

# **Nice Work (if you can get it): The Silent Films of Adrian Brunel**

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## **Declaration of Authorship**

I, Josephine Botting, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed:

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the filmmaking career of Adrian Brunel during the 1920s, concentrating on the period during which his most significant work was undertaken. Brunel has received increasing attention as part of recent reappraisals of British silent cinema and has emerged as a significant figure; the claims made for him in other work on the period will be examined to reach conclusions about the importance of his role and legacy. Drawing on a wealth of primary resources, in particular Brunel's own personal paper collection housed at the British Film Institute, but also the trade and daily press and other archival film material, this thesis represents a valuable insight into the British film industry during the period 1920 to 1928.

Brunel was a proponent of film as an art form and his career outlines his attempts to fulfil his own creative ambitions and the commercial imperatives imposed by the British film industry. This will be achieved by constructing a detailed and comprehensive biography of Brunel's career complemented by a close analysis of his films and their production histories.

As an in-depth study of an individual struggling to sustain a career in the unstable conditions prevailing in the British industry at the time, this thesis contributes to ongoing revisionist work on British silent cinema, both in terms of its workings as an industry and attempts to encourage its development along more artistic lines. It uncovers the various forces controlling the production, distribution and exhibition of films in Britain and the degree to which Brunel was able to negotiate these in his attempt to find a niche in the insecure and competitive arena of British film.

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## Abbreviations

AB – Adrian Brunel

ABSC – Adrian Brunel Special Collection

IMSC – Ivor Montagu Special Collection

*KW – Kinematograph Weekly*

*MPS – Motion Picture Studio*

**Introduction: 'Might repay serious excavation...': Adrian Brunel as a subject for study**

On 4 May 1929, Adrian Brunel attended a gala evening at London's Marble Arch Pavilion. In front of a packed auditorium, he was presented with a Certificate of Merit for his work directing *The Constant Nymph*, which had been voted Best British Film of 1928 by the readers of *Film Weekly* magazine. On the surface, this was the most triumphant moment of his career: the feature had not only been hailed as a fine example of British film art but had also been a massive box-office success for Gainsborough Pictures. Yet behind the gloss of the occasion lay deep divisions between the main players in the film's production. Michael Balcon, the studio head, refused to go on stage, so the film's star, Mabel Poulton, accepted the award on his behalf. Balcon and Brunel were not on speaking terms since Brunel had launched a legal battle against the studio over its apparent breach of his contract and was suing them for unpaid fees. Brunel's supervisory director on the film, Basil Dean, did not attend the ceremony; their working relationship had been extremely strained and, as an experienced filmmaker, Brunel's pride had been dented at having to deputise for a novice director.

This event serves to highlight some of the contradictions in Brunel's turbulent film career. Each success emerged from a challenging production history and tells a story of conflict and compromise. Each also heralded a period of intense frustration and unemployment. The acclaim he received for *The Constant Nymph* from both the press and audiences appeared to vindicate his long-held conviction that art and popularity in the cinema were not mutually exclusive. But, by 1929, silent film was already effectively dead, his methods were out-dated and his career as a director of mainstream films was over.



## Introduction

This thesis sets out to examine and assess Adrian Brunel's film career during the 1920s through a consideration of his films and the industrial context in which they were produced, supported by detailed research into his personal papers and other contemporary sources. Its aim is neither to confirm him as a genius nor to make claims for his films as 'masterworks' of British silent cinema. The intention is rather to bring new insights into his work by anatomising the production context and history in which each film was created. Each film, or group of films, is examined in relation to a particular issue or debate preoccupying the movie trade at the time and in the context of the difficulties posed by the unstable environment in which Brunel was at work.

Brunel is a worthy and rewarding subject for study due to the varied and unusual nature of his silent oeuvre and of the production set-ups within which he worked, as well as the comprehensive record of his life and work that he bequeathed historians. His attempts to inject original ideas into British filmmaking brought him into conflict with the industry powers that controlled what reached the screen and he was thus compelled to engage in difficult negotiations in order to try and protect his artistic integrity. Mapping out the journey from inception to completion of his works reveals the many obstacles he encountered during the process and the ways in which he navigated them. This thesis will therefore consider Brunel as a key figure in the tussle between the industry's commercial interests and the creative aspirations of many of those who worked under them. It thus reveals hitherto unknown aspects of the British film industry of the 1920s, how it functioned and the issues that preoccupied its participants.

In the pages that follow I survey the production landscape in which Brunel worked in order to outline the difficulties that hampered British film production during the 1920s. I will then proceed to challenge some of the negative views of the films emanating from it, which discouraged serious research into the period for many years. In addition I will situate

my own work within the revisionist studies that have appeared more recently as a counterbalance.

### **The context of British silent cinema**

When Brunel first entered the British film industry towards the end of the First World War, it was going through an extremely difficult time. Having experienced its vagaries first-hand, Brunel was well-placed to provide a personal view of it and, in 1929, some months after winning the *Film Weekly* award, he composed a lengthy summary of the situation as he saw it (Brunel 1929). In it, he acknowledged the toll that the war had taken on the country's prospects; during the conflict, audience numbers rose but could not be catered for by an industry badly affected both financially and in creative terms by the loss of practitioners through conscription. America lost no time and stepped in to fill the vacuum and supply the films that British cinemas needed and, after the war, continued to consolidate its strong position and began its domination of world markets (see also Burrows 2003: 5). Brunel's description of the postwar British film industry, as 'depleted, impoverished, old fashioned and out-of-practice... impeded at every step by officialdom' (Brunel 1929: 2), differs little from the narrative related by most subsequent historians.

Brunel regarded continued American domination, along with the government's failure to counter it, as largely to blame for the British industry's failure to improve its situation, yet a woeful lack of funding was another major hindrance to progress. This not only affected the quality of the films but also the ability of firms to sustain production while waiting to recoup profits, since the films often took months to reach the screen. Cinemas were committed to showing American product due to the aggressive block- and blind-booking practices employed by US companies. Whereas several Hollywood studios had become vast, vertically integrated concerns profiting from their own films directly, Rachael Low observed that 'much British production was conducted on a hand-to-mouth basis with

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an advance here and an advance there until the film was completed somehow' (Low 1971: 278). This certainly reflects the way Brunel worked for the first half of the 1920s and the lack of finance going into the film industry meant that production facilities were inadequate to say the least.

Germany had instigated protective measures for its own film industry in 1922, stipulating that distributors had to match foreign product with national on an equal basis. This, according to Brunel, increased investment and saw the country's output rise to 240 films by 1927 (Britain produced 40); more importantly 'German picture-goers had learned to prefer their home made films' (Brunel 1929: 2). In Britain, however, production continued to slow and exhibition figures for British films shown at home gradually fell, partly due to the slow-down but also because British firms simply could not combat the highly organised and hostile distribution methods of American companies. In 1926, domestic production reached its nadir; Tom Ryall describes it as a 'calamitous year' in which only 5% of trade shows was for British films (Ryall: 39).

This is a well-researched and much debated period in British cinema as historians have tried to explain the reasons for the slump. The failure of many of the film companies operating in Britain partly explains the contraction and some went out of business after one or two productions, unable to sustain themselves. But the issues facing the industry were not purely to do with quantity and questions were also raised about the quality of British films. The popularity of American productions caused concern about the effect such films were having on British culture and society and prompted a great deal of soul-searching in the press. Articles with titles like 'Do the Public Hate Our Pictures?' and 'What is Wrong with British Films?' appeared regularly in the trade papers and indicated the sense of inferiority from which the industry was suffering (*MPS*, 9 June 1923: 7; *Bioscope*, 11 June 1925: 16). Revisionist historians have made in-roads into dispelling the notion that British films were not popular with audiences and Christine Gledhill actually regards 1926 as a

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triumphant year for production due to the quality of the output (see Burrows 2003 and Morris 2009; Gledhill 2008: 163). However, it is clear from the amount of debate in the press that many in the trade were convinced that British films were generally of an inferior standard and two main reasons came to the fore: a failure of creative leadership and a lack of investment.

Brunel himself openly blamed 'the vulgar, uneducated film boss' (*MPS*, 26 August 1922: 6) for holding back the development of British filmmaking; actor Hugh Miller, three years later his co-founder of the Film Society, echoed this view, attributing the inadequacy of British films to a 'lack of imagination' on the part of financiers, who failed to recognise film as an art (*MPS*, 9 September 1922: 6). Liberal MP J. M. Kenworthy lamented that 'the production of... beautiful British films appears to be a dying industry', noting that the number of producers had dropped from twenty to just four or five in two years (Kenworthy 1925: 16). He regarded the poor reputation of film production among financiers and the superior business acumen of American producers as major culprits. Bemoaning the damaging effect that transatlantic domination had not only on the nation's industry but also on 'our national culture and the imperial aspect generally', he called for the government to help industry promote 'combination, organisation and capital' (*ibid.*: 17).

Two years later, the government announced the introduction of legislation in support of the British film industry. The Cinematograph Film Act (also known as the Quota Act) came into force on 1 April 1928 and set a quota for the proportion of British films that were to be exhibited in British cinemas. It was similar in principle to the German Kontingent but with much lower quotas: distributors had to ensure that 7.5% of the films they offered were UK productions, while exhibitors had to devote 5% of their programme to British films. These quotas were due to be raised in stages till they reached 20% by 1936 and measures were also put in place to prevent block- and blind-booking.

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While most in the industry welcomed the move, producer T. A. Welsh (business partner to British director George Pearson) regarded it as misguided, asserting that there were insufficient studios in operation to meet the level of production required by the quota. At first the Act proved very effective in stimulating production of British films and Low records that from the low point of 37 films made in 1926, the figure rose to 72 in 1928 (Low 1971: 156). However, Welsh's assessment turned out to be correct; while the number of films increased, quality did not improve as British studios, ill-equipped to cope with a surge in production, struggled to keep up with demand. The introduction of sound later that year set the industry back even further as it required investment in expensive recording equipment if producers were to stay in business.

For Brunel, the development of talking pictures armed America with a weapon to 'crush the British Film Industry at a time when it was really in the process of getting on its feet' (Brunel 1929: 3). The high prices charged to equip studios for sound recording and the shelving of many silent films further affected already struggling firms (ibid.). Meanwhile, American studios, initially affected by the quota, soon found a way to combat its effects; the British market was extremely valuable to them, especially when the arrival of sound established a strong link in the form of the common language. Therefore some of the US studios established British operations to produce cheap films to fulfil the quota, while others contracted small local producers to do the work for them. It was this practice that led to the production of what are referred to as 'quota quickies': British films made on a tiny budget and a very tight schedule to meet the regulations regarding exhibition of domestic films.

### **Revisiting British silent film**

As this summary shows, the British film industry of the 1920s was beset with problems and for many years historians did not consider the films it produced worthy of

serious research. The first in-depth study of the postwar years was the fourth volume of Low's *The History of the British Film*, published in 1971. Low's work is immensely valuable since it brings together information from a large variety of contemporary written sources into a comprehensive history. However, academics have noted her general dismissiveness of British films; indeed, her views must be considered at least partly responsible for the negative reputation that British silent cinema had for many years. This lack of esteem was cemented by film historian Kevin Brownlow, whose detailed book on American silent film, *The Parade's Gone By*, offers the verdict that: 'English films, with few exceptions, were crudely photographed; the direction and acting were on the level of cheap revue, they exploited so-called stars, who generally had little more than a glimmer of histrionic talent, and they were exceedingly boring' (Brownlow 1973: 591). Kenton Bamford expanded on Low's groundwork in his well-researched book *Distorted Images: British National Identity and Film* (1999) but failed to come to any more positive conclusions about the films.

However, more recent studies have countered the generally negative views of the period expressed by Low, Brownlow and Bamford. The British Silent Film Festival, which began in 1998, has generated a great deal of more sympathetic research into the subject and encouraged a rethink of the criteria by which the films have been judged. For example, Gledhill's study of the 1920s takes an intermedial approach, examining how cinema interacted with other popular forms, with the aim of dispelling the perception that British filmmakers failed to develop original strategies to differentiate their product from that of other film-producing nations (Gledhill 2003).

### **Brunel in revisionist studies**

The varied nature of Brunel's contributions to British cinema has meant that some commentators have struggled to define him. Low described him as 'something of an enigma' who was 'in the forefront of the movement towards film art... But despite a light

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wit and keen critical judgement, as a director he only made what Balcon later described as 'good little pictures' (Low 1971: 170). Later in the decade Bob Baker wrote: '[i]t's hard to say whether we're speaking here of a great talent crushed by the moguls, but I think probably not...for further investigation but without, perhaps, expecting too much' (Baker 1974).

More recently, in line with the general reappraisal of the period, there has been movement towards a more generous consideration of him. Brian McFarlane in *The Encyclopedia of British Film* makes the tentative suggestion that '[h]is work might repay serious excavation' (McFarlane 2003: 93) while Geoff Brown regards him as 'one of the liveliest new directing talents working in Britain' (Brown 2005). Robert Murphy's entry on Brunel in the *Dictionary of National Biography* comes to the following conclusion:

Undoubtedly Brunel could have achieved a great deal more in the right environment, and he suffered painful disappointment at the continual setbacks to his career. But his autobiography is testimony to his resilience and resourcefulness in carving out an interesting career... enjoying the 'nice work' of film-making when he could get it and employing his energies productively elsewhere when he couldn't. (Murphy 2016)

Two recent academic studies on the period have featured more in-depth examinations of Brunel's work: those by Jamie Sexton (2008) and Lawrence Napper (2009). In *Alternative Film Culture in Interwar Britain*, Sexton gives a detailed analysis of Brunel's short burlesques from an avant-garde perspective, using them to support his proposal of the existence of a small movement engaged in alternative filmmaking practices during the 1920s. Napper's work on the ways in which cinema engaged with middlebrow culture during the 1920s and 1930s devotes a chapter to a study of the various iterations of *The Constant Nymph*, tracing its journey from novel to stage and finally onto film. He identifies Brunel as a figure whose film work marked an attempt to bridge the highbrow/lowbrow divide that had long existed in British culture.

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These views of Brunel and his work will be tested against the findings emanating from this study and the contention that he was a significant player in the development of British film art is one of the major threads running through it. Gledhill and Napper suggest Brunel achieved this through a balancing of the high and lowbrow aspects of the medium, while Sexton highlights his burlesques as examples of an experimental creativity taking place on the fringes of the industry. As part of the ongoing rehabilitation of 1920s British cinema, this thesis is intended to complement and extend the revisionist work undertaken thus far. Not only does it reinforce the view of the period as a fertile area of study but also significantly adds to the debate by providing fresh evidence of the movement to develop a British cinema that could succeed on both artistic and popular lines.

### **Why study Adrian Brunel?**

Despite the academic interest in Brunel's work, there has never been a detailed study of his career and a justification of his selection as the subject of this thesis seems appropriate. There are several British directors whose careers followed a similar trajectory and who are equally worthy of investigation: George Pearson, Manning Haynes, Graham Cutts and Walter Summers, for example, were all hailed as promising, even great, directors during the silent era, only to find themselves, like Brunel, relegated to making low budget pictures in the 1930s. What makes Brunel stand out for the historian of early British cinema is the fact that he has bequeathed a remarkably comprehensive written record of his career, in the form of the Adrian Brunel special collection, which consists of 262 archive boxes of papers housed at the BFI National Archive. This offers an unparalleled insight into his life and work and forms a key component of this study.

As well as keeping all his papers, Brunel also assiduously preserved most of his silent films and his prominence in recent work on British cinema of the 1920s is at least partly attributable to the foresight he showed in ensuring the survival of his back catalogue.



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The only other British directors whose silent films have been subjected to sustained reappraisal are those whose oeuvre is similarly intact, although the films have endured for different reasons (for example, nine of Hitchcock's ten silent productions exist while all four of Anthony Asquith's titles are available). However, these survival rates are unusual for films of the period; in fact one of the major hindrances to a satisfactory re-evaluation of silent cinema is the paucity of extant titles. It is estimated that 75 – 80% of all silent films produced are lost (see Houston, Penelope, *Keepers of the Frame*, London: BFI 1994: 15) and it is therefore likely that many directors will never have their silent careers reassessed.

Examining the 1920s through the work of a single figure is a project not previously undertaken to the same degree; in fact, director-focused analyses of the British silent period are all but non-existent.<sup>1</sup> Ryall's contextualised history *Alfred Hitchcock and the British Cinema* looks at the director's work in relation to other cultural and industrial developments but does not offer a detailed account of the films' production or his interaction with the structures and practices within which he worked. The present study delves much deeper into the work of Brunel, situating it within a historical context, while the richness of the supplementary material enables an exposure of those involved with the production process, the choices and decisions they were responsible for and how those shaped the final product. This allows for an assessment of the degree to which Brunel was able to exercise creative freedom in making them and takes into account the exhibition landscape of which they were a part, bringing greater clarity to their impact on British film culture.

David Bordwell has defined four working situations that were available to European filmmakers during the silent era. These were: to be employed by a production company, to be contracted to the 'artistic' wing of such a firm, to form an independent company or to 'join a group making films outside the industry for specific artistic or political ends' (Bordwell 1981: 10). Of these, three apply to the British film industry and Brunel worked

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across all of them at various points in his career. Hence, a study of his films sheds light on the whole range of production set-ups that were at the disposal of British filmmakers, increasing its value to scholarship. Lacking among the working situations in Britain was an 'artistic' wing within the studios; had this existed, it may have provided the 'right environment' which, as the quote from Murphy suggests, could have seen Brunel's career flourish.

The traditional *auteurist* approach to film studies has evolved over recent years and the analysis of the work of a single director in isolation from its production context has its limitations since it fails to acknowledge film as a text influenced and affected by many different agents. It is also problematic when applied to British cinema, since the instability and fragmented nature of the national industry has meant that fewer directors have been able to develop the kind of consistent and lengthy careers that give rise to *auteurist* analyses. However, new ways of employing *auteurism* can assist with an evaluation of Brunel's career. Peter Hutchings rightly observes that '[b]agging another *auteur* for Britain is not necessarily the best way of developing our understanding of British cinema' (Hutchings 2000: 179) and instead offers a template for applying notions of authorship to directors within the British commercial sphere who, like Brunel, worked across diverse genres and production set-ups. Hutchings observes that Britain has produced many directors whose careers were 'truncated, interrupted or subject to sometimes bewildering transformations,' and thus Brunel's trajectory is less unusual than it may at first appear (ibid.: 182). Hutchings highlights the difficulty in establishing a 'cohesive authorial voice' in these careers but maintains that this need not invalidate the exercise of studying British cinema through the work of such directors since it can provide a valuable insight into the industry itself and the changing role of the director.

If we accept that Brunel's authorial voice can be heard more clearly in the films over which he was able to exert greater control, it becomes necessary to define what is

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meant by 'control' and how it is secured. Kristin Thompson set out to compare the Hollywood production process to that of European countries in which a more 'avant-garde' approach to filmmaking was prevalent (France, Germany and Russia) (Thompson 2004). She notes that a fairly rigid division of labour was established in Hollywood much earlier than in Europe, where directors continued to have an involvement in writing and editing their films until the late 1920s (ibid.: 364). She suggests that experimentation was therefore almost impossible in American studios while European directors may have had more scope to expand narrative and aesthetic boundaries (ibid.: 365). Establishing the roles that Brunel undertook on each of his films therefore forms an important element of this thesis and will assist in an evaluation of how much influence he managed to wield over his work.

As late as 1927, there was a feeling within the British industry that film directors were overstretched. *Bioscope* reported that 'in many cases a director has had to find his story, write his scenario, do his own costing and casting, cut and title the film when completed, and on occasion play a leading part, in addition to carrying out several other odd jobs' (*Bioscope*, 18 June 1927: 99). While it seems unlikely that this level of activity was the norm by the second half of the 1920s, Brunel's paper collection and other records bear testament to the many tasks he undertook on his productions. For his first major project, directing the A. A. Milne comedies in 1920, he claimed to have 'written the scripts, cast the pictures, designed some of the sets and dressed all of them' (Brunel 1949: 58); even while working at Gainsborough, memos show that he was often involved in writing, casting, costing and editing his films. Although performing several tasks within the production process may appear to offer greater control, the pressure of this workload may also have hampered a director's ability to give full attention to the job of directing. *Bioscope's* intervention quoted above certainly suggests a feeling that British cinema should move

towards the Hollywood model, which allowed a director to concentrate on his role on the studio floor.

In Brunel's case, his level of involvement in a production was generally, though not always, in inverse proportion to the film's budget. During the 1920s, the role of the director was changing and figures such as Brunel, who had mastered the techniques of screenwriting and editing and were keen to have an input into all three aspects of production, were becoming less common. While the skill he developed across these different roles allowed him to participate more fully in production and therefore gave him greater scope to engage in experimentation, they also led to conflicts with the other creative and commercial forces at work. Thus, his expertise across various areas of film production increased the likelihood that he would find himself at odds with those who either had a financial or artistic stake in the productions on which he worked.

### **Art vs. Commerce**

The chief source of the disagreements was Brunel's unwillingness to compromise his creative aspirations. He has been portrayed as both 'the odd-job man of British movies' (Baker 1974: 41) and a free-spirited highbrow and this dichotomy is one of the central tensions highlighted in this study. He was certainly someone who sought to bring originality and innovation to British films and to dispense with what he regarded as some of the bad habits that the national cinema had developed. Yet working within the confines of commercial production restricted how far he could fulfil this aim and often saw him relegated to non-directorial roles.

At this time, the potential for cinema as an art form was beginning to be realised and, although Britain did not participate to any great extent in the early stages of avant-garde film making, its intellectuals did engage in a great deal of debate on the subject. Brunel was an enthusiastic participant in these debates and a founding member of The Film

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Society, one of the aims of which was to inspire British directors to adopt some of the stylistic flair of European films. Other nations had begun to challenge America's cultural hegemony by cultivating ways to distinguish their product from the classical narrative form prevalent in America's output. The Russians regarded film as political tool, employing montage techniques to create association and opposition of ideas, while the German response to Hollywood dominance was to apply to cinema an aesthetic from the art world: Expressionism, using bizarre/surreal set designs and unusual lighting to create a disturbing feel to the films. The perception has been, however, that Britain failed either to successfully compete with America in the entertainment stakes or to develop its own style of cinema which would allow representation of its national values on the cinema screen. 'British cinema was never a popular cinema in any true sense of the word,' opined Roy Armes (Armes 1978: 61).

Gledhill has asserted that Brunel 'saw in cinema... a means of negotiating the highbrow/lowbrow distinction which emerged in English cultural consciousness at the turn of the century' (Gledhill 2000, quoted in Napper 2008: 70). However, as this thesis will illustrate, there was little tolerance within commercial cinema for such experiments. Ryall takes the view that '[t]he radical separation of "art" cinema from its commercial counterpart prevented any interaction between the two that might have helped to create a more aesthetically interesting entertainment cinema in Britain during the interwar years' (Ryall 1996: 21). This separation of commerce from minority culture is common to most views of the period and the British film industry is portrayed as unsupportive, even suspicious, of artiness, obsessed with protecting its interests and turning a profit for as little investment as possible. This perception remains largely unchallenged and, indeed, where glimmers of creativity can be identified in commercial cinema, they are relatively isolated and run counter to the general trend. Michael Balcon later reflected that '[w]e

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were in the business of giving the public what it seemed to want in entertainment. We did not talk about art or social significance' (Balcon 1969: 27).

The extent to which this was the case will emerge over the course of this thesis, through detailed reference to the exchanges that took place between Brunel and his employers, and the exploration and analysis of these relationships is one of the main aims of my research. Among other questions I seek to answer is why Brunel's career ultimately failed, despite the considerable praise he received for his work. His first feature, *The Man Without Desire*, prompted one reviewer to predict that 'the name of Adrian Brunel is going to be big – a coming master' (*The Sunday Herald*, n.d., typed review sheet, ABSC 176). After seeing *The Constant Nymph*, another critic declared him 'among the leading picture directors of this country' (*The News Chronicle*, n.d., typed review sheet, ABSC 8/56). I hope to ascertain whether this pattern of extreme highs and lows is solely attributable to the unpredictability of the film industry or whether it was Brunel's inability to successfully navigate it that made his career path so erratic. I will also look at some of the questions and issues that were preoccupying the British film industry during the 1920s, using them as a way in to each of Brunel's major works of the period 1920 to 1928. By looking at the films in the context of these debates I define them as representative of Brunel's efforts to change, reform or improve both the industry and the work emanating from it. In the following section I outline the methods I will employ to achieve these aims.

### **Methodology**

This is the first detailed work devoted to a major primary source for British film historians, the 'Adrian Brunel Special Collection', which, until now, has only been mentioned in passing elsewhere. The value of this study becomes clearer when one considers the paucity of such material relating to Brunel's main contemporaries, a

demonstration of which is shown by my analysis of other existing contextual information that can be subdivided into three main groups:

1. Biographical works by his contemporaries
2. Critiques written at the time
3. Academic work that has tended to focus more on the world around Brunel rather than his specific contribution.

The aim of this thesis is to redress an imbalance by drawing on a primary source of unprecedented detail, thoroughness and longitudinal scale and depth, with the aim of telling Brunel's own story and, by extension, offer a new perspective on British cinema in the 1920s through the experiences of one of its most enthusiastic participants.

My approach to this thesis is broadly historical and I have drawn on several academic works that have outlined a working practice for those engaged in film history. A useful starting point is Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery's assertion in *Film History Theory and Practice* that 'The empiricist concern with collecting and arranging data is a necessary component of film historical research', an exercise that forms the basis of this study (Allen and Gomery 1985: 14). The data used in this thesis has largely been compiled through in-depth research into Brunel's own papers, although extensive reference has also been made to trade and other journals, relevant autobiographical works and other writings on the period. James Chapman, Mark Glancy and Sue Harper expand on the work of Allen and Gomery in *The New Film History: Sources Methods Approaches*, where they stress the importance of primary sources to the 'new film historian', who they liken to 'an archaeologist who unearths new sources and materials, especially those which have been previously disregarded or overlooked' (Chapman, Glancy and Harper 2007: 7). To extend the analogy further, while the archaeology employed in the pursuit of this thesis may not have discovered many new sites, nor staked out a vast terrain, it has dug considerably deeper than previous excavations.

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Sarah Street's observation that 'documents which are relevant to a particular film, issue or personality acquire significance because of a specific set of circumstances which have determined their existence and survival' (Street 2000: 4) has a particular resonance in Brunel's case. He was convinced of the historical value that his vast paper collection could one day acquire for film historians. His archival instincts have served him well in terms of his ubiquity in writing on the period and, indeed, in more general works on British cinema, as Brunel's papers have been explored by historians investigating many different areas of British film as well as the careers of some of the figures he associated with, including Hitchcock, Ivor Montagu and Balcon. However, the vast scope of its contents has not hitherto been used to the same extent or in pursuit of a detailed study of Brunel himself.

An understanding of the importance of context is crucial to the new film historian and Street's *British Cinema in Documents* offers a valuable methodology for making use of the range of materials available to those researching film history. She contends that in the search for new sources, historians are now turning to material not directly related to the films themselves and this is true of much of the contents of Brunel's paper collection (ibid.: 2). Legal documents trace his involvement with various film companies over the years and their financial state, as well as his ill-fated attempt to sue Gainsborough Films. Letters from his bank show the degree to which the insecurity of his working situation affected his personal finances. Other correspondence provides information about his health or mental state, both of which affected his capacity to work at several points during his career (and indeed his work situation had a negative effect on his health). These details serve as a more objective counterbalance to the personal views revealed by his communication with friends and associates. Here one can gain an insight into his relationships with figures both within and outside the film world, while personal letters disclose his feelings towards colleagues or relate disagreements and the way he dealt with them. Through the use of more limited but fact-based documentation to supplement and complement other sources, perhaps less



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reliable but more detailed, I have provided a more nuanced and balanced picture than would otherwise be possible by relying on a single point of view. By providing evidence of his personal situation, it has been possible to give a richer picture of the man and thus allowed other documentation to be read in a more informed way. This allows for an analysis that takes into consideration more factors and thus affords a three-dimensional representation of Brunel both as person and filmmaker, as well as the environment in which he lived and worked.

The examination of this backdrop to his career offers an insight into one figure at work in British cinema during the silent era. As an example, on a more general contextual level, this study looks at Brunel's short films not only within the framework of the financial structure of small industrial concerns but also as a film form with specific challenges of distribution and exhibition. This has been done via detailed research into the trade press of the time as well as other contemporary writings and autobiographical works, as well as viewing films both by Brunel and other contemporary practitioners.

Street points out that not all documents can be read in the same way and many must be approached with caution (ibid.: 4). Brunel's autobiography is more reliable than many from a factual point of view due to his assiduous record keeping; however, in many cases, the tone in which he describes people and events is in marked contrast to that which surfaces in contemporary writings, particularly his letters. This correspondence often digs more deeply into his character and so furnishes much greater insight, exposing some of the raw nerves that were inflamed by his experiences. For example, his memoirs recount the Spanish shoot of his fourth Gainsborough feature, *A Light Woman* (1928), with a humour that is in complete contrast to the lengthy missives he wrote to his employers at the time, dissecting the frustrations he encountered. In his memoirs, Brunel professed a modesty regarding his own work and a dislike of 'boosting' himself but his collection contains countless letters sent to producers trumpeting his past successes in an effort to gain

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employment. Another source that has been approached with necessary scepticism are the trade papers, which often printed 'news' that was in reality supplied by production companies to present themselves and their work in glowing terms. In addition, a great deal of hyperbole was employed in praise of British films and critics were not always entirely free to express their own opinions in reviews. Hence these have all been used while bearing in mind the conditions affecting their reliability as factual sources.

Street concurs with Allen and Gomery's description of a film as a 'system' composed of many different elements which are interdependent and are thus affected or influenced by the others. (Allen and Gomery 1985: 16-17; Street 2000: 4). Chapman, Glancy and Harper expand on this, asserting that

films are shaped and determined by a combination of historical processes (including, but not limited to, economic restraints, industrial practices, studio production strategies and relationships with external bodies such as official agencies, funding councils and censors) and individual agency (representing the creative and cultural competences of their art directors, composers, costume designers, directors, editors, producers, stars, writers, etc.) (Chapman, Glancy and Harper 2007: 6).

While an aesthetic evaluation of Brunel's films is a key element of this thesis, it is conducted with the aim of assessing the relative influence of these historical processes on the agency of Brunel and his collaborators.

The decision to focus on Brunel's silent films was taken because of their unusually high survival rate, in contrast, for example, to the quota quickies he directed in the 1930s, almost all of which are lost without trace. The existence of the majority of his silent works, coupled with Brunel's remarkably comprehensive paper trail, presents a rare opportunity to trace the development of his films from the pre-production phase to their release and thus evaluate the success or otherwise of his efforts to maintain a creative input to his work. This facilitates one of the central aims of this thesis, an assessment of the degree to which Brunel succeeded in combining commercial imperatives with his own artistic aspirations.

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Film studies has moved on from accepting or rejecting films as 'masterworks' based on a narrow aesthetic measure and is formulating new ways to appraise them. Gledhill has built on the work begun by Andrew Higson through his analysis of Cecil Hepworth's 1923 film *Comin' Thro' the Rye* (Higson 1995) in moving away from using the European art film as the standard against which to judge British silent films. To this end, she set out to 'establish the parameters of an aesthetic and cultural context within which to evaluate and make sense of their peculiarities and intriguing features' (Gledhill 2003: 1). Through extensive viewing she developed ways to describe the films based on what they actually achieve rather than their perceived shortcomings, publishing the results in the form of a book in 2003 and an article in 2008, both of which make reference to the work of Brunel. This thesis aims to build on her approach by adding a greater level of contextualisation; thus, not only has it been possible to judge Brunel's films on the basis of what they achieve but also to measure them against his aspirations. The detailed background information contained in his paper collection reveals the degree to which he managed to match these aspirations and the obstacles that prevented him from doing so and thus allows for a more rounded analysis of his work and the negotiations he engaged in to get his films made.

### **Structure**

The main body of this thesis consists of six chapters that develop and build my arguments regarding Brunel's career. Chapter One takes the form of a detailed biography of Adrian Brunel, compiled from his own writings, his correspondence, diaries and other documentation in his paper collection, supplemented by information from the trade and daily press. It covers his entire life and film career, not just the period between 1920 and 1928 that is the main focus of the thesis. By covering his entire career, it is possible to show that problems affecting the industry in the 1920s persisted into later decades and to establish continuities in Brunel's own interests and concerns. This chapter also sets out to

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establish Brunel's 'biographical legend' and demonstrate the ways in which the biography supplements and moderates this legend. In addition, the biography serves to illustrate how the trajectories of his contemporaries and former associates both mirrored and contrasted with his own, and records when and how and these figures resurfaced in different situations, giving a much richer context to the period under consideration.

Chapters Two to Six provide a detailed analysis of the production and reception of Brunel's extant silent works. Each chapter focuses on one film or group of films and explores them within the context of an aspect of the industry that influenced how they were made and dictated the issues he had bringing them to the screen. By working chronologically through Brunel's principal directing projects between 1920 and 1928, the thesis builds a picture of his working practices and his contribution to British cinema. It thus accumulates a growing argument about his role as a proponent of film as an art form by charting his attempts to prove that films with an original and creative approach could find commercial success and help to establish a sustainable British film industry. By detailing the production histories of his films, this thesis also adds to an understanding of the different production environments in which he worked, which span the three main arenas: small independent firms, large studio combines and in a semi-amateur context.

Chapter Two looks at the role of the short film within the context of 1920s British cinema, a subject on which very little has been written. It looks at the various attempts by the British trade to elevate the form to a more viable commercial product and examines Brunel's own efforts to develop the short comedy along new lines through the films made during his time with Minerva Films between 1920 and 1921, where he gained his first real directorial experience.

In Chapter Three, the relationship between filmmakers and the film trade is explored via a study of Brunel's first feature, *The Man Without Desire*. It examines the discussions taking place in the British press regarding the consideration of film as an art

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form and how these debates influenced and affected the form and success of Brunel's film. Chapter Four looks at the production of Brunel's burlesque films and the complex ways they have been positioned recently as examples of experimental filmmaking in Britain in the 1920s. Through a detailed exploration of their production history, this chapter challenges some of the assumptions made about the burlesques and focuses on Brunel's intentions and techniques.

In the years following the First World War there was a rash of films produced in Britain and elsewhere that took the conflict as their theme. In Britain the genre tended toward conservatism, presenting war from a patriotic or even jingoistic perspective. In Chapter Five I examine Brunel's venture into the war film, *Blighty*, which was also his first studio feature, and evaluate how successfully he managed to adapt it to fit his own political and aesthetic concerns. Chapter Six explores issues around the source material for British silent films and debates about the reliance by producers on existing literary works as well as the role of the author. Brunel's own desire to encourage greater originality in British cinema was thwarted by his employers' insistence on assigning him to the direction of adaptations; a study of the production of his next two films, *The Vortex* (1927) and *The Constant Nymph*, gives an insight to the way he negotiated the many tensions inherent in this process.

As I have begun to suggest here, and as will become clearer during the course of this thesis, Adrian Brunel is a figure whose history can reveal a great deal about the British film industry during the 1920s. By examining the period from the perspective of the work of one individual and tapping into a hitherto underused and incredibly rich source of original material, this study enhances the existing literature by offering a much deeper exploration of the workings of the industry. The wealth of unique documentation in the Brunel collection reveals much about the relationships and dynamics between industry

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players as well as their views and attitudes towards filmmaking. My research will also provide greater insight into the problems that hampered the ability of British producers to compete with other film-producing nations, both in economic terms and from a cultural/aesthetic perspective. Through the increased understanding of this period of British film history this will provide, it will be possible to identify the roots of some of the difficulties the industry experienced in subsequent decades. This study adds to and complements the growing body of work on British cinema and silent film in general in several ways. By recalibrating the portrayal of Brunel in existing literature it provides a more balanced assessment of his aspirations and achievements. This thesis does not aim to overturn any of the widely held beliefs about the problems facing the British film industry in the 1920s but, by providing detailed and in-depth evidence of them, strengthens our understanding of their causes and the strategies that filmmakers used to try and obviate them.

I will argue that, through his relatively modest, yet eclectic and unusual filmography, Brunel attempted to extend the boundaries of British cinema and, although his ambitions often failed, even his unsuccessful projects expose aspects of the business hitherto unknown. One of my aims is to identify the reasons for the failure of his career, which appeared so promising at several points during the 1920s. This will surface through an exploration of the various themes that emerge from Brunel's work: the tensions between art and commerce, freedom and control and distinctiveness and conformity. The nature of these competing imperatives and how Brunel negotiated them in the course of his filmmaking will contribute to our knowledge of the obstacles to the development of a viable domestic industry.

Most importantly, it is hoped that this thesis will make a significant contribution to revisionist work on British silent cinema and demonstrate the potential for further study of the period.

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<sup>1</sup> There are, however, two academic works on early pioneers of the silent period: Simon Brown's *Cecil Hepworth and the Rise of the British Film Industry 1899 – 1911* and Luke McKernan's *Charles Urban: Pioneering the Non-Fiction Film in Britain and America, 1897 – 1925*, both published by University of Exeter Press.

## Chapter One: A Contextualised Biography of Adrian Brunel



*Figure 1 Portrait of Adrian Brunel c. 1926*

This chapter provides a contextualised historical overview of Adrian Brunel's filmmaking career. Working from a detailed chronology constructed from my paper-based original research, it pieces together his career and identifies recurrent themes and subjects within it. This lays the foundation for the subsequent chapters that examine in more depth Brunel's key productions of the 1920s. However, the biography spans his entire career rather than just the period I have focused on in the main body of the thesis. The reason for this is to demonstrate that while the silent film industry in Britain had its own particular problems, there are parallels and continuities across the decades of Brunel's career that can highlight both the issues pertaining to him and more general observations about the industry.

What emerges most strikingly from Brunel's career overview is the sheer volume of activity that he engaged in and that, throughout his working life, he would be juggling a number of projects at the same time. While this testifies to his energy and diligence, it also points up the insecurity of the structures he operated in, which forced him to seek extra sources of income in order to support himself. What emerges from this intense and varied activity is a complex trajectory where jobs overlap or run concurrently, associates



disappear to resurface later and enterprises evolve and change. Plotting such a multifaceted career and tracing all the threads within it is an enormous task but can add greater context to the production of his films. For example, the knowledge that Brunel was being sued by a former business associate around the time he made his first burlesque can offer a new perspective on his motivation and state of mind.

### **Brunel's Biographical Legend**

Brunel's memoir of his career, *Nice Work*, has proved a valuable record of his experiences in the British film industry from the 1910s to the 1940s and is widely quoted in many books and articles on the British film industry. It is entertaining, at times self-deprecating and sprinkled with anecdotes, yet gives only a partial account with many omissions. It has also been written, as are all autobiographical records, to present the subject in the way they wish to be seen. *Nice Work* is key to the way Brunel has been considered by historians thus far and represents the principal way in to Brunel's career. However, it is just one element of the very comprehensive 'biographical legend' he created. The concept of the biographical legend emerged from Russian formalist criticism and describes the mythology that forms around the work of authors and which 'mediates between the empirical life history of an artist or film maker and the artistic texts themselves' (Ryall 1996: 6). This 'legend' is created through the way filmmakers promote themselves and their ideas through means other than their films, such as interviews, articles, books and press material. Brunel was an avid writer and commentator who left behind a wealth of material for historians to draw upon in the form of books and articles. These became platforms to create his own mythology through constant retelling of what he regarded as important moments in his career.

One example of this myth-making was Brunel's oft-repeated tale about the production of his 1923 burlesque film *Crossing the Great Sagrada*. When it screened at the

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Film Society in 1927, he claimed he had spent £90 on its production (Amberg: 15<sup>th</sup> performance). The following year, he wrote in *Close Up* magazine that the budget was £80 and that the film consisted of one third each of titles, off-cuts and new footage (Brunel 1928: 44-45). In 1936 the proportions were reported as thirty per cent, fifty per cent and twenty per cent respectively and by 1949 the cost had risen to £98 (Brunel 1936: 21; letter from AB to Jacques Ledoux, n.d., ABSC 9/153). While the details are not particularly important, what is of interest is the frequency with which Brunel recounted this story, increasing its perceived significance as part of his own history as if the facts themselves conveyed some kind of insight into his work. He also claimed that *Crossing the Great Sagrada* made hundreds of pounds profit and led to an offer from a Hollywood studio, neither of which can be substantiated by documentation in his collection (Brunel 1949: 108; Brunel 1928: 44). And while he stated that his burlesques were never shown abroad, his collection contains a credit note for their sale to South Africa, Burma, India and Ceylon (Brunel 1928: 44; letter from Balcon to R. B. Wainwright, 10 March 1925, ABSC 3/112; letter from Balcon to R. P. Baker, 24 June 1925, ABSC 3/112). Brunel's version also omits the fact that two of the first series of burlesques were actually made by another director, Harry Hughes, and he made no effort to preserve these shorts for posterity, as he did so assiduously with his own. Thus it can be seen that Brunel was highly selective in the choice of facts with which he created his biographical legend and this thesis provides a corrective to some of the claims made both in his own writings and in more recent studies of his work. While the research into his paper collection and other contemporary sources cannot always prove or disprove Brunel's claims, it often throws up a very different perspective on his work and career to that presented in his own writings.

The most striking contrast that Brunel's papers bring to his legend is that between his public and private persona. While his industry writings are marked by a light-hearted humour behind which are some serious comments or observations, the tone of his letters

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to friends and colleagues ranged from pleading and desperate to indignant and outraged. His mode of address was very much tempered by his view of the recipient; his letters could be polite to the point of obsequiousness to figures such as C. M. Woolf and Graham Cutts, who both wielded considerable power at Gainsborough, while his correspondence with studio manager George Hopton, and even at times to Michael Balcon, could be self-important and lacking in respect.

An arrogant tone also surfaced in Brunel's early trade articles and may at least partly account for the negative reputation he obtained among some industry figures. The majority of his former colleagues regarded him with fondness, at least from the safe distance of several decades when they wrote their autobiographies. But one description of him is in marked contrast to the general impression given of the man, although its author had his own axe to grind. In 1923, Brunel's first business partner, Harry Fowler Mear, wrote an article for *Motion Picture Studio* about his early experiences in the film business. While he does not mention Brunel by name, it is clear who his target is. He described being approached by 'a somewhat semitic-looking individual tastefully attired in an American suit and sombrero hat, complete with shoulders, side-whiskers, and cigar' who was 'by no means prepossessing, and was, if anything...a trifle too glib to be absolutely convincing' (Mear 1923). It is a damning piece that suggests Brunel got Mear drunk and persuaded him to invest his money in producing a film, painting him as little more than a confidence trickster. Clearly still bitter about the episode, Mear's intention in writing the article was to smear Brunel in the pages of a journal read by many of his peers and associates and his target was undoubtedly wounded. Brunel's copy of the article has certain phrases carefully underlined, presumably those he felt most unjust or damning. He took criticism very personally and his papers contain a great deal of correspondence that testifies to his sensitivity to perceived or actual slights, particularly those against his skill and integrity as a filmmaker.

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By tapping in to such material, this chapter offers a supplement and corrective to Brunel's biographical legend, portraying a more three-dimensional picture of the man and his work. Particular attention has been paid to the earlier and later periods of his career since the 1920s are covered in depth in later chapters; for those films not examined in detail by this thesis, either because they have not survived or because they fall outside the period of study, a more detailed account of production has been undertaken here.

### **Early Life and Schooling**

Adrian Brunel was born at 58 Claverton Street, Pimlico, London on 4 September 1889.<sup>1</sup> His mother, Frances Lucy Adelaide Brunel Norman (known as Adey Brunel, although Adey was actually her maiden name), earned a living giving elocution lessons and delivering poetry recitals, one reviewer remarking on her 'rich, soft and musical' voice (press notices, ABSC 161). She wrote poems and short stories under the pen-name Dale Laurence. Brunel's father also went by different names; born Reginald Brunel Harris, he ran 'The Concorde Concert Control' as Reginald Norman-Concorde, promoting his wife's recitals as well as arranging musical performances of various kinds.<sup>2</sup> His headed notepaper is adorned with commendations of his services, praising his business methods and reliability; however, while he may have been a reliable agent, it seems he was less so as a husband since Adey divorced him in 1903 over an affair with his secretary. In November 1904 a letter to her from Frederick Delius, one of her ex-husband's clients, congratulated her on getting rid of 'that awful man' (letter from Delius to Mrs Norman, 4 November 1904, ABSC 2/158). From the age of fourteen, Adrian did not see his father and rarely, if ever, mentioned him.

His close relationship with his mother was a very important aspect of his formative years and she remained a key influence throughout his life. She was a highly cultured and refined woman whose great love of the arts and circle of literary and musical friends shaped Brunel's upbringing. He took a great interest in women's issues and campaigned

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with the suffragettes, submitted plays to the Women's Theatre Company and, in 1931, addressed what must have been one of the first gatherings of the Gateway Club, London's famous lesbian haunt (Brunel 1949: p 21; letter from Inez Bensusan to AB, 20 July 1914, ABSC L/170; 'notes for speech', 26 February 1931, ABSC 'S'/172). Although Adey was not able to afford the formal education she would have liked for him she ensured that he engaged in a wide range of artistic pursuits as well as developing a love of foreign travel.

Brunel did attend Harrow but was there for less than two years, between 1903 and January 1905<sup>3</sup>, although he found the 'old school tie' invaluable in later life. He had to leave for financial reasons and by October he was installed in a job at Lloyd's Bank, against the advice of headmaster of Harrow, Joseph Wood, who told Adey: 'He is a promising boy... but to send him out at so early an age as fifteen would be very hard for him, and would spoil his future career' (letter from Wood to Adey Brunel, 15 June 1905, ABSC 5/163).

### **War intercedes**

The 1911 census records Brunel as unemployed and living with his mother in Portslade, part of Brighton and Hove. His banking career over, he was now training to be an opera singer. He and his mother travelled to Egypt in 1913 where they both performed and *The Egyptian Gazette* remarked on his 'tenor voice of rare quality' (n.d., ABSC 176). He also tried his hand at writing and acting (one reviewer complimenting his 'remarkable little character portraits',<sup>4</sup> which he would capture on film ten years later in his burlesques). As his interest in film began to develop, he took to submitting plot outlines to film companies, with titles such as *His Leading Lady* and *The New Star* suggesting that even at that early stage he may have been keen on cinema itself as a subject for films. Croydon-based Clarendon Film Company expressed some interest in his work but would not accede to his request to have his name on screen (letter from Clarendon to AB, 28 July 1913, ABSC 'C'/170).

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The outbreak of war in August 1914 cut off many of the avenues he had been pursuing; the Women's Theatre stopped staging plays while the magazine *African World* declined to publish his article about Egypt as 'owing to the war we have cancelled all our Sudan and Egypt publications' (letter from Inez Bensusan to AB, 18 August 1914; letter to AB, 28 August 1914, both ABSC L/170). While Brunel was not keen to go to war he attempted to join up to avoid 'the white feather business'; however, a foot injury barred him from active service (Brunel 1949: 25).

Brunel's upbringing was to have a profound influence on his career. While he was always to feel an inferiority regarding his lack of education, the cultural stimulation he received led him to develop a lively, productive mind and provided him with a wide range of creative ideas to draw on when he turned to the cinema. Growing up in an environment in which singing, poetry, acting, writing and music played an important role and having been encouraged to pursue such activities helps explain the confidence and enthusiasm with which he approached filmmaking.

### **Moss Empire**

Brunel's first job in the industry was not on the creative side however, and in August 1915 he started working for Moss Empire's Bioscope, the film-renting department of the successful theatre and cinema chain. For an annual salary of £130 he was employed to sell the 'exclusive' films on their books; these were films which renters charged extra for because they were considered to be a greater box-office draw than standard productions.

Years later, Brunel reminisced about his experience with the company:

I lived, breathed, ate and dreamt pictures...I sat in my outer office arranging the transit cross-overs of such masterpieces as 'The Colonel's Wife', 'A Study in Scarlet'...and the many other productions of the Samuelson and Clarendon film companies. I followed their success from St. Annes to Wigan; I studied the reactions of Liverpool and Dublin; I speculated on their reception at Plymouth and Ilfracombe. (*The Era*, 1 January 1936: 25)

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In January 1916, Brunel got engaged to Irene Raphael, who was known to friends as 'Babs'. She was also from a cultured family and was cousin to classical pianist Irene Scharrer; she proved herself an ideal companion to Brunel and they entertained a wide range of society and industry figures. Moss Empires soon promoted Brunel and he and Irene were married on 6 March, the couple moving to 19 Randolph Crescent in Maida Vale, which they shared with Adey.

### **Mirror Films**

Late in 1916, Brunel left Moss to form Mirror Films with old school friend Harry Fowler Mear and began production of a five-reel subject entitled *In Old Madrid*. Despite their tiny budget of around £700 (a sum Mear had inherited), the pair secured the acting services of Bertram Wallis, a star of stage musicals, for what was to be his first film appearance in a role they wrote for him. The trend for casting well-known stage actors in British silent films during the 1910s has been studied in detail by Jon Burrows, who describes how several companies adopted a policy of adapting stage productions for the screen starring the actors who had made them famous (Burrows 2003). Brunel and Mear were thus employing a proven marketing tactic, their approach differing, however, in that they did not adapt an existing play, the cost of which would no doubt have been prohibitive. Instead, they took their title from a popular song: 'In Old Madrid' may have been a number from Wallis's repertoire and therefore would have had an association with the star; however, the title had to be altered and it eventually became *The Cost of a Kiss*.

The film synopsis registered on 24 November 1916 with the Incorporated Society of Authors, Playwrights and Composers reveals how far Brunel and Mear overreached themselves in their ambitions for their first film ('In Old Madrid' synopsis, ABSC 2/158). The settings are listed as Madrid, Paris, London, Devonshire and the Sierra while the action spans twenty years in its tale of an unfaithful wife, a husband killed in a duel to defend her

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honour and a daughter who vows to avenge her father's death. Locations include a lavish villa, a Spanish hunting lodge and a bandit's lair over a precipitous ravine, a combination that would have stretched the budget of a major studio, let alone that of a pair of novices with minimal finances (ibid.).

All these exotic settings were apparently recreated at the tiny Ebury Studios in Pimlico, London. Brunel later confessed how ignorant he was about the complexities of making a film: 'it was to be a 4,000 foot film, and so we ordered 4,000 feet of negative...there was one department of production we had not studied, nor even thought of as an important creative process...and that was editing' (Brunel 1949: 34-35). The trade show was held on 20 February 1917 at the West End Cinema in Coventry Street. Prior to this, *The Cinema* promoted the film as 'an interesting production' in which Bertram Wallis gave 'a remarkable and finished performance' (8 February 1917, ABSC 2/107). No further reports of the trade show exist and no sales resulted from it, Mear concluding that the film was 'junk'. His attempts to recoup something from the project came to nothing, mainly because the negative had been damaged by the processors Kine Industries (letter from Mear to AB, 2 July 1919, ABSC 2/107). In July 1918, Mear conceded 'I have to face the fact that I have an absolutely unsaleable article on my hands' (letter from Mear to AB, 3 July 1918, ABSC 107).<sup>5</sup>

Brunel's experience on *The Cost of a Kiss* taught him several valuable lessons, above all the importance of editing. He also became very protective of what he saw as celluloid assets when he saw how easily a film could be ruined in the wrong hands. The experience also illustrated that, while it was relatively simple to make a film with a small amount of capital behind you, the basic inadequacies in film handling and distribution services in Britain at the time meant that getting a decent copy of a film in front of a paying audience was extremely difficult. The problems of distribution facing smaller producers



continued well into the 1920s and were to be a major frustration for Brunel in his future enterprises.

### **War Work**

Whilst attempting to release his first film, Brunel accepted a job producing propaganda films for the Ministry of Information (Moi), which had been set up in early 1918 to make promotional material for the Board of Trade, the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries and the National War Savings Committee, among others. Brunel's major contribution to the campaigns was the idea for two-minute propaganda shorts named 'Film Tags', which were shown as part of newsreels and proved to be a highly effective way of communicating the government's messages.<sup>6</sup>

Brunel was well regarded by his superiors and on his departure from the Ministry, Colonel W. Arthur Northam wrote: 'I am convinced your originality, creative ability and systematic methods, will get you very far – you will be a very valuable person to some lucky firm' (letter from Northam to AB, 1 January 1919, ABSC 4/107). Another important contact he made at the Moi was Colonel A. C. Bromhead, whose peacetime role was manager of the British arm of the French Gaumont Company, which he eventually bought out in 1922. In subsequent lean years, Brunel approached him for work but without result (letter from AB to A. C. Bromhead, 5 November 1923, ABSC 170).<sup>7</sup>

Brunel remained with the Moi until the end of the war but he was eager to get back into the film industry and wrote to Northam on 18 November 1918 requesting to be released. He, Babs and Adey had been forced from the family home by a German bomb that fell on Maida Vale on 7 March 1918, and they did not return until October (Adey Brunel's diary 1918, ABSC 161). He was now in discussion with actor and producer A. E. Matthews about taking up a position, which was to start after he completed his task 'as a

sort of co-liquidator' of the Ministry (letter from AB to Matthews, 19 November 1918, ABSC 107).

### **British Actors' Film Company**

On 6 January 1919, Brunel took up a post as head of the scenario department at the British Actors' Film Company (BAFC), which had been established in 1916 by a 'majority of the West End artistes of the day' (Burrows 2003: 210). Their strategy was to use the calibre and celebrity of the shareholders to populate their films with theatrical names, which, it was hoped, would be a draw for audiences. Here, Brunel was to work with some key figures in the industry including Kenelm Foss, a writer, actor, director and producer who had moved from theatre into film in 1915 and Wilfred Noy, who had started his career at Clarendon Film Company in 1910. Here he directed well over a hundred films and may even have cast an eye over the early screenwriting efforts Brunel had submitted to the company before the war.

In his new post, Brunel was to select properties and write and edit scripts. BAFC had offices in Soho's Golden Square, but filming took place at the tiny Bushey Studio housed within Lululaund, the impressive Romanesque mansion built by German-born artist and filmmaker Hubert von Herkomer. Originally a theatre, it was converted to a film studio in around 1910 when Herkomer became interested in the medium and he shot several films there. Herkomer had died in 1914 and the house was requisitioned by the British government when war broke out, the studio being used by BAFC from about 1917.

The company was hampered by inadequate facilities and they acquired the Harrow Weald Park Estate in north-west London for studio use, although it is unclear if they ever filmed there. On behalf of BAFC, Brunel petitioned both Winston Churchill, Secretary of State for War, and Reginald Brade, his undersecretary, to try and secure the demobilisation

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of the estate's chief electrician, Sapper D. Harper, in order that work on the studio could proceed. His letter grandly proclaimed:

we are engaged in a big struggle to free ourselves from the domination of the Americans. It's a tough job. One of the most important agents in the fight is the BAFC, which is extending the sphere of its operations and raising its capital to half a million sterling. (Letter from AB to Brade, 29 July 1919, ABSC 2/107)

Brunel's framing of the company's business pursuits as part of a patriotic imperative that was vital to the rebuilding of the nation's industrial power may well have been informed by the expertise in propaganda he had obtained at the Mol. However, he regarded the film industry as key not only in terms of the country's economic sovereignty but also in terms of protecting its cultural influence on the world stage. He used his knowledge of the workings of the government to campaign for the release from the army of several men who had worked in the cinema before the war in an effort to encourage the rejuvenation of the industry.

Brunel's eagerness to prove his value to his employers was a pattern established early on, indicating his enthusiasm for the business but perhaps also reflecting his awareness of the insecurity of the industry and his position in it. He had been taken on at BAFC for an initial trial period of three months at a salary of £15 a week and was desperate to remain. He confessed to a friend: 'I have my wife telling me I am a soft hearted fool to play about with these people when I could do so much better elsewhere! But I am not so certain, for it is not only money that counts. Being with decent people with reasonable prospects of an influential position is a big factor in my view of things,' (letter from AB to John Payne, 30 March 1919, ABSC 2/107). Thus, from an early stage in his career, Brunel sought to work with like-minded people and valued intellectual stimulation and a cultured environment above remuneration.

BAFC extended his contract and in August 1919 Brunel was attempting to secure a job there for a recently demobbed acquaintance, writer Bernard Merivale. This desire to

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help friends into employment was a recurring theme throughout Brunel's career and undoubtedly hindered his own progression. Many of those he helped to boost had careers that eclipsed his own, while those he recommended who turned out to be unsuitable merely served to damage his reputation. His family also benefited from this loyalty and, in 1919, Wilfred Noy directed *The Lady Clare* from a screenplay by Brunel's mother, which was based on a poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson.

