



Issue 12: Book Reviews

Multimedia Histories: From the Magic Lantern to the Internet

By James Lyons and John Plunkett (eds.)

Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007. ISBN: 978-0-85989-773-0 (pbk). ISBN 978-0-85989-772-3 (hbk). 38 illustrations, xxv+275pp. £15 (pbk), £47.50 (hbk)

Picture Perfect: Landscape, Place and Travel in British Cinema Before 1930

By Laraine Porter and Bryony Dixon (eds.)

Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007. ISBN: 978-1-90581-601-9 (pbk). ISBN 978-1-90581-600-2 (hbk). 34 illustrations, xii+143pp. £14.99 (pbk), £39.99 (hbk)

A Review by Tom Ruffles, Anglia Ruskin University, UK

The University of Exeter Press is well-established as a publisher of film and television titles, and these two volumes are useful additions to their list. Both are collections of essays based on conference presentations, and each displays the strengths and weaknesses of that approach: on the one hand contributions usually have something new to say (though perhaps not so new after the four-year gap between initial delivery and publication); but they sometimes feel like works in progress, and do not always appear to be directly relevant to the titles of the collections, a heterogeneity that comes from taking what comes in from a call for papers rather than a planned overview of a topic.

Lyons and Plunkett's *Multimedia Histories* (in the *Exeter Studies in Film History* series) is the more substantial of the two. It is based on a conference held at the University of Exeter in 2003 (as reviewed in *Scope*, May 2004), which was the springboard for a project run by the Arts and Humanities Research Board (as was) Centre for British Film and Television Studies, called *Screen Practice Before Film*. This remediation of conference talks has been worth the wait, because these are in the main very strong essays. The results range widely as the sub-title indicates, from Victorian optical toys to the latest developments in the internet, and while including likely contenders for a volume on multimedia culture in the shape of photography, cinema, radio, video games and the internet, has some that are more intriguing, such as avant-garde music, dance, automata and cosmetic surgery. The result is a rich blend of historical and theoretical insights that yields dividends despite the occasionally stodgy style.

The sixteen essays are divided into four sections, designed to maximize the sense of interconnectedness rather than as a strictly linear exposition. The first begins with a plea by Ian Christie to consider the hardware in our exploration of the development of cinema's antecedents, while avoiding a teleological approach which sees the emergence of cinema as the culmination of

technological developments that retrospectively can be seen feeding into it. It can be regarded as a motif for the book as a whole, emphasizing how much the modern media landscape is indebted to its forebears, an indebtedness that is too often obscured, and also how important it is to keep the past constantly in view as we confront the media landscape of the future.

The other pieces in the first section develop another major theme of the book, the ways in which technological developments influence how we view the world, with Damian Sutton writing about Henri Bergson's theories of perception in the context of the growth of the cinematograph; and an analysis by Charlie Gere of the relationship between perception and real-time systems developed during the cold war (though perhaps more emphasis could have been placed on their origins in the Second World War) that influenced the production and reception of John Cage's *4'33"* (1952). Lastly William Boddy enquires what 'convergence' actually means (by probing past moments when claims were made for converging technologies), precisely what aesthetic and institutional autonomy meant in the first place, and who stood to profit by convergence. He also asks what causal relationships electronic media have with social change.

The next section focuses on how old forms adapt to new media, with contributions comparing collecting photographs in albums and on a computer (Patrizia Di Bello); how the World Wide Web functions in a manner reminiscent of a cabinet of curiosities (Michelle Henning); how the concept of the android has been utilized by cinema in the form of the 'synthespian' (Dan North); and an examination of the evolution of dance manuals from the 1920s to their redundancy in the days of disco (Jonathan Bollen). The third section reinforces the longevity of interactivity. It covers the usage of the stereoscope, and how it relates to a longer tradition of optical toys (John Plunkett); the early film shows in Britain, and how they can be seen as embedded in a class-based sensationalist entertainment industry (Andrew Shail); a case study by James Bennett of the BBC's interactive services, particularly the way it presented *Walking with Beasts* (2001); and a description by Andrea Zapp of gallery installations linked to the internet that allowed remote participation in developing a scenario.

The final section, 'Visions of Convergence: Bringing Media Together,' suggests a summary and speculations of how the media landscape of the future might look, but actually comprises a scrutiny of visual motifs in Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott* (by Isobel Armstrong); the work of the magic lanternist Alexander Black and how his shows -- "slow movies" -- echoed the structure of the narrative film, far in advance of the form as it then existed (Kaveh Askari); the interactivity afforded by DVD (less than initially promised by the industry) and video games, and the overlaps found in media types and delivery mechanisms (Richard Grusin); and, last of all, an analysis by James Lyons of the discourses surrounding a drama series and associated website about cosmetic surgery.

