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AHR Forum

Finding the People's War: Film,
British Collective Memory, and World War II

GEOFF ELEY

DURING THE SPRING AND EARLY SUMMER OF 1995, 1945 festooned the television screens of Britain. In late April and early May, the BBC re-presented the events of the ending of World War II in the most literal way, narrating them as a nightly newscast, introduced by a current presenter, but composed from documentary footage for the relevant date fifty years before, told as though the events were happening today. This device was brilliantly carried off, a small masterpiece of popular history, in fact, with its self-conscious imbricating of the present with the past, entertainment with history, gimmickry with earnestness, color with black-and-white. For any viewer older than forty, it evoked layers of recognition. It placed us inside the grand narrative, the presenter's poker-faced gravitas securing our pleasures in the didacticism while polishing the BBC's own aura of high-mindedness, its confident performance of national pedagogy. It positioned us immediately in a realm of nostalgia, not only for the lost reassurances of "1945" but for a particular form of historical narration, the hectoring newsreel modalities of "You Are There," and their generic documentary authenticity.

This duality, in which both a particular history and a more generalized discourse of pastness were engaged, was a striking feature of the 1945 celebrations and their commemorative excess. It described an important difference of usage, between history as the past and history as a sign in the present—on the one hand, an actually existing history, a relation to something that really happened, the remembering of 1945 itself and its contested political construction, and on the other hand, history as a container of meaning, a representational project, a field of disorderly interaction between a finished *then* and an active *now*.

"Remembering" World War II requires no immediate experience of those years. This is especially true of the immediate postwar generation (born between 1943–1945 and the mid-1950s), who grew up suffused in the effects of the war years but whose "memory" of them came entirely after the fact. During that generation's

I would like to thank Jeffrey Wasserstrom for conceiving the forum that originally prompted this essay. My interest in the legacies of World War II is linked to a continuing project on changing constructions of the national past in British and German cinema. Its ideas owe a huge debt to discussions with Lauren Berlant and a number of my Ann Arbor colleagues, including especially Becky Conekin, Kali Israel, Karl Pohrt, and Sonya Rose. Penny Summerfield also gave me a valuable reading at the final stage. Most of all, I would like to acknowledge Gina Morantz-Sanchez, whose readings and arguments shaped my thinking from the start.

formative years (say, until the mid-1960s), official and popular cultures were pervaded by the war's presence, via citations, evocations, stories, and commentaries, quite apart from the traces and indentations of everyday life and the private marks of families and personal histories. Consciously and unconsciously, this field of connectedness to the war became worked into public discourse in inspiring, insidious, and enduring ways, making an active archive of collective identification. Beyond the set pieces of anniversaries, speeches, sermons, retrospectives, and the honoring of the dead, entertainment cultures became a rich arena of such memory production. War heroics afforded obvious material—from the staples of British cinema, such as *The Wooden Horse* (directed by Jack Lee, 1950), *The Cruel Sea* (Charles Frend, 1952), *The Dam Busters* (Michael Anderson, 1954), *The Colditz Story* (Guy Hamilton, 1955), *Reach for the Sky* (Lewis Gilbert, 1956), *Carve Her Name with Pride* (Lewis Gilbert, 1958), or *Dunkirk* (Leslie Norman, 1958), to the epic television documentary of Winston Churchill's war premiership, "The Valiant Years" (Jack Le Vien, BBC, 1961), which, together with David Lean's *Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), brought World War II nostalgia to a monumentalized apotheosis.¹ But beyond such overt reverence, wartime also permeated the forms, conventions, and thematics of television drama, documentary, and comedy; popular fiction; comic books; and so on.

By 1995, this memorializing was itself becoming remembered. In the huge repertoire of the BBC's orchestration of the fiftieth anniversary, not only the events themselves were being explicitly celebrated, so were the richly sedimented popular cultural representations in which they had been shaped between the 1940s and the present. Not only the improvised national defense formations of the wartime Home Guard were being invoked but also the successful 1960s situation comedy "Dad's Army"; not only the war against Japan and the defense of the Raj but also the post-imperial nostalgia of another 1960s-vintage sitcom "It Ain't Half Hot Mum" (1974); not just the war's military chronicle but the cinematic stiff upper lips of Jack Hawkins, John Mills, Alec Guinness, and Kenneth More. This was the popular-cultural repertoire through which 1945's solidarities and complacencies had become increasingly performed. In this fashion, the public remembering in 1995 performed an insidious postmodern gesture, because not only history per se, already an incorrigibly contested term, but also its intervening forms of representation were being restaged for our benefit, with the effect (one might argue) that history was erased in the very act of its recuperation.

History enters popular circulation at the beginning of the twenty-first century through such confusions of mass-mediated meanings. They construct the national past via a compulsive simultaneity of connotations, in a promiscuous *mélange* of imagery and citation, creating a dense palimpsest of referentiality. Symbolic capital accumulates thickly around national history's grand events in this manner, encumbering our access to their meanings. This is nowhere stronger than in popular culture's teeming archive of visual representations in film, television, advertising, magazines, and the daily press.

¹ For a good overview, see Neil Rattigan, "The Last Gasp of the Middle Class: British War Films of the 1950s," in Wheeler Winston Dixon, ed., *Re-Viewing British Cinema, 1900-1992: Essays and Interviews* (Albany, N.Y., 1994), 143-53.

Kenneth Branagh's choice of *Henry V* (1989) to launch Renaissance Films excellently showed this effect, signifying history not only through its surface depictions of Shakespeare's play and the Battle of Agincourt, Tudor-Stuartness and the fifteenth century, but also through a much wider chain of associations. While Branagh worked at modernizing the canon and enlightening through entertainment, renewing Shakespeare's potential for national pedagogy, a recharged patriotic discourse was also being necessarily purveyed. Branagh's own primary interest may have been the popularizing of Shakespeare, a Shakespeare where the nationalist trumpeting of an aggressive and Francophobic Englishness was powerfully muted by the consciousness of the horrors of war. But it was the film's status as a *remake* that mattered more in the end, its lineage with Laurence Olivier's earlier version of 1944, where the relationship to wartime patriotism was clear enough. Successive representations were being folded into one another in the manner suggested above, so that Branagh's film inevitably inherited the Olivier version's iconic and allegorical charge. Of course, between Thatcherism's high tide in the mid-1980s and the Majorite detritus ten years later, Branagh himself was fashioned fleetingly into a contemporary icon, in self-conscious emulation of Olivier's earlier status.²

All this made the circulation of representational energy extremely complex. The Churchillian resonance from the 1940s radically exceeded the new film's purposes, conspiring in English nationalism's renewal behind the director's back. Branagh ventriloquized Thatcherist rhetoric in spite of himself. *Which* history exactly ended up being represented accordingly becomes a conundrum. Was it the expansionist exploits of medieval kingship and the Elizabethan triumphalism of Shakespeare's history cycle? Was it the more generalized archive of cultural associations Shakespeare signifies for the Anglo-British popular imagination? Or was it the Thatcherist reinscription of Churchillian "greatness" in the little-Englander animus against "Europe," licensed by the Falklands-Malvinas War, so that Shakespeare now stood in for the direct and explicit appropriation of World War II?³

In other words, at issue were competing mythologies of the recent past. After 1945, patriotism—British national feeling—was not straightforwardly conservative but, on the contrary, contained powerful inflections to the left. Pride in being British implied the egalitarianism of World War II, the achievement of the welfare state, and a complex of democratic traditions stressing decency, liberalism, and the

² In Alison Light's insightful account, Branagh "speaks for modern middle England," "equally at home in Hollywood as with the classics." See "The Importance of Being Ordinary," *Sight and Sound* 3 (September 1993): 16. Also: "The politics of Branagh's appeal could be read in a number of ways. It might suggest a white middle-class England wanting to free itself from older forms of identification. It could remind us that, like the theater, such an England—in the villages, the suburbs, and the dormitory towns, as well as in the city—was always the site of intense mobility, or enormous diversity, of heterogeneous histories which all, like that of the Reading Irish [Branagh's own provenance], need their own attention. Or it might seem more at one with the conservatism that retreats from such a recognition into a bland, meritocratic decency and accessible classlessness, what Stuart Hall has called the 'low-powered motor' of Majorism" (Light, 19).

