

Producers and Moguls in the British Film Industry, 1930-1980 – Andrew Spicer (UWE)

The role of the producer has been both caricatured and misunderstood, hence the absence of discussion in accounts of British cinema and in Film Studies as a discipline (Spicer 2004: 33-50; Spicer, McKenna and Meir 2014). And yet, as Alexander Walker argues, ‘the tendency to ignore the role of the producer or production chief has to be resisted if films are to make sense as an industry that can sometimes create art’ (1986: 17). Straddling the competing worlds of art and commerce and encompassing all the elements of the filmmaking process from conception to exhibition, producers need to be financial wizards, creative partners, efficient organisers, promoters and showmen, strategists and above all eternal optimists in the face of endless setbacks. In ‘The Context of Creativity’, which contrasts the policies of Michael Balcon at Ealing Studios with those of James Carreras at Hammer Films, Vincent Porter argues that producers play a crucial and creative role in filmmaking but their effectiveness needs to be considered over their career as a whole, contextualised within the conditions in which they operated (Porter 1983: 179-207).

Porter’s analysis is one of very few to focus specifically on the producer. Alexander Walker’s accounts of British cinema in the 1960s and 1970s (1984, 1986) are exceptional in the space and importance given to producers, but other studies of British cinema history in this period afford some consideration to producers (Chibnall and McFarlane 2009; Harper and Porter 2003; Harper and Smith 2012; Low 1985; Murphy 1989 and 1992). Charles Drazin’s *The Finest Years* (1998) provides several perceptive portraits of producers. There are biographical accounts of the better-known ones: Alexander Korda, Balcon and David Puttnam (see further reading) and critical studies of Sydney Box (Spicer 2006), Michael Klinger (Spicer and McKenna 2013) and Tony Tenser (Hamilton 2005). Producers’ memoirs, notably those by Balcon (1969), Betty Box (2000), Sydney Box (2005) and Herbert Wilcox (1967), are

essential sources but which need to be approached with caution as partial, often self-aggrandising accounts and checked against the trade press, another crucial source.

Although the producer's role is complex, we can distinguish three broad types. At the top were the moguls such as Korda and Balcon, who ran major companies and often employed other producers for specific films. Both were *filmmakers* who 'raised money because [they] wanted to make films' as opposed to 'financial magnates', such as J. Arthur Rank, who 'looked around for people to make films because they had the money' (Low: 217). Below the moguls was a heterogeneous middle tier of first-feature producers. Some, such as Sydney Box or Julian Wintle (Francis 1986), had periods as contract producers but their instincts were to operate, if possible, as independents (though they had to negotiate with the major corporations to get distribution or bookings on one of the major cinema circuits) and thus maintain control over budget, choice of subject matter, casting and technical personnel. Bumping along the bottom were the artisans producing low-budget films on tight schedules, who could survive and turn a profit, if they kept below a strict commercial ceiling. It must be emphasised that these types are fluid categories and producers may move between them over the course of a career.

Occasionally, producers combined to secure finance collectively and support each other's work as with Independent Producers in the 1940s (Macnab 1993: 90-99) or Bryanston and Allied Film Makers towards the end of the 1950s (Walker 1986: 72-5, 102-06; Harper and Porter: 182-84). However, most producers were competitive individualists, though several worked in long-term producer-director partnerships where the roles were shared or interchangeable: Michael Relph and Basil Dearden, Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat, John and Roy Boulting and The Archers (director Michael Powell and screenwriter Emeric Pressburger). Some producers, such as Tenser, kept to specific genres (in his case

sexploitation and horror); some confined themselves to a particular franchise: Peter Rogers and the 'Carry On' comedies (1958-78) or Albert R. Broccoli and Harry Saltzman, the creators of the Bond films. Klinger was more typical, cultivating a varied portfolio of films thereby spreading the risk across different genres and also modes of production by making films for both the domestic and international markets.

Those risks, as will become clear, were ever-present. Producers have consistently struggled to make feature films in a British film industry that has suffered from a weak, under-capitalised and poorly funded production base, where the major profits were made in distribution and exhibition. It was (and is) notoriously unstable, having a relatively small domestic market that necessitates, for higher budget feature films, international success, and has been subject to ferocious competition and deep penetration by globally dominant American studios. The British industry has been poorly served by weak and inconsistent government interventions that did little to alter these structural imbalances. Only for one brief period, 1942-48, when the Rank empire was at its strongest and audiences at their peak, did certain producers, including the flamboyant Filippo Del Giudice (Drazin 1998: 13-42), enjoy stability and an unprecedented (and never repeated) creative autonomy and bountiful budgets. By the late 1940s, British cinema experienced another of its periodic crises and Rank's draconian Managing Director, John Davis, ousted Del Giudice and centralised production, imposing strict controls on costs and subject matter.

