



While architecture is the most expensive art form, the cinema runs it a close second. Before the mid-1950s, feature film production was a heavy industry, carried out in factory-like studios with massive capitalisation and a high degree of specialisation of labour. The idea that an ordinary person could make a feature film from his own financial resources would have been absurd. Since that time, however, technological changes, such as the dramatic improvement of 16mm (narrow-gauge) film stocks and cameras, have enabled the proliferation of low-budget film production independent of the major studios. The lowest-budget sector of them all is what is known as “guerrilla” film-making, where one or two or a handful of individuals accumulate their financial resources, perhaps aided by outside investment, seek out the free or greatly discounted use of equipment and facilities, get cast and crew to work for deferred payments, “profit-shares” or extremely low wages, and use free locations rather than expensive film studios. With their minuscule budgets, the film-makers produce their epics, often under highly adverse circumstances. Their problems really begin when they try and distribute them.

In the United States, guerrilla film-making has for a number of fortunate film-makers provided a route into a successful Hollywood career. Sam Rami, director of the horror film *The Evil Dead* (US, 1979), Spike Lee, director of the comedy *She's Gotta Have It* (US, 1986), Robert Rodriguez, director of the thriller *El Mariachi* (US/Mexico, 1989) and Ken Smith, director of the comedy *Clerks* (US, 1996), all made a critical and financial success of their debut films and went on to become major Hollywood directors. Needless to say, for every success story such as these, there are hundreds of American guerrilla films which get no further than their producer's cupboard shelf, or, at most, a couple of screenings in obscure film festivals. But this does not stop others from trying. Film teacher Dov Simens, head of the Hollywood Film Institute, travels the world to teach a Two Day Film School which is aimed at giving everybody the information they need to produce an ultra-low budget feature film. I attended Simens' course under the auspices of Raindance, a London organisation which teaches various aspects of independent film-making and runs an annual festival of independent films from around the world. Simens is a witty and entertaining teacher, and by the end of the first day I was inspired by the possibility of making a full-length film for a few thousand dollars. On the second day, however, he described the problems of distribution faced by an ultra-low-budget film with no stars, which, quite frankly, tended to put me off the idea altogether.

### IT HAPPENED HERE

Nevertheless, others in Britain have not been deterred so easily. What was probably the first guerrilla film to be produced in Bri-

tain was *It Happened Here* (UK, 1964), directed by Kevin Brownlow and Andrew Mollo, which describes what might have happened if Britain had been occupied by the Nazis during the Second World War. It is a grim, utterly compelling study of occupation and collaboration which easily beats most Hollywood and Continental war films in its authenticity and depth. In the film, an apolitical Irish nurse moves from the countryside, where German forces are conducting anti-partisan operations against the British resistance, to London. There, she has to join a black-uniformed fascist collaborationist organisation in order to get work. This places her in conflict with her friends, a doctor and his wife, who are part of the resistance movement and are eventually arrested by the Gestapo. The fascists send her to a country hospital, where she unknowingly gives fatal doses of poison to Polish workers suffering from tuberculosis. When she realises what she has done, she protests, and is arrested and taken away by train. Partisans, assisted by American forces which have just landed, attack the train and capture the nurse, who tends to their wounded. In the final scene, British members of the Waffen SS surrender, and are massacred in cold blood by their partisan captors.

It took Brownlow and Mollo eight years to complete *It Happened Here*, and a great deal of trouble. Brownlow, as a young film editor, conceived the idea in 1956 and wrote the script. Mollo, a military history buff, frequently travelled to Germany to bring back the original Second World War uniforms and weapons worn in the film. They even obtained the use of a real Panzer tank for the scene of German troops fighting partisans. Brownlow's account of the making of the film<sup>1</sup> describes the perils of low-budget film production. While on location in Bermondsey, for example, a group of children attempted to disrupt the shoot; an actor in period police uniform pretended to be a police officer and got rid of them. When two actors in Nazi uniforms with replica sub-machine guns arrived at a country hotel, the manager called the police and had them arrested.

