chinese models of excellence', distorting the 'very concept of excellence' in its original setting; therefore, different gradations have to be applied when evaluating Chinese literature with this term (1984, 2). Ts'un-yan's use of the term 'middlebrow' has been challenged by W.L. Idema (1986). Idema finds Ts'un-yan's consideration of 'Chinese middlebrow fiction as products of so-called middle-class culture' problematic, as Chinese fictions produced at the turn of the century did not address or constitute a middle-class culture, but responded to 'the most demanding literary circles of their day' (1986, 114). For Idema, unless there is a 'demonstrable emergence of a large, internally segmented reading public of which each segment is serviced by a more or less clearly demarcatable body of publications', the term 'middlebrow' ought to be avoided.

The caution Idema advises is understandable because re-grading Chinese artistic and literary works according to an Anglophone scale is tricky. However, his insistence that 'a large, internally segmented reading public' served by a clearly defined body of publications must exist in China before the term is conferred might also risk stereotyping and homogenizing middlebrow tastes. Nonetheless, Ts'un-yan does make a valid point about the involvement of subjective evaluation of quality and historical contingency in defining the middlebrow in different cultures. This is particularly relevant to this chapter's discussion of Chinese middlebrow cinema, because film, as initially an imported cultural medium in China, has been constantly redefined and deployed by different social and political powers over the course of China's social and political revolutions and reforms in the past century. This history, without doubt, affects the ways in which culture, film and class have been intertwined and have affected each other in China, and needs to be taken into account when we discuss Chinese middlebrow films.

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the state has maintained a tight grip on culture in mainland China in part because of its effective policy-making, and in part because of the strength of native cultural expectations about the nature and uses of cultural products such as film (Zhu and Nakajima 2010, 33). For a relatively long time Chinese film was the state's mouthpiece for ideology and instrument for inculcation. As Yingjin Zhang

observes, between 1949 and 1978, Chinese cinema was ideologically dominated by 'CCP [Chinese Communist Party]-codified class consciousness' (2004, 203). During this period, Chinese cinema underwent significant changes compared to the pre-socialist period to legitimize the CCP's political hegemony in China. For example, in 1953, China's Film Bureau held two meetings and identified 'socialist realism' as the highest standard in film production for Chinese film professionals. The manner and lifestyles of petit-bourgeois intellectuals and elites were considered dangerous to the Party's leadership and the ongoing socialist revolution. Films produced during this period focused on figures identified with the revolutionary masses, such as workers, peasants and soldiers, and promoted public welfare and collective interest over individual fulfilment (Zhang 2004, 203). For this relatively long period, 1949–78, Chinese cinema stigmatized and ridiculed, rather than inheriting or promoting, the country's traditional emphasis on fine manners, proper speech and knowledge of classic literature, which was once possessed by the elites. Although the situation has gradually changed since the 1980s, when China launched its economic reforms and tentatively opened up, allowing filmmakers to enjoy more freedom, the history of film as a form of mass entertainment and political inculcation in China has had an undeniable impact on both the public and film critics' perception and evaluation of the medium, consequently affecting the formation of middlebrow culture in Chinese cinema.

Similar problems have been addressed by scholars such as Yi Zheng (2014), who analyses the reappearance of taste and class culture in current Chinese society, particularly in print media, and points out that both writers and publishing houses participate in a process of constructing a post-socialist civility to support a project of building a harmonious and affluent society proposed by the Party-state. Zheng argues that class is 'seldom a descriptive category of structural social change in China' and its use is often 'contingent and fraught with conceptual contradictions and political tensions' (2014, 5). For her, the cultivation and practice of taste in post-socialist China is 'a state-sponsored discourse, feeding into the discourse of economic development and its offspring – the harmonious society' (Zheng 2014, 9). In this process, a prominent problem is the 'lack of awareness of and understanding of taste and the need for distinction' among a 'Chinese newly made or yet to be made middleclass', which comes about owing to 'a history of material scarcity and social–aesthetic crassness based on a false promise of equality' in socialist China (Zheng 2004, 103). Although this seeming 'lack of awareness and understanding of taste' might be more complicated than Zheng argues, and 'the Chinese newly made or yet to be made middleclass' is a rather wide and obscure social group that needs to be clarified, her argument about how social and political movements have changed China's long tradition of cultivating cultural and aesthetic distinction is useful for us to understand that film has always been closely associated with popular culture in China and that this has affected the nature and development of Chinese middlebrow cinema.

Middlebrowness in Chinese popular cinema

Despite Chinese cinema's focus on a mass audience, since the early 1980s, a group of internationally renowned, highbrow or art-house Chinese film directors, particularly the fifth-generation directors, led by Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige and Tian Zhuangzhuang, has emerged. However, the Chinese film industry as a whole experienced a serious financial crisis when it underwent economic reform in this period, and had to resort to popular entertainment for films to survive. The reform abolished the state quota for production and the guaranteed purchase system established in the 1950s. Apart from some so-called 'leitmotif films' (主旋律电影 *zhuxuanlü dianying*), which are particularly selected and subsidized by the government to commemorate major historical and political events and promote national pride or a certain ideology among the public, the majority of films produced in China now have to face the pressure of the market. On the one hand, this commercialization of the film industry opens up possibilities for producers to explore different genres and more diverse themes; on the other hand, this pressure also forces them to take into account the market. Thus far producers have favoured a mass-centred cinema, which consequently undermines the position of art-house films in Chinese cinema.

At the same time, despite a reduction in state subsidies, the government maintains its grip on the production and exhibition in mainland China through censorship. Films on controversial subjects often may be denied production licenses or be banned. This discourages private companies or independent producers from investing in films that might not please the authorities. As Rui Zhang (2008, 74) points out, since the end of the 1990s, more and more independent filmmakers, who used to produce underground artistic or socially critical films and target international film festivals, including Jia Zhangke, Lou Ye and Wang Xiaoshuai, began to collaborate with the state or commercial film studios and try to gain access to the domestic market and appeal to domestic audiences. However, it is important to note that the new masses targeted by post-socialist Chinese cinema are a predominantly urban population, particularly the emerging middle class, rather than the previous revolutionary masses mainly composed of peasants, soldiers and workers. In contrast with the many art-house films of the 1980s, which focused on exotic rural subject matter, the mainstream of the Chinese film industry has now gradually shifted its focus to the country's burgeoning urban culture. This is attributable to recent urbanization as well as government subsidies for building modern screening facilities in cities. According to statistics recently released by institutions such as the China Film Association, the State Administrator of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television and the Beijing Film Academy, the composition of Chinese film audiences has changed significantly: now young and middle-aged 'white collar' workers in urban areas are emerging as the principal cinema audience (Yang 2011, 7). It might be misleading to think these statistics represent a full picture of audiences, as the surveys generating these statistics were conducted mainly in large and medium-sized cities. However, the fact that all these surveys focus on urban areas

also shows that it is to the new urban middle class that current Chinese cinema primarily addresses itself.

Another underlying factor attributed to this new urban focus is the prevalent discourse on the new Chinese middle class in current Chinese society. Since the early 2000s, many scholars and public commentators have debated the definition of the 'middle class' in a Chinese context, its existence and (if such a social group does exist) its potential social and cultural roles.[3] From as early as the beginning of the 1990s, this question has been frequently aired on Chinese media, although the actual term 'middle class' was rarely mentioned. Instead, a new word, *xiuxian* (休闲, leisure), was coined and widely used to describe a so-called 'middle-class' taste associated with modern urban life (replacing the previous, ideologically charged word, *zichan jieji* (资产阶级, bourgeois). At the same time this new word became a fashionable label to attach to various commercial products, from clothes to holiday resorts. This early emphasis on 'middle-class' taste and consumerism in Chinese mass culture and media, according to Jinhua Dai (1999, 219), is not the result of real cultural demands in Chinese society, but is a neoliberal construction to stimulate consumerism. Dai's argument has been echoed by Chinese film critics such as Huiyu Zhang (2011) and Liu Yang (2011). Zhang argues, for example, that although China is far from a middle-class society, narratives about the middle class have now become mainstream and shared by all social classes (2011, 20). She points out that mainstream films have now positioned themselves as part of middle-class culture, and shifted their focus from explicit criticism of society, or glorification of the Party and heroic representation of historical events, to wider themes emphasizing humanistic virtues such as self-sacrifice, hard work and loyalty (2011, 24). However, this new trend of middle-class tastes has also encountered criticism. Liu Yang (2011), for instance, analyses the image of the Chinese middle class in recently released commercial popular films such as 杜拉拉升职记 / *Go Lala Go*! (2010, Xu) and 非诚勿扰 / *If You Are The One I* and *II* (Feng 2008 and 2010) to argue that they are often emulations of middle-class lifestyle in developed Western countries, and are used as tools to encourage the public's further consumption, and to cater to the urban nouveaux riches' need to identify and consolidate their social status (Yang 2011, 9). For her, these films, which are imbued with so-called middle-class aesthetics, will only undermine the production of high-quality artistic works or popular films that address problems in Chinese society, and they will eventually lose their market share (2011, 8–10). These criticisms, on the one hand, reveal Chinese film professionals' anxiety about the commercialization of the film industry, as well as the new social and economic role of film in Chinese society; on the other hand, they also reflect their ambivalent attitude towards an emerging middlebrow cinematic culture. Rather than adopt these broad-stroke negative criticisms of the middlebrow, I argue that the increasingly commercialized film industry has not only blurred the divisions between artistic and populist works, but also provides opportunities for its audience, be it upper, middle or working class, to transform and participate

in a cinematic culture that is more inclusive and dialectic. Thus the open term 'middlebrow', rather than the class-bound 'middle-class tastes', is preferable. In the following sections I will analyse two films, *If You Are The One* (Feng 2008) and 让子弹飞 / *Let The Bullets Fly* (Jiang 2010), to argue that Chinese middlebrow cinema simultaneously takes on a populist guise and explores a middle road between explicit social criticism and public entertainment. While satisfying some viewers' curiosity about and aspiration for an upper-middle-class lifestyle, these middlebrow films also try to engage educated viewers through interrogating social problems, such as justice and cultural identity, caused by increasing social stratification and commercialization.

What can wealth bring? Feng Xiaogang and his New Year film, *If You Are The One* (2008)

Despite Chinese film critics' contempt for middlebrow tastes, films depicting middle-class urban life are often blockbusters in China. They are popular because they not only provide a venue for many viewers, particularly the lower middle class, to observe an imagined, desirable upper-middle-class lifestyle, but also strike a chord by exposing the problems encountered by the nouveaux riches despite their wealth. A good example of this contrast between film professionals and viewers' responses is one of Xiaogang Feng's New Year films, *If You Are The One* (2008).[4] This romantic comedy made 325 million RMB (around 32.5 million GBP) and became the box-office champion that year. Its sequel, *If You Are The One II* (2010), was also a notable success, with a revenue of approximately 474 million RMB (47.4 million GBP). Given the limited space of this chapter, I will focus on the first film, *If You Are The One*, and discuss its depiction of an imagined middle-class lifestyle in China on the one hand, and, on the other, its satire of the nouveaux riches to entertain the mass audience.

Starring You Ge (from mainland China) and Qi Shu (from Taiwan), the film depicts a romantic story between a single, middle-aged Chinese man (Qin Fen, played by Ge) who returns to China after many years abroad, and a young and beautiful air stewardess who has been hurt in an extramarital affair (Liang Xiaoxiao, played by Shu). At the very beginning, the film ridicules the wealth of Chinese nouveaux riches by showing how Qin became a millionaire by selling an 'innovative invention' to a stupid, but rich, venture capitalist: a 'Conflict Resolution Terminal' that is a plastic tube to cover people's hands when they are playing rock-paper-scissors to prevent cheating! In the following scenes, the film shows how the newly rich Qin puts an advertisement online to look for true love and has blind dates with many strange applicants before meeting Liang, including a former male friend who is now homosexual; a cemetery saleswoman who tries to sell him plots in a graveyard; a pregnant single mum; an erotophobic widow and a stock trader who sees choosing a partner as buying stocks. These dating scenes follow the usual humorous and satirical style of Feng's films. The dialogue between Qin

and his dates is snappy and sarcastic, mocking the match-making that is prevalent in contemporary China, as well as evolving notions of marriage and romance in an increasingly materialistic society. Liang, who is still suffering from her previous relationship, meets with Qin under pressure from her parents. Neither Liang nor Qin think they will be a fit, but they end up having a drink together and confiding their painful experiences in relationships to each other, thinking that after this they will never meet each other again anyway. But they soon meet again by accident. Then, attracted by Liang, Qin pursues her. Liang seems to be moved by Qin's persistence but is undecided. She asks Qin to take her to Hokkaido, Japan, where she has romantic memories about her previous lover, and attempts suicide by jumping into the sea from a cliff. But Liang does not die and the film ends with her recovering in a wheelchair, accompanied by Qin, having decided to start a new life. This happy ending echoes the atmosphere of the Chinese New Year Festival when the film was screened, and the string of satirical jokes in the dialogue make this romantic comedy entertaining.

However, as many viewers and critics point out, this light-hearted urban comedy is also packed with commercials for brand-name commodities, from the laptop that Qin uses to place his advertisement to the drink that Qin and Liang have on their first date and the car that they drive. As Shuyu Kong observes, 'Feng's films on the one hand satirize urban China's uneasy rush toward materialism and capitalism, but on the other hand ironically turn themselves into a dazzling brand-name catalogue for contemporary Chinese consumers' (2009, 158). Therefore, many film critics (Sha 2005; Ni 2006) consider Feng's films, despite – or perhaps because of – their box-office success, to be lacking in artistic value and depth compared to art films made by independent filmmakers and Sixth-Generation directors. Their concerns over the encroachment of commoditization in Chinese cinema and criticism of Feng's pandering to the taste of mass audiences mirror the impact that China's economic boom has exerted on the film industry as well as critics' contempt for middlebrow tastes in general. Other critics, such as Rui Zhang (2008, 141–2), try to justify Feng's compromise between profit-making and artistic pursuit. She stresses, first, the pressures from investors and sponsors in an increasingly profit-driven film industry, and highlights, second, Feng's strategy of burying social criticism for a more sophisticated audience under absurd and hilarious plots and dialogue.

As the first mainland Chinese film director to adapt the popular Hong Kong New Year film for a mainland Chinese audience,[5] Feng has been a very successful commercial film director. A recurring theme in many of his urban films is the humble living conditions of ordinary people and their striving for a better life in an increasingly materialist society, highlighting their resilience, virtue and admirable personality. Examples include Han Dong, a bus driver in 没完没了/ *Sorry Baby!* (1999), You You, an unemployed camera man in 大腕 / *A Big Shot's Funeral* (2001), and Wang Li and Wang Bo, a thief couple in 天下无贼 / *A World Without Thieves* (2005). Although in *If*

You Are The One (2008) the privileged social stratum is still the target that Feng mocks and satirizes, his focus has clearly shifted from characters at the bottom of the social scale to the new middle class. In this film, Qin is a millionaire with years of overseas living experience, who does not need to worry about money or go to work every day; Liang is a young, pretty air stewardess, which in China commands a handsome salary and respectable social status. In the film, they meet in various places, including a tastefully furnished restaurant, an elegant tea house and a picturesque private members' club. Clearly these places are carefully selected to depict the refined lifestyle of the Chinese upper middle class. Qin and Liang's trip to scenic Hokkaido is not only the climax of the film, but also the culmination of this showcasing of a stylish middle-class life. Using many bird's-eye-view shots, the film traces Qin and Liang's journey in an SUV against the breathtaking beauty of Hokkaido. For Liang, this journey and her attempted suicide are a breakaway from her past; for Qin, this journey is a romantic start of his new relationship with Liang (see Figure 7.1). Although this tie-in for the Hokkaido local tourist industry has been scorned by viewers,[6] Hokkaido's peaceful and exotic scenery does fit well with the romantic theme of the film, and echoes the recent trend of overseas tours among the newly affluent Chinese. With expanded urbanization and commercialization, leisure travel is no longer simply a way temporarily to escape from cities, but has now also become a consumer choice to display wealth and taste. Overseas leisure travel, in particular, becomes a conspicuous, aspirational form of consumption for many. According to a report by the Hokkaido local authority, the number of Chinese tourists staying near Lake Akan in Hokkaido, where the film was shot, jumped from 1,401 in 2008 to 10,221 in 2009 as an effect of this film (Hokkaido Bureau of Economy Trade and Industry 2011, 56). Clearly, despite some of the audience's contempt for the commercial side of the film, some of its elements speak to filmgoers' expectations and exert impact on the market (the Chinese overseas travel industry in this case).

FIGURE 7.1 *If You Are the One* (Feng 2008): Liang (Qi Shu) sits in the back of a SUV on her trip to Hokkaido

In this vein, *If You Are The One* has been successful in securing its sponsor and audience at the same time, although this success does not mean that audiences are taken in. As Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno note, 'The triumph of advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them' (1973, 167). After all, the mass urban audience that Feng aims at is not necessarily people who have the ability to copy the upper-middle-class lifestyle depicted. For this type of audience, an enjoyable two-hour film can be a temporary relief from mundane life. Back to reality where they have to strive to make ends meet, many will also be as cynical as the above-mentioned film critics with regards to the so-called middle-class lifestyle. This is probably why, in this film, Feng tries to offer an easily digestible depiction, but, at the same time, tries to appeal to the mass audience through multiple humorous jibes at the rich. This apparent paradox in the film constitutes a good example of an emerging Chinese middlebrow cinema responding to the expanded lower middle class in contemporary China. If, as discussed above, the Chinese media has created a middle-class culture to support the nation's economic reform and the state's construction of a middle-class civility, this culture is now also shaping the Chinese film industry, which then generates new forms and content to adapt to the community that is thought to be consuming these products. The expansion of the Chinese lower middle class and their consumption choices have inevitably affected Chinese middlebrow culture, which has translated into a film industry that seeks to deliver a combination of commercial appeal and high production values.

Dislocating justice: *Let The Bullets Fly* (Jiang 2010)

At first view, *Let The Bullets Fly* (2010) may seem an odd choice in this discussion of the middlebrow. Set in a small town in remote western China in the 1920s, the film tells the story of a group of bandits led by Pocky Zhang (Wen Jiang, also the director) and their conflict with Huang Silang, a local warlord and opium dealer (Chow Yun-Fat). Zhang and his gang derail a train and hijack Ma Bangde (Ge You), the new County Governor of Goose Town, and his wife (Carina Lau). To save himself, Ma tells Zhang that he is only the advisor of the Governor, and the real Governor, who purchased his post, died when the train crashed. Ma also persuades Zhang to disguise himself as the new Governor of Goose Town, with Ma as his private advisor, promising that he will help Zhang make a fortune in a short time through receiving bribes and squeezing local people. However, when Zhang and his gang arrive at Goose Town, they immediately find that the whole town is in fact under the control of Huang Silang, a ruthless crime warlord living in a fortified citadel. Despite being a bandit, Zhang is not really interested in bullying the poor. He begins to develop a social conscience and tries to establish order and justice in Goose Town, which undermines Huang's power and control. Zhang and Huang end up in a tug of war over the control of the town involving gunplay, thievery, disguise, double-spying and various outlandish stratagems, while the townspeople take a wait-and-see attitude and prepare to switch allegiances to

the winning side. At the end, Zhang puts up a show of attacking Huang's citadel and makes the locals believe that Huang has been beheaded. The locals then follow Zhang and break into Huang's citadel and force Huang to commit suicide.

This is an entertaining action comedy, then, with abundant dark and coarse humour satirizing corruption, revolution and public indifference, as well as slapstick comedy. Its gunplay and chases are spectacular and full of energy. Its director, Wen Jiang, a popular actor turned art-house director, is well known for the dark humour and theatricality of his films, although they also have a reputation of not being accessible to the public. Compared to previous art films that he directed, 阳光灿烂的日子 / *In the Heat of the Sun* (1994) and 鬼子来了 / *Devils on the Doorstep* (2000), *Let The Bullets Fly* (2010) seems to be more accessible and, indeed, it became the highest-grossing domestic movie in Chinese history, with profits of around 664 million RMB (around 66.4 million GBP). All this seems a far cry from the new middle-class and middlebrow culture discussed above. However, what is interesting about this film is not the fact that it became a blockbuster, but the fact that it attracted so much considered attention from both the public and critics that it inspired a collective interpretation. As Shelley Kraicer (2011) notes, this film 'connected with audiences and critics in an unprecedented way, earning a kind of across-the-board critical and public acclaim' that one seldom sees in China. It is this contribution to considered public debate – which is remarkably politically critical, given continued censorship – that I identify as middlebrow.

While critics have tended to focus on the narratives and characters of *Let The Bullets Fly*, the public, whose views are expressed on fan sites and blogs,[7] has been interested in exploring more sensitive areas, in particular the film's subtly satirical symbols and political allegories. For example, the scene of a train compartment pulled by horses, which appears at the beginning and end, is regarded as a metaphor for China as a modernizing country driven by outdated ideology, because the phrase 'horse-train', pronounced as '*ma-lie*' in Chinese, is also the shorthand for Marxism-Leninism in Chinese. The masks that Zhang and the other bandits wear, which are decorated with patterns of Mah-jong from one dot to nine dots, 筒子 (*tongzi*, with a similar pronunciation to *tongzhi*, comrade), have also been interpreted as a symbol that indicates that Zhang's group is made up of the real representatives of the Chinese masses, just as Mah-jong is considered the quintessence of Chinese culture. The name of the town, 鹅城 (*e-cheng*, Goose Town), and the repeated appearance of the image of geese, are seen as an allegory of China dominated by the ideology of the Soviet Union period, because not only is the map of China similar to the shape of a bird, but the character 鹅 (*e*, goose) has the same pronunciation as 俄 (*e*, an abbreviation of 苏 俄 [*su'e* Soviet Union]). The above interpretations have been widely circulated in the public domain, particularly online, and have stimulated, in turn, further creative readings of the film, from the script and the objects used in the mise-en-scène to the names of characters and specific scenes.[8] Despite the film producer's insistence that the film is just for entertainment, and has no political agenda (Guo 2011), it seems that the director deliberately planted clues in the story for the audience to follow.

For example, the film repeatedly stresses the idea of '公平' (justice), especially through the character Zhang. The first time is when Zhang has just entered Goose Town as the new governor, and decides to reinstate the drum in the county court for the public to report their grievances. Zhang claims that 'I am going to give justice to everyone. The drum for grievances cannot just be a decoration. It should let everyone voice their grievances and then return justice to the public'.[9] The second time is when he punishes Wu Juren in the town court after he witnesses Wu bullying a waiter in public. Seeing the locals kowtowing, Zhang fires a gunshot into the air and shouts, 'Stop kneeling! The emperors are gone, no one is worth your kneeling! I'm not worth your kneeling! I came to Goose Town for three things only: justice, justice, justice!' (see Figure 7.2).[10] The third mention of justice is connected to the death of Liu Zi, who is Zhang's foster son and also the youngest member of his gang. Hu Wan, one of Huang's henchmen, accuses Xiao Liu of eating two bowls of rice noodles but only paying for one. To escalate the dispute, Hu shouts, 'Just because you are the son of the governor, you ate an extra bowl of noodles without having paid for it. This is unfair. We want justice, justice!'.[11] Eventually the argument forces Liu Zi to resort to hara-kiri to prove his innocence before dropping dead. However, despite these repetitions, the film does not explore further the idea of 'justice' other than as revenge, but slyly propels viewers to seek and interpret the signs of 'injustice': from the six official titles that Ma buys to Huang and his henchmen's bullying of the locals and the locals' indifference and apathy in the noodle shop. These suggested scenes have been seized upon by viewers and widely discussed on fan sites, further stimulating analysis of the film. Jiang Fangzhou, a well-known Chinese writer and also the associate editor of *News Weekly*, writes in her Weibo account (China's Twitter-like microblogging service): 'The success of this film is attributable to the fact that Jiang made everyone feel flattered, thinking the film speaks for them: fans of Mao Zedong can see the shadow of Mao; fans of the US see the image of Washington; reformists see reform; revolutionists see revolution; populists see populism; "the rabble" find their saviour; and the SAPPRFT[12] reads in it the

FIGURE 7.2 *Let the Bullets Fly* (Jiang 2010): Zhang (Wen Jiang) announces: 'I came to Goose Town for three things only: justice, justice, justice!'

message of the glorified Party' (2010).[13] As Jiang suggests, the commercial success of this film, and the fact that it was not censored by China's State Administration of Radio, Film and Television, is largely because Jiang skilfully blends slapstick and satire to accommodate multiple interpretations, while carefully toeing the Party's political line. The fact that a film mocking 'justice' is so successful across the country indicates that injustice remains an urgent question in contemporary China. Thus while *If You Are The One* is middlebrow in its portrayal and critique of middle-class consumption, swashbuckling popular comedy *Let The Bullets Fly* is uninterested in the middle-class consumption that the Party seeks to promote. Rather, it is middlebrow as it fuses accessible entertainment with the serious matter of exposing injustice. An analysis of the considerable online comments generated by the film reveal a literate and considered – and political – response to it on the part of viewers that audience studies have shown to be newly urban and middle class.