Such fluctuations were typical of the British film industry and indicated the vulnerability of producers and their limited agency in the face of the wider economic forces over which they had little or no control. However, as John Caughie has argued, the chronic instability that characterises an industry that lacks either a fully-functioning studio system or a 'national corporation' heightens the importance of studying the various producers who tried to create,

against the odds, the conditions under which films can be made; he contends: ‘the history of the British cinema is the history of producers’ (1986: 200). Within such a wide canvas, my approach in a short chapter must necessarily be highly selective and I have avoided choosing producers, such as Korda or Balcon, who have received detailed scrutiny (see further reading). In order to achieve a degree of representativeness and to demonstrate the varied tasks producers have to perform, what follows is organised into three case studies, exemplifying those broad types – artisans (Julius Hagen), independents (Joseph Janni) and moguls (Nat Cohen) – covering different periods. These accounts focus on their specific production policies, contextualised within broader economic and cultural paradigms.¹

The Artisan: Julius Hagen

The 1927 Cinematograph Films Act, the government’s belated response to a profound crisis in the industry, together with the coming of sound, stimulated production by imposing a statutory obligation on renters and exhibitors to screen a quota of British films. One consequence was the notorious growth of the ‘quota quickie’, low-cost, hastily assembled films designed primarily to fulfil the quota. It created a sector that attracted a wide range of artisan producers including Jerry Jackson and George King. One of the most prolific was Julius Hagen, a German émigré who had started as a salesman for Ruffles Pictures in 1913, and learned his cost-conscious craft in the 1920s through becoming production manager at Stoll Studios, run on factory lines in a converted aircraft hangar in Cricklewood.

Sensing the Act’s potential, Hagen founded the Strand Film Company in 1928 and in December acquired the lease of Twickenham Studios; in April 1929, he secured a contract with the Radio Corporation of America to equip with sound. This dependence on American know-how and finance was typical: Hagen was completely reliant on US distributors for commissions. Having secured an initial contract with Warner Bros. in 1929, Hagen made six

films with an efficiency and economy that ensured subsequent work for other Hollywood studios. By 1933, Hagen was producing twenty films a year, the highest of any 'unaffiliated' producer, charging a flat fee per foot but ensuring extra revenue if the film attracted above average bookings (Chibnall 2007: 24). In order to fulfil his contracts, Hagen planned his production schedule meticulously, keeping the studios operating round the clock with separate crews working night and day on different films. However, the prospect of secure employment enabled Hagen to establish a good quality, stable production team that demonstrated great loyalty despite the low wages, although he was prepared to pay handsomely for top technicians, included renowned German cinematographer Curt Courant. Hagen, whom Linda Wood characterises as a 'natural salesman, flamboyant and gregarious, and willing to take chances' (1998: 38), had a showman's sense of the importance of good publicity and was careful to establish direct contact with exhibitors to market his films.

Those who worked at Twickenham recalled that, despite a 'feverish and restless environment' with everything very strictly budgeted and costs trimmed wherever possible, there was a 'keen spirit amongst the staff to raise the quality of the product' and that actors of the highest calibre were happy to appear in Hagen's films (Pearson 1957: 193-95). Director Bernard Vorhaus remembered Hagen would tear pages out of the middle of the script if the film fell behind, but conceded that he had 'a genuine desire to make good films, in contrast to some quicky [*sic*] makers, and he didn't interfere with what the director was doing so long as he did it fast enough' (2000: 64). Twickenham specialised in thrillers, whodunits and society melodramas adapted from novels, short stories and stage plays whose rights Hagen had acquired cheaply, such as *The Ghost Camera* (1933) directed by Vorhaus and starring John Mills and Ida Lupino. Hagen adopted a practice, used by several 1930s producers including Balcon and Wilcox, of making two types of differently branded films: Real Art for the quickies and Twickenham for the 'supers' that were more carefully distributed (Napper 2009:

194), such as *I Lived with You* (1933) written by and starring Ivor Novello.

Hagen's aspirations to make more ambitious films were fuelled by Korda's sensational success with *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933), which transformed both the industry's horizons (indigenous subject matter that could command an international audience) and its finances by attracting City investors. Hagen announced in January 1934 that he was embarking on films aimed at the international market, refurbished the studios and set up Twickenham Film Distributors in May 1935. It seemed that the dependent artisan had now become an independent: 'I have complete ruling over the subjects chosen and also over the stars and directors employed. I can spend what money I think adequate on each picture.' (Hagen in Wood: 46). Hagen concentrated on better quality films that were carefully scripted and staged with longer shooting schedules, e.g. *The Man in the Mirror* (1936).