Brunel's troubles at BAFC began over his first production for the company, *The Usurper* (Duncan McRae, 1919). He had adapted the source novel by W. J. Locke but was outraged when he attended the trade show at the Alhambra on 12 September 1919 to find the film had been heavily re-edited for release by the Phillips Film Company, distributor of BAFC's productions. Brunel felt compelled to send a letter to his guests at the screening, stating:

The film exhibited at the Alhambra yesterday was not the British Actors' copy, which the producer, photographer, and myself consented to having our names upon, but a mutilated and inferiorly printed copy which was submitted by the Phillips Film Co at the eleventh hour, against the wishes of the Directors of the British A FC and in spite of their protests. (Letter from AB to various, 13 September 1919, ABSC 4/107)

When Phillips found out about the letter they complained to BAFC who demanded an explanation (letter from Dearsley to AB, 9 October 1919, ABSC 4/107). Brunel claimed that his reputation had been damaged by the trade show but he had clearly put BAFC in a difficult position as they depended on Phillips to distribute their films (letter from AB to Dearsley, n.d., ABSC 4/107). This was the start of the deterioration of the relationship between Brunel and Phillips, particularly its Managing Director, H. J. Boam.

Three months later, a similar conflict arose over *The Auction Mart* (1920), another McRae/Brunel collaboration. Brunel rounded on Boam in a letter to Gerald Malvern, one of the company's directors: 'The Auction Mart also suffered through haste in editing...Mr Boam or his representatives should in no way be allowed to alter the film in any part (letter from AB to Malvern, n.d., ABSC 2/107). Brunel claimed that the editor at Phillips, 'rode

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rough-shod over everything...[and] was unable to retain the most elementary facts of the story' (ibid.). Later he lamented that Boam said 'his customers want "cruder stuff than The Auction Mart" ...[he] attacks the titles on the ground that they are "high-brow"' (letter from AB to Malvern, 14 January 1920, ABSC 2/107).

This was the first time Brunel's work had been labelled 'highbrow' but the term was to haunt him throughout his career and his perceived intellectualism has been painted as the main barrier to the progression of his film career. What is interesting about this particular myth surrounding Brunel's failure within the industry is that most of the references to him being a highbrow appear in his own writings or utterances. Boam may have regarded Brunel's work as too highbrow for his audiences but Brunel went on to repeat the slur in almost every interview he gave over the following years and it became something of a mantra he used to explain his lack of acceptance by the trade. Yet his actions during his time at BAFC and the tone of the communications quoted above suggest that it was perhaps partly his own attitude that alienated industry figures.

The fact that businessmen such as Boam had ultimate control over the output of a film-producing concern such as BAFC was clearly an anomalous situation within the industry and one that not only held back the development of British filmmaking but also offended Brunel's artistic integrity. However, Boam was a businessman and no doubt felt he was the best judge of what audiences wanted to see; in fact, *Kinematograph Monthly Record* regarded *The Usurper* as 'superior to more than 90 per cent of American films in "photography, production and casting"' (1919, quoted in Bamford: 71). Phillips was still a going concern when BAFC went bankrupt in 14 April 1921 and, the following month, Boam addressed the company's spring convention. According to *The Bioscope*, Boam's policy had changed little since Brunel's run-in with him: 'Mr Boam said that the company made a special effort to cut all films as short as possible. As soon as any picture had been definitely acquired it was gone over carefully and every foot of "padding" removed' (*Bioscope*, 12

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May 1921: 18). This no doubt accounted for the slogan used in the company's trade advertisements: 'Phillips Films are 100 per cent entertainment', artistic touches apparently not constituting 'entertainment', or perhaps even obstructing it.

This was Brunel's first experience of having his creativity interfered with by the business interests of the film industry but it was a pattern that was to be repeated throughout his career. His experiences with Boam no doubt fed into the views he expounded three years later in an interview with *Motion Picture Studio*:

The vulgar, uneducated, inartistic film boss of to-day has got to go. While he is controlling things the right talent will never get a change [sic]...In Germany... their much-advertised kultur was apparent, not only in their best films, but in their best film offices.' (*MPS*, 26 August 1922: 6)

Again, Brunel's obvious disdain for those running the industry would surely not have endeared him to them or inspired their trust, and his lack of diplomacy in voicing such views to the press laid the groundwork for his difficult relationships with financiers throughout the decade. Later in the same interview he took the opportunity to air his favourite grievance: 'I am dismissed as a "highbrow". They are afraid my work will be as dull as Ibsen, as highflown as Shakespeare, and that my sub-titles will be written in Greek' (*ibid.*).

Brunel resigned from BAFC in March 1920 over the two incidents, realising that the company was being held to ransom by Phillips: 'I have come to the conclusion that certain conditions are not likely to be changed, and that I should be doing myself harm by remaining' (letter from AB to Malvern, 9 March 1920, ABSC 2/107). Expressing regret at his departure, Malvern gave him some advice: '...in this business one has to have a skin like a rhinoceros as one has to meet and deal with so many uncouth and impossible people' (letter from Malvern to AB, 11 March 1920, ABSC 2/107).

**'A New Kind of Film Agency'**

During his time at BAFC, Brunel had been planning his next enterprise in correspondence with John Meredith ('Jack') Payne, who was in France with the British Expeditionary Force but had been a Director of Sidney Morgan's Renaissance Films. Their initial plan was to set up a studio but they decided instead that an agency would be a better business idea (letters from Payne to AB, 17 September 1919 and 2 October 1919, ABSC 3/107). On Payne's release from the army in February 1920, he and Brunel formed Bramlins with Bertram Jacobs, a screenwriter who had worked for the Ideal Film Company for several years under the name Benedict James.<sup>8</sup>

The agency opened almost immediately and aimed to provide 'a comprehensive service to producers, not only in casting, but finding suitable locations for productions, or advising and researching on costumes and so forth' (Gliddon: 40). Offices were taken at 241 Shaftesbury Avenue and they began trying to recruit talent immediately, but the business got off to a slow start and Payne's letters show how his optimism and enthusiasm rapidly faded when he realised how difficult running the enterprise was to be. John Gliddon was recruited to the firm soon after its establishment, through a chance meeting with Brunel: 'walking up [Shaftesbury] Avenue with Leslie Howard...[he] told me he and another friend, John Payne, had just gone into partnership... Would I like to join them as Casting Manager?' (ibid.: 40). Gliddon describes the enthusiasm and talent in the Bramlins offices, remarking that 'the only cloud in the sky was the pitiable state of the British Film Industry' (ibid.: 40).

Brunel's casual manner of recruitment reveals much about how business was conducted at the time, which seemed to be based around chance encounters on Shaftesbury Avenue and its environs. Film actors seeking work would frequent this part of London in the hope of securing a role in one of the few productions being cast; Gliddon

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himself had been a film actor. *Motion Picture Studio* summed up the plight of the film actor in a humorous poem:

To someone who in dulcet tone,  
Approached him for a trifling loan,  
A man in Shaftesbury Avenue,  
Said, 'I'm a movie-actor too.' (MPS, 18 August 1923: 7)

One commentator described the 'thousands of film actors, both male and female, thrown on the streets because the British film trade is in the doldrums' (Morton 1925: 82); with so few British films being made, agents' commissions suffered and the fact that Bramlins not only survived the decade but became a thriving agency is testament to Payne's determination. In 1930, the firm received investment from the Empire Building Corporation Ltd. in a deal brokered by film director Geoffrey Malins (letter from Payne to AB, 17 October 1930, ABSC 3/107). Gliddon also benefited from Brunel's patronage and became a leading agent in the 1930s, ultimately representing such stars as Vivien Leigh and Deborah Kerr.

### **Minerva**

To return to 1920, Brunel was now about to embark on his next producing venture, which was to permit him more control. While at BAFC Brunel had met stage actor Leslie Howard, nephew of Wilfred Noy. Howard was keen to get into films and had first approached Brunel about setting up a company in August 1919 but Brunel had refused the offer, preferring the regular income offered by BAFC to the uncertainty of running a business. By the time Brunel did resign from British Actors', Howard had established a production company with writer A. A. Milne and actors C. Aubrey Smith and Nigel Playfair. Brunel was invited to join the firm on a one-year contract starting from 24 March 1920, 'at a salary of £20 per week plus 10% royalty on the net profits of any productions you may



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complete during your first 3 months, and 15% for those afterwards' (letter from British Comedy Films to AB, 3 March 1920, ABSC 2/107).

The company became Minerva Films Limited; Milne was to write short comic subjects and Brunel would adapt, produce, direct and edit them, while Aubrey Smith and Howard performed. Minerva was backed to the tune of around £5000, with which Brunel began work on four two-reel films. In the midst of this frantic filming activity, on 20 June 1920, Brunel's son, John Christopher Brunel, was born.

While reviews of the Milne films were good, the company could not sell them and struggled to make enough to finance future productions. Brunel was more aware than ever that no serious attempt to make films could succeed without a large investment and proper studio space. Around this time, he met a man called Frederick Charles Clarke on a train; Clarke joined the board of Minerva and offered to purchase a studio for Brunel to run. Brunel regarded this venture as a turning point in his career and set about locating a suitable building.

In January 1921, an offer was put in on behalf of Minerva Films to purchase at a price of £10,000 a set of buildings in Ravenscourt Park, Hammersmith (letter from AB to Clarke, 31 January 1921, ABSC 4/107). This came to nothing and the following month attention had shifted to Barkers Studio in Ealing, which was on offer for £30,000 (letter from AB to Clarke, 20 February 1921, ABSC 4/107). A few weeks later, a contract was drawn up 'for the purchase and exploitation of Fred Karno's Island, Hampton Court' (letter from St Paul's Studios to AB, 7 March 1921, ABSC 4/107), the capital to be loaned to Minerva. By this point, Brunel had become suspicious of Clarke after several letters to him were returned. He hired a detective to track him down, the investigation leading to a house in Cheapside, East London, in which Clarke had rented a room; seemingly no-one in the area knew much about him and the detective failed to 'obtain information as to his financial

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circumstance to enable us to speak for a transaction involving your figures' (note, 28 February 1921, ABSC 4/107).

A rented room in Cheapside suggests that Clarke was not the man of means he pretended to be and Brunel must have been devastated to find that his hopes of running his own studio were dashed. All he could do was persevere with Minerva, which had two more films in production: *A Temporary Lady* and *Too Many Cooks* (*Bioscope*, 3 February 1921: 27). The following month, Minerva's cameraman H. M. Lomas left the firm to join British Instructional Films (*ibid.*, 10 March 1921: 11) no doubt frustrated by the company's difficulties and possibly owed money. He was an experienced cameraman who had worked for the Charles Urban Trading Company for several years from 1907 and his departure must have been another blow to Brunel.

By August, Minerva had formally dispensed with Brunel's services as 'Production Director' 'owing to the present position of the cinematograph industry,' although he continued to be involved as a shareholder (letter from W. J. Williams to AB, 20 August 1921, ABSC 6/107).<sup>9</sup> The letter coincided with the completion of filming of Minerva's final production, *The Beggar's Syndicate*, as announced by *Motion Picture Studio* (20 August 1921: 8). The only other Minerva production to be shown publicly was *A Temporary Lady*, which was filmed some months before *The Beggar's Syndicate* but was not unveiled to the trade until September 1921. The history of Minerva is typical of many small production companies set up in the wake of the war and demonstrates the problems of sustaining film production without recouping a profit on releases. This was Brunel's first experience of having a level of creative freedom, without the interference of a scissor-wielding distributor, but, as he learned, the distributor was a vital element in a film's life and without someone to make prints and secure bookings it was unlikely ever to be seen.

### Solar Films

After another unhappy working situation, Brunel optimistically announced his next venture: 'the doors of the Solar Services, the publicity business with which I am connected, are to be opened shortly' (letter from AB to Payne, 30 October 1921, ABSC 3/107). At an office at 7 Suffolk Street, Pall Mall, Brunel and Miles Mander (star of *A Temporary Lady*) planned to specialise in the production of travel films, assembling a board of experts with military and diplomatic experience abroad. Brunel was to receive £10 a week while on a production and he and Mander projected an extensive series of films to be shot all round the globe.

The first of these was a journey through North Africa and Brunel set off on 28 December 1921 to Morocco and Algeria via France and Spain to film what became *Moors and Minarets*. With him were cameraman Crispin Hay (who had acted in *The Beggar's Syndicate*) and Sir Percy Sykes, former Brigadier-General of the South Persia Rifles. On completion of the travel film, Brunel and Hay were joined by Mander and Annette Benson to shoot a fiction film against the backdrop of Tangiers; Brunel also appeared since they could not afford expenses for any more actors.

When Brunel arrived back in England, the shot negatives were confiscated by Customs, who declared it a foreign film, and it was many months before the material made it into the country. In the end, it proved cheaper for Brunel to transport the material to Germany to have it printed than to pay the import duties. The board of Solar had taken on leases for two London cinemas for a minimum of three months and Brunel and Mander found themselves running the Philharmonic Hall and the Polytechnic Cinema. The former was to be primarily for the exhibition of Solar's travel films, an enterprise announced at a lunch hosted by Sykes at which he described the 'series of "personally conducted" film journeys to foreign parts' which would be shown at there (*Bioscope*, 16 March 1922: 6). Future subjects were to include cinematic tours of Andalusia, Timbuctu, Liberia, China, the

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Antarctic and Peru. However, the company's first release, a travelogue of Burma with an accompanying lecture, was not a success due to the poor quality of both the film material and the speaker (letter from AB to Percy Sykes, 15 April 1922, ABSC S/170) and *Moors and Minarets* would not be ready to screen for many months.

To keep the cinemas in operation, Brunel and Mander sought out second-run titles that were cheaper to acquire than new releases. While acknowledging that the main objective of the pair was to 'raise money quickly' (no doubt to fund their ambitious foreign filming plans), Henry K. Miller asserts that their 'eye-catching programmes', which included *The Mark of Zorro* and John Barrymore's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (both 1920), were part of a 'grand scheme for a national repertory circuit' (Miller 2013: 50). Despite Mander's confident pronouncement of this ambition to the press, it seems unlikely they would have pursued further venues considering the number of other projects with which they were involved. Brunel was still determined to pursue a career as a film director and the burden of programming a cinema, while still trying to rescue the negatives he had spent months shooting, may have been an unwelcome distraction. However, he took advantage of having access to a cinema screen to finally show the Minerva film *A Temporary Lady*, which appeared in mid-May 1922 at the Polytechnic Regent Street as an accompaniment to *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, and also gave the two of the Milne comedies an airing.

Brunel had been trying to sell the Minerva productions for some time to any distributor or cinema that might take them. Solar was already heavily in debt and Brunel wrote in desperation to John Payne at Bramlins: 'After months of working for nothing – and now no hope of anything, I'm afraid for I don't expect to ever get much out of Solar...I now really and truly find myself with only three pounds in the world' (letter from AB to Payne, 23 July 1922, ABSC 3/107). He was doing small jobs for International Artists at the time and was asked to write scenarios for a series of films featuring Herbert Jenkins' popular

Cockney character 'Bindle', to be played by music-hall star Billy Merson, but the project was dropped (letter from AB to Merson, 23 July 1922, ABSC H/170).

Although the North African films were still awaiting completion, Mander and Brunel headed for Germany in August 1922 in search of a suitable studio to film their next project. The pair proved themselves ahead of other British producers in their decision to use German studios and Brunel was one of the first directors to work over there. At that time, the exchange rate with Germany was very favourable and the facilities were excellent; Brunel and Mander could not have failed to note the originality of the films emanating from the country. They were impressed with what they saw of the equipment and technical skills and reported that Germany was 'an earnest aspirant to the chief place in the film sun' (*MPS*, 9 September 1922: 5). They were to avail themselves of these facilities for what was to be their most ambitious project so far.

### **It Happened in Venice**

Despite having suffered financially from his involvement with Solar Films, Brunel stuck with Mander and they formed the Atlas-Biocraft Company (perhaps named after the Atlas mountains which so struck Brunel while in North Africa). His loyalty to his business partner may have been due to Mander's boundless optimism or a lack of other opportunities, but Brunel could not refuse the chance to direct his first feature, which was to be funded by wealthy businessman James White. White had made his fortune in the building trade and had made the move into cinema when he acquired the site of the Tivoli in London and decided to run it himself. According to Brunel, he presented the financier with two proposals: the first was the one considered the best commercial proposition while the second was added to make the first seem more appealing (Brunel 1949: 90). White decided to back the second and Brunel found himself embarking on *The Man Without Desire* with a budget of £5,000, a very small sum for a feature even in 1922 (*ibid.*). Ivor

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Novello was to star in the tale of an eighteenth-century count put to sleep for 200 years, adapted from an original story by Irish playwright Monckton Hoffe.

In October, *Motion Picture Studio* announced that Brunel and his crew had left for Venice where they filmed until the beginning of December, then travelled to Germany to film the interiors (*MPS*, 14 October 1922: 7). Novello finished his scenes by early December and departed almost immediately for New York to take up a contract with D. W. Griffith, for whom he was to 'play juvenile lead in 7 super films' (*MPS*, 16 December 1922: 5). Brunel returned to Britain early in 1923 but, once again, completion of *The Man Without Desire* was long delayed; while Brunel was paid during filming, the editing presumably had to be done in his own time and he was obliged to take on other work to supplement his income. However, Mander was still pursuing further projects and Brunel was sent to France in August to scout for locations for *The Rat*, an original screenplay written by Ivor Novello. Unsurprisingly, with no return from their unreleased films, the company failed to raise enough to get another production off the ground.<sup>10</sup>

At the end of 1923, *The Man Without Desire* was finally completed. It was distributed by yet another company set up by Mander, this time with E. T. Bass (who had worked for Stoll) and part-funded by Ivor Novello. Called Novello-Atlas Renters, its purpose was to market Atlas-Biocraft's products and it was to be 'directly concerned with films in which Ivor Novello is starred' (*Bioscope*, 6 December 1923: 38). Novello, having returned to England disappointed after only one film for Griffith, *The White Rose* (1923), was clearly setting out to establish himself as a film star and felt, as Leslie Howard had with *Minerva*, that getting in on a business level was the best way to ensure self-promotion. *Bioscope* announced the trade show of *The Man Without Desire* on 14 December and listed the other titles to be handled by the new firm: the long-languishing North African films *Lovers in Araby* and *Moors and Minarets* (the latter reviewed just before *The Man Without Desire*), and 'three half-reels of silhouettes', which had been commissioned by Mander

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from an animation company in Munich (ibid.). This package of releases testifies to the intense year of editing work undertaken by Brunel in 1923 to get all the films ready. In addition, he had been given the mammoth task of editing down 33,000 feet of film shot by Sir Rupert Clarke in New Guinea, which was released the following year as *Cannibals of the South Seas*. Along with these, Novello-Atlas also distributed Brunel's one-reel burlesque film *Sheer Trickery* (KW, 1 February 1924).

*The Man Without Desire* was released in late February 1924 by which time Brunel was planning a much-needed holiday. Babs' mother had died and left them several hundred pounds so in early March he, Babs, Adey and Christopher set off for Algiers. The strain of his work schedule over the previous eighteen months had taken its toll and his doctor had apparently been recommending a long holiday (letter from AB to Norman Penzer, 27 August 1923, ABSC 3/107). Even on holiday, Brunel did not waste the opportunity to make a film and the result was *The Boy Goes to Biskra*, which depicted the exotic locations through the eyes of his three-year-old son. During his absence, *Lovers in Araby* had its trade showing, Mander reporting that it got an excellent reception and expressing confidently that 'we shall certainly make money out of it' (letter from Mander to AB, 17 March 1924, ABSC D/170). Despite Mander's optimism, the company's releases failed to make a significant profit and it appears that bookings were minimal beyond the Tivoli Theatre, Jimmy White's own cinema, which was run by Vivian Van Damm, a great supporter of their efforts. When Brunel returned from his trip he again had to look for work.

The failure of *The Man Without Desire* to establish him as a major director must have been a tremendous knock-back to Brunel and more or less spelled the end of his filmmaking partnership with Mander. They had failed to raise further funds for production, hardly surprising since their financiers had seen no return on their investment thus far; Brunel maintained that, had they asked for larger sums up front, they would have won over

their benefactors more convincingly (Brunel 1949: p. 89). Despite the frustrations and lack of financial reward, this collaboration was perhaps the most promising that Brunel had during his long period working for small producing firms. The partnership lasted three years, which was quite a feat considering the constant financial difficulties they faced and this can be attributed largely to Mander's incredible drive, sound business ideas and excellent skill as a salesman. While he recognised that controlling all three aspects of the business – production, distribution and exhibition – was the only way to guarantee that films would reach an audience, the company was never sufficiently well-staffed or funded to sustain such levels of activity. Mander also understood the value of bringing exotic locations to the screen whether in the form of documentaries or feature films and the plans to circulate travel films accompanied by lectures was an ambitious undertaking. Unsurprisingly, Mander's talent and energy served him well and he went on to write, direct and star in his own films, eventually going to Hollywood and forging a career as a character actor.

Having spent his wife's inheritance on a family holiday rather than paying off his debts, Brunel returned from Algiers to find bankruptcy looming. He had by now set up a cutting room at Dansey Yard off Wardour Street where he undertook work for Atlas-Biocraft as well as any other jobs that he could get to keep himself afloat. He had become a very adept editor and was fascinated by the potential of the process to alter the way that audiences reacted to images. He had communicated some of these through humorous writings in the trade press but now began to put into practice some of the theories he had been developing over the preceding years (see Brunel 1921a).

### **The Burlesques**

Brunel was obviously pleased with the results of his editing experiment as, on 31 July 1924, he organised a screening of the resulting film, *Crossing the Great Sagrada*, at a



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private Wardour Street theatre. It was a burlesque on the hugely popular travelogue *Crossing the Great Sahara*, which was still on British screens six months after its initial release, a success which may well have rankled after the failure of his own travel film. The following week a trade journal reported that the film had 'set a small audience rocking' and suggesting 'Brunel should do more of this sort of thing' (*KW*, 7 August 1924: 40). Brunel was delighted with the response to the film and took the journal's advice, trade showing a spoof newsreel, *The Pathetic Gazette*, in October. Both films were distributed by Novello-Atlas and, according to Brunel, took a small fortune; *Sagrada* was certainly picked up by several small regional distributors, as shown by the promotional postcards the company produced for the film (1928: 44; postcard for *Crossing the Great Sagrada*, ABSC 1/164).

That autumn, an exciting project arose when Brunel was approached by Abel Gance to make a film on the life of William Shakespeare. Gance recorded having watched one of Brunel's films (presumably *The Man Without Desire*) on 15 September and spending an afternoon with Brunel (Napoleon Dossier, quoted by Kevin Brownlow in email to author, 23 November 2010). Cameraman Henry Harris recalled accompanying Brunel to the meeting at Gance's Paris flat and reported that the two men had 'clicked' (Henry Harris interviewed by Kevin Brownlow, 21 May 1969, private collection of Kevin Brownlow). Gaining the attention of one of the world's foremost artistic film directors must have made Brunel feel vindicated in refusing to compromise his creative integrity, not to mention relieved at the prospect of a lengthy spell of paid work on a prestigious project. Unfortunately, the death of the German financier behind the project put an end to it and the story, which Brunel strangely omitted from his autobiography, joins the long list of 'what ifs' that haunt his career (*ibid.*).

### Gainsborough Burlesques

Meanwhile, Brunel's burlesques had caught the eye of producer Michael Balcon, Director of Production at Gainsborough Pictures, whom he had met socially earlier that year. Balcon was always on the look-out for new creative talent and persuaded the studio's distributor, C. M. Woolf, to back another five burlesques by putting up a £150 advance for each. Brunel and Balcon were to be joint producers, with profits split equally between them after Woolf had been repaid. To become involved with a major producer, albeit on such a tenuous basis, must have felt to Brunel like a significant step towards gaining a foothold in a more stable part of the film industry.

He had barely completed the first Gainsborough burlesques when he was asked to make a special short for the premiere of the Harold Lloyd film *Hot Water* (Sam Taylor, 1924) at the Shepherd's Bush Pavilion on 31 December 1924. Woolf had made his name and fortune through promoting Lloyd in Britain and Brunel's short was a 'happily inspired and audaciously contrived little "spoof" film' about film distribution entitled, wryly, *Money for Nothing* and featuring Woolf himself (*KW*, 8 January 1925: 45-46).<sup>11</sup> The pattern during this period was that Brunel undertook many jobs for Balcon including re-shooting, editing and titling various productions and even, on one occasion, meeting with foreign producers on Gainsborough's behalf, indicating the amount of trust Balcon placed in him. Yet all this activity distracted him from his own business venture to make the burlesques and it was not until October 1925 that Brunel had completed the films.

According to Ivor Montagu, the burlesques were responsible for Brunel's negative reputation within the industry: 'he was accounted a dangerous intellectual, because he specialised in satirical one-reelers... it was axiomatic in the trade that audiences would not accept satire and that anyone intelligent enough to be satirical was dangerous' (Montagu 1970: 274-5). Yet Brunel had long been aware of this negative opinion of him and his work by certain members of the trade, which had started when he first clashed with Phillips Film

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Co. in 1919 and had probably not been helped by his subsequent articles in the trade press. Five years previously he had complained to Leslie Howard that: 'I am no more popular than I was. I should awfully like some of the anti-Brunellites to have a week in my shoes' (letter from AB to Howard, 28 December 1920, ABSC 4/107).

Brunel had earned Balcon's gratitude for his 'very loyal co-operation and services' in re-shooting, re-editing and titling two Graham Cutts films *The Blackguard* and *The Prude's Fall* (both 1925) (letter from Balcon to AB, 3 July 1925, ABSC 3/111). He had also retitled several German films that were being distributed by W. & F. Film Service (the company set up by C. M. Woolf and S. Freedman in 1919) as part of a reciprocal agreement with Ufa. Although he was not under contract to either Gainsborough or W. & F., Brunel was paid reasonably well for this work; however, he was by now supporting two associates, Lionel Rich (known as Tod) and J. O. C. Orton (known as Jock). He had given them a start in his cutting rooms and the three were kept busy with the work coming from Gainsborough, which was too much for Brunel alone.

The influx of young graduates such as Rich, Orton and Montagu to the film business during the interwar years was, eventually, to change the complexion of British cinema and Brunel's recruitment and training of so many contributed to the advancement of the industry in subsequent decades. Several of his trainees went on to work for Balcon at Gainsborough or, later, at Ealing Studios and Balcon had long been eager to bring more intellectuals into his workforce. In fact, in the 1930s, Ealing Studios became known as 'Mr Balcon's Academy for Young Gentlemen' due to the social status and educational attainment of its creative staff. The film industry was not the only area of the media that was undergoing this kind of 'intellectualisation' between the wars; as Graves and Hodge observed, 'The recruits that newspapers needed were no longer drudges trained from the age of fourteen in a newspaper office, but university men with a superficial knowledge of

many things, full of “ideas” and with a snappy way of expressing them’ (Graves and Hodge 1971: 58).

### **The Film Society**

If Brunel was suspected of being a ‘dangerous intellectual’ for making his burlesques, his association with the Film Society must have brought confirmation of the fact. Approached in early February 1925 by Montagu and actor Hugh Miller, he agreed to help set up the society and became a key figure within it. The aim of the society was to screen films that would not otherwise get a showing in Britain and *Bioscope* announced its formation on 7 May 1925. The Society immediately found itself branded ‘highbrow’ by the press, a label that stuck despite the strenuous denials by its members. The first screening took place on 25 October and their monthly gatherings on a Sunday evening soon became popular with the ‘intelligentsia’. The work and legacy of the Film Society has been examined in detail elsewhere (see Sexton 2008 and Miller 2013) and its importance in establishing regular curated repertory programmes is generally accepted. From Brunel’s point of view, his involvement led to an increase in his editing work, and, more importantly, established a friendship with Montagu that was to endure throughout his life.

Gainsborough took a dim view of Brunel’s involvement with the Film Society, feeling that his association ‘would damage the prestige of the films [he] made for them’ (Brunel 1949: 114) and on 11 December 1925 he resigned from the Board. He still maintained a link with both the Film Society and with Montagu who later joined the board of his editing firm, which became Brunel & Montagu Ltd. in 1927. At their Dansey Yard cutting rooms in London’s West End, the company retitled the foreign films imported for the Society’s screenings. Brunel continued to edit a great many films for W. & F., both Ufa titles and jobs which he found less intellectually stimulating, such as a series of horse-racing features starring champion jockey Steve Donoghue.

### **Brunel, Montagu and friends**

Brunel & Montagu Ltd. barely provided sufficient income to support Brunel and his family. But he thrived on the camaraderie that he had engendered through his informal training school and from a personal perspective this was probably the most fulfilling period of his working life. So many of his apprentices went on to have successful careers in the film business thanks to his tuition and encouragement. The coincidence of this enterprise with his association with both the Film Society and Gainsborough led to Brunel becoming a key member of a vibrant scene whose participants were involved in the practical, commercial side of the business while pursuing and encouraging a more varied diet of film viewing than that generally available. This group of industry aspirants and participants, referred to by Miller as 'the Brewer Street Pack', gathered daily at the Legrain coffee shop and other Soho meeting places (Miller 2013: 119).<sup>12</sup> Balcon recalled its members as including cameraman Henry Harris, directors Graham Cutts, Alfred Hitchcock, Victor Saville, and Edwin Greenwood, screenwriter Eliot Stannard and, of course, Brunel and Montagu (Balcon 1971b: 26).



*Figure 2 A 'hate party' gripe*

Brunel and Babs also entertained regularly at home and her obituary described her as 'a well-known hostess of the film world' and 'a woman of legendary hospitality' (*Daily Telegraph*, 31 March 1987, Irene Brunel cuttings, BFI Reuben Library). The pair hosted 'hate parties' at their flat, where guests were encouraged to air their dislikes about films and cinemagoing. Invitees included 'Hitch and Alma, Mich and Aileen [Balcon], Victor Saville,

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[Herbert] Wilcox, Vivian Van Damm, Sidney Bernstein, Iris Barry and [Walter] Mycroft' (Montagu 1958: 230). An article in *Picturegoer* entitled 'Our Hate Party' revealed that among the gripes of those present at one such gathering were 'close-ups of hands knocking at doors...the person who reads subtitles aloud...hurriedly made films...and lingering screen kisses' (Mannock 1927).

The rather loose arrangement under which Brunel was working for Gainsborough during this period meant he was paid separately for each job he undertook, sometimes even accepting a share in a production's profit in lieu of payment. He clearly felt a genuine sense of loyalty to Balcon that appears to have been reciprocated, given Balcon's considerable involvement with the burlesque production and distribution. However, by mid-1926 Brunel was becoming increasingly impatient and claimed to have turned down several offers of employment on the understanding that he was to be given a directing commission (letter from AB to Balcon, 30 April 1926, ABSC 4/112). His patience finally ran out when he learned that George Cooper and Hitchcock had been handed directing jobs ahead of him (letter from AB to Messrs Gainsborough Pictures Ltd, 18 May 1926, ABSC 1/111).

This promotion of others before him became a particular bugbear, references to it littering his correspondence with the company. His assessment that 'my prospects of obtaining employment as a director are now a negligible quantity after such a long period of inactivity' indicates the level of anxiety he felt about his future. The tone of this correspondence undoubtedly put a strain on his relationship with Balcon, who had been his one supporter at Gainsborough but was struggling to maintain sympathy for him. Montagu later described how 'intrigues kept [Brunel] ever from the floor' (Montagu 1970: 274), the main culprit apparently being the company's star director Graham Cutts, whose last two films Brunel had been asked to prepare for release. The correspondence between Brunel

and Cutts over these is polite but it is easy to imagine that Cutts did not take kindly to having his films 'improved' in this way by someone whose career he wished to stifle.

Brunel's demands to the Board of Gainsborough would have alienated them further and this may explain why his first feature was made under the auspices of Piccadilly Pictures, a company formed by Balcon and Reginald Baker in February 1926 (*British Journal of Photography*, 26 February 1926: 128). The company offered him a one-off contract, drawn up on 3 November 1926, to direct *Blighty*, a film depicting life on the Home Front during the First World War, based on an idea by Montagu. It was to cost no more than £8,000 and Brunel edited as well as directed, presumably to keep down costs (contract between Piccadilly Pictures and AB, 3 November 1926, ABSC 4/112).

Piccadilly Pictures' advertisement for its upcoming releases foregrounded *The Rat*, *The Lodger*, *The Triumph of the Rat* and *The Rolling Road* and prominently featured the names of directors Cutts and Hitchcock. Relegated to the second page, *Blighty* was promoted by a list of its stars, with no mention of Brunel as director (*Bioscope*, 6 January 1927: 4-5). Elsewhere in the same issue of *Bioscope* appeared the news that Brunel was to shoot a film in France for low-budget production and distribution company Butcher's Film Service, adapted from the novel 'A Night in Paris' by Mrs Horace Tremlett. This was never made (Brunel presumably passing it up in favour of remaining with Gainsborough), but the announcement shows that the level of insecurity that Brunel still felt regarding his position with the company led him to investigate opportunities elsewhere.<sup>13</sup> This insecurity would have been further fuelled by the observation in *Bioscope* that Brunel had 'not made a full-length film for a considerable time', while elsewhere Alfred Hitchcock was described as a 'brilliant young director' (17 March 1927: 39 and 34). He had little time to brood, though, since he was now busy writing a scenario for producer Sam W. Smith based on the patriotic song *Land of Hope and Glory* (Harley Knoles 1927), the tune of which was composed by

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Edward Elgar. The film starred Ellaline Terriss (also in *Blighty*) as a mother whose sons set off to explore the far-flung corners of the British Empire following the First World War.

The editing of *Blighty* was delayed by Brunel's arthritis and problems with obtaining the actuality shots needed for insertion, but it was finally trade shown on 22 March 1927 at the London Hippodrome. Reviews were positive and Low asserts that the film's success established Brunel as 'one of the most talented young British film makers', although he was by now approaching forty (Low 1971: 149). Both Cutts and Hitchcock had announced they were leaving Gainsborough at the end of their contracts, Cutts to direct for First National, Hitchcock for British National Pictures and Brunel must have felt optimistic about his future with the company. In the event, the departures of the two figures Brunel saw as blocking his progress did not improve his situation and he began to realise that his willingness to undertake whatever job was thrown his way, often for very little pay, had contributed to the lack of respect he was shown by the studio. In one particularly candid letter to Balcon he wrote: 'I...saw how Cutt's propaganda about my being "high-brow" had so undermined me and my own restraint had made me seem so unimportant, that I could be treated anyhow' (letter from AB to Balcon, n.d., ABSC 1/112).

### ***The Vortex***

Brunel's next Gainsborough commission was announced as a film version of the controversial Noël Coward play *The Vortex* (*Bioscope*, 21 April 1927: 23). Brunel knew that the story would have to be heavily edited for the screen to get past the censor, but what really soured his experience of making the film was the fact that he was not allowed to edit it himself, instead being sent immediately to Europe on his next project. He attributed the financial failure of *The Vortex* to the fact that he had not been permitted to see his vision for the film through to its completion but, despite his attempts to distance himself from the production, its poor reception further damaged his standing at the studio.



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Before shooting began on *The Vortex*, *Bioscope* had revealed Gainsborough's acquisition of an original story by Roland Pertwee called 'A South Sea Bubble', which would probably be Brunel's next film (*Bioscope*, 19 May 1927: 30). News that the studio was to produce a film version of the best-selling novel *The Constant Nymph* had also reached the trade, along with the report that it was to be brought to the screen by Basil Dean, theatrical director and co-author of the stage version, with 'the aid of a very expert assistant director whose name I shall be able to announce very shortly' (*Bioscope*, 28 April 1927: 27). Brunel was working on the scenario and casting for *The Vortex* at the time and began filming in June. At the end of June, Balcon was preparing Brunel's contract to direct *A South Sea Bubble* but, less than a month later, an agreement had been drawn up outlining the terms of Dean's working relationship with Brunel on *The Constant Nymph* (agreement between Balcon and Dean, 27 July 1927, ABSC 5/112).

### ***The Constant Nymph***

*The Constant Nymph* is generally considered to be Brunel's most accomplished feature, even though he did not receive sole credit for its direction and his input is thus not easy to qualify. Dean was a well-established theatre director but was keen to break into the cinema and saw this as his opportunity. As co-author of a highly sought-after property, he was in a strong position to dictate his own terms. Balcon asked Brunel to direct under Dean's 'supervision', an arrangement which Brunel was aware would further damage his battered reputation, but which he agreed to. Despite the difficulty of this working relationship, Brunel found himself able to influence the production more than he had hoped, winning the trust of the cast and crew who quickly became aware of the problems Dean's lack of film experience created, which Dean himself later acknowledged in his autobiography (Dean 1973: 9).

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*The Constant Nymph* was greatly anticipated by the press and public alike, so much so that a sneak preview of some scenes was shown at the Marble Arch Pavilion 'by request of the Prince of Wales' several months before its completion (*Bioscope*, 17 November 1927: 47). The trade show was held in February 1928; reviews were almost exclusively excellent and, as mentioned in the Introduction, it went on to be named Best British Film of 1928 by readers of *Film Weekly*.

### ***A Light Woman***

Brunel's next project for Gainsborough was based on a story by his mother, set in England and on the Riviera, about a wayward daughter and her father, a widowed nobleman who struggles to control her. C. M. Woolf apparently insisted the setting should be moved to Spain and once again Brunel was incensed to find his work interfered with (Brunel 1949: 144).<sup>14</sup> He was to be under intense scrutiny; Balcon arranged to send his brother Chandos to Spain to keep an eye on the production and issued the following memo:

I want to make it quite clear to everybody concerned that 'A LIGHT WOMAN' is to be a moderate price picture only. The figure I have in mind is £10,000. £12,000 absolute maximum... it must be understood by everybody concerned that if they do exceed our allocation, the entire script will have to be revised in order to meet with the limitations that are now imposed upon you. (Letter from Balcon to Harold Boxall, 5 March 1928, ABSC 6/112).

Under these strict conditions, Brunel and his crew set off for Spain on 7 April to begin what was to be another trying experience. The week before his departure, the long-delayed trade show of *The Vortex* finally went ahead at the Marble Arch Pavilion.

Brunel's relationship with Gainsborough, and particularly with Balcon, was reaching a nadir. It was around this time that Balcon warned Brunel against continuing his involvement with his editing firm Brunel & Montagu. Earlier in the year Brunel had contributed to his own unpopularity by complaining about the size of his name in an advert

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for Gainsborough in *The Bioscope*; the terse response from George Hopton (the studio's General Manager) leaves no doubt about his attitude towards Brunel: 'the placing of the advertisement and the drawing up of the matter took less of my time than given to the dictation of this letter' (letter from Hopton to AB, 5 January 1928, ABSC 6/112).

While the ups and downs of the Spanish shoot of *A Light Woman* are recounted lightheartedly in *Nice Work* (Brunel 1949: 143-152), a rather different account of events is to be found in an eleven-page letter in Brunel's collection. Here, he reveals that, once again, his work was to be supervised, at least at the script and preparation stage, by T. Hayes Hunter,<sup>15</sup> presumably to ensure it did not exceed the allocated budget; 'I then began to realise that I had definitely lost your confidence,' wrote Brunel (draft letter from AB to Balcon, n.d., ABSC 1/112). He describes the atmosphere on location as extremely tense, partly due to the problems they encountered but also due to the constant missives from the London office, which led to 'a growing feeling that we had to "account" for everything, and that all we said would be taken down in evidence against us' (ibid).

This was an anxious time for Balcon. It was becoming clear that the days of silent film were numbered and Gainsborough was about to be taken over by Gaumont-British. The public issue of shares was announced by *The Bioscope* on 3 May and the new company, Gainsborough Pictures (1928), was to be under the directorship of Woolf, Maurice Ostrer and Balcon. The changes in directorship meant a loss of independence for Gainsborough, which now became a 'wholly-owned outpost of the Gaumont-British empire' (Kemp, 1997: 28). Brunel learned of the take-over while filming in Spain, via a telegram from Balcon informing him that he had purchased shares in the new company on Brunel's behalf.

By June, Brunel was back in Britain filming interiors at the studio in Islington, after which the film was assigned to Arthur Tavares to edit. Brunel voiced his discontent with the finished version, lamenting, as he had with *The Vortex*, the forfeiting of his personal vision,

which he described as ‘those pseudo-clever touches that the critics like so much’ (draft letter from AB to Balcon, n.d., ABSC 1/112).<sup>16</sup>

### **A final Gainsborough production**

Brunel was already preparing his next film, an adaptation of a successful stage thriller *The Crooked Billet* by popular Australian dramatist Dion Titheradge, the second feature in his three-film deal with the company. Brunel wrote the screenplay with Angus MacPhail in July 1928, the pair attempting to render more cinematic a play set entirely in one location. They opened it out to include a nightclub scene, as noted in the review in *Daily Film Renter* (20 March 1930), but *The Picturegoer* reported that Brunel’s plan to film night scenes on Chelsea Embankment was obstructed by the police, resulting in the London scenes being reproduced in the studio (January 1929: 17).

In September 1928 Brunel sought clarification about his contractual situation at the studio and thus embarked on what was to become a lengthy battle with Gainsborough that ended up in court. Brunel drafted a letter requesting confirmation of the ‘terminating date of my twelve months agreement with the Company’, since it was approaching a year since he had finished *The Constant Nymph*, from which point his three-picture deal was to commence (letter from AB to Gainsborough, 22 September 1928, ABSC 6/112). In that time, he had barely completed *A Light Woman* and was due to start *The Crooked Billet* but, as he pointed out, this only allowed ‘thirteen weeks...to make two pictures’, with the third title not yet selected (ibid.). It soon became clear to Brunel that Gainsborough did not intend to give him a third film to direct.

The announcement in *Film Weekly* of Brunel’s upcoming film version of *The Crooked Billet* appeared in the same issue as the news that *The Jazz Singer* was ending its long run at the Piccadilly Theatre (*Film Weekly*, 22 April 1929: 5). The juxtaposition of these two pieces of information is significant; while Brunel shot *The Crooked Billet* entirely silent,

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Gainsborough, along with other production companies, was becoming nervous about releasing silents onto a rapidly changing market and the film was never seen in this form. The following summer, in the middle of Brunel's legal battle with the company, Gainsborough approached him to reshoot it as a talkie. He declined, saying that although 'I hate to think of anyone else touching "The Crooked Billet" ...it would weaken my position very much if I went back to Gainsborough to direct the talking version without being paid what I claim, because the obvious interpretation would be, "They couldn't have treated him so badly if he goes back to work for them"' (letter from AB to 'Carl', 26 July 1929, ABSC 1/111). It must have been difficult for Brunel to turn down the chance to make his first talking feature but he stuck to his guns and the new sequences were shot by Robert Atkins, a well-known theatre actor and producer with very little film experience. It was eventually released in March 1930 as a 'part-talkie', with the whole of the first and a section of the final reel silent and accompanied by a score by Louis Levy. The middle section of the film presumably contained an amalgam of Brunel's silent footage and Atkins' dialogue sections and both directors were credited.

Early in 1930, Brunel's case against Gainsborough was settled by an out of court payment, with Gainsborough agreeing to assign him one last film to direct. However, this never materialised, the official reason being the major fire at Islington Studios in January 1930 that had interrupted the company's production schedule. Brunel had spent around eighteen months directing films for Gainsborough and this period marked his most intense battle to maintain creative control over his work. The scrutiny he was under led to a difficult working situation that he lacked the diplomatic skills to deal with. Having established his ability to make films for a pittance and shown a willingness to salvage the work of others he was unlikely to rise up the ranks of the company, particularly since his somewhat arrogant self-belief made him too eager to speak his mind.

### Talking Pictures

Despite his fall-out with Gainsborough, Brunel was busy throughout 1929 with Brunel & Montagu, although the company had abandoned its Dansey Yard offices for rooms at 80-82 Wardour Street. Brunel continued to retitle foreign films for British release, earning praise from the likes of Erich Pommer at Ufa for his efforts (letter from Pommer to AB, 14 June 1929, ABSC 2/158). However, as silent films gradually dwindled and soon disappeared from cinema screens altogether, this work dried up, as predicted by a short film Brunel and his colleagues made that summer, *Brunel & Montagu* (1929), which satirised the company's demise. In actual fact, Brunel continued to run the firm for several more years, until at least 1931.

Brunel still had some useful contacts in the business, including Walter Mycroft, Film Society stalwart and ex-film critic on the *Evening Standard*, now working at British International Pictures (BIP) as scenario editor. Mycroft was instrumental in getting Brunel a commission from studio head John Maxwell and towards the end of 1929 he began work on his first sound film, *Elstree Calling*, which combined music-hall acts, numbers from Jack Hulbert's current West End stage revue and some original sketches, all to be shot at BIP's Elstree Studio. Approaching the project with enthusiasm, Brunel set about planning innovative ways to bring some variety to what was basically a stage-bound subject. As with *The Vortex*, he filmed with the editing process very much in mind, taking shots of the acts from several different angles so that when it was assembled it would not simply be a static theatrical presentation but rather 'something really new and arresting in the way of film revue' (letter from AB to Mycroft, 15 April 1930, ABSC 5/153). He wrote in sequences exposing and sending up filmmaking conventions, in which he himself was to appear as 'the director' with three megaphone-bearing 'yes men' and a montage of various activities around the studio (first skeleton scenario of *Elstree Calling*, 8 December 1929, ABSC 2/161). However, BIP was not interested in Brunel's ideas, perhaps objecting to the amount of time

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and money he was spending on what they regarded as a straightforward job. He was denied the opportunity to put his elaborate editing plans into practice and the film was assembled by Emile de Ruelle, BIP's supervising editor, assisted by A. C. Hammond.

However a worse ignominy was to come, as James Maxwell, head of BIP, insisted that some of his sequences were reshot by another director at the studio and Alfred Hitchcock was brought onto the film. His name appears under Brunel's on the film's credits and his contribution has been extensively mulled over by Hitchcock scholars (see Vest 2000; Kerzoncuf and Barr 2015: 88-97). Brunel was not invited to the première and never saw the completed film since 'the editor warned me that it would break my heart to see what they did with it!' (letter from AB to Dan Fish, 26 October 1931, ABSC F/170). Except for a brief flurry of correspondence about the foreign versions of *Elstree Calling*, Brunel's association with BIP came to an end and a tentative enquiry to Mycroft later that year about writing work there received a negative response (letter from Mycroft to AB, 30 October 1930, ABSC 5/153). Had Brunel shot *Elstree Calling* simply and cheaply, he may have found himself a niche at BIP but he was still determined not to compromise his creative integrity. His letters indicate his growing dissatisfaction with the British industry: 'I still hanker after Hollywood and am more convinced than ever that the best day's work I shall ever do is when I pack up and shake off the grime of Wardour Street,' he wrote in 1931 (letter from AB to 'Clive', 11 March 1931, ABSC C/170).

Thus Brunel entered the 1930s under a larger cloud than the one that had been hanging over him for much of the previous decade. Severely in debt and with few in the industry willing to employ him his correspondence took on a more desperate quality. 'Having been out of work for so long, all the time eating my heart out with jealousies and bitterness, getting more desperately hard up each day and never knowing where my next week's money was coming from and often not getting it, my nervous system is in need of fresh air' he wrote to Boxall (26 April 1931, ABSC 9/112) but Gainsborough had little

sympathy after his legal action against the company. He continued to petition the studio for directing work until an encounter with Simon Rowson near the end of 1931. Brunel recorded that Rowson had summed up the company's objection to employing him with the following verdict: 'I was not fit to make pictures...I hadn't the temperament' (typed document, 2 November 1931, 9/112). Angus MacPhail, who had been one of Brunel's trainees at Dansey Yard, was now at the scenario department of Gainsborough and helped his former mentor when he could, reading his story submissions and passing him bits of writing work. But this was not enough to sustain him and he had little choice but to go where the work was, in quota production.

### **Quota Quickies**

Quota quickies were low-budget features made to fill the quota of British films which cinemas were obliged to show by the Cinematograph Films Act of 1927. What had begun as a genuine attempt to encourage British film production had become an excuse for producers to fund cheap, quickly-made films, which were guaranteed a release with little need for promotion. While Steve Chibnall has done much to overturn the reputation of the form as unmitigated rubbish, Brunel's view of the quickie is clear from his choice of the title 'Slumming It' for the chapter in *Nice Work* that covered this period of his career (see Chibnall 2007). His resolve not to make cheap pictures had to give way to economic necessity but he threw himself into the task with his usual fervour, despite feeling dejected at the degree to which his career had declined. Quota production was a section of the industry in which several young filmmakers learned their craft (most notably Michael Powell) but also where many directors worked out their last years. Chibnall's list of the 'jobbing directors' at Elstree reads like a *Who's Who* of pioneers and innovators of the silent period: Adrian Brunel, George Pearson, George Cooper, Henry Edwards and Sidney Morgan (Chibnall 2007: 68). However, Brunel still had supporters in the trade press and an



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article about him in *To-Day's Cinema* suggested that quota production would be enhanced by his participation: 'Just look at some of the appalling hootedoodle we turn out and call "quota productions" and ask yourself if Brunel could not help doing better than that!' (cutting, 28 May 1931, ABSC 1/164). It certainly kept him busy throughout the decade and his sparse and varied credits during the 1920s were transformed into an impressively robust, if insalubrious, filmography.

He began his first assignment in 1933 making quota quickies for George Smith Enterprises. He churned out six in just over a year: *A Taxi to Paradise*, *I'm an Explosive*, *Follow the Lady*, *Little Napoleon*, *The Laughter of Fools*, *Two Wives for Henry* (all 1933) and *Important People* (1934), none of which survive. Having had experience of making films on a shoestring, he proved to be quick and efficient at it, turning out films within the budget and on time. Chibnall describes him as 'among the fastest directors working in British quickie production...Brunel...pursued a picture's completion like a guided missile' (Chibnall 2007: 36). It must have been some compensation to have a relatively free hand on these productions, a privilege rarely afforded him while directing for Gainsborough. Although Smith was usually in the studio during shooting, he was there to assist rather than scrutinise and Brunel's association with him was mutually satisfying.

After seven productions for Smith, he moved to British and Dominions (B&D) where he filmed *Badger's Green* (1934), a play by R. C. Sherriff, who had made his name in the theatre with the First World War drama *Journey's End*. By all accounts it was a huge success, costing £6,000 to make and taking £60,000 in bookings (letter from AB to Sherriff, 12 January 1946, ABSC 2/158). A play by a distinguished author was unusual in quota production yet the success of this film actually put him under greater strain. He expressed his despair at the 'appalling stupidity of the people who think that one just waves a wand and on the... basis of an inane farce one can repeat another *Badger's Green*' (letter from AB to Sherriff, n.d., 2/158). Brunel made two other films for B&D, *Cross Currents* (1935) and

*Love At Sea* (1936), finishing the second of these on time despite a fire destroying the studio.

By the end of this period, Brunel felt he had established himself as a 'quickie king...evolving a technique that showed what could be done when facing fearful odds' earning the nickname 'One-shot Brunel' (Brunel 1949: 171; letter in *The Evening Telegraph*, 10 June 1933, ABSC 200). Yet he was never reconciled to the come-down of making cheap pictures and still found himself among the kind of uncultured figures he had clashed with during the 1920s, men with 'no judgment or critical faculty, no ability to assess or analyse' (letter from AB to Sheriff, n.d., 2/158).

### **Budgets increase**

Brunel next went on to direct some slightly bigger-budget films and was paid £750 by Norman Loudon at Sound City to write a treatment for and direct *Menace* (1934). The sensational plot revolves around 'a railway magnate who wrecks trains during brainstorms' (Gifford 2016, 08668) a melodramatic premise that obviously gave the film an appeal to foreign markets, as a lobby card for the film's Mexican release proves (author's private collection). Brunel was then contracted to a co-production by Argyle Talking Pictures and Butcher's, being paid £650 for his services, which included 'scenario, dialogue, preparation, direction and supervision of editing' (contract, 3 December 1934, ABSC 3.4/160). Released as *Variety* (but at that stage entitled *Pageant of Variety*), the film contrasted historical variety acts with modern ones in its story of a family of music-hall proprietors and, although the film has not survived, sections of it were used in a later Butcher's release, *Cavalcade of Variety* (1940), which incorporated some of the acts from three different films. Brunel's sections of the film stand out since he did not simply film them from one angle but varied the set-ups, taking one or two shots showing dancers silhouetted in the foreground.

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He was asked by producer Paul Soskin to salvage a half-shot film, *While Parents Sleep* (1935), a light comedy based on a successful West End play. Despite the script being rewritten and recast as they went along, Brunel managed to end up with a relatively entertaining drawing-room piece. The film survives in the BFI National Archive and, although its low budget is apparent, it contains sound performances and has a swift pace.

### **Spiegel and Keaton**

In September 1934 Brunel was taken on by Austrian émigré Sam Spiegel to make a film that was meant to revive the flagging career of silent comedy star Buster Keaton, *The Invader*. As he later wrote to the producer, the shoot was ‘a nightmare neither of us will ever forget’, but worse was to follow. After Brunel and his editor Daniel Birt presented their cut, Spiegel wrote to say ‘the film has not lived up to my expectations’ (letter from Spiegel to AB, 10 January 1935, ABSC Spiegel/207). His distribution deal with Gaumont demanded the film should be a six-reeler but Brunel was adamant the script could only support a version running 5,200 feet. Spiegel brought in another editor to put back much of what had been purposefully left out and Brunel was so disgusted with the result that he wrote to MGM in January 1936 demanding that his name be removed from the credits. While having his work interfered with in this way was very vexing, he was not even paid his entire fee for the job as Spiegel’s company went into liquidation soon after. He threatened to take legal action against Spiegel but was urged not to ‘brood over *The Invader*... [it] will be forgotten before your many good jobs of direction’ (letter from C. G. H. Ayres to AB, 15 January 1936, ABSC 6/153). However, brooding was something Brunel had plenty of time for and in 1952 he again tried to recoup the money owed to him.

### **Butcher's and Korda**

By mid-February 1935, Brunel had signed another contract with Butcher's to direct *The City of Beautiful Nonsense*, a deal brokered by his former colleague Wilfred Noy, who was co-producing the film (contract, 16 February 1935, ABSC 3.4/160). This time his fee was only £500, presumably because the script had already been written, and the result was deemed 'an altogether pleasing film' (*MFB*, v2 n17, June 1935: 68) though, in private, Brunel described it as 'certainly nonsense and a far from beautiful treatment' (letter from AB to Sheriff, n.d., ABSC 2/158). The following year, Brunel must have felt his luck was changing when he was engaged by producer Alexander Korda to co-write a script for *The Return of the Scarlet Pimpernel* (Hanns Schwarz 1937) with Korda regular Arthur Wimperis. Brunel was then appointed as associate producer on the film but his experience on the floor was frustrating as his task involved 'tactfully trying to guide the most inelastic director it has been my lot to encounter' (Brunel 1949: 181).

In mid-1938, Mabel Poulton, Brunel's star in *The Constant Nymph*, wrote to tell him that she had been 'practically engaged to play Liza Doolittle in Shaw's *Pygmalion*' and hoped to secure the role of director for Brunel; however she lost the part to Wendy Hiller (letter from Poulton to AB, 1 June 1938, ABSC OP/170). In the meantime, Brunel had been asked by Korda to rescue an abandoned production, a request that must have reminded him of his two years of toil at Gainsborough. Based on Gogol's short story 'Taras Bulba', the film had been shot in French and English versions, both starring French actor Harry Baur, but neither had reached the screen. Brunel's job was to try and integrate the original footage into a rewritten script and reshoot parts of the film with different actors, including Roger Livesey and newcomer Patricia Roc. Unsurprisingly, the film, entitled *The Rebel Son* (1939), ended up a 'curious and hybrid production' and was neither a critical nor a box office success (*MFB*, v6 n54, April 1939: 74).

**Daniel Birt**

This demoralising project contributed to 1938 being a year of great despondency for Brunel and he again petitioned Balcon, now at Ealing Studios, for employment. Balcon responded positively, saying ‘there is no reason why there should not be writing assignments for you’ and Brunel’s reply indicates once again his low morale: ‘It’s time something good happened to me, for the last six weeks have been the most desperately disappointing in my whole life’ (letter from Balcon to AB, 3 November 1938, ABSC 4/153; letter from AB to Balcon, 22 November 1938, ABSC 170).

