



Arts & Humanities
Research Council



BEYOND TEXT

The Sounds of Early Cinema in Britain: Performance, Realisation and Reception

7-8 April 2011

Stewart House, University of London and
The Barbican Centre



UNIVERSITY OF LONDON · SCHOOL OF ADVANCED STUDY

PROGRAMME

Thursday 7 April 2011 at Stewart House, University of London

- 10.15am** Registration and coffee (Room ST273)
10.45am **Welcome/Introduction to the Conference**
(Room ST274/5)
- 11am – 1pm** **Sessions 1a and 1b** (Room ST274/5)
LONDON: THE FILM SOCIETY
John Riley: Music at the Film Society
Fiona Ford: Sunday Afternoon at the Film Society: Some Herring, a Mouse and Three Stone Lions
PRACTICES OUTSIDE LONDON
Peter Walsh: The Yorkshire Conversazione: Non-Standard Exhibition and the Move to ‘Complete’ Cine-Variety
David R. Williams: Music Hath Charms - A Musical History of Leicester Cinemas
- 1pm – 2pm** Lunch (Room ST273)
- 2pm – 4pm** **Session 2** (Room ST274/5)
AUDIENCES AND MUSIC/DANCE
Malcolm Cook: Animating the Audience: Singalong Films in Britain in the 1920s
Stephen Bottomore: ‘Selsior’: Early British Dance Films
Josephine Botting: Take Me Back to Dear Old *Blighty*: Nostalgia and Economy in Adrian Brunel’s Silent Film of the Great War
Lisa Stead: ‘The conversation may be more interesting than the film’: Women’s Writing and the Sound of Silent Female Audiences, 1911–1928
- 4pm – 4.30pm** Tea (Room ST273)

- 4.30pm – 5.30pm Session 3 (Room ST274/5)**
PERFORMANCE PRACTICES in the UK
 Gillian Anderson: *Way Down East* (Griffith, 1920) in Great Britain
 Jim Buhler: The Early Reception of British Exhibition Practices in American Trade Papers
- 5.30pm – 6pm Session 4 (Room ST274/5)**
RESPONSE to day 1, Professor Rick Altman
- 6.15pm** 2-course seated dinner, with wine (pre-ordered only)
 (Senate House, Court Room)
- 8.30pm** Screening of *Lonesome* at Barbican (optional)

Friday 8 April, Barbican Centre, with British Silent Film Festival

- 9am – 10.30am BSFF: THE GOOSEBUMPS EFFECT** (Cinema 2)
 Philip Carli and Neil Brand
- 10.30am – 11am** Break
- 11am – 12.30pm Parallel Session:**
TRANSITIONS and COMPARISONS (Cinema 3)
 Alexis Bennett: Early film, Early Music: *The Lady of the Lake* and the Dolmetsch Family
 Michael V. Pisani: Stages of a British Melodrama: *It's Never Too Late to Mend*
 Shira Peltzman 'Photographed with Sound': The Use and Function of Sound in Movietone's Epsom Derby Newsreels, 1929-1934
 Or, **BSFF: RADIO FUN**, Bryony Dixon (Cinema 2)
- 12.30pm – 2pm** Lunch break
- 2pm – 3.30pm BSFF: THE AUDIENCE** (Cinema 2)
 Luke McKernan (British Library): Only the Screen was Silent

3.30pm – 4pm Break

4pm – 5.30pm **PUBLIC FORUM: *Silent Musicians Speak*** (Cinema 2)

Chair: Miguel Mera

Featuring: Gillian Anderson (conductor and silent film historian), Neil Brand (BSFF), Alex Hogg (Minima), Paul Robinson (Harmonie Band), plus contributions from Professor Rick Altman (University of Iowa, Living Nickelodeon), and the musicians for the British Silent Film Festival

5.30pm – 7.30pm Break

7.30pm – 9pm **SCREENING** (Cinema 1)

Morozko (Father Frost) (dir. Yuri Zhelyabuzhsky, 1924), plus two ***Cinderella*** shorts: Pathe, 1907, and Lotte Reininger, 1922

Philip Ellis (Birmingham Royal Ballet) will conduct a reconstruction by Julie Brown (RHUL) of a score by British composer Frederick Laurence for ***Morozko***, a rarely seen and delightful soviet film based on a well-known Russian fairy tale about a stepdaughter who is driven out to face the spirit of winter. Laurence's "special score" is entirely original and reflects aspects of 1920s musical modernism and has not been heard since it accompanied the film's London run in 1925.

