Laraine Porter and Bryony Dixon (eds.),
Picture Perfect: Landscape, Place and Travel in British Cinema before 1930.
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One of the most heartening and, indeed, exciting revelations of film studies in recent years has been the bringing to light – and to a wider readership – the fascinating riches of early British cinema history. In this online journal I have reviewed in the last couple of years several key works of this rewarding excavation including Young and innocent? The cinema in Britain 1896-1930, edited by Andrew Higson, and The lost world of Mitchell & Kenyon: Edwardian Britain on film, edited by Vanessa Toulmin et al, both of them valuable testimony to a period of film productivity that had too long remained uncharted.

This latest volume focuses on the significance of location in the first thirty years of cinema in Britain and it grows out of the enterprising British Silent Cinema festivals organised by the partnership of the British Film Institute and the Broadway Cinema, Nottingham. The 2003 festival took location as its unifying theme and Bryony Dixon expands on this theme in the opening essay, ‘Location, Location, Location’, in which she draws attention to the commercial savvy of early filmmakers in stressing British landscape and to the simplistically perceived binarism of the idealised countryside in counterpoint to the idea of urban corruption. As she suggests, and as several of the other authors will go on to articulate in some detail, there is a need to ‘debunk some myths and assumptions about early British cinema’.

One of the strengths of the collection is in the range of contributors. There are, as well as Dixon, who is a curator at the BFI National Archive, and co-editor Porter, a Director of Nottingham’s Broadway Media Centre, such respected academics as Ian Christie and Christine Gledhill, independent filmmakers, Michael Eaton and Patrick Keiller, cinema historian Tony Fletcher, and Ivo Bloom, an Amsterdam-based film lecturer, and a half-dozen others across an unusually eclectic spectrum. This ensures a lively diversity of approach which makes for refreshing reading when some of the same thematic territories are being canvassed. And the level of contribution is surprisingly uniform, the result of serious research, careful viewing and a real enthusiasm for the subject.

This subject – the use of locations in early British cinema – may sound limited but that's not the impression the book leaves one with. There are some clear, over-arching trajectories of interest that are articulated in relation to particular genres and to individual films. By this I mean that the essays explore such crucial dichotomies as North and South and rural and urban but very often with deconstructive intent to undermine the commonly accepted myths. In Tony Fletcher's essay, ‘On Location in Edwardian Britain: Urban and Rural Violence’, he finds rural landowners dealing as oppressively with the poorer classes as urban employers, and he is concerned to explore the way some of the films of the period 'blend actuality and fictional scenes in a sophisticated manner.’ In other words, he is not just making social points about class (or gender) but also drawing attention to stylistic and formal matters.

Though most of the essays resist easy formulations, there is a recurring stress on the pastoral as a key element in early British films. Paul Moody’s account of ‘The Marketing of Landscapes in Silent British Cinema’ discusses the ‘romanticized view of rural locations [which] was widely established in British culture by the twentieth century. Films such as George Loane Tucker’s The Manxman (UK 1916) and, most significantly, Cecil Hepworth’s Comin’ Thro’ the Rye (UK 1923) are examined from the point of view of how they were marketed partly in terms of their natural settings, as well as in relation to their precursor novels. Christine Gledhill makes another important point about the representation of landscape and pastoral in these films: she finds in them not just a sense of a fixity locked into the past but a real potential for their ‘transformative value’, in which ‘the pastoral facilitates a meeting between past and future’.

If rural landscapes were often marketed in contrast to the pressures of ‘urban modernity’, the films were not necessarily monolithic in obsession with the corruptions of city life. Even a film such as Will Barker’s Rogues of London (UK 1915), in which rural values may still ultimately assert their ascendancy, suggests, in Judith Cowan’s intelligent analysis, that it is more complicated than such an outcome might suggest. She makes it plain that the variety of life in the metropolis, brutal as some of it might be, offers a range of entertainments that permit a cross-class movement – which is in the interests, too, of propelling the narrative.

Another valuable aspect of this revealing volume is its insistence at various points on the way these early films connect to the everyday life of the time, as well as possibly sowing the seeds of British film’s ongoing preoccupation with realism and the documentary tradition. On the other hand, Amy Sargeant’s ‘Everyone’s Doing the Riviera’ is fascinated with the British idea of France and particularly of the Riviera as a site of both
'exotic' pleasure in narrative and of locations in British filmmaking. And, on yet another hand, filmmaker Patrick Keiller is struck by 'how little of the actuality of the past is recorded on film.' In this matter, Ian Christie's account of how screenings of actualities and/or recreations of episodes from the Anglo-Boer War at the turn of the nineteenth century is vividly detailed about just how the realities of life were, with varying degrees of intervention, put before audiences in North London.

Virtually everything in this admirable volume deserves to be noticed. In the absence of unlimited time and space, I'd say it is very welcome for the large general notions of early cinema which it subjects to scrutiny, for its close reading of films and genres (e.g., racing films) and for the scrupulous quality of its research. It takes its place honourably with those other books devoted to retrieving and reclaiming an important part of a national past.

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