³ For useful discussions of the context of Olivier's earlier film, see Imelda Whelehan and Deborah Cartmell, "Through a Painted Curtain: Laurence Olivier's *Henry V*," in Pat Kirkham and David Thoms, eds., *War Culture: Social Change and Changing Experience in World War Two* (London, 1995), 49–60; and Cartmell, "The *Henry V* Flashback: Kenneth Branagh's Shakespeare," in Deborah Cartmell, I. Q. Hunter, Heidi Kaye, and Imelda Whelehan, eds., *Pulping Fictions: Consuming Culture across the Literature/Media Divide* (London, 1996), 73–84.

importance of everyone pulling together, in a way that honored the value and values of ordinary working people. More elaborately, it evoked images of the Depression and its social misery, which a broad consensus believed should never be repeated, and here the patriotic comradeship of the war was reworked into a social democratic narrative of suffering and social justice. The benign qualities of such patriotism can be exaggerated. The democratic romance of 1945 also contained huge complacencies, in relation both to Europe, the United States, and "other countries," and to themes of empire and race, organized around insidiously embedded assumptions of Englishness. Moreover, the postwar consensus came not only positively from reconstruction but also from repressive disciplinary structures of the Cold War. Enduring sources of conflict and new forms of divisiveness likewise remained, as the Suez Crisis, the rise of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, and other social movements soon would attest. By the later 1950s, dissidence in the arts, new patterns of consumption, and stylistic rebellions of youth were already corroding the stable conformities that otherwise marked the time. But the consensus—as a field of shared memories and identifications—marked a crucial threshold of disagreement, holding conflicts to a unifying and resilient hegemonic frame.

Thus for a long time after 1945, World War II provided a template for the popular political imagination. To form the rhetorical binding of the postwar consensus, it entered British cultural memory as a narrative of popular democratic accomplishment, requiring elaborate and extensive dissemination. In that process, greater material security and rising living standards remained sutured to the political values of common sacrifice, egalitarianism, and democratic expectation accompanying the victory over fascism—so that subsequent evocations of the "Dunkirk spirit" were elided into what Churchill on V-E Day had called simply "the victory of the cause of freedom in every land."⁴ But, by the same argument, any replacement of this consensus by a new and different set of political claims—the overturning and reconstruction of its political common sense—would require a new vision of contemporary British history, which repositioned World War II in popular understanding.

This was the complex transition occurring between the 1960s and the present decade. It locked the left-wing iconoclasm of the 1960s and the right-wing modernizers of Thatcherism into a complex dialectic of enablement, confrontation, and disavowal. The cultural radicalisms of the 1960s and 1970s first thoroughly destabilized the postwar settlement, angrily and exuberantly exposing its deficiencies and denouncing its congealing of values into a normalized resistance to change. But then a right-wing culturalist backlash ensued. The political transformation of the late twentieth century hinged on the Margaret Thatcher government's escalating radicalism of 1982–1985 (through the Falklands-Malvinas War, the 1983 elections, confrontation with the Greater London Council, and the Miners' Strike), which brutally delegitimized the labor movement in its national institutional credibility. But behind this party-focused confrontationism of 1973–1987, and the

⁴ Winston S. Churchill, Victory in Europe speech, May 8, 1945, in Judy Giles and Tim Middleton, eds., *Writing Englishness 1900–1950: An Introductory Sourcebook on National Identity* (London, 1995), 134.

leading anti-socialist edge of the attacks on the Labour Party, was a deeper cultural disorder.⁵ An accumulation of national anxieties pressed insistently on public consciousness in the 1970s and 1980s—the question of Europe, violence in Northern Ireland, the growth of Scottish and Welsh nationalisms and the “break-up of Britain,” crisis in the schools, fears of sexual minorities, and panics over immigration and race. The resulting controversies exposed far-reaching confusions in the discursive economy of national identification.⁶

This disordering of the stable consensus that coalesced after the war—the decentering of Britishness as a cultural formation, with older solidarities in dissolution and no new languages of comparable resonance emerging to take their place—was one effective legacy of the 1960s. The cultural iconoclasm of that decade, which disparaged the postwar settlement’s complacencies without ever fully capturing the political initiative in national-popular terms, opened a further space for the Right to regroup. Populist backlash against “permissiveness,” the collapse of received authority, and a generalized discourse of moral decline were as vital in fueling the Thatcherized Conservative Party from the mid-1970s as the attack on unions and the monetarist revivalism of the free market. But beyond these immediate conflicts, the architecture of popular identifications with World War II also became transformed. By 1983, Thatcherism was evoking the other Churchill of late imperial militarism and racialized cultural superiority, exchanging ideals of social justice for a patriotism straight and pure.⁷ In that sense, Thatcherism and the postwar settlement—“1979” and “1945”—signified hostile counterversions of patriotic consensus, whose confrontational opposition presupposed “1968” as a necessary third term.⁸

⁵ Beyond partisan offensives against the “enemy within,” which explicitly mobilized patriotic values against democratic activism of many kinds (in unions, new social movements, and Labour Party local government initiatives), a broader agitating of national culture and its prevailing assumptions took place. The new discourse of national “heritage” and its unifying properties was one major example, in the first instance through the National Heritage Acts (1980, 1983) and the Heritage Educational Trust (1982), but then through an extraordinary proliferation of activity, driven both by the commercial development of heritage sites, historical theme parks, and the economics of tourism in deindustrializing Britain, and by grass-roots enthusiasms and hobbies. Debates over the national curriculum, particularly for the subjects of History and English, focused similar contests over national identity, reaching an important climax in 1989–1990. The most panoramic and insightful analyses of this reconfiguring of the landscape of Britishness can be found in the work of the late Raphael Samuel (1934–1996), *Theatres of Memory*, Vol. 1: *Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London, 1994); and *Theatres of Memory*, Vol. 2: *Island Stories: Unravelling Britain* (London, 1998). An early brilliant set of reflections may be found in Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (London, 1984), followed by Wright, *A Journey through Ruins: The Last Days of London* (London, 1991). See also Tom Nairn, *The Enchanted Glass: Britain and Its Monarchy* (London, 1988); and the three volumes edited by Raphael Samuel, *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity* (London, 1989).

⁶ See also Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, ed., *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain* (London, 1982); and Paul Gilroy, “*There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack*”: *The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (Chicago, 1987).

⁷ Margaret Thatcher used the first Conservative Party political broadcast after the landslide victory of the 1983 elections to attack the Clement Attlee years directly, establishing rhetorical equivalence between the patriotisms of the Falklands-Malvinas War and the war against Adolf Hitler, and attacking the Labour government of 1945–1951 as a misuse of the peace, which the new victories of 1982–1983 could now undo. See Peter Hennessy, “Never Again,” in Brian Brivati and Harriet Jones, eds., *What Difference Did the War Make?* (London, 1993), 6.

⁸ This analysis was pioneered in the essays of Stuart Hall, collected as *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London, 1988). Aspects of the cultural backlash may be tracked

Taking this period between the 1960s and 1990s as a whole, therefore, something like a renegotiation of national culture has been taking place—a recasting of the most axiomatic assumptions of British public life, or its political common sense. This view of Thatcherism, as an aggressive reimagining of British identity, which re-centered political desires around far less generous constructions of the national interest and the national character, became a distinctive orthodoxy in cultural studies by the 1990s.⁹ To allow Thatcherism's success, such accounts have argued, an existing story of the nation's progress and health needed to be dislodged from its dominance in the consensual languages of public life. Ambitious and concerted renarration of the national past was entailed, through which the terms of popular identification with Britishness—the meanings of citizenship, of loyalty to the British state, and of the British “way”—might be redrawn. This reading of the present has also inspired vital discussions of the earlier twentieth and later nineteenth-century pasts, among which some pioneering analyses of race, gender, and empire have been especially exciting.¹⁰

FILM IS A VERY GOOD WAY OF exploring these effects. During the last two decades, British cinema has been systematically mining the national past for settings and stories. But—by contrast with the nineteenth century, the Edwardian years, the 1950s, and lately the Great War—World War II itself seldom appears. The British combat film has entirely vanished. The economics of big budget production are one

in Hall, “Reformism and the Legislation of Consent,” in National Deviancy Conference, ed., *Permissiveness and Control* (London, 1980), 1–44; Martin Durham, *Moral Crusades: Family and Morality in the Thatcher Years* (New York, 1991); Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, and Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London, 1978); Anne Marie Smith, *New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality: Britain, 1968–1990* (Cambridge, 1994). For the reworking of popular memories of the period 1918–1945 through popular fiction and visual culture, see Roger Bromley, *Lost Narratives: Popular Fictions, Politics and Recent History* (London, 1988).

⁹ For many professional historians, in contradistinction, refusing this “culturalist” analysis became *de rigueur*, attributing it to the “un-historical” preoccupations of cultural studies, as opposed to history in a formally credentialed sense. See the revealing “Comments” by (I) Peter Catterall and (II) Tony Mason, Jim Obelkevich and Nick Tiratsoo, and James Vernon’s “Reply,” *Social History* 23 (October 1998): 325–30, prompted by Vernon’s earlier conference report, “The Mirage of Modernity”: A Report on the “Moments of Modernity? Reconstructing Britain, 1945–64,” conference held at the University of Portsmouth, July 9–10, 1996, *Social History* 22 (May 1997): 208–15. In the meantime, proceedings of the latter were published as Becky Conekin, Frank Mort, and Chris Waters, eds., *Moments of Modernity? Reconstructing Britain, 1945–1964* (London, 1999). The emblematic text criticized by Vernon was James Obelkevich and Peter Catterall, eds., *Understanding Post-War British Society* (London, 1994). Recent works include Kevin Foster, *Fighting Fictions: War, Narrative and National Identity* (London, 1999); and Kevin Davey, *English Imaginaries: Six Studies in Anglo-British Modernity* (London, 1999).