No work for Balcon materialised, but the following year Brunel was approached by Daniel Birt, his editor on *Variety* and *The Invader*, who was now establishing himself as a producer in collaboration with his wife. Daniel and Louise Birt had picked up the rights to a play called ‘The Young Person in Pink’ and were producing it under the auspices of Butcher’s Film Service. Brunel was contracted on 15 June 1939 to work with Louise Birt on the script and direct the film for a fee of £500. Working with a former colleague and a cast that comprised such acting talent as Elizabeth Allan, Enid Stamp Taylor and Basil Radford led Brunel to describe this as ‘almost my happiest picture’ (Brunel 1949: 183). Unfortunately, by the time *The Girl Who Forgot* (as it was eventually titled) was ready to trade show in mid-September, World War II had broken out and cinemas began to close.<sup>17</sup>

Brunel had spent the 1930s churning out relatively cheap talkies or salvaging unmarketable productions, and on the surface his career appeared to have taken a nose-dive from the aspirations he had still harboured at the end of the 1920s. Most of his fellow-directors from Gainsborough found themselves in similar circumstances and Hitchcock was the only contemporary whose career had progressed. However, throughout the decade, his former colleagues Michael Balcon and Basil Dean steadily built their reputations as producers and, by the time war broke out, had established themselves among the most powerful men in British cinema. Yet neither came to Brunel’s assistance and the conclusion

that both agreed with Rowson's assessment of Brunel's talents, or at least regarded him as too difficult a personality to employ, cannot be avoided.

### **Amateur film**

Brunel wrote two books during the decade, *Filmcraft: The Art of Picture Production* in 1933 and *Film Production* in 1936, which earned him a following amongst amateur filmmakers, a hobby that had become very popular. He also wrote occasional articles for the journals *Home Movies and Home Talkies* and *Amateur Cine World*, attended events and gave talks to gatherings of the Institute of Amateur Cinematographers. Acknowledging his work for the cause, in the 1940s Wimbledon Cine Club named one of their annual awards 'The Brunel Cup.' When compiling advice for amateurs he drew on his own filmmaking experiences, in particular the techniques used for the burlesques, and emphasised the importance of editing. He had also produced his own home movies: *J.C.B./1920*, which recorded the development of his son Christopher from birth to the age of fourteen and the previously mentioned travel film *The Boy Goes to Biskra*. Neither film has survived but Brunel recalled *J.C.B./1920* as 'not unlike those "Secrets of Nature" films, where see you a plant growing and flowering before your eyes' (Brunel 1949: 104).

### **War Again**

On 4 September 1939, just after the outbreak of World War II, Brunel turned fifty. While still enthusiastic about filmmaking, he no longer had youth on his side. However, the advent of a second major conflict led Brunel into another phase of his career. Korda had been quick to exploit the threat of war and a propaganda film about Britain's air force, *The Lion Has Wings* was already underway. To speed up production, three directors were appointed: Michael Powell, Brian Desmond Hurst and Brunel. Brunel moved out of London,

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both to be near Pinewood and to escape the bombing but with little to do on the film he occupied himself by tightening up the script.

Once again, war interrupted had Brunel's career on several fronts. His stage play, *Only Yesterday* (based on *Blighty*) which was being performed at the Intimate Theatre, closed and tour plans were cancelled; further directing work for the Birts was put aside as was a lecture tour of America. Brunel saw an opportunity to share the expertise in propaganda production he had acquired during World War One but his letters to the government received polite but dismissive replies. He at last got a brief spell at Michael Balcon's Ealing Studios helping with the company's war efforts by writing and directing two propaganda shorts in the form of fictional narratives: *Food for Thought* and *Salvage with a Smile* (both 1940). A great believer that propaganda was better put over as entertainment, Brunel undoubtedly relished the opportunity to put his talents towards helping the war effort and concocted two neat six-minute films but got no further work.

Finding himself unemployed, Brunel was compelled to turn to the Cinematograph Trade Benevolent Fund for financial assistance which helped to tide him over until Balcon again gave him a small role on the film *Yellow Caesar* (Alberto Cavalcanti, 1941), a satirical short presenting the life story of Benito Mussolini. Brunel is credited with 'Additional scenes' and 'Dialogue', although in *Nice Work* he claims to have had a hand in several other aspects of the film (Brunel 1949: 189). The film has been described as 'probably the most striking of the 30-odd propaganda shorts released by Ealing Studios during WWII' due to its 'creative play with archive footage', which, with its echoes of his own burlesques, raises the question whether Brunel had assisted with this aspect (Duguid 2009). Throughout the war, Brunel wrote and submitted various scripts and ideas for propaganda films and after the conflict continued to petition for a permanent government film department (various items, ABSC 21).

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The following year, Leslie Howard, the star of Brunel's Milne comedies, came to his aid with an offer of work. Howard had spent much of the decade in Hollywood but returned to Britain to assist with the war effort and was living near Brunel at Beaconsfield. He had recently begun a directing career and offered Brunel the position of Production Consultant on *The First of the Few* (1942), which brought him back into contact with C. M. Woolf, who was involved (uncredited) on the production side and who died shortly after. Brunel was to take care of the second unit, one of his main contributions being a montage of aeroplane manufacture edited to music. He put considerable time and thought into the project, only to find his hard work ignored once again when it was drastically cut. A series of memos from the production suggests Brunel's appointment to the project may have been somewhat begrudging and that Howard anticipated conflict. 'I was warned not to be assertive or argumentative' Brunel wrote to production manager Phil C. Samuel, 'I have therefore scrupulously refrained from pressing any suggestions of mine' (memo from AB to Samuel, 16 November 1941, Adrian Hope Brunel cuttings, BFI Reuben Library). Following this, Derrick de Marney, one of the stars of *The First of the Few*, invited Brunel to direct *The Gentle Sex* (1943), a film about the ATS backed by Filippo del Giudice. In a demoralising turn of events, Brunel was asked to resign from the film and Howard took over, with Brunel relegated once again to Production Consultant. His hopes of continuing the collaboration with Howard were dashed when Howard's plane was shot down by the Nazis while he was flying back from Lisbon in June 1943.

In 1943, the BBC commissioned Brunel to write a radio play about Thomas Paine, a figure he had a long-standing interest in, but the project never saw the light of day.<sup>18</sup> While the episode is accorded only a passing mention in *Nice Work*, it was clearly an important project to Brunel and he argued with Walter Rilla at the Corporation over the decision to shelve it (letters AB to Rilla, various dates, ABSC 6/56). Further indignity ensued when Gabriel Pascal asked him to act as a stand-in for Claude Rains for the final shots in *Caesar*



*and Cleopatra* (1945). Brunel swallowed his pride and took the job but drew the line when asked to travel to Egypt to complete filming, claiming poor health prevented him from going.

Throughout this period, he kept up a correspondence with George Elvin, General Secretary of the Association of Cine-Technicians (A.C.T.) regarding his membership of the Feature Directors and Associate Producers Committee. His campaign to remain a member, despite not having directed a feature production since 1939, lasted three years, Elvin gamely continuing to engage in the debate long past the point that most would have given up. Brunel rather wryly explained why he had not directed for so long, writing: 'Although I might have been well enough for a part of the time to undertake the pleasant and comparatively unarduous task of directing, I was in no condition to undertake the unpleasant and strenuous task of getting a job as Director' (letter from AB to Elvin, 7 June 1945, ABSC 7/153). Elvin was respectful yet unbending, dismissing Brunel's suspicions that there was a conspiracy:

'no-one in A.C.T., or indeed the British Film Industry, would want to do anything to discredit the magnificent contribution you have made to British films. I can assure you the decision is merely an operation of rule and is in no way a get together to exclude you, as an individual, from the section'. (Letter from Elvin to AB, 12 May 1947, ABSC 7/153)

### **Post-war enterprises**

Throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s, Brunel continued to generate ideas. In 1946 he and Christopher started up a company called Pocket Cinemas Ltd to 'promote and operate 16mm cinemas, mobile and/or static' (letter, 7 January 1950, ABSC 9/56). They also considered the production of educational films, putting forward the idea for a series called 'The Children's Magazine', described as 'special one-reelers of value in entertainment and education' (letter from AB to 'my partners', 13 March 1950, ABSC 'shadowettes' folder/172). During the early 1950s, he corresponded with Mary Field,

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Executive Officer of The Children's Film Foundation, regarding a revival of the 'living shadowettes' Atlas-Biocraft had released in 1923. Once again, Brunel attempted to recycle his past successes and reintroduce them via new media; he even suggested pitching the shadowettes for television through his last company, Overland ('shadowettes TV films', n.d., ABSC 172).

Brunel's final credit to see the light of day was the television broadcast of his play *Till Tomorrow* by the BBC on 22 September 1948, which he had written back in 1914 and had been broadcast on BBC radio in May 1932 (notebook, ABSC 4/161; letter from AB to Lynn Fontanne, 23 May 1932, ABSC E/170). He directed a television pilot in 1951 called *Jack Sterling – White Hunter* but it was never shown. Despite the lack of film projects, Brunel kept busy and his collection is crammed with notebooks and letters from this period proposing ideas for film productions, invitations to address conferences and correspondence about other pursuits. He appeared on a BBC radio programme called *Film Time* and became a fairly regular radio contributor, appearing on *Woman's Hour* and *Town and Country*. He also published a series of 'broadsheets', decorative printed educational items covering a wide range of subjects from English monarchs to salad ingredients.

### Endings

Adrian Brunel died on 18 February 1958 at home in Gerrard's Cross at the age of sixty-eight. Irene Brunel outlived her husband by nearly thirty years, dying at the age of 95 in March 1987. Her obituary in the *Daily Telegraph* offered insights to her part in Brunel's career not mentioned by him, suggesting that she 'played a key role as an assistant at Minerva Films...and the Film Society' (Irene Brunel press cuttings, BFI Reuben Library). Christopher died two years later, on 27 April 1989 aged sixty-eight and *The Independent* marked his passing with a tribute by Peter Cotes, brother of Roy and John Boulting and a friend of the Brunel family. Cotes devoted much of the obituary to his memories of Adrian

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Brunel, writing of the difficult period for the British film industry between the two wars that 'many bad practices were combated, some even swept away [which] was in no small measure due to such people as Adrian Brunel and Ivor Montagu' (*Independent*, 18 May 1989, Christopher Brunel press cuttings, BFI Reuben Library).

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has provided a perspective on Brunel and his career which fills in many gaps and provides a much more comprehensive view of his work and career than has been presented in previous writings devoted to him. It illustrates the multi-faceted nature of his pursuits; while his filmmaking career was the focus of his energy, it was only one of many outlets through which he fulfilled his creative impulses and his collection is full of stories, articles and ideas in various stages of development. To some degree, this ability to diversify, both within the film industry and beyond, was necessary for his survival in the uncertain environment of British cinema and is true of many of his contemporaries. Brunel's reflections on his career reveal that the situation the British film industry was in during the 1920s was still subject to some of the same limitations in the following decades and the lack of vision that he deplored among producers persisted for some time. By the time the industry began to pick up and British cinema discovered successful formulae such as Ealing's music hall comedy and Alexander Korda's historical dramas, it was too late for Brunel to obtain mainstream directing work.

The curtailment of his career must be partly attributed to the way he conducted his relationships and this biography gives an insight into his persona, pointing up how it differs from the 'satirical jester' some commentators have portrayed him as (Brown 2005). Robert Murphy's description of Brunel's career quoted in the Introduction contains much of the vocabulary usually employed to describe it: 'disappointment', 'setbacks', 'resilience' and 'resourcefulness' sum up the main themes of his working life as depicted in his

autobiography (Murphy 2016). However, his correspondence reveals a very different character and one would be justified in adding the words ‘bitterness’, ‘frustration’, ‘desperation’ and ‘paranoia’ to the list.

The preceding biography has thus laid the foundations for the detailed study of Brunel’s filmmaking activities during the silent period which I shall undertake in this thesis, pointing to some of the interests, preoccupations, ambitions and personal traits which influenced the choices that he made. It has also highlighted some of threads running through his career, such as his constant recycling, reworking and reimagining of ideas and techniques, his pursuit of originality in all his projects regardless of budget or scale and his enduring interest and participation in debates about film in its many forms. In both his filmmaking and other arenas, his humour emerges as a ubiquitous presence, while his fascination with representing the social, industrial or technological aspects of cinema in his work has also been traced through his career. The following chapters will examine in more depth his career from 1920 to 1928 in order to study the production set-ups, collaborative relationships and commercial struggles in which he was involved and show how these factors helped or hindered his negotiation of the inhospitable industrial landscape of 1920s British cinema.

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<sup>1</sup> Most sources quote his year of birth as 1892 but the *Dictionary of National Biography* traced his birth certificate, which confirms that he was born three years earlier. Presumably he took to deducting a few years from his age.

<sup>2</sup> He also used the names Hope-Brunel and Brunel-Norman; as a child Adrian used the name Brunel-Norman while the 1939 census records a middle initial ‘H’, presumably for ‘Hope’.

<sup>3</sup> Dates supplied in email correspondence to the author from the Harrow School archivist 10 May 2014.

<sup>4</sup> *Sussex Daily News*, 25 July 1913, ABSC 176

<sup>5</sup> Brunel attempted to release the film again in 1921, presumably on the back of the positive reviews of his shorts made for Minerva Films, but this also failed. Even later, in 1924, Brunel was still receiving correspondence about the film as Mear tried desperately to recoup something from his investment.

<sup>6</sup> After World War II, frustrated at his inability to get work directing government films, Brunel went so far as to proclaim that he ‘practically invented propaganda films’ (letter from AB to George Elvin, 13 March 1947, ABSC 7/153)

<sup>7</sup> Brunel later claimed that it was he who had introduced Bromhead and Michael Balcon in the 1920s, leading to the collaboration between Gainsborough and Gaumont, which eventually led to the takeover of Gainsborough

<sup>8</sup> 'Bramlins' was a combination of the names of those involved: 'Br' from Brunel, 'am' from James and 'lin' from a family name of Payne's (Brunel 1949: 53).

<sup>9</sup> A share certificate in his name, dated 22 December 1921, records that he owned one hundred shares of £1 each (ABSC 3.3/160).

<sup>10</sup> Novello adapted his screenplay for the stage and it became a huge hit, allowing him to sell the film rights to Gainsborough for a large sum. The film was directed by Graham Cutts in 1925 and sealed Novello's reputation as a matinee idol.

<sup>11</sup> This film has not survived. Brunel asserted that Woolf was so keen on it that he 'projected it until it was worn out' (Brunel 1949: 110)

<sup>12</sup> Miller bases his naming of the group on Balcon's recollection that the Legrain was in Brewer Street but Brunel refers to a coffee shop in Gerrard Street, which was closer to his Dansey Yard office, as the site of their regular rendezvous. Certainly there was a Legrain in Gerrard Street into the 1950s and beyond, so Balcon's memory of its location may well have been faulty.

<sup>13</sup> 'A Night in Paris' was eventually filmed in 1929 as *A Knight in London* by Ludwig Blattner Picture Corporation.

<sup>14</sup> Balcon, however, denied this change of location in a letter to Brunel: 'Your story from the outset was set in Spain, and how you could have written a treatment and a script without having Spain in your mind I do not know...' (letter from Balcon to AB, 3 May 1928, ABSC 6/112)

<sup>15</sup> Hayes Hunter was an American film director who at that time was Director General of Gainsborough Productions.

<sup>16</sup> Since *A Light Woman* has not survived, it is impossible to gauge the results of Tavares' editing. However, a truncated version does exist on 9.5mm under the title *Dolores* which was released in 1933 and runs for only 27 minutes, compared to the 88 minutes of the original.

<sup>17</sup> The film was re-released after the war.

<sup>18</sup> Brunel accumulated the largest collection in Europe of books and pamphlets on Paine, which is now housed at the Working Class Movement Library in Salford (<http://www.wcml.org.uk/our-collections/activists/thomas-paine/thomas-paine-collection/>)

## Chapter Two: A Syndicate of Beggars: Minerva Films Ltd and independent short film production

In the summer of 1921 the following report appeared in *Film Renter And Moving Picture News*:

Certain scenes in 'The Beggars' Syndicate,' which Adrian Brunel is producing for Minerva Films, are laid in the famous Caledonian Market – the mecca of every London cheap-jack – where everything under the sun (moon and stars) can be purchased. A few days ago the Company, including Mary Patterson, Crispin Hay and Bert Darley, who are taking the principal parts, assembled in the market, while Adrian Brunel and Frank Hoffman, the camera-man, climbed the central tower for some high 'shots'... When Brunel returned to earth, looking like a tramp on account of the dirt from the tower, a stallholder, looking at Mary Patterson and Bert Darley, who were dressed very shabbily, asked what the film was called. On being told 'The Beggars' Syndicate,' he replied 'No, I asked what was the name of the film and not the name of the company!' (*Film Renter and Moving Picture News*, 16 July 1921: 34)

This anecdote made an entertaining piece of publicity for what was to be Brunel's final production for Minerva Films Ltd. but the stallholder's quip is a telling one. Given the desperate measures Brunel had been driven to in order to secure funds for continued production, the film's title was indeed equally applicable to the company itself. While the first six films made under the auspices of Minerva had been two-reel shorts, *The Beggar's Syndicate* was the first five-reeler the company had produced, a considerable risk given its already precarious finances. While the short films had been produced on minimal budgets, making enough profit from their sales to sustain further production had proved virtually impossible, leading the company to pursue less reputable sources for ever-dwindling amounts of investment.

But back in March 1920, Brunel had embarked on the venture with high hopes, anticipating his first proper chance to direct and to put into practice his creative ideas without the interference he had endured at British Actors' Film Company (BAFC). The first project Minerva undertook was a series of four short films based on stories by playwright and humourist A. A. Milne. Short- and medium-length productions were a key element of

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the cinema programme at this time yet, as with features, British films faced tough competition for screen time from America, particularly as shorts often formed part of packages sold by studios through their practices of block-booking. While it may appear obvious now that the feature film was always destined to become the primary commercial cinematic form, there were those in the early 1920s who championed the short film. This chapter examines the role and status of the short film during the silent period and the discussions about it which took place in the press. I will also show how it developed both as a commercial object and as a cinematic form capable of offering opportunities for British cinema to develop along national and creative lines. Through a detailed examination of Brunel's experiences with Minerva Films, this chapter will also detail the insecure financial conditions of small production outfits in the early 1920s alluded to in the press report above and the difficulties such firms had securing financing and distribution.

### **Brunel and the short film**

Most writing on the short film focuses on it as a medium for experimental and underground productions but some of the theory that has emerged can be applied to the form in a more general sense. Myles P. Breen observes that: 'The short film can legitimately be considered as a showcase for technique. What might distract and detract from the narrative in a feature, may be legitimate in a short' (Breen 1978: 4). During periods of unemployment, Brunel turned to the short film as a way to keep his hand in, maintain his profile and 'sell himself' as a director and it is not stretching the point too much to compare him to artist filmmakers, who '*have* to make their films as a poet *has* to write a poem. The main satisfaction is in the realization of the creative impulse' (David A. Sohn, quoted in Richard Raskin 2002: 3). While Brunel's 'creative impulse' should not be overemphasised, neither should it be entirely ignored; his short films are perhaps the clearest expression of

his style and humour and offer some of the best examples of his ability to harness his creativity within various generic forms.

From his time at the Ministry of Information during World War I, where he developed the 'Film Tag', until the Second World War, when he was again working on propaganda, the short film is woven throughout Brunel's career. Without the resources to work on feature films, he would turn his hand to short subjects, occasionally self-funded, to experiment with ideas and keep himself occupied between jobs. Yet while Brunel did experiment with film form and was sufficiently dedicated to the medium to work independently when no other option was available, it is possible to overstate the originality of the works he produced in this way and they need to be considered in the context of other productions taking place. As described in the Introduction the period between 1920 and 1925, when he produced most of his short films, was an extremely difficult one for British film. The domestic industry was going through a period of change and by the middle of the decade the kind of inadequately financed productions undertaken by short-lived and insecure companies such as Minerva came to an end. Yet at this moment in his career, Minerva offered Brunel a way out of the difficult and demoralising situation he found himself in at BAFC. He was engaged in a struggle between his desire for artistic control and a need for financial stability, and he hoped to achieve both through his involvement with Minerva. He also regarded it as a chance to help raise the intellectual tone of the cinema and contribute to the development of an identifiably British filmmaking style.

### **Minerva: the production set-up**

Brunel's experiences in the industry prior to joining Minerva had given him valuable insights into the business. The making of his ambitious first short film, *The Cost of a Kiss* had been particularly educational, not only about the practicalities of production but also the importance of protecting the negative of a film as a valuable asset which could easily be



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ruined. His run-ins with the distributor H. J. Boam while at BAFC, as recounted in Chapter One, had made him aware of an anti-intellectual streak among trade figures who, in turn, regarded Brunel's approach to cinema as marking him out as a 'highbrow'. Many of the observations on the industry that Brunel made in his correspondence at the time reveal the way that his thinking about the business was developing. He understood the economics of film production well enough to know the difficulty of profiting from it without having sufficient funds up front, not only to ensure the quality of the product but also to enable the producer to control its distribution. Writing to his friend and soon-to-be partner in Bramlins agency John Payne, Brunel asserted that a film company would ideally require an initial investment of £100,000, saying, 'It is only doing business on such a scale that big money can be made. One must have enough to rent one's own pictures' (letter from AB to Payne, 30 March 1919, ABSC 2/107).

Yet when Brunel signed a contract with British Comedy Films (soon to be renamed Minerva Films Ltd.), he was allocated the sum of £5000, with which he was to produce four short comedies. The impetus behind the establishment of the firm was the desire of actor Leslie Howard to forge a career in film, an aim presumably shared by actor and co-founder C. Aubrey Smith. Also involved was actor-manager Nigel Playfair, who had appeared in one or two films but appeared to have no ambition to act for Minerva. The financial backing for the enterprise came from Richard Fitz Power and Harry F. Towler. Both had recently left the forces, Towler as a Lieutenant Colonel, while Power had reached Second Lieutenant in the RAF. Towler appears to have been new to the film business but Power had 'spent a very considerable portion of his time in investigations into the technical side of cinematography' (*Kinematograph Year Book*, 1921: 547) although it is doubtful that he had any experience of actual production before becoming Minerva's chairman. Both may well have invested their army payouts in the new company, as Gledhill observes was often the case in the

immediate postwar period when many demobbed soldiers were eager to get into the film business (Gledhill 2008: 16). Also on the funding side was businessman Lionel Phillips.

As the only member of the company who had experience of filmmaking, Brunel took charge and was no doubt enthusiastic about having an opportunity to at last take control of the production process and put into practice his ideas about film. However, with this creative freedom came considerable frustration caused by the limited financial resources and a company board with little understanding of how films were made, pressures which led to a stressful working situation. On the positive side, he found himself at the centre of a creative team of like-minded men and thrived on their companionship and support. Milne's humour and style were clearly a good fit with Brunel's own, while Howard and Aubrey Smith also brought considerable talent to the process. Experienced cameraman H. M. Lomas and writer and assistant Bernard Carrodus, a Cambridge graduate also recently demobbed, completed the team. The combined talents of this group of largely university-educated men set to work to create four comedy shorts, which aimed to raise the form above the usual slapstick offered by supporting programmes.

### **Minerva as experiment**

In her article 'Play as Experiment in 1920s British Cinema' Gledhill identifies their project as part of a strand of peculiarly British cinematic experimentation located within what she terms the 'midstream' of filmmaking, i.e. somewhere between mainstream and amateur, which existed immediately after the war. Building on the work of Jamie Sexton (which will be covered in more detail in Chapter Four) she describes an environment that allowed filmmakers to 'expand, or "play" upon, the boundaries of what cinema might do' and links this to the penchant for entertainment and game playing which developed in postwar British society (Gledhill 2008: 16). Gledhill's case for this very British form of experimentation, while compelling, relies heavily on Brunel's work to illustrate the

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argument, citing all of his extant pre-1927 works as examples. In fact, the only other examples she provides are the features of George Pearson, of which only one has survived in its entirety, and the avant-garde film *Borderline* (1930), by the POOL group. This latter film, however, was made completely beyond the mainstream (and largely outside Britain) and after the passing of the Cinematograph Films Act in 1927, which brought an end to the 'fragmented and unstable' period of the industry she describes (ibid.). While she mentions writer/director/actor Guy Newall, Gledhill does not use any of his films to illustrate her argument, although his 1922 short *Beauty and the Beast*, with its self-conscious silliness in a tale of the unravelling of a woollen vest, is a good example. While Gledhill's article refers to the 'Minerva comedies', only the four films based on Milne's stories are discussed, not the three subsequent shorts made by the company. She maintains that Brunel's collaborations with Milne illustrate precisely the kind of child's play that such experimentation indulged in, yet the other Minerva films, although lost, are equally worthy examples; the pressbook for *A Temporary Lady* (1921) sums up the film's plot thus: 'It is all nonsense of course, but the best fun is always that' (*A Temporary Lady* pressbook, ABSC 214).

Gledhill's description of Brunel's filmmaking activities suggests that entertainment was a key element of both the films and the filmmaking process, referring to the 'spontaneous invention and "fun"' which Brunel and his crew engaged in, occasionally dampened by the 'frustration' of having to drum up funding (Gledhill 2008: 17-18). She thus conjures up a picture of a happy-go-lucky Brunel spending the first half of the 1920s going on jaunts with a group of kindred spirits to make films largely for their own self-amusement. This chapter will provide a corrective to this image and through more in-depth reference to Brunel's paper collection will reveal the reality of his experiences during his time at Minerva. Under intense scrutiny by producers and financiers, struggling to get his films made and shown and constantly on the edge of bankruptcy, Brunel may not have

recognised the 'cinematic Bohemia' that Gledhill would have us imagine (ibid.: 18). Although his humour was irrepressible and he continued to regard filmmaking as 'nice work', his experiences with Minerva were a harsh lesson in the realities of the British film industry. While Brunel had definite ideas about developing British cinema along more artistic lines, he had to make a living and was aware of the need for commercial success. He initially pursued this twin aim through the short film, finding it eminently suitable for the type of intelligent yet accessible humour he was keen to perfect.

### **The problem of the short film**

The lack of attention academia has given to the short film has led one commentator to describe it as 'the neglected stepchild of cinema studies' (Metter Hjort: 81). While general studies of the short narrative film are relatively rare, work that traces its development from the earliest days of cinema, either as a form of expression or as a commercial proposition, are all but non-existent. For the first fifteen years of the cinema, all films were short by necessity, restricted by the length of the reel inside the camera, and the history of the medium is inextricably linked to changes in cinematographic technology and developing exhibition structures. While longer 'feature' films gradually became the preferred commercial format, short films remained a key element of the exhibition strategy as part a programme for which the feature film was the main selling point. This exhibition pattern, in which cinemagoers were offered a programme of entertainment, echoed the theatrical variety show and endured in varying forms throughout much of the twentieth century until, in the late 1980s, the 'supporting programme' dwindled to a sprinkling of adverts and trailers.

The first cinematograph films lasted a few minutes and were records of locations or events, made primarily to demonstrate the capabilities of the new technology. As the equipment and the imagination of filmmakers improved, films were no longer limited by

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the amount of celluloid that the cameras could hold and the art of 'cutting' together several reels into a narrative began to be explored. Until around 1914, most films were one- or two-reelers, running between 10 and 20 minutes. The length of the films dictated the exhibition practices, leading to programmes consisting of several films, or a mixture of film and theatrical variety, depending on the venue. Low records that there was resistance in the exhibition trade when this pattern was threatened by the increasing length of films: 'The Trade Press, responsible commentators, and exhibitors' meetings repeatedly and in defiance of the facts expressed the view that "there are few plays which could rivet the attention of an audience for an hour"' (Low 1949: 48). Small showmen were fundamentally against the development for economic reasons, as Low explained:

When films were short...and a programme need last only an hour, a hall with four hundred seats could hold enough shows every day to cover costs, but programmes of two or three hours reduced the turnover to such an extent that even the cheaper 'super films' were beyond their means. (Low 1950: 27)

Into the 1920s, there was a fear that longer films would eventually drive out the shorter subjects, yet there were still those who believed that some audience members preferred shorts. Writing in *Motion Picture Studio*, F. Rupert Crew expressed the view that 'long films do not appeal to everyone' and that 'rather than sit through two long features, many people...stop away...' (Crew 1922a). But films continued to get longer and the feature film, as its name suggests, was driven by commercial imperatives as much as artistic ones.<sup>1</sup> However, its gradual take-over of the exhibition market, far from spelling the end of the short film, encouraged its development in different directions. Bryony Dixon observes that while 'the 90-minute feature began to dominate the cinema programmes... [s]hort films...continued to be the bread and butter of production' (Dixon 2012: 5). In the late teens and early 1920s, most films released were one of three lengths: the one or two-reel filler (each reel lasting just under 10 minutes), the five-reel feature and films of eight to ten reels, the most lavish of which were dubbed 'super-pictures'. By 1923, the five-reel feature

was becoming obsolete, one observer noting that ‘one of the most important British producing organisations...has ceased making them entirely, and is devoting its energies to the comparatively expensive “super-picture”... and – *the two-reel subject*’ (MPS, 12 May 1923: 10; his italics). Production companies invested ever-larger amounts into making features and heavily promoting their stars. Meanwhile, short films, which were never going to fetch the kind of rental sums commanded by features, were made on relatively small budgets and therefore could still offer filmmakers a degree of freedom to experiment.

While producers often struggled to profit from short fiction films, ‘interest films’ managed to maintain a popularity with audiences while at the same time elevating the short film above its lowly and often lowbrow status. Series such as Percy Smith’s *Secrets of Nature* made for British Instructional and John Betts’ *Sporting Life* films produced by Stoll built a reputation as intelligent programme fillers. They experimented with cinematic techniques such as time-lapse and slow motion photography, techniques which were also beginning to be employed by the European *avant-garde* filmmakers, although the interest films clearly engaged with them in the name of science rather than art. Brunel himself was to experiment with such techniques later, in the pursuit of humorous effects and, from 1925, the programmes of the Film Society would combine the three genres of silent film which employed these effects: artistic, comedic and scientific.

### **Exhibiting the short film**

Crew’s belief in the short film was seemingly vindicated by a statement of faith in the commercial, and artistic, value of the short subject near the end of 1923, when *The Bioscope* announced that producer and distributor New Era Films had taken over the Embassy Theatre in Holborn ‘for the purpose of showing an all-short programme’ (*Bioscope*, 6 December 1923: 36). The journal asserted that ‘There has been a great deal of discussion recently in the trade regarding the box-office value of short features, and many

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people have advocated the establishment of a short feature house' (ibid.). New Era was keen to emphasise that quality was key to their plans, *Bioscope* recording that 'the exhibition of any short film at the Embassy will become a real hall-mark of merit' (ibid.). However, while newsreel cinemas had proved a popular form of exhibition specialisation, it appears that the concept of a cinema programme consisting of short films was not a draw for audiences and, despite support in the Trade and mainstream press, New Era's experiment was short-lived. By April 1924, the Embassy Theatre adopted a new programming strategy and became, according to Henry K. Miller, 'a leading claimant to the title of London's first "continental" or "art" cinema' (Miller 2013: 79). This too was a transient phase for the venue and, the following year, it ceased to be a cinema altogether and was converted into a factory.

Until the mid-1920s, short films were reviewed alongside feature releases in *The Bioscope*, so a write-up of an American 'super-picture' could be found next to that for an 'interest' film showing the latest Paris fashions or a slapstick comedy. Eventually, the journal introduced a separate section for shorts, although it was not possible to review more than a handful of the titles in circulation. For exhibitors, the short film remained an important element of the cinema programme, with audiences expecting a combination of one long feature, accompanied either by one shorter (often five-reel) feature or several fiction shorts, and the 'topicals' (news and interest films). However, the programme was sold to audiences almost entirely on the main feature, meaning the short 'fillers' were of less value to the exhibitor and thus could not command very high rents. With the large number of American shorts on the market, it was difficult for new British producers to get their films on the screen, especially comedies as there were many well-established comedy franchises already on the market.

For ease of marketing and to render them more attractive, as well as offering continuity, shorts were generally sold in packages of six or twelve titles, usually with a

common theme or star. Larger companies were better able to fund these and could make use of the available equipment, personnel and studio space in between feature productions. For smaller firms looking to produce a series of six films the investment required could total as much as the cost of a feature, or perhaps even more, since the shorts would require the writing of six scenarios and very probably different casts, costumes and locations.<sup>2</sup> A further problem was the long delay between the trade show of a film and its release, a gap of between six months and one year, which was an impossibly long period for a small company to wait for the profits from rentals to come in. Thus there was little incentive to spend large amounts on such films and shorts were often criticised as cheap and inferior products, leading to demands within the trade for better quality short and mid-length films. In fact, throughout the first half of the 1920s, the role and future of the short film was a popular topic of discussion in the trade press.

### **Profiting from short films**

Although Brunel's Minerva shorts received largely positive reviews he failed to profit from them, either financially or in terms of significantly furthering his career. To some degree, his lack of progression within the film industry was exacerbated by his pursuit of a filmmaking form that was particularly difficult to make money from in the short term. For most of this period, the financing his companies received was very much on a hand-to-mouth basis and Brunel often worked without pay for long periods, or found himself having to supplement production costs from his own pocket. Together with the failure to establish a business relationship with a reliable distribution set-up, which would ensure the films obtained a proper release, these problems meant that Brunel and his associates spent a disproportionate amount of their time and energy managing the business side of Minerva rather than concentrating on maintaining their creative output. Without the structures that a more firmly established production company would have in place, it was almost



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impossible for a filmmaker to forge a stable career and produce a body of work upon which to build a reputation. As the landscape in Britain changed from small-scale concerns and independent film production to a more secure studio system, directors like Brunel found it increasingly difficult to make an impression on the market through short films, especially as the exhibition model built around the 'feature' presentation became more firmly established as the decade progressed.

The key to the successful distribution of the short film was a ready supply of well-packaged series with an obvious selling point. One British firm that managed to establish a reputation in this area was Ideal, a company that started out in production but soon realised that controlling the sales of American comedy shorts in Britain was a far more secure basis for a business. Under the directorship of Simon Rowson (a figure Brunel was to come into contact with at Gaumont some years later), Ideal was the most high-profile provider of such films, the company's promotions in the trade press promising to add 'pep' to programmes and assuring exhibitors that their shorts, far from being merely 'fillers', were 'fillers of seats, fillers of theatres, fillers of pay-boxes!!' (*Bioscope*, 19 March 1925: 21).

The idea that shorts were as valuable to exhibitors as features was eagerly promoted by those involved in their production. Screenwriter Eliot Stannard, who went on to be a key collaborator of Brunel and, more notably, Alfred Hitchcock, penned many short film scenarios for British and Colonial Kinematograph Company (B&C) in the early to mid-1920s. These included the six-part series *Wonder Women of the World* (1923), which depicted scenes in the lives of female historical figures, and *Gems of Literature* (1923), twelve two-reel films which offered audiences potted versions of works by the likes of Shakespeare and Dickens. Speaking to *The Bioscope* on behalf of B&C, Stannard described the company's shorts as 'pictures from which all the padding has been eliminated and only punch left, and in which a subject that could well fill eight reels has been compressed'

(*Bioscope*, 18 January 1923: 50). As such, he expressed the view that the company's two-reelers deserved to earn much higher rental fees than they currently commanded and should be put at the top of the bill. Stannard will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five but he was already one of British cinema's most experienced and accomplished screenwriters and wrote many articles about his craft and its importance to the creative process of filmmaking. A writer of his experience must have realised that, while reducing great literary works to bite-size programme fillers may have been a successful sales tactic, it was unlikely to contribute to the development of the art of film and it is possible that he was expressing the views of the company rather than himself.

Despite Stannard's apparent belief that shorts could be a substantial draw for audiences, the continued supremacy of the feature film as the main selling point of a cinema programme was inevitable and, if it was to improve, the short film required an approach more suited to the form. Some felt that this obsession with film length was a distraction from, or even a hindrance to, the development of quality products. 'Is it not just this fetish of length worship that is throttling the free development of picture making?' asked one observer, 'You meet many five-reel "stories" sawn and chipped in order to fit into one spool of film, and a depressingly large number of pale, thin, anaemic themes stretched and strained over five pain-packed reels' (*Bioscope*, 9 March 1922: 5). Clearly, some in the trade were beginning to realise that the subject needed to fit the form, rather than the other way round.

### **Art and the Short Film: Cooper's Quality Film Plays**

One of the most successful series of short subjects relied on less highbrow literary sources than those adapted by Stannard but which were almost certainly more suitable for screen adaptation. Director George A. Cooper garnered considerable attention for his 'Quality Film Plays', two-reelers made between 1922 and 1924 and adapted chiefly from

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short stories which had appeared in popular magazines such as *Pan*. Cooper's films had screened at the Embassy in Holborn and were singled out for praise by trade journalist Crew, who believed a successful cinema programme had to include good quality short fiction films. Criticising the typical cinema programme as 'boring', he advised exhibitors to seek out better quality shorts to complement their feature presentations (*MPS*, 23 September 1922: 6). In his earlier article, Crew had bemoaned the fact that one particular short film, which he regarded as a 'brilliant little effort at originality', had received no bookings at all (Crew 1922a). The reason for this, according to his neighbour at the trade screening, was that the film was: 'Too good for 'em! Won't understand it!' (ibid.). Crew, who went on to become a leading literary agent, was one of a growing number of educated cinemagoers who felt that exhibitors were failing to give him and his ilk the right kind of fare and were lazily pandering to the lower class audience members. He called for a more 'highbrow' approach to the medium, which should aim to bring to the screen: 'the world's masterpieces in short fiction pictured in one or two reels' and comedies which 'break away from the American slap-stick, of which the kinema-going public is so tired' (ibid.).

It is unlikely that Cooper would have had the wherewithal to afford the fees commanded by such 'masterpieces' yet he found other ways to raise the standard of his films above the majority of those on the market. Crew hailed him as 'a man... [who] has truly grasped the vital need for producing short stuff on super lines. He has given his little pictures not only artistic and conscientious direction, but has utilised star casts, proper sets, lighting and fine photography' (*MPS*, 23 September 1922: 6). Cooper's training had consisted of several years running the editing department of London Independent Film Trading Company, a rental firm that imported European films for distribution in Britain. Here, Cooper 'probably viewed and edited more Continental pictures than anybody in the industry and his experience... certainly afforded him unique opportunities to acquire an

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intimate knowledge of film construction' (*Bioscope*, 16 February 1922: 20-21). Brunel was to have a similar education through his own editing work.

Unfortunately, none of Cooper's Quality Film Plays have survived and records on them are scant. They received good coverage in the trade press, not least for their casting of star performers, and, although Miller claims they were 'well received but poorly distributed', Cooper managed to sustain production for three series and even sold some to America (*MPS*, 2 June 1923: 4). *Motion Picture Studio* asserted that his objective was 'to give to the public little dramatic or humorous stories in which the subtlety of detail finds expression...None of the plots... are conventional or banal...the subtitle is always subordinate to pictorial expression', aims that chimed with those of Brunel (*MPS*, 10 February 1923: 6). The films certainly earned Cooper considerable respect within the trade and in early 1924 *Kinematograph Weekly* was eager to know 'What George Cooper thinks', printing an article in which he expounded his views on the art of filmmaking (*KW*, 10 January 1924: 71). The previous month, *Motion Picture Studio* had also sought his opinion, this time on the conditions of British film production (*MPS*, 29 December 1923: 7). His response was a piece calling for film financiers to 'have a belief in the purpose of the British film, its ability not only to give entertainment value but also to express England! If you are only interested in British films for the money that may lie in them, then YOU do not help their progress' (*ibid.*).

Cooper clearly shared Brunel's faith in the creative potential of the medium and the need for the development of a truly indigenous form of filmmaking. In fact, the trajectories of the two directors were very similar and, like Brunel, Cooper was taken on by Gainsborough in the middle of the 1920s but found himself underemployed and in May 1926 was released from his contract. His career did not live up to the promise of his Quality Film Plays and he too spent the 1930s engaged in quota quickie production.

### **Minerva: the Genesis**

Cooper's Quality Films may well have developed and improved upon Brunel's earlier efforts to raise the standard of the short film through his work with Minerva. While both series featured actors with a theatrical pedigree, the Minerva films had the advantage of being based on Milne's original screen stories, essentially British in tone, which Brunel adapted into neat modern playlets. In this sense, the films were unusual since the majority of films made at the time were based on existing literary or theatrical works, as will be explored in more detail in Chapter Six. Brunel's idea of commissioning original screen stories from popular writers made sound business sense since the producer could benefit from the author's name yet not pay the exorbitant price usually charged for a published work.

Despite a desire to create a new and very British departure in short filmmaking, Minerva looked across the Atlantic for its model and Howard was keen that the Milne comedies should take inspiration from the films of American variety star Sidney Drew. His hugely popular films were made between 1911 and 1919 and paired him with his wife in comedies without slapstick that focused on the pitfalls of married life. While most screen comedians traded on a named alter ego, the Drew films were situational and he often portrayed the hen-pecked husband trying to appease a domineering wife. Production values were high; the promotional material for their 1919 film *Romance and Rings* claiming that the films were 'produced with all the care and skill that Mr and Mrs Sidney Drew can possibly put into them... [i]t takes them a month to make one of these new comedies – a month but it's worth that to give your people a half hour of hearty laughs'.<sup>3</sup>

Brunel had much less time, and considerably less money, to make his answer to these films. The budgetary restrictions meant that he found himself back at the cramped and inadequate Bushey Studios used by BAFC and the interiors were shot there between 17 and 29 May 1920. The following weeks were spent on location and the films include a great

deal of exterior shooting, an important feature of Howard's original idea for the company. The first incarnation, called 'British Sunshine Films', aimed to bring to native comedy the 'joie de vivre that only the sunlight, and nature's own surroundings can infuse into a production' ('notes on setting up on company' n.d., ABSC 1/107).

Like the Drew comedies, Milne's stories also turned to the foibles of middle-class contemporary society for their subject matter. However, rather than the dynamics between husband and wife, he focused on modern youth and intergenerational relationships, in particular the obstacles that the older generation can put in the way of young love. The Milne films stand up well in comparison to the Sidney Drew shorts they set out to emulate; the American films had intricate plots, which needed frequent and lengthy intertitles to guide audiences through them. Milne and Brunel aimed at a level of narrative simplicity that did not need such interventions, employing titles more creatively, often to embellish the narrative or address the audience directly. Four Milne comedies were made and while they all pursue a romantic outcome, the target of the humour varies, as the following plot outlines illustrate.

### ***The Bump***

In *The Bump*<sup>4</sup>, C. Aubrey Smith plays famous explorer John Brice, who is idolised by bright young thing Lillian Montrevor. Brice is the type of hero featured in *Boys' Own* stories – a man's man who explores uncharted territory in the name of King and Empire. He has recorded his adventures in several books, which Lillian devours eagerly and, although he appears old enough to be her father, she is thrilled when she meets him at a party. Her beau, Freddy Fane, is devastated to be thrown over but cannot compete with the manly exploits of Brice since his only talent is an aptitude for modern dance steps. Brice accepts Lillian's invitation to tea but since 'He has never been on an expedition by himself before' it

takes him six months to find her house, during which time she decides to settle for Fane; their wedding is underway as the explorer finally arrives at Stuccoway Terrace.

While this may point up the fickleness of modern youth, the real target of Milne's humour is British imperialism as embodied by the explorer. The first view of Brice is in close-up, his facial attributes described using arrows and handwritten luggage labels which appear on the screen. The image draws attention to the scars from, variously, 'argument with leopard', 'dual [sic] with scorpeon [sic] in Africa', 'shark bite in Red Sea' and 'legacy from angry bison (N. America).<sup>5</sup> Smith was well cast as Brice; his middle-aged upper-class bluster perfectly suits the character of a pompous celebrity. For Lillian, Brice embodies her ideal man, as she tells Freddie: 'If I ever marry, it must be a man who had done things.' But it becomes apparent that on the streets of London, without his native guide and carriers, the accoutrements of an outdated colonialism, Brice is singularly unsuited to life in the modern world – an anachronism more useless than the apparently fatuous 'jazzier' Freddie Fane.

### ***£5 Reward***

Leslie Howard secured himself roles in two of the Milne films, in the hope of establishing himself as a comic film actor. In *£5 Reward* he plays a young aristocrat in love with a farmer's daughter. The plot turns on its head the more usual convention in British films, which dictated that lower class characters should suffer due to their lack of social standing or obtain upward mobility via inheritance or marriage. In Milne's story, it is the aristocrat (Tony Marchmont, 'son of a hundred earls') who must prove himself worthy of the daughter of the farmer (although he is clearly a landowner rather than a farmhand). The discrepancy in their status, so the intertitles inform the viewer, 'is no reason why he should not kiss her again'. Unimpressed with Tony's private income, the farmer insists that any suitor for his daughter must be able to earn money 'by the sweat of his brow' and gives

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Tony a month to earn £5. Audrey, his belle, expresses her doubt that an indolent member of the upper classes such as Tony could possess any talents by which he could earn a living but he sets out to prove her wrong. His first assignment is cleaning out a pigsty, for which he earns one shilling and the realisation of the scale of the task before him gradually dawns on him ('If a man earns one shilling in one day, how many months will it take him to earn five pounds?'). The incomplete copy of the film held in the BFI National Archive ends here but the conclusion of the tale can be found in the script in Brunel's collection (ABSC 2/121). The farmer loses Tony's pocketbook, having taken charge of it when he set the challenge, and Audrey finds it. She persuades her father that he should advertise for its safe return and offer a reward; she then engineers it so that Tony finds the pocketbook and can claim his £5 reward along with Audrey's hand.

Like Brice, the aristocratic Tony is painted as an anachronism in a post-war world. Incapable of earning a living, he is only able to win the hand of his love with her help and, by outwitting her father, she proves herself smarter than both the men in her life. Howard attempts some comedy 'business', aimed at demonstrating how out of place the young aristocrat is away from his home comforts, as Brice is while wandering the London streets. Forced to wash in the farmyard, Tony rubs his face with water from a barrel, then, eyes closed, holds out his hands as if waiting to receive a towel from his valet. Later, when presented with a 'ploughman's lunch', he contemplates it with confusion before attempting to make a sandwich from the huge wedge of bread and cheese.

### ***Bookworms***

In *Bookworms* Howard again plays a young man in love, but this time the object of his affection is closely guarded by her uncle and aunt, forcing him to invent clever ruses to get close to her. By inserting a note into a library book, intended for his amour Miranda, he inadvertently reawakens the passion between the girl's stern guardians as well as



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matchmaking the housekeeper with a stranger. With these characters out of the way, the path is clear for Richard to call on Miranda and make his declarations of love. Howard's character is once again a rather feckless youth who lays in bed till all hours and contemplates suicide or emigration when his romantic plans are foiled. He appears not to have a job or any other occupation to distract him from winning the hand of Miranda.

The story is presented as a fairy tale, with Miranda as the fair maid imprisoned in a castle and guarded by a dragon in the form of the elderly housekeeper-cum-chaperone. The titles are decorated with appropriate imagery and, in a foreshadowing of Brunel's much more obtuse juxtaposition of text and image in his burlesques, set up oppositions through their content. Thus a card announcing that Miranda 'lived in a lovely Castle' is followed by a shot of an ivy-covered house. Richard is cast as the 'Young Knight' who must defeat the dragon and the Wicked Uncle who protect Miranda, yet he is far from the ideal fairy tale hero. This construction of the plot around fairy-tale references is just one element of the film's thematic linking with books and reading, the title card announcing it as *A Comedy in Two Volumes*. The plot itself revolves around reading and visits to the library and books are the means by which the romantic outcome is engineered. Along the way, there are opportunities to mark out the characters by their reading material, so Miranda is shown buried in Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, while her uncle and aunt read more sensational fare such as the biographical work *Life in Mormon Bondage* and *Shadow of a Crime* by middlebrow author Hall Caine. While the humour here is merely in the choice of existing titles, Brunel would later mock such middlebrow literature further through the use of parodic titles and plays on author names in his burlesque *So This Is Jollygood*.

### ***Twice Two***<sup>6</sup>

The last of the four films, *Twice Two*, again features matchmaking, as a young couple attempt to unite their widowed parents so they can marry each other without

leaving them alone. Jack and Jill meet when fate brings them together at a thatched cottage by a river, which they have both decided is a good subject for a painting. They gradually fall in love but neither wants to abandon their solitary parent. Thus they hatch a plan to bring them together by arranging to meet them both at the same time and place, then not turning up. The plan works and the film ends with the four forming two couples. Here again, the generation gap is a key element of the film and both young people, despite being devoted to their parents, find their lives and interests dull. Thus, in their respective homes we see 'the Colonel telling Jill how he went round the course that morning in 82 – or 182 we forget which' and 'Mrs Romer telling Jack how the vicar bored her'.

### **The Reception of the Milne comedies**

The trade show for the Milne comedies was held at the West End Cinema in September 1920 but featured only three of the films: *The Bump*, *Bookworms* and *£5 Reward*, with *Twice Two* being still at the editing stage. The press book produced for the occasion was in keeping with the films, containing humorous synopses written by Milne and comic observations on the productions. For example, it announces that for the production of *Bookworms* 'it is estimated that 18973524 books are employed in the library scenes. We wish, however to contradict the rumour that these are unsold copies of Mr Milne's latest novel', while the credits for *£5 Reward* include the note that 'pigs, cows, farm-hands, geese, donkeys and other wild fowl [were] trained with inexhaustible patience by Bernard Carrodus and photographed at great personal risk by H. M. Lomas' (Minerva Pressbook, ABSC 176).

The newspapers greeted the films with general enthusiasm, yet expressed some reservations. *The Daily Express* felt that '[t]he technical qualities displayed in these clever two-reelers are good without being brilliant' (7 October 1921, Minerva cuttings, ABSC 176) while the view of *The Morning Post* was that '[i]t is all slight but there is a vivacity, a gaiety

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and a humour' (20 September 1920, *ibid.*). However, some in the trade appeared to understand what Brunel and Milne were aiming to achieve and *Film Renter and Moving Picture News* declared that 'Mr Milne has raised the standard of film art on its lighter side and shown that it is possible to be humorous without pails of whitewash' (n.d., press for Minerva, ABSC 4/107). There was also an appreciation by some critics that the films were attempting to produce something original and British: 'It can be truly said that, prior to this show, British film humour did not exist' claimed the *Daily Express* (n.d., *ibid.*) while the *Morning Post* declared that 'The new venture of Minerva Films Limited gives us great hope that we have at last evolved a true native type of "the movie"' (20 September 1920, *ibid.*). In a two-page spread devoted to the films, writer and *Picture Show* columnist Edith Nepean described them as 'three delightful comedies' (*Picture Show*, 20 November 1920: 15). The feature contains an interview with Brunel, which confirmed his heightened sensitivity regarding his standing in the film community. He stated that 'my highbrow literary friends...dropped me as a crank' due to his enthusiasm for film writing; yet, he asserted, 'I was also regarded as one by my new associates in the film world, since I looked upon picture-making from another standpoint than that of mere money-making' (*ibid.*: 15).

The company board members seemed less than happy with the finished films, Playfair apparently finding fault with the performances and the sets. In a defensive response, Brunel wrote: 'I did my best under the circumstances' (letter from AB to Playfair, 14 October 1920, ABSC 5/107). Phillips was also displeased, expressing his disappointment and asking to speak to Brunel about the reception of the films (letter from Phillips to AB, 4 November 1920, ABSC 6/107). The challenging distribution and exhibition structures in Britain worked against Minerva and the films failed to find a buyer. The trade show had failed to attract many film renters and the subsequent delay in securing a sale meant the positive press reaction counted for little and distributors were wary of the product (Brunel 1949: 61-62). *Kinematograph Weekly* announced that they were to be handled by the

Cinematograph Intelligence Bureau, a small cinema chain, but this came to nothing (*KW*, 21 October 1920, ABSC 176). Brunel eventually had to sell the films to Moss Empires, at a significant loss, for £200 each, negotiating an additional 25% of the profits on bookings over £750 per picture (letter from AB to Howard, 28 December 1920, ABSC 4/107).

Early in 1921, Moss advertised the films rather half-heartedly at the bottom of their bill of new releases, promoting them as 'Minerva Comedies' (perhaps an attempt to establish a brand) and dubbed them 'A new departure' (*Bioscope*, 6 January 1921: 58-59). Meanwhile Brunel continued to try and sell the films abroad but his hopes of earning a profit to finance further productions soon faded and, despite the apparently marketable combination of a popular writer and a relatively well-known theatrical cast, the Milne comedies disappeared from view.

### **Re-evaluating the Milne comedies**

George Perry pinned the failure of the films on to the fact that 'there was as yet in British film comedies no place for West End theatrical humour' (Perry 1975: 49). However, Milne's film stories, peppered with wry intertitles, surely rise above this label, eschewing the drawing-room staginess and tennis-playing characters it suggests. They are, in fact, very cinematic and contain some original and genuinely amusing devices. The Milne comedy of which Brunel was most proud was *The Bump*, referring to it as Minerva's '*chef-d'oeuvre*' and Gledhill regards it as an 'exemplary' comedy of the period (Brunel 1949: 61; Gledhill 2003: 159). She identifies what she terms a 'literateness' in the film, by which the images possess an 'articulacy', becoming effective purveyors of narrative or characterisation (*ibid.*). Thus in *The Bump*, as she describes, a shot of Freddie's feet, showing his skill at dancing 'divinely', pans up to his smile, the two images illustrating his personality (*ibid.*: 159-160). Elsewhere verbal and visual messages mix so that the film images contain text (as in the labelling of Brice's face described above), while the decorated titles are illustrative as well

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as informative (Gledhill 2003: 159). The illustrated intertitles are a key element in the films' comic effect, considerably more detailed and complex than those used in most films, they alternately complement or undermine the text, a technique Brunel was to use again four years later in *Crossing the Great Sagrada*. These titles were designed by a friend of Brunel, Carlo Norway, who was the founder of the Decorative Arts Society and a member of a group of bohemians centred around Augustus John's Crab Tree Club. Brunel's connection to this group was to come to the fore later when he made his first feature, but commissioning a Modernist artist to illustrate the titles was clearly an element in Minerva's strategy to raise the short comedy above the usual standard of British productions. In his plans for the company, Brunel asserted that the artists Edmund Dulac and Claud Lovat Fraser were potential future collaborators ('Points in favour of expansion of Minerva Film Ltd', n.d., ABSC 6/107).

The innovative approach of Brunel and Milne is apparent from the sophisticated comic devices used in the films. One of these is an subversion of traditional storytelling modes and cinematic convention. The films play with the notion of the 'omnipotent author', chiefly through the intertitles, which are written as if the authorial voice they represent is as ignorant of the outcome of the narrative as the audience. As *The Bump* begins, we are shown images of each of the main characters but the titles express doubt over which of the male leads is to be the hero ('It's just possible he may be the hero. We are not sure yet. Have another look at him just in case'). The titles thus belie the nature of the films as works of fiction; the first title of *£5 Reward* states 'It is convenient to begin with that Tuesday...' as if the events are being picked up at random rather than having been plotted in advance. According to Brunel, *Twice Two* opened with a 'burlesque of the popular Wild West film' which ended abruptly to be followed by a title which read 'Sorry – that's the wrong film' before beginning the story in earnest (Brunel 1949: 61).<sup>7</sup>

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This type of self-reflexivity was not new to British comedy and the series of shorts featuring Fred Paul's popular character Pimple, which ran from 1912 to 1922, flaunted its cheapness and ineptitude to humorous effect. Brunel's relied less on this for the Minerva films (more so in his later burlesques), although it is glimpsed in the use of cartoon representations of Brice's adventures at the Pole and the Equator in *The Bump*, which stand in for location shots. Brunel and Milne chose instead to use the technique in a more complex way, foregrounding not the artificiality of the set and props but the very nature of the short film, laying bare its intrinsic narrational devices and drawing humour from the exposure of the usually omniscient storyteller as powerless to predict the outcome of his own tale.

