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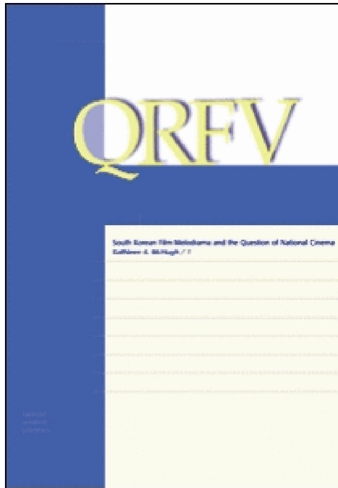

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A Review of "Fifty Key British Films"

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but this argument could apply to any era of Hollywood history, from the Hollywood art film of the sixties and seventies to today's digital blockbusters (xvii).

The benefits and deficits of Casper's approach to cinematic classicism demonstrate that inclusive and exclusive definitions of the classical Hollywood cinema might be best used in tandem to answer different research questions and explore different aspects of American movies as an industry and art form. Casper's book is extremely perceptive on localized change, but is less convincing when the films are placed within a larger cinematic context. However, this criticism does little to reduce the impact of Casper's achievement with *Postwar Hollywood*, or weaken his general argument that momentous changes in postwar America led to substantial and influential innovation within the film industry. *Postwar Hollywood* is a useful reference source for scholars, and students will find it accessible and engaging. Casper's prose is a model of readability and clarity, albeit with a few lapses into informality. Most importantly, his enthusiasm for his subject is palpable and infectious, leaving the reader eager to seek out many of the films discussed and to pursue further scholarship in this fascinating period.

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Fifty Key British Films, edited by Sarah Barrow and John White. London: Routledge, 2008

LEO ENTICKNAP

The use of the word "key" as an adjective suggests, in theory at least, that its subject is supposed to unlock something. In this case, the implication is of an argument that the fifty films discussed in the short critical essays which comprise this book can serve as exemplars, enabling a broader understanding of the cultures, genres, movements or filmmakers' output to which they belong. In practice, however, it tends to be used sloppily, as a rhetorical get-out-of-jail card to mean "important, in some vague way that I can't be bothered to define," by poor writers who are incapable of expressing a rationale both precisely and concisely (the use of the word "access" as a verb is another equally commonplace and irritating example of imprecise language).

The editors assure us that in this instance, "key" is not intended as a synonym for canonical. In fact the absence of any consistent methodology, either for the selection of the titles themselves or for the contributors' approach to their analysis, comes through loud and clear as the editors thrash about through their introduction attempting, unsuccessfully, to provide a coherent justification for the nature and extent of the book's coverage. On the one hand we are told that the editors sought to avoid ideologically motivated value judgments ("the very nature of a canon is that it is exclusive and this list is not designed to be that"), but on the other, they admit to "displaying vested interests".

The reader is warned that films "are not cut off from the world in splendid isolation within the cinema auditorium," yet "details of a film's production history are not supplied unless this is in some way relevant to ideas at the core of a film". Even the most trenchant advocate of semiotics and close textual analysis would surely be hard put to cite an example of a film whose production (and reception) history is in no way relevant to the ideas at its core! Yet the editors seem to regard this position as the rule to which empirical engagement with the films under discussion should be the exception.

The absence of a coherent rationale or methodology for the choice of case studies is sadly reflected in the bulk of the essays. Most of them would make perfectly adequate DVD sleeve articles, but their reflection of the state of the art of film scholarship in general and in British cinema in particular is woefully inconsistent and about three decades behind the times. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in the book's coverage of the silent period. Despite accounting for about a quarter of the British film industry's overall output during the 110 years, it is represented by just five of the fifty essays in the book. With one exception (Ian Christie's chapter on *The Life Story of David Lloyd George*), they represent a misguided view of British silent cinema which has its roots in the intellectual film culture that emerged in the 1920s and which was accepted, largely uncritically, by writers and historians until the mid-1990s. This stereotype was summarized succinctly by the presenter of a mainstream television documentary on the subject, broadcast in 2006, who noted that:

> British silent cinema has a terrible reputation among people who think they know about the movies. I've heard the same views over and over again: the directors were all mediocrities and amateurs. Hitchcock was the only decent one, and he ran away to Hollywood. The films are staid and boring and airless and studio-bound, full of posh people talking at each other in front of painted fireplaces.[1]

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Despite the efforts of academics such as Andrew Higson, Kenton Bamford, Christine Gledhill, the hundreds of curators and contributors to the annual British Silent Film Festival, several journals and a number of DVD publishers to overturn that myth in the last decade, it is one that *Fifty Key British Films* perpetuates, largely unchallenged. The Edwardian middle class (posh people and painted fireplaces, in other words) are represented by *Rescued by Rover* (Cecil Hepworth, 1905) and *The ? Motorist* (1906, Walter R. Booth). The idea that the only British silents of any cultural significance were the German-influenced ones resulting from the "Film Europe" movement (for which Hitchcock cannot take sole credit, but whose early output is the most commonly cited example) is embodied in two entirely predictable discussions of *The Lodger* (1926, Alfred Hitchcock) and *Piccadilly* (1929, E.A. Dupont).

Though largely a descriptive plot summary of the sort one would expect to find in an undergraduate essay, Sarah Barrow's exposition of *The Lodger* finds space to eulogize about the film sharing influences with the work of Lang and Murnau (13), the "almost expressionistic style with quirky tilt angles and shadows" (14) and its embodiment of feminist issues (15–16). Not once does she make any attempt to argue how, in the words of the book's title, the film offers any "key" to our understanding of the culture, practice or economics of British cinema in the period under discussion.

In this context *The Lodger* is a minor embellishment on the door handle rather than the key. Furthermore, her bibliography is shockingly inadequate: Tom Ryall's and Charles Barr's seminal books on early Hitchcock are absent (along with virtually all the standard literature on British cinema in the 1920s),[2] yet an introductory article on *The Lodger* on the

British Film Institute's website is considered a scholarly work on which to draw. On the evidence of this piece it seems that its author simply has not read enough to be able to site the film competently within the empirical context of its production and reception.

The one exception to the opening chapters' regurgitation of a now comprehensively discredited myth is Ian Christie's piece on *The Life Story of David Lloyd George*. Here the editors' choice of subject matter is deeply flawed: the film in question was abandoned during post-production and wasn't even screened until 78 years after its production. So again, if we are looking for "keys" as to what made the British film industry and culture tick during and immediately after World War I, the only way we could possibly find one in *Lloyd George* is by making a case that it represented the culmination of the British political establishment's first, tentative toes in the muddy water of film propaganda that began with the War Office Cinematograph Committee and progressed to the first Ministry of Information.

Christie's point that "it certainly challenges received opinion that British film-making in the 1910s was uniformly lacking in ambition" (11) is elegantly made, but he makes no substantive attempt to show why a curious and intriguing political footnote should be regarded as a "key" film. To round off the section, we have a chapter on *Drifters* (1929, John Grierson) which introduces and entrenches another crude and simplistic myth: that of "Saint John" Grierson and his Documentary Movement, who vanquished Hollywood's cultural imperialism with his unique blend of gritty social realism and the European avant garde. The fact that hardly anyone actually saw his films (on the rare occasions when the public could be induced to see a British film at all in those days, it was usually one featuring Jessie Matthews, Will Hay or George Formby, none of whose work is covered in the book) doesn't prevent Barrow from suggesting that it is in some implied and unstated way a "key" to our understanding of this period in British cinema history.