The screening of *Morozko* will be introduced by Julie Brown, and followed by a Q&A with the conductor and composer's family.

Performers:

Rita Manning (1st violin)

Patrick Kiernan (2nd violin)

Bill Hawkes (Viola)

Nick Cooper (Cello)

Chris Laurence (Double bass)

Lucy Wakeford (Harp)

Network conference closes c. 9.30/10pm; BSFF continues Saturday and Sunday.

ABSTRACTS

Gillian Anderson, *Way Down East* (Griffith, 1920) in Great Britain

British accounts of *Way Down East* in 1921/23 always refer to its phenomenal success.

The Griffith film, *Way Down East*, finishes its run at the Empire on Saturday. It will have had an extraordinary run for a film at a West/end theatre. It will then have been shown for 21 weeks and there have been 13 performances a week. Thus it will have had a consecutive run of over 300 performances, which is easily a "record" for a film in this country.

(London Times, Jan. 13, 1922)

'The inevitable result was a veritable musical victory for the house has been playing to capacity night after night and thousands of people had to be turned away as there was no further accommodation.' (reference to Albert Marchbank's performance at the Tower Cinema, Rye Lane, Peckham, London).

Accounts differ markedly however when describing the music. The first performances used the Peters/Silvers score, Griffith's own music director, projectionist and stage assistants for the sound effects. Even in important cities outside of London, Griffith insisted on using legitimate theatres and controlled the presentation.

When *Way Down East* finally went into regular movie theatres, however, criticism of the original music surfaced. This paper will describe the score's reception as reported in the British press and will attempt to tie the descriptions to the actual physical evidence in the Griffith score and parts for *Way Down East* at the Library of Congress.

Alexis Bennett (Goldsmiths), Early Film, Early Music: *The Lady of the Lake* and the Dolmetsch Family

The Lady of the Lake (James A. Fitzpatrick, 1928) is an example of a British silent film that was re-released (in 1931) with a specially composed and recorded musical score, described at the time as 'a musical interpretation'. Its romantic-historical subject matter (drawn from Walter Scott) invites a discussion of the means by which a sense of the past was evoked in film music of this period. My paper will investigate the involvement of the Dolmetsch family ('early music' revival pioneers) in the production of this forgotten epic, and the implications this had for the filtering of historical performance practice into commercial media at this early stage; I will also ask important questions concerning how widespread the practice of re-releasing films with added soundtracks actually was.

Josephine Botting (BFI National Archive), Take Me Back to Dear Old Blighty: Nostalgia and Economy in Adrian Brunel's Silent Film of the Great War

The war film was a popular genre during the 1920s, with America, Britain and other European countries producing their own, exorcising the ghosts of the dreadful conflict which killed so many between 1914 and 1918. My thesis is on the work of director Adrian Brunel and this paper focuses on his 1927 war film: *Blighty*. For many silent war films, the musical accompaniment would have been drawn from the songs sung by soldiers during the war, songs which were incredibly evocative both to those who had fought and those who stayed at home. *Blighty* was no exception but Brunel's was a war film with a difference: it has no battle scenes, no mud filled trenches and no heroics. Instead it tells the story of one English family on the Home Front experiencing the highs and lows of the Great War. Popular wartime songs were a key element in its creation of nostalgia, not only as non-diegetic accompaniment in the cinema but in the very fabric of the film. Brunel achieves this in several ways: through titles, words and visual imagery, and, in this paper, I explore how these songs are used as a powerful shorthand for conveying meaning and emotion in a very economic way.

Stephen Bottomore (Independent film historian), 'Selsior' – Early British Dance Films

The early British cinema was characterized by much imaginative experimentation, including in the area of live sound practices. In my paper I will describe one such example: the Selsior company and its films. In the couple of years up to the First World War this small company made a series of short films of dances to entertain cinema audiences as part of a programme of films. The gimmick they employed was to include an image of a conductor in the corner of the frame, so a live orchestra in the cinema could follow the conductor's baton and so keep time with the filmed dancers.

Selsior made at least fifteen films on this principle, including *The Tango Waltz*, *Way Down the Mississippi*, and *The Empire Glide*. Selsior films were exhibited in the UK over several years and some of the 'stars' were famous and successful, one of them, Ernest Belcher, even becoming a major Hollywood choreographer.