In 2011, well-known journalist Zhongxiao Guo published an article titled '*Let The Bullets Fly* Sets Off a Carnival of Political Allegory' as the cover story of the Hong Kong-based magazine *Asia Weekly*. He suggested that although viewers' interpretations might distort the original intention of this film, and weaken the exploration of its value, they are also reflections of prevailing social concerns and expressions of surging public feelings. Although Guo does not make clear what kind of value may be undermined, his observation regarding viewers' excitement in deciphering the content of the film rather than its artistic form is timely. As he notes, *Let The Bullets Fly* serves as an outlet for viewers to articulate their views on the reality of contemporary China. Film viewing is no longer, if indeed it ever was, simply the passive consumption of products, but rather an activity that allows viewers to participate in refined cultural discourses. Film interpretation therefore becomes a social act for educated viewers to distinguish themselves from ordinary filmgoers who are merely seeking two hours of entertainment, although their interpretations are mainly based on content rather than form, due to their limited familiarity with the vocabulary of the field. Within the constraints imposed by censorship, it is also a tentatively political act.

This engagement of the educated middle-class viewer is subtly changing the Chinese film industry. In Susan Sontag's words, this kind of interpretation 'tames the work of art' and makes it more 'manageable, conformable' (1994, 8). When Jiang was asked to comment on the box-office failure of his film 太阳照样升起 / *The Sun Also Rises* (2007), he claimed that it 'was not made to be understood, but to move the audience' (quoted in Liu 2010). However, in an interview with *Times* magazine, he joked that *Let The Bullets Fly* 'would be hard not to understand this time' (quoted in Liu 2010). Jiang's statement shows that Chinese film professionals, including art-house cinema directors, are gradually shifting from public political cultivation and moral education to fostering and satisfying a broad-based popular, but intelligent, audience. The strong response from Chinese viewers to the political allegories in the film shows that Chinese middlebrow culture is not simply an imitation of the west, a complaint one often sees about the new Chinese middle classes' consumption of imported luxury products to mimic the lifestyle of

the middle class in the west. Instead, the aggravated economic disparities and new social–political tensions resulting from China's economic reforms have exerted a significant impact on the aspirant and affluent new middle class as well as the burgeoning middlebrow culture in China.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that China's longstanding emphasis on inclusiveness and political conformity in state-funded art has undermined the cultivation of distinction and aesthetics in Chinese cinema, and made film not only a mass entertainment, but also a tool of political inculcation and moral education. However, China's economic reform and urbanization in the past decades has forced its film industry to adjust its policy and focus on the urban audience, particularly the affluent new middle class. This new urban focus in fact echoes the new prevailing discourse about middle-class civility supported by the state and the cultural industry. However, it also poses problems and challenges to Chinese film professionals due to market pressures and the enlarging but also increasingly stratified middle class. On the one hand, the nouveaux riches have to face the pressure of justifying their social status as well as cultural identity in a society still dominated by a mass culture that emphasizes equality rather than distinction. On the other, the division between middlebrow and lowbrow is increasingly blurred due to the expansion of the lower middle class in China, whose members have high educational backgrounds. All this makes it difficult to talk about a middlebrow culture as separate from mass culture in China. Films such as *If You Are The One* and *Let The Bullets Fly* are good examples of how filmmakers try to appeal to the masses and engage the new educated middle-class audience at the same time. Although these two films have very different styles, both of them address problems and issues that preoccupied the middle class during China's social and economic transformations. In this sense, Chinese middlebrow cinema plays a mediating role in addressing the cultural anxiety of the new middle class, and at the same time provides a substitute for their pursuit of distinction in reality.

Notes

1 中眉 (*zhongmei*) is the literal translation of the word 'middlebrow' into Chinese (*zhong*: middle; *mei*: brow); while the term 平眉 (*pingmei*), although it retains the literal translation of 'brow', replaces the idea of 'middle' with 平 (*ping*: 'flat', 'equal', 'at the same level').

2 This was published in the introduction of a special issue of *Renditions* (17/18, 1982), then re-published as an edited book, *Chinese Middlebrow Fiction, From the Ch'ing and Early Republican Eras* in 1984.

3 For more information on this discussion, see Lu (2002), Li (2009), Zhou (2005) and Yan (2008).

4 Feng Xiaogang is a renowned commercial film director as well as a successful script writer and TV drama director in China. Apart from the film *If You Are The One* (2008) and its sequel (2010), he also directed films such as *A Sign* (2000), *Cell Phone* (2003), *A World Without Thieves* (2004), *The Banquet* (2006) and *Aftershock* (2010).

5   New Year film (*He sui pian*) refers to films, usually comedy films, designed to be released and exhibited specifically during the Chinese New Year Holiday. Feng's 甲方乙方 / *Party A, Party B* (1997) is the first New Year film in mainland China and was the box-office champion that year. It has now become a very popular genre in Chinese cinema.

6   This response from some Chinese viewers is not difficult to understand, given the long-lasting tensions and hostility between these two Asian neighbours resulting from the war between them 70 years ago and the prevailing tension over a set of disputed islands in the East China Sea.

7   For example, on www.mtime.com, one of the major Chinese fan sites, at the time of writing (July 2014), there are 1,833 reviews and 13,209 comments on this film. Individuals' analyses of this film can also be found on various websites (e.g. www.douban. com and www.tieba.baidu.com) and personal blogs, e.g. '姜文的王朝永远不会到来-《让子弹飞》的一些暗线、隐喻、野心和吹捧' (Jiang Wen's Dynasty Will Not Come: Hidden Clues, Metaphors, Ambition and Puffery in *Let The Bullets Fly*) by Xi Liu (user name) (http://movie.douban.com/review/4534425/); '此时此刻我们去浦东——《让子弹飞》的隐喻' (At this Moment, We Are Leaving for Pudong: Metaphors in *Let The Bullets Fly*) by Kidwell (user name) (http://movie.douban. com/review/4545366/); '《让子弹飞》中的十大历史隐喻' (The Ten Historical Metaphors in *Let The Bullets Fly*) by Jin Manlou (user name) (http://blog.ifeng.com/ article/9488478.html); and '《让子弹飞》的经典解读' (The Classic Interpretation of *Let The Bullets Fly*) by aqssm (user name) (http://bbs.tiexue.net/post_4809999_1. html). Websites consulted 29 July 2014.

8   E.g. '猜《子弹》' (An Analysis of *Let The Bullets Fly*) by Du Junfei, http://blog.caijing. com.cn/expert_article-151525-15099.shtml. Consulted 29 July 2014.

9   '我要给所有人公平，有名无实的冤鼓，不能只是一个摆设，要让大家来鸣冤，要给大家主持公道。'

10 '不准跪！皇上都没了，没人值得你们跪！我也不值得你们跪！我来鹅城只办三件事。公平！公平！还是公平！'

11 '县长的儿子，吃了两碗粉却只给一碗的钱，这就是不公平，我们要公平，要公平！'

12 State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television of the People's Republic of China.

13 '姜的牛逼之处，在于这片毛粉见毛，美国粉见华盛顿，改良派见改良，革命派见革命，民粹们见民粹，屁民见救世主，广电们见没有某党就没有新中国，各派都喜闻乐见觉得替自己说了话。'

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8

COUNTER-HERITAGE, MIDDLEBROW AND THE *FICTION PATRIMONIALE*

Reframing 'middleness' in the contemporary French historical film

Will Higbee

With the exception of the 1960s and 1970s, when, for various reasons, it struggled to maintain critical legitimacy and popular appeal,[1] the historical film, whether in the form of literary adaptation, period drama or costume film, has occupied a prominent position in French national cinema. As in other national cinemas in Europe (especially Britain and Spain), the 1980s and 1990s saw the resurgence in France of interest in this area of filmmaking due to a particular set of industrial contexts at a time when popular cinema and 'Frenchness' were being redefined for audiences at home and abroad (Pidduck 2005, 33). Adapting a term first introduced to academic studies of British cinema by Andrew Higson (1995), scholars of French cinema working in the Anglo-American academy have thus described the emergence of the 'French heritage film' during this period (Austin 1996; Powrie 1999; Vincendeau 2001; Pidduck 2012). The French heritage film is most readily associated with the cycle of super-productions released in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which combined high production values with the box-office draw of major French stars as a means of differentiating French cinema from Hollywood and wooing both national and international audiences. The films emphasized national identity 'whether nostalgic or critical in character' (Moine 2007, 38) and, like their British contemporaries, were preoccupied with representing the past through a mannered 'museum aesthetic' (Vincendeau 2001, xviii; Beylot and Moine 2009, 21). This was highlighted in part by replacing narrative space with 'heritage space', defined by Higson as 'a space for the display of heritage properties rather than for the enactment of dramas' (2003, 39).

In French, 'heritage film' may be translated as *le film patrimonial*. Even though the term remains largely unknown and unused by French reviewers and the wider public, who are more likely to employ more descriptive nomenclatures such as *film en costumes* (costume dramas), *film historique* (historical film), *adaptation*, *biographie* (biopic) or *film d'époques* (period film) (Beylot and Moine 2009, 10), it has been

productively employed by scholar Geneviève Sellier, who interprets the films as French national cinema's response to globalization (2007). More recently, Pierre Beylot and Raphaëlle Moine apply the slightly modified term *fictions patrimoni-ales* as an interpretative, intermedial category for a range of historical films and costume dramas made since the 1980s for both film and TV and from auteur-led productions to the mainstream blockbusters (2009). In her contribution to Beylot and Moine's edited collection, Marie-Anne Paveau notes that the French term *patrimoine* indicates a specific set of social mechanisms (a combination of represen-tations, terminology, rhetoric and even legislation), whereby collective memory is constructed within a particular historical and social context, as opposed to the more general sense of historical value and cultural tradition that is implied by the English 'heritage' and, by extension, the heritage film (2009, 39). The *film patrimonial* or *fiction patrimoniale* shares the British heritage film's academicism, emphasis on his-torical verisimilitude, stress on female protagonists and stars and inscription of the present in the past of their narratives as a means of working through contemporary social issues and questions of national identity.[2] However, unlike the British herit-age film, the French equivalent tends to offer a greater range of historical periods, a more diverse representation of class and a tendency to explore darker subject matter (Boyet and Moine 2009, 22).

This combination of characteristics led to considerable commercial success. In the early 1990s, heritage films were regularly positioned at the top of the box office in France: *La Gloire de mon père / My Father's Glory* (Robert 1990) attracted 6,291,402 spectators, *Le Château de ma mère / My Mother's Castle* (Robert 1990), 4,269,318, *Cyrano de Bergerac* (Rappeneau 1990), 4,734,325, *Indochine* (Wargnier 1992), 3,211,258 and *Germinal* (Berri 1993), 6,161,776.[3] An increase in cinema-going amongst middle-aged spectators largely contributed to this success, and the *fiction patrimoniale* established itself as the 'hegemonic' presence in French cinema of the 1990s (Powrie 1999, 2). Writing in 1999, Phil Powrie suggested this success was on the wane (1999, 2); however, over the past twenty years, there has in fact been a diversification and evolution of its form, focus and influence in relation to what Hilary Radner (2015, 289) terms more broadly the historical film in contem-porary French cinema. The heritage film maintained a significant presence in the 2000s, as illustrated by the success of films such as *Le Pacte des loups / Brotherhood of the Wolf* (Gans 2001), 5.4 million spectators; *Un long dimanche de fiançailles / A Very Long Engagement* (Jeunet 2004), 4.4 million spectators; and *La Rafle* (Bosch 2010), 2.9 million spectators. *Brotherhood* indicated the potential for it to hybridize, combining its pre-Revolutionary French setting and emphasis on spectacle with elements of the action movie formula and Hong Kong martial arts films in a success-ful attempt to attract a younger audience (Higbee 2005, 298). Another indication of this continuing evolution has been the popularity of French biopics – films such as *La Môme / La Vie en Rose* (Dahan 2007) and *Coco Avant Chanel / Coco Before Chanel* (Fontaine 2009) (Radner 2015, 295).

A final example of the current development of heritage is the emergence of a cluster of films by French directors of North African immigrant origin, who had

previously favoured social-realist and comedy genres, and located their films in the present. 2000s and 2010s films such as *Inch'allah dimanche / Inch'allah Sunday* (Benguigui 2001), *Indigènes / Days of Glory* (Bouchareb 2006), *Cartouches Gauloises / Summer of '62* (Charef 2007), *Hors-la-loi / Outside the Law* (Bouchareb 2010), *Les Hommes libres / Free Men* (Ferroukhi 2011), as well as the TV film *Nuit noire, 17 octobre 1961 / October 17, 1961* (Tasma 2005), were devoted to exploring and exposing France's colonial history and emphasizing its direct impact on the nation's postcolonial present (Higbee 2013, 2). Moreover, the heritage turn in Maghrebi-French and North African immigrant filmmaking since the 2000s extends beyond a concern with Franco-Maghrebi colonial history, or the history of North African immigration to France, to incorporate narratives, subjects and historical settings that predate the presence of an extended North African diaspora in France: *Zaïna, cavalière de l'Atlas / Zaïna, Rider of the Atlas* (Guerdjou 2005), *Vénus noire / Black Venus* (Kechiche 2010) and *Les Chants de Mandrin / Smugglers' Songs* (Ameur-Zaïmeche 2012). I have argued elsewhere (Higbee 2013, 71–2) that these films can be identified as a form of 'counter-heritage'. Unlike the films that Claire Monk described as 'post-heritage' (2001, 7), which stress a concern with gender and sexuality, French 'counter-heritage' focuses on ethnic difference and immigrant histories, which challenge, or counter, the mainstream heritage film. Most notably, this countering questions the dominant neo-colonial or 'anti-repentant' modes of re-presenting and memorializing the past found in 1980s–90s examples such as *L'Amant / The Lover* (Annaud 1992) and *Indochine*.

Counter-heritage and the middlebrow

Applying the term 'counter-heritage' to this cluster of Maghrebi-French-authored films from the 2000s conveys the way they employ many of the aesthetic and narrative strategies of the heritage film to present a version of colonial history that runs counter to that offered by the French colonizer. However, what if we step back and, with a greater critical distance, question the relevance of 'heritage' for all contemporary historical films or period dramas produced in France? All of the heritage examples discussed are interstitially positioned between art-house and popular genre cinema, combine commercial appeal with reverence towards high culture, and are presented in accessible, engaging formats (prestige adaptations of French literary classics with an emphasis on spectacle and high production values) aimed, for the most part, at an educated, middle-aged, middle-class audience. All of these characteristics are shared with a category that has heretofore been associated with literature. Analysing the 'distinctive cultural space' of middlebrow writing since the 1920s, Beth Driscoll summarizes it as middle-class, reverential towards high culture, commercial, feminized, emotional, recreational, mediated and earnest (2014, 17–41). A convincing argument can therefore be made for the heritage film as the quintessentially middlebrow cinematic trend in contemporary French cinema.

How, though, does the middlebrow category provide alternative conceptual tools to analyse the position that counter-heritage films in particular occupy within

contemporary French cinema, especially with regards to their relationship to popular cinema – a concept that is itself always up for debate – and also the way that such films, and the presumed challenge that they offer to the dominant modes of representing (post)colonial history, engage (or not) with their audience? In a recent chapter on popular European cinema in the 2000s, Tim Bergfelder poses a broader but related question as to whether, beyond the more localized context of the British costume drama, the well-established category of the European heritage film maintains its purchase. He queries whether

> the 'heritage film' as a concept can be easily severed or exported from its original British context and references. . . . Indeed, if used too broadly, i.e. in the sense of a 'transnational genre', or where it is a mere synonym for a period film, the term leads to arbitrariness rather than clarification.
>
> *(Bergfelder 2015, 44)*

Bergfelder goes on to suggest that the 'aesthetics, values and aspirations' of 'prestige' and 'quality' that are typically bound up in the period film or costume drama might actually be better served by the term 'middlebrow', since these films inhabit an interstitial or hybrid position somewhere between what Elsaesser (2005) refers to as 'the image and idea' of national cinema (i.e. the ideological and cultural space in which a given film culture represents the imagined community of the nation in which it is located) on the one hand, and the 'purely commercial but critically despised end' of mainstream genre, stars and spectacle, on the other (2005, 44–5). This chapter proposes that the middlebrow may be a better conceptual tool for analysing the aesthetics, cultural aspirations and transnational reach of the French heritage film, or *fiction patrimoniale*, not least because these films display many of the characteristics that we already associate with the category.

On the face of it, however, substituting 'heritage' for 'middlebrow' seems to create as many problems as it solves. First, 'heritage' remains a useful means of analysing many European historical films, costume or period dramas, for they share a number of characteristics that can be compared: a self-conscious concern with an investigation and representation of the past and the commodification of such representations in an industrial art form such as cinema, a use of the museum aesthetic and heritage space, as well as what Belén Vidal refers to as a 'concern and intimate relationship with both the past and the present, where these terms are under constant (re-)negotiation since contemporary identities evolve in connection with a changing sense of historicity' (2012, 18). The middlebrow does not directly engage with these issues, since a representation of history is not part of its defining characteristics, which is not to say, however, that middlebrow films are not concerned with historical narratives that represent past lives and events.

Second, there is the problem of what the French literary scholar and middlebrow theorist Caroline Pollentier refers to as 'thinking the middlebrow across borders' (2012, 28). Middlebrow is, after all, a term that is marked by the specific cultural, historical and class-bound British context from which it emerged. On

a practical level, Diana Holmes rightly notes that 'the term middlebrow is richly meaningful in English but has no adequate French equivalent, "culture moyenne" being about the closest' (forthcoming). Indeed, as Pollentier has argued, in the preface to the 1984 English translation of *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* Bourdieu himself warns the English-speaking reader of 'the dangers of a facile search for partial equivalences which cannot stand in for a methodological comparison between systems' (quoted in Pollentier 2012, 37). Instead of seeking mere equivalents, which can never amount to more than an approximation of an idea or concept, Pollentier proposes a different approach, espoused by this volume as a whole, through which profitably to engage in a transnational, cross-cultural theorizing of the middlebrow:

> Rather than simply considering *moyen* and middlebrow as possible cultural 'equivalents', I therefore propose to develop a meta-theoretical questioning of Bourdieu's category: how does the sociological concept of *moyen* configure the social and symbolic values attached to this arguably national-based middle ground, and can this way of configuring middleness help us account for the emergence of the English middlebrow ethos?
>
> *(Pollentier 2012, 38)*

Using Pollentier's suggestion as a starting point, this chapter turns the question in the other direction by arguing that the middlebrow's configuring of 'middleness' helps us better to understand the cultural space occupied by the heritage film in contemporary French cinema. In particular, its association with accessibility, social mobility and the ability to negotiate or 'think through change' (Napper 2009, 8–10; Faulkner 2013, 5–8) helps us analyse what happens when a group of French filmmakers of Maghrebi immigrant origin move in the 2000s to occupy a cinematic space (the French heritage film or *fiction patrimoniale*) that, in narrative, aesthetic and ideological terms, has consistently been identified as offering a largely nostalgic, conservative view of French colonial and postcolonial history. This also brings into view the ongoing development of the heritage film as a cinematic genre or category in France and its artistic and ideological function in contemporary national cinema. In addition, since 'middlebrow' may apply to both texts and audiences, foregrounding this question asks us to analyse the extent to which French audiences have accepted the alternative histories offered by these films and, finally, to question what is at stake for the Maghrebi-French filmmakers themselves (in artistic and political terms) in crossing over into this middlebrow cultural space.

What I am not suggesting, then, is that there is a clear intellectual or scholarly logic for simply substituting 'heritage' for 'middlebrow' as a descriptive term for the French historical film or costume drama. Nor am I implying that all of the films that can be identified as 'counter-heritage' are necessarily middlebrow. Instead, I propose that employing the middlebrow in conjunction with the notion of the heritage film provides us with a critical framework within which to explore how 'counter-heritage' films negotiate the interstitial position that Bergfelder alludes to

between the *film d'auteur* and the more commercially driven form of the heritage film. It is precisely the in-between-ness of middlebrow cinema, identified by Sally Faulkner as a fusion of 'high production values, serious – but not challenging – subject matter, high – but not obscure – cultural references, and accessible form' (2013, 8), that makes it such an attractive critical tool with which to analyse these counter-heritage films. Faulkner's reference to the question of accessibility also invites us to consider how, in terms of narrative structure and character identification, these films attempt to engage with their spectators.

Through an analysis of these historical films by French directors of North African immigrant origin we are, therefore, also able to challenge the existing association of the middlebrow with the heritage film, whereby the middlebrow has a tendency to 'establish conservative readings as the dominant readings' and be defined 'more in terms of what it excludes than of what it actually entails' (Vidal 2012, 26–7). A corollary to this position is the potentially didactic element of middlebrow cinema, exposing a predominantly middle-class, educated audience to artistic forms deemed worthy of valorization as well as social themes/issues or broader philosophical questions that these audiences feel they should be addressing and consuming. This, then, brings us to the question of what such heritage films are for, as well as the issue of cultural value and legitimacy: who deems what representation 'worthy' and when? As Stuart Hall (2005, 24) suggests, the idea of heritage is not just about preservation or aesthetic and historical value; it is also about power and the way that the officially promoted heritage of a nation (or, for the purposes of this chapter, a national cinema) is often employed by those in a position of power, wealth and influence precisely to impose an interpretative schema that amplifies and legitimizes their own ideology, version of history and cultural dominance – a point that takes on a crucial significance in the case of contemporary counter-heritage films that enter into the debate around the memorialization of France's colonial past. Let us now try to work through these questions in relation to two case studies: *Days of Glory* (Bouchareb 2006) and *Black Venus* (Kechiche 2010).

