
ISBN: 0 82644 733 3 (pb)

267pp

£16.99

(Review copy supplied by Continuum International Publishing Group)


ISBN: 1 86064 563 1 (hb)

262pp

£35.00

"Men and women, now and then, in British cinema"


How different it is now. Then, nobody seemed to care much about the absence of any sustained critical discourse on British cinema. Now, scarcely a month seems to go by without a new book emerging on the subject, and not just any old book but books of high critical merit. In fact, the steady stream of interest that has found its way between covers in the last few years is surely one of the phenomena of film book publishing. It has no doubt fed on an invigorated interest in British film, as art form and industry; in its turn, it has fed into that interest, so that publishing and a culture of British cinema exist symbiotically. Alan Lovell once called Britain's "the unknown cinema"; what was once undiscovered territory is now being thoroughly ploughed and the results are heartening indeed.

There are several particularly encouraging aspects of recent books. They are not locked into an unproductive auteurism or elitism that would seek to establish a few
alpine heights and dismiss the rest. They represent many different theoretical approaches to the mapping of what was once more or less unknown territory (as, perhaps, Hollywood cinema was before critics started to take it seriously in the '60s): they may use feminist theory or theories relating to cultural production or the genre approach to provide a framework for their examinations of what is now seen to be a very rich cinema whose study for a long time suffered from various kinds of cultural snobbery. However, they wear their theory lightly enough: both the books under particular discussion here, and half a dozen others that have appeared in recent months are entirely accessible to people who would rather not read Screen. Their emphasis is on actual film texts; they all show a willingness to look well beyond the accepted canon, so that, though they may well look carefully at the films of Michael Powell, they are equally likely to consider what Betty Box or Lewis Gilbert was making in the '50s or '60s; they know that films are made in shifting contexts, that the studio system in place during and after World War 2 has been replaced by new kinds of film-making deals and consortia.

The following books are not of course all of equal merit, but it is true to say that all offer real rewards for anyone interested in British cinema - or for anyone who wants to find out what it is/was like at its most popular levels as well as in its more rarefied achievements. Apart from the two books for closer scrutiny here, I would list the following to suggest the efflorescence I mean: Robert Murphy's rigorous study of British cinema and the second world war (2001), such critical explorations as Geoffrey Macnab's Searching for stars: rethinking British cinema, Tony Williams's Structures of desire: British cinema, 1939-1955, Christine Geraghty's British cinema in the fifties: gender, genre and the new look, Sarah Street's British cinema in documents, and Duncan Petrie's Screening Scotland, and Steve Chibnall's exemplary study of an undervalued director, J Lee Thompson, all from 2000 alone, while there can rarely have been a more attractive book about a single film than Charles Drazin's In search of the Third Man (1999). As well, there have been such valuable anthologies as Jeffrey Richards's The unknown 19'30s : an alternative history of British cinema, 1929-1939 (1998, reprinted in pb 2000) and Chibnall and Murphy's British crime cinema (1999). This list is just to suggest the range of film that has been canvassed - and the varied breadths of canvas on which the authors/editors have been prepared to range. None of these is mere survey, each has a point of view: together, they - and others not mentioned - justify my use of the word "phenomenon".

The insights of Harper's and Spicer's books show the benefits of a scholarly approach and of a commitment both to close analysis and to the articulation of the shifting filmic and more broadly cultural and social contexts in which the films need to be considered. They are both written with a zeal for their subjects which makes the books both a pleasure to read and valuable social documents.

Harper's primary concerns are, first, to scrutinise the textual representation of women in British films from the '30s to the '90s and, second, to provide a survey of the difficulties facing women in the industry. Both of these two enterprises are very worthwhile and both throw up fascinating material but one might quibble and suggest that each could have sustained an entire book rather than two halves which, while connected, involve different kinds of research. There is obviously a link between the kinds of images of women in the films and the number of women working in the industry and their functions, but there isn't really enough room in the book to pull these together as firmly as one might wish. However, this is not to undermine the real usefulness and passion of each of the book's halves.

