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British Cinema from Hepworth to Hitchcock

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The tendency among film historians has always been to represent the British cinema as having had influential and innovative beginnings-the so-called British pioneers-but then to have fallen into decline and stagnation. From this perspective, as expressed for example by Georges Sadoul (1951), Rescued by Rover (Cecil Hepworth, 1905) is the high point. Films produced after that date, particularly in the period (1908-13) when one-reel dramatic narrative was dominant, have been neglected. Even writers like Barry Salt (1992), who has done a careful formal analysis of films from the early years, have focused perhaps unduly on fictional dramatic narrative, at the expense of the comic film and -- even more important -- the various forms of actuality film.

As a result of these historiographical biases, a certain injustice has been done to British films of the immediately post-'pioneer' period. Where there was innovation, it has been overlooked, or interpreted in the light of later developments, notably those that came to be part of the dominant Hollywood mode from 1913 onwards. In fact British films of the period were often quite sophisticated, particularly in the comic and actuality fields. Narrative editing, too, was often innovative -- but, unfortunately, the innovations tended to be in directions which went against the grain of what was to prove the dominant approach.

EARLY FORMAL DEVELOPMENTS

Before 1907-8, it was the actuality (in its broadest generic sense) and the comic film that dominated British production output. Producers were geographically widespread, although in the period after 1906 most of the production companies were located in or around London. Thousands of titles were produced; before 1902 most consisted of only one shot, but by 1905 lengthier films had led to the development of some reasonably complex editing strategies. For example, the point-of-view shot pair came into relatively early usage in British film. A particularly early example of this narrational strategy can be found in the Gaumont (British) film The Blacksmith's Daughter (1904). Here the second shot of the point-of-view shot pair is cued by having an old man lift a child up to look

over a fence, into a garden which a couple (the daughter of the title and her lover) have just entered. The second shot shows the field of vision; it lacks the presence in shot of the looker(s), but is taken from the space occupied by the man and the child in the previous shot. That this is intended as a point-of-view perspective is shown by the fact that the camera has been placed so as to shoot the scene through the fence, with the railings clearly visible in the second shot.

The Blacksmith's Daughter is not the only early British film that displays innovative shooting and editing strategies. The 1906 actuality A Visit to Peek Frean and Co.'s Biscuit Works (Cricks and Sharp, 1906) is remarkable not only for its relative length -- in excess of 2,000 feet when most fictional subjects were less than 500 feet -- but also because of its use of high-angle camera shots, panning, and tilt movement, and its use of scene dissection to give a more complete view of specific factory processes.

Despite the attention that has been paid by film historians to the development of early editing practices, one particular technique, which has relevance to comic, actuality, and fictional film narratives, has been largely overlooked; the jump cut in the context of shots which maintain a continuity of framing. For example, in The Missing Legacy; or, The Story of a Brown Hat (Gaumont Film Company, 1906), when a fight develops between the protagonist and three men, there is a cut at the point where the protagonist is wrestled to the ground. This is not 'lost footage' but a jump cut which allows the man's clothing to be reduced to tatters during the 'absent time' of the cut. The film-maker disguised this lack of clothing continuity by having the action staged largely out of frame, and by having the protagonist partially obscured by his attackers. Similarly, the jump cut is important in the narrative construction of some of the actuality films of the period. Thus in Building a British Railway -- Constructing the Locomotive (Urban, 1905) the jump cut (keeping continuity of framing) is used to create the temporal ellipsis that allows various stages in the process to be shown, including both initial and final stages of construction.

Film-makers of this period in fact showed considerable ingenuity in developing editing and shooting practices which ensured the effect they desired, whether in comic and actuality films or dramatic narrative films. For example, the device of the 'ingenious cheat' (Salt, 1992), whereby actor movement is used to simulate camera movement, has been noted in the case of Ladies Skirts Nailed to a Fence (Bamforth, 1900). However, this practice was not restricted to such comic sketches, but clearly also had a function in fictional dramatic narratives.