¹⁰ See especially Robert Colls and Philip Dodd, eds., *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880–1920* (London, 1986); and Mary Langan and Bill Schwarz, eds., *Crises in the British State 1880–1930* (London, 1985). More recently, see the companion volumes, Mica Nava and Alan O’Shea, eds., *Modern Times: Reflections on a Century of English Modernity*; and Bill Schwarz, ed., *The Expansion of England: Race, Ethnicity and Cultural History* (London, 1996). For race and empire, see especially Catherine Hall, *White, Male and Middle Class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (Cambridge, 1992); Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865–1915* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1994); Simon Gikandi, *Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism* (New York, 1996). For an interesting overview, see Leighton Andrews, “New Labour, New England?” in Mark Perryman, ed., *The Blair Agenda* (London, 1996), 125–46.

explanation for this, because large-action war films exceed the British industry's capability, whether for restaging the epic events of Dunkirk, the Battle of Britain, El Alamein, and D-Day, or for telling more generic stories of experience under fire. British versions of *Saving Private Ryan* (directed by Steven Spielberg, 1998) or *The Thin Red Line* (Terrence Malick, 1998) are out of the question. But human stories of soldiering on a non-epic scale, such as *A Midnight Clear* (Keith Gordon, 1992), which placed a U.S. Army unit in the Ardennes at Christmas 1944, are also missing. At most, British films have occasionally used World War II for purposes only tangentially related to the war itself—as in *Chicago Joe and the Showgirl* (Bernard Rose, 1989), about the short-lived crime spree of a G.I. deserter and his local girlfriend in 1944 London; or *Land Girls* (David Leland, 1997), with its depiction of young women conscripted into the agricultural labor force; or, most prominently (and paradigmatically), *The English Patient* (Anthony Minghella, 1996), whose complex plotting is both interwoven into the wartime circumstances and indifferent to their specific historical charge.¹¹

In making a point about the war per se, John Boorman's fictionalized self-portrait *Hope and Glory* (1987) stands very much by itself. Deliberately eschewing allegories of national sacrifice and fortitude, Boorman debunks the older narratives of the war, a purpose already signaled by the heavy irony of his film's title. For eight-year-old Bill Rohan, the war brought less blood, sweat, and tears than adventures amid the ruins and shrapnel of the neighborhood bomb sites, deliciously free from adult controls. The public values of the conduct of the war, whether patriotic or anti-fascist, are thus made marginal to the film's point of view. They are directly mocked. Bill's teacher conflates the war with the empire: "what fraction of the earth's surface is British? . . . Yes, two-fifths. *Ours*. And that's what the war is all about. Men are fighting and dying to save all the pink bits for you ungrateful little twerps." But while the headmaster intones jingoist pleas to the deity ("Let our righteous shells smite down the Messerschmidts and the Fokkers. Lord, send troublesome dreams to Herr Hitler"), Bill's generation takes a diametrically opposing view when the school is hit by a bomb ("Thank you, Adolf!"). In this way, the film subverts narrative and symbolic expectations, substituting a story of exciting and disruptive everydayness for the Churchillian grand narrative, the military chronicles, and all the associated iconicity.

The war spells huge upheaval in personal life yet affords the young Rohan/Boorman exceptional pleasures and opportunities. Otherwise, it appears mainly via air raids, rationing, and the exotic presence of U.S. and Canadian troops. The film removes the war's everydayness entirely beyond the political frames discussed above. In that sense, *Hope and Glory* differs profoundly from contemporary products of two other national cinemas centering on the war stories of small boys,

¹¹ Among the 136 films commissioned by the Channel 4 drama department during 1982–1991, only three were set in Britain during World War II, and none addressed the war's public or political meanings: *Another Time, Another Place* (directed by Michael Radford, 1983); *Hope and Glory* (John Boorman, 1987); and *The Dressmaker* (Jim O'Brien, 1988). One more, *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (Terence Davies, 1988), included the war in its framing. Several co-productions thematized the war's importance in Europe: *A Flame to the Phoenix* (William Brayne, 1983) and *The Road Home* (Jerzy Kaszukowski, 1987)—Poland; *Letters to an Unknown Lover* (Peter Duffell, 1985)—France; and *Voyage to Cythera* (Theo Angelopoulos, 1984)—Greece.

where the national allegory remains explicit and strong, *Empire of the Sun* (Steven Spielberg, 1987) and *Au revoir les enfants* (Louis Malle, 1987), which connect their stories self-consciously to frameworks of national remembrance, one an epic tale of late imperial geopolitical violence staged across the ravaged landscape of neo-colonial China, the other a poignant microcosm of French treatment of the Jews under Nazi occupation.

In its gender text, *Hope and Glory* presents fatherless families and a feminized home front. Bill spends the war surrounded by women—his mother, sisters, and aunts. They keep the family together, but their desires and transgressions also move the dangers and dramas of the plot.¹² Bill's elder sister Dawn runs around with G.I.s, precipitating a major crisis with her pregnancy by a Canadian airman. Her husband away in the army, Bill's mother Grace quavers on the edge of infidelity, confessing her feelings to the husband's best friend, until the unfolding of this adulterous love plot becomes abruptly preempted when the family home is destroyed by fire, reminding us of the moral and emotional destruction otherwise waiting to happen. They move to Grace's father's house on the Thames, and beneath the grandfather's surrogate patriarchy the future of normal family life is re-secured.

In Boorman's telling, World War II is reworked as a coming-of-age story, in which the anarchic pleasures of families without fathers in a bombed-out and socially disordered urban environment (London during the Blitz) are resolved in the pastoral certainties of the country house by the Thames, where Bill learns masculinity from his mother's irascible and misogynist father. It is hard not to read this boyhood memoir of a wartime society of women against the Thatcherized political language of the 1980s, whose disparagement of the "nanny state" (the social reforms of the 1940s) and celebration of the "iron lady" interposed itself between "second wave" feminism and the complex social histories of women's mobilization during the war. In *these* terms, Boorman's film does have a metanarrative about World War II after all, though one coded through the formally depoliticized reconstructions of everyday life. This political text resides in the extremely classical imagery of rural Englishness and its verities—gardens, sunlight, cricket, boating, green pastures, and the security of the ancestral home.¹³ Here, the war's effects are figured through disruptions of family and childhood, the broadening of women's experience, and the restabilizing of gender regimes, with far-reaching consequences for postwar social and cultural history. If the film begins with the collapse of appeasement on September 3, 1939, it ends with the securing of the family's integrity, bringing what Mary Desjardins calls the "destiny of Britain and destiny of the oedipally resolved male individual" into reassuring alignment:

¹² In interviews, Boorman described the film as honoring his mother's and aunts' wartime contributions. See Mary Desjardins, "Free from the Apron Strings: Representations of Mothers in the Maternal British State," in Lester Friedman, ed., *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism* (Minneapolis, 1993), 135.

¹³ The iconography of an old or "merrie" England is hinted at in the symbolics of the family's transition from the city. From his former possessions in the burned-out London home, Bill salvages only the figurines of Merlin and King Arthur, fused by heat in his box of toy soldiers. One of Boorman's earlier films was the retelling of the Arthur legend, *Excalibur* (1981).

Past and present, individual and collective popular memory of the war come together as Boorman finds the man in the boy. Mother will be under the eye of her father, and the older sister, now pregnant, will marry her soldier boyfriend on the country estate. Women, who during the war were producers, wives, mothers, lovers, nurses, and soldiers, now will be confined to the institution of motherhood, contained within marriage or the care of secure patriarchs.¹⁴

Boorman's film is consistent with the grain of contemporary historiography, which has been moving variously away from the celebratory treatment of the wartime coalition and the reforms of 1945–1951. Long ago, Angus Calder's book *The People's War* asserted complexities of social history and popular experience beyond the official rhetorics of patriotic solidarity and shared sacrifice, subjecting the solidity of national consensus in Westminster and Whitehall to a submerged history of social and political dissent.¹⁵ In the meantime, several distinct critiques have questioned the older picture of a postwar consensus predicated on the accomplishments of "1945." On the one hand, social historians have furnished evidence of popular radicalization potentially pushing beyond the Labour government's program of 1945.¹⁶ On the other hand, political historians sympathetic to Thatcherism have questioned the legitimacy of both the Clement Attlee government and the Churchill coalition on realist grounds, arguing that Britain's great-power interests were sacrificed shortsightedly to costly and ineffectual projects of ameliorative reform.¹⁷ Yet a third current queries popular identification with reform per se, asserting that "the majority of the public were ill-informed, lacked 'social solidarity,' and supported neither state intervention nor altruistic welfare policies."¹⁸ As Geoffrey Field observes:

In an effort to break through the impeding layers of nostalgia and demythologize the war years, historians have paid growing attention to aspects of life omitted from the "orthodox" heroic version, such as looting, black market activities, absenteeism, strikes, cynicism, and low morale. Some imply that the average person often has few opinions worth the

¹⁴ Desjardins, "Free from the Apron Strings," 125 and following. My argument in this paragraph follows that of Desjardins.

