

Acting Imperially: Race, Performance, and Cinema in Interwar Britain

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Joel Casey
St Anne's College, University of Oxford
Supervisors: Professor Laura Marcus and Professor
Santanu Das

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Abstract

This thesis explores the role of race, racism, and colonialism in British cinema culture of the 1920s and early 1930s. It argues firstly that silent film performance is received as a racialised element of film form in Britain; race is ‘read’ by British audiences into movements, gestures, and expressions. This is inflected by colonial constructions of racialised bodies and imperial geographies: the intimacies and distances between racialised groups that theorists argue underpin racial difference. Whereas many scholars have demonstrated that interwar British cinema entails performances of class, gender and national identities, this thesis foregrounds the performance of racial identity, often in ways which override or obscure these other social distinctions.

Secondly, it posits that this performance of racial difference informs constructions of taste, decorum, and style in British cinema. Racialised performance determines perceptions of cinema’s effect on the body—of both performers and spectators—and the way it represents and disseminates British cultural and imperial heritage and history. Through performances of race, British filmmakers and critics construct cinema as entertainment, art form, historical record, and colonial educational tool. This thesis takes the reception and production in Britain of four case study genres, the ‘Eastern’, the Limehouse melodrama, the expedition film and the British documentary, to evidence this. Representing different kinds of racialised performance, inflected by the specific settings and forms of racialised encounter depicted in each genre, these case studies raise different aesthetic and political concerns that are all explored through the racialised bodies that take centre stage.

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Note on referencing

This thesis references newspaper and magazine articles extensively, many of which are untitled or published anonymously. For ease of reading, I cite newspaper and magazine references in short form, giving publication title, date, and page number. Where relevant, I give the title or author in text. These resources were mostly found in online newspaper archives. Again, for ease of reading, I have not included details of these in footnotes, but list all newspapers and online archives used at the beginning of the bibliography.

To simplify further, I also shorten the following commonly used national newspapers or magazines and remove ‘*The*’ from all titles:

Daily Express (*Express*)

Daily Mail (*Mail*)

Daily Mirror (*Mirror*)

Manchester Guardian (*Guardian*)

Illustrated London News (*ILN*)

Pictures and the Picturegoer/The Picturegoer (*Picturegoer*)

This thesis also includes film stills to illustrate my argument. Unfortunately, in cases where I have accessed films in archives (primarily *Tommy Atkins* in Chapter 2, *The Yellow Claw* in Chapter 3 and *Cape to Cairo* in Chapter 4), I have not been able to include these.

Introduction

In the mid-1920s, two commentators writing in British publications, from very different perspectives and for very different audiences, foreground performance to endow cinema with imperial significance.¹ In the November 1923 issue of British fan magazine, *Picturegoer*, 'The Film Globe Trotter' by 'A. F. W.' contemplates cinema's capacity to enable spectators to see the world and encounter other peoples, cultures and ways of living:

[...] And yet, I've been abroad a lot,
In fact to all these places,
I've learned the customs of the lands
And studied foreign faces.
I know the way the people dress.
Although I haven't been
You see, I watch them every week
Upon the silver screen.²

The idea that cinema facilitates vicarious travel was recognised from the medium's origins and, in Europe and America, was closely intertwined with colonial impulses to record, penetrate, and attain visual mastery over colonised and colonisable spaces and peoples.³ Learning and studying 'customs' and 'foreign faces', the poet invokes colonial disciplines of anthropometry, ethnography and anthropology, and thus racial difference.⁴ Vicarious cinematic travel opens a 'contact zone' between the spectator and peoples of other lands.⁵ Delaying the revelation of the 'silver screen' until the final line, they suggest the idea that cinema provides a kind of unmediated access to 'foreign faces',

¹ I use 'cinema' in accordance with Andrew Shail's summation of 'cinema' as 'image regime': a historical entity, part of everyday life, social interaction and form of knowledge; 'film' refers to film texts; see Andrew Shail, *The Cinema and the Origins of Literary Modernism* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012), p. 9.

² *Picturegoer*, November 1923, p. 48.

³ Alison Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference: Cinema, Anthropology, & Turn-of-the-Century Visual Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 205; Jeffrey Ruoff (ed.), 'Introduction: The Filmic Fourth Dimension: Cinema as Audiovisual Vehicle', in *Virtual Voyages: Cinema and Travel* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 1-21; Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film*, paperback edn (New York: Verso, 2007), pp. 17, 77-80; Alison Griffiths, 'The Untrammelled Camera: A Topos of the Expedition Film', *Film History*, 25.1-2 (2013), 95-109 (p. 96); Sue Beeton, *Travel, Tourism and the Moving Image* (Bristol, Buffalo, and Toronto: Channel View Publications, 2015), pp. 39-60.

⁴ See e.g. V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 16-23; William Greenslade, 'Race and Biology', in *Late Victorian into Modern*, ed. by Laura Marcus, Michèle Mendelssohn, and Kirsten E. Shepherd-Barr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 321-334 (p. 322).

⁵ On the 'contact zone' in travel literature, see Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 2nd edn (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 8.

‘dress’, ‘customs’, and ultimately, to racial identity. The facial expressions, customs, and dress within this encounter cohere into a spectated film performance: the actions, movements, gestures and conduct of bodies on screen, rendered a performance, as I explain below, by their being directed towards and framed by the camera and presented for a cinema audience. The poem epitomises a British conception of cinema as a medium for depicting colonial encounter, in which race is made legible on the screen through the customs and costumes of such performances.

Two years later, *Telegraph* film critic Alder Anderson begins a column on the ‘British film crisis’ of the mid-1920s. He makes proposals for improving the state of British cinema in a period of perceived unpopularity and financial difficulty for the British industry, reaching its nadir in November 1924 when, it was reported, no British film was produced.⁶ Collating prominent voices in British and colonial industry and politics, like the Prince of Wales, ex-Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald and Board of Trade President Philip Cunliffe-Lister, Anderson speaks as an authority, in a national broadsheet, on cinema’s political and economic implications. He declares,

[i]t is realised that, if we agree to the postulate, “Trade follows the film,” we cannot evade its inevitable corollary, that an adequate provision of British films is essential to our national prosperity and prestige. [...] This is essentially a question, if ever there was one, in which it is necessary to think and act Imperially.⁷

The *Picturegoer* poem imagines edifying cinematic travel in a populist fan publication. Anderson’s article attributes cinema with utmost imperial importance, bolstering imperial trade while imparting, as he quotes from Australian senator R. V. Wilson, ‘a knowledge of what other parts of the world are like’. As Aboubakar Sanogo has observed, the British Empire provides a unique model for thinking about imperialism and cinema because of its sheer size:

⁶ These reports have since been contested. See e.g. C. A. Oakley, *Where We Came In: Seventy Years of the British Film Industry* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1964), pp. 75-83; Olly Gruner, “‘Good Business, Good Policy, Good Patriotism’: The British Film Weeks of 1924’, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 32.1 (2012), 41-56 (p. 41); Paul Moody, ‘The Lion Had Wings: The Invention of British Cinema, 1895-1939’ (unpublished doctoral dissertation, London School of Economics, 2013), pp. 101-102.

⁷ *Telegraph*, 21 December 1925, p. 8.

[f]or such an oversized empire, the question of how to image itself in relation to the world, to other empires and to image the millions of souls spread out across the four corners of the earth was a project in and of itself.⁸

Cinema was a primary means of disseminating this image, of mapping imperial trade, geography and the bodies within the Empire, and thus, Anderson concludes, required all stakeholders in the film industry to 'act imperially'.

In his injunction to 'act imperially', Anderson uses the verb in its most basic and capacious sense as in '[t]o perform actions, to do things' or '[t]o behave, to comport oneself', urging those in the film industry to 'act' by upholding and propagating the interests of the Empire.⁹ At the same time, in the context of a discussion about cinema, Anderson's word choice also evokes ideas of film performance, and particularly the dominant mode of fictional 'acting': to act also means '[t]o perform (a play, film or similar dramatic work); to represent something dramatically'.¹⁰ I foreground Anderson's appeal because, consciously on his part or not, it evokes and exemplifies the importance of on-screen performance to prominent discourses about cinema's imperial function among British filmmakers, commentators, and critics. Moreover, the ambiguity surrounding the word 'act' encapsulates the way in which film performance was understood to have a close relationship to the way people 'acted', 'performed', or behaved in the real world. In this thesis, while these points of contact between behaviour in everyday life and performance on screen are always operational, I am primarily interested in the latter: 'performance' here connotes embodied actions and behaviour filmed by the camera for a spectating audience. I further distinguish 'acting' from 'performance', using the former word to refer to the interpretation or impersonation of a character or persona *different* to oneself in *fiction* film and the latter more capaciously to refer to *all* of the ways in which someone behaves, moves and expresses themselves in front of the camera, in all forms of fiction

⁸ Aboubakar Sanogo, 'Colonialism, Visuality and the Cinema: Revisiting the Bantu Educational Kinema Experiment', in *Empire and Film*, ed. by Lee Grieveson and Colin MacCabe (London: BFI, 2011), pp. 227-245 (p. 227).

⁹ 'Act', in *The Oxford English Dictionary* [online], <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/1889?rskey=mCqAOs&result=5>> [accessed 6 July 2023].

¹⁰ 'Act', *OED*.

and non-fiction film.¹¹ However, Anderson's injunction illustrates the role of film performance, and the performance of racial and imperial identities, within the broader drive to ensure that cinema served imperial ends. Film performance in fiction and non-fiction film dramatised ways of 'acting imperially'. The ways bodies performed—and particularly performed racial identities—on screen, how this was framed by the camera, and how this was read by spectators, were perceived to be fundamental facets of how the film industry could 'act imperially' in serving the Empire's interests.

This thesis uncovers and examines the interrelationships between silent film performance, race, and cinema in 1920s Britain. Scholars have only recently begun to comprehensively address the centrality of performance in silent cinema, and, where they have, their focus has been largely on how it constructs class and gender identities.¹² What has been neglected, almost entirely in early British cinema history, is what it might have meant to perform 'imperially': the intersections between race, Empire, and silent film performance form a lacuna in studies of interwar British cinema. Performance is useful for understanding the role of race in 1920s British cinema culture for two key reasons. Firstly, this culture was, as I discuss later in this introduction, especially concerned with representing and exploring notions and themes of performance. Secondly, performance was (and remains) crucial to how identities and social positions, including racial identity, could be read into or inscribed onto subjects. Yet no study has explored the ways in which race underpinned discourses of film performance and cinema in interwar Britain. This thesis asks: how was performance in Britain informed by colonial politics and discourses? How did one perform

¹¹ In this thesis, I use 'non-fiction' to refer to any film which purports to be a recording of 'real' events, and 'documentary' to refer specifically to the non-fiction films, discussed in Chapter 5, produced by members of the 'British documentary movement', who self-consciously made and theorised their films under this designation.

¹² For some of the key works on silent film performance, see Roberta Pearson, *Eloquent Gestures: The Transformation of Performance Style in the Griffith Biograph Films* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford: University of California Press, 1992); Linda Fitzsimmons and Sarah Street (eds), *Moving Performance: British Stage and Screen, 1890s-1920s* (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 2000); Rebecca Swender, 'The Problem of the Divo: New Models for Analyzing Silent-Film Performance', *Journal of Film and Video*, 58.1/2 (2006), 7-20; Victoria Duckett, *Seeing Sarah Bernhardt: Performance and Silent Film* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2015); Elisabetta Girelli, *Silent Film Performance: Dramatic Bodies on Screen* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

‘imperial’ on screen within British cinema culture? The answers lie in the performance of race and the staging of racialised encounter.

*

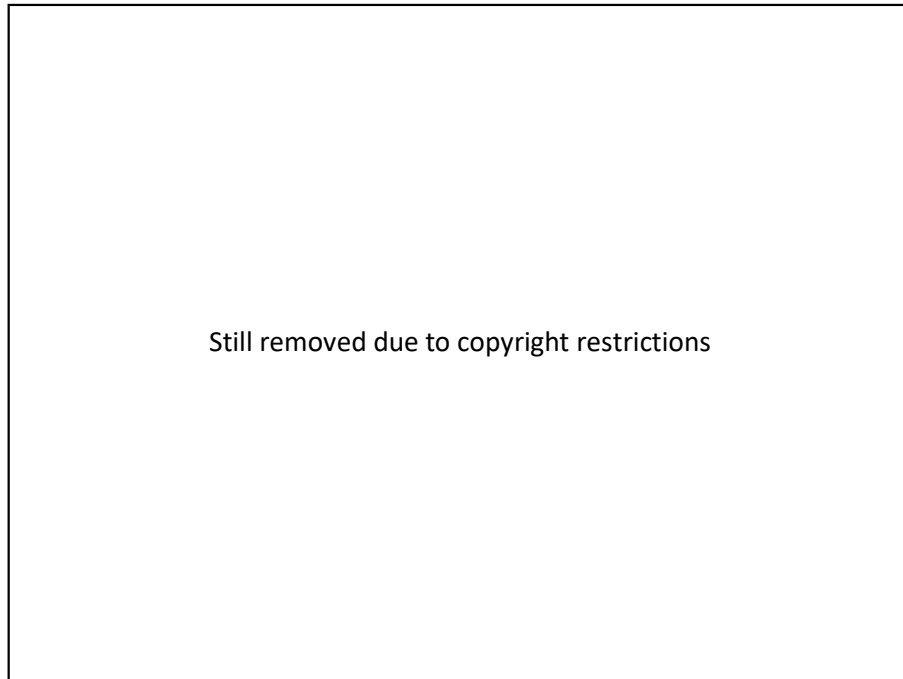


Figure 1: General Edmund Allenby marching through Jerusalem in *Allenby's Entry into Jerusalem*



Figure 2: Indian troops performing a Khattak dance in *With the Indian Troops at the Front*

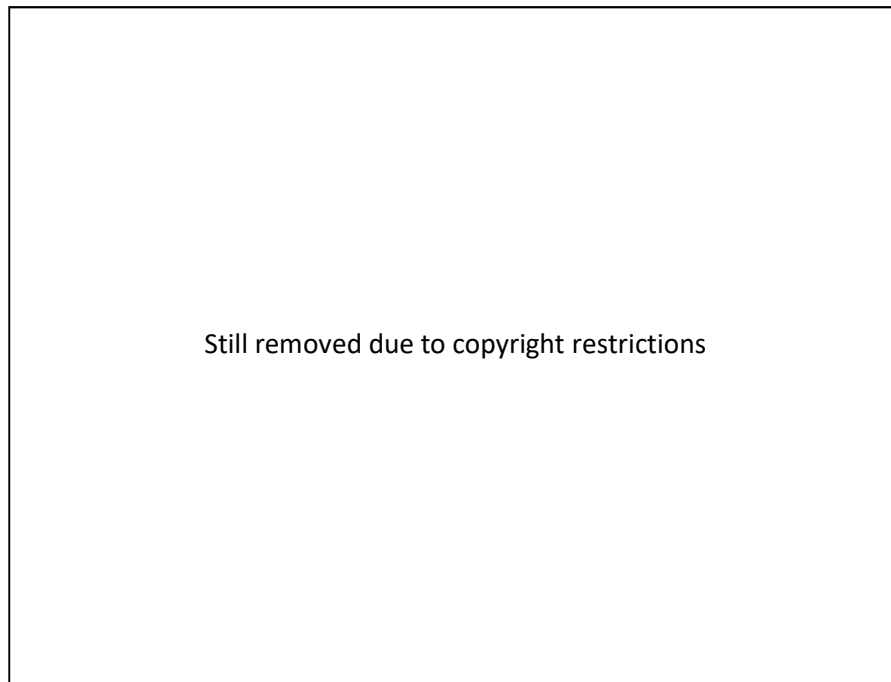


Figure 3: Shosho dancing on the scullery table in *Piccadilly*

Three seemingly divergent scenes demonstrate the importance of performance to British cinema's depictions of racial difference and racialised encounter in the interwar period. In 1918, a non-fiction newsreel entitled *Allenby's Entry into Jerusalem* (Frank Hurley and Harold Jeapes, War Office Cinematograph Committee, 1918) depicted General Edmund Allenby marching into Jerusalem after its capture by British Empire forces in 1917 (Figure 1). Carefully planned to emphasise his humility in opposition to the Kaiser who rode into the city, his slow, deliberate walk is watched by flanking soldiers, a performed display simultaneously evoking military might and restrained dignity.¹³ Compare this to the staged performances of another war film two years earlier, *With the Indian Troops at the Front* (Geoffrey H. Malins and Edward G. Tong, The British Topical Committee for War Films, 1916). A central sequence shows, as described by intertitles, 'Indians at play' in 'A Khattak Dance' and 'Sikhs wrestling', moments of organised performance for the camera bounded by a diegetic audience of other Indian and white European soldiers (Figure 2). Focusing on unreserved, undressed, moving bodies, these scenes of martial dance and hand-to-hand combat are designed to

¹³ See Luke McKernan, "'The supreme moment of the war': General Allenby's entry into Jerusalem", *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 13.2 (1993), 169-180.

evidence racial difference, distanced from the action of warfare. Whereas Allenby is depicted in military forward movement to embody dignified, reserved might, these earlier scenes transmute military combat into the conventions of ethnographic display.¹⁴ Against the backdrop of Palestinian space, Allenby's march becomes a spectated performance of *white* imperial masculinity, conquering and colonising through this movement. On the Western Front in France, these Indian soldiers are conversely presented at 'play' through an ethnographic lens, their bodies and the conventional 'manners and customs' of ethnographic film placed on show. Both of these are achieved, however, through staging and performance: the establishment of a bounded stage space on which race is made visible and legible through the body, gesture, and movement.

A decade later, another example demonstrates the continuing importance of staging racial difference in British cinema, across fiction and non-fiction and across the 1920s. In an early scene in the 1929 late-silent *Piccadilly* (E. A. Dupont, BIP, 1929), Shosho, played by the Chinese-American actress Anna May Wong, dances for her white co-workers on a table in the scullery of the Piccadilly nightclub, creating a stage for the performance of her difference spectated by these other dishwashers and the film audience (Figure 3). She distracts her colleagues with her gyrating arms, hands on swaying hips, bowed head, and coy smile, embodying exoticised, racialised femininity rather than the martial masculinities on display in the earlier war films. She is also watched by nightclub manager Valentine (Jameson Thomas), who has angrily descended into the nightclub to discover the source of a dirty dish; Anna May Wong acts as the character Shosho while, within the film's narrative, Shosho dances for, and is distinguished from, this white audience of Valentine and her co-workers. Moving from the public middle-class nightclub floor to its working-class inner spaces, Valentine discovers a performance of racialised exoticism and eroticism, in which Shosho is distinguished from the grubby white women dishwashers but also from the club's current white star dancer Mabel (Gilda Gray). With the table serving as another bounded stage delineated by the white

¹⁴ On the conventions of recording dance in ethnographic film, see Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 65-66; Assenka Oksiloff, *Picturing the Primitive: Visual Culture, Ethnography, and Early German Cinema* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 62-64; Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference*, pp. 219-220.

spectators on its margins, racial difference is made visible through her exoticised, eroticised dance. Attention to the way that race and imperial identity become legible through performance by commentators like 'A. F. W.' or Anderson reflects the tendency, exemplified in these scenes, to represent and foreground acts of performance and spectatorship—for and by diegetic spectators as well as film audiences—when delineating and making visible racial difference in British films.

My first contention, then, is that, while such racial identities, including white identities, were taken contemporarily to be essential and biological qualities, they were in fact read into and understood through repertoires of gesture, movement, expression, and behaviour on the screen—what I call film performance—as well as skin colour or appearance. Race became legible in the visual elements of silent film performance, elements I take from those delineated by Andrew Higson and Richard Dyer (excluding the vocal or voice which I do not examine in this thesis): respectively, the facial, the gestural and the corporeal/postural; and facial expression, gesture, posture and movement.¹⁵ Silent cinema always entailed sound elements, often through live lecturing or music, and sound technology in the later 1920s transformed film performance, as was acknowledged by theorists contemporarily.¹⁶ However, this thesis considers the ways in which race was understood on screen through the silent body's movement, gesture and expression. 'British' qualities of 'restraint' and 'reserve' in performance, for instance, were racialised, aligned with 'civilisation', 'cultivation'

¹⁵ Andrew Higson, 'Film Acting and Independent Cinema', *Screen*, 27.3-4 (1986), 110-133 (p. 112); Richard Dyer, *Stars*, new edn (London: BFI, 1998), p. 134.

¹⁶ For studies of sound and sound performance in silent cinema, see e.g. Richard Abel and Rick Altman (eds), *The Sounds of Early Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001); Rick Altman, *Silent Film Sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Julie Brown and Annette Davison (eds), *The Sounds of the Silents in Britain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). Interwar theorists exploring early sound film performance typically argued that a focus on voice risked transforming cinema into a kind of recorded theatre. Instead, they proposed that sound should be used to draw attention to what Belá Balázs calls 'our acoustic environment' through 'sound close-ups', sound montage, sound-image juxtapositions and poetry, rather than conventional dialogue; Béla Balázs, *The Spirit of Film* [1930], in *Béla Balázs: Early Film Theory: Visible Man and The Spirit of Film*, ed. by Erica Carter, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010), pp. 91-230 (p. 185). See e.g. Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin and Grigori Alexandrov, 'Statement of Sound' [1928], in *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896-1939*, ed. by Ian Christie and Richard Taylor, trans. by Richard Taylor, paperback edn (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 234-235; Rudolf Arnheim, *Film Essays and Criticism*, trans. by Brenda Benthien (Madison and London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), pp. 29-51; René Clair, 'The Art of Sound' [1929], in *Film Sound: Theory and Practice*, ed. by Elisabeth Weis and John Belton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), pp. 92-95; Balázs, pp. 183-210; James Donald, Anne Friedberg, and Laura Marcus (eds), *Close Up 1927-1933: Cinema and Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 79-93.

and usually whiteness; by comparison, exaggerated gesture, sensuousness and bodily display, were often aligned with 'primitiveness' and non-white racial identities. The second, corresponding contention is that these racialised performing bodies became a locus for articulating assumptions and ideas about cinema itself: not only its capacity to support or undermine colonial rule, order and hierarchies, but also parameters of film taste and decorum and the medium's aesthetic possibilities. Examining the very different context of eighteenth-century Britain, Simon Gikandi outlines a 'culture of taste' wherein associations of taste with rationality, cultivation, regulation, and restraint—the management of feelings, behaviour, and government—were achieved through their opposition to Black people stereotypically associated with 'primitive' instinct and pure sensation; taste inhered in the correct sensory, (dis)embodied responses to art, aligned with whiteness.¹⁷ Uniquely determined by the interwar context and cinematic apparatus, the performance of race and restraint analogously constructed a British cinema culture of taste. Silent cinema's bodily address, its status as art, and its relationships to other media forms were evaluated in Britain through racialised performance. Allenby's slow march embodies the imperial capture of a significant city, articulating cinema's capacity to record and disseminate 'heroic', historic imperial actions. Conversely, the ethnographic framing of Indian troops demonstrates the camera's capacity to reveal less momentous incidents, bringing spectators closer to exoticised 'play' and leisure, what happens in between the historic. It emphasises the capacities of the medium found by 'A. F. W.' to make visible and legible purportedly distant, 'exotic' peoples and ways of being in a vivid, moving form. Finally, Valentine's, and the camera's, lascivious gaze at Wong's legs in *Piccadilly* suggests cinema's capacity to facilitate eroticised contact. Inviting spectators to imagine sensual contact, alongside Valentine, with the performer, the film exploits transgressions of race and class boundaries to articulate transgressions of the film frame's boundaries. These moments exemplify how racialised performances played a crucial role in establishing what cinema *does* as art form, social space, and mass medium.

¹⁷ Simon Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011), pp. 59, 108.

Performances of racial identity determined two interrelated areas of cinema aesthetics key to British cinema culture: the relationship of cinema to the body and to history, heritage and the means of representing these. Firstly, race was central to expressing and exploring cinema's sensuous, erotic, and corporeal effects on performers and spectators. Scholars of modernist literature and early cinema have demonstrated the ways in which racial difference was used to articulate the newness, modernity, or difference of early-twentieth-century literature and Hollywood film.¹⁸ In interwar Britain, racial difference, made visible through performing bodies on screen, also defined cinema's difference: its unique *corporeal* address. In its vast, international reach and ability to record, reproduce and bring close or magnify, cinema's unprecedented sensuous and sensational mass appeal and dynamism were perceived to facilitate new forms of proximity and intimacy, via the screen and physically in theatres, that exceeded other media and live performing art forms. For British critics and filmmakers, this corporeality and its negative and positive potential effects were explored through racial difference. As discussed in Chapters 1, 2 and 3, the purportedly distasteful aspects of cinema, its sensuous and often sexual temptations, were projected onto people of colour: cinema's corporeal appeals and transgressions, its dangerous yet seductive capacity to 'move' the spectator physically, were aligned with non-whiteness. Equally, filmmakers and critics proposed alternative forms of sensuous address through the *white* body, as in films discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. In both cases, cinema's bodiliness was articulated through race and racialised encounter. If cinema was a kind of contact zone as it is framed in the *Picturegoer* poem, it was one of *bodily* interaction, address, and intimacy. The sensuous, 'moving' qualities of cinema, the relationship between 'motion' and 'emotion' which Giuliana Bruno and Laura Marcus find in early

¹⁸ Urmila Seshagiri, *Race and the Modernist Imagination* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2010), p. 8; Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Point* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1996); Alice Maurice, *The Cinema and Its Shadow: Race and Technology in Early Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

cinema discourses, were envisaged in Britain through performances of racial identity in this contact zone.¹⁹

Cinema's unique corporeal address epitomised the newness of the medium in British cinema culture. Yet performances of race also underpinned conceptions of cinema's *continuities* with other cultural heritages, media, and forms. Drawing on André Gaudreault's theory of the 'polyphony' of early cinema, its close relationship to other technologies of animation, Victoria Duckett proposes a supplementary 'performative polyphony' in silent film, in that silent film performance interweaves 'a range of intermedial codependencies' into the medium.²⁰ Similarly, Christine Gledhill demonstrates that interwar British cinema *foregrounds* its connections to older forms and media, to theatre, art, painting and literature, rather than obscuring or denying these connections as contemporary avant-garde movements and classical Hollywood cinema did.²¹ To this, I add that British cinema, in its entanglement with imperial history, foregrounds its connection to genres, media, and forms representing this history like ethnography, travel writing, and exhibitions. Whether critiquing cinema's reliance on cheap popular fiction (see Chapters 2 and 3) or celebrating its ability to memorialise heroic imperial deeds (see Chapter 4), British critics, commentators, and films made these associations through racialised performing bodies. Much scholarship explores constructions of a British national cinema through representing British 'heritage'.²² Some has engaged with the racial construction of heritage, usually in later postcolonial periods, echoing Immanuel Wallerstein's reminder that race, like nationhood or other categories of 'peoplehood', is always an appeal to an apparently unchanging, static shared history.²³ Stuart Hall's proposition that '[t]he British have

¹⁹ Bruno, p. 2; Laura Marcus, *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 5.

²⁰ Duckett, pp. 9-11. See also André Gaudreault, 'The Culture Broth and the Froth of Cultures of So-called Early Cinema', in *A Companion to Early Cinema*, ed. by André Gaudreault, Nicolas Dulac, and Santiago Hidalgo (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), pp. 15-31 (p. 20).

²¹ Christine Gledhill, *Reframing British Cinema 1918-1928: Between Restraint and Passion* (London: BFI, 2003), pp. 2-3.

²² See e.g. Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 26-97; Claire Monk and Amy Sargeant (eds), *British Historical Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002); Gledhill, pp. 56-57, 94-95.

²³ Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, trans. by Chris Turner (London and New York: Verso, 1991), pp. 78-79. See also e.g. Stephen Bourne, 'Secrets and Lies: Black histories

always seen “culture” as a vaguely disquieting idea as if to name it is to make self-conscious what well-bred folk absorb unconsciously with their mother’s milk’ epitomises interwar British cinema culture’s conception of cultural heritage as a kind of racial inheritance, transmitted through the body.²⁴ Hall writes that heritage ‘becomes the material embodiment of the spirit of the nation, a collective representation of the British version of tradition, a concept pivotal to the lexicon of English virtues’. While he goes on to think about this as a ‘discursive’ practice, on film it is very literally *embodied* in performers, actions, and movements.²⁵ Performances of race invoke other, older forms of representing British imperial and cultural histories, and thus contribute to bestowing or denying ‘virtue’ to certain films, genres and styles of performing.

Like Lea Jacobs exploring taste and sentiment in 1920s American cinema culture or Michael Hammond sketching a World War I British cinema culture, I combine close analysis of specific films, their reception, and the broader ‘systematic assumptions and categories that structured film preferences’.²⁶ Through this, ‘a realm of discursive exchange’ is established, between industry, fan and trade press, general national and local press, and audiences.²⁷ I apply this approach to performance as an element of film style, taking Higson’s distinction between ‘*intentions* of specific traditions’ of performance, and the *effects* of performance ‘in terms of the production of meaning’.²⁸ I focus as much on the latter, exploring reception of performance by interwar audiences, critics and commentators: how it was read (particularly in terms of racial identity), discussed, and used as the

and British historical films’, in *British Historical Cinema*, ed. by Claire Monk and Amy Sargeant (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 47-65; Gill Branston, ‘What a Difference a Bay Makes: Cinema and Welsh Heritage’, in *The Politics of Heritage: The Legacies of ‘Race’*, ed. by Jo Littler and Roshi Naidoo (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 127-140.

²⁴ Stuart Hall, ‘Whose Heritage?: Un-settling “The Heritage”’, Re-imagining the Post-nation’, *Third Text*, 13.49 (1999), 3-13 (p. 3).

²⁵ Hall, p. 5.

²⁶ Lea Jacobs, *The Decline of Sentiment: American Film in the 1920s* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2008), p. 18.

²⁷ Michael Hammond, *The Big Show: British Cinema Culture in the Great War 1914-1918* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006), p. 4. Colonial film scholars similarly propose moving beyond individual film texts to delineate broader debates about the medium; e.g. Martin Stollery, *Alternative Empires: European Modernist Cinemas and Cultures of Imperialism* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000), p. 1; Priya Jaikumar, *Cinema at the End of Empire: A Politics of Transition in Britain and India* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 3-4.

²⁸ Higson, p. 110.

starting point for broader discussions about the aesthetic capacities and limits of the medium. This approach enables a more transnational view of British cinema, which Martin Stollery claims is often neglected in scholarship on cinema and Empire.²⁹ In particular, given Hollywood's dominance, I examine British cinema in relation to British reception of American films and performances. As Mark Glancy and Hammond contend, British cinema history is always, in part, about American film; to ignore Hollywood in exploring the racial politics of British cinema culture would neglect debates about American dominance, and the effect of this on the British film industry, the British public, British imperial economics, and British films themselves always produced in the shadow of this dominance.³⁰ To limit my study, I focus on representations of British imperial geographies. Both British and American film industries were profoundly interested in films set in and at the borders of the British Empire. In subsequent chapters, I therefore take four genre case studies in which British colonial space, including Britain itself as the 'heart' of the Empire, becomes the location for racialised performances and encounters. These films and genres, their reception histories, and broader debates about the medium by British critics and commentators form 'a realm of discursive exchange' centred on race, Empire and cinema that constructs how the medium is understood in Britain.

Tracing these broader debates and discussions through reception, I focus on a middlebrow, middle- and upper-class British cinema culture anxious to reform cinema aesthetics and cinema-going practices, and to maintain hierarchies of race, gender and class. Exploring race in interwar Britain inevitably entails attentiveness to class and gender, the ways in which these identities are intertwined on screen but also in discourses about film performance, cinema and cinematic taste, which I trace in interwar newspapers and magazines. Examining the 1924 'British Film Weeks', Olly Gruner argues that these attempts to advertise and improve British film appealed to and legitimised

²⁹ Martin Stollery, 'From *Storm Over Asia* to *Dawn Over Africa*: Transnationalism and imperialism in British intellectual film culture of the late 1920s and 1930s', *Transnational Cinemas*, 2.1 (2011), 93-111.

³⁰ Mark Glancy, *Hollywood and the Americanization of Britain: From the 1920s to the Present* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014), pp. 3-5; Hammond, pp. 5-6. See also Laraine Porter, "'Temporary American Citizens': British cinema in the 1920s", in *The Routledge Companion to British Cinema History*, ed. by I. Q. Hunter, Laraine Porter, and Justin Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 34-46.

cinema for middle-class audiences rather than representing a popular movement.³¹ The discourses and debates discussed in this thesis reflect this same reformist drive, aimed at and emerging from middle-class and middlebrow spectators instead of intellectual cineastes or mass audiences. Lawrence Napper also finds a 'middlebrow' sentiment and aesthetic in British cinema culture, defined by 'adaptability and adaptation', intermediality and middle-class identity markers, 'social aspiration and cultural anxiety'. For Napper, this middlebrow quality did largely characterise British filmmaking and audiences in this period.³² As he points out, this inevitably entailed the erasure of difference across Britain and the Empire, rendering film a 'colonialist mediation' of British culture rather than reflecting its reality.³³ While this culture was contested and debated, then, it was self-consciously positioned as 'British' and held a dominant position in British cinema debates and discussions in this period. Within this culture, the performance of race played a neglected but formative role in exploring cinema's aesthetic and social effects, its impact on the Empire, its perceived impacts on the bodies of spectators and performers, and its relation to other histories, media and forms.

Theories of Performance: Theatrical, Sociological, and Cinematic

To explore the importance of the performance of race in British cinema culture, it will be necessary to outline how I understand performance in this thesis. I will start by exploring some theories and traditions of the concept beyond cinema: in everyday life and in the performing arts. These underpin my understanding of *film* performance as the behaviour, gestures, movements, and expressions of bodies on screen, authorised as such by the camera and, implicit in the camera's presence, the film audience. They also provide two key models for the representing and foregrounding of performance within the diegetic worlds of films that is so significant in interwar British cinema. What defines this term, especially the question of intention, and its distinctions from behaviour already raised by Anderson's phrase, 'acting imperially', has been a vexed issue. W. B. Gallie characterises

³¹ Gruner, pp. 50-51.

³² Lawrence Napper, *British Cinema and Middlebrow Culture in the Interwar Years* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2009), pp. 8-12.

³³ Napper, pp. 3-6.

performance as an ‘essentially contested’ concept, its very essence ‘bound up in disagreement about what it is’.³⁴ As Simon Shepherd observes, invoking this concept risks falling into the trap of its becoming ‘a catch-all term [...] to describe almost anything’.³⁵ This thesis follows Shepherd’s alternative injunction to find the value of theories of performance in their ‘ways of making sense of other materials. Performance theory can be a way of framing objects of study [...] thereby facilitating a new sort of thinking about them’. Doing so requires a *historicised* conception, which examines how it is used and understood in specific historical moments.³⁶

I briefly sketch here different traditions of performance beyond cinema, before narrowing in focus to my more specialised use of the term in this thesis, referring to film performance for a camera and cinema audience. I begin most broadly with sociological approaches that view *all* social interactions and actions as a kind of performance. I then turn to traditions of formal, staged performances set apart from everyday life within performing arts like theatre and dance. I situate film performance within these latter traditions, while also recognising its relationship to sociological models. I also distinguish fictional film ‘acting’ from other cinematic modes, including performance in non-fiction film. Having thus examined the wider traditions and theories underpinning this thesis, I finally explore interwar conceptions of film performance to offer the specific, historicised view, recommended by Shepherd, of how and why it was so significant in this period.

Everyday and Theatrical Performance

My understanding of race—as well as other aspects of identity, social status, affect and motivation—as being read into film performance in British cinema culture is informed by theories from the social sciences that characterise our everyday conduct as a form of performing. For instance, Erving

³⁴ See Mary S. Strine, Beverly Whitaker Long, and Mary Frances Hopkins, ‘Research in Interpretation and Performance Studies: Trends, Issues, Priorities’, in *Speech Communication: Essays to Commemorate the 75th Anniversary of The Speech Communication Association*, ed. by Gerald M. Phillips and Julia T. Wood (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), p. 183.

³⁵ Shepherd, p. vii.

³⁶ Shepherd, p. x. Marvin Carlson similarly approaches performance through its specific historical deployment in social sciences, art, and late-twentieth-century critical theory; Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

Goffman theorises everyday social behaviour and interactions as such, using the codes and conventions of theatre to explicate the ways we create meaning and communicate information in everyday interactions and thus avoiding Shepherd's trap of characterising 'almost anything' as performance. A crucial criterion that justifies this is the presence and validation of the performance act by an observer, a criterion which is also crucial in this thesis for defining performance on film through the presence of the camera and thus spectators. For Goffman, everyday social performance consists of 'all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers'.³⁷ This accords with theorists like Marvin Carlson who argues that performance is distinguished from other actions because it is always 'for someone, some audience that recognizes and validates it as performance'.³⁸ In Goffman's reading, this audience uses this 'activity' to establish information about the performer, their interior state, and their social position. This is achieved via 'sign-vehicles' by which this information is made evident to others. These include direct verbal communication but also intentional and unintentional gestures, conduct, behaviour, and dress.³⁹ These sign-vehicles form a performance, a general 'front' in which the actor and observer may fully believe or not but through which observers come to understand the subject.⁴⁰ Goffman concludes that '[a] status, a position, a social place is not a material thing to be possessed and then displayed; it is a pattern of appropriate conduct, coherent, embellished, and well articulated'.⁴¹ We establish our identity, interiority, position in the world, and relationships to others through performing them, through 'sign-vehicles' that form a broader 'front' to enable others to understand who we are. Whether deliberate or not, this is usefully understood as a form of performance: by a body and displayed for an audience, within a wider discursive field that contextualises and informs our understanding of

³⁷ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin Books, 1959), p. 32.

³⁸ Carlson, pp. 5-6. See also Elin Diamond (ed.), 'Introduction', in *Performance and Cultural Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 1-12 (p. 1).

³⁹ Goffman, pp. 13-17.

⁴⁰ Goffman, pp. 28-38.

⁴¹ Goffman, p. 81.

this performance.⁴² When Anderson speaks of ‘acting imperially’, then, one way of viewing this claim is in this context. To behave in certain ways in the world, to put on a certain ‘front’ that befits an imperial citizen, can be conceived as a kind of performance.

However, as I have asserted, this thesis is not primarily concerned with performance in everyday life. Instead, I am interested in film performance, which I position as both emerging from and in dynamic interrelationship with other live performing arts. These arts can be directly filmed by the camera, as in the recording of the Khattak dance in the *Indian Troops* film; as I discuss below, such representations of other performing arts are a key way in which performance is foregrounded and explored in 1920s British cinema. Equally, they can influence and underpin modes designed specifically for the camera. ‘Performance’ in this context is different from Goffman’s theorisation in that it occurs in a space distinguished from everyday life and typically aims for aesthetic effect. This understanding is informed by Richard Schechner’s definition of performance as ‘framed’ or ‘displayed’ behaviour and Josette Féral’s characterisation of ‘theatricality’ as a ‘cleft in quotidian space’ produced by the presence of the performer and/or spectator.⁴³ In this ‘framed theatrical

⁴² I note here the distinction between ‘performance’ of identity, as theorised by scholars like Goffman, and the ‘performative’ construction of identity and subjectivity. Drawing on linguistic theories of performative utterances which enact rather than merely describing what they speak, Judith Butler argues that ‘identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results’; it is a ‘doing’, a ‘repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame’ that *precedes* individual subjectivity; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* [1990], 2nd edn (New York and London: Routledge, 2007), p. 34. As such, this is distinct from and precedes any individual ‘performance’ by a subject: ‘performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate “act,” but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names’; Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* [1993] (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), p. xii. The performative construction of identity, ‘the matrix through which all willing first becomes possible, its enabling cultural condition’, in a sense, underpins my understanding of performance; Butler, *Bodies*, pp. xvi-xvii. Butler and other theorists of performativity elucidate the discursive field through which individual performances are legible but it is these individual performances that concern interwar filmmakers and audiences and thus form the subject of this study. For scholarship which uses performativity to account for the construction of racial categories, see e.g. Shirley Anne Tate, ‘Performativity and “raced” bodies’, in *Theories of Race and Ethnicity: Contemporary Debates and Perspectives*, ed. by Karim Murji and John Solomos (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 180-197; Nadine Ehlers, *Racial Imperatives: Discipline, Performativity, and Struggles Against Subjection* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2012).

⁴³ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 2nd edn (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), p. 2; Josette Féral, ‘Theatricality: The Specificity of Theatrical Language’, *SubStance*, 31.2/3 (2002), 94-108 (p. 98). Laura Sava outlines other theorists who have ‘linked theatre as a medium with spatiality’ and this creation of a space in which theatrical performance occurs; Laura Sava, *Theatre Through the Camera Eye: The Poetics of an Intermedial Encounter* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), p. 3.

space', the body is put on display, creating meaning, sensation, affect and spectacle for an audience.⁴⁴

Individual performing arts and forms—acting, dance, or music, for instance—must be understood within their specific histories, traditions and conventions, while also recognising the ways they are fundamentally transformed on screen. For example, dance is particularly important for this thesis: many films include scenes of dance, as sensual and spectacular instances of bodily movement and display and as anthropological 'evidence' of cultural and racial difference.⁴⁵ To understand the significance of this form, I draw on dance studies, particularly scholarship exploring the kinaesthetic and sensual potential of dance and its role in articulating identity and social position, and on 'screendance' studies which account for the 'hybrid aggregates of form and meaning' produced by the merged 'languages' of dance and cinema.⁴⁶ Dance both expresses corporeal experience and sensation, and serves as a 'public enactment' of identity.⁴⁷ This links with the role it has played in ethnography and anthropology as evidence of identity, culture or racial identity. Studying dance was a way to integrate bodily experience and sensation into studies of culture, but this was often understood through racist, imperialist taxonomies which ranked styles of dance in racialised hierarchies.⁴⁸ By and about the body, dance articulates and expresses corporeal

⁴⁴ Féral, p. 98.

⁴⁵ Dance is an everyday social act as well as a formal, staged performing art. However, in this thesis, I am primarily interested in traditions of formal, staged or 'theatrical' dance, including dance that has ritual and symbolic, as well as aesthetic, functions.

⁴⁶ Douglas Rosenberg (ed.), 'Introduction', in *The Oxford Handbook of Screendance Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 1-20 (p. 1). For dance studies scholarship key to this thesis, see e.g. Jane C. Desmond (ed.), *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities On and Off the Stage* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2001); Alexandra Carter and Janet O'Shea (eds), *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader*, 2nd edn (London and New York: Routledge, 2010); Carrie J. Preston, *Modernism's Mythic Pose: Gender, Genre, Solo Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 6-7, 58-99; Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011). For key works of screendance studies, see e.g. Judith Mitoma (ed.), *Envisioning Dance on Film and Video* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002); Erin Brannigan, *Dancefilm: Choreography and the Moving Image* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁴⁷ Jane C. Desmond (ed.), 'Introduction. Making the Invisible Visible: Staging Sexualities through Dance', in *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities On and Off the Stage* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), pp. 3-32 (pp. 3-5). See also Janet O'Shea, 'Roots/Routes of Dance Studies', in *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader*, ed. by Alexandra Carter and Janet O'Shea, 2nd edn (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 1-15 (p. 9).

⁴⁸ O'Shea, p 3. See also 'Introduction' footnote 14 on dance in ethnographic film.

meaning and sensation, and grounds identity—race, sexuality, gender—in the body and the way it moves. Understanding these histories of ‘theatrical’ performance modes like dance, and the way film informs and transforms them, is crucial to understanding performance in this thesis.

I view film performance as itself a performing art, and one which incorporates and draws upon other performing art traditions; always framed by the screen, it is distinguished from everyday life and placed in Féral’s ‘theatrical’ space in the same way. This remains the case for non-fiction film, even when its framed performances are not deliberate and conscious on the part of the recorded subject. At the same time, film performance and its reception are informed by codes of performance in everyday life. Moreover, both ‘theatrical’ and ‘everyday’ forms can be *depicted* in scenes within a film’s diegetic world, a crucial practice of British cinema in this period. From these theories and traditions beyond cinema, I now offer a definition of film performance as a distinct element of film form and further outline performance modes—particularly delineating the distinctions between fiction and non-fiction film performance—within this.

Film Performance: Acting and Beyond

As I have already proposed briefly, I understand film performance as what human bodies do on screen, directed towards the camera and thus the cinema audience and always informed, underpinned and transformed by its filmed and edited nature. It consists of unconsciously enacted and consciously dramatised movements, expressions, gestures, and actions by the body that are captured by the camera. Underlying this, therefore, are the assumptions that there are many modes of performing on film—including but not limited to fictional ‘acting’ as in depicting another character or persona—and, relatedly, that subjects can ‘perform’ in both fiction and non-fiction film. Before moving onto 1920s conceptions of film performance, then, I will briefly outline some of the scholarship from which I draw this definition and these two key assumptions.

While he is interested primarily in fiction film, Murray Pomerance proposes a useful definition that justifies this more inclusive understanding of film performance as what the body does

on screen. He argues that '[w]e might think of film performance more generally as behaviour turned expressly toward a particular view': that of the camera and, implicitly, the cinema audience.⁴⁹ Performance for Pomerance is 'of the body and from the body, expressed by way of the body'. As, on film, this body is absent, only reproduced in two dimensions, spectators 'must find [their] way toward and into these bodies'.⁵⁰ In this account, film performance is what the body does on screen, the reproduced and projected behaviour of human subjects which can then be broken down into elements like gesture, expression and movement, framed for a spectator who finds meaning, sensation and affect in it. While this performance is inextricable from film technology and technique like lighting, editing and camera movement that frame it, we can nevertheless distinguish this framed behaviour, displayed for and directed towards a camera and audience that validates it, as an element of film form.⁵¹

The camera provides a frame which transforms actions and behaviour into 'performance'. Fiction film 'acting', then, is but one of a more varied constellation of modes of performing on film. This is corroborated by Andrew Shail's account of the emergence of acting as the dominant mode at the beginning of the twentieth century. For Shail, fictional acting is determined by its goal of 'resemblance' or 'impersonation' of another character or persona.⁵² This accords with theorists who argue that acting is a sub-category of performance distinguished by the fact that the performer aims to portray an other, 'someone whom the actor is not'.⁵³ In this thesis, I use 'acting' to refer to the

⁴⁹ Murray Pomerance, 'Performed Performance and The Man Who Knew Too Much', in *Theorizing Film Acting*, ed. by Aaron Taylor (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 62-75 (p. 63).

⁵⁰ Murray Pomerance, *Virtuoso: Film Performance and the Actor's Magic* (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), p. xvi. Pomerance's contention accords with Elisabetta Girelli's definition in her work on silent film performance as simply 'the behaviour of human beings' on screen; Girelli, p. 1.

⁵¹ Henri Schoenmakers, 'Bodies of Light: Towards a Theory of Film Acting from a Communicative Perspective', in *Acting and Performance in Moving Image Culture*, ed. by Jörg Sternagel, Deborah Levitt, and Dieter Mersch (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2012), pp. 379-393 (p. 383).

⁵² Andrew Shail, *The Origins of the Film Star System: Persona, Publicity & Economics in Early Cinema* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), pp. 15, 21.

⁵³ Yuchen Guo, 'What Is Acting', *The Journal of Aesthetics & Art Criticism*, 80.1 (2022), 58-69 (p. 58); Schechner, p. 174; Michael Kirby, 'On Acting and Not-Acting', in *Acting (Re)Considered: A Theoretical and Practical Guide*, ed. by Phillip B. Zarrilli, 2nd edn (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 40-52 (p. 40).

‘impersonation’ of fictional characters by an actor in fiction films.⁵⁴ Shail provides film historical justification for seeing this only as one mode within the broader category of film performance. Even within his concentration on fiction film, he argues that ‘being filmed’ was seen as a form of performance ‘by means *other* than a discourse on acting’, and thus that ‘film performance has *never* [...] been identified in popular consensus as a matter solely of acting’.⁵⁵ To evidence this, Shail gives the examples of posing, emerging from life modelling performance traditions, and ‘risk-taking’, prominent in 1910s serial films in which performance was understood and evaluated through the way that performers endangered themselves and achieved stunts, drawing on circus and acrobatics traditions.⁵⁶ If fictional acting is evaluated according to its success in resembling or impersonating another persona or character, these examples are read through different criteria—the aesthetic appeal of corporeal postures and forms or the extent of the danger that the performer faces—but were still understood as modes of performing. These can, of course, be performed within a fictional diegetic world by an actor who is also acting. Shosho in *Piccadilly* is a *character* who is dancing within a fictional narrative, foregrounding and dramatising performance in the film. However, this dance is also a distinct mode, another kind of performance enacted by Anna May Wong, to be viewed on its own terms within separate performance histories. Shail concludes that ‘being filmed’ was the overarching condition for film performance for early cinema audiences (as it is for Pomerance), within which different modes—posing, risk-taking or dance, for instance—were possible. By the 1920s, ‘acting’ was dominant because of the dominance of feature fiction films but I view this alongside other ways of performing on film, informed by different performance traditions and with different intentions and effects.

These other modes are especially important when considering non-fiction film. As Vinicius do Valle Navarro explains, ‘[a] nonfictional performance is a rhetorical gesture, but it is also a

⁵⁴ It should be noted that it is possible to ‘act’ according to these definitions outside of fictional media and in everyday life, but for clarity I restrict my usage to fiction; see Goffman, pp. 65-73; Guo, p. 58.

⁵⁵ Shail, *Film Star System*, pp. 16, 18, 21.

⁵⁶ Shail, *Film Star System*, pp. 18-22.

concrete action. It takes place in the “real world” and is, furthermore, likely to have impact on it’.⁵⁷ In non-fiction film, other modes of performance are no longer mediated by fictional acting; when a subject dances, poses or performs in non-fiction film, this is understood to take place in some relation to the ‘real world’. If performance has been discussed and theorised in depth in fiction film, Stella Bruzzi has suggested that it has been ‘marginalised’ in non-fiction film studies; the claim that non-fiction film represents ‘real life’ and the general dominance of fiction film acting has led scholars to neglect the ways in which non-fiction film subjects nevertheless perform on screen.⁵⁸ More recently, however, scholars have begun to explore the ways in which the non-fiction film subject performs ‘as oneself’ rather than a fictional character.⁵⁹ Much of this scholarship has concentrated on the aesthetically and politically radical possibilities of foregrounding performance in non-fiction film.⁶⁰ For example, Bruzzi argues that performance can make visible the form’s ‘negotiation between reality on the one hand and image, interpretation and bias on the other’, revealing ‘the construction and artificiality of even the non-fiction film’ and, at the same time, ‘the truth that emerges through the encounter between filmmakers, subjects and spectators’.⁶¹ However, non-

⁵⁷ Vinicius do Valle Navarro, ‘Ordinary Acts: Performance in Nonfiction Film, 1960-1967’ (unpublished doctoral dissertation, New York University, 2005), p. 7.

⁵⁸ Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 125.

⁵⁹ As well as the scholarship mentioned below, see e.g. Caryl Flinn, ‘Containing Fire: Performance in *Paris Is Burning*’, in *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video*, ed. by Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski, new and expanded edn (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014), pp. 438-455; Leger Grindon, ‘Q & A: Poetics of the Documentary Film Interview’, *Velvet Light Trap*, 60 (Fall 2007), 4-12 (pp. 7-8); Louise Spence and Vinicius Navarro, *Crafting Truth: Documentary Form and Meaning* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), pp. 225-236.

⁶⁰ For instance, on subversive performance in ethnographic film, see Oksiloff, pp. 61-62; Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference*, p. xx; Michael Chanan, ‘Rouch, Music, Trance’, in *Building Bridges: The Cinema of Jean Rouch*, ed. by Joram ten Brink (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), pp. 87-95 (p. 92); Hamid Naficy, ‘Ethnography and African Culture: Jean Rouch on *La Chasse au Lion à L’Arc* and *Les Maîtres Fous*’, in *Building Bridges: The Cinema of Jean Rouch*, ed. by Joram ten Brink (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), pp. 97-108 (p. 98). On non-fiction film re-enactment as a critique of dominant historical narratives, see John R. Cook, ‘Making the Past Present: Peter Watkins’s *Culloden*’, in *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video*, ed. by Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski, new and expanded edn (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014), pp. 217-236; Joram ten Brink, ‘Re-Enactment, the History of Violence and Documentary Film’, in *Documentary Film, Memory and the Performance of Violence*, ed. by Joram ten Brink and Joshua Oppenheimer (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2012), pp. 176-189; Alice Correia, ‘Interpreting Jeremy Deller’s *The Battle of Orgreave*’, in *Documentary Film, Memory and the Performance of Violence*, ed. by Joram ten Brink and Joshua Oppenheimer (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2012), pp. 190-205.

⁶¹ Bruzzi, pp. 4, 8. See also Joshua Oppenheimer and Michael Uwemedimo’s examination of the re-enactments of genocidal murders in the state-sanctioned Indonesian propaganda documentary *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* (Arifin C. Noer, Perum Produksi Film Negara, 1984) as a performance and *reiteration* of oppressive political

fictional performance is not inherently radical; Bruzzi herself acknowledges that '[p]erformance has always been at the heart of documentary filmmaking', even as she favours the 'performative documentary' that foregrounds the artifice and construction of the form.⁶² Others like Thomas Waugh and Elizabeth Marquis have provided broader theorisations that accord with my contention that film performance incorporates all that bodies do on screen. Informed by sociological theories like Goffman's and especially the idea that everyday performance need not be deliberate, they argue that all actions by non-fiction film subjects, whether conscious or unconscious, foregrounded or not, form part of non-fictional performance that is readable by and thus contributes to the film's meaning for spectators.⁶³ As Marquis concludes, since 'any action presented to spectators in a documentary will signify in some way, *all* the things that non-fictional subjects do in fact constitute performance and will inevitably benefit from being analysed as such'.⁶⁴

In reading these actions as such, it is important to acknowledge the distinctions between this and fictional performance. In non-fiction film, where these performances are, in Navarro's terms, also 'concrete actions' in the 'real world', I approach them within the varying traditions and histories from which they emerge and by which they are understood, acknowledging their function in the 'real world' and how they have been read as 'real' actions by audiences. They are also received by contemporary audiences as having material effects; in this thesis, I argue that non-fiction film performance was understood in interwar Britain to more accurately represent racial difference and thus served as a better means than fiction to naturalise and concretise racial hierarchies and imperial ideology. As well as this, attention must be paid to the acknowledgement, or not, of performance in a way that does not apply to fiction film. Waugh breaks down non-fiction

power; Joshua Oppenheimer and Michael Uwemedimo, 'Show of Force: A Cinema-séance of Power and Violence in Sumatra's Plantation Belt', in *Documentary Film, Memory and the Performance of Violence*, ed. by Joram ten Brink and Joshua Oppenheimer (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2012), pp. 287-310.

⁶² Bruzzi, p. 125.

⁶³ Thomas Waugh, '"Acting to Play Oneself": Notes on Performance in Documentary', in *Making Visible the Invisible: An Anthology of Original Essays on Film Acting*, ed. by Carole Zucker (Methuen and London: The Scarecrow Press, 1990), pp. 64-91; Elizabeth Marquis, 'Conceptualizing Documentary Performance', *Studies in Documentary Film*, 7.1 (2013), 45-60.

⁶⁴ Marquis, p. 58.

film performance into the 'presentational', in which the subject directly addresses the camera (as in an interview, for example), and the 'representational', where subjects' behaviour is presented as (artificially) 'natural', denying awareness of the camera and thus the very notion of performing.⁶⁵ Representational performance 'disavows and hides its performance components' whereas presentational performance 'acknowledges and exploits' them.⁶⁶ In fiction film, even if the spectator sees similarities between actor and character, performance is never 'disavowed' as it is in representational non-fiction film. As Bruzzi points out, this disavowal is central 'to how non-fiction film has been and is to be interpreted'.⁶⁷ Understanding non-fictional performance therefore also requires questioning why it has been foregrounded or disavowed, and how this contributes to its meaning and reception in a British cinema culture fundamentally concerned with performance. Through these distinctions, I situate the work of filmed subjects in non-fiction film as an important part of this interwar British fascination with performance.

I have argued, then, that film performance consists of what the embodied subject does consciously or unconsciously on screen, framed for, presented to and validated as performance by an audience via the camera. To understand exactly how and why performance is such an important part of interwar imperial British cinema culture, I now explore contemporary ideas about this embodied subject on screen in the interwar period. I examine discourses of film performance among European film theorists and in British cinema culture, demonstrating commonly held concerns with the body's actions on screen, how these were transformed by the camera, and the aesthetic and political effects they could have on spectators.

Cinema, Performance, and Spectatorship in the 1920s

Cinematic Feeling: The Body and Performance in European Modernist Film Theory

Histories of interwar film theory have not always attended to performance. European avant-gardist and modernist film theorists and filmmakers, like Belá Balázs, Jean Epstein, Walter Benjamin or

⁶⁵ Waugh, p. 68.

⁶⁶ Waugh, p. 71.

⁶⁷ Bruzzi, p. 125.

Sergei Eisenstein, were primarily interested in distinguishing cinema from other media. As Marcus writes, such theorists aimed to emphasise its 'departure [...] from existing aesthetic and, in particular, theatrical conventions'.⁶⁸ They foregrounded editing, framing, and camera movement, rather than performance with its connections to pre-cinematic media like theatre. Yet film theorists constantly invoked the filmed body and its transformation under the camera's gaze to make claims about cinematic specificity. Stephan Boman's observation of the tension in Balázs' *Visible Man* (1924) and *The Spirit of Film* (1930) between 'physiognomic' and 'gestural' conceptions of cinema is instructive for interwar theories of silent film generally.⁶⁹ While the 'physiognomic' implies that the *camera* extracts interior feeling or meaning from a passive body, this is in tension with a conviction in the *performer's* role, their gesture (and movement and expression) which contributes equally to making meaning. Through these performing bodies and their sensory, corporeal impact on mass audiences, these theorists construct their vision of silent cinema's potential.

The body was the quintessential filmed 'object' to be discussed when considering what filming something does. For some, like Soviet theorists of montage editing, the body performed only to be reconstructed by the camera: Eisenstein's 'cut' or 'disintegrated' acting, for instance, involved cutting between 'types' to create emotion rather than relying on the movements, gestures or expressions of a single performer.⁷⁰ Yet for Balázs and Epstein, filmed bodies are not passive, recorded subjects; they are active performers, whose movements and gestures contribute to defining the medium's essential qualities. Crucially, this is not limited to interpreting fictional characters; Epstein and Balázs, as well as Benjamin, contend that cinema's essence, what French theorists call *photogénie*, is found in involuntary movements as well as deliberately dramatised theatrical 'acting'.⁷¹ Boman explains that 'for Balázs the human body', as much as the face, 'is the

⁶⁸ Marcus, p. 202.

⁶⁹ Stephan Boman, 'In the Flesh: Balázs, Brakhage, and the Anatomy of Filmic Gesture', *Discourse*, 42.3 (2020), 305-331 (p. 308).

⁷⁰ See Preston, pp. 95-96.

⁷¹ Jean Epstein, 'Magnification' [1921], in *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/Anthology 1907-1939: Volume 1: 1907-1929*, ed. by Richard Abel, trans. by Stuart Liebman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 235-241 (p. 238); Christophe Wall-Romana, *Jean Epstein: Corporeal Cinema and Film Philosophy*

measure of all filmic value'; this is a *performing* body, gesturing to make and convey meaning.⁷² Balázs carefully distinguishes silent film performance from other performance media, including those without speech like dance or pantomime. For Balázs, these latter forms take silence as their medium, whereas film performance is articulate, a kind of language expressed through the body.⁷³ Cinema is unique because there is nothing *other* than this performing body: the 'play of gestures' is not an 'accompaniment' but 'the film's *sole content*'.⁷⁴ The body becomes the medium for articulate, if not always conscious, performance. The absence of speech necessitates a primal, bodily 'language', 'the direct expression' of a 'non-rational self', such that 'the body becomes unmediated spirit, spirit rendered visible, wordless'.⁷⁵ This bodily 'language' transforms the body into 'spirit'; it reveals interiority, unleashed by the camera but expressed by the performer. Similarly, in Epstein's 'Magnification' (1921), an essay on the close-up as an important site of *photogénie*, he describes a close-up of a face to introduce the consequences of filming bodies generally. For Epstein, the close-up is 'anatomical' and he breaks down the face into parts, describing its moving musculature and finally the mouth 'splitting' into a smile, as if 'slit by a scalpel'.⁷⁶ The camera makes the body strange, alien, breaking it apart. Epstein later explains that the static close-up does not offer the same profoundly 'anatomical' or 'hypnotising' effect.⁷⁷ While he explores the possibilities of close-ups of landscapes and other objects, corporeality, the '[m]incemeat' of the body and its tiny unconscious movements, provide the primary example of the collaboration between filmed subject and camera to create *photogénie*.⁷⁸ The performing body asserts cinema's difference. Describing uniquely

(Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 2; Béla Balázs, *Visible Man or the Culture of Film* [1924], in *Béla Balázs: Early Film Theory: Visible Man and The Spirit of Film*, ed. by Erica Carter, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010), pp. 1-90 (p. 33); Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' [1936], in *One-way Street and Other Writings*, trans. by J. A. Underwood (London: Penguin Books, 2009), pp. 228-259 (p. 242).

⁷² Boman, p. 308.

⁷³ Balázs, *Visible*, pp. 25-26.

⁷⁴ Balázs, *Visible*, p. 18; Boman, p. 310.

⁷⁵ Balázs, *Visible*, p. 9.

⁷⁶ Epstein, pp. 235-236.

⁷⁷ Epstein, pp. 236-237.

