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Krunoslav Mikulan, Tihomir Engler

Editors-in-Chief
Chefredakteure

LiCuS
Visoka učiteljska škola Čakovec
A. Starčevića 55
40000 Čakovec, Croatia
Tel: 385-(0)40-370-000
Fax: 385-(0)40-370-025
Web: www.vus-ck.hr/licus/

Address
Anschrift

Kristina Horvat Blažinović

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Tihomir Engler

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For inquiries and information in English send an e-
mail to krunoslav.mikulan@ck.htnet.hr

Für Anfragen auf Deutsch, schicken Sie eine E-
mail auf tihomir.engler@vus-ck.hr

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Filming the British Compromise: British-Asian Cinema and Cultural Hybridity

Abstract:

It is a perplexing fact that in cultural studies countless publications discuss the American Dream while there is no mention of a British Dream. This paper proposes to use the term British Compromise, which will be sketched around three features which characterize life in contemporary Britain: the search for financial security and decent living; the search for educational opportunities; appreciation of cultural diversity.

The essay further explores the representation of the British Compromise in contemporary British film in order to show how films discuss social matters and how they log into mentalities and living conditions to reconstruct, reinterpret and reinvent them. The scarcity of resources in the British film industry has led to films which allow, and also challenge, viewers to concentrate and reflect upon the artefact. Such films are seen as ideal objects of film education because they facilitate didactically motivated reduction and concentration on the basic elements of film language.

In the end, this article is meant to show how foreign language teaching can benefit from the use of British-Asian films in particular. They provide learners and teachers with extraordinary perspectives on culture.

Zusammenfassung:

Es ist verwunderlich, dass sich zahllose Veröffentlichungen auf dem Gebiet der Cultural Studies mit dem Amerikanischen Traum befassen, während ein ‚Britischer Traum‘ keinerlei Erwähnung findet. In Ermangelung eines terminologischen Gegenstücks führt man hier den Begriff the British Compromise ein. Dieser Terminus wird mit Hilfe von drei konstitutiven Merkmalen umrissen, die für das Leben im heutigen Großbritannien als charakteristisch angesehen werden: dem Streben nach finanzieller Sicherheit und bescheidenem Auskommen; nach Bildungskapital sowie der Wertschätzung kultureller Vielfalt.

Der Beitrag setzte sich mit der Darstellung des British Compromise im zeitgenössischen britischen Film auseinander, um aufzuzeigen, wie Filme gesellschaftliche Verhältnisse und ihre Darstellungen diskutieren und reflektieren, wie sie die mentalen und sozialen Texte aufgreifen und neu konstruieren. Die Kapitalknappheit in der britischen Filmindustrie hat im Laufe der Jahre Filme entstehen lassen, die den Zuschauern Konzentration und Reflexion ermöglichen, aber auch abverlangen. Solche Filme können als ideale Gegenstände einer Filmerziehung verstanden werden, da sie didaktisch motivierte Reduktion und Konzentration auf die Grundbestandteile der Filmsprache erleichtern.

Schließlich soll dieser Beitrag deutlich machen, wie der Fremdsprachenunterricht speziell vom Einsatz britisch-asiatischer Filme profitieren kann. Sie gewähren nämlich Lehrenden wie Lernenden einen außergewöhnlichen Einblick in kulturelle Gegebenheiten.

1. Learning by Viewing: The Purpose of Film Education

Thanks to its multilayered interplay between sound and image, film possesses an exceptional intertextual density and may thus be regarded as the intertextual and cultural object par excellence. The present essay explores the representation in contemporary British film of cultural issues in British society in order to show how films discuss social matters and their presentation and how they log into mentalities and living conditions to reconstruct, reinterpret and reinvent them. In the end, this discussion is meant to show how foreign language teaching can benefit from the use of British-Asian films in particular.