Days of Glory: the immediacy and allegiance of the middlebrow

Directed by veteran beur filmmaker Rachid Bouchareb, *Days of Glory* exposes the hidden history of the pivotal role played by colonial soldiers from Africa in the Allied liberation of Europe from Nazi oppression during the Second World War and is the most prominent and commercially successful of all the Maghrebi-French counter-heritage films of the 2000s. The film broke new ground in a variety of ways for its Franco-Algerian director and cast of Maghrebi-French actors. Made for a budget of over €14m (at that time the highest ever for a production directed by a French filmmaker of Maghrebi origin), distributed across France on over 400 prints and starring Djamel Debbouze (a French-born actor of Moroccan immigrant origin and one of France's biggest stars), the film benefited from the kind of distribution and exhibition conditions reserved for only the high-profile French

mainstream releases. The film is a generic hybrid: part war film (though influenced more by Hollywood than European cinema in this respect) and part melodrama (the significance of which in relation to the middlebrow we shall pick up on later). While Radner (2015, 302–3) qualifies *Days of Glory* as an historical film rather than 'heritage', due in part to the fact that the film interrogates rather than celebrates the nation's past, it is still possible to identify the film with the notion of *fiction patrimoniale*, for its museum aesthetic and faithful recreation of the period (the uniforms, vehicles and weaponry used by the colonial soldiers and the look of the various towns that the troops liberate as they advance through southern Europe), and above all for the way that the film engages with the idea of the heritage film as 'present in the past', where identities in the present are constantly evolving in relation to representations of the past (Vidal 2012, 17). As is now well known, *Days of Glory* enjoyed critical and commercial success in France and abroad on a scale previously unheard of for a Maghrebi-French director: attracting 3 million spectators and numerous awards, including a collective best actor award for the five male leads at Cannes, and a nomination for best foreign language film at the 2007 Oscars. As a result of the film's phenomenal success, as well as its perceived influence on changing the law concerning war pensions[4] and French attitudes relating to the debt owed to African colonial soldiers, *Days of Glory* tends to be remembered more for its political or sociological impact than its cinematic or artistic merits, which tend to conform to the codes and conventions of the war film and melodrama (Hargreaves 2007, 205).

Days of Glory clearly fits with Bergfelder's description of the middlebrow category as a prestige production that occupies an ambivalent position between *film d'auteur* and popular genre cinema. In relation to popular cinema, the film clearly plays on the conventions of both melodrama (the heroic sacrifice of the colonial troops, the emerging love affair between one of the Algerian soldiers and a young French woman that is censored by the military authorities) and the war film (the camaraderie of the troops and the centrality of extended battle scenes to the film's narrative). With regards to auteur cinema, *Days of Glory* carries Bouchareb's authorial signature as it returns to common themes found in his earlier films (questions of hybrid identities, the relationship of immigrant/colonial minorities to the host nation) and was seen by the director as an intensely personal project, since his ancestors had served as colonial soldiers in the French army. The film thus would fit Driscoll's description (2014, 3) of the middlebrow as commercial, emotional, mediated and earnest.

However, Faulkner's notion of the middlebrow as concerned with social mobility and accessibility and Napper's sense of the middlebrow's ability to negotiate or think through change provide the most productive approach to understanding the process of middling taking place in the film and the critical means of 'thinking the middlebrow across borders'. In *Days of Glory* this is particularly important for understanding how the film negotiates the postcolonial present of contemporary France through a transnational Franco-Algerian history of the Second World War. In his analysis of the film's sociological and political significance, Alec Hargreaves draws attention to the slippage that occurs in both the film's narrative

and in numerous interviews given by the director and the film's stars between the 'nous' ('us') of France's postcolonial ethnic minorities and the 'ils' ('them') of the colonial troops who fought for France (2007, 212). This ambiguous shift is seen most obviously in Saïd's declaration 'when I liberate a country, it becomes my country' that he makes to a young woman who lives in the southern French town that the colonial troops have just freed from Nazi control. The exchange between Saïd and the young woman is presented in a conventional shot/reverse shot with the crucial lines delivered in close-up, so that, as the audience, we can be in no doubt of their significance and feel they are being delivered as much to us as they are to the young woman on screen. Similarly, the effect in the film – especially for a French audience who would have been familiar with Debbouze's status – is that the lines appear to be spoken as much by Debbouze the Maghrebi-French star as by the character he is playing.[5] Saïd/Debbouze's utterance thus obscures significant differences between the experiences of two distinct generations. On the one hand, the older generation of colonial soldiers who fought for France and then mostly returned to the Maghreb, in some cases subsequently fighting against France for independence from colonial rule; on the other, the younger Maghrebi-French actors, descendants of North African immigrants who came to France after the Second World War, who play the colonial soldiers in the film, and whose stake in legitimizing the Maghrebi diaspora's rightful place in France more than half a century later is bound up in a quite separate set of historical, cultural and political circumstances.[6] *Days of Glory*'s conflation of the historical perspective of the North African colonial soldiers and the present-day perspective of France's postcolonial ethnic minorities of Maghrebi immigrant origin therefore forms part of Bouchareb's strategy to transfer this historical narrative from the margins to the middlebrow cultural space of the heritage film. A close analysis of interviews given by Bouchareb and the stars of *Days of Glory* following the film's release (e.g. Pliskin 2006; Frois 2006) suggests that they were entirely conscious that such a slippage would occur but felt it was an acceptable risk to take if the film's political message was to be communicated in the most efficient way to the widest possible audience.

These potential problematic slippages between past and present do not seem to have concerned the vast majority of the 3 million spectators who flocked to see the film upon its release in 2006. The critical response was similarly and almost unanimously positive, though critics tended to praise the film's political conviction rather than artistic ambition – an understandable response given *Days of Glory*'s rather formulaic use of the generic codes of both melodrama and the war film. One way of explaining the audience's acceptance of the historical slippage between the real-life actors and the historical characters they are playing comes from the way the film encourages profound emotional engagement on the part of the audience with the characters (see Figure 8.1). If we return to the earlier example of Debbouze/Saïd addressing the audience/young woman, what is taking place is precisely what Murray Smith, in his study of character engagement in film, defines as allegiance: 'an emotional reaction that arises out of the moral structuring of the film, that is, the way that the film invites us to respond with regard to characters morally,

FIGURE 8.1   'Emotional engagement as (middlebrow) narrative strategy': Saïd (Jamel Debbouze) pledges his allegiance to France in *Days of Glory* (Bouchareb 2006)

through the devices of music, iconography, performance and so forth' (2005, 97). This point is reinforced by Radner in her analysis of *Days of Glory*'s melodramatic mode, which she sees as mobilizing the suffering of the colonial troops, not only at the hands of the Germans but also of their French commanding officers. The spectator's allegiance to the North African protagonists is clearly encouraged, and, by extension, we are left in little doubt regarding the film's criticism of the 'official' French version of history that obfuscated the extensive role played by the colonial troops in the Allied liberation of Europe (Radner 2015, 303–4). The strategy of narrative allegiance employed by Bouchareb in *Days of Glory* is therefore closely aligned to what Holmes identifies in middlebrow French literary fiction as the importance of melodrama (emotional engagement), immersion and transparency (or, put differently, an accessible narrative), as well as the inclusion of 'compelling characters, who invite at least partial empathy' (Holmes forthcoming).

As I have argued elsewhere (Higbee 2013, 84), the real risk taken by Bouchareb in *Days of Glory*, then, was to attempt to make a film that was both militant in its political objectives and consensual in its desire to engage a crossover, majority French audience in the question of memorializing France's colonial history. The film confronts its audience with the paradox identified by Nicola Bancel and Pascal Blanchard of France as both the birthplace of the *droits de l'homme* and one of the most brutal and exploitative colonial regimes (2005, 15). At the same time, it offers a corrective in arguing for the rightful place of these colonial troops in a Franco–Algerian history of the Second World War. The deployment of middlebrow narratological strategies of immersion, engagement and accessibility in

Days of Glory thus allows the wrongs of France's colonial past to be presented as an injustice that continues to affect both veterans from the colonies and French-born descendants of the North African colonial troops who gave their lives to ensure the freedoms enjoyed in France today.

Black Venus: entrenching hierarchies of film art and cultural value

Black Venus was the fourth feature film by critically acclaimed Maghrebi-French auteur Abdellatif Kechiche, whose growing status was confirmed by the critical and commercial success of his third feature, *La Graine et le mulet / Couscous* (2007). Though benefitting from an international cast of established actors, *Black Venus* maintained Kechiche's preference for showcasing unknown acting talent – rather than the bankable stars more readily associated with the heritage film – with the casting of screen debutante Yahima Torres, a Cuban émigrée living in Paris. Kechiche also continued to work with trusted creative collaborators, ensuring that aesthetic traits from his previous films – such as the visual style of largely static camera positions combined with the use of zoom and extreme close-ups, an emphasis on performative spaces and the body as spectacle, the dynamic use of language surrounding a taciturn central protagonist, a linear but expansive plotline, and the refusal of an optimistic narrative resolution – remain prominent elements in *Black Venus*.

While the film thus maintained many key traits of the director's authorial signature, in other ways *Black Venus* represented a departure for Kechiche. All his previous films had been shot on low budgets, with narratives set in present-day France: *Black Venus*, in contrast, was produced on a budget of nearly €13 million and is clearly part of the growing interest in historical biopics in the 2000s discussed above. The film recounts events from the final five years in the life of Sara Baartman, a Khoekhoe tribeswoman from the Cape Colony, who lived from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century, and was transported as a servant from South Africa to Europe in 1810. From this time, until her death in 1815, she was exhibited before audiences in England and Paris, achieving celebrity as the original 'Venus Hottentot', an object of curiosity, fear and prohibited (sexual) desire. As well as being sold to a bourgeois consumer culture of the exotic in the freak shows in London, and then to the libertine salons of nineteenth-century Paris, Baartman was, towards the end of her life, the subject of 'scientific' observation by French scientists under the direction of Georges Cuvier, Professor of Natural History in the Collège de France. The fascination of nineteenth-century audiences and scientists with Baartman thus places her at 'the intersection of gendered and racial stereotypes in the rise of European scientific racism' (Scully and Crais 2008, 302).

Black Venus presents a transnational historical narrative, set two decades before the French colonization of Algeria would begin the cycle of colonial contact and migration that established the North African diaspora in France. The film was shot in three languages (English, French and Afrikaans), employing an international cast of professional actors and hundreds of extras, paying attention to 'authentic' the

historical reconstruction (costumes, set design, props, [digital] recreation of histori-cal locations), consistent with the production values and the 'museum aesthetic' of the heritage film. The mise-en-scène of the freak shows in London, moreover, evokes the opening sequence of *Les Enfants du paradis / Children of Paradise* (Carné 1942), which provides an inter-textual reference to the Tradition of Quality, while scenes involving Cuvier's lectures to the French academy, the courtroom appear-ance of César and Sara, as well as her performances in the salons of Paris, expand *Black Venus*'s narrative focus beyond the intimate worldview and resolutely local horizons of the central protagonists in Kechiche's earlier films.

At first glance, *Black Venus* appears to adopt a similar production strategy to *Days of Glory* insomuch as the film's substantial budget is an almost inevitable con-sequence of the detailed cinematic reconstruction of historical locations. However, this elevated budget does not necessarily align *Black Venus* with the mainstream production practices and middlebrow audiences of the heritage film. Rather, the film is more readily associated with the production orbit of the *cinéma du milieu* (medium-budget, artistically challenging, auteur-led cinema), an observation that is reinforced by the participation of veteran independent producer/distributor Marin Karmitz in the film's production. Though the *cinéma du milieu* might initially appear as the ideal middling-space in which to find French middlebrow cinema, the reality is, in fact, more complicated. The term itself emerged from a protest offered by a small but influential group of independent French filmmakers, who lamented the increasing paucity of funding in France during the 2000s for artistically ambitious films that did not require the budget of a mainstream blockbuster, but needed more than other low-budget independent productions. Despite the association of the *cinéma du milieu* with auteur cinema, these films are not necessarily bound by a common set of artistic or aesthetic characteristics – and tend to be more firmly located in the auteurist camp than the hybrid position of European middlebrow cinema outlined earlier by Bergfelder. Moreover, the *cinéma du milieu*'s associa-tion with a broader defence of auteur-led production in French cinema of the mid-2000s has led some critics to point to the ambiguity surrounding the term (Vanderschelden 2009, 246). For example, does the *cinéma du milieu* refer to the economic rather than artistic concerns of these films, or does it function as a state-ment of intent, a call to arms or even a form of political intervention on the part of certain French filmmakers in current debates around the funding and direction of contemporary French cinema?

If the ambivalent position occupied by *Black Venus* between the auteur film and the heritage film (especially its meticulous recreation of the period setting) offers one potential link to the middlebrow, so does the focus on a female protagonist at the heart of the narrative. There is a suggestive, if not exact, parallel between Driscoll's observation that 'middlebrow literary culture is both female and femin-ized' because it is 'often produced, disseminated and overwhelmingly consumed by women' (2014, 29), and the implied female audiences of heritage film. The greater agency afforded to female protagonists in the heritage film (Beylot and Moine 2009, 21), however, has led to Julianne Pidduck's lament (2012, 102) that

this situation has resulted in a devaluation of the category in critical and cinephilic discourse. In Pidduck's words, this 'mode of production is commonly associated, at least implicitly, with denigrated female audiences and taste cultures' (2012, 102).

In the case of *Black Venus*, despite its narrative and mise-en-scène being entirely structured around the figure of Baartman, the film paradoxically denies any possibility of Smith's engagement, immersion or alignment with the central female protagonist (already noted as a key characteristic of the middlebrow in *Days of Glory*) (see Figure 8.2). The female body under duress and as a site of performance, exploitation and ambivalent agency is pushed to uncomfortable extremes in *Black Venus*. In one particularly disturbing scene, as she performs to a private audience in a Parisian salon, a clearly intoxicated Baartman is subjected to a harrowing objectification that effectively amounts to sexual assault, as the assembled libertine public are encouraged by her new master, Réaux (Olivier Gourmet), to embark on a tactile and ocular exploration of the Venus Hottentot's body to better understanding their own (sexual) desires and inhibitions. Baartman is, moreover, presented as a taciturn figure, unable to articulate her feelings and emotions to those around her. Baartman's various performances as the Venus Hottentot are thus analogous with the life-size cast of her body that stares back blankly at the audience from Cuvier's lecture – an icon that is repeatedly observed, analysed and contemplated by various intra-diegetic audiences in the film (as she is by the spectator themselves) without us gaining any greater insight into her motivations or desires. Frequently the spectacles in which she performs begin with an establishing shot that frames Baartman from behind, obscuring her face and looking out towards the expectant audience. Although conventionally employed to evoke an emotional connection or to suggest intimacy with a given character (such as in the previous example from *Days of Glory*), in *Black Venus* the close-up functions instead as a marker of

FIGURE 8.2   'Emotional detachment as (auteurist) narrative strategy': Sara (Yahima Torres), the 'unknowable' Venus Hottentot in *Black Venus* (Kechiche 2010)

Sara's alienation. It also appears in the mise-en-scène as a more traditional means of fragmenting and thus fetishizing her body, emphasizing the fact that 'for most Europeans who viewed her, Sarah [sic.] Baartman existed only as a collection of sexual parts' (Gilman 1985, 85). The danger of this representational strategy, which denies the agency of the female gaze and is consistent with Kechiche's refusal across all of his films to claim an absolute knowledge or truth over his protagonists, is that Baartman/Torres is reduced to a cipher that mobilizes gender and race as markers of perpetual otherness. Whereas, in *Days of Glory*, the other-ed body of the male colonial solider in fact becomes the heroic body within the narrative, in *Black Venus* the raced, female body under duress is simultaneously qualified as a site of fascination, desire and repulsion but never one of agency.

In contrast to *Days of Glory*, the possibility of accessibility and 'working through' issues of European scientific racism as a foundation of nineteenth-century French colonial ideology with a middlebrow audience via the heritage film is, therefore, denied by Kechiche. The film attracted just over 200,000 spectators in France; a modest figure given the size of its budget, the success of his previous film and Kechiche's auteur status. It thus failed to reach a sizeable mainstream audience (which in France today is generally considered to be over 1 million spectators) as *Days of Glory* had done. A detailed analysis of the critical reception of *Black Venus* supports this observation and offers further insight into the film's perceived lack of 'accessibility', either as narrative immersion or character engagement. The film was identified by one reviewer as a 'historical film in costume' (Spira 2010), with another even remarking that the *Black Venus*'s relentless pessimism and sombre tone was 'radical', given that it was placed 'at the heart of a mainstream genre' (the biopic) (Morain 2010). However, the critical response uniformly emphasized the film as auteur cinema, driven by the artistic vision of Kechiche, with one reviewer (Le Vern 2010) even comparing the representation of violence and suffering to the work of Italian auteur, poet and intellectual, Pier Paolo Pasolini. The critical discourse seems, therefore, to distance the film from the popular or feminized associations of the middlebrow space of the *fiction patrimoniale* in favour of the perceived cultural legitimacy and artistry of the auteur film. Similarly, the more negative reviews (Tranchant 2010; Vermelin 2010) focus on how inaccessible the film's dark narrative is for the audience. Elsewhere, Spira (2010) praises the powerful performance offered by the newcomer Torres as Baartman, but then stresses that the film leaves no space for allegiance or empathy on the part of the spectator.

This calculated distancing of the central protagonist is in stark contrast to the accessibility of characters in *Days of Glory*. *Black Venus* confirms Pidduck's observation that 'bodies in extreme states of pleasure, suffering and illness have become increasingly in evidence in French heritage films since the 1990s' (2012, 103). However, the film's denial of any agency for or empathy with its central female protagonist effectively shuts down the possibility for the film to add to the 'new scrutiny of embodied feminine and working class historical experience' (Pidduck 2012, 122) offered by French heritage film or *fiction patrimoniale*, which could have been achieved by employing the strategies of accessibility and immersion found in the middlebrow.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to explore the possibilities of re-thinking the middlebrow 'across borders' as a means of better understanding what occurs when, in the specific context of French cinema, Maghrebi–French filmmakers stake a claim to the cultural space of the heritage film or *fiction patrimoniale* in the 2000s with an interpretation of the national past that challenges a Eurocentric view of history. 'Middlebrow' may be mobilized as a conceptual approach, rather than descriptive marker or contextual category, which allows us to analyse how these counter-heritage films 'work through change' and can themselves contribute to the ongoing transformation of the *fiction patrimoniale*, located in an interstitial position between the mainstream and the art-house. In the case of *Days of Glory*, the extent to which the film engages with narrative immersion and character engagement (key characteristics of the cultural space of the middlebrow in both film and literature) is crucial for the film to reach its audience, and impacts on the heritage film's ability to contribute in a tangible way to the wider discussions in contemporary France over its contested colonial past and postcolonial present. While both *Black Venus* and *Days of Glory* employ the museum aesthetic of the heritage film, *Days of Glory*'s use of melodrama, combined with a narrative strategy of spectator allegiance with the colonial troops that actively encourages a slippage between the contemporary Maghrebi–French actors and the historical protagonists that they are interpreting, helps to explain the crossover success of the film with mainstream French audiences. In contrast, *Black Venus* identifies itself as an uncompromising and 'difficult' auteur film that denies the visual pleasures and character engagement typically offered by the middlebrow. As a consequence of Bouchareb's apparent willingness to embrace the middlebrow's potential for accessibility (to its intended audience), *Days of Glory* arguably becomes the more influential and, in political terms, radical work. The representational politics adopted in *Black Venus*, in contrast, for all their power and artistic 'worth', confine it within clear hierarchies of cultural value associated with the auteur film and obscure it from the view of popular French audiences, thus limiting a more profitable engagement with both the politics of gender and the memorialization of France's colonial past in the middlebrow cultural space of the *fiction patrimoniale*.

Notes

1 This wane in popularity over the 1960s and 1970s came in part as a result of the attack on the 'Tradition of Quality' by critics-turned-filmmakers of the *nouvelle vague* (above all, François Truffaut, on whom see Susan Hayward in Chapter 2 of this volume) but also because of changing audience preferences and production trends. On the one hand, there was the increased popularity of the *policier* (crime film) whose contemporary, realist narratives appealed more to French audiences at that time. On the other hand, the emergence of the new historical film offered France new ways to explore its past on screen (see Pidduck 2005, 32–3, and on the new historical film, Forbes 1992, 231–6).

2 Consider, for example, Pam Cook's statement that 'the past in such fictions is never simply the past: they look backwards and forwards at the same time, creating a heterogeneous

world that we enter and leave like travelers, in a constant movement of exile and return' (Cook 1996, 73).

3 Unless otherwise stated, all figures on the number of spectators are taken from www. cboboxoffice.com.

4 This is not actually the case – the law concerning equality for colonial war pensions was passed in the French parliament a few months before the release of *Days of Glory*. However, the fact that a number of critics and academics reported that the film was responsible for changing the law illustrates the broader awareness of these issues that the *Days of Glory* provoked in France during its production and upon its release.

5 Interestingly, this slippage between actor/star and protagonist also occurred in press inter-views given prior to *Days of Glory*'s release in France, such as the one given by the film's stars – Roschdy Zem, Sami Bouajila, Samy Naceri and Debbouze – following the film's success at Cannes (Pliskin 2006).

6 In this context, Durmelat proposes that Bouchareb's attempt to promote a sense of legitimacy and collective identity for the second generation through foregrounding the sacrifice of their parents' or grandparents' generation 'verges on [a] consensual hagiography' (Durmelat 2011, 105). Elsewhere, Rosello, whilst supportive of the film's political intent, expresses uneasiness with the way that the 'new', politically effective version of the history of the colonial troops refuses any subsequent scrutiny of its own version of historical truth (Rosello 2010, 111). For more on the politics of memorializing the colonial past in *Days of Glory*, see Higbee (2013, 80–5).

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9

RADICAL POLITICS, MIDDLEBROW CINEMA

Salvador (Puig Antich) and the search for a new consensus

Belén Vidal

This chapter investigates the place of radical politics as part of an imaginary of the past absorbed and repurposed by a contemporary middlebrow cinema. Radical politics is an inherently international theme shaped by local histories. The trope of student protest and youth subcultures in the so-called 'long sixties' and their radicalization into the armed underground activism of the 1970s (Suri 2013, 105–8) reflect a history of dissent that is transnational and cosmopolitan in character and, at the same time, reverts into specific national narratives built on traumatic legacies of political violence. European films centred on historical figures engaged in radical action (e.g. *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex / The Baader Meinhof Complex* [Edel 2008]) or, alternatively, on fictional accounts of young adults' experience of political (dis-) engagement (such as *Mio fratello è figlio unico / My Brother is an Only Child* [Luchetti 2007]) revisit the post–May '68 moment as a formative period for political identities through the popular memory of this era, channelled through the personal experience of political awakening.

My main case study, *Salvador (Puig Antich)* directed by Manuel Huerga (2006), sits at the confluence of the above two trends. A biopic of the young anarchist who became the last political prisoner to be executed by the Spanish state under the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco in 1974, *Salvador* is a significant yet understudied example of the retrieval of the memory of the period of the transition to democracy in contemporary Spanish cultural production.[1] In the context of the ongoing debates about the status of historical memory in democratic Spain, the film emerges as an important – if contested – example of 'counter-heritage' film (see Will Higbee in this volume), confronting its audience with the brutality of repression in the late years of the dictatorship, especially through its representation of capital punishment. Through discussion of *Salvador*'s mediated aesthetic in conjunction with the forms of public discourse generated by and around the film, I argue for the function of middlebrow cinema as a compelling conduit into a radical political

imaginary. This mode of approaching the political past is, however, not without its tensions. In this respect, this chapter seeks to illuminate the key role of the middlebrow film in the negotiation of (nationally specific) divisive historical narratives within a European cinema emerging from (and for) a post-ideological moment.

The return of politics as history in European heritage cinema

Salvador is representative of the political turn in a European heritage cinema largely identified with a middlebrow aesthetic. Elsewhere I have noted a trend in post-2000 heritage films that draws on the popular memory of the twentieth century against the backdrop of national crisis (Vidal 2012, 68), including the incorporation of the iconography and soundscape of the 1960s and 1970s as the setting for new *retro* fictions. This cultural shift adopts rather than disrupts the accessible narrative styles, emphasis on character and agency, and preponderance of genre tropes (in particular, melodrama) that make up the 'middlebrow-ness' of the heritage film. If the heritage-film debates of the 1990s read the period film largely through the aesthetic and political vacuum of nostalgia (Vidal 2012, 7–35), conversely, this new European heritage cinema places the political past within living memory at the heart of its thematic concerns. Thus, as Sabine Hake has noted, the fictionalization of contested political pasts – the return of politics as history – raises questions about the 'affective dimensions of the historical film and their contribution not only to the meaning of history and memory but also to the aestheticization and medialization of politics' (2010, 7). Such re-articulation of the political becomes most apparent in popular media: for example, the *Ostalgie* (or nostalgia for the East) phenomenon in post-unification Germany presents intriguing parallels with the recuperation of the memory of the dictatorship period in Spain (1939–75). In this respect, the television series *Cuéntame cómo pasó / Tell me How It Happened*, TVE 2001–present)[2] and a film such as *Good-bye Lenin!* (Becker 2003) equally suggest the primacy of the emotional imperative over the social or political (Smith 2006, 23). Such imperative is highlighted by the material cultures, as well as the related habits that underpin the aspirations of the Alcántara family in the Spanish series, and the 'socialist commodity culture . . . construed by former East Germans as a paean to an extinguished national identity or a communal interdependence fostered by chronic shortages' (Castillo 2008, 767) in the German film. In both cases, popular culture treads between memorialization and commodification, transforming a contested political past into a safe haven that provides familiar, if disputed, symbols of national identity.

