Room at the Top

Paddy Whannel

'There's very little doubt it's going to be the smart thing to admire the film version of John Braine's novel 'Room At The Top' ——Charles MacLaren, Time and Tide

IT was as much a criticism of the novel as of the film, that Lucky Jim on the screen was so easily drained of social reality. The film was nothing much more than a mediocre Ealing Studio comedy.

As Gabriel Pearson pointed out in his review of Room At The Top (U.L.R. Summer 1957), Joe Lampton, although a similar sort of hero, lives out his problems, instead of commenting on them. The judgment on working-class Dufton, on the world of the Borough Treasurer's Department (with its crawl for promotion and its acceptance that in local government you can't crawl very far), and on middle-class Warnley, are embodied in acts which are also stages in the hero's personal degeneration. They are not, as they were in Lucky Jim, social criticism external to the hero, which the film maker was then at liberty to regard as expendable.

In its frankness before physical love, its willingness to explore social experiences representative of the post war period, and its refusal to smooth away all ambiguities of motive and character shaped by social forces—this film is far ahead of anything produced by the British cinema, certainly since the war. In many respects, it is superior to the book, in which the attractions of the inhabitants of the Top—apart from the "Riviera tan" and the "Aston Martin"—were not clearly enough established. In the novel Alice has a maturity absent in her friends of the local Dramatic Society, but not ultimately a radically different set of values. In the film, on the other hand, Alice emerges as a rich and positive character.

Although interesting script changes play their part, the importance here of the actress's performance must be conceded. With a superbly controlled economy of gesture and expression (for example, her last scene in the pub where she stands looking at herself in the mirror) Simone Signoret conveys both Alice's resigned acceptance of her role in the enclosed bourgeois society and her need for a more enhancing contact with life at the deeper levels of experience. Once these responses are touched off in her relationship with Joe she slowly relinquishes control over her sophisticated defences, only to meet with betrayal and disillusionment.

A performance of emotional depth and intelligence, the direction and scripting—even the fact that the actress is French—add a significant social layer to the film. Signoret's performance makes her French background perfectly acceptable within the Yorkshire framework of the story. Joe looks with envy at the society of the Browns—the easy manners, the relaxed young men in sports cars, the big house with the swimming pool ("it's like a castle")—but bitterly resents its snobbery and arrogance. Only in part is this resentment rooted in ambition; it is also that he can measure the shallowness of "the Top" against the honest responses of working-class life in Dufton. But, when his aunt and uncle plead with him not to "sell out for brass" and to "stick to his own folk", he must reject this as "old fashioned nonsense" just as he rejects the class consciousness of the Browns. In this conflict between two sets of attitudes, Alice represents not only a more cosmopolitan order, but a wider way of life, based on an extension of the virtues that are deep in Joe's character and life. "Only be honest with yourself, Joe" is her insistent plea. It is on this that she builds, and his failure is inevitably her tragedy.

One of the essential weaknesses of the film is that these virtues in Joe are never given their proper expression. Laurence Harvey tries hard, indeed he tries too hard, and ultimately fails. He is carried along in a number of scenes by the power of Signoret, but this only has the effect of overbalancing the film, so that it tends to become her tragedy and not a mutual one. Harvey successfully suggests Joe's aggressiveness towards Jack Wales and the smart members of the Dramatic Society; what he fails to do is to bring to life on the screen the inner uncertainties and tensions which are part of the complex of feelings that one associates with Joe Lampton's sort of "classlessness". It is right that, when Joe mis-pronounces a word and his audience laughs, he should say, "I'm working class, and proud of it". But where is the uncertainty which would naturally follow an outburst of that kind? These kinds of depths are missing from Harvey's performance. And here, his physical appearance is a hindrance. He brings to the role too many of the smooth assurances of the people into whose world he is trying to break.

The scenes where Joe returns to Dufton are too tentative, and the working-class conservatism of his uncle and aunt is seen more as a sentimental attachment to the past than as a possible growing point for the future. In his first encounter with Susan he is given an inappropriate assurance, and it is particularly in his relationship with Susan and to a lesser extent with Jack Wales, that the weakness in characterisation is revealed.

The same is true of the presentation of Susan herself. Joe grades his women, and the grades take account of social position. When he embraces a woman he feels not only her body but also her expensiveness, and Susan's youthful beauty must be a beauty that comes not merely from youth, but from continental holidays and the right style of living. She must embody some of the values of the sports car. Heather Sears succeeds only in suggesting a rather silly and immature young woman.

So too with Jack Wales. The social distinctions reflected in the antagonism between Joe and Wales are blurred because the latter is seen only as an arrogant oaf. The same sort of failure is to be found in the way George Aisgill is presented. The frustrations the intelligent Alice must have felt with the drab world of business and the
dated smartness of the Drama Group are minimised by turning her husband into a calculating philanderer.