⁷⁸ Epstein, pp. 236-238.

cinematic performance styles, these theorists envisage an ‘amplifying reciprocity between somatic gesture and film technique’.⁷⁹

From Soviet theorists of montage to Balázs’ gestural expression, interwar theorists and filmmakers share the conviction that bodies were transformed by being filmed, grounding the specificity and possibility of the medium. Correspondingly, these theorists considered the effects of these bodily transformations on spectators to radical political and aesthetic ends. Developed in the interwar period, their theories disclose post-war impulses to remake bodies catastrophically damaged by the Great War, on screen but also in audiences.⁸⁰ Epstein’s close-up, he writes, ‘seems to address [him] personally. [He is] hypnotized’.⁸¹ Immediately, he transforms a consideration of cinematic technique into a profoundly intimate, ‘anatomical’ interaction between two bodies. Awakening all senses, the close-up allows him to ‘look’, ‘sniff at things’, and ‘touch’.⁸² Visualising and transforming performing bodies instigates transformations in spectating bodies. As Christophe Wall-Romana explains, Epstein sees in cinema a cure to the exhaustion, frustration, and alienation of the post-war masses: cinema’s essence inheres in its disclosure of how performers’

bodies express – or better, incarnate – their corporeal subconscious, as a means to invite the viewer’s body to get in touch with his or hers. The screen, we might say, is the porous membrane through which two kinds of self-sensation interface, for and within the viewer.⁸³

Accordingly, Balázs’ cinematic bodily language opens up spectators’ sensory experience, in a modern world of the printed word which restricts access to one’s senses. Cinema enables rediscovery of this primal language for spectators, not intellectually or purely visually but phenomenologically, through the whole body.⁸⁴ In doing so, the spectator could become not only healthy but ‘eloquent’, their body ‘a sensitive medium of the soul, capable of registering its slightest motion’.⁸⁵ Whereas

⁷⁹ Boman, p. 310.

⁸⁰ Wall-Romana, pp. 17-19.

⁸¹ Epstein, p. 235.

⁸² Epstein, p. 237. See also Jean Epstein, ‘The Senses I (b)’ [1921], in *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/Anthology 1907-1939: Volume 1: 1907-1929*, ed. by Richard Abel, trans. by Tom Milne (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 241-246.

⁸³ Wall-Romana, p. 28.

⁸⁴ Erica Carter (ed.), ‘Introduction’, in *Béla Balázs: Early Film Theory: Visible Man and The Spirit of Film* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010), pp. xv-xlvi (pp. xxiv-xxviii).

⁸⁵ Balázs, *Visible*, p. 12.

Benjamin or Eisenstein's theories of the 'shocks' that cinema and montage editing could produce are paralleled here, Balázs and Epstein especially envisage a kind of intersubjective relationship between bodies on screen and in audiences. Epstein concludes 'Magnification' by asserting that cinema 'modifies the functioning of the nervous system' more than any other medium: 'cinematic feeling is therefore particular intense'.⁸⁶ Recording performing bodies created 'cinematic feeling': uniquely sensuous, phenomenological, physiological and radically transformative effects in spectators.

Class, Performance, and Spectatorship in British Cinema Culture

For 1920s modernist and avant-garde theorists, cinema radically, even revolutionarily, transformed individual and social bodies. While their work has been much examined over the following century, such theorists only represent a particular intellectual perspective formed in avant-gardist and modernist, left-wing networks between European cities.⁸⁷ They have influenced film theory and provide a crucial context, but do not represent all thinking about film performance in the period. Less radical British filmmakers, audiences, critics, and commentators were also concerned with performance and its political and aesthetic implications, especially as it related to British class structure. As I have already suggested, scholars have demonstrated that 1920s silent British cinema, was particularly interested in foregrounding and exploring performance. This was the case to a greater extent than, for instance, Hollywood film developing a classical continuity style which aimed to create a 'real' diegetic world in which people purportedly behaved 'spontaneously', or a Soviet cinema using montage editing techniques to shock and transform audiences. In her essential work on the period, Gledhill dubs 1920s silent British cinema a uniquely 'performed cinema', which foregrounds ideas and forms of theatrical and everyday social performance: 'theatrical performers as characters and theatrical performances as narrative events', self-display, masquerade and disguise, and codes of observed public behaviour, particularly a 'British' performance style of

⁸⁶ Epstein, 'Magnification', p. 240

⁸⁷ Stollery, *Alternative Empires*, p. 16-35.

restraint.⁸⁸ Examining acting manuals, newspapers and film and fan magazines, she demonstrates that this transcended the style of specific films, underpinning a wider British 'cultural mode of perception', a way of understanding the medium more broadly in British culture.⁸⁹ This 'performed cinema', and the cinema culture surrounding it, was marked by the same questions surrounding film performance, its medium-specific qualities, and what cinema does to the body, but aimed to reinforce, rather than transform, an existing class system. While British discourses about cinema disavowed the revolutionary outcomes of its silent, 'universal' language and its sensuous address to mass audiences, they were fundamentally concerned with film performance and its relationship to class and social identity.

For Gledhill, interwar Britain's 'performed' cinema was underpinned by its relationship to 1920s class politics, linking film performance and ideas of performance of social status and identity in everyday life. This British cinema aesthetics emerged from Britain's 'deeply embedded perception of social difference and division governing social structure and cultural identity'.⁹⁰ Performance, staging, and theatricality played a key role in 'a culture that centres on demarcation between persons socially defined'.⁹¹ British cinema's 'theatrical' aesthetic arose from nineteenth-century cultural contestation over theatre, especially melodrama, and appropriate kinds of performance for embodying class and social status. The aesthetics of British film performance was thus tied with expression of social position. Nineteenth-century theatrical reform engendered representation more exclusively of middle-class life and restriction on public displays of emotion. Theatre was brought 'indoors', with restrained performance 'in conformity with middle-class codes of decorum'.⁹² This was reinforced by British cinema's theatrical geography, which marks performance stages and social distinction spatially. Characters of different social status inhabit different spaces, due to this shift towards an 'aesthetic of social decorum and distance between persons'; the body therefore remains

⁸⁸ Gledhill, p. 15, 21-22, 41, 62-63. See also Linda Fitzsimmons and Sarah Street (eds), 'Introduction', in *Moving Performance: British Stage and Screen, 1890s-1920s* (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 2000), pp. 1-4 (pp. 1-2).

⁸⁹ Gledhill, p. 4.

⁹⁰ Gledhill, p. 4.

⁹¹ Gledhill, p. 67.

⁹² Gledhill, pp. 16-18.

relevant in this British cinema culture, but usually as a problem to be repressed through certain performance styles.⁹³ Gledhill argues that this theatrical aesthetic required ‘public codes of performed behaviour’ that instilled this decorum and distance, implicitly drawing on conceptions of performance in everyday life as a marker of social status. The dominant version of such ‘decorous’ performed behaviour was ‘restraint’.⁹⁴ Jon Burrows similarly highlights the ‘reserved force’ and ‘qualities of absolute repose’ predominating in British film performance.⁹⁵ This ‘restraint’ was not ‘negation of feeling’ but implied the intensity ‘of what is *not* expressed’; it was a performed masking of emotion, a doubled performance—as both actor and character performed this concealment—that foregrounded itself as performance.⁹⁶ Restraint rendered social distance a middle-class ‘norm’ and thus a ‘national’ quality, even as it excluded many through these class significations.⁹⁷ Performance determined class and social status, as it does for Goffman, in ways which intertwined with the performance of race; as I explore in Chapter 3 via racial encounters in working-class East London and throughout the thesis more generally, both working-class bodies and the bodies of people of colour were read in parallel and overlapping ways in relation to the ‘norms’ of restraint, reserve, and distance. Performance articulates one’s interrelated social and spatial position in British cinema, connecting aesthetic style, decorum and taste, and social identity.

This aesthetic of distance and decorum also incorporated distance between spectator and performer, and thus appropriate ways of *watching* cinema.⁹⁸ These classed British film aesthetics existed in the context of equally class-inflected constructions of spectators, who were seen to be influenced by performances on screen. Whereas Balázs and Epstein celebrate sensuous, physical and intimate spectatorial effects, this sensuous interaction was usually conceived as a dangerous intimacy ‘moving’ mass audiences physically and emotionally. Again, performer and spectator were

⁹³ Gledhill, p. 19.

⁹⁴ Gledhill, pp. 22, 62.

⁹⁵ Jon Burrows, *Legitimate Cinema: Theatre Stars in Silent British Films, 1908-1918* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2003), pp. 28-33.

⁹⁶ Gledhill, p. 62.

⁹⁷ Gledhill, pp. 64-65; Burrows, pp. 33-34.

⁹⁸ Gledhill, p. 29.

inextricably imbricated; again, this was perceived to be a consequence of cinema's modernity and mass appeal but also performers' actions. Echoing theorists of silent film's primal, universal language, some film industry figures, newspaper critics, fan magazines, and even the Prince of Wales celebrated cinema's 'worldwide' popularity, its 'universal appeal' or 'language' liberated from written or spoken words.⁹⁹ Yet this very appeal, especially among British women and working-class audiences, was of great concern to elites and arbiters of cinematic taste. The qualities that distinguished cinema also marked it as a locus for class-inflected anxieties about the behaviour of the 'masses'. This was not unique to cinema: late-nineteenth-century 'new media' like telegraphy and phonography engendered fear and fascination as sites for 'social experimentation' and debates about which social groups were allowed to access them, and popular literature was also seen to be 'degrading' taste, discrimination, and political sensibilities.¹⁰⁰ However, cinema held a unique position in its universal bodily appeal; as the *Mirror* declared, it could reach 'the mind in the directest [sic] way imaginable, without the intervention of written explanation'.¹⁰¹ This very mass appeal did not rely on distinction, taste, or restraint but was accessible to all. Consequently, the 'masses', without the capacity to correctly read performances on screen, formed a particular locus of anxiety among British commentators.

As explored in Chapter 1, this was imagined through the 'conduct' of British and colonial citizens and subjects, through performances on screen and their incitement to behaviour by spectators in the real world. The performance of class, status, and identity on screen was thus perceived to be closely—and corporeally—related to the actions of spectators. Lee Grieveson argues that perceptions of this power were founded in early-twentieth-century disciplines of crowd psychology and sociology which underpinned conceptions of 'mimetic' spectatorship, wherein

⁹⁹ *Aberdeen Journal*, 9 January 1919, p. 2; *Express*, 21 April 1920, p. 3; *Picturegoer*, May 1921, p. 7; *Times*, 15 November 1923, p. 10.

¹⁰⁰ Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking about Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 3-4; Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932); Christopher Hilliard, 'Popular Reading and Social Investigation in Britain, 1850s-1940s', *The Historical Journal*, 57.1 (2014), 247-271 (pp. 267-268); G. Singh, 'Q.D. Leavis and the Novel', *English Studies*, 84.4 (2003), 355-371 (pp. 356-257).

¹⁰¹ *Mirror*, 23 March 1921, p. 7.

spectators were perceived to respond to cinema imitatively, copying behaviours seen on screen unthinkingly and irrationally; as Daniel Pick explains, crowd psychology theorised a de-civilising regression into homogeneity and irrationality, requiring the guiding hands of elites to shape and transform the 'masses'.¹⁰² This 'mimesis' was a sensuous process, as demonstrated by Michael Taussig who employs Benjamin to theorise mimesis as a desire to become 'other' through sensuous, corporeal contact.¹⁰³ Reflecting Balázs and Epstein's theories of cinema as phenomenological and physiological interaction with performers, mimesis occurs through corporeal, intimate relationships between performers and spectators. As demonstrated in Chapters 1, 2 and 3, commentators, reformists, and politicians worried about cinema because of its corporeal address, its intimate effect on spectating bodies. Again, then, the actions of performing bodies on screen and their effect on spectating bodies underpinned conceptions of film, film feeling, and film performance in interwar Britain. However, the radical possibilities of this were to be contained by performance styles and aesthetics that maintained existing class and social structures rather than transforming them and the bodies within them.

For modernist theorists and middlebrow British filmmakers, critics and journalists, gesture, movement, and expression determined what cinema does and is, aesthetically and politically. This was based on relationships between performer and spectator: the affective and sensory feelings, movements, collaboration and transportation mediated by film. Having outlined this context, I now explore how conceptions of racial identity silently but persistently underpinned these issues in the British imperial context. The intimacies, distances and hierarchies of the British Empire, and the racialised identities that emerged from these, were also fundamental in undergirding judgements and assumptions about cinema's value.

¹⁰² Lee Grieveson, *Cinema and the Wealth of Nations: Media, Capital, and the Liberal World System* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), pp. 214-222; Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c. 1848-c. 1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 88-96.

¹⁰³ Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*, reissued edn (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 16.

Styles of Being: Race, Performance, and the Body in British Cinema Culture

In *Visible Man*, Balázs characterises his gestural film performance as ‘the *first international language*’. While individual ‘ethnographic features’ can provide ‘ornamental aspects of a stylized milieu’, one gestural system, he believes, will come to dominate and be understood by all. This is the ‘language’ of the ‘white race’, providing the ‘first living seeds of the standard white man who will one day emerge as the synthesis of the mix of different races and peoples’. Shockingly, Balázs concludes that, by creating a ‘uniform ideal of beauty as the universal goal of selective breeding, the film will help to produce a uniform type of the white race’.¹⁰⁴ With the inevitable conclusion of such eugenic thinking in Nazism, Balázs reneged on these ideas in later work, locating cinema’s internationalism in its ability to transcend borders rather than eradicate races.¹⁰⁵ However, in the 1920s, Balázs’ cinematic ‘utopianism’ inheres in annihilating racial difference through what Erica Carter calls the ‘ideological trap’ of Enlightenment universality, inscribed as white, European and male.¹⁰⁶ His thinking sits in line with a broader tendency in interwar film theory to utilise the concept of the ‘primitive’ to explain cinema’s ‘magical’ qualities and ‘primal’ appeal, a concept underpinned by white supremacist and colonial hierarchies that distinguish ‘primitive’ and ‘civilised’ cultures and racialised groups.¹⁰⁷ The idea that cinema creates sensuous interfaces between bodies of performers and spectators that could revivify alienated, exhausted masses relied upon them being white. Equally, it assumed that performance could be read *racially*, resonating with ethnographic film which assumed that body posture, gesture, and movement provided an index of inherent racial

¹⁰⁴ Balázs, *Visible*, p. 14.

¹⁰⁵ Carter, p. xxxviii.

¹⁰⁶ Carter, p. xxxviii.

¹⁰⁷ Rachel O. Moore demonstrates the significance of the category of the ‘primitive’ in early film theory, showing the ways that key interwar theorists variously saw cinema as a ‘primitive’ form of expression that could counter the alienating effects of modernity, evade ‘rational’ cognition and uncover sensuous forms of meaning, and as a kind of magical fetish that gave life to inanimate objects; Rachel O. Moore, *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000). Examining German film theory and American popular cinema culture respectively, Assenka Oksiloff and Beth Corzo-Duchardt explicitly connect this primitivist tendency in early film theory to racialised hierarchies rooted in colonial disciplines of ethnography and anthropology; Oksiloff, pp. 117-158; Beth Corzo-Duchardt, ‘Primal Screen: Primitivism and American Silent Film Spectatorship’ (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Northwestern University, 2013), pp. 12-22.

difference.¹⁰⁸ The gestures, movements, and expressions in which Balázs and other 1920s theorists and thinkers were interested articulated not just affective interiority but also racial identity.

For Balázs, the ‘language of the white race’, enacted by the body on film, would become dominant and thus eradicate racial difference, universalising white ways of feeling and behaving. Might we, then, find the same racist underpinnings in British cinema culture, which shared early film theory’s concern with performing and spectating bodies and their transformation through cinema? Rather than proposing this eugenic ‘uplift’ of the world into whiteness, British filmmakers and commentators enlisted film performance to maintain and reify hierarchies of racial difference as other scholars have shown with class difference. The idea that race, in conjunction with class, gender, national and other identities, can be theorised as a kind of performance has been explored in various disciplinary fields. E. Patrick Johnson and Nicole Fleetwood have argued that Blackness is articulated, and its definition and meaning are continually contested and negotiated, through theatrical and everyday forms of performance by Black Americans.¹⁰⁹ Other scholars have examined performances of whiteness, including in film, that serve to position this category as simultaneously neutral or invisible and ‘superior’, while producing other racial categories in opposition.¹¹⁰ Angelia Poon has specifically demonstrated the ways in which white, imperial Englishness was imagined as a form of performance in Victorian literature, proposing—as Gledhill does of class and gender identities—that white Englishness comes into being within a ‘visual economy of looking relations’.¹¹¹ This thesis follows such scholarship attentive to the way race is performed and read into performance, the way certain repertoires of gesture, movement, expression and conduct are taken as indicators of racial identity, in the context of interwar British cinema culture specifically.

¹⁰⁸ Rony, pp. 29-35.

¹⁰⁹ E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011).

¹¹⁰ John T. Warren, *Performing Purity: Whiteness, Pedagogy, and the Reconstitution of Power* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003); Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, *Performing Whiteness: Postmodern Re/Constructions in the Cinema* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003); Kelsey Klotz, *Dave Brubeck and the Performance of Whiteness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), pp. 13-18.

¹¹¹ Angelia Poon, *Enacting Englishness in the Victorian Period: Colonialism and the Politics of Performance* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2008), p. 15.

While the neglect of performance in British silent cinema studies has been rectified in the last twenty years, the undergirding influence of conceptions of race in this ‘performed cinema’ has not been comprehended.¹¹² Balázs’ vision of cinema producing a ‘uniform type of the white race’ contradicts the logic of *specifically British* colonial racist ideologies which were founded in purported fundamental differences, and thus the impossibility of the British Empire’s colonised subjects being assimilated or ‘becoming white’. Scholarship on race and silent cinema has largely focused on America.¹¹³ However, this thesis foregrounds race in the British colonial context, alongside class, gender, and national differences to reveal it as another crucial performance marker of difference, distance, and decorum. In a more progressive argument than Balázs’, though still determined by colonial primitivist thinking, British critic and filmmaker Kenneth Macpherson introduces the August 1929 issue of modernist film journal *Close Up* on Black filmmaking by asserting the need for ‘racial cinema’ that does not profess an implicitly white universality but articulates racial difference.¹¹⁴ As James Douglas and Marcus demonstrate, this ‘racial cinema’ would construct Blackness through ‘a certain physicality, a certain naturalness, and ultimately that primitiveness necessary for a modernist aesthetic’s challenge to the suffocating reality of bourgeois life’.¹¹⁵ Macpherson is representative of the impulse to locate racial difference in ‘a certain physicality’: forms of embodied movement, gesture and action on screen. This belief in the body’s capacity to express and concretise racial difference on screen through performance was pervasive in 1920s British cinema culture.

As much as an issue of how performers perform to construct racial identities on screen, then, race was something *read into* performances. Scholars have also warned that characterising

¹¹² Much British silent cinema scholarship focuses on British national identity, but not its racialised dimensions; as well as Gledhill and Burrows, see e.g. Higson, *Waving*; Kenton Bamford, *Distorted Images: British National Identity and Film in the 1920s* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999); Laraine Porter and Bryony Dixon (eds), *Picture Perfect: Landscape, Place and Travel in British Cinema before 1930* (Exeter: The Exeter Press, 2007).

¹¹³ E.g. Daniel Bernardi (ed.), *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996); Rogin, *Blackface*; Matthew Bernstein and Gaylyn Studlar (eds), *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997); Foster, *Performing Whiteness*; Maurice, *Cinema*.

¹¹⁴ Quoted in James Douglas and Laura Marcus, ‘The “Negro viewpoint”’, in *Close Up 1927-1933: Cinema and Modernism*, ed. by James Donald, Anne Friedberg, and Laura Marcus (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 33-35 (p. 33).

¹¹⁵ Douglas and Marcus, p. 33.

race as a kind of performance risks implying that racism is therefore, in some way, the fault of the ‘performer’, obscuring the fact that racialisation is something done *to* the racialised subject.¹¹⁶ However, focusing on the reception of these performances acknowledges that specific gestures or expressions do not inherently connote racial identities but are *read into* them within a ‘cultural mode of perception’. As Linda Williams asserts in her examination of the ‘racial melodrama’ and the role which its Manichean oppositions have played in constructing racial categories in American culture, ‘[i]f race as an essential entity does not exist, racialization does; it gives meaning to the visible signs of difference and that meaning has long been embedded in popular culture’. While it is true that ‘race’ is a constructed category rather than a biological reality, this category still has a social and political reality in the way it ‘constructs “racialized subjects” in the political imagination’.¹¹⁷ Britain’s ‘performed cinema’ and cinema culture was invested in ‘racialising’, inscribing and reading racial difference and distance into, performing bodies, their framing on film, and their invitations of intimacy and sensuous interaction or their decorous distance.

If performance is of and from the body, as Pomerance contends, I argue that analysis of performance in British cinema needs to incorporate work on colonialism, the body, and sexuality in order to understand its racialised dimensions.¹¹⁸ This has been neglected in the burgeoning field of studies of film and empire, which usually either explore the representation of colonial space and the naturalisation or subversion of colonialism, or examine how colonial economics and policy, debates, and networks inform all film production, aesthetics, regulation and censorship, and reception.¹¹⁹ This

¹¹⁶ Fleetwood, pp. 27-28; Tate, p. 195.

¹¹⁷ Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 4.

¹¹⁸ Developments in scholarship on the body, sexuality, and colonialism are catalogued in Chelsea Schields and Dagmar Herzog (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Sexuality and Colonialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021).

¹¹⁹ Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 100-213; Stollery, *Alternative Empires*; Jaikumar, pp. 107-191; Lee Grieveson and Colin MacCabe (eds), *Empire and Film* (London: BFI, 2011); Stollery, ‘Transnationalism and imperialism’; James McDonald Burns, *Cinema and Society in the British Empire, 1895-1940* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Christine Grandy, ‘The Empire and “Human Interest”: Popular Empire Films, the Colonial Villain, and the British Documentary Movement 1926–39’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 25.4 (2014), 509-532; Maurizio Cinquegrani, *Of Empire and the City: Remapping Early British Cinema* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2014); Grieveson,

work has been tremendously important but I shift from geographical, economic, and political networks towards the performing body and cinematic taste.

Racialised Film Performance in Imperial Interwar Britain

Edward Said and Ann Laura Stoler provide starting points for examining racialised film performance in a British imperial context in their theorisations of white people in colonies. In *Orientalism*, Said describes 'Kipling's White Man', 'an idea, a persona, a style of being' that provided a model for British colonists and settlers. This 'very concrete manner of being-in-the-world' served British colonists and settlers in upholding white supremacy and colonial rule, maintaining 'white prestige' through bodily comportment. Articulated by 'speaking in a certain way, behaving according to a code of regulations, and even feeling certain things and not others' through 'specific judgments, evaluations, gestures', this was a means of 'acting imperially' through comportment and performance—'a pattern of appropriate conduct' in Goffman's terms. This performance 'style' also aimed to ensure that indigenous, colonised peoples 'acted imperially' in response in accordance with their racialised position in this white supremacist colonial hierarchy.¹²⁰ Some critique Said's monolithic approach which frames *Orientalism* as a binary opposition that obscures the nuances of specific empires, geographies, and gender, class and racial identities.¹²¹ His 'White Man' might also be seen thus. This thesis demonstrates that there are manifold ways to perform 'imperially'; in Chapters 3 and 4, for instance, I explore how women might perform imperially on screen, and in Chapter 5 on the British documentary movement, how working-class men perform their white imperial identity. Stoler's work is more attentive to the way bodies are always racialised, gendered and classed, outlining intertwining constructions of the body, intimacy and sexuality with colonial

Cinema; Priya Jaikumar, *Where Histories Reside: India as Filmed Space* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019). See also *Colonial Film Database* <<http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk/>> [accessed 8 March 2022].

¹²⁰ Edward Said, *Orientalism* [1978] (London: Penguin Books, 2003), pp. 226-227.

¹²¹ E.g. Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains: British and French Orientalisms* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. ix-x; Ali Behdad, *Belated Travelers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), pp. 9-13; Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 15-22.

rule, geographies and hierarchies. Echoing Said's 'White Man', Stoler writes that 'Europeanness' and whiteness were based upon 'assessments of who was judged to act with reason, affective appropriateness, and a sense of morality'.¹²² How one performs in colonial space determines racial identity for Stoler as it does for Said, incorporating gender and class into this analysis.

These colonial performances corresponded with and in part created the racialised boundaries of colonial space, resonating with British cinema's socio-spatial aesthetics and parameters of decorum. If British cinema distinguished bodies according to class and status, scholarship on colonialism and racism can point to the fact that race, intersecting with gender and class, also determined these distances and distinctions. Stoler argues that the policing of colonial bodies, distancing white settlers (especially white women) from indigenous, colonised subjects, underpins the colonial construction of race; empire and race were safeguarded through policing of intimacy.¹²³ This intensified with the nineteenth-century 'embourgeoisement' of colonies, wherein middle-class white women were encouraged to emigrate to colonies to curb sexual relations between white men and indigenous women, leading to greater policing and spatial segregation of white women and indigenous men, 'protecting' the former from the purportedly hypersexual threat of the latter. 'White' bourgeois domestic space was brought to the colonies, always threatened by but protected from indigenous peoples outside it. This process of separation and distinction constructed and fortified the racial hierarchies on which colonial exploitation is based and justified as 'development' or 'civilising'.¹²⁴ Race in a British colonial context was perceptible not only through skin colour but through how one performed: how bodies moved and interacted, their distance or proximity, and their location in a colonial geography or what George Lipsitz dubs in an American context a 'white spatial imaginary'—the racialisation of space to serve and uphold racial difference and white supremacy.¹²⁵ As Said knew, understanding the ways race manifested in corporeal 'styles

¹²² Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2010), p. 6.

¹²³ Stoler, pp. 6-13.

¹²⁴ Stoler, pp. 55-60.

¹²⁵ George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), p. 13.

of being' does not mean neglecting the material, socio-political, and economic underpinnings of racialisation, but rather registering the way in which race justifies and facilitates the economic exploitation of certain peoples and places, and thus always intersects with class positions.¹²⁶ Nevertheless, these 'styles', underpinned by imperial economic exploitation, make perceptible racial difference and colonial hierarchies. Intersecting with class and gender differences, these became *aesthetic* styles of performance in British cinema.

The economic and aesthetic logics of these processes of racialisation are always historically contingent, changing over time and place to suit the economic, political and social needs of institutions and groups which have the power to construct racial difference.¹²⁷ Wartime and post-war Britain saw heightened sensitivity and attention to race and proximity between racial groups. As Santanu Das summarises, '[b]etween 1914 and 1918, in a grotesque reversal of Joseph Conrad's vision, hundreds of thousands of men from South Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean and Pacific Islands sailed to the heart of whiteness and beyond to take part in the horror of Western warfare'.¹²⁸ The direction of colonial travel, and even civilisational hierarchies, seemed to be reversed through modern warfare. After the war, this intensified as demobilised soldiers of colour settled in Britain. The Great War destabilised imperial spatial and social boundaries and the very conception of Britain as disconnected 'island race', the 'relationship between national topography and national character'.¹²⁹ Lucy Bland outlines racialised, gendered and classed post-war British anxieties about 'miscegenation' and interracial sexual relationships. Returning home wearied, unemployed and injured, white men found

¹²⁶ See e.g. Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), pp. 2-3; Balibar and Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class*; Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 113. Gerald Sim argues that Said's materialist conception of race is neglected when his work is employed in film studies; Gerald Sim, 'Said's Marxism: *Orientalism's* Relationship to Film Studies and Race', *Discourse*, 34.2-3 (2012), 240-262.

¹²⁷ This point is often made by showing how different nationalities and ethnic groups are 'inducted into' whiteness at different historical moments; see Steve Garner, *Whiteness: An Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 63-79.

¹²⁸ Santanu Das, 'Longing, love, and loss in times of war: South Asian sepoys on the Western Front', in *The Routledge Companion to Sexuality and Colonialism*, ed. by Chelsea Schields and Dagmar Herzog (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), pp. 339-352 (p. 339).

¹²⁹ Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 5.

the spectre of the racial “other” courting “their” women. White working-class masculinity [...] now came up against challenges to two main definers of British masculinity, namely the ability to work and the ability to attract the opposite sex.¹³⁰

Simultaneously, they discovered newly enfranchised British women, working ‘men’s jobs’ and inhabiting public space, apparently catalysing further undermining of white masculinity.¹³¹ This was expressed through racialised bodies, and how these bodies behaved in relation to each other: distances and proximities, sexual invitation or restraint and reserve. Performance styles and performance spaces valorised and disavowed in British cinema culture were inflected by this corporeal, sexualised geography of Empire and its corresponding racial hierarchies.

In 1920s British cinema culture, then, race was read into film performance, influenced by interrelated histories, disciplines and discourses of primitivism and colonial rule, as well as anthropology and ethnography, social Darwinism, degenerationism and Orientalism. Gledhill and Burrows acknowledge that ‘character acting’ especially became a style associated with interpreting people of colour, opposed to restraint or reserve.¹³² This was influenced by colonial disciplines: ‘as many acting manuals acknowledged, in concert with the evidence provided by natural historians and anthropologists, codes of expression vary with class, gender, ethnicity and age’.¹³³ Gledhill quotes Netterville Barron who argues that, while ‘relaxing movements [...] are the alphabet of good manners’, ‘overacting’ and ‘convulsive movements’ are conversely the result of irrationality and are ‘most frequently seen among the uneducated and [...] less civilised peoples’.¹³⁴ Drawing on psychology and anthropology for legitimation, Barron aligns restraint with ‘civilised’ manners opposed to purported ‘degenerate’ or ‘primitive’ exaggeration or overacting by marginalised social groups. Barron exemplifies the reading of performance according to racist hierarchies of evolution, civilisation, and culture, which placed the supposed most primitive—usually Black African people—at

¹³⁰ Lucy Bland, ‘White Women and Men of Colour: Miscegenation Fears in Britain after the Great War’, *Gender and History*, 17.1 (2005), 29-61 (p. 37).

¹³¹ Bland, pp. 37-38.

¹³² Burrows, pp. 173-174, 177-179; Gledhill, p. 71.

¹³³ Gledhill, p. 71.

¹³⁴ *Motion Picture Studio*, 27 May 1922, p. 12, quoted in Gledhill, p. 82.

the bottom of a scale which was temporal and spatial, situating the primitive in a time and space distanced from white 'civilisation'.¹³⁵

Yet if the racialised nature of character acting is acknowledged, silent British cinema scholars rarely recognise that whiteness was opposingly manifested in performance styles positioned at the *top* of these social, spatial, and performative hierarchies, usually through the middle-class 'norm' of restraint. Certainly, imperial historians have found reserve or restraint to be a key marker of whiteness, Britishness, and civilisation in colonial discourses.¹³⁶ As Stoler argues, whiteness too had to be policed and controlled to maintain colonial rule.¹³⁷ The invention and popularisation of social Darwinism rendered white Europeans subject to the same evolutionary scales as peoples of colour marked as primitive, enabling regression as well as progression and domination.¹³⁸ Radhika Mohanram demonstrates that these ideas emerge from the interrelationship of metropole and colony, the perceived dangers of 'miscegenation' and interracial contact, and ultimately racialised groups 'out of their proper places'.¹³⁹ For Alastair Bonnett, the post-war moment epitomised a period of 'white crisis' in Britain from 1890 to 1930, in which whiteness was foregrounded in public expressions of a loss of faith in the natural capacity of white Britons for imperial rule, and responding intensified ideologies of 'Anglo-Saxonism' and white imperial diasporas' shared identity

¹³⁵ See e.g. Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 9; Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 40-42; Jean and John Comaroff, 'Africa Observed: Discourses on the Imperial Imagination' [1991], in *Perspectives on Africa: A Reader in Culture, History, and Representation*, ed. by Roy Richard Grinker, Stephen C. Lubkemann, and Christopher B. Steiner, 2nd edn (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 31-43 (p. 35-40); Michael Bell, 'Primitivism: Modernism as Anthropology', in *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms*, ed. by Peter Brooker, Andrzej Gąsiorek, Deborah Longworth, and Andrew Thacker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 353-367 (p. 353-355). On the particular denigration of Black African people, see Mudimbe, p. 6; Barbara Bush, *Imperialism, Race and Resistance: Africa and Britain 1919-1945* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 28.

¹³⁶ E.g. Radhika Mohanram, *Imperial White: Race, Diaspora, and the British Empire* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), pp. 18-24; Poon, p. 1, 16.

¹³⁷ Stoler, p. 1.

¹³⁸ William Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel 1880-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 21-22; Seshagiri, pp. 27-28.

¹³⁹ Mohanram, p. 41.

and 'superiority'.¹⁴⁰ While Bonnett notes that 'white crisis' was often voiced through discussions of nationhood, he proposes, echoing William Greenslade, that 'its work may be better understood if placed within a broader discussion concerning the imperial and racial character of Britons (and/or Englishmen and women) as white people'.¹⁴¹ The 'national' performative qualities of restraint which Gledhill and Burrows observe should thus also be seen as *racial* qualities. Social Darwinism, degenerationism, and white crisis, as well as anthropology and Orientalism, became lenses through which film performance was read and racialised, shaping conventions and ways of evaluating film performance and the cinema medium for British audiences.

Methodology and Chapter Structure

Performances, which were perceived to fit into racial hierarchies, became a site for asserting and exploring cinema's colonial and aesthetic value in Britain: the effects films have physically, affectively and sensuously, and the way cinema should and does relate to other media and cultural and imperial histories. The diversity of opinion about cinema and race cannot be synthesised into a monolithic 'Britain'. I explore dominant middle-class and elite discourses about cinema, primarily through British newspapers and magazines: broadsheets like the *Times* and *Telegraph*; tabloids like the *Mail*, *Express* and *Mirror*; local newspapers, particularly the *Guardian*; and fan magazines like *Picture Show* and *Picturegoer* which mediated Hollywood star reportage for British audiences.¹⁴² These publications evidence the prominence of these discourses in political, colonial, and industrial spheres while also reflecting their dissemination across the nation and their influence on British filmmaking. Film historians have observed that newspapers provided wider access to cinema culture: '[n]ewsprint circulated where film prints did not', rendering cinema a part of metropolitan and

¹⁴⁰ Alastair Bonnett, 'From White to Western: "Racial Decline" and the Idea of the West in Britain, 1890-1930', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 16.3 (2003), 320-348 (pp. 322, 329-330); Ana Carden-Coyne, *Reconstructing the Body: Classicism, Modernism, and the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 27-28.

¹⁴¹ Bonnett, p. 323; Greenslade, *Degeneration*, pp. 21-22.

¹⁴² On British fan magazines' representation of Hollywood, see e.g. Mark Glancy, 'Temporary American Citizens? British Audiences, Hollywood Films and the Threat of Americanization in the 1920s', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 26.4 (2006), 461-484; Lisa Rose Stead, "'So oft to the movies they've been": British fan writing and female audiences in the silent cinema', *Transformative Works and Culture*, 6 (2011) <<https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2011.0224>> [accessed 19 October 2021].

colonial everyday life.¹⁴³ As Andrew Shail writes, 'newsstands became mechanisms for nationally disseminating a nationally standard discourse on cinema'.¹⁴⁴ There was a relatively consistent dominant, middlebrow discourse surrounding cinema which formed *an* important British cinema culture, determining film production and reading performance to define not only the Empire and its subjects but the medium of cinema itself.

I approach these issues through four case study genres demonstrating different ways cinematic values and taste are discussed and imagined through racialised performance: the Hollywood 'Eastern', the Limehouse melodrama, the expedition film and the British 'documentary'. In this introduction, I have broadly explored 'race' as a relational and comparative construction between groups, with whiteness historically positioned at the 'top' of the hierarchy. The case study films represent specific locations and racialised groups, and I am attentive to specific colonial histories that contextualise these locations in the interwar British imaginary. Over the four case studies, I raise discrete issues and performance styles: respectively, the performance of play, inscrutability, imperial heroism, and everyday labour and leisure. In doing so, I trace the trajectory proposed by many interwar British commentators, moving from fiction to non-fiction, from 'lowbrow' populist narratives to recordings of imperial travel and colonial rule and work. In the final chapter, the documentary movement stands as the apotheosis of the discourses I describe over the 1920s, transcending the transition into sound, and thus new forms of performance, and demonstrating the continued resonance of these issues in a corpus of films that has taken on canonical status in British cinema history.

Contextualising the case study genres, Chapter 1 analyses further broader narratives of film performance and spectatorship in interwar British cinema culture. Looking across the interwar period, it examines debates about the impact of film performances of whiteness on indigenous

¹⁴³ Richard Macdonald, 'The rise of the Film Society movement', in *The Routledge Companion to British Cinema History*, ed. by I. Q. Hunter, Laraine Porter, and Justin Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 109-118 (p. 111); Haidee Wasson, 'The Woman Film Critic: Newspapers, Cinema and Iris Barry', *Film History*, 18.2 (2006), 154-162 (pp. 155-157); Burns, p. 61.

¹⁴⁴ Shail, *The Cinema*, p. 29.

spectators of colour and white British spectators, especially vulnerable spectators who act 'mimetically'. These mimetic responses were constructed according to racialised hierarchies of 'primitive' spectatorship, but this opened the possibility for white spectators to spectate in 'primitive' ways, evidencing forms of racial 'degeneration'. Through these debates, the racialised performing body functioned as a locus for considering appropriate boundaries of taste in cinema, Hollywood's position in relation to British cinema and the Empire, the medium's effect on performing and spectating bodies and larger social bodies, and its relationship to other media and British imperial heritage. Concerns about the representation and spectatorship of whiteness, especially via Hollywood film, governed the boundaries of decorum in film performance and spectatorship and the right models for 'better' representation and modes of cinema-going. These debates underpin the subsequent case studies.

In Chapter 2, I show that the 'Eastern' genre facilitated exploration of Hollywood film in Britain, through its 'Oriental' desert setting and associated performance styles of 'play'. Three Eastern male star performances embodied white American masculinity and American film style, with multivalent effects perceived for British spectators which determine conceptions of cinema's corporeal address. Rudolph Valentino's protagonist in *The Sheik* was seen to epitomise Hollywood artifice in playing with racial and gendered ambiguity and disguise, and playing with the white British Diana. Diana stood in for white women audiences in Britain unable to distinguish Hollywood fakery from 'true' representation of colonial spaces and colonised people. Douglas Fairbanks' performance in *The Thief of Bagdad* is placed in a mythical, magical past and thus, for British critics, the domain of children's play and fantasy. British critics asserted Fairbanks' unambiguous whiteness in his performance, against a background of 'Oriental' femininity, rendering the film an example of the revitalising effect of 'playing primitive'. Finally, I turn to the Foreign Legion film *Beau Geste*, which disavows femininity, placing womanhood within the past, so that the desert becomes a de-sexualised space of homosociality and 'brotherly love'. This unsexual bodily intimacy grounded consideration of white supremacist racial solidarity between British and American cinema cultures.

Chapter 3 explores the Limehouse film's reflexive contemplation of its origins in popular literature and theatrical 'yellowface melodrama', narrativising the tensions of adapting popular literature and cinema's status as 'art'. The genre depicts stereotyped Chinese villains in London who embody an alternative restraint as inscrutability, deception, or villainy, threatening white women and, through them, whiteness. I suggest that these films were read in Britain as triply dramatising racial boundary-crossing as geographic entry into British space, sensuous boundary-crossing between spectator and performer, and medial boundary-crossing between cinema and other media. The three case studies exhibit varying responses to this. In the context of the Stoll studio's policy of 'eminent adaptations' of British literature, *The Yellow Claw* frames performance of Chinese identity as 'adaptation' in itself, evoking dangerous tensions between art and artifice, deception and sensationalism through stereotyped Chinese restraint. British critics bestowed the American *Broken Blossoms* with 'art film' status by reading Lillian Gish's performance of constraint, pain, and emotion as assertion of whiteness through a self-distancing from the sensuous, violent Limehouse around her. Finally, *Piccadilly* celebrates cinematic boundary-crossing and the erotic contact it enables through the 'hybrid', transcendent performance of Anna May Wong.

In Chapter 4, I shift from popular fiction films to the non-fictional genres that many British commentators thought could better represent white Britishness on screen. I demonstrate that the expedition film was claimed as a British genre through performances of heroic whiteness, articulated as restraint, bravery and cheerfulness in the face of a 'savage' racialised landscape. By connecting these films to imperial traditions of ethnography, exemplary biographies and imperial monuments, these films comment on cinema's function as historical records, memorials, and exempla for British spectators. Yet this restrained whiteness is in tension with the inevitable bodily depredations of this heroic travel, the need to assert their tangible engagement with the 'savage' location. This tension is intertwined with a second contradiction related to class and race: are these films representations of untouchable, aristocratic heroism or representatives of whiteness to be shared with the British 'masses' through mimetic, sensuous spectatorship? These issues are articulated through formal

tensions between invocations of the tangible, haptic experiences of travel, and pictorial visions of the landscapes and peoples within them that distance the spectator. Moreover, in certain moments, the spectatorship by indigenous people in these films provides a critique of the performance of whiteness as heroism, restraint, and civilisation. Firstly, I show that Lowell Thomas' 'travelogues' of Edmund Allenby and T.E. Lawrence's Eastern Front campaigns reinstate mobility and heroism to the Great War against the muddy, static horrors of the Western Front, placing the war film in this expedition tradition and framing the films themselves as the spoils of war. I then examine Chaplin and Stella Court Treatt's filmed 'Cape to Cairo' expedition across Africa. Framing the couple as 'star' leads, this mostly lost film combines a modern, interwar expedition with a tradition of imperial heroic travel and Victorian exemplary life biographies, and oscillates between distant pictorialism and close-up 'haptic' views of mud and earth which evoke the corporeal difficulty of travel. Finally, I compare two failed expedition films in extreme cold climates, *The Great White Silence* and *The Epic of Everest*, that explore the difficulties of recuperating these failures into a heroic performance of whiteness.

I conclude in Chapter 5 with the late 1920s and 1930s British documentary movement. Contrary to conventional British film history narratives which have marked these films as a radical turning point in British cinema coinciding with the radical new technology of sound cinema, they actually exhibit the same concerns with performance, race, and the body that preoccupied British cinema culture for the preceding decade. British documentaries and documentary filmmakers distinguished themselves rhetorically from previous British cinema by *disavowing* performance but performances of race and class identity still underpin their claim that documentary creates 'community'. The films depict 'ordinary' imperial labour as performance, but interlink this with performances of intimacy, contact, and affection operating within racial boundaries, positioning British audiences as inheritors of imperial labour and imperial affective experiences. I begin with the first planned Empire Marketing Board (EMB) Film Unit film, *One Family*. This film links the documentary movement and 1920s British cinema; the child protagonist becomes a cipher for the

spectator's imperial education, his performance modelling white conduct for spectators. I then turn to *Drifters*, arguing that, while it rejects the imperial exhibition form of *One Family*, it still invokes 'feelings' of racial community through performances of intimacy, education, and affection. Finally, I examine *The Song of Ceylon*, which depicts not white colonial subjects but Sinhalese communities at work, worship, and leisure. Its reception as Basil Wright's 'transcription' of another racial group relies upon three dance sequences within the film, which create an alternative vision of labour and leisure, a distinct and distanced racialised 'community'.

Chapter 1: Spectating Performance and Performing Spectatorship: Racialising Cinema-going in Interwar Britain

On 9 March 1932, in a letter to the *Times*, Hylton Ralph Murray-Philipson recalls his experience watching a film in Singapore depicting an English villain behaving in a 'disgraceful manner'.¹ Leaving in disgust, he discovers 'hundreds of natives squatting behind the screen watching the film', so that the 'actions and writing were of different appearance'; intertitles become meaningless and performance is distorted. Horrified by their cheers at the American hero outwitting the villain, he proposes attention to 'the propaganda powers of the film and to tighten up the censorship at home and in the Colonies'. As James McDonald Burns writes, '[t]he idea of culturally isolated peoples abruptly peering through an open window into the West was a tantalizing and terrifying prospect'.² Murray-Philipson's letter encapsulates interwar British cinema culture discourses by commentators, critics, and politicians imagining forms of 'primitive' spectatorship with dangerous colonial implications. He worries about how this villain *performs* and how this influences spectators' actions. The screen's double-sidedness allows 'squatting' (implying primitive) Malay Singaporeans to witness warped versions of performances already misrepresenting British whiteness; if the English's villain's behaviour is concerning enough, the perspective of the 'primitive' spectators consolidates this.³ Resonating with Henri Schoenmakers' theory of acting as work between performer and spectator, this collaboration is seen as *distortion* rather than productive creation; 'incorrect' performance and incorrect reading of this coalesce to undermine white, British 'prestige'.⁴ The letter epitomises Beth Corzo-Duchardt's assertion that an imagined naïve, primitive spectator was always present in early cinema-going discourses, a model avoided by cultivated cinemagoers that also shaped ideas about

¹ *Times*, 9 March 1932, p. 8.

² Burns, p. 3.

³ For the connection of uprightness to civilisation and cultivation, see e.g. Santanu Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 43; Mohanram, pp. 49-51.

⁴ Schoenmakers, p. 382.

cinema's effect generally.⁵ For Murray-Philipson, though, this naivety inheres in repeated misreading of whiteness. If 'first contact' narratives, depicting 'primitive' audiences reacting with fear or awe to film, expressed the medium's pleasurable sensory and affective shocks, these prominent British discourses reflected a subsequent step in which the primitive cinemagoer was *familiar* with the medium, though still found primal pleasure in it.⁶ Through this, film performance informed how the world viewed whiteness and behaved in response, with implications for Empire and cinema.

Murray-Philipson's letter exemplifies the surfeit of anxious interwar reportage about spectating practices of 'native audiences', recently highlighted by film historians. This focused especially on Indian audiences, and on the effects this 'primitive' spectatorship was believed to have on perceptions of white settlers, colonists, and prestige.⁷ Following Annette Kuhn, historians demonstrate that these anxious discourses, while underpinned by economic rationales, waning British control of imperial markets and American cinema's 'cultural imperialism', had aesthetic functions, delineating the wrong kinds of film and how cinema is understood as a medium.⁸ Also influenced by Kuhn, this work has recognised that these constructions of colonised spectators were intertwined with colonial and racial constructions of the body, sexuality, and intimacy. Poonam Arora connects these debates to Stoler's work. For Arora, the physical presence of white women in colonies was matched by the *image* of white women on screen in the early-twentieth century, which

⁵ Corzo-Duchardt, pp. 12, 32. See also Oksiloff, pp. 117-124.

⁶ Tom Gunning, 'An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator', in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, ed. by Linda Williams (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), pp. 114-133; Moore, pp. 3-4, 48-51; Oksiloff, pp. 29-32; Corzo-Duchardt, pp. 95-153.

⁷ E.g. Poonam Arora, "'Imperilling the Prestige of the White Woman': Colonial Anxiety and Film Censorship in British India', *Visual Anthropology Review*, 11.2 (1995), 36-50; James Burns, 'Watching Africans Watch Films: Theories of spectatorship in British Colonial Africa', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 20.2 (2000), 197-211; Prem Chowdhry, *Colonial India and the making of empire cinema: Image, ideology and identity* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000); Brian Larkin, 'Colonialism and the Built Space of Cinema in Nigeria', in *City Flicks: Indian Cinema and the Urban Experience*, ed. by Preben Kaarsholm (London, New York, and Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2004), pp. 180-206; Jaikumar, *Cinema*, pp. 65-103; Babli Sinha, "'Lowering Our Prestige": American Cinema, Mass Consumerism, and Racial Anxiety in Colonial India', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 29.2 (2009), 291-305; Monika Mehta, *Censorship and Sexuality in Bombay Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), pp. 26-32; Burns, *Cinema*, pp. 79-132; Manishita Dass, *Outside the Lettered City: Cinema, Modernity, and the Public Sphere in Late Colonial India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁸ Annette Kuhn, *Cinema, Censorship and Sexuality, 1909-1925* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 10.

undermined ‘embourgeoisement’ of colonial space by representing a different kind of public, sexualised white femininity.⁹ She explains that

[t]he deliberately cultivated cultural and psychological distance that the British had maintained from Indians for three quarters of a century came to be diminished by the democratizing effects of filmic narratives and the desegregation of social spaces associated with the cinema.¹⁰

However, anxieties around this were ‘managed’—reasserting racial and spatial difference—‘not [...] through a regulation of the venue of cinema, but through its content and distribution’.¹¹ Constructions of colonised spectators thus constructed cinema too: its function as a contact zone, its sensuous possibilities, and appropriate decorous and racially determined ways of responding to it.

In this chapter, I argue that this scholarship has neglected two crucial elements. Firstly, I contend that these debates are to be understood through the *performance* of on-screen and spectating bodies and its aesthetic, social and sensual implications. Secondly, while film historians have explored the regulation of film and constructions of spectators in the metropole (especially white women and the working classes) and in colonies separately, I propose that these apparently separate groups need to be understood *together*; after all, Murray-Philipson proposes censorship and film production ‘at home and in the Colonies’.¹² White depictions of ‘native audiences’ did not represent real colonial cinema-going practices, demonstrating only anxieties and aims of white people and institutions. As constructions of the primitive only ever tell us about the purportedly civilised dominant culture which envisions them, ‘primitive’ spectators discussed in British newspapers and political spheres did not really exist; they were imaginary constructions, part of narratives bespeaking anxieties about whiteness on film and a corresponding imagined white, British mass audience.¹³ These debates require ‘contrapuntal’ reading incorporating both white

⁹ Arora, p. 36.

¹⁰ Arora, p. 44.

¹¹ Arora, pp. 37-38.

¹² For the regulation of British women and working-class spectators, see e.g. James C. Robertson, *The British Board of Film Censors: Film Censorship in Britain, 1896-1950* (London, Sydney, and Dover: Croom Helm, 1985), pp. 19-22; Kuhn, pp. 68, 120-122; Lise Shapiro Sanders, “‘Indecent Incentives to Vice’: Regulating Films and Audience Behaviour from the 1890s to the 1910s’, in *Young and Innocent: The Cinema in Britain, 1896-1930*, ed. by Andrew Higson (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002), pp. 97-110.

¹³ Mudimbe, pp. 18-20; Torgovnick, p. 11.

metropolitan spectators and spectators of colour.¹⁴ White spectatorship was discussed and policed in similar terms, placing all audiences on a racialised hierarchy from primitive, unruly, inappropriate to cultivated, tasteful, civilised responses to cinema.

This chapter thus argues that constructions of white British and indigenous colonised spectators across the Empire form a single colonial discourse of anxiety about whiteness, white spectatorship, and white conduct. This is evident in the tension about whether the issue lies in the film performer or spectator—in Murray-Philipson's anecdote, in the English villain or the Singaporeans watching from the wrong position—and thus *misrepresentation* or *misreading* and mis-imitation. Commentators critiqued white performers, especially in Hollywood films, disseminating an 'incorrect' whiteness through sexualised, immoral conduct and bodily display. Yet this preceded anxieties about misreading these performances through bodily mimetic spectatorship and purportedly irrational, primitive cinematic taste. While this bodily spectatorship was constructed as primitive through indigenous colonised spectators, they were not imagined to imitate the misrepresented whiteness on display. To repeat an assumption of colonial ideology often discussed in postcolonial scholarship, 'native spectators' can *never* imitate whiteness correctly; their racial difference cannot be overcome as this would undermine the racial basis of colonial rule.¹⁵ Instead, they were imagined, with great consternation, as seeing this incorrect performance of whiteness and judging all white people through a reverse ethnographic gaze. While spectating enabled contact and intimacy across racial and spatial boundaries, mimesis and identification was assumed to operate on a very broad 'colour line' so that 'native spectators' could only imitate other performers or characters of colour. By contrast, white spectators who spectated 'primitively' *did* imitate these misrepresentative performances of whiteness. Sexualised and sensational on-screen images, reproduced mechanically across the world, reproduced this whiteness in spectators. Arguments about 'native spectators' did lead to some projects which aimed to produce films for

¹⁴ See Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993), p. 63.

¹⁵ See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 121-131.

indigenous audiences, such as the Bantu Educational Kinema Experiment.¹⁶ Some scholars have also read these dominant constructions against the grain to reveal actual subversive practices of spectatorship that contested colonial regulation.¹⁷ However, primarily, constructions of both white and 'native' spectators, and of misrepresentation and misreading, came down to British colonial anxiety about whiteness and its reproduction through film performance.

Creating the spectre of native spectators allowed British commentators to disavow and displace cinema's corporeal sensations onto racialised bodies and racialised encounter. They proposed to mitigate these effects by envisaging an alternative, 'white' cinema founded upon aesthetics and performance styles of restraint, in opposition to damaging misrepresentations usually in Hollywood film.¹⁸ This would only be officially actualised with the films, discussed in Chapter 5, of the EMB Film Unit which aimed to advertise and humanise Empire to its citizens, but these commentators imagined a better, *healthier* British cinema for spectators' bodies. This was conceived through representation of British imperial history and heritage, characterised as a tradition of bodily restraint and mastery which could be reproduced on screen and therefore in white spectators.

Hollywood held an ambiguous place in relation to this, simultaneously pro-colonial and white supremacist, but also emerging from a competing Empire vying for cultural and economic dominance.¹⁹ In British discourses about 'primitive' spectators, misrepresentations of whiteness were primarily attributed to American cinema. Miriam Bratu Hansen argues that classical American cinema created a kind of (locally adapted and appropriated) universal sensory 'vernacular', combining narrative efficiency with a focus on the 'sensual, material surface', sensation, excess and

¹⁶ See Burns, 'Theories of spectatorship', pp. 198-208; Burns, *Cinema*, pp. 118-129; Aaron Windel, 'The Bantu Educational Kinema Experiment and the Political Economy of Community Development', in *Empire and Film*, ed. by Lee Grieveson and Colin McCabe (London: BFI, 2011), pp. 207-225; Sanogo, pp. 227-242; Grieveson, pp. 184-187.

¹⁷ Jaikumar, *Cinema*, pp. 69-103; Beth Corzo-Duchardt, 'Contested territory: American film spectatorship, colonial mimicry and British Empire', *Screen*, 56.4 (2015), 401-414.

¹⁸ Some commentators also worried that Soviet film encouraged anti-colonial revolutionary sentiment; see e.g. *Mail*, 7 January 1926, p. 8; *Times*, 18 September 1926, p. 9; *Telegraph*, 13 April 1931, p. 4; Arora, p. 46.

¹⁹ Chowdhry, pp. 38-40.

glamour.²⁰ Because of this ‘universal’ sensory appeal, American film was imagined in Britain as degenerately sensationalist, ‘primitively sexual’ or ‘savage’, with the potential to produce the same racially degenerative effects in British spectators.²¹ Some critics wrote of ‘Jewish brains’, ‘alien hands’, and people not ‘of Anglo-Saxon blood’ who were in ‘control’ of Hollywood, while others denigrated ‘foreign and Semitic types’ on screen appealing to a ‘heterogeneous, rootless American proletariat’.²² On-screen performers were of particular concern. Discussing the spontaneity of American film stars read as ‘being’ rather than ‘acting’, Gledhill writes that, ‘[i]n suggesting the projection of the actor’s self across the gap between performer and audience, spontaneity, it seems, not only disturbs the aesthetics of restraint but threatens social and sexual excess’.²³ Performed ‘social and sexual excess’—display, intimacy and availability—was what rendered cinema a sensual, eroticised contact zone for British critics. This underpinned Hollywood’s ‘threatening deterritorialising potential’, or ‘its capacity to mix spaces and populations, to undercut boundaries and to foster utopian possibilities that ran counter to economic and political structures of imperial hegemony’.²⁴ Hollywood was a white—and white supremacist—institution, but its films were seen in Britain to undermine British imperial dominance and engender racialised degeneracy. Reaching across the screen, its performance style encouraged the same in spectators: a reciprocal bodily communication characterised as ‘primitive’ that upset racial and spatial divides.

In this chapter, I follow the pattern of these narratives about ‘primitive’ racialised spectatorship. I begin by delineating anxieties expressed about the ‘wrong’ kinds of performance. I then demonstrate how the effect on spectators was expressed through bodily metaphors of engulfment, consumption, and contagion, before examining the perceived effects of this on colonial

²⁰ Miriam Bratu Hansen, ‘The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism’, *Modernism/modernity*, 6.2 (1999), 59-77 (p. 61).

²¹ Arora, p. 38; Rudolph Messel, *This Film Business* (London: Ernest Benn, 1928), p. 22-23; *Times*, 10 August 1920, p. 8; *Times*, 5 September 1925, p. 11.

²² *Fortnightly Review*, April 1929, p. 535; *Express*, 21 April 1925, p. 8; *Mail*, 4 August 1921, p. 8; *Express*, 12 December 1921, p. 6; *Express*, 16 June 1922, p. 4; *English Review*, February 1927, p. 139; *Times*, 27 August 1925, p. 12.

²³ Gledhill, p. 80.

²⁴ Sinha, p. 305; Grieveson, p. 177.

geographies and hierarchies. Finally, I turn to the 'right' kinds of performance and cinema, which commentators imagined the British industry would provide. This also underpins the structure of the case studies to follow, beginning with the 'Eastern', most associated with Hollywood performance, and moving to British, non-fictional alternatives which purportedly offered more appropriate performance styles.

Firstly, then, anxieties were expressed about performances in American or Western film that represent whiteness as criminal, hypersexualised, and degenerate. This mostly centred on the representation and perceived availability of white women on screen to spectators across the Empire, framed as a danger to white prestige in blurring racial and spatial colonial boundaries and placing whiteness on display. Secondly, corporeal metaphors were used to articulate the corporeal effects of these performances on metropolitan and colonised spectating bodies. These metaphors underpinned the third key point: that cinema drew bodies together which colonial geographies were built to keep apart, and encouraged incorrect performances in real colonial spaces. In each of these sections, I begin with depictions of indigenous colonised spectators before demonstrating continuities between these and discourses about white British spectators. While these discussions mostly lampoon cinema generally, I do examine specific concern with serial films. Often mentioned as a particularly dangerous form for 'primitive' spectators, examples from serials visually illustrate the anxieties raised in these debates. Finally, I begin to delineate the effects this has on conceptions of the medium, setting up the case study chapters. I explore the ways these narratives informed the construction of cinema as corporeally impacting upon bodies, and British cinema's positioning as a 'healthier', more 'wholesome' alternative, in which modes of performance themselves became a kind of white, British heritage.

These discourses were primarily expressed by industry figures and critics hoping to legitimise the medium, and administrators, aristocrats and politicians invested in a successful colonial economy. However, they were discussed regularly in newspapers and impacted British film production and evaluation in British criticism. The central tenets of the arguments were remarkably

consistent in various spheres, especially prevalent over the 1920s but lasting into the 1930s after the introduction of sound undermined cinema's perceived universal appeal. At key moments, these discourses reached particular intensity: the immediate post-war period, the 1926 Imperial Conference; the 1927 Cinematograph Films Act that followed this; and the publication of Indian Cinematograph Committee (ICC) (1928) and Colonial Films Committee (1930) reports on cinema-going.²⁵ While valuable work has examined the implications of spectatorship anxieties in specific colonial territories, British metropolitan cinema culture exhibits more general outcry directed inwards to the British masses and outwards to the Empire's colonised spectators. This chapter is interested in imaginary British metropolitan constructions of spectators that viewed spectatorship as a racialised practice responding to racialised performance. The corporeal, sensory and sensationalist tenor of these constructions circled around performance to reflect both tantalisation and terror and, ultimately, to construct perceptions of cinema in Britain.

Racialising Spectatorship in Interwar Britain

Spectatorship and the Great War

These anxieties are not unique to the post-war moment. In 1910, for instance, Black American boxer Jack Johnson beat the white Jim Jeffries to defend his heavyweight title, before his fight with 'Bombardier' Billy Wells, due to take place in London, was cancelled after intervention from British authorities. The films of these fights (ultimately unmade in the latter case) aroused similar consternation as spectated performances of a Black man beating a white man and thus undermining white supremacy when viewed across the Empire.²⁶ While this earlier panic focused on specific films of a real event, the interwar period saw a widened concern, directed at the medium as a whole.

²⁵ On the Imperial Conference and Films Act, see Jaikumar, *Cinema*, pp. 4, 41-64. On the ICC, see Arora, pp. 45-46; Jaikumar, *Cinema*, pp. 65-103; Mehta, pp. 29-32; Dass, pp. 77-97. On the Colonial Films Committee, see Moody, pp. 133-141; Burns, *Cinema*, p. 82.

²⁶ See Lee Grieveson, *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early-Twentieth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 121-150; Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), p. 185; Dan Streible, *Fight Pictures: A History of Boxing and Early Cinema* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2008), pp. 195-265; Theresa Runstedtler, *Jack Johnson, Rebel Sojourner: Boxing in the Shadow of the Global Color Line* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2012), pp. 41-114; Burns, *Cinema*, pp. 33-37.

In the introduction, I proposed that the influx of colonised peoples into Europe after the Great War reversed colonial hierarchies and rendered white Europe visible and proximate to colonised people. One example of this highlights the significance of representations of racialised bodies and interracial physical intimacy. By December 1915, nearly 138,000 Indian soldiers had come to support the war effort in France, with 34,252 casualties among them.²⁷ In November 1914, after numbers of wounded became unmanageable in French hospitals, the War Office agreed to transport Indian soldiers to military hospitals in Britain. These 'networked imperial sites' became loci for these transforming colonial relations; this large group made acutely visible the shifting spatial and racial dynamics of Empire in this crisis moment.²⁸ Convalescing soldiers were sources of intrigue and exoticism for local Britons, but the proximity of white British women and Indian men soon became a vexed issue.²⁹ As Rozina Visram writes, '[w]ithin the imperial context, the mystique of English womanhood and the prestige of the empire were interlinked'.³⁰ According to India Office documents, this reached a head with a photograph of a white nurse standing with a wounded Indian soldier in the 24 May 1915 *Mail*. This contradicted official representations of Indian soldiers, such as *With the Indian Troops at the Front*. While this film aimed to depict the war as a common, united effort across the Empire, it still distances Indian soldiers from white soldiers and barely shows them in combat, preferring to separate them by framing them as ethnographic 'types'.³¹ By contrast, the *Mail* photograph placed white women and Indian men in proximity in the same frame. Visram suggests that this was responsible for the Army Council order that female nurses should be removed from these hospitals.³² The government response demonstrates 'how integral the *izzat*, or honour of

²⁷ Andrew Tait Jarboe, 'Propaganda and Empire in the Heart of Europe: Indian Soldiers in Hospital and Prison, 1914-18', in *Empires in World War I: Shifting Frontiers and Imperial Dynamics in a Global Conflict*, ed. by Andrew Tait Jarboe and Richard S. Fogarty (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014), pp. 107-135 (pp. 107-108).

²⁸ Samuel Hyson and Alan Lester, '"British India on trial": Brighton Military Hospitals and the politics of empire in World War I', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 38 (2012), 18-34 (p. 18); Jarboe, pp. 109-115.

²⁹ Hyson and Lester, p. 25-28.

³⁰ Rozina Visram, *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), p. 185.

³¹ Toby Haggith and Richard Smith, 'Sons of Our Empire: Shifting Ideas of "Race" and the Cinematic Representation of Imperial Troops in World War I', in *Empire and Film*, ed. by Lee Grieveson and Colin McCabe (London: BFI, 2011), pp. 42-44.