However, despite the increased budget, to the public these films still appeared to be 'minor productions, with small sets and an air of frugality'; Hagen was unable to secure many cinema bookings (Low: 255). Like all British producers in this period, including Basil Dean at Ealing, Hagen found to his cost that American distributors were reluctant to get behind films they had not financed. Hagen had to dissolve his distribution company because of the limited number of films produced. He went into receivership in January 1937 having also over-expanded acquiring additional studios at Riverside and Elstree. Hagen's difficulties were symptomatic of a wider crisis in the British film industry with numerous bankruptcies, severe cutbacks and considerable diminution of output. The insurance companies that had financed the boom pulled out, leaving Hagen and others like him with no alternative source of finance. The 1938 Act, which introduced a minimum cost provision, killed the quickie and encouraged American companies to make higher quality production (counting as double or

triple quota). Hagen, who had taken little account of his own health in his fervid determination to make British films, died of a stroke in 1940.

Despite being an artisan producer, Hagen should not be dismissed as a penny-pinching philistine; even his quickies, despite their invidious reputation, were an important training ground for talent. Having established himself as an efficient artisan through volume production, Hagen used his enhanced independence to make better quality British films that might compete internationally. Like many other artisans, Hagen overreached himself, but his demise was caused not by poor quality films but by the stranglehold American studios exerted and by the government's failure to support indigenous filmmakers effectively.

The Independent: Joseph Janni

As noted in the Introduction, after a period of stability and expansion, the British film industry experienced another crisis in the late 1940s and both Rank and the other combine, Associated British Pictures Corporation (ABPC) cut back on production and the employment of contract staff, forcing many producers to become independent (Harper and Porter: 155-84). These included Daniel Angel, Sydney Box, Anthony Havelock-Allan, Maxwell Setton, John Woolf, and Joseph Janni who formed Vic Films in 1948. Milan-born and half Jewish, Janni had fled from Fascist Italy in 1939 and spent several months interned as an enemy alien on the Isle of Man before learning the craft of production as assistant to producers John Sutro and John Corfield. The cultivated, university-educated Janni saw films as artistic rather than commercial products: 'It's no use making films because one just wants to make money, or fill in time ... The only satisfying way is to wait until a subject comes along which is exciting enough to keep you totally involved in it for two or three years if necessary' (in Blume 1971). Vic's first film, *The Glass Mountain* (1949), based on Janni's idea and which he co-wrote, combined European opera and romantic melodrama with the other element he deemed

essential, an important social issue; in this instance, the problems of readjustment experienced by returning servicemen. *The Glass Mountain* was a major success, reissued in 1950 and 1953.

Although this initial success established Janni as a credible producer, like all British ‘independents’, he was actually dependent on ABPC or Rank for production finance, a distribution deal and cinema circuit release. The 1950s therefore proved to be a frustrating decade for Janni who was forced to subordinate his desire to find engaging subject matter to Rank’s demands for commercial product. He made a variety of films for Rank – comedies, thrillers, war films (*A Town Like Alice*, 1956) and action-adventure (*Robbery Under Arms*, 1957) – all of which were competent but indistinguishable from the work of other producers. Only *White Corridors* (1951) made on a slender budget and with minimal involvement from Rank, showed Janni’s desire to engage with urgent social issues, in this case the struggles of staff working in a provincial hospital.

Janni found his *métier* in the development of the British New Wave, which replicated in Britain the engagement with new subject matter, social consciousness and sexual frankness that Janni admired in Italian Neo-Realism. Janni’s relationship with Rank ended in 1959 when they refused to finance his intended production of Alan Sillitoe’s novel *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. Janni’s salvation came through Anglo-Amalgamated (see next section), which provided full funding for his plans to film Stan Barstow’s *A Kind of Loving* and Keith Waterhouse’s *Billy Liar*, two more novels about contemporary provincial life and the sexual longings of young men. In a bold move, Janni hired John Schlesinger as director having admired his television documentaries. It was the start of a highly productive partnership that encompassed six films and lasted intermittently until the late 1970s. The pair bonded as

outsiders with a shared rebelliousness against a hidebound British Establishment (Mann 2004: 179).