This parallelism in the debates on what are otherwise diverging political histories needs to be teased out if we are to avoid reverting to diffuse nostalgia as a post-postmodern explanatory model. Post-unification German cinema's attempt at 'normalization' of the nation's relationship with its past twentieth-century history produced a commercial cinema that has been described as 'a repudiation of the social and cultural legacies of the '68 generation and an affirmation of post-ideological

society and its promotion of consumerism, materialism, and fun mentality' (Hake 2008, 192). This 'cinema of consensus', as per the phrase coined by Eric Rentschler (2000), was the byproduct of a post-Cold War era in which former geo-political antagonisms and alignments had dissolved with the prevailing of Western capitalism. Rentschler retrospectively extends his condemnation of the 'provincialisation of German film culture' in the 1990s (c.f. 2000, 268–74; 2013, 245), to the New German historical films, which 'provide conciliatory narratives that seem above all driven by a desire to heal the wounds of the past and thereby seal them, to transform bad history into agreeable fantasies that allow for a sense of closure' (2013, 243). For Rentschler, international hits *Der Untergang / Downfall* (Hirschbiegel 2004) and *Das Leben der Anderen / The Lives of Others* (von Donnersmarck 2006) continue the normalization process advocated by a cinema of consensus devoid of the oppositional energy associated with the New German Cinema in the 1970s (c.f. Rentschler in Cooke 2012, 18–19). However, this holistic reading of the new heritage cinema of the 2000s has been questioned by less deterministic interpretations of the films. Drawing on Alison Landsberg's concept of 'prosthetic memory' (to which I will return), Paul Cooke proposes a reading of the above films that is more attentive to the layering of different points of view as well as to the affective nature of cinema (2012, 103–22); these films aim at audiences who, due to temporal and/or cultural distance, have a 'less fraught relationship with the past' (2012, 104).

The phrase 'cinema of consensus' is apposite in the context of modern Spanish cinema, which, in some ways not unlike post–*Wende* Germany, has been marked by the need to confront the legacy of a traumatic totalitarian past and the effects of full if uneven assimilation into global Western capitalism. In this context, 'consensus,' however, acquires an altogether different resonance. The Spanish democracy was built on the political consensus between parties across the political spectrum (generally referred to as *pacto del olvido* or 'the pact of oblivion'), which curtailed the possibility of a radical break with the past to ensure a future of stability and national reconciliation through political reform. This meant giving up on fully dismantling the Francoist institutions and, although a general amnesty was granted to political prisoners and exiles, the regime's crimes against the civilian population were not condemned (Vilarós 1998, 1–21; Aguilar 2001). In this respect, the return of politics in the heritage film often signals the discontents of such consensus. National anxieties about the incompleteness of the transitional process are subsumed within increasingly transnational modes of filmmaking: the globally successful *El laberinto del fauno / Pan's Labyrinth* (Del Toro 2006) refers back to the strategies of 1970s dissident cinema (through the focus on a young girl's gaze, reminiscent of *El espíritu de la colmena / The Spirit of the Beehive* (Erice 1973), but the generic framework of the fantasy film addresses a spectator who did not live through or necessarily know about the legacy of the Spanish Civil War. *Pan's Labyrinth* revises a (highly political) cinematic legacy and textualizes a traumatic national past but, like the abovementioned German examples, it circulated as a post–national popular art film in the global market (Shaw 2013, 67–92).

This double bind results in a European heritage cinema which, paradoxically, seems to unburden itself from the legacy of the past while remaining obsessed with its political iconography. Embracing a controversial subject matter (terrorist violence, political repression and capital punishment), *Salvador* engages frontally with the debates about the management of historical memory. But how does the film negotiate the ongoing process of political normalization? Through a combined analysis of the textual strategies and the public discourse surrounding the reception of *Salvador*, I suggest that the iteration of the imaginary of radical politics addresses the spectator along a double axis, both national and generational. In the following sections, I critically engage with 'consensus' as a middlebrow formation preoccupied with the affective transmission of a legacy of radical politics divorced from radical forms.

Salvador's mediated aesthetic: the performance of memory

Salvador deals with a traumatic episode of the national past within the accessible structures of the biographical docudrama. In 1969, while still in school, Salvador Puig Antich[3] becomes part of the Marxist-based anarchist group Movimiento Ibérico de Liberación-Grupos Autónomos de Combate, or MIL (the Iberian Movement of Liberation). In less than five years he falls prey to an ambush by agents of the Brigada Político-social, the arm of the Francoist police in charge of rooting out political dissidence. A frantic shoot-out results in the youngest agent being killed and Puig Antich sustaining severe bullet wounds. Following a trial by court martial that remains disputed to this day (Angulo 2006; Gómez Bravo 2014), Puig Antich is condemned to death. At age twenty-five, he became the last political prisoner to be executed under Francoist rule by the method of the garrotte, less than two years away from the death of the dictator and the subsequent change of political regime that would have likely ensured his amnesty.

The film covers these historical facts through a linear narrative focused on its hero's plight during the short period between his detention in September 1973 and his execution on 2 March 1974. A little-known story of leftist activism thus informs a plot that plays with melodramatic time – and (historical) bad timing – to maximum effect. Starting in medias res with the violent arrest of Salvador (Daniel Brühl), the first act presents Salvador's conversations with his defence counsellor, Oriol Arau (Tristán Ulloa). This device allows for a first-person flashback and the extended use of diegetic voiceover, through which Salvador explains the beginnings of his involvement with the MIL, their actions (from robbing banks to maintaining a dissident press and supporting underground worker unions) and group discussions, up to the day of his capture by the political police. This first part of the film also dwells on his relationship with his family, especially with his youngest sister Merçona (Andrea Ros), as well as with two women: the prim, middle-class Cuca (Leonor Watling), and the

hippie Margalida (Ingrid Rubio). The second act focuses on Salvador's waiting time in prison, the increasingly sympathetic exchanges with one of the guards, Jesús Irurre (Leonardo Sbaraglia), and the days up to his trial by a court martial. The final act, structured as a countdown, concentrates on the last three days in which Arau desperately tries and fails to secure a revocation of Salvador's death sentence, up to Salvador's last night in the company of his sisters, witnessed by the now compassionate Irurre. The hoped-for last-minute pardon is not granted, and the film concludes with Salvador's execution, followed by a brief closing scene that recalls the public demonstrations of anger during his funeral, hinting at a future beyond the dictatorship.

This narrative enters the realm of memorialization through familiar media. The first part of *Salvador* not only works a composite of personal memories delivered through a classical linear flashback, but also stresses the function of the biopic as a form of (public) 'prosthetic' memory. Landsberg's influential term proposes that cinema, as a technology and a product of capitalism, is capable of disseminating memory beyond the borders of the ethnic and national communities where these memories originate (2004, 26–7). In this respect, an analysis of the opening credit sequence is instructive. It presents a densely textured collage of inscriptions, historical footage and photographs, in a stylized composition of whites, blacks and reds. The symbols of the Falange, the MIL and the Civil Rights movement mix with protest slogans in Catalan (the word 'llibertat' – freedom – appears). The profile of Franco at the centre of a bull's eye slowly dissolves into the drawn profile of General de Gaulle gagging a student under the phrase 'sois jeune et tais toi' (be young and shut up), an iconic graffito of May '68. The use of found footage is equally eclectic and stylized: bleached black-and-white images, photographic negatives and slow-motion footage of Martin Luther King Jr, children fleeing the bombings in Vietnam, lines of *gendarmes* in front of the barricades in Paris, demonstrations and a sea of Spanish flags appear in masked sections of the frame. Only one sharply defined image takes over the whole of the frame: a photograph of the garrotte, a powerful (anti-)national symbol offered as the reverse to the internationalist approach to the era of political extremes. These images are part of a mass-mediated culture, in which narratives about the past are 'transportable', and thus able to 'organize and energize the bodies and subjectivities that take them on' (Landsberg 2004, 26). Landsberg's approach presupposes a model of collective memory that is embodied and affective, and permits vertical, national histories to be re-assembled and horizontally disseminated.

Salvador places the MIL within a broader popular memory of the period and links their actions to an international struggle against political repression. In a scene that precedes their last, failed action, the members of the group watch a news broadcast of Pinochet's coup d'état against the government of Salvador Allende in Chile. Other references are engineered through the audiovisual textures of the shot: in a brief montage that condenses the successful setting-up of a clandestine printing press, live-action footage is juxtaposed with animated comic-book drawings, extracted from the documentation produced by the MIL in this period.

The sequence is scored to the lively rhythm of Georges Moustaki's rendition of 'Nous sommes deux', a French version of the Greek protest anti-military Junta song 'Imaste dio, imaste tris' (1970) by Mikis Theodorakis, highlighting the near simultaneity of the underground student movements in Spain and Greece (in the latter country, a 'late '68' took place in 1973; see Kornetis 2008, 261). This (brief) use of animation and contemporary song recalls forms of political cinema of that time: Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise* (1967) is one obvious referent, but the effect is almost the opposite of that film's experimentation with Brechtian distantiation. Rather than a cinematic approach that fractures, every intertextual element in *Salvador* adds up to form a cohesive, univocal memory of the period. The play with textures and intertexts fuses anti-Francoist activism with the transnational student movement, producing a holistic image of the long sixties that infuses the cultural memories of the period with new energy and 'transports' them (to use Landsberg's formulation) across the generational divide.

In these textual operations, certain images metonymically stand for the (fragmented political map of) the whole period. Student protests have become a strong signifier for the long sixties; a visual shorthand for the generational character of the period's social movements. However, the prosthetic mediation of experience also makes it performative. At the start of his conversation with Arau, Salvador interpellates his counsellor (in voiceover): 'Do you remember Enrique Ruano?'[4] This manifest cue to a brief account of the killing of a student under arrest by the political police (which marks Salvador's entry into the MIL) is meant to jog the spectator's memory. The following scene, which stages a violent clash between students and the police at Barcelona University Square, has the same performative quality. The camera's closeness to the action, dynamic compositions, sharp lighting contrasts and pounding score (Iron Butterfly's hard rock theme 'In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida') create an immersive spectacle, but the sequence also self-consciously comments on its status as re-enactment. A background element in the digitally altered settings momentarily comes to the fore: a newsagent billboard shows a Kodak advertisement with the slogan 'quiero recordar este momento' (I want to remember this moment) (see Figure 9.1). The inclusion of extraneous elements (like the ubiquitous television sets, or this particular photographic image) in the mise-en-scène highlights the prosthetic, composite nature of the memories evoked, through images that are nevertheless historically accurate (the billboard is extracted from a series of Kodak adverts issued in the latter part of the 1960s), 'performing' the links between memory and consumption in a reflexive way. The instances of intertextuality I have just explored lack the radical alterity of modernist experimentation associated with sixties militant cinema. This mediated aesthetic, however, introduces a degree of self-reflection: who is doing the remembering? And to whom is this memory work aimed? In other words, the mobilization of visual (and aural) aspects that render cultural history intelligible invites questions about the functions as well as the limits of historicism, which are part and parcel of the middlebrow fusion of contested histories within consensual structures of memory.

FIGURE 9.1 'I want to remember this moment': the trope of student protest through performative prosthetic memory. *Salvador (Puig Antich)* (Huerga 2006)

Salvador's reception in Spain: the politics of the middlebrow

Salvador's status as a middlebrow film cannot be fully grasped outside the public discourse that regulates the encounter of the film with its spectators. In 2006, the year that *Salvador* was released, heritage dramas seemed to dominate Spanish cinematic production (Wheeler 2014, 218) and historical memory was at the foreground of public debate. After being presented in the prestigious Cannes sidebar 'Un certain regard' in May, the film was released nationwide on 15 September with 189 prints, a high number of screens for a Spanish film (comparable to Pedro Almodóvar's *Volver* [2006], which had 230 prints). Well supported by Mediapro in terms of media exposure, *Salvador* made its mark in the national box office (particularly in Catalonia), occupying fifth place in its opening weekend. It ended the year in eighth place in the list of Spanish releases in terms of number of admissions.[5] Three months earlier, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero's socialist government had put to parliament the controversial Law of Historical Memory, as it has become known in the media.[6] The law sought to recognize all political victims of the Civil War and the dictatorship, and to prescribe the withdrawal of Francoist commemorative symbols in public places. This initiative was thus seen as supporting principally those on the losing Republican side, although the preamble to the text of the law states that memory is a private matter (Labanyi 2008). The law was passed in October 2007, amidst the outcry of the Popular Party and the right-wing media. However, the projected law was also beset by dissension amidst parties on the left. Stephanie R. Golob notes that the final legal text declares the jurisdiction of military courts 'illegitimate', but stops short of calling the dictatorship 'illegal'. This disputed writing of the law shows the 'continued lack of consensus on whether or how Franco's victims should be recognized by the Spanish state—or society' (Golob 2008, 136). The Law of Historical Memory was the culmination of a decade of social movements demanding the recognition of the victims of the dictatorship, but it did not bring closure to it.

This incomplete process of justice and reparation left an empty discursive space, which has been filled by a wave of cultural production that sought to 'work through' (Ellis 2000) the traumatic memory of the twentieth century in Spain. The Transition has proved especially controversial (Cascajosa Virino 2012, 260–1) and a conspicuous object of revision by novelists (such as Javier Cercas and Isaac Rosa [Labrador Méndez 2011]), cultural critics, and popular cinema and television. A producer's project led by Jaume Roures (who had been a member of anti-Francoist underground organizations during the dictatorship), *Salvador* is an adaptation of a journalistic text (Francesc Escribano's *Compte enrere / Countdown* [2001]) and sports high production values in line with the international ambitions of Roure's media group Mediapro.[7] The film received ample institutional support via subsidies by the Memorial Democràtic, the association for the support of democratic values and historical memory sponsored by the Catalan government. Not only was *Salvador* well positioned to benefit from the public interest in historical memory, but it also aimed to make a political intervention at local and national level; in this respect, Roures, Huerga and scriptwriter Lluís Arcarazo used the promotion of the film to support the revision of Puig Antich's sentence and the rehabilitation of his memory long pursued by his sisters – a judicial process that is in progress at the time of writing (Gómez Bravo 2014).[8]

In this particular mediascape, *Salvador* was not only absorbed by the debates about historical memory, but can almost be considered a byproduct of them. Reviews of the film highlighted its importance as a moving critique of political repression (e.g. Om 2006; Torreiro 2006; Balló 2006). However, it also elicited controversy over the choices made in the representation of the central figure. Former members of the MIL and affinity groups signed a collective manifesto (which was published online two days after the film's release) in which they dubbed the film 'a luxury shroud for a miserable product'. In this manifesto, members attack what they see as a misrepresentation of the anti-capitalist, anti-state goals of the MIL, and the co-opting of Puig Antich's memory as well as the exploitation of his death as a 'morbid spectacle' for the benefit of private interests (MIL Societat Anònima 2006). Emili Pardiñas, a novelist, academic and former MIL member, virulently criticized the film for de-ideologizing the figure of Puig Antich in favour of melodrama: 'we identify with the hero . . . not because of his ideas, but in spite of his ideas' (Riera 2006, 9).[9] Historians of the left also point out the film's erasure of the underground worker's movement, whose support was the MIL's true raison d'être (e.g. Domínguez Rama 2007); the film features no characters identifiable as working-class, nor reference to any of the massive strikes in the early 1970s. But the most acrimonious disputes about the film concerned the division of opinion with regard to the ambiguous role of the liberal left in the failed defence of Puig Antich (e.g. Bofill 2006; Lopez Arnal 2006; Espada 2006). It should be noted that the film's official website (http://manuelhuerga. com/salvador) offers a comprehensive archive of reviews and position pieces – including some scathing attacks on the film – thus doubling as a public forum for dissemination and debate. Although the discourse around the figure of Puig

Antich falls beyond the remit of my discussion, even a cursory inspection of the thread of opinion generated by the film reveals a very mixed reception: *Salvador* is simultaneously praised for its cinematic values and historical importance, and questioned for the mythification of its subject as romantic hero and national victim (Türschmann 2009), thus emptying resistance of political meaning.

Given *Salvador*'s credentials, ideological goals and aesthetic ambitions, the film's apparent undermining of its own political subject seems paradoxical in a context in which, to put it simply, the losers' version of history has become the new cultural dominant. This apparent contradiction in the middlebrow mode can be unravelled through the notion of parapractic historicity. In his study of parapraxis in German cinema, Thomas Elsaesser proposes an inquiry into the performativity of the medium (cinema and television) which, while supplying a steady flow of traumatic images (related to the Holocaust, and to the terrorism of the Rote Armee Fraktion/Red Army Faction, or RAF), stages a 'permanent present tense of the past' (2014, 96), ensuring, in other words (Elsaesser uses a televisual analogy for the merging of the traumatizing agent/medium), that Hitler and the RAF are 'always on' (2014, 42). This hypothesis can all too easily be extrapolated to the Spanish context where, at least since the end of media censorship and the accelerated expansion of the cultural industries during the democracy, it is fair to claim that Franco and the Civil War have been permanently 'on'. Elsaesser adopts the Freudian term *Fehlleistung* – meaning 'failed performance' as well as 'performance of failure' – to refer to commemorative events that fail to produce the desired meanings. This failure at 'mastering the past' with regards to Germany's (domestic and international) self-image points at unresolved conflicts lodged in the national psyche. And yet, this failure to mourn – i.e. to bring closure to the past – acted out through oedipal conflict and generational strife also succeeds in a different way: reversing cause and effect, the failed performance of the past in the present retroactively illuminates the past differently, pointing at hidden meanings and agendas. Parapraxis, in sum, 'registers a blur that troubles the implied transparency of the "facts"' (2014, 105). Returning to what we could consider the 'primal' generational scene in *Salvador* – the set piece re-enacting the clash between students and the police—the conspicuous Kodak slogan 'I want to remember this moment' precisely points at this kind of parapractic displacement: the mise-en-scène of the past fails to bring closure, but in bringing the past to the present – prosthetic memory caught in a loop, always 'on' – it also reframes the immediacy of reconstruction characteristic of the middlebrow mode of the film as an ambivalent act of memory presciently oriented to the future.

The poetics of parapraxis advocated by Elsaesser before the twin iterations of trauma and terror in contemporary German media have relevant implications for a reading of middlebrow cinema's political effects (as well as politics *in* the middlebrow film) at a moment in which Spanish society was, once more, reconfiguring its relationship with the past under the pressure exerted on the foundations of its democratic future. The General Elections of 2004 went ahead in the wake of the terrorist attacks on four passenger trains in Madrid on 11 March, which resulted in nearly 200 casualties. Claims of a cover-up by the right-wing government of José

María Aznar, which at first attributed the bombings to the Basque separatist group Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA, Basque Homeland and Freedom), denying evidence of Al-Qaeda's responsibility (later confirmed), allegedly swayed the outcome of the elections in favour of the PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party). Under the new socialist government, the management of memory became a priority which, as we have seen, continued to strain the democratic consensus. *Salvador* effects a broader reconfiguration of the meanings of democracy and terror in the shadow of national and global politics; in this context, the location of the failure of radical politics in the past creates a space for the working through of other, unresolved conflicts, which directly concern the negotiation of the role of historical memory in the present, and its transmission, through middlebrow cultural production. The place of radical politics is thus occupied by family melodrama, a form of prosthetic memory articulated along generational lines, whose potential for the integration of different spectatorial positions – a crucial function of the middlebrow – will be explored in the next section.

Historical parapraxis and middlebrow spectatorship

In her study of middlebrow Spanish film, Sally Faulkner notes that the peculiar trajectory of Spain under the dictatorship means that questions of politics – the polarization of left and right positions – rather than questions of class became the immediate preoccupation of Spanish culture and Spanish cultural theory (2013, 6). And yet, as her study amply demonstrates, the construction of a film culture that can retrospectively be identified as 'middlebrow' was an integral part of the strategy for the consolidation of a new democratic order, one that, paradoxically, would assert continuity over social change (2013, 159–63). The aesthetic fusion of 'high' and 'low' values into formally accessible films became a feature of the top-down policies seeking the reconstruction of Spanish film culture as the image of the progressive aims of the first socialist government (1982–96), with Pilar Miró as Director General of Cinema. In broad parallel to the German 'cinema of consensus' discussed above, the 'cine polivalente' (multipurpose cinema) (Riambau 1995, 421) of the Miró era – a cinema of literary adaptations and quality realism, oriented to the promotion of democratic values and to the production of a new 'Europeanized' self-image (Vilarós 1998, 239) – can be seen as a bridge between the allegorical cinema of the 1970s and the return of politics as history in the string of genre films set during the Civil War and the Francoist period since the mid-1990s. For José Enrique Monterde, the active reworking of the past in the historical fictions made in growing numbers under the first socialist government was instrumental in forging the new political consensus, with (middle-class) family memories (a motif that 1970s cinema had mobilized for oppositional readings of Spanish social real-ity) becoming the central narrative trope of this emerging retro cinema (1989, 59). When the PSOE returned to power in 2004, political debate was just as polarized as in their first term of office but, twenty years on, it had moved on to the nation's inability to 'master the past' at the level of its public institutions – in other words,

its inability to reconcile a collective mourning process with political justice – which needs to be linked to the constant return of the past in popular cinema. *Salvador*'s formal accessibility and emphasis on a private space of family relations place it squarely into a middlebrow cinema that contributes to this unfinished mourning process.

The film's retrospective reading of the political past effects, in the words of Germán Labrador Méndez, an 'adaptation of the values and codes of the transitional anti-Francoist language to the values of the contemporary Spanish middle class' (2011, 128–9).[10] Throughout the 2000s, middle-class conflicts and lifestyles effectively became the focus of retro fictions, including *Torremolinos 73* (Berger 2003) or *El Calentito* (Iglesias 2004), as well as films engaged more directly with themes of generational memory, such as *El camino de los ingleses / Summer Rain* (2006) and *Un franco, 14 pesetas / Crossing Borders* (2006) (its sequel, *2 francos, 40 pesetas*, came out in 2014). While not exactly a cycle, these films address, with varying degrees of success, a desire for accessible representations of a time still embedded in the personal memory of a large part of the audience, and made familiar through the visual dynamic between the domestic everyday and background socio-political events so successfully cultivated by the aforementioned television show *Cuéntame cómo pasó*, as well as the steady flow of international cinema engaged in the active revision of the long sixties. Nevertheless, as noted by Faulkner in the Introduction to this volume, we need to be wary of the slippage between 'middle class' and 'middlebrow'. While closely related, these terms are not interchangeable. To understand how and where *Salvador*, a much more overtly political film than any of the above, sits with regard to middlebrow spectatorship – or, in Labrador Méndez's terms, how it adapts its representation of transitional politics to the values of the middle class – we need to consider the film not only as contributing to these representations, but also dynamically enabling the transmission of experience in ways that project certain values onto the political past. The performative strategies of prosthetic memory, including family melodrama, articulate an incorporation or 'fusion' (Faulkner 2013, 6), which is not only aesthetic and social, but also political.