The motto 'Learning by Viewing' was coined at the Berlin conference *Kino macht Schule* in March 2003, which was convened by *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*, an institute of political education, and *Filmförderungsanstalt*, the German Film Institute which promotes film education in German schools. Their call to action remains topical, as audiovisual media are far too often used merely for entertainment and only rarely for the purpose of film education. Since youngsters consume films in a largely passive way, physically and mentally, schools need to instruct them how to learn by viewing and how to use film in an active and critical manner (Diehr 2004: 81). The Berlin conference was right to challenge politicians to make film education a compulsory component of the national curricula (<http://www.bpb.de>). The benchmarking objective of film competence has been defined as the ability to decipher the semiology of moving images, which should be taught across the curriculum. To enable future teachers to assist learners in learning by viewing, it is highly advisable to make film competence an integral part of teacher training, even part of university exams.

While there seems to be widespread agreement on the demand for film competence, the film canon itself, which was proposed at the Berlin conference for implementing film education, remains questionable to say the least. Firstly, an open canon makes far more sense than the proposed list of compulsory films. Secondly, the choices made in that list have rankled with teachers, film lovers and experts alike. Of the 35 films of this canon, thirteen come from the US and only one from the UK, the thriller *Blow Up*, made by Antonioni in 1966 (Kriest 2004). This canon urges the conclusion that British film does not have a significant profile. It recalls the French film-maker Truffaut's provocative critique of British cinema "that there was a certain incompatibility between the words British and Cinema" (Frears in Lovell: 2001: 200). Such disdain for British cinema may be caused by ignorance, for even experts are largely unaware of the enormous teaching potential of British film, especially with regard to the development of film competence. The following paragraph aims to show

that British film has been shunned and criticised entirely without justification. Or to say it in Frears' words – "Well, bollocks to Truffaut" (Frears in Lovell 2001: 200).

2. The Advantages of the British Film for Film Education

Teachers expect a film suitable for classroom viewing to work on several levels, so that working with it in the foreign language class may, in addition to enhancing language skills, develop skills in film analysis and promote knowledge of the target culture as well as cultural competence. This paper does not set out to explore the first level, the impact of the chosen film on language skills, since films from other countries, e.g. America, Australia or Canada, could just as easily increase the much-needed language input. American films are even easier to come by and offer a larger choice than British films. Why then would a teacher want specifically to choose a British film? The answer is strongly influenced by the simple fact that, usually, a British film costs far less to produce than the average American film. The scarcity of resources in the British film industry has contributed to the development of cinematic features which have turned out to be extremely advantageous for film education. This potential is neatly expressed by the saying 'small is beautiful'. Thus the term "small" is not meant to belittle the performance of the British film, but rather to refer to its budget: a close look at some figures makes this somewhat clearer.

Towards the end of the nineties the production of the average Hollywood feature film devoured \$ 59,7 million, approximately € 48 million. Blockbusters such as *Men in Black* or *Jurassic Park* cost more than \$ 100 million to produce (Hill 1999: 77). What are the major factors that make those films so expensive? To start with, famous actors, big name stars, are paid astronomical sums whatever the quality of the film and regardless of its success. Arnold Schwarzenegger, for example, pocketed an incredible \$ 10 million plus 15 per cent profit share for his role in *Total Recall* (Kochberg 1999: 33). The Hollywood majors, i.e. the big studios, are known for their policy of privileging successful authors and successful filmmakers. They may cost more than young no-name artists, but they have already proven in the past that their films attract cinema-goers. Therefore, the majors willingly pay them large sums to produce new box-office successes based on familiar patterns at low financial risks. The two most important ingredients of the successful pattern are, first, a thrilling, action-packed plot and, second, sensational special effects, indicating that a film displays state-of-the-art technology – for example, *Lord of the Rings*. Finally, one must not forget the expensive marketing campaigns which are supposed to guarantee large numbers of viewers - from the opening night onwards - which are vital to recoup the high production costs. That is the reason why

up to 25 per cent of the income is spent on the marketing of a film (Kochberg 1999: 36).