I have discussed the book's coverage of the silent period at some length, because it encapsulates the obsolete and limited approach and execution of the volume as a whole. Where is the work of Maurice Elvey (that was actually shown at the time it was made), Guy Newall, Graham Cutts, Betty Balfour, early newsreel series such as *Topical Budget* and all the other output of pre-1930 British cinema which represented the mainstream culture of the day and for which a genuine case could be made for a "key" to understanding the bigger picture? If even a television program pitched at a mainstream audience can draw on recent research that has started to challenge some of the long-standing misconceptions reproduced uncritically in this book, surely a work which its editors claim is "sufficiently exploratory and analytical to be useful as models for students of film" (xviii) should be able to do so?

Following this precedent, the historiographical framework informing the choice of later films also seems to be essentially and uncritically drawn from the early generation of British cinema scholars, e.g. Roger Manvell, Penelope Houston and Roy Armes. The 1940s is represented by the traditional mix of "realism and tinsel," as the title of Robert Murphy's 1989 book characterizes it:[3] the often celebrated, paradoxical combination of Documentary Movement-influenced gritty melodramas represented by *Love on the Dole* (1941, John Baxter) and *Millions Like Us* (1943, Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat), and the European-influenced fantasies celebrated by *Penguin Film Review* and their ilk, in this book, represented by *Brief Encounter* (1945, David Lean) and *The Red Shoes* (1948, Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger).

The 1950s are virtually written off altogether (and if it wasn't for the canonical need to slot Ealing in somewhere, it wouldn't even be a case of virtually) before we're into the British New Wave, James Bond and Swinging London. The final chapters of the book follow a similar pattern, making no substantive attempt either to critically engage with

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accepted wisdom or make a coherent and methodically justified case for the films under discussion encapsulating or illuminating any wider issue, either in terms of British cinema history or their reflection of the society, culture or political or economic climate which gave rise to them.

Over the course of the book as a whole, the choice of titles has also been unduly influenced by auteurism—Hitchcock, Lean and Loach all have two entries, and Powell and Pressburger three, for example. In none of these articles do their authors try to argue why these three directors are in any way "key" to British cinema, in a broader sense—in fact, it could be argued that they are celebrated as auteurs precisely because they rejected and resisted the industrial and cultural practices which characterize British cinema as a whole. Studying exceptions that prove rules can often be a useful exercise, but only if you're clear why you're doing it.

The shortcomings of this book boil down to four underlying problems. Firstly, it lacks a coherent methodology for selecting the case studies. From the list of films selected, the three essential criteria for inclusion would seem to be critical canonization of individual films and directors, critical canonization of genres and movements and the widespread availability of films on retail DVD (only two of the fifty—*The Life Story of David Lloyd George* and *Pressure*—are not, at the time of writing). Throwing the catch-all adjective "key" into the title and asking your reader to take your word for it that these films are important is frankly not good enough.

The second is that the de facto methodology adopted is overly narrow and obsolete, taking as its starting point the assumption that a "film" has to be two hours long and have actors in it. British audiences in the 1930s experienced the deteriorating political situation in greater numbers and far more profoundly in Gaumont-British News's coverage of Stanley Baldwin's "I will never stand for a policy of great armament" speech in the 1935 election campaign,[4] or its condemnation of "the crucifixion of Czechoslovakia"[v] than by the aesthetically striking but conceptually bungled allegory in *Things to Come* (1936, William Cameron Menzies), for example.

Literally millions more Britons saw the classroom safety films of the 1970s and '80s such as *Play Safe* (1978, David Eady) and *Say No to Strangers* (1981, Ronald Dunkley) than *Performance* (1970, Donald Cammell and Nicolas Roeg) or *Pressure* (1975, Horace Ové). The emergence of formal scholarship in amateur, ephemeral (e.g. the establishment of the Orphans Film Symposium and the Center for Home Movies) and industrial film, and the recognition that this constitutes an important part of the audiovisual heritage and culture of any developed country, seems to have totally passed the editors of this book by. In stark contrast to the innovative and refreshing approach taken to the selection of Patrick Russell's "100 British Documentaries,"[vi] including everything from party political broadcasts to advertisements where a case can be made for a significant cultural impact, these editors' definition of what constitutes a film is depressingly retrograde.