³² Visram, pp. 186-187.

white women, and policing of touch and proximity across the racial and sexual divide was to the maintenance of the Raj'.³³ This was an issue of internal political machinations rather than public moral panic, but it epitomises concerns with the representation of interracial intimacy and contact during and after a war which upturned racial-spatial hierarchies, and the sexual and spectatorial charges of these; white women became not just visible but proximate to men of colour through the war, and representations of this proximity could damage white prestige further, even when primarily viewed by white Britons.

Das concludes of this photograph, in ways which align with post-war anxieties about cinema, that

[i]n a classic intersection of race, class, and gender prejudice, the colonial state fashioned the image of irresponsible and profligate English working-class girls cavorting with sexually depraved sepoys which imperilled, in imperial eyes, the very future of the British Raj.³⁴

The photographic representation and dissemination of interracial encounter and proximity engendered colonial anxieties about white prestige, miscegenation, racial hierarchies, and white male virility. This would also concern interwar British cinema culture. The photograph raises the question: what was the difference between this photographic journalism and the 'moving pictures' around which so much debate circulated in the 1920s? While the photograph could *depict* illicit intimacy, cinema invited the spectator to participate in such intimate, boundary-crossing acts of contact. It *transported* the spectator, geographically, affectively and sexually, and this was evident in the focus on performers' bodies and the corresponding bodily metaphors used to describe spectatorship. Cinema's dynamic movement and direct bodily address appeared to British commentators to pose a unique threat, underpinned by the geographic, social and bodily transformations of the Great War.

The war also transformed British cinema culture, filtered through anxieties about race, bodies and performance. Cinema was associated more than ever with political turbulence among working-class and colonial masses, and thus debated in political forums in Britain and the dominions

³³ Das, 'Longing', p. 346.

³⁴ Das, 'Longing', p. 346.

and colonies.³⁵ These debates were undergirded by perceptions that the war had enabled America, neutral for most of the conflict, to consolidate their industrial dominance.³⁶ This was expressed through concerns about race, degeneration, and performing bodies. Ana Carden-Coyne argues that post-war British culture is profoundly absorbed in attempts to reconstruct an idealised, classical white body, and, through this, civilisation itself.³⁷ For Carden-Coyne, this rendered post-war rebuilding an aesthetic, bodily concern.³⁸ Accordingly, in British cinema culture, performance could transform spectators' bodies, simultaneously transforming the Empire's social 'body' for better or worse.

"Is this the way the Sahibs live when they are at home?": Misrepresenting Whiteness on Film

Addressing the English-Speaking Union in 1925, Arthur Lee, Viscount of Fareham, raised the dangers of American films' representation of 'social life' in 'almost all savage countries', recalling being in India and overhearing the question, '[i]s this the way the Sahibs live when they are at home?'.³⁹ This question epitomises concerns about performance and misrepresentation of whiteness. White people's everyday conduct, 'how they live' and its screen representation, was central to anxieties about cinema and colonial spectatorship. Critics and commentators described a process in which performances in European and American settings, which were not usually viewed as 'racial', suddenly *became* performances of whiteness when viewed by spectators like those Lee describes. Annual reports by the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) express concern with '[s]cenes in which British Officers are seen in a discreditable light in their relations with Eastern Peoples', 'British social life held up to ridicule', or '[w]hite men in [a] state of degradation amidst native surroundings'.⁴⁰ Misrepresenting whiteness, such films purportedly offered insight into an immoral modern 'world of

³⁵ Burns, *Cinema*, p. 56; Robertson, pp. 19-22.

³⁶ See e.g. *Times*, 20 May 1920, p. 16; *Times Cinema Supplement*, 21 February 1922, p. vi.

³⁷ Carden-Coyne, p. 23.

³⁸ Carden-Coyne, pp. 2, 265-310.

³⁹ *Telegraph*, 21 December 1925, p. 8.

⁴⁰ BBFC, *Report For Year ending December 31st, 1919* (London: BBFC, 1919), p. 7; BBFC, *Report For Year ending December 31, 1921* (London: BBFC, 1921), p. 9; BBFC, *Report Year ended December 31st, 1926* (London: BBFC, 1926), p. 6.

whirling motor-cars and costly yachts and eternal evening clothes and hectic night clubs which [...] is, in fact, very far removed from realities'.⁴¹ As novelist F. Britten Austin contended, this misrepresentation was dangerous for whiteness in the real world: when spectators of colour 'see film-representations of white women [...] to them the whole white race is thus degraded'.⁴² A few sentences above, he expounds the dangers of representing 'American loyalties, American manners, American customs' for 'millions of British men, women and children'. This Americanising degeneration was *also* racial degeneration for British commentators. For these critics, white and colonised spectators—and ultimately white prestige and the Empire's white supremacist politics, geographies and hierarchies—were transformed and endangered by film performance.

Commentators were primarily concerned with depictions of crime and sexuality, connectedly constructed as deviant, degenerate and dangerously modern; they epitomised cinema's overly 'modern', quick, sensory, and sensational qualities. In India especially, representations of 'criminal' resistance could purportedly spur real anti-colonial actions.⁴³ Ex-secretary and manager of the Calcutta Opera House, Constance Bromley, wrote articles for the *Mail*, the 1922 *Times* 'Cinema Supplement', and the *Leeds Mercury* denouncing this influence on Indian audiences, the latter of which was quoted in parliament.⁴⁴ She worries about American cinema depicting violence by *any* person of colour against white people being 'a first-class handbook to the teachings of Mr. Gandhi'.⁴⁵ Representations of violence against white people provided for 'native spectators' models of anti-colonial and criminal behaviour that could undermine colonial rule and white prestige.

Spectatorship of such scenes was imagined as racially bounded mimetic spectatorship. Equal concern was devoted to the representation of white immorality and vice which did not invite imitation from spectators of colour but put whiteness—the white body and white spaces—on display, making them visible and perceptible to audiences usually distanced from them.

⁴¹ *Sunday Mirror*, 27 September 1925, p. 7.

⁴² *Sunday Mirror*, 3 October 1926, p. 6.

⁴³ E.g. *Mail*, 18 August 1928, p. 10; *Times*, 10 November 1928, p. 11.

⁴⁴ *Mail*, 11 July 1919, p. 3; *Times* Cinema Supplement, 21 February 1922, p. xiv; *Leeds Mercury*, 20 August 1926, p. 6; Sinha, p. 295; Arora, p. 38.

⁴⁵ *Times* Cinema Supplement, 21 February 1922, p. xiv.

Commentators constantly worried about 'crime and social licence', '[c]rime, vice, and hectic revelry', or life in European 'centres of crime and infamy' of white people in the metropole.⁴⁶ In a 1921 report, the Calcutta Board of Film Censors stated their worry that white characters' 'evil' is allowed to continue throughout films, such that its 'discomfiture' at the conclusion does not 'teach the good moral which is intended' to 'a half-educated audience'.⁴⁷ Alongside crime, the other main cinematic 'vice' was sexual display and availability of white women. For Stoler, poor white people and white women embodied the limits and thus definition of European self-image in colonies.⁴⁸ If white urban criminals, often working-class, epitomised the first of these on film, white women also defined screen representations of whiteness. Again, BBFC reports evidence concerns surrounding white femininity: films were censored for showing 'improper dress', 'indecorous dancing', British women's behaviour in the 'East', and sexual 'situations' or 'liaisons' with men of colour.⁴⁹ Similarly, newspapers cited the way 'natives are shown making love to white women', and depictions of women in 'attitudes of abandon' or 'a state of almost complete nudity and behaving in a shameless manner'; such performances made *visible* and *accessible* white femininity, undermining the 'mystique of English womanhood' on which 'white prestige' apparently rested.⁵⁰ Manishita Dass suggests that white women film stars embodied the medium for 1920s audiences in the British Empire and India, performing 'the pleasures and the perils of both modernity and the cinema'.⁵¹ Cinema's universal corporeal address, its mass appeal and reproductive capacities, were apprehended through displays of sexualised femininity. As Arora explains, this bespoke miscegenation anxieties, and anxieties about white women's new public position.⁵² Their visibility and reproducibility opened whiteness up to immorality, via the gaze and touch of 'native spectators'.

⁴⁶ *Express*, 16 June 1920, p. 3; *Dundee Courier*, 23 August 1930, p. 4; *Times*, 18 September 1926, p. 9.

⁴⁷ *Times*, 4 July 1921, p. 10.

⁴⁸ Stoler, pp. 25-26.

⁴⁹ E.g. BBFC, *Report For Year ending December 31st, 1919* (London: BBFC, 1919), p. 7; BBFC, *Report Year ended December 31st, 1926* (London: BBFC, 1926), p. 6.

⁵⁰ *Times*, 23 February 1920, p. 12; *Mail*, 1 September 1922, p. 7; *Times*, 10 July 1930, p. 15.

⁵¹ Dass, pp. 125-148.

⁵² Arora, pp. 38-39.

In the early 1920s, concerns about such display, opening whiteness to ‘native spectators’, centred on serial films, particularly ‘serial queen melodramas’ featuring imperilled women performing athletic stunts. Bromley complains of their ‘acts of outrage on white women’ that are ‘the worst possible “dope” on which to feed 300,000,000 natives’.⁵³ The *Times of India* evidences the amount of serials being exhibited in Bombay cinemas at this time. In late 1918 to early 1919, before Bromley returned to Britain, advertisements promote: *Who Is Number One* (William Bertram, Paramount, 1917) at the Majestic (4 January to 7 March) and New Alexandra Cinema (4 Jan to 22 February); *The House of Hate* (George B. Seitz, Astra Film, 1918) at the Imperial (6 December to 7 March) and the Poona Aryan Cinema (30 December to 8 March); and *A Lass of the Lumberlands* (Paul Hurst and J. P. McGowan, Mutual Film, 1916) at the Excelsior (30 December to 28 February). The advertisements for these now-lost films emphasise their white female stars’ exploits and their ‘thrilling’ and ‘sensational’ plots (though interracial ‘outrages’ go unmentioned). Film historians demonstrate that these plots and performances by female stars chime with anxieties about wartime and post-war women’s sexual confidence and expressiveness and growing presence in public.⁵⁴ This visibility rendered them supposedly vulnerable and proximate to ‘Oriental villains’ in these films; for *Express* film critic G. A. Atkinson, the serial is ‘infinitely misleading, not only for its utter disregard of all laws and conventions and the horrifying adventures of the heroine, but for the manner in which natives are posed as successful villains’.⁵⁵ As such, they were apposite examples of the salacious display of white femininity that apparently misrepresented whiteness.

⁵³ *Times Cinema Supplement*, 21 February 1922, p. xiv; *Leeds Mercury*, 20 August 1926, p. 6.

⁵⁴ Shelley Stamp, *Movie-Struck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture after the Nickelodeon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 125-140; Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), pp. 221-262; Jennifer M. Bean, ‘Technologies of Early Stardom and the Extraordinary Body’, in *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*, ed. by Jennifer M. Bean and Diane Negra (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 404-443 (pp. 424-432); Mark Garrett Cooper, ‘Pearl White and Grace Cunard: The Serial Queen’s Volatile Present’, in *Flickers of Desire: Movie Stars of the 1910s*, ed. by Jennifer M. Bean (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2011), pp. 174-195; David Chapman, ‘Amazons, Vampires and Daredevils: Athletic Women in Silent Films’, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 31.13 (2014), 1577-1597.

⁵⁵ Cooper, p. 190; *Express*, 16 June 1920, p. 3.



Figure 4: Pauline is accosted by an old 'gypsy' woman in *The Perils of Pauline*...



Figure 5: ...leading to her capture by a group of 'gypsy' men

Interwar critics do not actually analyse these serials, taking as given the dangers of depicting white women predated upon by men of colour. However, surviving popular serials evidence the dramatisation of the visibility and public position of white women. If British theatre and cinema, according to Gledhill, moved indoors in line with middle-class codes of decorum, serial films depict insistently outdoor women, foregrounding permeable boundaries between private and public space and the insidious racialised dangers they enabled. In the surviving nine-episode version of *The Perils of Pauline* (Louis J. Gasnier and Donald MacKenzie, Pathé Frères, 1914), for instance, independent heiress Pauline (Pearl White) is targeted by her carer Raymond Owen (Paul Panzer) for her inherited fortune. Her public 'perils' render her visible and vulnerable to characters of colour in outdoor space. In the second episode, Owen abandons Pauline in the American West where a group of Sioux hunters discover her, subjecting her to violent trials from which she barely escapes. Later, Owen hires 'gypsy king' Balthazar (Clifford Bruce) to assist him. In Episode 8, Balthazar's plot to entrap Pauline begins with an old woman, in darkened make-up, reading Pauline's palm. She approaches Pauline in public space, encroaching upon her as she attempts to walk away and holding her hand before a group of men emerge from the bush behind and seize her (Figures 4 and 5). In both cases, Pauline's body is on display— in the latter case overtly scrutinised as she is coerced into a palm reading—leading to her kidnap by men of colour. In such instances, serials visualised and dramatised the spectatorship of white femininity and bodily display.

Most critics and commentators concluded that such performances, epitomising cinema's 'primitive', sensual immorality, 'travestied' Britishness or whiteness, providing 'a false and shameful picture of English life'.⁵⁶ Opening white civilisation to spectators of colour, they reversed the direction of the ethnographic gaze, allowing these spectators to appraise whiteness. As the *Times of India* put it, audiences might assume that these acts of immorality represent a true vision of 'the White Man in his idle moments'.⁵⁷ Similarly, for a *Mail* correspondent, showing crime as 'everyday' caused '[i]ncalculable harm' to white prestige.⁵⁸ The representation of white criminality and vice purported to capture whiteness 'unawares' and 'naturally', representing this vice as everyday or ordinary, as ethnographic film purported to capture its subjects.⁵⁹ This perhaps also explains prominent condemnations of white women in 'nightclubs', engaged in performances of dance and self-display in public space that mirror conventional, 'voyeuristic' capturing of ritual dances in ethnographic film. These dances provided ethnographic information, summarising or epitomising racial difference through performance and movement, and position distanced, even forbidden, bodies tantalisingly on display.⁶⁰ Through this, British critics argued that these performances 'degraded' whiteness.

If this was dangerous for 'native spectators' in damaging white prestige, it also 'degraded' white, metropolitan spectators; their mimetic imitation became a form of dangerous racial 'reproduction', centred similarly on whiteness and its visibility. From the 1910s, cinematic crime and its influence on children was widely discussed: 'imitative crime' was cited as one basis for the 1917 National Council of Public Morals' (NCPM) inquiry into cinema's relationship to the social and moral health of the 'race'.⁶¹ In the 1920s, this thinking was maintained by the *Mail* cinema columnist, Arthur Weigall, who also wrote 'The Influence of the Kinematograph on National Life' in *The*

⁵⁶ *Mail*, 23 June 1921, p. 10; *Times*, 16 November 1923, p. 15.

⁵⁷ *Times of India*, 21 April 1926, p. 8.

⁵⁸ *Mail*, 15 December 1921, p. 8.

⁵⁹ Rony, p. 35; Oksiloff, pp. 63-64; Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference*, p. 203.

⁶⁰ *Times*, 4 October 1926, p. 15; *Mail*, 3 March 1927, p. 5.

⁶¹ Kuhn, pp. 43-44 121-122; NCPM, *The Cinema: Its Present Position and Future Possibilities* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1917), pp. vi-vii, xxxv. As early as 1915, *Punch* joked about cinema's position as 'scapegoat' for canny children excusing their criminal behaviour; *Punch*, 6 January 1915, pp. 14-15.

Nineteenth Century and After.⁶² His racialised conception of cinema spectatorship is theorised through crime and vice. In this article and his more widely-read *Mail* column, Weigall was

absorbed by questions of national characteristics as historically and culturally determined, suggesting that the issue of “national cinema” was not separable from a hierarchisation of races, nations, and their evolution.⁶³

For Weigall, ‘what is termed racial character is very largely fashion’, but this can last so long as to seem ‘inherent in the blood’.⁶⁴ Therefore, racial ‘fashions’ construct ‘national’ and racial character, especially through cinema given its representation of such changeable, external, *performed* characteristics, conduct and bodily adornments. For Weigall, American cinema represents criminality as transcendable behaviour rather than heritable quality: ‘heredity is not taken into account, and the hero is not rendered less eligible by the fact that his father is a “crook”’.⁶⁵ Invoking heritability and sexual ‘eligibility’, he reflects an near-Lombrosian degenerationist conception of crime as ‘bio-historical anachronism’, a ‘natural’, atavistic quality to be ‘bred’ out of ‘civilised’ society.⁶⁶ In his *Mail* column, he dubs this reproduction of degenerate behaviour ‘alien to the Anglo-Saxon idea’, degrading the ‘standards and ideals’ of the ‘Anglo-Saxon race’.⁶⁷ Performed crime was imitable, a fashion, but one which damaged ‘Anglo-Saxon’ conduct and values; incorrect representation of whiteness itself became ‘heritable’ via the screen. Thomas Wood contends in the *Times* that, if British spectators continued ‘tolerating foreign extravagances which proclaim the white races to be nothing but degenerate half-wits, we shall pay the cost some day’.⁶⁸ The damage to ‘prestige’ and thus colonial rule was projected onto indigenous subjects *and* white subjects through degeneration rhetoric. White performers represented and reproduced whiteness in such a way that all spectators would ‘pay’ for these misrepresenting performances.

⁶² Laura Marcus, ““Hieroglyphics in motion”: representing ancient Egypt and the Middle East in film theory and criticism of the silent period”, in *The Ancient World in Silent Cinema*, ed. by Pantelis Michelakis and Maria Wyke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 74-90 (p. 85); Arthur Weigall, ‘The Influence of the Kinematograph upon National Life’, *The Nineteenth Century and After*, April 1921, pp. 661-672.

⁶³ Marcus, ‘Hieroglyphics’, p. 85.

⁶⁴ Weigall, ‘Kinematograph’, p. 662.

⁶⁵ Weigall, ‘Kinematograph’, p. 667; *Mail*, 27 October 1920, p. 6.

⁶⁶ On Cesare Lombroso’s degenerationist criminology, see Greenslade, *Degeneration*, pp. 88-119; Pick, pp. 122-128.

⁶⁷ *Mail*, 29 September 1921, p. 10; *Mail*, 11 October 1921, p. 10.

⁶⁸ *Times*, 5 March 1932, p. 13.

Misreading Misrepresentation and Cinema's Metaphorical Effect

Film performances, viewed by 'native spectators', became racialised performances which could dangerously misrepresent the West and Britain. This misrepresentation was then imagined to be misread by cinemagoers throughout the Empire without the *taste*—aesthetically and corporeally—to recognise the untruth. From 1915, the BBFC is attentive to spectators, censoring films 'calculated to wound the racial susceptibilities of members of the Empire'.⁶⁹ The BBFC's claim to protect these 'susceptible' spectators resonates with paternalist colonial rhetoric of the white man's burden and benevolent rule of colonised peoples who needed to be protected from dangerous influences and cultivated under Western guidance.⁷⁰ Yet the deliberately vague phrase, 'racial susceptibilities', leaves room for spectators of all racial groups to be 'susceptible'. What exactly this phrase means—whether an inability to read race properly or offence at misrepresentation of one's own racial group—is unclear. For most commentators, however, the former was most problematic. Spectatorship was conceived on a racialised hierarchy of cinematic 'taste', with spectators of colour at the bottom, perceived as most primitive and 'susceptible'. Sometimes, this was explained as a result merely of illiteracy, inability to read the intertitles that glossed these films.⁷¹ For most commentators, though, illiteracy was a *symptom of* primitiveness, of 'racial susceptibility'. Colonial correspondents, including Bromley, claimed that the 'native mind' worked—and spectated—differently because of a 'positive genius for picking up false impressions', deficient 'sense of proportion' or lack of mental sophistication and development.⁷² This unsophistication meant that misrepresentative performances were read to be true.

Spectatorial irrationality and misreading are expressed through metaphors of bodily engulfment, consumption, and contagion which also serve to project onto 'susceptible' spectators

⁶⁹ BBFC, *Annual Report For Year ending December 31st, 1915* (London: BBFC), p. 5.

⁷⁰ Bush, p. 30.

⁷¹ E.g. *Times*, 4 July 1921, p. 10; *Mail*, 10 July 1926, p. 8; *Times*, 5 October 1926, p. 10.

⁷² *Times Cinema Supplement*, 21 February 1922, p. xiv; *Times*, 23 February 1920, p. 12; *Times*, 18 September 1926, p. 9.

the sensory pleasures of film spectatorship. As Dass explains, cinema was a ‘medium of multiple contagia’.⁷³ Such metaphors are not unique to cinema culture and have, throughout Western history, articulated concerns with popular media, bad taste, and the overlaps between mind and body, emotion, sensation and irrationality.⁷⁴ Yet cinema’s perceived universal mass appeal rendered such metaphors particularly apposite, echoing their use by crowd psychologists like Gabriel Tarde and Gustave Le Bon.⁷⁵ The choice of metaphor had different implications, especially regarding spectators’ culpability. As ‘flood’, American cinema became a natural disaster, imperilling ‘susceptible’ minds and colonial space.⁷⁶ Metaphors of food, poison, and drugs suggested more active choices to consume misrepresentations.⁷⁷ However, these all invoked unsophisticated, indiscriminate bodily spectatorship. Constructions of ‘native spectators’ envisaged indiscriminate, unrefined sensory pleasure, a sensory, moral and aesthetic lack of ‘taste’.

These metaphors of consumption evoke Constance Classen’s ‘model of sensory evolution’, wherein preoccupation with ‘lower’ senses purportedly evidenced primitive ‘sensuality’ without rational reflection.⁷⁸ When colonial administrator Hesketh Bell shifts attention from ‘Eastern’ cinemagoers to Africa, his argument is founded on such sensory racial hierarchies. For Bell, the ‘East’ deliberately and barbarously consumes cinematic ‘dope’ or ‘poison’, making it too late to save these audiences. Conversely, he explains that Black ‘Africans’ are unable to discern that cinema is too ‘strong meat’ for them and should be guided accordingly.⁷⁹ ‘African’ spectators misjudge their appetites, requiring British leaders to provide more digestible food. This relies upon traditions of

⁷³ Dass, p. 14.

⁷⁴ See e.g. Leavis, p. 7; Allan Conrad Christensen, *Nineteenth-Century Narratives of Contagion: ‘Our feverish contact’* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005); Peta Mitchell, *Contagious Metaphor* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2012). Raza Kolb and Anjuli Fatima outline the ‘imperial poetics’ of contagion used to characterise anticolonial forces throughout colonial history; Raza Kolb and Anjuli Fatima, *Epidemic Empire: Colonialism, Contagion, and Terror, 1817-2020* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

⁷⁵ Mitchell, pp. 62-72.

⁷⁶ E.g. *Times*, 23 February 1920, p. 12; *Guardian*, 5 October 1926, p. 12; *Times*, 27 April 1927, p. 12; *Mirror*, 17 September 1927, p. 3; *Picturegoer*, June 1929, p. 12; *Dundee Courier*, 19 August 1930, p. 4.

⁷⁷ E.g. *Express*, 19 March 1923, p. 5; *Telegraph*, 21 December 1925, p. 8; *Mail*, 7 January 1926, p. 8; *Times*, 30 July 1926, p. 10; *Times*, 16 November 1929, p. 8; *Times*, 19 July 1935, p. 7.

⁷⁸ Constance Classen (ed.), ‘Introduction: The Transformation of Perception’, in *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Age of Empire* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 1-24 (pp. 18-20).

⁷⁹ *Times*, 4 October 1926, p. 15.

representing Black peoples' eating practices in colonial travel literature sexually and corporeally, purportedly evidencing lack of control and irrationality and thus the need for colonial rule.⁸⁰ This 'primitive' eating is adapted to cinematic consumption and 'bad taste', requiring the 'rule' of white British elites to judge appropriate film. Bell does not attribute the same *blame* to African spectators, presented as too primitive to understand their inappropriate behaviour. Yet this again relies on characterising spectatorship, according to racialised evolutionary scales, as bodily consumption.

Precisely because these metaphors rely on evolutionary scales, they were also applicable to white spectators. Whiteness was placed highest in this racial hierarchy, but white audiences, too, could degenerate into watching films 'primitively'. Victorian degeneration discourses had 'a central preoccupation with the economy of the body and the social effects of its reproduction'; this was reflected in interwar cinema discourses, imagining bodily responses to cinema as a symptom of degeneration.⁸¹ Prem Chowdhry argues in the Indian context that '[c]ognition and comprehension of this media was [...] assumed to be the prerogative of the enlightened British audience alone'.⁸² Yet the interconnection of discourses of 'vulnerable' white audiences and audiences of colour evidences anxiety that British spectators could lose this 'cognition and comprehension' through 'primitive' engagement with film. As Anne McClintock explains, disease and contagion anxieties informed policing and boundaries of colonial *and* metropolitan space according to the logic of degeneration and the idea that social difference could become biological.⁸³ Consequently, British spectators, too, were 'flooded', 'poisoned', 'drugged', or 'eat' and 'drink' film in ways which damage them.⁸⁴ A month after the death of Virginia Rappe, and comedy star Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle's arrest for manslaughter, the *Sunday Express* characterises Arbuckle's popularity as symptomatic of 'an age

⁸⁰ Tim Youngs, *Travellers in Africa: British Travelogues, 1850-1900* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), pp. 54, 64-68.

⁸¹ Pick, p. 6.

⁸² Chowdhry, p. 17.

⁸³ McClintock, pp. 46-47.

⁸⁴ E.g. BBFC, *Report For Year ending December 31st, 1919* (London: BBFC, 1919), p. 4; *Times*, 7 July 1926, p. 14; *Times*, 19 January 1927, p. 15; Weigall, 'Kinematograph', p. 661.

suffering from Fatty Degeneration of the Mind, the Heart, and the Soul'.⁸⁵ His alleged sexual violence and large frame embody degenerate, immoral, unhealthy consumption of cinema. The article concludes that this reflects a society with 'appetites [that] are lower than the lusts of Greece and Rome and the vices of aboriginal savages'. Unhealthy consumption degenerated white metropolitan spectators to a position 'lower' in colonial evolutionary scales than 'savages'.



Figure 6: Kathlyn is watched by an Indian man as she enters her ship cabin in *The Adventures of Kathlyn*...



Figure 7: ...and watched again in her lodgings in India

Again, the serial queen melodrama visualises this insidious contagion. Only the first episode of the popular *The Adventures of Kathlyn* (Francis J. Grandon, Selig, 1913) survives, in which Kathlyn (Kathlyn Williams) travels to India alone to rescue her kidnapped father (Lafayette McKee). This limited footage presents her in domestic space—a cabin on a liner and a house in India—penetrated by Indian villains, resonating with the insidious effects of 'primitive' spectatorship. Aligning the film frame with these spaces, the episode emphasises the way that her visibility enables penetrative movement from these racialised figures (Figures 6 and 7). The alignment of the film frame with spatial and racial transgression comments on the serial's solicitation of anticipation between episodes, transcending *narrative* boundaries. Such transgressions prompt Atkinson to utilise consumption metaphors to articulate their impact on spectators. For Atkinson, white women without husbands 'devour' serials, 'a kind of mental tippie [...] like dram-and-drug taking' that leaves

⁸⁵ *Sunday Express*, 2 October 1921, p. 8.

them ‘in a gentle ferment of anticipation’ between episodes; likewise, Indian spectators ‘exist on’ these films.⁸⁶ For both, serial spectatorship is irrationally desperate.⁸⁷ Easily consumable but with long-lasting effects, serials epitomise the metaphorical blurring of spatial, racial, and bodily boundaries of performers and spectators. Though commentators often moved beyond them to cinema generally, they most acutely expose the degenerative effects of cinema.

Colonial Consequences

Some accounts of cinema-going by colonised peoples did not represent this bodily, ‘primitive’, irrational spectatorship with the same anxiety. In descriptions, located in the timeless and history-less space of ethnographic description theorised by Mary Louise Pratt, ‘native spectators’ were viewed as exotic and erotic curios, rather than dangerous threats.⁸⁸ An example of this provides a useful counterpoint, pinpointing the anxieties that *did* emerge in other accounts. Australian artist Ellis Silas describes a monthly cinema exhibition in the Papuan island, Samarai, first in his *A Primitive Arcadia* (1926) and expanded upon for the *ILN*. In an illustration of this scene, he even represents these spectators watching a white woman dressed glamorously on screen (Figure 8). Here, the bodies of Papuan spectators hint at the sensual, sexual pleasures of cinema spectatorship, while remaining contained in an ethnographic domain. Rather than condemning indigenous spectators, Silas’ ethnographic description accords with myths of Pacific Islands as ‘primitive paradises’, disconnected from but desirable to a modern world.⁸⁹ Silas describes their unsophisticated spectatorship, laughing at dramatic scenes, thunderously applauding and ‘overstepping all bounds’ in excitement.⁹⁰ These accounts also depict unrestrained, transgressive spectatorship—even sexualised in Silas’ case as ‘sinuous maids [...] abandon themselves to a delirium of pleasure’—not to

⁸⁶ *Express*, 14 April 1920, p. 3; *Express*, 30 January 1922, p. 6.

⁸⁷ *Express*, 16 June 1920, p. 3.

⁸⁸ Pratt, pp. 56-66.

⁸⁹ Sarah Johnson, ‘Missionary Positions: Romantic European Polynesias From Cook to Stevenson’, in *Travel Writing in the Nineteenth Century: Filling the Blank Spaces*, ed. by Tim Youngs (London and New York: Anthem Press, 2006), pp. 179-199.

⁹⁰ Ellis Silas, *A Primitive Arcadia: Being the Impressions of an Artist in Papua* (London: T. F. Unwin, 1926), pp.44-45; *ILN*, 3 September 1927, p. 382.

chastise but to invite voyeuristic, titillated gazes. After the exhibition, Silas describes the silence of the now-empty shed: 'the wrinkled sheet is bare of other lands and people; the boisterous, happy throng have dispersed'. The 'boisterousness' of the 'primitive' crowd, their sexual and sensual response to film, is *contained*, not bleeding into the 'real world' and impacting upon colonial geographies and rule.⁹¹



Figure 8: Silas' illustration of the screening in Samarai

By contrast, Brian Larkin, Babli Sinha, and Burns explain that more critical colonial spectatorship discourses were tied to actual colonial encounter—and thus colonial crime, public health and segregation—in which colonised peoples could not be consigned to a 'primitive', eroticised, Edenic past.⁹² They reflected anxieties about indigenous people not respecting white supremacist spatial and performative codes. Dass connects contagion metaphors to cinema's ability to enable virtual travel and its universal language, undermining colonial rule for British commentators and Indian nationhood for Indian nationalists by taking the masses beyond everyday

⁹¹ Pratt, pp. 40-44, 51-52, 56-66.

⁹² Larkin, pp. 180-206; Sinha, pp. 294-295; Burns, *Cinema*, p. 12. Robin D. Jones correspondingly argues that Indian cinemas were spaces for performance of whiteness, modernity, and progress, excluding indigenous peoples; Robin D. Jones, *Interiors of Empire: Objects, Space and Identity within the Indian Subcontinent, c. 1800-1947* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 202-204.

life ‘with the contagion of a pernicious “modernity”’.⁹³ This again reflects imperial benevolence rhetoric, the growing belief that the imposition of ‘modernisation’ or ‘culture change’ on Indian and African communities caused societal disintegration, leading to policies of ‘indirect rule’ to ‘protect’ indigenous peoples from modernity.⁹⁴ Certainly, some commentators worried that cinema brought modernity too close. Reporting on cinema in Japan in 1926, for instance, a *Times* correspondent bemoans that, for those nostalgic for ‘things Eastern in the East, the unchecked and apparently uncheckable inroad of the film is a saddening sight’.⁹⁵ The apparently self-explanatory, natural spatial separation, where Eastern things belong in the ‘East’, is undermined by cinema, which brings ‘[l]ife in highly seasoned slices’ to the spectator. Bodily consumption of modernity brought it too close, transforming not just the spectator but the very geographies of the ‘East’ and Empire.

Primitive spectatorship thus permeated the real world, not containable in the theatre space or in ethnographic description. Bromley worries that American films’ ‘false impressions of English life’ have a ‘personal’ effect in undermining ‘the welfare of English women’ in colonies; she described women having to ‘stand aside on the pavements to avoid being rudely jostled’ and being ‘addressed as you pass along the streets of the bazaars’.⁹⁶ ‘Personal’ because intimately affecting the body and social space of white womanhood, cinema and its sensuous, misrepresentative performances undermined the spatial and social order on which colonial society was founded. Anne Friedberg theorises a ‘mobilised “virtual” gaze’ enabled by cinema, as part of a nineteenth-century culture of mobility and movement emerging from transformations in tourism, transport and communications. For Friedberg, in order to enable imaginary mobility for spectators, this gaze was inherently ‘decorporealised and derealised’; this ‘form of subjectivity, whose “mobility” is routed through the “virtual”’ existed apart from the body. These ‘primitive’ engagements with cinema were dangerous because they were *not* decorporealised. By contrast, the ‘mobile’ gazes of ‘native

⁹³ Dass, pp. 97-103.

⁹⁴ Windel, pp. 208-210; Karuna Mantena, ‘The Crisis of Liberal Imperialism’, *Histoire@Politique*, 11.2 (2010), <<http://dx.doi.org/10.3917/hp.011.0002>> [accessed 11 March 2019], paragraphs 50-60.

⁹⁵ *Times*, 23 July 1926, p. 12.

⁹⁶ *Leeds Mercury*, 20 August 1926, p. 6.

spectators', which brought them close to modernity and white femininity, were embodied, catalysing treacherously tangible transformations to colonial hierarchies and geographies.⁹⁷

Undermining British prestige through performance undermined British rule, British film industries, and the imperial economy itself as it encouraged consumption of American goods and ways of living. It also affected conduct of *British* spectators—what Weigall calls the 'total loss of just that "something" which is the British heritage'.⁹⁸ This is evident in condemnations of white women spectators for spectatorship characterised as hypersexualised and overly concerned with display and fashion, especially view-obstructing hats, rather than films.⁹⁹ Journalist and writer Sidney Low declares that 'travesty' of English manners and institutions, depicting the English as 'vulgar', 'ostentatious' and bullying in the colonies, 'is unfortunate in this country and wholly injurious in the outer Empire. The rising generation is led to undervalue the old Motherland'.¹⁰⁰ This imperial significance was emphasised by J. Audrey Rees, director of the British Empire Film Institute. Complaining to the House of Commons, in a meeting about cinema's 'civic education' and current failure to 'inspire the younger generation [...] with love and comprehension of the Empire', he argued that American films 'possessed no ideals of value to the race'.¹⁰¹ Three months later, Cunliffe-Lister took these concerns to the 1926 Imperial Conference, highlighting cinema's 'appeal to the most impressionable of our people (for kinema audiences are for the most part young)'.¹⁰² Misrepresenting 'conduct' on screen through 'display', 'vulgarity', and 'criminality' lowered prestige for the 'rising generation', too, causing incorrect performances as white imperial citizens. Cinema dangerously impacted children and women, embodiments of the propagation of whiteness. Irrational bodily spectatorship created a broader culture of 'primitive' conduct in the metropole and

⁹⁷ Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 2, 32-33.

⁹⁸ *Mail*, 4 August 1921, p. 8; *Mirror*, 25 January 1923, p. 5.

⁹⁹ E.g. *Mirror*, 5 July 1919, p. 5; *Mirror*, 20 January 1922, p. 5. Shelley Stamp, Lise Shapiro Sanders and Chris O'Rourke examine the gendered regulation of cinema audiences in America and Britain; Stamp, pp. 10-40; Sanders, pp. 99-100; Chris O'Rourke, *Acting for the Silent Screen: Film Actors and Aspiration between the Wars* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2017), pp. 81-98.

¹⁰⁰ *Sunday Mirror*, 11 October 1925, p. 6.

¹⁰¹ *Times*, 7 July 1926, p. 14.

¹⁰² *Guardian*, 22 October 1926, p. 6.

colonies: of unrefinement, bad taste and impudence that undermined imperial rule and colonial economies.

Constructing Cinema through Racialised Spectatorship

When British commentators bewailed the effects of certain racialised film performances on racialised spectators across the Empire, they imagined cinema degrading and degenerating whiteness, and thus colonial rule and imperial economic systems. Yet this also relied upon and continued to produce assumptions about cinema as a medium of imperial significance, which would influence not only colonial administrators and politicians but British filmmakers and critics. Debates about screen representations of whiteness foregrounded performance as a crucial part of cinema's effect, ensuring that performances were comprehended through a racial lens. Performing bodies were framed in a reciprocal relationship with the space around them: their performances transformed the geographies and spatial configurations of a colonial world, and the spaces, stages and settings they occupied in turn informed and underpinned the meanings of their performances. Finally, these debates reflect the fact that performance was always read in terms of its bodily effect on the spectator, constructing cinema as a medium of the body, bodily interaction and intimacy. Cinema was perceived to reproduce and disseminate racialised bodies and encourage interactions between them, in audiences and via the screen.

Therefore, cinematic interaction—the ways in which cinema moved the spectator—formed the basis for both tasteful and dangerous cinema. A cinema guided by values of middle-class and elite British politicians, commentators, and critics would 'correctly' portray whiteness and encourage 'correct' spectatorship, founded upon restraint, decorum and better taste. Cinema's mass (bodily) appeal had to be harnessed by British filmmakers; as Grieveson argues, numerous commercial and political entities believed that it could biopolitically shift 'conduct' into forms more conducive to the British Empire's political and economic goals.¹⁰³ Responding to prominent contagion metaphors, this British cinema was usually constructed, including in the 1926 Imperial Conference's 'Imperial

¹⁰³ Corzo-Duchardt, 'Primal Screen', p. 12; Grieveson, *Cinema*, p. 224.

Education' Report, as more 'regenerative', 'healthy', 'clean', or 'wholesome' by political commentators, film critics, and industry promoters.¹⁰⁴ This was still a bodily cinema, but one which would encourage 'healthier' conduct.

The ways in which this bodily effect was regulated were thus also central to the construction of *national* cinemas. This is evident in the rationale for the Films Act which instituted a British film quota. Jaikumar finds that, while film exhibitors and renters generally opposed the bill, because their profits came from imported American films, and British film producers and studios supported it, these 'competing factions paid allegiance to the construct of a nation. In these debates, the nation acquired an external fixity and emerged as a sanctioning entity'.¹⁰⁵ She also quotes a 1925 Federation of British Industries petition for a quota to the Board of Trade asserting that

[t]he film has enormous power in influencing the masses, and especially the growing population throughout the Empire [...] That this powerful influence should be directed from foreign countries and convey the ideas and customs of those countries instead of those that are British is deplorable.¹⁰⁶

Responses to 'primitive' spectatorship, then, entailed not only policing, but facilitation and legislative support of British cinema conveying British 'ideas and customs'—modes of performance or 'styles of being'—to 'the masses' in Britain and the Empire.

For many, as Jaikumar observes, this 'healthiness' required films in British or colonial settings involving domestic and colonial historical events, literary works, and symbols like the country house, aristocracy or the English countryside.¹⁰⁷ This especially incorporated *imperial* heritage, what Bromley calls the 'history of British administration': the events, battles and 'accomplishments' of the British Empire and their representation in literature and art.¹⁰⁸ Commentators called for films which made use of the Empire's 'almost limitless' exterior locations

¹⁰⁴ *Express*, 10 April 1922, p. 6; *Times*, 14 May 1924, p. 11; *Picture Show Annual* 1926, p. 14; *Times*, 9 October 1926, p. 7; *Times*, 5 March 1932, p. 13; *Guardian*, 10 June 1932, p. 11.

¹⁰⁵ Jaikumar, *Cinema*, p. 57.

¹⁰⁶ Jaikumar, *Cinema*, p. 57.

¹⁰⁷ Jaikumar, *Cinema*, p. 48. See also Roberta Pearson, 'Shakespeare's Country: The National Poet, English Identity and British Silent Cinema', in *Young and Innocent: The Cinema in Britain, 1896-1930*, ed. by Andrew Higson (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002), pp. 176-190 (p. 182).

¹⁰⁸ *Leeds Mercury*, 20 August 1926, p. 6.

and ‘pictorial treasures’, its ‘scenic and historic backgrounds’.¹⁰⁹ This heritage was not just national but racial. Through this, cinema could promote what theatre critic James Agate called, in a 1922 lecture, shared ‘race emotion’, uniquely facilitated by cinema as a medium of shared mass sensation.¹¹⁰ Many commentators shared this notion, asserting cinema’s potential to ‘tighten the sentimental bonds of Empire’ as a ‘moral Imperial cement’ that connects ‘the [white] Imperial family’ across metropole, dominions and colonies, or alternatively ‘Anglo-Saxon’ communities, incorporating the United States too.¹¹¹ Gledhill suggests that 1920s British cinema contributed to the democratisation of the nation’s heritage; this product of upper- and middle-class culture became accessible to the ‘masses’ through film.¹¹² Through this heritage, British cinema could correct misrepresentations of whiteness and ‘bond’ racialised communities.

This concern with British history and heritage, space, and artistic production was also connected to concerns about the racialised performing body. Performing could invoke British imperial history and the forms in which this history has been represented. In turn, this distanced British cinema from the sensual excesses of Hollywood, turning to an intermedial imperial tradition of representing and performing whiteness instead. British film in dominant British discourses rendered certain ‘styles of being’, modes of performing ‘imperial’ including though not limited to ‘restraint’, a part of British heritage, to be reproduced on film and thus in white spectators. Critics often framed ‘subtlety’, ‘refinement’, and ‘restraint’ as alternatives to Hollywood sentimentalism and immoderation.¹¹³ For example, in a report on the use of the 1924-1925 Empire Exhibition’s buildings for British film production, the *Irish Times* notes the rare occasions where audiences see English films and ‘enjoy the absence of the crude American morality and the flaunting style of acting

¹⁰⁹ *Times Cinema Supplement*, 21 February 1922, p. x; *Mail*, 25 October 1926, p. 6.

¹¹⁰ Quoted in *Guardian*, 21 November 1922, p. 9.

¹¹¹ *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 3 June 1927, p. 704; *Telegraph*, 14 July 1921, p. 6; *Times*, 24 May 1923, p. xii; *Mail*, 6 June 1921, p. 6. See also Grieveson, *Cinema*, p. 164-165.

¹¹² Gledhill, pp. 56-57.

¹¹³ *Express*, 23 January 1922, p. 6; *Spectator*, 2 February 1924, p. 171; *Mirror*, 17 April 1925, p. 7; *English Review*, February 1927, p. 140; *Times of India*, 28 March 1927, p. 10; *Fortnightly Review*, April 1929, p. 539.

practised in Hollywood'.¹¹⁴ Likewise, Weigall appeals for films showing that the English 'do not like showing off; we detest boasting; and we generally prefer to confine the theatrical to the playhouse', later describing this English quality to be replicated on film as 'a sort of nice poise'.¹¹⁵ For Weigall, this English 'spirit' had 'no class limitations and appeals to all walks of life'; it was a democratic 'heritage' in itself to be shared among all white spectators.¹¹⁶

This comment on the lack of 'class limitations' on white Englishness, the common 'poise', humility and restraint, comes as part of a complaint that British exhibitors had not booked *The Fifth Form at St. Dominic's* (A. E. Coleby, I. B. Davidson, 1921) because it depicted public school life. Restraint was characterised as a *white*, rather than aristocratic, heritage, even if upper-class performers seemed to embody it best. This can be illustrated with the none-more-aristocratic figure of the Prince of Wales, whose film appearances purportedly modelled appropriate performance. Alder Anderson finds restraint epitomised in his conduct, 'debonair, courteous, considerate and [...] absolutely free of any affectation', in films of his visit to Canada and subsequent world tour.¹¹⁷ Rather than putting whiteness on sensual and sexual display, he performed it through restraint and humility. Through such style, Anderson concludes, British cinema can counter the misrepresentation of 'manners and customs practised in England', and their damage to 'prestige'. The Prince of Wales would be associated with an aspirational better British cinema, speaking at the first British Film Week and appearing in films of his imperial travels over the 1920s.¹¹⁸ In 1925, a serialised film, *The Prince of Wales' Tour* (G. Barkas and S. Rodwell, BIF, 1925) depicted his tour of Africa. Unlike American serial queen melodramas, this serial depicted the 'triumphal nature of his progress through regions of the Dark Continent, peopled by loyal adherents to the British Crown, who were once not so keen on the intruding Englishman'.¹¹⁹ Primarily, the film emphasises his capacities to bring together the white diaspora across the Empire through his 'triumphal' performance of

¹¹⁴ *Irish Times*, 17 June 1927, p. 6.

¹¹⁵ Weigall, 'Kinematograph', pp. 664-666; *Mail*, 4 August 1921, p. 8.

¹¹⁶ *Mail*, 8 December 1921, p. 4.

¹¹⁷ *Telegraph*, 25 November 1920, p. 14.

¹¹⁸ *Telegraph*, 21 December 1925, p. 8.

¹¹⁹ *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 6 October 1925, p. 6.

aristocratic 'debonairness', 'courtesy', and lack of 'affectation'. For example, Part 7, the second on his stay in South Africa, begins with his reception by Durban children. He walks through a series of arches made by long poles held by schoolgirls, surrounded by the handkerchiefs and flags of spectators behind (Figure 9). The Prince's individualised movement, framed and hallowed with decorative floral arrangements, is opposed to the masses of white settler spectators. Dressed in a grey suit and pith helmet, moving slowly but purposefully with arms swinging, he exemplifies a British aristocratic whiteness which draws together white masses in a colonial, rather than sensual or erotic, cinematic spectacle. Later in the decade, the Prince would exhibit his travel films to the Post-War Brotherhood, an organisation of Great War veterans established 'to perpetuate that spirit of comradeship shared by all classes on the battlefield'.¹²⁰ The Prince's lack of affectation provided a white 'inheritance' that transcended class difference, turning working-class crowds into a racially bounded white group. He thus epitomised the normative performance of whiteness for British commentators, 'healthy' in promoting a sentiment or sensation of shared whiteness and a heritage in itself which would overcome class division.



Figure 9: The Prince of Wales welcomed to Durban in *The Prince of Wales' Tour*

¹²⁰ *Mail*, 27 November 1930, p. 11.

As I will show in this thesis, the 'correct' performance of whiteness was usually British restraint, refinement, or humility, often in non-fiction film as with the Prince of Wales' performances of 'debonairness' and lack of 'affectation'. The 'native spectator' bespoke anxieties about the representation of whiteness and British imperial behaviour that informed the capacities of cinema to represent and impact upon the body, the racialisation of performance, and the kind of British films which could 'act imperially' by correcting misrepresentations of whiteness. Consequently, I focus on case studies which represent whiteness and colonial racialised encounter and their reception in Britain. These colonial concerns about performances of racial identity bleed into questions of cinema's legitimacy and aesthetic value, and particularly the construction of a British performance style and aesthetic within this imperial cartography of cinema and cinema-going. In a letter to the *Times*, a correspondent writes before the 1926 Imperial Conference that '[i]t is probable that more has been said and written during the last year about the connexion [sic] between British films and the British Empire than ever before. It is certain that less has been done'.¹²¹ While it was true that it would take until the formation of the EMB Film Unit in the same year for something official to 'be done', I now examine what was 'said' about specific genres and 'done' with British films across the interwar period in response to colonial conceptions of performance and spectatorship.

¹²¹ *Times*, 24 May 1926, p. xiv.

Chapter 2: Performing Play: The Hollywood 'Eastern' in Britain

In October 1931, Major L. A. M. Jones warned the Authors' Club of the dangers of '[t]he Sheik class of film' and showing an 'illiterate Eastern audience [...] the spectacle of an Oriental caveman humbling the pride of a white girl'.¹ Beginning with *The Sheik* (George Melford, Paramount, 1921), based on E. M. Hull's popular 1919 desert romance novel and starring Rudolph Valentino, such films depicted Arab rulers falling in love with and kidnapping white women, who come in turn to love these domineering, forceful, but 'exotic' men. Subjecting white women to 'rough stuff' from men of colour, they were especially criticised by British commentators as an American genre which would have 'evil effects' on white prestige, revealing English people as 'fools' to indigenous spectators.² The sheik, invariably played by a white, though often 'Latin', South or Central American, Spanish or Italian, man, misrepresented whiteness and threatened white femininity, providing dangerous models for white and indigenous spectators alike.

Simultaneously, however, such films epitomised American cinema's exciting glamour, exoticism, and spectacle. As the *Derby Daily Telegraph* puts it, '[t]he East, with its sheik, harem, and nautch girls, holds a glamour particularly adaptable to the screen'.³ The sheik film is a subgenre of the 'Eastern' genre. Proposed by John C. Eisele, the Eastern is determined by its 'Oriental' setting in West Asia or North Africa and narrative patterns engendered by this setting and the racialised encounters it enables.⁴ In this chapter, I explore why the Eastern—specifically the sheik romance, Arabian Nights fantasy and Foreign Legion adventure subgenres—came to represent the sensational perils and pleasures of American film dominant in interwar British cinema culture. As Eisele reminds us, the 'East' has been a space for articulating cinematic 'magic' since at least Georges Méliès'

¹ *Telegraph*, 20 October 1931, p. 8.

² *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 17 May 1929, p. 16; *Times of India*, 7 November 1923, p. 14; *Guardian*, 19 September 1925, p. 9. See also Sinha, p. 300.

³ *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 17 November 1923, p. 3.

⁴ John C. Eisele, 'The Wild East: Deconstructing the Language of Genre in the Hollywood Eastern', *Cinema Journal*, 41.4 (2002), 68-94.

nineteenth-century trick films.⁵ Accordingly, in British film reporting, expensive shoots, sets or costumes, especially but not exclusively of Hollywood mega-productions, were described as akin to ‘the fabled bazaars of the East’, or having ‘emanated from the Arabian Nights’.⁶ More broadly, cinema was a medium which ‘entranced’ and ‘moved’ the spectator via ‘magic carpet’.⁷ Whether positively invoking Hollywood spectacle and beauty or negatively implying excess and superficiality, the ‘East’ provided the location, exotic magic, and decadence that epitomised cinema and especially the wealth and spectacle of Hollywood fiction.

This spectacle of excess and exoticism was embodied for British audiences in the racialised performances of male stars. For Eisele, three films exemplify the subgenres of the Eastern: *The Sheik*, *The Thief of Bagdad* (Raoul Walsh, Douglas Fairbanks Pictures, 1924), and *Beau Geste* (Herbert Brenon, Paramount, 1926), respectively starring Valentino, Douglas Fairbanks and Ronald Colman.⁸ In the case of the Eastern, spectacular masculinity, rather than femininity, epitomises cinema’s glamour and modernity, reflecting Hansen and Steve Neale’s argument that classical Hollywood’s ‘male gaze’ on women performers can be reversed and focused on men’s bodies.⁹ Said’s ‘eminently corporeal’ tradition in Orientalism is applied to male sensuality and eroticism rather than its usual association with women’s veiled or denuded bodies, ‘female carnality’, or the ‘harem and nautch girls’.¹⁰

Particularly, these Easterns associate racialised masculine performance with *play*. The Eastern’s representation of play emerges from a longer tradition of commercialist American Orientalism outlined by Susan Nance. In the nineteenth-century, ‘playing Eastern’, in theatre and in

⁵ Eisele, p. 68.

⁶ E.g. *Picturegoer*, August 1921, p. 8; *Telegraph*, 5 June 1924, p. 15.

⁷ *ILN*, 27 September 1930, p. 526; *ILN*, 18 September 1926, p. 526; *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*, 7 April 1928, p. 428; *Picturegoer*, March 1922, p. 14.

⁸ Eisele, pp. 81-83.

⁹ Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 245-294; Steve Neale, ‘Prologue: Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on men and mainstream cinema’, in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, ed. by Steve Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 9-20. And see Laura Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1989), pp. 14-26.

¹⁰ Said, *Orientalism*, p. 184; Eleonora Sasso, *The Pre-Raphaelites and Orientalism: Language and Cognition in Remediations of the East* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), p. 37. On ‘female carnality’ in Orientalism, see e.g. Said, *Orientalism*, pp.207-208; Behdad, pp. 18-34; Lowe, pp. 75-101.

consumer culture through dress and consumption, was the primary lens through which West Asia and North Africa were viewed and understood by Americans.¹¹ Central to this was an 'Eastern or Oriental voice', 'a language of fantastic self-indulgence by which Americans first tried on perceived Eastern styles of personhood defined by excess and consumption'.¹² The rhetorical verbosity, metaphor, and formality that formed this 'style' were later adapted into theatre, costume, and consumerism, as well as, of course, film; the 'Oriental' thus became a mode of playful performance.¹³ This is reinforced by Hsu-Ming Teo's argument that American Orientalism was informed by 'a distinctly carnivalesque visual tradition' of exotic animals, acrobatics, and horsemanship and stunts by men.¹⁴ The Eastern thus emerges from American Orientalism and male playful performance drawn from populist entertainment forms.

Interwar British cinema, too, turned to fantasy, folk traditions, and appropriation of the 'foreign' and the past in 'fancy dress', as a means of escapism from the horrors of the Great War.¹⁵ However, the Eastern's racialised dynamics rendered this turn more complicated. This was tied to its desert setting. As Priya Satia explains, the 'Arabian' desert was viewed from Britain as an 'unseeable' space, 'beyond the domain of the universally accessible, rational, secular world'; as such, it challenged the apparent omniscience of the British Empire.¹⁶ Unlike the colonial spaces elucidated by Stoler—formed of rigid spatial, racial and gendered boundaries—the Eastern's malleable desert landscape encouraged playful shifts of location and identity. This provoked especial anxiety given the post-war transformations in West Asian and North African politics: British mandates over Iraq and Palestine had superseded Ottoman rule, and the Egyptian Revolution of 1919 led to Britain

¹¹ Susan Nance, *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream, 1790-1935* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), pp. 1-8.

¹² Nance, p. 27.

¹³ Nance, pp. 27-29.

¹⁴ Hsu-Ming Teo, *Desert Passions: Orientalism and Romance Novels* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), p. 118.

¹⁵ Gledhill, pp. 2, 6.

¹⁶ Priya Satia, *Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain's Covert Empire in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 4.

recognising Egyptian independence in 1922.¹⁷ Even when films name specific cities or locations—*The Sheik* begins in Biskra in Algeria, for example—they tend to visualise a generic ‘Oriental’ desert space. Yet British critics were informed in their reception by this political climate—by greater British control in West Asia and greater instability in North Africa, where France had more colonial control—alongside anxieties about American cinema’s representations of Empire and whiteness discussed in the previous chapter. Performances by white Americans in West Asia and North Africa could form a kind of escapist play, an exciting encounter with imperial spaces to inspire the next generation of imperialists, but could also represent dangerously sensual and sexual play with colonial geographies and racial hierarchies by a Hollywood cinema emerging from a competing imperial power.

In considering these questions, British critics drew on British traditions of Orientalism and representations of the ‘East’, and asked whether the American traditions based in ‘lowbrow’ entertainment forms, identified by Nance and Teo, might be undermining the Empire via cinema. For British commentators, the excesses of the Hollywood Eastern arose from this American Orientalism—a crude, commercialist interest in exoticism and sensuousness—as opposed to a British Orientalism seen to be more scholarly and historicised, even though it was founded upon racist, colonial thinking. Imperial historians have observed a fascination with ‘Arabia’ or ‘the Middle East’ that was perceived, in Britain, as peculiarly ‘British’, underpinned by the idea that British men, steeped in centuries of imperial history and Orientalist scholarship, possessed a unique understanding of Arab peoples or the ‘Arab mind’.¹⁸ Especially during and after the Great War, military figures and Orientalists like T. E. Lawrence not only ‘played Arab’ for sensual consumerist pleasure, but saw this as an embodiment of their claim to ‘know’ the desert space and its

¹⁷ D. K. Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East 1914-1958* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 44, 69-101, 151-219; M. W. Daly (ed.), ‘The British occupation, 1882-1922’, in *The Cambridge History of Egypt Volume 2: Modern Egypt, from 1517 to the End of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 239-251 (pp. 248-251).

¹⁸ Kathryn Tidrick, *Heart-beguiling Araby* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 1; Satia, pp. 3-5.

inhabitants.¹⁹ Teo thus opposes American ‘stereotyped, bawdy, sensuous, and exotic’ popular Orientalism with a British tradition founded in ‘high culture expressions in artistic and literary endeavors [...] also anchored in travel narratives and scholarly treatises produced by famous travellers and Orientalists’.²⁰ British travel narratives by figures like Richard Burton or paintings by artists like William Holman Hunt claimed to represent a ‘truer’, more ‘measured’ and ‘restrained’, Orient, even as they framed the space as a fantasy ‘locus of a pristine and authentic Arab way of life, a land of utopian dreams and [...] an asylum from an ailing and degenerate modern Western civilisation’.²¹ By contrast, Hollywood Easterns drew their inspiration from the *Arabian Nights*, which was distanced from the contemporary colonial world and which placed ‘the audience in the position of a child’, and from popular contemporary novels by Hull and P.C. Wren.²² While the *Arabian Nights* had been translated by serious poets and Orientalists including Burton, the novels conversely come under fire from Q. D. Leavis as examples of the degraded state of contemporary popular literature and public taste in her 1932 *Fiction and the Reading Public*. Leavis complains of such literature causing ‘a habit of fantasying’ that would ‘lead to maladjustment in actual life’.²³ Indeed, she notes that these books provide ‘the same satisfaction’ as cinema, though the latter is communal, noisy and urban rather than solitary and withdrawn.²⁴ This Orientalist escapism, viewed as particularly adaptable to the cinema, is taken up in American film, and is opposed to the scholarly and imperial traditions of Orientalism valorised by middle- and upper-class critics.

The Eastern’s racialised performances were understood in Britain as embodying Hollywood cinema, to positive (white supremacist) or negative (degenerative) effect. Through its male stars, the Eastern became a locus for resolving British cinema culture and the British Empire’s relationship to

¹⁹ Satia, p. 5.

²⁰ Teo, p. 120.

²¹ Billie Melman, ‘The Middle East / Arabia: “the cradle of Islam”’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. by Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 105-121 (p. 113). On Holman Hunt’s quest for ‘Oriental’ authenticity, see Meredith Veldman, *The British Jesus, 1850-1970* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), p. 135.

²² Marina Warner, *Stranger Magic: Charmed States & the Arabian Nights* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2011), p. 11.

²³ Leavis, pp. 54, 46, 52

²⁴ Leavis, pp. 55, 57.

Hollywood. This provides an earlier example of the tension, explored by Chowdhry, between the shared white supremacist project of British and Hollywood film and their status as industries of competing Empires, explored here through racialised hierarchies of 'primitivism'. Anne Anlin Cheng argues that America's 'exoticized energy, the passions and optimism of a new age of mechanization and industrial democracy', were situated by European modernists as 'the other frontier in European Primitivism'.²⁵ Similarly, Michael Cowan characterises America in early-twentieth-century Europe 'as a source of technological progress *and* a cultural "primitivization"'. For Cowan, such perceptions were not about American society but 'a displaced effort to work through social and cultural transformations taking place within Europe'.²⁶ In its very modernity, dynamism and technological innovation, epitomised in its cinema, America represented an alternative 'primitive', denigrated by many European commentators. This 'primitive' quality was exemplified by the Eastern's exotic glamour and sensuous excess and embodied in its Arab men for British critics. The Eastern and its 'primitive' characteristics could support or undermine the white supremacist project of colonial British cinema culture; they could represent a degeneration of whiteness, or provide contact with wild colonial spaces and bodies that could regenerate whiteness. As I discuss further in Chapter 4, the Great War's Eastern Front had been an exception to the despair and degradation of the Western Front and trench warfare. While the trenches rendered British men static, stuck in viscous mud and drawn-out battles with minimal gains, the Eastern Front had been a site of military success, of mobility and imperial conquest. A 'primitively' dynamic American cinema could represent this exoticised mobility. Equally, other critics have observed that Ahmed in Hull's source novel was likely inspired by T. E. Lawrence, a key figure on the Eastern Front notorious for his own performances of Arab identity that 'played' with his homosexuality and gender expression.²⁷ 'Primitive' forms of play

²⁵ Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 86.

²⁶ Michael Cowan, 'Americanism, Popular Culture and the Primitive: Johannes Vilhelm Jensen, *Madame D'Or* (1904)', *Orbis Litterarum*, 60.2 (2005), 109-132 (pp. 109-110).

²⁷ Michael Yardley, *Backing into the Limelight: A Biography of T. E. Lawrence* (London: Harrap, 1985), p. 232; Billie Melman, *Women in the Popular Imagination in the Twenties: Flappers and Nymphs* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1988), p. 94.

in the American Eastern were perceived in Britain to both reinforce and undermine a colonial project of white supremacy and white prestige.

In this chapter, the three case study films cohere into a spectrum, representing the varying ways in which Britain responded to American cinema and its 'primitive' play. The 1920s Easterns I discuss can also be distinguished according to their male stars' proximity to Arab identity.²⁸ In *The Thief of Bagdad*, Fairbanks plays Ahmed, an Iraqi character who only interacts with other Bagdadi and Asian people. *The Sheik* is about the relationship between Valentino's character, also called Ahmed, and Diana Mayo (Agnes Ayres), a white high-society British woman. It is implied that Ahmed is Algerian but his true British-Spanish heritage legitimises his love for Diana. Finally, Colman in *Beau Geste* is an English Foreign Legion soldier, Beau, whose only interaction with Algerians or Arabs in the film is in fighting them as he attempts to defend the isolated desert fort, Zinderneuf, under the orders of the despotic Sergeant Major Lajaune (Noah Beery). These differences are crucial to understanding their British reception.

British critics read the three films' engagement with white and Arab masculinity, and the performances of play which embody these, differently, evidencing the different ways in which the performance of race in the Eastern could inform perceptions of Hollywood film. After *The Sheik*, Valentino's playful sheik persona came to embody purported Hollywood artifice, sensuousness, and excess because this persona entailed 'play' with race, gender and sexuality and the boundaries that define these categories. In particular, 'vulnerable' women spectators were characterised as being unable to understand this play as artifice and thus unable to comprehend Hollywood film appropriately; this is dramatised in the film itself as the white, British Diana falls in love with the violent, 'primitive' sheik. By contrast, while *The Thief of Bagdad* also sees Fairbanks portraying a playful Arab character in a fantasy land, British critics viewed this only as an expression of Fairbanks' own whiteness, a manly 'playing Eastern' against a feminised, Orientalised background setting.

²⁸ This resonates with Eisele's distinctions between the Eastern's subgenres according to their integration, marginalisation, or identification with Arab characters, positing that earlier Easterns are marked by greater integration and interaction between white and Arab characters; see Eisele, pp. 70-72.