Reading sometimes "against the grain" and adopting a chronological view, Harper
distinguishes dexterously among the various patterns of female representation that obtained in succeeding decades. She is, for instance, especially interesting about the "split" heroines of wartime films in which the "sensible girls" of the '30s had metamorphosed into strong, still feminine presences like those associated with, say, Deborah Kerr and Wendy Hiller, or those "wicked ladies" who kicked against the pricks, as it were, of domestic restraint and kept one's sympathies even when they came to bad ends, or the women of Ministry of Information shorts whose function was to remind a temporarily dislocated nation of the benefits of patriarchal structures. The discriminations involved here are intelligently placed in an exceptional social context, and the accounts of individual actresses and their films do not lose sight of this. This rewarding pattern of exploration of images and contexts is pursued in the analysis of the postwar scene in which Anna Neagle's persona is seen as a middle-class reassurance in the face of convulsive change. Further, Harper is very astute in picking her way through the kinds of representation fostered by such key film-makers as Herbert Wilcox, Alexander Korda, Ealing Studios (to whom women often seemed a site of danger and distaste) and the Archers, who displayed women as "erotic beings; but that is all they are").

There is a different sort of scholarship at work in Part II. Individual chapters are devoted to women as producers, writers, directors, costume designers, art directors and editors. (Were there no cinematographers? Probably not. What about the legendary continuity "Girls", like Tilly Day and Angela Martelli?) Harper's excavations in this section throw up masses of information which will be new to many people. Of course she rightly talks about that very proficient producer Betty Box and her feminist sister-in-law Muriel Box who had such difficulty in establishing herself as a director. However, it is even more interesting to hear about those women film-makers whose very names have scarcely been sighted/cited in the conventional studies of British cinema: for example, the Hammer producer Aida Young, "promoted to full producer when another producer broke his leg"; the screenwriter Marjorie Deans, a fascinating peripheral figure in British cinema for two decades; or Launder and Gilliat's director Thelma Connell. It is not necessary to agree that they all did marvellous work; what is marvellous is how they persisted and got anything done at all. Harper collaborated on the 1983 breakthrough BFI Dossier, Gainsborough melodrama; she has done as much as anyone to examine the importance of the representation and function of women in British cinema.

Spicer's book aims at and achieves "an empirical but theoretically informed cultural history of the changing images of men in British cinema from the Second World War to the present". The strength of this elegantly and wittily written book is that, in the precision of its detail about individual performances, actors and films, it never loses sight of its argumentative threads. He establishes very early his understanding of "changing and competing types", his appropriation of the Foucauldian concept of gender as "cultural performance", and his grasp of the "shifting context of production" against and in the light of which he will situate his examination of "typical men". In the simplest terms, his argument is that the types favoured in any period will mutate, either subtly or radically, within the dictates of hegemony. At the start of WW2, for example, the debonair gentleman as personified by Leslie Howard, and the Fools and Rogues, like George Formby and Will Hay, were two types which were wholly acceptable to film audiences. Very skilfully, Spicer argues that these gave way during the war years to other types: to the Common Man as hero, obviously a crucial identificatory figure for the necessary consensualism of the war years (cf. David Niven's Perry in The way ahead (UK 1944)) and John Mills's Everyman; and, to answer another kind of psychic and ideological need, to the Byronic hero, personified by James Mason and the "muscular eroticism" (Spicer has a way with the telling phrase) of Stewart Granger. The '30s fools and rogues were
joined by and then displaced by such new exemplars as Tommy Trinder and Frank Randle. As the war dragged on there were two key mutations which would have repercussions in the postwar period: Damaged Men and Criminals, men whom war had treated ill and men who had made a good thing from it.

It is tempting to go through this richly documented study in this sort of detailed way, but it is better to let the book speak for itself rather than try to run a parallel discourse. Right up to his examination of, say, present-day damaged men, such as the unemployed protagonists of The full monty (UK 1997) (Carlyle is characterised as an Underclass Everyman but their society has "damaged" the masculinity of these men), Spicer keeps his eye firmly on his agenda. (It is good to report that the study is not so solemn as to preclude the wit of describing Monty's men as "workers who have nothing to lose but their underpants".) No major actor of British cinema of the last fifty years has been ignored (nor have quite a few minor ones) and the diagnoses of such disparate "types" as Stanley Baker, Anthony Steel, Dirk Bogarde, Hugh Grant and many others constitute an important addition to the archaeological work on popular British cinema.

"Popular", both these writers (and the others I listed above) have fully understood the significance of popularity when writing about cinema. "Mainstream" is a term sometimes used contemptuously but it is after all where the overwhelming majority audiences are swimming and it is good to have its currents so definitively - and entertainingly - mapped.

Brian McFarlane