¹⁵ See Angus Calder, *The People's War* (London, 1969); and for a new and salutary restatement of the case, Bob Holman, "Pulling Together: Propaganda and Myths Have Obscured What It Was Really Like to Live through the Blitz; Bob Holman Remembers His Boyhood," *The Guardian*, August 22, 2000. The classic statements of the earlier orthodoxy regarding the postwar consensus and its origins in the wartime coalition were Paul Addison, *The Road to 1945* (London, 1975); and Kenneth O. Morgan, *The People's Peace: British History 1945–1989* (Oxford, 1990). For an important more recent study, see Stephen Brooke, *Labour's War* (London, 1992).

¹⁶ See especially James Hinton, "Self-Help and Socialism: The Squatters' Movement of 1946," *History Workshop Journal* 25 (Spring 1988): 100–26; and Hinton, "Coventry Communism: A Study of Factory Politics in the Second World War," *History Workshop Journal* 10 (Autumn 1980): 90–118.

¹⁷ See especially Correlli Barnett, *The Audit of War* (London, 1986); and Barnett, *The Lost Victory: British Dreams, British Realities, 1945–1950* (London, 1995); John Charmley, *Chamberlain and the Lost Peace* (London, 1989); and Charmley, *Churchill: The End of Glory; A Political Biography* (London, 1993). For a judicious set of discussions, see Brivati and Jones, *What Difference Did the War Make?*

¹⁸ Rodney Lowe, "The Second World War, Consensus and the Foundation of the Welfare State," *Twentieth-Century British History* 1 (1990): 175. For a summary statement of this view, see Steven Fielding, Peter Thompson, and Nick Tiratsoo, "England Arise!" *The Labour Party and Popular Politics in 1940s Britain* (Manchester, 1995). For excellent rejoinders, see the forum "Labour and the Popular" in *History Workshop Journal* 43 (Spring 1997): Sarah Benton, "The 1945 'Republic,'" 249–57; John Marriott, "Labour and the Popular," 258–66; James Hinton, "1945 and the Apathy School," 266–73.

name—and caution that the idea of a popular wartime consensus for reform was largely a myth manufactured by intellectuals.¹⁹

Boorman's film seems grist for this mill. But while deromanticizing the grand story of "the people's war" ("according to folk memory . . . our last great collective achievement as a nation"),²⁰ it also deploys a different kind of romance, namely, the private story of a young boy's entry into experience, the opening of his expanded horizons, via the interruption of ordinary life's rhythms and repetitions. The film tells *this* story by deliberately distancing the public script of the just and anti-fascist war, because for most ordinary experience (it implies), this was beside the point. *Chicago Joe and the Showgirl* likewise brackets the war's public meanings. Its twin protagonists are both on the run, a young U.S. deserter with a family in Boston and an eighteen-year-old London stripper in flight from an abusive childhood and violent husband. They spin extravagant fantasies for each other, he as a Chicago gangster (and, to his respectable girlfriend, a military intelligence operative), she as a Hollywood star and gangster's moll. These vicarious identities become mutually incited into robbery and murder. As the police interrogations reveal a week later, this thirst for excitement grows from sad, abused, and impoverished young lives.²¹ A third film, *Another Time, Another Place* (Michael Radford, 1983) stages its story of loneliness, longing, and desire in a remote and barren landscape of rural Scotland, where the war impinges on life mainly via the assignment of three Italian prisoners of war to a local farm. The Italians' difference (sensuality and southern warmth) moves the farmer's much younger wife to fantasies of escape. The resulting scenario of sexual passions, frustration, and misunderstanding provides a powerful allegory of imprisonment and liberation, for which wartime circumstances offer the formal setting.

These films find a place beyond the obvious and received political framework of the war's meanings to tell stories of escape. They deploy a standard trope of nostalgia ("the past is another country").²² They each use a classic strategy of cinema for representing freedom, possibility, and constraint, whether through the imagery of childhood (*Hope and Glory*), fantasy identifications with the movies (*Chicago Joe*), or the metaphor of sexual liberation (*Another Time, Another Place*).

¹⁹ Geoffrey Field, "Social Patriotism and the British Working Class: Appearance and Disappearance of a Tradition," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 42 (Fall 1992): 27. See also Pete Grafton, *You, You and You: The People Out of Step with World War II* (London, 1981); and Angus Calder's later book, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London, 1991).

²⁰ Hennessy, "Never Again," 6. Hennessy's *Never Again: Britain, 1945–1951* (London, 1992) is the most powerful restatement of the older consensus regarding the achievements of the postwar Labour government.

²¹ These elements (period drama, Hollywood fantasy, social problem film) are stitched together very schematically, with weak plotting and a thin script, and the film is not a success. My point concerns the story's relationship to the war's surrounding context, from which it is entirely disarticulated.

²² The promiscuous use of this trope during the last two decades certainly captures a powerful contemporary impulse toward nostalgia in suitably ironic tones, but it tends to assimilate all periods of the recent past to a single problematic and flattens the specificities of particular periods and their place in collective and personal memory. See David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, 1985); Wright, *On Living in an Old Country*; Bromley, *Lost Narratives*, 7. See also Marek Kaniewska's film, *Another Country* (1984), about the shaping of British ruling-class attitudes in the public-school culture of the 1930s. The trope originates in the first sentence of L. P. Hartley's novel *The Go-Between* (1953), made into a film of the same name by Joseph Losey (1971): "The Past is a foreign country: they do things differently there." See the Scarborough House edition (Chelsea, Mich., 1980), 3.

In a sense, they follow the logic of much contemporary historiography by looking past the war's big events to explore broader histories of popular experience and the human stories where these were embedded. But in so doing, they also sever the "people's war" from the "people's peace"—that is, from the succeeding narrative of reform and reconstruction that previously organized collective memory and characterized the postwar consensus. *Chicago Joe* ends badly (with hanging and imprisonment), thereby confronting the postwar idealizing of the welfare state with the recalcitrant circumstances—of social problems, garish pleasures, tawdry dreams, sad lives, and of course family secrets (incest, rape, domestic violence)—it failed to affect. This became a more general theme of British cinema in the 1980s, which gazed bleakly and sardonically on the socio-cultural continuities behind the postwar consensus and its reforms, making the 1950s into the sordid and repressed underside of the prosperous normalization celebrated by "You've Never Had It So Good."²³ The films *Dance with a Stranger* (Mike Newell, 1984), *Wish You Were Here* (David Leland, 1987), *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (Terence Davies, 1988), *Scandal* (Michael Caton-Jones, 1988), *The Krays* (Peter Medak, 1990), *Let Him Have It* (Peter Medak, 1991), *An Awfully Big Adventure* (Mike Newell, 1994), and *Intimate Relations* (Philip Goodhew, 1995) all in their different ways take this view.

This cinema's key impulse—toward histories of ordinary lives beneath the big events, via childhood memoirs, crime reports, melodrama, sex stories, or family romance—offers valuable starting points for studying World War II, allowing its public meanings to be rethought. Serious historical work of this kind on wartime popular experience barely exists, although oral historians in Italy and Germany have provided some leads.²⁴ But by employing an interpretative approach to ordinary people's lives (through interviews and surviving written documentation) and addressing social history's subjective and experiential dimensions, the elusive connections between culture and politics might be concretely exposed. In that sense, cinema constructs its own history—not necessarily by the "truth" of its representations or the accuracy of its literal reconstructions but by visualizing intimacy, interiority, and everydayness, which are otherwise notoriously resistant to the historian's eye. By these means, usable questions come to the fore.

The films mentioned above supply useful incitements to microhistory and the history of everyday life in these terms, opening social relations and practices to

²³ "You've Never Had It So Good" was the slogan identified with the prime ministership of Harold Macmillan (1957–63) and the third successive Conservative election victory of 1959, although, as Peter Clarke points out, the main electioneering slogan in 1959 itself was "Life's better with the Conservatives. Don't let Labour ruin it." See Peter Clarke, *Hope and Glory: Britain 1900–1990* (London, 1996), 270.