Cecil Hepworth's Rescued by Rover (1905) was a major commercial success, and in order to produce enough prints to meet demand, Hepworth's company remade the film twice. From a narrative perspective all three films are the same, but at the level of film form there are some small yet significant differences. In the first version of the film the scene in which the remorse-stricken nurse bursts into the room and confesses to the loss of the child is handled differently from the two later versions. The first version breaks this scene down into two shots, the second being filmed from a closer camera position and at a

slightly different angle to the action. The other two versions, however, simply use one shot -- the second camera set-up. Thus, on the face of it, the earliest version makes use of scene dissection, whilst the later versions do not. If we view scene dissection as a development in film form, then here we have a seeming regression. What has happened, however, is rather that the film-maker has learnt from the 'mistake' in the staging of the scene in the first version, in which the two shots of this scene register perceptually as a change of camera position when it is actually the actors who have moved. Thus by 1905 Hepworth had a clear idea of how close the camera should be to the staged action, and was prepared to move the actors forward to accommodate. When confronted by a similar problem in a scene in Falsely Accused, produced the same year, Hepworth moved the camera forward, since the staging of the action (with an attempted exit through a window being dramatically important) precluded the possibility of moving the actors.

THE MAIN FILM GENRES

The fact that British films in the period up to 1906-7 were successful and influential, nationally and internationally, has been well documented. Even contemporary critical writing confirms the view of the superiority of British films vis-à-vis their American counterparts. An editorial in the Projection Lantern and Cinematograph of July 1906 states, 'The cinematograph trade seems to be booming in the States. The demand for films is exceptionally heavy, with the result that very inferior subjects are being produced, many of which would not be tolerated at British halls'. The British success was derived from both innovative filmmaking (Fire!, Daring Daylight Burglary, Desperate Poaching Affray) and the fact that international markets were open. However, by 1912 the situation had reversed. The Moving Picture World of 20 January 1912 commented, 'English films in this country are a hopeless drug on the market and cannot even please the Canadians.' So why the fall? Hepworth himself, in his autobiography, refers to being 'not sufficiently alive to the many changes which were occurring in the industry', and such Hepworth films as Dumb Sagacity (1907) and The Dog Outwits the Kidnappers (1908) do show a remarkable similarity (in story and film form) to the earlier Rescued by Rover. Added to the perceived lack of quality of British films, and not unrelated, was the effective closure of the American market to British producers with the formation of the Motion Picture Patents Company in 1908.

It was around this time that the series film first appeared on British screens. The British and Colonial Kinematograph Company (hereafter B. & C.) moved into the production of series films at an early date. The Exploits of Three-Fingered Kate (First Series) was reviewed in the Bioscope in October 1909, and a number of series were to follow in the years leading up to the First World War. In terms of popular success none was more important than the Lieutenant Daring series, which first appeared in 1911; the Bioscope of 28 March 1912 published an interview (and photograph) of Lieutenant Daring, 'the famous English film actor'. However, since the interview was conducted with references solely to Daring the fictional character, and not to Percy Moran, the actor who played the role, then it would be more correct to refer to the notion of a picture personality rather than a star. From the perspective of film form these B. & C. series films are also interesting because of their use of emblematic shots (of the eponymous hero/heroine) at the end (or, less often, at the beginning) of the films. Their inclusion might be seen in

terms of a generic code, since shots of this type are relatively rare in other film genres, with the exception of the comic film, where again emblematic shots can be found at the beginning or end of the film in productions from various British companies.

The importance of the Daring series can also be gauged by the fact that, when B. & C. undertook a production trip to the West Indies in 1913 (something of a first for a British company to take its artists such a distance), Percy Moran was in the party, and at least one series entry was shot in Jamaica; Lt. Daring and the Dancing Girl. Although the West Indies was its most far flung and exotic shooting location, this company often made use of scenic location shooting, a fact that its publicity emphasized. For example, the first in the Don Qseries of films (1912) was advertised as having been filmed 'amidst Derbyshire's rugged and picturesque' hills, and this strategy of foregrounding scenic pleasure is structured into the film itself in The Mountaineer's Romance (1912), when an introductory title card announces, 'This Photo-Play Was Enacted Around The Beautiful Peak District, Derbyshire'.