Finally, focusing on three white British brothers, *Beau Geste* was read as a narrative of homosocial and desexualised white masculine bravery in which the faceless, Arab enemy is depersonalised and distanced. In this latter film, play is transformed into imperial military action and bravery as the film transitions from the Geste brothers' childhood to adulthood. This play as imperial heroism became a model for a kind of cinema in which Hollywood and Britain were not opposing forces but united in valorising whiteness through film performance.

While the Eastern was primarily conceived in Britain as an American genre, I also compare these American archetypes with British imitations: *The Rat* (Graham Cutts, Gainsborough, 1925) and *Tommy Atkins* (Norman Walker, BIP, 1928). These imitations demonstrate the ways in which British filmmakers adapted the Eastern's performance styles, settings, and narratives: the disparaged 'sheik' figure is transformed in *The Rat* into a white character who *diegetically* performs racialised 'play' but returns safely to whiteness, while *Tommy Atkins* reinforces *Beau Geste's* white solidarity, showing the Foreign Legion as a space in which all men can perform white heroism, regardless of class distinctions. These films evidence the actual popularity and appeal of the Eastern in Britain, such that British filmmakers felt compelled to imitate them, and the ways in which the genre's narratives, performance styles and techniques had to be adapted to conform with British codes of taste, decorum, and performance.

Rudolph Valentino and the Swindle of the Sheik

Smiling Savagery in The Sheik

An American film set in French-colonised territory, depicting an Italian actor playing a British-Spanish man pretending to be Algerian, *The Sheik* is a film about performance of racial and ethnic identity. Its *mise-en-scène* and performances constantly emphasise the artificial and theatrical, with proscenium-like framings that distance the audience, in ways which could accord with British cinema's foregrounding of performance.²⁹ However, this emphasis does not coalesce into the clear social 'meanings' of performance that characterised British cinema, which signal class, ethnic, gender and

²⁹ Teo, p. 122.

other social distinctions. Instead, the film explores Valentino's face and body for its ambiguity, its ability to contain multiple meanings, to be read (or misread) varyingly.



Figure 10: Ahmed's ambiguous smile in *The Sheik*

Valentino's powers of disguise were crucial to his star persona: he used clothing and make-up to transcend boundaries of identity, according with a fan culture which encouraged self-transformation and 'embraced Orientalism as its prime signifier of luxury and sensuality'.³⁰ In *The Sheik*, this centres on his 'playful' smile. Throughout, Valentino laughs and smiles as he toys with Diana, and thus with racial and gendered difference and distance. His romantic beauty is blurred with his racialised threat and 'primitive', 'caveman-like' violence. Ahmed kidnaps Diana when she ventures into the desert, holding her in a cushioned, curtained Orientalised tent. Interior spaces in this desert, constructed from soft, malleable materials, do not concretely separate bodies. These materials create what Hansen calls 'a sensuality of vision', rendering the screen itself a kind of body.³¹ This is evident during a desert sandstorm. Inside Diana's tent, both Diana and Ahmed are backed by flickering flags as Diana attempts to assert that she will be missed by her expedition companions. Ahmed's own fluidity of performance and identity is emphasised in this malleable

³⁰ Glancy, *Hollywood*, pp. 60-65.

³¹ Hansen, *Babel*, pp. 289-290.

space as he smiles with widened eyes, explaining that the desert is 'a great hiding place'. The desert's unseeable, unknowable nature conceals Diana and its 'savage' weather seems to coordinate with Ahmed's own 'primitive' kidnapping. This extends to his performance as his smile comes to signify not romance but violence, a predator toying with his prey (Figure 10). Ahmed pleasures in scaring Diana, in taking her into his space in which she cannot navigate and distance herself from him. When she runs out into the sandstorm, Ahmed pulls her inside and smiles more intensely as she realises she cannot escape, slowly dragging her into a kiss and laughing as he does so. Ahmed's play with Diana becomes play with racial and spatial boundaries crucial to British colonial rule and cinema culture. This desert was not a space that Britain controlled. Algeria represented an alternative French assimilationist colonial model, rather than direct or indirect rule favoured by the British. As Elizabeth Ezra explains, French colonial rhetoric 'touted the universalist merits' of a 'Greater France' composed of "'100 million Frenchmen" [...] who made up France's colonial empire'. For French colonialists, this was evidence of France's 'greatness' over the British Empire.³² While Ezra shows that that French-colonised peoples would never be truly assimilated, this rhetoric structures perceptions of the French Empire in contrast to the British, and informs the representation of an indigenous Algerian sheik playing with the boundaries of whiteness. In a territory out of British control, Ahmed plays with an unruly, adventurous British woman, and thus with space and race in ways which could prove particularly dangerous for British spectators.

This was doubled in *The Sheik* because of the blurring of theatrical and 'real' spaces. If British cinema carefully constructs stages for public performance, the Eastern's desert blurs these boundaries. Before *The Sheik*, Valentino's star persona was constructed around the 'Latin Lover' archetype, the romantic South American or Spanish dancer. With his first major film, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (Rex Ingram, Metro Pictures, 1921), Valentino was promoted for his abilities as a tango dancer, playing on 'the era's fascination with (and fear of) dance as a stimulus for the sexual imaginations of American women', linking 'the exotic to the erotic in forging a

³² Elizabeth Ezra, *The Colonial Unconscious: Race and Culture in Interwar France* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000), pp. 3-4.

contradictory sexual spectacle of male ethnic otherness'.³³ The 'fear' of male dance arose from anthropological theories associating dance and sexual display by writers like Havelock Ellis, and especially the spectacle of androgynous, licentiously sexual male bodies.³⁴ Through dances like the tango or 'apache', performances of 'savagely' virile sexual masculinity could be performed in a stage space containing this racialised 'play'. In *The Sheik*, however, performance space is ill-defined. Ahmed does not dance; his performative play is never restricted to a diegetic stage. As such, *all* of his performance becomes part of this play, and the Latin Lover's ambiguities bleed out into the



Figure 11: Ahmed and Omair fight

³³ Gaylyn Studlar, 'Valentino, "Optic Intoxication," and Dance Madness', in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, ed. by Steve Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 23-45 (p. 28); Gaylyn Studlar, 'Discourses of Gender and Ethnicity: The Construction and De(con)struction of Rudolph Valentino as Other', *Film Criticism*, 13.2 (1989), 18-35 (pp. 19-20, 23).

³⁴ On Ellis and associations of dance and sexuality, see e.g. Havelock Ellis, *The Dance of Life* (London, Bombay, and Sydney: Constable & Company, 1923), pp. 41-47; Susan Leigh Foster, 'Closets Full of Dances: Modern Dance's Performance of Masculinity and Sexuality', in *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities On and Off the Stage*, ed. by Jane C. Desmond (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), pp. 147-207 (pp. 154-158). On anxieties around the spectacle of the male dancer, see Studlar, 'Optic Intoxication', pp. 23-24; Paul B. Franklin, 'The Terpsichorean Tramp: Unmanly Movement in the Early Films of Charlie Chaplin', in *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities On and Off the Stage*, ed. by Jane C. Desmond (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), pp. 35-72 (pp. 35-36); Kevin Kopelson, 'Nijinsky's Golden Slave', in *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities On and Off the Stage*, ed. by Jane C. Desmond (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), pp. 97-111; Ramsay Burt, 'Nijinsky: Modernism and heterodox representations of masculinity', in *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader*, ed. by Alexandra Carter and Janet O'Shea, 2nd edn (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 220-228.

desert space and film as a whole. In fact, the film only foregrounds Valentino's performance when he is playing with this ambiguity. When Diana and Ahmed really do fall in love, Diana is kidnapped again by Omail, a figure who becomes the racialised 'other', with darker skin and Black servants, permitting Ahmed to become white.³⁵ When Ahmed rescues Diana, they fight in wide shot (Figure 11). Unlike earlier scenes of sexual violence, his face is not foregrounded in close-up. As typical heroic lover, his face and body become less prominent. Valentino's performance of ambiguity, unreadability, and malleability is foregrounded and provides the film's primary spectacle throughout.

By the conclusion, Ahmed's threatening, mocking play becomes a kind of doubled performance of Arab identity.³⁶ When fighting Omail, he is injured and falls unconscious. At this point, Diana comments that his hands are bigger than usual for Arab men, consequently discovering his racial identity. Occurring when Ahmed is unconscious, a bandage around his head replacing his turban, his transformation into whiteness is visible not only in his hands but his changed costume and demeanour: from exaggerated, ambiguous expressions and laughter to weakness. When he regains consciousness and he and Diana embrace, he smiles once more, but, barely awake, his eyes remain half-closed (Figure 12). The revelation of his European identity seems also to imply weakness, the end of his bodily spectacle. Elizabeth Gargano argues that Hull's novel explores 'contemporary anxieties about Anglo-Saxon masculinity' by contrasting effeminate British men with the rugged, 'savage' Ahmed, but that these latter qualities become 'the traits [...] of a good imperialist' when his Englishness is uncovered at the conclusion.³⁷ Yet the film seems conversely to divest him of his 'primitive' power and strength, associating British masculinity with a passive, prone posture in domestic space. Like Diana at the beginning of the film in her pith helmet, Ahmed travesties the traditions of heroic imperial masculinity proved in feats of exploration and military might. The resolution of his gendered and racial ambiguity, and his play with primitivism, violence

³⁵ Teo, p. 134.

³⁶ Elizabeth Gargano, "'English Sheiks' and Arab Stereotypes: E. M. Hull, T. E. Lawrence, and the Imperial Masquerade', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 48.2 (2006), 171-186 (p. 182).

³⁷ Gargano, pp. 175, 181-182.

and racialised boundaries, divests him of his spectacular masculinity. He is no longer performing, but he is also no longer interesting as a figure of ambiguity and racialised power. The film's valorisation of ambiguity would lay at the foundation of critiques of the sheik subgenre in Britain.



Figure 12: Ahmed recovers from his injuries

'Sheik Stuff' in Britain

Teo compares the British source novel and American film adaptation to highlight differences arising from the varying colonial contexts and preoccupations about race and immigration in interwar Britain and America. While film historians have argued that Valentino's effeminacy and racial ambiguity expressed immigration anxieties and the unstable position of immigrant groups in relation to American constructions of whiteness, Teo posits that the novel responds to post-war British colonial moral panics about white women in public space and 'miscegenation'.³⁸ Similarly, Laura Frost contends that the desert romance's short post-war window of popularity coincided with 'a time of vigorous debate about new possibilities for gender roles'.³⁹ These ideas can also be applied

³⁸ Teo, pp. 94-101.

³⁹ Laura Frost, *The Problem with Pleasure: Modernism and Its Discontents* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p. 94.

to the British reception of the film. Leavis' conclusion that the novel represents a 'symptom of cultural decline' arises, according to Frost, because of its cliché, repetitive, 'stale' nature, eliciting a similarly stale, unsophisticated response and misunderstanding of 'real life'.⁴⁰ Echoing discourses of cinema-going as 'primitive' consumption, critics like Leavis saw naïve readers responding to the novel in almost automatic, and certainly somatic, ways. Frost argues, though, that the desert romance's formulaic approach provided its pornographic appeal to women readers, mixing exotic newness and familiar genre clichés and plots.⁴¹ Pleasure in the genre's repetitive clichés undergirded the appeal and condemnation of the sheik film in Britain too, seemingly inducing the same unthinking, even 'primitive' spectatorship in young women cinemagoers.

Such responses to the film were figured as an inability to read the sheik, especially by these 'susceptible' white women. Initial reception of the film was actually positive. Certainly, the desert setting was noted to be completely fake: the *Mail* praises Melford's use of the desert, but explains that this was the *Californian* desert, with Algerian palm trees disguising it.⁴² Extending this, the *Express* acclaims 'a stirring film, richly imaginative, and packed with sentiment which Arabs would refuse to recognise as Arabian'.⁴³ Other critics, meanwhile, admire Valentino's performance of Arab identity, his 'mixture of autocracy and childlike faith', 'turbaned duskiness' or combination of 'fire' and 'restraint'.⁴⁴ Glancy suggests that Valentino was less controversial in Britain because of his self-conscious acknowledgement of his role as performer, according with British codes of film acting foregrounding performance.⁴⁵ Yet as his performance coalesced into cliché and imitators emerged, British commentators began to see, instead, his performance embodying the dangerous artifice of Hollywood. The *Aberdeen Journal* explains that the sheik's popularity emerged because most cinemagoers were 'flappers' desiring escapism; these spectators fall for the 'spell of the East' and 'desert scenes', which 'send the little shop-girl home hugging the glorious thought of how she would

⁴⁰ Frost, pp. 100-101.

⁴¹ Frost, pp. 110.

⁴² *Daily Mail Atlantic Edition*, 30 July 1923, p. 8.

⁴³ *Express*, 20 January 1923, p. 6.

⁴⁴ *Guardian*, 28 January 1922, p. 7; *Guardian*, 13 February 1923, p. 14; *Times*, 24 January 1923, p. 8.

⁴⁵ Glancy, *Hollywood*, pp. 66-74.

like to visit Cairo and seek adventures in the sandy desert'.⁴⁶ The proliferation of sheik films with the same performances, clichés, and 'primitive' passions—the subgenre's repetitive formula outlined by Frost—seemed to encourage reproduction of white femininity in supposedly dangerous ways. As Ivor Brown put it for the *Guardian*, '[y]ou cannot walk down the street without seeing some illumined scream of the Picture Palace about ape-men, sheikhs, jungle-love, and stark realities of primitive passion. "Primitive" appears to be the operative word with this sophisticated industry'.⁴⁷ The sheik film was 'primitive' in its depictions of 'savage' domination and submission, but also in the way it was spectated by women, drawn into this false fantasy.

For British commentators, the sheik film was a kind of deception, an artifice which could not be properly read by 'primitive' spectators. This was linked to the sheik's body and performative play with identity, and ultimately to the broader artifice of Hollywood itself, articulated by opposing these female fantasies to British male colonial knowledge of the 'East'. The Hollywood sheik was a feminine fantasy to be dispelled by male British journalists and travellers who had actually visited colonial spaces and seen Arab rulers, situated in a British colonial travel tradition rather than that of popular women's fiction.⁴⁸ The *Aberdeen Journal* sums up the British response when its London correspondent claims that, since 'the vogue of the "Sheik" in novels and films began, travellers from the East have been trying to throw cold water on our romantic ideas', while a *Mail* journalist begins his account of Moroccan travel by claiming that it will dispel the 'romantic illusions' and 'spurious sentiment' on 'the Swindle of the Sheikh'.⁴⁹ Women spectators metaphorically ate up Americanised sheiks through irrational bodily consumption, duped by commercialised American Orientalism that only scholarly traditions of British Orientalism, travel writing, and colonial anthropology could contest. The *Mail* writer describes 'that fierce, dashing, amorous, irresistible, gallant, masterful,

⁴⁶ *Aberdeen Journal*, 8 October 1924, p. 5. Other articles suggest that the sheik and Valentino's popularity is founded in this desire for escapism; see e.g. *Guardian*, 24 August 1926, p. 13; *Hull Daily Mail*, 24 August 1926, p. 4.

⁴⁷ *Guardian*, 30 July 1932, p. 9.

⁴⁸ This accorded with contemporary criticisms in anthropology about 'armchair anthropologists' who did not travel to conduct fieldwork; see Efram Sera-Shriar, *The Making of British Anthropology, 1813-1871* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016), p. 5.

⁴⁹ *Aberdeen Journal*, 27 September 1926, p. 4; *Mail*, 25 April 1924, pp. 9-10.

manly, utterly false and imaginary figure', their excess of descriptors mirroring the exaggerated expressions and overly ornate sets of the sheik film itself. Similarly, the *Dundee Courier* claims that '[t]he tall, commanding figure, of stately mien and easy grace, is but a figment of some imaginative film-producer's dream'.⁵⁰ Valentino and his imitators' performances did not 'correctly' represent Arab masculinity. The intimacy with the sheik's body invited by films and imagined by naïve female spectators was a false intimacy, to be replaced by the 'truth' in detailed racist descriptions of these bodies up close. Sheiks were, apparently, rather 'unpleasant'. They reportedly had 'more fleas than romance about them'; they were 'corpulent', 'homely' and aged, or 'middle-aged, swarthy, leathery skinned, hawk-nosed, thin-lipped men with bristly, dirty beards'.⁵¹ These writers assert the 'truth' of the sheik, against which the film version is always contrasted, through their bodies and what is glossed over on screen. Despite the indexical reality of the medium and its purportedly universal legibility, British commentators drew on the historical weight of Britain's tradition of scholarly Orientalism to critique this, arguing that the Hollywood sheik was in fact a kind of occlusion. The sheik film claimed to represent the ethnographic truth of racial difference through performing bodies but actually dissembled, covering up the gritty, unpleasant reality with glamour, the beauty of the Hollywood star and his sensuous address.

The sheik film was thus received as exemplifying the dangers of a Hollywood cinema which incorrectly represented colonial encounter and racial identities, dangers that most profoundly impacted upon British women. As Frost points out, Hull's source novel creates a doubled perspective for women readers wherein they can simultaneously condemn Diana's foolish self-endangerment and overreaching adventurous spirit, and take pleasure in her erotic encounters with Ahmed.⁵² The film recreates this through the emphasis on performance and the possibilities of multiple interpretations of Ahmed's performance. However, in doing so on film—the medium critiqued for its universal access to all classes and races and its capacity to bring performers close to spectators

⁵⁰ *Dundee Courier*, 7 December 1923, p. 7.

⁵¹ *Dundee Courier*, 13 September 1924, p. 4; *Nottingham Evening Post*, 10 December 1924, p. 7; *Dundee Courier*, 13 September 1926, p. 4; *Times of India*, 22 February 1929, p. 16.

⁵² Frost, p. 94.

without textual mediation—it provoked especial concern for commentators. This conception of naïve feminine irrationality is dramatised in Diana’s role in the film: in a British reception context concerned with ‘performed cinema’, the white woman protagonist could be not just overly adventurous but a spectator, incapable of reading and performing correctly. Diana sees Ahmed as exciting, exotic spectacle. She first meets him when sneaking into a Biskra casino which has been reserved for Ahmed’s party. Behind Ahmed is a dancing Arab woman whose clothes Diana will borrow to disguise herself, and who becomes the centre of the shot when he leaves (Figure 13). To access Ahmed’s exotic spectacle, Diana must ‘play Eastern’ herself. On discovering her, Ahmed laughs and rips away her veil, the first instance of his play with her and the first instance in which he controls her performance via costume. She becomes aligned with the camera’s engagement with Valentino’s face and body: the pleasure in his ambiguous smile and androgynous looks, his play with violence and the performance of race, implicating the spectator in this play too. For British spectators, then, *The Sheik* could epitomise the dangers of misreading Arab masculinity and Valentino’s performance, and the potential of Hollywood’s cinematic glamour to obscure the ‘reality’ of the ‘East’, especially for naïve white women.



Figure 13: Diana watches the ‘Oriental’ dancer in the Biskra casino

A British Valentino?

The Sheik exemplified anxieties about Hollywood misrepresentation of racial difference and colonial encounter, through exoticism, glamour and sensation. Yet there were equally concerns that the British film industry was not taking advantage of this trend. Particularly in fan magazines more amenable to American cinema, some wondered who came closest to being a British Valentino, Latin Lover, or Sheik, often settling upon actor, singer and composer, Ivor Novello. Evidently written before Valentino's death on 23 August 1926, the 1927 *Picture Show Annual* suggests that other American and British actors were disputing Valentino's supremacy, situating the Welsh Novello in a lineage of 'exotic' stars like the Italian Valentino, the Mexican Ramon Novarro, and the Spanish-born Antonio Moreno.⁵³ As late as 1933, *The Times of India's* London-based film critic Greville Bain bemoans British studios' inability to discover 'romantic British heroes', but asserts that, in Novello, 'England has at least one romantic idol of the screen, whose following of devoted women can compare with that of any of Hollywood idols'.⁵⁴ Accordingly, Gledhill positions Novello as the closest British example to the typical American star, 'divorced from the discrete boundedness of a character', offering his body to the camera 'as if for the first time'.⁵⁵

Novello most closely resembles Valentino in *The Rat*, often cited contemporarily as his star-making role and a rare British film successful in America.⁵⁶ *The Rat* evidences Novello's connection to Valentino, but also a *distancing* from the Hollywood star's racialised play. Novello plays Pierre Boucheron, an underworld criminal known as 'The Rat' who lives with, and eventually falls in love with, his initially casual girlfriend Odile (Mae Marsh). He only realises his love for her after pursuing the upper-class Zélie (Isabel Jeans), and her partner Herman (Robert Scholz) sexually assaults Odile, who murders him in self-defence. The imitation of Valentino is most evident in the seedy White

⁵³ *Picture Show Annual* 1927, p. 30.

⁵⁴ *Times of India*, 12 October 1933, p. 13.

⁵⁵ Gledhill, p. 83.

⁵⁶ E.g. *Picture Show Annual* 1927, p. 30; *Guardian*, 29 August 1926, p. 7; *Mirror*, 2 February 1926, p. 9; *Guardian*, 17 February 1926, p. 12; *Spectator*, 30 October 1926, p. 736.

Coffin nightclub. After winning a knife fight against a man who has insulted Odile, he pulls another woman into his embrace and begins an 'apache' dance, violently flinging her around like Valentino in *Four Horsemen*. Novello smiles threateningly, like Valentino, his face almost pressed against the woman's. The apache is a sexualised dance which 'simulates through movement a violent battle of wills between a man and a woman'.⁵⁷ Holly Maples groups the apache with the tango and other dances popular 'because the exotic and foreign origins associated with them allowed the participant a safe realm for role-playing, fetishization, and the exotification of self'.⁵⁸ The dance's centrepiece occurs when she wraps her legs around him and he spins her around, holding her head, in a movement which exemplifies his blurring of sex, dance and violence towards women (Figure 14). As with *The Sheik*, Gledhill sees *The Rat* exceeding the limits of 'safe' performance: enabled by the 'boundary figure' of the apache, '[t]he ritualistic "performance" [...] refuses to stay within the bounds of its own stage'.⁵⁹ Novello's performance serves as a 'sexual challenge' to the spectating Zélie, who has come to the nightclub as a 'tourist' in this working-class space. In this sense, then,



Figure 14: Pierre flings his dance partner in *The Rat*

⁵⁷ Holly Maples, 'Embodying Resistance: Gendering Public Space in Ragtime Social Dance', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 28.3 (2012), 243-259 (p. 251).

⁵⁸ Maples, p. 248.

⁵⁹ Gledhill, p. 26.

Novello apes Valentino's sheik in playing with spatial and social boundaries and exceeding defined performance space.

However, Gledhill neglects the scene's racialised dynamics—partially constructed by its intertextual echoes of Valentino's 'savage' lovemaking—which permit this class transgression. Playing the role of a Frenchman and an 'apache' criminal figure particularly associated with turn-of-the-century France, it would be possible for Novello to evoke the same kinds of ethnic ambiguity as Valentino's performances.⁶⁰ Instead, whereas *The Sheik's* play with race and gender was perceived as a challenge to racial hierarchies and colonial geographies, *The Rat* locates racialised 'play' in the realm of performance to concretise shared racial identity. Earlier in the film, in another White Coffin scene of violence, two women fight over their respective relationships with Pierre, while a Black and an East Asian man look on, mimicking their punches and laughing in a scene which seems to dramatise anxieties about racialised spectators watching white women. This moment associates the seediness of the club with the presence of men of colour and their ability to spectate white women, a trope which is common in films set in nightclubs, discussed further in the following chapter. Yet



Figure 15: A weakened Pierre at the film's conclusion

⁶⁰ Robert A. Nye, *Crime, Madness and Politics in Modern France: The Medical Concept of National Decline* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 196-202; Maples, p. 251.

these men, or any people of colour, seem to have disappeared in the following nightclub scene, replaced by Pierre's performance of 'apache savagery'. The class transgression of the film is enabled by the absence of racial transgression. At the end of the film, Novello finds himself in a similarly passive, weakened position with Odile caring for him (Figure 15), but this does not incorporate the revelation of whiteness at the end of *The Sheik* as his whiteness has never been in doubt outside these performance spaces.⁶¹ While the knife fight 'escapes' the performance area, the dance does not; Pierre's play with racial identity stays within theatrical performance spaces, unlike his play with class and gender. His play with class transgression is, in fact, *enabled* by his whiteness.

If Novello was promoted through association with Valentino, other critics distanced him from the sheik archetype. The *Mail* maintains that the association between Novello and Valentino is an American promotional gimmick, distinguishing his 'sensitiveness' from the 'caveman technique of Valentino'.⁶² Other British actors and filmmakers also distanced themselves from 'sheik stuff'. *Broken Sand* (Adrian Brunel, Atlas Biocraft, 1924) and *The White Sheik* (Harley Knoles, BIP, 1928) exploited the popularity of the subgenre, but promotional reports emphasised that they did 'not contain a Sheik as its hero' or were 'a deliberate effort to divest the Arab sheikh of his halo of romance'.⁶³ While rare cases like *The Rat* did depict a romantic figure that 'played' with racial difference in similar ways to Valentino's sheik, this was restricted to defined performance spaces and distanced from his play with gender and sexuality. Valentino's undermining of the legibility of racial difference through 'primitive play' could not be repeated in British cinema.

Responses to the clichés of the sheik film, embodied in Valentino, demonstrate the way in which national cinema was delimited through racialised performing bodies. British cinema was marked by its distance from the playful ambiguity, sensuality, and bodily spectacle of the sheik. More generally, these responses undermined ideas of cinema's indexical 'truth', suggesting that this

⁶¹ Gledhill and Michael Williams see this passivity or helplessness as part of Novello's star persona; Gledhill, p. 84; Michael Williams, 'War-Torn Dionysus: The Silent Passion of Ivor Novello', in *Young and Innocent: The Cinema in Britain, 1896-1930*, ed. by Andrew Higson (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002), pp. 256-270.

⁶² *Mail*, 30 January 1926, p. 6.

⁶³ *Picturegoer*, February 1923, p. 26; *Hull Daily Mail*, 13 September 1927, p. 3.

too could be 'played' with by Hollywood cinema and star performance. Cinema's direct bodily address in the sheik film was mediated by Orientalised excess and spectacle, which distracted from, concealed or even blurred the purported ethnographic 'reality' of the racialised bodies of Arab and white men. Yet *The Rat* and Novello's performance evidence the appeal of this bodily address, the sensuality of a Valentino, and a perceived need to capitalise upon and adapt this for British audiences. The sheik film embodied American cinema's dangers for naïve white spectators, dramatising the British white male body's weakness in the face of Hollywood's glamorous and racialised, 'primitive' appeal to white British women. By adapting these conventions to a British star vehicle, escapist romance and masculine virility could be reclaimed. This was one technique for recuperating the energy and appeal of the Eastern for British audiences. However, other Eastern subgenres, the *Arabian Nights* fantasy and the Foreign Legion adventure, were also seen to provide more appropriate models of masculinity and play for British spectators, especially British boys.

Douglas Fairbanks' Primitive Poetry

Athleticism and the Orient in The Thief of Bagdad

In 1933, film critic Seton Margrave dubs Douglas Fairbanks' *Mr. Robinson Crusoe* (Edward Sutherland, Elton Productions, 1932) an 'Aladdin's Cave of delights', remembering that, '[t]hrough the unsavoury period of Sheik appeal and sex appeal every film made by Douglas Fairbanks was morally beyond reproach'.⁶⁴ Accordingly, Gaylyn Studlar contends that the most successful 'Latin Lovers' ended up being the safely Anglo-Saxon actors like Fairbanks, who 'could temporarily satisfy female desire for erotic exoticism without threatening either American men or notions of Nordic/Anglo-Saxon purity'.⁶⁵ When Fairbanks inhabits 'Aladdin's Cave', he does so as an evidently Anglo-Saxon, and thus unambiguous, 'moral', star. In the 1920s, Fairbanks played an Arab character in the Arabian Nights fantasy, *The Thief of Bagdad*. In fact, this film contains scenes which evidence the difference between the two stars when compared to Valentino's sheik sequel, *The Son of the Sheik* (George Fitzmaurice, Feature Productions, 1926). Masquerading as a prince to win the

⁶⁴ *Mail*, 2 January 1933, p. 4.

⁶⁵ Studlar, 'Discourses', p. 30.

Princess' (Julanne Johnston) love, Fairbanks' Ahmed is discovered to be a thief and whipped by palace guards. Echoing this scene two years later, *The Son of The Sheik* sees Ahmed's son, also called Ahmed and also played by Valentino, ambushed, knocked out, and whipped viciously before being tied up by the villainous Ghabah (Montague Love). These two whipping scenes in these near-contemporary films are comparable moments of eroticised submission to other men, common to the 'Latin lover' genre.⁶⁶ Yet Fairbanks is not placed on display like Valentino. After Valentino is whipped, his chest and arms are exposed and glistening (Figure 16). Ghabah mocks him by claiming that '[y]our people would gladly pay ten thousand francs to look at your handsome face again'. This self-reflexive comment draws attention to his body and beauty as spectacle. While Fairbanks is also topless, he curls into himself and the camera quickly cuts to the Princess grieving (Figure 17). There is not the same emphasis on the spectacle of Fairbanks' body in pain. Unlike Valentino, Fairbanks' bodily spectacle does not arise from his sexuality or gender and racial ambiguity. Instead, he is most visible and spectacular when performing athletic, playfully adventurous stunts.



Figure 16: The younger Ahmed tied up and on display in *The Son of the Sheik*



Figure 17: Ahmed whipped by palace guards in *The Thief of Bagdad*

Fairbanks' play in *The Thief of Bagdad* is associated with *childhood* rather than ambiguity and transgression.⁶⁷ In part, this was because his fantastical Bagdad was located in a magical, antique past with no white characters and thus no possibility for dangerous racialised encounter. It

⁶⁶ See Hansen, *Babel*, p. 285; Studlar, 'Discourses', p. 28.

⁶⁷ Gaylyn Studlar, *This Mad Masquerade: Stardom and Masculinity in the Jazz Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 21.

was distanced from the instabilities of contemporary Iraq which, in 1925, was under British mandate and ruled by the British-installed King Faisal I, but had faced Kurdish, Sunni and Shiite rebellion since the War ended, including a three-month-long siege of British forces in Baghdad in 1920.⁶⁸ It is possible to see the victory of whiteness over indigenous rulers in the narrative of Fairbanks 'winning' the Princess' love over the Princes of Persia, the 'Indies', and the 'Mongols'. Yet this victory is achieved in a fantasy space, the magic of which is articulated through Fairbanks' performance. In his role, Fairbanks did not evoke romantic heroes of popular fiction or imperial heroes of British military history. Instead, Fairbanks was connected to a racialised physical culture movement to restore strength and virility to white men, purportedly lost in the face of 'effeminate' stars like Valentino.⁶⁹ Michael Williams suggests that Fairbanks was seen to embody the manly grace of the classical male body, '[c]laiming potency in the face of deterioration', in the context of such movements.⁷⁰ As Jeffrey Vance claims, Fairbanks' films were 'filled with optimism, ebullience, and adventure', his characters embodying Fairbanks' own 'restless energy and self-confidence'.⁷¹ In *The Thief of Bagdad*, Fairbanks performs a 'primitive play', but one which is read in British contexts as a means of recuperating, rather than undermining, whiteness. It is 'primitive' in its profoundly American address to children rather than in its violence. He is not seen as a white body masquerading as Arab but a childish, yet athletic body, particularly suited to the moving medium of film.

Marina Warner argues that the *Arabian Nights* Aladdin story has proven popular because of its multiplicity and mobility: it is 'a story of movement, of descents and dips, flights and ascents'.⁷² These qualities are taken up in *The Thief of Bagdad*, according with Fairbanks' dynamic, athletic star persona and cinema's mobility. This is achieved through Fairbanks' acrobatics which, despite connecting him to this Aladdin archetype, distance him from stereotypes of 'Oriental' luxurious

⁶⁸ Courtney Hunt, *The History of Iraq* (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 2005), pp. 62-63; Fieldhouse, p. 87.

⁶⁹ Heather Addison, 'Captializing their charms: Cinema stars and physical culture in the 1920s', *Velvet Light Trap*, 50 (2002), 15-35 (p. 28).

⁷⁰ Michael Williams, *Film Stardom, Myth and Classicism: The Rise of Hollywood's Gods* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 48.

⁷¹ Jeffrey Vance, *Douglas Fairbanks* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), p. 2.

⁷² Warner, p. 361.

repose. Ahmed is introduced in a wide shot of a city street (Figure 18). Barely visible, he lies on a wall at the bottom of a frame emphasising verticality, in which soldiers hold long, pike-like weapons under an exaggeratedly high archway and balcony. Ahmed is the only horizontal body, lounging in an apparently deep sleep, contrasting with the purposeful movement around him. A slow fade to a soft-focus close-up emphasises this sense of daydreaming, unfocused languor. Yet as a man leans past Ahmed, he steals this man's wallet. He is awake. As the man realises that it is missing, another close-up depicts Ahmed sitting upwards and smiling. He is not lounging but active, alert, and enjoying his thievery. He then gets into a fight with another man who notices his crime. An authority figure comes to mediate, and Ahmed claims that the wallet is his with an exaggerated pumping of his chest. He confidently asserts that it is empty, causing the actual owner to laugh. When the wallet *is* revealed to be empty, he escapes. Again, he laughs heartily after this success, hands on hips in an upright posture (Figure 19). The initial display of indolence, associated with the magical dream world of the desert 'East', is a diegetic performance within the film, mocked by Fairbanks as he transforms into playful dexterity.



Figure 18: Ahmed introduced asleep in a busy street scene



Figure 19: Ahmed laughing after his successful scam

From this, the 'Oriental' setting becomes the backdrop for Fairbanks' masculine athleticism. He bounds his way across the exaggeratedly tall city, transcending it through his muscular performance. When he first encounters the Princess, after breaking into her palace to steal treasure, he jumps and climbs to showcase his abilities, rather than to achieve romantic love or the titillating

depiction of a sensuous feminine 'Orient'. Fairbanks loves the Princess not as a sexual object to be held like Diana, but an object of athletic achievement. The Princess, along with her guards, are asleep when he discovers her, surrounded by translucent curtains (Figure 20). She is a silent, passive figure, watched, rescued, shuttled and embodying, unlike Fairbanks, 'Oriental' languor. This image of the Princess asleep, surrounded by luxury and soft comfort, echoes but contrasts with the shot of the soon-to-be mobile Ahmed at the film's beginning, associating her instead with 'Eastern' treasures to be 'won'. The 'Orient' and the effeminate characters inhabiting it provide the ground for Fairbanks' performance. Ambiguities of race and gender are resolved, as whiteness is associated with masculine athleticism and 'Eastern' identity with feminine repose. Unlike Valentino's films, where his play with 'Oriental' and masculine identity comprise the film's spectacle, the Orientalised backdrop here becomes the passive, static, indolent playground over which the muscular, athletic, always laughing Fairbanks plays—not with whiteness but with Orientalised space.



Figure 20: Ahmed discovers the Princess in languorous repose

'the Playboy of the Anglo-Saxon World': Fairbanks in Britain

Ryan Jay Friedman observes that Fairbanks, despite his Arab character, is always associated with whiteness in the film through costume and *mise-en-scène*.⁷³ Accordingly, most British critics made a point of asserting that the film, despite its 'Eastern' setting, is essentially an American one, in which Fairbanks plays himself. One critic for the *Aberdeen Journal* writes that, '[w]hether Douglas Fairbanks is Robin Hood or a Thief of Bagdad, he remains Douglas Fairbanks'. This is because 'his wonderful and comic powers of acrobaticism will be the central motive of the picture'.⁷⁴ Similarly, for the *Derby Daily Telegraph*, '[w]hile many aver that he is an execrable actor, as a poser and interpreter of the romantic Fairbanks has no equal, and he bounds through this Arabian night [...] with an abandon that none can resist'.⁷⁵ His character, playful, athletic and inventive, suits Fairbanks' 'amazing agility' and 'versatility', as opposed to Fairbanks adapting his performance to embody the thief.⁷⁶ Fairbanks' skill is not in acting, but in bounding through the setting. One critic of *The Thief of Bagdad* does suggest that Fairbanks 'displays his American smile a little too frequently'.⁷⁷ Generally, however, Fairbanks persona shone through to positive effect; his inability to embody the Arab role, performing a recognisable playful American whiteness instead, made the film enjoyable.

For British critics, Fairbanks performed only as himself, a white American play-acting in an 'Oriental' fantasy. Unlike with the sheik figure, this was not read as dangerous play with racial identity but merely a performance of white virility in an 'Eastern' space. Rather than evidencing cinema's sensuous, erotic 'play', Fairbanks' corporeality articulated cinema's mobility and 'primitive' dynamism. A profile of Fairbanks in the *Times* a year after *The Thief of Bagdad*'s release emphasises his bodily vitality. He is

a force of nature, a wave sparkling and bounding ashore in bright sunlight or the brilliant rush of a racehorse about a windy field. He possesses an immense athletic and romantic animation. I had not

⁷³ Friedman, p. 139.

⁷⁴ *Aberdeen Journal*, 25 March 1925, p. 4.

⁷⁵ *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 7 September 1926, p. 3.

⁷⁶ See e.g. *Gloucester Citizen*, 13 April 1925, p. 7; *Hull Daily Mail*, 20 March 1925, p. 9.

⁷⁷ *Hull Daily Mail*, 24 March 1925, p. 5.

been with him ten minutes before I found myself saying, "This is the Playboy of the Anglo-Saxon World." Impossible to imagine this lithe, bronzed figure at rest!⁷⁸

The glut of metaphors, the hyperbole, and rhapsodic attention to his athleticism evoke something of the 'Oriental' excess in catalogues of the sheik's false qualities, but also the constant shifting of Fairbanks himself. He is not a 'playboy' because of his wealth or excessive glamour, but because of his play. In this, his performance of a 'bronzed' body like that of Ahmed is countered by his 'Anglo-Saxon' vigour, a vision of American vitality and 'nature' but also whiteness.

This 'primitive' American vitality could provide a model for British spectators and filmmakers. Fairbanks was seen to have maintained 'the primitive urges and instincts of boyhood' and thus 'ideal masculine goodness in a manly way through physical regeneration and optimistic moral action'.⁷⁹ The *Times* profile is part of a column by Robert Nichols which aims to discover why Britain does not 'get better pictures'. Fairbanks explains in it that

[o]urs is a young, heroic, elastic, and athletic medium, and youth, heroism, and athletics suit it. We should keep it in the open air. I intensely dislike drawing-room films, with their atmosphere of stiff shirts and debauchery [...] Our future lies in our past, to which we are beginning to return.

Fairbanks endorses a kind of cinematic primitivism, equating athleticism, movement and the outdoors with this return to 'our past'. In this article series, this has implications for British cinema. The British 'drawing-room film', with its 'stiff shirt' performance style of restraint, represents an over-civilised, even degenerate cinema to be healed by 'open-air' primitivism. His 'Anglo-Saxon' play inspires Anglo-Saxon spectators into athleticism themselves, countering suggestions that Hollywood contributed to post-war degeneration, instead associating over-civilised British restraint with this risk. Fairbanks contravenes British cinema conventions but this is seen as a positive alternative to a too-restrictive British cinema and culture. Critic Iris Barry argues similarly that his films 'exhilarate and purify the mind like mountain air with their swift, refreshing action'.⁸⁰ Getting outside and closer to nature through cinema has curative effects, enabled by Fairbanks' 'exhilarating' antics. Fairbanks offered what Cowan describes as the European primitivist 'fantasy of overcoming the modern

⁷⁸ *Times*, 1 September 1925, p. 10.

⁷⁹ Studlar, *Masquerade*, p. 23.

⁸⁰ *Mail*, 19 March 1926, p. 8.

“European” conditions of decadence, neurasthenia and exhaustion’.⁸¹ In the *Mail* later in the decade, Frederick Lonsdale writes that Fairbanks ‘stands for all that is best in the typical American. He plays hard, keeps fit, and works like a demon’.⁸² His Americanism, his ‘Anglo-Saxon Playboy’ athleticism and dynamism, could cure an exhausted British cinema and society.

For British critics, then, this ‘primitive’ performance style epitomised in *The Thief of Bagdad* had both a racial/colonial and aesthetic function, improving the ‘quality’ of white people and film. This was because his performance style resonated so closely with the cinematic medium. Paul Rotha describes Fairbanks in *The Film Till Now* (1930) as ‘essentially filmic’, while acknowledging that this is a strange claim given that he is ‘an acrobat who is unable to put drama into his gestures or emotion into his expressions’. Through his ‘rhythm, his graceful motion and perpetual movement of acting material’, he has discovered an ‘essentially filmic’ kind of acting.⁸³ Other critics similarly praised Fairbanks’ cinematic performance style which works despite his poor acting. C. A. Lejeune views Fairbanks’ skill as virtually unconscious. In her review of *The Thief of Bagdad*, she echoes Balázs in imagining a performance in which he wears a Benda mask and attains a completely filmic style, foregoing facial expression in favour of bodily communication.⁸⁴ Fairbanks ‘has always kicked an expressive leg, made vocal the turn of a wrist [...] his gestures have caught a rhythm of their own and stolen meaning from the face’. There is refinement—a ‘poise’ and ‘dignity’ in her words—to his performances, but these are not those of the knowing British performer. He

has poetry in him. It is a queer, crude poetry, rather restless, rather spasmodic; that of a child who suddenly finds himself for the first time face to face with the beauty of words, and lets them tumble this way and that, recklessly, gloating over them. Fairbanks has never yet had mastery over the store of his own poetry, nor a clear understanding of it, but it has turned him towards the study of movement, the perfection of beautiful gesture, and made a harlequin of him in spite of himself.

⁸¹ Cowan, p. 115.

⁸² *Mail*, 20 June 1930, p. 8.

⁸³ Paul Rotha, *The Film Till Now: A Survey of the Cinema* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1930), p. 108.

⁸⁴ *Guardian*, 4 October 1924, p. 9.

Lejeune reforms Fairbanks' primitively American movement into the origins of a cinematic acting style. Fairbanks' body was itself cinema for these British critics, producing an unconscious, 'primitive' poetry, but one of white, childish vitality rather than the racialised 'primitive' play of a star like Valentino.



Figure 21: Ahmed dwarfed by the spectacular landscapes he traverses...



Figure 22: ...and by a dragon he fights

Of course, cinema's mobility and magic are also evoked in the film through its trick photography and practical effects used to represent magical objects like the flying carpet, magic rope, or giant monsters which Fairbanks fights. Yet for British critics, this was intertwined with the spectacle of Fairbanks' body, his ability to use this magic to perform his primitive, poetic play. The film's 'tangible fantasy' brings together the physicality of the body and the ethereal magic of cinema effects and of the ancient 'Orient'.⁸⁵ Robert Irwin suggests that all Hollywood *Arabian Nights* stories are fundamentally about the spectacle of technology and special effects used to create them.⁸⁶ Contemporarily, the American film theorist and poet Vachel Lindsay dubs the film the 'first triumph in movie history in the use of the means of fancy which are available to the films'.⁸⁷ Yet Fairbanks' bodily feats authenticate this cinematic 'fancy', making it tangible. When he takes advantage of a

⁸⁵ Kristian Moen, "'The well-organized splendor of a growing culture': Sites of fantasy and *The Thief of Bagdad*", *Early Popular Visual Culture*, 8.1 (2010), 63-73, (p. 65).

⁸⁶ Robert Irwin, 'A Thousand and One Nights at the Movies', *Middle Eastern Literatures*, 7.2 (2004), 223-233 (p. 231).

⁸⁷ Vachel Lindsay, *The Progress and Poetry of the Movies* [1925], ed. by Myron Lounsbury (Lanham and London: The Scarecrow Press, 1995), p. 169.

magician's 'Indian rope trick' to climb from a balcony on which he has just stolen some bread, he inserts his body, his athleticism into the centre of the frame. As he goes on quests throughout the film to retrieve the magical objects allowing him to rescue the Princess, the magical locations and monsters are articulated in opposition to Fairbanks' body again, huge in scale but always overcome by him (Figures 21 and 22). G. A. Atkinson takes a similar view. Praising the 'riot of miracles in trick-photography', he then describes how Fairbanks, 'with his customary aplomb, steams joyously through a narrative not less agile than himself'.⁸⁸ British critics picked up on the way in which Fairbanks' masculine virility expresses the 'primitive', but invigorating, magic of Hollywood cinema. His muscular movement and vitality authenticate cinematic magic, rather than bespeaking Hollywood's capacity to misrepresent the body as the sheik film purportedly did.

Atkinson goes on to suggest that 'he must be a hard-boiled cynic indeed who can withhold a cheer' after the final scene in which the princess and Ahmed ride on a magic carpet over the city and its adoring crowds. Nance characterises 'Oriental' carpets as the epitome of primitivist nostalgia for a 'simpler' art.⁸⁹ This magical object becomes part of a 'primitive' cinematic aesthetic, a childlike excitement that undoes post-war cynicism and exhaustion through witnessing whiteness soaring above the East. The combination of Fairbanks' vitality and the magic of Hollywood offers a *wholesome* regression to a less developed position. As they transcend the city, they reach a state of pure movement; the final shot sees them flying without any backdrop and static in the centre of the frame as if the camera is travelling at the same speed (Figure 23). No longer moving through the frame, the movement of cinema, magical objects, and Fairbanks perfectly align in this image of ancient magic, modern technology, and bodily vitality. Fairbanks' play as a 'primitive', but evidently white, thief embodied Hollywood cinema in a less dangerous form for British critics, in its colonial and aesthetic function. The magic of cinema lay not only in the films 'Oriental' tricks, but in the white body which so muscularly clammers over them. This 'primitive' corporeality could 'move'

⁸⁸ *Express*, 25 September 1924, p. 3.

⁸⁹ Nance, p. 44.

spectators physically, aesthetically, and regeneratively, rather than erotically and untruthfully as the sheik did.



Figure 23: Ahmed and the Princess fly out of Bagdad on their carpet

Beau Geste's White Realism

Hollywood representations of West Asia and North Africa were conceived in Britain as characterised by excess, artifice, and their male protagonists' primitive play; positively or negatively, they performed exaggeratedly, unrestrainedly, in ways which foregrounded the body. However, Jacobs and Teo observe a shift over the 1920s, reflecting Jacobs' 'decline of sentiment' in Hollywood, from romances to the 'male adventure' film which features 'a more or less tentative diminution of the romance plot, an emphasis on a male pair whose relationship is defined as much by rivalry as friendship'.⁹⁰ The Foreign Legion film is a primary example of this. As Michael Orme puts it, previously, 'the public wallowed in emotionalism. Hollywood gave it glycerine tears *ad lib*', but now '[t]he world of romance has been invaded by such films as "Beau Geste," which, whatever its faults, does not err on the side of sentimentality, and even the great Sheik himself, King of Sentimentality, may have to tremble on his artificial throne in the near future'.⁹¹ The sheik romance apparently

⁹⁰ Jacobs, p. 178; Teo, p. 106.

⁹¹ *ILN*, 1 October 1927, pp. 534, 572.

appealed to women without the taste to consume cinema correctly, while *The Thief of Bagdad* used femininity as a symbol of the 'Oriental' against which Fairbanks could articulate masculine virility. *Beau Geste* continues in this trajectory by omitting women entirely, focusing on homosocial relationships between brothers, appealing to men and specifically boys by building on a literary culture of imperial adventure stories.⁹² Set in Algeria like *The Sheik*, it eliminates the possibility for interracial intimacy and sexual play, locating play and romance firmly in an English domestic context so that Algeria becomes a site only for articulating white colonial masculinity. Within the multinational Foreign Legion, the homosocial relationships establish a white 'imperial family', a network of white solidarity erasing the possibility of racialised and gendered encounter.

As well as Novello, another contender for replacing Valentino was *Beau Geste*'s star, the English Ronald Colman. Colman fulfilled a different role in his star-making film however, playing a definitely white, English Foreign Legion soldier. Like Valentino, he was 'swarthy, dark-eyed, very masculine', 'the screen's perfect lover', and even the 'most popular of sheiks'.⁹³ The *Dundee Courier* directly connects Valentino's death and the release of *Beau Geste*, reporting that '[t]he question of who is to succeed Rudolph Valentino as the darling of the film "fans" seems to have been settled by crowds of Londoners who have been "queueing up" to see Ronald Colman in "Beau Geste"'.⁹⁴ Yet this column also reveals that Colman's 'love of the stage' is 'hereditary' as he was a descendant of eighteenth-century playwrights, foregrounding the Anglo-Saxon, English heritage that Valentino lacked. Colman was not a representative of a 'primitive' American cinema but a 'cultured', historied English tradition of refined performance. This refinement enabled his popularity with men too. A *Picturegoer* profile imbues him with a 'gift of subtle expression' and concludes that he was 'a typical, healthy-bodied and healthy-minded Englishman. Not a trace, thank heaven, of the matinee idol'.⁹⁵ His 'healthy' British restraint distinguished him from romance, and indeed from Fairbanks' American

⁹² See Shohat and Stam, pp. 100-101.

⁹³ *Picture Show Annual* 1926, p. 103; *Picture Show Annual* 1928, pp. 106, 142; *Hull Daily Mail*, 9 September 1933, p. 2.

⁹⁴ *Dundee Courier*, 8 November 1926, p. 10.

⁹⁵ *Picturegoer*, March 1925, pp. 42-43.

primitivism. The profile concludes that, while some actors smile to look attractive, Colman always had a dramatic reason to smile; 'he is one of the few artists who can smile—and still remain subtle'.⁹⁶ Unlike Fairbanks, whose characteristic smile was the signal of his exaggerated, dynamic and athletic American primitivism, Colman retained his sophisticated English restraint even when performing playfully.



Figure 24: A soldier cowers in the desert dust in *Beau Geste*

While an Arab militia forms the violent external threat against which *Beau Geste*'s story of besieged white bravery, the film's villain is Sergeant Lejaune (Noah Beery), whose cruelty against the soldiers stationed at Fort Zinderneuf leads to internal mutiny, only put aside to fight the attacking indigenous forces. If Valentino and Fairbanks endure sexualised violence inflicted by men to attain their love interest, here the violence is grittier and de-eroticised, less an attack on the body than the psyche. The desert space is one of emptiness and degradation, forgoing the opulent spectacle, magic and malleability of other Easterns. The fort is introduced in long shot, with a man and camel walking slowly towards it. Rather than emphasising massive scale, this foregrounds this desert's vast barrenness, in which the only order and presence are found in the building, a symbol of colonial rule.

⁹⁶ *Picturegoer*, March 1925, p. 43.

In the fort, the male body is on display, not for its spectacular beauty or individual athleticism but a shared sensation of pain and discomfort, slow movement, and desperation for water, as the camera cuts between exhausted, sweating men. Similarly, the primary scene of Lejaune's cruelty is directed at two unnamed deserters who he exiles into the desert, whipping them both out of the gate repeatedly. In close-up, one of the men cowers in the dust while others watch on (Figure 24). Again, this is not sexualised submission but an undermining of the white solidarity of the Legion, creating an image of degraded white masculinity, dirtied by the desert sand. Devoid of love interests and Orientalised magic, the film finds its spectacular images in the desert's barrenness and deprivation, and the need for heroic homosociality, a solidarity between white men, to oppose and rule this horrific space.



Figure 25: The fort on fire at the film's opening...



Figure 26: ...and a cut to the idyllic Brandon Abbas

In the desert scenes, the film seems to forsake the play of the other Eastern subgenres as it minimises the presence of the Arab characters with whom 'primitive play' is usually associated. Unlike with Valentino's sheik or Fairbanks' Ahmed, the 'primitivism' of the Arab characters is separated from the 'refined' white stars. The film still depicts playful childishness, but this never blurs with the primitive. Instead, the idyllic English childhood of the Gestes is contrasted with the desert's horror.⁹⁷ The film begins with the discovery of the empty fort manned by dead bodies and its sudden catching fire (revealed at the end to be the result of a mock 'Viking funeral' for Beau

⁹⁷ Eisele sees this geographical contrast as central to the subgenre; Eisele, p. 74.

performed by his brother Digby (Neil Hamilton)). It then cuts to the Geste's childhood. A long shot of the burning fort, an image of heat and dryness, cuts to pastoral greenery and water 'under the age-old trees of Brandon Abbas, in country England' (Figures 25 and 26). The narrative shifts from the edges of Empire to Britain's aristocratic centre, an old but verdant country estate. Close-ups then depict the Geste children playing a naval war game with toy boats. The horror of the opening scene is juxtaposed with war as play. Yet John (Micky McBan) is hit in the leg by one of the toy cannonballs, and his brothers are forced to cut the ball out. John insists that he will not yell, and close-ups reveal the only girl of their group, Isobel (Betsy Ann Hisle), crying while he grimaces. His restraint in the face of pain is framed as a masculine gesture in opposition to Isobel's feminine response. He is 'cited for bravery' and awarded the title, 'Stout Fella', by the young Beau (Maurice Murphy). After hearing stories of the Foreign Legion from their family friend, Captain Henri de Beaujolais (Norman Trevor), the children dress as 'Touaregs' in white cloaks, playing now with North African identity. Even here, dressed in clear white clothing in the wood-panelled halls of an English country home, their 'playing Eastern' occurs in a space of white Englishness; it is not ambiguous play with identity but playing at the disguises of explorers and adventurers like Blunt, Burton or Lawrence, embodied in the film in the heroic older figure of de Beaujolais. When the film cuts to their adulthood, they are presented in smart evening wear, only to be replaced by the uniforms of the Foreign Legion. The first scene of their adulthood sees them agreeing on a game of bridge, but even this adult play will be abandoned for the seriousness of real life. Soldiering as bucolic childish play is located in the past and in English space, naturally developing into the true heroism of colonial military sacrifice.

These opening scenes could provide a critique on their eventual enlistment: arising from childhood distortion of the reality of war, their jingoistic militarism results in the deaths of two brothers and familial dissolution. According with this, there are instances later in the film where playful performance are recalled through the cruel Lejaune. During the siege of the fort, he orders that the dead men's bodies are propped up so that they 'look dangerous', a performance of masculine military might. The bodies are dragged about, their floppiness contrasting with the erect

postures of attentive soldiers and aligning instead with the limp flag above; Lejaune's performance of 'looking dangerous', degrading sacrificed white bodies, is aligned with a symbol of national and colonial impotence. Later, the group realises that the Arab soldiers have retreated to pray, giving the men a respite. Despite their exhaustion, Lejaune, laughing sadistically, insists that the soldiers sing and dance. He then forces the men to laugh so that their opponents can hear, and a series of close-ups show the haggard men laughing through their pain (Figure 27). Now play has become a performance in itself, a travesty of the childhood vision of warfare. The smiles and laughter of Valentino and Fairbanks are replaced by this image of tortured white masculinity. Yet the film still valorises military sacrifice and the brotherhood found in colonial warfare, and returns, finally, to play, when Digby gives Beau the 'Viking funeral' they envisioned as children. He plays the trumpet in a rigid, strained posture, gripping it firmly as if to emphasise the pain underneath this 'play'. Nonetheless, this is heroic masculinity for the film, asserted through homosocial love and sacrifice for one's fellow white man. While the film critiques blind military allegiance to the (French) flag, it does not critique the brotherly spirit, emerging from shared racial identity, undergirding the Foreign Legion or the 'play' that leads men to enter colonial space and prove themselves.



Figure 27: A soldier laughing at Lejaune's behest

Essentially Masculine and Completely Real: Beau Geste's British Reception

In Britain, critics emphasised the fact that the film jettisoned the romantic for the masculine. The *Times* splits the film into two areas of interest: the fact that it is 'essentially a masculine film', where women have 'no bearing on the action', and its 'complete realism'.⁹⁸ Valentino's gender ambiguity and relationship to Diana are replaced by the unambiguous homosociality of 'brotherly love', a phrase constantly repeated in reviews.⁹⁹ The *Picture Show Annual* article frames the film as a different kind of role for Colman, remembering that '[n]ot a shadow of the "screen's perfect lover" was visible; not a foot of lovemaking had he to do'.¹⁰⁰ In another column, Orme cites him as an actor popular with women, but not for his lovemaking. His role in *Beau Geste* 'contains in it every element that makes an appeal to an Englishwoman's heart [...] Yet neither he nor his brothers, who stand by him so loyally, have time for much love-making'.¹⁰¹ *Beau Geste*'s popularity 'destroyed the fable that best-sellers are always about sex', and showed that 'the devotion of man to man is more moving than man's love for women'.¹⁰²

This resonates with gendered, as well as racialised, interwar constructions of popular literature, reflecting Nicholas Daly's argument that late-nineteenth-century imperial romances were gendered as 'healthily masculine', appealing to the 'wild man' to revivify British white masculinity, utilising contemporary degeneration discourses.¹⁰³ Despite Hull's *The Sheik* and Wren's *Beau Geste* both being critiqued as lowbrow literature, faithfulness to Wren's novel was *praised*, an example of an American film correctly representing a British narrative and British whiteness. For the *Guardian*, Hollywood had respected the novel in producing 'a thoroughly masculine adventure story'.¹⁰⁴ Starring Colman, and directed by the British-born Herbert Brenon, the film was framed as an English

⁹⁸ *Times*, 5 November 1926, p. 12.

⁹⁹ E.g. *Western Daily Press*, 18 January 1927, p. 5; *Hull Daily Mail*, 22 February 1927, p. 7; *Aberdeen Journal*, 23 March 1927, p. 3; *Guardian*, 11 January 1928, p. 15.

¹⁰⁰ *Picture Show Annual* 1928, p. 142.

¹⁰¹ *ILN*, 11 December 1926, p. 1198.

¹⁰² *Guardian*, 7 November 1926, p. 15.

¹⁰³ Nicholas Daly, *Modernism, Romance, and the Fin de Siècle: Popular Fiction and British Culture, 1880-1914* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 18-19.

¹⁰⁴ *Guardian*, 7 November 1926, p. 15.

one masquerading as American. Lejeune revels in the fact that Brenon's 'instinctive approach to a subject is British; his bias is British; his enthusiasm is for England as a home and not as a tourist's paradise'.¹⁰⁵ British critics emphasised its British ethos of aristocracy, refinement, and realism, derived from a 'healthily masculine' British text, just as Colman's acting style was framed in terms of its manly, British sophistication.

British critics, therefore, did not view the film as a critique of militarism but as representing this transition from play to manly attainment. As Lejeune puts it, '[i]n the Foreign Legion, remembered from old nursery games, they meet again', while the rest of the story tells of 'their light-hearted stand for all that is decent in soldiering and honest in comradeship, of their queer tenderness for one another in the face of danger, and of the old traditions that make death proud and holocaust the last splendour of a king'.¹⁰⁶ Their playfulness manifested itself in their 'light-hearted' British decency, comradeship, and 'queer tenderness'. Another *Guardian* reviewer praises the film for its masculine denial of femininity, but frames this racially: Brenon 'takes his stand by the traditions of our race [...] he is able to clothe Galahads in the uniforms of the Foreign Legion, and bring back perfect chivalry to the age of Freud'.¹⁰⁷ For this critic, Brenon drew upon British traditions of childhood adventure and King Arthur narratives while updating these into modernity, resonating with Fairbanks' dynamically cinematic retellings of ancient *Arabian Nights* narratives. The sheik was perceived as reflecting a modern, post-war, effeminate masculinity, dressed in the robes of the virile, nobly 'primitive' sheik. Fairbanks was also a modern American performing an Arab role, though one who challenged post-war feminisation and degeneration. This review flips this formula: the Gestes were ancient knightly masculine heroes dressed in modern Foreign Legion uniforms, resurrecting a *British* ancient tradition. Despite being an American production about the French

¹⁰⁵ *Guardian*, 9 April 1927, p. 17.

¹⁰⁶ *Guardian*, 13 November 1926, p. 9.

¹⁰⁷ *Guardian*, 7 November 1926, p. 15.

Legion, British spectators could take ownership of this film. *Beau Geste* forms part of a cinema aiming not for national specificity but 'racial solidarity implied by the imperial project as a whole'.¹⁰⁸

Democratising Colonial Masculinity in Tommy Atkins

The endorsement of *Beau Geste* in British cinema culture is most evident in the British industry's imitation, *Tommy Atkins*. An adaptation of a play following *Beau Geste*'s narrative, the film was advertised as the "'Beau Geste" of the British army'.¹⁰⁹ Like *Beau Geste*, it depicts childhood play by boys enamoured with colonial soldiering, then forced to come to terms with the reality of this life in an 'Eastern' fort. A title explains that this was the site where 'a small Force upheld British prestige in an outpost of Empire'. Directly referencing anxieties about 'British prestige' on film, it draws on an American movie (though one claimed for Britain) to counter them. Transferring the fort to British colonial space, it does not make the same critique of military jingoism, instead focusing on battles between Arab and British forces. However, it does depict similar play and characterises military endeavour as heroic performance. Beginning with a long shot high above soldiers, this is revealed to be a children's game played by a British colonial officer's son, Harold (Alfred Leonard). When Arab soldiers attack and his father is forced into battle, the two embrace and the father orders, '[e]yes front—chest out. Be a brave soldier'. This performance of brave colonial masculinity will be retained by Harold after his father is killed and he returns to an English country house under the care of the apparent Earl of Petherton. Echoing *Beau Geste* again, Harold grows up in this home with two other children, Victor (Leslie Tomlinson) and Ruth (Pat Courtney). When he (played as an adult by Walter Byron) discovers that he—not Victor (now played by Henry Victor) who has become a military officer—is the true heir to the Petherton title, he runs away to avoid ruining the life of his love, Ruth (Lillian Hall-Davis). He enlists as a private under the generic common soldier name, 'Tommy Atkins'. In Egypt, he and Victor fight together and Victor is killed in battle, giving his blessing for Harold's marriage to Ruth just before reinforcements arrive. He collapses into Harold's chest in an image of

¹⁰⁸ Shohat and Stam, p. 102.

¹⁰⁹ *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 7 May 1929, p. 5; *Times of India*, 12 October 1929, p. 19.

brotherly love and homosocial sacrifice. Again, then, the film represents heroic masculine sacrifice in a dangerous, degrading desert landscape, as a natural development from childhood playful relationships.