In comparison with these American figures, British films are produced almost on a shoestring. On average, British production costs equal 5 per cent of the Hollywood film: £ 1,6 million to be precise, or € 2,5 million. *My Beautiful Laundrette* was shot on a budget of no more than £ 600,000 (Tönnies/Viol 2001: 133). The meagre budget virtually forces British filmmakers to seek out previously unknown artists, authors and directors. These material limitations lead to "simple" films in the sense that they do not merely revolve around visual effects. They are made in authentic settings at little expense, the technical term being 'location shooting'. Thanks to the frugal, unadorned dramatization, the British film often attains the quality of TV drama. Since the British film industry has never been able to compete with Hollywood commercially, the dominance of the American studios has contributed noticeably to a style of filming that became known as British Realism in the sixties and has influenced British film production ever since. The proponents of British Realism have always defined their own concepts, which were not meant to imitate Hollywood nor compete with it. The leading representative of British Realism, Ken Loach, has been making successful films for over forty years, with his latest productions *Just a Kiss* and *The Wind That Shakes The Barley* having gained international acclaim. Loach's films exhibit the defining features of British Realism in an almost unadulterated fashion: he employs lay actors instead of expensive film stars; location shooting takes place in authentic settings, often deprived areas in the north, to suit the social criticism of his films; lighting is characterized by reliance upon natural light and absence of overtly dramatic effects; a quiet camera creates objectifying, distancing effects, renounces obtrusive narrative functions and is combined with long cuts. These techniques thus lead to films which are documentary in nature, allowing, and also challenging, viewers to concentrate, reflect upon the artefact. Films like these lend themselves to introducing young people to film analysis, because they facilitate didactically motivated reduction and concentration on the basic elements of film language, namely field sizes, camera angles, camera movement and editing. With British films, teachers need not fear that learners are overtaxed by too many visual stimuli and by technical tricks and trimming.

3. The British Compromise: Three Facets of British Culture

Since the early 80s Black British Cinema has developed against the background of a film industry operating within a stringent budget. The term 'black' has been adopted from Alibhai-Brown who uses it to mean simply 'non-white', while the combination of 'British-Asian' is seen as a generic

term for British artists of Asian, mainly Indian, Pakistani and Bengali, origins (Alibhai-Brown 2001: VII). Many writers such as Hanif Kureishi, Gurinder Chadha or Meera Syal belong to ethnic minorities and come from mixed families themselves. Their stories predominantly deal with growing up under the harsh conditions in which second and third generation immigrants find themselves in today's Britain (Sterneborg 2004). Successful films like *My Beautiful Laundrette* from 1985, *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *Bhaji on the Beach*, both from 1993, exemplify those stories and have contributed to the outstanding international reputation of British-Asian films. Their particular appeal lies in the way they present different configurations of cultural identity. They create images of the ethnic diversity which characterizes British society in the 20th and 21st centuries. Owing to the migration background and many different lifetime experiences and aspirations depicted in these films, they also provide extraordinary multiple perspectives on culture. Those involved in the teaching of culture will find that British-Asian films lend themselves to the acquisition of culture-specific knowledge as well as to the development of cultural competence, indeed of prime importance but not just for the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) class.

At some stage in the course of a school career, every student comes into contact with the concept of the American Dream, whether in history or political instruction or English classes. Significantly, neither in school books nor in cultural studies is there any mention of a British Dream. The fact that one searches in vain for an equivalent expression suggests that immigration into the UK took place under different conditions and for different reasons than in the US. It has led to different ways of cohabiting in contemporary British society from what still remains the case in America. In the absence of a terminological counterpart to the American Dream, a new term must be sought which reflects the idea that a British dream is of a more pragmatic rather than a visionary nature.