Although none of the Selsior films seem to survive, I have many pictorial advertisements from the trade press which offer a quite detailed record of the look of these productions. In my presentation I will tell the story of this company, present some of the visual documentation, and (perhaps) play a recording of one of their tunes. In addition, I will mention other systems which incorporated the image of a conductor in the film frame, and will situate Selsior within the wider international context of early dance films.

Jim Buhler (University of Texas at Austin), The Reception of British Exhibition Practices in American Trade Papers, 1907-1914

With the exception of occasional coverage of developments in mechanical synchronization of the film with the phonograph, the American trade papers prior to 1910 did not show much interest in foreign exhibition practices, British or otherwise. Reports from foreign correspondents, interviews with visiting foreign film company executives or American executives who had recently been abroad, and reprints from foreign newspapers and trade journals tended to remark on the level of interest of a country's population in film, whether the audiences liked American films, how the film companies of that country saw the American market, and so forth. The articles seemed designed, in other words, to report on the sort of economic activity that would be of direct interest to Americans engaged in the film business. This situation began to change after 1910, when the American trade papers worked in earnest to establish institutional standards for film exhibition in the United States. A semi-regular 'London Letter', which frequently commented on the openings of the more elaborate theatres and productions in the city, began appearing in 1911, and this was followed in late 1912 by the establishment of a page of 'Foreign Trade Notes', often dominated by the 'British Notes'.

In this paper I will look particularly at the commentary on music and other performing acts in London theatres and argue that these accounts served less to document London exhibition practices than to define and implicitly measure the progress of American ones.

Philip Carli and Neil Brand, The Goosebumps Effect (BSFF)

Before we screamed at the music for *Jaws* or sighed at the score for *Brief Encounter*, silent movie musicians were turning the classical repertoire into cinema chemistry by choosing music that would fit the mood - but why do high quavery violins produce unease? And who first used them? Did previous generations recognise specific music as dramatic the way we do now? Some of the answers, provided by polymath musicologists Dr Philip Carli and Neil Brand, may surprise you as they try out musical ideas to the best moments of Hitchcock, Griffith and German cinema.

Malcolm Cook (Birkbeck), Animating the Audience: Singalong Films in Britain in the 1920s

This paper will examine the brief but vigorous popularity of singalong films in Britain in the mid-1920s. This alternate sonic practice utilized an animated 'bouncing ball' to indicate the lyrics of a song with the intent of promoting a communal 'singsong' in the audience. While the US counterparts to these

films, produced by the Fleischer brothers, looked forward to the era of synchronized sound in their use of the De Forest Phonofilm sound-on-film system, the British films looked back to cinema's music hall heritage by distributing a score for live accompaniment, featuring music hall standards rather than contemporary songs and by emphasizing the British character of the films. The performance of sound with these films thus engendered an active, participatory and communal reception rather different from the stereotype of the passive cinema spectator.

Bryony Dixon, Radio Fun (BSFF)

As we consider the period in which sound and image began to converge, at the end of the 1920s and into the early 1930s we take a look at the relationship between the two distinct forms of radio and cinema. From the strange case of Mr Smith Wakes Up, a radio play adapted as an early sound film, to radio's love affair with the stars of the cinema, this radio-related miscellany from the BFI National Archive also includes a welcome screening of the Hans Richter classic, *Radio-Europa* (1931).

Fiona Ford (University of Nottingham), Sunday Afternoon at the Film Society: Some Herring, a Mouse and Three Stone Lions

On Sunday 10 November, 1929, the Film Society opened their fifth season with a programme that contained a typically eclectic mixture of films chosen for their cinematographic rather than commercial value, most of which had not been shown in England. A variety of sonic practices were used to accompany the different films, providing a representative selection of older and existing approaches in use at the end of the silent era, at a time when only a small minority of English cinemas had converted to sound technology. The first half of the programme contained a silent film with no accompaniment at all (*The Fall of the House of Usher*; Watson & Webber, USA, 1928), a silent film with an accompaniment furnished by gramophone records (*Drifters*; Grierson, GB, 1929), and a sound cartoon (*The Barn Dance*, Disney, USA, 1929). The programme concluded with *Battleship Potemkin* (Eisenstein, USSR, 1926), screened with a live orchestral performance of the special score composed by Edmund Meisel for its German release in April 1926. In addition to surveying the sonic practices used in the first half of the programme, this paper will focus on why Eisenstein – who was in the audience that afternoon – was so disgruntled with the presentation of *Potemkin*, conducted by the composer himself. Eisenstein blamed Meisel for requesting a slower projection speed to suit his music, provoking laughter during the 'stone lions' scene where it had not been intended. Evidence from the extant *Potemkin* scores will be used to scrutinize Eisenstein's recollection of events.