²⁴ See especially Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class* (Cambridge, 1984); Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany, N.Y., 1991); and Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison, Wis., 1997); Lutz Niethammer, ed., *Lebensgeschichte und Sozialkultur im Ruhrgebiet 1930 bis 1960*, Vol. 1: "Die Jahre weiß man nicht, so man die heute hinsetzen soll": *Faschismuserfahrungen im Ruhrgebiet* (Bonn, 1983); Niethammer, ed., *Lebensgeschichte und Sozialkultur im Ruhrgebiet 1930 bis 1960*, Vol. 2: "Hinterher merkt man, daß es richtig war, daß es schiefgegangen ist": *Nachkriegserfahrungen im Ruhrgebiet* (Bonn, 1983); Niethammer and Alexander von Plato, eds., *Lebensgeschichte und Sozialkultur im Ruhrgebiet 1930 bis 1960*, Vol. 3: "Wir kriegen jetzt andere Zeiten": *Auf der Suche nach der Erfahrung des Volkes in nachfaschistischen Ländern* (Bonn, 1985); Niethammer, von Plato, and Dorothee Wierling, eds., *Die volkseigene Erfahrung: Eine Archäologie des Lebens in der Industrieprovinz der DDR* (Berlin, 1991).

anthropological analysis and other forms of close reading taken from cultural studies. Such approaches profoundly complicate the category of politics, allowing new interconnections between the national and the local to be viewed, where the “local” describes all those quotidian places (family, household, work, schooling, entertainment, sexuality) removed from the recognized public frames for assigning political meaning. Revisiting the war in this way by analyzing particular lives—counterparts to the young Rohan/Boorman in *Hope and Glory*, or the showgirl in *Chicago Joe*, or Janie the farmer’s wife in *Another Time, Another Place*—can both deepen our grasp of the changes of the 1940s and clarify their reach. Such films mark out territories barely mapped by the burgeoning social histories of the past three decades—childhoods, the dream worlds of teenagers, the geographically remote periphery, provincial landscapes beyond the home counties, and parochial lives of all kinds, especially those of women. These are what Carolyn Steedman calls “lives lived out on the borderlands, lives for which the central interpretative devices of the culture don’t quite work.”²⁵ Such lives contained, as Annette Kuhn remarks, “ways of knowing and ways of seeing the world . . . rarely acknowledged, let alone celebrated, in the expressions of a hegemonic culture.”²⁶

Two further examples help rejoin these reflections to World War II’s place in British collective memory. The first is Fred Schepisi’s film *Plenty* (1985), adapted by David Hare from his play of the same name (1978), one of several attempts by playwrights on the eve of Thatcherism to problematize the legacy of 1945 from the left. Others include *Brassneck* (1973), Hare’s collaboration with Howard Brenton for the stage; and three television plays broadcast by BBC1—Hare’s own “Licking Hitler” (1978), the televisual companion piece to *Plenty*; Ian McEwan’s “Imitation Game” (Richard Eyre, 1980); and Trevor Griffith’s “Country—A Tory Story” (Richard Eyre, 1980). Calder’s *People’s War* directly inspired these productions. For Hare, reading it “changed all my thinking as a writer. An account of the Second World War through the eyes of ordinary people, it attempts a complete alternative history to the phoney and corrupting history I was taught at school.”²⁷ It “pointed out that it was the Second World War itself which educated people towards the great Labour victory of 1945.”²⁸ Set in a provincial industrial town, *Brassneck* opens against a projection of Churchill on V-E Day, and plots the renovating of British capitalism amid the panic of the Labour Party’s landslide election victory in July 1945. In one of the play’s key speeches, a local Labour politician recounts the squandering of radical chances: “We ’ad a chance in 1945. Finest government this

²⁵ Carolyn Kay Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1987), 5.

²⁶ Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (London, 1995), 8. A key referent for the idea of the “borderlands” is the work of Raymond Williams, especially *The Country and the City* (London, 1973); *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, 1977); and his first novel, *Border Country* (London, 1960). Among the huge critical literature, see especially Dennis L. Dworkin and Leslie G. Raman, eds., *Views beyond the Border Country: Raymond Williams and Cultural Politics* (New York, 1993); Dai Smith, “Relating to Wales,” in Terry Eagleton, ed., *Raymond Williams: Critical Perspectives* (Cambridge, 1989), 34–53. For everyday life, see Alf Lüdtkke, ed., *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life* (Princeton, N.J., 1995); and Geoff Eley, “Labor History, Social History, *Alltagsgeschichte*: Experience, Culture, and the Politics of the Everyday—A New Direction for German Social History?” *Journal of Modern History* 61 (1989): 297–343.

²⁷ Carol Hornden, *The Plays of David Hare* (Cambridge, 1995), 25.

²⁸ David Hare, “Introduction,” in Hare, *Plays One* (London, 1996), xiii.

country ever 'ad. But not good enough. Not quite good enough by half. By the end, in rags . . . 'Ow can we ever forgive ourselves? I can't forgive myself. Labour Party, the party we all love."²⁹

Plenty is an allegory of postwar normalizing and national decline, revisiting 1945's mythic promise from a vantage point of disillusionment (1978–1983), when the Left's hold on this collective memory was exhausted and Thatcherism was being born. Its main character, Susan Traherne, descends painfully from the wartime intensities of undercover work in the French Resistance, which spelled purpose, excitement, and optimism for the postwar period, into emotional illness and aimless marginality. Susan's personal story—drifting through jobs and relationships, failing to conceive a child, settling for an establishment marriage, sinking into medicalized quiescence—is woven into a narrative of Britain's decline, marked by the public events of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation (1953) and the Suez Canal Crisis (1956). Her emotional breakdowns, signified as willful “loss of control,” become metaphors of failed breaking out, where the banality and returning conservatism of postwar society briefly crack, only to be relentlessly restored. The material “plenty” of reconstruction betrays a moral lack, as Susan moves from a logic of agency and emancipation (sexual experiment, economic and professional independence, bohemianism, optimistic self-assertion) to one of abjection. Her protests transmute into emotional flailing, producing self-destruction and self-disgust. Losing independent selfhood, undermining her diplomat husband's prospects, and then ending her marriage, Susan returns vainly to the scene of wartime excitement, first to a Special Operations Executive reunion, then seeking to relive the sexual encounter with her fellow agent Lazar, where the film began.³⁰

The film seldom uses the language of politics directly. An exception is a dinner party during the Suez Crisis, preceded by Susan's memory of Lazar's parachute drop into occupied France, which merges into newsreel footage of British paratroopers over Egypt, followed by footage of the Trafalgar Square rally against the invasion (“the whole country is torn apart . . . a pitch of public dissent unknown for many generations”). Here, the death rattle of empire becomes a requiem for 1945's failed hopes, when the bravery of anti-Nazi Resistance bespoke generalized ideals of “freedom.”³¹ Susan, already bristling against a marriage entered as the lifeline from a nervous breakdown, rails against the hypocrisy of British policy: “Everything

²⁹ Howard Brenton and David Hare, *Brassneck* (London, 1974), 85.

³⁰ The film begins with a parachute drop into occupied France, where Susan receives the visiting agent Lazar. After a narrow escape, they make love, with a spontaneous and physical intensity marked by fear and the proximity of death. Throughout the film, this brief encounter holds a place for excitement, risk-taking, decisiveness, comradeship, emotional honesty, authenticity of feeling, loyalty to a cause, and agency—all the qualities that during the peace become lost.

³¹ The dinner-party sequence begins after Susan's first breakdown two years before. Her old lover, the boring but dependable Raymond Brock, a career diplomat, has been called to the hospital. He appears in the doorway; she turns to face him; we see the image of Lazar parachuting into France at the start of the film; the film flashes forward to newsreel of parachutes descending over Egypt; Susan and Raymond are now married. Amid the debacle of the dinner party, Susan reflects: “October nights. Those poor parachutists. I do know how they feel. Even now. Cities, fields, trees, farms, dark spaces, lights. Parachute opens. We descend. Of course, we were comparatively welcome. I mean, we did make it our business to land in countries where we were wanted. Certainly the men were. Some of the relationships, I can't tell you. I remember a colleague telling me of the heat, of the smell of a particular young girl. ‘The hot wet smell,’ he said. And nothing since. Nothing since then. I can't see the Egyptian girls, somehow. No, not in Egypt. Not now. I mean, there were broken hearts when we left. I mean,

is up for grabs. At last. We will see some changes. Thank the Lord." Her tirade bursts through the decorums of the occasion but shatters mainly the self-containment of the marriage, as husband Raymond finally explodes. The evening crashes amid the embarrassment. Although Raymond's mentor Leonard Darwin resigns in protest against the government's deceptions, he does so from an arrogant and racist traditionalism. Politically, nothing results. Symbolically, Raymond is subsequently posted to Jordan, where Susan lives opulently, medicated and apathetic.