This film is set in 'British' colonial territory in 1895 and thus looks back nostalgically to British rule over Egypt, while the battle evokes the Egyptian revolution that was to come. However, Harold's performance—'[e]yes front—chest out'—aims to represent a kind of common, rather than aristocratic, soldiering: the everyman epitomised by the 'Tommy Atkins' character he plays. This British version opens the possibility of performing imperial valour and heroism to all white male spectators. On discovering his lineage, the aristocratic figure plays the ordinary white, British soldier, a role accessible through bodily conduct, sacrifice and experiencing the degradations of military life in remote colonial settings. Some advertisements assert that '[t]his is not a picture about the war', but in fact a 'stirring melodrama', foregrounding the domestic country house love triangle between Victor, Harold and Ruth.¹¹⁰ In part, this reflects the commonly held idea in 1920s British cinema culture that country homes and rural England represented unique assets to distinguish British cinema from American pictures. However, for more critics, the English scenes were least interesting: 'old-fashioned' and 'stilted', characterised by 'stiffness' and 'creaking with age'.¹¹¹ Critics and reporters emphasised the realism of the Sudan-shot war scenes, with one report outlining the real depredations experienced by actors in a climate 'hardly suitable for white people'.¹¹² It was also supported by the Army Council, with advice from Captain H. Oakes Jones and with extras from British Army cavalry and infantry regiments.¹¹³ This attention to realism aimed not only to distance the film from Hollywood artifice, but to mark it as a reproduction of colonial military life, performable, reproducible, by the masses in the theatre. Like *The Rat*, transgressions of class in 'Eastern' space are enabled by the shared, rigid identity of whiteness, and, in this case, the exclusion

¹¹⁰ *Nottingham Evening Post*, 18 March 1929, p. 2; *Dundee Courier*, 14 May 1929, p. 3.

¹¹¹ *Mail*, 19 May 1928, p. 12; *Telegraph*, 19 May 1928, p. 12; *Mail*, 18 February 1929, p. 16; *Telegraph*, 19 February 1929, p. 8.

¹¹² *Mail*, 23 May 1928, p. 12.

¹¹³ *Telegraph*, 19 February 1929, p. 8.

of women. The film depicts, and allows spectators to enter into through the everyman role of 'Tommy Atkins', the trials of a heroic era of colonial warfare, using a modern medium of movement and sensory 'thrills' to depict British history. In a British film, imitating an American film adapted from a British novel, *Tommy Atkins* aligns with *Beau Geste* in representing white solidarity that extends to the spectator through the cinematic medium.

Conclusion

These readings of American films relied upon racialised conceptions of play and the primitive; these could represent the old-fashioned, childish, regenerative, or dangerously degenerative. If *Beau Geste* and *Tommy Atkins* recall childhood origins for heroic white masculinity, *The Sheik* was seen, by contrast, to embody a 'primitive' present of escapist romance and cinematic eroticism. As the interwar period continued, the connections between the old-fashioned, the 'primitive', and the childish persevered. After Valentino's death in 1926, cinemas sporadically returned to *The Sheik*, which remained popular into the 1930s. Valentino's death itself was framed as an instance of the dangers of film fandom and Hollywood's corporeal address. As his body laid in state in New York, newspapers reported on the 'thousands of his admirers, mostly women, who crowded about to pay a last tribute', the 'crush and disorders in which numbers were injured', and the eventual closure of the chapel due to repeated 'indecorum' by 'film-struck' girls.¹¹⁴ The *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* contemplates how few of the 'excited horde of men and women who surged around the mortuary' could have ever seen him 'in the flesh'; he had only provided brief escapism but his death had still caused 'hysterical mourning', unlike that for military and political 'Great White Men' like 'Nelson, Wellington or Gladstone'. The writer concludes that this 'display bodes ill for the future of our civilisation'.¹¹⁵ This 'display', these bodily excesses of 'film feeling', bespoke the bodily effect of Valentino's sensuous, eroticised masculinity, even after death. However, with repeated screenings of his Sheik films, British critics and commentators shifted their focus from his body. In reports on re-releases of *The Sheik*, the film was framed as a curio, an old-

¹¹⁴ *Telegraph*, 25 August 1926, p. 9; *Telegraph*, 26 August 1926, p. 10.

¹¹⁵ *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*, 28 August 1926, p. 219.

fashioned, even 'primitive' example of an earlier cinema and film performance style. One article quotes M. C. Elliot, secretary of the Valentino Association, who complains that the film 'is like a museum piece', an idea repeated by the *Times*.¹¹⁶ This primitiveness purportedly renders the film more of a comedy to 'modern viewers'.¹¹⁷ It is characterised as a historical, primitive relic, humorously outdated and exaggerated. This response contained and undermined Valentino's performative smiles and aggression, his play with the white British woman, to suggest instead a comedic play. If the American version of a British woman, Diana, falls for Valentino's charms, critics made it clear that a modern, 1930s British audience would not. Fairbanks' 'primitive' vitality was energising to the British spectator; Valentino's primitivism was concerning in its play with gendered and racial boundaries. By the 1930s, however, Valentino's sheik played primitively in a different way: he was contained as an example of a comically outdated cinema, divested of his subversive power.

By contrast, films like *Beau Geste* prefigured British imperial epics of the 1930s: not just Foreign Legion films like the American (Merian C. Cooper, Lothar Mendes, and Ernest B. Schoedsack, Paramount, 1929) and British (Zoltan Korda, London Film Productions, 1939) adaptations of *The Four Feathers*, but also colonial films in settings beyond West Asia and North Africa which villainised or erased female desire.¹¹⁸ The Orient, and thus Hollywood Easterns, were constructed in interwar Britain through a complicated network of histories and representational traditions. A setting without the hard boundaries that marked colonial space and racial difference, the desert became the site in which American cinema was performed, read into and onto the bodies of male stars according to racialised hierarchies of primitivism and decadence. The differing responses to performances of the 'primitive', white and Arab identities, masculinity and femininity, and kinds of 'play' associated with a fantastical Orient determine, firstly, whether these films could be assimilated into a British colonial project of white supremacy and, secondly and relatedly, how cinema is understood to affect spectators' bodies.

¹¹⁶ *Mail*, 28 July 1938, p. 6; *Times*, 22 July 1938, p. 12.

¹¹⁷ *Mail*, 25 July 1938, p. 4.

¹¹⁸ Julie Codell, 'Domesticating Empire in the 1930s: Metropole, Colony, Family', in *Empire and Film*, ed. by Lee Grieveson and Colin MacCabe (London: BFI, 2011), pp.189-203 (p. 189).

As popular American films, they were understood to operate on a spectacular, sensual level, but the way this worked was framed and evaluated differently. Valentino's play apparently served to entice women spectators and obscure the realities of Arab and white masculinity. Fairbanks' childish play embodied American primitivism through hyperactive movement, exaggerated gesture, and spectacle which could nevertheless reinvigorate British spectators. Finally, Colman's performance of masculinity was most assimilable to a British model of white masculinity precisely because it did not rely upon spectacle and self-display; instead, Colman is presented as one of a group, a homosocial collective embodying white solidarity, within an Orient defined not by sensuousness, glamour and excess but by a different kind of arduous bodily address. British critics thus received these films, and the American popular cinema they represented, through the racialised performances of their male stars. Their gestures, movements, and expressions, especially their smiles, became signifiers of race, gender, primitiveness, and, through these, aesthetic and colonial value. In *The Rat* and *Tommy Atkins*, these performances themselves were adapted, responding to British cinema culture anxieties about Hollywood's representation of whiteness by 'playing' only with class boundaries to solidify racial distinctions.

In the following chapter, I turn to another Orientalist genre and a different kind of star: the Limehouse film's female performers. The Eastern depicted fantastical, remote spaces, distanced from British spectators. By contrast, the Limehouse film was set in the 'heart' of Empire, stimulating different anxieties about cinema's penetrating, insidious possibilities. As with Diana, these are mapped onto the bodies of British women. However, in the Limehouse film, these women are the star performers, while their Chinese characters become spectators of white femininity. Rather than dealing with the playful display of masculinity and its connection to the 'primitive', the Limehouse film explores the female body's display, and through this, the possibilities and limits of cinema's status as art rather than mass entertainment. Alongside this, while the Eastern performance style is read in terms of excess and exaggeration, playful gestures and riotous laughter, the Limehouse film is performed through modes of *restraint*—a reserved, or even oppressed, white femininity and

inscrutable Chinese masculinity. The next chapter thus explores a different 'Orient' entering British metropolitan space with different implications for constructions of the medium.

Chapter 3: Performing Restraint and Constraint: Adaptation, Art, and the

Limehouse Film

On 19 November 1919, *Punch* published a cartoon introducing 'Mr. Ho Sing Hi, the Famous Chinese Cinema Actor' and his 'Characteristic Expressions' (Figure 28).¹ These 'Expressions', denoting emotions from 'Ecstasy' to 'Hate', are represented with the same image, parodying fan magazine photographs of actors performing different emotional states to demonstrate performative versatility.² The cartoon mocks a *lack* of facial and emotional flexibility, drawing on racist

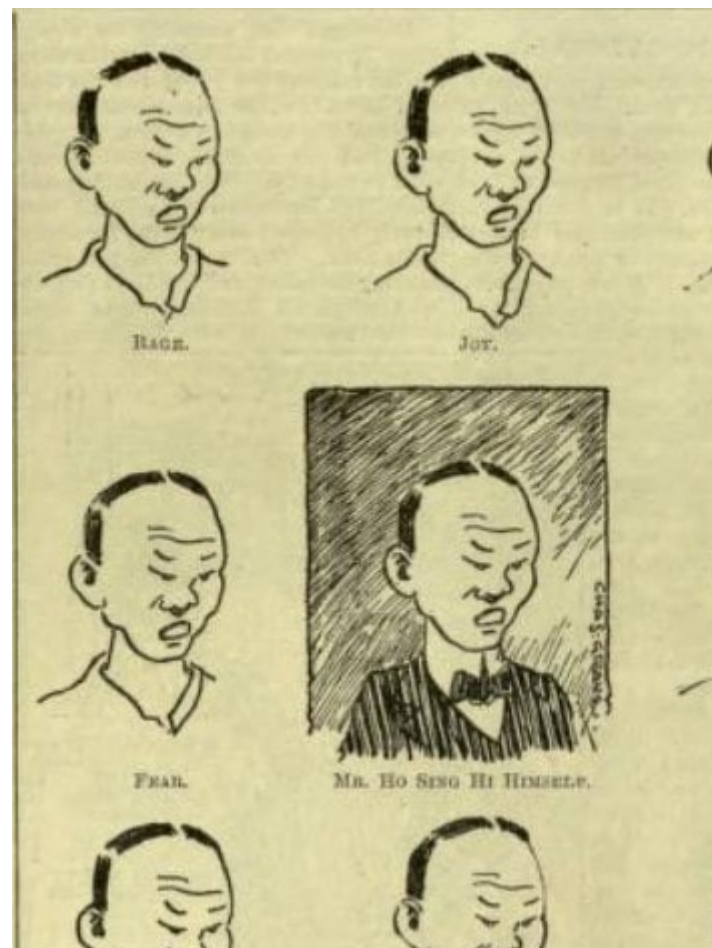


Figure 28: A *Punch* cartoon mocking Chinese 'inscrutability'

¹ *Punch*, 19 November 1919, p. 425.

² From the same week, see *Picture Show*, 15 November 1919, p. 10.

stereotypes of the indiscriminateness, inscrutability and unchangeability of Chinese people.³ The film actor's characteristic expressions are replaced by fixed characteristics of racial difference. In British interwar cinema culture, films and critics correspondingly envisaged East Asian 'Oriental' identity as a performance concealing interiority. Michelle Su-Mei Liu distinguishes between 'Asian', denoting a geographical or cultural origin, and 'Oriental' performance, denoting 'a performative category marked by imaginative interpretation of Asia', performable by both white and Asian actors.⁴ If Hollywood Easterns' Arab characters performed 'Oriental' excess, Chinese characters in 1920s American and British films performed a different 'Orient', characterised by inscrutability, a restraint distinct from the aristocratic, Anglo-Saxon, male 'norm'. As Fairbanks challenges restraint through his athletic, exaggerated vitality, 'Oriental' reserve also problematises this dominant mode. It endangers the association of restraint with the rational, civilised, cultivated white body. This Anglo-Saxon, male norm marked British cinema's Britishness but also its artistic quality; expressing the intensity 'of what is *not* expressed', it bespoke the actor's aesthetic refinement. In this chapter, I argue that performances of restraint in a genre associated with 'Oriental' performance facilitated consideration of cinema's capacity for art: was cinema a developing art form which deserved a place alongside theatre and literature, or was it, like 'inscrutable' Chinese characters, artful as in dissembling and duplicitous, disguising a medium of sensation and titillation?

For both East Asian and white actors, restraint and reserve—the qualities which characterised an aristocratic British style—also underpinned 'Oriental' performance, sometimes to represent 'Oriental' self-sacrifice but also, more often, belying villainy and violence. In this chapter, I examine a body of cinematic representations of the East End port district of Limehouse, a British space but one that was associated indelibly in this period with Chinese migrants. This 1920s film

³ See e.g. Robert Bickers, *Britain in China: Community, Culture and Colonialism 1900-1949* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 26; Rey Chow, 'How (the) Inscrutable Chinese Led to Globalized Theory', *PMLA*, 116.1 (2001), 69-74; Shanyn Fiske, 'Orientalism Reconsidered: China and the Chinese in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Victorian Studies', *Literature Compass*, 8.4 (2011), 214-226 (p. 217-218).

⁴ Michelle Su-Mei Liu, 'Acting Out: Images of Asians and the Performance of American Identities, 1898-1945' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Yale University, 2003), p. 7.

cycle, of which films were produced in both Hollywood and Britain, shifted 'Oriental' performance from remote locations to the heart of Empire in London. It became the site for problematising restraint through two racialised, gendered versions differing from the middle- and upper-class, Anglo-Saxon male 'norm': firstly, the potentially duplicitous restraint of Chinese male characters and, secondly, the restraint of white women in the context of post-war anxieties about white women's position in public space. In British cinema, Gledhill aligns 'Orientalism and Victorianism' in offering 'the pleasures of repression'; Victorian aristocratic restraint and 'Oriental' restraint both offered means of performing hidden 'passions'.⁵ Yet Gledhill and Lisa Rose Stead also explore criticisms of restrained performance directed at (white) women. For men, restraint was 'a much admired source of authority' but women had to perform this restraint contradictorily alongside 'emotional sympathy', representing their care and organisation of the family and the household.⁶ Stead extends Gledhill's analysis to fan magazine discourses about British female stars unable 'to navigate this incompatibility between modest British womanhood and the culture of personality that stardom embodied', to be both a public figure of glamour and self-display, and a private, domestic figure.⁷ Gledhill and Stead observe women being held responsible for the family's psychic and social stability, but they are also held responsible for *national and racial* stability. In the Limehouse film, this is measured by their restraint, in relation to that of Chinese men and the public and private spaces of East London itself.

The Limehouse in which these issues of film performance are worked out belongs to a longer, multimedial history of representations of an East London 'Chinatown', especially in fiction and newspaper reportage. This Limehouse was associated with the constraint, control, and encirclement of women by Chinese men, within the cramped streets and rooms of London and, on film, the frame itself. From the nineteenth century, London's working-class East End was characterised as an internal heart of darkness, its residents treated with a comparably imperialist

⁵ Gledhill, p. 63.

⁶ Gledhill, pp. 65-66.

⁷ Stead, paragraphs 11.9-11.14.

gaze and 'civilising' approach.⁸ This was intensified in Limehouse, a port which contained greater racial diversity. Representations of Limehouse in the press, literature, and other popular media foregrounded its Chinese population disproportionately.⁹ The presence of Chinese people was characterised as reverse colonisation, an infiltration of people, but also values and aesthetics, into British space.¹⁰ The district formed 'an imaginary cartography, which projects onto the real cityscape its own shadowy ideological antagonisms and fears'.¹¹ It became a Chinese space, 'built on essentially non-English terrain'.¹² This imaginary Limehouse thus brought the 'Orient' too close to the West; it made 'the Orient mobile', relocating it in 'the heart of Western civilization'.¹³ Yet on visiting the district and not finding such corruption, reporters concluded that 'Chinatown looked disappointingly drab and harmless (and empty), because the Chinese presence was sly, hidden, underground'.¹⁴ This imaginary Limehouse constructed in literature, newspaper reportage, and other media was simultaneously corrupting and 'inscrutable'.

Limehouse's shadowy insidiousness reflected China's actual ambiguous 'semi-colonial' relationship to the Empire: despite remaining an independent state not under colonial rule, a system of 'private enterprise imperialism' gave British private interests significant control, especially in

⁸ Richard Dennis, 'Modern London', in *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, ed. by Martin Daunton, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), III, pp. 95-131 (pp. 112-113); Gary Day, *Class* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 144.

⁹ John Seed, 'Limehouse Blues: Looking for Chinatown in the London Docks, 1900-40', *History Workshop Journal*, 62 (2006), 58-85 (pp. 59-76). John Seed acknowledges the difficulty of accurately ascertaining Limehouse's Chinese population, but notes that 47% of the 'foreign-born' population in the 1921 Census were Chinese; Seed, pp. 62-65. See also Shannon Case, 'Lilied Tongues and Yellow Claws: The Invention of London's Chinatown, 1915-45', in *Challenging Modernism: New readings in literature and culture, 1914-45*, ed. by Stella Deen (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), pp. 17-34 (pp. 17-18).

¹⁰ Seed, pp. 71-73; Anne Veronica Witchard, *Thomas Burke's Dark Chinoiserie: Limehouse Nights and the Queer Spell of Chinatown* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 71-72, 97.

¹¹ Seed, p. 70.

¹² Agata Frymus, 'Imagining Chinatown: *Broken Blossoms* (1919) in Britain', *Altre Modernità*, 20 (2018), 12-37 (p. 20).

¹³ Case, p. 22; Bickers, p. 24.

¹⁴ Ruth Mayer, 'Introduction: A "Bit of Orient Set Down in the Heart of a Western Metropolis": The Chinatown in the United States and Europe', in *Chinatowns in a Transnational World: Myths and Realities of an Urban Phenomenon*, ed. by Vanessa Künnemann and Ruth Mayer (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 1-25 (p. 18); Seed, p. 79.

‘treaty ports’ like Shanghai.¹⁵ The infiltrations of ‘villainous’ Chinese bodies into Britain has been read as a projection of the real colonial violence enacted upon China in the nineteenth century, particularly the Opium Wars which, after British victory, led to the establishment of treaty ports, inhibited the Chinese suppression of the illegal opium trade and preceded widespread opium addiction in China.¹⁶ The Limehouse genre instead represents opium abuse, and the languor and indolence associated with it, as inherently Chinese traits. Entering Britain via its ports, these qualities could also ‘corrupt’ white people, especially white women who once again embody British colonial territory and whiteness, transforming their bodies physiologically and aesthetically. Through the dissemination of opium and other drugs and through sexual threat, Chinese men purportedly penetrated the metropolitan centre via white femininity that they captured, encircled, and enclosed in East London’s literally cramped, claustrophobic geography.¹⁷ This also permitted exploration of illicit sexual activity, reflecting Gina Marchetti’s appraisal of Hollywood’s ‘fascination’ with the ‘Orient’ as a space where ‘[e]rotic fantasies can be indulged, sexual taboos broken’. Yet this was always balanced by anxieties about miscegenation and engulfment.¹⁸ Architecturally, sexually and colonially, a Chinese presence apparently penetrated and transformed the British Empire through restraint and constraint.

The enclosed, entrapping spaces of Limehouse’s Chinese residents became stages—framed, demarcated and spectated spaces—for performance of sexual, gender, and racial identity, and ultimately the legitimacy of the genre and cinema itself. In an East End associated with Chinese characters stereotypically depicted as deceptive and disguised—and usually opposed to a West End

¹⁵ Bickers, pp. 1-18. See also e.g. Jürgen Osterhammel, ‘Britain and China’, in *The Oxford History of the British Empire: The Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Andrew N. Porter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 146-169; Susan Schoenbauer Thurin, *Victorian Travelers and the Opening of China, 1842-1907* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999), p. 11; James L. Hevia, *English Lessons: The Pedagogy of Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century China* (Durham and London, and Hong Kong: Duke University Press and Hong Kong University Press, 2003), p. 20-27.

¹⁶ E.g. Bickers, p. 53; Michael Diamond, *‘Lesser Breeds’: Racial Attitudes in Popular British Culture, 1890-1940* (London: Anthem Press, 2006), pp. 19-20.

¹⁷ See e.g. Bickers, pp. 52-53; Jon Burrows, “‘A Vague Chinese Quarter Elsewhere’: Limehouse in the Cinema 1914-36’, *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 6.2 (2009), 282-301 (pp. 285-288).

¹⁸ Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the “Yellow Peril”: Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 1-2.

of glamour and stardom—performance is foregrounded and dramatised in the films as narrative elements.¹⁹ Like the Eastern genre, the Limehouse film’s popularity reached its peak during the 1920s. Marek Kohn connects this to the coming of sound, suggesting that the exoticised inscrutability of ‘Oriental’ performance relied upon silent cinema’s silence; once they could speak, Chinese Limehouse residents were consigned to comedic Cockney inoffensiveness.²⁰ The racialised performances that the Limehouse film foregrounded, then, were silent performances, corporeal forms of expression and address. Equally, though, they drew on Limehouse’s intermedial history, and its performances were read in Britain as indexes of cinema’s relationships with other media. As a consequence of the popularity of spectacular theatrical representations of China over the nineteenth century, China became analogous with a conception of the theatrical, embodying shared stereotypes of performance, eroticism, excess and artifice.²¹ Elizabeth Hope Chang argues that, above all, this artifice underpinned perceptions of Chinese objects, aesthetics, and people in nineteenth-century Britain—matched by a sense that it could be infectious, infiltrating British aesthetics and ways of seeing.²² Again, this was a British colonial projection, as the sacking and looting of the Summer Palace in 1860 had directly led to a proliferation of Chinese objects and artefacts in late-nineteenth-century Britain.²³ While Limehouse spaces provide performance stages, I suggest that the intoxicating effect of its Chinese characters was also comprehended as a kind of *generic* infiltration by British critics. If restraint as a performance style was potentially degraded in its performance by Chinese men and white women, the Limehouse genre itself held the same power to degrade the cinema medium. These films about a contact zone in the heart of the Empire—depicting

¹⁹ Pam Hirsch and Chris O’Rourke (eds), ‘Introduction: Film Londons’, in *London on Film* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 1-13 (p. 7).

²⁰ Marek Kohn, *Dope Girls: The Birth of the British Drug Underground* (London: Granta, 1992), p. 174. Burrows also notes the demographic reduction in Chinese people in Limehouse around 1931 due to a decline in shipping business; Burrows, ‘Limehouse’, p. 296.

²¹ Witchard, pp. 4-5, 39-40, 41-42

²² Elizabeth Hope Chang, *Britain’s Chinese Eye: Literature, Empire, and Aesthetics in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

²³ Chang, p. 114.

interracial intimacies in a moment of heightened anxiety about ‘miscegenation’ in Britain—threatened cinema’s relationship to its cultural heritage, racialised as a white imperial inheritance.

Most Limehouse films are influenced by, if not directly adapted from, Limehouse fiction. These adaptations emerged in a period of British cinema when both publishers and filmmakers were seeking to widen appeal of their respective media through film adaptations, ensuring ‘continued survival of a specifically national set of aesthetic codes’.²⁴ However, Napper writes of the anxiety among ‘middlebrow’ audiences that, ‘translated to a popular medium and exposed to a popular audience, the “middlebrow” novel of quality might afford no more than the lowbrow pleasures of sensationalism’; if adaptation could raise the status of British cinema, it could also signify impurity, ‘a degeneration of cultural values’.²⁵ In this chapter, I argue that the racialised encounters and performances of the Limehouse genre became a means for exploring these questions of adaptation, ‘purity’ and degeneration, and the legitimacy of cinema, its status as art. Adapting British classics, by what the Stoll studio called ‘Eminent British Authors’ in their series of adaptations from 1919, could legitimise a British national cinema in the face of Hollywood’s dominance.²⁶ However, the two key Limehouse novelists, Thomas Burke and Sax Rohmer, were not necessarily of this ‘eminent’ school; Rohmer especially wrote sensationalist popular pulp fiction.²⁷ While Burke’s Limehouse stories offer a more ‘artful’, sensuous and magical space compared to Rohmer’s typical ‘Yellow Peril’ narratives, both envision a city and white female population sexually and spatially menaced by Chinese men.²⁸ In a medium struggling to assert its legitimacy, the influence of these less ‘eminent’ writers became in itself a menace to cinema, threatening the same impurity.

²⁴ Napper, pp. 59, 57-79; Nathalie Morris, ‘An Eminent British Series: The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes and the Stoll Film Company 1921-23’, *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 4.1 (2007), 18-36 (p. 14).

²⁵ Napper, p. 79.

²⁶ Jon Burrows, ‘Big Studio Production in the Pre-quota Years’, in *The British Cinema Book*, ed. by Robert Murphy, 2nd edn (London: BFI), pp. 20-27 (pp. 20-24); Napper, pp. 61-67.

²⁷ Seshagiri, pp. 53-55.

²⁸ For comparisons of Burke and Rohmer, see e.g. Anne Veronica Witchard, ‘“Curious Kisses”: The Chinatown Fantasies of Thomas Burke’, in *Chinatowns in a Transnational World: Myths and Realities of an Urban Phenomenon*, ed. by Vanessa Künnemann and Ruth Mayer (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 101-115; Seed, pp. 58-59; Case, pp. 18-20.

The other intermedial influence on the Limehouse genre was melodramatic theatre, also inherently concerned with spatial and racial hybridity and intermediality. The subgenre of 'yellowface melodrama' depicted performances of whiteness and Chinese identity like the Limehouse film, presenting white heroines against Chinese men 'as the innocent object of lust and token of the fragility of the West's own sense of moral purity'.²⁹ This heroine became the embodiment of (white, Western) virtue and morality within the melodramatic Manichean opposition of good and evil.³⁰ As Burrows observes, much recent debate has focused on whether melodrama should be considered a genre, or a mode ranging across time, genre, and medium.³¹ The idea of melodrama as a mode, especially one that transcends theatre and fiction to exist in non-fiction forms and everyday life, resonates with the intermedial nature of the Limehouse genre.³² Burrows divides early-twentieth-century British conceptions of melodrama into 'two equally emblematic and well-established brands: "sensational" melodrama and "sentimental" melodrama'.³³ These designations align with the distinctions between the work of Rohmer and Burke, and the two archetypes of Chinese men in 'yellowface melodrama': the deceptive Chinese villain and the tragic Chinese lover, who perform restraint either to conceal malice or sacrifice impossible interracial love. Stage melodrama and Limehouse fiction played at the edges of respectability, depicting titillating encounters between Chinese men and white women. In Limehouse films, the relationships between

²⁹ Marchetti, p. 10; Sean Metzger, *Chinese Looks: Fashion, Performance, Race* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2014), p. 62.

³⁰ On this opposition's centrality to melodrama, see David Mayer, 'Encountering melodrama', in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*, ed. by Kerry Powell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 145-163 (p. 148).

³¹ Jon Burrows, "'Melodrama of the Dear Old Kind': Sentimentalising British Action Heroines in the 1910s', *Film History*, 18.2 (2006), 163-173 (pp. 163-165). Elaine Hadley, Gledhill, and Williams characterise melodrama as a mode, without stable generic or historical characteristics, whereas Ben Singer and Steve Neale argue that generic characteristics can be located at specific historical moments; Elaine Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics: Theatricalized Dissent in the English Marketplace, 1800-1885* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 3; Christine Gledhill, 'Rethinking Genre', in *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed. by Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), pp. 221-243 (p. 225); Williams, p. 12; Singer, pp. 6-7; Steve Neale, 'Melo Talk: On the Meaning and Use of the Term "Melodrama" in the American Trade Press', *The Velvet Light Trap*, 32 (1993), 66-89 (p. 76).

³² Williams, p. 12; Burrows, 'Melodrama', p. 165.

³³ Burrows, 'Melodrama', p. 165.

cinema and these other genres, forms, and media were articulated and explored through racialised encounters and performances.

Burrows' essential article on the Limehouse cycle in Britain ties these concerns about intertextuality, melodrama, and theatricality to the 'artfulness' of cinema, locating the source of this connection in the British reception of *Broken Blossoms* (D. W. Griffith, D. W. Griffith Productions, 1919). British writers foregrounded D. W. Griffith's artful direction and its high-quality acting which connected the film to legitimate theatre and painting, mitigating scandal about its central interracial relationship between Buddhist missionary Cheng Huan (Richard Barthelmess) and Limehouse waif, Lucy (Lillian Gish).³⁴ As Anne Veronica Witchard notes, theatricality is also foregrounded in the film: the set design 'interpreted the theatricality of Burke's Limehouse' by 'breaking the shot into planes'.³⁵ For British critics, this evidenced the film's fantastical Hollywood quality, in which Limehouse was 'an Americanised "costume" fantasy with precious little connection to the realities of British life'.³⁶ This artful quality was generally framed positively, but could also have damaging effects. A letter to the *Mail* by R. W. Morris worries that '[i]f this film were shown before natives it could not but give them a bad impression of us. Possibly the natives might take this as typical of English homes?'.³⁷ The 'art' becomes artifice, a misrepresentation of white domestic spaces which, these critics asserted, would not be comprehended merely as fantasy but as 'typical' and real by 'primitive' spectators. Australian journalist E. C. Buley asserts that '[t]he "new art" of the moving picture has cast its glamour over' the 'abomination' which the film's interracial relationship represented to him. He concludes that '[t]he art of the thing constitutes its danger': by being so 'artful', so exquisitely made, it insidiously disguises the risks he perceived in promoting interracial relationships.³⁸ After *Broken Blossoms*, then, Limehouse as a cinematic space was either improved or infiltrated by other media, mitigating potential sensationalism or disguising the seedy reality. If

³⁴ Burrows, 'Limehouse', p. 290.

³⁵ Witchard, *Chinoiserie*, p. 231.

³⁶ Burrows, 'Limehouse', p. 289.

³⁷ *Mail*, 17 April 1920, p. 4. See also *Telegraph*, 5 February 1920, p. 4.

³⁸ *Mail*, 9 April 1920, p. 6.

Limehouse cinema creates 'stages' for performance of gender and racial identity, these could be positive, 'artful' expressions of romance, tragedy or glamour, or negative, lascivious, and even racially 'degenerative' sensationalism.

Limehouse as a British space became a stage for exploring intermediality, intertextuality, and the corrupting influence of popular forms, articulated through the infectious threat posed to white women. Urmila Seshagiri reads Limehouse fiction as a 'racializing of modernity's crises': the fragmentation and alienation of metropolitan life, the proliferation of new technologies and ways of living, and the realisation of the 'wholeness' of the Empire's peripheries—alternative perspectives newly visible to British subjects.³⁹ The crises of the modern technology of cinema, and its impact on traditional colonial geographies and cultural heritages, are similarly racialised in the Limehouse film. To explore this, I divide the chapter according to the two traditions of Rohmer's sensationalism and Burke's sentimentalism. In the first section, I explore a Stoll adaptation of a Rohmer novel, *The Yellow Claw* (René Plaissetty, Stoll Picture Productions, 1920). Situating this within Stoll's policy of 'eminent' adaptation, I suggest that the performance of Chinese villainy and inscrutability exhibits ambivalence about 'adapting' China to Britain. I then turn to two Burke-influenced Limehouse films. I demonstrate that British promotion and criticism of *Broken Blossoms*, adapted from a Burke short story, concentrated on the performance of the white female protagonist, Lucy, rather than Barthelmess' Cheng Huan, to articulate the film's 'art' and extricate it from Limehouse squalidness. Finally, I discuss *Piccadilly*, a late Limehouse film written by the middlebrow writer Arnold Bennett. An Anglo-German production, with a Chinese *woman* protagonist played by Anna May Wong rather than the Chinese men typical of the genre, the film conversely celebrates cinema's potential for glamour, hybridity, and boundary-crossing. Wong's performance of Orientalised restraint evokes cinema's allure and sensory address, which is opposed to the stultifying conventions of popular crime fiction and melodrama. These films exhibit attention to generic, spatial, gendered, and racial boundaries and limits. Formal and thematic containment, entrapment, and encircling are central to

³⁹ Seshagiri, pp. 61-62.

how they address the generic and socio-sexual implications of the presence of Chinese bodies in the Empire's heart and in British films. They provide the means to explore these forms of hybridity while also containing them at the narratives' conclusions. The differing ways that these films explore and resolve these tensions raised various consequences for constructions of cinema and cinematic taste within British cinema culture.

Stoll's *The Yellow Claw* and the Art of Adaptation

Despite its emphasis on 'eminent' British narratives and authors, the Stoll studio also exploited 'Oriental' exoticism, while marking 'Oriental' performance as a 'British' trait in a similar way to British critics who claimed understanding of Arab spaces and peoples as British colonial knowledge. In a British film news column in *Cinema Chat*, Stoll is described as a 'Mecca of enthusiastic students of China' after its adaptation of the stage play, *Mr. Wu* (Maurice Elvey, Stoll, 1919). Here, the column continues, British actors are 'adapting [themselves] to Chinese temperament and atmosphere'.⁴⁰ Positioned within British scholarly Orientalism, Stoll claims ethnographic knowledge of Chinese 'temperament and atmosphere', the representation of conduct and of space. The verb, 'adapting', here is instructive in the context of Stoll's 'Eminent British Authors' series. This 'adaptation' is framed as a contribution to British cinema; the actors work as if 'responsible for the fame of Los Angeles—instead of little Richmond'. After the success of *Mr. Wu*, a proportion of Stoll's British adaptations used narratives about China and Chinese people. Some, like *Mr Wu* and *The Chinese Bungalow* (Sinclair Hill, Stoll, 1926), were adapted from theatrical productions featuring 'eminent' British theatre actor, Matheson Lang. These were set and contained in Chinese settings, distanced from Britain. In these films, adapting 'Oriental' identity could signal an artful, even scholarly 'knowledge' of a Chinese 'style of being', a means for British actors to take control of Chinese space and bodies only 'semicolonially' controlled in actuality. In Limehouse, however, the 'art' or 'scholarly' nature of these performances were undermined by their infectious, insidious position in the British metropole. *The Yellow Claw* exemplifies this. Adapted from Rohmer's 1915 novel, it

⁴⁰ *Cinema Chat*, 18 August 1919, p. 6.

dramatises performance and spectatorship to address the tensions of art and artifice and ‘eminence’ and sensationalism in Stoll’s ‘Oriental’ adaptations.

The film is a typical ‘Yellow Peril’ mystery narrative which begins with the white Mrs Howard Vernon (June Tripp) overdosing on opium in an upper-class British home. Gradually, a team of respectable white men in public roles reveal that this death, and a wider ‘infiltration’ of Europe with opium dens, is the fault of the Chinese villain, L. King. The film never mentions Limehouse, in keeping with Stoll’s ‘policy of disavowing even nominal links between Rohmer’s ‘Yellow Satan’ and any of London’s real Chinese immigrants’.⁴¹ However, the book on which it is based situates King’s main lair, ‘The Cave of the Golden Dragon’, in Limehouse, and a Rohmer narrative, in which the influence of a Chinese villain reaches upper-class suburban and West End people, invokes Limehouse implicitly.⁴² In his review of *The Yellow Claw*, G. A. Atkinson writes that the film follows ‘[t]he tradition (which, as readers of the "Daily Express" are aware, has some foundation in fact) that there is a large and subversive Chinese organisation in London's East End’.⁴³ Atkinson reconnects the film to Chinese Limehouse inhabitants. In this case, Atkinson mitigates the narrative’s sensationalism through association with ‘factual’ reporting in the *Express*. This resonates with his belief that the film ‘touches the highest level of technical excellence’; he distances ‘true’, technical art and scholarly Orientalist authenticity, from sensationalist artifice. Yet the *Times* connects the film to ‘the old-fashioned “penny dreadful”’, rather than authentic reportage.⁴⁴ The Limehouse genre’s ambiguously ‘legitimate’ origins were thus noted by critics, providing implicit evaluation of the films themselves.

An adaptation from popular fiction rather than theatre without the legitimising influence of an actor like Lang, *The Yellow Claw* reflects these anxieties about its origins: whether it was merely a sensationalist magazine thriller, epitomising the ‘almost infinitely commodifiable’ nature of the ‘Yellow Peril’ fantasy, or an artful adaptation.⁴⁵ It comments on this tension through performance

⁴¹ Burrows, ‘Limehouse’, p. 286.

⁴² Sax Rohmer, *The Yellow Claw* (New York: McBride, Nast & Company, 1915), p. 180.

⁴³ *Express*, 6 January 1921, p. 9.

⁴⁴ *Times*, 11 January 1922, p. 8.

⁴⁵ Seshagiri, p. 54.

and disguise. The key setting, the Cave of the Golden Dragon, is a space of costuming and disguise, its main hall broken into theatrical 'planes' of Chinese decoration and furniture like Witchard argues of *Broken Blossoms*. The den is filled with secret passages and compartments, architectural disguises revealed throughout the film. Furthermore, characters are forced to disguise themselves to enter. French detective Gaston Max (Harvey Braban) disguises himself as an opium addict to infiltrate the lair and expose King's identity. Similarly, Soames (Norman Page), the butler of the home at the film's beginning and King's secret accomplice, is told to disguise himself with blackface makeup in order to hide from British police in the lair. Through this seedy Limehouse-aligned space, costume and disguise are associated with villainy, deception, and ultimately the infiltration of British space.

These qualities are also aligned with 'Oriental' restraint. The film never directly depicts King, the ruler of this Cave. King embodies an extreme of restraint by disappearing into shadowy insubstantiality. Unlike King, we do see Ho-Pin (Kiyoshi Takase), his main servant, throughout the film. However, his only role is to enact King's demands; he is a surrogate for the spectral villain, emphasised by his slow, deliberate movements which articulate a sense of his being controlled invisibly. Played by a Japanese actor, Ho-Pin as performer is a *mask* for this hidden figure. If white actors like Lang expressed the artifice of 'Oriental' identity through their 'yellowface' make-up and performance, the body of Ho-Pin himself becomes a kind of 'yellowface' disguise for an invisible performer, who orchestrates those in his theatrical domain into disguise, costuming, and racialised performance. His restraint, his invisibility, is connected to his control over this space within Britain, articulated through masking, disguise and concealment, and through forcing others, especially white Britons, to disguise themselves in the same way.

Watching from his invisible position, King's own 'performance' in the film is spectatorial. He is only ever visible as a shadow through a Chinese screen print. He is made visible as art, and indeed art facilitates King's opium smuggling; he extends his reach through an art studio owned by a dealer who tricks women into smoking opium-laced cigarettes. In a central scene, Gaston is taken to an 'Observation Room', where he is approached and kissed by the 'Lady of the Poppies' (Kitty Fielder),

another white woman under King's influence. They are made to perform for him in 'Oriental' attire and with slow, soporific movements. Gaston is lit by spotlight and surrounded by darkness, encircled, framed, contained and forced to perform. King watches them through eyeholes in the print, invoking the encircling imagery of the Limehouse film. King is not a performer but the scene's orchestrator and audience; L. King, visible only through the two holes, or Os, in the print, becomes 'Looking'. Making explicit concerns about the 'artful' nature of performance of Chinese identities, he becomes both shadow and artwork, completely inscrutable in both. The darkness surrounding the white characters as they embrace symbolises King sexually and psychologically engulfing them, but as absence projected onto a screen. A dark shadow, he exists only as restrained, reserved 'observer', watching and orchestrating white characters forced into erotic display.

As observer concealed by darkness, King is aligned with the *spectator*, invoking cinema audiences' voyeuristic desire for the sensational. However, the shadow was associated with the cinematic use of light and dark epitomised by German Expressionism and the proto-cinematic form of shadow theatre.⁴⁶ Through these associations, *The Yellow Claw*'s shadowy concealment could also represent cinematic artfulness. In Atkinson's review, he remarks before discussing the film that

[t]hat superficial air of automatism which marks out the Chinaman from the rest of the world makes him a singularly arresting and convincing figure in the film, especially his mincing gait, which has in it even a suggestion of "flicker".⁴⁷

Atkinson links the 'air' and movement of Chinese men to the very projection of light onto a screen, to cinematic essence. The 'mincing gait' suggests effeminised movement, contributing to the film's melodramatic opposition of white, masculine officialdom and effeminate East Asian villainy. Yet this movement is cinematic and underpins the film's 'technical excellence' in lighting and shadow. King's inscrutability becomes the film's art itself.

In the final scene, King and his cronies are chased onto a boat and drown in the Thames, the hand of King briefly re-emerging to drag the Lady of the Poppies down with him. In this moment, an intertitle repeated three times throughout the film, 'Who is Mr. King?', is superimposed over

⁴⁶ Maurice, pp. 126-127; and see Elizabeth Abel, 'Shadows', *Representations*, 84.1 (2003), 166-199 (p. 189).

⁴⁷ *Express*, 6 January 1921, p. 9.

shimmering water. *Picturegoer* commends the film as part of an article about London on screen: *The Yellow Claw* successfully depicts the ‘highways and byways of London’s river [...] with its many bridges, its forsaken wharves, and its air of harbouring all the tragedy in the world’.⁴⁸ Within the context of another article arguing that Britain’s resources need to be exploited on film, the Thames is not represented as the magisterial centre of the Empire’s maritime economic network but a seedy, bleak setting concealing nooks and crannies—the Thames of the Limehouse docks, a space of melodrama and death. The writer of this article continues that this Thames is a ‘godsend to the writers of mystery stories’ and Rohmer has ‘utilised it well in his tale of opium and murder’.⁴⁹ With the never-solved mystery of King’s identity, white, imperial masculinity loses out, underlined by the submergence of the white Lady of the Poppies. The white woman is not saved and King remains intangible; he always underlies London’s surface as a potential threat to British space, and indeed British cinema in making it seedy, sexual and sensational. This conclusion thus invokes the film’s connection to ‘mystery stories’ in the moment that represents the engulfment of the ‘artful’ villain by the city itself. King is completely concealed in *The Yellow Claw*, becoming unrepresentable and unknowable, yet persists as a reminder of what lies beneath the city, and the claims for eminence made through Chinese characters and performance by the Stoll studio.

Through theatricality, disguise and extremes of restraint, *The Yellow Claw* articulates anxieties about Stoll’s ‘eminent’ adaptation of popular literature, the depiction of interracial encounters in British space and ultimately the tensions between art and sensationalism. Other films influenced more by Burke’s Limehouse, like *Broken Blossoms* and *Piccadilly*, depict a less criminal Chinese presence in Limehouse. However, they examine the same anxieties about restraint, corruption of British space, and its relation to medial and generic hybridity. King’s presence encircles, and enforces performance from, *The Yellow Claw*’s white characters. In *Broken Blossoms*, Cheng Huan does the same but this *distances* Lucy from a grimy, British Limehouse and its generic associations.

⁴⁸ *Picturegoer*, January 1922, pp. 8-9.

⁴⁹ *Picturegoer*, January 1922, p. 9.

Rescuing Lucy: Broken Blossoms in Britain

When *Broken Blossoms* was exhibited in Britain a year after its American release, press attention focused on its exhibition at the Alhambra in Leicester Square. In London's West End, the film was exhibited with live performances before and afterwards, recreating the Buddhist temple in which Cheng Huan is advised on his missionary trip at the film's opening. These theatrical additions were part of a 'plan of attuning the mind of the spectators to the picture' by creating 'the proper atmosphere'; taking the film out of London into the 'East', they restored the characters and London spectators to a place of performance and fantasy. This space was a more respectable one for the potentially illicit interracial romance to be exhibited. As the *Mail* puts it, '[e]ffects of the legitimate stage were used to enhance the "atmosphere" of the film'; the film is rendered 'legitimate' through theatrical associations distancing it from the real London.⁵⁰ Gledhill suggests that these additions 'lent cultural prestige and respectability' to attract a 'better, higher-paying class of clientele'. At the same time, they 'opened up an interface between live and screen performance'.⁵¹ 'Adapting' the exhibition space, the film's British exhibition aimed to create intermedial connections with a higher 'class' of art, beyond Limehouse popular fiction and the 'lower class' of sensationalist 'yellowface melodrama'. The film and its British reception would aim to assert the same distance through 'Oriental' performance, restraint, and appropriate spectatorship.

Learning to Perform in Broken Blossoms

Despite his own work in melodramatic theatre before film, Griffith promoted himself as a director whose 'films represented an emancipation from the stage, an escape from a moribund art'.⁵² Roberta Pearson attributes Griffith a crucial role in shifts in American acting over 1908 to 1913 from a 'histrionic code', involving self-conscious performance, exaggerated gesture and tableaux, to a

⁵⁰ *Mail*, 16 March 1920, p. 5.

⁵¹ Gledhill, *Reframing*, p. 12.

⁵² Russell Merritt, 'Rescued from a Perilous Nest: Griffith's Escape from Theatre into Film', *Cinema Journal*, 21.1 (1981), 2-30 (p. 4).

‘verisimilar code’, with less exaggerated gestures in a continuous flow.⁵³ While Griffith did not invent or instigate this style, his self-promotion—and the repetition of this by critics—meant that he *did* influence performance style, associating the ‘verisimilar’ or ‘naturalistic’ with the cinematic, in comparison to ‘theatrical’, exaggerated or melodramatic style. However, in *Broken Blossoms*, as the theatrical prologues and epilogues imply, the ‘theatrical’ offers escape from sordid ‘real’ London. An artificial, theatrical adaptation of London space with Chinese aesthetics provides solace for the white heroine. It also enables the film to articulate itself as ‘art’: ‘adaptation’ to Chinese performance styles and aesthetics separate Lucy from a degraded Limehouse and its generic associations.

According to Pearson, from Griffith’s early Biograph shorts, which occasionally drew on ‘yellowface melodrama’ as in *The Fatal Hour* (D. W. Griffith, Biograph, 1908) or *That Chink at Golden Gulch* (D. W. Griffith, Biograph, 1910), ‘Griffith paid most of his attention to his female actors, the “child-women” to whose thespian training he devoted himself’.⁵⁴ In such shorts, as in his most notorious film, *The Birth of a Nation* (D. W. Griffith, David W. Griffith Corporation, 1915), in which Lillian Gish also starred, and *Broken Blossoms*, these ‘child-women’ perform racial melodrama’s innocent, morally pure white femininity: the ‘white female body under assault at the hands of, or as a result of a relationship with, a man of color’.⁵⁵ From her role in *The Birth of a Nation* embodying white femininity violently threatened by a newly enfranchised Black American populace, Gish’s star persona represented white femininity and ‘the future of the white race’; as Dyer argues, her ‘almost angelic delicacy’ and connection with light and virtue embodied a white feminine ideal.⁵⁶ *Broken Blossoms* depicts the impossibility of this ideal surviving in a degraded, working-class Limehouse.

⁵³ Pearson, *Eloquent Gestures*, p. 90.

⁵⁴ Pearson, *Eloquent Gestures*, p. 90.

⁵⁵ Susan Courtney, *Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation: Spectacular Narratives of Gender and Race, 1903-1967* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 19-20.

⁵⁶ Kristen Hatch, ‘Lillian Gish: Clean, and White, and Pure as the Lily’, in *Flickers of Desire: Movie Stars of the 1910s*, ed. by Jennifer M. Bean (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2011), pp. 69-90 (pp. 75-76); Richard Dyer, ‘A White Star’, *Sight and Sound*, 3.8 (1993), 22-24.

Lucy is another innocent child-woman, forced to grow up by the violent Limehouse around her. Throughout, her 'growing up'—through violence, sexual threat and discovering love—is represented as learning to perform, and being forced to do so by the encircling, containing forces surrounding her. Limehouse's violence is represented not by Huan but by Lucy's father, Battling Burrows (Donald Crisp), a boxer who bullies and abuses his daughter in their home. This home is a claustrophobic space in which Burrows circles around the room and Lucy, echoing his circling trajectories in boxing matches (Figures 29 and 30). As Duckett argues, Gish performs her restriction and entrapment as restraint, embodied in her tightly wrapped shawl and her quick, small, nervous gestures; this restraint is not aristocratic grace but fear and constraint, a turning in on oneself.⁵⁷ The room's claustrophobic *mise-en-scène* traps Lucy between bed and kitchen, forcing her to perform a domestic and even incestuously sexual role for which she is too young.⁵⁸ The violence Lucy faces is most embodied in a moment of performance when Burrows insists on her smiling. In close-up, Lucy presses her mouth into a distorted smile, undermined by her wide, terrified eyes (Figure 31). This moment captures the tensions of women's restraint, as she is forced into performing an



Figure 29: Battling Burrows circles Lucy in their home in *Broken Blossoms*...

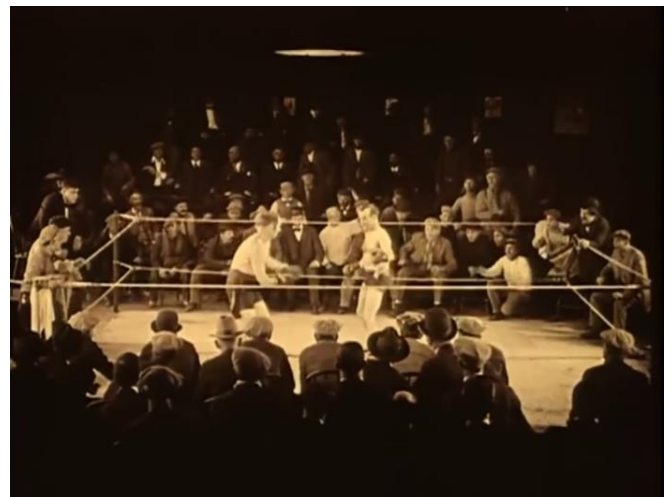


Figure 30: ...as he circles his opponent in the boxing ring

⁵⁷ Victoria Duckett, 'The Silent Screen, 1895-1927', in *Acting*, ed. by Claudia Springer and Julie Levinson (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2015), pp. 25-48 (p. 42).

⁵⁸ Julia Lesage sees the prominent bed in the home's *mise-en-scène* implying a sexual relationship; Julia Lesage, 'Artful Racism, Artful Rape: Griffith's *Broken Blossoms*', in *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. by Christine Gledhill (London: BFI, 1987), pp. 235-254 (pp. 242-244).

exaggerated, travestied vision of happy domesticity by a domineering man. Similarly to the ambivalent ‘art’ of *The Yellow Claw*, we are aligned with Burrows’ expectant gaze, the camera itself framing and containing Lucy. Witchard notes the sexual implications of her relationship with Burrows, reading her passivity, vulnerability and awakening sexuality as part of a Victorian ‘combination of juvenile eroticism and sexual innocence’.⁵⁹ This perverse, violent sexual awakening is framed as an induction into the performances of womanhood: beautiful smiles, and domestic and sexual labour.



Figure 31: Lucy forces a smile for Burrows



Figure 32: Lucy touches her mouth but smiles naturally in Huan’s quarters

The white brute Burrows embodies Limehouse’s entrapment, violence, and seedy sexuality rather than the Chinese character. However, the Chinese Huan cannot offer a future for white femininity either. Lucy eventually finds refuge from Burrows’ violence when, after being brutally whipped, she stumbles through the streets before fainting in Cheng Huan’s shop. Here, she discovers her sexual desires, again represented through performing—this time ‘adapting’ herself to Chinese aesthetics. Huan brings Lucy to his bedroom above and decorates the room and her body with *chinoiserie*. Once Lucy changes into a ‘magical’ Chinese robe, she is able to sit up. This decoration has a curative impact in this space of fantasy extracted from the sordid London spatially and morally ‘below’. She is in another cramped, contained space, wrapped tightly in fabrics, yet one which allows her to escape Limehouse’s depravities. After dressing Lucy, Huan gives her a mirror to inspect

⁵⁹ Witchard, *Chinoiserie*, p. 229.

herself. She is depicted in a close-up and looks almost directly at the camera after looking in the mirror (Figure 32). In the wider shot that precedes this, Huan is situated slightly behind her; this shot, therefore, implies Lucy, or Gish's, consciousness of the *film's* audience. Able to see herself, she becomes conscious of onlookers; yet unlike her reaction under Burrows' gaze, her eyes widen in joy and surprise and her mouth upturns. No longer forcing a histrionic grin, she touches her mouth but finds that she can smile naturally. Enclosed and contained by the camera frame and space, she performs comfortably through her 'decoration' with Chinese fabrics and objects. *Broken Blossoms* dramatises the process of disavowing Limehouse, 'adapting' space and body to transcend its sordid associations. Through Huan's adaptation of this British space, the enclosure of the frame and the room now represent safety and sanctuary from the outside world.



Figure 33: Huan contemplates his missionary journey

In the room above Huan's shop, the bed in which Lucy recovers remains as a reminder of Lucy's potential erotic or sexual role. Yet Huan is juxtaposed with Burrows as another character performing and spectating in opposition to her. Played by the white Barthelmess, Huan would also contrast with David, his character in Griffith's *Way Down East* (D. W. Griffith Productions, 1920), who falls in love with Gish's Anna despite her previous marriage and dead child. In this film, the

rural, white, American couple are able to overcome their distance and achieve the marital happy ending. However, Barthelmess' performance as Huan can only be characterised by sensitivity and distance. Like Lucy, he constantly holds his hands close to his chest and watches her yearningly, performing a physical 'Oriental' restraint of the body, a respectful distance from Lucy's white girlhood. He tends to her wounds and carries her to bed, but mostly just stares at her. This recalls the scene in which Huan is introduced as a missionary to London in a Chinese temple, an addition to Burke's source text which simply describes him having 'come to London by devious ways'.⁶⁰ His *spiritual*, not 'devious' movement is expressed in this opening scene. In a Buddhist temple, a monk advises him, and he contemplates his 'great dream' of bringing a 'message of peace' to the 'Anglo-Saxon' West. Huan looks beyond the frame in medium close-ups, holding his hands to himself yet visualising his projected journey (Figure 33). Again, physical restraint is expressed through a gaze directed outward. A window behind them opens onto a panoramic, blurred view, through which he and the monk stare as the temple bells ring. Perched in the mountains, a high-up space akin to Huan's bedroom, the temple is a location for looking outward while restraining one's body. As with the shadowy presence of King in *The Yellow Claw*, Huan's performance becomes spectatorship. Yet whereas this epitomises King's villainy, Huan's spectatorly distance positions him in opposition to the melodramatic villain as spiritual, poetic lover, while rendering Lucy Limehouse's visual centre.

The film raises the spectre of miscegenation only to claim a 'purer' love through Huan's self-effacement. Of course, this was only permitted because both Gish and Barthelmess were actually white, performing 'Oriental' restraint as a kind of fantasy escape. The narrative reaches a melodramatic conclusion through the destruction of this 'pure' love. This misreading of this purity by Burrows is a *generic* miscomprehension, misreading the interracial relationship according to 'Yellow Peril' miscegenation anxieties. Lucy is discovered after one of Burrows' cronies hears her in Huan's shop. Sneaking upstairs, his head appears in the frame's background, an interruption of Huan's perfectly curated space making Lucy's private performance visible to outsiders. Initially shocked,

⁶⁰ Thomas Burke, *Limehouse Nights: Tales of Chinatown* (London: Grant Richards, 1916), p. 18-19.

Burrows' friend then laughs; what Huan sees as poetic, magical and beautiful, this man sees as comedy. When the news filters through to Burrows, he sees Lucy's presence in Huan's shop as a result of a 'Yellow Peril' villain's devious trickery. Correspondingly, Huan's decorated space becomes a site of entrapment, the disconcerting infiltration of the deceptive and disguised; the clothes and ornaments become signs of sexual invasion instead of mediating 'pure' love. Burrows ends Lucy's reprieve by destroying this space: he rips Lucy's clothing, breaks a table leg to smash ornaments and decorations, and tears down tapestries. This spatial destruction is also represented in close-ups as he approaches Lucy in bed. His face is closer to the camera than in other characters' close-ups, and he then moves even nearer so that his grimace fills the screen (Figure 34). Burrows' face replaces the room and frame. The close-up resumes its role in asserting Limehouse's claustrophobia, though the spectator is more ambivalently placed: with the camera alternating between characters, the spectator is aligned with Lucy's fear and suffering and Burrow's sadism. The close-up in Huan's room no longer represents an awakening to pleasurable feminine performance but a destruction of *mise-en-scène*. With the removal of the mediating, distancing Chinese props and decorations, the horrified and furious facial expressions of the two characters are all that remain as the narrative reaches its tragic conclusion. The film dramatises 'Oriental' performance as a means of escaping grotty, violent working-class London, though concludes asserting the impermanence of such escape.



Figure 34: Burrows fills the frame in close-up

Removing the 'Limehouse note'

Burrows drags Lucy to their home, whips her violently, and is finally murdered by Huan who arrives too late to save her. Huan returns Lucy to his shop, places her in bed in the now-ruined room, and finally kills himself. The film's tragic conclusion was repeatedly observed by critics as signalling its artistry: a picture that 'dares to have an unhappy ending', its 'unutterable gloom' marked the 'progress' of the medium and its distinction from other films.⁶¹ Yet Barthelmess' performance, replacing lustful, sexual predation with spiritual worship, was not foregrounded in this. British critics commented almost exclusively on Gish; as Huan effaces himself in the film, the same process occurred in the British press. Gish's terrified, hysterical performance in the scene after Burrows has torn Lucy from Huan's shop was most commended. When Burrows drags her home, she escapes into a closet, retreating into an even smaller, more claustrophobic space. Burrows hammers, shouts, and eventually breaks the door, while Lucy presses herself against the wall, her body contorted as she screams, grimaces, and bites her hands (Figure 35). As Burrows strikes the door, Lucy moves back and forth before finally resorting to spinning and screaming. The circular movement returns in this



Figure 35: Gish cowers in the closet as Burrows breaks in

⁶¹ *Mail*, 26 September 1919, p. 3; *Telegraph*, 9 October 1919, p. 4; *Guardian*, 29 August 1919, p. 5.

space of entrapment, the frame colluding in forcing Gish's performance of fear. The terror of Limehouse's infiltration, embodied in the violent, masculine Burrows, provokes Gish's performative excellence for British critics.

If Gish's acting contributed to the film's art, critics had to address the fact that this performance's apotheosis is the moment of terror and agony, the melodramatic peak of emotion at the villain's hands. They did so by extracting this moment from Limehouse as Huan extracts Lucy in his shop. *Express* critic 'H. S.' employs the film's vertical metaphor when claiming that Gish's acting in the cupboard scene 'rises to supreme heights'.⁶² Another *Express* article addresses the ambivalence of this scene more directly. Declaring that the 'exquisite artistry' of Gish's performance is 'the most poignant thing that has ever been done on the cinema', it compares *Broken Blossoms* to Greek tragedy, where 'the horrors take place off the stage'. The film lacks this 'reticence' but Gish's conveyance of the 'utter misery of shadowed childhood' through 'shades of expression which connote a supreme artist' engender 'a lesson in love and pity, not a revolting exhibition of brutality'.⁶³ What could be a celebration of violence becomes an exploration of transcendent emotion through subtle performance transitions. The writer concludes that Greek tragedy provides a model: '[t]he commonest reproach brought against the cinema is that it exploits the ape and tiger in mankind. The motto of the artist-producer must be reticence, reticence, and again, reticence'. Evoking the film's own condemnation of the 'primitive' brute, Burrows, this writer distances Gish from this. Transforming Lucy's performance from melodramatic to tragic, though still through association with the legitimising medium of theatre, raised the film above its Limehouse setting and its brutality and seediness.

One writer does find in Gish's performance a specifically cinematic, rather than theatrical, form of expression, which nevertheless asserts the film's distinction. A *Times* critic praises Gish in *Broken Blossoms* as 'an actress who has studied the different requirements of the screen and the

⁶² *Express*, 23 January 1920, p. 3. Weigall employs similar vertical metaphors; *Mail*, 25 November 1921, p. 14.

⁶³ *Express*, 12 April 1920, p. 6.

stage, and has concentrated everything on facial expression'.⁶⁴ The film's reliance on close-ups, encircling, enclosing and eliminating all but the face, enables Gish's performative superiority. Gish's face becomes the centre of the film's art. The camera provides not an enclosure but perfect framing. This distinction from theatrical performance arises with a grievance that Griffith did not completely remove 'the Limehouse note' by setting the film in 'an imaginary Chinatown'. This is 'a Limehouse which neither Mr. Burke nor any other man who knows his East-end of London will be able to recognize'. Appealing to the authority of the source text's author, the film's Limehouse is a fake version of a real, British place, distracting from what could be achieved if it was set in a purely generic 'Chinatown'.⁶⁵ Similarly, Anderson reports on watching the film with Burke, who initially 'did not believe in the cinema as an interpreter of ideas' but changed his mind upon watching the film.⁶⁶ Despite its Limehouse not being 'the street he knew', the film depicts 'a poignant human tragedy that might have been enacted in any one of a score of the big cities of the world'. Again, the connection to Limehouse, as city space and as generic setting, is disavowed in favour of a cinematic art that works 'universally', that is recognisable in *any* city. Of course, Gish's naïve, terrified 'child-woman' is in fact a performance of whiteness against Burrows' brutish primitivism and Huan's 'Oriental' distance. Yet Gish's whiteness is framed as universal, embodying cinema's 'universal' language. While Anderson initially only lists Gish's performance as part of acclaiming the acting of all three main roles, he singles out her 'exhibition of sheer terror that leaves the spectator gasping' in the closet scene. Like the *Times*' attention to 'cinematic' facial expression, Gish's performance goes beyond language to achieve a universally bodily effect. Once more, Gish is foregrounded in 'opening up a new vista for the picture play'. Her performance emerges from containment, enabling cinema to express 'universal' emotions. Quoting Griffith that the narrative can contribute to 'internationalising human sympathy', Anderson distances the film's Limehouse from Britain. As with Balázs' 'universal language' which is, in fact, a language of whiteness, however, Gish's universalism,

⁶⁴ *Times*, 23 January 1920, p. 10.

⁶⁵ Burke's authority on Limehouse was often used to critique the setting's inaccuracy; see e.g. *Times*, 26 January 1920, p. 10; *Guardian*, 23 September 1922, p. 7.

⁶⁶ *Telegraph*, 29 January 1920, p. 14.

the film's art, can only emerge with her ascent into whiteness, into enclosed, indoors spaces: the spaces of Victorian idealised white femininity, which, Mohanram proposes, rendered middle-class femininity a kind of classless white 'norm' from which working-class women were excluded.⁶⁷ Gish's performance attained 'universal' resonance in its enclosure and constraint, by male characters, indoors spaces and the close-up film frame.