The parodic film appeared relatively early in British film production. In the same year as Charles Urban first produced his Unseen World series of films, the Hepworth Company made a parody of it. The format of the Urban series was based on combining the technologies of the microscope and the movie camera, to produce magnified views of the 'natural world'. Hepworth's The Unclean World (1903) has a man place a piece of the food he has been eating under a microscope. A circular mask shot then reveals two beetles, but the joke is realized when two hands enter the frame and turn the beetles over, revealing their clockwork mechanisms.

It was with the series film, however, that the parody almost developed into a genre in its own right. B. & C.'s 'Three-Fingered Kate', who is continually eluding the hapless Detective Sheerluck, may well be a direct parody of Éclair's 'Nick Carter -- le roi des détectives'. The sending up of current events, and particularly current film releases, was the stock-in-trade of Fred Evans, the most successful screen comic in Britain around 1913-14, who in the latter year produced a number of spoof 'Lieutenant Pimple' films, including Lieutenant Pimple and the Stolen Invention. The Hepworth Company was also producing spoofs of B. & C.'s and Clarendon's naval heroes. The prevalence of these cheap-to-produce parodies is an indicator both of the lack of any comic star in the British cinema in the pre-war period and of the still largely artisanal nature of British film production, with the concomitant lack of finance, since much of the comic pleasure of these film parodies resides in cheapness of production. The only requirement was that the audience could make the necessary link back to the parodied film(s), and most often this was clearly signalled in the titles themselves.

Although good at producing popular and cheap series and parodies for the home market, British companies were slow at exploiting their own cultural heritage, unlike the American competitors such as Vitagraph, who produced A Tale of Two Cities (1911) to celebrate the centenary of Dickens. British producers concentrated heavily on comedy

production in this period, when the dramatic narrative had become the staple of the industry. For example, of the films released in Britain in January 1910, the only British company with a significant number of fictional drama releases is Hepworth, and these were considerably shorter than comparable films from European and American producers (three of the four dramas released by Hepworth in that month were less than 500 feet, whereas European andAmerican dramas were closer to 1,000).

None the less by 1912 there was a degree of optimism in the British trade press, and the view expressed by both Cecil Hepworth (1931) and George Pearson (1957) was that by 1911-12 British companies had largely caught up lost ground. This was particularly true for companies like Hepworth and B. & C., who began to produce a more attractive product through, for example, the good dramatic use of scenic locations and a more restrained and naturalistic acting style, notably in films like A Fisherman's Love Story (Hepworth, 1912) and The Mountaineer's Romance (B. & C., 1912). Some of these films also display a remarkable degree of filmic sophistication. For example, in Lt. Daring and the Plans for the Minefields (B. & C., 1912), a scene in which Daring prepares to pilot a plane is broken down into a series of four shots, involving axial cut-ins and a reverseangle shot.

Clive Brook and Betty Compson in the successful British melodrama Woman to Woman (1923), directed by Graham Cutts from a script by Alfred Hitchcock

COMPETITION FROM AMERICA

However, if British film-makers had 'caught up' in 191112, the rise to dominance of the multi-reel film shortly afterwards, and the distribution practices of American film companies, would again leave the British trailing behind. The home industry suffered from the way a number of American companies 'tied in' British exhibitors. For example, the Gaumont Weekly of 28 August 1913 complained, 'Many theatres have exclusive contracts with the American manufacturers -- a cheap way of supplying the theatre'. Almost coincident with the shift to multireel films as the industrial norm was the emergence of a star system in America. This was not the case in Britain, where even in the 1920s the only actresses who could be called British film stars were Chrissie White and Alma Taylor (particularly through their work with Hepworth) and Betty Balfour. Stars in general and male film stars in particular were significantly lacking, in a period when they were so central to the rise to dominance of the American film. Indeed, writing as late as 1925, Joseph Schenck commented brutally on British film productions: 'You have no personalities to put on the screen. The stage actors and actresses are no good on the screen. Your effects are no good, and you do not spend nearly so much money' (Bioscope, 8 January 1925). Related to the lack of male stars in the British film industry was an accompanying lack of any action genre equivalent to the Western, and the lack of light comedy, genres which established so many American male stars in the 1910s and 1920s.