Therefore I propose to use the term British Compromise, which will be sketched around three major features: the search for financial security and decent living; the search for educational opportunities; appreciation of cultural diversity. This threefold definition does not claim to be a complete account of the British Compromise, however, it displays three facets of British culture which characterize life in contemporary Britain, and which thus earn their place in the cultural studies curriculum as well as in the EFL class. These three features of cultural life are also spotlighted, interpreted and critiqued by British-Asian films, as the following paragraphs will show.

3.1 The Search for Financial Security and Decent Living

The desire for a job with which to earn themselves a secure living was characteristic of the first phase of immigration which started soon after the Second World War, bringing to the UK people from the former British colonies. The year 1948 marked the beginning of this first phase, when the Empire Windrush put into Tilbury Docks with 492 Jamaican immigrants on board. They were, like many who followed after them in the 50s and 60s, responding to an open door policy and an officially organised recruiting campaign through which British society sought to compensate for its shortage of labour. At about the same time, immigration from the Indian subcontinent began, which has remained an ongoing process up to the present day. The early Commonwealth immigrants were welcomed with open arms, willing as they were to take up unpopular jobs and manual labour during the time of relative blossoming enjoyed by the British economy in the 1960s (Sturm 1999: 32).

These immigrants were eagerly welcomed by the transport industry, particularly by London Transport and British Rail, and recruited into the Health Service. This affinity between specific groups of immigrants and particular trades and employers can still be observed today in the large cities with a high immigrant population: someone who, travelling to London, suffers a broken leg in the city's busy streets will in all probability be treated by a Chinese doctor and looked after by a Jamaican nurse; for legal advice he will consult an Indian lawyer, to whose office a West Indian taxi driver will drive him, pointing out to him along the way a Pakistani fast food restaurant in which to recover from all his stress – and above all from the culture shock.

The way in which first-generation immigrants did not expect to make their fortunes, but had rather more modest expectations, is reflected in British-Asian films. In *Anita and Me* (AAM), for example, while Mr Kumar, father of the main character, Meena, works as a hospital doctor, the family is not seen as well off – after all, they live in a very ordinary estate in a mining community with a high rate of unemployment. In *Bend it like Beckham* (BLB) Mr Bhamra, father of football-mad Jesminder, works as an official at Heathrow Airport in order to provide his family with a respectable middle-class standard of living. In *East is East* (EIE) George and Ella Khan earn their living by running a takeaway in a typical working-class area of Salford.

3.2 The Search for Educational Opportunities

Frequently in British-Asian films the future of the second-generation immigrants, that is children who were already born in Britain, plays a significant role. Ella Khan in EIE scrimps and saves to enable one of her

sons to attend a college of art. The Bhamras in BLB as well as the Kumars in AAM set great store by their daughters' schooling and wait with bated breath for their exam results. The fact that Jesminder will study law and have a career as a lawyer seems as set in stone for the Bhamras as is the Kumars' determination that Meena will become a doctor. In this way the film makers exploit a motive which drove many Commonwealth citizens to migrate specifically to the UK, because they were hoping to make it possible for their children to acquire a respectable education, to attend a good school and go on to university. For them it was not the American Dream-like progression from rags to riches, but the acquisition of "cultural capital". The fact that since the 1990s the children of immigrants have been achieving higher educational qualifications and integrating into the professions indicates that the search for educational opportunities has paid off. In 1997 the proportion of African Asians, Indians and Chinese among the 16-to-24-year-olds holding certificates of higher education is as high as or even higher than that of the native whites (Baringhorst 1999: 33). It remains the case, however, that Afro-Caribbean, Pakistani and Bengali youngsters are still underrepresented and underprivileged (Abercrombie/Warde 2000: 474).