The Minerva project was a valuable exercise in exploring new sources for the cinema. Having experienced the difficulties of adapting existing literature to film while at BAFC, Brunel was keen to bring specially written film stories to the screen and the collaboration with Milne seemed a perfect compromise. His plan was to continue along these lines, commissioning original stories by some of the most popular authors and playwrights of the time. Others were thinking along the same lines; Bamford notes that a similar scheme saw Jesse Lasky, of Famous Players-Lasky, on a trip to Britain in 1920 seeking deals with authors such as J. M. Barrie, H. G. Wells and Arnold Bennett for 'original stories written specifically for the screen, with special consideration for [its] requirements' (*Cinema Chat*, No. 66, 1920, quoted in Bamford: 73). Brunel had his sights set on similar targets and his notes record that, after working with Milne, he had hoped to obtain the 'co-operation of distinguished authors at minimum cost', his possible contenders also including Wells and Bennett along with W. W. Jacobs, George Bernard Shaw and F. Anstey ('Points in favour of expansion of Minerva Film Ltd', ABSC 6/107).<sup>8</sup> While none of these collaborations came to fruition, Anstey did correspond with Brunel about producing a scenario for Minerva, asking his advice on the correct way to compose a screenplay and for guidance as

to when certain shots should be used (letter from AB to Anstey, 11 June 1920, F. Anstey Coll. MS 54309 fo. 271). Brunel's idea of commissioning film stories from authors was a canny one as it lent the production the kudos of a popular name but avoided the high cost and the considerable pressure which inevitably ensued when adapting an already successful work. Brunel's plan was a step towards a more constructive and economical use of the talents of writers interested in the medium and could have been a genuinely innovative approach to British cinema.

Before the Minerva films had been sold, Howard had set off for New York to continue pursuing his stage career, no doubt disappointed at the loss of his investment in the company and his lack of success as a film star. Brunel wrote to him there, complaining about the state of the industry and asking for a cheque as he was 'terribly hard up' (letter from AB to Howard, 28 December 1920, ABSC 4/107). Despite the interest the trade press showed in his work, Brunel struggled to win support within the industry. While his attempt to bring intelligent humour to British screens would no doubt have been appreciated by commentators such as Crew, who were pleading for such films in the trade press, Minerva did not have the business experience to secure proper distribution for the Milne-authored comedies.

### ***A Temporary Lady***

Despite the failure of the Milne comedies to make a profit, Minerva embarked on two further films early in 1921. The announcement of these productions in the trade papers suggested that the collaboration with popular authors was at an end; one was based on a short story while the other, entitled *A Temporary Lady*, was co-written by Brunel and Mill Wadham, who appears to have no pedigree in the business. *A Temporary Lady* was a two-reel comedy and, although it has not survived, the plot summary in *Kinematograph Weekly* describes its tale:

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A 'slavey' who works in a boarding house falls in love with a man who drives up each week in a Rolls-Royce. She gets a legacy of 50 pounds. She leaves 'service' and dresses as a man and follows the man to a hotel. They become acquainted. She then changes and introduces herself as the sister. The man falls in love with her. She confesses her deception, and he tells her that he is not rich and only a salesman. (*KW*, 11 May 1922, ABSC 4/107)

Cast as the main characters were Annette Benson and Miles Mander. Foreshadowing Brunel's later humorous commentaries on the cinema, Benson's character was a movie obsessive: 'Her whole outlook on life was affected by "the pictures"'. If she had a tiresome job to do in the kitchen, she thought how Charlie or Tommy Meighan or Sessue Hayakawa would do it, and the drudgery of the task would disappear as if by magic' (pressbook for *A Temporary Lady*, ABSC 214).

The long delay between the shooting of the film in spring 1921 and its release in May 1922 indicates the company's continued distribution problems. In fact, the film had been trade shown in September 1921 and Brunel claimed that 'it got splendid notices' (Brunel 1949: 62) but, by the time of its the release, Minerva had ceased production and Brunel had gone into business with the film's star, Mander. The pressbook produced to promote it, in an example of optimistic self-promotion, sported a portrait of Brunel on the cover, presumably seeking to trade on his reputation within the industry. The reviews it contains are indeed positive and recognise its combination of humour and intelligence; *The Cinema* found it 'clean, crisp, amusing and clever' while *Film Renter* described it as 'A piece of delicious fooling' and singled out Benson as a 'comedienne of genuine power and ability' (pressbook for *A Temporary Lady*, ABSC 214). The reviewer in *Kinematograph Weekly* describes an intriguing 'original touch' in the form of 'the frequent introduction of a cat and two beetles whose actions illustrate some point of the story'; whether this was in the form of animated sequences, titles or live action is not recorded but it may have been a reference to the popular natural history films of Percy Smith. The other Minerva film in production at the same time as *A Temporary Lady* was called *Too Many Cooks* but although



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*Bioscope* announced its completion in June, it was never released (*Bioscope*, 23 June 1921: 19).

After the failure of the company's first six films to make a profit, Brunel sought advice from others in the business. T. A. Welsh and George Pearson advised him to abandon the two-reel film and invest instead in a five-reeler because 'like this one can spend much more per reel and get a bigger return' (handwritten notes, n.d., ABSC 4/107). The editor and chief reviewer of *Bioscope* also felt that expanding into production of five-reel films was the next step, but recommended continuing with two-reelers as well. They came up with the suggestion that the company 'should link three two-reel films together as the Fox Film co did at a recent trade show... We might put three films together dealing with suburban life' (ibid.), a canny way to extend the life of a series of shorts and a ploy used in the 1950s to bring television productions to the cinema.

Brunel clearly took the advice to leave behind the short film as *Bioscope* announced in June 1921 that Minerva was working on the five-reeler *The Beggar's Syndicate* (*Bioscope*, 23 June 1921: 19). The original story was written by Brunel, adapted by Mill Wadham and then developed into the continuity script by Brunel. The story tells of an aristocrat fallen on hard times who joins forces with a coffee-stall owner and a woman called Maggie to set themselves up in business. Comedy ensues as they try their hands at decorating, portering, pavement artistry and selling quack medicine. As in *A Temporary Lady*, the action is commented on by an animal, this time an anthropomorphised dog called Caesar, who has his own intertitles and was even to have his dream visualised via an image superimposed alongside a shot of himself asleep (it appears that Brunel dropped this sequence as it proved too difficult to film). The script called for shooting in various London locations, including Selfridge's roof garden and Victoria Station as well as the crew's expedition to the Caledonian Market described at the beginning of this chapter.

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This film featured comic actor Bert Darley alongside 'Minerva discovery' Mary Patterson, who was described, somewhat mysteriously, by *Bioscope* as having 'a quaint method of portrayal which is peculiar to herself' (*Bioscope*, 23 June 1921: 19). The reason for this was presumably that Patterson had no acting experience and the film was being financed by businessman Arthur T. Locan in an attempt to launch her career as a film star. In an undated document Brunel records that 'I shall use my best endeavours to train this gentleman's wife as a cinema-artist with the view to her starring in our productions' ('Points in favour of expansion of Minerva Film Co., ABSC 6/107). In fact, Patterson (whose real name was Mildred Baker) was actually Locan's mistress and he had ploughed much of his fortune into trying to establish her on both stage and screen. As early as December 1920, a script for *The Beggar's Syndicate* had been submitted to him for approval and by July 1921 shooting was well underway but Brunel was struggling with Miss Patterson's lack of experience. A frantic letter to Locan indicates that the businessman had expressed discontent with the material shot thus far, in particular the amount of screen time Patterson had been allocated; Brunel wrote to assure him that 'everything was done to build up Miss Patterson's part' (letter from AB to Locan, 18 July 1921, ABSC 4/107).

Locan had made a fortune out of the mass production of cheap housing for the working classes after the First World War, winning valuable contracts from local authorities for his concrete constructions. However, he could not fulfil them and was exposed for devious practices and eventually bankrupted in August 1921 (Marriner 1990: 74-77), an event which coincided with the completion of filming as well as the termination of Brunel's employment as Production Director for Minerva. With Locan's bankruptcy, the film went unedited but Brunel remained on the board of the company and was dealing with the financial fall-out of its demise. Despite Minerva having suffered 'a great legal disaster', as late as November 1922 Power was still attempting to raise funds for the company which was then pursuing the idea of making 'business development films' to promote products

and corporations (letter from AB to Lesley Mason, 3 May 1922, ABSC 6/107; letter from Power to AB, 8 November 1922, ABSC 6/107; 'Business Development Films', n.d., ABSC 6/107)

By this time Brunel had already been in business with Mander for over a year and was heavily involved in various new projects. He had spent less than eighteen months with Minerva and could justifiably look back on his work there with some pride, having completed five films which had approached the short form with genuine creativity and originality. However, the pride was undoubtedly overshadowed by the bitterness of the struggle he had had to get the films seen, keep the company afloat, wrangle with slippery and even corrupt funders and support his wife and new-born child. When *A Temporary Lady* was eventually released in May 1922, Brunel instructed his associate at Solar Films to promote it under the name of the distributor, Globe Film Company, rather than Minerva, acknowledging that the name had lost what little publicity value it briefly had (letter from AB to Vincent Lawrence, 22 April 1922, ABSC 5/107).

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has demonstrated that the makeshift and insecure nature of the British film industry after the war was a major hindrance to a sustainable production set-up and thus held back attempts to develop new modes of cinematic expression. While it did provide a space where Gledhill's 'artistic "amateur"' could experiment with filmmaking relatively free from interference and thus develop British cinema in new directions, this approach to filmmaking was disastrous for the industry (Gledhill 2008: 16). John Payne at Bramlins observed how 'firm after firm has started to produce comedies and then closed down, having no more money' and, despite the support of many industry figures, Minerva became another casualty (handwritten notes re: Minerva, n.d., ABSC 6/107). The pages of the trade papers emphasised the need for the British film industry to develop along more

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sustainable lines with pleas for an end to the ‘pottering at production’ which had characterised it thus far (*Bioscope*, 1 Jan 1925: 34). Throughout the decade, suggestions were made in the press for a co-ordinated approach to film production backed with large-scale funding: ‘What is lacking is men with a combination of finance and courage’, wrote the editor of *Bioscope* (*ibid.*); certainly there was a good deal of mistrust among financiers who did not regard filmmaking as a sensible form of speculation, preferring to stick with more traditional forms of investment. Thus, much of the finance that went into film, as Brunel discovered, came from businesses which were as tenuous as the film companies themselves.

The importance of Brunel’s collaborative working practices to his filmmaking has also been established in the course of this chapter and the theme will be developed throughout the thesis. While at Minerva his key partnership was with A. A. Milne and the writer’s humour set the tone for the company’s approach. Brunel learnt a great deal from him, developing the subversive use of subtitles further in his later burlesques. Also important were the connections to the theatre via Howard and Smith and his attention to their performance styles to develop character contribute to the humorous effects of the films. Having to balance the contributions and expectations of author and actor was a key skill for a director, especially in an economic environment where collaborators often also had a financial stake in the production. As will be expanded upon in subsequent chapters, each of Brunel’s ventures was to throw up its own benefits and challenges in terms of the forces and personalities he came into contact with. The negotiations he engaged in throughout his silent film career to preserve his own artistic vision are key to the way that he struck a balance in his work between a desire to innovate and a need to satisfy commercial imperatives.

In addition, the preceding chapter has explored the debates around and contextualised the development of the short film during the early 1920s and, by doing so,

cast doubt on the wisdom of Minerva's decision to pursue its production. While the company's films were well-received by the critics, selling them proved to be almost impossible in an over-crowded market, a pattern that was to be repeated during Brunel's independent producing career. The fact that British producers clung on to the hope that short films could be a viable commercial form, against the tide of big-budget American 'super-films' dominating British screens was perhaps a form of patriotic resistance to Hollywood's dictation of the rules by which cinema operated. Directors like George Pearson understood that the feature film was becoming the principle commercial form and had shown that British productions could promote a national approach to cinematic artistry. Brunel's next venture was to give him a chance to do the same and the following chapter will explore the genesis and production of his first full-length film.

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<sup>1</sup> Trade papers did refer to the 'short feature', meaning a short fiction film, although 'feature' was more commonly attached to the main item in a cinema programme.

<sup>2</sup> This clearly did not apply to the serial, an episodic storytelling mode which would screen at cinemas weekly to tempt audiences back to find out what happened next.

<sup>3</sup> Press material for *Romance and Rings* (1919) accessed at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Romance\\_and\\_Rings.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Romance_and_Rings.jpg) on 7 April 2010.

<sup>4</sup> The title refers to Brice's 'Bump of Locality' which he proudly boasts of to Lillian and is shown in a sketched intertitle as being much larger than those of the audience. This is a dig at phrenology, the study of the significance of different parts of the head, which, although long discredited by the scientific community, experienced a renewal of interest in the twentieth century. The bump of locality was supposed to indicate a good sense of direction; by the time Brice arrives at Lillian's house, he finds that his once impressive bump has completely disappeared.

<sup>5</sup> The spelling mistakes may have been deliberate, perhaps implying the explorer's ignorance or may be the fault of the title designer, Carlo Norway.

<sup>6</sup> As with *Five Pounds Reward*, the negative of this film which was donated to the BFI by Brunel is not in its completed form, instead having 'flash intertitles' throughout (single frames inserted to indicate where titles should go).

<sup>7</sup> Brunel records that this joke, which he attributes to Milne, was at the start of *£5 Reward* (Brunel 1949: 61) but, while the Wild West sequence itself has not survived (perhaps discarded by an overzealous archivist, or maybe even reused elsewhere subsequently by Brunel himself), the title relating to it can be found in the BFI National Archive's print of *Twice Two*. I thus assume that it belongs in that film and Brunel's memory was at fault.

<sup>8</sup> Several years later, Wells wrote three screen stories for Ivor Montagu, as comic vehicles for Elsa Lanchester.

**Chapter Three: Art, the Trade and *The Man Without Desire***

In this chapter I will look at some of the discussions about film as an art form that were taking place around the time Brunel made his first feature, and how they may have encouraged or influenced the realisation of his own creative ambitions. Previous chapters have shown that some in the trade deemed 'highbrow' interventions into cinema as a threat to its success as a form of commercial entertainment and this notion will be explored further, as well as Brunel's attempts to balance the two in the next phase of his career. In addition I will expand on the difficulties facing small producers during the first half of the 1920s by detailing the ways they affected Brunel's next venture.

The British trade and daily papers devoted many pages to debates around the status of cinema; the question of whether it could be considered an art form or would never be more than commercial entertainment exercised observers and practitioners over many years. In its earliest days the moving picture was primarily a working class form of entertainment often exhibited in insalubrious surroundings, but by the First World War it had begun to attract a better class of patron as films became more sophisticated and cinemas and theatres took over as places to watch them. This gradual movement up-market was accompanied by calls for British cinema to develop along more artistic lines, although there were differing views about what that actually meant.

Voices were heard both from within the industry and from outside but the trade press took particular interest in the opinions of those who worked in the American film industry, perhaps hoping they would be able to reveal to British producers the secret of box office success. One such figure that expounded his views to the British press was French director Maurice Tourneur, who had been based in the US since 1914. In an article for *Kinematograph Weekly* early in 1924 he insisted that 'the aim of the men who make motion pictures is to line their pocket books,' continuing, 'the only way in which the

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financial backer...can obtain a return of the funds...to say nothing of a profit, is to appeal to the great masses. And the thing which satisfies millions cannot be good' (Tourneur 1924).

Tourneur's views appeared just weeks before the release of Brunel's first feature and were in sharp contrast to his own. 'Ours is an art before it is a business,' he had told *Motion Picture Studio* in 1922, adding, 'look after the art and the pounds will look after themselves, for in the kinema, art pays' (*MPS*, 26 August 1922: 6). Yet Tourneur's realisation that commercial imperatives precluded film from inclusion in the ranks of the arts had emerged from bitter experience. He had set up his own production company in 1918 to take his directing into a more artistic realm than the studios would permit. Under its auspices he made some lyrical features among which *The Blue Bird* (1918) and *Prunella* (1918) stand out as heavily stylised, fairy-tale like theatrical adaptations. Both films were regarded by critics as 'an artistic achievement' but failed financially, which he put down to the fact that 'the managers of the smaller houses throughout the country considered [them] "too high brow" for their patrons' (Tourneur 1920). Tourneur could not sustain production independently; he claimed he 'would rather starve and make good pictures' but resented the fact that he was making films no one would see (*ibid.*). He abandoned his poetic mode of filmmaking and returned to a more naturalistic approach, giving up on his mission to educate audiences through his work.

Brunel would no doubt have read Tourneur's dismissive words but they are unlikely to have swayed him from his own belief that film could be an art form. At that moment he was experiencing the same delight that Tourneur had felt when he read the effusive reviews of his film, as *The Man Without Desire* had received excellent write-ups. He was full of optimism about his own artistic vision for British cinema but, also like Tourneur, this would be followed by his own bitter experiences, which must have shaken his belief that 'art pays'.

**'Enter the Intellectuals'**

For some years, British cinema had been pursuing a greater degree of respectability in order to attract a better class of patrons to the new cinema buildings which began to be built in the early 1910s. The middle of that decade saw the start of an intellectualisation of the medium with an influx of creative figures who began to 'think seriously about the relationship between films, scenarios and the fields of literature, drama and painting;...intellectual domains on which they were able to draw' (Turvey 2003: 85). Gerry Turvey identifies screenwriter Harold Weston as one such figure, noting that he recommended that the way for a screenwriter to raise himself above the level of a mere hack was to 'study the techniques of the drama, and when he has satisfied himself that he is fully cognisant of the dramatic values, he should turn his attention to the art of picturisation – that is, he must study the work of great painters' (1916; quoted in Turvey: 87). Fellow scenarist Eliot Stannard endorsed this approach some years later, offering the view that great works of art could provide 'immobile subjects which might well have formed episodes in a screen play' (1920; quoted in Turvey: 90).

A 1924 article in *Pictures and Picturegoer* posited the notion that the reverse was also true and that cinema could be a source of artistic images to rival the world's great paintings. Its author, Marjorie Mayne, claimed that 'The Motion Picture is just finding itself as an art, and the directors use the megaphone and the camera much as the painters use their palette and brushes' (Mayne 1924: 41). Taking the comparison further she wrote: 'as the artist paints rather that which his soul sees than the actual lineaments of the model before him, so the camera, in the hands of a skilled photographer who sees eye to eye with the director can idealise and even etherealise scenes and faces' (ibid.: 43). She regarded British directors as excellent proponents of this new art, claiming that Maurice Elvey and George Pearson could hold their own among the Europeans detecting, for example, 'a distinctly Hogarthian atmosphere' in Pearson's *Love, Life and Laughter* (1923) (ibid.).



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As Christine Gledhill has described, British filmmakers had for some years been employing techniques of framing and composition familiar from works of art, a device much remarked on by the critics (Gledhill 2003: 33-34). Yet Mayne insisted that the pursuit of visual beauty on the screen did not mark out film as a highbrow pursuit, regarding it as a democratic medium which could have an educative role. 'The film reaches the poor as well as the rich, the ignorant as well as the cultured, and sooner or later, all must benefit by the artistic lessons it teaches,' she declared (Mayne 1924: 42).<sup>1</sup> The evocation of fine art compositions on screen advocated by Mayne formed a key part of Brunel's visual strategy for his first feature. He modelled the compositions of *The Man Without Desire* on the paintings of Pietro Longhi, an eighteenth-century artist who specialised in scenes of Venetian life. In this sense, he was pursuing a well-established visual approach in British cinema; his choice of artist, however, was in the pursuit of a much more exotic effect than most of Mayne's examples.

### **Educating the public**

In spring 1923, not long after he had completed filming on *The Man Without Desire*, Brunel attended a reception held by the recently formed Faculty of Arts, a group which aimed to 'develop the arts and crafts of the country as a national asset' (Low 1971: 35). At the meeting, its representatives encouragingly reported that they had 'been considering the film as an art for the past year' (*MPS*, 17 March 1923: 10). One exhibitor addressed the meeting to request that the 'Faculty of Arts...endeavour to educate the public to appreciate the best stuff and so assist the Trade as a whole'. The Faculty, however, rejected the need for such schooling, asserting that, 'the "gallery" was as well educated as the "stalls"' (ibid.). This was a view Brunel had long supported and had pointed the finger back at the trade: 'the intellectual standard of audiences [is] so much higher than that of those film men who are ruining our business' (*MPS*, 26 August 1922: 6). Brunel's

faith in British audiences encouraged him to believe that it was possible to bring original ideas to filmmaking to create something with popular appeal.

### **Two audiences**

While Brunel publicly credited ordinary cinemagoers with intelligence, the creation of the Film Society in 1925 was seized on by the trade press as evidence that its founders, of which he was one, held them in contempt. The Society's aim was to cultivate an alternative, anti-commercial programming strategy in Britain to accommodate films its committee felt were worthy of exhibition or re-release but which mainstream distributors were not picking up. The group rapidly found itself labelled 'highbrow' by the press, compelling Montagu to defend the venture and clarify his definition of cinematic art. Taking care to praise the merits of commercial films, he suggested that the 'factors that make a picture interesting...are often quite independent of the factors that make for a popular success' (*KW*, 15 October 1925: 69). He identified these factors as 'ingenious technique of acting, of production, of lighting, of design' and pointed out that 'a picture important from this point of view is quite rightly, in most instances, judged unsuitable for public exhibition by the Trade, owing to its morbidity, or that obscurity which we agree in labelling highbrow' (*ibid.*). His attempts to clear the Film Society of charges of exclusivity merely seemed to reinforce the impression that the group regarded its tastes as separate from and, indeed, superior to the majority of the filmgoing public. Yet perhaps his real target was the film trade; his explanation implies that by failing to book such films, distributors and exhibitors were responsible for creating and sustaining the division.

Indeed, the perception by the trade that most of the viewing public were incapable of appreciating more 'difficult' or 'artistic' cinematic fare appears to have been fairly common. Some commentators have taken the view that, to those running the business, 'the word "arty" was the ultimate in invective' and, as Montagu pointed out and Tourneur

discovered, distributors had the power to decide what they deemed 'suitable' for audiences (Brownlow, 1973: 591). As illustrated in Chapter One, some distributors would even take it upon themselves to remove sequences they felt detracted from a film's entertainment value. Although Tourneur was adamant that cinema could never be an art form, he accepted that there was room for artistic intervention into it. He proposed a middle way, conceding that there is 'a great field for expression' in cinema and that all audiences could appreciate 'beauty on the screen' whether in a performance, visual composition or screenplay (Tourneur 1924). Thus it would seem that there were degrees of 'artiness' which had to be carefully navigated if a director wished to make a film with visual expressiveness and originality but not render it too 'highbrow', and thus put it out of reach of the general public.

### **Atlas-Biocraft**

Brunel and Mander appeared to be well aware of the need to balance art with business when they set up their new production company, Atlas-Biocraft, in September 1922. The establishment of the firm was heralded by *Motion Picture Studio* with a full-page article and, demonstrating that they had put some thought into articulating their ambitions, Brunel and Mander spelled out their aim to produce 'pictures with the maximum amount of artistry compatible with commercial enterprise' (*MPS*, 28 October 1922: 16). By the time the article appeared, Brunel was already in Venice shooting *The Man Without Desire*, with which the new firm hoped to demonstrate 'the craftsmanship of picture making' (*ibid.*). Indeed, the positive response to the film's eventual release suggests that, had it come out a few weeks earlier, Mayne may well have listed Brunel among Britain's 'New Masters'. Made on a very small budget, the film represents a unique experiment by a group of creative individuals from a range of cultural spheres each contributing their ideas around film as art to produce something genuinely original. As well

as a testament to Brunel's ability to use limited resources to considerable effect, *The Man Without Desire* shows his skill at drawing on the talents around him and combining their ideas in a coherent way. Having outlined some of the debates taking place around the time of the film's production and release, I will now examine the film's production history and how well the film managed to find a path between art and commerce.

### **Brunel and Mander**

'The state of the English market is simply awful. Firms are going broke or are trying to avoid catastrophe the whole time,' wrote Brunel to Leslie Howard after the failure of the Milne comedies (letter from AB to Howard, 28 December 1920, ABSC 4/107). Brunel's correspondence from the period paints an increasingly gloomy picture of the British film industry and, several months later, he gave up on *Minerva* and joined forces with Mander. Mander was a year older than Brunel and, like him, had spent a short period at Harrow School, their attendance possibly overlapping briefly. Mander had then taken a very different path, spending his twenties fighting in the First World War and farming sheep in New Zealand before returning to England. After trying his hand at acting, he soon developed much bigger ideas regarding a career in the British film industry. His drive and dynamism meant their three-year association was probably the most promising period of Brunel's career in terms of the creative opportunities and wide experience it brought him. As already laid out in Chapter One, Mander and Brunel operated with limited resources but high ambitions and had connections with an impressive array of businessmen, military and diplomatic figures, politicians and bohemians. Between 1921 and 1924, they developed a series of ideas for film projects and managed to secure investment from a variety of sources, from aristocrats to 'a fellow... in the motor trade' (letter from Mander to AB, 14 January 1922, ABSC 207). While Brunel occupied himself writing, directing and editing the films, Mander was tirelessly engaged in raising funds, although Brunel proved his skill in

this regard also, thanks to what Mander termed his 'unostentatiously persuasive' manner (letter from Mander to AB, 21 February 1922, ABSC 207).

Mander's correspondence with Brunel during the period of their association reveals him to be a man who worked unstintingly to recruit funders and eminent board members and to develop new projects. Their first enterprise, Solar Films, was, in Mander's words, a 'sprat to catch a whale', the idea being that when they had made 'a decent profit on our small capital... the whales are waiting to be caught' (letter from Mander to AB, 19 January 1922, ABSC 207). Mander's business plan appeared promising and he confidently stated: 'I shouldn't be surprised if in three months' time the capital of our company wasn't £50,000 as we have one or two really rich men in tow' (ibid.). The production and exhibition of travel films seemed a sound proposition at the time, as audiences appeared to have an appetite for them. Mander noted that 'Ponting took £42000 in 35 weeks' (referring to the lecture tours Herbert Ponting gave in 1919 accompanying his film of Captain Scott's Antarctic expeditions)<sup>2</sup> and, later, that *Crossing the Great Sahara* was 'still going strong' several months after its release (letter from Mander to AB, 22 February 1922, ABSC 207; ibid., 17 April 1924, ABSC 207). However, the level of investment needed to maintain a roster of productions shot in far-flung regions of the world was beyond the means of Solar films and without a famous name such as Scott to draw in audiences, the kind of profits Ponting apparently made remained out of their reach. But Mander's optimism was not dented and, although their two North Africa films were still waiting to be edited, he was determined to push on with their production plans.

### **A first feature**

As they approached the end of their first year in business together, Mander and Brunel decided to attempt their first feature film. Having exhausted several sources of smaller investment, they approached wealthy businessman James White for a lump sum.

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White had become involved with the cinema through his property investments, which had led to his ownership of the Tivoli Theatre in the Strand, but apparently 'had little faith in the kinema as a financial proposition' (*KW*, 7 July 1927: 26) and had never before invested in production. In fact, he was much more interested in the theatre and had a controlling interest in Daly's Theatre, off Leicester Square (see Forbes Winslow 1944). However, Brunel and Mander persuaded him to put £5000 into the production of a feature film, a very small amount even in 1923 (Brunel 1949: 90).

The financial strictures under which the film had to be made would be a challenge, made greater by the decision to shoot on location in Venice. However, with his experience of filming in North Africa, Brunel was enthusiastic about the prospect of going to Italy and of working at a German studio. The decision to shoot the interiors in Germany was at least partly a pragmatic one since, during the immediate postwar period, the German economy had been weak and the exchange rate was favourable to British producers.<sup>3</sup> Brunel and Mander spent time there in August 1922, visiting studios and production companies, and were very impressed with what they saw, regarding Germany as 'an earnest aspirant to the chief place in the film sun' (*MPS*, 9 September 1922: 5). Brunel was one of the first British directors to make a film in Germany and he and Mander reported back positively to the British trade press about conditions.<sup>4</sup> As mentioned in Chapter Two, the kind of British studio that a small company like Atlas-Biocraft could afford was barely adequate and the superior facilities afforded Brunel and his crew in Germany, as well as the technical and creative support from the staff there were to be vital to the project. In this sense, Atlas-Biocraft showed itself to be ahead of the rest of the industry and its work during this period 'anticipates the growing internationalism that pervaded the British film industry from the mid-1920s onwards', with German co-operation becoming common by the middle of the decade (Morris 2005).

***The Man Without Desire***

The German technicians were just one of the range of talents brought together to make *The Man Without Desire*. The film starred actor and composer Ivor Novello, who was developing a reputation as a screen idol, while opposite him appeared the beautiful Russian actress Nina Vanna. In order to save money, Brunel and his wife (under her stage name Jane Dryden) took on two roles, that of a newspaper editor and his fiancée. Flamboyant theatre designer Hugo Rumbold took charge of the art direction, as well as playing the villainous Count Almore. However, Rumbold's participation in the project had begun long before filming got under way; in fact, it was he who engineered the firm's introduction to White. As Brunel acknowledged, he was a key creative collaborator who contributed to the screen story, suggested filming in Venice and proposed taking visual inspiration from the work of Pietro Longhi (Brunel 1949: 91)

Rumbold was, by all accounts, an extraordinary character and the lavishness of *The Man Without Desire* is undoubtedly largely attributable to his input. From a traditional diplomatic family, he was a decorated military hero of the First World War but was best known for his theatrical designs and as 'a Bohemian and a clubman' at the centre of London's beaumonts (letter to the *Times*, 25 November 1932). His penchant for play-acting was well-known, Cecil Beaton describing him as 'the prize dresser-upper of our day' (Beaton 1937: 116); infamous for impersonating females, he once apparently spent several weeks dressed as a maid in order to continue an affair with an Italian princess (Grantley 1954). *The Man Without Desire* was Rumbold's only excursion into the cinema and his influence on the production was significant, from its elements of sexual intrigue to the meticulous period detail, created by a man who 'apparently carries the 18<sup>th</sup> century atmosphere about in his pocket' (*Times*, 13 January 1916: 11).

With Rumbold on board and decisions about locations and period made, Brunel and Mander had to come up with a screen story. They had reservations about a period film,

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feeling it might be off-putting for audiences, and thus sought a device that would allow for a temporal change to occur midway through the film. This shows they were sensitive to audience tastes and attempted to ensure the project would appeal to a wide range of viewers, while also advancing the medium as an art form. As with the Milne comedies, an established writer was approached to come up with an original storyline and Brunel invited Irish playwright Monckton Hoffe to contribute an idea.<sup>5</sup> Hoffe had developed an interest in suspended animation and originated the idea of putting eighteenth-century Count Dandolo to sleep for 200 years and waking him up in the present day, thus allowing for the temporal transition the filmmakers desired. From the few lines provided by Hoffe, Brunel wrote a treatment entitled 'It Happened in Venice', which was registered with the Incorporated Society of Authors, Playwrights and Composers on 5 September 1922. He then commissioned Frank Fowell, a former colleague at the Department of Information, to write the scenario, a task he must have completed in record time since Brunel and his cast and crew set off for Venice on 11 October 1922 now armed with a script entitled *The Man Without Desire*.

Unseasonably wet weather held up filming but, unsurprisingly, the combination of personalities on set also threatened the proceedings. Brunel was working under the watchful eye of Tommy Dawe, General Manager of the Tivoli, who had been despatched by White to protect his investment. White was a canny businessman but vain and arrogant; Vivian Van Damm, who worked for him at the Tivoli, found him 'repulsive' (Van Damm 1952: 63).<sup>6</sup> Dawe must have reported to his employer that Rumbold was a liability and, less than two weeks after they arrived in Venice, Brunel was instructed that he 'must not take any further action in the production' (letter from Dawe to AB, 23 October 1922, ABSC D/170). This necessitated recasting his role with an Italian actor, Sergio Mari, and Dawe stipulated that actress Dorothy Warren should take over the art direction.<sup>7</sup> Following Rumbold's despatch, filming went reasonably smoothly, although the poor weather meant



that Brunel did not get all the shots of Venice he wanted to before they moved on to Germany.

### **A long gestation**

By early January 1923, Brunel was back in England after two and half months abroad, no doubt relieved that the filming was over. However, the year ahead was to be a particularly trying one which he spent 'fighting against a breakdown' (letter from AB to Norman Penzer, 27 August 1923, ABSC 3/107), due to mounting debts from Minerva Pictures and Bramlins Agency as well as the lack of cash flow from Atlas. In November he wrote to former colleague Colonel Bromhead at Gaumont, announcing that he had resigned from Atlas and would be grateful for any freelance work available, including editing and titling (letter from AB to Bromhead, 5 November 1923, ABSC 170). Despite his gloomy prospects, the following month finally saw the trade show of *The Man Without Desire* and it must have brought renewed hope to Brunel. His paper collection at the BFI contains a large scrapbook into which someone, perhaps Brunel himself, meticulously pasted every cutting, creating a collection of enthusiastic write-ups for the company's first feature. Buoyed by the reviews, Novello-Atlas Renters, the company Brunel and Mander had set up to distribute the film, took out full-page adverts in the trade press crammed with examples of the hyperbole lavished on it.



Figure 3 Pressbook for *The Man Without Desire*

### **It Happened in Venice**

The film's plot received a good deal of praise for its original and thought-provoking nature, *Motion Picture Studio* enthusing that it was 'so unhackneyed and in every way a departure from the stock plots of current pictures that the promoters, author and producer are to be heartily congratulated on breaking away from the traditional ingredients of the modern screen' (*MPS*, 22 December 1923: 5). It opens with a scene in contemporary London, where Robert Mawdesley has been summoned to his lawyer's office to read a letter left by one of his ancestors two hundred years previously. The letter was to be read at midnight on 4 September 1923 in the presence of a lawyer, a representative of Vinings Bank and a doctor familiar with Indian occultism. As the lawyer begins to read the letter, the film returns to 1736 to recount the tragic story of Count Vittorio Dandolo.

Dandolo is in love with Leonora, who is trapped in an unhappy marriage with Count Almoro who, in turn, is having an affair with La Foscolina. Leonora is reluctant to enter into an extra-marital relationship despite her feelings towards Dandolo, partly due to her devotion to her son. Angered by a newspaper report about him and La Foscolina, Almoro crushes the hands of the editor who wrote it. The editor determines to take revenge and charges his fiancée, who is maidservant to Leonora, with poisoning Almoro. But the Count discovers a letter from Vittorio to Leonora and he forces Leonora to drink the glass of poisoned wine destined for him. Dandolo arrives just in time for Leonora to die in his arms; furious, he strangles Almoro then seeks refuge in the home of an English scientist Simon Mawdesley. Mawdesley has been conducting experiments in suspended animation and offers to put Vittorio to sleep in order that he should escape the law.

The film then returns to the present, where the gathered group have finished reading the letter. Robert Mawdesley and the lawyer travel to Venice and find the bricked-up grotto where Vittorio is hidden. After opening the casket in which Dandolo has lain for two hundred years, they leave him to wake up alone, fearing that the sight of them in their

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modern clothes might be too great a shock for him. He gradually comes to but, with no memory of why he is there, goes straight to Leonora's house where he meets Genevra, her ancestor, who he takes for his lost love. He also meets the twin of Almore, who is in fact Genevra's cousin Count Gardi-Almore. Dandolo is given a letter left for him by Simon Mawdesley containing a warning that, once re-awakened, he may find life 'so different as to be almost colourless. You may even awake to find yourself utterly without desire of any kind.' Dandolo falls in love with Genevra and they marry. But, as the letter predicted, he finds himself devoid of passion, which quickly sours the relationship and he resolves to kill himself. Retrieving his eighteenth-century clothes he finds a poisonous pill left by Mawdesley and writes a farewell note to Genevra. She goes to his room and, finding him dying, experiences a reawakening of her love for him. After a passionate embrace, he dies in her arms.

While the film is a melodrama with fantastic elements, Brunel could not resist inserting some humorous touches and exploits the comic possibilities of Dandolo's reactions to twentieth century innovations. Thus, he bows to Genevra's voice on the telephone, is amazed by matches and cigarettes, expresses disgust at the efforts of a modern barber (in a scene which contrasts to an earlier one in an eighteenth-century men's hairdressers) and wrestles with a collar and tie. These touches by Brunel lighten the mood of the film, *Motion Picture Studio* regarding his use of levity as a sign of Britishness: '[t]he director has...refrained from undue heaviness, which would have been very marked had a German directed it, for instance. Several light touches are most welcome' (22 December 1923: 5).

#### **'In every way a departure'**

While critics recognised the plot as 'clever and ingenious' and 'a new type of film story', *The Man Without Desire* echoes themes to be found in other literary sources. The

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notion of cheating death or ageing is explored by examples of fantastic fiction such as *Dracula*, *Frankenstein* and *Peter Pan* but a closer connection to Dandolo's escape from the ravages of age is that of Oscar Wilde's protagonist in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (written in 1890). For both men, their prolonged youthful state leads to a dissatisfaction with life. Dandolo declares 'I find life to-day so savourless' while Wilde wrote: "'I wish I could love,' cried Dorian Gray, with a deep note of pathos in his voice. "But I seem to have lost the passion, and forgotten the desire"' (Wilde 1983: 226).

Parallels with fairy tales such as *Snow White* and *The Sleeping Beauty* are detectable, but a twist is provided in the fact that visual allusions to them are provided by both the death of Leonora and the putting to sleep of Dandolo. The dusty sarcophagus in which Dandolo is entombed is more reminiscent of a coffin than of Snow White's bier, but Novello may still have drawn the romantic parallel in his own mind.<sup>8</sup> The theme of a male character who sleeps for years was familiar from Washington Irving's 1819 story *Rip Van Winkle* and more recently, and more pertinently, in a science fiction novel by H. G. Wells called *The Sleeper Awakes*. First written in 1899, then revised in 1910, it tells of a man who falls into a coma for two hundred and three years, waking to find the world a very changed place. Although Wells uses the device to concoct a dystopian fantasy rather than to study the effects of the experience on the sleeper, the parallels with Hoffe's hastily-penned tale are notable and invite speculation that he had this story in mind when he wrote the plot outline for Brunel.

Literature had long been fascinated with such fantastic tales but British cinema rarely strayed into the genre and it was the Germans who had led the way with films such as *Der Golem* (Paul Wegener 1915) and *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (Paul Wiene 1920). Critics seemed to welcome a bit of 'mystery and spookiness' in a British film (*The Film Renter & Moving Picture News*, 1 January 1923, Atlas-Biocraft cuttings book, ABSC 196) and detected the debt it owed to Teutonic style, one asserting that 'the film was directly

modelled on German methods of production. The hands are the hands of Brunel, but the voice is the voice of Lang' (*Manchester Guardian*, 25 February 1924, *ibid.*). The film's director of photography, Henry Harris, was very experienced, having worked with Abel Gance on *J'Accuse* (France, 1919) and his camerawork in *The Man Without Desire* contributes to its eerie feel. The use of lighting is notable at several points, such as the moment when the gloomy entrance hall of the Almore palazzo is suddenly illuminated by a block of bright sunlight through an open door, and a shot of the dank mausoleum where Dandolo reposes, lit only by a tiny window above which casts a faint shaft of light on his pale features. The shadow of Mawdesley's hand moves over Dandolo's face, recalling the claw-like fingers of Murnau's *Nosferatu* (Germany, 1922)<sup>9</sup> a moment that provoked rare praise from Rachael Low for the film's 'unexpected angles...and...touch of the macabre and the mysterious' (Low 1971: 258).

The film's shades of German expressionism may well have prompted the critic on the *Evening News* to comment on the film's 'distinctly "high-brow" touch' (cutting from *Evening News*, n.d., Atlas-Biocraft cuttings book, ABSC 176). The word may have made Brunel's heart sink but he would no doubt have been reassured to find the reviewer had used the term to link his film with two other releases that week: US film *Anna Christie* (John Griffith Wray 1923) and the 1921 German feature *Destiny* (aka *Die Müde Tod*, Fritz Lang), obtaining a delayed release. The critic described these three films as 'the welcome ray that heralds the dawn of imagination in the photo play' (*ibid.*).

### **'Dramatic and original'**

As highlighted in the Introduction to this thesis, critics were often overly generous in their appreciation of British films, no doubt for reasons of patriotism. Nonetheless, the number of complimentary reviews that Brunel's debut feature received suggests that there was wholehearted recognition by the critics that the film was a striking and original

contribution to British cinema. *Motion Picture Studio* noted a 'refreshing avoidance of the obvious', the *Daily Graphic* praised the 'dramatic and original story', while *Bioscope* found it 'ingenious in conception' (all from typed sheet of reviews, ABSC 1/134). Its artistry was another draw: 'As an artistic whole it can confidently be recommended as the best film of the year' (*Times*, 31 December 1923; *ibid.*) and 'No more beautiful setting, no greater accuracy of detail could be demanded' (*Sketch*, 23 January 1924, Atlas-Biocraft cuttings book, ABSC 196). The original thematic and artistic aspects of the film are thus worth elucidating to see how its makers approached the challenge of bringing cinema into the realm of art.

### **Putting art on the screen**

In the light of Mayne's contemporaneous article in *Picturegoer*, it seems surprising that critics failed to remark on the film's recreation of Longhi's paintings. However, this may have been because the reference was somewhat obscure, although there is a scene in which Dandolo actually looks at copies of his artworks. Or perhaps it was because this was actually one of the less progressive devices used by the film and critics preferred to focus on its more original aspects. However, the use of Longhi's work as inspiration means the early scenes are intriguing in that they provide a window on an unfamiliar time and place, assisted by an exceptional attention to detail, with some of the costumes and props being genuine antiques. It also suggests an editing structure for these sequences, whereby the interiors are captured first in long-shot in the form of tableaux, carefully arranged but relatively static, allowing each scene to be appreciated for its artistic composition before the action begins. The figures remain in one spot but each performs some 'business' within the scene; the camera then picks out these details, focusing on individuals to give the sequence greater authenticity. It also lends it a theatrical feel, creating a backdrop of Venetian décor as integral to the plot as the characters.

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As in the artist's representations, Brunel populates the chambers of Il Ridotto ('the fashionable gambling and meeting place of Venice') with masked figures, negroes and dwarfs, creating a suitably outré backdrop for intrigues and infidelity. Elements of Simon Mawdesley's den can be found in Longhi's 'The Alchemist' and 'The Apothecary'; this is the film's most atmospheric setting and the dark chamber contains a skeleton, huge leather-bound books, heavy chains, vials and a serpent-like creature hanging from the ceiling. A forerunner of the mad scientist's laboratory seen in horror films of later decades, the room is further adorned by the striking figure of Mawdesley himself in a fur-trimmed floor-length dressing gown, his bushy eyebrows protruding from beneath a patterned head scarf.

As well as the carefully composed interiors, Brunel also exploits the aesthetic potential of the Venice locations. Scenes are staged using architectural details such as balconies and staircases, while gondola rides provide a contrasting sense of perspective. As the film moves from London to Venice after the prologue, Brunel uses high-angle panoramic shots of the city to establish the transition of time and place, prefaced by the description contained in Mawdesley's letter being read to the gathered group: 'Venice is unlike any foreign parts that I have visited. Life is entirely devoted to pleasure and the God of Love reigns supreme... It is typical of Venice that what I have to relate should have happened here.' The description makes the transition even more profound; not only are we going back in time two hundred years but to a place that promises a very un-British atmosphere of high living and pleasure-seeking. This use of titles was something Brunel had theorised about some years before and he regarded it as a vital tool for ensuring that a change of key was properly signalled to the audience. He advocated that such tonal shifts should be preceded by a title to provide 'a connecting link between the two parts of the story, [that] would also contain a separate idea which should be impressed on the minds of the viewers from this point onwards' (Brunel 1921b).

### **Symmetrical structure**

The division of the action of the film across two time zones allows for the creation of a series of symmetries and parallels within it, which suggest both comparisons and contrasts. Each of the principle actors portrays two characters, one in the eighteenth century section and the modern descendant of their character in the twentieth. Although this was undoubtedly for budgetary as well as creative reasons, it was noted as an effective device. *The Times* observed that '[t]his calls for the most delicate acting on the part of the three [actually four] principals, and each is so nearly alike, and yet so utterly different, in the two characters that there can be nothing but praise for their work' (*The Times*, 15 December 1923, Atlas-Biocraft cuttings book, ABSC 176). The exception, of course, is Novello's Dandolo, although his character does undergo a transformation of a different kind as a figure whose 'life and love are of the past'. The performance styles of the actors differs in each half, a mannered theatricality in the gestures and expressions of the costumed actors giving way to a more relaxed, informal acting style in the modern day scenes. Novello also moderates his acting, gradually abandoning the flourishes he still adopted on first coming out of his coma as he gets accustomed to modern fashions, and eventually appears at home in a dinner suit. Gledhill observes that the character must "'grow up"... in conformity to the new conditions of verisimilitude in the postwar 1920s' and Novello/Dandolo attempts to do so, his flamboyance stifled by the dull suits he is forced to wear (Gledhill 2003: 171). Meanwhile, the more elaborate font used to convey his speech in the intertitles marks him out as different from the twentieth century characters. He loses all trace of his roots in the more genteel age and it is not until he dons his original costume again that he resumes the air of melodrama befitting his final tragic scenes. It is almost as if the more stagey, static eighteenth-century sequences represent a more traditional style of composition and performance, which Brunel symbolically abandons halfway through the film to usher in a more modern, forward-looking aesthetic.



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Brunel also employs this structure to stage several sequences that are mirrored across the centuries. For example, Leonora and Almore are seen boarding a gondola in one scene while a later shot shows Robert Mawdesley disembarking at the same spot and Dandolo and Genevra have their first kiss in the same bower framed by columns and climbing plants where he first embraced Leonora two hundred years before. Novello's Dandolo has his own repeat performances in the form of the two love affairs, neither consummated, and he also 'dies' twice, both times through the intervention of Simon Mawdesley, and his final demise in the arms of Genevra was foreshadowed by that of Leonora in his own embrace.

The relationships between the four main characters take on a new complexion in the modern scenes, allowing the film to offer a commentary on the decline in modern morals and generational differences. In the eighteenth-century section of *The Man Without Desire*, Nina Vanna's Leonora holds back from fully indulging her feelings for Vittorio for the sake of her son; she tells him that she needs a friend and he seems content to take that role. Genevra, a modern woman, is more demanding than her ancestor, regarding Dandolo's non-consummation of their marriage as an affront to her feminine appeal and inhibiting him further by her sexual forwardness. She begins to find the advances of her cousin more appealing in the light of her husband's frigidity. Thus La Foscolina, although still vampish, becomes the 'wronged woman' and complains of her lover's pursuit of his cousin's affections. While Dandolo has had his passions dulled, he can still experience jealousy inspired by Genevra's plotting and attempts to strangle Gardi-Almore in a replay of Almore's murder in the first act.

Novello's intense and self-absorbed acting style is ideally suited to the melodramatic role, ably creating an air of doomed love, and he clearly relished the period sets and costumes. At the climax, Dandolo engineers the situation in order to die alone, but Genevra comes to him, allowing the film to close on a tender scene in which she finds her

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love reawakened by his suffering and selflessness. As he comes to the end of his life, the furniture and wallpaper behind the couple disappears and the final shot shows them against a black background, almost as if the lights have dimmed on a theatrical stage and a spotlight is picking out the two figures. The final shot of the film shows Novello's pale face in profile, head lolling back and closed eyes raised heavenwards. Novello reported that, 'Vittorio's death scene was generally said to be my best bit of acting' and critics at the time seemed to concur (Wilson 1975: 59). 'Mr Novello does his best screen acting' claimed the *Evening News* and credited Brunel for this: 'No other director has been able to get into the work of this actor... fifty per cent of the power and charm he displays under the guidance of Adrian Brunel' (n.d., Atlas-Biocraft cuttings book, ABSC 176; KW, 20 December 1923, ABSC 196).

However, some cinemagoers were apparently treated to a different conclusion to the film. *The Bioscope* informed its readers 'that alternative "sad" and "happy" endings of the film have been produced for use at the choice of the individual exhibitor' (*Bioscope*, 20 December 1923, Atlas-Biocraft cuttings book, ABSC 196). While European producers occasionally made alternate endings to their films for foreign markets, Brunel presumably intended this as a marketing ploy aimed at cinema owners, which appears to have been fairly unique. Strangely, the publicity for the film failed to promote the gimmick, although in reality it did not live up to its promise. The 'happy ending' consisted of a coda to the film in which the scene reverts to the library where the four men gathered at the start of the film are seen again. It emerges that they were 'discussing the thing for so long that they had all fallen asleep over it and the re-awakening of "Vittorio" and this second tragedy of his life are nothing but a visualisation of their dreams' (*Pictures and Picturegoer*, January 1924: 35). By removing this final scene, the exhibitor could leave audiences with the final shot of Dandolo expiring. It is not clear how the idea came about since no script for the film survives but it may have occurred to Brunel during the editing, perhaps because he was

unsure how to end the film. While Novello unsurprisingly favoured the tragic finale, *Bioscope* expressed a preference for the happy ending, taking the view that '[t]here is no material or psychological reason why the hero should be debarred for ever from happiness, and the picture already contains a full ration of melancholy' (*Cavalcade* 11 October 1947, ABSC 176; 20 December 1923, Atlas-Biocraft cuttings book, ABSC 196). However, reducing over half of the film's narrative to a kind of group hallucination may have struck audience members as a rather unsatisfactory conclusion to the drama.<sup>10</sup>

### **'Temporary boycott'**

Brunel's response to the effusive critiques was to pen an article entitled 'Is Originality Popular?' (Brunel 1924). In it he expresses his surprise at being labelled 'courageous' for producing a film which apparently departed so radically from the typical British fare, as well as damning views of the way some critics and exhibitors regarded the cinemagoing public. He hints at the contradiction affecting progress within the film production business: 'When a film that is out of the ordinary is offered, it is, if any good, welcomed by the Press on behalf of the public, but is resented by a large section of the Trade...the old-fashioned exhibitors...dread progress or innovation', accusing them of believing that that 'the public is composed of vulgar imbeciles' (ibid.). His ire was no doubt directed at the author of the *Impartial Film Report*, whose negative review of *The Man Without Desire* was, with a touch of irony, included among the effusive commendations for the film compiled for the film's trade advertisements. This weekly report, which was circulated among independent cinemas, labelled the film 'heavy...dull entertainment...weak' (*KW*, 3 January 1924). Privately, Brunel accused the trade of waging a campaign against him: 'the film has been dubbed "high-brow", "too good", "above the public" etc. which is all rot and the result is a temporary boycott which I mean to fight for all I'm worth' (letter from AB to Howard de Walden, n.d., ABSC H/170).

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*The Man Without Desire* began a pre-release run at White's Tivoli Theatre on 18 February 1924, directly following a run of another costume drama, Rex Ingrams' *Scaramouche* (1923). By all accounts, the run of Brunel's film was hugely lucrative and a letter from Van Damm, in which he claimed that in one week '23,857 people paid for admission to view it', was reproduced in press advertisements (*KW*, 28 Feb 1924: 20). But despite the enthusiastic reviews and encouraging opening the film failed to deliver a profit and fairly rapidly sank from view. Brunel's later assertion that this was because Novello-Atlas was 'ridiculously and unbelievably under-financed and could not keep pace with the agents' commissions on the bookings' perhaps tells part of the story (Brunel 1949: 101). However, suggestions of hostility towards the film from renters would explain Mander's summary at the time; he reported that, while the film had gone down well in the capital, particularly at Marble Arch and Kilburn, outside London it did very badly (letter from Mander to AB, 24 April 1924, ABSC 207).

KINEMATOGRAPH WEEKLY February 26, 1924

**A FACT**

*No Picture ever had a FINER PRESS!!!*

THAN

**The Man Without Desire**

Starring **IVOR NOVELLO**

but of course

**PUBLIC OPINION IS THE DECIDING FACTOR, so this is INTERESTING.**

**HAS ANY BRITISH FILM TAKEN MORE MONEY IN ONE WEEK**

*The Trade, Strand, W.C., February 26, 1924.*

*The General Manager, Messrs. Novello Atlas Renters, Ltd., 185, Wardour Street, W.*

*Dear Sir,*

*I have very much pleasure in writing to tell you that this picture had by far one of the most successful weeks that nearly its showing since the "THE MAN WITHOUT DESIRE."*

*It was indeed gratifying to know that 23,857 people paid for admission to view it, and not at that rate, under the circumstances, no other film was more showing and I congratulate you and your firm on this production.*

*Yours faithfully,*  
*Richard F. Van Damm,*  
*General Manager,*

**NOVELLO ATLAS RENTERS, Ltd.,**  
**185, WARDOUR STREET, W.1.**

Phone - Regent 205, 206, 207. Telegrams: Novello, (Private), London.

Figure 4 Trade promotion for *The Man Without Desire*

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*The Man Without Desire* appeared to have had suffered a similar fate to Tourneur's earlier art films, also deemed unsuitable for the average audience, which led to his retreat from pursuing film as an art and, in 1926, a return to his native France. Brunel, however, was not prepared to abandon the fray although his article in *Motion Picture Studio*, presumably intended to hit back at his critics, was ill-advised. Both Brunel and Mander held strong views about the ignorance of many in the film trade and voiced them frequently. Around this time, Mander proudly recounted that while giving a speech at a Film Week in Newcastle he had 'a golden opportunity of digs at Stolls, unenterprising exhibitors and the Impartial report' (letter from Mander to AB, n.d., ABSC 207). Mander's 'digs' and Brunel's open hostility to the trade indicate a level of over-confidence, even arrogance, which would seem at odds with good business practice and it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that it turned certain of its members against them.

With so many new films being released each week, *The Man Without Desire* rapidly disappeared from cinemas. On 4 February, Michael Balcon's much-anticipated (and massively budgeted) first feature, *Woman to Woman* (Graham Cutts 1923), opened in the UK to reviews which rivalled those of Brunel's film. It had even received a Hollywood preview after which director Rex Ingram hailed it 'one of the best and most sincere films I ever saw in my life' and Balcon's success in securing US distribution deal for the film meant that he had funds to set up his next production, *The White Shadow* (Cutts 1924) (*KW*, 1 February 1924). Mander, meanwhile, had pinned his hopes on making profits in Britain and was compelled to conduct 'a whirlwind campaign for capital all over England' optimistically hoping that the company would 'click for £20,000 or so' (letter from Mander to AB, n.d., ABSC 207). While the travel films, *Moors and Minarets* and *Cannibals of the Southern Seas*, were doing reasonably well, they did not bring in sufficient profit to continue production and the company's next film, which was to be an adaptation of Novello's stage play *The Rat*, had to be abandoned.

### **Art and the commercial**

With Atlas-Biocraft in dire financial straits, Mander enlisted all the help he could muster in his campaign to raise money. Among his supporters were director Edwin Greenwood and Eliot Stannard (both of whom were to become important collaborators of Brunel), who, according to Mander were 'untiring in their efforts to find money for the only honest film people they have ever met' (letter from Mander to AB, 17 April 1924, ABSC 207). Perhaps Stannard's support for their cause was due to his own belief that British cinema needed to adopt more artistic methods in order to liberate itself from the dominance of Hollywood. While the interest of an intellectual minority in watching more 'obscure' cinematic experiments from outside Britain eventually led to the formation of the Film Society, as outlined earlier in this chapter, it appears that the fusion of artistic and commercial imperatives which Brunel had attempted with his first feature did not find favour with general audiences in search of entertainment. Echoing the words of Tourneur, Arthur Wellesley L'Estrange Fawcett later summed up the dilemma thus: 'A film that is an art success and not an entertainment success can never be seen except by a small, eclectic public, and no one can afford to make pictures for an eclectic public – at least, not more than one. Many clever people have made that one good film, but no one in the world will or can afford to back him a second time' (Fawcett 1927: 250). For the time being, Brunel would have to be content with that 'one good film', as his career directing features was to stall for the next three years.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have outlined some of the debates that were taking place within the British press around whether cinema could, or should, aspire to being an art form. Through a study of Brunel's first feature, *The Man Without Desire*, I have shown how these discussions affected his work as well as the different ways he contributed to them. He

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admitted that the film was the product of an evolutionary process, involving the creative input of several associates (Brunel 1949: 91). After the literary and theatrical collaborators he worked with at Minerva, for this project he found himself with a group of more artistic, bohemian co-creators. This made his first feature a more unconventional affair with lavish sets and costumes and an exotic and decadent feel. Once again, critics responded well but distributors were not convinced and, unsurprisingly, it would appear that the elite coterie Brunel and Mander had assembled for the production was out of touch with the tastes of ordinary cinemagoers. In fact, this particular experiment may have confirmed the belief of some in the trade that art and commerce were not compatible.

In its review of *The Man Without Desire*, the *Sunday Herald* predicted that 'the name of Adrian Brunel... is going to be big' (n.d., ABSC 134). Had Atlas-Biocraft been able to generate funds to film *The Rat*, Brunel may have established himself as a major talent but the short memory of both press and public meant that his profile soon faded. The appetite of cinemas for new product meant that audiences were constantly being sold the next 'super picture', each publicised with a level of hyperbole that often equalled that lavished on Brunel's film. However, in spite of the immense frustrations his association with Mander had caused him, due to long periods without a proper wage and challenging working conditions, he had gained valuable experience of many aspects of the business.