The principal weaknesses in the central characters are, therefore, less in themselves than in their relationships with others, and these weaknesses are not simply failures of characterisation, but represent a faltering before social issues.

This ultimate refusal to push through with the film's own logic is seen also in the treatment of the urban environment. Perhaps the best passages in John Braine's novel were the descriptions of Joe's reactions to places and things. The town, with its outward symbols of status graded upwards to the big houses at 'Top: the lounge with the grand piano, and the clean tiled bathroom which impressed Joe because it had been built as a bathroom. In the film these things tend to be spoken about, they are not presented visually, which is to say, we are not made to feel them in the way a working-class boy coming into a middle-class environment feels deeply the difference in the quality of life almost as much through the quality of things as in the attitude of people. Where the town is shown, as in the dog-racing sequence, we see it over the shoulders of the characters. One is grateful, of course, for that amount of the "other England" on the screen, but there is a difference between seeing the environment as a background, and feeling it as an all-present shaping force on people. If only some of the significance given to the rooms in "The Tokyo Story" had been given to the houses and streets of Warnley. Of course, to point the comparison with Ozu's masterpiece makes us realise how far "Room At The Top" falls short, but that it is possible to compare at all is a recognition of the level at which the film deserves to be treated.

Character in Context

In one striking sequence, indeed, the director has been daring enough to capture something of the significance of place—because it is daring that is required, daring to resist the conventions of pace in editing and the pressures to "keep the plot on the move." After Joe's final break with Alice, she is shown drinking in the pub. The camera holds her while she stares in the mirror, and then leaves unsteadily. We hear her car drive away. The next shot shows Joe, in the morning, crossing the street. It holds him as he enters the Town Hall, and the camera follows him as he walks down its bare corridors past a few odd groups of typists and officials. This is one of those sequences of "character-in-context" which are so rare in British films. Here the physical setting is more than background—it is used, and adds to the meaning of the film. As much as the last words of the barman in the pub, the appearance of the open town square, filled with people on their way to work, with the town clock striking nine, followed by the long walk through this gaunt, cold municipal building hints at the tragedy that has taken place, and the events that are to follow. Another striking sequence is that in which Joe, confronted by Brown's offer in the Conservative Club that he should marry Susan and go into the business, allows his hand to move round the stem of the wine glass: the moment of indecisive silence is broken by the faint sound of a tramcar. As such points in the film, Clayton's direction is completely assured. This is particularly so in his handling of the quarrel between Joe and Alice, in which the dialogue comes over with an attack and directness unique in a British film. But in many other sequences, his feel for place and setting is not firm enough, and the pace not sufficiently varied. This is particularly so in his direction of the scenes where Joe returns to Duffton: and this is an important failure, because the Duffton background is as important as Warnley in understanding the character of Joe.

After the death of Alice the film somehow loses its grip, and Joe's meeting with Mavis, a grotesque caricature, and his subsequent beating-up is played out in a no-man's land, almost a dream world, in which the physical setting is conventional and so vague as to be insubstantial, peopled with stereotyped thugs. Here the film is almost swamped by the conventional weaknesses of the British cinema as a whole. Harvey is slow, and almost mannered: the working-class characters are stock-types, and overdone: the direction tends to fall into melodramatic clichés. (This is a point, interestingly enough, where the novel is particularly good—spare, but effective and moving.) As a result, the social issues of the film are thrown out of focus, and the irony of Mavis's boy-friend saying to Joe, "I know your kind, with your money, coming in here thinking you can buy everything," is all but lost.

The film picks up again with the final wedding scene, but in the concluding images falters before its own irony—(the novel does, too)—which demands the savagery of a Von Stroheim. The contrast between Joe's apparent success and his real failures are never sufficiently dramatised. They are turned inwards, and remain unexpressed, like the tears in his eyes as the Jaguar drives the couple away over "the Top."

There are other minor blemishes in the film. The middle sequences are episodic, the clerks at the Town Hall seem too far from social stress. Here there are perhaps too many familiar faces. Hermione Baddeley as Elspeth may prove a barrier to many audiences. But the scene where she throws curses at Joe for his treatment of Alice is explosive. Nevertheless, Room At The Top is a film of real strength. I shall not easily forget Alice walking away down the dark street giving, without turning, a tired, disillusioned and self-pitying wave of the hand.

With Look Back In Anger soon to be seen, and the possibility of screen versions of The Entertainer, Live Like Pigs and Taste of Honey to follow, Room At The Top may herald that revival of the British cinema from such unlikely sources as the stage and the novel. For this reason alone, it deserves all the support it can honestly be given.

