‘Whatever people say I am…’: Multiple voices on screen and page in Saturday Night and Sunday Morning.

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The British New Wave in cinema, which ran from 1958 to 1962, was built around the adaptation of a number of literary texts that derived their ‘newness’ by vocalising working-class protagonists, hitherto largely suppressed in popular visions of British society. As a knock-on-effect, British screen culture refreshed, suffering as it did from the same level of under-representation that blighted literature. In a wider context, the films’ freshness and vigour can also be seen to be identified in a new approach to film style and aesthetics which had more in common with the European art cinema than the staid traditions of British filmmaking. The likes of Tony Richardson (*Look Back in Anger* [1959], *The Entertainer* [1960], *A Taste of Honey* [1961] *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* [1962]), Karel Reisz (*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* [1960]) and Lindsay Anderson (*This Sporting Life* [1963]) were key figures in the Free Cinema movement, a banner under which a series of films focussing on British working-class life and rejecting the aesthetic orthodoxies of mainstream representation were united. Moreover, the aforementioned directors (particularly Anderson) were heavily involved in a critical re-appraisal of British cinema, deriding its middle-class pre-occupations and inconspicuous aesthetic programmes. Such criticisms were fuelled by a passion for more expressive world cinemas [1]. Duly, the New Wave films eschewed conventional modes of address in favour of open-ended, episodic narratives, central characters bereft of clear goals, persistent forays into subjectivity, and highly poetic *mise-en-scène* composition –
all characteristics which chimed with the self-consciously artistic post-war films movements of France and Italy [2].

These characteristics countered the tradition of efficient and understated, but largely faceless film authorship in British cinema, propelling the *voice* of the director into focus. However, while it is easy to attribute the concepts of auteurism to the French New Wave (which in the large part rejected adaptation), the British New Wave’s grounding in literature complicates matters somewhat. Indeed, on this basis critics of the British films argue vociferously against an appraisal of the works in the light of their more esteemed continental counterparts:

[...] the idea of a New Wave involved putting film first and not subordinating it to literature or theatre [...]. The The Angry Young Men films, however, plainly put film second. Their success was directly derived from the success of the original plays and novels [...] The film versions [...] clearly depended on the preprublicity [sic] and acclaim already generated by their literary sources for their initial impact. (Wollen 37)

Peter Wollen’s attack on the New Wave is typical of a reductive trend in British film criticism to denigrate the films by comparing them to the more feted and celebrated achievements of the likes of Godard and Truffaut. Wollen is correct to imply that the commercial successes of source material created the market conditions for the New Wave
to emerge, but unlike France, the British film industry’s free-market complexion meant that the creation of a British art cinema saw pragmatism and good fortune as more substantial factors than ideological conviction. However, the implication that adaptation provides an insurmountable barrier to predominant, personal artistic expression must be challenged if we are to celebrate this valuable and profound arm of national culture. Such an engagement reveals that the British New Wave films were not money-grabbing dilutions of ‘proven successes in other media’, but complex symbiotic convergences of literature and film. (Durgnat 129)

Parallel Voices

Alan Sillitoe’s 1957 novel, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, was made into the most successful of the New Wave films in 1960, under the direction of Karel Reisz with Albert Finney in the starring role as the promiscuous and uncompromising Nottingham factory worker Arthur Seaton. Harry Saltzman, who headed up the ‘Woodfall’ production company which was responsible for many of the New Wave films, had seen limited success for the Tony Richardson anchored *Look Back in Anger* and *The Entertainer*, and as a result, money was scarce. While his instinct suggested the hiring of an established screenwriter for *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* the financial situation dictated that the cheapest option, Sillitoe himself, would have to do (Walker 80). This is perhaps another example of the way in which fortuitous circumstances rather than artistic conviction characterised the inception of the New Wave, but in observing the journey from novel to film it is clear that the often uncomfortable collaboration of Reisz and
Sillitoe produces a fascinating narrative in itself, regardless of the circumstances of their union.