Their work together showed the value of the creative partnership that can develop between director and producer. As an independent, Janni was not, like Hagen, enslaved to volume output and could afford to work slowly and meticulously on a single production. His creative influence was strongest in pre-production. Schlesinger recalled Janni's absolute insistence 'on long, detailed, sometimes exhausting re-examinations of the script ... He was a very creative producer – not very interested in selling a movie, but wonderful at the script stage and the casting' (in McFarlane: 511). Janni was on set throughout in order to enable Schlesinger, an obsessive perfectionist, to concentrate on making the best possible film freed from financial worries; he 'made deviousness a fine art [managing] to conceal a growing over-budget from the backers as long as possible so their complaints came too late to prevent us completing the shoot' (Schlesinger 1994: 32). Janni also intervened in post-production, arguing about particular scenes that might be shortened or cut altogether.

A Kind of Loving was huge success domestically, persuading Anglo to increase the budget for *Billy Liar* and fund a third film *Darling* (1965) in which Julie Christie, Janni's 'discovery', plays the eponymous lead as the woman unable to find stability or satisfaction, symbolising the anomie and rootlessness of a rapidly changing British society. As a major international success, *Darling* attracted the interest of the American studios that dominated British film production in the 1960s. MGM offered a huge \$4 million budget for a 'big roadshow' picture, which became an expansive adaptation of Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1967). Janni later acknowledged that this departure into period melodrama was misjudged, the result of being 'dazzled' by MGM's money (Walker 1986: 264). He recovered his core purpose through enabling Ken Loach to direct his first feature, *Poor Cow* (1967), by

convincing Anglo to back the film despite their misgivings about the commercial potential of a story about a South London mother who marries a petty criminal (Ibid: 361, 377).

Janni collaborated with Schlesinger again for *Sunday Bloody Sunday* (1971), funded by United Artists, helping to develop the screenplay alongside Schlesinger and the critic Penelope Gilliatt and hiring others to rewrite some of her ‘unplayable’ dialogue. Although Schlesinger’s highly personal film, another exploration of deracinated modern lives set in north London, was a critical and commercial success, like all independents Janni struggled throughout the rest of the decade as audiences declined and indigenous companies became increasingly cautious. Schlesinger’s American reputation persuaded United Artists to finance *Yanks* (1979) alongside CIP Filmproduktion, which provided a German tax shelter. Set during the Second World War, *Yanks* was another carefully crafted and sensitive melodrama, which explored the relations between American soldiers stationed in northern England and the home population. Janni suffered a stroke as the film was being completed, ending his career as an active producer.

Janni’s career demonstrates the creative potential of independent production, particularly through a mutually sustaining partnership with a talented director, to make challenging films that engaged with the shifting socio-sexual paradigms of British society. However, it also shows the persistent struggle to find production finance and the difficulties in persuading film executives to fund innovative indigenous production rather than play safe. Janni was fortunate in finding an enlightened executive, Nat Cohen, in the 1960s but Cohen’s own position in the industry was subject to a different set of pressures.

The Mogul: Nat Cohen

Profiling Nat Cohen in the early 1970s, Alexander Walker considered him to be ‘in many ways a more urbane version of the one-man-bands who used to boss the studios in

Hollywood's heyday of the movie moguls' (1986: 111). Cohen controlled the whole of the conglomerate Electrical and Music Industries (EMI)'s film divisions, making decisions about budgets, distribution, scripts, casting and direction in almost three-quarters of British-made films (Murari 1973: 9). That so much power was invested in one man proclaimed Cohen's ability to adapt but also how the British film industry had been reconfigured in the aftermath of the departure of the American studios. Cohen's career needs to be understood within that wider context.

Like all movie moguls, Cohen started humbly. He built a small circuit of cinemas in the 1930s' boom and after the war became an artisan producer, founding Anglo-Amalgamated in 1945, in partnership with Stuart Levy, an experienced distributor. Anglo combined the distribution of cheap American imports with the production of low-budget, swift-moving crime thrillers such as *Assassin for Hire* (1951) for the 'B'-feature market using the tiny Merton Park studios in which Cohen and Levy became major shareholders. Anglo became highly attuned to the requirements of the second-feature sector, specializing in 'programme-fillers', notably the Edgar Wallace adaptations (1960-64), dual-purpose films for cinema distribution and broadcasting on American television. Cohen was always an executive rather than on-the-floor producer, supervising the company's overall output not particular films; the Wallace adaptations, for instance, were all produced on a strict budget by Jack Greenwood. Anglo's volume production ended with the extinction of the second feature in 1964, but the company's fortunes had been transformed already by backing *Carry on Sergeant* (1958) whose huge success enabled it to pursue a more ambitious production policy (though they insisted Peter Rogers produce another 'Carry On' each year until he switched to Rank in 1967).