Broken Blossoms centralises the performance of white femininity by Gish and Lucy, highlighting an ambivalence around enclosure and its creation of spaces for live performance. This was taken up by British critics, who wrestle with the fact that the apotheosis of Gish's performance comes at the moment of Lucy's greatest terror, laden with potential sensationalism. Whether by relating Gish's performance to tragedy or by asserting its essentially cinematic nature, British critics disconnected it, and the film, from the melodramatic popular origins of the Limehouse setting. Gish's performance—inheriting a 'Western' tradition or articulating a 'universal' whiteness—was thus protected from generic or medial 'impurity'.

Speaking of the scene in which Lucy views herself in the mirror, Ruth Mayer posits that 'she also reveals what every spectator of the day knew all along to be there, underneath the tattered clothes and dirty make-up: the glamorous, beautiful star, Lillian Gish'.⁶⁸ Lucy's awakening to the possibilities of her self-image, performing in a way which separated her from the film's sordid 'Limehouse note', is an acknowledgement of her stardom. The naïve Lucy could only implicitly invoke stardom but later Limehouse films more directly explored its perils and pleasures. Released ten years after *Broken Blossoms*, *Piccadilly* examines star performance through a relationship between a white character and a Chinese Limehouse resident. Anna May Wong's Shosho begins the film as a dishwasher in the club's scullery, but is discovered by nightclub owner Valentine (Jameson Thomas) and becomes the star dancer, displacing the club's current white performers, Mabel and Victor (Cyril Ritchard). Through this narrative of star performance, coded as American, exotic and

⁶⁷ Mohanram, p. 30.

⁶⁸ Ruth Mayer, 'The Glittering Machine of Modernity: The Chinatown in American Silent Film', *Modernism/Modernity*, 16.4 (2009), 661-684 (p. 669).

erotic, this late Limehouse film also explores cinema's essential qualities alongside its intermediality and, through these, its legitimacy and value.

Piccadilly, Limehouse and Film Stardom

Ending 'the sufferings of some broken blossom': Limehouse's White Women Stars

At the beginning of the 1920s, *The Yellow Claw* and *Broken Blossoms* explore the ambivalent theatrical and literary heritage of the Limehouse genre through performances of restraint and constraint by Chinese men and white women. Released at the other end of the decade, a late-silent film at the beginning of the sound era, *Piccadilly* also explores the legacy of the now decade-long film cycle and its death in a silent format already becoming outdated. This was reflected in its exploration of star performance and the changing nature of female stardom perceived in British cinema culture. Over the 1920s, British commentators observed a shift in female stardom, aligning with Jacobs' 'decline of sentiment'. C. A. Lejeune complains in 1924 of 'The Hard Heart' of contemporary audiences, whose tastes no longer favoured the 'little innocent, pathetic star of yesterday' but vamps, villains, and 'character men'.⁶⁹ In 1929, *Picturegoer* laments 'the passing of melodrama' in cinema, so that roles like those of Mary Pickford and Gish were 'things of the past'.⁷⁰ The writer notes that film tragedy, here *synonymous* with melodrama rather than being opposed to it, had come to be tempered by comedy, unlike 'movies of ten years back, when queues waited hours to have a good cry at the sufferings of some broken blossom'.⁷¹ *Piccadilly* would reflect these changing conventions in star personae, through the exoticised and eroticised Anna May Wong.

This shift is also evident in Limehouse films, which turn from naïve 'universal sweethearts' to actual diegetic performers, aware of and comfortable in their public visibility. 1920s Limehouse films prominently feature nightclub settings, the very site for anxieties about misrepresenting white femininity discussed in Chapter 1. Accordingly, these sites become spaces to *critique* the visibility of female stars and suggest a need to return to the domestic and private. As in *The Rat*, the city and the

⁶⁹ *Guardian*, 14 June 1924, p. 6.

⁷⁰ *Picturegoer*, February 1929, p. 22.

⁷¹ *Picturegoer*, February 1929, p. 23.

nightclub are spaces of modern sexual expression and close bodily contact. Mara Arts demonstrates the centrality of the London nightclub to 1920s British cinema as a location associated with pleasure and illicit activity, enjoyed vicariously through film.⁷² If Lucy discovers her stardom in *Broken Blossoms*' mirror scene, later Limehouse films depict a more knowing figure, managing their image in public London space and purposefully making themselves visible to white and Chinese spectators. In the lost British *Blinkeyes* (George Pearson, Welsh-Pearson, 1926), the eponymous character (Betty Balfour) is a popular East End dancer. However, her fame renders her susceptible to the treacherous desires of the Chinese melodramatic villain, 'Chang'.⁷³ Later in the decade, British-German production *The Alley Cat* (Hans Steinhoff, British & Foreign and Orplid-Film, 1929), centres on Melona Miller (Margit Manstad), star of a nightly stage show, and East End comedian, Polly (Mabel Poulton). These women's public visibility as performers and white women in London again makes them vulnerable to a Chinese Limehouse inhabitant, employed by the film's villain, Beck (Clifford McLaglen). Ultimately, they choose to leave stardom behind in favour of romance and domesticity with their lovers. In these films, the nightclub and stage are spaces to be transcended, where white femininity is made visible and vulnerable to lascivious gazes and sexual predation.

Like *Piccadilly*, *The Alley Cat* was a silent film released in 1929 when sound was already dominant. If Gish's performance was marked as 'universal' through silent facial expression, in later Limehouse films, silence becomes another constraint through which the woman star performs and uses her body. In *Piccadilly*, this connects the film to the preceding decade of Limehouse films. Burrows contends that *Piccadilly*'s relationship to the Limehouse genre has been neglected.⁷⁴ *Piccadilly* complicates the gendered and racial politics of the genre by starring Wong in the role of a Chinese woman dancer, rather than the typical white performer. Her silence underpins the focus on her body as her primary means of expression. King-Kok Cheung argues that East Asian people,

⁷² Mara Arts, 'Glamour and Crime: The London Nightclub in Silent Film', in *London on Film*, ed. by Pam Hirsch and Chris O'Rourke (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 27-39.

⁷³ Burrows, 'Limehouse', p. 286.

⁷⁴ Jon Burrows, '*Piccadilly* (1929)', in *Silent Features: The Development of Silent Feature Films 1914-1934*, ed. by Steve Neale (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2018), pp. 205-220 (p. 207).

especially women, are stereotypically associated with a ‘culture of verbal restraint’ and silence, rendering them ‘devious, timid, shrewd, and, above all, “inscrutable”’ but finds, in writing by East Asian women, subversion of these stereotypes and questioning of the very authority of language.⁷⁵ Anna May Wong’s performance accordingly serves as a critique of sound film, the denigration of performance and the body in the Limehouse genre, and racialised British performance conventions themselves. Through bodily communication, she transcends the distances British cinema established between spectator and performer.

This comes in a film about and produced under conditions of international hybridity, undermining the condemnation of hybridity and boundary crossing in previous Limehouse films. As Burrows observes, the film uses sweeping camera movements to undermine London’s rigid geographies, emphasising the ‘fluid nature of attitudes and alliances’ and the ‘thoroughly hybridized and cosmopolitan’ nature of everyday life.⁷⁶ This was further reinforced in this early-sound moment; as John Belton explains, unwieldy recording equipment and camera soundproofing restricted camera movement. Thus, ‘[t]he design of early sound recording technology played a crucial role in determining the “look” of early sound film’.⁷⁷ In this moment, only silent cinema could create this aesthetic of hybridity and boundary crossing, reinforced by purportedly ‘universal’ silent performance. Arnold Bennett’s authorship lent the film associations with ‘eminent’, middlebrow literature like earlier Stoll films. Yet it starred a Chinese-American and was directed by German director E. A. Dupont, hired as part of British International Pictures’ (BIP) policy of producing ‘quality’ international films and seen to embody the hybridity and internationalism of ‘Film Europe’, a pan-

⁷⁵ King-Kok Cheung, *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 1-4.

⁷⁶ Burrows, ‘*Piccadilly*’, pp. 213-214.

⁷⁷ John Belton, ‘Awkward Transitions: Hitchcock’s *Blackmail* and the Dynamics of Early Sound Film’, *The Musical Quarterly*, 83.2 (1999), 227-246 (p. 228). Kelly Robinson demonstrates that British International Pictures, the studio which produced *Piccadilly*, were exploring these difficulties with early sound technology contemporary to its release; Kelly Robinson, ‘An Adaptable Aesthetic: Theodor Sparkuhl’s Contribution to Late Silent and Early Sound Film-making at British International Pictures, 1929-30’, *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 17.2 (2020), 172-190.

European movement aiming to challenge Hollywood dominance.⁷⁸ Dupont had in fact been criticised by British critics for his 'spectacular cosmopolitanism' in evoking the glamour and sensationalism of nightclub life.⁷⁹ While Bennett's novels, as the *Times* observed, also contained nightclub scenes and dealt with murder, Dupont's direction meant that 'traces of its authorship' by Bennett were obscured by his 'cosmopolitan' spectacle, much as *Broken Blossoms*' 'art' could obscure the dangerous depiction of 'miscegenation'.⁸⁰ In its production, form and narrative, *Piccadilly* explored hybridity and impurity through silent performance and its sensational bodily address, reaching across the boundary of the film frame itself.

Later, Dupont would make unsuccessful sound films shot simultaneously in multiple languages to reach different national markets.⁸¹ However, in *Piccadilly*, cinema is celebrated for its *silence*, visual spectacle, and hybridity, through Wong's performing body. The film breaks boundaries, undermining the claustrophobic, threatening 'stages' of the Limehouse genre.⁸² Wong's Orientalised, silent mystique raises anxieties about women's dance and public performance in Limehouse and the West End. Rather than articulating its dangers for white women, the film explores the pleasures of the medial, sexual, and spatial impurity that the nightclub and Limehouse implied to contemporary audiences. However, as a silent film in the sound period depicting an interracial relationship and subversion of colonial hierarchies and geographies, this 'impurity' and hybridity is unsustainable. My analysis is thus divided into two halves: how Shosho transcends Limehouse's entrapment, visualising pleasurable, spectacular forms of hybridity and transgression,

⁷⁸ Tim Bergfelder, 'Negotiating Exoticism: Hollywood, Film Europe and the Cultural Reception of Anna May Wong', in *"Film Europe" and "Film America": Cinema, Commerce and Cultural Exchange 1920-1939* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999), pp. 302-324 (p. 307); Andrew Higson and Richard Maltby (eds), "'Film Europe" and "Film America": An Introduction', in *"Film Europe" and "Film America": Cinema, Commerce and Cultural Exchange 1920-1939* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999), pp. 1-31; Andrew Higson, 'Polyglot Films for an International Market: E.A. Dupont, the British Film Industry, and the Idea of a European Cinema, 1926-1930', in *"Film Europe" and "Film America": Cinema, Commerce and Cultural Exchange 1920-1939*, ed. by Andrew Higson and Richard Maltby (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999), pp. 274-301 (p. 274); Tim Bergfelder, 'Life Is a Variety Theatre – E.A. Dupont's Career in German and British Cinema', in *Destination London: German-speaking Emigrés and British Cinema, 1925-1950*, ed. by Tim Bergfelder and Christian Cargnelli (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books), pp. 24-35 (p. 26).

⁷⁹ Higson, 'Polyglot Films', p. 281.

⁸⁰ *Times*, 2 February 1929, p. 10.

⁸¹ Bergfelder, 'Variety Theatre', pp. 32-33.

⁸² Burrows, 'Piccadilly', p. 215.

and how the film works to restore this entrapment. Shosho is finally contained through the restoration of Limehouse's connection to crime fiction and melodrama; these generic origins are framed as stultifying and conventional, undermining Shosho's transgressive dynamism.

Dance, Transgression, and Transcendence in Piccadilly

Piccadilly represents the shift in conventions of Limehouse's performing white heroines, depicting the replacement of a white star, Gilda Gray's Mabel, with a Chinese star, Wong's Shosho. Gray was not a 'Gish-like' star, and in many ways exemplified the more 'modern' actress who contemporary critics like Lejeune perceived to have displaced her. Famous for popularising the 'shimmy', she often appeared in skimpy costumes unbefitting of earlier performers of innocent whiteness. In a *Picture Show Annual* profile, for instance, she is photographed in Orientalist costume with headdress and translucent skirt.⁸³ Yet the same profile also emphasises her 'clear and colourless' skin and 'childlike simplicity of manner'. Anna May Wong was not afforded this framing. Instead, as Atkinson writes, she was 'a Chinese flapper', embodying exoticised modern femininity.⁸⁴ Wong's 1920s roles were characterised by what Tim Bergfelder calls 'ethnic eclecticism', playing Chinese, Mongolian, Inuit and indigenous American women.⁸⁵ Before *Piccadilly*, Wong was most famous for her role in *The Thief of Bagdad*. Celine Parreñas Shimizu argues that this role inaugurated the screen tradition of the vampish 'dragon lady' using "'Oriental" femininity [...] to trap white men on behalf of conniving Asian males'. In American publicity, 'the image of Anna May Wong shows the Asian Woman as a sublime object of beauty hiding a grotesque interior'; her villainy relies on 'Oriental' inscrutability and restraint.⁸⁶ In *Piccadilly*, however, this is complicated by her positioning as female star and protagonist. The film exploits Limehouse to undermine the genre's focus on performances of white

⁸³ *Picture Show Annual* 1929, p. 140.

⁸⁴ *Express*, 25 September 1924, p. 5.

⁸⁵ Bergfelder, 'Negotiating Exoticism', pp. 302-324.

⁸⁶ Celine Parreñas Shimizu, 'Making Woman Asian: Racialized Sexuality on Screen and Scene' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Yale University, 2003), p. 77.

femininity in bounded, contained spaces, celebrating instead the hybridity and boundary-crossing of a star like Wong.



Figure 36: Mabel and Victor begin their symmetrical dance in *Piccadilly*

This is engendered primarily through moments of diegetic performance—eroticised and exoticised formal dances and non-staged social performances. Always spectated by some form of audience, these establish spaces to be transgressed and articulate the rise and fall of Mabel and Shosho. The film invites comparison between the two dances, performed in full in the film, at the Piccadilly by Mabel and Victor and Shosho. Both emphasise formal symmetry and its subsequent interruption. At the beginning of the film, Mabel and Victor’s dance introduces them as soon-to-be-displaced stars. They begin by descending two symmetrical staircases, coming together and swapping places repeatedly (Figure 36). This leads to two individual sequences. Victor first performs a tap routine, the camera tilting to his feet and back up as he spins, then cutting to the audience to depict some watching intently while others chat and eat. The camera returns to him and pans left as Victor faces it and thrusts a top hat repeatedly. It works in dynamic partnership with Victor, responding to and following his dance. Mabel then rhythmically lifts the bottom of her skirt and undulates her shoulders. Initially, the camera follows her but cuts to two men gossiping about her

sexual relationship with Valentine. White femininity is not centralised but interrupted. Elizabeth Kendall and Virginia Brooks suggest that, in silent film dance sequences, choreography was less important than establishing ‘a presence, a mood’, a ‘feel for motion’; dance could be split into ‘fragments’ to add to a film’s atmosphere.⁸⁷ In *Piccadilly*, this ‘mood’ is of fragmentation, disruption and distraction, compounded further by Charles Laughton’s interruption. Laughton plays an unnamed diner who, discovering dirt on his plate, shouts in annoyance so that other spectators, and Mabel, turn to look at him, shifting the visual centre and generic register of the film from a performance of titillating white femininity to comedic corpulence. One type of performance is interrupted by another, and the fragility, translucence, and grace of the white woman star is mocked through association with male corporeality and consumption.⁸⁸



Figure 37: West End’s bright lights

This precedes the interruption of Wong’s Shosho, the Chinese protagonist who recalls the infiltration of the theatrical in Limehouse film. The source of the dirty plate is revealed to be Shosho, whose own dance is distracting the dishwashers. Initially firing her, Valentine rehires her as a dancer

⁸⁷ Elizabeth Kendall, *Where She Danced* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 134-136; Virginia Brooks, ‘From Méliès to Streaming Video: A Century of Moving Dance Images’, in *Envisioning Dance on Film and Video*, ed. by Judith Mitoma (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 54-60 (p. 55).

⁸⁸ Anne Anlin Cheng suggests that Mabel appears corporeal and heavy compared to Shosho’s light ethereality throughout; Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 71.

after a sexual encounter and she performs her routine on the same stage. Shosho's dance differs in that Shosho *is* the interruptive force. Mabel performs before Shosho on the night, without Victor who has quit the club, but this performance is not shown. Despite the almost ridiculously glittering outfit she wears, she has been displaced as the visible performer, and the embodiment of the West End's light display shown at the beginning of the film (Figure 37). Shosho's dance begins with her still, crouched in tableau, before her hands start moving in slow wave-like patterns and she stands. She is an image of intangible mobility and light. From her central position, she barely moves, but gestures outwards with her hands and body (Figure 38). She is framed by four large candles with bulky glitter-ball bases, contributing to a *mise-en-scène* of stasis. Yet, as Anne Anlin Cheng argues, Shosho projects herself beyond this fixed framing. Cheng highlights the 'trope of the circle' in the dance as 'the perfect analog for Shosho's mode of simultaneous self-expansion and self-containment'.⁸⁹ Even her Orientalist 'warrior' armour, which she has Valentine buy from a Limehouse shop, is solid and tightly hugs her body, as if binding her. Yet simultaneously, it gleams with light reflecting across the room. Light allows Shosho to extend beyond herself during this routine. She looks out of the frame left and right; unlike Mabel, whose look outwards signals Laughton's interruption, Shosho projects herself as Huan does in *Broken Blossoms*. Cuts to the audience reveal a transfixed crowd, spotted with the glitter-ball's light. Shosho does not shimmy but shimmers, framed and contained, the centre of the space and audience's gaze, but refracted and reflected outwards too. While Mabel and Victor dance together, their dance characterised by interrupted symmetry, Shosho dances alone, situated as the centre of the space. If Gish performs the pain of being enclosed as Lucy in *Broken Blossoms*, Shosho's displacement of the white woman is a spectacle of glamorous stardom as transcendence of enclosure; this Limehouse star is celebrated for exceeding boundaries.

⁸⁹ Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, p. 81.

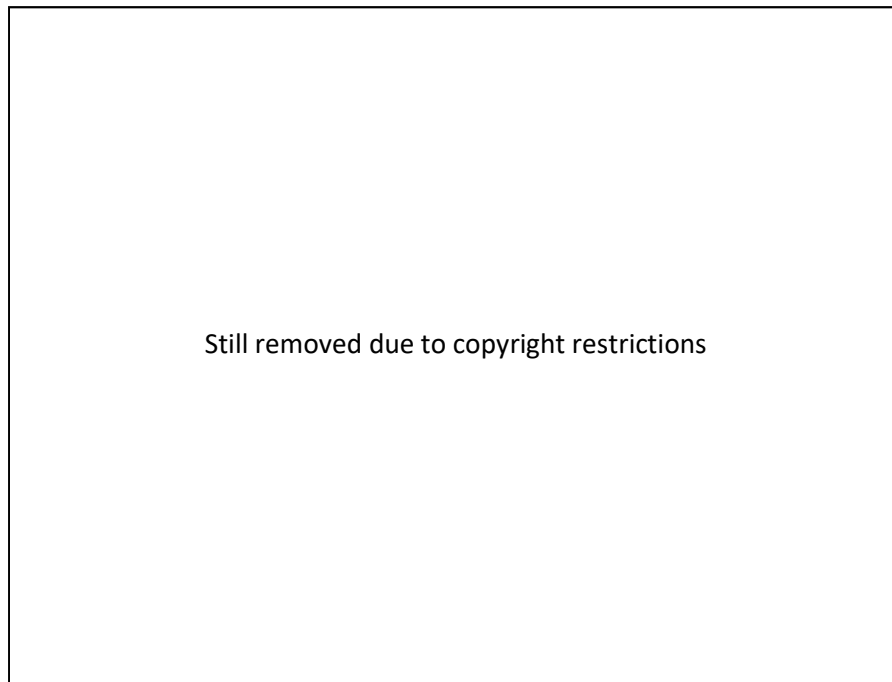


Figure 38: Shosho's dance at the Piccadilly

Shosho's light display is a performance of 'Oriental' exoticism and extension. Yet the film emphasises this as performance: her deliberate exploitation of her body and identity. Yiman Wang argues that Wong, as an Asian-American actor, was not judged by her performance skills but as index of the 'Orient'. Her acting was seen as mimetic instead of performative, 'indexically related to what was imagined to be "Chinese" or "Oriental"'.⁹⁰ Wong countered this with a performative strategy that Wang calls 'yellow yellowface': the ironic over-performing of Chineseness through the same 'corporeal signs' of clothing, hair, and mannerism that white stars used when playing 'yellowface' roles. Wong thus facilitated a 'performative problematization of the Orientalist role' that exposed the artifice of 'yellowface' performance.⁹¹ In *Piccadilly*, Wong's character, Shosho, uses 'yellow yellowface'. This is evident in that we see her reality in Limehouse contradicting the 'Oriental' performance she displays in the West End. Whereas earlier Limehouse films depict the creation of theatrically artificial spaces as an extension of a threatening, deceptive villainy stemming from Limehouse, Shosho's artificial West End display has no origin in the East End. In a crucial scene, Valentine visits a Limehouse Chinese restaurant at which Shosho has insisted he buy the 'warrior'

⁹⁰ Yiman Wang, 'The Art of Screen Passing: Anna May Wong's Yellow Yellowface Performance in the Art Deco Era', *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies*, 20.3 (2005), 158-191, p. 162.

⁹¹ Wang, pp. 170-172.

costume. While one shot depicts a group of Chinese men and one white woman gambling, this is cut with shots of Chinese men eating, a barman cleaning glasses, and Valentine's interested, but not shocked, responses. This Limehouse interior is banal, surveyed by a near-ethnographic gaze. The camera moves inward with Valentine, entering the door as if penetrating unknown space. Yet this setting is not another fantastical Limehouse lair, but shabby and ordinary, housing everyday behaviour rather than underworld crime or 'Oriental' spectacle. The barman directs Valentine to the restaurant's rear to find the salesman. Here, Valentine finds a Chinese man, Jim (King Hou Chan), later revealed to be Shosho's lover. Jim is surrounded by Chinese statues, but his bored expression dispels any sense of a space of decorative display. He gestures left, and a curtain is pulled but this moment of revelation at the centre of this Chinese space reveals only a white East-End vendor; even this shot is only 'decorated' by a white rag in the background. The colonialist penetration of Limehouse by Valentine and the camera is undermined by the revelation of a scruffy white man at its centre.

Wong's 'yellow yellowface' performance has no referent in her real life and home. When Shosho emerges, she is dressed in ordinary, though chic, 'Western' clothing. There is a moment of ironic performance in this scene when Shosho insists that Jim wear her Orientalist costume so she can see how it looks (Figure 39). If Valentine's entrance into the restaurant/shop moves the film into a 'social realist' register for Paul Matthew St. Pierre, he argues that this scene is also one in which hierarchies of gender and race are reversed as Valentine becomes 'Other', an intruder into 'Chinese' space, and as Jim wears this skimpy woman's costume.⁹² Yet Jim's performance itself, his expression as he slumps against the wall with ordinary shirt sleeves protruding from the outfit, is of utter boredom, deflating this transgression and maintaining 'social realism'. The reversal of colonial power central to 'Yellow Peril' and Limehouse narratives is here not fantastical but ordinary. Valentine surveys the costume with a similarly disinterested gaze. This moment of cross-dressing performance,

⁹² Paul Matthew St. Pierre, *E. A. Dupont and His Contribution to British Film: Varieté, Moulin Rouge, Piccadilly, Atlantic, Two Worlds, Cape Forlorn* (Madison and Teaneck: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010), pp. 92-94.

potentially fantastical and subversive, is transformed into another financial decision and transaction within the city's commodity circulation. Despite the connection to Huan's shop in *Broken Blossoms*, this space is not one for escapist performance, but ordinary commercial activity.



Figure 39: Jim dressed in Shosho's costume

The Limehouse scene reveals Shosho's orchestration of her stardom. Unlike *Broken Blossoms*, the woman performer takes charge and is not coerced but orchestrates performance. Shosho displaces the white woman with a display of both boundedness and the projection of the body beyond itself, a managed spectacle of sexuality and eroticism. After she is initially caught by surprise by Valentine's surveillance in the scullery scene, she remains conscious of her performances throughout. This enables her to cross London's spatial, classed, and racial boundaries, escaping the scullery to the nightclub dancefloor and thus, metonymically, East London into the West End.⁹³ As an East Asian, working-class woman who finds freedom through performances of sensuality, Orientalist exoticism and West End glamour, Shosho disrupts the geography of Limehouse and London, and the codes of racialised performance in British cinema culture. She reminds that the performance of race is a performance, drawing attention to, exploiting and even making glamorous and erotic the

⁹³ Ian Christie, 'East-West: Reflections on the Changing Cinematic Topography of London', in *London on Film*, ed. by Pam Hirsch and Chris O'Rourke (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 239-252 (p. 242).

crossing of colonial and domestic spatial boundaries. However, this subversive performance must be contained, regardless of the film's revelry in it. In contrast to other films in which anxiety about Limehouse's intermedial and populist origins are expressed through a central performer, Shosho's subversive implications is contained by reconnecting her *with* these generic associations.

Containing Shosho

As Burrows recalls, *Piccadilly* was produced at 'the tail end of this pronounced vogue' for the Limehouse film.⁹⁴ A silent star, communicating through her dancing body, Shosho was already something of a relic at the close of the Limehouse cycle and beginnings of the sound era. This is dramatised in the film when she is murdered. Initially, it is implied that Mabel had broken into her home and shot her, but it is revealed in the final scenes that Jim killed her, with Mabel's gun, out of jealousy at her relationship with Valentine. Shosho's death becomes a loss of control over her performance, wrested from her by associations of the Limehouse genre with 'lowbrow' fiction, melodrama, and sensationalist newspaper reportage. Throughout the film, Shosho's private displays for Valentine are undermined reminders that she cannot be conscious of *everyone* watching. As their romance develops, Shosho brings Valentine to an East End club. This is introduced with a long pan over hands grabbing drinks, before finally stopping on Shosho and Valentine's hands. Valentine hesitantly places his hand on Shosho's. This partial view of them in a busy East End nightclub provides the possibility of contact otherwise not permitted in public. However, soon after, a policeman looks into the glass door, followed by a white woman who looks through the two Os in the word 'SALOON' before entering. This space is not as private as it appeared. The Os provide a means to spectate and enjoy East End rabble-rousing, but also suggest another kind of circular containment, echoing the 'Looking' in *The Yellow Claw*. The woman approaches and begins dancing with a Black man, initially unnoticed by others but soon becoming a spectacle as the bar owner separates them and chastises the man. After she argues with the owner, he kicks her out, much to

⁹⁴ Burrows, '*Piccadilly*', p. 207.

the approbation of the baying crowd. Valentine and Shosho suddenly become aware of their own visibility as an interracial couple, even in this surreptitious space. As Higson puts it, *Piccadilly* demonstrates that the excitement surrounding Film Europe's internationalism and cosmopolitanism is 'always contained by the discourses of colonialism, and the celebration of white, Western values'.⁹⁵ These values are represented by the spectating urban crowd, bearing witness to and policing the protagonists' transgressions.



Figure 40: Shosho frames herself for Valentine

This commotion leads to Shosho and Valentine's exit. By a low bridge on a street corner, Shosho gives Valentine a prim handshake, but the camera tilts to Valentine's surprised reaction as he realises she has given him a key to her house. Nineteenth-century newspaper reporters 'exploring' the East End often described low, tunnel-like entrances to working-class parts of the city to emphasise their hidden, seedy quality.⁹⁶ In *Piccadilly*, this serves as a space where Shosho instigates another private performance. In her home, Shosho uses ornate furnishings to frame and veil herself for Valentine (Figure 40). Later, she smiles as she lounges on the sofa before him and with slow, deliberate movement, veils her face again with a translucent sleeve. The room's

⁹⁵ Higson, 'Polyglot Films', p. 283.

⁹⁶ Barry Milligan, 'The Opium Den in Victorian London', in *Smoke: A Global History of Smoking*, ed. by Sander L. Gilman and Zhou Xun (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), pp. 118-125 (pp. 119).

furnishings and her clothing buttress her deliberate, languidly erotic performance. Having witnessed the repercussions of interracial courting and contact in the East End club, Shosho performs by delaying and displacing contact, framing herself to be observed but not touched. Valentine grabs her hand to kiss it, but Shosho stops him, moving her hand slowly out of his grasp and out of the shot. Restraint becomes the means to perform exoticised 'Oriental' eroticism and distance. The film then cuts away, not permitting sight of the consummation of their relationship; Shosho exercises sexual restraint which increases sexual tension, distancing spectators to emphasise her erotic and exotic mystique.

Yet even this final private performance is made public, and this leads to Shosho's containment via a generic shift into crime fiction, presented as a dull, uninteresting alternative to the illicit, glamorous interracial romance preceding it. After Valentine leaves, Mabel convinces Jim to admit her. She and Shosho have an argument about the object of Valentine's affections, and Mabel seems to shoot Shosho and passes out. Gaining entry to Shosho's private rooms, Mabel makes visible her private performance. After Shosho dies, the majority of the final eighteen minutes of the film are occupied with the inquest into her death. Most of this is spent re-telling, from various perspectives, a story which the spectator knows: Shosho and Valentine's affair. Compared to the rest of the film, this sequence is notably unglamorous; the grey blankness of the court's walls appropriately enclose the uninteresting narrative recapitulating in drawn-out detail events already known. Bessie (Hannah Jones), who had worked with Shosho in the scullery and later becomes a go-between for her and Valentine, begins, describing her discovery of Shosho's body. If Mabel is one model for the ousted white Limehouse star, Bessie is another: an older, outdated East End figure, made exaggeratedly ugly—the large mole on her chin is a prosthetic addition—in comparison to the dainty innocence of previous Limehouse female stars. Bessie's account raises no questions for the jury and she is dismissed. Even Mabel's shock appearance and purported revelation only describes what the audience has seen; she even re-performs the actions of drawing the gun on Shosho and fainting. Only the revelation that Jim has killed himself in the mortuary provides new information.

The mortuary itself, where Jim confesses, is even barer than the court room and, with its ashlar walls, represents a pre-modern space, set apart from the West End. It is here that the narrative returns to melodramatic cliché: this was a revenge killing by a Chinese lover whose pretence of brotherly affection for Shosho could no longer be upheld. The end of the film, then, is also a generic shift from East End-West End romance to Limehouse crime melodrama. Yet this is a shift into a more boring, less sensual register, where the spectator is aligned with a court audience and a judge, witnessing repeated, slow performances of a duller, unexotic and unerotic restraint—a juxtaposition with Shosho's deliberately erotic slowing in the preceding sequence.

Christopher Pittard argues that late-Victorian detective fiction 'dramatises an anxiety about material contamination and impurity [...] and aligns detection with the act of cleaning'.⁹⁷ For Pittard, this is tied to an anxiety that detective fiction itself was cheap waste, 'something to be consumed and then thrown away, without lasting value'. The cleansing of criminality and villainy also legitimises the genre, purifying it by disconnecting it from sensational narratives and 'impure' forms.⁹⁸ In *Piccadilly*, Shosho is comparably contained by being cleaned up, placed back into the Limehouse genre with which her racial identity associates her. In the film's last scene, the inquest is reported in newspapers with Shosho's photograph. If Atkinson legitimised *The Yellow Claw* by connecting it to 'authentic' newspaper reporting, headlines of 'Shosho Lover Dead' and 'Shosho Confession & Suicide' represent her return to melodramatic Limehouse news. These newspapers displaying her photograph and story enable Pittard's generic cleansing. Grasped and crumpled, they symbolise her loss of control over her performance. Before, she evoked erotic contact while restraining herself at the same time, using light, glamour and movement to invite sexualised, haptic, gazes from diegetic and film spectators alike. Now, she is made easily touchable. After one man finishes reading the paper, he returns it and throws a cigarette to the ground. The newspaper and cigarette are connected as ephemeral urban goods to be briefly held and discarded. Shosho is

⁹⁷ Christopher Pittard, *Purity and Contamination in Late Victorian Detective Fiction* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), p. 3.

⁹⁸ Pittard, pp. 20, 25.

consigned to everyday consumption of disposable, tangible commodities. She still circulates round the city, but as waste material, yesterday's news. Despite *Piccadilly's* general distance from 'the convention of a Limehouse replete with Orientalist cliché', Ian Christie characterises its conclusion as a return to typical East End narratives of transgression and punishment.⁹⁹ Both the drawn-out inquest and the sensationalist reporting return Shosho to this conventional Limehouse as a means of controlling and containing her subversive performative strategy.

Suddenly shifting genre at the last moment and consciously inviting comparison with the more sensuous, erotic scene preceding the inquest, the film *performs* a disavowal of Shosho similarly to Shosho performing a disavowal of bodily contact while asserting eroticism in the process. Shosho's subversive impact can be allowed if it is framed as the *memory* of a performance, something now lost especially in a new era of sound film and thus new modes of sound performance. In *Piccadilly*, this was emphasised with an added sound prologue, in which a man visits a country pub on his return from Shanghai. He soon learns that this pub is run by Valentine, who he remembers as 'one of the best turned-out men in London'. Valentine is now dressed, as he quips, in 'more comfortable' clothes and smokes a pipe rather than the cigarettes he smokes in the main film, reiterating his disconnection from the city. This added sound sequence retrospectively frames the narrative as a story that Valentine tells the man, a memory of a now-lost, silent London. Given that Shosho's performance was fundamentally designed to evoke boundary-crossing of seemingly impermeable spatial and social limits, it is possible to read her transcending this framing at the beginning of the film which consigns her to silent, exotic memory. *Piccadilly* is an elegy to the Limehouse genre and its potential for hybridity, sensuous and illicit forms of contact and interaction otherwise disavowed in British cinema. It celebrates this older space and performance style as one of glamour, beauty, and sensory pleasure. This was a *cinematic* pleasure articulated through light and camera movement in combination with dancing, gesturing and moving bodies that contrasted to dull, monotonous present modes of performing. The generic associations of Limehouse once more

⁹⁹ Christie, p. 243.

entail the risk of degrading cinema as an art form. However, this is not mitigated by asserting its actual association with 'higher' arts but by celebrating the cinematic—light, glamour, movement and sensuous address—through the racialised spectacle of Shosho's body.

Conclusion

If *Piccadilly*'s hybridity could be appreciated as memory, a performance no longer possible after the narrative's ending and the onset of sound cinema, the Stoll film leaves disconcerting suggestions that the degenerative influence of their Chinese villains, and the 'lowbrow' sensationalist register they represent, might outlast the narratives which contain them. By contrast, British critics denied racial hybridity in *Broken Blossoms* by extracting Lucy from the space of racial encounter and performance, making her a representative of whiteness and a 'highbrow' white dramatic cultural heritage. Through emotional, bodily and sexual 'Oriental' restraint (or lack thereof), these films exploit the generic and racial coding and valuing of performance—and encircling, enclosing, protecting or extending stages for performance—to articulate anxieties about the interruptions, infiltrations, and infections of other genres and media within cinema.

In the next chapters, I turn away from fictional genres, associated with Hollywood, sensation and artifice, to non-fiction films that middle-class and elite commentators thought could oppose their dominance and form the basis for an alternative British national cinema. If the Limehouse film evidenced anxieties about literary and cultural inheritances, these non-fiction films could correct this, connecting British cinema to imperial heritages of travel and exemplary colonial conduct. Again, then, while they do not depict 'acting', they remain concerned with performance as the means to reach mass audiences. Interwar Britain's 'performed cinema', dramatising and foregrounding diegetic moments of performance, is not restricted to fiction but remains present in non-fictional genres characterised as uniquely 'British'. The following chapter is interested in the performance of heroism through travel. While British commentators expressed anxieties about the misrepresentation of whiteness by turning it into sensuous spectacle in Hollywood film, the

expedition film transformed this, offering a 'British' panacea to these dangerous, degenerative misrepresentations by making a spectacle of white explorers in non-fiction film.

Chapter 4: Performing ‘The Drake Spirit’: Monumentality and Heroism in the Expedition Film

Responding to mid-1920s claims of a ‘British film crisis’, G. A. Atkinson dismisses this ‘ill-informed comment on the stoppage of work in our film studios and the lowly position of the British photoplay in the world’s markets’.¹ He proposes looking beyond fictional ‘photoplays’: ‘[i]n travel films, a branch of cinematography of which Great Britain has almost a monopoly, we easily beat the world’. Atkinson claims the travel film for Britain, echoing common refrains that the genre appealed to a uniquely British ‘love of travel inborn in us’, because it was ‘the foundation of our Empire’.² Atkinson dubs this ‘The Drake Spirit’. Situating this pocket of British cinema supremacy in a longer tradition of British imperial heroism, he compares British travel filmmakers to a symbol of British imperial conquest and adventure, Francis Drake, in their shared heroic desire to explore the world, while implying that this desire is a spiritual, essential quality. This foregrounding of the ‘Drake Spirit’ especially evokes the expedition film. Overlapping with subgenres like the travelogue, ethnographic film and the *documentaire romance*, expedition films are distinguished by their difficulty; as Amy Jane Staples puts it, ‘[w]hile travelogues are more concerned with touristic, leisurely activities, expeditionary films focus on remote regions of the world, highlighting the adventures, risks, and off-the-beaten-track discoveries of the heroic filmmaker’.³ British expedition films claim their Britishness through performances of ‘Drake Spirit’ by their heroic protagonists, while invoking Britain’s colonial heritage to be passed onto white British spectators. As Atkinson writes in another column, ‘[t]ravel films are an expression of the national outlook as characteristic as the exploits of Elizabethan worthies’.⁴ The non-fiction form emerged from its own national cultural and imperial heritage, a

¹ *Express*, 20 November 1924, p. 5.

² *Mail*, 10 October 1921, p. 6.

³ See Amy Jane Staples, ‘Safari Ethnography: Expeditionary Film, Popular Science and the Work of Adventure Tourism’ (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Santa Cruz, 2002), p. 22; Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930-1934* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 222.

⁴ *Express*, 8 November 1923, p. 11.

parallel tradition equally important for passing on values of (white) Britishness and establishing the medium's merits. The Britishness of expedition films arose from their connection to a lineage of imperial explorers and the imperial forms that recorded and memorialised these journeys; cinema is situated in another tradition of imperial documentation of heroic performance with travel books, exemplary lives, and monuments and memorials to imperial heroism.

Before examining this chapter's case studies, I delineate modes of performance prominent in expedition films by protagonist explorers and filmmakers and by indigenous subjects, and examine how these relate to traditions of travel literature and imperial heroism. I then explore three expedition film landscapes which differently inflect the non-fictional performances that take place within them. I begin with the battlefield in Lowell Thomas' two 'travelogue' films about Britain's Eastern Front Campaign, *With Allenby in Palestine* and *With Lawrence in Arabia* (Lowell Thomas and Harry Chase, privately produced, 1919), relating war and expedition films in their parallel depictions of movement across dangerous, exotic landscapes. I then explore the more conventional expedition landscape of the African 'Cape-to-Cairo' route in Chaplin and Stella Court Treatt's *Cape to Cairo* (Tommy Glover, privately produced, 1926), a film which is now mostly lost but can be reconstructed through reviews, reportage and the accompanying travel book. The chapter concludes in the more distanced, difficult to record, cold extremes of *The Great White Silence* (Herbert G. Ponting, Gaumont, 1919), which recounts Captain Scott's Antarctic expedition, and *The Epic of Everest* (J. B. L. Noel, Explorers' Films, 1924), about the 1924 attempted Everest ascent.

Performances of whiteness in these films are differently inflected by the landscapes and spaces in which they are performed, as well as indigenous peoples who spectate and perform themselves. I demonstrate that, while Western Front films depicted a static, mud-swamped battlefield in which imperial heroism was difficult to perform, the Eastern Front in the Lowell Thomas films became the site for exciting, mobile warfare performed by white imperial heroes. This is based on a racialised hierarchy where white supremacy is established through martial characteristics, the ability to conquer, manage, and organise colonial space and bodies. In *Cape to*

Cairo, which retells the expedition from South Africa to Egypt in exclusively British-colonised territory, whiteness is constructed as a kind of hybrid of traditions derived from Victorian explorer and traveller narratives and more modern, interwar imperialism performed by British alternatives to Hollywood 'stars'. This is most evident in the presence of a female traveller, Stella, who fulfils the role of glamorous star and exemplary model of whiteness. Finally, while *The Great White Silence* and *The Epic of Everest* are framed within a heroic, exemplary mode, these are about failed expeditions, and consequently view whiteness through an elegiac lens, articulating heroism through the loss of youth, masculine homosociality and ultimately imperial supremacy. In capturing these performances of whiteness in these three landscapes, cinema was imbued with the capacity to record and memorialise historic events. In the first two chapters, the Eastern and the Limehouse film became sites in British cinema culture for exploring fictional acting and its sensuous, exoticised address to the body: the Eastern stood for Hollywood's excess and glamour, while the Limehouse melodrama explored cinema's complicated relationship to 'art'. With the expedition film, non-fictional performance of travel itself was the locus for articulating cinema's 'British' role as exemplum and historical record of imperial heroism.

Performing and Memorialising in the Expedition Film

Expedition Film Performance

The Eastern and Limehouse films inherited acting traditions from forms such as theatrical melodrama, music-hall, and circus performance. In parallel, Tom Gunning and Rick Altman propose a stage pre-history of the travel film in the nineteenth-century travelogue, in which lecturers performed with still images, lantern slides, other props, and eventually moving pictures.⁵ Moreover, travel literature also records performance of heroic, often imperial, deeds and achievement on which the travel film draws. Despite recognition that the travel film is a performative genre,

⁵ Tom Gunning, "'The World Within Reach': Travel Images Without Borders', in *Virtual Voyages: Cinema and Travel*, ed. by Jeffrey Ruoff (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 25-41 (pp. 25-26); Rick Altman, 'From Lecturer's Prop to Industrial Product: The Early History of Travel Films', in *Virtual Voyages: Cinema and Travel*, ed. by Jeffrey Ruoff (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 61-76 (pp. 61, 63-69).

scholarly analysis of the films discussed in this chapter has rarely focused on performance, and this is not contextualised with British cinema culture's anxiety to assert Britain's cinematic and imperial relevance and represent whiteness and racialised conduct and encounter correctly. These performances of whiteness in expedition films became models for a decorous, though still bodily, performance of whiteness in British film.

These performances are differently inflected by the landscapes, registers, and genres of specific films, but the idea of imperial 'spirit' is consistently present. Expedition film promotion and reviews constantly emphasised long distances travelled and danger to explorers and filmmakers, invoking traditions of descriptions of disease, indigenous non-cooperation and dangerous flora and fauna in travel narratives.⁶ Whiteness was read into imperial fervour, bravery, or cheerfulness in light of this difficulty and danger. This resonates with Shail's example of risk-taking as a form of film performance discussed in the Introduction. Shail draws from Jennifer M. Bean's essay on 1910s women serial stars, celebrated not for glamour or skill in interpreting characters but risk-taking and 'their superlative physical and psychical stamina'.⁷ Expedition films also entail non-fictional performances of risk-taking and facing danger and difficulty by expedition members. For Dane Kennedy, explorers' endangerment in nineteenth-century travel narratives meant that their 'bodies and minds thereby became privileged sites of truth and knowledge [...] Physical ordeals supplied their own standards of measure, establishing the credibility of the explorer and the authenticity of his experience'.⁸ Experience of hardship, then, proves the truth of the camera's record, in perceived contrast to Hollywood artifice. This accords with Bean's argument that on-location shooting and bodily imperilment were seen to authenticate cinema's realism.⁹ In British cinema culture, this bodily imperilment, which evidenced the film's 'truth', entailed a different non-fictional restraint: still marked by upper-class or aristocratic 'stiff upper lip', the effects of this hardship were now

⁶ See e.g. Leila Koivunen, *Visualizing Africa in Nineteenth-Century British Travel Accounts* (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), p. 74.

⁷ Bean, p. 407.

⁸ Dane Kennedy, *The Last Blank Spaces: Exploring Africa and Australia* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 94.

⁹ Bean, pp. 409-411.

concealed, though still perceptible in this repression, through bravery, ‘pluck’, and civilised conduct in purportedly uncivilised spaces.

For Bean, the serial is part of a wider corpus of early body genres—including the ‘jungle safari’—which evidence ‘the existence of a competing industrial logic in the period, one favouring the affective sensation of realistic thrills and grounded in the practice of on-location shooting’.¹⁰ Kevin Brownlow locates expedition films within an ‘alternative cinema’ patronised by middle-class audiences interested in education and uplift, but they were equally ‘alternative’ in their status as a ‘body genre’, where performance inheres in overcoming danger.¹¹ The tensions between bodily thrills and educational (racial) uplift are evident in the films in this chapter. Gunning and Lauren Rabinovitz offer differing models for the genre’s origins: for Gunning, it emerges from a nineteenth-century travel culture of ‘views’ that produce the world as consumable picture; Rabinovitz conversely situates travel cinema within a history of body genres, recreating the sensory, corporeal experience of travel.¹² Expedition films can be placed variously on this spectrum between travel as picture and vicarious, bodily experience. Foregrounding corporeal hardships enables spectators to imagine or perceive these sensations, whereas more disembodied performance facilitates pictorial ‘views’. In her wide-ranging exploration of the interlinked drives of travel and cinema, Bruno calls for attention to ‘site’ as well as ‘sight’, a move from the visual to embodied experiences of cinema and its spaces.¹³ Performance is crucial in British expedition film’s oscillation between and mediation of sights and sites, and thus how the genre—and cinema generally—were perceived in British cinema culture.

These performances are underpinned by a conception of the ‘site’ to be explored as ‘primitive’, with which the white performer and the mobile medium of cinema are contrasted. As Friedberg argues, the virtual mobility enabled by cinema differed from pre-cinematic technologies in

¹⁰ Bean, p. 407.

¹¹ Kevin Brownlow, *The War, the West, and the Wilderness* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), p. 418.

¹² Ruoff, p. 11; Gunning, ‘The World’, p. 26; Lauren Rabinovitz, ‘From Hale’s Tours to Star Tours: Virtual Voyages, Travel Ride Films, and the Delirium of the Hyper-Real’, in *Virtual Voyages: Cinema and Travel*, ed. by Jeffrey Ruoff (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 42-60.

¹³ Bruno, p. 15.

that it was *temporal*, offering an image of the past as well as another space.¹⁴ This was doubled in travel films that depicted what McClintock names ‘anachronistic space: prehistoric, atavistic and irrational, inherently out of place in the historical time of modernity’. Moving into this was constructed as movement out of civilisation and back in time.¹⁵ This drew on nineteenth-century anthropology. Anthropologists used geological and spatial metaphors to explain this temporal and civilisational difference and the necessity to move ‘backwards’ in space and time to discover the origins of human society in present-day ‘primitive’ cultures.¹⁶ Nineteenth-century anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan asserts that, ‘like successive geological formations, the tribes of mankind may be arranged, according to their relative conditions, into successive strata’, a spatio-temporal metaphor that Assenka Oksiloff sees underpinning his ‘savage, barbarian, and civilised’ categorisations.¹⁷ The explorers discussed in this chapter are not anthropologists, though often claim to provide anthropological information. Yet they rely upon constructions of ‘primitive’ people and the spatialisation of this temporal and civilisational distance. Heroic versions of whiteness can be articulated *because* of the landscapes, and their inhabitants, among which these performances occur, while cinematic technology offered the means of moving back in time, accompanied by and focalised through the white explorer.

In British expedition films, inhospitable landscapes take on the theatrical qualities of British fiction film settings, as the performances of whiteness take on qualities of theatrical restraint. They distinguish performing bodies spatially, temporally, and racially through stages and spaces for performance and spectatorship, aligning with Alison Griffiths’ assertion that ethnographic film should be understood as a network of ‘looking relations’.¹⁸ Consequently, the performances of indigenous peoples are equally central. While white explorers’ performances have been neglected in

¹⁴ Friedberg, p. 38.

¹⁵ McClintock, pp. 40-41.

¹⁶ See Oksiloff, pp. 59-60; Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 28.

¹⁷ Oksiloff, p. 60.

¹⁸ Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference*, p. xxix.

recent scholarship, indigenous subjects' performance has rightly received more attention.¹⁹ This has been important in restoring agency to indigenous performers and their subversion of the camera's white, imperial gaze. However, Brian Hochman and Jaikumar have questioned this foregrounding of indigenous agency which can actually obscure the realities of power imbalances and racist colonial relationships operating in these films. As Jaikumar writes,

[c]ontemporary viewers who oppose the politics of a film desire to seek contingencies and resistances within racist and colonial film texts in order to read against their grain. But such critical gestures have limited historiographic value beyond the immediate satisfaction of upending a racist text.²⁰

The power of performance to subvert a film's colonial politics should be recognised but so should the way in which these performances are opposed by performances of white expedition members and shaped by the camera, filmmaker and British reception.

These films position indigenous subjects in two key ways: as part of a spectacular landscape to be observed and organised, and as spectators of the performed spectacle of whiteness. Yet this latter role also returns the films to the very anxieties about the misrepresentation of whiteness and its availability to spectators of colour discussed in Chapter 1. The return gaze is a locus for debates about resistance and agency in ethnographic film. Griffiths contests Fatimah Tobing Rony's claim that cinema eclipsed live exhibition of indigenous subjects in Europe and America because it prohibited them from looking back, arguing instead that the return gaze on film still threatens observers' visual sovereignty and thus 'the illusion of complete control exerted by colonial authorities'.²¹ The expedition films discussed in this chapter also evidence the power of looking back in certain moments, contextualised within British cinema culture's spatial and social geographies of performance and spectatorship. These moments complicate the expedition film's effect: they align the spectator with indigenous subjects rather than travelling imperialists, they position spectatorship *as* performance in itself, and they critique the films' central performances of whiteness. Of course, they are often framed as instances of Larkin's 'colonial sublime', the 'spectacle

¹⁹ E.g. Rony, pp. 23-24; Oksiloff, pp. 61-69; Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference*, p. xx.

²⁰ Brian Hochman, *Savage Preservation: The Ethnographic Origins of Modern Media Technology* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), pp. xxii-xxiii; Jaikumar, *Histories*, p. 38.

²¹ Rony, p. 43; Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference*, p. 200.

of colonial rule' through display of technology as power to indigenous peoples.²² As such, they do not fundamentally undermine these films' imperial, white supremacist politics but at least reveal their cracks. Explorers' performances of whiteness in these expedition films are opposed to—and designed to control—the purported primitiveness of indigenous subjects. Nevertheless, they simultaneously hint at anxieties about whiteness on screen, undermining the spectacle of difficulty and restraint that characterises and renders 'British' the expedition film.

An Exemplary Genre

These films centralise performances of whiteness, positioning the roles of indigenous people as witnesses to this spectacle or a spectacle in themselves, returned to Britain by the protagonists' efforts. While anxieties about the misrepresentation of whiteness are readable into these films, they were produced and received in Britain with the idea that they had pedagogic, uplifting value for white British spectators. In her study of big game hunting and British imperialism, Angela Thompsett explains that colonial settings, primarily the 'African Interior', that were previously perceived as simply 'backwards' were reimagined as 'primeval, timeless space' in the late-Victorian and Edwardian period. Responding to 'concerns about overcivilization and racial degeneration' engendered by Western modernity, these settings, framed as unpopulated and 'wholly separate from the modern world', became sites for 'a pleasant trip in a pristine land or an arduous test of character and fortitude in a more dangerous space'. However, both versions could provide a restorative counter to the degenerative effects of modernity, rejuvenating white travellers through contact with the primal and 'primitive' in line with ideas of the rejuvenating effects of the 'outdoors' expressed around Fairbanks' films.²³ These rejuvenating effects could potentially be felt by spectators *watching* such travel on film too, particularly British expedition films that depicted the latter model of 'arduous', 'dangerous' travel in these 'primeval' spaces. Bean proposes that the

²² Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 36.

²³ Angela Thompsett, *Hunting Africa: British Sport, African Knowledge and the Nature of Empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 136.

alternative mode of performance based on risk-taking and ‘superlative physical and psychical stamina’ by the serial stars of the 1910s was particularly appealing to early-twentieth-century cinemagoers disturbed by ‘anxieties concerning a paralysis of will and the exhaustion of nerves’. In this context, the stars’ ability to withstand the ‘shocks’, exhaustion and degeneration of modernity became a kind of ‘enviable resiliency’ for spectators.²⁴ I suggest that, in the British expedition film, such resilience and fortitude against the dangers of travel in ‘primeval, timeless space’ was imagined to provide not simply an ‘enviable’ image but a *model* that white spectators could experience and learn from. Cinema could provide this experience vicariously, offering a different kind of invitation to intimacy and bodily experience—that of shared exemplary ‘resiliency’ in facing the ‘primitive’ degradations of colonial expeditions. In the NCPM report on cinema mentioned in Chapter 1, the appeal of imitating cinematic criminal behaviour for children arises because ‘[r]isk, danger, adventure, boldness appeal to the boy’.²⁵ Expedition films redirected these bodily, mobile appeals through the same medium. They encouraged shared involvement in ‘primitive’ corporeal difficulties, enabling spectators to feel part of imperial voyages into wild spaces. Paralleling claims of modernist theorists like Epstein or Balázs, these films were viewed to offer, through their central performances, a rejuvenating experience of the corporeal sensations of travel for a mass audience.

While cinema was best placed to transport spectators to these ‘primitive’ spaces and counter modernity’s negative effects, this was not a new way of conceiving of imperial travel: the expedition film drew upon conventions of representing expeditions from travel books, photography, portraiture, journalism, and biographies from previous centuries. As Staples explains, while ‘technological advances in transportation and cinema’ enabled changes in ‘the image-making practices of western travellers’, these films ‘remained embedded in nineteenth-century narratives and visual tropes of travel and exploration’. In particular, she highlights a Victorian ‘heroic mode’ of depicting imperial travel through ‘[s]ensationalistic tales of adventure and discovery’ in the British

²⁴ Bean, p. 429.

²⁵ NCPM, p. xxxv.

and American press that foregrounded the individual ‘archetypal figure of the “explorer”’.²⁶ Berny Sèbe argues that such imperial ‘heroes’ were central in both strengthening national self-confidence and cohesion, and articulating an *ethical* mode of being, embodying national and moral virtues.²⁷ Sèbe explores the continuation of this ‘heroic mode’ in twentieth-century semi-fiction biographical films like *Livingstone* (M. A. Wetherell, Hero Films, 1925), but the same nineteenth-century conventions persist, I argue, in non-fiction expedition films.²⁸ Interwar critics placed expedition films in a lineage of media which recounts imperial heroism, depicting individual explorers and their performances in dangerous, primal spaces. Comparably to the ‘eminent’ adaptation of fictional British literature, the expedition film’s Britishness inhered as well in its intertextual relationship to this ‘heroic mode’ and imperial genres of exemplary heroic lives and travel writing, a relationship formed in their shared recording and memorialising of exemplary performances.²⁹ In granting the expedition film this memorial function, critics granted a new generation of explorers the same prestige and historic significance, and granted cinema-going an essential place within this tradition of history and memorialisation.

While spectators gained access to these journeys through these records, they did not actually travel. The expeditions remained the preserve of upper-class, public school-educated elites, conflicting with the idea that all, including the British cinema-going ‘masses’, could experience this travel. I have shown that shared whiteness often allowed for the transcendence of class boundaries in British cinema. Yet in the expedition film, the tension remained between the idea that all could participate via the democratising medium of cinema, and that these films represented extraordinary

²⁶ Amy Jane Staples, ‘Safari adventure: forgotten cinematic journeys in Africa’, *Film History*, 18.4 (2006), 392-411 (p. 393).

²⁷ Berny Sèbe, *Heroic Imperialists in Africa: The Promotion of British and French Colonial Heroes, 1870-1939* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 27, 177.

²⁸ Sèbe, pp. 127-128. *Livingstone* was produced on an expedition following the same route as the eponymous explorer to literally re-perform his journey; see the *Telegraph* column reporting the expedition, beginning in *Telegraph*, 22 December 1924, p. 9.

²⁹ On exemplary lives, see Justin D. Livingstone, *Livingstone’s Lives: A Metabiography of a Victorian Icon* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), pp. 116-118; Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 82-83; Sèbe, pp. 179-193.

feats of bravery and overcoming hardship, performable only by British society's elite. This tension is reflected in the two modes of pictorial distance and vicarious experience. It is also evident in moments of spectatorship by indigenous subjects; if these subjects and the British masses both watched a spectacle of whiteness, they were aligned in ways which compromised the project of white uplift on which these films were purportedly founded. The films were exemplary to British spectators, but that also implied a kind of distance between them and the performers, who were already embodying an (upper-class, restrained) ideal. They aim to represent and memorialise white heroism, providing an alternative to Hollywood fiction in an alternative form of bodily address. However, they also evidence anxieties about the possibility of representing whiteness 'correctly' and of reaching and connecting with spectators through this. The films deal with these tensions in varying ways. I begin with a film which represents war itself as a kind of heroic expedition. Given the cross-class encounters and intimacies that war necessitated, and the role of the white American Lowell Thomas in producing the travelogue, the Eastern Front films most comfortably resolved these tensions.³⁰ Positioning Edmund Allenby and T. E. Lawrence as if behind the camera, justifying the fact that it was actually rather difficult to film them, Thomas aligned these heroic upper-class figures with himself and the spectator.

Organising the East in Lowell Thomas' Travelogues

In 1929, E. E. Barrett declares for *Picturegoer* that the slogan, 'Join the army and see the world', should be replaced by 'Join the movies and see the world'.³¹ While Barrett is appealing to the fan magazine reader's desire to *make* films, this speaks to perceptions that the masses could vicariously travel through film, just as the Great War had enabled men of all classes to travel ten years previously. Great War films have been read as propaganda, opportunities to spot friends and family, memorials, news, and spectacular action.³² Yet Barrett anticipates scholars who reveal

³⁰ On the cross-class intimacies of the Great War, see Day, p. 166.

³¹ *Picturegoer*, May 1929, p. 24.

³² See e.g. Nicholas Reeves, *The Power of Film Propaganda: Myth or Reality?* (London and New York: Continuum, 1999), pp. 14-42; Laura Marcus, 'The Great War in twentieth-century cinema', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the First World War*, ed. by Vincent Sherry (Cambridge: Cambridge University

interrelationships between war and travel genres. For instance, Bruno interconnects cinema's touristic drive with the imperialist drive to police and conquer.³³ Kristen Whissel demonstrates the influence of panoramas and travelogues on Spanish-American War (1898) actualities. Facilitating access to distant spaces, they enabled 'civilians' illusory participation in the mass mobilisation of troops [...] thereby conflating the cinematic "journey" with the military mission to incorporate audiences visually into the circuits of imperial traffic'.³⁴ Although 'wartime itself and its themes are not congruent with "travel for pleasure"', Sue Beeton contends that war cinema stimulated touristic interest in landscapes and spaces from the Anglo-Boer War throughout the twentieth century.³⁵ In this section, I apply this recognition of the intertwined histories of representing war and travel to Great War film; while Claire Buck has highlighted travelogue and ethnographic conventions in First World War writing, these connections have been neglected in Great War film, particularly on the non-European Eastern Front.³⁶ The war film relies upon travel tropes to display newly conquered spaces; concurrently, the war's historic import establishes the camera's capacity to record and immortalise heroic performance. The Great War film is thus a useful entry for examining British commentators and filmmakers' claims for the expedition film's Britishness through its non-fictional performances.

Thomas' Eastern Front films were received in the context of more familiar Western Front films, depicting more recognisable European landscapes in which Allied Forces had sustained profound losses. These films did not provide images of traditional imperial heroism, instead depicting stasis, sticky muddiness and violence. Paul Virilio's classic account of warfare and cinema's intertwined histories begins with the transformations engendered by Western Front trench warfare.

Press, 2005), pp. 280-301; Hammond, pp. 70-127; Michael Hammond and Michael Williams (eds), *British Silent Cinema and The Great War* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Laura Marcus, 'First World War Film and the Face of Death', in *The First World War: Literature, Culture, Modernity*, ed. by Santanu Das and Kate McLoughlin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). pp. 114-127.

³³ Bruno, pp. 77-80.

³⁴ Whissel, pp. 23-25.

³⁵ Beeton, pp. 38, 61-106.

³⁶ Claire Buck, *Conceiving Strangeness in British First World War Writing* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

With the emergence of trench warfare and its long periods of inaction, Virilio describes the gradual hardening of the War into ‘a static conflict in which the main action was for millions of men to hold fast to their piece of land, camouflaging themselves for months on end’, so that ‘the vast new battlefield seemed to be composed of nothing’; lacking plant life, any landscape features and especially human combat, the battlefield was defined by absence, inaction rather than heroic military performance.³⁷ In such a space, ‘sight lost its direct quality’ as soldiers rarely saw their opposition or anything beyond the bleak, shapelessly muddy expanse; for Virilio, this inaugurated the replacement in twentieth-century warfare of ‘the old homogeneity of vision’—the singular (imperial) viewpoint of an individual from which the battlefield could be surveyed—by a ‘heterogeneity of perceptual fields’ realised on film, aircrafts and other new military technologies.³⁸ On the Western Front, he continues, ‘the soldier had the feeling of being not so much destroyed as derealized or dematerialized’; the battlefield produced a sensation of incorporeality and immateriality in this space of nothingness.³⁹ Some contemporary commentators also viewed the War’s battlefields thus. Bemoaning a bland emptiness that lacked the visual interest required for cinema in a 1918 interview after touring the trenches, D. W. Griffith complains that, ‘viewed as a drama, the war is in some ways disappointing’. He recalls soldiers ‘hidden away in ditches. As you look out across No Man’s Land there is literally nothing that meets the eye but an aching desolation of nothingness’.⁴⁰ However, his conclusion that ‘[t]here is nothing but filth and dirt and the most soul sickening smells’ evokes multisensory, embodied experience, a tangible stickiness and muddiness that refutes Virilio’s assertion of the dematerialised experience of Western Front soldiers. Other historians have challenged Virilio’s theoretical account by similarly foregrounding material experience, the sticky muddiness and intimacy, of trench warfare.⁴¹ These sensations *could* be recreated on film. Christina Stojanova’s finds in *The Battle of the Somme* (Geoffrey Malins, British

³⁷ Virilio, p. 14.

³⁸ Virilio, pp. 15.

³⁹ Virilio, p. 15.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Richard Schickel, *D. W. Griffith: An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), pp. 353-354

⁴¹ See Das, *Touch*, p. 29.