Despite Salvador's weight as the centre of the story, as a character he has an extremely limited narrative arc. His portrait is conveyed largely through the eyes of the characters closest to him, which the film articulates through a shifting point-of-view structure. Following the face-off with the police at the very start of the film, Salvador is rushed to hospital, where he is treated for bullet injuries under the aggressive vigilance of one of the agents. While lying in a semi-conscious state, Salvador is the object of a series of (mis-) recognitions: the policeman's shout 'This guy is dangerous!' when the medics take him into surgery is met with the surgeon's surprise upon identifying Salvador as the younger brother of a former schoolmate. In the next scene, Salvador is admitted into the Barcelona Modelo prison under the hostile look of Irurre – another guard contemptuously comments: 'He looks like a nice kid, doesn't he? Well it turns out the son of a bitch has killed a policeman'. The scene ends with a medium shot of Salvador in his cell, facing the barred window, his back to the camera. The next two scenes are linked through this visual

motif of prison bars: the first one opens with a close-up of Salvador's father oblivi-ously tending to a canary in a cage left of the frame, in a dimly lit sitting room. The camera tracks left to re-frame Salvador's three eldest sisters through the bird's cage, as they discuss their brother's prison regime. The next three shots continue to juxtapose the cage's bars in the foreground over the women, seen in focus in the background. The scene cuts from the three elder sisters to the youngest one, Merçona, placed centre-frame, in silence, her point of view dominating the scene. A cut and a sound bridge of the canary's chirp take us through to the next scene back in the Modelo jail, which opens with a close-up of a wide-eyed Merçona, framed from Salvador's point of view and looking up to him, again through bars. She is then reframed between her three sisters. All four anxiously watch Salvador, their gazes reflected on the glass wall separating them from their brother (see Figure 9.2).

Through a series of tightly framed close-ups, Salvador is placed at the centre of three scenes, literally or figuratively, as the present/absent object of different characters' emotional reactions. This inter-subjective network of looks places the emphasis on the unstable meaning of Salvador's (at this point) passive body and his disputed belonging (to a family, to a community). The scenes also anticipate the role of transmission via Irurre – a character placed at the opposite ideological end, who will be 'converted' by his contact with Salvador – and the young Merçona – who will grow up into adulthood in a democratic state – as privileged witnesses, as well as repositories of Salvador's memory into the future. This dual focus is replicated at the end of the film, which cross-cuts between Salvador's slow agony at the garrotte, as Irurre watches on in distress, and Merçona's quiet breakdown in the school yard, realizing her unspeakable loss.

This structure of (private) transmission that appeals to the spectator's affective involvement underlies the film's re-articulation of the political past through present democratic values. In a perceptive analysis of the film and its divided reception in Spain, Josep-Anton Fernàndez highlights the role of Transition politics in the

FIGURE 9.2   Through the eyes of others: Salvador as seen by his sisters, whose gazes dominate the shot. *Salvador (Puig Antich)* (Huerga 2006)

contemporary political landscape, noting that 'the effects in the present of the rewriting of the past performed by Huerga . . . involved the redrawing of political frontiers between "us" and "them" (that is, between antagonistic positions) at a time of a budding political crisis both in Catalonia and in Spain' (Fernàndez 2014, 87). The film reconfigures political discourse by operating a shift from antagonism to *agonism*. Fernàndez uses the terms proposed by Chantal Mouffe to describe the shift from enemies to adversaries – to be opposed, but not destroyed – necessary for the existence of a pluralist democracy (2014, 94–5). Fernàndez locates this move in the building of mutual trust between Irurre and Salvador in scenes in which jailer and prisoner play basketball and chess, and initiate tentative conversations about education and father–son relationships, following Irurre's disclosure that he has a dyslexic child. These character-centred scenes shift (violent) political antagonists into adversaries able to establish a ground for mutual acceptance and, even, understanding. From within his prison cell, Salvador is able to effect change, if only through his contact with one individual. These scenes therefore manage, according to Fernàndez, 'the integration of potentially intractable difference into the acceptable boundaries of a consensus built around emotional identifications that transcend every political divide' (2014, 96); however, this comes at the cost of reducing Puig Antich to an 'empty signifier'; his figure an empty space in which the 'struggle for hegemonic meanings' takes place (2014, 90). The forging of consensus is thus the 'legacy of Puig Antich's ultimate sacrifice, his contribution to the construction of the Spanish democracy that was about to be born' (2014, 95). Further to this, Labrador Méndez also notes that this sacrifice is formulated through a quasi-Christian narrative of redemption, compounded by the obvious symbolism of the hero's traditional Catholic name, 'Salvador' (Saviour). This parallelism is reinforced by the sympathetic portrayal of the priest called into the Modelo prison on Salvador's final hours before his execution. The logic of sacrifice can bring closure through the conversion of the (political) other through empathy with democratic values. The film thus construes a new version of the 'narrative of concord' that is one of the pillars of the Transition: a consensus founded on pacts between political enemies to construe a viable national future. As Labrador Méndez concludes, in this process, the recuperation of the history of the losing side provides the only politically fit (or, as he puts it, 'decorous') narrative for a retrospective explanation of democracy's foundations (2011, 129).

Salvador rescues from within a narrative of defeat the basis for a successful (in this case, hegemonic) consensual narrative that supports the public demand for reparative justice to the victims of Francoism, while recognizing the need for national reconciliation. In this respect, the film is exemplary of the political space occupied by middlebrow cultural production. The logic of parapraxis becomes, once more, evident: reversing cause and effect, the return to a moment of radical politics in *Salvador* joins terror and trauma through a 'transferential logic [that] makes possible an ambiguity and reversal in the positions of victim and perpetrator' (Elsaesser 2014, 40). Both the MIL's extreme-left ideology and violent praxis and the ideologically conditioned civil servants of the regime (part of the future social basis of the

democratic state) are retrieved as victims of the fascist state, rather than as political agents in their own right. In the first part of the film, anarchist violence is represented as a manifestation of the authenticity of the counterculture (Suri 2013, 106) in contrast to the ultimate evil of fascism, not through an ideological programme ultimately incompatible with a state democracy. The film's nostalgia for a previous moment of radical politics thus gets expression in broadly generational, rather than ideological, terms. Salvador's principles and 'fearless' attitude are presented as a response to the previous generation of defeated political subjects, symbolized by his father, a traumatized survivor of the prisoner camps of the Nationalist army. The film's desire to acknowledge and redress the generational gap is couched in the language of melodrama, in scenes in which Salvador tries to dialogue with his father through his letters from prison. This correspondence becomes a three-way circuit of transmission: the father is hardly able to acknowledge his son's letters (it is too late for his generation to take a stand) but their message is not lost on Irurre – also a young father – who intercepts one of the missives. Fernàndez sums up the film's strategy succinctly: 'the mediation of the father figure in the film turns the brutal antagonisms of the last years of Francoism into a family melodrama' (2014, 96). However, we must also consider how, as politics become absorbed by the spectacle of consensual history, this form of middlebrow cinema becomes a multi-layered political act with echoes across other nations dealing with receding memories of historical trauma.

Straining the limits of middlebrow consensus

The relay of trauma through (inter-)generational narratives geared to transmission has further implications for thinking about the national/post-national interface in European cinemas, and about the role of the middlebrow as a stylistic and cultural hinge. Film narratives of national crisis that reconstruct the encounter of left-wing politics and terror tactics in explicitly familial, and often oedipal, terms appear time and again in Italian cinema's steady flow of films about the *anni di piombo*, or the 'leaden years' (1969–83) (O'Leary 2010, 254), whereas the generational thinking underpinning the different waves of German films on 1970s terrorism and the histories involving successive generations of the RAF dovetail, in turn, with changing modes of representation. With films such as *Deutschland im Herbst / Germany in Autumn* (various directors 1977), the New German Cinema's innovative style 'drew attention to the problem of representing terrorism and . . . to the whole discursive space in which terrorism is tackled' (Mazierska 2011, 98). Later films such as the melodramatic *Die Stille nach dem Schuß / The Legend of Rita* (Schlöndorff 2000) veer towards a new emotional realism by investigating the impact of armed struggle on the private lives of individuals; as the decade wore on there was a turn towards the re-mythologization of the RAF through sensationalist aesthetics and pop mythologies. *Baader* (Roth 2002), for example, displays a different kind of revisionism, positioning the terrorist in an archival understanding of German film history, less as a site of trauma than as nostalgic generational reference (Frey 2013, 47–81).

Born in 1957 – only nine years after Puig Antich – Huerga has declared his desire to make a film for 'everyone, but especially for a young audience' (Camí-Vela 2007, 200). His evolution as a filmmaker (trained in the avant-garde, pioneer of experimental television formats and seasoned television director for key public events, such as the Opening Ceremony of the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona) is also telling of the move of progressive artists from the margins to the centre of institutional discourse – an evolution not dissimilar from the institutionalization of the former, radical left in Spanish politics, and in the European governments in the 1980s and 1990s. Huerga's (and Roures') move to the middlebrow centre of cultural labour with *Salvador* is animated – and legitimized – by a desire for trans-mission which has broader political implications. Elsaesser notes that generational memory privileges elements of collective historical thinking versus the great man/single actor vision of history (all too easily amenable to the imaginary of fascism through the emphasis on the leader) yet also subordinates history to an 'out-of-time' narrative of evolutionary destiny that makes visible the paradox of agency: the group is both deemed to have a unique outlook shaped by shared experience, and is (negatively) defined with regard to the legacy of the previous generation (2014, 203–6). Such generational thinking in particular underlies cultural revisions of the 1968 moment, in which we need to include the wide spectrum of oppositional and resistance groups that were active in the convulsed last years of Francoism (Kornetis 2008; Ysàs 2007). Most notably, Kristin Ross concludes that the depoliticization of May '68 by the French mainstream media in the 1980s was the logical result of the fetishization of youth. Placing the 1968 actors within the liminal space of adolescence, marked by its inevitable eventual incorporation into the adult world of labour, means placing revolutionary politics in the realm of the transient (2002, 200–8), a narrative that was confirmed by the failure of May '68 to lead to real political change in France, notwithstanding its vast socio-cultural impact.

In the context of the relationship between middlebrow cultural production in Spain and democratic consensus, the alignment of radical politics with generational thinking is possible precisely due to the emphasis on the transmission of democratic values as the lasting legacy of radicalism's transient/transitional quality: its (anti-) heroes are commemorated *because* they did not continue to perform as political subjects. In this respect the generational thinking underpinning *Salvador* is based on political loss, a loss magnified by Puig Antich's status as the ultimate victim of the Francoist repressive state,[11] melodramatically rendered in the film. *Salvador*'s focus on an obscure, ephemeral group (the MIL had already disbanded when Puig Antich was captured) allows for a re-imagination of resistance that sidelines the difficulty of retrieving more complex histories of political dissent, namely the long-standing terrorist activity associated with ETA,[12] which continued well into the democratic period (ETA pledged a definitive cessation of its armed actions in 2011), as well as the more unfathomable global trauma of Al-Qaeda terrorism, which so brutally irrupted into Spanish politics in 2004. If, as Elsaesser notes, 'in the light of 9/11, the RAF now acts as a kind of protective fetish, against the much worse and even less graspable forms of terrorism that came after' (2014, 145), *Salvador*'s narrative

of historical defeat similarly restores the link between revolutionary politics and terrorism that was severed after the attacks of 9/11 in the United States, and the 11-M in Madrid – the inflection point that marks the end of the 'classical' (national) terrorism and the international narrative of leftist radical politics, and the beginning of a discourse of global terrorism as the absolute other of the capitalist West (Gabilondo 2002).

Salvador shows both the potential and the shortcomings of a middlebrow cinema about radical politics that operates in the interface between these national and post-national modes of address. If the visual collage in the opening credits sutures the 'lost' memory of Salvador (and of Francoist repression) to more familiar milestones of the age of cultural extremes, the closing credits carry out a seemingly contradictory operation: video footage of the conflicts in Palestine, the Balkans, the attack on the Twin Towers, the US prison camp in Guantánamo and the Madrid 11-M bombings is scored to a new recording of protest songwriter Lluís Llach's emblematic song 'I si canto trist' ('And If My Song Is Sad'), originally composed after Puig Antich's death. Thus Salvador's story is relocated to a larger political constellation, placing this national history of violence within a post-national world order, where older ideological divisions have been subsumed within global capitalism and the default ideology of liberal democracy. This direct re-framing of the past stresses the simultaneity of the archive – terror as a televisual flow of images, perpetually 'on' – a move criticized as crude and politically suspect (e.g. see Fernàndez 2014, 89; Riera 2006, 10). Removed from their original context, these images do not make up a clear political intervention by themselves but, rather, they contribute to what, again borrowing from Hake, we could call post-political affects (2010, 3–31), redefining the experience of political engagement within a broad humanist remit and in melodramatic terms.

Victimhood and political failure in melodrama become a mode of agency that asserts the relevance of the past to the present. In this respect, the (extraordinary) last section of the film, which comprises the race against the clock to stop the Francoist death machinery, Salvador's last night, spent with his sisters in prison, and the prolonged ordeal of his execution, fully re-enacted in a ten-minute scene, relentlessly enacts the melodramatic logic of the dramatization of injustice which, as Linda Williams has asserted, allows for the negotiation of moral feeling in a post-sacred world (1998, 53–61). For some reviewers, this bold turn to melodrama is an abrupt shift in tone: Carlos F. Heredero, for example, argues that Salvador incongruously contains two films with broadly different styles (2006, 33). Melodrama here works as a form of affect that strains the formal and political limits of (consensual) middlebrow spectatorship. The saturated colours, high-contrast lighting and zooms in the action-driven first part of the film, which openly pastiches (cinematic) visual ideas of 1970s, give way to a palette of greys, ochres and blues in the final act. Combining a highly textured use of HD cinematography with tight framing, the camera keeps close to the bodies at all times, giving the final sequences a poignant immediacy. Brühl's heavier movements, the contrast between his extreme paleness and black hair, the emphasis on physical contact (hugging, clasping of hands, touching of hair

and faces, hands on shoulders) are heightened in tight two-shots or compositions with multiple figures. This emphasis on gesture prepares the ground for the scene of the execution itself. The internal duration of the scene, in which nothing is elided, is balanced with a series of short, panning shots partially masked through the blocking of objects and bodies between the camera (always placed at eye level with the actors) and Salvador, blindfolded and tied to the wooden rod. The camera relentlessly circles around the tight circle of military men and members of the political police standing up, who close in on the seated figure. The crowded frame and the smallness of the chosen room stress claustrophobia. Set to an orchestral variation of 'I si canto trist', the scene tight-ropes between pathetic spectacle and the emphasis on conspiratorial procedure and the ritualistic *act* of killing.

The mise-en-scène and tempo, stressing visibility and duration, challenge the spectator from the point of view of the ethical, but also the political, connotations of prosthetic memory. With this ending, *Salvador* de facto rejects the metaphoric structures of oppositional cinema, bringing into full view what was left in the off-screen space of the modernist political films of the Transition such as Pere Portabella's *El sopar / Supper*★ (1974) (which films recently released political prisoners getting together for supper on the day of Puig Antich's execution, an event that is not alluded to in the recorded conversations of the group; Marsh 2010, 556); Basilio Martín Patino's *Queridísimos verdugos / Dearest Executioners* (shot in 1973 but not released until 1977) and Carlos Saura's *Los ojos vendados / Blindfolded Eyes* (1978), all of which refer to state torture and killing through distancing devices that reflect on the institutional mechanisms of political violence. In contrast, as a form of prosthetic memory that seeks to communicate the experience of the traumatic past to a generation historically removed from it, *Salvador*'s ending prioritizes the demands of transmission within parapractic displacements that enact other forms of repression, such as the film's elimination of a complex social space, including diverging gender and class experiences of state violence. The literalness of the spectacle, in which nothing is left to the imagination, addresses the (national) spectator through the idea of collective victimhood, but also reiterates the demand to bear witness through affect. The final scene shows the demonstrations of public support, as Inma, Salvador's eldest sister, says in voiceover (in a letter to her absent brother Quim): 'At last political conscience is awakening'. With its final act, the film seals the middlebrow's pedagogical project of generational transmission, but also strains the limits of the consensual, drawing a line between victims and perpetrators in no uncertain terms.

Conclusion: towards a new cinema of consensus?

Salvador comments on the social and cinematic legacy of radical politics through its narrative and mediated aesthetics, within a consensual frame of recuperation of the traumatic national past (the institutionalization of the debates about historical memory in Spain). The film's investment in generational transmission is enabled by its middlebrow mode of address, which endows it with specificity in terms of both textual strategies and public circulation.

This middlebrow mode of address sits at the national/post–national interface in contemporary European cinema. The emergence of radical politics (and the spectacle of political violence) as a trope in heritage cinema needs to be addressed with regard to traumatic national histories, but also in the context of a post–national imaginary emerging from transnational frameworks of production and reception, on which European cinemas depend for their survival in the shadow of global Hollywood. This is apparent in the return of politics as history in the (internationally visible) new phase of the German 'cinema of consensus'; it is also foregrounded by the astute casting of German–Spanish actor Daniel Brühl in the title role in *Salvador*, a choice consistent with a star persona forged through previous roles in middlebrow films with a marked political content. Brühl's multi–lingual skills and double residency (between Berlin and Barcelona) add to his identity as a European transnational star who often plays brooding idealists caught at historical crisis points – as in his breakthrough role in *Good–bye Lenin!*, followed by *Die fetten Jahre sind vorbei / The Edukators* (Weingartner 2004) and *Joyeux Noël* (Carion 2005) to the point of near self–parody in his later films (as eco–terrorist in *Two Days in Paris* [Deply 2007] and rising star of Nazi cinema in the World War II romp *Inglourious Basterds* [Tarantino 2009]).

Nevertheless, the negotiation of traumatic national pasts through a middlebrow cinema inevitably strains the limits of consensual narratives. In Spanish cinema (and television), the recognition – and the transmission – of the memory of those on the losing side of history has generated a rich body of heritage films about the Civil War and the dictatorship, which in some respects continues the tradition of the liberal and didactic 'cine polivalente' of the 1980s. The context, however, has changed – and so have the aesthetic and political aspirations of the films. *Salvador* received a mixed reception by those whose story it was supposed to help mourn and commemorate; seeking to make an intervention through an accessible narrative style and an engaging focus on melodrama, *Salvador* was perhaps too politically vague to satisfy the different national investments in the story of Puig Antich, while remaining too obscure in its historical referents to attract substantial international interest.[13] This raises the obvious question of the fit between radical content and middlebrow filmmaking. However, through an exploration of the parallelisms between the German and Spanish film historiographies and the notion of paraprac–tic historicity, I have highlighted that the significance of this middlebrow cinema of memory lies not in its success (or lack thereof) to forge a new consensus about the meanings of past (if anything, the case of *Salvador* goes to show the precarious–ness of such consensus), but in what its mediated aesthetics and self–insertion in the public sphere have to say about contemporary attempts at 'normalizing', or com–ing to terms with that past. The re–enactment of the moment of radical politics through middlebrow modes of filmmaking may be an instance of 'failed perfor–mance' (in Elsaesser's phrase), yet this failure adequately to bring closure to the past instead makes it retrospectively prescient, articulating its constant negotiation through a cinema of generational narratives and post–political affects. This form of parapractic historicity thus illuminates the usefulness of middlebrow cinema as a form of prosthetic memory. In 2014, the resounding critical and box–office success

of the 1980-set detective thriller *La isla mínima / Marshland (Rodríguez)* attests that the remediation of the historical memory of the Transition is ongoing – and always 'on' – but is also clearly evolving, increasingly re-focusing histories of violence through genre narratives and, perhaps, moving towards a new cinema of consensus unafraid to broach the troubling recursiveness of the past.

Notes

1 The period commonly referred to as the 'Transition' is usually placed between 1975, the year of Franco's death, and 1982, the year of the landslide victory of the PSOE (the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) in the first democratic elections after the approval of the Spanish Constitution of 1978. On middlebrow cinema during this period, see Sally Faulkner in this volume.

2 Popularly known as *Cuéntame* (created by Miguel Ángel Bernardeau, 2001–), the show, which deals with the everyday experiences of an average middle-class family, the Alcántaras, from 1968 onwards, is the longest-running drama series in the history of the television of the Spanish democracy.

3 I will hereafter opt for 'Salvador' when referring to the character, and 'Puig Antich' in instances where I refer to the historical figure.

4 All dialogue has been transcribed from the Spanish DVD edition of the film (*Salvador*. Barcelona: DeAPlaneta/Savor ediciones, 2007). All translations are mine.

5 Data provided by Rentrak and the 'Cine y audiovisuales' section of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport website, http://www.mecd.gob.es/cultura-mecd/areas-cultura/cine.html.

6. The full name is 'Law 52-2007, 26 December, recognizing and extending the rights of the victims of persecution or violence during the Civil War and the dictatorship'. The full text can be accessed on the Boletín Oficial del Estado: http://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2007/12/27/pdfs/A53410-53416.pdf.

7 *Salvador* was made for seven million euros, with 20% financial investment from the UK, where post-production work was carried out. Therefore it technically qualifies as a Spanish-British co-production.

8 See, for example, Huerga and Arcarazo's discussion of the film in the film show Sala 33 alongside Carme Puig Antich (20/12/2009), available at http://www.ccma.cat/tv3/alacarta/programa/Salvador-Puig-Antich/video/1993859/. Consulted 30 June 2014.

9 '(Ese es) el proceso de construcción dramática en el cual nos identificamos con el héroe no por las ideas que tiene sino a pesar de esas ideas'.

10 'Se opera una adaptación de los valores y códigos del lenguaje antifranquista transicional a los valores de la clase media española actual'.

11 Favouring a single narrative line, *Salvador* omits reference to the second man executed along-side Puig Antich on 2 March 1974, the Polish detainee Heinz Chez, whose true identity was later revealed as Georg Welzel, citizen of the German Democratic Republic. Significantly, Welzel's story was the object of an investigative documentary, *La muerte de nadie: El enigma Heinz Ches / Nobody's Death* (Dolç 2004), but has not been adapted into fiction film.

12 There are very few biopics of members of ETA, although the most notable examples are resolutely middlebrow: *Yoyes* (2000) and the television miniseries *El precio de la libertad /*

The Price of Freedom (Euskal Telebista 2011), on Mario Onaindia. Significantly, both marry the political and emotional through a focus on the personal journey of individuals whose shift in political allegiances provides redemption narratives. Both devote a significant amount of story time to their subjects' family life. See Stone and Rodríguez 2015. I want to thank Miguel Ángel Idígoras for drawing my attention to and providing me with a copy of *The Price of Freedom*.

13 The film had its theatrical and DVD circulation limited to some European territories and Japan, missing out on the key UK and US markets (where it was shown only in the festival circuit).