Despite the low esteem in which most British film productions were held, particularly in the international market-place, optimism remained high in the immediate post-war years in the British trade press, though the idea of a protection system, for example by the imposition of import quotas, was beginning to gain ground. The London Film Company had made use of American personnel (producers and actors) as a means of differentiating its products from other British producers as early as 1913, and continued with this strategy through the war years. A similar strategy was adopted by B. & C. after the war, although with the quite specific aim of breaking into international markets, particularly the American. Despite some initial success, the American market remained as elusive for this company as it proved for other British producers, and by the mid-1920s the company went out of business. In terms of production and exhibition, 1926 can be seen as the nadir of the British film industry; according to the Moyne Report not more than 5 per cent of films exhibited that year in Britain originated from British studios.

But it was not only American distribution practices and lack of capitalization or a star system which hampered the potential success of the British film. At a time when American films were clearly beginning to exhibit the dynamic traits associated with continuity editing, British films were often marked by narrational uncertainty and the inability to construct a unified spatio-temporal narrative logic (the hallmarks of what we

now call the classical Hollywood style). For example, the distinction between fade and cut shot transitions, which had become clearly established in the American cinema in the 1910s, was often lacking in British films. Thus in The Passions of Men (Clarendon, 1914) the temporal logic of the narrative is at times disrupted when shot transitions are made by fades rather than cuts, and vice versa. Hepworth, idiosyncratic even in the context of British film-making, used the fade as the general mode of shot transition, even into the 1920s. The fact that Hepworth used the fade transition not for temporal ellipsis, but simply to link shots together, posed a number of narrational problems. Most obviously, compared to Hollywood films, with their slick continuity editing, the films appeared slow and ponderous. More specifically, the constant use of the fade transition tended to emphasize the discontinuous nature of narrative space, and the films, albeit often of beautiful pictorial quality, become a series of 'views'. Regarded by Hepworth as his best and most important film, Comin' thro' the Rye (1916) did not find a distributor in America. As Hepworth somewhat poignantly states in his autobiography, regarding his attempts to find an American distributor, 'I was told that it might not be so bad if it was jazzed up a bit, and I came home.'

Although Hepworth's films of the 1910s and 1920s were admittedly idiosyncratic, other British films from this period exhibited varying degrees of narrational uncertainty. A lengthy part of the narrative in Barker's melodrama The Road to Ruin (1913) is devoted to a dream sequence. However, clearly uncertain as to the audience's ability to follow the narrative logic of the story, the filmmakers twice remind the spectator of the dream status of the events unfolding; once through a return to a shot of the protagonist dreaming, and once through the interpolation of an intertitle, which simply states, '-- and dreaming still . . .' . Similarly, the use of the point-of-view shot pair, although increasingly common in films of the 1910s, was sometimes used with a degree of equivocation. Many of the films of the early 1910s did not use a true optical point of view, but moved the camera 180 degrees in relation to the character looking off screen, so that the second shot reveals not only the object of the look, but also the 'looker' as well. At a key point in The Ring and the Rajah (Londan Films Co., 1914), the film makes use of pointof-view shots. One of these has the rajah looking intently off screen, through some open French windows. This is followed by a shot of the rajah's rival in love, from a camera placement that approximates to the rajah's optical viewpoint. The relationship between these shots was clearly not regarded as self-explanatory, and an intertitle is introduced, with the words 'What the Rajah saw'. The next shot, which has both the looker (the rajah's servant) and the object of the look in shot is then in turn preceded by an intertitle which states, 'What the servant saw', suggesting a distinct lack of confidence in the audience's ability to read point-of-view articulations, in spite of the act that they had been in use in both the American and British cinema for nearly a decade.