The politics in *Plenty* is displaced into talk of honesty and truthfulness, registers of impatience and the desire for change, images of freedom, belief in directness, and the urgency of "making a judgement."³² In Susan's story, this involves the recurring desire "to move on." But by the film's denouement—a violent confrontation between Susan and the diplomat husband whose career she has finally ruined—there is nowhere left to go. Susan walks away from the marital home into futurelessness. The longed-for reunion with Lazar, her wartime lover, whose cufflinks she has carried during the film's two decades, occurs in the stereotypical English setting of a seedy and desolate seaside hotel. Lazar declares his own emptiness: "I gave in. Always. All along the line. Suburb. Wife. Hell. I work for a corporate bureaucracy as well. I hate the life that we lead." This encounter seals the film's litany of disappointments—failed sex, unattainable familialism, exhausted narratives, compromised and thwarted desires, disabling nostalgia, an irretrievable past. As Susan drifts into marijuana-induced oblivion, Lazar leaves the hotel, and the screen dissolves into a sunlit French hillside in 1944. A youthful Susan exults in the day of Liberation: "But things will quickly change. We've grown up. We will improve our world. There will be days and days and days like this."

What can we make of this story of failed hopes, where politics is replaced by a not very likable personal narrative—of restlessness, failed intimacy, emotional containment, mental instability, privatized withdrawal, social privilege, and aimlessness?³³ In realist terms, this is a story of one woman's not very coherent protest against postwar normalizing. Removed from other contexts (Susan's earlier and wider biography, family attachments, organized public life beyond the civil service, other

there are girls today who mourn Englishmen who died in Dachau. Who died naked in Dachau. Men with whom they'd spent a single night."

³² Early in their relationship, in the late 1940s, when Raymond is commuting from Brussels to see Susan at weekends, she challenges him impatiently: "Don't creep around the furniture—look at me and make a judgement."

³³ After returning from the war, Susan works in a shipping office and moves socially in her new friend Alice's bohemian milieu ("living very foolishly, a loose set in Pimlico," as Raymond later calls it), preserving her independence against the relationship with Raymond (with its requirements of moving to Brussels, settling down, marriage). She later moves from a civil service job (planning the coronation festivities) into advertising, from resurgent traditionalism to commercialized triviality. The sterilities of public and professional life are matched by the protracted and demeaning failure to conceive a child, in a practical contract with Mick, a peripheral and working-class member of Alice's bohemian set. In an act of desperation, precipitated by Mick's unwanted attentions (pressing for a genuine relationship), Susan fires her Special Operations pistol. While convalescing from a subsequent breakdown, she marries Raymond, who loyally reappeared. The film moves from Susan's agency and independence (the experience in occupied France, the early postwar optimism), through the frustrations and developing emptiness of peacetime normalization, to the "safety" offered by Raymond. The story is carried by two further breakdowns, one at the dinner party during the Suez Crisis, the other when Susan leaves the marriage. The film moves between 1943 and 1962.

contexts of politics), it appears as narcissism and mental illness, as each of the men in Susan's peacetime life in fact concludes.³⁴ And for David Hare, "people do go clinically mad if what they believe bears no relation to how they actually live," so that Susan's acting-out ("I have a weakness—I like to lose control," she confesses to Lazar at the film's end) becomes "the cost of living an honest life in a corrupt system."³⁵ In this dimension, the film is an attack on postwar restoration, the ability of the English establishment to regroup, its power to thwart dissent and stifle change. The arrival of the new "plenty"—economic reconstruction, capitalist prosperity, consumer largesse—is counterposed to the survival of the old politics, divested of honor (via the "fraud" of Suez), and defended with cynical self-assurance. As such, *Plenty* belongs in a long line of cultural criticism, now identified with the British New Left but beginning with the scattershot posture of John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* and Colin Wilson's book *The Outsider* (both first appearing in May 1956).³⁶

In *these* terms, the film suggests an agenda for the history of the postwar imaginary. This essay has focused on the exhaustion of an earlier national-popular mythology of World War II, whose leftist versions passed into crisis in the 1960s, before being aggressively dismantled by Thatcherism.³⁷ Hare was writing for theater, television, and cinema explicitly from inside this moment: "We are living through a great, groaning, yawling festival of change—but because this is England it is not always seen on the streets. In my view it is seen in the extraordinary intensity of people's personal despair, and it is to the despair that as a historical writer I choose to address myself time and again."³⁸ In this register of disillusioned retrospection, British playwrights, filmmakers, artists, and cultural critics generated a rich discourse around the postwar era, often mirroring earlier debates of the 1950s. Television drama focused much of this critical culture, ranging across the twentieth century more broadly for its repertoire in the work of Trevor Griffiths, Ken Loach, Dennis Potter, and others.³⁹ One use of *Plenty* and similar retrospec-

³⁴ Within the protocols of middle-class decorum, Susan's behavior is only named in the succeeding crises, by Mick in the confrontation before the shooting, by Leonard Darwin during the Suez dinner party ("Mental illness is it? Your wife?"), by Sir Andrew Charleson (Raymond's Foreign Office superior), and by Raymond himself, threatening Susan with committal immediately before she leaves the marriage. For her friend Alice, on the other hand, Susan's behavior is "psychiatric cabaret."

³⁵ Hornden, *Plays of David Hare*, 71, 113. The first quotation is Hare's, the second Hornden's gloss.

³⁶ See the excellent discussion in Robert Hewison, *In Anger: British Culture in the Cold War, 1945–60* (Oxford, 1981), 127 and following.

³⁷ For the concept of the "national-popular," originating in the thought of Antonio Gramsci, see David Forgacs, "National-Popular: Genealogy of a Concept," in *Formations of Nation and People* (London, 1984), 83–98.

³⁸ David Hare, "A Lecture," King's College, Cambridge, March 3, 1978, in Hare, *Licking Hitler* (London, 1978), 67.

³⁹ Trevor Griffiths was best known originally for his plays, *The Party* (1973), *Comedians* (1975), and the eleven-part Thames TV drama about a left-wing Labour MP, "Bill Brand" (Michael Lindsay-Hogg and others—Roland Joffé and Stuart Burge, 1976). He was also screenwriter for *Reds* (Warren Beatty, 1981). From the mid-1970s, he began writing mainly for television, including "Country: A Tory Story" (Richard Eyre, 1980), "Oi for England" (Tony Smith, 1982), "The Last Place on Earth" (Ferdinand Fairfax, 1985), and "Fatherland" (Ken Loach, 1986). See Trevor Griffiths, *Collected Plays for Television* (London, 1988), and *Judgement over the Dead: The Screenplay of "The Last Place on Earth"* (London, 1986). Ken Loach worked originally in television, directing "Up the Junction" (BBC1, 1965) and "Cathy Come Home" (BBC1, 1966), before making his first cinema releases, *Poor Cow* (1967), *Kes* (1969), and *Family Life* (1971). He continued directing for television, including the four-play cycle on the 1926 General Strike, "Days of Hope" (BBC1, 1975). His films include *Looks and Smiles* (1981), *Hidden*

tives, therefore, might be to take them as an incitement to begin crafting new social and cultural histories of the complex realizations, failures, and transmutations of 1945's original hopes.

Plenty is positioned midway between the angry radicalisms of the 1960s, which demanded a resumption of the commitment to change compromised after the war, and the new defeats of the 1980s, when Thatcherism harnessed popular discontents for a project of right-wing modernization. But what becomes harder to recuperate from the later vantage point of the new post-Thatcherist present (and the commemorative nostalgia of 1995, where this essay began) is the extraordinary optimism of 1945 in the idealist release of the Liberation ("There will be days and days and days like this"). Yet here is Dennis Potter, otherwise the most acerbic of critics of the complacencies of postwar British political culture in the 1950s and 1960s:

we were, at that time, both a brave and a steadfast people, and we shared an aim, a condition, a political aspiration if you like, which was shown immediately in the 1945 General Election, and then one of the great governments of British history—those five, six years of creating what is now being so brutally and wantonly and callously dismantled was actually a period to be proud of, and I'm proud of it.⁴⁰

Reentering the modalities of this optimism, and exploring its trajectories between the 1940s and 1960s, requires more than simply totting up the findings of opinion surveys and the patterns of election returns, however essential for judging the character of popular expectations.⁴¹ For, in many respects, such hopes attained utopian proportions, reimagining the nation via an insistent sentimentality of "fair shares" and "everyone pulling together." During the war years themselves and the immediate postwar period (say, 1942 to 1947), research might examine a series of discursive motifs—powerful dimensions of wartime languages of the future, generalized expectations of a new beginning, personal longings for a "normal" life, the Beveridge-driven imagery of unprecedented social security ("from cradle to grave"), and idealized egalitarian projections of national unity. In the 1950s, this collectivist momentum was elided into more conservative forms of patriotism, which increasingly assimilated the war to militarism, empire, monarchy, and British