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PART III

Middlebrow across borders

10

'KINGS OF THE MIDDLE WAY'

Continental cinema on British screens

Lucy Mazdon

A list compiled by the BFI of the top twenty foreign-language films released in the UK between 2002 and 2013 reveals that eight of these films were either European or co-productions involving European partners.[1] Among those films achieving over £2 million in ticket sales at the UK box office we can find: *Volver* (Almodóvar, Spain, 2006; 2.9 million); *Das Leben der Anderen / The Lives of Others* (von Donnersmarck, Germany, 2007; 2.7 million); *Coco Before Chanel* (Fontaine, France, 2009; 2.6 million); *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (Oplev, Sweden/ Denmark/Germany, 2010; 2.1 million); *Untouchable* (Nakache and Toledano, France, 2012; 2 million) and *Untergang / Downfall* (Hirschbiegel, Germany/Italy/ Austria, 2005; 1.9 million). Assessing this list, Huw D. Jones has noted the need to guard against 'the stereotyping of the foreign-language film audience' (2014). He points out in particular the diversity of genres on offer, ranging from Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* (USA, 2004) and *Apocalypto* (USA, 2007), both non-English-language Hollywood-style blockbusters, to Chinese 'wuxia' martial arts movies such as *Hero* (Zhang, Hong Kong/China, 2004) and *House of Flying Daggers* (Zhang, China/Hong Kong, 2004). However, if we look carefully at the European films on the list, they can be seen to share one characteristic: they are all what we might label 'quality' or 'prestige' movies. A critically acclaimed melodrama from one of Europe's great 'auteurs'; a well-crafted Nordic crime drama adapted from the highly successful novel of the same title; an historical drama; a stylish biopic: these are not films to scare the chattering classes. Like so many other successful European films at the UK box office, films such as *Cinema Paradiso* (Tornatore, Italy, 1988) and *Amélie* (Jeunet, France, 2001), these are what we might term, borrowing from David Jenkins, 'Sunday best cinema', a well-crafted, intelligent, but not overly challenging set of films (2015). Indeed these are films that in many ways define middlebrow cinematic culture: high production values; a realist aesthetic;

important cultural references; yet films that remain accessible and are neither overly obscure nor too challenging.

In a *Sight and Sound* dossier published in June 2005, Nick James claimed that French cinema constituted, for British audiences, 'the gold standard for art cinema in the UK'. 'Without a regular flow of distinctive work from France', he wrote, 'there would be little sense of an alternative cinema to Hollywood' (James 2005, 14). To some extent James' claim makes sense: as historically the most widely distributed foreign-language cinema in the UK (with the exception of Bollywood), French cinema is the most obvious contender to take on Hollywood in a fight for British audiences' attentions. But does it really set a gold standard for *art* cinema? As I have argued previously, also in *Sight and Sound* (Mazdon and Wheatley 2008), James' comments are actually a little surprising given the British prominence at that time of French films such as *Tell No One* (Canet 2006) and *La môme / La Vie en Rose* (Dahan 2007), films that are firmly positioned within the conventions of mainstream, middlebrow commercial cinema (the thriller, the biopic), and, as such, do little to further the cause of art cinema. Indeed, James himself acknowledges that the films he perceives as challenging the mainstream (Bruno Dumont's *Twentynine Palms*, 2003, and Olivier Assayas' *Clean*, 2004, for example) are not 'necessarily popular with the majority': they were roundly beaten at the British box office by Jean-Pierre Jeunet's World War One love story, *Un long dimanche de fiançailles / A Very Long Engagement* (Jeunet 2004) and *Les choristes / The Chorus* (Barratier 2004), a nostalgic remake of a 1940s movie, *La Cage aux Rossignols / A Cage of Nightingales* (Dréville 1945), celebrating the power of music to transform the lives of a group of young boys. Of particular note is James' admittance that *Sight and Sound* itself has at times been guilty of lambasting these 'challenging' films while simultaneously holding them up as a benchmark against which 'unadventurous' British cinema can be defined (2005, 20). Here he voices longstanding British critical discourse that champions 'art' cinema and turns to the 'Continent' as a model, while at the same time dismissing the 'pre-tention' and the overt intellectualism that both, at times, can be seen to display.

So, rather than see French cinema as the saviour of the British art house, it would be more accurate to describe it as the bedrock of foreign-language distribution in the United Kingdom, the cinema which, along with other 'continentals', has been a constant presence at film societies and specialist theatres, and which has an enduring appeal for the typically culturally aspirational audiences looking for something a little more challenging, a little more distinctive than the products of Hollywood, a cinematic experience which is 'safely exotic' (Mazdon and Wheatley 2008, 39). Recall once more the BFI's list of the top twenty foreign-language films released in the UK. Four of the films are American, or American co-productions, and topping the list we find *Passion of the Christ* and *Apocalypto* directed by, and featuring, a well-known Hollywood star; eight films are Bollywood productions, their large audiences essentially drawn from Britain's South-Asian community. Nowhere in the list do we find the challenging 'art' films lauded by James, and, as I have mentioned, the European films that feature are quality genre movies whose only real distinction from the mainstream is through their subtitles.

Drawing upon research carried out by the BFI in 2011,[2] Huw Jones draws some conclusions about the typical audience for foreign-language cinema in the UK:

> a picture begins to emerge of the typical foreign-language film fan as some-one who is young-to-middle-aged, well-educated but not necessarily well-off, highly knowledgeable about film as well as other cultural activities, and usually living in an urban environment. Put simply, foreign- language films appeal most to those with a high degree of cultural capital.
>
> *(Jones 2014)*

My own research (Mazdon and Wheatley 2013) would nuance this account to some extent. While Jones' conclusions may well be appropriate for the broader foreign-language film audience in the UK (witness the relative success of Tartan Distribution's Asia Extreme series in the early 2000s), the audience for European cinema is typically just a little older, a little less adventurous and a little less 'high-brow' than the BFI data suggests. Director René Clair, whose films enjoyed significant success in the British market in the 1930s, remarked in an interview with Caroline Lejeune in 1939:

> Make no mistake about the French cinema. The ordinary, bread-and-butter French picture is just the same as ever. We have as many bad films in France as you have in England, only you people don't see them. The vogue for French films abroad is largely mere exoticism. You admire French films as we in Paris admire the big Hollywood production. They are foreign and interesting.
>
> *(Lejeune 1939)*

The British success of Christophe Barratier's previously mentioned *The Chorus*, which made £133,000 on its opening weekend in the United Kingdom in March 2005, and went on to top the tables for French releases in Britain that year, provides a very good example of British appetite for the tastefully 'exotic'. Back in 1946, as British audiences began to get a taste of recent French filmmaking after the dark days of the war, *A Cage of Nightingales*, source for Barratier's remake, was similarly appreciated. Writing in *Sight and Sound* in 1946, Roger Manvell praised the film's 'humanism', which he compared to other recent French releases and re-releases *Farrebique* and *La Femme du Boulanger / The Baker's Wife* (Manvell 1946, 154). This focus on the film's 'humanism' recalls characteristics of so much European film that is successful with UK audiences: strong dramas; powerful character acting; high production values; a grounding in the 'real'. Interestingly, Manvel's men-tion of *The Baker's Wife* provides us with another example of the endurance of certain attitudes towards French film in particular as cinematic treatments of the work of Pagnol have long proved popular with British audiences. Claude Berri's adaptations of *Jean de Florette* and *Manon des Sources* (1986) were immensely popu-lar as they embodied and reinforced notions of an idyllic, if impoverished, rural France, notions later echoed in a whole series of representations ranging from

Peter Mayle's best-selling account of his life in the Luberon, *A Year in Provence* (1989), to a Stella Artois advertising campaign in the late 1990s. And such affection for this gritty, yet simultaneously picture-postcard, version of French life has a long and enduring history, as Jean Queval revealed in *Sight and Sound* in 1953 when he noted British love for the 1930s–50s films of Pagnol that were, in his opinion, 'vastly over-estimated in Hollywood and Hampstead for obvious reasons of exoticism' (Queval 1953, 106).

As British audiences fell in love with Audrey Tautou's Amélie and her adventures in a highly stylized Montmartre, we were reminded once again of this love for films that are recognizably and yet unthreateningly French: much-loved locations, familiar genres and forms, and perhaps a recognizable star. These are the movies that seem to appeal to those cinemagoers with a taste for the films of France. As the relative failure of the more challenging 'art-house' fare championed by Nick James and populist products such as the *Taxi* series (Pirès, Krawczyk, 1998–2007), which do little more than ape Hollywood, reveals, attempts to move beyond these clearly defined and quite limited tastes more often than not fail to succeed. And of course it is not just French film that finds itself subject to these rather narrowing definitions. As Europe's major film producer and, historically, most significant non-English-language European presence on UK screens, French cinema's transformation within the British market is of particular note. However, as the films listed at the start of this chapter begin to suggest, in just the same way, other 'continental' cinemas typically find themselves part of a similarly tasteful, safely exotic, middlebrow film culture once they reach British shores. Those films that do not fit that particular mould will either never make it to the UK, or are likely to only ever achieve very narrow distribution. How did continental cinema assume this particular identity in Britain? What were the forces and initiatives that positioned so much of it as part of a prestigious but ultimately safe cultural middle ground?

Of course, what we understand by the term 'middlebrow' is far from straightforward. What constitutes middlebrow culture is both culturally and historically bound and, as it mediates between high cultural forms and the field of mass production, it can be described, as Nicola Humble suggests, as an essentially 'parasitical form dependent on the existence of both a high brow and a low brow for its identity' (Humble 2001, 11–12). In other words, the middlebrow should be seen as fluid, unfixed, a means of negotiating cultural capital and moving between cultural spaces. The first use of the term recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary* was in 1925 when *Punch* remarked rather cattily that the BBC claimed 'to have discovered a new type, the "middlebrow". It consists of people who are hoping that some day they will get used to the stuff they ought to like' (anon. 1925). This notion of the middlebrow as a means of negotiating pleasure and improvement is something we can see underpinning audience taste for European cinema in Britain. Those films that perform particularly well at the box office provide easy entertainment; yet, with their subtitles and art-house exhibition, they simultaneously offer a veneer of cultural advancement. This combination of education and

entertainment also, of course, lies at the heart of the BBC's public service ethos, a fact clearly noted by *Punch* even in those very early days of radio broadcasting.

As Lawrence Napper has argued, it is no coincidence that the BBC should share the middlebrow's negotiation of pleasure and improvement (2009, 8). Napper explores the relationship between the British film industry in the interwar years and other forms of mass cultural production such as the radio, publishing and, of course, early television. He sees this relationship as part of a very deliberate strategy to construct a 'middlebrow' culture, distinct from Hollywood cinema and with the ability to appeal to the fastest-growing audience of the period, the lower middle class:

> Informed by its specific deployment in contemporary debates, the term [middlebrow] should be understood as indicating a series of attitudes towards nationality, modernity and culture that are not necessarily as negative as is often assumed. The term 'middlebrow' quickly became adopted as a description of a form of taste in culture generally – particularly in literature and music. But it is clear from contemporary sources that the term originated in Britain precisely to describe an audience whose taste was addressed by these new 'national' communication technologies, and whose relationship to more obvious commercial popular culture (epitomised by American mass communication forms) was curiously ambivalent.
>
> *(Napper 2009, 8)*

What is crucial for our discussion here is that Napper demonstrates very convincingly that the emergence of a middlebrow culture in Britain was absolutely bound up with the mass cultural industries, notably cinema, and that the battles over what constituted high, low and middlebrow culture were arguably fought most fiercely during the interwar years. In other words, the construction and definition of the middlebrow coincides with the emergence of sound cinema and the struggles to establish a place and an audience for the continental talkies in Britain. Those films were indeed part of these cultural battles and, as I shall now go on to discuss, they were not always straightforwardly part of the cultural middle ground that they predominantly inhabit today.

Even prior to the advent of sound in the late 1920s, many of the films of continental Europe were generally associated in Britain with highbrow culture and a modernist aesthetic. Napper remarks:

> Europe might be said to have been the home of 'Culture'. Specifically, Continental Europe was associated with the 'highbrow' culture of Modernist aesthetics espoused by various art movements based in cities such as Paris, Vienna and Berlin. In the developing circles of intellectual film culture, represented in Britain by the Film Society and *Close Up*, it was the art cinema of Europe, the montage of the Soviets and the expressionism of Germany which was the benchmark of achievement.
>
> *(2009, 26)*

Synchronized sound of course created new challenges for non-English-language films in Britain as dialogue now rendered them inaccessible and arguably even more 'highbrow' to many filmgoers. There existed two main outlets for the showing of these films throughout the 1930s: the London-based Film Society established in 1925 and its regional off-shoots, and the specialized cinemas. Behind these institutions was quite a small group of cinephiles, critics and filmmakers who believed firmly in the importance of cinema and were not content with the offerings of the commercial circuits alone. Figures such as Ivor Montagu, Thorold Dickinson, Iris Barry and Elsie Cohen were film aficionados and their pioneering attempts to bring the best of continental production to the Film Society and/or the specialized cinemas were essentially so that they themselves could enjoy these films and share their preferences with like-minded individuals. In other words, the tastes and choices of a small group of cinematic pioneers who acted as both distributors and exhibitors would, to a great extent, determine what was shown to British audiences and thus go on to play a vital role in constructing dominant notions of what constituted cinematic 'art'. Their ambitions were largely 'highbrow', an attempt to ensure the recognition of film as an art form in its own right.

The first screening of the Film Society took place on Sunday 25 October 1925 at the New Gallery Kinema in London's Regent Street and was attended by 1,400 people. The idea for such a society had come from filmmaker and writer Ivor Montagu and actor Hugh Miller. They were keen to establish a film society which, like the Stage Society founded in 1899, would show work that either for reasons of censorship or because it would be considered uncommercial would not otherwise be performed (Samson 1986, 306). A statement in Programme Eight affirms:

> The Film Society was founded in order that work of interest in the study of cinematography, and yet not easily accessible, might be made available to its members. During season 1925–26, it has shown thirty-nine films. Twenty of these (thirteen French, six German, one Japanese) had not before, and have not since, been shown publicly in this country.
>
> *(Amberg 1972, Programme Eight)*

So the Society's Council sought out films that would otherwise not be shown in Britain, films that were apart from the mainstream and as such may have been relatively few and far between, and they showed them to like-minded people who would share their interest and, it was hoped, their tastes. Members who did not comply with the Society's expectations were reprimanded – both Programmes Fifteen and Eighteen noted that there had been complaints about audible comments and conversations during performances. The Society aimed to educate those who attended its screenings, to impart a taste for 'work of interest' in cinematography and to teach them, via its programmes and its lectures and discussions, how to understand and even how to watch its films.

This 'improving' or 'educational' agenda is significant in terms of our discussion of the cultural positioning of continental cinema. For while, as we have noted,

European cinema in the 1920s and early 1930s was predominantly perceived as part of a highbrow elite culture, and the members-only Film Society played a role in perpetuating such perceptions, by setting out to educate audiences about film, the Society also played a vital role in cultural mediation. While the rather steep membership fee would have precluded many from attending the Society's screenings, membership most certainly did not comprise 'highbrows' alone, and, alongside the likes of Virginia Woolf, one could find Adrian Brunel and other industry professionals, whose love for the art of film was married with a keen interest in its commercial potential (Napper 2009, 70).

Nevertheless, to a certain degree, it was its very exclusivity that enabled the survival of the Society. High membership fees meant films could be shown in excellent facilities with full orchestral accompaniment, leaving audiences keen for more. Arguably more significant than the Society's underlining of its members' intelligent, restrained attitude to films were its attempts, during its second season, to obtain a permanent sanction from the London County Council for the showing of uncensored films on a Sunday afternoon. As Jamie Sexton remarks, 'The Film Society thus used its intellectual and respectable status as a cultural weapon, drawing a qualitative difference between its members and the audience that attended commercial cinemas' (Sexton 2008, 26). This construction of a discerning, intelligent audience became a dominant stereotype for audiences for foreign cinema and of course had a significant impact on future distribution and exhibition strategies.

Of particular significance is the role the Society played in the creation of tastes and expectations for, and exhibition of, 'specialist' film in the United Kingdom. The films shown by the Society throughout the 1930s became the basis of a 'canon' of cinematic excellence which, to some extent, has continued to define film, and determine what kinds of films are shown and where, ever since. As David Robinson remarks in the outline to his planned history of the Society, 'To a remarkable extent the received history of the film was established in this country – and even, to a degree in Europe – by the Society's programmes' (Robinson 1963). The founders of the Society took their role very seriously – cinema, they believed, was important – and the films they chose to show did indeed provide a window on non-mainstream and foreign production which played a vital role in the construction of a serious film culture in Britain. By hiving off the 'continentals' from commercial cinema, the Film Society clearly played a vital role in bestowing upon foreign-language film the 'cultural capital' that has remained a key attraction for some audiences and an insurmountable barrier to others. Nevertheless, in its mixed audience and attempts to educate, we can also see the beginnings of a mediation of a film culture then perceived as highbrow which would arguably set in place continental cinema's move towards the British cultural middle ground.

The other main outlets for continental cinema in the 1930s were the so-called 'Continental' cinemas. Although competition from these venues was instrumental in hastening the demise of the Film Society, they offered the potential for a rather wider range of 'specialized' film, did not employ a members-only policy, and thus

played a crucial role in the construction of an albeit still specialized, but less exclusive, audience for continental cinema.

The first of the 'Continental' picture houses was Eric Hakim's Academy in Oxford Street, which opened its doors as Britain's first permanent 'art cinema' in 1931. Films were programmed by Elsie Cohen who began by programming one film per week, and publicized her programmes through weekly press shows and preview screenings at the Film Society. As Vincent Porter notes, her first season was a six-week series of French films, including *Le Roi des resquilleurs / The King of the Gate Crashers* (Colombier 1930), *Jean de la Lune* (Choux 1931) and *La Douceur d'aimer / The Sweetness of Loving* (Hervil 1930) (Porter 2010, 20). The season was a success, and the Academy began to advertise itself as 'The home of real French talkies', going on to première over thirty French films during the 1930s (Porter 2010, 20). The cinema quickly took on a reputation as the home of quality continental cinema. Writing in *Close Up* in June 1933, E. Coxhead declared:

> Everyone knows the Academy Cinema. When we say Academy, it is as often as not (and how shocked our grandfathers would be to hear it) that one we mean. It is more than a cinema; it is a policy, a promise, a guarantee. Something one has in common with other people, a topic of conversation, a means of making friends. . . . In my opinion, the greatest work of the Academy is the establishment of quite new relations between exhibitor and audience. As its ideas spread, the theatre itself will become less important; it will end as just one of a wide circle of theatres working on the same plan. But the spirit of co-operation which it has fostered will increase; the ideal of a thinking audience, as opposed to an audience which is spared all thought by the exhibitor's own policy, may finally become the most powerful factor in the Trade.
>
> *(1933, 133–7)*

Coxhead's remarks are revealing as they demonstrate a real desire for the democratization of cinematic taste (letting the audience choose its films) and yet a simultaneous exclusivity ('something one has in common with other people') which in many ways mirrors the members-only ethos of the Film Society and is without doubt typical of the highbrow aspirations of *Close Up*.

Certainly Cohen aimed to reach a wider audience through the Academy. Several rows of stalls were kept at very low prices, and while much publicity was concentrated through a mailing list, Cohen ensured this spread beyond London by offering those outside the city the chance to learn about particular films. As Coxhead hints, Cohen also planned a chain of Academies in every major British town, although her attempts at expansion were to prove unsuccessful. She began programming at the larger Cambridge Theatre in London's Cambridge Circus, but the size of the building made this venture unsuccessful, and she abandoned it after only six months. Hakim also asked Cohen to programme another of his theatres, Oxford Street's Cinema House, in 1934. This was also to prove short-lived as

Hakim's debts forced him to sell the cinema to the commercial D.J. James circuit later that year.

Cohen's work at the Academy was without doubt pioneering and provided a cinematic experience, open to all, not before available to British (or rather London) audiences. Turning once again to *Close Up*, an editorial of 1932 states, 'Actually, we are becoming so accustomed to assisting at the best Cosmopolitan talkies at the Academy that we are apt to forget the initial marvel of having a specialised theatre in sleepy London' (anon. 1932). The Academy's success in attracting audiences for continental film led to competition and the opening of a series of specialized movie theatres across London and indeed further afield. In 1933, James Fairfax Jones, Secretary and Treasurer of the Southampton Film Society, opened the Everyman Cinema Theatre in Hampstead. The cinema was funded by a group of like-minded friends, suggesting that, rather like the Film Society before it, this was a very personal and somewhat amateurish project. As Fairfax Jones recalled, 'It cannot be said that any of us associated with the venture had any very special knowledge of the film industry. We were animated with a laudable desire to have a small cinema at which we could give programmes of good films as a matter of regular policy' (Fairfax Jones 1994/5, 23). The policy was to 'conduct the Everyman on Film Society lines, reviving and presenting the best films, long and short, available from international sources; but with this difference, that the Everyman programmes were to be available to the public at large, rather than to a limited audience of subscribers' (Fairfax Jones 1994/5, 23).

The venture was not at first a success, despite decent audiences for Hitchcock and Clair seasons. However, the showing in early 1935 of Robert Siodmak's *La Crise est finie / The Crisis is Over*★ (1934) attracted good audiences, and from then on the cinema 'reached a level of constancy which dispelled most financial cares and encouraged the expansion of ideas' (Fairfax Jones 1994/5, 2). Just as the Academy was very much the work of Elsie Cohen, so the Everyman was the pet project of Fairfax Jones, who not only selected films but also staffed the front desk, running the cinema as a hobby right up until his death in 1973. Among the 'best' films shown for the first time to the 'public at large' (rather than the members-only Film Society) was Vigo's *Zéro de Conduite / Zero for Conduct*★ (1933) which, banned in France, was given a world public première at the Everyman in 1937. Fairfax Jones noted:

> The repercussions of this programme in various quarters were most interesting. *Zéro de Conduite* was clearly conceived and produced in all sincerity, with point and purpose. It accordingly merited serious criticism. All the critics disliked it and expressed their dislike in various ways. Some of them merely slanged it, others tried to puzzle it out, others gave it headlines and smart journalism. The most reasoned and intelligent review came from *The Times* and the most deplorable piece of criticism I think I have ever encountered came from *The Observer*. Miss Lejeune awarded the film a series of facetious noughts without adding one word of reason or explanation. Speaking at the

> opening performance Basil Wright used the phrase "Zero de Lejeune, or Nought for *The Observer*" – a remark which was greeted with immediate and sympathetic applause. . . . The upshot was that more people than we thought possible came to see the film and it ran for five weeks. Never before had we such curious audiences or such curious audience response. Most people disliked *Zéro de Conduite*, although almost everybody thought the experimental shorts a very good collection.
>
> *(1994/5, 24–5)*

This account reveals much about the Everyman's remit at the time and indeed its legacy. The cinema was instrumental in showing films so far unavailable anywhere and was prepared to take risks to show what its programmers perceived as the 'best' work. As a 'specialized' cinema, the Everyman's audience remained rather limited and the films it exhibited, including the continentals, became 'specialized' in turn. As Fairfax Jones remarked of the Vigo screening,

> But we have to remember that in the main it is the size – or rather lack of size – of the Everyman, which has but 260 seats, which enables us to conduct such experiments with any success. An audience sufficient to pack the Everyman would present a spectacle of pathetic desolation if transferred to any one of the local Odeons.
>
> *(1994/5, 25)*

Nevertheless, these screenings, part of a regular cinema programme, were, like those of the Academy, more accessible to the general public than the Film Society's Sunday afternoon sessions. Moreover, despite its size, this was a commercial cinema and it needed to sell tickets to remain viable. We can note the reoccurrence of certain films and types of cinema, suggesting a catering to particular audience tastes. French films were a very prominent feature of the Everyman's programmes, both during the 1930s and after the cinema's post-war re-opening. The programmes also reveal eight René Clair seasons and the regular reappearance of directors such as Duvivier, Allegret, Carné and Renoir. These were the films that had pleased audiences at the Film Society and that would become the bread and butter of continental distribution in Britain during the war years. We may recall that it was René Clair himself who noted British audiences' interpretation of even the most banal French film as 'exotic', and it would seem that his own films were among those enjoyed by British filmgoers with a taste for something slightly different. It is also worth noting audience response to *Zéro de Conduite*: both a rush to the cinema to see this highly controversial film and a general antipathy to the work itself. Already we get a sense that it was not the avant-garde, challenging, highbrow continental works that pleased British filmgoers, but the rather safer, quality pictures, which afforded easy pleasures alongside a sense of cultural superiority by dint of their very foreignness. This is underlined by some of the 'long players' at the continental picture houses during the 1930s:

between October 1936 and May 1937 Studio One screened *La Kermesse Héroïque / Carnival in Flanders* (Feyder 1935) for eight months; the Curzon showed *Pépé le Moko* (Duvivier 1937) for seven weeks between April and May 1937; and the Academy held over *La Grande Illusion / Grand Illusion*★ (Renoir 1937) for three months during spring 1938 (Porter 2010, 22). Great works certainly, and part of a canon of great French cinema, but to a large extent sharing those middlebrow attributes of quality, realism and relative accessibility that would predominate in British exhibition of continental film in later years.