Topical Committee for War Films, 1916)—seen by an estimated twenty million people in the six weeks after its October 1916 release—a ‘perception of immediacy’ and ‘corporeal vision’ as ‘tactile, and thereby affective, process’, contesting Virilio’s derealised military gaze.⁴² In the *Somme* film, the focus on muddy violence permitted uncomfortably claustrophobic, embodied spectatorship. The *Mail* asserts that ‘you are not in London but at the front’; one injured soldier ‘is brought past—so close that the stretcher seems to brush you’.⁴³ The spectator experiences disturbing contact with the war’s violence. This was vicarious travel, but bringing spectators into contact with damaged white men’s bodies and a space of sticky, smelly stasis.

By contrast, the Eastern Front was associated with mobility. As Graham Dawson demonstrates, much Great War scholarship delineates shifts from discourses of romantic adventure to nightmarish horror and irony.⁴⁴ Yet Dawson observes popular cultural forms, including cinema, that are often neglected in this scholarship and in which patriotic adventure narratives persist.⁴⁵ Dawson, Buck, and Teo juxtapose with depictions of the Western Front the successful Eastern Front campaign’s representation as a war of mobility, facilitating ‘freedom, adventure, and individual heroism for the English imaginary of warfare’.⁴⁶ If Western Front mud threatened ‘dissolution into formless matter’ and thus a de-civilising for British soldiers in a culture which associated verticality and the sense of sight with ‘civilisation’, the Eastern Front’s mobility permitted a less problematic representation of imperial heroism.⁴⁷ Eastern Front films attempt to recover a modern, civilised uprightness and mobility against ‘primitive’ landscapes in opposition to the vicarious stasis perceived in the *Somme* film. For Buck, Thomas’ vision of the Eastern Front ‘relies on and repurposes the exotic space of the Arab desert as a theatre in which the industrialized warfare of the Western Front could

⁴² Christina Stojanova, ‘The Great War: Cinema, Propaganda, and the Emancipation of Film Language’, *Acta Univ, Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies*, 14 (2017), 131-156 (pp. 136, 139-140, 142). See also Das, *Touch*, pp. 230-231.

⁴³ *Mail*, 22 August 1916, p. 5.

⁴⁴ Dawson, p. 56. For an example of such scholarship, see Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* [1975] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 3-38.

⁴⁵ Dawson, pp. 171-172.

⁴⁶ Buck, p. 82, 87; Dawson, p. 177; Teo, p. 101.

⁴⁷ Das, *Touch*, pp. 37, 43.

be remade'.⁴⁸ Returning to the site of Chapter 2 in West Asia, the Eastern Front as represented in Thomas' travelogue exhibition was a more fitting stage for imperial performance and conventions of ethnography and travel literature.⁴⁹

Thomas' exhibition consisted of two films (of which some sequences are now lost): *With Allenby in Palestine* and *With Lawrence in Arabia*. In these films, the Western Front's discomforting corporeality is 'remade' through the absence of the protagonist's bodies on screen, presented as a kind of dematerialised heroism enabling spectators access to previously inaccessible sights. Yet, in the exhibition and reception of the films, these absent performers' corporeality re-emerged. After its hundredth performance in Covent Garden, the travelogue transferred to the Albert Hall, toured Britain, Australia, Malaya, Burma, and India, and was seen by over one million by January 1920.⁵⁰ This was supplemented by Thomas' articles for *The Strand Magazine* and his book, *With Lawrence in Arabia* (1924) on Lawrence, which greatly outsold Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1926).⁵¹ These films and Thomas' lecturing—of which his writings and newspaper descriptions indicate the content—disseminated a successful, mobile campaign on a mobile, travelling medium. Yet the panoramic 'pictures' of the Eastern Front were rendered tangible *by* the continued investment in the absent bodies of the films' travelling heroes, Lawrence and Allenby, with whom Lawrence campaigned and who led the Egyptian Expeditionary Force to take Palestine. As Dawson and Sèbe argue, the Lawrence mythology is underpinned by early-twentieth-century technological and media developments.⁵² In the Thomas films, modern cinematic mobility intersects with traditional imperial heroism, creating a British record of performances of whiteness to counter the enervation and racial degeneration of modern life and modern warfare.

⁴⁸ Buck, p. 86.

⁴⁹ Melman, 'Middle East / Arabia', p. 114.

⁵⁰ Brownlow, p. 447; *Telegraph*, 19 January 1920, p. 13; *Mail*, 26 January 1920, p. 4.

⁵¹ Geoffrey Nash, *From Empire to Orient: Travellers to the Middle East 1830-1926* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005), p. 194.

⁵² Dawson, p. 208; Sèbe, p. 114.

Mobile War: Lowell Thomas' Travelogues

The heroic exploits of the protagonists are not evident on watching the films' available footage, an inevitable outcome of filming dangerous battles in dangerous places with unwieldy camera equipment.⁵³ This raises the potential for what James Campbell terms 'combat gnosticism', 'the belief that combat represents a qualitatively separate order of experience that is difficult if not impossible to communicate to any who have not undergone an identical experience'.⁵⁴ Yet in the films and Thomas' lecturing, this is justified as evidencing the men's heroic, humble restraint; their distance does not signify their inaccessibility but their very performance. This also accords with the first reports and newsreel of Allenby's march into Jerusalem, the event stage-managed to emphasise Allenby's humility in conquering the city. As the *Guardian* enthused, the newsreel sees Allenby marching 'in a characteristically British way, ignoring all obvious opportunities for picturesque display'.⁵⁵ Likewise, Lawrence's lack of 'display' is eulogised by Thomas as he praises his unification of 'nomadic tribes of Arabia' 'quietly, without any theatrical headlines or fanfare of trumpets'.⁵⁶ Their invisibility becomes a deliberate performance style in itself, restraint and humility reflecting their heroism and structuring what is seen on screen.

Minimising their protagonists' display, the films depict military travel and manoeuvres, panoramas and 'street scenes', and indigenous people at work and leisure. The Allenby film does not include his heavily reported march; he is only seen receiving a medal halfway through. The first half depicts Allenby's forces marching and firing mortars. Reflecting Whissel's argument about American imperial war actualities, it articulates military white masculinity through organised movement and mobility in colonial spaces and the operation of modern machinery.⁵⁷ A *Times of India* review describes aerial shots, now lost, beginning in Egypt and following train lines between Cairo and

⁵³ Marcus, 'Face of Death', p. 115.

⁵⁴ James Campbell, 'Combat Gnosticism: The Ideology of the First World War Poetry Criticism', *New Literary History*, 30.1 (1999), 203-215 (p. 203).

⁵⁵ *Guardian*, 16 February 1918, p. 6.

⁵⁶ *Strand Magazine*, January 1920, p. 42.

⁵⁷ Whissel, pp. 35-41.

Jerusalem.⁵⁸ Opposing the *Somme* film's muddily tactile view, these images abstract an inhospitable desert—imagined as a place of mystery in the Eastern—and render it traversable and consumable for a British Empire newly in control of the region, literally following but also transcending the Ottoman Empire railway infrastructure with a more modern form of transport.⁵⁹ This serves the aim of later colonial film, noted by David Trotter, to visualise colonial connection and contiguity, and thus the new imperial economic bloc which Grieveson suggests film was enlisted to represent and naturalise.⁶⁰ It invites the spectator to experience the sensation of travelling across these economic lines. Yet shooting from above also entails another de-emphasis of performance. Minimising bodies, the travelogue's spectacle inheres in 'discovering' and surveying the landscape. Aerial photography not only fixes space but the people in it. Virilio proposes that Western Front aerial wartime photography aimed 'no longer to study the deformations involved in the movement of a *whole body* [...] but to *reconstitute the fracture lines of the trenches, to fix the infinite fragmentation of a mined landscape alive with endless potentialities*'.⁶¹ Aligning camera and military technology, these early shots render an unfamiliar, inhospitable landscape a mappable, travelable, colonisable whole, distancing individual bodies like those injured, stuck in mud and dying in the *Somme* film.

This recalls Jaikumar's reading of British Instructional Films' (BIF) 'Indian Town Series' and its attempts to fix certain spaces and subjects which had historically challenged colonial mapping, ordering and categorising impulses: in parallel to Jaikumar's account, the Allenby film only records Palestinian subjects closely when they can be restricted to 'anachronistic' space, their assigned position in a colonial racialised geography. Jaikumar demonstrates that the 'Indian Town Series' excludes nomadic Afghan subjects in the North-West Frontier Province film because they had historically resisted border control regulations and the requirement for passport photographs to

⁵⁸ *Times of India*, 1 February 1921, p. 10.

⁵⁹ Virilio, p. 46; Caren Kaplan, *Aerial Aftermaths: Wartime From Above* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018), p. 158.

⁶⁰ David Trotter, 'Representing Connection: A Multimedia Approach to Colonial Film, 1918-39', in *Empire and Film*, ed. by Lee Grieveson and Colin MacCabe (London: BFI, 2011), pp. 151-165; Grieveson, *Cinema*, pp. 158-159.

⁶¹ Virilio, p. 71.



Figure 41: The gate through which we 'enter' Jerusalem in *With Allenby in Palestine*

enter British India, undermining the stability of imperial borders and refusing to provide an 'accurate visual trace'. Instead, the film depicts workers whose roles fix them in specific locations, which in turn 'anchors the viewer within clearly demarcated views and spaces'.⁶² Jaikumar finds this attempt to instil visual and spatial certainty and security exemplified in the narrator's clear, untroubled demarcation of 'outside' and 'inside' the walls of Bikaner.⁶³ This has a direct parallel in the Allenby film when, after Allenby has received his medal, a title describes Jerusalem being 'enclosed by aged stone walls' and the film cuts to a shot panning left from a distant city view to an old gate, an entrance through which the spectator can enter the older, 'anachronistic' space previously walled away from the British (Figure 41). In this space, distinguished from the modern, mobile spectator, the film intercuts religious landmarks and 'street scenes', yielding Jerusalem's sights and sites. Soldiers moving through unfamiliar landscapes at a distance or in aircrafts *produce* this space for consumption. Rather than incorporating indigenous peoples into a global imperial economy, Palestinians are visualised as historical relics alongside religious buildings and monuments. Despite a title introducing street scenes in 'modern Jerusalem', they are aligned with the ancient space, as one

⁶² Jaikumar, *Histories*, pp. 69, 71.

⁶³ Jaikumar, *Histories*, p. 71.

'street scene' pans upward from a street to an old stone tower. Movement is depicted, but on horseback and foot, and from these street scenes, the film cuts to The Well of David and an elderly man climbing stairs from it, as if to emphasise this space's ancient stillness. The remaining footage implies a juxtaposition of ancient Jerusalem, in which people 'perform' their racial and spatial difference and distance through everyday actions, with a mobile, near-omniscient camera.

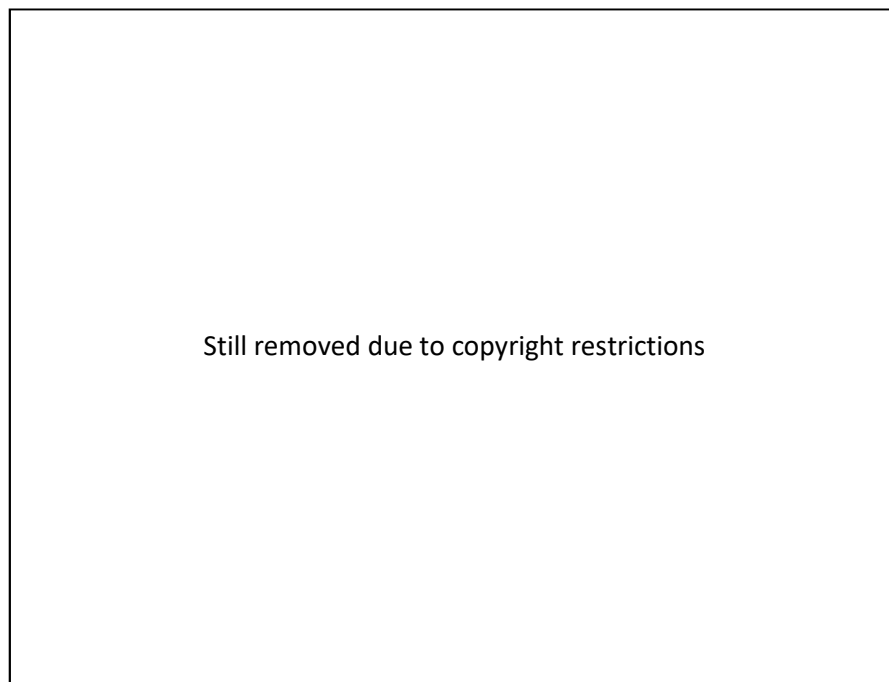


Figure 42: A warship's gun invades the Arab soldiers' dance in *With Lawrence in Arabia*

The Lawrence film is also concerned with mobility and modern technology, despite concentrating more on Arab soldiers incorporated into British military endeavour. It begins in Port Said in North-East Egypt, as a boat is loaded for the journey to Jidda. From this closer perspective, the camera focuses on Arab soldiers and labourers loading livestock on and off of the ship manually and laboriously, and later marching on foot across the desert, suggesting a less mobile, modern warfare. Military manoeuvres supersede ethnographic interest, epitomised on the boat when a dance by Arab soldiers is almost displaced by the warship's paraphernalia and the spectator's perspective follows the sightline of a large gun invading the frame (Figure 42). Racial difference is thus articulated according to another racial hierarchy: 'martial race theory'. From the nineteenth century, certain 'races' were cast as naturally 'manly' and 'warlike', more suitable to military

endeavour.⁶⁴ However, this ‘martial capability could only be fully realised under white leadership’; nineteenth-century models of ‘white military masculinity upholding ideals of self-control and rationality’ were necessary to organise the manly but irrational ‘martial races’.⁶⁵ If the Allenby film distinguishes spaces racially, the latter film represents racialised forms of military movement and mobility. Whiteness is positioned at the top of a martial hierarchy, controlling and overcoming ‘Eastern’ space and peoples.

Lawrence is only visible in the surviving footage once, driving towards the camera with Emir Faisal, later the King of Iraq. Another distanced shot, this reduces their bodies to anonymity with an intertitle explaining who they are. Only military vehicles, emblems of racing, dynamic British imperial modernity, are distinctly visible. The only scene which renders Lawrence anything other than an invisible controlling hand places him on equal footing with Iraqi royalty in this modern vehicle. Of course, this entails the risk of erasing the racial and spatial differences these films articulate. As Dawson explains, the visual iconography of the ‘Blond Bedouin’, the white Lawrence dressed in Arab vestments, ‘promises the pleasures of narrative play with cultural difference in an exotic “Oriental” setting’.⁶⁶ As noted in Chapter 2, historians suggest Lawrence’s influence on *The Sheik*; both play the role of ‘Englishmen who masquerade as Arab sheiks, and who alone are capable of uniting and leading the unruly tribes of the desert’.⁶⁷ Lawrence’s own race, sexuality, and gender expression were characterised as kinds of performance playing with colonial conventions. Yet, like the Sheik, Dawson proposes that Lawrence’s white masculinity is ultimately asserted through this performance: ‘becoming an Arab’ allows him to become a white, masculine hero, incorporating ‘the desired qualities of Arab masculinity whilst simultaneously retaining his Britishness, evident in qualities and knowledges that the Arabs are unable to emulate’.⁶⁸ His proximity to Faisal is equally

⁶⁴ Santanu Das, (ed.). ‘Introduction’, in *Race, Empire and First World War Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 1-32 (p. 12).

⁶⁵ Haggith and Smith, p. 44.

⁶⁶ Dawson, p. 167.

⁶⁷ Teo, p. 101.

⁶⁸ Dawson, p. 186.

readable as his control over Faisal, his induction of the Arab ruler into the spaces, technologies and ways of being of white imperial masculinity.



Figure 43: Jewish women mourn at the Wailing Wall in *With Allenby in Palestine*...



Figure 44: ...while Arab women turn from the camera in front of another wall

However, some moments do undermine the colonial order and mapping of space and bodies in these films. The street scenes in Jerusalem replace organised military rule with busier, less controllable panoramas. After entering Jerusalem, an intertitle introduces 'The Wailing Wall where the Jews lament over the destruction of Jerusalem'. The following shot shows Jewish women and men praying against the wall, their gazes mostly averted from the camera (Figure 43). A cut to Arab women in a line by another wall situates them on the left hand side of the frame rather than the right (Figure 44). One woman looks at the camera but pointedly turns away, while the rest stare down, out of the frame. These women are connected in rejecting the camera's ethnographic observation. Allenby's successful occupation of Jerusalem occurred a month after the Balfour Declaration asserted Britain's support for the Zionist movement and occupation of Palestine, and Thomas' film would be exhibited two years later. By its release, Britain had officially and publicly backed occupation of Palestine by Jewish people, in what David Cronin argues was a political move by an ultimately anti-Semitic Arthur Balfour and British Empire hoping to gain wartime support from

Jewish people before Germany did.⁶⁹ The Balfour declaration and subsequent conquering of Palestine would herald its colonisation and the foundation of Israel, serving as 'the key to ultimate Zionist success'.⁷⁰ Yet the film does not exhibit a Jewish populace celebrating Allenby's army to project an 'obsequious' population in Palestine, sympathetic to British imperial interests, which Balfour hoped the declaration would produce.⁷¹ The camera divides Jewish and indigenous Arab populations, opposing them in the frame. However, they are connected in their rejection of the camera aligned with Allenby and British spectators. The city's sights are cumulatively characterised as spoils of war and imperial performance, previously inaccessible to white, British spectators. These images, contrastingly, show two groups in mourning, almost entirely ignoring the camera apart from glances which almost seem pleas for privacy. The Western Wall is a significant religious site in Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, and it became significant during British occupation as part of Britain's policy, announced by Allenby, to maintain 'as far as possible, the rights of the different religions in the holy places, and to ensure freedom of access and religious worship there'.⁷² This site epitomised Britain's purportedly 'humble' colonial conquest, respecting religious rights, but actually demonstrates the rejection of this by Jerusalem's inhabitants, including the settlers they claimed to be backing. Dressed mostly in black, the 'mourners' do not fulfil visual spectacle, but bespeak another perspective, another kind of spectatorship of these martial 'achievements'. Like Allenby and Lawrence, these performers refuse to play to the camera, complicating their incorporation into Griffiths' ethnographic network of 'looking relations' or narratives of heroic imperial warfare as movement.

Griffiths actually uses the Jerusalem street scenes in this film as emblematic of the return gaze's multiple possible readings.⁷³ These moments could visualise the camera's introduction,

⁶⁹ David Cronin, *Balfour's Shadow: A Century of British Support for Zionism and Israel* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), pp. 4-5.

⁷⁰ Fieldhouse, p. 127.

⁷¹ Cronin, p. 10.

⁷² Kobi Cohen-Hattab and Doron Bar, *The Western Wall: The Dispute over Israel's Holiest Jewish Site, 1967-2000* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2020), p. 30.

⁷³ Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference*, pp. 196-197

alongside the motorcar and aircraft, as modern technologies, connecting this 'ancient' religious site to the modern Empire, or they could more confrontationally look back at this voyeuristic camera. Yet the film perhaps most significantly opens space for anxieties about modern, martial whiteness in moments where subjects look away, refusing to engage with the camera. In this scene of mourning and prayer for the city, simultaneously a scene of refusing to perform, the idea that these films only record Allenby and Lawrence's decorporealised, heroic whiteness is partially challenged.

'America's Tribute to British Valour': Exhibiting Thomas' Travelogue in Britain

The films focus on the spectacle of Jerusalem, its people, and military action; the heroics of Allenby and Lawrence occur off-screen and this very absence is even paralleled with ethnographic subjects who refuse to look at the spectacle of martial white supremacy and to become performers themselves. The film footage captures a failure to record Lawrence and Allenby's feats. Yet this should be contextualised with its exhibition and reception, which re-centralised heroic performance. Thomas changed his title from *With Allenby in Palestine and Arabia* to *With Allenby in Palestine and Lawrence in Arabia* after its initial release, implying Lawrence's greater popularity.⁷⁴ Despite this change, reviews often focused on Allenby's heroic example. The use of Thomas' *Strand* articles about Lawrence to speculate on the content of his lectures has disproportionately emphasised him at Allenby's expense.⁷⁵ *With Allenby in Palestine* was always exhibited alongside *With Lawrence in Arabia*, and references to 'the Allenby film' were mentioned years later when discussing landmarks of non-fiction and British cinema.⁷⁶ The interplay between Lawrence, Allenby, and Thomas structured the exhibition and recuperated the absent performances of the films.

By considering how Thomas delivered his exhibition, the centrality of performance becomes evident. Literally onstage, next to the screen, but separated from the ethnographic, panoramic and military displays, Thomas' lecturing, judging from his writing, invoked Lawrence and Allenby's

⁷⁴ Dawson, p. 168.

⁷⁵ See e.g. Dawson, p. 168.

⁷⁶ E.g. *Times*, 4 July 1928, p. 14

bodies. Lawrence's performance was seemingly more ambivalently related to whiteness. In Thomas' *Strand* articles, the 'undersized, beardless youth' is juxtaposed with Allenby, the 'massive, towering, square-jawed six-footer'.⁷⁷ If Allenby avoided the cameras because of his heroic humility, this is tempered for Lawrence who turns 'red as a schoolgirl' and disguises himself so that he resembles 'Circassian girls' and 'gipsy women', or even big game, difficult to capture on film.⁷⁸ Dawson places Lawrence at the end of his study of imperial 'soldier heroes', shifting their exemplary conventions as the 'Blond Bedouin' or 'white Arab' playing with gender and racial conventions and exhibiting an 'aura of ambivalent and even transgressive sexuality'.⁷⁹ While Allenby's performance is determined by his stolid, muscular corporeality, Lawrence is rendered more fluid, determined by his dress and manner. Both, however, were seemingly re-embodied by Thomas' descriptions. They do not appear on screen but their conduct and differing inflections of performative restraint are central.

Despite his transgressive performance of gender and race, Lawrence still functions as an imperial white masculine hero in his 'Eastern' adventuring. Buck proposes that, while Lawrence's accounts emphasised the 'freedom' from modernity and technology that the desert offered, Thomas contrasted Lawrence's modern technology with a pre-modern 'Oriental' Arab force.⁸⁰ The film's alignment of Lawrence with technology, like the motorcar and the bombs he plants on railway raids, distances him from Arab soldiers who handle livestock and walk through the desert. This was further emphasised by Thomas, who connects the protagonists to British imperialists and legends like Raleigh, Drake, Clive, Gordon, Kitchener, Richard Lionheart, and King Arthur.⁸¹ They were placed within this military and imperial exemplary tradition, even if opposed in bodies and performance styles. Through Thomas' alliance of their performances with imperial achievement and modernity, Lawrence and Allenby were characterised as *facilitating* the spectacles seen on screen; they were aligned with the modern machinery of film and transport, with spectators *behind* the camera.

⁷⁷ *Strand Magazine*, January 1920, p. 42.

⁷⁸ *Strand Magazine*, January 1920, pp. 50, 52; *Strand Magazine*, March 1920, p. 253; Lowell Thomas, *With Lawrence in Arabia* (New York and London: The Century, 1924), p. 370.

⁷⁹ Dawson, pp. 167, 170.

⁸⁰ Buck, pp. 90-92.

⁸¹ *Strand Magazine*, January 1920, p. 42.

This was reinforced by the third heroic performer: Thomas himself. As with films like *Beau Geste* and *The Thief of Bagdad* or Gish's white 'universality' in *Broken Blossoms*, his American identity enabled the expression of transatlantic white solidarity, another antidote to Hollywood misrepresentations of whiteness. Thomas acknowledged that he recounted events through 'the nose of a Yankee' but the travelogue becomes 'America's Tribute to British Valour' through the performances it re-tells.⁸² For the *Mail*, Thomas' American exhibition was 'a national monument of a great accomplishment'.⁸³ His American performance provided a counterpoint to the restraint which rendered Allenby and Thomas unfilmable. He claimed that only an American could 'tell the British what they had done', as they were too 'modest' to talk about themselves.⁸⁴ If the film was a British 'monument', a stonily silent artefact distancing the spectator from the invisible protagonists memorialised, the American Thomas glossed it, emphasising white solidarity over national difference; his unrestraint allowed British heroism to emerge. American and British performance styles operated differently, but coalesced to convey both Allenby and Lawrence's white imperial masculinity.

The travelogue's representation of 'British Valour' thus held educational, anti-degenerative potential. Allenby himself called for the films' exhibition in schools, applauding their 'great educational value in stimulating patriotism and pride' in Empire.⁸⁵ Alder Anderson characterises Thomas' exhibition as an 'invigorating tonic to revive the drooping courage of the chicken-hearted' and 'a trumpet call to every man, woman, and even child to remind them of their great inheritance, and that all must do their individual share in handing it on untarnished'.⁸⁶ For Anderson, the films were evidence that 'the race is no more degenerate to-day than it was when giants walked the land'. This was because spectators were placed 'in the company of thousands of men, their fellow-citizens'

⁸² *Guardian*, 13 April 1920, p. 16; *Aberdeen Journal*, 4 May 1920, p. 3; Cinema programme: Royal Albert Hall, London, 1 November 1919, Exeter, The Bill Douglas Cinema Museum <http://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:4415/Documents/Details/EXEBD_18684> [accessed 31 March 2020].

⁸³ *Mail*, 23 October 1919, p. 5.

⁸⁴ *Mail*, 23 October 1919, p. 5; *Observer*, 17 August 1919, p. 5.

⁸⁵ *Telegraph*, 19 September 1924, p. 13.

⁸⁶ *Telegraph*, 2 October 1919, p. 4.

who had 'abandon[ed] all the amenities of civilisation' to face '[d]iscomfort of all kinds', 'cheerfully', 'as if these conditions were perfectly normal'. This forbearance of the discomfort of travel is, Anderson claims, accessible to all: a 'normal' 'inheritance' to be *felt* through film. The 'evidence' of this racial vitality came from Thomas' performance, which invoked the invisible performances of the protagonists and rendered the film footage evidence of their work. Through Thomas, the exhibition functioned as memorial and regenerative exemplum for white spectators.

Performance—Lawrence and Allenby's military endeavours and Thomas' retelling—facilitated the spectacle. When Buck delineates Thomas' use of technology to set Lawrence against a pre-modern 'East', she neglects perhaps the most crucial technology in disseminating this spectacle to interwar audiences: the camera itself. The films do not just represent Allenby and Lawrence's exploitation of transport and communications technologies to incorporate West Asia into the Empire; they re-enact this through the camera. As a mobile modern technology, it can represent both traditional white masculinity and Lawrence's more fluid, even transgressive, white masculinity as heroic Empire-building. The films were understood as records of heroic racialised warfare and racialised movement, even when these were not visibly occurring on screen, and thus they became exemplary for spectators. Anderson describes the films as 'propaganda at its very best' and acclaims their potential to 'allay industrial unrest', foregrounding the role that performances of whiteness were perceived to play in obscuring class difference and asserting racial solidarity. Anderson describes the 'impressive' demeanour and 'rapt attention' of the 'packed' theatre, envisaging an audience performing its own restraint in response, regardless of class distinction and distance. In Anderson's review and in the very conception of the films as 'monument' or memorial, a different kind of (non-fiction) cinema, underpinned by older models of imperial heroism, emerges, visualising—through the camera's modern mobility—a new post-war colonial order and a more 'civilised' style of being for white, British cinemagoers.

‘stirring achievements enacted amid gorgeous scenery’: Memorialising Travel in *Cape to Cairo*

Thomas’ travelogues evidence the war film functioning as travel film, an expedition across a dangerous landscape to imperial ends. In the interwar period, expedition films continued to provide images of imperial ‘heroes’ testing their mettle against racialised backdrops. As with Thomas’ films, these aimed to depict modern, technological travel, in which camera and transport facilitated an interwar imperial heroism. This is epitomised in *Cape to Cairo*. Recording the Court Treatts’ journey across Africa with *Express* reporter Fred Law, Stella’s brother Errol Hinds, cameraman Tommy Glover, and Nyasaland guide and translator Julius Mapata, the film recounted the motorcar journey from South Africa to Egypt, solely via British Empire territories. The expedition purportedly aimed to scope out a possible road route for economic ‘development’ of British territories.⁸⁷ Accompanied by Glover’s camera from the start, this expedition was always intended to be filmed; by following this potential trade route in cars, as the Allenby film flew over train tracks in West Asia, it would map the new interwar imperial economy. The film ran at London cinemas—firstly for three months in 1926 at the Polytechnic, which from 1923 was devoted to films ‘of nature and travel’, and then at the Stoll Picture House in 1928—before touring provincially as late as 1932.⁸⁸ It played to schoolchildren and toured in Canada, suggesting its perceived colonial relevance to white audiences in Britain and the Empire.⁸⁹ While this film did not illustrate production processes like the documentaries discussed in the next chapter, it used the older mode of non-fictional narrative, the difficult travel of the imperial expedition, to articulate the connectedness and comprehensiveness of Empire in Africa, and the ways in which British products—the British Crossley cars and the British Sands & Hunter cameras—‘performed’ mechanically in the face of ‘excessive wear and tear under abnormal conditions of

⁸⁷ Tal Zalmanovich, “‘Women Pioneer of Empire’: the making of a female colonial celebrity”, *Postcolonial Studies*, 12.2 (2009), 193-210 (p. 196); *Country Life*, 13 September 1924, pp. liv, lvi.

⁸⁸ On the Polytechnic’s exhibition policy, see *Times*, 11 April 1923, p. 9. For listings evidencing its exhibition runs, see e.g. *Times*, 3 July 1926, p. 12; *Sunday Mirror*, 11 March 1928, p. 4; *Nottingham Evening Post*, 8 March 1932, p. 10.

⁸⁹ *Wiltshire Times and Trowbridge Advertiser*, 7 April 1928, p. 7; *Kinematograph Weekly*, 19 April 1928, p. 35.

travelling’.⁹⁰ Older modes of exemplary white performance merged with modern technological development and interwar imperialism.

Another modern quality was evident in the appropriation of film stardom for the expedition’s imperial performances. Released at an intense moment of debate surrounding British cinema’s imperial function, preceding the 1927 Films Act, this film provided a modern British alternative to Hollywood stardom in framing expedition members’ performances alongside the sights of the journey. In his history of the ‘Cape-to-Cairo imaginary’ from its first conception by Cecil Rhodes, Peter Merrington observes that the route ‘has never been a practical itinerary for regular travellers’ and has limited economic utility. Because of this, attempts to traverse it should be seen as ‘symbolic’ journeys or ‘a kind of performance—a feat, a heroic lark, an attempt at a record, a point to be proven, and a set of legends rehearsed in travel’. This idea that following the route is ‘a kind of performance’ rather than a practical imperial endeavour is reinforced by the theatrical ‘staging of particular scenarios’, ‘casting of explorers as principal actors and indigenous Africans as picturesque and type-cast extras’, and ‘imperial mise-en-scène’ typical of such expeditions.⁹¹ To travel from Cape to Cairo, Merrington proposes, is to perform for indigenous onlookers and metropolitan audiences, via reports, retellings and monuments, in ‘a national act of identity formation’.⁹² From its first conception, this route was a white colonial ‘imaginary’: a constructed stage without foundation in the practicalities of traversing it for enacting white imperial heroism and marking racial hierarchies in a manner akin to the ‘white spatial imaginaries’—spaces racialised to maintain white supremacist ideologies and inequalities—theorised by Lipsitz and referenced in the Introduction.⁹³ Building on Charles Musser’s dubbing of the Court Treatt expedition specifically as a ‘media event’, Tal Zalmanovich characterises their journey in such terms as colonial *star* performance, a stage-

⁹⁰ *British Journal of Photography*, 5 March 1926, p. 142; *ILN*, 6 February 1926, pp. 248-249.

⁹¹ Peter Merrington, ‘A Staggered Orientalism: The Cape-to-Cairo Imaginary’, *Poetics Today*, 22.2 (2001), 323-364 (pp. 357-359).

⁹² Merrington, p. 324.

⁹³ Lipsitz, p. 13.

managed spectacle of white imperial might.⁹⁴ Exploiting modern technologies of the car and camera, the Court Treatt's re-treading of this route was a 'statement of imperial ownership and conquest', and a deliberate and conscious 'performance intended to prove that Africa could be overcome "whether by heroism or facility" using modern technology'.⁹⁵ This performance situated the expedition members, particularly the Court Treatt couple, as film 'stars', but stars articulating modern white British imperial heroism. Their performance could serve to physically connect 'anachronistic' African space to a global imperial economy and, simultaneously, to imbue British cinema, British performers, and British products with the same dynamism, mobility, and sensation perceived in Hollywood film.

Most of *Cape to Cairo* is now lost; only several shots of Egypt survive. Yet Allyson Nadia Field asserts, in her 'Manifesto for Looking at Lost Film' preceding her study of the lost corpus of early Black American 'uplift cinema', that 'scholarly writing is [...] disproportionately weighted toward extant films. However, with more than 80 percent of films made in the silent era considered lost, it is irrational to perpetuate extant-centric film history'. She argues that neglecting lost films ultimately results in a limited, partial view of film history, proposing that such films should still be studied through their extrafilmic traces utilising 'adapted methodologies'.⁹⁶ While I have mostly focused on extant films in which performance can be closely examined, *Cape to Cairo's* exemplary status as an expedition film *about* performance of the journey and of white imperial identity demands attention through such an approach. Its very status as 'media event' provides the 'adapted methodology' required: I examine the multi-media reportage of the expedition and film—Law's initial reporting, Stella Court Treatt's book and the photographs included, and film reviews—for insight into the expedition's performances and their framing on screen. Photographs especially evidence the sorts of images perceived to be worth recording and of interest to a cinema-going public. While they cannot

⁹⁴ Charles Musser, 'Presenting "A True Idea of the African of To-Day": Two Documentary Forays by Paul and Eslanda Robeson', *Film History*, 18.4 (2006), 412-439 (p. 415).

⁹⁵ Zalmanovich, p. 198.

⁹⁶ Allyson Nadia Field, *Uplift Cinema: The Emergence of African American Film and the Possibility of Black Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), p. 23.

tell us how the film looked exactly, I read these for indications of the moving performances that the film depicted. Through this evidence, I argue that performance was central to *Cape to Cairo* and its British reception, as it has been throughout the history of the Cape-to-Cairo imaginary. Further, its reproduction of performance cemented (British) cinema's capacity to memorialise historic, heroic events in an excitingly modern, democratised way. *Cape to Cairo* was framed as a modern, mobile historical 'record' or 'monument' of heroic achievement. It captured and reproduced the Court Treatts' actions and self-reflexively commented on this reproduction to imply cinema's role in 'reproducing' the next generation of imperial citizens.



Figure 45: A close-up photograph of a tyre stuck in mud in Stella's travel book, *Cape to Cairo*



Figure 46: A wider photograph of a car stuck on rocky terrain

From available evidence, the film apparently consisted of two kinds of shot. On the one hand, it depicted the spectacular and picturesque. The surviving footage is a series of long shots of ruins in Luxor. In Stella's book, many photographs are similarly landscape shots, encouraging a narrative break to tilt the book and examine the image.⁹⁷ Reviews corroborate the idea that such sights were presented in the film, praising its capturing of landscape, especially Victoria Falls, flora

⁹⁷ Stella Court Treatt, *Cape to Cairo: The Record of a Historic Motor Journey* (London, Calcutta, and Sydney: George C. Harrap & Company, 1927), pp. 37, 47, 49, 55, 110, 113.

and fauna.⁹⁸ However, these static landscapes were not generally most notable for reviewers, who instead fixated on difficult travel: the ‘mud and sand, hunger and thirst, hostile natives and charging buffaloes’, the tactile sensations and bodily dangers.⁹⁹ Alongside spectacular landscapes, many photographs in Stella’s book are of sticky mud or rock-strewn roads (Figures 45 and 46).¹⁰⁰ These are usually close-ups, offering tactile engagement with the ground. Oksiloff observes interplay between panoramas and close-ups in German ethnographic cinema which positions ethnographic bodies as scrutinised object while also, through panoramas, framing these bodies as synecdochic for whole cultures or races.¹⁰¹ This commercial British expedition film analogously alternated between explorers’ bodies and landscapes made visible through their labour. The *Daily News* is representative in evoking the film’s ‘stirring achievements enacted amid gorgeous scenery’.¹⁰² The film is praised as a record of performed ‘achievements’ as much as the background against which these are enacted. While Thomas’ exhibition implied white heroic performers behind the camera, *Cape to Cairo* cut between them and the spectacle they produced. Stasis and hardship necessarily preceded the distanced panoramic views.

What facilitates these views is not difficulty, however, but the resilience of the group undertaking the expedition, transcending bodily degradation in what becomes a non-fictional performance of white restraint. Counterpointing photographs of stuck wheels and mud, the *Cape to Cairo* book also includes images of, for instance, ‘Ploughing through Mud’, ‘One of the Cars being hauled through a River’, and ‘The First Car to cross the Bahr el Arab’.¹⁰³ The ingenuity of the expedition crew, managing large groups of indigenous men who perform the physical labour, enables and merges with the ‘performance’ of their vehicles. One photo, reproduced in the *New York Times*, is composed with a diagonal line of South Sudanese men bisecting landscape and river

⁹⁸ *Reynolds’s Newspaper*, 4 April 1926, p. 6; *Financial Times*, 6 April 1926, p. 9; *Bioscope*, 8 April 1926, p. 27.

⁹⁹ *Daily Herald*, 31 March 1926, p. 5.

¹⁰⁰ Court Treadwell, pp. 58, 60, 71, 78, 81

¹⁰¹ Oksiloff, pp. 17-19.

¹⁰² *Daily News*, 30 March 1926, p. 5.

¹⁰³ Court Treadwell, pp. 58, 76, 131, 194, 199, 211.



Figure 47: A photograph of South Sudanese men carrying the car across a river



Figure 48: A photograph of the expedition crew eating dinner

(Figure 47).¹⁰⁴ Advertising the film for American readers, this still image evokes (white, British) forward movement across space and the organisation of bodies by the expedition. Indigenous labourers are abstracted into a visual pattern of movement and forward dynamism. Captioned as ‘An Adventure Stanley Missed in Africa’ in the *New York Times*, this moment is compared to but distanced from imperial travel traditions, introducing the modern technology of the motorcar. In this instance, modern technology seems to have failed but the performances and ingenuity of the expedition team, it is implied, overcomes this. This relies on abstracting the actual work done by indigenous people with the camera. Framing the spectacle, it turns this moment of stasis into an image of directed dynamism and performance. Their movement becomes a performance of overcoming ‘primitive’ landscapes and the primitivising state of being pulled into the dirt, through modern technology in combination with their heroism and physical capacities.

How this overcoming is expressed through body language, gesture, and facial expression is not described in reviews, but their performances are evoked through recollections of ‘optimism’,

¹⁰⁴ *New York Times*, 27 December 1925, p. 7.

‘unfailing resource and dogged determination’, ‘enterprise, pluck and endurance’, ‘patience and resource’.¹⁰⁵ In Stella’s book, one photograph depicts ‘[a] happy meal’, as the Court Treatts sit with Hinds and Lawson around a table on wooden blocks (Figure 48).¹⁰⁶ This photograph incorporates everyday expedition life into their performance. Despite being backed by wilderness, they eat at a dining table, raising themselves from the ground to perform ‘civilised’ Western life. Their ability to conceal the hardships of travel from their faces or bodies was performed on screen and at exhibitions. Law notes spectators’ shock, on their arrival into Egypt, that they ‘all look so healthy’, a sentiment Stella repeated in interviews and lectures, noting her greater health after their hardships.¹⁰⁷ Lecturing appearances proved this healthiness derived from traversing ‘primitive’ space. Chaplin lectured with the film at the Polytechnic and Hinds continued this on provincial tours. Despite their narratives of difficult travel, critics underline their ‘cheerfulness’, ‘breeziness’, or even ‘raciness’.¹⁰⁸ Leila Koivunen argues that travel book portraits ‘demonstrate the commitment of a traveller to Western culture. Explorers were depicted as European gentlemen, whose long journeys in the “dark continent” had left no trace on their faces’.¹⁰⁹ The same was true in the physical presence of explorers as lecturers. As with Thomas, their performance in the theatre itself provided a supplement to the performance on screen that emphasised their healthiness and vitality despite all they had faced. Imperial whiteness could be read in their conduct and vitality faced with corporeal depredations, merged with the spectacle of modern technologies of automobile and camera.

Transcending the difficulties of the landscape and its inhabitants established a vision of imperial heroism operating in conjunction with the modern motorcar and camera. It also articulated a kind of alternative modern *stardom*, especially through Stella. She was described on her return as a

¹⁰⁵ *Telegraph*, 30 March 1926, p. 6; *Times*, 30 March 1926, p. 12; *Country Life*, 10 April 1926, p. lxiv; *Guardian*, 8 July 1927, p. 1.

¹⁰⁶ Court Treatt, p. 106.

¹⁰⁷ *Express*, 25 January 1926, p. 1; *Mirror*, 10 February 1926, p. 2; *Sunday Post*, 10 April 1927, p. 4.

¹⁰⁸ *Daily Herald*, 31 March 1926, p. 5; *Croydon Times*, 19 February 1927, p. 4; *Portsmouth Evening News*, 21 June 1927, p. 6.

¹⁰⁹ Koivunen, pp. 152, 155.

glamorous beauty, rather than rugged explorer: the *Scotsman* rhapsodises about the ‘dainty figure clad in a shimmering golden gown’ who appeared in the interval, while the *Mirror* describes her as ‘tiny and fragile-looking’, unlike the ‘popular conception of an explorer’.¹¹⁰ Sounding more like Gish than a hero able to overcome difficult landscapes, she is characterised as feminine and fragile, a glamorous, ‘shimmering’ star. Exploration and expedition were typically masculine endeavours but Thompsell proposes that the few women who did take part evidence the greater significance of performing *white imperial identity* through this travel than performing masculinity.¹¹¹ Stella’s glamorous, delicate stardom was detached from her rugged, hard-working performance in the film but this is the condition she was able to return to after her modern, feminine colonial adventure. In photographs in her book, Stella does perform glamorously, posing with a smile in front of a tree (Figure 49), but, in another photo, she looks directly into the camera as she kneels in the muddy road, holding a large stick (Figure 50).¹¹² In both, she wears ‘masculine’ trousers or shorts, the outfit



Figure 49: A photograph of Stella posing in front of a tree



Figure 50: A photograph of Stella kneeling with a stick

¹¹⁰ *Scotsman*, 20 April 1927, p. 12; *Mirror*, 12 June 1926, p. 7.

¹¹¹ Thompsell, pp. 101-133.

¹¹² Court Treatt, p. 78.

of colonial endeavour rather than ‘shimmering’ glamour. The latter photo especially epitomises ‘pluck’ faced with difficulty; she stares back resolutely, calmly, with passive facial expression, planting the stick in the ground for balance, but also as a flagpole signifying ownership and civilised uprightness. As Zalmanovich observes, she also emphasised her femininity on the expedition, performing as ‘carer’ for expedition members, indigenous people and animals.¹¹³ Yet this was a practical, modern femininity, a glamorous adventurousness and new model for up-to-date, interwar travel including women.

Zalmanovich proposes that

individuals such as the Court Treatts and their expedition were the perfect fodder for the front page: they were adventurous; they utilized relatively new and exciting technologies; and they remained glamorous even in the dusty and occasionally muddy paths of the African continent. Most significantly, they had managed to maintain a fine balance between distance and accessibility: they were easier to identify with than royalty but unquestionably more alluring and daring than the neighbours next door.¹¹⁴

Their ‘exotic’ glamour potentially distanced the spectator. However, *film* stardom was understood in Britain as a kind of corporeal address, an overcoming of distance that (usually dangerously) transcended class and spectator-performer distinctions. In this British version, the dangers of such bodily address were transformed into the shared experience of white imperial travel. Open to women and men and, implicitly, the British cinema-going masses, this transcended gender and class divisions. For the *Times*, moreover, this was achieved through the combination of the journey’s ‘pleasures’ and ‘hardships’: audiences could not

doubt the reality of the difficulties or fail to admire the patience and resource which overcame them. So good is the record that we are made sharers in the hardships as well as in the pleasures of this remarkable adventure.¹¹⁵

The ‘record’ enabled vicarious travel by recording these performances, not of glamour but difficulty.

Up to her knees in mud, dressed in practical, even masculine shorts, Stella’s film representation

¹¹³ Zalmanovich, pp. 205-206.

¹¹⁴ Zalmanovich, p. 195.

¹¹⁵ *Times*, 30 March 1926, p. 12. This sensation of ‘participating’ in the journey through the film was often reported; see e.g. *Bioscope*, 8 April 1926, p. 27; *West Sussex Gazette*, 8 April 1926, p. 6; *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 22 March 1927, p. 4; *Scotsman*, 23 March 1927, p. 1; *Oxford Chronicle and Reading Gazette*, 12 August 1927, p. 12.

contrasted with her feminine 'shimmering gowns' at the exhibition, but formed part of an alternative British star performance 'felt', tangibly, by audiences at home.

Emphasising the tactile experience of the difficult landscape—for men and women in ways which transcended gender difference in favour of shared racial identity—was one approach by which the film aimed to overcome this distance and involve spectators. The other key means of doing so was asserting shared whiteness in opposition to indigenous peoples. In its focus on white explorers' performance, the film seems to have mostly erased the role of indigenous subjects. Certainly, this had political utility in that it portrayed an Africa 'devoid of menacing groups contesting British rule in the continent': for instance, Garveyist, pan-Africanist, indigenous trade unionist and anti-colonial movements in South and East Africa.¹¹⁶ Indigenous people are denied the capacity to act, as political agents or film performers. They are characterised as spectacle within the landscape or as spectators awed by white performance; these two roles function to convey white supremacy. Firstly, indigenous people are framed for the camera as spectacle, organised and enabled by the expedition. Indigenous performance is thus understood to be a result of the white explorers' performance, evident in the management of indigenous labourers to transport the Crossley cars and create images of dynamic movement. According to the *Western Daily Press*, the film also contained 'native war dances and ceremonies', formal, ritualised performances opposed to informal performances for the camera by the white expedition members.¹¹⁷ According with ethnographic film convention, these dances and ceremonies functioned as spectacle and indication of racial difference which characterised 'natives', across the vast, diverse trajectory of the Cape-to-Cairo route, as a homogenous Black entity. Indigenous people's labour and performance becomes index of racial difference, 'landscaping' them, as Rony writes, within a 'savage' space to be traversed

¹¹⁶ Zalmanovich, p. 194. On indigenous resistance to colonial rule in South and East African territories traversed by the Court Treatts, see e.g. Audrey Wipper, 'Kikuyu Women and the Harry Thuku Disturbances: Some Uniformities of Female Militancy', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 59.3 (1989), 300-337; Bush, pp. 157-171; Clive Gabay, 'Decolonizing interwar anticolonial solidarities: The case of Harry Thuku', *Interventions*, 20.4 (2018), 549-566; Samwel Mhajida, 'The Contempt of Public Property: the Datooga Salt Fracas and the Resistance against Colonial Definition of Property in Central Tanzania (1923-1927)', *Ethnologia Actualis*, 19.1 (2019), 36-53.

¹¹⁷ *Western Daily Press*, 20 May 1930, p. 4.

and organised, fixing 'dynamic cultural confrontation into a still life'.¹¹⁸ As Robert J. Gordon points out of dance in ethnographic film, indigenous performers could partially control meaning through their bodies, gestures, and movements, but this unfolds on a stage controlled by the colonial figures filming.¹¹⁹ Such scenes, then, are simultaneously subsumed into and opposed to the 'performance'—not ritualised and formally staged but for the camera—of the expedition's white members: they further evidence the crew's heroic achievement in attaining and choreographing this spectacle.

Conversely, indigenous people also serve as audiences to the film's imperial spectacle. Both the cars and the expedition's gramophones are exploited as tools of a colonial sublime, spectacular technologies viewed with amazement by indigenous subjects.¹²⁰ Stella claims in a *Sunday Post* interview that it was difficult to say whether her white femininity or the spectacle of the motorcar provided the 'star turn' for indigenous crowds.¹²¹ Both became emblems of the expedition's modernity, uniquely apposite for a cinematic medium of glamour, dynamism and movement. Yet one photograph in Stella's book evidences resistance to this. Taken from inside the car, it frames five South Sudanese men through a window 'Seeing a White Woman for the First Time' (Figure 51).¹²² Black indigenous subjects are both viewed subject and audience for the performance of British technology and imperial feminine glamour. Four men look out of the frame, smiling at the vehicle. The window delineates between 'us' in the car and indigenous men outside. However, one man looks back more ambivalently, facing away from the others, dismayed rather than excited. Whereas the four cock their heads, he is as upright and erect as any photographs of expedition members, staring defiantly, unawed. This is partially contained by the caption which considers this a response to the sight of white femininity, paralleling it with awe at modern technology (including the camera). Yet the ambivalent look is not explained away by this. While indigenous agency and action are constantly transmogrified into evidence of racial difference and primitivism, this moment does seem

¹¹⁸ Rony, p. 80.

¹¹⁹ Gordon, pp. 212-213.

¹²⁰ For photographs of Stella's gramophone 'demonstration', see Court Treatt, pp. 72-73.

¹²¹ *Sunday Post*, 10 April 1927, p. 4.

¹²² Court Treatt, p. 183.

to question modern, technological white supremacy. The man refuses his role as awed spectator or mass to be overcome. He remains defined by the distinctions laid out in the film, framed by the car window and thus 'outside' modernity, but his performance seems to question such hierarchies, becoming performer and spectator simultaneously and wresting attention from the spectacle of 'star' imperial femininity ubiquitous throughout the journey and evoked in the caption. We cannot say for sure whether this moment, or any like it, is present in the film but its inclusion in the book raises the possibilities for other perspectives, other modes of spectatorship of heroic whiteness. As a photograph, even more so, this moment arrests the vehicle's dynamism, the film's forward



Figure 51: A photograph of a South Sudanese man matching the camera's gaze

movement. For an instant, it recreates a different, uneasy feeling of being spectated, of having the white ethnographic gaze matched and thus echoing commentators worrying about 'native spectatorship' in discourses discussed in Chapter 1. It evidences some questioning of the performance of white modernity—and the invitation to spectators to partake in this through film—within *Cape to Cairo*'s multimedia spectacle.



Figure 52: A photograph of Stella, Chaplin, and Errol at Cecil Rhodes' grave

Emma Sandon argues that the Court Treatts' later fiction film made on another expedition to the Sudan, *Stampede* (Errol Hinds and Stella and Chaplin Court Treatt, BIF, 1930), merges ethnographic imagery and fiction to situate the film within a British imperial tradition. It draws on 'existing aesthetics of live ethnographic representations and displays and early actuality films through their combination of dramatised re-enactment, performance, and what we would now call

documentary'.¹²³ Sandon's analysis can be applied to and extended with *Cape to Cairo*. It is described by the *Western Daily Press* in 1931 as 'a vast pageant of Africa, depicting forests, mountains, savage tribes, and animal and insect life'.¹²⁴ The film becomes an imperial procession, marshalling, organising, and domesticating the African landscape and peoples as they move past the screen. *Cape to Cairo's* relationship to pre-cinematic imperial forms is reliant on the modern, dynamic performances of the Court Treatts and their British technology, rather than indigenous subjects as Sandon finds in *Stampede*. Another photograph depicts the Court Treatts and Hinds standing by Rhodes' grave in Zimbabwe, and shots of this apparently appear in the film (Figure 52).¹²⁵ As Zalmanovich explains, this connects their project to Rhodes' own Cape-to-Cairo plans.¹²⁶ Moreover, it implies resemblance between the expedition film and colonial graves or monuments. Rhodes' grave epitomises this form, domesticating and claiming ownership over African land in a 'visual analogue of the idea of white settlement itself'.¹²⁷ Erect, upright over Rhodes' grave, they place themselves in his heroic lineage of colonising African land, as the next generation of modern, not Victorian, explorers whose restraint and aristocratic distance is tempered by the democratisation that the camera provides and the speed and dynamism of British products. The film is thus interpellated as memorial, reflected in its constant celebration as 'epic pictorial record' of their 'historic' actions, but also reflects a newer, more dynamic imperialism.¹²⁸ The *Weekly Dispatch* dubs the film the 'self-produced Odyssey of a Motoring Ulysses', again emphasising the *record* of imperial achievement as updated epic narrative.¹²⁹ Film records imperial performance for posterity, enabling spectators to 'feel' the journey while memorialising it, in the same way that the physical

¹²³ Emma Sandon, 'Representing "African Life": From Ethnographic Exhibitions to Nionga and Stampede', in *Young and Innocent: The Cinema in Britain, 1896-1930*, ed. by Andrew Higson (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002), pp. 191-207 (p. 192).

¹²⁴ *Western Daily Press*, 26 March 1931, p. 5.

¹²⁵ Court Treatt, p. 55; *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 4 March 1927, p. 5.

¹²⁶ Zalmanovich, p. 197.

¹²⁷ David Bunn, 'The Sleep of the Brave: Graves as Sites and Signs in the Colonial Eastern Cape', in *Images and Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa*, ed. by Paul S. Landau and Susan Griffin (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 56-83 (p. 60).

¹²⁸ *Western Daily Press*, 20 May 1930, p. 4; *Bioscope*, 1 April 1926, p. 17; *Croydon Times*, 12 February 1927, p. 6; *Gloucester Citizen*, 16 May 1928, p. 11.

¹²⁹ *Weekly Dispatch*, 28 March 1926, p. 17.

presence of Rhodes' grave, shaping the landscape, records and re-enacts his colonial exploitation of South African land. Unlike photographs or graves, it does so in motion, allowing narrative to unfold, depicting the 'before' and 'after' to the spectacular landscape images and memorialising the labour and movement that underpins them.

Through its modern mode of imperial adventure, the film took on exemplary significance—as motorcar enthusiast and Conservative MP John Douglas-Scott-Montagu introduced them, the Court Treatts became 'typical examples of British pluck and initiative'.¹³⁰ The film reproduced and monumentalised imperial travellers in motion, utilising new technologies—of the camera, celebrity reportage and vehicular transport—to invoke the feeling, as well as the spectacle, of white imperial heroism. Older heroes, like Cecil Rhodes, were invoked in death but their continued impact on the African landscape, like the very construction of the 'Cape-to-Cairo' space, was emphasised as an example assumed by present-day mobile imperial heroes. This was repeated as the film could enable the 'reproduction' of their heroic qualities and conduct in British spectators. Through its modern dynamism, appropriating Hollywood stardom, it claimed to do so better—more democratically, glamorously and sensationally—than other imperial forms.

Great White Explorers in Great White Silences

Chaplin described the Cape-to-Cairo route as 'a sort of Mount Everest to motorists', noting the 'added zest to know that two other expeditions had met a tragic end'.¹³¹ Underlining the expedition's difficulty and his achievement in overcoming this, he invokes another notorious contemporary expedition film, *The Epic of Everest*, which recounted the failed 1924 ascent. In this section, I shift from African topographies to the cold extremes of Everest and Antarctica, which, as Chaplin's comparison insinuates, relied on similar conventions of overcoming difficulty as white imperial heroism. More than the Cape-to-Cairo route, Antarctica and Everest offered no economic or colonial benefits; traversing them was another performative 'heroic lark' or 'point to be proven'. Explorers were not connecting a colonial economy; their performative power was located in their

¹³⁰ Quoted in *Telegraph*, 30 March 1926, p. 6.

¹³¹ *Northern Whig*, 17 February 1926, p. 8.

bodies' vitality against an extreme backdrop. Stages for 'aspiring heroes and leaders to pit their strength and intellect against one of the harshest environments on Earth', the films about expeditions to these remote locales epitomise exemplary heroism as an end in itself.¹³² However, they also represent failure as neither achieved their goals and overcame the 'savage' landscapes, ending in deaths of crew members. In *Cape to Cairo*, the camera was essential, alongside expedition members and the motorcars they drive, in articulating the experience of modern imperial travel, drawn from but updating imperial heritage. By contrast, these two films elegise older, disappearing forms of elite white imperial masculinity and camaraderie.

Griffiths summarises this, writing that the Everest expedition was 'a throwback to old-school exploration, closer in style to the indelible image of the Arctic explorer "foot-slogging [in front of] his sled" rather than the motorcars and airplanes that catapulted exploration into the twentieth century'.¹³³ The spectator and cameraman are left behind in both films, complicating spectators' vicarious experience of the heroic explorer's journey. Indeed, in the case of *The Epic of Everest*, the upper-class mountaineering crew were uneasy about letting a cameraman film their ascent, seeing this as cheapening their noble pursuit.¹³⁴ Rather than recording modern star performance, the camera becomes intrusive, vulgar, an overly democratising force. In this section, then, I explore how these expedition films resolve their status as failure and elegy for the death of an older form of Empire-building and white heroism. In *The Great White Silence*, Herbert Ponting renders himself, the camera operator, imperial hero, reconstructing these tragic events on film and positioning cinema as imperial memorial. By contrast, *The Epic of Everest* more profoundly opens the possibility of alternative perspectives by spectators of colour, incorporating this into the film's conclusion. In doing so, it imagines travel *beyond* colonial geographies and performance into geological timescales,

¹³² Robert G. David, *The Arctic in the British Imagination 1818-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 20.

¹³³ Alison Griffiths, 'Cinema in Extremis: Mount Everest and the Poetics of Monumentality', *Film History*, 32.1 (2020), 40-71 (p. 46).

¹³⁴ Griffiths, 'Cinema in Extremis', p. 48.

invoking spiritual perspectives that subvert expedition films' staging of racial difference and performances of whiteness.

Absent of humanity, these expedition landscapes offered different representational challenges. This absence has been theorised through Siegfried Kracauer's work. *The Epic of Everest* was produced at the same time as a burgeoning genre of German 'mountain films' which, for Kracauer, prefigured Nazism. The 'heroic idealism' of mountaineering, the 'exaltation of some lonely mountaineer on a lofty peak' and the 'idolatry' of the landscape, formed a nationalist, masculine, anti-rationalist vision echoing Nazi values.¹³⁵ As Esther Leslie puts it, the mountain becomes 'a place of solitude, silence, self-discipline, of purified action, of totally marshalled instincts that are immune to mechanization, and, as such, speaks to certain 'races', the Aryan-Roman and the Aryan-Nordic'. For Kracauer, Leslie asserts, '[t]he mountains and the icebergs were portents of the Nazism to come'.¹³⁶ Kracauer's spaces of restraint in the face of danger resonate with the expedition film, and its racialisation of space and the performers who transcend it. They also anticipate analogies made by scholars such as Sukhdev Sandhu, Scott MacKenzie, and Anna Westerståhl between the Arctic's literal whiteness and its status as stage for white masculinity in early cinema, and Dyer's proposal that the myth of European origins in the Caucasus mountains associates whiteness with cold, remoteness, and hard conditions.¹³⁷ In this sense, the white spaces of Antarctica and Everest were perfect for performing white supremacy and older models of unmechanised imperialism

At the same time, these spaces undermined Enlightenment 'planetary consciousness' and Empire in that they lacked natural resources and colonisable indigenous people.¹³⁸ For Jennifer Fay,

¹³⁵ Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* [1947], ed. by Leonardo Quaresima, revised and expanded edn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 111-112, 119, 257-258, 259-260.

¹³⁶ Esther Leslie, *Liquid Crystals: The Science and Art of a Fluid Form* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016), pp. 136, 140.

¹³⁷ Sukhdev Sandhu, 'Songs of migration', *Sight and Sound*, 20.3 (2010), 8; Scott MacKenzie and Anna Westerståhl Stenport (eds), 'Introduction: What are Arctic Cinemas?', in *Films on Ice: Cinemas of the Arctic* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), pp. 1-28 (p. 15); Richard Dyer, *White* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 20.

¹³⁸ Jennifer Fay, *Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 181. See also Mariano Siskind, 'Captain Cook and the Discovery of Antarctica's Modern Specificity: Towards a Critique of Globalization', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 42.1 (2005), 1-23.

Antarctica is non-visible, unrepresentable, even inhuman—much as Kracauer saw mountaintops—destabilising conventions of the sublime, ‘the benchmark aesthetic of extreme natural encounters in the eighteenth century’.¹³⁹ Fay connects Antarctica’s obliteration of ‘significance’ to Kracauer’s theorisation of the camera’s objective, unthinking recording.¹⁴⁰ Both evoke ‘the alterity of the unseen world before it is domesticated into narrative’.¹⁴¹ Kracauer believed mountaintops could be salvaged from Nazism as ‘symbols of the ahistorical, eternal, non-human’.¹⁴² Analogously, Fay argues that Antarctica ‘eludes the cinematic and even the photographic record altogether’ because it is too bright, dark, cold, still, or undifferentiated.¹⁴³ As such, mountainous and Antarctic landscapes potentially complicate the imperial explorer’s journey and its narrativisation. Without landmarks, ethnographic spectacle or visible protagonists, both films conclude with the ‘white silence’ of deceased explorers as potentially the purest performance of imperial whiteness as restrained self-effacement. Yet this silence lingers uncomfortably, a sign of imperial failure, the death of a model of white heroism.

Reconstructed Heroism in The Great White Silence

The Great White Silence’s footage was taken during Captain Scott’s 1912 South Pole expedition which ended with the deaths of all who reached the Pole. First exhibited in 1913, promotional materials established this footage as an anti-degenerative ‘pictorial record of what must always be one of the finest stories of devotion to purpose, ideals and duty, in the annals of the British race’, which taught what ‘being an Englishman should mean’.¹⁴⁴ By the release of *The Great White Silence*,

¹³⁹ Fay, pp. 163, 182.

¹⁴⁰ Fay, pp. 173-175.

¹⁴¹ Fay, pp. 167, 172. Griffiths differentiates Everest from Antarctica because of the presence of indigenous Tibetan people. However, the peak itself is unpopulated, akin to Fay’s Antarctica; Griffiths, ‘Cinema in Extremis’, p. 52.

¹⁴² Leslie, p. 141.

¹⁴³ Fay, p. 164.

¹⁴⁴ Cinema programme: Philharmonic Hall, London, 1914, Exeter, The Bill Douglas Cinema Museum <http://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:4415/Documents/Details/EXEBD_18663> [Accessed 9 June 2020]; Cinema programme: Philharmonic Hall, London, 1914, Exeter, The Bill Douglas Cinema Museum <http://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:4158/Documents/Details/EXEBD_18666> [accessed 12 November 2020].

these images were already old, reminiscent of a previous age of imperial travel. Yet before its exhibition, no less legitimising a figure than King George V likewise hoped that ‘every British boy might see the pictures, and learn their story as they would help to foster the spirit of adventure that made the Empire’.¹⁴⁵ Despite representing failure and tragedy, Ponting’s footage rendered British imperial conduct exemplary film performance, demonstrating imperial self-sacrifice, restraint and duty. This is because the ‘pictures’ were as important as the ‘story’: Ponting gives the *camera* a crucial role in memorialising and reconstructing a ‘spirit of adventure’ from this unsuccessful journey.