The novel is given an immediate potency by the author’s invigorating use of free-indirect discourse, which firmly places Arthur’s brash and relentless stream of consciousness at the centre of the narrative. As such there is, on the surface at least, a foregrounding of the character as the dominant textual voice; by extension, enveloping Sillitoe’s within it:

“Because it was no use saving your money year after year. A mug’s game, since the value of it got less and less and in any case you never knew when the yanks were going to do something daft like dropping the H-bomb on Moscow. And if they did then you could say ta-ta to everybody, burn your football coupons and betting-slips, and ring up Billy Graham. If you believe in God, which I don’t, he said to himself.” (Sillitoe 21)

The relentlessness of the dialogue and the unchecked passion of its content are facilitated by the initial lack of a conspicuous authorial mark to rein in its delivery; with the concessionary ‘he said to himself’ being the only explicit barrier to first person address. Ian Haywood goes further:

The narrative is told almost entirely from his point of view, and the use of free indirect speech means that the story is dominated by Arthur’s
vernacular voice (in the film version a voiceover was used to create a similar effect). (Haywood 102)

The implication that a similar dominance of the protagonist’s voice occurs in the screen adaptation leads us towards a comparative approach to the film. Indeed, the initial impression, like in the novel, sees stylistic and narrative devices subordinated towards a heightened emphasis on Arthur.

As the opening scene begins in Arthur’s place of work, a gentle pan across the factory floor finds him at his lathe which he begins to operate. A cut to his hands at the wheel immediately coincides with the start of Johnny Dankworth’s score; thus at this juncture the movement to Arthur’s point-of-view is given added subjective impact by the tacit sense in which his actions determine the aural and visual palate of the film. Three more shots show Arthur’s hand at the lathe before we hear his voice-over: “Nine-hundred-and-fifty-four”, this precipitates a close-shot of him in profile, before a return to the subjectively-motivated hand composition and another snap of dialogue: “Nine-hundred-and-fifty-bloody-five”. Reisz then cuts to a medium-shot of Arthur exchanging dialogue and taking his wages from his boss. While the exchange takes place, another line of voice-over is heard: “Another few more and that’s the lot for a Friday”. What is interesting here is that despite the interplay between objective and subjective visual compositions, the aural features remain firmly aligned with Arthur. As he converses with his boss we do not hear the dialogue, only Arthur’s non-diegetic voice, along with the atmospheric sound of the factory and the score (which from its introduction has been
connected to Arthur). This aural subjectivity is heightened by the time Arthur’s point-of-view gaze casts itself around other characters in the factory, with Arthur surveying his co-worker, Jack, in conversation with their superior: “Yes Mr. Robboe, no Mr. Robboe, I’ll do it as soon as I can Mr. Robboe”. Soon after, Arthur’s perspective is altered slightly as Robboe himself comes to prominence in the frame, and once more we hear the protagonist’s commentary on the exchange: “And look where it got Robboe, a fat gut and lots of worry”. Here the dominance of Arthur’s voice - both directly and in the more subtle form of his perspective – extends to literally vocalise his subjects, firmly establishing Arthur as the central narrative agent within the film. Similar patterns of sound and image continue as the scene concludes, tellingly, with Arthur uttering a conclusive line of voice-over dialogue: “What I’m out for is a good time, all the rest is propaganda.” This coincides with a final point-of-view shot, seeing him throwing down his towel at the lathe. As he does so, a solitary drum beat sounds, once more affirming the extent to which stylistic choices in the scene are dictated by the protagonist’s actions.

This sequence is evidence of the parallel Haywood identifies between the free indirect discourse of the novel, enacted by Sillitoe, and Reisz’s use of subjective mechanisms in the film. However, in the shots that immediately follow the opening scene, the solidity of this assertion is compromised. As the titles emerge, themselves a direct reminder of artifice, we see an aerial perspective outside the factory as the workers spill out. The following shot brings us in line with the workers as they run towards the frame, we then return to the aerial position, before we finally see Arthur as he pulls his bike out of the shed along with his co-workers. The sequence finishes with a tracking shot in which
Arthur leads a mass of his colleagues while they ride away from the factory. Arthur’s centrality in the final two shots ensures that we are left in no doubt as to his position within the narrative, yet the altered register from the first to the second sequence holds great significance for the question of ‘voice’ and authorship in the film. The predominance of aerial crowd shots, represents a stripping away of the subjective layers that were added with such force and momentum in the factory. A new sense of distance - both physical and in terms of the camera’s relation to Arthur – complicates our initial perception of the protagonist’s dominance, and in so doing subtly asserts the voice of the director in its place.

