



## From Silent Screen to Multi-screen: a history of cinema exhibition in Britain since 1896

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These reviews (from May 1929 until December 1932) and scripts are of interest for readers who want to learn more about Duncker himself, but no mandatory reading for persons interested in film culture in Weimar Germany. That is not to say that Duncker's writings are un-interesting (see for instance his lengthy appraisal of *Kuhle Wampe* or *Who Owns the World*, 1932, on pp. 131–134) but most reviews are too short to offer new insights. Nevertheless, a remarkable book on a remarkable and tragic film professional.

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### **From Silent Screen to Multi-screen: a history of cinema exhibition in Britain since 1896**

STUART HANSON

Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2007

256 pp., bibliography, index, £50.00 (cloth), £14.99 (paperback)

Stuart Hanson's book is a much-needed introduction to the history of cinemas and cinema-going in the UK, and is well-placed to become a companion piece for the study of social history as well as British films. The book's straightforward, clean prose and its accessible chronological structure will grant it a broader audience beyond academia. In addition, it is a scholarly contribution to a field that, so far, has mostly benefited from the work of authors such as Allen Eyles (*Gaumont British Cinemas*, 1996; *The Granada Theatres*, 1998; *Odeon Cinemas 1 and 2*, 2002/2005) and Richard Gray (*Cinemas in Britain: 100 years of cinema architecture*, 1996), who specialise in the architectural qualities of purpose-built cinemas. Hanson's book renounces its potential nostalgic appeal by having no photographs; it has, however, greater ambitions for context. It uses modes of analysis drawn from the social sciences to situate film exhibition as part of the various processes that transformed urban spaces and everyday life throughout the 20th century. This contextual approach is a hallmark of Manchester University Press's 'Studies in Popular Culture' series, and Hanson's book is an appropriate addition to this collection that already covers a range of topics from music hall to horseracing.

The storyline of this book is a familiar one, described in the foreword by the general editor of the series, Jeffrey Richards, as a 'process of evolution' from fairgrounds to picture palaces, in which the cinema's popularity reached its peak in 1946 with over 31 million tickets sold every week. There followed a vertiginous decline variously blamed on the advent of television, changing demographics, suburban lifestyles, or dilapidated cinemas. When admissions plummeted to their lowest point in 1984, the outlook seemed bleak for the industry; but then the first American-style multiplex cinema opened in Milton Keynes, and the fortunes of the exhibition sector were reversed. It is a simple enough story, punctuated by the permanent imminence of the death of cinema and the collapse of the industry.

What makes a book like this interesting is its ability to make sense of these trends and propose explanatory models.

Consequently, the best moments of the book are when Hanson considers how social transformations, such as the increased primacy of the nuclear family and the ownership of domestic appliances, created new patterns of leisure that affected the film industry; or how the deregulation of urban planning during the Thatcher era stimulated the building of large out-of-town entertainment complexes. There are some clearly interconnecting topics that recur in each chapter: official intervention (in the form of censorship, licensing, or economic stimuli, depending on the shifting moral standing of the cinema); the class composition of the audience and the changing patterns of middle- and working-class leisure; the development of audience research methods; and the effect of urban planning policies on cinema building. The book would have benefited from highlighting these topics and following them in a more consistent way, for which an alternative chapter structure is conceivable. Some active editorship could have contributed to a tighter interweaving of the book's themes; it might also have spotted some awkwardly punctuated phrases, and realised that most of the data presented in table form would be more effectively communicated by a simple graph.

An explicitly thematic treatment would perhaps have allowed for a deeper engagement with some of the key debates that are instead summarised from a neutral perspective. Hanson's balanced exposition of some rather contentious historiographical issues, such as the class identity of cinema audiences, can come across as timid. This is a limitation of his reliance on secondary sources, which is unavoidable for a book of this scope. The first part of the book, for instance, draws extensively on Nick Hiley's excellent work on the early development of the exhibition industry in Britain, mainly that published in numbers 2 and 3 of the *Journal of Popular British Cinema* (1999–2000), and in the 2002 book edited by Andrew Higson, *Young and Innocent?* Hiley's view that the 1909 Cinematograph Act led to the demise of the cheap shows known as 'penny gaffs' and gave incentives to speculative investors has been contested by Jon Burrows in a 2004 article in *Film History*, cited by Hanson, and more recently in a collaboration with Richard Brown published in the March 2010 issue of this journal (*HJFRT*). Hanson's decision not to take part in this debate is understandable, but somewhat disappointing.

Covering 'exhibition in Britain since 1896' is a broad remit, and of course Hanson does not encompass all possible aspects of the topic. There is not much coverage of the management of cinemas, labour relations, or programming and publicity strategies, especially during the first half of the century. The book focuses on mainstream exhibition in larger towns and suburbs, which makes for a sharper narrative that will no doubt be complemented in the future by research on peripheral, rural, or non-mainstream practices. This is also true of the tantalising insights into the notion of the cinema as public sphere, and the way in which the varying fortunes of cinema admissions are a window on how the balance between public and private lives has changed (Hanson cites a 2003 article by Phil Hubbard, suggesting that multiplex customers enjoy an experience of 'light sociality' involving minimal physical interaction with others). There is much more to be said on this topic, and Hanson's book can be taken as an invitation.

In the last two chapters, Hanson considers ‘the multiplex revolution,’ using statistical sources and official documents instead of published scholarly research. This makes this part of the book the most vigorous, although it closes with a tone of uncertainty. The book stops in early 2005, before the rise of HDTV and mainstream IMAX movies. The exhibition landscape is dominated by multiplexes, and their screens are taken up by a handful of Hollywood blockbusters. Whilst digital technology seems to offer a chance to create a ‘more diverse film culture,’ there are many obstacles to this ideal. The old single-screen picture palace, and the experience it afforded, appears condemned to languish in the ‘heritage’ category, ‘rather like working industrial museums’ (p. 186). But what is it we lost? A truly diverse film culture would be aware of the forking paths of its history, and would recognise the valuable forms of social interaction that can be had without 3D glasses on. *From Silent Screen to Multi-screen* is a firm step in that direction.

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### **A European Television History**

JONATHAN BIGNELL and ANDREAS FICKERS (eds)

Malden/Oxford/Carlton, Blackwell, 2008

x + 273 pp., index, €69.00 (cloth), €23.00 (paperback)

Any study of European television history is an extremely ambitious undertaking. Europe itself is made up of a diverse collection of states, each with its own cultural identity and experience of political and economic change, and finding common themes within this disparate group might seem impossible. It is hardly surprising therefore that there is currently no scholarly study on this subject, but Bignell and Fickers explain in their opening chapter that their aim is to ‘offer a unique historical and analytical perspective on the leading mass medium of the second half of the twentieth century’ (p. 1). With the help of members of the European Television History Network (officially launched at the 2005 conference of the International Federation of Television Archives), they have compiled a series of case studies on their chosen themes. Most chapters are written by teams of scholars, with one lead author, and reflect the background and areas of work of that particular group. As a practitioner who spent most of my life working for BBC television, I did approach the book with certain expectations and was occasionally left wondering why certain topics had been omitted or at least under-examined, but students of media history should be inspired by this long awaited work.

‘Early TV: Imagining and Realising Television,’ by Knut Hicketier, examines the beginning of television, and the claims that it had been invented by one particular scientist which were already prevalent throughout Europe and America in the 19th century. As radio and then television technology developed and its popularity increased, so did political rivalry over this new medium. When it was announced that