So as the interwar years saw fierce debates about what should or could constitute high and low culture, and the emergence of a new middlebrow culture, which was more accessible to the growing middle classes, so exhibition spaces and audiences were being negotiated for non-English-language film. In this sense the establishment of foreign sound film in Britain was absolutely bound up with these debates about the nature of culture. Moreover, and as we have already noted, cinema lay at the very heart of the emergence of a middlebrow culture. Attempts to protect British cinema from the pressures of the market, notably through the 1927 Cinematograph Films Act, as well, of course, as the protected status afforded to the BBC, gave both a special status that ensured distinction from the overtly commercial products of Hollywood (Napper 2009, 8). But while protection meant both cinema and the BBC were to eschew the vulgar, the 'lowbrow', they were also of course expected to attract audiences, to woo them away from Hollywood fare and back to the rather more decorous national product. As the arrival of synchronized sound complicated the British exhibition of non-English-language film, so these films also had to negotiate their place within these cultural struggles and to a great extent managed this through a similar attempt to appeal to the 'middle ground'.

As we have seen, the cinema of the continent was initially associated with a highbrow modernist culture, yet as the 1930s progressed, this was to alter in significant ways. While to some extent the Film Society, with its members-only policy, could afford to take risks, showing challenging work that would never find a home in commercial venues, this was not true of the continental picture houses. Of course they remained specialized, catering to an audience on the lookout for something different from mainstream fare. Yet, as the 1930s wore on, the likes of the Curzon, the Academy and the Everyman increasingly found themselves showing those continental movies that would appeal to as wide an audience as possible. And, as I have argued elsewhere (Mazdon and Wheatley 2013), while the prestigious German productions that had pleased cinemagoers in the late 1920s and early 1930s disappeared due to political circumstance, audience taste was typically best pleased with the quality, realist productions at which French cinema excelled in the 1930s. Indeed, and as Vincent Porter has noted, the 1930s was something of a golden era for French cinema in Britain, with over 110 feature films and around twenty shorts exhibited in London (2010, 19).

I would argue that it was this journey to the specialized continental movie theatres, and the establishment of a canon of quality, often French, continental drama,

which were to play a crucial role in positioning European cinema in Britain as part of a culturally aspirational yet relatively familiar and unthreatening middlebrow culture. John Russell Taylor summed up the Academy cinemas as 'the kings of the middle way, catering to the intelligent middle-brow, middle-class audience' (1986, 186), and this essentially defines the core British audience for continental film of the 1930s and continues to do so today. Even the Film Society, which did set out to champion the cinematic experimental and avant-garde, ensured any cinematic excess was safely constrained by the exclusive, middle-class nature of its gatherings. The continental cinemas showed 'prestigious' European film to a 'discerning' audience. To enjoy continental film by the end of the 1930s was to appreciate quality and good taste, an association which, as the BFI top twenty cited at the beginning of this chapter suggests, persists to this day. Although war reduced the flow of these 'quality' films to the UK during the 1940s, and British film culture underwent a number of significant changes, this positioning of the 'continentals' as a quality middlebrow was largely reinforced. Despite the undeniable limitations imposed by German occupiers and Vichy authorities alike, French film production did not cease, and, via revivals of pre-war favourites, the Gallic cinema in particular retained a visible presence in the United Kingdom. The lack of new films due to the war was countered by frequent and often popular revivals, revivals that would entrench both the familiarity of these films and their canonization, again playing an important role in positioning a certain type of continental cinema in a quality middle ground.

It is of course vital to underline that we are indeed talking about a certain type of continental cinema here. Both in the 1930s and subsequently, distribution and exhibition of European cinema in Britain were not restricted to the type of prestige picture I have been discussing here. And, of course, as the decades wore on, different strategies and different types of film were essayed in an attempt to reach new audiences. Yet despite these shifts and experiments, things have really changed very little: British audiences for non-English-language film remain small,[3] only a very limited selection of 'foreign' production is ever distributed in the UK, and among these films those that consistently attract the biggest audiences are the 'Sunday best' films we have discussed.

The development of new platforms for the exhibition of non-English-language film in Britain may appear to offer the promise of increased diversity, and certainly VHS, DVD and in particular digital provision have extended and enhanced the British circulation of foreign film in important ways. And yet even the most cursory glance at the films available on mainstream digital providers such as Netflix suggests little significant change, as we see a selection of films that to a great extent echoes the range in the BFI's top twenty alongside various rather more explicit works, themselves of course part of another stereotype that has structured non-mainstream foreign-language distribution in Britain (Selfe 2010).

Perhaps the best indicator of the persistence of the continental drama's role in British culture as a safe but improving middle ground is provided by the recent success of the so-called 'Euro dramas' on BBC4. The first to air in 2006 was *Engrenages / Spiral*, and this French series was followed by the Italian *Il commissario*

Montalbano / Inspector Montalbano (2008–12), then a series of Scandinavian dramas including: *Wallander* (2008–11); *The Killing* (2011–14); *Borgen* (2012–14); *Bron / Broen / The Bridge* (2012–15); and *Den fördömde / Sebastian Bergman* (2012), and various other subtitled series. *Spiral* and its Scandinavian crime counterparts in particular have garnered extensive broadsheet column inches extolling their complex and compelling plots, fascinating characters and gritty representation of the rain-drenched streets of Copenhagen, or teeming Parisian neighbourhoods. The critical success of *The Killing* was confirmed by the series' receipt of a BAFTA in 2011, and this success was then matched by *Borgen* in 2012.

This critical esteem clearly went hand in hand with the dramas' transmission on BBC Four. The channel emerged in 2000 to replace BBC Knowledge and was launched with the slogan 'everybody needs a place to think'. In the words of the Corporation, 'BBC Four's primary role is to reflect a range of UK and international arts, music and culture. It provides an ambitious range of innovative, high quality programming that is intellectually and culturally enriching, taking an expert and in-depth approach to a wide range of subjects'.[4] The scheduling of *Spiral* and its European counterparts on BBC Four thus immediately positioned the dramas as 'serious', 'quality' television distinct from the more populist offerings of BBC One.

The shows have been among BBC Four's more successful programmes in terms of audience. Average audience share for BBC Four stands at around 0.9%; share for Series Three of *Spiral* (2 April–7 May 2011) averaged at 2.2% and went as high as 3% for episode one. Series Two of *The Killing* (19 November–17 December 2011) averaged at 3.8%, reaching 4.2% for the final episode.[5] In this sense they have helped to raise the channel's profile, creating a respectable audience in a highly competitive environment. Thanks to their subtitles, they provide a badge of 'quality' for BBC Four, and thus enhance its cultural status, yet they also provide entertainment and, by extension, the audiences that are vital to the channel's survival.

It is striking that many of BBC Four's Euro dramas have scored highly in terms of audience appreciation. Series Three of *Spiral*, for example, averaged at 87%, while Series Two of *The Killing* averaged at 92%.[6] While the overall quality and indeed pleasure of these dramas means high levels of audience appreciation are no great surprise, I would argue that the programmes are not particularly innovative, or particularly distinctive. Indeed if one were to remove the foreign locations and the subtitles from *Spiral* and *The Killing*, I wonder whether they would have been purchased by BBC Four at all, or garnered so much critical attention. Just as certain types of European cinema have provided a safely exotic experience for their audiences, *Spiral* and BBC Four's other Euro dramas function in similar ways. Their subtitles set them apart from English-language television, and inevitably lead to scheduling on BBC Four rather than BBC One. This, in turn, marks them more clearly as 'quality' television, which then bestows distinction and a feeling of discernment upon their audience. This is the kind of 'clever pleasure' that broadsheet critics love to praise and middle-class viewers proudly discuss. If these programmes can be seen as in any way representative, it would seem that rather than change in the face

of new audiovisual developments, the continental drama's role as the lynchpin of middlebrow quality provision has only become more entrenched.

Notes

1 BFI, *Statistical Yearbook, 2002–2014.* http://www.bfi.org.uk/education-research/film-industry-statistics-research/statistical-yearbook. Consulted 2 April 2015.
2 http://www.bfi.org.uk/about-bfi/policy-strategy/opening-our-eyes-how-film-contributes-culture-uk. Consulted 2 April 2015.
3 In 2014 40% of total UK releases were foreign-language films, but they only represented 2% of UK box-office revenues. http://www.bfi.org.uk/sites/bfi.org.uk/files/downloads/bfi-statistical-yearbook-2014.pdf. Consulted 5 August 2015.
4 http://www.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/insidethebbc/whatwedo/television/. Consulted 2 April 2015.
5 BBC Marketing and Audience Data. http://www.barb.co.uk. Consulted 2 April 2015.
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11

HYPOTHESES ON THE QUEER MIDDLEBROW

Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover

Although the middlebrow has often been theorized in relation to class and taste, it has not yet been analysed as a force in contemporary 'world cinema'.[1] As the case studies in this volume show, we are more used to conceptualizing the middlebrow in nationally specific terms, and if middlebrow most often refers to modes and practices of reception, rather than describing a genre, textual aesthetic or mode of production, then it becomes difficult to track across national borders. This dominant model of middlebrow as reception practice raises issues such as audience and address, genre and authorship and legibility and universality which remain of acute concern in the case of international films. Does the nature of the middlebrow change, however, when global circulation starts to strip away specific national parameters and cultural specificity? The encrusted layers of culturally specific knowledge that often freight the middlebrow are unavailable to films that travel to global audiences, so markers of quality must attach to the circulatory mechanisms of world cinema itself, rather than rely wholly on nationally located content or context. Moreover, shifts in commercial film distribution and exhibition such as specialized video on demand (VOD) and online streaming services – while rarely legally accessible beyond national borders – demand that we reconceptualize ideas about world cinema audiences and the processes of taste-making. The expansion of file-sharing, ISP-blocking, pirating software and even region-free hardware amplifies this need.

Although contemporary scholarship on the middlebrow points to reception's role in defining a register that has no automatic generic qualities, no semantic or syntactic structures of its own, there are nonetheless forms of textuality that more frequently attach to it. Middlebrow taste has been linked to heritage films, to historical costume dramas, to serious issue films, to adaptations, biopics and humanist dramas. The category 'world cinema' conventionally also includes such perennial genres, and it often exploits modes of the middlebrow. The popularity of films

about children, for example, draws on their narrative promise to evade difficult socio-political contexts and to offer an insight into foreign cultures that can be universally legible. In fact, child-centric *Badkonake sefid / The White Balloon* (Panahi 1995) is an example of a kind of film that – outside Iran – is viewed as a middlebrow 'foreign' film. As we have argued elsewhere, the politics of universality and cultural specificity are always complexly intertwined at the arthouse (Galt and Schoonover 2010). In categories such as the popular art film, a world middlebrow has emerged – arguably visible since the 1950s but gathering force in the new century. There is a significant category in world cinema between art cinematic auteur films by directors such as Tsai Ming-liang and genre films like Thailand's popular *Satree Lex / Iron Ladies* series (Thongkongtoon 2000 and 2003) that we might usefully conceptualize in terms of the middlebrow.

World middlebrow films are not formally experimental or subversive in the ways usually attributed to art genres or even to the kind of prize-winners heralded at Venice, Toronto, Berlin or Cannes. They are not like the 'difficult' world arthouse cinema that boldly warps conventions and expectations, remaining unafraid of being labelled inscrutable and always posed to an elite international audience (such as slow cinema). Nor are middlebrow films the domestic genre pictures distributed via arthouse exhibition circuits and understood as 'art cinema' simply because they are foreign (Galt and Schoonover 2010, 7).[2] In dismissing the work of Christopher Isherwood, British literary critic Cyril Connelly argues that middlebrow culture suffers from a 'fatal readability' (quoted in Harker 2013, xi). Following from the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definition of 'middlebrow', we could say that the marketing of the world middlebrow film appeals to its 'limited intellectual or cultural value; demanding or involving only a moderate degree of intellectual application, typically as a result of not deviating from convention'.[3] Continuing to borrow from the *OED*, we could say that these films gear themselves to an aspirant but unadventurous audience who always carry 'the implication of pretensions'. The category of solidly world middlebrow defines itself in relation to its highbrow arty competition. The trailer for *Dabba / The Lunchbox* (Batra 2013), for example, implies that the enigmas and social transgressions of big city life are always redeemed by cleverness, coincidence and humanist goodwill. The preview insulates foreignness and ambiguity from any of the dissonances of Satyajit Ray's modernity or Jia Zhangke's ambivalences towards historical change.

A significant example for our purposes is *The Chicago Reader*'s 1988 review of Patricia Rozema's film *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (1987):

> the story . . . caters to middlebrow cultural insecurities even more doggedly than Woody Allen usually does. While it's refreshing to find lesbian sensibilities represented honestly in a mainstream context, and the film is not without its other virtues (the performances are adept, and the conclusion is intriguingly open-ended), the cutesy style tries to promote the heroine's dim-witted innocence in such an anti-intellectual fashion that the movie's self-righteousness may set your teeth on edge. The very title of the film,

which misquotes a line from Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,' is symptomatic of the pretensions in store.

(Rosenbaum 1998)

This review's combination of 'dogged' accommodation of middlebrow fears and pretensions, of cutesy intellectual naiveté and self-righteousness, reflects its sense of the aspirant but also the inadequate features that define the middlebrow text. It also suggests that one of middlebrow's only merits is as textual mediator between the 'mainstream context' and honest 'lesbian sensibilities'. The lesbian middlebrow, for Jonathan Rosenbaum, does a particular kind of cultural labour, albeit at a cost to 'true' artistic endeavours, such as Eliot's poetry.

In locating a world cinematic middlebrow, queer cinema provides not only an interesting subset but, in fact, a necessary case study. LGBT film festivals have provided a central locus for the creation of audiences for international films that were neither difficult modernist art cinema nor the kinds of global popular film that had previously been seen in the West (e.g. Hong Kong action films, J-horror, Bollywood crossovers). An emerging queer middlebrow audience comes into view in the festival popularity of serious films about LGBT experiences, drawing on discourses of quality, social engagement and identitarian membership that construct new canons of cinematic value across national lines. At the same time, a queer middlebrow audience also emerges online. Since queer films were less frequently programmed in many commercial cinemas, and not always easily available in video stores, LGBT films pioneered VOD technologies. If porn provided an early impetus for the platform and delivery of infrastructure, middlebrow films formed the backbone for the development of services like Wolfe On Demand, Pecadillo Player and the now-defunct lesbian site Busk for LGBT audiences in the US and UK. And, in turn, the latter platforms served as early alternative models of online distribution, propagating porn's boutique model of merchandising while online superstores like iTunes VOD, Netflix streaming and Amazon Prime Instant Video offered very few LGBT features. Queer cinema is thus crucial to writing the history of the middlebrow as a determinant in contemporary world cinema. In this chapter, we thus advance a series of hypotheses on the queer middlebrow; somewhat polemic propositions that attempt to prise open the intersections of queerness with contemporary world cinema. A certain type of queer feature film is, we propose, an ideal site to observe and critique the contemporary phenomenon of the world middlebrow.

Queerness makes films middlebrow

Although earlier models of art cinema include gay auteurs such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder and even Derek Jarman as central figures, in contemporary world cinema queerness can operate as a middlebrowing factor, indicating a certain identitarian or social problem status that disbars films from truly highbrow taste. Examples include *Ma vie en rose / Life in Pink*★ (Berliner 1997), *Ang pagdadalaga ni Maximo*

Oliveros / The Blossoming of Maximo Oliveros (Solito 2005), *Tomboy* (Sciamma 2011) or *The Kids are Alright* (Cholodenko 2010), all of which address bourgeois audiences concerned about the status of the family. Arguably, Lisa Cholodenko's film gained greater popular traction as a result of its wealthy lesbian mid-life crisis narrative featuring two straight Hollywood stars (Julianne Moore and Annette Bening), but a comparable straight film (say, with Kristin Scott Thomas) may have retained a greater art cinematic cachet. Although all of these films screened predominantly in arthouse cinemas, they exemplify what film historians have outlined as the dual role of the arthouse, to nurture both middlebrow audiences as well as the more obviously highbrow ones (Wilinsky 2001, 94; Betz 2003, 202–11). Art cinema directors who wish to retain high cultural status must avoid being seen as queer to distance themselves from a middlebrow category that would limit their access to global art cinema's critical circuits. Thus, although several of the most prominent auteurs in recent world cinema represent queer sexuality in their films, they are not usually considered in the context of LGBT cinema. We're thinking here of Lucrecia Martel, Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Tsai: two of these filmmakers are out as gay, but none is predominantly famous as a gay or lesbian filmmaker on the world stage.

A complex case for this hypothesis is Pedro Almodóvar, who for much of his career was received as a queer art cinematic auteur. As he has gained a wider and more mainstream audience, however, his position in international film culture has shifted. From *Bad Education / La mala educación* (2004) to *The Skin I Live In / La piel que habito* (2011), many of Almodóvar's recent films could easily be read as middlebrow.[4] What was once transgressive is now a marketable brand (with a *Bad Education* image on an Illy demitasse set to match), and indeed it is not clear that audiences for these films primarily think of them as queer at all, rather than simply quirky, urbane, boldly stylish and slightly kinky.[5] Do we read these films as art cinema, middlebrow, world cinema or queer? These categories are particularly labile in this historical moment, and Almodóvar's unsettled occupation of several at once illustrates the centrality of queerness to the changing landscape of the global middlebrow.

Queerness destabilizes categories of taste

Middlebrow overtly proclaims itself as a category of taste, as a means of distinction or group definition, but these labels are inherently unstable. As labels go, middlebrow depends more on the exhibition-specific mode of address than on textual features or formal signatures. Films can pass in and out of the category of middlebrow depending on how a given exhibition context interpellates audiences. So middlebrow is a constellation through which texts, like planets, pass. But neither is the exhibition space purely determinate since theatres such as Picturehouse, Odeon or Angelika, film festivals like Telluride or Flare, and online platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, Love Film or Mubi always serve as venues for a range of art films, mainstream films and middlebrow films. And whereas art cinema was once the domain of particular theatres, middlebrow was often the odd guest of other venues. While institutions like the Film Society existed in some urban centres

(see Lucy Mazdon's chapter in this volume), the middlebrow has more often been a space erected ad-hoc and from distribution rhetorics, a welcoming address to either higherbrows in mainstream cinemas or lowerbrows in arthouses. The move towards polymorphous and nimble platforms and exhibition venues is thus heralded by the growing prominence of middlebrow taste. Middlebrow is thus simultaneously a harbinger of the expansion of middle-class taste and the shifting parameters (worldview) of the status quo and an interloper that destabilizes audiences.

Although conventionally the middlebrow has often been dismissed as overly stable, stodgy and safe, Lawrence Napper has argued that it can equally be defined as a promiscuous mixing of forms. His account of the growth of the middlebrow in Britain in the interwar years offers historical perspective on the category's current elastic qualities described above. He writes, 'Unlike Modernism with its interest in formal purity and experimentation, middlebrow culture was engaged in blurring the boundaries of its media' (Napper 2009, 9). Of course, queerness has often been theorized as a force that disrupts established categories (Jagose 1996, 2; de Lauretis 2011, 244). As Jaime Harker puts it, 'Like "queer", middlebrow . . . is a term that can potentially destabilize a host of binaries that continue to frame literary and cultural studies: art and trash, innovative and derivative, hard-boiled and sentimental, radical and conservative, and, I want to add, gay and mainstream' (2013, xiv). If the middlebrow can contain, in particular historical formations, the potential for such impurity, then a queer middlebrow might be particularly adept at blurring media boundaries and categories.

Queerness seems to be in conflict with conventional accounts of the middlebrow, in which it is commonly dismissed as a category of mainstream comfort, lacking in dangerous conceptual seepage. It is certainly largely dismissed by queer film scholarship, which has not devoted much attention to the apparently normative pleasures of LGBT middlebrow films. However, if middlebrow cinema is an interloper inextricably linked to the compromises of bourgeois national taste, and if queerness has been both conceptually opposed to this category of cultural normativity, and, historically, queer people have been forcibly excluded from the mainstream's ambit, we must ask, what does a queer middlebrow bring into view? One way of answering this question is to examine closely the slippages that films in the queer middlebrow trigger. In doing so, we propose embracing rather than avoiding the difficulty of bringing together conventional accounts of middlebrow with the modes of attention and registers of taste that have developed in queer cinema. Indeed, a corollary to this approach is to question the stability of the middlebrow from a queer perspective, opening out the intrinsic instability of cinematic taste categories.

Within the institutional spaces of queer cinema, it can be hard to see what is middlebrow because softcore porn and low-budget sex comedies coexist side by side with art cinematic modes of textuality. Queer sites provide less segregation of registers than straight ones, bringing together implausible bedfellows and disrupting further the already unstable channels of conventional cinematic experience. Thus, gay and lesbian categories on Amazon, Peccadillo and TLA online mix softcore with art films in a way that does not happen with straight DVD generic categories.

On TLA, the barriers between porn and mainstream entertainment are the most porous. One type of content leads to the other, as if *Bareback Packers 5* (Sparta 2008) were a gateway drug to romcoms like *The One* (Jentis 2011) and *Is It Just Me?* (Calciano 2010)! This porosity illustrates the co-dependence of high and low forms, as Thomas Elsaesser (1994), Mark Betz (2001), Barbara Wilinsky (2003) and Karl Schoonover (2012) note; but it also enables us to see how the middlebrow operates as mediator of the two. Online audiences for culturally respectable middlebrow films might be tempted on the one hand by more explicit movies and on the other hand could be seduced into viewing art films. For example, an omnibus feature that collects sexy shorts about gay men by director Reid Waterer, *Global Warming, Vol. 2* (2014), is a popular film on TLA's website. This film's main page on the TLA site suggests that customers might also like to purchase porn industry comedy spin-off *Where the Bears Are* (Dietl 2012–14) and Argentine art film *El tercero / The Third One* (Guerrero 2014). Middlebrow can operate as a placeholder to be occupied by films tasked with mediating the differences between audiences, in a parallel way to how it worked for Rosenbaum, mediating between lesbian and mainstream audiences. Middlebrow as a discourse diversifies the appeal of films and venues, but also, and this is crucial, expands the market for very different films adjacent to the middlebrow film playing in that same venue.

Broderskab / Brotherhood (Donato 2009), a Danish drama about same-sex attraction between two neo-Nazis, has several middlebrow markers, including the fact that it screened at several international LGBT film festivals including Hong Kong, London and San Francisco, and that it treats a social problem (neo-Nazis) through individual drama. It is linked to other gay middlebrow films; on IMDb, the 'people who liked this film' section recommends *Contracorriente / Undertow* (Fuentes-León 2009), *A Single Man* (Ford 2009) and *Brokeback Mountain* (Lee 2005). But right next to *Brotherhood* on the TLA website, we find *Buffering* (Flaxstone and Martin 2011), a British sex comedy about impoverished roommates who start making online porn to make ends meet. As TLA put it, *Buffering* is 'A deliciously light-hearted take on the consequences of unexpected sexual escapades, this is one sexy romp'.[6] *Buffering* may not be a middlebrow film but this unexpected proximity illustrates the spillage across registers that the queer middlebrow encourages in audiences. The marketing of 'sexy' male bodies as a trope of queer visual pleasure in *Brotherhood* as much as *Buffering* demonstrates the queer middlebrow's promiscuous combination of registers. Thus, although the first hypothesis seems to effect conformity and the second seems to upset it, they can in fact work in tandem. Queerness makes films middlebrow but that middlebrow is an unstable, peculiarly queer category. A new category of queer world cinema develops and exploits this mixing.