The Critics

In view of that, it is disheartening to find that—with some notable exceptions—the critics failed to discover for themselves or their readers the genuine strengths of the film. They appeared, in fact, to be so unwilling or unable to respond to the film or its material as, in many instances, to misinterpret the film—even at the level of its plot! Thus Elizabeth Frank (News Chronicle):

"Room At The Top throws a strange spotlight upon the extra-marital amours of the rich and powerful business tycoons of the North."

In fact, the film does not throw a "strange spotlight" on any such thing. The one case where is is implied—Alice's husband—is almost incidental to what the film is about. The really rich and powerful—the Browns—are locked in the tightest of upper-middle-class marriage arrangements.
Miss Nancy Spain, the well-known film critic of the Daily Express wrote:
"Alice is shattered. She drives her car over a cliff. The wretched Joe learns too late that in the eyes of his neighbours he may have committed moral murder."
The whole point of Joe's tragedy and the implied criticism of his society is that he will not be blamed. The script makes this quite explicit. (It is almost the most important moral statement in the novel too.)

"No one will blame you, Joe," says Soames. To which Joe replies, "That's just the trouble."

This is not just a case of not hearing the words spoken. It is a conscious or unconscious unwillingness to face up to the moral judgments and social criticisms which lie at the heart of this film, and which make it a film of substance about this society.

Peter Burnup wrote in the News of the World:
"Our hero breaks the bad news to his mistress who has found a fleeting content in the shabby affair. She suddenly realises he is craven. 'You murderous fancy man,' she cries. And filled with remorse and drink she crashes herself to death down a cliffside.'

It is difficult to understand how anyone could be so unmoved by Simone Signoret's performance as to describe her involvement with Joe as giving her a "fleeting content." "Fleeting content" and "the shabby affair" are phrases which drain these sequences in the film of any depth and feeling. In the terms which the film establishes, the relationship is a genuine fulfilment for both Joe and Alice. It is the only point at which Joe is able to "be himself"—stripped of his ambitions and uncertainties.
And when the relationship finally breaks down under the pressure of Joe's ambition, Alice is not made to feel that Joe is craven: she sees that he is weak. There is a wealth of meaning lost through the substitution of "craven" for "weak." What is worse—the words, "You murderous fancy man," are used not by Alice but by Elspeth, and in a later scene: such words from Alice would have completely destroyed the feeling with which the final parting is played.

Unfavourable Reviews

Among the exceptions to the approving notices was that by Jympson Harman in the Evening News, who found it a "curious subject to film"(!) and, guarding himself by a disarming reference to his "old-fashioned ways," said primly:
"I found irritating the picture's youthful ardour in substituting candour for artistic restraint in matters which are not usually detailed on the screen."
Thus the critic dismisses one of the very few British films within memory which refuses to conventionalise and trivialise and evade and pussy-foot its ways round the mature sexual relationship between a man and a woman.

On the other hand, Fred Majdalany (in the Daily Mail) seemed a little disappointed that there wasn't more sex, and in general found the film old-fashioned, dealing with such out-of-date questions as class. The following is characteristic of his pedestrian philistinism:
"We are left with a boring parable about class-consciousness painted in the most lurid colours and carried to the extremes of caracterisation. The mood is Victorian melodramatic—the Scholarship Boy versus the Hon. Fauncewater-Fauncewater—and filling it with large helpings of mainly verbal sex does not make it any less so."

"The climax is so melodramatic that I fully expected someone to cry out: 'Dead and never called me mother.'"

Most intriguing of all was Miss Lejeune in the Observer. She did not like it at all. There was all this "class" business, of course:
"The film deals with the calculated rise to riches of an ambitious young man named Joe Lampton (Laurence Harvey) who insists on telling us that he is working class and proud of it."

And then there was "sex":
"I wasn't much impressed by what I saw, and what remains in my mind is a series of enormous close-ups, so large that every pore was magnified, with the forehead frequently cut off to make room for the upper nude torso, registering the supposed arduous and satisfactions of a physical relationship."
The phrase "supposed arduous and satisfactions of a physical relationship" bears—to say the least—a curious relationship to the syntax of that sentence, and to the critical judgment being made. It is difficult to discover exactly what Miss Lejeune disliked. Is she criticising the direction and camera work, the lack of love sequences in the film (hardly!), or the propriety of showing it all on the screen, or the belief that such a relationship can have "ardours" and give "satisfactions"? In general she felt that it was all very unfair to the North—"I'm a Lanes woman myself, but here I'll make a solid stand for Yorks"—thus striking a false note of "provincial" haifellow-well-met which it is one of the strengths of the film itself to challenge and undercut.

Foreheads and Torsos

This was too much for Mr. Philip Oakes, and under pressure from a letter by him in the Observer Miss Lejeune replied that what she really meant to say was that she wanted "films about real people," but added that it would be nicer if they were nice. So much for all that talk about a revival of the British cinema. Mr. Oakes, on his side, devoted an inordinate amount of space to praising the Secretary of the British Board of Film Censors in his review in the Sunday Dispatch, including long quotations from the Grand Master himself, Mr. John Trevelyan.

