**Behind the Façade**

**Room at the Top**

This above all – to thine own self be true,

And it must follow, as the night the day,

Thou canst not then be false to any man.

*Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 3

During a romantic scene in *Room at the Top*, Joe Lampton attempts to recite the lines above to his lover, Alice, who had patiently taught them to him. “This above all – to thine own self be true / And... and... and...” When he forgets what should follow as the night the day, it is an omen that he is about to lose his soul.

*Room at the Top* was the first major film to pull back the veil of modesty that had long dominated the British cinema. The famous “stiff upper lip” of the British that had seemed commendable during the years of wartime adversity ossified during the 1950s into a cinema of middle-class reserve that seemed increasingly irrelevant to the lives that the majority of the population actually lived. It was this gulf between exterior restraint and interior reality that fuelled the criticisms of a new generation of writers whom journalists labelled the “Angry Young Men”.

One of the angriest of those young men was critic and documentary film-maker Lindsay Anderson, who attacked a commercial cinema that he described as “snobbish” and “wilfully blind to the conditions and problems of the present”, a cinema in which “our emotions are so bottled up that they have ceased to exist at all”.  With his friends Karel Reisz and Tony Richardson, Anderson founded in 1956 the Free Cinema movement, whose manifesto declared: “As film-makers we believe that no film can be too personal.” It became an important foundation for the British New Wave of the 1960s, which – with such films as *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning, A Taste of Honey* and Anderson’s own masterpiece, *This Sporting Life* – forged an emotionally mature, social-realist cinema, but it required the commercial cinema itself to make the break-through. Produced by the established and very prominent production company Romulus Films, *Room at the Top* was an adaption of John Braine’s 1957 bestselling novel, which captured the mood of a post-war society in the throes of change. Its success offered the necessary proof that anger could be profitable.

With its tough, abrasive hero Joe Lampton, the film gave voice to a working class that had previously been confined to mostly subordinate, deferential roles. Upon its release in 1959, reviewers celebrated a film that took advantage of an increased latitude in the rules of   censorship to bring a new realism to the way people actually behave. “At long last a British film which is truly adult,” wrote the critic of *Reynolds’ News*.  *"Room at the Top*  has an X certificate and deserves it – not for any cheap sensationalism but because it is an unblushingly frank portrayal of intimate human relationships.”

It is the destruction of intimate human relationships that becomes the key theme, as Joe’s ambition drives him to place conformity to social convention ahead of his own inner feelings. He is in love with Alice Aisgill, an older, unhappily married woman, but courts Susan, the daughter of the millionaire industrialist Mr Brown, the most powerful man in the provincial town of Warnley where the drama is set. In his pursuit of Susan, Joe puts on  a pretence of a love that he does not feel. But with Alice, the boundary between exterior and interior is removed: he doesn’t have to act; he can be himself.

In what becomes a dark, Faustian tale, the emotional honesty that Alice taught him is sacrificed to Mammon, as Joe opts for the material advantages of marriage to Susan rather than fight for a relationship that is encumbered in so many practical difficulties. “You’re a timid soul, aren’t you, Joe?” Alice reproaches him during their final parting. “These people at the top. They are the same as everybody else. But you had it inside of you to be so much bigger than any of them. You just had to be yourself.”

In laying bare the mechanism of self-interest and emotional deceit that causes Joe to opt for bourgeois propriety, the film bleakly suggests that it is the usual way of the world. Susan’s father, the millionaire Mr Brown, started out as a young, ambitious working-class man rather like Joe. They share the same energy, persistence and pragmatic ruthlessness. If it is Joe’s readiness to put ambition before sentiment that brings them into the same family, it is clear that Mr Brown long ago followed the same path. The icy coldness of his wife offers some evidence: if Mrs Brown ever loved Mr Brown, it is hard to escape the impression that such feeling long ago gave way to disillusionment, so that now, as her daughter marries Joe, the only values left to defend are those of social respectability.

*‘To thine own self be true…’* By daring to take an uncompromising look behind the façade of exterior appearances, *Room at the Top* – succeeding where Joe failed – lived up to this injunction, and, albeit briefly, inspired the British cinema to hold up a mirror to the reality of people’s lives.

Charles Drazin, 26 April 2017