The film's authenticity extended to the recruitment of actual neo-Nazis to play leaders of the fascist collaborationist organisation. In a six-minute scene, these individuals sit around a table expressing their actual opinions about politics, National Socialism, Jews and euthanasia. So shocking were these views that the Board of Deputies of British Jews demanded that the scene be cut from the original release print, which the distributors agreed to, against the wishes of the directors. (The scene was restored to the video release, and is reproduced as an appendix to Brownlow's book.) Although the film must be counted as a classic of 1960s British cinema, and was shown at the London Palladium and other up-market venues, Brownlow and Mollo received no money whatsoever from it, the distributor claiming that their share was eaten up by “expenses”. Nor have their directorial careers gained much from it, although Brownlow has since become Britain's leading film historian and restorer of lost classics such as *Napoléon* (France, 1927), directed by Abel Gance, and Mollo has written a number of books about historical military uniforms.

### NOOKS AND CRANNIES OF SOCIETY

Nevertheless, in recent years the number of people in Britain who have taken the guerrilla film-making route has dramatically increased. They have been the subject of two books, neither of which really inspires about the prospects for “no-budget” British films. Lucy Johnson has edited a collection of interviews by Graham Jones with a variety of film-makers who have gone down the guerrilla path, and who have plenty of war stories to tell.<sup>2</sup> For instance, Daniel Figuero describes the problems he faced making *A Fistful of Fingers* (unreleased), a no-budget Spaghetti Western filmed in Somerset:

The thing that almost killed me was when, on the night before we were going to start shooting, the guy supplying us with the camera pulled out. Six hours before we were about to shoot we didn't have a camera! The next morning we lost about three hours going off to hire a camera. In the end we got a very good deal which saved the day. There was another time when a location fell through, and I ran into a telephone box with a fistful of ten pence pieces trying to ring round to bor-

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row anyone's flat. In the end I managed to convince the upstairs neighbour of one of the lead actresses, who was, it turned out, confined to his bedroom with a terrible cold. We shot the scene around sneezes coming from his bedroom.

You become a major hustler doing this type of filming. You've got to be a wheeler-dealer. You've got to adapt to whatever's happening. I hope to do big-budget films one day — it'll be a luxury.<sup>2</sup>

Chris Jones and Genevieve Jolliffe have written *The Guerilla Film Makers Handbook* [sic], which is a guide for would-be no-budget producers, based partly on their own experiences producing *The Runner* and *White Angel*, warning of the pitfalls and emphasising the fact that such productions always lose money in Britain, as distinct from almost always in the US.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, such a film can assist in developing a career in film production. At its best, it can also draw attention to nooks and crannies of society not usually seen on cinema or television screens.

### THE ILLEGAL DRUG CULTURE

One of the most remarkable changes to have occurred in Britain over the past decade has been the dramatic increase in the prevalence and social acceptability of illegal drugs of all kinds. Once confined to such circles as students, creative artists and musicians, drugs are now commonplace in environments ranging from impoverished council estates to Knightsbridge drawing rooms. A year or so ago, the high society magazine *Tatler* published a guide to illegal drugs that aroused no more controversy than its guides to Soho restaurants or Chelsea boutiques. It is estimated that two million people across Britain take some form of illegal drug every weekend.<sup>4</sup> The novelist Michael Moorcock writes that:

Most of us nowadays know casual, non-dependent users of drugs who are pillars of the community: public-sector professionals, journalists, lawyers, captains of industry. The backbone of the country, like the successful judges and executives of major corporations who go home in the evening and relax with a spliff, a Perrier and CNN. In other words, drugs have become middle-class, and about as threatening to society as Mickey Mouse.<sup>5</sup>

The film *Trainspotting* (UK, 1996), directed by Danny Boyle, candidly portrayed the drugs culture in Scotland. A new film, *Underground* (UK, 1998), written and directed by Paul Spurrier, which has just received its première at the Raindance Film Festival, surpasses *Trainspotting* with an even more powerful study of the drug scene in London. Spurrier, formerly a well-known child actor who now makes corporate videos, and the film's producer, Chris Leeson, have taken the guerrilla film-making route in order to finance and produce this low-budget, high-energy gem of a feature debut. Spurrier also worked as cinematographer, camera operator and editor. He disdained the use of tripods in order to give an authentic, documentary-like atmosphere to the film, which was shot on 16mm colour stock. *Underground* was screened at the Metro Cinema, London, in 1998, and is scheduled for video release in the spring of 1999. It promises to become a cult film for the drug and rave generation of British youth.

