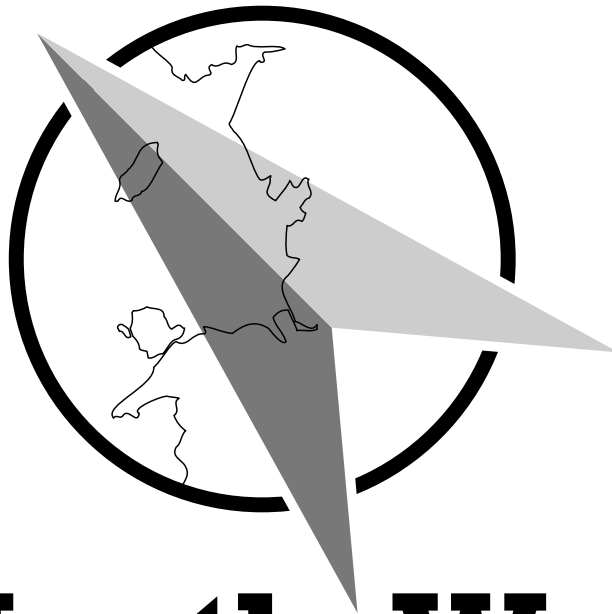


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Representing regional life: the place discourses of *Granada Tonight*

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Abstract

This paper analyses a regional news bulletin in order to illustrate the ways in which media discourse may contribute to popular understandings about place and social relations. Initially then, the programme *Granada Tonight* is shown to buy into dominant and conventional discourses about North West 'reality' and, as such, reaffirm the historical 'othering' of North West culture in the regional and national psyche. However, the same text is then shown to be the site for resistant or oppositional ideas that undermine conventional discourse and encourage a more pro-active North West political culture.

Keywords

Media discourse, television, *Granada Tonight*, North West, place imagery.

Introduction: media and common-sense realities

The cultural turn in geography has re-charged the debate over the social practices of place construction and representation. At the heart of this endeavour, Rose (1994) identifies a concern with 'the cultural politics of place' – the process through which power, ideology and cultural practice may combine to legitimate and naturalise place images and representations (Agnew and Duncan 1989; Anderson and Gale 1992; Barnes and Duncan 1992; Cresswell 1993; Keith and Pile 1993; Massey 1994; Shields 1991; Shurmer-Smith and Hannam 1994). Geographers have also begun to deal more explicitly with how myth and imagination fuel the social construction of the spatial (Anderson 1983; Daniels and Rycroft 1994; Said 1978; Shields 1991; Shurmer Smith and Hannam 1994). There is growing recognition that places are as much contested cultural creations with diverse intersubjective realities (Shurmer-Smith and Hannam 1994, 16), as they are material entities with an objective resonance. Thus, in general terms, one of the broad aims of the new cultural geography is to map the intersections of the symbolic, the imaginary and the material in order to address how social reality is variably defined and relations of power are reinforced (Keith and Pile 1993).

In this paper, I address how television news has a key role to play in constructing common-sense

realities about place and attendant social relations. As an everyday resource the news encourages us to reflect on our own 'place' and to make sense of 'others' in different places and social situations. Because the news, at least in popular discourse, is still largely identified as a 'trustworthy' and 'objective' narrator of social life we might suggest it has a certain power to inform our own personal and shared understanding about what is 'really' happening, 'out there' (Jensen 1990). As a case study I analyse an edition of *Granada Tonight*, the daily regional news magazine of Granada Television, the independent Channel 3 broadcaster for the North West of England and North Wales. Through an analysis of a single bulletin, I show how this programme uses particular forms of place discourse to fashion a daily, and selective, reconstruction of events in the North West.

Two major themes are identified. Firstly I address how *Granada Tonight* may be seen to reinforce convention-bound place discourses about Northern place and social relations. These discourses prescribe a polarity that draws sharp distinction between the bleak, uncivilised, powerless North and the cultured, civilised, powerful South (Pocock and Hudson 1978, Shields 1991, Jewell 1994). Secondly, I then contrast this conventional (mis)representation with evidence to show how *Granada Tonight* also challenges these historical myths through a concern

to foster a positive political resistance, largely against Central Government in London.

