Reading the Cinematograph

The Cinema in British Short Fiction
1896-1912

edited by ANDREW SHAIL


Reading the Cinematograph

The birth of cinema coincided with the heyday of the short story. Reading the Cinematograph studies the relationship between popular magazine short stories and the very early British films.

The book pairs eight short stories about the cinema with eight new essays from leading film and literary scholars. Contributors including Tom Gunning and Andrew Higson reveal the influence which film and fiction had on one another in Britain at the beginning of the twentieth century. The short stories are by authors ranging from the notable (Rudyard Kipling and Sax Rohmer) to the unknown (Raymond Rayne and Mrs H.J. Bickle).

‘As entertaining as it is edifying, Reading the Cinematograph showcases the transformative presence—and role—of cinema in British short fiction at the turn of the twentieth century. Andrew Shail has devised a marvelous format for the occasion: eight stories, reprinted in full and accompanied by their original illustrations, followed by valuable critical commentary by eminent film scholars, and framed by Shail’s indispensable historical/critical introduction and sure editorial hand. A work of impeccable and imaginative scholarship . . .’ Maria DiBattista, Professor of English at Princeton University and author of Fast Talking Dames

Andrew Shail is Lecturer in Film at Newcastle University. He is co-author of a BFI Film Classic on Back to the Future and editor of a special issue of Early Popular Visual Culture on intermediality in early cinema.
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Dedication

John Galsworthy dedicated the one-volume edition of *The Forsyte Saga* (1922), a work that he had been writing since 1904, thus:

TO MY WIFE:
I DEDICATE THE FORSYTE SAGA IN ITS ENTIRETY, BELIEVING IT TO BE OF ALL MY WORKS THE LEAST UNWORTHY OF ONE WITHOUT WhOSE ENCOURAGEMENT, SYMPATHY AND CRITICISM I COULD NEVER HAVE BECOME EVEN SUCH A WRITER AS I AM.

To my partner
'carryin' a little reticule an’ lookin’ from side to side – comes out Mrs. Bathurst.'

Paperback cover images: front cover, a still from Mitchell & Kenyon 422: 
*Lord Roberts’ Visit to Manchester, 19 October 1901*;
back cover, a drawing from Story Three in the book, 
*Colonel Rankin’s Advertisement* by Raymond Rayne, December 1901.

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Notes on Contributors

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David Trotter is King Edward VII Professor of English Literature at the University of Cambridge. His books include *Paranoid Modernism* (Oxford University Press, 2001) and *Cinema and Modernism* (Blackwell, 2007). He was co-founder of the Cambridge Screen Media Group, and is currently Director of the University’s MPhil in Screen Media and Cultures.
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Reading the Cinematograph
Introduction

Andrew Shail

This volume consists of two elements. The first is a body of short stories, in all of which the presence of cinema is central to the plot, first published in the UK between 1896 and 1914 (or between the emergence of projected motion photography and the outbreak of the First World War, by which time cinema had achieved a significant degree of institutional stability). These sources are presented in full (as most have never been reprinted), with original illustrations, and (where multiple versions exist) in their earliest versions. The second element is a set of analyses of these stories by film and literature historians, scholarly works (referred to hereafter as ‘Chapters’) that treat the stories as valuable records of the interpretative frameworks that pertained to cinema in the years of its novelty.

A consequence of the urge to separate the history of early cinema from film studies’ general origins in literary studies has been a hugely productive disciplinary alternative affiliation with less institutionalized disciplines, including the history of amusements, music hall, public lecturing, circus, unlicensed theatre, and spiritualism. If we have lost cinema’s earliest public, then historians of early cinema have, for some time now, benefitted from the fact that this public was writing newspaper and magazine articles, diary entries, letters, autobiographies, travel narratives and invective pamphlets, and drawing cartoon strips and caricatures. But they were also writing fiction, and the authors of these short stories have left, in high ‘compression’, records of popular perceptions of cinema in these years of half-formed, multiple and rapidly changing popular classifications. The often complex narrative relevance of cinema in these works means that they can constitute superbly preserved snapshots of popular perceptions of the new entity. Any piece of fiction densely encodes—in narrative voice, focalization, the relationship between fabula and sjuzet, temporal structure, genre, mode and
intertextuality—components of the popular thought that supervised its composition. Concentrating on the short story—in part so as to be able to reproduce these documents in full—Reading the Cinematograph seeks to discover the historical cinema in short stories by treating them as components of the larger effort to absorb and make sense of the new technology, at a point when no consensus on the purposes and propensities of the cinematograph existed. This study is therefore deliberately distinct from an analysis of the influence of the arrival of cinema on late-Victorian and Edwardian fiction, although it can tell us much about the kind of entity that cinema was conceived to be, of which we must be keenly aware if we are to identify its effects on fictional production and literary institutions.

Fiction has very recently come to the attention of historians of early film. Stephen Bottomore’s 1995 and 2004 articles on the appearance of cinema in French fiction (listed in Chapter 1) were the only substantial studies until 2007, when Laura Marcus drew heavily on the fictional appearance of cinema in her work on early film culture. Stephen Bottomore’s special issue of Film History on ‘Moving Picture Fiction’ (Summer 2008) has just presented the first significant analysis of film in fiction, including Ken Wlaschin and Stephen Bottomore’s bibliography of fiction mentioning cinema in the years up to 1927, which shows that at least seventy-four short stories referring to film were published in the UK between 1896 and 1914.

The eight short stories reproduced here, selected from a shortlist of eighteen, have been chosen on the basis of four criteria: first, the plot must more or less pivot on the presence of a film apparatus or exhibition (such stories are the most likely to have encoded perceptions of cinema, rather than merely employing cinema as a cipher for something else); second, they must have been written by non-specialists; third, they must have appeared in popular periodicals (combined, these two criteria are the closest it is possible to come to a guarantee that the stories resonated with popular perceptions); and fourth, they should, collectively, give some idea of the changes undergone during these first two decades of cinema (their primary use, for this collection, as historical sources). In addition, as I detail below, short fiction is a particularly apposite source for film history, in that it played a primary role in the commercial literary landscape during the years when cinema emerged.

While the following stories are not spread evenly across the fifteen years they span as a whole, this date distribution reflects a more general historical distribution also borne out in Wlaschin and Bottomore’s survey (see Fig. 1). This corresponds to a rise and fall in the sheer amount of popular discourse on film in general, a pattern that has been noticed before. The seven-year