Queer middlebrow is worldlier and more sexual than straight middlebrow

Queer cinema is categorically linked to sex, or at least to dissident sexuality, which already promises tension with one quality of the middlebrow as it has been

understood in a European context, which is the reaffirmation of dominant bourgeois social values (see Deborah Shaw's chapter in this volume on Mexican film by way of contrast). In the emergence of New Queer Cinema in the early 1990s, aesthetic radicality was closely linked to sexual dissidence, producing queerness as precisely that which could not be recapitulated into mainstream taste. But, in the 2000s, queer cinema has been mainstreamed to an extent perhaps unimaginable in the heady days of *Poison* (Haynes 1991) and *The Living End* (Araki 1992), and queer sexualities are an increasingly prominent feature of films aimed at middlebrow audiences. *La vie d'Adèle / Blue is the Warmest Colour* (Kechiche 2013), for example, provoked extensive debate in middlebrow cultural venues about whether the lengthy lesbian sex scenes were exploitative, or even authentic to lesbian experience (Dargis 2013; Di Rosso 2014; Silman 2013). Public discourse on sexuality has apparently liberalized since the moment of New Queer Cinema, but we find it significant that queer films continue to push at the boundaries of sexual representation, even in the sphere of the middlebrow.

If queer sexuality is a destabilizing quality, where do queer films locate their middlebrow bona fides? Reference to national culture is one recurring mode of accessing middlebrow textuality, through literary adaptations, stories about high cultural forms and biopics. However, queer cinema is not so strongly linked to these mainstream signifiers of cultural status. There are some noteworthy examples: in the American context, *Milk* (Van Sant 2008) is an Oscar-winning biopic of the gay politician Harvey Milk and in terms of world cinema, *Ba wang bie ji / Farewell My Concubine* (Chen 1993) draws on the traditional Chinese form of Peking opera to locate a series of desirous relationships between men. However, there are relatively few possibilities for queer narratives in national literary, political and cultural histories and so queer films often find their cultural capital elsewhere. One of the places they do this is via concepts of worldliness or cosmopolitanism – queer films garner middlebrow status by purporting to provide insight into foreign cultures through conventionally individualized queer stories. Thus, for instance, *Ha-Buah / The Bubble* (Fox 2006) promises insight into Middle East politics through what its online publicity describes as 'a forbidden love – that of a Palestinian and a Jew'. Praised by the *Hollywood Reporter* for its 'humanism' (Farber 2007), *The Bubble* promises cosmopolitan feelings, liberal humanism and naked bodies.

This deployment of foreignness to confer serious cultural status of course has a long history in art cinema. That the equation of foreign with arty persists is visible in, for instance, Jacques Audiard's prison drama *Un prophète / A Prophet* (2009) and Christophe Honoré's queer musical *Les chansons d'amour / Love Songs* (2007), both of which are really popular genre films but whose status becomes more ambiguous in the Anglophone world because of their being French (see Mazdon's chapter in this volume). But queer films partake in a particular model of worldly distribution in which the inclusion of homosex conjures a middlebrow space out of both film texts which might not otherwise be included in 'world cinema' and audiences who might not otherwise consider themselves as part of an arthouse demographic. Thus, a Thai film like *Pheun Ku Rak Meung Wa / Bangkok Love Story* (Arnon 2007) or a

Russian one like *Я люблю тебя/ You I Love* (Stolpovskaya and Troitsky 2004) would probably have had little potential for international distribution if they were straight narratives. Despite being aesthetically striking, both films centre on romantic melodrama plots that could be perceived as excessive, and neither provide enough markers of cultural seriousness to recode as art cinema. However, both films gained an expanded circulation via LGBT distribution channels – LGBT film festivals in the first instance for *You I Love*, and LGBT-oriented distributor TLA, which provides both DVD sales and VOD for *Bangkok Love Story* – as what they termed a type of 'hot gay world cinema'.

How do audiences for these films understand themselves as cosmopolitan? Are they attracted by the promise of explicit sexuality or of cross-cultural understanding? These are precisely the questions that critics have asked about the original international audiences for Italian Neorealism and European art cinema in general. And as Schoonover has argued (2012), these competing attractions are not misunderstandings but integral features of world cinema's affective politics. The promise of explicit sexuality has always been in tension with the claim to cultural seriousness in world cinema. Queer film intensifies this tension: since fewer queer films are made than straight ones, distributors have embraced a global reach to find new content, at the same time that 'queer cinema' inherently promises sex as a categorical quality, whether as an identitarian mode of cinematic articulation or as a type of pleasurable bodily spectacle. Whereas the straight middlebrow avoids excessive corporealism and draws respectability from national cultural discourses of 'taste' and 'quality', the queer middlebrow can rarely afford to exclude either sex or foreignness.

The queer middlebrow has a lower brow than the straight middlebrow

Middlebrow films gain much of their status from their circulation in middle-class culture. These films are discussed in the quality papers, and are not only reviewed, but are also the subject of feature articles. Sometimes they even make it to the news pages: a queer example would be a controversial film like *Fire* (Mehta 1996), while straight films such as *The Help* (Taylor 2011) prompt renewed (if limited) discussion of social issues. However, readers of the *Guardian* or the *New Yorker* who enjoyed *Brokeback Mountain* and *A Single Man*, and who follow closely the career of Almodóvar, are unlikely to have heard of Sébastien Lifschitz's acclaimed 2004 film *Wild Side*, about a transgender prostitute who returns to her country home to look after her dying mother, or *Brotherhood*. These films were well reviewed in the LGBT press (Elliot 2011) and in serious cinema venues such as *Sight and Sound* (Bickerton 2005, 80), but failed to leverage the kind of mainstream critical support that middlebrow films require.

Part of this distinction is about the inherent relation of queerness to marginality. With a few notable exceptions such as *Brokeback*, *Xi Yan / The Wedding Banquet* (Lee 1993) or, more recently, *Blue is the Warmest Colour*, queer texts do not often generate national and international press. To be middlebrow, a film needs to generate

mainstream cultural discourse: in a recursive structure, it becomes important because important venues are producing discourse about it. Queer filmmakers are less often on the radar of these cultural commentators, because they are less likely to have access to the institutions of cinema and media and, as Patricia White (2008, 410) points out, that marginality is redoubled in the case of lesbian or trans filmmakers, or filmmakers from outside centres of independent film funding and taste-making. Moreover, queerness taints films in a conservative cultural environment even as it opens certain middlebrow doors: even *Brokeback* could not win the Academy Award for Best Picture despite being Oscar bait in every possible way. Ang Lee had the power to make a gay love story play in every multiplex, but very few gay directors could move their films out of the LGBT section of the video store. Is the difference purely a question of access? In other words, is a middlebrow queer film such as *Brotherhood* no different in form, style and tone from *Brokeback*, but with fewer opportunities for mainstream exposure?

We believe that is not the whole story, and that middlebrow also implies a different textual register for queer cinema. The issue of production values links structural marginality with style: queer films are often made on a lower budget and this makes them look too cheap to be culturally respectable. White has addressed radical low-budget queer practices with 'no pretensions to mainstreaming', arguing that 'there are . . . lesbian works that deploy a certain "poverty" – in terms of means of production or aesthetic approach – in order to deflect audience demand for familiar stories, happy endings, repeatable pleasures, identity assurances' (2008, 410–11). Queer middlebrow cinema may share a poverty of means with the lesbian minor cinema that White describes but it has entirely different cultural goals. The same qualities that White sees disavowed by more radical filmmaking are the very pleasures that contemporary queer middlebrow cinema pursues.

It is insightful to compare the types of middlebrow cinema more generally with relatively high- or low-budget aesthetics. Middlebrow cinema partakes in a discourse of quality that invests heavily in being able to see that money has been spent on what is onscreen. Expensive costume dramas like *Atonement* (Wright 2007) emphasize the money spent on costumes, props, stars and cinematography. The foregrounded long-take cinematography bespeaks a carefully constructed and pictorial vision that promises aesthetic pleasures at the same time as social engagement. Cheaply made films like *Jules et Jim* (Truffaut 1962) can eventually become middlebrow, but this is a process of enfolding into the mainstream, and is rarely how such films initially circulate. In the contemporary context, low-budget films like *Frances Ha* (Baumbach 2012) deploy a low-fi, indie style to garner cultural capital by referencing cinephile histories. Cheapness, here, is a signifier of quality because of its explicit connection to canonical touchstones of serious cinema.

Let's consider what happens to these two modes of contemporary middlebrow cinema when they turn queer. The high-budget version becomes distinctly cheaper and is thus unable to sustain the fantasy of glossy, pleasurable, serious art. *Un amour à taire / A Love to Hide* (Faure 2005) takes on a World War II theme common in European middlebrow cinema – a melodramatic story of hiding from Nazis in

Occupied France and ultimate death in the Shoah – but it looks far too cheap to access the audiences for *The Pianist* (Polanski 2002) or *The Reader* (Daldry 2008). The scenes in 1940s Paris do not involve lavish costumes and cannot create expansive street views, and the emotional effect of the concentration camp sequences is potentially undercut by the spectator's strong sense that they were, like old sci-fi television, essentially shot in a quarry. This queer middlebrow is cut-price, reiterating in its visual register the lack of mainstream attention to homosexuals in the camps.

Moreover, in attempting to construct a queer political affect similar to that of mainstream quality historical dramas, *A Love to Hide* reveals the ideological tensions implicit in the queer middlebrow. The film leverages a non-controversial political melodrama about saving Jews in an attempt to mainstream homosexuality as part of a culturally valued narrative of historical trauma and redemption. It draws explicit parallels between the treatment of Jews and homosexuals in the Shoah, evoking first a Jewish girl in hiding and then revealing the homosexuality of the old friend who agrees to help her. Ultimately, only Sarah the Jewish girl survives, and the film ends with her as an old woman visiting France's deportation memorial. Ideological tensions become visible in *A Love to Hide*'s evocation of gay historical memory in the form of heritage drama. On the one hand it is clearly a liberal social issue movie: it ends with titles explaining how 10,000–15,000 homosexuals died in the camps; how France didn't decriminalize homosexuality until 1981 and not till 2001 was the deportation of homosexuals officially recognized by France. But on the other hand, the film can only reach this present-day lesson by representing Sarah as a mother and grandmother. Only the moral force of her heterosexual reproduction enables the film's present-day emotional payoff. The film kills all of its gay characters and cannot imagine a form of social reproduction other than hetero. To fold queers into a cultural history of the French state, we have to travel via the straight Jew who survives and reproduces rather than through the dead queers who cannot. At once liberal and reactionary, *A Love to Hide* exemplifies the troublesome politics of the 'quality' queer middlebrow.

The imbrication of production values, aesthetics and politics is, unsurprisingly, a less significant problem for films that begin from a mode of low-budget realism. Lucía Puenzo's *XXY* (2007) and Andrew Haigh's *Weekend* (2011) both draw on world cinema trends towards a simultaneously gritty and elegiac realism, and both films use that mode's attenuated style to queer effect. In *XXY*, an Argentinian intersex teen is suspended between the concerned and medicalized gaze of the family and new opportunities to explore bodies and sexualities. Set in rural Uruguay, the film's slow and attenuated narrative works to create a queer diegetic space of self-creation in which Alex, the protagonist, can ultimately determine how to embody gender. *Weekend* uses naturalism to very different aesthetic ends, drawing on traditions of British working-class realism to evoke the sensory experience of young gay male relationships. Both films represent a certain level of international success and visibility: *XXY* won the Critics' Week prize at the Cannes Film Festival, for instance, and *Weekend* premiered at SXSW.

However, although these films were popular with festival arthouse audiences and garnered praise from serious film critics, they tended to remain in the LGBT

cinema ghetto. Whereas the angsty straight Manhattanites of Baumbach's *Frances Ha* can speak to mainstream audiences, intersex teens or working-class gay romance cannot so easily make that leap. The mainstream cinematic release for both of these films was very limited, and this is especially so for *XXY*, which was made by a female director and did not focus on white gay male experience. It is suggestive, however, that the success of *Weekend* led Haigh to make the television series *Looking* (2014–15) for HBO. The series also uses a naturalistic tone to tell stories of gay male romance, but its bourgeois perspective and broadcast by a major American cable channel arguably enables *Looking* to fit much more snugly into the category of middlebrow than *Weekend* did. (Nonetheless, the show was cancelled after two seasons, its crossover audience apparently not sufficient to be renewed.) One key question for this hypothesis, then, is whether low-budget realism can be a route into the middlebrow for queer cinema today. We may be witnessing a shift in sensibility in which a low-budget realist mode becomes a more plausible route into the queer middlebrow mainstream than the more traditional heritage melodrama.

The queer middlebrow has a necessary relationship to histories of neoliberalism

We cannot think about the existence of a queer middlebrow without considering the shift in LGBT politics from radicalism to liberal citizenship based upon rights discourses, NGO lobbies, corporate sponsorship and supra-governmental oversight. The history that scholars such as Lisa Duggan (2004), David Eng (2010) and Sarah Schulman (2012) have traced in the US context, in which privacy has been leveraged as the legal means to include gays and lesbians as equal citizens, has developed a revised figure of the queer as an individual stakeholder in the global economy, equally subject to capitalist citizenship, folded into the neoliberal project rather than standing against or outside of its limiting vision of life. Similarly, critics of the LGBT film festival circuit have argued that processes of globalization and corporatization have exerted pressure to deradicalize these queer cultural spaces. Richard Fung (1999, 92), for instance, describes the trend towards more commercial features at festivals starting from the 1990s which increased the proportion of white middle-class stories. At the same time, however, queer festivals were under pressure to globalize, and these new international queer films provided at once a liberal vision of accessible, often identitarian, narratives and a potentially disruptive influx of 'foreign bodies' onto queer screens. Indeed, the prevalence of white gay films could even be read as a backlash against the prominence of non-white and non-Western queers on screen and in audiences. This situation describes perfectly the double-edged sword by which middlebrow films can facilitate apparently increased visibility and cultural capital for LGBT people, but that same process also narrows the frame of who is represented and what can be seen.

The concept of the 'crowdpleaser' becomes significant to understanding the queer middlebrow, and, we would argue, the development of world cinema. The crowdpleaser is a type of film that wins audience awards at film festivals, sometimes but

not always, LGBT film festivals. It often fits into a category that Galt (2013, 53) has delineated as the popular art film, which combines pleasures and modes of narration associated with popular genres with certain markers of art cinema. In this context, the crowdpleasing film also tends to combine another pair of elements in tension: both conservative and liberal politics are mobilized simultaneously by films' depictions of serious social issues. Sukhmani Khorana (2013, 3) has borrowed the idea of the crossover film from its original Indian context to describe how world cinema can 'cross over' from a domestic to an international audience, and this more capacious use of the term is especially productive in thinking about middlebrow world cinema. The middlebrow film works by compromise (its address striking a happy medium for various audiences) and a compensation (offering an international middle ground). To extend Khorana's concept once again, we can think of the queer middlebrow film as attempting to cross over from the queer cinematic ghetto to a mainstream cultural space, whether that journey is from queer to mixed audiences, from festival to general release, or from a radical to a liberal vision of queer culture. Examples include *Viola di mare / Purple Sea* (Maiorca 2009), *Three Veils* (Selbak 2011) and *Flores Raras / Reaching for the Moon* (Barreto 2013). These crossover films cross borders and become crowdpleasers that promise a liberal and cosmopolitan vision of queer worldliness. They represent some of the most widely viewed international queer films of the 2000s and they often articulate a neoliberal optic for both LGBT identity and world cinema.

One especially telling example is *Undertow*, a Peruvian drama that won audience awards at the Sundance, Miami and Lima film festivals and played at LGBT festivals including Tokyo, Paris and San Francisco. As a consequence of the Sundance win, the film was distributed theatrically in Europe and North and South America, including a limited release in the UK. The success of the film illustrates the tendency for contemporary middlebrow world cinema to reinscribe neoliberal visions of relationality (a tyranny of exchange values in which all aspects of life and desire are made uniformly interchangeable, comparable and exchangeable). This is particularly true in regard to how the film negotiates the relationship between desire, community and public identity. The film is set in a Peruvian fishing village, a touristic location which allows for Western fantasies of a simpler rural life as well as a pleasurable mise-en-scène of beaches and picturesque streets. More troublingly, though, its narrative stages a reactionary humanism that quite literally kills queerness to produce a normative vision of happiness in a reproductive hetero marriage.

The film begins with protagonist Miguel talking to his pregnant wife's belly – setting up an image of reproductive heteronormativity as a starting point. Despite being married to a woman, Miguel has a male lover called Santiago. Santiago is an out gay man who is rejected by the village as a result of his sexual orientation, forced to live on its social margins, while Miguel is closeted and accepted. Miguel sneaks away from his wife to have sex with Santiago in a cave, and here we see illustrated how often queer films divert from middlebrow norms of restrained 'good taste' and narrative ellipsis in depicting sex. The scene hits notes of much more lowbrow gay movies (such as those marketed with bare-chested men that dominate the offerings of websites like TLA), including skinny dipping, sun-kissed butt shots and sandy physiques on the beach

FIGURE 11.1 Apparitional homosexual desire: the half-dead couple from *Undertow* (Fuentes-León 2009) together privately in public

with glittering water in the background. *Undertow*, like many queer middlebrow films, mixes registers audaciously. However, not very far into the narrative, Santiago drowns: the gay relationship is excised from everyday reality and Santiago returns as a ghost. Queerness becomes a ghostly presence, haunting the visible world of the film in a selectively diegetic fashion. There are hints of something resistant in this structure of haunting; the marginalized and yet insistent presence of queerness in a space that pretends to be straight. Still, the major narrative labour achieved by the trope of the ghost is to stage the impossibility of queer visibility. As a ghostly presence, Santiago is trapped in the village where nobody but Miguel can see or hear him, in a situation notably similar to his social ostracization before he died. In a key scene, the lovers can go for a walk out in the open – something they could never do before – because Santiago is invisible (Figure 11.1). In this retrograde fantasy of queer publicity, holding hands in public is contingent on violently expelling the actual queer.

Miguel does eventually come out to his wife, but in the form of a Biblical confession. He constructs his sexuality in analogy to Mark 9:45, 'and if thy foot offend thee, cut it off', implying that homosexuality is a sin that he must confess to cut it out of his life. The film performs the same cauterization on queerness in its final removal of Santiago from the diegesis. In the narrative climax, Miguel decides to offer Santiago's body to the sea in the local Catholic ceremony that Santiago explicitly did not believe in when he was alive. Not only his queerness but his atheism is punished by a narrative that teaches him a lesson by subjecting his body both to violent death and traditional religious rites. Of course, the ceremony that Santiago mocked as a fairy tale when he was alive transpires to be true, as the rite does work to exorcise his ghost. *Undertow* works to exorcise the ghost of queerness, returning to church, family and traditional values. By the film's end, there is no visibly queer character remaining, Miguel is returned to his role as patriarch and the heteronormative family home is restored.

In *Undertow*, the neoliberal queer subject cannot be a social outsider in a positive way, a force able to critique, disrupt or enact change, but must be folded into the traditional community in the most punitive manner. Seen in these terms, it is strange that such a conservative film won audience awards at film festivals around the world, including LGBT festivals. This international traffic illustrates a form of the neoliberal queer cosmopolitanism that emerges as a feature of the queer middlebrow. Steve Rose in the *Guardian* (2010) writes, 'In world cinema terms, you can't get much further off the beaten track than this extraordinary Peruvian drama'. The claim of 'off the beaten track' implies a backpacking vision of touristic world cinema where the more obscure the location, the more authentic the experience. But however distant the location from the centres of critical judgement, *Undertow* provides a reassuring familiarity for global audiences. This combination of exotic globalized location with violently assimilationist content could be seen to stage precisely the neoliberal vision of the world.

This narrative reading is not, however, the whole story. At the formal level, too, *Undertow* stages the queer middlebrow's globality and cinematicity. The film maintains a space for desiring homosexual bodies within its frames, but only for cinema audiences. Whereas spectators can see Santiago as a ghost, the film's supporting actors perform as if they can't see him or his physical effects on the world. Seen only by each other and by us as spectators, the apparitional gay couple carries an odd relationship to the diegesis, without the special effects trickery of *The Invisible Man* (Whale 1933). More importantly for this chapter, the couple's appearance is not established through experimental or arthouse techniques, like a split-focus diopter, wipe, optical printing, jumpcut or even animation. Rather, the couple remains visible in the compositions typically found in middlebrow depictions of romance: the framing accommodates Santiago and centres him in the image. The apparitional couple is granted cinematic space through two-shots that frame them in conversation and through hand-held framing that responds to the action of their tussles on the beach.

The narrative space that *Undertow* allows for the visibility of queer desire is cinematic and privatized, inviting only the spectator and the couple to see same-sex intimacy. When we think of this couple as occupying a local, a national and thus a *known* space of intimacy, the apparitional publicity of their desire remains a troubling concession. If the semi-visible nature of the queer romantic couple provides scenarios essential to the film's international popularity, then we find that the space Miguel and Santiago occupy exploits different geographical orientations and scales of publicness. As such, the space in which the apparitional queer couple gains its power is perhaps that of the world middlebrow. This is a space that fully allows them to be 'here' and queer as long as that here and queer remains a non-national space. In fact, in the venues of the international queer film culture (the film festival, the streaming website, file-sharing exchanges), this couple becomes less of an apparition than a fixture for queer audiences around the world. The questions raised around visibility and audience suggest that *Undertow* indexes a mode of representation that demands to be studied in its extranational life. The film's entrée to the world stage was via a queer world middlebrow film culture. This queerly cinematic

visibility should not necessarily redeem the film. The fact that queerness is viable only in an international space and through a global lens is perhaps also a problematic compromise, one reductive in its vision of queer politics. The power of the queer middlebrow is to use the spaces of cinema to reanimate an otherwise invisible desire and to make it both public and worldly. However, this ability seems dependent upon a formal system in which global gay visibility ignores or forecloses on locally and regionally specific politics, social practices and sexual intimacies.

Across this chapter, we have proposed that the contemporary notion of the middlebrow is more frequently constituted with a global inflection than a national one. And when we come to consider a queer middlebrow, the category comes to life in those films that narrativize global interactions and understand filmic space as having international consequences. If we depend on previous models of the cinematic middlebrow that understand it through the lens of the nation, then we risk both occluding crucial sectors of queer film culture and misunderstanding the contemporary middlebrow. The queer middlebrow tends to complicate or even overturn the concept's nationalist bent. However, it also risks installing a neoliberalization of the international spaces of desire and politics that may impose unique burdens on those of us living queerly.

Notes

1 'World cinema' is a contested term, and our use both appreciates the value of thinking beyond national and regional borders and acknowledges the geopolitical consequences of Western film culture's more restrictive and myopic discourses of worlding.
2 Lucy Mazdon nuances this category in relation to the particular case of continental cinema in Britain in Chapter 10.
3 'Middlebrow, n. and adj.'. OED Online. March 2015. Oxford University Press. http://0-www.oed.com.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/view/Entry/252048?redirectedFrom=middlebrow. Consulted 2 June 2015.
4 There may be a case for locating this shift even earlier, to 1995's *La flor de mi secreto / Flower of My Secret* (Faulkner 2013, 209–17). We might also note that 2013's *Amores pasajeros / I'm So Excited!* returned to being too gay for this broader audience, moving Almodóvar's career back away from the middlebrow, and hence to being understood as a commercial and, to some degree, a critical failure. John Waters' later career reflects a similar trajectory albeit in relation to a slightly different set of generic registers.
5 Chris Perriam touches on this shift with a somewhat different emphasis, arguing that Almodóvar moves from defining Spanish gay style in pre-1999 films to reflecting on film genre and world cinephilia in the 2000s (2013, 80–1).
6 TLA website, 'Buffering'. http://tlareleasing.com/films/buffering/press/. Consulted 21 January 2014.

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