Cohen was anxious to raise Anglo's status and produce 'A'-features, but realised Anglo could not compete directly with the UK-based arms of the major American. His strategy was to pursue a progressive production policy by enabling new talent to enter the industry and make more individual films, including John Boorman (*Catch Us If You Can*, 1965) and Clive Donner (*Nothing but the Best*, 1964) as well as John Schlesinger. Cohen recognised that the film landscape had changed and therefore he had to take risks: 'there is no such thing as playing safe [I am] a gambler, but an extremely cautious one ... I back judgement, not luck.' (in Walker 1986: 111). However, Cohen ensured Anglo's financial security through a series of shrewd corporate manoeuvres. He sold half of Anglo to ABPC in 1962 and, after Levy died in 1967, a further 25 per cent to EMI in November 1968 when it took over the ailing company. In March 1969, Cohen joined EMI's board and in May 1970 became the CEO of Anglo-EMI, a wholly-owned production subsidiary with a revolving fund of £6 million. It was in March 1971, after Bryan Forbes's resignation as head of EMI Films, that Cohen completed his ascent to mogul as controller of the entire film division, including the short-lived EMI-MGM productions, newly-formed in order to co-finance international films with bigger budgets. Cohen, always a filmmaker and not a financial magnate, had, as noted, become the most powerful producer in the British film industry. He was in a position of exceptional freedom, able to make decisions quickly without reference to boards or committees.

However, although Cohen continued to back aspiring young film-makers including David Puttnam, the pressures of being a mogul – the responsibility of ensuring that the film division provided a profit for the parent company – made Cohen increasingly cautious. His production policy in the 1970s was characterised by circumspection rather than enlightened risk, investing in safe subjects such as television spin-offs including *On the Buses* (1971) and its sequels. Cohen's most successful initiative was to encourage the production of a highly

successful series of Agatha Christie adaptations – *Murder on the Orient Express* (1974) and two sequels – lavish productions set in exotic locations with all-star casts, which performed well on both sides of the Atlantic. The Christie films accelerated the trend towards American-orientated production, which did little to stabilize a declining industry or encourage indigenous talent, but pleased Cohen's boss at EMI, Bernard Delfont, head of the entertainments division, who, like his brother Lew Grade, was fixated on conquering the American market through a direct assault. However, as the decade wore on, Cohen's conservative commitment to family entertainment looked increasingly outmoded. Delfont gradually replaced him with younger talents, Michael Deeley and Barry Spikings, whose commitment to American-orientated internationalism was more thoroughgoing; Cohen was ousted altogether in 1979. By the early 1980s, the failure of EMI and the film wing of Grade's Associated Communications Company effectively ended the corporate era in the British film industry and the possibility of further movie moguls emerging.

Cohen's career exemplifies the inexorable pressures experienced by British film producers who become moguls replicating the problems experienced by Balcon and Korda in the 1930s. The size of their companies and the budgets of their films could only be sustained by competing with Hollywood films in the international marketplace. The perceived demands of a global audience exerted a strong pull towards safe, formulaic material and an iconic Britishness that would play around the world. Cohen, subject to the machinations of the parent corporation over which he had little influence, had more power but less creative freedom than many independents.

Conclusion

These three case studies have shown the varied activities in which producers typically engage. Although their priorities diverged because of their different but often overlapping

and shifting positions within the industry – artisan, independent and mogul – each was a genuine filmmaker rather than a financial magnate who wanted to create opportunities, despite all the difficulties, for creative talent to produce British films. As heads of production-distribution companies, the major preoccupation of Hagen and Cohen was to ensure their financial stability; thus although they hired the principal personnel and set the budgets, they left the detailed production of their films to others. As an independent without direct overheads, Janni had the freedom to work closely on each individual film and his most substantial achievement came through a long-term creative partnership with the director John Schlesinger. However Janni's independence was circumscribed by the necessity to raise production finance on a film-by-film basis and therefore to negotiate with the major corporations that controlled the industry. Each producer had to struggle with a range of external problems, including American competition, demonstrating the need to understand their work historically, within the shifting cultural and economic contexts in which each had to work. Each contributed significantly to the course of the British film industry and an understanding of their achievements and thus the pivotal role producers play, suggests the urgent need for other producers' careers to be excavated, documented and carefully analysed rather than ignored.

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Endnote

¹ They are all men. For the few women producers who succeeded in a male dominated industry see Harper 2000: 155-66. The most important was Betty Box (see Ashby 2000: 166-78).

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