As I have shown in this chapter, Brunel's first feature was an impressive piece of filmmaking, especially considering its tiny budget, and testifies to the ambition and dynamism which Brunel and Mander contributed to the British film industry. While believing that film was an art form, they also recognised the need to achieve a balance between art and entertainment. However, *The Man Without Desire* suffered from a surfeit of ideas and the competing visions of the group who participated in the project did not necessarily chime with Brunel's own personal aspirations for the film. More to the point, they did not appear to be in accord with what the film renters deemed suitable for the

cinemagoing public. Rather, the film underlined their perception that there were two kinds of cinemagoer, one of which was not capable of appreciating a certain type of picture.

As a stylised period melodrama with fantastic elements and moments of grand guignol, *The Man Without Desire* is atypical of Brunel's work. However, his personal stamp emerges in the humorous interludes and the original touches that demonstrate his implementation of some of the ideas he had been developing about filmmaking. While he was not ready to abandon his conviction that it was possible to inject originality into British cinema that could appeal to all audiences, the failure of his first feature compelled Brunel to strip back his ambitions both artistically and economically. His experience with *the Man Without Desire* had showed him that in order to achieve financial success he needed to win over the trade; this was a feat he managed to achieve with his next project.

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<sup>1</sup> A similar view pertained to the filming of theatrical works in the 1910s, which Jon Burrows suggests led to 'a considerable expansion of the nature and breadth of the social constituencies that would be exposed to them' (Burrows 2003: 17).

<sup>2</sup> Ponting later edited the footage into a feature film, *The Great White Silence* (1924).

<sup>3</sup> This favourable situation was apparently about to change, however, due to rising costs which, it was predicted, would soon 'be about 50 per cent higher' (Dewhurst 1922).

<sup>4</sup> Director George Dewhurst was in Germany at the same time as Brunel, filming *What the Butler Saw* at the Jofa Studios in Berlin in December 1922 (Dewhurst 1922).

<sup>5</sup> Hoffe's play *The Little Damozel* had been filmed by Wilfred Noy in 1916 so it is possible that Brunel's connection with the playwright had been forged via this mutual contact.

<sup>6</sup> White committed suicide in 1927 when threatened with bankruptcy.

<sup>7</sup> Warren was apparently 'an actress of some note, who possesses a literary and artistic knowledge unrivalled by her sex' (*MPS*, 28 October 1922: 16). It is possible that she is Dorothy Cecil Wynter Warren, who ran a London art gallery later in the decade. Brunel stated that, with regard to the casting, if he 'didn't agree to certain nominations, the money wouldn't be forthcoming' (Brunel 1949: 93) so it is possible that White had insisted on Warren's inclusion.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew Sweet wrote of 'claims that...one of [Novello's] more eccentric parlour games...involved him lying naked in a specially designed glass coffin, past which his friends were required to file in a rehearsal of their future woes' (Sweet: 70).

<sup>9</sup> Brunel presumably saw *Nosferatu* on one of his visits to Germany since, as Miller notes, it was not shown in Britain until 1928 due to copyright difficulties (Miller 2013: 123).

<sup>10</sup> While Brunel was editing the film, George Pearson's feature *Love, Life and Laughter* (1923) was released and it is likely that seeing it encouraged him to try the experiment since it employed an unusual narrative device. The film's sad ending turns out to be the climax of a story being told within the film and the final scene shows the heroine listening to the tale. Apparently, some German distributors removed this finale, preferring to end the film on a sad note with the heroine abandoned by the hero (Pearson: 113).





### Chapter Four: Making Dull Films Jolly: Brunel's Burlesques

After the visual excesses of *The Man Without Desire*, Brunel's next venture was a complete contrast. His series of short comic burlesques condensed the filmmaking process down to basics and saw him working in a semi-amateur context with much greater creative control. The results are the most personal works in his filmography, representing a direct expression of his humour and revealing his very individual perspective on the British film industry. Made between 1923 and 1925, these eight one-reel films were born of a combination of necessity and frustration and experimented with technique in their parody of cinematic genres. There has been considerable debate about their place within the landscape of British filmmaking in the 1920s in terms of their production, their style and Brunel's intentions and this chapter will explore how they can best be located, before looking at the films themselves in more detail.

Of all Brunel's films, the burlesques have garnered the most attention from British film historians who differ considerably, however, in their conclusions about the contribution the films made to the development of silent cinema. Michael O'Pray describes them as 'an avant-garde attack on the conservatism of the British film industry' (O'Pray 2000), while Laraine Porter assures us that they mark out Brunel as a 'creative genius' (Porter 2012: 36). On the other hand, Rachael Low dismissed them as 'facetious parodies' and Luke McKernan was also left unimpressed by Brunel's comedic output, regarding him as 'a restricted talent with a narrow frame of reference' (Low 1971: 149; McKernan 2000: 9). A more tempered view has been expressed by Geoff Brown, who concludes that 'the burlesque comedies... give [Brunel] a distinctive place in British cinema history as a satirical jester and a key player in the film industry's uneasy war between art and commerce' (Brown 2005). How distinctive Brunel's work on these films actually was and whether they managed to advance the troops in Brown's 'uneasy war' will be explored in this chapter. In

order to do this, I will consider the burlesques both within the context of their production and reception and through a survey of more recent assessments of them. Beginning with an overview of the field of experimental filmmaking during the 1920s, I will consider ways of defining Brunel's burlesques with regard to perceptions of the avant-garde during the silent period.

For the purposes of this study, I consider the following to constitute Brunel's two series of burlesques: *Sheer Trickery*, *Crossing the Great Sagrada* and *The Pathetic Gazette*, all made in 1923 and 1924 during his time with Atlas-Biocraft; and *So This is Jollygood*, *Battling Bruisers*, *A Typical Budget*, *Cut it Out*; *A Day in the Life of a Censor* and *The Blunderland of Big Game*, which were produced in 1924 and 1925 under the Gainsborough umbrella.<sup>1</sup> *Sheer Trickery* has not generally been regarded as one of the burlesques but I include it here as it is undoubtedly, as I will show, a forerunner of the series in terms of its impetus, production history and the cinematic techniques it employs.

### **A British avant-garde?**

Some revisionist histories of the period have claimed Brunel's burlesques as part of an alternative film culture in 1920s Britain, even an avant-garde tradition of a sort. In 2000, the British Film Institute released a VHS collection in its series *History of the Avant-Garde*, entitled *Britain in the Twenties*. The films assembled for this compilation are something of a mixed bag; most date from the end of the decade and the only link between them is that they were all made outside the confines of the industry proper. While the films by (non-British) artists Len Lye (*Tusalava*, 1929) and Hans Richter (*Everyday*, 1929) more comfortably fit the definition of an avant-garde film given by the collection's curator Michael O'Pray, as one which aims to 'subvert commercial cinema in the name of art' (O'Pray 2000), he concedes that the others are better described as 'more experimental than avant-garde' (ibid.). The earliest title in the compilation is Brunel's burlesque *Crossing*

*the Great Sagrada* (1924); also featured are Ivor Montagu's comedy *Bluebottles* (1928); *COD A Mellow Drama* (1929), which was shot by commercial director Sinclair Hill<sup>2</sup> during downtime at Cricklewood Studio while sound equipment was being installed; and an animated geometry demonstration, *X+X=O* (Brian Salt 1936).

In the booklet accompanying the release, O'Pray concedes that the films were made on the fringes of the mainstream rather than as part of a coherent avant-garde movement. However, he identifies 'a broader experimental film community' in Britain grouped around the Film Society and the journal *Close Up* (1927–1933), which, he suggests, was in thrall to the avant-garde filmmaking coming out of Europe, an enthusiasm which was reflected in their own work (O'Pray 2000). In fact, *Crossing the Great Sagrada* predates both the Film Society and most of the key European avant-garde works and, in common with *Bluebottles* and *COD*, employs experimental techniques in pursuit of comedy rather than consciously to expand the boundaries of film as an art form. It is therefore difficult to argue for the films as formalist, as Sexton attempts to do, and thus for them to qualify for avant-garde status.

In terms of theorisations of the avant-garde, the claims of O'Pray and Sexton for a British avant-garde, however tentative, appear still less convincing. Peter Bürger's detailed examination of the various definitions of the avant-garde in relation to the historical movements it encompasses makes it clear that the films O'Pray brings together fail to meet the criteria that would qualify them as examples. O'Pray's description of the avant-garde as the subversion of commercial forms under the banner of art lacks rigour; yet the precise categorisation of the avant-garde during this period is much debated by academia. The work of Bürger was partly in response to a recognition that the terms 'avant-garde' and 'modernist' were being used almost interchangeably and his book *Theory of the Avant-garde* set out to establish clear distinctions between the two. He asserts that 'the intention of the historical avant-garde movements was defined as the destruction of art as an

institution set off from the praxis of life' (Bürger 1984: 83) and thus the integration of art into life, establishing their approach to the art world as one of radical intervention.

Bürger's thesis has been employed subsequently by several commentators to demonstrate the modernist credentials of British artists. Summarising his work, Richard Sheppard indicates that Bürger regards the historical avant-gardes as 'the expression of a deep-rooted angst in the face of extremely powerful and constricting social and technological systems' (Sheppard 2000: 23), a motivation he shows not to be applicable to British artists of the period. Acknowledging that 'the British avant-gardes...were much smaller, less radical and less threatening than their Continental counterparts' (ibid.: 12), Sheppard suggests that experimental British art and literature are more accurately classified as modernist, defining modernism not as a movement with specific traits and aims but as 'a complex range of responses to a complex set of problems by a variety of people in different but related historical situations' (ibid.: 6). While both the avant-garde movements and modernism were reactions to modernity (see Huyssen, quoted in Sheppard 2000: 6), the modernists did not reject classical forms in the way that the avant-gardistes did, but rather incorporated elements of them in their work. Avant-garde artists regarded their materials as having no intrinsic importance, significance being imbued upon it by the artists themselves through their engagement with it. In contrast, the modernists viewed the material itself as a vital element of their work, its physical traits having an influence on its form. Sheppard, along with other writers on the period such as Stella Tillyard and David Peters Corbett, thus argue convincingly against the existence of an avant-garde movement that conforms to Bürger's definition within any artistic sphere in Britain, with the exception of the vorticists.

Thus it can be seen that while Brunel's burlesques and the other films assembled by O'Pray contain some modernist elements, they were not made within the context of an avant-garde movement and cannot be categorised as such. While they combine elements

of an artistic approach with a semi-industrial structure, the diversity of their styles and the contexts in which they worked rule out any consistent categorisation of them as a movement with similar methods or aims. This practice of artistic experimentation within the context of the industry found a more natural home in Britain in the documentary movement of the 1930s, with Len Lye and others making films sponsored by government departments and corporate companies, which allowed a greater degree of freedom than British studios were willing to grant. Other contemporaries of Lye, including co-contributors to the magazine *Close Up* such as Oswald Blakeston and Daniel Birt, graduated into the studios where any artistic ambitions were kept very much in check.

### **Alternative film culture**

Jamie Sexton devotes a chapter to Brunel's burlesque films, along with *Bluebottles* and *COD A Mellow Drama*, in his book *Alternative Film Culture in Inter-War Britain*. Acknowledging that the term 'avant-garde' is problematic, particularly when used in relation to British films of this period, he defines his area of study as 'alternative film culture' which, he states, constitutes a 'broader alternative network... engaging with and celebrating filmmaking considered artistically excellent and/or capable of opening up new pathways for the progression of film as art' (Sexton 2008: 5). He outlines the existence of a filmmaking community beyond the mainstream that exhibited its work in non-commercial settings with the aim of expanding the artistic horizons of British filmmaking. Like O'Pray, he identifies the centre of such activity as the Film Society and the journal *Close Up*, yet qualifies his definition of this 'alternative' culture with the somewhat contradictory acknowledgment that '[d]uring the inter-war period fixed conceptual divisions between types of film production did not exist' (ibid.: 4).

In his analysis of Brunel's burlesques, Sexton concurs with O'Pray, arguing that they exhibit a 'scathing attitude towards different aspects of the British film industry' (ibid.: 53)

and offer an 'exposure of... aesthetic dead ends' (ibid: 59). Questioning why these films have never been situated in a modernist framework, he cites the view of Rosalind Krauss that the 'one thing that holds constant in modernist-vanguardist discourses is the theme of originality' (Krauss, 1986, quoted in ibid.: 62). Sexton suggests that since the films are parodies, they cannot be considered to exhibit originality and, in addition, were not made under the auspices of an established avant-garde movement. Yet he considers that the parodic nature of the films qualify them as 'deconstructions' of established generic traditions and 'attacks on British film culture' (ibid.: 64), which in turn fed the general anti-British prejudice evident in film criticism of the time. While the parodic nature of the films is evident, whether this renders them unoriginal however is less definitive. As I will show, it is Brunel's technique rather than his intent that mark out the films as innovative works of British filmmaking.

Sexton also suggests that the burlesques were not made with the aim of commercial exploitation (ibid.: 65). However, although Brunel's first two burlesques were made in the spirit of experiment and it is possible that he did not have public exhibition in mind when he set out to make them, his financial situation precluded the luxury of being able to indulge his creative impulses purely for their own sake. And while he may have been surprised at the positive reception the trade gave *Crossing the Great Sagrada*, his subsequent burlesques were made with the aim of cashing in on what had proved to be a successful format. It is also misleading to consider all eight films as part of a coherent whole since the first three were made under different conditions to the other five. Although Brunel had considerable creative control over the production of these shorts, even once he was being funded by Balcon and C. M. Woolf, it is an exaggeration to say he was 'free from commercial restrictions' (ibid.: 53). *Crossing the Great Sagrada* can be regarded as an example of what David E. James terms 'calling-card films', that is experimental shorts made by filmmakers in an attempt to establish themselves in the

industry and it was certainly successful on that front, in that it gained Brunel a commission to make more such films (James 2005: 22).

Henry K. Miller supports the view that Sexton's failure to acknowledge the burlesques as commercial propositions weakens his identification of Brunel as part of an 'alternative-versus-mainstream binary' (Miller 2010: 50). Gareth Buckell also rejects the classification of the films as avant-garde and feels that the attempt to claim them as such 'smacks of desperation' since Brunel didn't conduct major formal experiments and his films 'barely captured the imagination of Britain's avant-garde critics' (Buckell 2005: 37). In fact, the burlesques had been co-opted into the canon of artist films over half a century before any of these writings. In 1949, Belgian film curator Jacques Ledoux screened *Crossing the Great Sagrada* as part of a programme of avant-garde films (alongside works by Germaine Dulac and Jay Leyda) in the 'Festival Mondial de Film et des Beaux-arts' in Belgium (programme for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Festival Mondial du film et des beaux-arts de Belgique, 29 June 1949, ABSC 1/164). However, the aim of this chapter is not to make a case for Brunel as a practitioner of avant-garde filmmaking, nor to argue for the existence of such a movement in 1920s Britain; nevertheless, some new ways of defining the cinematic avant-garde during this period can usefully feed into a reading of his burlesques.

### **Experiment through play**

Both Sexton and O'Pray use the term 'playfulness' to describe the gentle satire Brunel applies in his burlesques, a concept that Christine Gledhill expands on in her article in *Film History* (Gledhill 2008; this is covered in some detail in Chapter Two of this thesis in relation to the Milne comedies). She outlines a subgenre of the avant-garde or modernist tendency that includes the 'notion of "play" as an outlet for testing...the technical capabilities and formal parameters of filmmaking' (Gledhill 2008: 15). Amy Sargeant also places Brunel within a group producing films that 'suggest that a revolution in form could



be undertaken for fun... rather than in “deadly earnestness” (Sargeant 2005: 86). This definition of a more light-hearted form of film experimentation accommodates the work of Brunel and other practitioners who were intent on integrating themselves into the industry but whose approach to filmmaking was less serious or political in its aims.

The avant-garde works emanating from Europe in the 1920s assumed various guises. Experimental films which generated meaning via satire, such as *Ballet mécanique* (Fernand Léger, 1924) and *Entr'acte* (Francis Picabia/René Clair, 1924), perhaps have the most in common with British experiments of the period. However, they apparently failed to impress the members of the Film Society when they were imported for their screenings; Ivor Montagu recalled that a riot nearly erupted in the cinema during the screening of *Entr'acte* in January 1926, a reaction which perplexed him since he regarded the film as merely ‘a witty cod’ (Montagu 1975: 224).<sup>3</sup>

### **Burlesque, slapstick and the avant-garde**

While the British intelligentsia apparently preferred their avant-garde filmmaking to be taken seriously, James observes that the surrealists scorned French art cinema and found their inspiration in the films of Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin<sup>4</sup> (James 2005: 22). Alex Clayton also connects the development of the cinematic avant-garde to the work of Chaplin and Keaton, as well as Georges Méliès, finding parallels in their self-reflexivity and lack of narrative logic, as well as the use of formal tricks such as stop-motion and fast motion (Clayton 2010).

Clayton’s ideas have their roots in Tom Gunning’s 1986 article ‘The Cinema of Attractions’ in which he posits the theory that 1906 marked a turning point for cinema, when film’s direct engagement with the spectator began to wane in favour of narrational presentations. Gunning describes cinema between 1895 and 1906 as primarily concerned with demonstrating the possibilities of the technology and presenting audiences with new

sights, with little emphasis on its narrative potential (Gunning 1986: 64). He observes that in both comic and erotic titles of the period characters look into the camera 'establishing contact with the audience' and that this direct engagement with the spectator did not entirely disappear from cinema in 1906, surviving chiefly in avant-garde films which made a virtue of a confrontational relationship to the spectator (ibid.).

### **A 'Typical' Avant-Garde**

In his book *The Most Typical Avant-garde*, David E. James directs his attention to the films made by individual filmmakers at work on the fringes of Hollywood from the 1920s onwards. He regards the avant-garde not as a form of expression with a purely artistic or political impetus, but as springing from a desire to experiment and, through experimentation, produce something original which may assist its creator's entry to the industry. The earliest example he discusses is Dudley Murphy, an American who had connections to the European avant-garde and spent time in Paris in the mid-1920s where he assisted Fernand Léger on *Ballet mécanique*. Prior to this, he had independently produced three lyrical dance films which James describes as 'neither purely artisanal and domestic nor purely industrial but rather a cottage industry spanning both and casually using marginal industry labor' (James 2005: 24). Despite these production methods, Murphy's employment of standard cinematic conventions meant the films found 'a comfortable place in commercial filmmaking' and were immediately purchased by distributor Sol Lesser, who commissioned Murphy to produce more (ibid.: 25).

James focuses on Los Angeles as a location where filmmaking is the principal industrial activity and thus any non-studio production was physically and metaphorically on the fringes of Hollywood. He identifies several types of practitioner who turned to film for different reasons, observing that 'people outside the studios – and sometimes in them – began to make films on contrary aesthetic and political principles; some understood their

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activities as art rather than commerce, some were politically inspired, and some made films for recreation and the sheer pleasure of the exercise of their faculties' (ibid.: 3). He is particularly interested in the way that some of those who engaged in cinematic experimentation became integrated into the industry proper and whose techniques were thus absorbed into mainstream filmmaking, a phenomenon which he observes also occurred in Europe (ibid.: 22).

James draws attention to the fact that many of the films produced on Hollywood's fringes take as their subject matter filmmaking or aspects of the film industry. He devotes a chapter to Slavko Vorkapich's 1927 experimental short *The Life and Death of 9413 – A Hollywood Extra* which was shot on 35mm film at a cost of \$97, largely in the filmmaker's own kitchen. It combines humour and surrealism in its depiction of a man who attempts to become a film extra but endures inhuman treatment by an unforgiving industry. James observes that 'despite its formal sophistication, artisanal production and critical thematics, *The Life and Death of 9413* did not place itself outside of or opposed to the industry so much as find a place in it. As well as being specifically about Hollywood, it engaged Hollywood practically in several ways' (ibid.: 40). James notes that the day after the first screening of *The Life and Death of 9413*, Vorkapich was offered a contract by Paramount to work in special effects. He thus concludes that, contrary to what one may expect, Hollywood studios were keen to recruit talented amateurs into the industry and that some, but presumably not all, of the films produced under the conditions he describes achieved commercial exhibition and even facilitated their creators' absorption into the industry proper (ibid.: 22).<sup>5</sup>

In contrast to James's examples, the films discussed by Sexton were made by figures with experience in the industry, although they were not actually produced within the context of a studio but in a kind of liminal space between the amateur and commercial realms. However, Brunel's burlesques have distinct parallels with the experiments

emanating from Los Angeles: they were made at his own expense, took the industry as their subject matter and their exhibition helped to gain him obtain a foothold in mainstream production. In addition, although branded as 'Adrian Brunel Burlesques', these films were very much collaborative works, made with a group of friends and colleagues who contributed their skills and ideas yet worked for little or no pay, thus qualifying them as 'marginal labor'. The final and perhaps most important parallel lies in the notion that the filmmakers engaged in experimentation for the enjoyment of it and to indulge their creative faculties, an impetus which was very much driving Brunel's own efforts, as he elucidated in two articles in the trade press.

### **Film 'Transformation'**

In the making of *Crossing the Great Sagrada*, Brunel inadvertently pioneered what is now termed the 'collage film'.<sup>6</sup> He had accumulated off-cuts from various completed projects and, ever averse to seeing things go to waste, decided to use them to test some of his theories of editing. He had first aired these ideas four years earlier in an article in *Pictures and Picturegoer*, entitled 'How to Make a Dull Film Jolly', in which he made the light-hearted claim that 'It is possible to convert a bad drama into a good comedy. It hasn't been done yet but the process presents vast possibilities' (Brunel 1920). He thus set about constructing a spoof using out-takes from various 'serious' productions, including the travel films *Cannibals of the South Seas* and *Moors and Minarets* and his first feature, *The Man Without Desire*. He cut these together into a one-reel film, adding titles and some original material; through witty title cards he creates a loose narrative from the disparate fragments of celluloid and the newly-shot footage, which mostly features Brunel acting out all the roles. The humour is largely derived from the disparity between the expectations raised by the titles and the content of the ensuing image, which subverts expectations and undermines the audience's trust in the authoritative 'narrator's voice'. This device had

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been used in Brunel's earlier comedies made at Minerva and, by his own admission, some of the credit for the idea must go to A. A. Milne. In fact, the *Picturegoer* article was written at about the time he was beginning production with Minerva and it is interesting to speculate whether Milne may have influenced Brunel's thoughts on film editing. The article also advocated foregrounding the filmmaking process through formal tricks such as running film backwards and speeding it up and *Crossing the Great Sagrada* (and indeed *Sheer Trickery*, shot the previous year) tests many different methods of manipulating images.

After the success of *Crossing the Great Sagrada* had vindicated his theories on editing, Brunel felt inspired once again to expound them to the press, this time for an article in the *Bioscope* entitled 'A Film Transformation Factory' (*Bioscope*, 13 November 1924: 39). Penned by journalist Hubert Waring, the article does not mention Brunel by name, referring instead to its interviewee as 'Sparkleton', but the parallels with his earlier piece leave little doubt of his identity.<sup>7</sup> The journalist gives an evocative description of Sparkleton's 'small factory' located in a

narrow alley off Wardour Street...when I went in he was standing almost knee-deep in film boxes. On some benches round about were various coils of celluloid, a large number of appliances for cutting and 'editing' and piles of dusty-looking scenarios. At one end of his shop stood a projector and at the other a screen. Sparkleton was busy alternately holding up sundry strips of films to the light and consulting a 'book of the words.' (ibid.)

During the visit, 'Sparkleton' enlightened the journalist on his novel moneymaking enterprise:

thanks to the new 'transformation' process you needn't despair even of the stupidest drama...I can assure you that, after I had cut them up a bit, transposed, rejoined, scrapped the sub-titles, put in some snappy ones of my own and started all over again with the fifth reel first, you wouldn't have known them. My clients were simply amazed. (ibid.)

Despite the tongue-in-cheek tone of both articles, Brunel expresses an implicit criticism of mainstream filmmaking; his disillusionment with the industry would have been all the more

tangible since, when the second article appeared, he had several unsuccessful films under his belt.

### **'Backgarden' films**

Brunel maintained that the filming of the new footage for *Sagrada* was performed in a typically unconventional manner: in his back garden (Brunel 1949: 108). However, cinema manager Vivian Van Damm claimed that the film was shot in *his* back garden, asserting in his autobiography that he himself was:

a pioneer in home-movie making... mostly backgarden movies. About the only title I can recall now is *Crossing the Great Sagrada*, shot entirely with the natural background of a seaside beach and the adjoining garden of my house. That week-end our guests included Henry Edwards and Chrissie White, Miles Mander, Godfrey Winn...and last but not least, Adrian Brunel, who wrote the script and directed the film' (Van Damm 1952: 176).<sup>8</sup>

Van Damm's reference to *Sagrada* as a home-movie provides a different perspective on Brunel's burlesques. The fashion was growing for the rich and aristocratic, who could afford the expensive equipment, to invite friends for summer weekends at their country homes where they would dress up and make silly, sometimes rather outré, films for their own amusement. At the same time that Brunel was conducting his first 'ultra-cheap experiment' in Van Damm's (or his own) garden, Lord Beaverbrook's rather more impressive estate at Cherkley Court, Surrey, was being used as the location for an amateur film entitled *They Forgot to Read the Directions* (1924). His house guests, including fellow newspaper proprietor Sir Edward Hulton and authors H. G. Wells and Rebecca West, appeared in the production, penned by West, which featured babies being drowned and the same kind of punning character names concocted by Brunel, such as General Sir Dis Senta.

Meanwhile, that same summer, Oxford graduate Terence Greenidge began making films using the latest technical development, the 16mm camera, which had appeared on the market the previous year and was specially designed for amateurs. While staying at the

Hampstead home of his friend Evelyn Waugh, he shot *The Scarlet Woman*, written by Waugh and featuring him and his brother Alec, Elsa Lanchester and future British film producer John Sutro. 1924 also saw the formation of a group whose members were to become a driving force behind the development of amateur filmmaking, the Cambridge University Kinema Club, and they lost no time in producing a short comedy entitled *The Witch's Fiddle* (1924).

Sargeant has drawn a parallel between this 'hobbying' and Brunel's own experiments while Gledhill's description of a wider group of 'artistic "amateurs"' at work, as Brunel was, within small, loose and informal enterprises is also compelling (Sargeant 2005: 84; Gledhill 2008: 16). However, neither fully acknowledges the commercial necessity that underpinned Brunel's work and which drove him on occasion to fall back on his own initiative to carry on working. His experimentation thus often sprang from a need to maintain his profile or to find ways to circumvent opposition from the industry to his work.

### **The Birth of the Burlesques: *Sheer Trickery***

*Sheer Trickery* was produced along precisely these lines and very much in a spirit of experimentation. Filming was completed in the summer of 1923<sup>9</sup>, although the idea had been conceived two years previously as an aborted project to demonstrate how films are made (Brunel 1949: 107). It was first shown in February 1924 as part of the supporting programme for *The Man Without Desire* during its prestigious pre-release run at the Tivoli Theatre. The kind of camerawork it employed was not new to film; as Laraine Porter notes, '[t]he early period in British cinema (1895-1902) is populated with comedians that delight in the technical possibilities of film' (Porter 2012: 19). However, these early films were more interested in creating illusions through manipulating the image in camera while Brunel primarily uses editing techniques, foregrounding the technical trickery and building a narrative around seemingly unrelated scenes.

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*Sheer Trickery* is sub-titled 'A picture of cinematograph devilry' and opens with images which flip between positive and negative, purportedly to prove that 'black is white'. Traffic is shown exiting Piccadilly Circus backwards at high speed, making for 'a much brighter London' and slow- and fast-motion is used to illustrate various scenarios including builders going about their work in slow motion due to 'that Monday morning feeling'. Next, a man eats his lunch in reverse, wine pouring upwards from a glass into a bottle and a banana miraculously being restored to its skin and the diner, the worse for wear after his topsy-turvy meal, sees double, with shots superimposed on top of one another to create the effect. Fast-motion is used again as he gets into a taxi and is taken through the streets at breakneck speed, intercut with close-ups of his face showing him looking nervous and queasy. When he arrives at his destination he refuses to pay the driver and decides to return by tube, although this turns out to be a similarly alarming experience since the train hurtles along the tracks without stopping at any stations. This harrowing journey is shot from the driver's cab, mimicking the popular early cinema genre of the phantom ride. Unfortunately the surviving print of the film ends at this point and therefore appears to be incomplete.

*Sheer Trickery* was made the year before René Clair's avant-garde film *Entr'acte* but the two films have some similarities. Both use slow motion, film run backwards and superimposition to create effects and contain a long sequence of movement as the central focus, which emulates a staple form of early filmmaking. In Brunel's film it is the phantom ride, while *Entr'acte* appropriates the chase film<sup>10</sup> (although at certain points referencing the phantom ride as well) as a funeral cortège descends into chaos when the cart bearing the coffin breaks loose and is pursued through the streets. When selecting *Entr'acte* to screen at the Film Society, Ivor Montagu took the view that it 'was not made with the intent...of the serious surrealists. It is made for a giggle' (Montagu 1970: 334-5). More recent assessments of the film regard it somewhat differently however, Townsend



recognising it as a satirical comment on the mass repatriation of the bodies of French soldiers killed during the First World War, although one which appropriates humorous forms to convey its serious intent (Townsend 2009: 281) Although Brunel made his film before Clair, it does appear to be, at least in part, a response to surrealism. The sequence of the man feeling queasy contains a double-exposed shot of houses filmed using a Dutch tilt intercut with a wind-up Charlie Chaplin toy, a dog and a shaky shot of the street, creating a very disconcerting viewing experience. The Chaplin toy would appear to be an overt reference to *Ballet mécanique* which was also made after *Sheer Trickery*, raising the possibility that Brunel added this shot at a later stage. However, Brunel's humour is less confrontational than either of these surrealist works, drawing attention to the image manipulation with titles which point up and contextualise it. Brunel's use of cinematic conventions, such as explanatory titles, places him more firmly in the mainstream and apart from the genuinely surreal work of the European avant-garde.

### ***Crossing the Great Sagrada and Pathetic Gazette***

Brunel claimed that *Crossing the Great Sagrada* was 'made as the direct result of a challenge that he was unable to infuse the leaven of humour into a production' (*KW*, 28 August 1924: 70). As outlined above, much of this humour derives from the juxtaposition of image and text, so a title announcing 'We left Blackfriars Bridge behind us on Thursday. A unique view of same crowded with mid-day traffic' is followed by a shot of a rope bridge in Africa being crossed by natives. This dislocation between the film's establishment of expectation and its revelation continues throughout the film, as we are taken on a fictional journey with explorers 'Holmes, Sweet and Holmes'. Gledhill regards 'the precociously literary interplay of word and image in... Brunel's...burlesques' as an inheritance from 'the emerging popular arts of the nineteenth century', comparing Brunel's use of text and image to an artistic trajectory within British culture which originated in the eighteenth

century and William Hogarth (Gledhill 2008: 22). However, it is unlikely that Brunel was attempting to draw such a highbrow parallel and, in fact, he concocts an suitably ironic explanation for the mismatch. He draws attention to the flaws in the editing process: 'The sections of this film having been joined together in a hurry, the indulgence of the audience is craved for any mistakes. An Ultra-Rapid Film.' He points up the importance of good editing by illustrating what can occur when it is undertaken in a hurry or inexpertly, the irony being that achieving the humorous effect involved considerable work on his part. He thus used his skill at manipulating the medium to poke fun at the genres and techniques of British cinema which he regarded as becoming formulaic.

*Crossing the Great Sagrada* opens with extensive punning titles which point up the pomposity of the travelogue, a genre to which Brunel was no stranger. Not only had he shot his own travel film, *Moors and Minarets*, but he had edited another and had also been involved with the exhibition and distribution of such films during his time with Solar Films. Although *Moors and Minarets* has not survived in its finished form, the film material that Brunel deposited with the BFI in the 1930s includes outtakes from the production. Amongst these are the title cards for the film, which announce: 'Novello-Atlas Renters present Moors and Minarets/ Through the heart of Morocco with the great Traveller Sir Percy Sykes K.C.M.G.', followed by the credits 'Personally Supervised by Adrian Brunel' and 'Photographed by Crispin Hay'. *Sagrada* apes and parodies these lengthy titles: 'John D. Spooof and Jess E. Lastic by arrangement with Al Donnerblitz present Holmes, Sweet and Holmes' Great Voyageogue "Crossing the Great Sagrada" A Priceless Picture'. A subsequent card contains the legend 'All the foregoing specially supervised, carefully watched and partially controlled by Adrian Brunel assisted by Lionel Rich.' Brunel here pokes fun at the notion of the traveller as celebrity which such films, including his own, perpetuated and the shots illustrating Brunel and Rich at work show them lounging on a bench in the sun.<sup>11</sup>

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Holmes, Sweet and Holmes then appear, all played by Brunel in different costumes. Although they are brothers, the three are presented as being of different nationalities. The first wears a huge fur coat and Russian hat, the second sports traditional British colonial gear including pith helmet, fly swatter and monocle, while the third is garbed in Scottish national dress consisting of kilt and tam o'shanter. Brunel's penchant for dressing up was amply indulged in the burlesques and his appearance in bizarre costumes is a running feature; in fact, the character of 'Prince Olarf of Yugo-Slowa' appears in all the extant films. Here, Olarf is presented as a great hunter and 'Honorary Admiral of the San Marinan Navy' who is encountered by the crew on their journey. Brunel also appears as Lord Pifford, another recurring character who, in the first of several digs at wealthy financiers, is presented as an imposing figure fawned over due to his power and status.

Other mismatched titles and images follow: the outskirts of London are illustrated by a view of Venice, while a painting of a sailing boat in a harbour purports to be 'Enos, a neighbouring fishing village – where Harry Tate was born' (Tate was a music hall star). Between the scenes of the explorers various destinations and sequences of their exploits, Brunel intercuts diagrams showing the trajectory of the travellers. Such title cards, bearing maps of the countries, were a standard device in travel films; in fact Brunel employed them in *Moors and Minarets* but here he pokes fun at them. So, an animated sequence of an arrow flying randomly across the screen is said to be a 'Diagram of the direction in which we were going – Drawn by G. Hawse Power F.R.G.S.' and the title 'Diagram of the direction in which we thought we were going', is followed by an image of a London underground tube map indicating the explorers' continued confusion.

When they eventually reach their destination, The Great Cascara of Sagrada, a shot of a waterfall appears, followed by the same image flipped over which represents the view *after* crossing it. Thus begins the journey home but, travelling back through the desert, they

all perish and the final images show the various celebrations of their deaths around the world.

The pace at which text and image are supplied contributes to the effectiveness of the humour, as well as the variety of the juxtapositions. The titles are incredibly detailed, containing not just explanatory text but comments on the images in the form of parodies of the company information which they often include – ‘A Dull Picture Production’, ‘An Indolent Film’ – as well as hand-drawn sketches complementing or undermining the text.



Figure 5 Promotional postcard for Crossing the Great Sagrada (ABSC 1/164)

*Crossing the Great Sagrada* had a private trade show on 31 July 1924 at the American Theatre in Wardour Street, as announced in the *Bioscope* of the same date, which called it ‘distinctly a one-man show’, listing the many roles Brunel takes in the film. The *Evening Standard* described the film as ‘17 minutes of chuckles’, while the *Weekly News* asserted that it ‘would make a misanthrope laugh’ and many critics reported that the audience responded to its humour enthusiastically (typed list of reviews, ABSC 1/164).

### ***Pathetic Gazette***

According to Brunel, *Sagrada* was a tremendous success and showed at 'hundreds of theatres throughout the United Kingdom' (Brunel 1928: 44). The irony in the fact that such profits should be generated by a film Brunel put together his spare time for around £90 while productions they had spent thousands of pounds on failed to bring a return was surely not lost on Brunel and Mander. However, they lost no time in trying to repeat the phenomenon and in October 1924, they organised a trade show for *Pathetic Gazette*, a spoof of the newsreel *Pathé Gazette*. This film has not survived and all that remains is the review in *The Bioscope*, which deemed it a 'merry and original trifle which would enrich the programme of any better class or middle class house' (*Bioscope*, 9 October 1924: 58). The review gives a summary of the contents of the film, which included a scene of 'Government officials at Constantinople and Sicily', the different locations being distinguished by the headgear worn; speeded up shots showing a famous sprinter after taking drugs; 'a famous film star entering (and leaving) a convent...the loss of a Scotchman's sixpence...and a display of Paris fashions for men by a male mannequin' (ibid.). Brunel received considerable praise for his own performances, the *Bioscope* reviewer praising his 'marked gift of versatile characterisation and quite an astonishing mastery of make-up' (ibid.).

### **The Harry Hughes burlesques**

The *Bioscope* review summarises *Pathetic Gazette* as an 'entertaining novelty production' yet on the same page of the journal appears an almost identical review of a similar-sounding short also deemed 'a novel and entertaining production' (*Bioscope*, 9 October 1924: 58). The one-reel comedy *Adam's Film Review* (a play on the popular cine magazine *Eve's Film Review*, also made by Pathé) was directed by Harry Hughes and was also distributed by Novello-Atlas Renters. The review suggests Hughes' film trod the same

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ground as Brunel's, describing it as one 'which wittily burlesques the inconsequential jumble of subject matter and frivolity of treatment characteristic of some magazine pictures' (ibid.). Hughes is credited with 'remarkable gifts as a parodist' yet the film relies on similar comic devices such as 'clever titling', national stereotyping ('Margate and Southend are summarised in close-ups of a visitor of the Hebrew persuasion') and the use of camera tricks to create amusing scenarios ('A scientist demonstrates his Death Ray which...brings down a factory chimney, stops the street traffic and pushes a train backwards') (ibid.).

Hughes also directed and scripted another burlesque for Brunel and Mander; entitled *Unnatural Life Studies*, it is described as 'A burlesque on the life of a flapper' and was apparently also trade shown in October 1924 (Gifford 2016: 07282). It would seem that Brunel and Mander were so certain that their new format was a money-spinner, they hastily invested in three more burlesques, taking on Hughes to help assemble a marketable package of shorts as quickly as possible. Despite its trade show, *Unnatural Life Studies* was not reviewed.

How exactly Hughes and Brunel came together is uncertain but they had had similar experiences in the industry and shared many of the same views about British film. After many years as an editor, Hughes had begun touting himself as a scenario writer. In 1921 he had taken out a one-page advert in *Motion Picture Studio* entitled 'Do You Want Me?' in which he lamented the state of British films, which he described as being in a 'grievous rut' (MPS, 20 August 1921: 6). This he attributed to the dependence of the industry on adaptation and the failure to appreciate the value of scenarists such as himself. He had had a long editing career, although with only one credit to his name as scenario writer, on the 1921 feature *The Shadow of Evil* for British Art films. He, like Brunel, believed that the British film industry needed to encourage more original screenwriting, expressing

the view that 'the adapted novel is always a failure' and revealed that, also like Brunel, he was on the point of bankruptcy through continued unemployment (ibid.).

It is possible the two had met the previous year after Hughes felt compelled to write to Brunel in praise of *The Man Without Desire*. His letter would certainly have recommended him to Brunel as a man after his own heart. 'I came away from your Trade Show of the "Man Without Desire" with the feeling that I must write to you at once to congratulate you on a masterly piece of work' he wrote, continuing, 'I put it off, however, because I am only a scenario-writer and film editor of fifteen years' experience and, as such, cannot be expected to know as much about the merits of a film as... those erudite critics who broadcast their impartial and ungrammatical opinions to a sheep-like trade' (letter from Hughes to AB, 19 December 1923, ABSC 'H'/170). His antipathy towards the trade would have encouraged Brunel to regard him as a worthy collaborator in his gentle critiques of its foibles.

The careers of the two men continued in parallel; Hughes moved from editing to direction, joining Nettlefold Studios in 1926 and then working for BIP from 1930 onwards, overlapping briefly with Brunel's period there. In the mid-1930s Hughes and Brunel were both engaged in the production of quota quickies for Argyle and Butchers before Hughes began a stint at Welwyn Studios. Hughes, however, managed to maintain a directorial career into the 1940s, his final credits on children's films after the war. Thus Hughes joins the ranks of the 'loners' as defined by Low: a figure searching for a place within the industry and willing to try his hand at whatever task would earn him that place but ultimately failing to establish himself securely (Low 1971: 146).

### **Screen parody**

As suggested earlier in this chapter, the concept of poking fun at the cinema was not a new one and the industry itself had long been the subject of screen humour on both

sides of the Atlantic. In Britain as early as 1903, Cecil Hepworth parodied the scientific series *The Unseen World* with his own version *The Unclean World*, while in a comedy vein Fred Evans made *Pimple as a Cinema Actor* (1912) and *Pimple Writes a Cinema Plot* (1913), featuring his popular comic alter ego, and *Mike Murphy as Picture Actor* (Dave Aylott, 1914) saw the Irish character cause havoc in a film studio. In 1923 Bertram Phillips produced and directed a series of six shorts, each burlesquing a different style of narrative film. These 'Syncopated Picture Plays' included skits on melodrama (*Stung By a Woman*), D. W. Griffith (*One Excited Orphan*) and the 'dream comedy' (*Tut-Tut and His Terrible Tomb*) (MPS, 16 June 1923: 12-13). The review judged them to be of varying quality, the highest praise reserved for *Dickens Up-to-Date*, in which the humour was based largely around the titles, which put American slang into the mouths of characters from *Oliver Twist*.

Thus parodying the cinema was not necessarily a novel concept and Brunel's burlesques can be seen as part of a tradition of such spoofs. However, what sets them apart is his aesthetic approach, which saw him experimenting with techniques employed by European avant-garde filmmakers, his reuse of footage edited together to produce new meanings and interpretations and his collaboration with a loose group of like-minded creatives who shared his drive to bring originality to British cinema. As 'calling-card' films, Brunel's first two burlesques were a success, bringing him to the attention of the establishment and leading to his attachment to Gainsborough Studios.

### **The Gainsborough burlesques**

Brunel records that it was soon after the release of his first two burlesques that he met Michael Balcon, the two men having been introduced by portrait photographer Alexander Stewart (known as 'Sasha') and his wife (Brunel 1949: 108). Vivian Van Damm also played a part in his entrée to Gainsborough by arranging a screening of *Crossing the Great Sagrada* for distributor C. M. Woolf at his private theatre. Balcon agreed that if Woolf



liked the film, Brunel could have access to studio space and equipment to produce further burlesques. The screening was a success and Brunel was loaned a budget of £150 per film, on the understanding that he would work for nothing but would take a share of the profit after Woolf had been repaid. Given the huge takings of his earlier efforts had generated, he had no doubt that this venture would be financially successful.

Yet Brunel was to find that his place within the studio set-up was not conducive to the kind of rapid production he had been used to and it was several months before the press got wind of this new series of burlesques. On 26 February 1925 *Bioscope* named the first two titles as 'Jolligood' [sic] and 'Battling Bruisers'; the following month *So This is Jollygood* was trade shown and was reviewed in the journal on 12 March 1925, presumably being rushed out and retitled so that enterprising exhibitors could book it to screen in support of the American feature *So This is Hollywood* (1924). As late as July that year, Gainsborough was still promising the series of burlesques as part of its upcoming programme of releases; a two-page advert in *Bioscope* listed six new Brunel shorts, including one called *Defective Holmes* that was never made (*Bioscope*, 16 July 1925: 15).

The script for this film is in Brunel's paper collection and confirms it as a spoof of the popular Sherlock Holmes serials. Why it was never made is not clear; possibly Conan Doyle was not keen to have his characters parodied but it is more likely that Brunel simply did not have the time or the money to make it, since it required a great deal of location shooting. It bears the hallmarks of Brunel's other burlesques: joke names (Dr Watson and Professor Veriarty), visual and verbal comedy ('Holmes...starts to smoke three pipes at once, plays the ukelele wrapt in thought and the familiar dressing gown') and the ubiquitous presence of Prince Olarf of Yugo-Slowa (script for *Defective Holmes*, ABSC 1/172). The film's final title was to read, 'Come, Watson, we just have time to stroll back to London and look in at the last act of Lohengrin' while the detective and his side-kick walk off past a sign reading 'London 80 miles' (ibid.).

***So This is Jollygood***

Brunel's first Gainsborough burlesque was the closest he got to exposing the vagaries of the film industry itself. It derives humour from highlighting the cheapness and dreariness of the British film industry in comparison to the glamour of Hollywood; a shot of Buckingham Palace purports to be 'Miss Mary Philbanks Home' while the 'Typical Home of British Film Star' is shown to be a run-down terrace in a poor urban area. Brunel also turns his attention to the money-grabbing figures that producers have to deal with as a financier and author demand such a high percentage of the profits that the filmmakers end up out of pocket.

Next Brunel takes the viewer through the various processes prior to production, beginning with the scenario department, 'where 11 stories are rejected every 29 1/3 seconds' by three men who plough through a pile of books with barely time to read a few lines before throwing them their shoulders to be caught in a waste-paper basket by a man in a peaked cap. This is a visual representation of Brunel's lament in 1921 that 'hunting for a good film story amongst the stuff deluging a scenario-editor's desk is like looking for a Lilliputian needle in a Brobdingnagian haystack' (Brunel 1921d). And his complaint that 'the undeveloped organisation of a studio... necessitates work being done in a hurry by men whose brains are worn out through reading other people's rubbish until their heads swim' also finds an outlet (ibid.: 19).

The 'types' which populate American films are caricatured, from the vamp and villain to the firm-jawed hero and innocent heroine, while the Hollywood melodrama is targeted further in the recreation of a 'typical scene' from a film entitled 'Starving Hearts on Broadway'. In it, an evil landlord attempts to evict a poor widow, her mother and child<sup>12</sup> from their hovel; overacting and clichés abound, with glycerine being dropped into the actors' eyes to feign tears and a rotund director bellowing instructions through a

megaphone. The decadent nature of studio personnel, hinted at in the scenario editors' haste to get to the pub, is reiterated in the final scene. A sarcastic title which reads: 'And so, the day's work over, they betake themselves, these slaves of the public, to the haven of their own firesides, or the quiet joy of the nursery at the children's hour,' is followed by a night club scene in which couples party with wild abandon.

### ***Battling Bruisers***

Brunel's second Gainsborough burlesque, *Battling Bruisers*, portrays national stereotypes in the context of a parody of newsreel sports coverage and the short films exploring different sporting activities. Brunel shot the film on 10 November 1924, completing over seventy shots on 1700ft of film in one day; as he himself confessed, 'This is not the contemplative method of the masters of comedy' but, revealing his priority, 'think of the money we save!' (letter from AB to Balcon, 14 November 1924, ABSC 2/111)

As Sexton notes, British sporting shorts later became occasional inclusions in the Film Society programmes and especially highly regarded were those made by John Betts, namely the series *Sporting Life and What Not to Do But How to Do It* (1924), which became *Sport & Interest in a Fresh Light* in 1926. These were one-reel 'interest' films which were akin to natural history films in adopting a scientific approach to their subject. Using slow-motion in pursuit of this approach, *Boxing; A Sport to Train a Good Temper, Self-Discipline, Initiative* (1924) demonstrates tactics through slowing down the action, while in *The Hurdler* (1926) footage of famous sportsman F. R. Gaby in action was also shown slowed down to illustrate the movement of the limbs and muscles.

Yet these films were not the subject of Brunel's humour, which was more interested in boxing as an opportunity to indulge in parodies of national stereotypes. Boxer-cum-bullfighter 'Mañana Carambo The Tantalising Toreador of Toledo' uses a cape to confuse his opponent in a sequence which has actuality footage of audiences at a

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bullring cut in (very probably from the Spanish leg of *Moors and Minarets*). A French and Italian boxer are depicted as coy and effeminate in the next fight between Rognons au Beurre and Cutie Cattaro. They skip delicately round the ring, punching feebly and engaging in embraces until they end up dancing. The gong to mark the end of the round is struck delicately by a hand with its little finger cocked and during the break the two men sip cups of tea. Their seconds are beautiful young men wearing lipstick who almost swoon when the hitherto decorous fight descends into viciousness and Rognons throws his gloves down in a fit of pique, conceding the match.

The final bout is prefaced by a long sequence of shots purporting to be of Moscow and Petrograd and edited in the style of Russian formalism. Jamie Sexton notes that this section seems to ape the type of Soviet montage seen in films such as *Kino-Eye* (Dziga Vertov, 1924) and *Battleship Potemkin* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1925), but, as he points out, neither film was seen in the UK until after Brunel had released this Gainsborough burlesque (Sexton 2008: 60). He thus suggests that this sequence was added to the film at a later date and the fact that *Battling Bruisers* is more than 300 feet longer than the other burlesques seems to support his theory. Sexton rightly observes that the close-up shots of faces reacting to the events in the boxing ring are similar to those in the Odessa Steps sequence in *Battleship Potemkin*. However he fails to notice the similarities the sequence also bears to Dziga Vertov's 1929 film *Man with a Movie Camera*. A dark, blurred image shows Brunel looking into the viewfinder of a camera – the man with the movie camera – and uses some of the stylistic devices Vertov employs in his documentary: fast cutting, Dutch tilts and large, dramatic titles in Cyrillic announcing the locations. Intercut with these are images of minarets (possibly out-takes from *Moors and Minarets*), tractors driving through fields, shots of workers' marches and what appear to be Communist rallies in Hyde Park, along with images of railway tracks shot from a speeding train, interiors of train carriages and feet walking in the park.

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The obvious similarity between this sequence and Vertov's film would further support Sexton's theory and suggest that it was added after *Man With a Movie Camera* was shown in the UK at the Film Society on 11 January 1931. Sexton has ascertained that *Battling Bruisers* was screened by the Nottingham and District Workers' Film Society on 29 November 1931 and given Brunel's habit of constantly revisiting and recycling his work, it is very possible that he cut in the Russian sequence thinking it would appeal to that audience as well as bringing the film up to date (Sexton 2008: 61). In fact, he later wrote that 'editors sometimes amuse themselves with a spot of Russian *montage*,' but asserted 'such experiments should be kept for the private amusement of technicians' (Brunel 1936: 39).

The production of the first two Gainsborough burlesques was announced in the trade press in early 1925 and, as mentioned, it appears that Brunel felt that timing their release to coincide with that of similarly theme features would boost sales. An American feature spoofing filmmaking, *In Hollywood with Potash and Perlmutter* (released in the UK simply as *So This is Hollywood*), was soon to reach British screens and *So This is Jollygood* was trade shown the same week. W. and F. was about to bring out a series of shorts called *The Flying Fists* starring American boxer Benny Leonard and Brunel may have hoped that exhibitors would see the value of a thematic tie-in with *Battling Bruisers*. Whether this tactic yielded results is not known.

### ***Cut It Out***

*Cut It Out; a Day in the Life of a Censor* was another direct comment on the British film industry and highlights some of the more ridiculous restrictions imposed by the British Board of Film Censors at the time. This burlesque has a rough narrative structure in which an unwitting film director has his shoot constantly interrupted by Harper Sunbeam (played by Edwin Greenwood), 'Chairman of the Society for Detecting Evil in Others' with his list of 'Banned Subjects'. The film within a film is a loose story of an Earl who employs a governess

but plots to kidnap her when she rejects his advances. The finale sees her tied to a railway track by the Earl and his criminal sidekick but she is rescued just in time by Major Cowley, played by Brunel.

Throughout the film, Sunbeam interrupts filming, brandishing his book of rules and demanding that the director cut out the offending shots. As the governess climbs over a stile, he leaps into view with a tape measure, complaining that she is revealing too much leg and when the Earl and his henchman drink beer, he insists that they put it back to avoid 'Drinking scenes carried to excess', so the sequence is runs in reverse and the glasses fill up again (repeating the device used in *Sheer Trickery*). A scene of the Major apparently fighting in the trenches is curtailed for its depiction of the 'realistic horrors of warfare' while an argument between the Earl and his accomplice is forbidden since it shows 'relations of Capital and Labour'. In the final scene, the Major and governess kiss and the censor takes out his stopwatch, telling them when to stop. In a moment of wish fulfilment, the infuriating Sunbeam is obliterated by a speeding train and all that remain are his hat, umbrella and book.

### ***The Typical Budget***

In *The Typical Budget*, Brunel returned to his 'chop-logic mode of discursivity' and got further mileage out of the newsreel format (Gledhill 2008: 21). This time he aped the series *Topical Budget*, which ran from 1911 to 1931 and was one of three major British newsreels during the silent period, along with the *Pathé Gazette* and *Gaumont*. The opening title announces 'We guarantee that everything in this film is absolutely fictitious and totally inaccurate' leading to a cynical animated gag in which three globes metamorphose into a pawnbroker's sign, presumably implying that money makes the world go round. The next section re-uses shots from *Sheer Trickery* showing traffic in Piccadilly Circus travelling backwards, to indicate the perils of putting your clock back too

early. A chef then demonstrates how to make a 'Cheap pie for 3 persons', the ingredients of which include caviar, oysters and 1812 brandy.

As in actual newsreels, the sections of the film vary in length, some consisting of just a few shots while others are longer and develop a more involved narrative. 'The Art of Self Protection' shows a man in a suburban street having his bag stolen by a robber (played by Brunel). The victim of the crime goes to 'Professor Ogo-Pogo, the Ju-Jitsu expert of the University of Mah-Yongg' to learn the art of self-defence. An elaborate series of physical manoeuvres are demonstrated to him and he sets out to put them into practice. Once again set upon by the robber, he leads him to a patch of grass and begins to imitate the elaborate sequence taught to him by the Professor. However, while he's doing this, the robber surreptitiously steals his watch, pushes him over, picks up the bag and runs away. For this skit, Brunel took inspiration from the phenomenon of a former boxer called Johnny Coulon who took Paris by storm in 1920 with his mystifying stage act. By all accounts, he had developed a 'magic grip', one finger on the ear of his opponent, the other on their wrist, which, when applied, rendered them powerless; a report at the time stated that 'one man has been robbed of £400 by an ingenious pickpocket while in the act of showing how it is done' (*Manchester Guardian*, 22 December 1920). While it was not exactly topical by 1925, the sequence is a very accomplished comic interlude and its reference to popular pseudo-scientific beliefs harks back to the reference to phrenology in the Minerva film *The Bump*.

The film's sports section is preceded by a title announcing that 'Owing to films not appearing till they are out-of-date, and in order to suit all tastes, we have combined our Sports into one section'. This sequence would not be out of place in an episode of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (BBC TV, 1969-1974), as three men wearing mismatched sporting gear (fencing mask with cricket pads, cricket whites with riding boots) run round a field hitting rugby balls with hockey sticks and tackling each other, a title labelling their antics as

'cutting it up rough and doing other things to keep fit'. Brunel later described the making of this sequence: 'My colleagues and I all dressed up in fantastic hybrid sporting costumes, and, together with our cameraman, drove out to a quiet field where we filmed our crazy sportsmanship' (Brunel 1936: 91).

As a collection of unconnected skits, the newsreel burlesque is somewhat hit and miss. However, since the jokes come thick and fast and in so many different forms (visual, textual, silly, topical) and the pacing of the shots and sequences varies, it proved to be a format with potential and flexibility, which is presumably why Brunel recycled it in the second group of burlesques.

As well as mocking the content of the newsreel, Brunel also points up some of the technical clichés it employed. In a section entitled 'Sago Making in North Borneo', he uses an 'in camera' effect, opening the iris at the start of each new shot so the image is seen inside a small circle which gradually gets larger until it fills the screen. He draws attention to the device with a title which reads 'Sorry to keep on opening and closing the picture like this, but they do it in all the best topicals.'<sup>13</sup> This section of the film is perhaps the least successful, consisting of titles describing the sago-making process intercut with shots of Trafalgar Square, a joke exploited much more effectively in *Sagrada*, which here rapidly wears thin.

Much simpler and more humorous is the final sequence: 'Paris Fashions for Men'. Brunel plays 'Mons. Paquin-de-Poche/ The Marvellous Mannikin of Montmartre' seen reclining on a chaise longue, cigarette in hand before modelling several peculiar outfits designed for different occasions, including a game of tennis or refereeing a football match. Titles describe a 'chic little sash of multi-coloured curtain-binding "The Rudolph"', which adorns a sheik costume in the style of Rudolph Valentino, and the 'apache scarf' or 'Novello', a reference to Ivor Novello's role in the stage play *The Rat*. The *Bioscope* review of the previous year's *The Pathetic Gazette*, describes 'a display of Paris fashions for men



by a male mannequin' (*Bioscope*, 9 October 1924: 58) and it would thus appear that Brunel simply inserted this sequence into *A Typical Budget*, presumably reasoning that, given the limited release of the earlier film, it was unlikely anyone would notice.