Apart from a tendency to opaque language, my only substantial criticism is the assertion that chemical-based photography has an "indexical link with reality," that is, corresponds "point by point to nature" as Charles Peirce puts it, a correspondence now under threat from digitization. This demonstrates a misunderstanding of how photography works, implying that the scene captured is an unmediated slice of reality. It ignores the extent to which meaning is determined by issues of framing, lens quality, distance from subject, camera movement, f-stop, focal length, exposure time, filters, paper grade, dodging, burning, composite printing, and all the other ways in which a non-

digital photograph can be manipulated. Such control did not begin with Photoshop.

Overall, this collection, while mapping the terrain, does so in a way that promises exciting developments for future scholarship. It shows how fruitful connections between cultural expressions past and present can be, and suggests how much more work there is to be done in extending the notion of convergence from the usual diachronic emphasis on multimedia to a synchronic one. The editors have done a good job of emphasizing the contemporary relevance of old technologies, not just their antiquarian interest.

Where some of the items in *Multimedia Histories* require an effort to decode them, the thirteen in Laraine Porter and Bryony Dixon's much shorter book *Picture Perfect* (in the *New Research in British Film and Television Studies* series) are models of clarity, though it too suffers from an arbitrariness that is unavoidable when gathering contributions from disparate authors, in this case presentations made to the 2003 British Silent Cinema Festival held at Nottingham. Their brevity is presumably caused by time limitations imposed on speakers.

The editors are well placed to edit this collection, one being the co-ordinator of the festival and the other a curator at the British Film Institute's National Archive, specializing in the silent period. The volume begins with a description by Bryony Dixon of the sixth festival and some of the themes that emerged, and indicates some of the potential entries that were omitted. The term 'landscape' would seem to privilege the rural, perhaps emphasized by the cover illustration showing Alma Taylor *Comin' Thro' the Rye* (Cecil M. Hepworth, 1923), but depictions of the urban environment are also dealt with, although not to such a great extent. A constant theme throughout is the extent to which cinematic representations of place, both fiction and non-fiction, have helped to construct an image of nation, whether it be grimy inner city or rural idyll.

An essay on realistic depictions of society's criminal underbelly (complementing Shail's on sensationalist entertainments in *Multimedia Histories*) by Tony Fletcher gives a brief overview of rural and urban violence in early British films, some familiar, others less so. A surprising quantity of crime is displayed, showing how filmmakers took Northcliffe's 'Get me a murder a day!' to heart. There is clearly much work to be done in disinterring early cinema's relationship to the tradition of crime reporting in the sensationalist press, as well as the crusading investigative journalism typified by W. T. Stead. Paul Moody looks at ancillary print materials -- advertising and press books -- showing how landscapes in early films were exploited for marketing purposes, again highlighting an area too often neglected by the focus on the films themselves.

An examination of pictorialism in Cecil Hepworth's films by Simon Brown concentrates particularly on the period 1908-13, contrasting unfavourably Hepworth's grasp of narrative structure with that of his international competitors, and is followed by a consideration by Christine Gledhill of the concept of pastoral and how it subverts a simple polarization between town and country: individuals move between the two realms, which in the process take on an ideological freight as pastoral becomes a site of transformation. Two further essays, one by Judith Cowan, the other by Judith McLaren, feature leisure issues in urban and rural setting respectively. In the first, the city as depicted in the *Rogues of London* (Bert Haldane, 1915) is seen through a lens inflected by class. The second is on the popular genre of horse racing films in the silent period.

An essay on filming in Iceland, by Ivo Blom, though interesting, seems tangential to the aims of the collection, while one on the film industry that flourished on the French Riviera (by Amy Sargeant) is linked much more firmly to British cinema. Closer to home, an investigation by the prolific Ian Christie of how filmic depictions of the Boer War were consumed in a small part of North London makes a fascinating but all too brief case study. Patrick Keiller's essay on the city of the future is largely a reprint of an article that appeared in the AHRB's Centre for British Film and Television Studies' newsletter Winter 2003/4, in which Keiller reflects both on his own filmmaking practice, and how film can make us aware of changes in the built environment. And Alan Burton excavates some examples of Labour movement films of parades, and discusses how these records show the ways in which public space was contested.

In a lively collection of recent scholarship quibbles are few. There is surprisingly little reflection on the emphasis on pastoral nostalgia that emerged during the Great War, nor the social upheavals that followed it. A two-colour additive process was certainly 'experimental' in 1906, when George Albert Smith was granted a patent for what would become Kinemacolor, but it was hardly experimental by the time Claude Friese-Greene made *The Open Road* (1926). And although it is true to say that little work has been done on the role lecturers played as accompanists to silent film, mention should be made, in addition to Nick Hiley, who is cited, of Martin Sopocy, who discusses the role of the narrator at great length in his *James Williamson: Studies and Documents of a Pioneer of the Film Narrative* (Associated University Presses, 1998).

Part of the enjoyment of this volume, which sheds new light on old favourites and brings to light pleasures yet to come in the form of hitherto unknown films, is that, unlike the one-off *Multimedia Histories* conference, the Silent British Cinema festival occurs every year. This book provides encouragement -- if any were needed -- to book tickets to Nottingham for the next one.

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