Luke McKernan (British Library), *Only the Screen Was Silent* (BSFF)

Luke McKernan, moving image curator at the British Library, presents an instructive entertainment on children and cinema-going in London before the First World War, using oral history and memoir testimony, music and film.

Shira Peltzman (BFI National Archive), 'Photographed with Sound': The Use and Function of Sound in Movietone's Epsom Derby Newsreels, 1929-1934

Despite the ubiquity of the newsreel in British cinemas during the 1920s, few historians have addressed how the newsreel industry adapted to new sound technologies, and how the transition to sound re-defined their product. British Movietone was an early adapter of sound technology, and between 1929 and 1934, their use of sound changed consistently and dramatically as they strove to incorporate and perfect the use of sound in their newsreels. This 'experimental period' bore witness to shift in paradigm in the newsreel industry that saw an inversion of the traditional narrative structure to one in which the soundtrack became the dominant element and the primary means of conveying information to audiences. A nuanced understanding of the development of this new narrative structure is achieved by analyzing a single event filmed repeatedly by Movietone—the Epsom Derby—over the course of the five years that followed the transition to sound. I use in-depth textual analysis to highlight some of the possibilities sound offered the medium of the newsreel in its first few years of existence, as well as to identify experiments in sound design that were used in the Derby films and then summarily discarded. Examining the uses of sound design that were retained allows for a detailed understanding of the birth and evolution of a new narrative structure to emerge. Considering the Derby films as being emblematic of an industry-wide struggle to articulate a relationship between sound and image within their films enables their importance in a broader cinematic context to emerge, and allows new light to be shed on the creation of a new set of sonic and aesthetic conventions within newsreel production that lasted throughout the next several decades.

Michael V. Pisani (Vassar College), *Stages of a British Melodrama: It's Never Too Late To Mend*

When in 1937 David MacDonald directed *It's Never Too Late To Mend* with 'the barnstorming butcher of melodramatic menace' Tod Slaughter, the story already had a long British production history, both on the stage and in the cinema. Charles Reade's 'sensation novel' was published in 1856 and served as a harsh indictment of the British prison system. Even more than the novel,

Reade's dramatic version at the Princess's Theatre caused a riot over its depiction of the abuse of prisoners and the inclusion of the infamous 'treadmill' scene. The play was quickly taken up in other theatres around the country. It was produced as late as 1905 in Birmingham by Andrew Melville. In the early years of the cinema there were no less than five silent versions (1911, 1913, 1917, 1922, and 1925).

This presentation compares the use of music in the stage, silent, and sound versions. Focus will be on the villain Squire Meadows and his interaction with other characters in the play, all of whom fall under his merciless and cruel victimization. Sources are Reade's promptbook (59 numbered musical cues), instrumental parts from the Drury Lane Collection, British Library (56 cues), another set of parts in the Theatre Collection, University of Kent (50 cues), cue sheets to the later silent versions, and the very sparse musical soundtrack in the 1937 film (9 cues). Meadows is not musically highlighted as a villain in the stage versions (nor in the sound film), whereas in the silents his stealthy plotting merits various types of creepy 'misteriosos'. These comparisons raise some interesting questions about musical characterization in the silent film.

John Riley, Music at the Film Society

The Film Society was a members' organisation that aimed to improve the standing of cinema by showing artistically or technically worthwhile films that had failed to interest the commercial sector. It opened in 1925 but, though it embraced sound as soon as possible for such an organisation, it also kept faith with silent cinema almost throughout its existence. As late as 1937, two years before it was wound up, the Society was regularly screening silent films, to support the sound features.

Though there is a large amount of material about the Film Society, a surprisingly small and usually frustratingly imprecise amount of it relates to what audiences heard during the screenings. However, there is indirect evidence that allows us to get some idea. Correspondence and notes discuss the music that was played and invoices from musicians supplemented this.