*Typical Budget* got its first screening at the inaugural performance of the Film Society on 25 October 1925, more than a year after Brunel had taken on Balcon's commission to create the Gainsborough burlesques. Sandwiched between Walter Ruttman's 'Absolute Films' and Paul Leni's *The Waxworks* (1924), it was perhaps not the ideal premiere for Brunel's rather uneven comedy and *Kinematograph Weekly* speculated rather drily that it 'will undoubtedly be seen in a less rarefied atmosphere' (*KW*, 29 October 1925: 48). While one or two reviewers responded well to Brunel's humour, several felt his film was an unworthy inclusion in the programme; 'the only English film... was a dismal failure' wrote *Saturday Review* (31 October 1925, reviews of burlesques, ABSC 5/56), *The Nation and the Athenaeum* described it as 'crude and thin' (31 October 1925), while the *Times* critic wished he 'had been better amused by it' (26 October 1925, reviews of burlesques, ABSC 5/56).

### ***The Blunderland of Big Game***

The fifth burlesque Brunel made for Gainsborough was *The Blunderland of Big Game* and it is the only one which has not survived. The idea had come to him directly after completion of *Crossing the Great Sagrada* (*KW*, 28 August 1924: 70), and was another spoof of a recent release, *The Wonderland of Big Game* (1923), which followed an expedition to East Africa to photograph wildlife. The image below is one of the few traces remaining of the film and suggests that it was made on similar lines to the others, with Brunel's stock company dressed up to play all the parts, its perpetuation of racial and colonial stereotypes and probably with the use of further stock footage from Brunel's cutting room. Despite the title, it was actually another expedition film which 'tells the story

of the ascent of Mount Eversharp by that intrepid explorer, Mrs Forseater Ford' (Brunel 1936: 21).



Figure 6 Cutting from Home Movies and Home Talkies, July 1933

### Distribution of the burlesques

Rachael Low put the burlesques lack of exhibition potential down to the fact that they 'appealed especially to those in the film trade' (Low 1971: 149). Her assessment of the films' appeal seems to have been shared by Gainsborough, who made little effort to promote and distribute them; only *So This is Jollygood* appears to have been screened to the press. This was understandably a source of great distress to Brunel, not least because, having worked without payment while making them, he was expecting a cut of the profits in return. Towards the end of 1925, in a last-ditch attempt to sell the films, a two-page advert promoting them appeared in *Kinematograph Weekly*, although it is not clear who commissioned and paid for this publicity. Perhaps Balcon felt obliged to help his friend out of a financial hole (he had not made enough profit even to repay Woolf's loan) or perhaps

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Brunel paid for it himself. Rather ironically It depicts a caricature of Brunel in his 'British Burlesque Factory' churning out comedy films as if on a production line. This attempt to 'brand' his work as a unique product which could be sold on his name and, indeed, his face, is typical of his approach to self-promotion during this period.

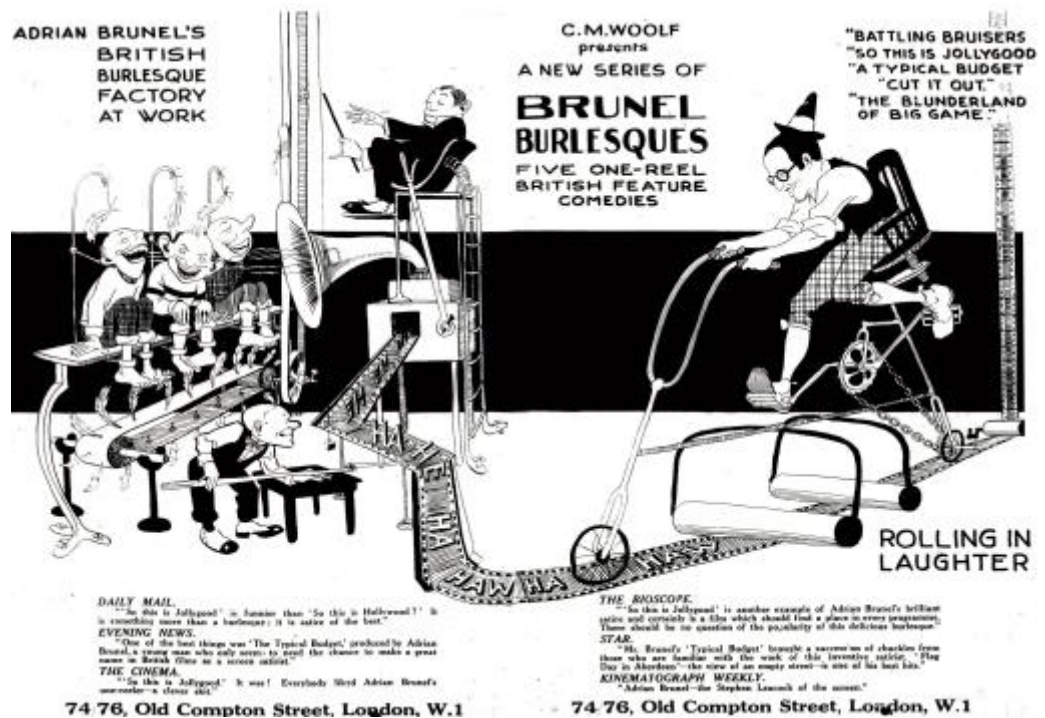


Figure 7 Trade promotion for Brunel's burlesques (KW, 12 November 1925: 10-11)

Brunel took up the matter of the lack of promotion with C. & M. Productions, the distributors of Gainsborough's films, in a letter to the company's General Manager Jeffrey Bernerd early in 1926. Bernerd had apparently written off the burlesques as 'terrible' and Brunel was incensed both by this assessment and Bernerd's lack of effort in trying to sell them, which had led to bookings amounting to a meagre £580 (letter from AB to Bernerd, 27 February 1926, ABSC 1/111). *So This is Jollygood* was shown at the Film Society on 11 April 1926, presumably in a last-ditch attempt by Brunel to secure distribution; the programmes notes optimistically state that the film was 'shortly to be released' (Amberg 1972: 7<sup>th</sup> performance). Getting no satisfaction from Bernerd, Brunel took his complaint to C. M. Woolf later that month and the distributor made his own feelings on the films known:

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As regards the general booking value of them, I am afraid that despite the fact that of their kind they are very good Comedies, they are too subtle and clever for the average exhibitor, and it is to be regretted that even with the small amount we have done in several instances where exhibitors have booked these films unseen they have tried to get out of their contracts, the principal offender being Davis of Marble Arch, who is paying for them but not showing them so he says, and I am afraid that I cannot hold out any hope to you that we shall even get anything like our money back on them. (Letter from Woolf to AB, 27 April 1926, ABSC 1/111)

He offered Brunel the opportunity to take on the sale of the films himself, reserving a small cut of the profits for the company. Presumably Brunel turned down Woolf's offer, realising by that stage that the films would be difficult to sell so long after completion.

Woolf's assessment of the films as 'too subtle and clever' seems to reinforce the industry's view of Brunel as a highbrow and the evaluation of the burlesques as appealing to a more educated audience. However, the humour in the later burlesques is more silly than intellectual and the jokes become rather laboured. While *Crossing the Great Sagrada* and *Sheer Trickery* have an air of spontaneity, having been born out of a spirit of experimentation and desire to create something new, the Gainsborough burlesques lack the same spark of originality and appears that Brunel found the pressures of his other assignments for the studio, as well as the financial strictures, hindered the creative process. While the first three burlesques were made as much for fun as for profit, they apparently provided Novello-Atlas with a nice income, Brunel wryly observing that 'If I had only received my share from the bookings I would have made about 900 per cent profit' (Brunel 1949: 108). Yet once the creative process became a job and his livelihood was at stake, Brunel found the inspiration more difficult to conjure up and the results failed to recoup the investment, with four of the Gainsborough series never being properly released. Brunel's situation had a great deal to do with this; he was keen to make himself useful to Balcon and found himself re-editing Gainsborough productions and writing titles for foreign films being distributed by W. and F. Consequently, by the time he had completed his next five burlesques, it was too late to benefit from the success of *Crossing the Great Sagrada*.

An 'abbreviated edition' of *Sagrada* was to show at the Film Society on 10 April 1927 but by that point Brunel had to concede that he would never make any profit from the series (Amberg 1972: 15<sup>th</sup> performance).

### **Recycling and reimagining**

However, this did not stop him turning back to the films when he next found himself in financial difficulty and the burlesques are prime examples of Brunel's desire and need to get the greatest return for his investment in every project, including that of his own time and ideas. Thus, not only did the early films utilise material which was a waste-product from the editing process, but Brunel continued to try and exploit the concept and humour for several years to come. In 1931, he scripted sound versions of the two travel burlesques, entitled 'Recrossing Sagrada' and 'So This is Africa'. The latter script, a reworking of *The Blunderland of Big Game*, gives an indication of what the earlier film contained and Brunel's notes reveal that the title was superimposed on a map of India and followed by the subtitle 'An Unnatural History Film' (reusing the title of one of Hughes' films). The credits appear as follows:

From a cast of 60,669 mammals, reptiles, Actors and other invertebrates,  
we would mention  
Mrs Smarty Jobson.....Edwina Greenwood  
Capt. Smarty Jobson.....Lionel Rich  
Oompapa.....John Orton  
Lord Pifford.....Mr X.  
(script for 'So This is Africa', ABSC 3/54)

These sound films were to be recut versions of the originals with a soundtrack added over the top, a development of the form which could have had comic potential since the juxtaposition of voice-over and image would have been more immediate. Neither film was made but it is possible that Brunel began recutting *Blunderland* and this may explain why the film has not survived.

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This project having failed, Brunel found other ways to capitalise on his ideas. Around the same time, he wrote a series of articles for *The Era* which recycled much of the humour of the films. One was entitled 'Trade Shows Revue-d' and was a spoof film review section which used the same kind of puns the burlesques had indulged in, with titles such as "'Baby's Irisch Nose" by Lowe-Brau Picture Corp' (*Era*, 30 December 1931: 4). Another article purported to be a guide for would-be screenwriters (the kind of amateur he deplored in his *Picturegoer* piece ten years earlier [Brunel 1921d]) and began 'Can you write? That is to say do you know how to formulate the letters of the alphabet? Yes? Then you can write film scenarios' (*Era*, 30 December 1932: 24).

Yet his advice to the amateur also took a more positive and paternal direction and he began to discuss his methods in making the burlesques to give budding filmmakers ideas for their own efforts. His first reflection on them appeared in *Close Up* magazine, focusing on their experimental aspect, as befitting the nature of the journal (Brunel 1928). But in his books on filmmaking, which were aimed at the amateur, he recommended this recycling as 'the cheapest form of film-making and in many ways the easiest' (Brunel 1936: 92). Most amateur filmmakers were still using silent film and continued to do so for some time even after the introduction of a 16mm sound camera in 1935, so these ideas would still have had relevance to this community. The other advantage of his method, Brunel elucidated, was that it did not 'rely on the usual forms of continuity, such as one requires in a story-film, you can cut out incidents bodily and boldly if they do not come up to the standard you set yourself' (Brunel 1936: 24).

### **Conclusion: Too subtle or too crude?**

In this chapter I have contrasted the reception of Brunel's burlesques at the time of their production with the ways they have been approached by revisionist literature, which has included them in a group of loosely defined avant-garde works made on the fringes of

the mainstream. I have shown that although they adopt a humorous approach and were made for commercial release, there are ways to accommodate them within the canon of experimental works. *Crossing the Great Sagrada* in particular stands out as an experimental effort which brought a genuinely original approach to filmmaking and, according to Brunel, was also a financial success. His first three burlesques were born out of a combination of a burgeoning home movie practice and a desire to test his theories of how manipulating and re-contextualising images in different ways could produce new interpretations of the material. The testing of boundaries he engaged in on these films illustrates the varied approaches he took to combining creative expression with commercially viable formats. However, when he tried to turn this technique into a lucrative franchise, the freshness and originality was impossible to sustain and the Gainsborough burlesques were deemed 'too subtle and clever' for mainstream cinemas yet too 'crude and thin' for the more 'rarefied' exhibition environment of the Film Society screenings.

As I have described, as a group of films, Brunel's burlesques are of considerable interest for what they reveal about the British film industry at the time. Although they do not all take an experimental approach to filmmaking, Brunel incorporated his observations on the film business and generic conventions into these satirical shorts primarily to highlight what he saw as a general lack of originality (of which he was not always wholly innocent himself) and point up what he regarded as 'aesthetic dead ends' (Sexton 2008: 59). Far from scathing attacks Sexton regards them as, Brunel's burlesques are best categorised as affectionate exposés of established film genres which he felt had started to become hackneyed, making a gentle dig at an industry failing to innovate sufficiently.

While the films facilitated Brunel's tentative entry into the studio system, this move also brought him into direct confrontation with the conservatism of those running it. Having attempted to bring originality to British cinema from a position of relative freedom

on the fringes of the industry, the next phase of his career saw him struggling to innovate from within.

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Sargeant credits the film *What's Wrong With Cinema?* (1925) to Brunel (Sargeant 2005: 93). However, although it has similarities to his burlesques, he does not mention it in *Nice Work*, he is not credited on it and there is nothing else to connect him to it.

<sup>2</sup> While O'Pray credits the film to Hill, the notes written for its Film Society screening suggest it was actually made 'by courtesy of Mr Sinclair Hill, by members of the technical staff at the Stoll Studios Cricklewood' (Amberg 1972: 32<sup>nd</sup> performance).

<sup>3</sup> According to Montagu biographer Russell Campbell, in other sources he stated that this particular incident took place at the screening of *Ballet mécanique* (Campbell 2016)

<sup>4</sup> Note the appearance of a puppet-like Chaplin at the beginning and end of *Ballet mécanique*.

<sup>5</sup> As Ian Christie has pointed out, in both France and Britain some practitioners did move between the avant-garde and the film industry (Christie, Ian, *Film on Film, Formal Experiment in Film 1910-1975*, Hayward Gallery 1979). In fact, René Clair only made one avant-garde film before embarking on a successful directing career and Germaine Dulac's career spanned both areas. In Britain, some of those involved with the journal *Close Up*, including Len Lye and future Brunel collaborator Daniel Birt, graduated to the industry in the 1930s.

<sup>6</sup> For a definition, see Beaver 2007 p. 46, although rather than a 'visual and rhythmic effect', Brunel aimed for comic results.

<sup>7</sup> He may well have preferred to remain anonymous due to the fact that he had begun working for Balcon and feared his flippant views may not sit well with his employers.

<sup>8</sup> While Van Damm's guests that weekend may have included such personalities, they do not appear in Brunel's film.

<sup>9</sup> Brunel may have scripted the film but at least some of the shooting was done by associates at Atlas-Biocraft while he was out of the country (letter from Miles Mander to Brunel, 10 August 1923, ABSC 207)

<sup>10</sup> Townsend suggests this is a specific reference to Mack Sennet's *Keystone Cops* (Townsend 2009: 287)

<sup>11</sup> Brunel was, however, well aware of how hard such filming could be and his autobiography details the difficulties he encountered while making *Moors and Minarets* (Brunel 1949: 67-86).

<sup>12</sup> 'Bertrude' the child in the scene is played by Brunel's son Christopher.

<sup>13</sup> Brunel's film collection housed at the BFI contains several cans of outtakes from *Moors and Minarets*, including a large number of such iris shot cut from the final version of the film. Presumably, when Brunel watched the first cut of his travelogue he realised how repetitive and hackneyed these shots looked and cut them all out.



**Chapter Five: 'A war film with a difference': *Blighty* and Brunel's negotiation of the British studio system**

While the burlesques brought Brunel to the attention of the industry, they failed to secure him the role he hoped for. In fact, his reputation for making successful films on a tiny budget ultimately worked against him and, having agreed to Gainsborough's terms of undertaking non-directorial jobs, he had effectively devalued his work. It took two years of campaigning before he was permitted to direct a feature for the studio, during which time he was kept afloat by sheer determination and a versatility that was both a boon and a hindrance. While he was kept busy with editing and other tasks, his directing career was on hold, with longterm damage to his reputation.

The last chapter explored Brunel's capabilities when allowed to work with relative freedom and demonstrated his potential for creativity when external interference was largely eliminated. Such experiences were not to prepare him for the complete contrast of directing a feature under the watchful eye of a producer and distributor primarily concerned with their profit margins. His attachment to Gainsborough no doubt led him to believe that he had finally gained a position from which he could influence mainstream filmmaking, backed by the resources and access to a distribution set-up that would ensure his films reached an audience. However, as this chapter will reveal, his experience of making his first studio feature *Blighty* was a stark introduction to the politics of studio production, requiring him to engage in complex negotiations in his attempts to maintain a level of creative control over the project. Through an analysis of the film's production process, I will provide an insight into the workings of Gainsborough Studios, its personalities and the tensions which were at play within it. The various versions of the story and script of *Blighty* in Brunel and Montagu's paper collections allow for a detailed investigation into the decisions and compromises made to balance the creative ideas of the

filmmakers with the commercial imperatives of the studio. The film will also be evaluated within a generic context, as an example of one of the most popular genres of the 1920s, the war film. I will consider the production and reception of war films during the period and suggest that the generally conservative nature of the genre threw up both challenges and opportunities for Brunel's continued endeavours to imbue British film with the originality he felt it lacked.

### **Brunel and Gainsborough**

Brunel was convinced that his lack of opportunities at Gainsborough was due to a conspiracy of two of its dominant powers: C. M. Woolf and star director Graham Cutts (who was himself beginning to be outshone by his former assistant Alfred Hitchcock). Ivor Montagu's assessment of Brunel's situation corroborates this view and he recorded that 'intrigues kept him ever from the floor' (Montagu 1970: 275). Brunel spent more than two years engaged in post-production on other people's films, including two of Cutts' features: *The Prude's Fall* (1924) and *The Blackguard* (1925). He took on whatever tasks he was offered to convince Balcon of his value to the company; his eagerness to please was driven largely by his ongoing financial instability and a desire to be accepted by the industry and he was thus prepared to work for Gainsborough without a proper contract. However, his willingness to work on minor projects for little recompense meant that he struggled to be regarded as a major player by the studio heads and he found himself employed as an 'odd-job man', with vague promises of a feature of his own to direct.

At the same time, he was fulfilling commissions outside Gainsborough, as outlined in more detail in the Biography section of this thesis. These included editing and retitling prints of foreign films to be shown by the Film Society, work undertaken by his own editing firm that now had two assistants, Lionel Rich and J. O. C. Orton, whom he felt under obligation to support financially. Despite dragging its feet over Brunel's long overdue

promotion to feature director, Gainsborough felt justified in scrutinising how he spent his time and took a dim view of his association with the anti-commercial activities of the Film Society. Consequently, at the end of 1925, Brunel was compelled to resign from the Board of the Society, although he continued to title and supervise the preparation of the foreign films it imported.

Brunel was becoming increasingly discouraged and, by the spring of 1926, approaching the age of thirty-seven and with only one feature to his name, desperation began to set in. His profile at Gainsborough had never been high and, as time went on, his prospects of ever re-establishing himself both within the studio and the wider industry were looking increasingly poor. His letters to Balcon veered between wounded and pleading to petulant and threatening. In one particularly bitter missive, he reminded Balcon of his promise that he would be 'working on a production by the beginning of last January [1926]', continuing: 'That date had to be postponed, I know, but in the meantime I find George Cooper installed before me and you are now talking about stars for Hitch's...picture' (letter from AB to Balcon, n.d., ABSC 5/111; although undated, the letter refers to Balcon's imminent trip to America which puts it around March 1926). His sense of betrayal extended to other collaborators: 'Ivor Novello's hope that I would not be directing "The Rat" is the sort of thing that has done me no good. Stannard, Emelka, Freedman and others have had their fling at me' (ibid.). Clearly dissatisfied with the studio's perception of him, he wrote 'I have carried on with the work, much of which you have been instrumental in getting me and for which I am very grateful; but the result has been in certain minds "Brunel is very happy – he won't mind waiting"' (ibid.). The letter inevitably comes round to the issue constantly driving his correspondence: 'I am hopelessly in debt and must again borrow a considerable sum this month. This is no concern of anyone's but myself, I know' (ibid). Later that year he sent another long letter detailing the services he had given the company, reminding Balcon that he had been assured that his work on *The Prude's Fall* had

'improved the film "a thousand per cent"' (letter from AB to Balcon, 18 May 1926, ABSC 1/111).

The amount of power that Cutts had at Gainsborough is revealed by several letters Brunel sent petitioning him to try and secure a commission; in January 1925 he received encouraging correspondence from him, in which he promised to take up Brunel's cause with Gainsborough's new Board member Charles Lapworth. Despite this, Brunel was convinced that Cutts mistrusted him and feared that he was being slandered behind his back: 'I...saw how Cutt's propaganda about my being "high-brow" had so undermined me and my own restraint had made me seem so unimportant, that I could be treated anyhow' (letter from AB to Balcon, n.d., ABSC 1/112); he threatened to resign from the company at one point on hearing 'from several sources that Cutts had said that he was never going to let me direct for Gainsborough if he could prevent it' (ibid.). Yet he continued to pin hope on his friendship with Balcon, writing 'When I read your reply, I realised how foolishly trusting I had been simply because I had one friend in the company. You were my friend, but I thought also that you had confidence in me' (ibid.) and he appealed to Balcon to use his influence with Gainsborough's board of directors to try and re-establish his reputation. However, Brunel may have been mistaken to assume that Balcon had such leverage, since he himself was under enormous pressure to ensure that his films returned a profit on the investment made by Woolf, who had been sole financier of his productions since *Woman to Woman* in 1923. Woolf was a shrewd businessman with 'the capacity to reduce strong men to tears' (Balcon 1972: 30) and commanded a high level of control over Gainsborough's production schedule, including which directors would get commissions. After the failure of Brunel's burlesques, what little regard Woolf had for him is likely to have dissipated and Cutts' apparent suspicion of him would have further hampered his progression. While Balcon clearly felt a sense of loyalty towards Brunel, he had to tread carefully with Woolf and pick his battles; he had fought to get Hitchcock a directing job and

then had to struggle to get his films released which would have left him little energy to argue for Brunel's promotion within the company. Balcon's faith in Hitchcock was eventually justified after the successful Trade Show of *The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog*, which saw the film hailed as 'the finest British production ever made' (*Bioscope*, 16 September 1926), a verdict which would also have boosted the profile of Ivor Montagu at Gainsborough, who had done remedial editing work on it. Perhaps, having secured Hitchcock's future, Balcon then felt able to address Brunel's situation since, on 3 November 1926, he contracted him to direct a feature, although the commission was not what Brunel had hoped for.



Figure 8 Cartoon of C. M. Woolf (KW, 10 January 1924: 54)

### **Silent Genres: the War Film**

The concept of genre during the silent period was less well-defined and seemed of less concern to producers and exhibitors than other selling points, such as the proven marketability of certain stars or properties. In fact, as Simon Brown points out, 'it was the producers who spoke the language of genre and they spoke it not to audiences but to renters and showmen' (Brown 2016: 147). The film reviews in the trade papers were erratic

in their assignation of genre during the 1920s; *Motion Picture Studio* and *Kinematograph Weekly* omitted it altogether, while the *Bioscope* reviewers allocated each title a 'Type' that seems to have been standardised around the mid-1920s. Films were divided into roughly two types: drama or comedy, with various nuances within these categories, so audiences could opt for a social drama, Western drama, melodrama; a burlesque or a farcical comedy.

However, one genre which was ever-present on cinema screens during the decade, and which was a topic of much debate in the press was the war film, and the relatively high number of these produced was a subject that exercised commentators both within and outside the trade. Perhaps due to this, and the fact that war films are regarded as a potent measure of the national mood, they have enjoyed considerable academic attention in recent years. In 2004, the British Silent Film Festival was devoted to the war film (leading to an edited collection by Michael Hammond and Michael Williams) and Lawrence Napper published a book on the subject in 2015. In addition, Christine Gledhill, Kenton Bamford and Andrew Kelly have given the British silent war film in-depth consideration within more general works on the period or genre.

The devastating effects of the First World War were explored by all forms of creative expression during the interwar years, when musicians, artists, poets and writers described, reflected on and tried to make sense of the destruction and tragic loss the conflict had brought. Filmmakers were no exception and, throughout the 1920s, various perspectives on the war were presented in the form of screen entertainment in Britain, Europe and America. However, the resulting works could never be a simple expression of an individual's emotional reaction to the conflict; as a commercial product film was subject to the pressures at play within the British industry that governed what kind of production found its way onto the screen. Through a reading of Brunel's first Gainsborough feature *Blighty*, this chapter will consider the sensitivities around the content of and approach to

the war film in the postwar period and explore how Brunel and his collaborators negotiated the demands of the industry, the press and the public to get it made.

### **The Art of War**

After his experiences with *The Man Without Desire* three years previously, Brunel's ideas about film as an art form had progressed and developed. The expertise in editing he had acquired, both at Gainsborough and on behalf of his own firm, along with the 'education' he was receiving through preparing and watching the foreign films selected for Film Society screenings would no doubt have fuelled his thinking on the balance between art and entertainment and how much of the former could be included without interfering with the latter. Hammond and Williams maintain that the war film could be a valuable tool when used by enlightened filmmakers as part of a move towards developing 'respectability in terms of film as art' (Hammond and Williams 2011: 3). However, this may have been hampered by what Napper regards as the way that some British war films of the period 'struggle to accommodate a series of competing modes,' resulting in works that are 'generally formally odd', a failing he relates to a more general 'crisis in language' affecting responses to the war (Napper 2011: 110). Neil Brand also detects this, describing most British silent war films as 'a vivid record of the very confusion, insecurity and insularity of those we witnessed fighting the war, particularly on the home front' (Brand 2011: 139). Whereas Germany, having been defeated, was better able to 'speak eloquently from the grave of its losses, horrors and nightmares through the medium of Expressionism' (Ibid.: 142), Brand asserts that Britain found it much harder to reconcile the notion of victory with the devastating losses it had suffered.

British films about the war tended towards superficially conventional narratives, such as those in Maurice Elvey's films *Comradeship* (1919) and *Mademoiselle d'Armentières* (1926) and *The General Post* (Thomas Bentley 1920) and *The Guns of Loos* (Sinclair Hill

1928). These often used a melodramatic mode to tell a story of romance against the backdrop of the war, allowing for themes of parting, battlefield heroism, camaraderie and the loss of loved ones. Elements of comedy were often employed to lighten the tone; stereotypical chirpy Cockney characters, such as Shorty Bill in *Poppies of Flanders* (Arthur Maude 1927), reflected the humour that had been so crucial to keep up the spirits of the soldiers in the trenches. Andrew Kelly, in his study of the war films made in the 1920s and 1930s, detected 'a depressing uniformity' in their unquestioningly patriotic approach (Kelly 1997: 58), while, looking back on his career, Michael Balcon recalled that '[h]ardly a film of the period reflects the agony of those times' (Balcon, quoted in Barr 1998: 13).

The general tendency of these films to present a non-controversial view of the war may be attributable to the fact that their aim was, perforce, to 'honour the memory of those who die in war without celebrating war itself' (Sargeant 2011: 80), a negotiation which may have compromised the ambitions of some filmmakers. As Brand observes, public feelings about the war were far from straightforward during this period and accommodating the subject within established narrative structures was perhaps a way of attempting to impose some kind of order onto the turmoil of emotions. A letter in *The Motion Picture Studio* supports this view: '[t]he public mind is still quivering in uncertainty, unrest and doubt, as the result of many years of most ghastly and cruel warfare, and unconsciously seeks every opportunity afforded to recapture that pre-war stability, sanity and equanimity' (MPS, 11 November 1922: 7).

Beyond the conventional narrative film, another popular approach taken by British producers to the subject of the war was the reconstruction of major battles. Director Walter Summers was one of the chief proponents of this form, bringing to the screen *Ypres* (1925), *Mons* (1926) and *The Battles of the Coronel and Falkland Islands* (1927) among others. These combinations of dramatic re-enactment with actuality footage aimed to bring to life battles which, for those who hadn't participated in them, must have been impossible



to imagine. But while generally well received – C. A. Lejeune describing *The Battles of the Coronel and Falkland Islands* as ‘without question the best motion picture that a British director has ever made’ (Lejeune, quoted in Dixon 2011: 20) – such unusual combinations of documentary and drama tended to be rather episodic and lacked any real points of identification in terms of characters. Contemporary reports suggest that audiences for these films were primarily male: ‘That young England is taking trouble to acquaint itself with the history of the war is the conviction of a number of cinema managers to whom I have spoken on the subject...*Havoc, Ypres, Zeebrugge* attract audiences almost all male and 50% postwar.’ (*Yorkshire Observer*, 30 July 1926, quoted in Gledhill 2011: 105). However, this may not have been the audience demographic that the producers were expecting, if the publicity for *Ypres* is anything to go by: ‘it is estimated that there are over three million survivors who fought in that inferno during the Great War, every one of whom will be anxious to live over again at a distance those dark yet glorious days’ (*Bioscope*, 17 September 1926: 47). There was undoubtedly a sense among the press and the producers that war films were continuing to attract audiences and that they offered a fairly safe box-office proposition.

In order for war films to present this ‘safe’ option, they were expected to portray a certain view of the conflict. According to Kelly, the conservatism of the British film industry not only accounted for a lack of variety and imagination in the presentation of the subject of war but it also precluded the production of any films which could be described as truly antiwar (Kelly 1997: 58). Conversely, Bamford implies that anti-war themes and sentiments were common in films of the time, singling out the Herbert Wilcox title *Mumsie* (1927) as an unusual example which ‘ran *against* the anti-war theme of other films’ (Bamford 1999: 168-9; my italics). Whether or not the films truly reflect it, anti-war feeling ran high in Britain during this period. Richard Overly states that ‘to be anti-war in the 1920s and 1930s was to acquire membership in a broad church...there existed a profusion of anti-war

organisations... taken together their active members and supporters certainly numbered millions' (Overy 2009: 221). The subject of war was undoubtedly attractive to producers, though it was perhaps less so to audiences. Bamford quotes the records of the 1927 House of Commons debates in which one Member of Parliament laments the fact that 'so much of the production... which goes on should only be in the direction of war films' (Bamford 1999: 129). If even politicians were bemoaning the overabundance of British war films, it is likely that the cinemagoing public felt the same way. In fact, when Sidney Bernstein's 1927 audience questionnaire asked patrons to rank eight film types in order of preference, men put the war film at number six, while women put it last (*KW*, 11 August 1927: 37).

Long before these results confirmed it, Brunel was convinced that the public had no appetite for war films and this formed part of his objection to his first commission for Gainsborough: 'a "war film" was about the only type of film I wouldn't direct. This was not only because nearly every war film was based upon the chivalry, bravery and sacrifice of men in the fighting forces, and inevitably pro-war propaganda, but because there had been a spate of war films and the public was sick of them' (Brunel 1949: 127). Indeed, while the genre had been a mainstay of British production schedules since 1914, it reached a peak in 1927. Under the heading 'Is War Overdone?', a contributor to *Kinematograph Weekly* observed that 'In our long list of home productions... about 25 per cent are war stories, and there is a risk that the public may tire of the eternal battle footage however well done' (*KW*, 9 June 1927: 20). Bamford suggests that the high level of production of war-themed films during this year may have been due to the imminent introduction of the Cinematograph Films Bill, or Quota Act, which contained a requirement that films should be 'adequately patriotic' to register (Bamford 1999: 130). This preoccupation with a conflict that had wiped out a generation of young men was hardly surprising, however, and was by no means restricted to the cinema; Malcolm Bradbury points out that 'the fiction of the

Twenties was... dominated by the war novel; by 1930, it's estimated, some seven hundred books had been written on the war' (Bradbury 2001: 144).<sup>1</sup>

As mentioned, the war film has been the subject of recent academic attention and the collection of essays compiled by Hammond and Williams contains various reflections on the important role it played in helping the nation work through the trauma of the Great War. But while offering some valuable and detailed analyses of the films which have survived, the book is less interested in the ways in which the British film industry negotiated the genre and its attempts to reconcile the dreadful reality of the war with the necessity of remaining patriotic while making a commercially successful entertainment film. In the course of this chapter, I will attempt to rectify this omission through a reading of *Blighty* supported by reference to the records of its production, in particular the various incarnations of the scenario for the film, Brunel's correspondence and reports in the press.

### **'A New Pattern'**

According to Brunel, it was C. M. Woolf who insisted that his directorial debut for Gainsborough should be a war film, the studio's first since its major success with *Woman to Woman* in 1923 (Brunel 1949: 126). Brunel's initial reluctance to undertake the commission was overcome through the intervention of Ivor Montagu, who convinced Balcon that a story set on the Home Front during the First World War would be more appealing to audiences than a more conventional approach. Thus, Brunel and Montagu set about writing 'a British war film to a new pattern' which omitted 'the grim terror' of the conflict (*Illustrated Daily Herald*, 27 March 1927, scrapbook of reviews, ABSC 1/85). Their story centres on an aristocratic family consisting of Lord and Lady Villiers and their children Ann and Robin, who reside in an elegant London townhouse with a strong air of tradition in its furnishings and trappings. While the names of the characters emerge during the drama, the opening credits list them as 'The Mother', 'The Father' etc., suggesting that they represent

everyman/woman; 'any family from the highest to the humblest' as one critic wrote (*News of the World*, 3 April 1927, *ibid.*).

The narrative traces the events that befall the family from the start of the war through to the first anniversary of the Armistice. Opening with a depiction of the occurrence which sparked off the conflict, the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand, the viewer is then taken to the home of the Villiers where the news of the event barely registers, Ann being more interested in the boxing results. Robin is away, studying in Germany, but is forced to make a hurried return to England as the threat of war becomes real, joining up the moment he gets back, despite not yet being nineteen. The film portrays the training he undergoes and the comradeship he develops with his fellow soldiers before they are sent to France. Later, in a tavern behind the French lines, Robin is reunited with Marshall, formerly the Villiers' family chauffeur, now his superior in army rank. Also at the tavern, Robin meets and falls in love with a French refugee, they marry and she has his baby. But he is killed in action before his child is born, and it falls to Marshall to break the news to the Villiers of the new additions to their family. The arrival of Robin's wife and child in London, which coincides with Armistice Day, brings some comfort to Lord and Lady Villiers and, one year later, they prepare to welcome Marshall into the family as well, as he and Ann announce their engagement.

This transformation of British society by the war, presented in the film in microcosm but implied as affecting the country on a wider scale, may well be a figment of Montagu's romantic imagination. Lord and Lady Villiers do not end up with the son- and daughter-in-law they might once have expected yet they accept without question the choices made by their children in this new order. However, despite the deviation from tradition, the film does conclude with the continuation of the family line ensured by the birth of Robin's son, albeit to a foreigner of uncertain heritage. The marriage of Ann and Marshall suggests that the First World War led to a lowering of class barriers, yet there is

little evidence that this really was the case and it is likely that this narrative feature was a figment of Montagu's utopian imagination rather than an accurate reflection of a societal shift. In fact, according to Virginia Nicholson, in the years after the war when young men were in short supply, gentlewomen did not contemplate marrying beneath them even though the alternative was spinsterhood<sup>2</sup>. Another societal change that the film highlights is the phenomenon of women performing men's work for the first time and thus beginning to demand the same rights as their male counterparts; when Ann and Marshall arrive at her family home to seek permission to marry, it is *she* who now drives the family car.

#### **'The artist versus the moneybags'**

*Blighty* was made by Piccadilly Pictures, a subsidiary of Gainsborough set up by Balcon and Charles Lapworth. With C. M. Woolf as chairman of Piccadilly, Balcon now found himself 'in effect tied indissolubly to W&F' and Woolf's control over the company's output increased. In Balcon's own words, Brunel's first feature for the company was to be 'a modest, inexpensive production' (Kemp 1997: 28; Balcon 1972: 25), Woolf presumably not wishing to invest significant sums in a film by a director in whom he had little faith and who had thus far shown himself willing and able to work for very little. His budget was £8000, below the usual for a Gainsborough film, which averaged between £10000 and £30000 (*Woman to Woman* had cost £30000) (Balcon 1972: 16). Given these financial limitations, the film had to be shot entirely in the studio and the only exterior shots are to be found in the stock footage of soldiers in France. After seeing the film at the British Film Institute many years later, Godfrey Winn recalled the money-saving measures Brunel and the crew had to take: 'the trench-warm that I had worn in one scene had been lent to me by the young floor manager who had been "out there" himself' (Winn 1967: 226). But one aspect Brunel was not prepared to scrimp on was the cast, although the fee for stage star

Ellaline Terriss reportedly used up such a large proportion of the budget that he was forced to employ an unknown actor, Annesley Hely, to play the part of her husband, Lord Villiers.

The economic strictures within which Brunel was working were spelled out in the contract he signed and it was in his own financial interest to work within them. His basic payment for directing the film was £350 but a £250 'bonus' was promised providing that he did not exceed either the budget or schedule. For each day that he went over the 28-day shoot, running from 6 December 1926 to 8 January 1927, he would lose £25 of his bonus, while every extra £100 he spent would mean a £20 deduction (contract, 3 November 1926, ABSC 4/112).<sup>3</sup>

It was clear that the relative freedom Brunel had enjoyed while producing independently was at an end and that Gainsborough would be closely monitoring everything he did, and not only on the studio floor. He had already resigned from the Film Society board and Balcon later expressed concern about his activities with editing firm Brunel & Montagu. Given his tenuous position, the opportunity he was given to direct *Blighty* required considerable negotiation with the studio to enable him to maintain even a limited amount of creative control. Having Ivor Montagu's collaboration undoubtedly smoothed the way and his idea to focus on the home front allowed him and Brunel to draw on their own direct experiences and memories of the period. In his memoir, Brunel records that the scriptwriting process was a group effort, describing sessions taking place at his home with accomplished scenarist Eliot Stannard at the typewriter and he, and occasionally Montagu, feeding in ideas (Brunel 1949: 127).<sup>4</sup>

In spite of the incentives offered to Brunel, the studio was taking no chances and kept a close eye on his progress to ensure he finished on time. Winn recalled the set visits from the high-ups in Wardour Street and detected the pressure the crew were under, although he recorded that Brunel maintained his composure throughout the shoot, describing him as 'an artist who achieved his best effects by never raising his voice' (Winn

1967: 226). Winn was under no illusions as to the state of the British film industry at the time and was aware of the problems Brunel faced, invoking 'the stereotyped lament in the making of all pictures...the artist versus the moneybags' (ibid.: 228). Brunel's composure was tested by the foibles of his cast, particularly the 'exhibitions of temperament' by French actress Nadia Sibirskaïa who incited the ire of cameraman Jack Cox due to her insistence on positioning her face at a forty-five degree angle to the camera (Brunel 1949: 128; Winn 1967: 226). Ellaline Terriss had stipulated that her contract include a clause which accommodated her taking a nap each afternoon, further slowing the film's progress. On 29 December 1926, Balcon wrote to Harold Boxall, Piccadilly's General Manager (who had worked at Islington studios when Gainsborough began production there), concerned that Brunel would overrun his shooting schedule. The letter would have left Brunel in no doubt about his place in the studio pecking order:

Mr Brunel will understand that not only will the extended time affect the cost of his own production, but it will affect the cost of DOWNHILL, which is scheduled to commence on Monday 10<sup>th</sup> January and if there is any delay in this connection, it will be a very serious matter indeed owing to the director and star artist being engaged at a high price for a limited period (ABSC 2/111).<sup>5</sup>

Following completion of the filming, Brunel set to work on the editing, his dual role presumably a further cost-saving measure, since his contract makes no mention of extra payment for his post-production work. The editing was delayed by an attack of arthritis, which had also affected him during the shoot, and he had to argue strenuously with Balcon against showing the film to W. & F. before it was ready, i.e. 'without our topical scenes, without fades, with scratch titles' (letter from AB to Balcon, n.d., 5/112). Brunel was well aware of the perils of projecting a film before it was at a suitable stage of cutting and would have been extremely concerned that to do so with *Blighty* would have jeopardised his future with Piccadilly and perhaps even held back the release of the film.



Figure 9 Nadia Sibirskaja as 'The Girl' in Blighty

### Striking the right national note

*Blighty* was Trade Shown in March 1927 and reviews describe the film largely in terms of its national appeal and its perceived realism. “*Blighty*” ...will thrill with its unforced drama and its memories, and it will also delight with its sensitiveness and its truth to life’ said the *Mid Devon Advertiser*, while the *Royal Magazine* described the film as ‘English to a fault’ (*Mid Devon Advertiser*, n.d.; *The Royal Magazine*, February 1928, both in scrapbook of reviews, ABSC 1/85). References to features of home front life are a key element of its Britishness with Brunel and Montagu drawing on their own memories in the period recreation. Lady Villiers scratches her head as she tries to comprehend a handful of ration cards, her husband screws up his face after sipping a cup of tea containing the saccharine used due to sugar rationing and, a map can be seen on the library wall with pins stuck in it marking the progress of the war. Such details throw a spotlight on the way domestic life was affected by the war and reviewers expressed appreciation of the realistic touches: ‘*Blighty*...is a simple, deeply touching and sincere glimpse of the home-life of very normal English people during the War, with its ration-cards, father in special constable’s uniform, wounded soldiers, heart-breaking telegrams from the War Office... air-raids, recruiting stations and girl-widows’ (*The Spectator*, 14 May 1927, *ibid.*).



Several critics referred to the impending quota laws in their reviews of *Blighty*: 'If all the quota pictures are of the same kind...the British exhibitor and the British public will have no reason to complain, and they should be shown abroad as typically British' (*Liverpool Post*, 28 March 1927, *ibid.*); 'There are a number of passages... in "Blighty" which... make it certain that in this country we have the ability to meet all that the Cinematograph Films Bill anticipates in British pictures' (*Sunday Pictorial*, 27 March 1927, *ibid.*). Exaltations of British films as valuable additions to the national canon were not uncommon in the press during this period; the impulse to proscribe and define a national cinema significantly preoccupied those commenting on the medium. The *Jersey Morning News* proclaimed *Blighty* 'the finest British picture yet made', while *The Birmingham Mail* declared it 'a fine British production which strikes the right national note' (*Jersey Morning News*, 26 March 1928; *Birmingham Mail*, 24 March 1927, both in scrapbook of reviews, ABSC 1/85).

As well as contributing to a national cinema, British films were also praised for providing a contrast to American productions. US war films, in particular, were regarded as brash, overly emotional and vulgarly jingoistic; *What Price Glory* (Raoul Walsh 1926) was described as 'lurid' while *The Big Parade* (King Vidor 1925) was deplored because 'not one mention was made of the English [sic] army' (Bamford 1999: 130). Lawrence Napper argues for a reading of British war films of the period as part of the struggle against the 'rewinding of history by Hollywood... that accords America centrality even in European affairs' (Napper 2011: 109). The harnessing of patriotism in efforts to further the cause of British cinema certainly played a part in this struggle and the need to combat the dominance of Hollywood was a constant theme in the British trade press of the postwar period and beyond. 'British' traits such as restraint and dignity were regarded as antidotes to American films; significantly, the reviews of *Blighty* abound with words such as 'sincere', 'sensitive', 'intimate' and 'simple hearted'. Brunel's desire to avoid a conventional approach to the

genre certainly informed the making of *Blighty* and the press was sensitive to this. *The Star* reported the following incident at its trade show:

A tiny something was just visible in the rays of two searchlights on the screen at the Marble Arch Pavilion on Monday night, when a woman came down the centre aisle and in a disgusted voice told her companion that it was "another of those rotten war films"...I hope this severe critic later acknowledged "Blighty" to be a war film with a difference and that she appreciated the touches of beautiful sentiment it contained' (*Star*, 9 November 1927, scrapbook of reviews, ABSC 1/85).

Andrew Kelly considers *Blighty* to be one of the few controversial films made during the silent period (Kelly 1997: 63) but is vague about the reasons, seeming to rely chiefly on Brunel's own description of it as 'anti-war'. Leslie Halliwell concurs with Kelly, hailing *Blighty* as 'one of the key British films of the twenties to make a comment about the war' (quoted in Kelly 1997: 63). However, Roy Armes equates it with the majority of British war films in its use of 'the love affairs of the younger generation... to celebrate the myths of the British aristocracy: gallantry in action and tolerance in behaviour, patriotism and self-sacrifice' (Armes 1978: 72). Such varying views on the film may be consistent with the lack of in-depth study of it until recently, but also indicate the problems inherent in trying to detect political meaning in what is primarily an entertainment medium, particularly in relation to a subject as difficult as the Great War. On the surface, *Blighty* seems to display a similar conservatism to other contemporaneous offerings, particularly since it recycles the common themes of loss and romance – albeit romance which transcends both class and nationality. Yet perhaps, as already suggested, this familiar narrative structure was a necessary frame within which Brunel was attempting to explore less typical ideas. I would maintain that by avoiding battle scenes and depicting the war almost exclusively on the home front, *Blighty* examines the effects of the conflict, both positive and negative, while avoiding the 'commonplace flagwagging or flamboyant heroics' of which many critics had expressed a weariness (*The Pioneer*, 8 May 1927, scrapbook of reviews, ABSC 1/85).

Some reviewers commented on the aesthetic aspects of the film: '[t]he photography...has that touch of genuine artistry which one associates with the work of Jack Cox,' wrote the *Sunday Express*, while the *Glasgow Sunday Mail* of the same date felt the film 'manages to be a little bit different from the war films that have preceded it, and gives the producer a fresh opportunity for impressionism' (*Sunday Express*, 27 March 1927; *Glasgow Sunday Mail*, 27 March 1927, scrapbook of reviews, ABSC 1/85). Its loose narrative structure was remarked on, sometimes negatively: 'it is at times a little disconnected and jumps too frequently from one subject to another...the status of the characters [is] not very clearly defined...' was the view of the critic in *The Bioscope* (*Bioscope*, 24 March 1927: 57). Monica Ewer, reviewing for the *Cork Weekly Examiner*, suspected this may have been deliberate: 'Perhaps Mr. Adrian Brunel was really bent on being very subtle. Can we trace here the influence of the expressionist school of drama? Are these composite portraits? Are these negative personalities of deliberate achievement?' (*Cork Weekly Examiner*, n.d., scrapbook of reviews, ABSC 1/85).

Ewer was unusual in perceiving an artistic intent on the part of the filmmakers, yet the various versions of the script held in the BFI's Special Collections reveal that in the early stages of preparation this intent was to be expressed far more overtly. The Ivor Montagu collection contains a second draft of the 'film story' (IMSC 20) and an original film story and 'skeleton synopsis' can be found in the Brunel collection (ABSC 163 and 5e/56). The film story in the Brunel collection is credited to Ivor Montagu while the other two documents are unsigned. The 'skeleton synopsis' and second draft film story are likely to be the work of Brunel, the latter also containing additional notes probably added by Montagu. All three documents differ substantially from the finished film and testify to the compromises made, which will be examined in the next section of this chapter.

**The evolution of *Blighty***

The second draft film story ponders the problem of ‘how to effect the time lapse’, referring to the considerable ellipsis of action necessary in a film which covers a period of five years. One suggestion made in the document is for a model shot, like that ‘used in *Fridericus Rex* [Arzen von Cserepy 1923] of a valley somewhere in France...gradually the little crosses increase in number, till the whole valley is filled with crosses’, marking the progression of the war as measured by the growing numbers of dead.<sup>6</sup> In the end, Brunel and Montagu opted to use what they refer to as ‘the panorama idea’ to indicate the passing of time. This consisted of shots of recruitment posters pasted to a wall with no spatial or diegetic relation to the rest of the action, showing how the messages changed to reflect the different stages of war. There is a grim irony in these posters on which Brunel fixes his camera as they proclaim the jingoistic exhortations which enticed men to their deaths. Declarations such as ‘We Must Have More Men’ invoke thoughts of the huge number cut down on the front line, while the notion that the soldiers in the trenches were as ‘Happy and Satisfied’ as the Tommy smiling out from the poster is hard to credit. These posters appear at intervals in the narrative, their potent images and patriotic incitements to fight sometimes referencing the events just seen, at other times prefacing the episode that follows. Before the scenes in the recruiting office, the posters announce that ‘England Expects Every Man to Do His Duty’ and ‘Join the Army TO-DAY’ while exhortations for men to ‘Fall In’ and go ‘FORWARD!’ lead into the departure of Robin and his detachment for France. Brunel’s use of propaganda in this way has a particular resonance given his role in the production of official films during the Great War. He later recorded that his strategy was to commission films which were diverting rather than didactic, urging producers to ‘look after the entertainment quality of their product, and the propaganda would look after itself’ (Brunel 1949: 40), a tactic which seemed to serve him well in his approach to *Blighty*.

***Blighty* and music**

From early in the development of the film story, music was a key element of *Blighty*'s evocation of wartime and, as well as visual and sensual reminders, it employs triggers to aural ones. Montagu's original title for the film, 'Après la guerre', was a phrase with several connotations. It became a euphemism for 'never', reflecting the seemingly endless nature of the conflict, but its main point of reference was to a song popular with British soldiers in France during the war, 'Après la guerre fini', the lyrics of which were sung to the popular pre-war tune 'Sous les ponts de Paris'. Onto this melody, the soldiers grafted the following blend of French and English:

Après la guerre fini  
Anglais soldats parti  
Mademoiselle in the family way  
Après la guerre fini

The song is sung in the film by the British soldiers gathered in the French estaminet, accompanied on the piano by one of their number. The scene is placed very deliberately within the film, just after a shot of Robin's wife as she sits holding her baby and listening to the singing. The choice of song is not, however, intended to cheapen their relationship, or to imply any lack of devotion on Robin's part, rather the construction of the sequence creates an emotional juxtaposition. The dissonance between the poignancy of the shot of widow and baby (it is the first time that the audience sees Robin's child) and the sentiments in the song has a slightly jarring effect (at least to those who are familiar with the lyrics, as most of the audience would have been). Hence, only the first line of the lyrics appears on the intertitles; since the audience could fill in the missing lyrics and understand their relevance to the plot of the film. As in the song, French mademoiselle has fallen pregnant by a British soldier, although in *Blighty* he marries her first and is killed in action rather than deserting her.<sup>7</sup> Yet the nature of the song doesn't sully the harmless release

that carousing in the tavern offered the soldiers and from her half-smile as she hears the singing, Robin's wife clearly doesn't detect any negative reference to her own situation.

Montagu's original title was still being used right up until shooting began at the start of December 1926 but, at some point in the following weeks, the decision was made to change it, Brunel expressing concern that exhibitors may find French words difficult and embarrassing to pronounce. So the film became *Blighty*, an affectionate term for Britain which acquired a particular resonance for British soldiers during the First World War, symbolising a nostalgia for home which was reinforced by its appearance in popular music hall songs such as 'Take Me Back to Dear Old Blighty,' 'Marching Back to Blighty' and 'A Bit of a Blighty One'. The last refers to a wound just serious enough to get a soldier sent home; Marshall refers to his own wound thus. So the very title of the film is likely to have evoked memories of the war for the audience, quite possibly in the form of one of these songs.

In Montagu's second treatment of the film he makes suggestions for the musical accompaniment: 'What noise have we got? "Tiperary" [sic], "The Long, Long Trail" is obvious British Instructional Music.<sup>8</sup> We want "Who's Your Lady Friend?" and other less hackneyed of the popular airs of the time' (second draft film story, IMSC 20: 19). While each cinema would have arranged its own accompaniment to the film, several of the press reports offer comments on the music played at the film's trade show at the London Hippodrome on 29 March 1927. The musical director was a violinist called Max Hayman and *The Kinematograph* reported that his 'musical accompaniments had been selected with restraint and discrimination' (*Kinematograph*, 31 March 1927, cuttings book, ABSC 1/85). *The Cinema* took a different view on the musical aspect of the presentation, noting that Hayman

made almost exclusive use of well-known war-time popular songs for his setting...although these songs have been used with every war film made, we have never noticed that they have been exploited anything like so freely... The idea of "Blighty" was to reawaken in the mind the emotions we all experienced during the war. The popular songs of the day had more

than an ordinary significance; “Tipperary” for all its cheapness as a melody, has become a classic, it cannot be played without stimulating the mind to the active memory of those never-to-be-forgotten days’ (*The Cinema*, 31 March 1927, *ibid.*).

Clearly, the musical accompaniment to the film was an important element of its evocation of the wartime mood. Even on set, music was used to stimulate the actors during moving scenes; *Picturegoer’s* reporter visited Piccadilly Studios during the filming and related that there was a piano at the edge of the set with a group around it ‘singing old wartime songs with sympathetic fervour, with the idea... of spurring on a dignified, elderly gentleman... to a big emotional crisis’ (*Picturegoer*, February 1927: 20-21).<sup>9</sup> Godfrey Winn later recalled that Ellaline Terriss also required assistance to emote: ‘in the scene where she said farewell to her boy bound for the front, [she] asked for a record of ‘Evensong’ to be played at the side of the set’ (Winn 1967: 227).

#### **‘Suggested symbolism’**

The second draft of the story suggests the incorporation of certain devices which Brunel and Montagu had seen in features shown at Film Society screenings. One such idea, which did not make it into the film, was inspired by *Feu Mathias Pascal* (Marcel Herbiere, 1925): ‘a close-up of a wedding-card or newspaper cutting, showing Ann and David arm in arm, perfectly still like a photograph. They then walk towards the camera’ (IMSC 20). But the skeleton synopsis contains more radical visual concepts which belie a more definitive attitude to war. At the outbreak of the conflict, a montage sequence was proposed beginning thus: ‘across the surging faces of the excited youngsters there fades in the sinister Brenda mask of the War-God. This comes to concrete’ (skeleton synopsis, ABSC 5e/56). The montage was to continue with a sequence of stock military images in which the soldiers are never actually seen in full, merely as disembodied elements of a larger war machine – hands loading shells and legs marching – as preparations for war get underway.

The Brenda mask is then seen again, slowly fading into an image of a different mask on which 'the senseless features have contracted into an expression of hideous joy and relish'. This grinning mask was to reappear at pertinent moments in the film.

While the finished film does contain a montage representing the outbreak of war, it uses stock footage of the armies of the different nations mobilizing and the gloating mask was excised completely. The title card announcing 'WAR' has the letters scratched directly onto the celluloid, which gives it a rawness and potency. A later sequence described in this synopsis reintroduces the model shot of a cemetery mentioned in the early film story, in which row upon row of graves is gradually revealed; this time, however, it was to end with a shot of white doves settling on an overturned gun. The subsequent toning down of such symbolic imagery may in part have been due to the intervention of Balcon, who, while he expressed doubt about their inclusion, was not entirely dismissive. 'I do think a lot of consideration should be given to the suggested symbolism before we definitely decide on the present suggestions,' he wrote and also expressed concerns about the slow build up of the plot and some of the lack of motivation (letter from Balcon to AB, 2 December 1926, ABSC 4/112). In the same letter, Balcon was adamant that one particular shot should not remain in the script, indicating how far he was prepared to tolerate the film's anti-war stance: 'I also do not agree with Lady Villiers taking up the Union Jack when she stands on the balcony to watch the departing troops' (ibid.).

### ***Blighty* as art film**

Brunel's experiences in the industry had already led him to conclude that British film art was not safe in the hands of film financiers. These experiences, along with his awareness of his tenuous position at Gainsborough, may have made him more circumspect about trying to include the more lyrical shots originally envisaged for *Blighty*, curbing his instincts towards visual experimentation in favour of maintaining more control over the



finished film. While the final version of *Blighty* bears relatively few traces of the proposed cinematic artistry, the impressionistic approach to the narrative was an aspect intended by the filmmakers from the outset. Montagu's original film story states: 'Plot slight, important thing, the war happenings, made acute by sympathetic nature of people who experience them. Compare this, and size of cast, with the Big Parade.' Critics noted this, with one reviewer describing the film as 'a collection of brilliant ideas' rather than a coherent story (*The Star*, 9 November 1927, cuttings book, ABSC 1/85). Montagu may have recalled an earlier British war film, George Pearson's *Reveille* (1923), which had 'no plot in the accepted sense of the word' and was also set largely after the war (*Bioscope*, 3 July 1924: 8). Or perhaps *Blighty's* approach to storytelling owes more to the avant-garde films that Brunel and Montagu saw at Film Society screenings, such as the experimental short *Ménilmontant* (Dimitri Kirsanoff 1926) with its fragmented narrative. *Blighty* certainly borrowed one major element from this film, in the form of its star Nadia Sibirskaiã, who took the role of the French refugee. Her pale skin, dark eyes and waif-like form are striking, and Brunel exploited her 'foreignness' to emphasise her role as an outsider who fundamentally alters the lives of one English family.