Agenda (1990), *Riff Raff* (1993), *Raining Stones* (1993), *Ladybird, Ladybird* (1994), *Land and Freedom* (1995), *Carla's Song* (1996), and *My Name Is Joe* (1998). In "Fatherland," Loach directed a Griffiths screenplay. Dennis Potter wrote forty plays for television between 1965 and 1994, establishing his reputation with "Stand Up, Nigel Barton" and "Vote, Vote, Vote for Nigel Barton" (both Gareth Davies, BBC1, 1965). Without directly addressing World War II, many of his works concern questions of history and memory between the 1930s and 1960s, especially the six-part series "Pennies from Heaven" (Piers Haggard, BBC1, 1978); "Blue Remembered Hills" (Brian Gibson, BBC1, 1979); "Blade on the Feather" (Richard Loncraine, LWT, 1980); the six-part "Singing Detective" (Jon Amiel, BBC1, 1986); "Christabel" (Adrian Shergold, BBC2, 1988); and the six-part "Lipstick on Your Collar" (Renny Rye, Channel 4, 1993). In general, see George W. Brandt, ed., *British Television Drama in the 1980s* (Cambridge, 1993); and John Tulloch, *Television Drama: Agency, Audience and Myth* (London, 1990), esp. 91–165.

⁴⁰ Dennis Potter, *Seeing the Blossom: Two Interviews and a Lecture* (London, 1994), 9. In his drama, Potter never explores this optimism of 1945 per se. If his initial critical success excoriated the hollowness of postwar progress (the Nigel Barton plays), his three major works of the Thatcher era treated the Depression ("Pennies from Heaven"), the generalized postwar period ("Singing Detective"), and the Suez Crisis ("Lipstick on Your Collar") respectively.

⁴¹ See especially Fielding, Thompson, and Tiratsoo, "England Arise!"

traditions, flattening into the complacencies attacked so vociferously in the 1960s. In its transition from stage to screen (1978–1985), Hare's *Plenty* subtly registers that cultural shift, substituting the event of the 1953 coronation for the 1951 Festival of Britain as the scene of Susan Traherne's incipient breakdown, from which Raymond rescues her for the establishment.⁴² In the process, the film removed an earlier space of contradiction originally present in the play, between the Festival of Britain's imagining of a modern and democratic Britain different from the Britain of tradition and the smugly returning traditionalism, which the coronation then reaffirmed.⁴³

We need ways of exploring these gaps between hegemonic stabilities and the desires they contain—between the resilient and limiting frame of the postwar consensus actually fashioned during the 1950s and the more open possibilities preceding it in the “people's war” and its promise of reconstruction.⁴⁴ My final example concerns a remarkable documentary made by Humphrey Jennings for the Crown Film Unit of the Ministry of Information, *A Diary for Timothy* (1945). The diary of this film's title is a collage of Britain's future presented to a baby born on the fifth anniversary of the war's beginning (September 3, 1944), which blends a record of his first six months with the hopes and experiences of four (male) citizens, namely, a fighter pilot, a coal miner, a farmer, and an engine driver.⁴⁵ The Britain assembled by Jennings for this purpose is an artful unity of countryside and town, farming and industry, the sounds of production and the sounds of song, images of

⁴² In the original play, Susan is working for the Festival of Britain in 1951 when she “contracts” with Mick to conceive a child. The failure of the experiment over a period of eighteen months combines with the emptiness of Susan's new work in advertising to precipitate a breakdown, through which she eventually marries Raymond. In the film, the coronation is substituted, and the scene moves from 1951–1952 to 1953–1954.

⁴³ The coronation supplied the material for a classic sociological debate on the coordinates of the postwar consensus in Britain, namely, Edward Shils and Michael Young, “The Meaning of the Coronation,” *Sociological Review*, new ser., 1 (1953): 63–81; and Norman Birnbaum, “Monarchies and Sociologists: A Reply to Professor Shils and Mr. Young,” *Sociological Review*, new ser., 3 (1955): 5–23. See also Nairn, *Enchanted Glass*, 115–23; and Annette Kuhn's discussion in “A Meeting of Two Queens,” in *Family Secrets*, 59–83. By contrast, the Festival of Britain, effectively a celebration of the social democratic modernity envisaged by the postwar Labour government, vanished from popular memory during the 1950s, an erasure assisted by Conservative dismantlement of the exhibition sites after 1951. See Becky Conekin, “‘Here is the Modern World Itself’: The Festival of Britain's Representations of the Future,” in Conekin, Mort, and Waters, *Moments of Modernity*, 228–46.

⁴⁴ In the meantime, see Sonya O. Rose, “Sex, Citizenship, and the Nation in World War II Britain,” *AHR* 103 (October 1998): 1147–76; Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman*; Kuhn, *Family Secrets*; Conekin, Mort, and Waters, *Moments of Modernity*; Jim Fyrth, ed., *Labour's High Noon: The Government and the Economy 1945–51* (London, 1993); Fyrth, ed., *Labour's Promised Land? Culture and Society in Labour Britain 1945–51* (London, 1995); Kirkham and Thoms, *War Culture*; Ronald Fraser, *In Search of a Past: The Manor House, Amnersfield, 1933–1945* (London, 1984).

⁴⁵ Humphrey Jennings (1907–50) came from a family involved in the Arts and Crafts Movement and was educated as a classicist and historian, before publishing poetry and joining the surrealists. He helped organize the International Surrealist Exhibition (1936) and co-founded Mass Observation with anthropologist Tom Harrisson, poet Charles Madge, and others (1937). His most important pre-war film was *Spare Time* (1939), which showed workers as producers of culture away from the job, using the steel, coal, and cotton industries. His best-known films during the war were *Listen to Britain* (1942), *Fires Were Started* (1943), and *The Silent Village* (1944). The first was a documentary evocation of the nation at war, the second a fictionalized presentation of the Auxiliary Fire Service during the Blitz, the third a reconstruction of the massacre at the village of Lidice, in the Czech Republic. See Mary-Lou Jennings, ed., *Humphrey Jennings: Film-Maker, Painter, Poet* (London, 1982); Kevin Jackson, ed., *The Humphrey Jennings Film Reader* (Manchester, 1993); Anthony Hodgkinson and Rodney E. Sheratsky, *Humphrey Jennings: More Than a Maker of Films* (Hanover, N.H., 1982).

progressive modernity (industry, science and technology, inventiveness and ingenuity) and affirmations of tradition (Christian rituals and the family hearth), conveying both the solemnities of the present (fighting a long, hard, and victorious war) and the hopes of the future. The structure and commentary of the film are predictably gendered and subtly infused with class distinctions. But they also bespeak the aspiring egalitarianism of so much of the wartime mobilization. As Michael Eaton observes: "The ruins of the present reveal the possibility of a new, more equitable, and democratic society in the postwar world."⁴⁶

A huge amount more could be said. For example, Jennings's career opens a window onto the populism of the British progressive intelligentsia during the war (E. M. Forster penned the film's commentary), which as a broad-gauged socio-cultural history still remains to be written.⁴⁷ Intertextually, a reading of *Plenty* could link back through *Diary for Timothy* to the earlier *Peace and Plenty* (Ivor Montagu, 1939), which was commissioned by the Communist Party of Great Britain during its Popular Front campaign against the government of Neville Chamberlain, with the upcoming elections of 1940 in mind. "For Peace and Plenty" was the slogan of the CPGB's Fifteenth Congress (September 16–19, 1938), held while the Munich Crisis was at its height.⁴⁸

Jennings's film studiously avoids political and other biographical specificities. For example, the miner Geronwy Jones (who died in 1973 of "miners' lungs") was a lifelong Communist, formed in the militancy of the South Wales coalfield, where *Peace and Plenty* would have been shown; his miner son-in-law Ray was decorated by the Soviet Union for serving on Arctic convoys during the war.⁴⁹ The "gentleman" farmer Alan Bloom became an eminent horticulturalist and steam-engine preservationist after the war (developing new plant hybrids and founding the Bressingham Steam Engine Museum), later joining the Quakers and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. These and the other two biographies—Peter Roper (the fighter pilot) is a psychiatrist in Montreal, Bill (the train driver) was untraceable in 1995—contained rich potentials hidden inevitably offscreen. But through these actual futures, *Diary for Timothy* suggests complex links to the postwar period, offering other trajectories besides *Plenty's* narrative of exhaustion and despair, sometimes converging with the latter, at other times describing a more ambivalent space. Timothy himself made an emblematic journey through the 1960s—leaving school at sixteen to work as an insurance clerk, joining a rock band, fighting with Mods against Rockers—before training as a teacher (1971). At fifty, he was working

⁴⁶ Michael Eaton, "Humphrey Jennings (1907–1950)," in Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, ed., *The Oxford History of World Cinema* (Oxford, 1996), 329.