Curiously enough, Charles MacLaren of Time And Tide joined the Foreheads against Torsos and North against South schools of thought. Weighting his case rather crudely, he tried to undercut a favourable response to the film and embarrass any critic who might have been tempted to take it seriously by suggesting that "serious" treatment would be superficial and fashionable:
"There's very little doubt it's going to be the smart thing to admire the film version of John Braine's novel Room At The Top, which contributes to the fashionable idea that most people in the north of England are uncouth barbarians talking with vowels as broad as a cobbled street, unfamiliar with any form of culture higher than that of the local dramatic society, civically corrupt and ready at any moment to be nobbled by the power of brass. How different from us, we comfortably reflect as we attend our London cocktail parties; although of course it would be non-U to say so." Fashionable or not, one would have imagined that one of the things a critic might have been tempted to remark about the film was that it was one of the very few serious films, set outside of London, where an attempt had been made to carry the regional accent through to the central hero, it is interesting, however, to see that Mr. MacLaren assumes that the alternative to living in the North is living it up at a cocktail party in London. After all, who has suggested that the people in the film are uncouth barbarians? Certainly not John Braine nor Jack Clayton. The suggestion comes from Mr. MacLaren himself, who seems to assume that simply because Dufton people are
poor and Warnley doesn't have the Old Vic, they must be uncultured.

The approving notices ranged from Dilys Powell in the Sunday Times (there is subversion everywhere!), who praised but did not analyse the film (surely a film as important as this deserves more than praise?) to Patrick Gibbs of the Telegraph. Mr. Gibbs made this perceptive remark: "What disturbs is the outlook which regards a human being and an inanimate object (if I may so describe a Lagonda) as comparable." Mr. Gibbs is on to something here—the way the film dramatises the sense of the object of riches being transformed into the personal ambitions of the hero, which Stuart Hall wrote about in "A Sense of Classlessness" (ULR 5). But Mr. Gibbs does not follow his point through—perhaps the self-conscious remark about the Lagonda suggests why.

After all this, The Times's comment is almost classic—and beyond comment. With that faint unease which can only be generated in Printing House Square, The Times critic said, wonderingly: "... perhaps such people exist. . . ." Of reviews in the "left" dailies and weeklies, William Whitebait in the New Statesman was thoughtful, but surprisingly grudging. Frank Jackson of Reynolds News did not feel that the film gave an up-to-date picture of the classless society of Welfare Britain:

"I find it hard to believe that any young man in 1951 would be so naive as to see the Boss's daughter as a symbol of 'brass and power'. And far from arriving at an annual dance in an uncomfortable dinner jacket and stiff shirt front, the truly lifelike young man of today would be the smartest fellow in the room."

Nina Hibben in the Daily Worker approved the criticism of the tycoons, but her Marxist blinkers prevented her from understanding the subtleties of the film, or Joe's predicament.

"Now it's unhappily true that some working people have corrupt social ambitions. But in a film that sets out to explore class relations and sex relations between classes, it is a trick to select an immature, over-sexed, unprincipled climber as the main representative of the working class."

Finally, the Daily Herald. Under the heading: "Now Britain joins the BEDROOM BRIGADE ... and adds a slice of Yorkshire pudding," Anthony Carthew went on to say:

"Room At The Top arrives brandishing a well-merited X certificate as proof that British studios can produce something as sexy as the offerings of the craftiest Continental sin-peddlers."

This tone of nasty facetiousness was worked out in the caption under the still: "Who ever heard of such goings-on in Yorkshire!"

The deliberate overblowing of the cheap and sexy in this review destroys even the pretense of serious criticism. The language of criticism and the language of debased publicity are here indistinguishable, and the attempt to write in a popular style has been made an excuse for the worst kinds of vulgarity.

The critical reception of Room At The Top should make us think again about the trivial standards which now abound in the British cinema industry, and the much-repeated cry from the critics for a "revival." The overall impression is that few critics would know a revival if they saw one: and that, far from being the strong and unheeded voice of responsibility, the critics have often conspired in the very thing which they deplore so loudly. They are unwilling to break out of the "nice" circle of trivial and stereotyped experiences which now pass for life in the material which the cinema uses: they will not explore the tensions and experiences of their own times, when someone has the courage to put them on the screen. They shy away from any kind of moral or social statement in a film, when it threatens to open up the hidden recesses of "Britain: unknown country," and they are embarrassed when human relationships are shown to involve the passions and interests of men and women (or they evade them by treating them as cheese-cake and peep-show sex, which is worse). In many cases, one feels that the critics have, over the last ten years, had the films they want or deserve—and that, unfortunately, because of their important position in shaping critical attitudes and responses, they have made countless readers and audiences see things their way.