The media discourse

To investigate the construction of social meaning through discourse analysis is to move away from the notion that language is a mere 'transparent representation of the 'real'' (Hall 1980, 131) and to recognise that meaning is not given but socially produced. A discourse is a way of seeing the world, a particular mode of thinking and communicative expression on a subject. Discourse does not describe reality but offers a selective or ideological 'take' on that reality (Inglis 1990; Fairclough 1995).

For the media theorist the ways in which ideology is framed through discourse and then transformed into the text is of central concern. Since the media can only offer a partial and reductive view of the world, the media theorist works to uncover those particular ideological values that are being selected, reinforced and embedded in texts as 'natural' and 'common-sense'. Common-sense rationality, however, is not pre-given; whose rationality is being presented in the media world must also be assessed:

'The 'commercial' character of television has then to be seen at several levels: as the making of programmes for profit in a known market; as a channel for advertising; and as a cultural and political form directly shaped by and dependent on the norms of a capitalist society, selling both consumer goods and a 'way of life' based on them, in an ethos that is at once locally generated, by domestic capitalist interests and authorities, and internationally organised, as a political project, by the dominant capitalist power' (Williams 1974, 41 cited in Inglis 1990, 127).

Because the authority and power of the television text is rooted in its capacity for 'naturalizing' particular views of the world (Abercrombie 1996), it is often assumed that media texts have a certain power to encourage audience subjects to accept what is presented as authentic and objective. In Williams's scheme audiences are recruited in the interests of the capitalist project, encouraged to conform to and accept the modalities of capitalist economy, society and culture as both natural and normal. Whilst media theorists would not deny this, many have argued for a more critical engagement with the complexities of media audiences. This has led to an 'ethnographic turn' in media research with more emphasis being placed upon the differential capa-

bilities of audience fractions to, in part, synthesise their own meanings from media texts (Bausinger 1984; Morley 1992; Ang 1996).

In this paper my interest is not to explicitly investigate the degree to which Granada Television acts as a purveyor of 'capitalist interests', or to understand the role of the 'active' audience. Rather, I want to address how *Granada Tonight*, at the textual level, uses particular place discourses to mark out the cultural characteristics of the English North and South. I focus on how commonsense ideas about the 'realities' of Northern (and by inference Southern) life are inscribed within the text and suggest that such inscriptions can contribute to popular understandings of North West people, place and culture. To focus solely on the text is not an attempt to disregard the significance of the political-economic contexts of media production, or to deny the analytical power of audience ethnographies. However, in agreement with Fairclough I would argue that textual analysis remains an integral part of media research since:

... although readings may vary, any reading is a product of an interface between the properties of the text and the interpretative resources and practices which the interpreter brings to bear on the text (1995, 16).

The text is still a valid object of inquiry. I would not however disagree with Radway (1984) who suggests that a more integrated approach might be a fruitful correspondence, through which theorists of the text, the audience and political-economy can work to educate one another.

The cultural production of North and South

By way of introduction, I wish to briefly sketch out a history of the cultural opposition between the English North and South. Pocock and Hudson (1978) note that a popular contrast developed throughout the nineteenth century, as the Northern, industrial middle class which emerged began to agitate against the political, economic and cultural elite to the South. Similarly, the accelerated development of a Northern, urban working class had also begun to unsettle the decision makers of the metropolis (Briggs 1968; Pocock and Hudson 1978; Shields 1991; Taylor *et al.* 1996).

In response to these changes, and initially through cultural channels such as the regional novel, Southern elites consolidated the opposition between

the pastoral, sophisticated south and the urbanised, uncivilised north (Pocock and Hudson 1978). The dialogue between the novel and the formal structures of the State are no better exemplified by Disraeli's *Sybil; The Two Nations* (1845), an influential work that contrasted wealthy London with the industrial culture of 'Mowbray' (reputedly based on Manchester). Similarly Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854) offers a definitive bourgeois treatment of the Northern town; 'Coketown' is propped up as a spatial Aunt Sally:

'It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but, as matters stood it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage ... [i]t had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill smelling dye ... [i]t contained several large streets all very like one another ... inhabited by people equally like one another ... to whom everyday was the same as yesterday and tomorrow ...' (1979, 65).

Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) and North and South (1855), Bennett's *Anna of the Five Towns* (1902), Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913) and Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) are firmly located within a literary tradition that reduced the North and South to separate and internally undifferentiated unities; the latter desirable, the former 'festering in planless chaos' (Orwell 1985, 45). These representations became cemented in political and educational discourse (Pocock and Hudson 1978), with little consideration of how the North might be a diverse or fragmented entity, or indeed, how the North might be constituted in the eyes of its inhabitants. To live North of London was to reside in a vast hinterland blanketed with parochial industrial drabness; no matter that the regional novel might beset in Manchester, or Nottinghamshire or the Potteries; little internal difference was acknowledged within this vast periphery. During the late 1950s and early 1960s the 'authentic' experience of the (largely Northern) working classes were pushed to the forefront of the 'new wave' of artistic endeavour (Laing 1986). Despite good intentions the protagonists took a rather reactionary view of Northern culture; for instance 'Kitchen Sink' realist cinema¹ has often been criticised as overly poetic or apt to augmentation of stereotyped 'drab' imagery (Higson 1984). The power of the naturalized gaze of 'social realist' film once again reduced the North to an undifferentiated unity; a distant grey other

where 'real' working class 'landscape and stories' (Lovell 1990) could be found.

This contrast would continue. Significantly, Granada Television emerged at a time when one of the espoused concerns of cultural elites was to understand and articulate the day to day concerns of proletarian culture (Laing 1986). As Granada established itself as a voice for the North it too would buy into these convention-bound notions of what the North was really like – *Coronation Street* being the prime example (Dyer *et al.* 1981, Laing 1986, Lovell 1990). Today, traces remain of this history; here I show how *Granada Tonight* harks back to traditional notions of Northern culture and community through appeals to nostalgia, working class solidarity and the exclusion of social and spatial 'others'. However I also want to show how these myths have been re-worked through the development of confrontational political opposition to Central Government; a pro-active agenda that seeks to establish the region as a capable political community. I would argue that the recognition of such a capability, or potential, has largely been absent from popular artistic conceptions of the Northern life.

Granada and *Granada Tonight*

Granada Television began broadcasting from Manchester in 1956. Founded and initially controlled by the socialist entrepreneur Sidney Bernstein, the company has continued to conform to his ideals of quality commercial broadcasting with a public service conscience (Black 1972; Laing 1986; Moorehead 1984). Bernstein re-christened the region 'Granadaland'; a place, in his words, inhabited by an 'homogenous, cultured group', bound together in a 'close knit industrial society' (Granada 1981). Today the term is regularly invoked to convey a sense of solidarity and shared interest. As the largest single supplier of output to the Channel 3 network, Granada Television continues to generate substantial profits for its parent company Granada Group plc (Baker 1996). Longevity, a commitment to quality regional programming and a number of extramural community projects such as the *Granada Community Challenge* (Granada 1995) have reinforced its high profile presence as a 'voice' of the North West.

Granada Tonight broadcasts from Manchester, with a brief opt-out to Liverpool, between 6.00 and 6.30 pm every week day. Comprising of a series of

short reports on 'happenings' across the region, studio presenters link together an amalgam of 'hard' news and lighter 'human interest' items. The format of the show draws on the conventions of news bulletin structure (Glasgow University Media Group 1976), with the formal 'hard' news at the start of the bulletin giving way to 'human interest' items, where an informal style is adopted to reflect on the regional culture. The programme concludes with a summary of the headlines, the weather and a preview of items which will be presented in tomorrow's edition. The bulletin used here was broadcast on Monday 25th March 1996; one of the editions recorded over a two week study of the regional output of Granada (Table 1). This edition is discussed as it contains clear and typical examples of the principal bipolar relation between 'conventional' and 'oppositional' discourses; a relation found to be dominant both quantitatively and qualitatively over the study period (Banks 1996).