But beyond that, there are the spaces where screenings took place – the Film Society moved through various cinemas in its fourteen-year life. Though the New Scala and the Tivoli no longer exist, the New Gallery is now a branch of Habitat that bears some structural relation to the original. Studies of the existing spaces will be supplemented by contemporary documents giving an insight into the musical possibilities and limitations of these venues, including what musical forces it would be possible to accommodate and what the acoustic qualities of the spaces might have been.

Lisa Stead (University of Exeter), ‘The conversation may be more interesting than the film’: Women’s Writing and the Sound of Silent Female Audiences, 1911-1928

This paper explores women’s written response to sound in the silent era cinema space. By offering examples of reflections upon the noise of the audience, the chatter of female cinemagoers and the experience of orchestral accompaniments, the paper explores the diverse ways in which British women engaged with the gendered experience of the cinemagoing in distinct written forms. These include women’s fan magazine letter writing, the newspaper criticism of leading female critics C.A. Lejeune and Iris Barry, and the essays of modernist writer Dorothy Richardson contained within the specialized film journal *Close Up*.

The noise of the audience for the *Close Up* writers was symptomatic of a feminized mass public targeted by film culture, fundamentally entwined with cinema’s status as a lowbrow popular entertainment. For the female newspaper critics, the sound of the audience was closely tied to issues of class, with the theatre space often envisaged as an arena of quiet escapism for the working woman. For female fan letter writers, audience and orchestral sonic practices prompted debate within female fan communities, offering a discussion point around which such ‘everyday’ spectators could assert their own interpretation of the texture, value and class-specific experience of cinemagoing.

Attention to British women’s discussion of audience sound assists, therefore, in illuminating the female encounter with cinema as an experience in space in silent era Britain, as well as an interaction with individual texts—and one which engaged pervasive issues of class and gender.

Peter Walsh (University of Sheffield), The Yorkshire Conversazione: Non-Standard Exhibition and the Move to ‘Complete’ Cine-Variety

The profile of the town hall showman in the early British film history has been widely established as that of the independent operator, with a complete programme of films and musical entertainments obliged to constantly travel in pursuit of fresh audiences. The early practices of Sheffield-based photographer and exhibitor Jasper Redfern offers a new insight into a distinct mode of town hall exhibition, which largely remained outside the public eye. Utilizing the cinematograph in combination with an Edison concert phonograph and static colour photography, Redfern offered not a complete entertainment, but a segmented selection of attractions which could readily be adapted and integrated into any number of private social events of a scale similar to the town hall show.

Playing to employee suppers, society balls, and grammar school ‘conversazioni’, Redfern’s demonstrations found a place in full programmes of recitals and dramatic monologues. Seamlessly integrating into the format of

traditional musical soirees and cultural evenings, Redfern's approach offered something to an exclusive audience that a public town hall show could not: from passion plays for Primitive Methodists; cinematic and phonographic 'reproductions' of municipal elections for Sheffield's Press Club; to up close technical demonstrations at Sheffield's YMCA.

In the short period from 1899 to 1902 this distinct exhibition practice thrived alongside Redfern's more conventional town hall shows, successfully capitalizing on interest outside of the established channels. This practice would slowly develop towards a more recognisably 'complete' form of cine-variety in the years that followed.

David R. Williams (Teesside University (retired)), Music Hath Charms – a Musical History of Leicester Cinemas

In Volume 30 of the Journal of the British Music Society, Karl Kroeger documents the strong cultural tradition of music in 18th Century Leicester. From the newspaper advertisements of subscription concerts in the early part of the 20th century, and the formation of the Leicester Philharmonic Society in 1906, it is clear that this was still very present in the town as cinemas were being opened. Not surprisingly then, the inclusion of music within cinematograph performances and established cinemas was also a factor of notable report and praising comment.

Theatre rivalries, individual reputations, the installation of organs, sound effects machines, synchronized mechanical devices were all distinctly reported in local newspapers very turned on to the effectiveness of the Sounds of Early Cinema. Drawing upon my very detailed research into the cinema history of Leicester, it is possible to reveal the practices of the musical presentations in major and minor cinemas up until the completion of the sound conversions in 1931.

Leicester may not have had a very different musical history from any other place, but it is rare to find one so well documented and the illustrated paper may promote others to research and compare the musical heritage of their own local cinemas.

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The research team are: Dr Julie Brown (Royal Holloway, University of London), Principal Investigator and Dr Annette Davison (University of Edinburgh), Co-investigator.