The lead character, Rat (Billy Smith), is a teenager who lives in a squalid council flat with his sister, and sells illegal drugs to a variety of customers, ranging from young clubbers to wealthy property developers. He takes his wares to a rave in a club named *Underground*, which is run by a bald-headed villain called Raymond, who is portrayed with menace and panache by Nick Sutton. The habitués of *Underground* include a girl named Skye (Zoe Smale), one of Rat's customers, to whom he is romantically attracted, as well as a gang of computer thieves, also friends of Rat, who are planning a job later that evening.

A girl to whom Rat sells some pills collapses, unconscious and severely ill, after consuming them. Raymond and his three henchmen, who include the silent but sadistic Animal (George McAllister), close the rave and disappear with their money, furious that Rat has encroached on their territory. They resolve to locate and kill him. The tension mounts to a fever pitch of intensity during the rest of the film as they pursue their prey across the night-time

city. This pursuit takes place across a variety of superbly-chosen locations, from a middle-aged dealer's flat, where a drug-induced orgy is in progress, to the lair of the computer thieves dismantling their loot, through the streets of London to a final confrontation in an Underground railway tunnel.

### ENERGY, FLAIR AND AUTHENTICITY

The film must be judged a success on practically all counts. The cast, all of whom are unknowns except for Ian Dury as Rat's father and Chrissie Cotterill as his mother, bring to life the vivid characters, painted with broad strokes, of Spurrier's screenplay. The larger-than-life crooks, with their witty dialogue, are especially fresh and convincing, and Spurrier thankfully spares us the usual cinematic underworld clichés. Instead of driving a car or motorcycle, Rat rides a bicycle. Instead of jewel or car thieves, we see computer thieves. This is a crime thriller in which the police are absent. One shortcoming in the script is that the lead character is not fully developed into a three-dimensional personality. He exhibits a narrow self-interestedness and indifference to the fate of others which alienates a great deal of audience sympathy. The performance of some of the actors in minor parts also leaves scope for improvement. Having said that, the story has enough twists and pace to sustain the audience's attention from the first scene to the last. It conforms to a broad interpretation of the three unities — time, place and action — which Aristotle recognised as the essence of good drama. The action of the film occurs during a single night, in a single city and in accordance with a single idea.

What is particularly striking is the effective combination of the cinematic arts in order to produce a verisimilitude lacking from many larger-budget films. The co-ordination of acting, lighting, locations, editing, music and sound creates in the viewer a vivid experience of the brash milieu which the film depicts, which is at the same time suspenseful and visually stylish. Spurrier is not afraid to mix cinematic styles or defy the conventions of editing technique. The opening sequence is a montage of scenes of "tourist's London", which look like moving postcard photographs. These scenes sharply contrast with the darkness and stylised colour of the underworld through which the villains pursue Rat. Sequences of rapidly moving crowds and traffic are clearly inspired by *Koyannisquatski* (US, 1983), directed by Godfrey Reggio. In the evocative orgy scene, Rat is given drugs by a middle-aged hippie whose slow, hypnotic voice describing the pleasures of intoxication speaks in rhythm with the dissolves between shots of writhing, naked, garishly-lit bodies.

Occasionally one can accuse the director of going too far in this respect. In the scene in which Rat discusses Raymond's threat to kill him with the computer thieves, the camera moves rapidly from one talking head to the other without cuts. That is to say, the viewer sees the face of the first speaker, then a rapid move across the intervening space towards the second speaker, then a jerk towards the third, back to the second, and so on. This method was used briefly and effectively for the first time in *Tuez sur le pianiste* (France, 1960), directed by François Truffaut. Here, however, it outstays its welcome and induces a combination of eye-strain and irritation in the viewer.

But these are minor quibbles. *Underground* resonates with energy, flair and authenticity. It combines the pace of the best Hollywood thrillers with a peculiarly British wit, verve and atmosphere. As a cinematic work, as a manifestation of youth culture, as a snapshot of a nation increasingly dependent on mind-altering illegal drugs, it should be seen by everybody who is interested in Britain at the end of the twentieth century.

### NOTES

1. Kevin Brownlow, *How It Happened Here*, Cinema 1/Secker and Warburg, London, 1967.
2. Graham Jones (interviewer) and Lucy Johnson (editor), *Talking Pictures*, British Film Institute, London 1997, p. 14.
3. Chris Jones and Genevieve Jolliffe, *The Guerilla Film Makers Handbook*, Cassell, London, 1996.
4. *Time Out*, 21st-28th October, 1998, p. 14.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 16.