This represents the beginning of the interplay between a delivery of narrative built directly around Arthur’s exchanges with other characters, and the more distanced and less-functional compositions that re-affirm a separate, authorial register. One such example can be found following a philosophical exchange between Arthur and his cousin Bert (Norman Rossington). Rather than cutting to another scene to build upon the previous one, or to continue the loose flow of narration, Reisz cuts to an extremely high static long take (eight seconds) of rows of houses with the factory in the distance. The sustained nature of the image, and its effect on the rhythm of the scenes that it punctuates invites the viewer to search for meaning that is separate from the mere delivery of Arthur’s story. As John Hill writes: ‘[…] the look of the camera is not merely anonymous but also ‘authored’, the look from the ‘outside’ is rendered ‘visible’’ (Hill 134). Here, the anonymity of the observer’s gaze through a subordination of style towards Arthur’s voice, is markedly counteracted, as the author (in this case Reisz) underlines a separate
presence. This leaves us pondering the role of Sillitoe. Certainly, Haywood’s comments on the seamless transferral from page to screen of the author’s free indirect discourse, can be countered by this example of cinematic authorship. Interestingly, Haywood goes further in his discussion of Sillitoe’s apparently sustained vocalisation of Arthur:

‘There is no privileging of Standard English, which helps to reduce the damaging gap between the cultural position of the author and that of the characters.’ (Sillitoe 102)

This suggestion that the foregrounding of an authorial presence has a ‘damaging’ effect on the working-class subject will be considered later. While Sillitoe’s voice in the novel is not represented by an explicit shift in linguistic register, it is palpable in the same manner that Reisz’s poetic punctuations are on film:

“Rain and sunshine, rain and sunshine, with a blue sky now on the following Sunday, and full clouds drifting like an aerial continent of milk-white mountains above the summit of Castle Roc, a crowned brownstone shaggy lion-head slouching its big snout out of the city, poised as if to gobble uncouth suburbs hemmed in by an elbow of the turgid Trent.

(Sillitoe 60)

The language here is pointedly figurative, with metaphor and simile fostering a distanced poetic gaze at the urban space that is distinct from the more internalised commentary that
emanates from Sillitoe’s vocalisation of Arthur in the novel. While the rapid rhythm of
the delivery and the muscular tone of the imagery chime with the depiction of Arthur that
we have come to know, the absence of his voice is conspicuous. Moreover, the
heightened physical perspective that the passage indicates – a sense of looking over at the
city below – underlines the notion of a marked distance from Arthur. While the
disjunction here is not as crude as ‘Standard English’ vs free indirect colloquial speech,
there is a clear poetic authorial presence which counters the dominance of character,
suggesting the presence of separate voices and a tangible ‘gap’ between author and
subject. Stanley Atherton is adamant that this figurative dimension in Sillitoe’s work can
be justified in relation to a default ‘realist’ position:

[...] for Sillitoe symbolic levels of meaning are unimportant in
themselves, and should function ideally only in combination with the
realistic elements of a story to reinforce the social message being
presented. (Atherton 48)

Yet here, ‘the realistic elements of a story’ – and by extension, Arthur’s voice – are not
integrated. The kind of narrativised symbolism to which Atherton is referring can be
identified in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*:

The fact that Brenda did not seem very pained about him going away, and
the wide blue sky of a summer evening, found no response in him, made
him feel empty at the landscape’s colours and folds.’ (Sillitoe 118)
A lyrical register is evoked entirely in conjunction with a sustained focus on Arthur’s internal voice; yet in the earlier passage there is no such connection. A more fertile parallel is found by returning to the aforementioned long-take in the film. Here we see a clear affirmation of an authorial voice, erecting a poetic impulse that runs in contrast to the steady progression of narrative. These kinds of compositions are common in the screen version, perhaps most significantly in the moments after Arthur’s beating at the hands of two soldiers when Reisz cuts to a 10-second static take of the Nottingham skyline, before a closer (but still high-angled) 8-second take of Arthur’s street. Eighteen seconds provides an ample length for the attribution of figurative meaning: indeed, it demands it. Interestingly, in the novel this sense of an artist looking down upon his subjects is enacted in a similar vein, albeit at a different point in the narrative:

‘July, August, and summer skies lay over the city, above rows of houses in the western suburbs, backyards burned by the sun with running tar-sores whose antiseptic smell blended with that of dustbins overdue for emptying, drying paint even drier on front doors, rusting knockers and letterboxes, and withering smoke from factory chimneys coiled blackly’

(Sillitoe 110)

Here we get a clear sense of observation: of the author as a distinct agent looking upon his environment. Just as Reisz’s long takes intimate a sense of a conspicuous authorial force, so too Sillitoe’s reflective tone maintains an explicit disjunction between place and
character. With the comparison between these literary and filmic motifs in mind, Haywood’s fears of ‘a damaging gap between the cultural position of the author and that of the characters’ (Haywood 102) seem realised. Naturally, critics of the New Wave in film have also identified the potentially shaky ideological ground that this aspiration towards a ‘poetic realism’ engenders:

The spectator of the ‘kitchen sink’ film is in a privileged position, privy both to the interior monologue of the figure in the city, and to the master-shot, the all-embracing view of the city from the outside. This position of visual mastery is also a position of class authority […] (Higson 151)

To follow this logic, Andrew Higson’s criticisms are equally applicable to the narrative patterns enacted by Sillitoe, in that the readers of the novel (like the spectators of the film) enjoy a dual perspective in the form of the authorial voice and the character’s subjective voice. Yet the comparison becomes unstable when we consider Higson’s comments about ‘class authority.’ He later writes:

The distance in That Long Shot, between the vantage point of the spectator and the city as the object of the gaze, is at the same time a representation of the distance between the classes. (Higson 155)

A contributing factor in Higson’s evocation of class politics is undoubtedly the knowledge that the New Wave directors were all, to varying degrees, of a higher social
position than the characters they observed through their films. Thus, the foregrounding of a marked distance between ‘observer’ and ‘observed’ cannot fail to be underpinned by questions of ideology. Yet by highlighting the parallel sense of ‘distance’ in the novel through recourse to an analysis of authorial voices across the two texts, we can, in the case of Saturday Night and Sunday Morning, move to destabilise this reductive critical position. While Sillitoe may have penned the novel under an orange tree in Majorca [3] his voice is as authentic as they come, being born into abject poverty the like of which is barely hinted at in the comparatively affluent lifestyles of Arthur Seaton and his acquaintances (Atherton 25). Charges of class-superiority are far less sustainable when levelled at Sillitoe rather than Reisz, and in identifying the manner in which Reisz parallels Sillitoe’s poetic gaze, we can show that such an overly sociological reading of style has its limitations.

Therefore, in identifying a shared approach to environment and character across the two forms of Saturday Night and Sunday Morning, we can identify how the filmic form gave new life to the literary precedent. Yet, one might argue that it is still possible to level the accusation that the New Wave films simply represented faceless adaptations of their rich source material, in that in this case the director simply replicates the figurative approach of the writer, meaning that the authorial voices exist as Sillitoe the novelist, and Sillitoe the screenwriter. However, in highlighting the similarities between the narrative function of the poetic register across the two media, it is crucial to maintain a sense of the fundamental differences which also exist. Consider the manner in which Sillitoe’s poetic
voice as writer actively, and almost didactically, shapes the metaphorical significance of the space for the reader:

[…] a crowned brownstone shaggy lion-head slouching its big snout out of the city, poised as if to gobble uncouth suburbs hemmed in by an elbow of the turgid Trent. (Sillitoe 60)

In stark contrast, the far less involved and consciously distanced static long-take in cinema seems empowering for the viewer, presenting a sustained image which invites us to ascribe our own meaning rather than providing us with a ready-made symbolic system. Thus, while the self-conscious authorial voice is similarly used to counter the narration in literature and film, the vastly different reading strategies that each medium encourages make reception a wholly distinct endeavour. This dynamic underlines the fundamental importance of the exchange between writer and director in the New Wave: confirming the sense in which the symbiosis of authorial voices transcends reductive discourses of commercial adaptation.

