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In the remarkable upsurge in scholarly study of British cinema which has characterised the last few years, one of the most heartening aspects has been the exploration of its earliest days. While everyone interested in film has always known about D.W. Griffith, Mack Sennett and Lillian Gish, indeed about everyone to do with Hollywood then or now, the same people were less likely to be *au fait* with the achievements of R.W. Paul or Charles Urban or Betty Balfour.

There were Rachel Low's sturdy groundbreaking seven-volume survey *History of British film*, of which the first four books (1949-71) take us up to 1929, and John Barnes' five-volume, more idiosyncratic series *The beginnings of the cinema in England: 1894-1901*, eventually published under a uniform title in 1996-98. These two works of vast scholarship to some extent mapped out the field with which the book under discussion is concerned. As well as a steady stream of writing about early British cinema, there have been conferences (the present volume owes its genesis to one such held at the University of East Anglia in 1998) and websites devoted to its study.

*Young and innocent* is the work of names well known for their contributions to early cinema studies and of newer scholars who have found material well worth their archaeological excavation. It covers the period from late Victorian cinema, when the moving visual image was still a new phenomenon, to the arrival of the talkies, charting major developments along the way. It gives a potent sense of intense, sometimes passionate activity, prolific - probably - beyond what any casual knowledge of the growth of British cinema might have suggested.

The over-riding approach of the most recent work, including *Young and innocent*, is anti-teleological. That is, we are not being asked to view early cinema in terms of a long-term prognosis of what it would become but to value, document and analyse its achievements for their own sake. This is both valuable as historical survey and as means of understanding how cinema came to be the sort of art and entertainment it
was. In his excellent "Introduction", Higson writes:

To adopt such a [teleological] perspective is often to overlook what cinema was at
the time - what its constituent parts were, how they operated together, but also how
they related to other contemporary practices, other media, entertainment and leisure
activities of the period.(2)

Certainly, one of the striking merits of this book is the way in which early British
cinema is constantly being placed in a variety of contexts, as a result of which its
nature and importance emerge with greater clarity.

For instance, it is obviously viewed in relation to the growth of cinema as a world
phenomenon, as it moved towards - though not inevitably - a narrative end, and,
further down the track, towards the feature-length narrative entertainment. It also
takes into account the early practices of distribution and exhibition, the kinds of
programmes favoured (with, again, the feature coming to dominate), as well as the
general cultural and ideological climate in which filmgoing became an established
leisure-time activity. In relation to the latter, there is fascinating material on the
conjunction of early film with the idealised Shakespearean/pastoral myth-making
activity of cultural artificers or on the place of Africa and Empire as concepts which
fed sorts of film-making other than the fictional variety. As well, the book places
British silent cinema of the '20s in the context of the emergent film culture that
became focused in such institutions as The Film Society and such journals as Close
up.

And while drawing attention to the valuable contextualising of the film-making of its
period, one should also praise the editorial decision to include a section on
"Bibliographical and Archival Resources". This section emphasises the importance
of trade periodicals in building up a sense of British film as an industry and gives a
fascinating insight into the growth of film writing in daily newspapers. Young and
innocent is aware equally of film as exercising a cultural elite who wanted to see it
as having a status comparable to that of the other arts and of film as an
unstoppably engrossing form of popular entertainment.

The book's over-all approach ensures a very comprehensive coverage of its chosen
subject and period but its organisation also allows for treatment in depth where
appropriate. There are, for instance, revealing accounts of a significant early
film-maker such as Charles Urban (by archivist Luke McKernan, who maintains a
website on Urban) or of an individual film such as Cecil Hepworth's Alice in
wonderland (1903), by Higson, who uses the film as a site for identifying key
concepts at work in early film such as its relation to the literary text, the idea of a
"cinema of attractions" and the development of cinematic narrative techniques.
Those only dimly aware of the names of early British film-makers - for example,
Urban, Hepworth, James Williamson (his "rescue narratives" are discussed by
Frank Gray) or screenwriter Eliot Stannard (in an essay by Charles Barr,
speculating on Hitchcock's serious, and unacknowledged, indebtedness to
Stannard) - will be grateful for the sustained attention they receive here from people
who know their subjects well.

Those who do not know British silent cinema well, or at all, may be amazed at its
range and prolificacy. World War 1 enabled Hollywood to assert a supremacy in
production and exhibition which it never subsequently lost, but this book makes
clear that there are nevertheless rich pickings in British silent cinema. Before
narrative claimed the cinema for its own, there was a range of other kinds of
film-making (films made to record music hall performances or for scientific
purposes, for example), and various authors offer perceptive readings of the
connections between film and the other arts, especially the theatre and literature.
Some of the essays are a little dry (including Mike Walsh’s account of the
post-WW1 reception of British films in Australia, though the subject is not perhaps
conducive to the kinds of immediacy of impression which most of the others give)
but the over-all standard is very high, representing rigorous scholarly research.

If a reviewer may be permitted to choose some favourites, I should choose: Michael
Williams’s very evocative distillation of Ivor Novello’s postwar fame, as a key star for
troubled times, his mass appeal (though primarily to women) as “war-torn
Dionysus”; and the exemplary accounts of the work of Ivor Montagu, one of the
founders of The Film Society, and the hugely important Iris Barry, critic and curator.
These latter two are symptomatic of this admirable book’s great strength: that is, in
the eclecticism of their interest in film, neither dauntingly elitist, though wanting film
to take its place as a respected art form, nor mindlessly populist, but aware of film's
demotic appeal.

Brian McFarlane