Sibirskaiã's stillness and calm presence offer a contrast to the more mannered performances of the British actors. Although the reports about her uncooperative behaviour on set suggest she was unhappy with the transition from art cinema to the mainstream, she and Winn, as Robin, play a beautifully understated scene at his last departure. With minimal gesture – she touches his hair, he gently fingers the collar of her dress – they prepare for his return to the front. After he has gone, the camera focuses on her face, glistening eyes raised to heaven as she utters a prayer for her husband's safe return. Several reviewers remarked on her expressiveness while the *Graphic* praised the film's unconventional treatment of the scene: 'For one thing alone this picture should be crowned with laurels...: A girl sent her sweetheart off to the war *without standing at*

*attention and saluting him*. I have waited many years for a film that had the grace to omit that embarrassing little ceremony' (*Graphic*, 2 April 1927, scrapbook of reviews, ABSC 1/85; their italics).

As well as eschewing a fully developed narrative progression, as already mentioned, *Blighty* depicts no actual combat events on screen, preferring to focus on the reaction to them by those affected. The avoidance of battle scenes means Marshall is not seen sustaining the wound which brings him home, the audience learning he is injured when Lady Villiers encounters him at the military hospital. Likewise, Robin's death is revealed by the arrival of a telegram and we are not explicitly told that his wife is expecting their child until after the birth. This lends authenticity to the way that events unfold since the audience is often not privy to them until the family back on the Home Front finds out. In this way the film unites audiences in a shared experience and provides opportunities for poignant scenes which all can identify with. The most notable of these depicts the arrival of the telegram announcing Robin's death and several critics singled it out. Renowned stage actress Ellaline Terriss (as Lady Villiers) was praised for the restraint and subtlety with which she played the scene, one reviewer writing: 'her slow mounting of the staircase, as though life had been bereft of everything worth having, was the work of one who knew how to make every movement count' (*Daily Film Renter*, 24 March 1927, scrapbook of reviews, ABSC 1/85).

The omission of scenes of conflict also allows the film to avoid any clear cut portrayal of 'good' (British) versus 'evil' (Germans); in fact there is almost no mention of 'the enemy'. Brunel's own retrospective assessment was that *Blighty* 'fulfilled the requirements of a popular patriotic picture, in that it showed a decent English family behaving decently' but avoided displaying partiality toward either side (Brunel 1949: 126). The only scene featuring Germans depicts Robin in Heidelberg where he has formed a close friendship with fellow student Fritz. This is the only representation of 'the enemy' in the

film and the generally positive light in which Germans are depicted sets the tone. Other British films presented much more negative stereotypes, such as *Comradeship*, in which a German impregnates an English girl before revealing himself as a spy when he abandons her at the outbreak of war.

*Blighty's* attitude towards the British army, however, is more complex. When he announces to the Villiers family that he has joined up, Marshall ventures that being a soldier will be 'more fun than driving a car', a statement which encapsulates the sense of adventure many young men felt on going to war, yet appears crass in the light of the horrific experiences most subsequently went through. The film also points up the ease with which underage boys were accepted into the army. Robin is asked 'Sure you're nineteen?' by the Medical Officer and, after a moment's hesitation, he nods, accepting Robin's response with no proof of his age. Another potential recruit struggles to read the letters on the eye test chart but his friend signals from behind the MO to help him pass. The fact that the scenes of recruitment are presented in a light-hearted tone goes some way to disguising the serious points underlying them but their effect is no less valid.

Between the scenes of Robin's recruitment and training, Brunel intercuts shots of soldiers marching through the night, with no clear indication of their spatial or temporal relation to the rest of the action. The soldiers are also presented as rows of anonymous uniformed ranks, amongst which it is almost impossible to focus on an individual or register any expression. The armed forces are mainly seen in darkness, such as those operating the ack-ack guns and searchlights during the air-raids; even in the wartime stock footage the film uses to summarise events, soldiers are mainly presented in silhouette. When Robin and his group of new recruits are being trained, they are initially shown in their civilian clothes which mark them out in terms of class and walk of life. But once they are parading in their uniforms, all individuality is erased; they may be democratised but they are also robbed of any distinguishing features. Robin and Marshall, part of the Villiers' household,

are the only soldiers whose fate we follow in the film, the other men who sign up with Robin are seen briefly but eventually disappear with no indication of what has happened to them. We never even learn the names of his two companions (the Cockney private already mentioned and a tall curate) and after Robin meets the refugee they barely feature, except for a glimpse of the curate playing the piano at the estaminet when Marshall returns to find her. Her character is not referred to by name in the film either (although she is called Marie and then Julie in early story versions) and the fate of the other refugees who arrive with her at the Café Normand is never known. These apparent loose ends reflect the uncertainty of wartime liaisons and show the damage that war does to relationships, robbing a man of his friend, a wife of her husband, a child of its father.

*Blighty* ends on a bittersweet note, the final scene representing another bridge between the past and the future. Ann and Marshall announce their desire to marry just as the two-minute silence is beginning on the first anniversary of the end of the war, a time when thoughts turn to those who lost their lives. In this way, the film's conclusion allows the audience to embrace the changes, as the characters have done, while not forgetting the dead. Lord Villiers' sad yet calm acceptance of Robin's death offers no comment on the validity of the war and this final sequence draws together the threads to end on a message of reflection and hope.<sup>10</sup> One particular shot in this final sequence, which is missing from the print which survives in the BFI National Archive, invited comment in the press. It shows Robin's son as a young boy playing with a fort and tin soldiers, watched by his mother and grandmother. This image (described by one reviewer as 'ironical') was an effective shorthand, linking memories of young men 'playing soldiers' with fears for the future. The war saw teenage boys like Robin joining the army in a fervour of patriotism and a spirit of adventure, oblivious to the horror which awaited them; even at the time *Blighty* was made, Britain was already haunted by the fear of another conflict in which the next generation would have to fight.



Figure 10 Young Robin plays with toy soldiers in a scene now missing from *Blighty*

### 'Quietly Anti-war'

The fact that some of Brunel and Montagu's original 'artistic' intentions for *Blighty* had to be compromised to meet the demands of the studio suggests that such aspirations were not easily accommodated in British cinema of the time. Some war films did incorporate more imaginative visual expression: *Poppies of Flanders* (Arthur Maude 1927), for example, uses a displacement device to indicate the mental state of ex-soldier Jim Brown, with a row of soldiers in a photo becoming a line of bottles. But this device sits rather uncomfortably within an otherwise conventional presentation of the story of a man broken by the Boer war who is redeemed by his love for a woman before being killed in the Great War. Other productions also contained moments of visual experiment, such as the final shot of battle reconstruction film *Ypres* in which the figure of Britannia appears superimposed onto a painting of a desolate battlefield with white crosses. The fear and desperation of those engaged in battle is conveyed in *The Guns of Loos* by an extreme close-up of a soldier screaming for more shells as rain streams down his face. However, while these moments offer an emotional engagement with the conflict, they are rarely integrated effectively into the respective films or form part of an overall artistic vision.

Brunel and Montagu regarded the British film industry as highly conservative. They were no doubt aware that a war film with metaphorical visual touches would be unlikely to find favour with Gainsborough, even though they had consciously focused on celebratory themes. However, *Blighty* was innovative in its approach to the genre and critics acknowledged it as an attempt to do something different and 'not a stale rehash of film conventions or an imitation of anything' (*The Spectator*, 14 May 1927, scrapbook of reviews, ABSC 1/85). Given that one of the aims of the Film Society was to expose British filmmakers to original ideas, it may have been expected that a collaboration between two of its founder members would demonstrate an appreciation of more innovative film-making styles. Yet Brunel and Montagu had to temper their ambitions for the finished film, as the existing versions of the synopsis testify. They claimed moderate success, however, in their aim to make a film which 'quietly' registered their views on war while acknowledging the sacrifices made by the soldiers themselves and, indeed, by those who stayed at home.

Despite the compromises Brunel had to make and the pressures he was under, both of which have been examined in this chapter, *Blighty* vindicated his promotion to director by Gainsborough. By taking a genre of which the public was expressing weariness, and using the theme to reflect on their own experiences and memories, Brunel and Montagu produced a box office success on a relatively small budget. Brunel's creative collaboration with Ivor Montagu makes the film of particular interest since it was the only one between these two key figures who were at work on the fringes of the mainstream during the 1920s. Brunel and Montagu used their interest in filmmaking techniques and appreciation of film as an art to build reputations within the British film industry which, briefly, allowed them sufficient freedom to nudge the boundaries of commercial filmmaking. While even their fairly modest artistic pretensions could not be fully realised within *Blighty*, their political convictions remained intact and they were able to satisfy the

demands of the industry and their own reservations about contributing yet another overtly jingoistic war film.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have examined the place of the war film in British cinema of the 1920s, both as entertainment and as a reflection of the feelings of British society towards the conflict. Within the context of this examination, I have located Brunel's film *Blighty* and outlined his approach to the genre given his anti-war views. As an example of the work of Brunel and Montagu, two major players in Britain's alternative film culture of the 1920s, *Blighty* presents a fascinating case study of how they negotiated the forces within the studio system to imbue an essentially conservative film genre with elements of art cinema. Working with Montagu led Brunel's creative impulses towards a more European aesthetic, as the notes of their deliberations testify, and my in-depth exploration of the genesis and production of the film brings to light the influences they brought to the project. My analysis has detailed Brunel's attempts to incorporate his original ideas into the film, shown how the structure and operation of the studio intervened to curb those ideas and the ways he attempted to negotiate those interventions.

Despite the restrictions imposed by the powers that be at the studio, Brunel managed to bring something of his own vision to the film and *Blighty* represents a relatively successful blending of Brunel's artistic aspirations and the commercial imperatives demanded of him. This was partly due to the small investment the studio had made in the project but no doubt also because of his collaboration with Montagu, a figure who had the trust of Balcon at the time. While many of their more overt visual flourishes were excised before production, the film does exhibit some effective devices, such as the 'panorama' shots used as a shorthand to mark the passing of time. Perhaps most importantly, they were able to base *Blighty* on an original screen story, making it unusual in Gainsborough's

filmography since the studio, in common with the majority of producers at the time, usually looked to existing literary and theatrical properties for their source material. Brunel's next two commissions for Gainsborough were to be adaptations and, as the following chapter will show, this was to complicate their progress to the screen and increase the pressure on Brunel as a director.

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<sup>1</sup> Many of these books were in the form of novels and a comparison of *Blighty* with such literature could encourage a re-evaluation of the film that would recognise its place amongst critical memoir of the period.

<sup>2</sup> See Nicholson, Virginia, *Singled Out*, (London: Penguin Books 2007) p. xiii

<sup>3</sup> Rather cannily, Brunel made the counter suggestion that if he brought the film in *under* budget, he would be paid 10% of the money saved.

<sup>4</sup> Stannard and Montagu are credited with the script and story respectively, while Brunel does not receive a writing credit. A letter from Brunel to Balcon in December 1926 also mentions the involvement of playwright Charles McEvoy (letter from AB to Balcon, 28 December 1926, ABSC 4/112). Correspondence also indicates that Balcon and George Hopton fed into script discussions.

<sup>5</sup> The director in question was, of course, Alfred Hitchcock, the star Ivor Novello.

<sup>6</sup> Brunel had edited this film for W. & F. at the beginning of 1925 (letter from AB to Balcon, 31 March 1925, ABSC 3/112).

<sup>7</sup> Lawrence Napper detects ambiguity in the film as to whether they are in fact married but the girl is clearly seen wearing a wedding ring. Although such liaisons undoubtedly happened, film censorship at the time would no doubt have prevented the presentation of a British soldier having an illegitimate child and it is unlikely that it was Montagu's intention to present this aspect of the war (Napper 2006).

<sup>8</sup> A reference to that company's battle reconstruction films.

<sup>9</sup> Brunel later referred to the problems he had had with the actor F. Annesley Hely so it is possible that the on-set accompaniment was necessary to coax a usable performance from him.

<sup>10</sup> The print of the film held by the BFI ends abruptly before Lord Villiers gives his answer to Marshall's request.



**Chapter Six: Adaptation and the Power of the Author: *The Vortex* and *The Constant Nymph***

While Brunel navigated the difficult production process of *Blighty* with relative success, the film's positive reception was not to improve his situation at the studio, as this chapter will demonstrate. Through a study of his next two films for Gainsborough, I consider the importance of adaptation within British cinema and the conflicting views within the trade and among authors about whether the novel or play was a suitable source for the cinema. The reliance of producers on existing literature meant that some authors acquired considerable power over the adaptation process, further complicating the struggle for control, as Brunel's experiences testify. Through an examination of the production histories of *The Vortex* (1927) and *The Constant Nymph* (1928) this chapter details Brunel's approach to the very different obstacles to creativity he encountered on the two films and evaluates how well he negotiated the problems they posed.

**Adaptation and silent cinema**

Up to and including *Blighty*, all Brunel's directorial projects had been based on original screen stories, yet this did not reflect the general trend in British silent cinema. For producers, the attraction of successful novels and plays as source material was obvious; a popular title possessed inherent marketing value as well as hopefully providing a well-crafted narrative on which to base their films. Stoll Picture Productions, for example, had so much faith in the strategy that it launched its filmmaking activities by acquiring the rights to a raft of literary works, branding its output the 'Eminent British Authors' series' and promoting its films on the back of the success of the books. According to Jon Burrows, 118 of the 128 titles Stoll made between 1919 and 1928 were based on contemporary English novels and the approach served the company well for several years (Burrows 2009: 157).

The Ideal Film Company, a distributor which branched out into production in 1915, had rarely strayed from tried and tested sources, while, as mentioned in Chapter Two, British and Colonial Kinematograph Company's 1923 series 'Gems of Literature' reduced works by Shakespeare, Dickens and Sheridan to one reel for easy digestion by audiences whose only exposure to classic literature may have been at the cinema. Even a young innovative producer like Michael Balcon failed to buck this trend: of the twenty-two features he produced between 1923 and 1929 only six were from original screen stories.

Rachael Low complained that 'every possible or impossible play and novel, historical, classical, pot-boiling and contemporary, was wrung into service' by the film industry, only to be 'changed about and made uniform by the script department' (Low 1971: 240-241). While this is something of a generalisation Low does get to the nub, which is that producers were as interested in such titles for their inbuilt publicity value as their intrinsic quality as source material. However, Low's negative views of this policy have undergone recent revision through the work of several academics, one of the first being Andrew Higson. Nathalie Morris summarises his argument thus: 'the choice of source text, often combined with other elements of the country's heritage (landscape, architecture, art, history) was a key strategy by which producers sought to mark their product as part of a nationally-specific cinema' (Morris 2009: 190). Revisiting Stoll's output, Burrows challenges Low's condemnation of the studio as a 'film factory without creative leadership' (Low 1971: 125), describing some of the imaginative strategies it applied to the translation of literary works to the screen (Burrows 2009: 157). Lawrence Napper has defended Gainsborough's preference for adaptation, citing the success of *Woman to Woman* (Graham Cutts 1923), *The Rat* (Cutts 1924), *The Lodger* (Hitchcock 1926) and *Hindle Wakes* (Maurice Elvey 1927) as evidence that the tactic could enhance the studio's reputation providing it was discerning in its choice of title (Napper 2009: 72).

The four titles singled out by Napper were indeed successes for Balcon (although the inclusion of *The Rat* is questionable since it originated as a screenplay before being rewritten for the stage) but he does not mention the box office failure of some of the studio's other film adaptations. Balcon himself admitted that the profits from his first feature *Woman to Woman* (based on the play by Michael Morton) were swallowed up by the losses of his second, *The White Shadow* (Cutts 1924) (based on an unpublished novel by the same author) (Balcon 1969: 16).<sup>1</sup> The company later filmed three of Noël Coward's plays in quick succession: *The Queen Was in the Parlour* (Cutts 1927), *Easy Virtue* (Hitchcock 1928) and *The Vortex*, banking on the playwright's reputation for controversy to bring in audiences. However, all three were financial failures, leading Balcon to reflect in his autobiography that 'It was no doubt wrong of us to seek to bask in the reflected glory of people like Noël Coward, we followed trends and did not try to make them' (Balcon 1969: 27). However, as I have already illustrated, Balcon was not entirely in control of Gainsborough's production slate and many of the decisions regarding its content lay with distributor and major stakeholder C. M. Woolf.

### **Merit Rewarded**

In 1929, *Film Weekly* readers were asked to vote for their favourite British film released the previous year in order to give 'practical help to British producers' (*Film Weekly*, 11 February 1929: 6). A list of 28 titles was printed from which readers selected their top six.<sup>2</sup> Of these films, 22 were adaptations<sup>3</sup> and three were directed by Brunel: *The Constant Nymph* at number one, *Blighty* at number eight and *The Vortex* at number twenty-three. *The Constant Nymph* was based on a successful stage play taken from a best-selling novel and was one of eight adaptations in the top ten. *The Vortex* was joined towards the bottom of the poll by three other film versions of hugely successful stage plays: *The Arcadians* (Victor Saville 1927) at number nineteen, Hitchcock's *Easy Virtue* at

number 21 and *Quinneys* (Maurice Elvey 1927) at number twenty-two (*Film Weekly*, 22 April 1929: 5).

These two Brunel adaptations in the *Film Weekly* poll were directed for Gainsborough after *Blighty* and serve as illustrations of the negotiations involved in bringing successful properties to the screen. The fact that both were adaptations introduced further challenges to Brunel's determination to put into practice the ideas he had been cultivating and imbue his work with a personal stamp. The power and influence of authors and playwrights within the British film industry was considerable and many were engaged in testing the limits of that power through attempts to maintain control over their own intellectual property. The most notable example was popular and prolific crime writer Edgar Wallace. He joined the Board of British Lion in 1927, guaranteeing them first option on all his books but allowing him significant control over how his work was presented, even down to directing two of the films. For Brunel, the added involvement of well-known authors further complicated his job and, despite the prestige of the subjects, had the effect of depleting his own symbolic capital rather than enhancing it.

The process of translating a literary work into a screenplay could be complicated by many factors. The task of screenwriting was often hampered by the fundamental unsuitability of the source material or the interference of the author. The screen persona of the star involved could affect the narrative (for example, Ivor Novello's casting in Hitchcock's *The Lodger A Story of the London Fog* meant his innocence had to be established at the end of the film), while the censorship restrictions for film were more stringent than those for theatre or literature.

#### **Adaptation vs. original screen stories**

The relative merit of adapted and original screenplays was the subject of considerable debate in both the trade and general press during the silent period. Many

commentators felt that as a new medium and an essentially visual form, cinema was better served by specially written screen stories and that silent film could never do justice to the novel or play. While silent films could advance plot and communicate dialogue via intertitles, it was generally accepted that overuse of these interrupted the narrative flow; as early as 1920, director Kenelm Foss declared that 'every sub-title is a confession of failure' (Foss 1920: 13). While some novels lent themselves more readily to visual communication, particularly those which related a story with sufficient action to ensure a cinematic approach, stage plays were generally dialogue-driven and dependent on nuance of language and verbal tone to convey character and motivation which were difficult to articulate via text or facial expression.

Brunel's experience adapting novels and plays for British Actors' Film Company had cemented his belief that cinema was best served by specially written stories which developed the medium as a new artistic form with its own language. This strategy had also helped to keep down production costs; while purchasing a successful property could be expensive, Brunel's collaborations with established authors A. A. Milne and Monckton Hoffe had provided him with inventive outlines for his films at a fraction of the price, to which his skill could then be applied to visualise the story for the screen.

### **Authors and film**

In September 1927, *Bioscope* reprinted a joke seen in a publishing magazine which indicated its view of film adaptations:

Publisher: 'Where did you get the plot for your second novel?'

Author: 'From the film version of my first.'

(*Bioscope*, 1 September 1927: 55)

The perception that film producers had little respect for the integrity of authors or the literary works they purchased may well have been largely accurate but the authors themselves were not above reproach. In his 1925 Gainsborough burlesque *So This is*

*Jollygood*, Brunel had portrayed the author as a hardheaded businessmen, eager to exploit film producers by demanding 100% of their profit in return for the rights to his novel. Yet some writers possessed sufficient integrity to acknowledge the limitations of adapting novels and plays to film. In 1921, popular Scottish writer and journalist Neil Munro had told *Bioscope* that 'as a novelist myself... I declare to you my honest conviction that good – and even famous – novels can't make really good films...The film drama must be absolutely original, written from the beginning for the film and not for print' (*Bioscope*, 24 March 1921: 77).<sup>4</sup>

Five years later Virginia Woolf added her voice to the campaign, albeit in a rather more poetic manner. In a 1926 article entitled 'The Cinema', she expressed her views about the development of the new medium:

So many arts seemed to stand by ready to offer their help... All the famous novels of the world, with their well-known characters and their famous scenes, only asked, it seemed, to be put on the films... The cinema fell upon its prey with immense rapacity, and to the moment largely subsists upon the body of its unfortunate victim. But the results are disastrous to both (Woolf 1981: 168).

While there was little danger of Woolf's brand of highbrow literature appearing on screen, her views were echoed the following year by Andrew Soutar, who had been widely adapted for the cinema both in Britain and America. In a leading article in *Bioscope* he asserted that: 'the original story written by one who possesses an exact knowledge of the screen's possibilities and impossibilities is vastly superior to ninety per cent of novels or plays...The novel, the stage and the screen are three distinct mediums of expression, each demanding a technique of their own' (*Bioscope*, 18 August 1927: 32). His article prompted the following letter in response:

Authors hold the film industry in the palms of their hands and I believe that they will continue to do so, so long as film producers cannot be brought to realise that a novel worth £10,000 to a publisher may not be worth twopence as material for a film... we will continue to have bad pictures, and plenty of them, so long as the film companies refuse to put the original

scenario-writer in his proper place instead of making him a literary batman to the successful novelist and playwright.

But when is the budding author going to concentrate from the first on the screen itself as a medium? Not so long as film companies prefer the established novelist and playwright and treat the scenario-writer as a mere 'hack' (John A McCaughan, *Bioscope* 25 August 1927: 35).

In 1928 *Picturegoer* canvassed the views of best-selling authors as to whether screen adaptation was preferable to original stories and asked if they were being 'encouraged to write specially for the film producer' (*Picturegoer*, December 1928: 28). Several of the authors defended their profession, insisting that only an experienced writer had the skill and dedication to properly craft a narrative while the untrained and hurried work of the 'hack' scenario writer could never attain an equal literary standard. Novelist and playwright W. B. Maxwell went a step further, expressing the view that 'the art of the screen should be illustrative or interpretative, and not inventive or creative' (*ibid.*). Joan Sutherland condemned original screen stories as 'thin, weak in characterisation and somewhat lacking in plot', perhaps a rather disingenuous view considering she was a prolific writer of romantic fiction for Mills & Boon (McAleer 1999: 46-47). She clearly had an axe to grind with the film industry and took the opportunity to complain that:

it seems the hardest thing in the world to sell books to film producers and novels once so posted or delivered vanish into the blue...not even a printed note comes to the unfortunate fondly hoping author, and, as for the aforesaid copies, heaven and the studio's office char-woman alone can know what becomes of them (*Picturegoer*, December 1928: 29-30).

Sutherland's view provides an interesting contrast to that of Virginia Woolf; the two authors resided at opposite ends of the literary scale, neither of which held much appeal for film producers. As Lawrence Napper illustrates in *British Cinema and Middlebrow Culture in the Interwar Years*, studios in the 1920s turned largely to middlebrow writing for their source material. Popular author Boyd Cable fell into this category and his 1923 short story 'The Rolling Road' had been filmed by Gainsborough in 1927. Despite his relationship with the cinema, Cable told *Picturegoer* that 'the

adaptation... does not make as good a picture as the story written directly for the screen... because the method of telling the story is so entirely different that one loses by being wrenched to the method of another' (ibid.: 28). He regarded it as 'a weakness of the screen that it so commonly seeks its material in successful books or plays, merely because they have been successful' (ibid.) insisting further that 'the strongest (if unconscious) supporters of my belief are the producers themselves, because they are admitting a novel or play is not suitable for the screen when they turn it upside down and inside out and round about in the effort to turn it into a screen play' (ibid.: 28-29).

This overreliance on proven titles undoubtedly contributed to a stifling of originality in British cinema and held back the development and recognition of screenwriting as a creative art. Some properties did make a successful transition to the screen, usually where producers made a judicious choice of title and screenwriters adopted an imaginative approach to the screenplay; one writer who could be relied upon to do this was Eliot Stannard. He had been in the business since 1914, had extensive experience of adapting literary works and wrote all of Hitchcock's screenplays for Gainsborough, as well as many others for the studio including *Blighty* and *The Vortex* for Brunel. Stannard had developed the skill of teasing out the cinematic elements of a narrative and introducing visual devices that would convey theme and characterisation in an original way. However, like Brunel, Stannard was subject to the forces that held sway at the studio and due to his freelance status had to tread carefully. While Stannard could have been a valuable ally for Brunel, yet he failed to form an alliance with his screenwriter, as Hitchcock clearly had, instead allowing his insecurity to make him suspicious of Stannard's loyalties. In a letter to Brunel written soon after they had worked on *The Vortex* in 1927, Stannard sought to reassure him: 'You must believe me when I tell you I am incapable of hurting a man behind his back, of sneaking, of putting up my opinion against his where it does not directly concern me; or of crawling or flattering' (letter from Stannard to AB, n.d., ABSC 5/112). He



also alluded to the difficulties of reconciling his position as a creative writer with the commercial demands of the industry, claiming 'I am outspoken, impatient... and lost jobs through rightly or wrongly taking a certain artistic stand' (ibid.). Their collaboration on *The Vortex* undoubtedly tested their relationship, creating tensions clearly exacerbated by Brunel's own anxiety about his position at the studio and he and Stannard did not work together again.

### ***The Vortex: Coward's first hit***

After *Blighty*, Brunel had hoped to direct Noël Coward's *Easy Virtue* but that assignment was given to Hitchcock. Instead, it was announced in *The Bioscope* on 21 April 1927 that Brunel was to bring to the screen another Coward hit, *The Vortex*. Although a very different subject to his previous film it has certain thematic links in that it considers the effects of the First World War on a well-to-do family. However, while *Blighty* dealt with general societal changes relating to gender and class, *The Vortex* takes a more psychological approach in its examination of contemporary family life. Announced as a 'tale of postwar youth', Coward's play hinted at the selfishness and moral confusion of the decadent years following the conflict, exploring the theme via a mother/son relationship threatened by behaviour on both sides which betrays and undermines the traditional family roles.

Coward's play had been a huge success and had brought him celebrity both as playwright and actor. However, its controversial subject matter (infidelity and drug-taking) meant it was beset by censorship issues and Coward had to appeal to the Lord Chamberlain in person to get permission to stage it, apparently managing to convince him that it was a 'moral tract' (Morley 1975: 94). His intention had been to write 'a good play with a whacking good part in it for myself' (Coward 1934: xv) to further his acting career but West End theatrical managers would not finance it without a star name attached. So he

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produced and directed it himself at Hampstead's Everyman Theatre in November 1924 where it was so popular that its two-week run was immediately followed by six months in the West End.

The play focuses on the Lancasters, an upper-class English family. Florence refuses to conform to the behaviour that society expects from a middle-aged wife and mother, preferring to leave her 'pre-war' husband, David, in his country retreat while she enjoys the company of younger men. In Act I, her son Nicky, a composer, brings home his fiancée Bunty to meet his mother but she finds it difficult to accept the concept of her son getting married, especially when it emerges that Bunty was once engaged to Tom Veryan, Florence's current companion. Act II takes place at a weekend party in the Lancaster's country home, where it emerges that Nicky takes drugs and the tensions present between him, Florence, Bunty and Tom erupt. Bunty breaks off her engagement to Nicky and Florence then finds her in the arms of Tom, causing her to have a hysterical outburst. Act III shows the fall-out from the party; Nicky goes to his mother's room to try and make her understand the effect her behaviour is having on him and their relationship. They are reconciled but it is too late for Nicky's relationship to be saved.

If the play had proved difficult to bring to the stage, the film version was to encounter even greater obstacles and Brunel was unhappy with the assignment, knowing that major liberties would have to be taken with the plot to appease the censors. Nicky could not be portrayed as a drug-user while Florence's dalliance with Tom Veryan would have to be confined to nothing more than outings to the theatre and dances. Brunel and Stannard thus embarked on the challenging job of translating Coward's play for the screen.

Watching *The Vortex*, one may well concur with the description of it by William K. Everson as 'a curiously flat version of the Coward play' (Everson 1973). The film sticks closely to the structure of the play, Act I mostly taking place in Florence's London home (with the addition of some establishing scenes at Nicky's studio), while Acts II and III relate

events during the weekend gathering at David Lancaster's country home, opened out with a few exteriors of the garden. Most of Brunel's set-ups exhibit little creativity or variety and consist mainly of long shots intercut with medium shots, with almost no close-ups. In fact, during preparation Brunel expressed his dislike of 'half-meaningless close-ups', preferring to use them sparingly for greater effect (*The Vortex*, Initial Continuity, ABSC 4/43). The few close-ups in *The Vortex* appear during the film's emotional climaxes when rapid cutting between the faces of the characters brings their reactions to the fore and conveys the intensity of the scene. The film's somewhat pedestrian construction is occasionally enlivened by devices such as a jerky panning shot around Florence's living room to simulate Nicky's gaze as he takes in her 'strenuous' décor and a shot in which Nicky spies the dancer Yvette reflected in a mirror surreptitiously taking drugs.<sup>5</sup>

### **Coward on screen**

Coward himself had no input into the adaptations of his three plays by Gainsborough and at the time professed to having no interest in writing for the screen 'I want to write words not stage directions...it doesn't appeal to me' (*KW*, 30 June 1927: 45). In production at around the same time as *The Vortex* was Hitchcock's version of Coward's *Easy Virtue*. Another Stannard adaptation, it takes enormous liberties with the play and includes a lengthy sequence shot on the Riviera. On stage, the entire action of *Easy Virtue* takes place at the home of the Whittakers, a rather staid and conservative family, whose son John arrives home with Larita, a divorcée several years his senior whom he met and married in Paris. Stannard relegated the events of the play to the final third of the film, opening with a lengthy courtroom scene interspersed with flashbacks which detail Larita's unhappy first marriage and infidelity. The film's editing, especially in this first act, displays considerable ingenuity, with a variety of shot distance and a greater sense of movement within shots. Several of the flashbacks are introduced through imaginative intercutting, for

example a close-up of the judge's monocle swinging becomes the pendulum of a clock. The sequence is also made more dynamic by the use of cutaways, for example to a shot of a court reporter's notebook in which a précis of the case is being written, thus avoiding the need for static titles to convey dialogue. Following the court case, Larita travels to the Riviera, as did Hitchcock and his cast and crew to film her romance with John Whittaker.

Coward's opinion of Stannard and Hitchcock's transformation of *Easy Virtue* does not appear to be on record but he did express his appreciation of the performances: 'I think Isabel Jeans and Franklin Dyll... are both marvellous in 'Easy Virtue,' which I have just seen run through' he told *Kinematograph Weekly* in an interview about his thoughts on the cinema (*KW*, 30 June 1927: 45). However, his tone seems to convey a slight impatience with cinema's obsession with the stage: 'pandering is a mistake... let British film makers be honest with themselves and do their best without reference to what the public are wrongly supposed to demand' (*ibid.*).

The contrast between the production values of these two Coward adaptations indicates the relative standing of Brunel and Hitchcock within Gainsborough at the time. The luxury of a location shoot was denied Brunel and sequences requiring extras (such as a rehearsal and a party scene) were dropped from *The Vortex*, while Hitchcock's courtroom scene contains a whole gallery of observers that appears in two or three brief shots. Although the impressive sets for both films were designed by Clifford Pember, *Easy Virtue* has more than twice as many, including a lavish dining room at the Whittaker's house replete with floor-to-ceiling murals that is only glimpsed in two scenes.

But it was not only the budget of the two films that dictated their relative merits. Hitchcock was apparently entrusted with greater control over the direction of *Easy Virtue* and permitted the inclusion of expressionist touches akin to those he had used in *The Lodger A Story of the London Fog* the previous year and which had earned praise from critics. In contrast, the ideas developed by Stannard and Brunel to make *The Vortex* more

cinematic and communicate the themes of the play did not make it to the screen, although they are present in the versions of the script in the Brunel collection. As with *Blighty*, attempts to introduce poetic visuals were not supported by the studio and the creative elements of the screenplay fell victim to the lack of budget or Balcon's nervousness about permitting such 'experimentation'.

### **Adapting *The Vortex***

The Brunel collection contains Stannard's film treatment and his initial continuity; there are also notes and letters containing thoughts and ideas from Brunel, his mother Adey and Angus MacPhail. One of Brunel's concerns was that the average viewer might not know what a vortex was and he suggested finding a way to 'illustrate the meaning of the word cinematically in the manner of [Walther] Ruttmann or [Dudley] Murphy (cf. "Metropolis" [1924] and "The Love of Sunya" [1927])' (letter from AB to Balcon, n.d., ABSC 3/158). Following this, he advocated an opening montage

devised from symbolic representations of Modern Society, Neuroticism, the affectations of Art with a capital A, the popularly supposed moral freedom of Paris, etc. Such a series of conglomerated shots could be made to end up with shots of Nicky's hands alternately playing the piano and writing the musical score he is engaged upon...I have a fondness for such shots as these last two as an introduction to our character (ibid.).

For later scenes, he proposed that 'the stages of Nicky's disillusionment might be marked by photographic symbolism, if we have any brain waves on the subject' (ibid.). It is hard to imagine an audience that struggled with the meaning of 'vortex' responding positively to 'symbolic representations of...Neuroticism' and Brunel's montage did not make it into the scenario. Stannard had his own idea for establishing the themes of the film, imagining

a symbolic tableau explaining the meaning of *The Vortex*... I would suggest characters in Brenda masks showing a wonderfully dressed woman in youthful mask talking to a man in evening dress with the mask head of a hog and Nicky young and happy and expressionless. His face changes to spiritual and physical horror as the masks fade off the other two characters

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revealing an old woman and a young man. (*The Vortex*, initial continuity, ABSC 1/161)

This nightmarish sequence was to be followed by scenes establishing the two main characters: Florence about to undergo a facelift, revealing her vanity, and Nicky in Paris, a successful composer leading a bohemian lifestyle. Stannard described a party at Nicky's studio attended by 'slightly eccentric, rich Paris poseurs...exquisites and dandies...[t]he women are glorious dolls with a smattering of women who defy fashion' (suggested film treatment, ABSC 4/158). Stannard also wrote in two sequences showing rehearsals for Nicky's revue, the first with dancers in rehearsal clothes while the second was to mirror the action of the first but 'aided by gorgeous costumes and skilful lighting [so] the scene becomes a riot of colour and life' (suggested film treatment, ABSC 4/158). Act II was also to gain some sequences aimed at injecting some interest, Stannard suggesting superimposing 'phantom hands' playing the piano over shots of Bunty running upstairs (Scenes 377-380, Initial Continuity, ABSC 1/161) to bring some variation to an otherwise flat sequence. More ambitiously, he wrote in a shot of Nicky criticising Florence's taste in clothes, followed by a cutaway of 'a mannequin parade between two biting titles showing that Florence has bought for herself dresses displayed by girls of eighteen... a splash of movement and colour in the midst of a very intimate sequence, which without break or relief might be somewhat monotonous on the screen (for this act relies greatly on the spoken word and inflection of voice)' (suggested film treatment, ABSC 4/158).<sup>6</sup> None of these elements found their way into the finished film and, apart from the opening scenes in Nicky's studio, an introductory shot showing Florence undergoing beauty treatments, some exteriors of the Lancaster's garden and the final reconciliation scene, the film adheres fairly closely to the structure of the play.

Ian W. MacDonald has analysed the various written versions of *The Vortex* for an article about the position of the scenario writer during the late silent period (2011). He

regards the correspondence between Brunel and Stannard as evidence of the increasing power of the director over the construction of the film, while the writer struggled to 'find a way past their focus on performance allied to plot selection and pace, towards an understanding of the camera as the instrument which provides power and emphasis in film narrative' (MacDonald 2011: 61). While MacDonald is right to highlight the lack of value placed on the work of the screenwriter within the British film industry, he overestimates Brunel's power at Gainsborough. While an examination of the relationship between Stannard and Hitchcock may reveal a different power balance, a viewing of *The Vortex* reveals that the debates over the screenplay between Brunel and Stannard were ultimately fruitless and the greater struggle taking place was between them as creative personalities within the studio and those who were producing and financing the films.

### **Characters and casting**

Above and beyond his artistic ambitions, Stannard's main concern was to overcome the censorship issues and render the play's somewhat unsavoury events more palatable to audiences. He felt that 'the failings of both mother and son are very ticklish to handle in view of healthy-mindedness of the provinces' and suggested taking a humorous approach since 'the provinces love laughing at the vanities of Mayfair' (*The Vortex*, suggested film treatment, n.d., ABSC 4/158). Characterisation and the casting of the major roles thus became key. Ivor Novello had already been selected to play Nicky and, in keeping with his status as matinee idol, the character would need to be portrayed as an upstanding young man untainted by any suggestion of degeneracy. The scenes Stannard wrote in to illustrate his bohemian existence were excised and the closest Nicky gets to debauchery is being acquainted with a dancer who takes drugs, a discovery he reacts to with horror, calling her a 'little rotter'. Novello had strong views on the character of Nicky:

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He must'nt [sic] be cynical or disillusioned at all. He must have complete and absolute faith in his mother... It should be his lost illusion in her that should start Nicky's gradual loss of character. (Letter from Novello to Balcon, 26 April 1927, ABSC 5/112).

As the star of the film Novello was paid £100 a day (compared to Willette Kershaw's £100 per week<sup>7</sup>) and thus his views would no doubt have had traction with the studio. However, on the film's release, a reviewer observed that: 'There is not one of the characters in the story for whom it is easy to develop the slightest grain of sympathy' (cutting, nd, no source, ABSC 4(1)/112) and the character of Nicky, devoid of the complexities he exhibits in the play, becomes emasculated and insipid.

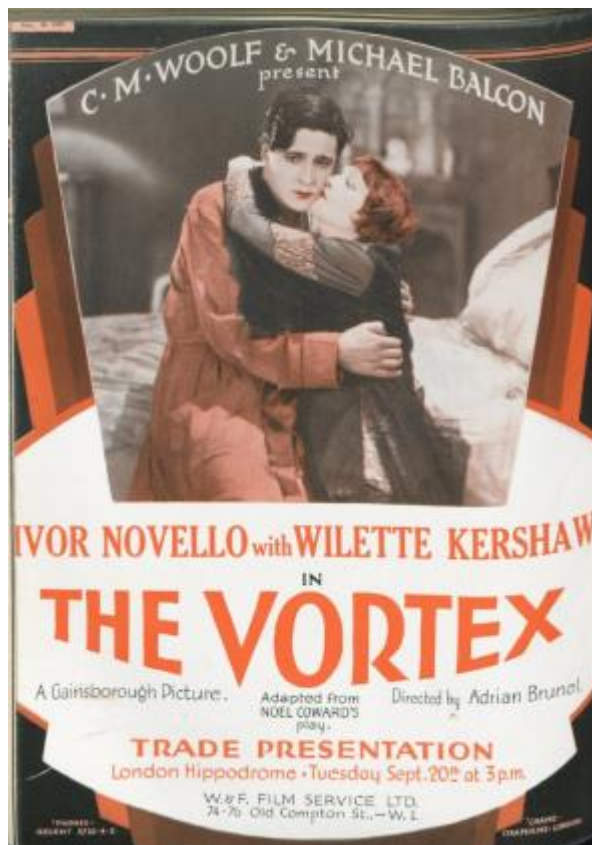


Figure 11 Advertisement for the cancelled trade show of *The Vortex* (Bioscope, 1 September 1927: 26)

The character of Florence therefore becomes the sole source of the 'vortex of beastliness' at the heart of the film, yet is permitted only the merest hint of infidelity. With the hard-hitting themes of Coward's controversial play removed, Stannard was left with a tame and rather moralistic family melodrama:



By making his mother frivolous without being physically immoral we should show that when a woman neglects her husband and son and completely ignores her responsibilities as wife and mother, then the home ceases to exist and loneliness and unhappiness are the lot of the two men in question'. (Stannard, Suggested Film Treatment, ABSC 4/158)

Florence's relegation to a narrative device meant that her casting proved to be the most difficult aspect of the film. A total of thirty-nine actresses were apparently considered for the part, Brunel finally settling on American stage star Willette Kershaw (letter from AB to Balcon, n.d., ABSC 5/112). He was as indecisive with the other roles and 40 actresses were looked at for Bunty while Tom Veryan and David Lancaster also proved vexing to cast (ibid.). It is easy to imagine that this prevarication at so early a stage in the production, along with the to-ing and fro-ing over the screenplay, did not fill Balcon with confidence about Brunel's ability to control the production.

### **Happy Ending**

In the play, Nicky and Bunty are far too unconventional to bother with an engagement ring but in the film the ring becomes an important prop when she breaks off their engagement and as a symbol of their reconciliation. This reconciliation was the 'happy ending' which Brunel knew would be deemed necessary for film audiences. In fact, all the contributors to the adaptation process agreed that a more solid resolution was required than that of the play, which ended on a tableau of Florence and Nicky comforting each other after promising to reform. Stannard's suggested treatment viewed Nicky's split from Bunty as irrevocable but he added an epilogue in which Florence is 'dressed according to her age and with grey hair but happy, walking happily through the farm' (which she has hitherto loathed for its dullness) (*The Vortex*, suggested film treatment, ABSC 4/158). She and David see Nicky flirting with a young woman and look forward to welcoming her into the bosom of their now happy family (ibid.). But Brunel got his way over the ending, insisting that Nicky and Bunty should get back together, 'not because exhibitors will

demand this but because audiences will' (letter from AB to Balcon, ABSC 3/158) and the film concludes with Florence and Nicky joining forces to intercept Bunty the morning after the party and convincing her to stay. Thus one of the few aspects of the film over which Brunel was able to exert control merely cemented its conventionality and no doubt fuelled Coward's violent reaction to the proposed changes: 'he was speechless for a moment, and then let out a torrent of criticism that even the telephone couldn't stop' (Brunel 1949: 131).

When filming began on 1 June 1927 it soon became clear that once again Brunel was to be under the scrutiny of the studio (*KW*, 2 June 1927: 35). George Hopton reminded Brunel of his responsibilities, instructing him 'to exercise great care when scheduling the day's work to see that the artist is used to the best advantage on that day, particularly Novello,' (letter from George Hopton to AB, 10 June 1927, ABSC 5/112). Brunel's problems were compounded by the limitations of Willette Kershaw. Despite having a long stage career behind her this was her first starring role on film and she found the shoot 'a trying ordeal' apparently because she appeared to subsist on 'vegetable extract pellets', meaning she could only sustain a performance for twenty seconds before flagging from lack of energy (Brunel 1949: 132).<sup>8</sup>

Brunel finished shooting *The Vortex* around the third week of July and was eager to start editing. He had planned the shoot carefully and knew exactly which takes he was going to use, especially important since he had had to work around the limitations of the actors, particularly Kershaw. But he was put to work on his next film, *The Constant Nymph*, almost immediately and on 4 August 1927 *Bioscope* announced the imminent departure of the cast and crew to begin filming. Much to Brunel's annoyance, his protégé Lionel Rich was brought in to edit *The Vortex*, which was completed by the beginning of September. Brunel did not see the finished film until mid-November and he was extremely unhappy with it, petitioning Gainsborough strenuously to allow him to recut the film. 'Even without re-takes I could make this a good film' he declared to Balcon, 'and I am prepared to do

anything to put this film as I intended it. I am getting on with *The Constant Nymph* as fast as possible so that I can have time for *The Vortex* before it goes to W&F' (letter from AB to Balcon, 16 November 1927, ABSC 5/112).

Brunel was no doubt keen to reinstate the 'cute shots' he had filmed: 'little twists...intriguing camera angles, some effective close-ups, some unexpected shots' to 'divert the attention of the critics' (Brunel 1949: 133). But, as later correspondence attests, the film was released without his recuts and for years after, Brunel maintained that he could have made it a success: 'It was a tragedy for all concerned that, after delaying the premiere until the trade was suspicious, that we didn't fool them by having me put it right' (letter from AB to The Directors of Gainsborough Pictures, n.d. [probably circa 1932], ABSC 7/112).

### **The reception of *The Vortex***

The trade show of *The Vortex* was originally set for 20 September 1927 but was postponed, ostensibly because Novello was out of the country filming *The Constant Nymph*. After a delay of six months, it finally took place in March 1928, a month after *The Constant Nymph* was released; presumably, there was concern about the quality of the film but why Brunel was not given the opportunity to re-edit is unclear. The reviews of *The Vortex* were mixed. 'Very good booking for discriminating patrons' was *Kinematograph Weekly's* summary (*KW*, cutting, n.d., ABSC 1/122) while *Bioscope's* reviewer regarded it as 'another proof that the most successful of stage plays is not necessarily suitable for the screen' (*Bioscope*, 29 March 1928). It was released on 23 April and was a flop; George Hopton later wrote to Brunel: 'Re: "The Vortex". I think that the less said about this production the better. You are no doubt aware that same has been released and the results to the exhibitor have been disastrous. I am afraid it will be some time before we hear the last about this production' (letter from Hopton to AB, 13 June 1928, ABSC 2/111). By this stage,

Brunel's protests throughout the production had been forgotten and he now felt that he was being held entirely responsible for the film's failure. He later wrote bitterly: 'Although I was not the father of 'The Vortex' you have tried to palm a paternity order on to me in regard to this bastard' (handwritten draft letter from AB to Hopton, n.d., ABSC 1/112).

Whether the 'cute shots' which remained in the can would have succeeded in lifting the film above its conventional approach can never be ascertained; it is thus difficult to assess the merits of *The Vortex* as 'an Adrian Brunel film' and he was eager to point out that it should not be considered as such. Four years after its release, he wrote to Noël Coward to exonerate himself:

I was not responsible for the treatment or the script (I protested against both), nor the take-choosing, the editing or the titling; nor for the fact that three of the principals had never been on the screen before and one of them was an invalid. There are many whys yet you could fire at me – and I hope you will one day, for my answers will help you to understand what's still wrong with British pictures – but there is one thing sadder than all the rest that I will reveal, and that is, I could have saved the picture even after it had all been shot if they had let me. (Letter from AB to Coward, 31 October 1931, ABSC C/170)

Brunel's position within the studio was somewhat ambiguous; although he was assigned to direct what must have been a valuable property to Gainsborough, he was not given sufficient budget or control to do what he felt was required for it to be a success. His next film was an even more high profile adaptation, although on this occasion he was not even to be trusted to undertake it as sole director.

***The Constant Nymph: 'A triumph for British production'***

Despite Coward's lack of input to the film versions of his plays, Brunel undoubtedly felt his spectre hovering over the production of *The Vortex*, as the letter above suggests. However, the very solid presence of two writers exerted a much more potent influence over his next film. Margaret Kennedy's *The Constant Nymph* was the best-selling novel of 1924 and had been adapted very successfully for the stage; thus the news that it was to

appear on the screen was received with great anticipation. *Bioscope* expressed the view of many in the business: 'The purchase of the film rights of Margaret Kennedy's enormously successful novel and play by Gainsborough can be regarded as a triumph for British production and for Michael Balcon, the managing director' (*Bioscope*, 3 March 1927: 30). Balcon was therefore under intense pressure to produce a film which lived up to the expectations of audiences and, with so much at stake, took on some of the pre-production work himself. Like *The Vortex*, *The Constant Nymph* dealt with a controversial subject: a love affair between a man and a young girl. British censors appeared to have objected less than those in Hollywood and, in the event, were apparently appeased when they learnt that actress playing the child, Mabel Poulton, was actually in her twenties. A much more delicate negotiation for Balcon was that with the authors of the play, Kennedy and Basil Dean (the latter had also directed the stage version), both powerful figures who had to be handled carefully if the production was to have a smooth passage to the screen.

Kennedy and Dean were newcomers to film but insisted on writing the scenario themselves; while their status as novice screenwriters may have given Balcon some concern, it did no harm to have their names attached to the project on a creative level. Although their initial screen treatment does not appear to have survived, Brunel's collection contains the Initial Continuity, which presumably stuck to it quite closely. This was written by Alma Reville, Hitchcock's wife, who had established herself as a talented screenwriter with an excellent eye for cinematic composition and was to demonstrate a sympathy for narratives with strong female characters. Reville's draft was passed to Angus MacPhail to embellish and his scenario is also preserved in the Brunel collection. However, there are important differences between these and the finished film<sup>9</sup> which illustrate that, once again, creative compromises were made.

### **Brunel and Dean**

Dean was an accomplished theatre director but was eager to make the move into film and persuaded Balcon to let him direct *The Constant Nymph*.<sup>10</sup> Putting the direction of 'his company's costliest production to date, upon which the future of Gainsborough Pictures might well depend' (Dean 1973: 8) into the hands of someone with no experience was undoubtedly a risk for Balcon but Dean's involvement would also be a selling point and the trade press eagerly printed regular updates on the project.<sup>11</sup> Early in 1927, the *Bioscope* trumpeted Dean's directorial debut in three separate announcements and reported that he had just returned from 'studying production methods' in Berlin, indicating how seriously he was taking his prospective career change (*Bioscope*, 17 Feb 1927: 55).

Despite the assertion in the *Bioscope* on 24 March 1927 that *The Constant Nymph* 'will go into production almost immediately', the start date was pushed back through the spring and early summer. In April, it emerged that 'Mr Dean will have the aid of a very expert assistant director' to be named shortly after, yet this announcement was also long delayed, as was the confirmation of the casting of the lead actors. In June it was revealed, again prematurely, that filming was to begin the following month (*Bioscope*, 9 June 1927: 21) at which point Brunel had just started filming *The Vortex* and had not yet been mentioned in connection with *The Constant Nymph*.<sup>12</sup> Mid-June saw Balcon and Dean travel to the continent to scout for locations in the Tyrol and by early July, Dean had secured an agreement with composer Eugene Goossens, who had written the song 'When I Am Dead' for the stage play, to produce a new score for the film (*Bioscope*, 23 June 1927: 38-9; *Bioscope*, 7 July 1927: 45).

Three weeks later the casting of Ivor Novello as the film's hero, Lewis Dodd, was announced (*Bioscope*, 27 July 1927: 25), followed swiftly by news that Brunel was 'to co-operate with Basil Dean in the direction of the film...the technical part of the production will be in his charge' (*Bioscope*, 4 August 1927: 23). Here it also emerged that the coveted

role of Tessa had been given to young but experienced British film actor Mabel Poulton, a casting decision made by Brunel against the instincts of Ivor Montagu, who wrote that he 'retched at the idea' of her as Tessa (letter from Montagu to AB, 3 August 1927, ABSC 5/111).

The constant delays indicate the amount of prevarication there was on the part of the studio, presumably over the nature of Dean's involvement and how best to manage his demands, While Rachael Low regarded Brunel's appointment to the film as an 'attempt to promote... [him] as a leading director' (Low 1971: 169) this is clearly far from the truth. A week before the *Bioscope* announcement of his attachment to the film, Brunel had signed an agreement with Dean which stipulated that their billing as: 'DIRECTED BY ADRIAN BRUNEL UNDER THE PERSONAL SUPERVISION OF BASIL DEAN' (agreement between Dean and Balcon, 27 July 1927, ABSC 5/112). Dean insisted that he should be 'at liberty to attend as much or as little of the actual taking of the film as I see fit; that I see the takes daily if required; that Mr Brunel agrees to confer with me daily, or as often as I see fit, upon the actual shots; that retakes are to be made if required by me; that the existing agreed scenario is not departed from without my prior consent; that I may personally take part in the actual direction of any particular scenes, where I feel I can be of material assistance (ibid.).

Brunel had little choice but to be amendable, given his tenuous position at Gainsborough and was probably the only director there who would have submitted to such an arrangement. Montagu wrote an impassioned letter to Brunel, imploring him not to accept a job which 'no one else of your standing could even be asked to do, to get him [Balcon] out of a hole that he's got into through sheer pigheaded ignoring of my (probably our) advice' (letter from Montagu to AB, 3 August 1927, ABSC 5/112).<sup>13</sup> Brunel would have been well aware of the effect that taking on a role that amounted to little more than assistant director would have on his status at the studio yet he ignored Montagu's advice,

whether out of loyalty to Balcon, his own financial needs or perhaps in the hope that having his name attached to such a high profile project (with a large budget) may benefit his reputation.

### **The plot of the film**

The film's story begins on a train approaching a lake in the Austrian Tyrol. On the train are Lewis Dodd and Kiril Trigorin, both on their way to visit the famous composer Albert Sanger at his mountain chalet Karindehütte. They then board a boat and, on disembarking, are met by two of Sanger's daughters, who take them home. At the chalet, they are greeted not by Sanger but by his wife Linda, and Trigorin (and the audience) is then introduced to the rest of the household: Sanger's five daughters, Kate, Paulina, Toni, Tessa and Susan, Roberto the manservant and Ike, a rich benefactor. Sanger, however, does not join the family group, remaining up in his room in front of his piano, with his dog and a bottle of wine for company.

When Sanger dies suddenly, the family falls into disarray. The position of the widowed Linda is now uncomfortable and she leaves with Trigorin, with whom she has been flirting since his arrival. Toni marries Ike but the future of the other girls is uncertain so Lewis, assuming responsibility, contacts their uncle, a Cambridge don. He arrives with his daughter Florence and she and Lewis quickly fall in love and decide to marry. Tessa is devastated as she has long been in love with Lewis herself. She and Paulina are sent to boarding school in England but are very unhappy and escape back to the stylish Chiswick home of Lewis and Florence. Florence is not pleased, especially when the deep affinity between Lewis and Tessa becomes apparent. After Lewis's performance of his new symphony, he and Tessa run away to Brussels, where she dies of a weak heart.



### The film's reputation

*The Constant Nymph* was considered a lost film for many years and, as often happens with such titles, acquired the aura of a missing masterpiece; yet, when it was eventually rediscovered, it did not entirely disappoint. One of the first academics to study the film was Lawrence Napper, who devoted a chapter of his book on middlebrow film culture in the interwar years to the relationship between the novel, the play and the film, with particular attention to the emerging development at the time of new means of presenting and propagating works of art. His premise is that not only was the text of *The Constant Nymph* subject to this trend, having been published, performed on stage and made into a film, but also that the narrative itself has that very theme at its heart (Napper 2009: 40). He regards both Brunel and Kennedy as examples of artists who negotiated the twin aims of producing something culturally significant which also appealed to the mass market. However, as I have already illustrated, Brunel's artistic input to *The Constant Nymph* was limited by his late attachment to the project and the fact that he was not in full directorial control. Thus, Napper's claims for the film as an example of Brunel's ability to balance art and commerce need investigation.

Several forces were pulling the project in different directions, as the documents in the Brunel collection show. As with *Blighty* and *The Vortex*, the original script was filleted of most of the authors' attempts at poetic imagery. In the case of *The Constant Nymph*, these elements were largely the work of Dean and Kennedy which made the negotiation process more complex than on his previous productions, since Brunel found himself caught between a studio with apparently little faith in his abilities and a strong-minded co-author and supervisory director, all of whom had a great deal at stake.

The two continuity scripts in the Brunel collection credit Kennedy and Dean as authors of the 'scenario'; the first is Alma Reville's Initial Continuity, with a second 'Revised Continuity' by Angus MacPhail. Neither is dated and the second is incomplete, consisting of

MacPhail's revisions to Reville's version up to the end of Act I. This appears to be the copy of the scenario which was used during the location shoot in Austria, since it bears handwritten notes by both Brunel and Dean, testifying to the fact that creative decisions continued to be taken even when filming was underway. These scripts give an indication how much more ambitious and 'expressionist' the film was originally intended to be.