The third problem is that the analysis of those films offered is largely uncritical, bordering on hagiographic at times. Trish Shiel is content to take Michael Powell's word for it that with *The Red Shoes* (1948, Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger), he lift[ed] storytelling onto a different "level" (67). *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962, David Lean) is "symbolically rich" (122). The production of *Pressure* is characterized as the worthy battle of a visionary filmmaker against a philistine establishment. And so on and so forth.

The final problem is the poor technical quality of the editing. This is particularly evident in the book's approach to citation and referencing. For example, Isabelle Mcneill's piece on *Orlando* (1992, Sally Potter) draws on only three cited secondary sources (195–200), compared to ten in Trish Sheil's chapter on *The Red Shoes*. There are a significant number

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of factual errors throughout the text. For example, *The Ring* (1928, Hitchcock) was not a "re-make of Dupont's *Variete* [sic] [1925, E.A. Dupont] of two years earlier"—it was based on an original screenplay—the one and only film Hitchcock directed which was not adapted from any previously published narrative, in fact. If Lynda Townsend has any empirical evidence to suggest that *The Ring* was consciously inspired by *Varieté* (let alone that it can unproblematically be described as a remake), she doesn't choose to share it with us.

There are also technical errors in the scholarly apparatus. The citation of Charles Barr's *Ealing Studios* by John White on page 83 is of a 1998 revised edition and gives no indication that the work was originally published in 1977, and the websites cited in Freddie Gaffney's chapter on *Lawrence of Arabia* have no retrieval dates. I am hardly likely to recommend this book to my students if, after giving them a study skills lecture in which I state that Internet sources should be properly referenced, they can cite the book as evidence that this is unnecessary!

It is thus difficult to imagine where the audience for this book lies. Despite the editors' belief that it is "sufficiently exploratory and analytical to be useful as models for students of film," the rationale informing the choice of films clearly is not, and neither are most of the individual articles (two welcome exceptions being John White's chapter on *Love on the Dole* and Dave Allen's on *We Are the Lambeth Boys* [1959, Karel Reisz]). But the attempts in that direction also risk alienating the more general reader, as does the book's overall presentation. There are no illustrations, the proportional font used is too small and tightly spaced to be easily legible and the paper on which it is printed is rough and acidic.

In short, the book has the feel of a cheap, popular fiction paperback—not what one would expect for a recommended retail price of £14.99. One useful purpose it does serve is to encapsulate a complex but largely familiar narrative of preconceptions and stereotypes that has come to dominate mainstream thinking about British cinema history and culture, both within the academy and beyond it. If the book itself succeeds in provoking readers into critically questioning the cultural prevalence of that narrative, then it will have done so where its editors and most of its writers, sadly, have failed.

Leo Enticknap is a lecturer in cinema in the Institute of Communications Studies at the University of Leeds. His research is currently focused on the history, cultural practice and ethics of archival film preservation and restoration. More about his work and research can be found at www.enticknap.net

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Notes

1. *Silent Britain* (David Thompson, 2006), BBC Four, 31 May 2006, 2100–2230 hrs.
2. Tom Ryall, *Alfred Hitchcock and the British Cinema* (Urbana-Champaign, University of Illinois, 1986); Charles Barr, *English Hitchcock* (Moffat, Cameron and Hollis, 1999).
3. Robert Murphy, *Realism and Tinsel: Cinema and Society in Britain, 1939–48* (London, Routledge, 1989).
4. *Gaumont-British News*, issue no. 192 (31 October 1935).
5. Ibid., no. 545 (20 March 1939).
6. Patrick Russell, *100 British Documentaries* (London, British Film Institute, 2007).