Item summaries: convention and opposition

Conventional discourses:

The idea that the North is unwelcoming or suspicious towards 'outsiders' has a long history (Jewell 1994). An item reports how Diane Modahl, the athlete wrongly accused of drug use, recently cleared her name after a protracted legal battle. As a North West citizen Diane's troubles are of interest to *Granada Tonight* viewers as the story recounts how

she took on various external authorities in her fight. The tone is unambiguous; Diane is 'our' athlete who had been 'falsely branded a cheat' by outsiders and the narrative fulfils conventional news requirements for a 'feel good' resolution to a human interest story. Similar appeals were made in the 'holiday disasters' item which highlighted the hidden dangers of package holidays. Although this story was not particularly concerned with North West place, it was intriguing in the sense that it showed the dangers of engaging with outsiders in foreign places. A litany of disasters are unveiled as Granadaland inhabitants ('ordinary people') move outside of their milieu and engage with foreigners. Our 'victims' reveal how they received an apartment above a 'booming disco' and how there 'wasn't any English person, no rep to greet us'. Stereotyped images of the package experience are conveyed as we are warned of the dangers of unscrupulous travel agents and untrustworthy foreigners. Finally, we are given some practical advice on how to avoid 'holiday horrors'.

It has been argued that in nineteenth century Manchester, for the masses, cultural guidance and moral sustenance were provided by the self-styled 'Manchester Men' (Kidd 1993; Tickell and Peck 1996). Outside of their mercantile interests, this loose coalition of industrialists were given to indulgence in acts of civil philanthropy to bolster their self-styled image as 'custodians of a gendered, as well as a class-based morality' (Tickell and Peck 1996, 606). This

Table 1: Item content of Granada Tonight: 25.3.96

Item number	Location of item	Principal content or focus
1	Chester	Effects of BSE on farming industry.
2	Warrington	New young offenders institution.
3	Clwyd	Fire service funding cuts.
4	Manchester	Murder inquiry.
5	Ashton-under-Lyne	Murder inquiry.
6	Manchester	Local doctor sacked for 'moonlighting'.
7	Liverpool	Music concert: the 'Summer Pops'.
8	Manchester	Diane Modahl case.
9	Region	Holiday disasters.
10	Region	Football round-up.
11	Gwynedd	Motor sport round-up.
12	Liverpool	Concert ticket competition.
13	Chorley	Fred Talbot answers viewers' questions.
14	Region	Weather.
15	Llandudno	Archive footage of trams.

tradition of 'correct' cultural guidance persists in *Granada Tonight*. An item reveals that to celebrate Granada's fortieth birthday, the Manchester Hallé and the Liverpool Philharmonic orchestras are to play together for the first time in a 'unique event'. As the presenters inform the viewers that Granada has succeeded in uniting the cities of Manchester and Liverpool, self-referentiality is bolstered by the selection of *Coronation Street* actor Roy Barraclough as host for the event, and the promise that an array of North West stars would be invited to recall their associations with the company. To my mind this event was typically Granada; classical music with the common touch, the blending together of 'high' and 'low' culture (Granada 1981, Moorehead 1984). The philanthropic, paternalistic ambition to regulate the cultural tastes of the masses is also invoked in the story of the 'Summer Pops', a public concert by the Liverpool Philharmonic. Appeals are made for viewers to shake off any prejudices towards classical music because not only will the repertoire range 'from the classics to the Beatles' but it is also being brought to the people via a marquee on the Liverpool waterfront, and in the words of the composer Carl Davis, 'no-one has any problems about going into a big top'.

I want to suggest that one of the stock signifiers of North West culture is what I will call the loveable comic eccentric. This figure appears in various guises throughout the history of popular culture; George Formby, Frank Randle, Billy Liar, Reg Holdsworth; comic personalities that somehow embody the essence of warm hearted, simple Northern humour. *Granada Tonight* has its own versions. In this story we meet Fred Talbot the scatty weatherman who is routinely called into action to front popular 'scientific' items, answer viewers' queries (in a slot entitled 'Right said Fred') and present the weather in his child-like, excitable manner. Reflecting a music hall and cinematic tradition, Fred embodies the 'Northern' qualities of the ordinary 'little man' bluffing his way through the lighter vagaries of life.

Nostalgia and a shared belief in the 'community past', a mythical golden era of urban kinship, has often been associated with the North (Taylor *et al.* 1996). A recurring theme within *Granada Tonight* is the exploration of the relationship between the regional past and present. Archive footage of trams in Llandudno 'in the old days' was dusted off in

order to give the viewers 'a touch of nostalgia'. Over the two week study period it was noted that direct and indirect excursions into the past were a regular occurrence. I propose that such items are valuable in providing the modern viewer with a link into the perceived traditions of the North West; stock icons of working class community past are frequently invoked to symbolise a time when social relations were somehow steeped in an all pervasive goodwill that warmed the individual and collective heart. Resuscitations of the past are also used to underline the need for community in the present and to remind viewers that not only do they have a tradition to uphold, but that Granada itself is embedded in that tradition and has a role to help maintain and reinforce a sense of collective North West identity. The implicit assumption is that the people of the region value and pursue social arrangements that precipitate this collective sense of worth; arrangements that are irresistibly rooted in mythologies of a white, organic, industrial, community past (Taylor *et al.* 1996).