⁴⁷ For another suggestive film-related point of entry, see A. L. Kennedy, *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (London, 1997), a brilliant discussion of the Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger film (1943). See also Kevin Macdonald, *Emeric Pressburger: The Life and Death of a Screenwriter* (London, 1994), 204–28. Penelope Houston, *Went the Day Well?* (London, 1992), underutilizes the opportunities presented by another wartime film (directed by Alberto Cavalcanti, 1942).

⁴⁸ See Bert Hogenkamp, *Deadly Parallels: Film and the Left in Britain 1929–39* (London, 1986), 192–214; and Paul Marris, "Politics and 'Independent' Film in the Decade of Defeat," in Don Macpherson, ed., *Traditions of Independence: British Cinema in the Thirties* (London, 1980), 70–95.

⁴⁹ As a result of the Cold War, such medals could not be displayed in official ceremonies, including the annual Remembrance Day marches. This and other details are taken from Hugh Purcell, "Glory Traps," *New Statesman and Society* (May 12, 1995): 19–23, which revisits the subjects of *Diary for Timothy* in a fascinating exercise of "where are they now?"

in a middle school north of London, struggling with inadequate resources, overgrown classes, a bureaucratized curriculum, an aggressive student culture, and declining social supports. The traditional family values of 1944–1945 were gone. High rates of divorce and single-parent households made one contrast. Dechristianization was another: “Ten years ago, a film was made about [Timothy] and the most depressing scene, to me, was of Timothy and his small children wandering round a Luton shopping precinct at Christmas with Muzak carols on the tannoy and Space Wars on the computer screens. This was intercut with Jennings’ version of Timothy’s first Christmas.”⁵⁰ Timothy’s grandfather was a vicar, and in the late 1960s he considered ordination. Now neither of his children was baptized.

Analyses like these can link postwar cultures of reconstruction through the complexities of wartime to the mobilized anger of the pre-war society. By integrating stories of adult citizenship resonant with this larger history, *Diary for Timothy*’s central device uses the image of the new baby without making childhood into the only available model for imagining a future. In fact, Jennings’s film makes the postwar world into a project, whose making will require agency, an ethics of participation, and an implicit politics. “What are you going to do?” the commentary asks the baby Timothy: “Will it be a world of greed, unemployment and then another war, or will you make the world a more decent place? You will have the power to choose, the right to criticize, so life in a way will be more dangerous. You will have the difficulty of growing up free. What’s going to happen during the next few years when you are here and we are not?”

Of course, while childhood figures so easily in our contemporary politics as a trope of sentimentalized optimism, in incitements to nostalgia and appeals to innocence, a place where political values can be unproblematically secured, actual childhoods are the scene of painful difficulty and ambivalence. They are the source of complicated histories, which can be fashioned into coherence only with costs and incompleteness. Childhoods are made not only through discovery of the world and the entry into experience but also via hurt, longing, and loss. Through the gravity of the wartime setting, and by using adult lives grounded not only in patriotism but also in hardships and struggle (the preceding miseries of Depression, as well as the sacrifices of the war), *Diary for Timothy* manages to capture something of this ambivalence. Some recent films placed in the war, such as *Another Time, Another Place*, or *The English Patient*, show similar understanding, using the settings of death, damage, and justified conflict for stories of escape, trauma, the working through of loss, and possible liberations.

Annette Kuhn, addressing another film of the early postwar years, *Mandy* (Alexander Mackendrick, 1952), the story of a young girl’s struggle out of deafness, comments beautifully on this ambivalence: “[Thinking with this film autobiographically] shows me, a child of Mandy’s generation, how possibility and loss are written into the world my generation inherited; how they are written into our very expectations, as children coming to consciousness with the traces present all around us of a war we did not live through—traces in our physical surroundings, in our parents’ talk, in so many aspects of our daily lives.”⁵¹ Kuhn brilliantly engages the

⁵⁰ Purcell, “Glory Traps,” 23.

⁵¹ Kuhn, *Family Secrets*, 38.

subject of my essay, using a form of archive—films, photographs, imaginative representations, autobiography—that historians commonly approach with suspicion. She also cites a famous photograph of St. Paul's Cathedral during the Blitz in December 1940 (“a keystone in British popular memory of the ‘People's War’”), whose emotional immediacy continues to exceed the skepticism of the intervening historiographical judgments. As she writes, this photograph manages “to speak to me—to interpellate me—in a very particular way,” irrespective of “my considered opinion of the Second World War as a moment of unprecedented national unity in my country.”⁵² In the unexpectedness of this encounter between history's public appropriations and their personal resonance, the complex workings of memory and its archive, both collective and personal, explicit and unconscious, can create openings where the historian's more conventional practices might not.

Where does this leave my opening reflections? In the British context, on the evidence of recent filmmaking, one particular representational archive of World War II is now largely gone. This is partly a matter of content, of the particular past that gets to be staged. Where U.S. filmmakers are still drawn to military spectacles, such as *Saving Private Ryan*, *The Thin Red Line*, and now the latest restaging of Pearl Harbor promised by Jerry Bruckheimer and directed by Michael Bay, British directors prefer “human stories” where the war's fighting, military strategy, and explicit politics sink back into the *mise en scène*, as in *The English Patient* or most recently Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair* (Neil Jordan, 1999); no less spectacular in their way, using the exotic landscapes of the Italian campaign and the empire's global geography or the dark atmospherics of London under aerial siege, these narratives are uncoupled from World War II's historical specifics.⁵³ This shift allows other kinds of stories to be told.

What I have argued is that the larger script of British history in the second half of the twentieth century is being rewritten, in a process that began in the 1960s, became radicalized through the polarized cultural politics of the following two decades, and continued in the profoundly changed contexts of the 1990s. In the process, World War II's previously foundational importance for popular memory became repositioned, whether in the formal languages of national politics and public institutions, in the aesthetic productions of the arts and popular culture, in the private realms of nostalgia and fantasy, or in all the other manifold forms through which assumptions and images about the national past circulate through public culture and everyday life. The complexities of this contemporary history have many more dimensions than my brief discussion can suggest. But film offers a valuable starting point in three ways.

It provides a screen for contemporary anxieties and dilemmas, where particular representations and representational repertoires are also specifically produced and shaped: in common with the arts and cultural production more generally, film is

⁵² Kuhn, *Family Secrets*, 106.

⁵³ Another especially poignant illustration of this difference might be the U.S. undersea action drama *U-571* (Jonathan Mostow, 2000), which not only stages another tale of martial heroics but does so by stealing a specifically British exploit. The Enigma coding machine seized by the U.S. submarine in question was actually captured by the Royal Navy six months before the United States entered the war. For an astute commentary on this minor imbroglio, see the editorial, “Villains of History,” in *Sight and Sound* 10 (July 2000): 3.

both the bearer of its own histories and a bridge to wider societal analysis. Likewise, it affords access to change across time: by close formal and symptomatic readings of the kind I have presented, carefully contextualized via the appropriate historical and historiographical analyses for both cinema and society, key shifts in social, cultural, and political history can be exposed. Finally, the questions assembled by means of these historically contextualized close readings can then be taken back to the periods and themes addressed, in this case World War II and its legacies. In providing access to popular memory in these ways, film (both made at the time and since) can be an invaluable resource—not as a straightforward reflection or literal reconstruction of events but as an imaginative incitement to argument and thought.

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During World War II this was where military convoys left for the front. Soldiers bade goodbye to their friends and loved ones in the square in front of the station. On June 26, 1941, four days after the German army attacked the USSR, Belorussky Station hosted the first performance of the song "Svyashennaya voyna" (Holy war), which became an anthem for the Soviet people. Lyrics to the song in both English and Russian can be found [here](#). During the war Mayakovskaya, like other stations of the Moscow Metro, was used as a bomb shelter. Moreover, on November 6, 1941 it was here that Soviet leader Joseph Stalin said the words "Moscow will stand, the Soviet people will not be broken!" This speech was broadcast by radio to the whole country. When asked to remember World War II, Americans report numerous events, but the majority of people report the attack on Pearl Harbor, D-Day and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Credit: Three Lions/Getty Images. Advertisement. The time was turbulent, from the First Opium War (a defeat by the British) through many other defeats and unfavorable treaties in which Chinese people were dominated by the Japanese, French and English. Although the century was declared over in 1949 when the People's Republic of China was established, the Chinese remember the sting of those times and still interpret modern events through them. These collective memories can be about facts or about interpretations, as in the remembrance of the embassy bombing.