

Review: Geoff Brown, *Silent to Sound: British Cinema in Transition*

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Silent to Sound: British Cinema in Transition

By Geoff Brown

John Libbey Publishing, 2024

Review by Jacob Browne, University of St Andrews

The framework of “transition” poses a particular set of questions. Can it simply be defined as everything that exists between the appearance of a new form and the subsequent disappearance of an old one? Can we definitively say what prompts the transfer of dominance from one to the other – especially when the superiority of the new form is, at best, not always or not yet apparent? Is there a particular kind of chimerical beast that exists in the interim, that emerges as each form responds to and adapts (or fails to adapt) to the other? This highly detailed volume on the transition from silent to sound in British cinema (roughly 1927 to 1934) by critic and scholar Geoff Brown navigates its own way through these issues, and asks several more interesting questions of its own – not least surrounding the notions of “Britishness” evoked by its title.

In roughly chronological chapters, Brown picks an intricate path through the technologies, techniques, personnel, studio infrastructure, and public responses bound up in the arrival of “talkies” to Britain. Across twelve chapters and an epilogue, Brown details an often maligned or ignored era of national cinema. Only some of the films discussed survive, and fewer are widely seen today – Alfred Hitchcock’s *Blackmail* (1929) is probably the most familiar, yet currently lacks a British Blu-Ray release – though Brown helpfully indicates where films may be viewable online or in archives. Availability aside, many remain a hard sell. Brown admits certain “limitations on the artistic value” (5) of this era of British cinema in comparison with the output of Hollywood, as well as other national industries.

Nevertheless, brighter spots persist, and the brightest in this volume appear when it is possible to write about a British transitional film that is both extant and engaging.

Tensions around “Britishness” motivate the starting point of the first chapter, on early attempts at both sound-on-disc and sound-on-film systems. With the release of *The Jazz Singer* (1927), patriotic impulses prompted a retrospective search in the contemporary press for “British” pioneers of film sound technology, the findings of which Brown is justifiably sceptical. Some – like Wordsworth Donisthorpe’s 1878 patent for phonograph-assisted “talking pictures” – can scarcely be called workable technology, while others – those of the Paris-born Eugène Augustin Lauste, or Lee de Forest, native of Iowa – are claimed as British by virtue of completing some of their work in the country. Elsewhere, however, “British” seems synonymous in practice with “English.”

Two crucial moments appear in quick succession in Chapter Two – one in direct response to the transatlantic crossing of successful sound films; the other, blithely oblivious to them. The first was an initial slew of opportunistic attempts to cash in on sound films, often characterised by “muddle, graft and incompetence” (64), with supposed investments in new technology diverting attention from suspect areas elsewhere in production companies’ accounts. The second was the Cinematograph Films Act of 1927, mandating 7.5% of an exhibitors’ slate to be British in origin, leading to a proliferation of cheaply made “quota quickies.” With its pressing concerns of British national film production and the suggestion that quota-filling “silent” features prolonged the transition period (266), the Act haunts the remainder of the book and might have deserved a chapter to itself.

The next chapters cover the race to produce the first British talkie. The early frontrunner, the lost *Black Waters* (1929), was disqualified for insufficient Britishness – it was “made by a

British company with British money, on foreign soil with overwhelmingly American personnel” (75). Chapter Four focuses on the eventual “winner,” *Blackmail*, proving a highlight of the book. Nevertheless, given the adulation afforded to Hitchcock elsewhere, it is to Brown’s credit that he highlights the disquieting “sexual banter” the director forces on his star, Anny Ondra, in surviving test footage (97). The runner-up, the *Metropolis*-lite *High Treason* (1929), gets some of the less focused Chapter Five devoted to it, while Chapter Six takes in the international co-production *Atlantic* (1929), offering a direct and revealing comparison between the English-language, German and French versions.

The volume’s range of interests are on display in subsequent chapters. Chapter Seven deals with two particular studios (British & Dominions and British Talking Pictures) as case studies, while Chapter Eight describes the origins of British musicals, imitating American trendsetters with local talents. Chapter Nine is a stand-out offering on theatrical adaptations, which promised borrowed prestige alongside the dreaded implication of static, action-free, dialogue-heavy features. Chapters Ten and Eleven broaden the picture from the British talkie, the former exploring the last of the silents produced in Britain, while the latter takes a more global approach to reception. It is in Chapter Eleven that an ironic denouement to the worries about Britishness emerges, as the first “British” talkie success, *Rome Express* (1932), is praised for its “rare and satisfying fusion of international and domestic attractions” (313). Finally, Chapter Twelve explores the cinema’s “full supporting programme” – newsreels, amateur productions, and documentary projects (including the landmark work of John Grierson and Alberto Cavalcanti) – which, again, is a stand-out chapter.

Brown’s written tone has a journalistic directness that serves his narrative well. On the level of immediate comprehension, his avoidance of academic jargon is admirable, and he offers effective summaries of complex technologies and historical developments. Nevertheless, this

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sentence-by-sentence directness is not always matched with an overall clarity of structure. There is some inevitable awkwardness in the academic habit of heavily signposted introductions and conclusions, but in jettisoning them entirely, this volume leaves little to orient the reader. As such, the list of sub-headings offered at the beginning of each chapter in lieu of a chapter summary gives little advance sense of its actual focus or argument. The chronological structure results in some misleading juxtapositions, too – for example, the chapter subtitled “Fire, Fraud and the Creation of the British Musical” is simply listing the concurrent developments it describes, not any causal or argumentative link between them. Similarly, Brown offers wry asides and acute observations throughout, but refrains from overt or extensive editorialising on the grand scale, which may disappoint some readers even as it satisfies others. Overall, though, the great strength of this book is its detailed research, presenting complex situations with innumerable side-paths and parallel developments as a coherent and often entertaining narrative. It is generously illustrated with images and adverts from the trade papers of the era and may highlight material of great use to historians and researchers.