

London in the Silent Era

During the early cinema era, the British Film Industry flourished and developed a unique identity through its work. One identifiable trend in the films produced during this time is an emphasis on national identity. This essay will focus on two sources that investigate this trend by considering the role of nationalist ideologies when attracting and engaging with audiences, and how the representations of London developed over time. The first source is an essay from Paul Moody entitled 'The Marketing of Landscapes in Silent British Cinema' (2007) which provides textual analysis of promotional publications from the silent era, considering how these materials gave the films their uniquely British identity. The second source is the book 'Of Empire and the City' (2014), featuring Maurizio Cinquegrani's exploration of the role of imperialism in early British Cinema, with a particular focus on the connections between cities and their cinematic representations. Though these two sources have their own agendas in investigating representations of British landscapes, this essay shall primarily focus on the portrayal of urban life in London and how both sources compare ideas of the role that films played in creating a sense of national identity.

Paul Moody's essay, found in the Book 'Picture Perfect: Landscape, Place and Travel in British Cinema before 1930' (Ed. Porter and Dixon, 2007), attempts to consider the role of location in silent British Cinema by, in contrast to the conventional method of studying the work of creative technicians, analysing marketing materials that "aided the construction of a film's message." (Moody, 2007, P.19). When considering the representation of urban locations in Britain, Moody notes that there was a focus on "the seedier, more thrilling aspects of city life..." (p.20) and analyses the pressbook for 'A Girl in London' (1925). Here, Moody describes how "beautifully designed backdrops of London cityscapes [highlight] the integral role that London was to play in the film," (P.20) before remarking on how these "landscapes were utilized to present a cohesive community... for a general London identity to which a homogeneous people adhered." (P20-21) Moody immediately establishes the relationship between a film's ideology and its representation of urban life in promotional material. Moody soon develops this idea by analysing publicity material for Piccadilly (1929), noting how the "collage of exciting scenes, each of which has an exotic flavour... depicts the stimulating side of the city." (P.21) It is clear from this analysis that Moody sees the promotional material as more than an attractive piece of marketing for audiences, but rather an integral part in the development of a film's message.

As Moody continues, he suggests a film's portrayal of reality intentionally attempts to "make the films attractive to the mass public." (P.21-22) This vital consideration of the financial benefit of generating appeal through empathising with ordinary life is a reminder of the ultimate goal of a film's marketing and, I suggest, implies a notion of the films' artistic merits being tainted by their urgency to capitalise on the public's sense of national identity. Moody does not dwell on this point, swiftly moving on to an arguably philosophical argument that commonplace activity in the city is presented as more than a lifestyle, even suggesting that these situations are "actually part of their whole - and hence indistinguishable from their character." (P.22) The idea of these representations conflating atmospheres of exciting urban cities with the ordinary everyday life becomes consistent throughout Moody's writing, seen in this argument as he observes the films' embodiment of culture and identity, cementing the significance of identity in marketing materials. Furthermore, Moody reinforces his idea of a homogenous people adhering to a "general London" (P.20) by acknowledging the appeal filmmakers generated by reflecting the realistic life that audiences were familiar with.

The final development of Moody's argument focuses on the consistency and permanence of a city's identity: "...the permanence of the protagonist's roots remains prominent in the marketing..." (P.22) He analyses the pressbooks for *Hindle Wakes* (1927) and *East is East* (1916) to exemplify his argument, noting how a representation of a "departure from home only ends in disillusionment and a swift return," and how one pressbook's imagery portrays a message "of one adhering to one's roots." (P.22, 23) When concluding his focus on the representations of urban locations, Moody conflates his discussions surrounding identity, realism and tradition, arguing that the "realism is utilized to verify the claim for a homogeneous identity that is deeply rooted in the city..." (P.23) confirming his ideas of identity playing a fundamental role in a film's message.