3.3 Appreciation of Cultural Diversity

There is yet another characteristic feature of the British Compromise to be taken into account – the heterogeneity of Britain's ethnic groups and the great variety of their cultural life. Sociological research has shown that a multiplicity of causes has led to this situation, too many to be fully discussed here. I propose to mention only two of these characteristic features as examples. Firstly, Britain's colonial legacy resulted in many immigrants being already conversant with the language of their destination country, using English as a first language, a second language or an official language before they came to Britain. This familiarity with English enabled dialogue and the beginnings of mutual understanding between themselves and the host society. The second characteristic feature I would draw attention to is the way in which an increase in intermarriage – that is, ethnically mixed marriages, and families of mixed ethnicity – has encouraged cultural variety in both public and private life. The National Census of 1991 must be regarded as a milestone in the development of the multi-ethnic society. For the first time since the introduction of the Census in 1801, the 1991 Census contained a so-called ethnic question, an invitation to respondents to designate the ethnic group to which they belonged. The inclusion of this 'ethnic question' effectively acknowledged that the UK was a land of immigrants, and that British society had become multicultural (Abercrombie/ Warde 2000: 228). Additionally, the

demographic data collected in the Census revealed serious socio-economic differences between the white and non-white populations which, in subsequent investigations, were acknowledged to be signs of discrimination and covert racism. The legislature has since responded with various anti-racism laws designed to improve the situation, though not for all ethnic groups equally. Nowadays, the successful integration of the African Asians, the Indians and the Chinese is spoken of with pride: on average, these groups are better qualified than the national average. In the twenty-first century there is no more talk of the collective underprivilege of ethnic minorities (Baringhorst 1999: 33). A further milestone in the journey towards a multi-cultural society was the establishment in 1998 of the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, which two years later published the so-called *Parekh Report*, a social analysis and a set of recommendations for the amelioration of multi-cultural society. This report, too, confirmed that diversity is the predominant defining characteristic of present-day Britain. According to the calculations of the Office for National Statistics, the proportion of the population with community backgrounds outside Britain – that is, people of non-British background – is something over ten percent (Commission 2000: 372). While from the outside, perhaps, the non-white minority appears to comprise a homogeneous group, in fact it is anything but homogeneous, consisting of nine distinct groups of people from different ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, almost half of these people were born in Britain. They see themselves, to varying degrees, as British-Asian or Afro-British, or British-Caribbean citizens. It is from these groups that the momentum originates which is changing not only the ethnic minority communities but also the whole of British society. Modood et al. arrive at the following prediction: "The process of mixing and hybridisation will increasingly be the norm where rapid change and globalisation have made all identities potentially unstable" (Modood et al. cited in Commission 2000: 27).

4. Filming the British Compromise

Bearing in mind the fact that films, despite their vividness, do not aim to achieve a documentary-style reflection of social reality, nevertheless they can lead audiences to reflect on and to discuss actual social relationships. On the one hand films may be regarded as products of the British culture industry; on the other hand they make possible a critical debate with a specific interpretation of social and cultural life – namely, that of the filmmaker. This interpretation is strongly embodied in fictional individual cases – those of the films' characters. Thus, feature films can motivate audiences, especially young ones, to engage with culture-specific topics and facilitate their understanding of foreign cultural contexts.

The material, mental and social dimensions of cultural life in Great Britain are best illustrated in the classroom by showing extracts from films featuring young protagonists who belong to the same age group as the pupils (cf. Teasley/Wilder 1997: 148). Often from the perspective of young characters, such films deal with issues such as conflict between parents and children, first experiences of love, friendship, jealousy and ambitions for the future – in short, themes that engage the interest of young people whatever their ethnic background. The following briefly summarised British Asian films do not merely fulfil these requirements. Additionally, they present concrete examples of cultural hybridity: both in words and images they open the eyes of their audiences to the complexity of national and cultural identities.