Oppositional discourses:

In contrast to the convention-bound discourse, here I elaborate on how *Granada Tonight* also presents a political and oppositional agenda. The lead story is an update on the 'beef crisis', backed by today's news that the Government seems unlikely to recommend a programme of mass slaughter for infected cattle. The crisis is pitched as an external problem, constructed by Government and imposed upon the 'ordinary' farmers of the North West. The presenter invites us to sympathise with 'confused and concerned' farmers who are portrayed as helpless and at the mercy of the vicissitudes of Westminster. Images of farmers at home watching the Health Secretary, Stephen Dorrell, on the television, cast Government as an external but authoritative intruder into the home and the region. The history and continuity of regional farming is emphasised to show the invasive nature of both Government and BSE – both are seen as equal 'intruders' with disruptive potential. The presenter suggests that this is an attack on the history and security of the region;

... [the] family have been farming cattle on this site outside Chester since 1919. In our region ... it's thirty years since they [farmers] faced a crisis on this scale ...

In analysing news stories it is useful to think of absent narratives, or rather alternative explanations for the issue in hand (Fiske and Hartley 1978). To consider what is not said helps us to hone in on the specificity of the stance taken by a narrator. For instance in this story we might ask; why was any contribution to the crisis that may have been made by practices internal to the farming industry not considered? Does the wider public see the crisis in terms of Government-versus-the-rest? Labour MP Gwyneth Dunwoody is shown speaking for the concerns of 'mothers and grandmothers' who, as custodians of the 'ordinary' family, 'are not scientists' but confused and helpless consumers let down by an indecisive Government. The emphasis on female confusion ties in with the wider confusion the region – seemingly the region is female, weakened and under threat!

A similar sense of siege or invasion informs the coverage of the development of a young offenders institution in Warrington (or in Granada's terms an 'American style boot camp'). Immediately we are invited to resist this intrusion. Again we are pitched against the Government (embodied by the Home Secretary, Michael Howard) as they try to impose an unwanted presence in 'our' region. Images of American institutions punctuate the story; young men undergoing various drills, regimentations and disciplines. Statistics are relied upon to show how the system has failed in America and how, in Britain too, the 'short, sharp, shock' treatment has failed to curtail crime increases. Labour MP George Howarth is interviewed criticising the project and the presenter is also keen to detail the futility of such solutions. From the Government, Prisons Minister Anne Widdicombe is very briefly interviewed extolling the virtues of the project and predicting its success but she (unlike the presenter) is unable to use any statistics to back up her claims. It is clear that 'we' are assumed not to want this expensive and ill-conceived project in 'our' region, as the presenter concludes:

'In all, sixty young offenders will be housed here at a cost, so far, of just under two million pounds.'

Again, the distinction between 'us' and 'them' is reinforced when a presenter informs us that 'Fire chiefs in North Wales are set to clash with the Government over spending cuts' and begins to position the problem as a dispute between hard

working, hard pressed public servants against a distant and mean Government. Often television news has been accused of partiality against unions in favour of 'management' or Government (Fiske 1992; Glasgow University Media Group 1976, 1980) and it is interesting here to see a reversal as Granada implicitly takes sides with the unions when the dispute is with Central Government. One of the codes that underpins the Granada style is 'North West good, Westminster bad' and any perceived interference or imposition from Westminster is viewed as a violation. Over the two weeks *Granada Tonight* became less sympathetic to the unions and the industrial action when the dispute was internalised within the North West, i.e. between North West workers and North West management (Banks 1996). On these occasions the narrative would revert to a more conventional treatment whereby labour grievances were glossed over and the likely disruption for management and consumers was emphasised (Fiske 1992; Glasgow University Media Group 1980).