Moody's unorthodox focus on the use of promotional material could easily be considered his strongest asset. It provides invaluable insight into the intentions of the filmmakers when attempting to convey a message, and equips the reader with useful narration of characters' inner dialogues - Vicky in *East is East*, for example, learning that "the East in her came uppermost." (P.22) It could be said, however, that Moody's lack of analysis of the films themselves is problematic. When writing about *Piccadilly*, for instance, he neglects to speak of the distinct dichotomy between different districts (namely *Piccadilly* and *Limehouse*) in the film. Of course, the progressive nature of the narrative in *Piccadilly* may work in favour with the idea of homogenous identity, but it is the absence of these considerations that is

cause for concern. Another credible asset of Moody's essay is his following focus of representations of rural landscapes in Britain. This contrast provides clarity over the specific roles of urban London life in film and elucidates his arguments on the significance of tradition and permanence.

The book 'Of Empire and the City' (Cinquegrani, 2014) considers the role of imperialism in British identity in the silent era. Considering the impact of traditional ideologies in silent film, Cinquegrani states that early films of London provide opportunities for a study of a city with constant intersection between the empire and urban life. (P.46) Similarly, he also notes that early films "offer a view of a variety of cultural and political expressions of empire," (P.47) referring to the prominence of uniquely British iconography including royal celebrations and the "frenetic activity in the financial heart of the empire, the City of London." (P.47) Cinquegrani's writing provokes imagery of pride for the British Empire among audiences at the time, outlining a distinct fondness for traditional undertones in the early British actualities.

From here, Cinquegrani shifts his focus slightly from what can be found in the early silent actualities to rather what cannot be found, and the evolving representations of London's socio-economic divide. He achieves this by first observing the omission of any poverty-stricken areas of London in the early silent films: "[An] empire whose urban pockets of deprivation and neglect were relegated from the screen." (P.47) This conscious exclusion of the poorer side of city life is questioned as Cinquegrani makes the bold argument of early cinema's omissions being an "act of submission to an imperial vision of urban life..." (P.48)

By contrasting this neglect with early photography's gritty, realistic "spectacle of filth" (P.48) we can see a striking divide in representations of London. Though it would not be too far-fetched to suggest, for example, that this is an example of ignorance on the filmmaker's behalf, Cinquegrani more optimistically argues that this is "an attempt to regain... confidence in urban modernity at the heart of the empire." (P.49) This reflection in the changing direction of artistic representations of London may also suggest Cinquegrani's own idea of a change in audiences' idealistic perceptions of London identity. After all, the intention of "reaffirming or creating tradition" (P.49) certainly reiterates the idea of a permanent and unchanging identity with imperial culture - the emergence of and appreciation for developing technology may be said to have inspired audiences to shift their own criteria for identifying with a culture.

It is this link between the old and new that makes Cinquegrani's work so insightful when studying early British cinema: The consistent interdisciplinary study of Film and History provides a thorough insight into the evolution of London's representations - primarily through the observation of photography conventions and improved living conditions towards the end of the nineteenth century. The density of this discussion of imperialism in silent film is not exclusive to this particular chapter of Cinquegrani's book; its vital role in analysing the intentions of filmmakers at the time in fact permeates throughout the book, reiterating the importance of the empire in national identity. Moreover, the frequent inclusion of external references aids the contextual understanding of such a unique approach to analysing this era of cinema.

When considering the effect of imperialism and the traditional empire on audience's attraction to a film, some interesting comparisons with Paul Moody's writings become apparent. The first is the important variable of traditional values. While Moody sees these values as fundamental aspects of audience attraction that was exploited and commercialised to appeal to the mass public, Cinquegrani instead implies a belief that the integration of said values with modernity connotes a more progressive and poetic approach to representing urban city life. However, although neither texts explicitly share ideas on the worth nor importance of these values, a parallel can certainly be seen between the writings' prominence of familiarity with the traditional, either in the loyalty of one's roots or the imperialistic imagery in early cinematography. One final comparison is that of the written material itself. The collaboration of contextual analysis of imperial influence before 1914 with textual analysis of marketing material from 1916 onwards results in a remarkably rounded understanding of the topic. Despite two very different investigations into silent British film, the writings of Moody and Cinquegrani work in tandem to create an enlightening introduction to the effect of traditional values colliding with new technology in silent British cinema.

Word count: 1629

References

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