In a film which also became popular outside Britain, *Bend It Like Beckham*, the central character is the 18-year-old Indian Jesminder Bhamra, known as Jess. She lives in Hounslow in the outer suburbs of London and, while taking part in a kickabout in the park, she is discovered by Jules and recruited into his girls' football team in which she plays with great success, falling head over heels in love with the Irish trainer, Joe. Jess's parents, traditional-minded Sikhs, try to put an end to both her sporting ambitions and her affection for Joe. They expect from their daughter obedience, hard work, and observation of the cultural customs and traditions of their homeland, together with success as a future law student in England. Jess rebels against all this, often in secret, until, towards the end of the film, all her dreams are fulfilled: Jess and Jules win a scholarship to an American football college; also, Jess and Joe promise each other that after Jess's return home they will confront her parents with the fact that they are a couple. This film can be described as a modern fairy tale complete with happy ending that does not overtax young audiences either in terms of language or theme.

If the marketing campaign is to be believed, *East is East*, a 1999 film, is also a comedy (Diehr 2004: 82). EIE consists of a series of episodes not all of which can be described as comic, in which the weight of different cultural traditions and expectations threatens to break apart the Anglo-Pakistani family of Ella and George Khan and their seven children. These pressures lead to serious rows between the authoritarian father and the most rebellious of his sons, who is determined to put up no longer with these traditions, especially arranged marriage. A giant shadow is cast over the Khans' family life in one very powerful scene in which Ella, who is used to mediating between her husband and their children, is brutally beaten up by George. It looks as if this mixed marriage is irrevocably destroyed, although towards the end of the film the relationship of George and Ella moves towards a reconciliation. Not exactly what one would call a happy ending.

In the film *Anita and Me* the audience is taken on a journey to the Midlands in the 1970s, to the mining town of Tollington near Birmingham (Diehr 2004: 83). The protagonist, Meena Kumar, gives an account of the formative years of her life on the threshold of adolescence. She feels herself to be torn between, on the one side, the care and security – but at the same time the narrowness – of her Indian family, and on the other side her admiration for her precocious English friend Anita Rutter. Following the novel of the same title, the film tells the story of Meena's friendship with Anita. It shows how she came to win the acquaintance of this cheeky, street-wise, borderline antisocial girl who knows all the tricks – and thereby to develop for herself a hybrid identity. At the end of the film the socially ambitious Kumars move away to a residential area, a move that marks not only a stage in the family's upward social mobility but also the end of Meena's childhood and the end of the friendship of these ill-assorted girls. In what follows, I have selected episodes from these three films that illustrate those oppositions and potentials for conflict which give the British Compromise its distinctive quality.

4.1 Falling into the Trap of Homogenisation

The concept of 'homogenisation trap' denotes the false conclusions which people invariably arrive at when they rashly move from a perceived similarity and uniformity between other people to a belief that they are members of a quite distinct, closed group. An episode from BIB illustrates the homogenisation trap into which people in the United Kingdom all too easily blunder by lumping together all of the non-white population. In a crucial football match Jess, the young Indian woman, makes an aggressive tackle on a member of the opposing team and is sent off the pitch by the referee. She loses her self-control, not on account of the previous fouls committed by the other player, but because the latter abuses her as 'Paki'. To be called 'Paki' causes an Indian woman great offence. For the white player, as for many audiences, all Asian-looking young people are 'Pakis', having little or no idea of the differences and the tensions that exist between the two distinct groups, Indians and Pakistanis. Audiences of young EFL students, by observing the emotions that the word 'Paki' provokes for Jess, a young woman of Indian origin, are motivated to seek an explanation of the long lasting political tensions between India and Pakistan in which the UK has been involved since Indian independence and the partitioning of India in 1947. This episode of the film ends with Joe's attempt to comfort Jess with the comment that as a British citizen of Irish stock, he can completely understand her indignation, even though he does not condone her violent reaction. This short dialogue serves to bring to the audience's attention the situation of Britons of Irish descent, often

lumped together by foreign learners of English, alongside the Scots and Welsh, under the label 'English'.