Points of Departure

It is short sighted to suggest that this balance is without compromise and some consternation. Alexander Walker’s take on Saturday Night and Sunday Morning’s adaptation process, gleaned from interviews with both Sillitoe and Reisz, underlines the
tensions of the collaboration through a discussion of the ending, in which Arthur with his girlfriend, Doreen, alongside him, hurls a stone at a new housing estate:

‘There has been controversy over the meaning of this ending. An earlier screenplay ended with the marriage, done with a good deal of laconic humour. […] The ‘stone throwing’ new ending is held by Sillitoe to be ‘just Round One’ and his rather bitter reference at the time we spoke in 1972, to ‘the bloody Tory Government and then the Labour people’ makes one think that he saw Arthur Seaton’s settling down into placid consumer society as only a temporary lapse from militancy which would revive when things got economically tougher. (Walker 85)

From this two things are clear: one, that the conclusion was by no means arrived at with ease, and two, that Sillitoe’s hopes for it were more markedly political than the eventual reality. This notion is supported by Reisz’s alternate reading:

The stone-throwing is a symbol of his impotence, a self-conscious bit, telling the audience over the character’s shoulder what I think of him. I wanted to continually contrast the extent to which he is an aggressor with the extent to which he is a victim of this world. I wanted the end to have this feeling of frustration.’ (Walker 85)
These differing accounts are highly significant in that they serve to further emphasise the interplay that exists between two artists, and perhaps more tellingly, the manner in which the authorial voice of the director is, in this scene at least, more palpable. Indeed, Reisz’s admission of self-consciousness serves to highlight the extent to which auteur-driven cinema is capable of critiquing an apparently dominant narrative agent, in a manner in which Sillitoe’s free-indirect discourse cannot.

The sense of the film as an ambiguous (and often subtly critical) portrait of an individual, once more resonates with the notion of the New Wave films as sharing characteristics with the European art cinema. Here, what David Bordwell in his work on the art cinema conventions calls ‘the biography of an individual’, can be applied to Reisz’s complex approach to Seaton (Bordwell 95). However, again it is possible to evoke the authorial voice of Sillitoe within this dynamic. In writing the screenplay, the author clearly struggled: ‘I had to read the novel twenty times and ended up hating it, and the script took about nine months and four or five drafts.’ Interestingly, he told Walker that the biggest frustration was ‘cutting things out’ (Walker 81). Indeed, the main cosmetic difference between the novel and the film are the absence of auxiliary characters, such as Winnie (Brenda’s sister, with whom Arthur also has an affair), Sam (a Black sailor who stays with Arthur’s family), and Fred (Arthur’s elder brother). While we have acknowledged the dominance of Arthur’s narrative voice in the novel, the presence of these characters goes someway to keeping his primacy in check, and providing a wider social context to his behaviour. To this end, at one point Sillitoe extends his vocalisation of Arthur to Fred:
'Fred was always amazed at the way a fight started; a defective machine was set in motion and you knew it was going to break itself up unless you ran to the switch and stopped it. But at such moments he became too interested in the movement towards destruction, and the machine turned into a twisted mass of nuts and bolts on the floor.’ (88)

Here, Fred watches Arthur in a fight and the temporary subjective shift provides the reader with an alternative perspective to judge Arthur’s actions. In the film, no such role exists: Fred’s character is enveloped into the two-dimensional Bert, Arthur’s cousin, who provides little more than light-relief and the narrative function of providing a visible sounding board for the protagonist’s soliloquies. Thus, in navigating the adaptation process, Sillitoe is forced to cull numerous aspects of his novel in the pursuit of efficiency. Chief among the casualties is a narrative criticism of Arthur, a role that (as we have seen) he is forced to cede to the film author, Reisz, who enacts it in a wholly different manner. In one sense, this silencing of Sillitoe’s voice can be viewed as negative, particularly as it seems to lessen the social scope of the narrative. Yet in the context of British cinema, the increased centrality of the protagonist is able to insulate the film from the dangerous potential to emblematisethe working-class figure, an affliction of previous attempts at working-class representation in the more wide-ranging propagandist cinema of wartime. Instead, the markedly individuated figure of Arthur is dominant, and his deployment within a more liberated narrative and aesthetic framework opens the film up to new potentials. In this sense, Sillitoe almost inadvertently engages with Reisz in a further exchange. As a result, the sharper focus on Arthur generates
another presence within the multiplicity of voices that catalyses the movement from page to screen: Albert Finney. Sillitoe’s own views on the casting were characteristically blunt:

‘He wasn’t my idea of Arthur,’ […] ‘My Arthur was taller and thinner in the face and the whole film should have been rougher, more brutal, to match him.’