### **Genesis of the screenplay**

Reville's continuity includes the stylistic flourishes presumably devised by Dean and Kennedy, including what they termed 'visions': imaginary sequences mainly in the form of superimposition. On Dodd's arrival at Karindehütte, a brief sequence was written to show the inspiration he found in the surroundings: 'a rough manuscript of music, this dissolve into little music notes, these dissolve into little birds flying about, then to a beautiful scene in the Tyrol, then to a forest, then the forest trees change into the bars of a cage, and the birds are fluttering their little wings against them, this dissolves into the actual room, the small hut and Lewis is busy scribbling' (Sc. 58, initial continuity, ABSC 5/55). A note underneath specified that: 'the scene should never take on definite hard lines – merely impressionistic drawings – melting from one to another – with the same smoothness a symphony has' (ibid.) After the death of Sanger a more elaborate 'vision' was composed, to represent Lewis's relationship to Tessa:

The mountain gradually takes the form of a terrific rock, a fairy castle slowly appears way up on the very top, this is dissolved into a forest, tall tree trunks, which appear to envelop the castle, a tiny figure, resembling a will-o'-the-wisp light floats in and out of the trunks. Lewis's own figure appears, very tiny and starts to chase the little light, he loses it, he is distraught, the trunks swirl and bend and again take the lines of the castle on the rock, the little light figure runs up and up the rocky mountain, Lewis's tiny one after it, the little light reaches the top, Lewis after it, as he just nears it, it vanishes, and he is left alone, a tiny weak figure. (Initial continuity, ABSC 5/55)

During Lewis's concert at The Queen's Hall a similar interlude was envisaged. Again, Lewis is shown in the mountains chasing a 'will-o'-the-wisp' but this time the vision occupies only

the top half of the screen, with Lewis and the orchestra at the bottom of the frame. This superimposition is brief and as it fades, 'the orchestra comes again sharp and clear, Lewis is urging them on, almost lashing with his baton, slowly over them again appears the shadow of Sanger – grim and horrible, as if he is dying, the instruments work up with another flourish, the figure fades away quickly, and they finish with a big crash' (ibid.).

The technique was also to be used to illustrate Tessa's fragile health and state of mind. In a scene in which Florence accuses Tessa of being Lewis's lover, Tessa cowers before her and Florence's face transmogrifies into that of Linda, Sanger's last wife. The sequence depicting the journey to Belgium was considerably lengthened in this version. At one point, Tessa was to be shown sitting on a tram opposite a man and woman. Gradually their faces were to transform into those of Florence and Sanger regarding her in a stern and disapproving way. Dropping her gaze to the legs of the two people, Tessa sees the woman's umbrella turn into a hockey stick and their legs become a confusion of girls' legs as they play hockey. This final act was also originally written as a parallel-cut sequence, with shots of Lewis and Tessa travelling to Brussels intercut with Florence and Charles setting off after them, Florence entering the room just in time to see Tessa lying dead in Lewis's arms (ibid.).

### **A 'Touch of Poetry'**

Dean's autobiography provides clues to the inclusion and subsequent excision of these 'visions', which were apparently the idea of the First World War poet Robert Nichols:

He wrote me long, barely legible letters...making various imaginative suggestions. One was that while Lewis Dodd was conducting his 'Symphony in Three Keys' at Queen's Hall, the scene should 'dissolve' into panoramic views of the mountains in the Tyrol, sunshine alternating with shade according to the mood of the music: a suggestion that would have caused the film distributors of those days to faint from shock. (Dean 1973: 8)

On viewing the film, Kennedy expressed her delight at how it had turned out yet voiced her preference for 'our original ending, i.e. dissolving images of the old Tyrol life mixed up with the death scene – I think it would give this scene just the touch of poetry it now lacks' (letter from Kennedy to Balcon, 5 February 1928, ABSC 6/111). Balcon's response confirms that the 'vision' had actually been shot: '[w]e have tried the dissolving scenes out and it was the general opinion of those who saw them that they rather interrupted the death scene, and was quite a shock to see them' (letter from Balcon to Kennedy, 7 February 1928, ABSC 6/111).

Dean's memoirs seem to imply that C. M. Woolf took exception to the inclusion of these 'visions' and that even writers with the selling power of Dean and Kennedy were not sufficiently important to overrule the views of Gainsborough's major stakeholder. Woolf no doubt objected to Kennedy's 'poetry' and insisted on the removal of shots which interrupted the narrative, just as Boam at Phillips Film Co. had done during Brunel's time at British Actors' Film Company. As Tom Ryall suggests, 'depicting the interior life of the mind... marked out the French avant-garde film makers of the day' but apparently was not part of the repertoire of British producers (Ryall 1996: 25). While this project had seemed to offer the possibility of exploring these avenues in a mainstream feature, the 'poetry' sought by Margaret Kennedy was apparently deemed incompatible with commercial filmmaking.

As the quote from Dean above shows, in hindsight he put his advocacy for such poetics down to his own naïvety about the workings of the film industry. But what of Brunel? Such imagery was surely the kind of lyrical illustration of a film's themes that he himself had tried to bring to the screen in the hope of pleasing the critics. His views on Kennedy and Dean's 'poetry' are not known but he may well have been interested to see if it would survive Woolf's scrutiny. While he followed Dean's orders and filmed these

'visions', he was unlikely to have been surprised when they ended up on his cutting room floor.

### ***The Constant Nymph as art film***

Brunel's reaction to the excision of the fantasy elements of the screenplay is not recorded but, since he had not been involved in the writing process he was perhaps less personally affected by it. His creative input only came into play once he was on location and he injected some of his own ideas into the film during the shooting and editing stages, over which he managed to exert sufficient control. He had considerable experience of location shooting from the North African films and *The Man Without Desire* and, as already illustrated, proved himself adept at making creative decisions on the spot. He wrote to Balcon that: 'When I saw the local trains I realised that they were so delightfully typical that we should not lose them if we could possibly get them, for the carriages are open and the engine is a sight to behold. You know that you can rely on me to get the most valuable shots' (letter from AB to Balcon, 19 August 1927, ABSC 5/112). Elsewhere he described 'a short love scene I have played between [Trigorin and Linda], into which I had driven some pigs into the background. As a symbolical touch I am quite pleased with it' (letter from AB to W. O'Bryen, 25 August 1927, ABSC 5/112).

Despite having some creative flexibility, Brunel was all too aware of where the power resided between himself and Dean and he found the shoot a trying experience. Dean's role appeared to be to communicate 'What Miss Kennedy had in mind' yet his obvious lack of experience enabled Brunel fairly rapidly to establish his control over the filming process and he was greatly encouraged by this validation of his own abilities (Brunel 1949: 138). 'I found that I had to step in more and more from a purely technical position and assist in the psychological interpretation of the characters' he wrote to Balcon, '...it makes me realise that I am every bit as capable as the great man of the theatre in this department of the

work...I am something more than a mere “technician” (letter from AB to Balcon, 19 August 1927, ABSC 5/112). While Brunel maintained a reasonably civil relationship with Dean, cameraman Dave Gobbett made no attempt to disguise his impatience with the novice director, an antagonism referred to both in Brunel’s correspondence and Dean’s autobiography (ibid.; Dean 1973: 9). Brunel vented his frustration with Dean to Balcon, calling him ‘objectionable’ and ‘antagonistic’ but his cordiality on set served him well (letter from AB to Balcon, 19 August 1927, ABSC 5/112). As the shoot progressed, he found Dean ‘much more amenable and reasonable’ (ibid.), even acknowledging the value of Dean’s work with the actors to enhance their understanding of the characters. Dean, aware of his limitations on the technical side, took to observing the process and, years later, acknowledged his debt to Brunel: ‘His choice was a wise move on Balcon’s part, for I doubt whether any other English director would have put up with my fumbling attempts to maintain the integrity of the story, while knowing nothing of the mysterious ways of the film camera’ (Dean 1973: 9). Dean left Austria before the shoot was over, rejoining the crew in Munich where the interiors were to be filmed at Emelka Studios (letter from AB to Balcon, 19 August 1927, ABSC 5/112). It appears that the tension did not dissipate during the next stage of filming, as novelist and friend of Novello Phyllis Bottome recalled in her memoirs.

It was, as all good films are, a difficult production... Several of the most attractive girls were in love with Ivor; and not in full harmony with each other. The producer... was in an unspeakable temper [and] had retired to his room where his meals were carried to him on a tray. Nobody knew German, yet all the mechanics in a Bavarian studio could only speak German... An elderly actress with an important role had been seriously upset by one of the younger actresses. (Bottome 1944: 54)

With both Brunel and Dean present at Emelka, it is open to conjecture which ‘producer’ she was referring to. When the interiors of Karindehütte were complete, the cast and crew returned to London to film the Chiswick interiors at the Gainsborough Studio in Islington as well as the symphony scene at London’s Queen’s Hall.<sup>14</sup>

## Chapter Six

Brunel spent three months on the post-production of the film and this unusually generous amount of time enabled him to achieve some of his best work. The editing is highly effective; although not employing the kind of ingenious intercutting seen in *Easy Virtue*, it has what the *Observer* critic described as ‘a very unusual briskness’ in which ‘every moment has lively interest’ (*Observer*, n.d., BFI Reuben Library Press Cuttings). As Napper observes, ‘the Sanger meal, particularly, is handled with extraordinary sophistication, even by the standards of Hollywood film in the mature silent period. Several conversations are occurring at once, some at cross purposes, and some in secret, and yet Brunel’s cutting and intertitling remain both unobtrusive and extremely “readable”’ (Napper 2009: 77). The film is built around such key scenes, or set pieces, in which revelations are brought to light and relationships defined and developed. However, these are not always presented directly in the novel but reported via conversations between characters. This is an important element of the novel’s style since it is the way in which the characters describe events that reveal their attitudes to those involved in them.

The family meal described above is the first time that the inhabitants of Karindehütte come together and tensions and rivalries surface. Sanger does not join them at the table and his absence is highlighted when the diners take up a chant for him to come down and eat. The jovial mood of the meal, celebrating the arrival of the girls’ beloved Lewis, is destroyed by Linda’s cross-examination of Toni about the new earrings she is sporting, reducing her to tears and breaking up the party. The scene is echoed after Sanger’s death, this time with a very much more subdued mealtime gathering, with Lewis now sitting at the head of the table, having assumed the patriarchal position. With Sanger now permanently absent, the tensions between the family members surface in a more bitter and damaging way and his daughters turn against Linda and her child.

Later in the film, there are two contrasting sequences of performance, the most ambitious of which shows Lewis Dodd conducting his symphony at the Queen’s Hall.

*Bioscope* reported that 'fifty-four scenes were shot there... claimed to be a record for a day's work' (*Bioscope*, 3 November 1927: 32); Brunel later claimed to have shot 70 (Brunel 1949: 142). The intercutting of these shots provides the viewer with a variety of perspectives, interspersing views of the audience with shots of the main characters. Thus Lewis is seen conducting, with his back turned, oblivious to the feelings of the observers; Tessa appears nervous after sneaking out to see the performance; while Florence is tense and unhappy, knowing that as soon as the performance is over Lewis plans to leave her.

An earlier performance in the film marks an equally pivotal moment in a scene which was praised by one critic as 'a gem of comedy' (*The Star*, 21 February 1928, BFI Reuben Library Press Cuttings). Florence has organised a musical evening at the Chiswick house to 'launch' Lewis into polite society and guests with a musical bent perform what appear to be (in the absence of any sound) rather twee party pieces. Unimpressed by the recital, and by Florence's attempts to civilise him, Lewis, along with Tessa, Paulina and Toni, sneak out of the drawing room and head downstairs where they stage their own concert in the kitchen. Florence discovers them dancing round the table playing the comb and paper and various kitchen utensils and orders Lewis back upstairs where he humiliates her with a defiant performance of a song called 'Silver Sty' (with the opening lyric 'There was a lady loved a swine...'), a clear dig at her attempts to civilise him. As the guests, embarrassed by Lewis's behaviour, file uncomfortably from the room, he thumps out the Funeral March on the piano, until the room is empty, even Tessa having berated him for his cruelty.

### **Characterisation**

The shot set-ups, framing and editing contribute to the characterisation, with performance and *mise en scène* also playing an important part. Albert Sanger, a central character in Kennedy's novel (in the play he is heard but not seen), becomes a shadowy figure who never emerges from his upstairs room in the chalet where he sits alone with his



dog, composing and drinking. We thus get an impression of the extent to which he has isolated himself from his family, let alone the rest of society. In his few appearances in the film, he is shot from behind and his face is never shown, which reinforces the portrayal of a man who has turned his back on the world. He is not seen full face until just before he dies, when he rises from his piano, unbolts the door of his room then turns and falls to the floor out of frame left. When the family discovers him, he is lying with his face in a pool of light. The film's hero, Lewis Dodd, is first seen behind in a book which he lowers to reveal a bespectacled face smoking a pipe.<sup>15</sup> Later in the film, Florence is introduced in a similar way as she lowers a newspaper at the breakfast table after she and her father learn of Sanger's death. Although the method of introduction establishes a connection between Lewis and Florence, it also highlights a difference; while he has his nose buried in a book, demonstrating his affinity to literature and the arts, Florence is more interested in current affairs and gossip. We get an inkling of her rather superficial nature when the arrival of a card from Lewis Dodd, 'the famous composer' causes her great excitement.

The use of locations in the film and the characters' relationship to them is crucial to its narrative development and changes in mood. While Sanger is never seen enjoying the open air or freedom to which he fled from the stifling atmosphere of England, his brood of barefoot daughters are the spirit of the place; dressed in little more than rags they roam the countryside, with no formal education but an innate feel for music and an appreciation of nature. Particularly in tune with her surroundings is Tessa Sanger. She is first seen standing alone near a mountain top, enjoying the wind on her face, awaiting Lewis's arrival. She is often placed high up, looking down, suggesting that she occupies the moral high ground. When she sees the boat on the lake which is bringing Lewis, she runs headlong down the slope and meets her sister Paulina reclining in the grass opposite a row of religious effigies. This sequence establishes a connection between the spiritual and the natural and shows the Sanger girls are at home with both. The association is reinforced in a

scene later that day when Tessa is shown leaning against a figure of Christ on the cross, once again looking down from a mountainside. From her vantage point she can see Linda, her father's 'wife' canoodling with Trigorin the wealthy visitor and, troubled by the image, seeks solace in nature and the spiritual. Seeing Lewis nearby, she goes to him for comfort but is driven to tears by his light-hearted rejection of her, establishing her sensitive disposition. The relationship between Tessa and Lewis is also of a spiritual nature and is never consummated; much later, Tessa is horrified by Florence's suggestion that they are lovers. Lewis tells Florence that if he tried his 'fascinating ways on [Tessa], she'd give me a black eye,' a stinging remark since Florence *did* succumb to them. The theme of Tessa's purity and saintliness comes to a climax in the final scene in which she stands silhouetted in front of a window, arms outstretched, in a pose suggestive of Christ on the cross.

### **Light to Darkness**

The progression throughout the film from light to darkness, from space to enclosure, echoes the gradual descent of Tessa and Lewis from hope into despair. The first image we see is on board a train where Lewis Dodd sits, one elbow out of the window of the open-sided carriage which is taking him to Sanger's home. From the train he and his fellow traveller, Trigorin, board a steam boat across a lake. These Austrian locations could not be more redolent of freedom and open space, as Brunel noted, the mountain train has no windows to obstruct the fresh air. Dodd and Sanger's children are frequently shown outdoors and are clearly most at home outside among nature.

The locations elicited a great deal of positive comment in contemporary reviews of the film and, for British critics, attractive landscapes were a definite selling point for a film. While the English countryside was used by British filmmakers as a symbol of nostalgia for a pre-industrial society and an evocation of 'home', the Tyrolean landscape in *The Constant Nymph* contributes a very different atmosphere (see Gledhill 2003: 95). The novel reveals

that Sanger left Britain due to his disillusionment with the cosseted, protected existence in which genius is encouraged to produce art for the masses rather than art for art's sake (Kennedy 1983: 2). Thus the dramatic locations symbolise the freedom and escape from these restrictions sought by both Sanger and Dodd; their musical compositions make manifest their refusal to conform to the demands of the English cultural milieu. Sanger's music, we are told, was neglected during his lifetime while the Sanger children tease Lewis about his disdain for melody (ibid.). The mountainous setting and Karindehütte, the basic chalet in which the family lives, reflect Sanger's adopted bohemian lifestyle, his lofty ideals and disregard for convention. During this first act Brunel presents the spectacular scenery to its full advantage, employing mainly medium long and long shots with few close ups, to emphasise the sense of space and freedom.

After the engagement of Lewis and Florence, the mood of the film changes dramatically. In contrast to the natural spirituality connecting Lewis with Tessa, he declares his love for Florence in a much more conventional spiritual site, a small village church. An intertitle has already announced that, 'With the marriage of Toni and Ike, Tessa began to realise that the happy days of Sanger's "Circus" were over' and the scene shifts to London society, centred on Lewis and Florence's smart Chiswick home. As per the script, the house exhibits 'the Ideal Home attempt at Bohemian decorating' (initial continuity, ABSC 5/55), with thick drapes, plump cushions and knick-knacks on every surface. On arrival there after their honeymoon, Florence asks Lewis if he approves of the décor and his look of disdain is answer enough. His behaviour reinforces this lack of respect and he throws the cushions onto the floor, drops a dead match on the carpet, taps out his pipe on top of the piano and kicks the door shut with relish. His lack of interest in material objects jars with her pride in her home and it is clear that, away from the romantic setting of the Tyrol, cracks have quickly appeared in their relationship. Florence even tries to tame Roberto, the Sanger

family retainer who has been brought over to London, dressing him in a suit and instructing him to bring the post on a silver salver.

Once the scene shifts from the Tyrol the film is completely studio-bound, adding to the feeling of enclosure. The large cast of characters which populates the first act is gradually pared down to the three central figures of Lewis, Tessa and Florence, shown confined within the Chiswick house (with one or two scenes at the boarding school) until the night of Lewis's concert at the Queen's Hall. After the concert, Lewis leaves Florence entertaining the well-dressed guests gathered in his dressing room and goes to the station to meet Tessa and take the boat train.

In this final section of the film, it reaches its darkest and most claustrophobic.<sup>16</sup> A note in the continuity script instructs that, 'From now on to the end the set must be lost completely – merely impressions against a hazy background – quickly passing before the camera' (initial continuity, ABSC 5/55). Indeed, the shots that make up this final section, particularly those of the journey, use expressionistic lighting techniques, with certain elements in the frame picked out while the rest remains obscure. The scenes charting the journey to Brussels are each barely a few seconds long and this compression adds to the feeling of furtiveness and haste and reinforces the feeling that they are stepping into the unknown with no hope of return. A sense of confinement is created by the use of medium shots and close-ups, suggesting the surroundings are closing in on Lewis and Tessa. As they arrive at the station platform, the guard has already shut the gate but opens it for them and bolts it behind them as they run into the blackness beyond. A brief model shot of the city lights from the enclosed, black interior of the train is followed by the couple walking up the ship's gang plank, barely visible in the gloom. Tessa falters and slips and shadowy figures rush into the frame to assist her. The scene fades to black, then fades up on the inside of a cramped cabin; Tessa lies in bed while a nurse tends to her, the tiny porthole above offering no air or light. The scene again fades to black and passengers jostle as a

customs inspector searches their luggage. Next, Tessa is shown walking into shot under a sign which reads 'BRUXELLES NORD'; she turns and waits for Lewis to join her. An intertitle reads: 'Hurry and confusion – The stabbing beats of her heart – No wonder the night's shelter of a cheap Brussels boarding house found Tessa tired out – Exhausted.' The camera pans round in the room in a rolling motion, indicating her unsteadiness, followed by a medium close-up of Tessa, barely visible in the dark of the room. The last intertitles appear superimposed on a background of clouds, indicating Tessa's proximity to heaven, reinforced by the aforementioned shot of her silhouetted as if on a crucifix. As she lays dying, Lewis and the landlady stand over her, only their faces and hands visible.

### **The Trade Show**

The film was trade shown at the Marble Arch Pavilion on 20 February 1928 and press and public alike were clamouring to attend; one reviewer noted that 'The crowd to see the first showing was so great that the doors were 'rushed' and numbers of people with tickets were unable to get into the theatre at all' (review, no source, n.d., BFI Reuben Library press cuttings). Modernist British composer Eugene Goossens had failed to deliver his eagerly anticipated score and, with little time to spare, the Pavilion's musical director Louis Levy had been brought in to provide an appropriate musical accompaniment (*Today's Cinema News and Property Gazette*, 17 February 1928: 4). This he did by using 'When Thou Art Dead' and three other Goossens compositions linked together with some musical phrases of his own composition. The *Bioscope's* musical expert praised Levy's efforts and remarked that using Goossens' 'Folk Tune' as a key theme 'had much to do with creating the right atmosphere for Lewis Dodd' (*Bioscope*, 1 March 1928: vii). Dodd's symphony was composed by Vivian Ellis, a surprising choice since the twenty-four-year-old was best known as a writer of popular songs for musical comedies. The screening was greeted by 'roars of applause' (review, no source, nd, BFI Reuben Library press cuttings) and Basil Dean

addressed the audience, praising Mabel Poulton as the 'ideal' Tessa (*The Star*, 21 February 1928, BFI Reuben Library Press Cuttings).

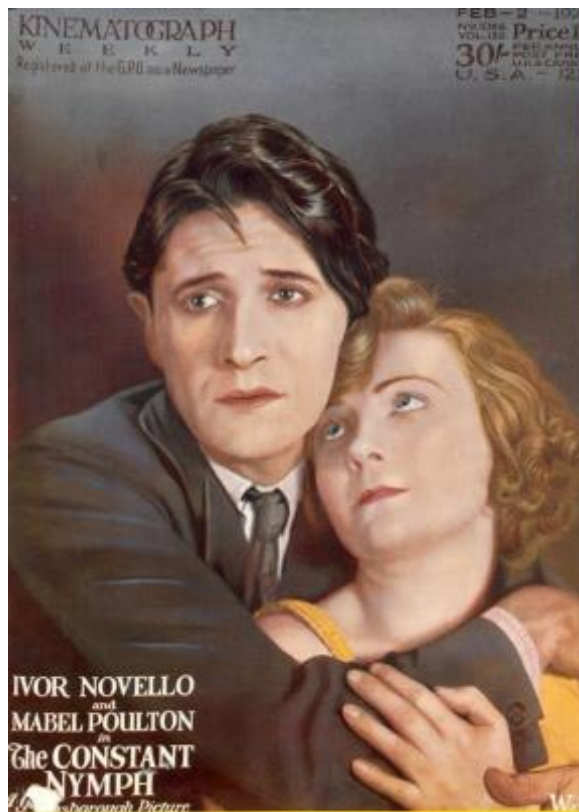


Figure 12 Cover of Kinematograph Weekly, 2 February 1928

### 'Second to none'

The critics were virtually unanimous in their praise for *The Constant Nymph*: 'One of the most brilliant pictures yet made...exceeds in merit and interest both the novel and the play' (*News Chronicle*, n.d., ABSC 8/56); 'There are points of beauty... that set it just as high in this respect as anyone could possibly wish amongst the achievements of the cinema' (review, no source, nd, BFI Reuben Library press cuttings); 'as an entertainment... it ranks second to none' ('Fine British Film', no source, n.d., BFI Reuben Library Press Cuttings). Some reviews attributed its success to Brunel and some to Dean, while one or two pronounced themselves uncertain which of the two deserved the credit: 'It is Mr Dean's first adventure in this medium and it is not clear how he and Mr Brunel (already

known as a competent director) shared their task' ('British Girl's Film Triumph', n.d., BFI Reuben Library Press Cuttings). Dean later commented on the collaborative nature of the film in his description of the opening night attended by himself, Brunel and Balcon. 'All three of us were jostled by huge crowds of fans who mistook Adrian for myself and me for him,' which he concluded was, 'a fitting comment upon the mix-up of functions that had attended the somewhat painful process of making the film' (Dean 1973: 14).<sup>17</sup>

### **Novel to play to film**

One of the few reservations voiced by the critics about the film was that filmgoers who had not read the book or seen the play may not comprehend the intricacies of the plot and some maintained that it was an unsuitable subject for the screen. The *Times* critic wrote, 'the story of Tessa and Lewis, charming and moving as it is, is frankly inadequate in the form of "silent drama"' (reviews, n.d., ABSC 8/56). Balcon's regret regarding his choices of adaptation has already been referenced and he was no less negative about the selection of *The Constant Nymph*, despite its huge success, deeming it (and *The Vortex*) 'demonstrably unsuitable for adaptation to a medium without the power of speech' (Balcon 1969: 36). Seemingly oblivious to the debates already well underway, Dean claimed that '*The Constant Nymph* announcement started a long argument as to whether stage plays could ever be made into successful films' (Dean 1973: 7).

While Christine Gledhill has acknowledged criticism of British silent cinema on the grounds of its 'staginess' and tendency towards theatrical performance styles, she has undertaken a reevaluation of this trend. She recasts it as one of the ways filmmakers attempted to produce a unique national cinema, incorporating theatrical methods into their work as a form of intermediality. This is most clearly seen in the preference for long shots and treatment of the film set like a stage but Gledhill recognises that more complex examples of the technique demonstrate 'the metaphorical significance of the public

performance as a space for playing out tensions in British culture between life and artifice, private emotion and public presentation' (Gledhill 2003: 15). Certain scenes in *The Constant Nymph* conform to this sense of staging, perhaps not surprisingly, since the film is built around the set pieces which constituted the play. As well as the sequences of performance already mentioned above, the film contains other 'metaphoric stages'. Karindehütte has exterior steps to a balcony, from where Paulina and Tessa look down on Linda flirting with Trigorin on the porch and from where Florence greets the morning on her first day at the chalet, secretly observed by Lewis from the window of his hut.

This preference for long shots led to an underuse of the close-up, an aspect of *The Constant Nymph* that did not go unnoticed. While Brunel's ambivalent attitude towards the device has already been covered elsewhere, Sydney Carroll lamented the scarcity of close-ups in the film, insisting that they could have provided 'opportunities of revealing to us the inner secrets of Tessa's mind' (*Sunday Times*, n.d., BFI Reuben Library press cuttings). He qualified the omission by suggesting that the filmmakers 'followed the narrative at too respectful a distance, afraid to bring their cameras closely upon their people lest they should forget to be natural and should degenerate into film fantastics' (ibid.). In fact, Reville's initial continuity does contain instructions for a number of close shots, but mostly towards the final act as the film reaches its emotional climax and Brunel conforms to her plan, using them sparingly during the dramatic scenes.

### **Artistic Integrity**

Lawrence Napper draws a parallel between Kennedy and Brunel in their ability to steer a course between 'art' and the market. The character of Lewis Dodd is shown to be resistant to new media and the pressure on him to conform and adapt his work for a mass audience, brought to bear by Florence, is seen as representative of the popular cultural view of art. Unlike Dodd, Kennedy embraced the opportunity to adapt and disseminate her



text via other media; Basil Dean, wrote that 'she was as keen as the next person for a share of American dollars' (Dean 1973: 7). Yet, despite having set her sights on a Hollywood deal, Kennedy was not prepared to sacrifice her 'artistic integrity' to the constraints of the Hays Code (Dean 1973: 6-7), instead selling the rights to Gainsborough at a greatly reduced rate.

The pressure authors were under to widen their exposure via film versions of their work was countered by arguments as to whether literary sources were suitable material for films simply because they were popular. While it was assumed that their popularity would guarantee them an audience, critics invariably compared the films to their sources and often found them wanting. One reviewer wrote of *The Constant Nymph*: 'Somehow... the story is not on the screen quite so effective as it is on the stage' (no source, n.d., BFI Reuben Library press cuttings), while another summed up the critics' position thus, 'Since there is a marked difference between stories which can best be told in pictures and those which are expressed in words, we have grown suspicious towards film versions of plays or novels' (*Observer*, n.d., BFI Reuben Library press cuttings). Yet, as Napper reveals, co-writer of the film Angus MacPhail, after analysing the results of a competition to nominate screen stories in November 1929, concluded that people would go and see a film adaptation of a novel they have enjoyed, 'no matter how unsuitable the novel may intrinsically be as screen material' (quoted in Napper 2009: 73).

Kennedy herself, when questioned by *Picturegoer*, denied that 'a screen adaptation of a novel or play can ever be entirely successful' (*Picturegoer*, December 1928: 31). Perhaps due to her experiences with *The Constant Nymph*, she regarded the process of screenwriting as somewhat demeaning for a novelist, continuing: 'The screen writer must be a good story-teller, but he need have no command of language at all, and since an author's whole business is to acquire such command he is wasting his especial talent if he writes for the screen' (*ibid.*).<sup>18</sup> Dean, having now embarked on a film career, expressed more benign views, maintaining that the success of a film adaptation is dependent on the

intrinsic merit of the story and asserting that 'a good yarn can sometimes make a first-rate film' (ibid.: 29).

Napper's comparison between Kennedy's negotiation of the various outlets available for her work and the way that Brunel tried to reconcile his artistic impulses with the constraints of making commercial features is useful up to a point. Brunel's position as a creative force was far more fragile and the struggles he had maintaining control over his films inevitably limited the power of his agency. The analogy perhaps works better when viewing his work more broadly; throughout his career, Brunel was constantly attempting to recycle his own works and ideas, both the successful and unsuccessful one, via different media. Thus, he reused off-cuts from his films to construct his burlesques, rewrote silent films as talkies (see the script for *Re-Crossing Sagrada* in ABSC 1/163; this was never produced) and turning *Blighty* into a stage play entitled *Only Yesterday*. In this way, he demonstrated his ability to adapt his ideas for different media and maintain his profile across different audiences, an exercise largely precipitated by his precarious economic situation.

### **Brunel and adaptation**

While the readers of *Film Weekly* voted *The Constant Nymph* the best film of 1928, it did not feature in the selection of the year's highlights by poet and film critic Robert Herring. In fact, his book *Films of the Year 1927-1928* lists only one British feature in its round-up, Hitchcock's *The Lodger*, amongst the French, German and American titles he deemed worthy of inclusion. This should not be a surprise however, given that Herring was an associate of the POOL group of avant-garde filmmakers and contributor to literary journal *The London Mercury*. In his foreword to the book he outlines the criteria he applied to his judgments, concluding that 'in the best films...both theme and story unfold so that there is a weaving of the two sets of images, the apparent and the real' (Herring 1929: 2).

Thus, had Kennedy's 'visions' been incorporated into *The Constant Nymph*, it would certainly have brought the film a step closer to Herring's view of film as art. Brunel's views of this 'poetry' are not known; in any case, he was not in a position to voice his views on the screenplay of the film. He had toyed with the notion of portraying 'inner thoughts' in earlier films but for comic rather than lyrical effect; such as his idea to show the dreams of the dog in *The Beggar's Syndicate*, perhaps as a wry comment on the psychoanalytic approach of European filmmakers. While he strove towards originality and a movement away from conventional themes and what he regarded as stale, hackneyed filmmaking techniques, he may have regarded the use of such flourishes as somewhat obtrusive within narrative filmmaking.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has focused on the importance of literary adaptation to the British film industry and the value producers put on the marketing potential of popular plays and novels. I have shown how controversial this strategy was and the ways in which it hindered the development of British cinema along more artistic lines. By charting the production histories of Brunel's first two theatrical adaptations, *The Vortex* and *The Constant Nymph*, I have demonstrated how Brunel approached these projects and assessed the varying degree of involvement he had at each production phase and how much this affected his ability to influence the results. Thus it can be seen that despite the inherent difficulties of adapting theatrical works for the screen, Brunel attempted to inject originality into the films where possible, whether through contributions to the scriptwriting process or more spontaneous interventions during shooting and editing.

Brunel's experiences on *The Vortex* and *The Constant Nymph* have parallels and contrasts. The fact that he was entrusted to direct two high profile stage plays would seem to indicate the studio's faith in his abilities yet my investigations into Brunel's paper

collection reveal the degree to which he was scrutinised and the pressure he was under. Although the first of the two was low-budget and studio-bound, he was accorded very little control and the film was compromised by the lack of support he received for his vision of it. *The Constant Nymph* was a lavish production largely shot on location and with the advantage of German studio technicians for the interiors; the money and time Gainsborough invested in it was justified by its reception and box-office success. We can only speculate whether Brunel's cut of *The Vortex* would have been a financial success or wonder how well-received *The Constant Nymph* would have been without Dean's work on the performances. The negotiations Brunel had to engage in on these two productions reveal a great deal about the relationship of the director to the literary work, his role being essentially a mediator between the concept of that work in the minds of the critics and audiences and the reality of the opportunities offered and limitations imposed by its cinematic rendering.

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<sup>1</sup> *The White Shadow* would not have the same marketing value as *Woman to Woman* as it was based on an unpublished work, although Morton's name would presumably have carried some weight with audiences.

<sup>2</sup> Twenty-eight seems a rather small number of films to have been released in 1928. It is difficult to ascertain release dates from the available sources but over sixty features were trade shown in 1928 (Gifford 2016).

<sup>3</sup> The six original screen stories were: *The Further Adventures of the Flag Lieutenant* (W. P. Kellino 1927) (this was in fact the sequel to *The Flag Lieutenant* [Maurice Elvey 1926] which was based on a stage play); *Blighty*; *Carry On!* (Dinah Shurey 1927); *Confetti* (Graham Cutts 1927), *Victory* (M. A. Wetherall 1928) (a war-themed film produced by Woolf for Gaumont-British) and *This Marriage Business* (Leslie Hiscott 1927).

<sup>4</sup> Munro's work was not adapted for the screen until 1959.

<sup>5</sup> Brunel had used a similar device in *The Man Without Desire* when Count Almoro spies the maid poisoning his wine.

<sup>6</sup> This sequence was shot but not used since Balcon felt that the quality of the dresses in it would 'invite unfortunate comparisons with American films' (note from Balcon to AB, 17 June 1927, ABSC 5/112).

<sup>7</sup> Letter from George Hopton to Brunel, 10 June 1927, ABSC 5/112.

<sup>8</sup> This debilitating condition is presumably what put paid to her theatrical career; the reviews of her performance in the London stage version of *Woman to Woman* were lukewarm.

<sup>9</sup> The only surviving copy of the film available to view is a 16mm print discovered by Kevin Brownlow. This would have been created in the 1930s for screening at film societies and, while such prints were often cut down, it appears that this version corresponds closely to the original release version.

<sup>10</sup> Dean is somewhat coy in his autobiography, claiming that he merely suggested to Balcon that he should 'take part in the actual production'. However, it is likely that he insisted on having a role in directing the film, especially given his ambitions in that direction (Dean 1973: 7).

<sup>11</sup> Brunel maintains the budget for the film was £30,000 which, although a considerable sum, was the same amount that *Woman to Woman* had cost in 1923.

<sup>12</sup> However, notes in the Brunel collection reveal that the screen tests for *The Vortex* he was presiding over were also being used to scout for actors for *The Constant Nymph* (letter from Balcon to Harold Boxall, 24 May 1927, ABSC 5/112).

<sup>13</sup> This 'hole' was presumably his promise to let Dean direct the film.

<sup>14</sup> The Queen's Hall was London's largest and most prestigious concert venue and was home to the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra between 1894 and 1941, when the Hall was destroyed by an incendiary bomb during an air raid.

<sup>15</sup> Brunel also used this device in both *Blighty* and *The Vortex*.

<sup>16</sup> This emotional dissonance in the final scenes is also present in the novel (Cockburn 1975: 177)

<sup>17</sup> Dean asserts that this occurred at the ceremony for the *Film Weekly* award but, as stated in the Introduction, he did not attend this event.

<sup>18</sup> Kennedy went on to become a successful screenwriter, even writing a treatise on the discipline, *The Mechanised Muse* (1942).

### **Conclusion: Brunel's Legacy**

On 8 February 1957, Adrian Brunel attended a screening of his 1923 feature film *The Man Without Desire* at the British Film Institute's National Film Theatre as part of its celebration of sixty years of cinema. It was the only British film among the programme of postwar silent titles, which featured works by Film Society favourites such as Marcel l'Herbier, Carl Dreyer, Victor Sjöström and Fritz Lang. In fact the blurb for the film asserts that Brunel's film 'stands comparison with the remarkable contemporary decors of the German cinema', indicating that silent film was still very much judged according to its European art credentials (National Film Theatre brochure, November 1956-February 1957: 23). The print shown had been restored by the technical team at the National Film Archive especially for the event and under Brunel's personal supervision. The evening was reportedly a great success; Brunel had a 'flow of requests' for his autograph and independent distributor Contemporary Films expressed an interest in acquiring the rights to re-release the film theatrically (letter from Harold Brown to AB, 22 February 1957, ABSC 2/31).

Brunel was now 67 years old and had just over a year of life left. It was 27 years since he had received the *Film Weekly* award for *The Constant Nymph* and he had not directed another A-picture in that time. Whether the attention he received at the BFI that evening brought him comfort in the knowledge that his work was still appreciated, or dejection at the thought of the years he had spent in the wilderness is impossible to know.

#### **'Past faults'**

At the beginning of the sound period, Brunel had spent a great deal of time reflecting on the reasons for his rejection by the major British studios. By 1931, with his health suffering, he complained that 'every possible symptom of a nervous breakdown is

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afflicting me' (letter from AB to Balcon, 22 July 1931, ABSC 9/112). He began trying to pinpoint where his career had gone wrong. 'I've been trying to discover my past faults,' he wrote to Balcon, 'so that I might correct any bad impressions I may have left with Gainsborough' (letter from AB to Balcon 23 February 1931, ABSC 9/112). He seemed not to recognise that his legal action against the studio may have been one of these 'faults', despite later conceding that it was 'the greatest mistake of my life' (Brunel 1949: 154). Simon Rowson's damning verdict that Brunel's temperament made him unfit to be a film director sealed his fate with the studio and it was clear from Balcon's replies that certain figures in the company did not want him anywhere near the studio floor (letter from AB to Balcon, 2 November 1931, ABSC 9/112).

The industry remained largely uninterested in Brunel's ideas about filmmaking and he continued to detect 'a definite antagonism to the educated worker and the creative artist' (letter from AB to Gordon Beckles, 16 February 1931, ABSC 170). Indeed, he was not the only Film Society founder whose ideals had been undermined by the state of the industry. *Evening Standard* critic Walter Mycroft had taken a job at Elstree in 1927 where he 'had to suborn any loose aesthetic ideas to the practical imperatives of producing films... that would make a profit' (Porter 2006: xv). Ivor Montagu had 'retired in disgust from our picture production business, as he regards the fight too uneven' (letter from AB to Gordon Beckles, op. cit.). Brunel had to accept that his efforts to influence British cinema may never succeed and he also withdrew from the fray, moving into the production of the quota quickies he so disdained. However, although his career failed, in the sense that he never secured a high-profile studio appointment where he could truly indulge his creativity, there are positive ways to assess his legacy.

### **Brunel and 1920s revisionism**

Revisionist histories of the silent period have made considerable in-roads into counteracting the perception of British silent films as 'boring' and 'stilted and stultifying' that pervaded for many years (Brownlow 1973: 591; Jeffrey Richards in Bamford 1999: ix). Yet the dire conditions affecting the industry, as described in the course of this thesis, inevitably had an impact on both the quality and the quantity of the films produced. Gledhill has convincingly argued against these negative views and her book *Reframing British Cinema 1918-1928: Between Restraint and Passion* analyses the way that British filmmakers adapted literary, pictorial and theatrical modes for the cinema, her work arming the scholar with more positive ways to read British silent films. While she regards these methods as attempts to produce a national mode of cinematic expression, this reliance on traditional cultural forms was something that Brunel was keen to distance himself from.

He believed that British films could be developed along more original and innovative lines and his direction of travel, with one or two deviations, was away from a reliance on existing cultural models, which he regarded as hampering a more creative approach. He devoted his efforts to an exploration of how to utilise the attributes of the medium, employing the narrative power of the camera to communicate ideas through visual cues and using the potential of editing to offer new interpretations of the image. While some revisionist studies have linked Brunel to the avant-garde, my work has shown that he was truly neither avant-garde nor an 'art cinema' director but sought to blend a particular conception of cinematic art with commercial entertainment.

As I quoted in the Introduction, Rachael Low described Brunel as being 'in the forefront of the movement towards film art' yet expressed surprise that his films did not exhibit more overt signs of this interest in artistic developments (Low 1971: 170). She clearly considered European art films as the natural source of inspiration for a British



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director attempting to raise his work above the level of 'good little pictures' and Brunel's involvement with the Film Society naturally fuels the perception that his aesthetic interests lay in that direction (ibid.). Yet, as this thesis has shown, Brunel also absorbed ideas from the work of his collaborators and other British directors, in particular George Pearson. Montagu later maintained that British films were popular with audiences, contrary to the views expressed by Armes and others, naming Pearson as 'the climax, the last example of films that were very 'English' and had a feeling' (Armes 1978: 61; Wollen, Lovell and Rohdie 1972: 80). Brunel's use of pictorialism in *The Man Without Desire* and his obvious debt to Pearson's narrative approach both in that film and in *Blighty* indicate that his work brought together what he saw as the best of American, European and British cinema, while also injecting his own humour and original ideas.

During the early 1920s, the vocabulary to describe the way Brunel was thinking about film did not yet exist. Vincent Porter suggests its gradual development in Britain may well have sprung from the gatherings of the Film Society founders, quoting Mycroft's use of the word 'filmatics' in 1926 as an example of a term which may well have been generated by their discussions (Porter 2002: 76). This soon evolved into 'cinematic', a word that first appeared in print in Britain in 1927, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. By the end of the decade, it was being used regularly in film magazines such as *Film Weekly* and helped describe the kind of approach Brunel had been advocating and devising for some time. Roy Perkins and Martin Stollery also credit Brunel with being one of the first in Britain to introduce into his industry writings the distinction between 'cutting' film as an artisanal practice and 'editing' as a creative intervention (Perkins and Stollery 2008: 176).

On the rare occasions he was able to work 'with more or less a free hand', such as on *The Man Without Desire* and *Blighty*, Brunel undoubtedly managed to contribute to the development of British cinema along more artistic lines (letter from AB to Frances Birrell, 29 October 1931, ABSC 170). In this light, a more positive view of his career is possible and

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the reputation he has acquired in recent academic studies through a reappraisal of his films reinforces that view. The work of Gledhill and Jamie Sexton, as well as Henry K. Miller's PhD thesis on minority film culture, identify Brunel as an important proponent of a creative approach to British silent cinema and have thus given him a prominent place in histories of the period. This thesis has supplemented and balanced these studies in various ways.

My investigation has brought to light a different side to his character, offering a corrective to the biographical legend of him previously presented, which was based primarily on Brunel's own account of his career as told in his autobiography. As I have shown, the Adrian Brunel Special Collection housed at the BFI provides an alternative perspective on his life and work and a clearer picture of the possible reasons for its ultimate failure. My research into Brunel's career has tempered Gledhill's depiction of him as part of a 'group of free-wheeling film-makers' having fun on the fringes of the industry (Gledhill 2003: 170). As illustrated, the harsh realities of the British film industry in the first half of the decade were such that, while he undoubtedly retained his passion for the cinema, he was subject to frequent bouts of depression and ill health brought on by the financial pressures. 'The life of a director,' he told *Motion Picture Studio*, '...is a long succession of homeopathic doses of lunacy,' a restorative which presumably helped him endure the trying times in between but did not eliminate their effects (*MPS*, 14 October 1922: 7). While Sexton's exploration of Brunel's burlesques offers valuable insights into Britain's alternative film culture, his claims for him as a purveyor of scathing attacks on the British film industry have been shown to be an overstatement. I have suggested instead a reading of the earlier films as a way of testing out his theories of editing with an eye on gaining entry to the industry proper, while the later burlesques are affectionate satires which offered 'homeopathy' of a different kind, allowing Brunel to air some of his frustrations with the business that he was addicted to.

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As the event referred to at the beginning of this Conclusion attests, the reappraisal of Brunel's work actually began long before even Low's examination of the 1920s. At the time of the BFI screening of *The Man Without Desire*, Brunel's burlesque *Crossing the Great Sagrada* was widely available on 16mm prints hired through the film society circuit, inspiring a glowing review in *The Film User* which dubbed it the 'reductio ad absurdum of the travel film' (*Film User*, June 1953: 323). In *Alternative Film Culture in Inter-war Britain*, Sexton suggests that Brunel's burlesques had previously been omitted from the critical appraisal of alternative film culture in Britain (Sexton 2008: 52). However, they were labelled avant-garde as early as 1949 when *Crossing the Great Sagrada* was exhibited as an experimental work, while in the 1960s they were dubbed 'abstract' works by distributor Contemporary Films (programme for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Festival Mondial du film et des beaux-arts de Belgique, 29 June 1949, ABSC 1/164; notes for screening of *Blighty*, press cuttings, BFI Reuben library).

It is possible that Brunel himself was responsible for generating some of the interest his films received later in his life; he had contacts in many spheres and was constantly engaged in proposing ideas for projects. However, the curiosity about his work did not abate after his death. On 8 August 1962, the BFI resurrected *Blighty* as part of a season of films about the First World War. Speeches were given by Montagu, Sir Michael Balcon and Godfrey Winn, the film's star, who later reflected that 'the picture was so sensitively directed by Adrian Brunel that it has withstood to a remarkable degree the erosion of Time and changing tastes' (Winn: 226). In the 1980s, the discovery of a print of *The Constant Nymph*, long believed to be lost, led to yet another BFI event, this time attended by actress Mabel Poulton (Eyles and Meeker, 1992). The screening prompted Kevin Brownlow (who had brought the film back to light) to moderate his previously damning views of British films, conceding that it was 'quite absorbing' (Brownlow, notes on screening of *The Constant Nymph*, 15 May 1985, Brownlow's private collection). Thus

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Brunel's films, as representative of the work of a director with a creative and original attitude to filmmaking, aided by his determination to preserve and promote his own legacy, opened the way for the revisionist work undertaken on British film.

My work has also elaborated on earlier accounts of the workings of the film industry in 1920s Britain. By describing in detail the environment, the personnel and the processes involved in the production of films, this study hopes to furnish a better understanding of the economic, political and creative decisions that affected the results. For example, the role of the distributor has been shown to be particularly relevant to an investigation into Brunel's career. Geoffrey Macnab's recent contribution to this area, *Delivering Dreams: A Century of British Film Distributors*, fails to acknowledge the enormous power this arm of the trade wielded over film producers during the silent era (see Macnab 2016). This thesis partly fills this gap in his survey, offering concrete examples of the ways distributors intervened to curb the creative efforts of British filmmakers.

### **Brunel and his collaborators**

While acknowledging the important contribution made by Brunel, this thesis has brought a greater understanding of the collaborative nature of his filmmaking. The degree to which he can be credited with the 'authorship' of his films varies considerably for each of them, as has become clear over the previous chapters, and the contributions of other figures have emerged as key to their effect. For example, *The Man Without Desire* benefited from the creative input of three unconventional personalities in the shape of Hugo Rumbold, Monckton Hoffe and Ivor Novello, as well as the work of the skilled German studio technicians, all coordinated by Brunel to make a highly unusual and original film. Yet the production was also made under the watchful eye of the financier, who stepped in to curb some of the excesses of these characters.

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By the time he made the burlesques, Brunel had gathered round him a group of co-workers much more in tune with his own more irreverent, light-hearted approach and, although he claimed credit for writing, direction and editing the films, his 'trainees' undoubtedly lent much to the creative process. In contrast, his third Gainsborough feature *The Constant Nymph* saw Brunel forced into a collaboration with theatrical director Basil Dean. Yet, despite the tension between them, the result was the film in Brunel's filmography that came closest to achieving his twin aims of popularity and aesthetic value. His subsequent productions for the studio found him in a much less favourable position and without the support of sympathetic, like-minded co-creators, he struggled to achieve the same results while making films under intense scrutiny and financial pressure.

### **Brunel's industry legacy**

Brunel's informal film education programme, which tutored many of the 'trainees' referred to above, led to what is perhaps his major legacy to British cinema. Most of its graduates went on to play key roles in the creation of what Brunel was convinced would one day emerge: original and typically British films that found success both at home and abroad. Montagu regarded the tuition he gave to young aspirants eager to get into the business to be his principle contribution:

The number of young men who passed...through this schooling, learning from Adrian Brunel not only the rudiments of their craft but his infectious love for it, to make their own mark on the film production of the thirties and forties, is quite extraordinary: Henry Harris, Reggie Beck, Lionel Rich, "Jock" Orton, Ivor Montagu, Angus McPhail, Sergei Nolbandov, Frank Wells, Ian Dalrymple, Michael Hankinson. (*Times*, 25 February 1958, Adrian Hope Brunel press cuttings, BFI Reuben Library)

Brunel's humour, inquiring mind and assiduous attention to detail were surely part of his bequest to these figures and surfaced in their contributions to British cinema in the coming decades. J. O. C. Orton went on to write screenplays for the popular comedies of Will Hay and Arthur Askey in the 1930s and 1940s, Angus MacPhail and Sergei Nolbandov became

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central figures at Balcon's Ealing Studios, while Ian Dalrymple built a reputation as an editor and, by the 1950s, had developed a career as a successful producer. Frank Wells, son of H. G. Wells and a business partner in Brunel & Montagu, worked in art direction and producing. All had come up through Brunel's cutting rooms in Dansey Yard, where they gained an excellent grounding in film assemblage that provided them an entry point into the industry.

### **Amateur vs professional**

Perhaps encouraged by the success he had in helping young aspirants get a foothold in the industry in the 1930s and 1940s, Brunel shared his ideas and knowledge more widely via three manuals: *Filmcraft: The Art of Picture Production* (1933), *Film Production* (1936) and *Film Script: The Technique of Writing for the Screen* (1948). Daniel Gritten's survey of the filmmaking manuals written in Britain in the late 1920s and 1930s classifies Brunel's industry writings as representative of the views of the 'minority film culture' of the period and regards them therefore as offering an opposing view to manuals by accepted industry representatives. Gritten asserts that Brunel 'maintained a commitment to the principles of silent cinema: a focus on movement, on montage as opposed to continuity editing, on visual storytelling, on film as art and on film as an international medium' (Gritten 2008: 271).

In 1931, Brunel had become involved with an unsuccessful project to establish a film school, 'The British Cinematograph Training Studios Ltd', with Sinclair Hill and Arthur Boulting (father of John, Roy and Peter Cotes) (Cotes 1989). Having failed in this attempt to profit through offering professional instruction, he aligned himself with amateur filmmakers and much of the advice in his three books on film production was aimed at the growing community of hobbyists. He expressed the belief that this type of filmmaking, 'untrammelled by commercialism and unhampered by censorship', would emerge as the

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source of genuine experimentation in the medium, but this did not come to pass in British cinema the way it had in America with filmmakers such as Dudley Murphy (Brunel 1936: 26). Through his articles in amateur film magazines he developed close ties with local cine-clubs where non-professionals showed their films and exchanged ideas. The instruction and encouragement he gave within this nascent arena no doubt rewarded him with a level of respect and authority he had largely lost within the film industry proper; and represented a continuation of the teaching and training skills he had developed during his time with Brunel and Montagu.

### **'Hard and bitter struggles'**

Despite the skill he showed at quota production, which at last meant regular employment, Brunel was never reconciled to his comedown in the directing ranks and he continued to ponder on his failure. In a rare moment of seriousness, he confessed: 'I have passed through periods without work – bleak patches of two years and three years, when every time I was on the point of signing a contract some mysterious force intervened and I found myself out on the street again' (*The Era*, 1 January 1936: 25). He concluded his ruminations with the question: 'How many film workers could tell the same story of hard and bitter struggles against difficult odds?' (ibid.).

The answer is many, some of whom crossed paths, or even swords, with Brunel along the way. Among the figures whose legacy to British cinema is now forgotten or undervalued are once-celebrated directors such as Graham Cutts and Manning Haynes. Cutts was one of the most famous British directors of the 1920s but his reputation has been overshadowed by his association with Alfred Hitchcock, which has led some to ascribe the success of his films to the involvement of his protégé. Yet, as Gledhill and Barr suggest, Hitchcock undoubtedly learnt a great deal from working with Cutts, who also made some intelligent and insightful contributions to debates on British film (Gledhill 2003: 116; Barr

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2012). In 1924, he predicted the demise of the 'empty artificial creations' of the national cinema and called for films to be 'more artistic, more sincere and more allied to reality and life' (Cutts 1924: 51). Haynes too was regarded as a great talent and was dubbed by *Bioscope* an 'artist in celluloid' (*Bioscope*, 18 June 1927: 99). His film *Passion Island* was deemed 'entirely novel', the critic boldly proclaiming that his 'imposition of close-up upon long shot is an amazingly effective device which to-morrow will be adopted by the world' (*Bioscope*, 2 June 1927: 21).

There are also those whose imprint has been more effectively erased, such as Harry Hughes and George A. Cooper. Hughes' collaboration with Brunel on the burlesques has been completely forgotten but he clearly shared a similarly witty and original approach to film. He claimed to have made the first British sound-on-film short, recorded in his diary as an 'epoch-making moment', a tantalising reference that leads the historian to wonder what other insights his journals might provide (*Film Weekly*, 13 May 1929: 7). Cooper's 'Quality Film Plays', now lost, were 'little dramatic or humorous stories in which the subtlety of detail finds expression' and their success led to a US sale, a rare accolade for British films at the time (*MPS*, 2 June 1923: 4). Cooper, like Brunel, was taken on by Gainsborough in the mid-1920s but left after two months, frustrated by the lack of a directing project.

I would suggest that following on from this exploration of Brunel's work, a study of these directors, who surface to a greater or lesser degree through the course of this study, could also reveal a great deal about the struggle for art in the British film industry in the silent era. Each attempted to strike out in new directions both through their filmmaking and in the ways they were thinking about British cinema. They also undoubtedly faced many of the same setbacks and frustrations as Brunel and an investigation of their careers would reveal similar tales of 'hard and bitter struggles', making them worthy candidates for further investigation.



### **Final thoughts**

This summary of Adrian Brunel's achievements and legacy has served to reaffirm his importance to British cinema and justify his choice as the subject of this study. In the course of this thesis, I have constructed the first detailed history of Brunel's silent film career through extensive research into his paper collection and other contemporary records, viewing his films and reading academic works on the period. The aim of the project has been not only to shed new light on Brunel's contribution to British cinema but also to increase our understanding of the film industry and, to a lesser degree, film culture during the 1920s. I have demonstrated that Brunel's films are worthy of study on their own merits but acquire greater significance when looked at as products of the tussle between art and the market taking place in British cinema in the 1920s. Each of his films represented a battle fought on various planes: for freedom over control, for creativity over commerce and for originality over conformity. While he won minor victories over the course of the decade, the powerful producers and distributors whose interests rarely extended beyond their profits ultimately won the war.

Through an in-depth study of one filmmaker's contribution to British cinema, I have illuminated lesser-known aspects of the industry and surveyed some of the issues and debates that preoccupied it, as well as exploring the methods by which Brunel negotiated the difficulties placed in the way of his creativity. The diverse nature of his output means that this anatomisation of his career illuminates the workings of the British film industry across the three production environments that existed during the period: small, insecure firms making low-budget films, large studios and as part of an 'alternative film culture', as defined by Sexton, operating outside or on the fringes of the commercial realm. This broad spread makes this study of Brunel's career a useful addition not only to studies of silent film but also to wider research on the role of the director within British cinema history.

## Conclusion

To varying degrees, Gledhill, Sexton and Napper have all defined Brunel as a figure who, through his silent films, navigated a path between art and commerce. By laying out the production histories of these films, I have uncovered the complex processes behind their creation and thus engendered a greater understanding of how he managed to steer a course through the obstacles that stood in the way of both his creative and economic objectives. My research has shown that the lack of control he had over many of his films, whether due to financial restrictions, pressure from producers or some other force, affected his ability to influence their artistic content. By identifying what Brunel hoped to accomplish, and measuring it against what he actually managed to achieve it has been possible to evaluate the degree to which his aspirations were curbed by prevailing conditions within the British film industry. In this way, I have supplemented the existing literature, brought greater clarity to the perception of Brunel as a proponent of film art and moderated some of the claims for his work.

As mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis, one of the ambiguities about Adrian Brunel's career that I hoped to clear up was why it had failed, considering the promise he showed. As I have demonstrated in the preceding chapters, the answer is a combination of the difficult and unstable conditions that existed within the British film industry and Brunel's own reluctance to compromise his artistic ideals. This led some in the trade to regard him as a highbrow, while the views he expounded to the press about the ignorance of industry bosses undoubtedly soured his reputation. Yet I hope to have demonstrated ways of looking at Brunel's career and exploring his legacy that can lead to more positive conclusions about it.

In a period of enormous instability in the British film industry, which saw many directors struggling to build a career, Brunel showed enthusiasm and determination in his efforts not only to survive but also to set British cinema on a path towards popular and artistic success. While this ambition did not come to fruition during the 1920s, the

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contribution he made during the decade undoubtedly expanded the boundaries of British cinema. It is hoped that this thesis has brought a greater understanding of how he achieved this.

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<sup>1</sup> My research on the Adrian Brunel film collection was undertaken in my capacity as a Curator at the BFI National Archive; much of this collection is not available to the public due to the Archive's preservation rules.