Thus it was not only under-capitalization, or the lack of a star system, but also aspects of film form that made British films so uncompetitive with those of the United States. Reference to British films in the American trade press as 'soporific' can in large part be linked to issues of film form -- lack of scene dissection and degrees of narrational uncertainty. Indeed, a film such as Nelson (1918), produced by Maurice Elvey for International Exclusives, can fairly be described as primitive -- whether in terms of its cheap and poorly designed backdrops, its wooden acting, or a mode of narrative

construction that makes minimal use of continuity editing. It is mainly the film's length (seven reels), that distinguishes it from films produced a decade before.

Ivor Novello and Mae Marsh in The Rat (1925), the story of a Parisian jewel thief, directed by Graham Cutts and produced by Michael Balcon

THE 1920S: A NEW GENERATION

By the mid- 1920s most of the pre-war production companies had gone out of business, and with them such 'pioneers' as Cecil Hepworth. A new generation of pro ducers or producer-directors entered the industry during this period. Both Michael Balcon (producer) and Herbert Wilcox (producer-director) adopted similar strategies to develop the indigenous industry. One such strategy was the importation of Hollywood stars. This

was not a total novelty, but in the past it had met with only limited success. However, Wilcox successfully utilized the talents of Dorothy Gish, and in doing so also established a deal with Paramount. More important was the development of co-production agreements by both Balcon and Wilcox, and other British producers. Co-productions, particularly with Germany but also with other countries such as Holland, would become a significant factor in the development of the British film industry in the mid- and late 1920s. It was as a result of this practice that the young Alfred Hitchcock acquired experience of German production methods when he was sent to work at the Ufa studios in Neubabelsberg early on in his career with Gainsborough.

For Herbert Wilcox, the agreements he signed with Ufa were important not only as a way of opening up the market but also because the contracts gave him access to the tates. However, this success was in large part attributable to spectacle (adequately financed) and the sexual dynamic of the narrative; but Wilcox, unlike Hitchcock and some other young directors, seems to have learnt little from the encounter with German cinema, and, from the perspective of film form, Decameron Nights is a film still marked by the relatively long scale of most of its shots and a general lack of scene dissection.

Michael Balcon was an important figure in the British film industry for a number of reasons. Although he produced only a relatively small number of films in the 1920s, most of them, including The Rat (Gainsborough, 1925), were big commercial successes. Further, Balcon's career was a clear signpost to that division of labour that came rather late in the British film industry: that is, between producing and directing. Balcon was a producer, rather than a producer-director, and it was only the separation of these roles that allowed the development of skills specifically associated with each function.

Although in the context of British culture film-making was generally. held in low esteem, a number of university graduates were to enter the film industry towards the end of this period, including Anthony Asquith, the son of the Liberal Prime Minister. Asquith had not only developed a considerable knowledge of European cinema during his university days, but his privileged background enabled him to meet many Hollywood stars and directors during his visits to the United States. The importance of these factors became evident when he began his film career. On Shooting Stars (British Instructional Films, 1928) Asquith was assistant director, but he had also written the screenplay, and was involved with the editing of the film. Shooting Stars was self-reflexive, in so far as it was a film about the film industry, film-making, and stars, although the reference was more to Hollywood than England, with Brian Aherne featuring as a Western genre hero. The lighting (by Karl Fischer), the use of a variety of camera angles, and the rapid editing of some sequences linked the film more to a German mode of expression. These elements, combined with the fact that the screenplay was not developed from a West End theatre production, unlike so many British productions in the 1920s, produced a film that was pure cinema.

By the end of the 1920s the British film industry was transformed. The shift to vertical integration established a stronger industrial base, and, despite its negative aspects, the protective legislation introduced in 1927 did also lead to an expansion of the industry. The new generation who entered the industry in the mid-1920s had a greater knowledge and understanding of developments taking place in both European cinema and Hollywood, and this was also to play its part in the transformation of the British cinema, making it better prepared to face the introduction of sound at the end of the decade.

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