In this story fire-fighters' union representatives are interviewed and allowed to state their case. The union officials are seen attending a formal meeting and the use of fast camera edits signify the urgency of the crisis as officials discuss plans for future action. The opposing (Government) point of view is not aired.

Conclusions

From an analysis of the place discourses contained within an edition of *Granada Tonight* two dominant themes emerged. Firstly, the concentration on community, stability and stock signifiers of regional culture (trams, *Coronation Street*, comic personalities) and 'commonsense' are all highly conservative foci that fail to incorporate any sense that the North West is multicultural, internally heterogeneous or has in fact moved away from its traditional image as the 'Land of the Working Class' (Laing 1986). *Granada Tonight* helps reinforce these projections through its reliance on symbolic forms that tie into these historical 'truths' about the North and North West. Such popular 'truths' contribute to the continued subordination of the North to the South in political, cultural and economic terms (Pocock and Hudson 1978). In an age when it is becoming increasingly vital to have the correct 'image' – especially for

attracting investment in economic and cultural strategies – then arguably a continued emphasis on caricatured elements of a mythical past may only serve to reinforce the national (and perhaps global) image of a region in decline.

Secondly, in contrast to this reactionary imagery, a recurring motif of *Granada Tonight* was an intrinsic opposition to the actions of Government. Viewers were presented with accounts of how Central Government consistently interferes in the 'running' of the region, the BSE story being the prime example. By undermining the authority of Government and proclaiming the integrity and autonomy of a discrete and capable North West culture, Granada adopts the role of regional 'public servant'. This concern to instil a political resistance to 'Government' and the 'South' has a historical precedent: consider the words of Forman, Bernstein's collaborator in the early years of Granada:

'One of the important things in television is to be able to make programmes about things that people don't want you to make programmes about. And unless you do that fairly frequently and with a good deal of vigour, you'll find that you're penned in and penned back. All the forces of Government and the establishment want you to make the programmes that are helpful to Government and this is not at all our job. Often it is our job to make programmes the Government will not like one little bit' (Forman 1981, 99).

Throughout Granada's history, programmes such as *What the Papers Say*, *World in Action*, *Up-Front* and various dramas and documentaries (Moorehead 1984) have asserted the autonomy and political capability of the North West. *Granada Tonight* is part of this tradition through sustained opposition to the hegemony of Westminster and the 'South'. As successive Conservative governments have presided over the effective dissolution of regional and local government power bases then the opportunities for dissenting 'voices' to be heard from the provinces have diminished. Thus I would argue that Granada's attempts to sustain critical commentary on the regional consequences of Central Government policy is particularly significant.

In final summary then, through an analysis of the discourses of *Granada Tonight*, I have illuminated upon the conservatism inherent to the programme; but also shown how the same text promotes interests that in part challenge the ideological imperatives of dominant discourses on North West cultural life. I would argue that such an apparent paradox lends preliminary support to theories that identify texts as sites where both hegemonic and counter hegemonic discourses can cross cut and co-exist (Rose 1994). However, these initial findings must be contextualised. To understand more fully the power and significance of the *Granada Tonight* discourse, we would have to consider how other influential discourses and practices that are brought to bear on the text prior to, and during, its construction, and further, within contexts of consumption (Morley 1992, Radway 1984). Further we might want to consider a comparative analysis where the work of Granada is placed in context with the work of, for instance, the BBC or other producers of regional media imagery and information.

Notwithstanding these concerns I would suggest that critical engagement with the ways in which media texts work to construct, classify and represent different places and social relations offer geographers a departure point for a more general appreciation of the ways in which power arrangements are reproduced and social reality defined. In an age when the media has emerged as the dominant site for the exchange and dissemination of ideas and percepts that shape our experience (Inglis 1990), then this critical engagement becomes essential. In this paper I have provided only one example of how a media text may work to reinforce and challenge a set of place-based social relations. The wider project is to track, from the local to the global, how media forms work to construct selves and others, inclusions and exclusions, and to map the political consequences of, and responses to, such activity.

Notes

1. For example, *Room at the Top* (dir. Jack Clayton 1958), *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Karel Reisz 1960), *A Taste of Honey* (Tony Richardson 1961), *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (Tony Richardson 1962), *A Kind of Loving* (John Schlesinger 1962), *Billy Liar* (John Schlesinger 1963) and *This Sporting Life* (Lindsay Anderson 1963).

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