4.2 Hybridity and Diversity within the Microcosm of the Family

Interestingly, the abusive term 'Paki' also occurs in EIE – in this case coming from the mouth of twelve-year-old Sajid, the Khan family's youngest son who is himself half Pakistani. He uses the word to announce the arrival of the Pakistani Shah family, who are visiting the Khans with the intention of putting their two marriageable daughters in contact with Sajid's older brothers. The fact that the visit does not lead to the successful double wedding which the patriarchs had planned, because the two grown-up Khan sons Abdul and Tariq successfully pit themselves against their father, brings to a head tensions within the ethnically mixed family (Khan-Din 1999: 127-128). Especially in the film's scenes of greatest conflict, the Khan family presents the audience with a concrete example of the process of ethnic mixing and its varied outcomes. It is actually not the case that all seven Khan children stand exactly half way between their strongly Muslim father on the one side and their liberal-minded English mother on the other. Rather, each child lives his or her own version of the Pakistani-English mix, from the rebellious Tariq, who wants to be totally English, to the deeply religious Maneer, who obediently follows his father. The subtle differences between them come sharply into focus in one particular scene in which Tariq, Saleem and Meenah eat bacon and sausages. Their brother Maneer is outraged that his brothers and sister should dare to consume pork, thereby disobeying the religious rules of their father, who is out of the house at the time.

4.3 The Development of Personality under the Influence of Cultural Hybridity

Most of the film AAM concentrates on the lengths Meena goes to in order to make herself as much as possible like her admired English friend Anita. She imitates Anita's clothes, her Midlands accent, her slang and her mannerisms. Meena is overjoyed when she finally manages to get her parents to allow her to invite Anita to supper. During the meal Anita not only whinges about the unfamiliar way the various dishes are presented together, but she also makes disparaging remarks about the Kumars' custom of eating with their fingers. To the astonishment of her family – and also of the audience – for the very first time Meena does not take Anita's side. She calmly goes on eating with her fingers and breaks the painful silence by saying: "We always eat our food with our fingers. [...] Like in all the top restaurants. Bet you didn't know that, did you?" (Syal 1997: 254).

She shows that she is better acquainted than Anita not just with Indian customs, but with English ones as well. For the first time and most emphatically she shows pride in her Indian origins. Meena has obviously learned to unite her British and Indian loyalties and to give her English friend a lesson in cultural awareness.

5. View the Right Thing - Value Added by the Film Text

Time and again teachers in schools and colleges are astonished to discover that courses in film analysis really do increase the motivation of their students. English language films, when they are chosen with care and followed up with inspiring tasks, can achieve much more than support the students' acquisition of foreign language skills and film literacy. The decisive 'value added' component of a British-Asian film is the way it widens the students' culture-specific knowledge and provides wonderful material for the development of cultural competence. Films suitable for the classroom are not those originating from the realm of High Art and Literature: audiences can also learn a great deal from the productions of everyday culture – culture with a small 'c'. This is well illustrated by the example of the wonderfully funny British-Asian TV series *Goodness Gracious Me*. This sitcom, immensely popular in Great Britain, consists of a series of very short sketches, which never fail to challenge the cultural perspectives of the programme's audience. One example is the sketch in which four Indians attempt unsuccessfully to get their tongues round the apparently simple English name of a new colleague, Jonathan, a tongue-twister to speakers of a subcontinental language. Most of us at one time or another have had the experience of being unable properly to articulate an east European or African or Asian name – but once the *Goodness Gracious Me* audience sees Jonathan's irritation, they realise exactly how someone feels when their own name is repeatedly mispronounced.

The ability to change perspective, to step outside one's own habitual point of view and experience, together with a corresponding willingness to place oneself in another's position, is undeniably a key component of cultural competence. Defamiliarization and empathy do not necessarily come naturally. Rather, they call for a conscious change of thinking, an acceptance of the confusion following from the suspension of one's habitual ways of looking at the world. Stories, pictures and films which force an audience into this unfamiliar position and encourage them via humour to a change of cultural perspective certainly count as 'the right thing'. Fortunately, the small British film industry has produced a great many such films.

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Films

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