

## BOOK REVIEWS

### **The lost world of Mitchell & Kenyon: Edwardian Britain on film**

VANESSA TOULMIN, SIMON POPPLE & PATRICK RUSSELL (Eds)

London, British Film Institute, 2004

vi+210 pp., illus., index, £15.99 (paper), £48.00 (cloth)

The publication of this volume is part of a larger project linked to a rather extraordinary event, which occurred in the mid-1990s: the discovery of more than 800 rolls of nitrate negative film produced by the Blackburn-based company of Mitchell & Kenyon in the early years of the 19th century. (In 1995 already about 70 prints of enacted material had surfaced and been acquired by the Cinema Museum, London, which used the Haghe Film Award money they had received earlier to restore these films.) This new discovery led to collaboration between the British Film Institute and the National Fairground Archive at the University of Sheffield in order to not only preserve and restore the films, but also to conduct research on their historical context, Vanessa Toulmin being the key player in the organisation and coordination of the various scholarly activities. The collection of essays presented in this book is one of the results of this enterprise, together with a DVD (*Electric Edwardians*, BFI, 2005), presentations of the films combining projections with contextual explanations at different occasions (international festivals, conferences, lectures), as well as a successful BBC television series *The Lost World of Mitchell & Kenyon*. Watched by a large audience, this broadcast turned a phenomenon that might, at the outset, have seemed of interest to scholars only, into a major public event. The next step of the project will be the publication of an extensive Mitchell & Kenyon filmography. So apart from the unquestionable archival and scholarly merits of this project, it may well turn out to also be a landmark in the way it opened up possibilities to productively work with the audiovisual heritage.

The book is divided into three parts, each of which covers an important dimension of the project. The Mitchell & Kenyon films being for a major part productions made specifically for local audiences, or presented in local contexts by itinerant showmen (and functioned thus to a large extent outside national, let alone international, distribution networks), their production and reception contexts, as well as their value as historical documents, are at the centre of the contributions collected here.

The first part of the volume provides the reader with background information concerning the collection: a short history of the Mitchell & Kenyon company

(Timothy Neal, Vanessa Toulmin, Rebecca Vick), information about the archiving process (Patrick Russell), and an essay on the moving image technology available at the time the films were made (Leo Enticknap). The second part contextualises the films themselves and provides insights into different aspects of the film texts. Stephen Bottomore looks at local film production in an international context, while Richard Brown gives an account of regional enterprises in British film exhibition. In addition, Vanessa Toulmin presents the relationship between Mitchell & Kenyon and the travelling showmen, who were their main clients. Four other contributions concentrate on the importance of the Mitchell & Kenyon films for the regional film histories of the North East (David Williams), Ireland (Robert Monks), Wales (Dave Berry) and Scotland (Janet McBain)—it is one of the particularities of this corpus that London and the southern parts of England are not represented. And finally, Tom Gunning discusses the specificities of the Mitchell & Kenyon factory gate films as a specific genre in the history of early cinema. In the third part, scholars from different backgrounds discuss the possibilities of using the films as source material for historical research. The possibilities of doing so appear very rich, indeed: looking at the images of street processions (Andrew Prescott), of ceremonial processions and folk traditions (John Widdowson), of events related to the Boer War (Simon Pople), of seaside and holiday crowds (John K. Walton), of football matches (David Russell), of street scenes and means of transport (Ian Yearsley), and urban landscapes (Patrick Keiller), historians working on a wide range of fields of interest discover a wealth of information in these scenes of everyday life in Edwardian Britain.

It is one of the distinctive merits of this publication that the authors both present the results of fine scholarship exploring the Mitchell & Kenyon collection of films as well as its broader historical context and suggest perspectives for future research on this material. On the basis of the work done up to now (including the fact that thanks to the DVD at least a small part of it is quite easily accessible), historians of early cinema as well as historians of popular culture can start asking new questions or look at the films from new angles, especially in the form of comparative studies, confronting them with other productions from Britain or abroad. Next to the Edison, Lumière and Méliès films, the Mitchell & Kenyon collection now counts among the large bodies of moving images produced by a single company, which survive from the first decade of film-making. Similar and yet profoundly different, this British corpus represents a considerable enlargement of the material available for early cinema studies. Offering new insights into the importance of local and regional patterns for the exhibition and circulation of films as well as into the work of itinerant showmen ordering, but also organising and structuring the views taken by the firm's cameramen, the Mitchell & Kenyon productions help us to better understand the position of living pictures as a cultural phenomenon in the early 20th century.

Thanks to this volume, the collection no longer is an uncharted territory. The contributors have mapped out for us its most important features, have indicated various paths across it and described what we may expect to find there. This is, as the editors put it 'a first step on a long road to fully exploring the consequences of the discovery of this national treasure' (p. 4). And it is more than that: an example for the potential productivity of archivists and scholars from a variety of disciplines

coming together to analyse a corpus of films. Hopefully, other initiatives of this kind will follow.

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### **Encyclopedia of early cinema**

RICHARD ABEL (Ed.)

Abingdon/New York, Routledge, 2005

xxx+791 pp., illus., bibliography, filmography and index, £135 (cloth)

'Early cinema', a phrase that is much more appropriate than 'primitive cinema' or alternatives that are equally pejorative, is the umbrella term for cinematographic activities that took place approximately from the early 1890s to the mid-1910s. In these first 20–25 years of the emergence of cinema, everything about this 'new' medium was in a state of flux. Initially just another scientific experiment turned into a fairground attraction, cinema, simultaneously developed in varied ways, came during the early years into full bloom and outclassed, in terms of global popularity, any other form of mass culture.

Since the early 1980s, influenced by similar trends in the broader academic field of film studies, the historiography of early cinema has undergone significant changes. Whereas the 'traditional' scholarship, which focuses mainly on film-making or production and therefore often deals with developments in Europe and North America only, is fortunately still practised by many researchers, a new 'revisionist' approach has justifiably made it equally important to study film exhibition in its broadest sense (venues of exhibition, cultural contexts, social spaces, etc.). As Richard Abel points out in the brief and overly modest introduction (p. xxix) to his *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema*, 'this shift has drawn new attention to those regions in Asia, the Middle East, South and Central America, and Africa, where filmmaking initially may have been minimal but movie-going was significant'. With the assistance of 150 contributors, 10 of whom served as special consultants, Abel has managed to represent both the traditional and the revisionist scholarship (one wonders for how long it will remain necessary to make this distinction) as well as to cover virtually the entire globe. (For obvious reasons, Europe and North America nevertheless draw most attention to themselves). To bring this labour of love to good end, Abel, himself a pre-eminent scholar of silent cinema and author of groundbreaking studies such as *The Cinè goes to Town* (1998 rev.) and *The Red Rooster Scare* (1999), has rounded up all the usual suspects. The list of contributors (just to name a few: Rick Altman, Ivo Blom, Stephen Bottomore, Eileen Bowser, Guido Convents, Tom Gunning, Frank Kessler, Martin Loiperdinger, Laurent Mannoni, Luke McKernan, Jean-Jacques Meusy, David Robinson, Dan Streible, Kristin Thompson, William Uricchio, etc.) reads like a who's who of early cinema historiographers.

The broad scope of this volume, which presents an overview of roughly 25 years of global film culture (and the hybrid forms and practices of mass culture that preceded and paralleled it), of course imposes limits on the number and length of