(Walker 82-83)

The implication that Finney’s involvement in the film distorted Sillitoe’s vision is fundamental to questions of authorship within adaptation. For Sillitoe, the hypothetical Arthur that he envisaged would have replicated the more coarse tone of the novel. Again we can again see how Sillitoe’s loss was the film’s gain, and how the multiplicity of creative voices within the screen text adds texture and afterlife to its constitution.

In his review of the film for *Sight and Sound*, Peter John Dyer firmly emphasises what he perceives to be the benefits of adaptation, suggesting that Reisz: ‘[…] gathered together all that is of value in Sillitoe’s novel and discarded the excesses […]’ (Dyer 33). While we have shown that this kind of dismissal of Sillitoe’s role is unfair, what is most significant is the manner in which Dyer describes the protagonist:

Reisz never loses his judgement of pace, whether accelerating with Finney’s anger or defiance or come-uppance, in street, pub and whirling
around Goose Fair; or decelerating in the love scenes and along the river bank. (Dyer 33)

It is ‘Finney’s anger’, not Arthur Seaton’s that is identified and celebrated. This meta-textual observation underlines the manner in which the discourse of cinematic spectacle infringes on the purity of the literary text. Adaptation opens up the relatively closed parameters of the novel, proliferating visual signifiers that demand interpretation on multiple levels. In this sense, Finney’s expansive cinematic voice challenges the textual rigidity of Seaton’s, (and by extension, Sillitoe’s). Although it may be the author’s words he speaks, Finney’s performance and his existence outside the bounds of the text comprehensively undermines the stability of the authorial presence:

We are interested in Arthur Seaton not because he is a worker but because he comes in the form of Albert Finney. The crowds turned up in their thousands because they had been told that at last there was a British actor who had not yet emasculated his personality in acting school and who knew that to convey reality you had to be far from ordinary. British cinema had made it most powerful statement about the working class by discovering a new kind of hero. (Stead 195)

Peter Stead’s assessment of Finney’s impact is useful for what it reveals about the popularising quality of the cinematic spectacle in contrast to the novel. We can again see how the suppression of Sillitoe’s voice – this time in favour of Finney’s star persona –
has the effect of strengthening the film’s position within the context of British cinema. In centralising the character of Seaton, the film creates the space in which Finney, with all his unique regional authenticity, is able to strike a blow against the middle-class hegemony of the British dramatic tradition, just as the film deviates from formal and aesthetic traditions identifiable with a conservative mainstream address.

Thus we can add the ‘voice’ of Finney to the multiple and interchanging manifestations of authorship which lie at the heart of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. Indeed, this sense of an organic exchange of ‘voices’ is what distinguishes the New Wave adaptations. We can identify a convergence between committed writers and equally committed directors who emerge from differing social and artistic backgrounds, combined with an acceptance that the protagonist - and to some degree the social environment – possess their own rich paths of meaning. In this sense, the subject and more broadly the notion of the subjective, the observer and the observed, and the author and the auteur combine, sometimes purposefully and sometimes accidentally, to develop rich filmic texts which offer much more than a mere simplification of their literary origin. The criticisms levelled by Peter Wollen originate because there is no attempt to engage with these symbiotic voices. An appreciation of their conflation is critical to a full understanding of the British New Wave.

Notes


[2] For a fuller account of the conventions of art cinema, see Bordwell, David *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985)
[3] Having been discharged from the Air Force on a disability pension Sillitoe devoted his time to writing. In 1952 he and his wife, Ruth Fainlight, moved to the continent where the pair took on occasional work, during this period Sillitoe conceived *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning.*

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