

# British Cinema – The Very Short Introductions Podcast – Ep 61

**Rebecca Parker** 00:07

Welcome back to the Very Short Introductions Podcast. From public health to Buddhist ethics, soft matter to classics, and art history to globalization, we'll showcase a concise and original introduction to a wide range of subjects, for wherever your curiosity may take you. So here is today's very short introduction.

**Charles Barr** 00:26

Hello, my name is Charles Barr. I'm a retired professor of film studies. My career has been spent mainly in England at the University of East Anglia, but I also taught for a few years overseas in the Irish Republic and in America, and that kind of experience is important, because it gives you a fresh angle on your own country and culture, and in this case, your own cinema, which is the topic of my book, *British Cinema: A Very Short Introduction*. In the past, I've written books about Alfred Hitchcock and about Ealing Studios. Most people in Britain and beyond would recognize those names, even though Ealing's last films were made in the late 1950s and Hitchcock's in the mid 70s. A situation can still be referred to as being as tense as a Hitchcock thriller, as lovably eccentric as an Ealing comedy.

**Charles Barr** 01:17

Ealing is unmistakably British, part of British culture and history. Hitchcock, on the other hand, is best known now as a Hollywood director for films he made there in the 1940s like *Rebecca*, the 1950s like *Vertigo*, the 1960s like *Psycho* and *The Birds*. And people even in Britain wouldn't be aware that he was a Londoner. Hitchcock didn't go to Hollywood til he was 40, after making more than 20 films in England, of which the best known are probably the political thrillers, *The 39 Steps* and *The Lady Vanishes*. Hitchcock was formed in British cinema. And he's just as much a part of its history as Ealing is; the history of the 20s and 30s, just as Ealing is of the 40s and 50s. Both Hitchcock and Ealing demand a place within any survey of British cinema--how do they fit in?--and they certainly get a place in my book.

**Charles Barr** 02:13

It's probably true of any of these Very Short Introductions that they can only offer to provide a framework for understanding the topic, and it's certainly true of this one. I tried to provide a critical framework, a conceptual framework, and a historical framework. First, the critical for which I go back to my own roots again. I began to engage with cinema in the 1960s. It was no kind of academic subject yet. There were very few books written about films. But there was an explosion of interest and excitement about the medium, which laid the foundation for all the academic and scholarly apparatus that we have now. This excitement in Britain, as elsewhere, was focused mainly on the riches of Hollywood cinema past and present. And on new cinema from Europe, especially Sweden, Italy, and France. British cinema was pretty much universally seen as far inferior, with a few bright spots illuminating a dreary landscape.

**Charles Barr** 03:16

The major document of the time was a book-length interview with Alfred Hitchcock, conducted by the French critic and filmmaker Francois Truffaut, a glamorous leading member of the celebrated French New Wave. At one point, he suggested to Hitchcock that there was a certain incompatibility between Britain and cinema; it just wasn't as central to the culture of Britain, or as expressive as it was in other countries. Hitchcock went along with this, and so did many others, me included. For one thing, it was hard in those days to get access to the range of old films that might have helped to change this view. Few films were then shown on television and, of course, we had no DVDs and no streaming. Incidentally, that Hitchcock interview book with Truffaut has stayed in print ever since and very influential.

**Charles Barr 04:05**

As time went by, I started to see more films, and to get more interested in British cinema, and so did many others. But that very strong hostility from the formative years took a long time to dispel and residues from it still persist. It's important to understand this as part of the history. British cinema has had a persistent struggle to establish itself critically, just as it has economically. Which brings me to the historical framework. In the book, I suggest a very tentative pattern of ups and downs in the prestige and achievements of British film production throughout the 20th century, decade by decade, the 20th century, the century of cinema. There are many brilliant British technical innovators in the early years of the century. But they were swept aside in the 1910s by the entrepreneurial dynamism of American production. The Americans established a ruthless economic control over British cinemas.

**Charles Barr 05:05**

From then on, British filmmakers would struggle to resist this by creating their own distinctive forms of cinema with varying success. The 1920s a promising with the early films of Hitchcock and the foundation of the documentary film movement, a very British development, but the 1930s, despite Hitchcock and despite documentary, are down period. This is the decade of what's been termed "the Hollywood British film," the film based on British history or literature or drama but made in Hollywood, with better production values and higher audience appeal, even in Britain, than the native rivals could manage. Films like *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, and versions of Dickens and Shakespeare, and the early World War II film, *Mrs. Miniver*, centered on a British family withstanding the Blitz but shot entirely in Hollywood. But by the time of *Mrs. Miniver* in 1942, British cinema was itself starting to become a purposeful part of the war effort, with a kind of central support under Churchill that it had not had before.

**Charles Barr 06:13**

And the 1940s is, indisputably, British cinema's finest decade. Dickens was taken back from Hollywood to Britain; Shakespeare was taken back, among a range of films now seen as classics, made by a golden generation of filmmakers like David Lean, Carol Reed, and the partnership of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. Hollywood Oscars may be crude as an indication of merit, but they do serve as a marker of international visibility and prestige. And it is a fact that British films have mainly been honored, historically, in alternate decades: the 1940s, the 1960s, and the 1980s, starting with *Chariots of Fire*, decades when interesting things were happening in British society and politics, and cinema engaged vigorously with these developments. Finally, the conceptual framework. What do we mean by British. As of the 1920s, this is an increasingly urgent issue and British cinema has often engaged with

it in eloquent ways through, what we could term, the genre of "the Northern," setting the English against the Scottish, or Yorkshire or Lancashire events and environments. More radically, what do we mean by cinema? For Hitchcock in the 1930s, for Ealing in the 40s and 50s, for me and others starting to engage with cinema in the 60s, it was films shown in cinema buildings, films shot and projected on celluloid film.

**Charles Barr 07:47**

Now, that format is almost obsolete. Is it still cinema? We have access to a mass of new films and old films on Blu Ray, and on streaming ,as well as occasionally in cinemas. But there are strong continuities between old films and new as I touch on in the book. And the very ease with which we can now access films past and present allows us to understand those continuities, and to appreciate the ways in which British films have engaged so eloquently through Hitchcock, and Ealing, and others with their historical moment over the decades. So, finally, I hope that has at least sparked your interest in British cinema and its history, and there's no doubt that there's a huge amount of scholarly material, much of it very readable, that helps you to follow, in much more detail, the account that I've given over the decades. There's books about British cinema of every decade from the 20s through to the 90s. Good luck to you in starting to explore that or at least starting to explore some of the riches of British film production.

**Rebecca Parker 09:03**

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