Figure 53: The still photograph of Ponting filming alongside the boat shown in *The Great White Silence*

Throughout *The Great White Silence*, expedition work is balanced with filming. During a gale, the camera is attached to their boat’s side as waves crash against the hull. Again, the camera is aligned with an imperial vehicle’s forward movement; cinema’s mobile gaze recreates imperial exploration. The frame contains no people, but the camera pans to sea, foregrounding Ponting’s presence positioned precariously to simulate the dangerous journey. The moving camera, the moving ship, and Ponting enable the spectator’s vicarious movement. Later, the boat cuts through

¹⁴⁵ *Times Cinema Supplement*, 21 February 1922, p. xii.

Antarctic ice, the camera again positioned to simulate its movement. Demonstrating British naval might and propulsion, the boat literally penetrates untouched land. Once more, attention is drawn to the camera. A still photograph depicts a prone Ponting filming these shots on a plank protruding from deck (Figure 53). Only Ponting can make the film mobile and modern, invoking imperialism's forward impulse. With the expedition crew barely present in these early scenes, Ponting's camerawork and self-endangerment create the film's mobility.

This continues on Antarctica, as Ponting is filmed playing with huskies and penguins. The film also introduces the expedition's mascot here, a cat named with the racist 'N-word'. Associating animal life with Blackness, travel film nature photography is connected to ethnography, putting white explorers into relief against a 'wild' setting. Travel film conventions are reasserted and racial difference is invoked despite the absence of humans in this landscape, though Ponting's position among and intimacy with these filmed animals perhaps signals his distance from other expedition members. The film turns to its tragic conclusion after this interlude, complicating these conventions. Long shots, depicting the crew marching into 'the Great White Silence', becoming smaller and smaller in the featureless landscape, are interspersed with intertitles explaining their strategy. The camera and spectator are unable to follow this part of the journey, remaining static as they fade. These shots depict a spectacularly vast landscape but, in contrast to *Cape to Cairo*, the explorers dwindle within it, undermining the heroic overcoming of landscape central to the expedition film. The last moments of performance by the explorers in the film diminish them in a vast, still, empty space, tragically separating them from the spectator aware of their eventual fate.

However, because Ponting has been foregrounded as the film's focaliser, narrative sense is possible through *his* heroic effort as the explorer remaining behind. The camera's immobility does not necessitate narrative immobility. From here, the film reports without recording travel. While reconstructed scenes depict setting up camp, titles ask spectators to 'imagine' these, highlighting their reconstructed status. Animated maps, excerpts from Scott's diary, and photographs recount the journey. As the men die, they are memorialised with diary quotations and photographs which

frame them in eternally erect, static heroism, distanced from cinema's mobilised gaze. The film ends with photographs and painted recreations, edited with quotations from Scott's diary. Scott writes, '[h]ad we lived, I should have had a tale to tell of the hardihood, endurance and courage of my companions. These rough notes and our dead bodies must tell the tale'. Yet the film is not formed of 'rough notes', or dead bodies, but Ponting's collage of other texts and images. The film turns from vicarious travel to a static, pictorial, disembodied, distant, but intermedial mode. Ponting orchestrates this, constructing whiteness within the empty Antarctic landscape; this is presented as exemplary heroism in its own right.

The film concludes with shots of a memorial for the deceased. Like *Cape to Cairo*, even in failure, *The Great White Silence* presents itself as a monument, a reproduction of imperial heroism that could produce the same qualities in spectators. If Ponting could not *film* the performance, it is expressed through the building of monuments, the writing of texts, and, finally, film editing. On his death, the *British Journal of Photography* asserts his greatest achievement to be obtaining 'permanent records and remarkable pictures of that immortal adventure', noting that he 'worked for years in perfecting' the film.¹⁴⁶ His construction of the material—re-released with sound as *90° South* in 1933—is framed as a lifelong endeavour of heroic recording in itself. Making narrative sense from Antarctica's emptiness and the expedition's failure, Ponting performs and conveys exemplary whiteness, even if this is white 'silence'.

'everything, material, animal and human, is dwarfed by the apparition of Everest'

The Great White Silence mitigates the unrepresentability of Antarctica and older imperial heroism by asserting Ponting's authorial presence and the film's role as imperial monument and memorial. Captain John Noel, who filmed the 1922 and 1924 Everest Expeditions, cited Ponting's films as his inspiration.¹⁴⁷ However, Noel's films are distinguished by the presence of Tibetan communities

¹⁴⁶ *British Journal of Photography*, 15 February 1935, p. 109.

¹⁴⁷ Peter H. Hansen, 'The Dancing Lamas of Everest: Cinema, Orientalism, and Anglo-Tibetan Relations in the 1920s', *The American Historical Review*, 101.3 (1996), 712-747 (p. 725).

below the mountain's peaks. *The Epic of Everest* incorporates sections on the residents of Pagri, nomadic shepherds in the plains above Pagri, and Rongbuk monastery monks. Simeon Koole marks the emergence of a Tibetan nation-state after two hundred years under Chinese 'suzerainty' with the formation of a Tibetan army after China's ineffective response to British and Nepalese military incursions.¹⁴⁸ For Britain, Tibetan autonomy was favourable, opposing Russia and protecting the British-Indian border.¹⁴⁹ Yet it denied British explorers ownership of this landscape, emphasised within the film by reminders that the expedition required the Monastery's blessing to access Everest, and the presence of Sherpa porters better at traversing it. Unlike *Cape to Cairo*, which traces a journey across a British-ruled landscape, *The Epic of Everest* depicts contested territory. The performance of imperial whiteness is more complex in this space, where colonial, political, and racial hierarchies are less rigidly asserted. The film could and does articulate such racist hierarchies, but its contested setting leads to a more fractured approach than Ponting's. Rather than mapping and claiming control of the space by filming and performing in it, like Thomas' travelogues, the film renders Everest distant, inhuman, and uncontrollable. Through this, it raises the possibility of transcending heroic individual, geographical and imperial categories, and even the human, destabilising expedition film conventions.

On the film's release, critic Walter Webster notes this, contemplating how 'everything, material, animal and human, is dwarfed by the apparition of Everest'.¹⁵⁰ This includes the white explorers and filmmaker themselves. Noel does not appear on screen like Ponting, and dangerous filming is not highlighted. The film begins introducing Everest as 'a principle, an attraction and a spur to action to call out all that is best in men who are pioneers' and 'the last of the world's great lodestones of romance and adventure', another connection to British imperial lineages of white heroism and its retelling. While Ponting begins with expedition members' portraits, Noel begins with long shots of the Himalayas and Everest, framing the *mountain* as monumental heroic protagonist.

¹⁴⁸ Simeon Koole, 'Photography as Event: Power, the Kodak Camera, and Territoriality in Early Twentieth-Century Tibet', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 59.2 (2017), 310-345 (pp. 312-314).

¹⁴⁹ Koole, pp. 314-315.

¹⁵⁰ *Sunday Mirror*, 14 December 1924, p. 17.

Information about Everest in titles is intercut with static long shots of the peak. A sped-up timelapse emphasises its seemingly eternal stillness as insubstantial clouds wisp past. Kracauer positively distinguishes timelapse photography of clouds-backed mountains from sentimental 1920s mountain films; these long shots evoke eternity, transcending ‘human’ narrative—and its appropriation for fascist or racist ends.¹⁵¹ The first shot depicting human presence reveals a mass of snow, with two men walking away from the camera in the distance. These early sequences establish the film’s representation of Everest’s grandeur rather than human endeavour.



Figure 54: A long shot of the expedition’s ‘army’ in *The Epic of Everest*

Similar long shots continue throughout the film, such as those of the expedition rendered tiny despite being an ‘army of five hundred men and animals’ (Figure 54). As in *The Great White Silence*, then, explorers are not depicted as tangible, corporeal embodiments of imperial heroism. Instead, *The Epic of Everest* is shot so that the hardships of travel become intangible and abstracted. Shooting from distance does not do this inherently. The Allenby film’s aerial photography and the landscapes of *Cape to Cairo* also contain the potential for minimising human presences. Other expedition films like *With Cobham to the Cape* (Basil Emmott, Gaumont, 1926), which depicts Alan Cobham’s flight from London to South Africa, also consist of aerial shots, transcending and

¹⁵¹ Kracauer, p. 111.

abstracting inhospitable landscapes. Yet these rely on heroic explorers' alignment *with* the camera, and thus the power of modern Western technology. Unlike *Cape to Cairo*, there is no cutting between close-up and panoramic views of this dangerous journeying. In these cold climate expedition films, spectators know the journey is difficult but cannot share in this; heroic whiteness is placed at great distance. Griffiths claims that 'the camera's sensory evocation of glacial landscapes containing diminutive humans heightened the spiritual and geographical significance and prestige of mountaineering, transforming the mountain into a stage upon which individual and national ambitions and conflicts would be performed'.¹⁵² Correspondingly, the *ILN* proposes that 'those bastions and walls of ice', in which 'humanity dwindles to a pin-point', resemble 'some gigantic stage-setting'.¹⁵³ Yet Griffiths also observes 'a romanticized, pictorial lens, one reminiscent of Victorian photography and early daguerreotypes'.¹⁵⁴ If the Himalayan landscape is a stage, it is a pictorial one, de-emphasising its performers' remote bodies; the 'prestige' of mountaineering is established by distancing spectators from participation in it. Everest is a stage reduced to its barest, where performance consists of the mere *presence* of climbers in an empty vastness.

Eschewing close-up 'corporeal vision', exploration in a dangerous space is abstracted. This is evident compared to *Climbing Mount Everest* (J. B. L. Noel, Royal Geographic Society, 1922), Noel's film of an earlier 1922 expedition. This is less interested in climbing than anthropological representation of indigenous groups and is structured conventionally, chronologically recreating the journey, with intertitles addressing spectators as if accompanying the expedition.¹⁵⁵ On the initial train journey, this is enhanced with shots from the roof, evoking early cinema 'phantom rides'.¹⁵⁶ Moreover, greater attention is devoted to discomfort and danger. Jungle heat and mountain chill are bemoaned in intertitles, as well as insects tolerated by the party. The latter is followed with close-ups of leeches on men's hands and legs. The close-ups of discomforted bodies, typical ethnographic

¹⁵² Griffiths, 'Cinema in Extremis', p. 48.

¹⁵³ *ILN*, 27 December 1924, p. 1276.

¹⁵⁴ Griffiths, 'Cinema in Extremis', p. 53.

¹⁵⁵ Hansen, 'Dancing Lamas', pp. 725-726; Brownlow, pp. 463-464.

¹⁵⁶ On the phantom ride film, see e.g. Lynne Kirby, *Parallel Tracks: The Railroad and Silent Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), pp. 45-47; Bruno, p. 20.

descriptions and dances, and the chronological structure are less prominent or absent in *The Epic of Everest*. In part, its long shots are a necessity as Noel could literally only travel so far with his camera, but this earlier film implies Noel's *choice* to employ a different stylistic approach, characterised by distant, incorporeal movement.

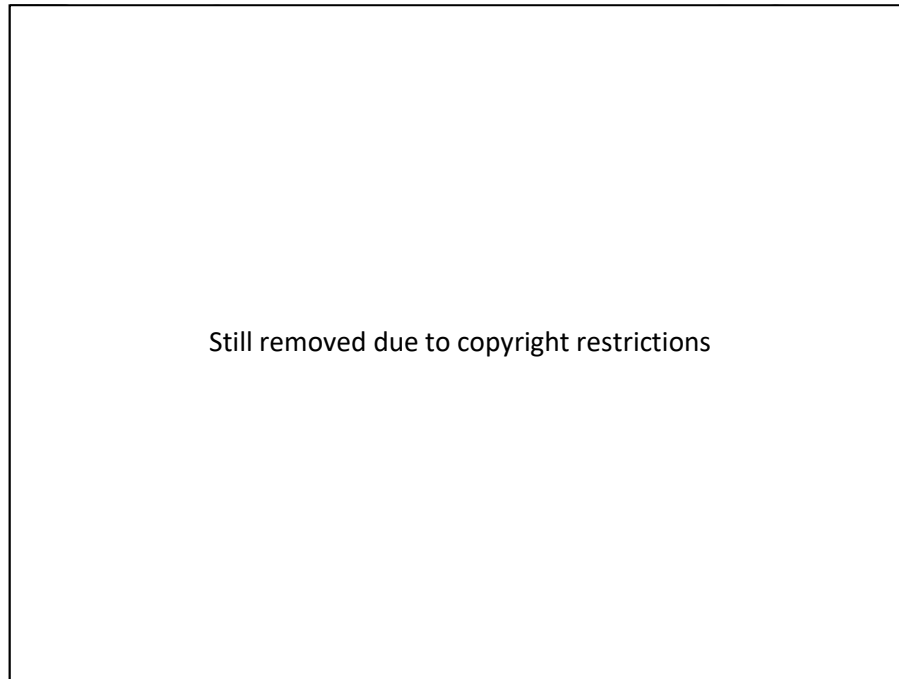


Figure 55: People, animals, and the muddy ground in Pagri

Like *Climbing Mount Everest*, *The Epic of Everest* includes ethnographic footage of Tibetan people. In the latter, though, these ethnographic subjects are presented as something to be transcended on the journey. To establish Everest as abstract stage for the heroic battle of elite white imperial explorers versus nature, the town of Pagri becomes a more 'tactile' space below. The people of Pagri are connected to the lower landscape as a title declares, '[a]mid dirt and mud and stinking refuse, the people live with their dogs and cattle in these hovels begrimed with the smoke of the argo fires'. Following this, shots depict townspeople, cattle, and dogs on rough muddy ground, backed by uneven brick buildings (Figure 55). Later close-ups frame individuals of interest in the community. This section offers a closer view. Unlike the *Somme* film or *Cape to Cairo*, however, where tactile evocations of dirt permitted identification, here, they distance the (implicitly white)

spectator from ethnographic subjects. Glossed with racist intertitles as dirty, tactile, and uncivilised, Pagri people are distinguished from the expedition mountaineers.



Figure 56: Nomadic shepherds above Pagri in long shot

After leaving Pagri, the expedition meets nomadic shepherds grazing yaks on higher grass plains. This community is represented more favourably, without indiscriminate mixing of mud, animals and humans. A title explains that the men graze yaks while women make butter, splitting their labouring roles; even a dog has its own close-up, his barking characterised as work in warding off predators. However, when the film turns from butter-churning women to the landscape, the beauty of the scenery is described and Tibetan men are depicted in long shot in front of and next to large buildings, showing their sparseness against the Himalayas (Figure 56). The film then depicts empty monasteries as titles describe the sensation of going 'back a thousand years of time'. The film does not frame movement geographically but temporally, into a remoteness of time as well as location. However, this is not McClintock's anachronistic space, but *beyond* human scales to geological and spiritual temporalities. The spatial-geological metaphors of nineteenth-century anthropologists reach an extreme endpoint in a history extending *beyond* the human and thus beyond the possibilities of performance by individual subjects.

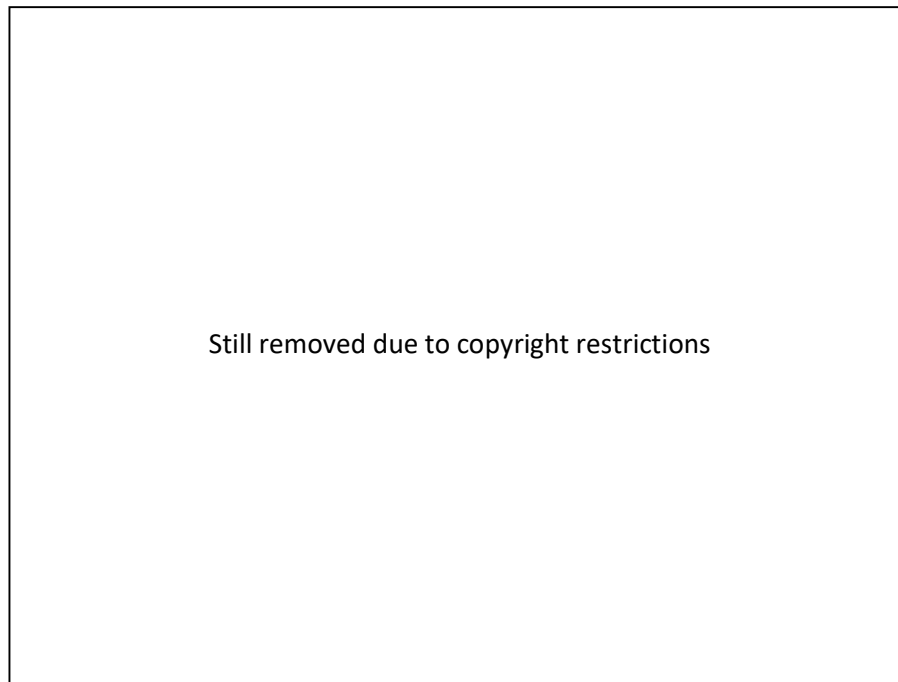


Figure 57: The expedition crew pose uneasily

The film subsequently depicts the expedition crew, pausing to offer some intimacy with the men. Yet this too ultimately distances them from the spectator and camera. An intertitle asserts that '[n]o better men' could 'take up the stern battle ahead', followed by a group shot of the crew. This could introduce more typical heroic portraiture, but the group seems uneasy, laughing, fidgeting and turning from the camera (Figure 57). The explorers—the 'best men' for the 'stern battle' rather than models anyone could follow—reject the camera's 'vulgar' interruption into the sanctity of this elite battle with nature and its potential to make this space accessible to all. As Griffiths suggests, this shot exposes the 'reality' behind the memorialisation of imperial heroes.¹⁵⁷ Yet this 'reality' is one of unfilmability, as much as the emptiness of Everest. Following this, individual crew members are depicted at work, writing on type-writers and notepads as they plan the final ascent. Providing closer engagement reveals *preparation* rather than adventure. They are posing and, more frequently, writing, doing the dull, bureaucratic work of exploration which only precedes further shots of the landscape contrasting with these activities. Unlike *The Great White Silence* which assembles a memorial to heroism from such written texts, emblems of 'civilised' behaviour in an extreme setting, this film frames writing as prosaic preparation for an unfilmable event. If the film moves upwards

¹⁵⁷ Griffiths, 'Cinema in Extremis', p. 56.

from 'dirty' Pagri residents to remoter spiritual space, echoing the vertical transcendence of *Broken Blossoms*, this must transcend the civilised, white expedition party too. Images of civilisation are left behind so that only Everest and miniscule mountaineers are visible. Ethnographic sights are transcended in *The Epic of Everest*, but so too are the trappings of civilisation that mark the difference of white travellers from such sights.

An early title describes Everest lacking 'any trace of life or man. It is a glimpse into a world that knows him not', echoing Fay's argument about the ahistorical, inhuman Antarctic landscape. Yet, while Antarctica permits explorers 'to test their physical and mental mettle against an unforgiving environment without indigenous mediation or interference', *The Epic of Everest* goes further, erasing even this endurance test.¹⁵⁸ The final ascent is almost entirely composed of distanced shots of mountaineers. Like Scott's Antarctic expedition, it ends unsuccessfully, with the deaths of George Mallory and Andrew Irvine. This is not shown but described in intertitles, intercut with more long shots of the mountainside. After the search party for the men admits defeat, yet another long shot sees four men, unintroduced and indistinguishable, walking out of the frame leaving the spectator to the empty landscape. The film then asks the spectator to 'look back over the solitudes of the glacier, where those men remain behind', emphasising the emptiness of the space and Mallory and Irvine's heroic disembodiment and disappearance. The following title poses the question: '[i]f you had lived as they had lived and died in the heart of nature, would you, yourself, wish for any better grave than a grave of pure white snow?' Echoing the ending of *The Great White Silence*, the men are consumed by the 'pure' whiteness of the untainted space. Their heroism inheres in *disappearance* into the landscape, beyond performance and beyond the comprehension of spectators left 'below'. Ponting's presence throughout *The Great White Silence* creates a sense of something being produced and returned in the film record of the journey. In *The Epic of Everest*, because of the long shots and absolute distance between camera and explorer, the journey consists of disappearance into another realm of geological or spiritual time beyond humanity itself; the

¹⁵⁸ Kennedy, p. 266.

emptiness of the landscape is not overcome but embraced. Even the stone memorial for the men is shot from distance, while intertitles contemplate the mountain's 'awful and uncanny power'; the film is literally distanced from the expedition film's exemplary and memorialising conventions.

As Peter H. Hansen demonstrates, the film and wider contemporary discussions about the expedition shifted rhetorically from science to spirituality, framing the journey as pilgrimage and the mountain as living being according with Tibetan beliefs.¹⁵⁹ The final intertitles muse that while Everest had been 'a thing of rock and ice and snow' to 'us', it was 'more' to the Tibetan people: a 'Goddess, Mother of the World'. The film wonders if something 'more than the physical' was implicated in the expedition's failure, 'something beyond our knowledge'. The powers of Western science and imperial classification—of space, peoples and nature—are questioned as Mallory and Irvine travel beyond humanity and the imperial world where bodies, movement, and performances can be classified and measured—even, possibly, beyond race itself. This would be evidenced further in its exhibition, despite British critics aiming to recuperate it within the memorialising and exemplary traditions of expedition films.

Restoring the Human: The Epic of Everest's Exhibition and Reception

Not only are indigenous peoples transcended by the mountaintop's 'purity' but so are the spectator, camera, and filmmaker. This undermines the heroic forward drive of British imperialism and its visualisation through the 'British' genre of the expedition film; with the deaths of Mallory and Irvine dies a vision of imperial virility and propulsion. This proved an uncomfortable climax for Noel and British critics, leading to varying responses in reviews. The film finally affirms Fay's evocation of the emptiness, and thus inhumanity, of Antarctica. Yet reviews seemed to affirm humanity over the inhuman, distanced camera perspective. Everest's emptiness accords with one of the key maxims of colonial exploration and discourses around it, which evacuate colonisable landscapes of their

¹⁵⁹ Hansen, 'Dancing Lamas', pp. 724-725.

indigenous people to frame them as 'blank spaces' on an abstract map to be filled.¹⁶⁰ As such, many critics simply continued to read the film as a 'record' of 'heroic effort' and 'sacrifice', a thrill and education which enables vicarious travel and is distinguished from artificial Hollywood production.¹⁶¹ Yet some acknowledged the geological, rather than human or imperial, focus. Like Webster, the *Observer* judges *The Epic of Everest* 'curiously impersonal', passing 'the confines of civilisation': '[m]ountains, rather than their intrepid explorers' are the 'real heroes'.¹⁶² Similarly, Iris Barry characterises it as 'just photographs of a mountain. The human element is, perhaps, artfully, subordinated'; for Barry, its value is *not* in explorers' heroism or Noel's skill but 'abstract beauty', its distanced view turning geography into picture without acknowledging the performance that has facilitated this.¹⁶³ These reviews conveyed the long shots' abstraction of travel film conventions and heroic, imperial performance.

This tension was reinforced by its exhibition. Noel returned from filming the expedition with seven Tibetan 'Lamas' who had come to dance and play music in a live accompaniment to the film in London and then across the country. This promotional device raised a third perspective: that of the indigenous Tibetans who were transcended in the film's trajectory. Again, many critics read this live performance as typically exoticising ethnographic spectacle, creating Tibetan 'atmosphere' within the theatre and thus contributing to vicarious travel. The *Express* reports that they would 'sing and play on weird native instruments [...] in a reproduction of some of the characteristic ceremonies of Tibetan secular festivals', articulating the conventional ethnographic display of 'ceremonies', music and dance.¹⁶⁴ This was underpinned by framing the Lamas as spectacle. In advertisements, they were the 'talk of all London', and newspapers reported ubiquitously on their travelling, their 'strange'

¹⁶⁰ Kennedy, p. 2; David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 92-108.

¹⁶¹ *Telegraph*, 10 December 1924, p. 15; *Sunday Mirror*, 14 December 1924, p. 17.

¹⁶² *Observer*, 14 December 1924, p. 11.

¹⁶³ *Spectator*, 20 December 1924, p. 982.

¹⁶⁴ *Express*, 8 December 1924, p. 15.

rituals, and shock at the Western world.¹⁶⁵ Simultaneously, promotional materials praised Noel for having 'brought back' the Lamas; if Mallory and Irvine were unable to return, Noel returned with film and performers of anthropological interest.¹⁶⁶ Creating 'Tibetan atmosphere' in Britain, the ethnographic spectacle of the Lamas could enable vicarious travel and permit popular anthropological education, situating the filmgoer as white, imperial, anthropological observer and traveller.

The Epic of Everest, then, was exhibited and received such that it could be read as typically delineating racialised subjects and spaces. However, the presence of the Lamas in Britain and in theatres also opened the possibility of a reverse Tibetan perspective. J. Jeffrey Franklin pinpoints the late-nineteenth century as the moment of British 'discovery' of Buddhism, leading to an appropriative 'Western Buddhism' which assimilated features that conformed to Victorian norms.¹⁶⁷ One *inassimilable* feature Franklin catalogues is 'the Buddhist "no-self" doctrine, which was directly antithetical to the foundational principles of Protestant and capitalist individualism'.¹⁶⁸ This quality is present in *The Epic of Everest's* conclusion and, I suggest, was compounded by Tibetan Lamas in Britain. If accompanying lecturers for exhibitions usually cemented performances of whiteness on screen, the presence of Tibetan live performers enabled the possibility of reverse spectatorship that foregrounded failure of the performance of whiteness in the film and the spectator's ambivalent position in relation to this.

News reports about the Lamas who came with Noel highlighted spectatorship, reflecting the fact that they were travellers themselves, both performers and spectators ethnographically examining Britain. Coming from 'a height of 14,000ft.', they literally looked down on Britain,

¹⁶⁵ Hansen, 'Dancing Lamas', pp. 729-733; *Mirror*, 17 December 1924, p. 7; *Times of India*, 30 September 1924, p. 3.

¹⁶⁶ Cinema publicity programme: New Scala Theatre, London, 1925, Exeter, The Bill Douglas Cinema Museum, <http://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:4158/Documents/Details/EXEBD_18252> [accessed 12 January 2021] p. 4.

¹⁶⁷ J. Jeffrey Franklin, *The Lotus and the Lion: Buddhism and the British Empire* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2008).

¹⁶⁸ Franklin, p. 23.

‘[a]mazed at what they regarded as a City of Devils’.¹⁶⁹ Such reports were accompanied by photographs depicting the Lamas staring solemnly at British readers (Figure 58).¹⁷⁰ The Lamas affirmed that travel was not limited to white Britons who were rendered ethnographic subjects themselves, overturning racial and spectatorial hierarchies. This also contextualised the film’s ethnographic images, in which Tibetan people look back at the camera with a similar gaze. When the *Observer* describes figures on the mountain as ‘human pygmies’, this confirms a reversal of ethnographic sightlines *through* the long shots, designating white explorers with anthropological categorisations that emphasise distance, slightness and insubstantiality rather than heroic strength.¹⁷¹ As the crew wait futilely for Mallory and Irvine, irised long shots of the peak are intercut with a Sherpa man looking through a telescope, while two others watch nervously (Figure 59). All three wear goggles, further highlighting a moment of spectatorship in which people of colour are *not* viewed ethnographically. This is framed in a medium shot noticeably closer than the extreme long shots. Behind them is not a vast mountainous skyline but uneven rocky ground. This reverse-shot to the irised mountain images reveals the spectator’s shared perspective with Sherpas. This can only have been reinforced in the first London exhibitions in which, reports claim, fog obscured the screen, denying spectators ‘visual sovereignty’, the omniscient ‘monarch-of-all-I-survey’ perspective from higher ground usually taken by imperial travellers.¹⁷² This reminds spectators that they are *not* accompanying the explorer in vicarious travel, but on the ground, far from the ‘stage’ of Everest. In fact, depicting a lost mode of heroic imperialism, the film becomes a reverse salvage ethnography, depicting a ‘disappearing race’ of *white* subjects viewed by British spectators and indigenous people alike.¹⁷³ Unlike the Allenby film or *With Cobham to the Cape*, which abstracted landscapes below, the spectator and camera are left on the ground, looking *up* at explorers inaccessible to them. The spectator-performer distinction along racial lines is undermined in the face of Everest’s vastness. The

¹⁶⁹ *Mirror*, 2 December 1924, p. 2.

¹⁷⁰ *Times*, 2 December 1924, p. 18; *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 1 June 1925, p. 9.

¹⁷¹ *Observer*, 14 December 1924, p. 11.

¹⁷² *Mail*, 3 December 1924, p. 7. See Pratt, pp. 197-204.

¹⁷³ On salvage ethnography filmmaking, see Rony, pp. 99-126; Hochman, pp. 116-141.



Figure 58: The 'Lamas' stare back at the camera on their trip to Britain

Still removed due to copyright restrictions

Figure 59: Sherpas search anxiously for Mallory and Irvine

film implicitly posits the impossibility of 'reproducing' imperial whiteness in spectators, aligning them instead with the animals, Tibetans and Sherpas opposed to the upper-class, heroic adventurers.

The presence of Tibetan people, on screen and in theatres, complicated this film rather than providing its conventional ethnographic subject. These figures were not incorporated into a global

imperial economy, nor organised by white explorers. They were spectators of whiteness who did not underline its power but questioned and undermined it. In doing so, they destabilised the genre as exemplary record of whiteness. The film asserts that categories of traveller and indigenous subject, heroic imperial performer and ethnographic performer, are not as racially and geographically bounded as they were usually presented. Taking the expedition film to its dangerous extreme could have depicted white men versus 'savage' nature in the ultimate performance of whiteness, and indeed many critics elected to read the film in this way. However, *The Epic of Everest* exposes a realm beyond imperial geographies and staging, and blurs and upturns racial hierarchies to hint at the end of heroic imperial travel and performance in the face of two men tragically disappearing into a world beyond these categories.

Conclusion

The Epic of Everest counterpoints a genre viewed as exemplary, educational, and regenerative for the next generation of white, British, imperial subjects. The expedition film was privileged in educational discourses and settings, in part because of its depiction of other spaces, flora and fauna and peoples, but also its display of whiteness. These films announce themselves as memorials to historically significant performances of whiteness, a non-fictional performance mode. The value of this 'British' cinema was placed in its ability to record, memorialise, and recreate heroic imperial whiteness. This inevitably entailed a tension in the distinction between the white imperial heroes memorialised on screen and mass audiences in Britain distanced from them but also called to perform like they did, a tension often articulated through the unsettling reverse gazes and spectatorship of ethnographic subjects. However, critics generally ignored or erased these unsettling elements, resolving these contradictions by exploring the ways in which cinema could facilitate fantasy travel for white British audiences through witnessing corporeal performances of whiteness as transcending a wild landscape.

There is evidence that, by the end of the 1920s, these memorials of imperial heroism were beginning to crumble. Royal Geographical Society secretary, Arthur R. Hinks, writes in 1927 that *The*

Epic of Everest was ‘an unsatisfactory enterprise’ and that there was no money to be made in travel films, while Noel himself admitted he had ‘lost everything’ to his Explorer Films company, established to produce the film and fund the expedition.¹⁷⁴ This also corresponds with Zalmanovich and Georgine Clarsen’s assessments that such performatively difficult journeys were no longer perceived as particularly thrilling by this time: ‘the Empire as a source of pride and patriotic virility began to wane. Feats of imperial conquest no longer received the same amount of public interest’.¹⁷⁵ The role of the individual explorer/filmmaker and the difficulties they experienced no longer provided, in themselves, an educational example of heroism for British spectators.

However, these films were prominent in discussions and debates around cinema, and thus remain an important genre in interwar British cinema culture. The importance of education and uplift, of ‘reserved’ style in performance and film form, and of opposition to Hollywood fiction informs the 1930s British documentary movement addressed in the next chapter. British documentary evidences a shift away from the individual actor. It turns to the ‘ordinary’ man (almost always a man), who could more appropriately reflect or model the everyday conduct of spectators in Britain. However, the centrality of performance to British cinema culture—its role in establishing the aesthetic and social value of cinema—persists. While British documentary of the 1930s has often been framed as a radical, modernist shift from ‘lesser’ 1920s British film, the next chapter places the movement in relation to the discourses around race, Hollywood, and fiction and non-fiction film performance which have been central to this thesis thus far. The Allenby film, *Cape to Cairo* and *Stampede*, the Scott films, and *The Epic of Everest* were all exhibited for schoolchildren later in the 1920s and early 1930s, alongside documentary movement films, at events such as the Imperial Institute’s regular film screenings.¹⁷⁶ This attests to British documentary’s connection to discourses surrounding performance and race of the previous decade. While the British documentary

¹⁷⁴ Quoted in Griffiths, ‘Cinema in Extremis’, p. 63.

¹⁷⁵ Zalmanovich, pp. 207-208; Georgine Clarsen, ‘Machines as the measure of women: Colonial irony in a Cape to Cairo automobile journey, 1930’, *The Journal of Transport History*, 29.1 (2008), 44-63, p. 50.

¹⁷⁶ See *Times*, 4 July 1928, p. 14; *Sunday Mirror*, 25 November 1928, p. 5; *Times*, 20 February 1929, p. 12; *Sight and Sound*, Fall 1932, p. 87

movement disavowed the individual heroic performer in British non-fiction film by the 1930s, conceptions of racialised performance remained central to its perceived educational and aesthetic effects.

Chapter 5: Performing the Ordinary: Race and the British Documentary Movement

At the end of the 1920s and beginning of the 1930s, filmmakers like John Grierson, Paul Rotha, and Basil Wright produced non-fiction films for commercial and state sponsorship—most famously, from the Film Units of the EMB and, on its dissolution in 1933, the General Post Office (GPO). These filmmakers also wrote and lectured on their filmmaking practices and beliefs, generating a body of films and film theory which they consciously viewed as a movement and a radical turn from previous British cinema. They aligned their work and thinking with alternative, modernist, and avant-garde film cultures and groups which disavowed British cinema as outdated and over-reliant on theatrical and literary heritage. Film historians have thus typically situated the British documentary movement in relation to European and especially Soviet currents in filmmaking and film theory.¹ However, I argue in this final chapter that attention to documentary performance evidences its connection to and emergence from 1920s British cinema culture and its conceptions of race, performance, and cinematic taste. Given this movement's canonical status in British cinema history—often at the expense of British filmmaking before the 1930s—the documentary movement provides one avenue by which these 1920s discourses continue to inform British filmmaking and cinema culture.

British documentary's novelty was typically articulated through performance or, more accurately, a disavowal of acting. This was conceived through the racialised, degenerationist rhetoric of 1920s British cinema culture. Often, this echoed conventional British attacks on Hollywood cinema: in *Documentary Film* (1936), Rotha criticises the film star as an 'anti-social' figure who prohibits engagement with reality and modern life in favour of 'worship of the ego'.² More broadly,

¹ E.g. Paul Swann, *The British Documentary Film Movement, 1926-1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 9; Jamie Sexton, *Alternative Film Culture in Inter-War Britain* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2008), p. 75; Laura Marcus, "'The Creative Treatment of Actuality': John Grierson, Documentary Cinema and 'Fact' in the 1930s", in *Intermodernism: Literary Culture in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain*, ed. by Kristin Bluemel (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), pp. 189-207; John Orr, *Romantics and Modernists in British Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 7-10

² Paul Rotha, *Documentary Film* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936), pp. 44-45.

for British documentarists, the star epitomised ‘acting’ as a mode of individual performance. Grierson articulated this through racialised rhetoric. His documentary ‘manifesto’ published in British periodical *Cinema Quarterly* in 1932-1934, ‘First Principles of Documentary Cinema’, bemoans ‘the shim-sham mechanics of the studio, and the lily-fingered interpretations of the metropolitan actor’.³ As Marcus suggests, Grierson renders the studio actor an ‘effete figure in his manufactured world’.⁴ Three years before ‘First Principles’, in an August 1929 article for left-wing journal, *The Clarion*, Grierson asks, ‘[w]ill we ever, while Wardour Street and Hollywood reign, unshackle the cameras from their studio foundations and take them into the open? Will we ever be able to yank these Piccadilly actors by their lily-white pants into the dramatic realities of the workaday world?’.⁵ This, too, emphasises ‘effeteness’ but as ‘lily-white’, a kind of over-civilised, artificial performance form that emasculates the performer. He imagines films of factories and mines better ‘than can ever be taken by studio out of Mayfair and the night clubs’.⁶ Grierson made these remarks in the early sound era, when, as mentioned in Chapter 3, most sound films had to be made on studio lots where noisy cameras could be housed in soundproofed booths. ‘Freeing’ the camera from the studio, then, was also about freeing the camera from the studio-set talkie, the sort of film which, David Bordwell argues, incorporated *dialogue*, rather than sound as a whole, into classical Hollywood style. Bordwell writes that

in Hollywood, dialogue constitutes the chief vehicle of narrative action [...] The primary energy was thus invested in staging the visual spectacle—the human figures in surroundings—and coordinating that with a staging of the characters’ voices. Body and voice, the person: that is what one records, on image and on sound, for use in narrative.⁷

Studio sound cinema—and this included ‘Wardour Street’ studios like BIP producing their own sound features in this moment—prioritised the individual voice as part of the individualised performance of

³ John Grierson, ‘First Principles of Documentary’ [*Cinema Quarterly*, Winter 1932], in *The Documentary Film Movement: An Anthology*, ed. by Ian Aitken (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), pp. 81-93 (p. 83).

⁴ Marcus, ‘Creative Treatment’, p. 193.

⁵ John Grierson, *Grierson on the Movies*, ed. by Forsyth Hardy (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 29.

⁶ Grierson, *Movies*, p. 29.

⁷ David Bordwell, ‘The introduction of sound’, in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge, 1985), pp. 298-308 (p. 302).

the actor.⁸ While British documentaries like *The Song of Ceylon* (Basil Wright, Empire Tea Marketing Board, 1934), discussed below, experimented with noise and forms of sound montage, speech and dialogue were, in the early British documentary period, associated with this studio-bound, 'lily-white' performance style. Intertwining and disparaging indoor sound studio settings with this effete, over-civilised, even degenerate performance style, Grierson calls for more rugged performance, based in action, labour and the *outdoors* 'workaday world'. He thus echoes ideas about film performance discussed around Fairbanks and the regenerative possibilities of his athletic outdoorsness. Race, as it intersected with gender and class, remained central to managing the behaviour of performers, filmmakers, and spectators.

Grierson and other British documentarists famously cited Robert Flaherty's influence, particularly his two 'ethnographic' documentaries *Nanook of the North* (Les Frères Revillon, 1922) and *Moana* (Robert Flaherty Productions, 1926). Despite this rejection of individual actors, these films focus on and are named after individual figures, but they were implicitly taken as representative of Inuit and Samoan peoples. Grierson writes for *The Clarion* that '[i]t was no Hollywood actor who hunted for Flaherty, but Nanook, of the North, with centuries of killing in the poise and thrust of his harpoon'.⁹ In 'First Principles', he reasserts that Flaherty 'walked away from the studios' and thus 'came to grips with the essential story of the Eskimos, then with the Samoans', while Rotha in *The Film Till Now* also cites Flaherty as the head of a 'naturalistic' movement in cinema working outside studios with 'real material'.¹⁰ However, Grierson critiques Flaherty's 'wan and distant eye' as inappropriate for 'the more immediate material of the modern world'; while he was able to reveal the 'truth' of 'remote', 'primitive' peoples, he could not represent the 'ordinary'—i.e. the white, metropolitan world—as the documentarists claimed to do.¹¹ Flaherty's individualised focus on the 'primitive' performer struggling against nature in *Nanook* 'refers us back to hunting instincts and fighting instincts, but these do not necessarily represent the more civilised fields of

⁸ On BIP's sound film policy, see Robinson, 'Adaptable Aesthetic', pp. 174-177.

⁹ Grierson, *Movies*, p. 29.

¹⁰ Grierson, 'First Principles', p. 84; Rotha, *The Film*, p. 50.

¹¹ Grierson, 'First Principles', pp. 84-85.

appreciation'.¹² Flaherty's films were an alternative to the Hollywood star system's degenerative excesses, but remained a 'primitive' cinema, not appropriate for the networked, imperial 'modern' world which Grierson was aiming to represent in EMB and GPO documentaries. These 'ethnographic' documentaries were 'outdoors' and focused on the 'real', but also on 'primitive' individuals, neglecting the networked modernity of the modern British Empire. Documentary movement rhetoric thus disavowed the individual actor as 'primitive' or over-civilised, employing British cinema culture's racial discourses to make claims about better forms of cinema.

On one hand, the claim for newness and for the art of the documentary relied upon the rejection of 'acting'. On the other, it was established through a definition of the form, by Grierson and Paul Rotha, as 'the creative treatment' or 'dramatisation' of 'actuality'.¹³ Rather than mechanically reproducing the real world, or creating 'artificial' fictions, documentary involved a shaping or constructing of the real by the filmmaker; the claim to represent the 'workaday world' was tempered by the 'artistic' construction of this 'reality' into an ideal, an ideal which I suggest works to form racialised communities.¹⁴ Grierson would later assert, in a revised preface for the American edition of Rotha's *Documentary Film* (1938), that documentary 'is devoted to saying how men live and should live'.¹⁵ This exemplifies an important tension in documentary theory between the 'actual' and the 'ideal', what happens on screen and what should happen. As Marcus writes, early in his career, Grierson perceived realism as going beyond the 'actual' to attain 'deeper and complex understanding of the real'.¹⁶ I argue that performance of the ordinary was a crucial element of the 'actuality' to be 'creatively treated' or 'dramatised'. Marquis rebuts Michael Renov's oft-quoted claim that documentary is always 'the result of interventions that necessarily *come between* the cinematic sign [...] and its referent', reminding us that a focus on documentaries as 'mediated

¹² Grierson, 'First Principles', p. 92.

¹³ *Cinema Quarterly*, 2.1 (Autumn 1933), p. 8; Rotha, *Documentary Film*, p. 115; Andrew Buchanan, *The Art of Film Production* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, 1936), p. 15.

¹⁴ Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real: The Griersonian Documentary and Its Legitimations* (London: BFI, 1995), pp. 11-12.

¹⁵ Paul Rotha, *Documentary Film*, revised edn (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1939), p. 9.

¹⁶ Marcus, 'Creative Treatment', p. 201.

representations' obscures the meaning-making of the documentary performer.¹⁷ This primacy of the filmmaker and the camera's mediation over the performer's work arguably arises *from* this definition of 'creative treatment of actuality', relegating performance to pliable 'actuality'. As Marquis notes, performance's meaning is always informed by the way it is framed, edited, and structured on the screen.¹⁸ However, performance is a crucial part of documentary meaning, and one that has been obscured by the very rhetoric of British documentarists, thus also obscuring the importance of race to the aesthetic and colonial claims of the movement.

British documentarists remained in dialogue with 1920s ideas about performance, race, and cinematic taste. If the individual, professional 'actor' was disavowed, other kinds of 'performance' took their place: particularly the performance of 'ordinariness', 'everyday' life in the 'workaday world'. This is not deliberate acting as in fiction film, but still involves forms of gesture, movement, and expression framed by the camera which articulate interiority and identity. As Grierson's idea of the 'workaday world' suggests, labour was central to British documentary, particularly the labour of the working classes. Labouring itself becomes a performance mode, not by individuals but inhering in repetitive actions by groups. This hard work, almost exclusively by men, is heroised in a manner similar to the heroisation of travel in expedition films: it is performance as doing, as achievement, rather than acting. Less focused on the upper-class, 'civilised', individual explorer, rhetoric about documentary still bore the influence of these travel films in valorising a form of non-fictional performance. This performance as doing, however, is founded in the everyday and ordinary—in gesture, movement and speech that articulates this everydayness—rather than the monumental and heroic gesture and movement read into the actions of Allenby, the Court Treatts, or Scott. This ordinariness is formed from labour, but also moments of stillness, leisure, and intimacy. I argue that documentary performance is defined by a balance, or tension, between labour and rest: between work and leisure, domesticity and intimacy. As a whole, these form a portrait of the ordinary which

¹⁷ Michael Renov (ed.), 'Toward a Poetics of Documentary', in *Theorizing Documentary* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 12-36 (p. 26); Elizabeth Marquis, 'Performance, Persona & the Construction of Documentary Identity', *Post Script*, 33.1 (2013), 17-32 (p. 17).

¹⁸ Marquis, 'Conceptualizing Documentary Performance', pp. 46-47, 49-53.

is framed as more 'real' than fiction, or indeed previous non-fiction, film. In *The Projection of England* (1932), EMB secretary Stephen Tallents, who was decisive in employing Grierson and using film within the Board, writes of the need to 'project' England more effectively in media including cinema, critiquing the international media 'diet' of the average British woman.¹⁹ Tallents concludes that changing this relied 'not merely upon outstanding achievements but in the last resort upon the faithful performance of their daily tasks by Englishmen and Englishwomen'; this is not the charge of heroic upper-class and exceptional figures but ordinary English people.²⁰ He contends that all of us 'have means of projecting a fragment of England upon a corner of the world's screen', citing examples of this performance and projection, like customs officials and porters handling luggage, helping tourists in the street or shopkeepers serving customers. Again, then, performance is valorised in its ordinariness, and this ordinariness is the means of 'projecting' national—and, I suggest, implicitly racial—qualities and communities.

The performance of national and racial identity was part of the documentary movement's colonial aims, originating as it did from the EMB. As much scholarship has demonstrated, the documentary movement emerged from British colonial culture as well as European 'alternative film cultures' in dialogue with internationalist art cinema and criticism.²¹ The EMB was established by Colonial Secretary Leo Amery in May 1926 'to promote interimperial trade in lieu of the formal establishment of a protectionist economy' through scientific and economic research, advertisement, and publicity, in the context of concerns about the 'Americanisation' of the Empire.²² If economic fears were implicit in much racialised anxiety about spectatorship and performance in 1920s British cinema culture, these were an explicit stated aim of EMB film production. Grieveson concludes that

¹⁹ S. G. Tallents, *The Projection of England* (London: Faber & Faber, 1932), p. 10.

²⁰ Tallents, p. 47. Tallents dedicates the book to the citizens of all British nations, suggesting that his 'new art' was British, as much as English; Tallents, p. 7.

²¹ See Stollery, *Alternative Empires*, pp. 140-202; Scott Anthony, 'Imperialism and Internationalism: The British Documentary Movement and the Legacy of the Empire Marketing Board', in *Empire and Film*, ed. by Lee Grieveson and Colin MacCabe (London: BFI, 2011), pp. 135-148; Marc Matera, 'An Empire of Development: Africa and the Caribbean in *God's Chillun*', *Twentieth Century British History*, 23.1 (2012), 12-37; Grandy, pp. 524-531; Grieveson, *Cinema*, pp. 158-194.

²² Grieveson, *Cinema*, p. 178. Swann, p. 21; Jack C. Ellis, *John Grierson: Life, Contributions, Influence* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), pp. 32-33; Matera, pp. 23-26.

'[f]ilm production was to be directly tied to the sustenance of an imperial political economy, to the visual illustration and elaboration of imperial economic relations'.²³ Similarly, for Trotter, British documentaries make concrete an imperial infrastructure of intangible media, using images of contiguity to 'pin' the 'flow' of capital to the earth's surface.²⁴ While the documentary movement's connections to previous colonial debates about cinema have been noticed, racialised performance is an under-acknowledged element of this. Documentary made visible economic links, but also 'political and affective "bonds"'.²⁵ Scott Anthony argues that British documentary aims to 'bind together classes, regions and industries of interwar Britain'.²⁶ This is achieved through racialised performance which renders these 'bonds' a felt, affective connection as well as a political and economic one.

Christine Grandy tangentially addresses questions of performance in British documentary in her argument that 'human interest' should be considered a key goal of British documentary, but is only applicable to white documentary subjects, whereas people of colour are only represented 'as antagonists, workers, or nothing at all'.²⁷ Similarly, Grieveson and Trotter highlight British documentary's 'harvest trope' which represents white workers as users of machines and technology, collaborating with modernity, while colonised workers of colour are restricted to manual labour.²⁸ Documentary performance is 'racially bounded', in Grandy's terms, establishing distinct, heritable racialised communities and therefore re-asserting the geographical boundaries and distances of Empire on which this colonial economy relies.²⁹ In his preface to *Documentary Film*, Grierson posits that early British documentary 'offered a contact with the life of the community deeper and more intimate than anything journalism and the other arts were giving us'.³⁰ This supplements Rotha's

²³ Grieveson, *Cinema*, p. 178.

²⁴ Trotter, pp. 151-152, 154.

²⁵ Grieveson, *Cinema*, pp. 175-176.

²⁶ Anthony, p. 144.

²⁷ Grandy, p. 532.

²⁸ Trotter, p. 159; Grieveson, *Cinema*, pp. 190-192.

²⁹ Grandy, p. 513.

³⁰ John Grierson, 'Preface by John Grierson', in Paul Rotha, *Documentary Film* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936), pp. 5-14 (p. 5).

argument that documentary provided an alternative to Hollywood and fiction cinema's appeal to 'immediate sensation' in its message for 'a community'.³¹ If, as Daniella Gitlin argues, Grierson and other documentarists inherited 1920s constructions of cinema audiences as atavistic mass who consumed cinema through the senses rather than intellect, documentary could offer an alternative in turning this mass into a community, uniting through shared *affect* rather than a shared craving for bodily sensation.³² Central to this was the rejection of the individual 'actor'; instead, performance was visualised as shared or communal work and leisure, moments of hardship and moments of intimacy between bodies, rather than expressed through individual performances. An imagined community—watching documentaries in theatres, in schools, in the Imperial Institute and other non-theatrical settings like schools and societies—was to be cultivated on screen by an ordinary, intimate documentary performance style.³³ While these films contain moments of hardship, they represent a shift from an aesthetics and performance style of danger and difficulty in expedition films to one which incorporates pleasure and intimacy. The 'universal' effects and affects of cinema were ultimately bounded by race for most 1920s British theorists and critics, applying only to white metropolitan spectators; for British documentarists, sensations and emotions evoked by performances read through colonial lenses of racial difference were again intended to create 'felt' racial communities, intimacies, and shared experiences determined along racial lines.

This emphasis on bounded racialised communities—particularly of white Britishness, expressed and performed through 'ordinary' performances—eliminates the interest found in much 1920s British filmmaking and cinema culture in colonial encounter, usually structured as an encounter between performers and spectators. While the films aim to encourage shared affect and experience between white documentary 'performers' and white spectators, depicting white workers risks transforming them into ethnographic subjects, who do not perform but merely evidence white racial 'essence'. If expedition cameramen were part of the crew of heroic white imperialists,

³¹ Rotha, *Documentary Film*, p. 16.

³² Daniella Gitlin, 'To Experience *Song of Ceylon*', *Cineaction*, 87 (2012), 28-33 (p. 29).

³³ For the theatrical and non-theatrical exhibition settings for British documentaries, see Stollery, *Alternative Empires*, pp. 172-174; Ellis, pp. 59-61.

documentary filmmakers were distanced from their subjects, heroising their working-class labour but not performing it themselves. Examining later Griersonian documentary films, Robert Colls and Philip Dodd argue that the documentary movement and Grierson's theory were influenced by late-nineteenth-century 'Into Unknown England' writing, which exploited colonial rhetoric of travel and ethnography to 'explore' working-class Britain.³⁴ This metaphorical rendering of British metropolitan citizens as subjects of ethnographic analysis in 'dangerous', 'exotic' locations complicated the EMB's goal of affectively and economically unifying white, imperial populations in parallel to the class tensions between performer and spectator in the expedition film. Consequently, alongside and as part of the performance of the ordinary in British documentaries, I argue that these films dramatise the *learning* process, the way in which bodies are educated into their racial community, creating another form of intimacy and alliance between spectator and performer. This process of teaching necessitates the higher-status, spatially and socially distanced role of the 'teacher' (or filmmaker), but these differentiated roles constitute a singular racialised 'community'. Again, these 'communities' are as delineated by class and gender but race remains a crucial intersecting element, uniting even the distinct roles of men and women or working-class labourer subjects and the higher-class filmmakers recording and 'treating' their performances.

Supplementing existing scholarship on documentary's imperial origins and the movement's connections to British cinema culture, I demonstrate a continuity between EMB and GPO films from 1926 to 1934 and the discourses around race and performance discussed in previous chapters, even when the movement began to embrace sound film.³⁵ Jack Ellis argues that the documentary movement should be defined by its constant steady flow of short films for commercial, educational, and specialist contexts, rather than its few 'prestige' classics like *Drifters* (John Grierson, EMB, 1929) or *The Song of Ceylon*, while Anthony distinguishes 'between the films made for prestige, on which

³⁴ Robert Colls and Philip Dodd, 'Representing the Nation: British Documentary Film, 1930-45', *Screen*, 26.1 (1985), 21-33 (pp. 22-23).

³⁵ 1934 is often framed as a documentary movement turning point as the GPO finally attained the capacity to produce sound film, though *One Family* also used sound in 1930; Swann, pp. 54-55; Ian Aitken (ed.), 'Introduction', in *The Documentary Film Movement: An Anthology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), pp. 1-68 (p. 18).

the movement risked its institutional chips, and those made for more utilitarian reasons, on which the movement would compromise'.³⁶ However, these canonical films serve as nodes connecting the movement's colonial and aesthetic aims. Following Stollery's suggestion, I situate these films within their contemporary reception context to explore their broader relationship to British cinema culture in this moment, challenging the primacy of documentarists' own claims.³⁷ I take the 'prestige' films as case studies but compare these with 'utilitarian' educational films, while also problematising this distinction by suggesting that the claim for 'prestige' relies on their imperial and racial pedagogical possibilities. It is also important to recall that spectators able to access contextual documentarist theories formed a small percentage of these films' viewership; these ideas circulated in Jamie Sexton's 'alternative film culture', and to some extent beyond through the journalism of critics like C. A. Lejeune. However, a large part of British documentary's audience was schoolchildren, watching in the Imperial Institute theatre or schools and theatres across the country at the behest of the Empire Film Library. The alternative film culture watching, reading about, and discussing British documentary is the audience we know most about, whose perspectives we can most easily access. However, these films are also designed for schoolchildren and imperial educational exhibition. These viewing conditions and audience responses are harder to recover.³⁸ However, the study of shorter 'utilitarian' films, and the recognition of alternative readings of 'prestige' films when exhibited in educational contexts, can offer a more complete picture of documentary's place in interwar British cinema culture.

This more holistic picture of British documentary reveals the continued impact of 1920s discourses, despite the claim by documentarists for a complete break with previous practice. It also

³⁶ Ellis, p. 131; Anthony, p. 136.

³⁷ Martin Stollery, 'John Grierson's "First principles" as origin and beginning: the emergence of the documentary tradition in the field of nonfiction film', *Screen*, 58.3 (2017), 309-331.

³⁸ Documentary films are occasionally mentioned in interviews conducted for *Cinema Culture in 1930s Britain*, now incorporated into the *Cinema Memory and the Digital Archive* project; see 'Valentina Bold interviews Douglas Rendell', *Cinema Memory and the Digital Archive* <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/projects/cmda/archive-data/interview_transcripts/DR-95-169AT002.pdf> [accessed 30 June 2022], pp. 9, 14-15; 'Valentina Bold interviews John and Marion Cooper', *Cinema Memory and the Digital Archive*, 14 June 1995 <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/projects/cmda/archive-data/interview_transcripts/JC-95-045AT002.pdf> [accessed 30 June 2022], pp. 16-17.

evidences the continued significance of racialised performance. The three case studies exhibit different modes of fictional and non-fictional performance but all evidence similar concerns with the creation of community through performances of labour, leisure, and learning. I begin with the first films to emerge from the EMB: *One Family* (Walter Creighton, EMB, 1930) and *Drifters*. These are usually opposed by scholars, with the former sequestered as an example of an outdated exhibitionary mode of colonial cinema and of too-heavily fictionalised documentary, and the latter as the future of British non-fiction cinema in its montage editing and attention to working-class life. However, placing them in conversation reveals *One Family's* importance to the documentary movement and *Drifters'* importance to an imperial film culture. Even as the documentary images of *One Family* are framed by a fictional narrative of the protagonist's dream, while *Drifters* is purely composed of non-fictional footage, both films articulate a vision of whiteness through combinations of labour and domestic intimacy, utilising images of 'imperial families' to establish affective connections between performer and spectator. I then turn to *The Song of Ceylon*, a film which is more evidently 'about' race in portraying Ceylonese life for a British audience. Whereas the first two films create community through *inclusion*, recognition and intimacy, *The Song of Ceylon* articulates community, and racial difference, through exclusion, depicting a distanced and different culture. I explore the meanings of the film that arise with greater attention to the film's central dance sequences, unusually acknowledged within the film itself as diegetic performance for spectators on screen and in audiences. These dances evidence a parallel racial 'community' which British spectators can temporarily experience but into which they cannot be inducted or educated. If the documentary movement claimed a break from previous British cinema culture, re-asserting the importance of racialised performance and spectatorship reveals a persistent connection. British documentary evidences a continued value placed on performing whiteness 'correctly', inviting spectators into an affective racialised community through the performing body, with these 'felt' bonds underpinning the economic ambitions of the form.

Domesticity, Family, and Whiteness in *One Family* and *Drifters*

In a statement recorded for a 1970 episode of the BBC series, *Omnibus*, about Sergei Eisenstein, Grierson recalls Eisenstein's, and particularly *Battleship Potemkin's* (Goskino, 1925), influence on both *One Family* and *Drifters* in a way which epitomises the standard retrospective narrative of these films. Grierson remembers that private screenings of the film for Whitehall and EMB officials led Rudyard Kipling to think '[t]hese Russians are doing all over again what we do so splendidly in our own country. They are making tattoos, and what we ought to be doing ourselves is making tattoos in film form'.³⁹ As such, he suggests, *One Family*, influenced by the 'pageantry side of *Potemkin*', was the first outcome of *Potemkin's* British exhibition, and it was only once this 'died the death of a dog' that *Potemkin's* pageantry was forgotten. Afterwards, Grierson 'came on to the scene as a substitute', producing *Drifters* which was influenced not by *Potemkin's* pageantry but 'the battleship's thrilling engines' and the thrill of Soviet montage editing itself.⁴⁰ This retrospective of the documentary's origins has become the standard narrative, a teleology which envisages a turn away from what Stollery calls the 'compressed exhibition' of *One Family* to industry, the working classes, and rhythmic, near-mechanical editing which mirrored this subject matter.⁴¹ *One Family* has been aligned with a broader decline of the imperial exhibition and the idea that cinema replaced this as the dominant form of imperial spectacle for the metropolitan public to see and know the Empire.⁴² In the standard account, the film becomes representative only of an outdated imperial form, whereas *Drifters* is more modern and progressive in its formal evocation of the thrill of industrial life.

This section re-examines *One Family's* significant relationship to the documentary movement, and *Drifters'* relationship to the colonial goals of the EMB, beyond merely advertising British imperial herring fishing. Paul Swann suggests that *One Family's* failure turned the EMB, and

³⁹ Grierson, *Movies*, p. 181.

⁴⁰ Grierson, *Movies*, p. 181.

⁴¹ Stollery, *Alternative Empires*, p. 159.

⁴² See, for example, Virginia Woolf's essay, contemporary to *One Family*, on the downfall of the exhibition epitomised by the 1924 British Empire Exhibition; Virginia Woolf, 'Thunder at Wembley' [1924], in *Selected Essays*, ed. by David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 169-171.

later the GPO, to shorter documentary films. Filmmakers rejected the ‘epic’ or tattoo forms of both *One Family* and the longer colonial films Grierson imagines in his a 1927 memorandum, ‘Notes for English Producers’, which was to advise EMB filmmakers on film production.⁴³ Yet more recently, Anthony and James G. Mansell, as well as Stollery and Grieveson, have contended that, despite the film’s poor reception, its aesthetics remained the formula for EMB documentary in attempting ‘to forge new imaginative bonds between the nation at home and the Empire abroad’, bringing ‘the periphery to the centre of the nation’ and reminding ‘the periphery of its bond to the beating metropolitan heart’.⁴⁴ Grierson himself spoke at the premiere of *One Family*, one year after *Drifters*’ release, to commend its status as the first attempt, even beyond his own film, ‘at celebrating the everyday of the Empire’, dramatising ‘the resources and achievements of England and the Empire’ through the ‘material of the everyday, of labour and production’.⁴⁵ *One Family* is centred on an individual actor, imagined as the proxy for the young white spectator, being ‘transported’ across the Empire through film. By contrast, *Drifters* cuts between unnamed herring fishermen to visualise generalised labour and imperial production. The two films evidence the distinction between individual ‘acting’ and communal performance, but both are invested in performing the ordinary and everyday and, in so doing, creating racialised community. *One Family* and *Drifters* exploit the ‘actual’ to create a vision of the ideal: namely, a shared identity transcending boundaries of class and geography. As Rotha imagines, shared affect replaces ‘immediate sensation’. Yet this shared affect is represented on screen in sensuous ways, through a combination of labour and domesticity, representing ordinariness through touch, intimacy, and proximity.

⁴³ Swann, p. 35. And see John Grierson, ‘English Cinema Production and the Naturalistic Tradition’ [1927], in *The Documentary Film Movement: An Anthology*, ed. by Ian Aitken (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), pp. 72-75.

⁴⁴ Scott Anthony and James G. Mansell, ‘Introduction: The Documentary Film Movement and the Spaces of British Identity’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 23.1 (2012), 1-11 (pp. 5-6); Stollery, *Alternative Empires*, p. 159-161; Grieveson, *Cinema*, pp. 189-192.

⁴⁵ *Times*, 2 July 1930, p. 12.

'Celebrating the everyday of the Empire': One Family's Dream of Whiteness

One Family was the intended first EMB film, directed by Walter Creighton who had produced the Wembley Tattoo at the British Empire Exhibition. After production difficulties from 1927, the film was finished in 1929, a soundtrack was added in 1930, and it was released, after *Drifters*, the same year. The film depicts the production of a Christmas plum pudding, after a London schoolboy, played by real London schoolboy, Douglas Beaumont, falls asleep in class having seen a pudding advert walking to school. In a dream, he enters Buckingham Palace where a council is held by the Dominions, represented by glamorous 'society women'. The boy then visits parts of the Empire to see how the components of the King's pudding are produced in episodes which more closely resemble later documentary films in their articulation of labour and industrial processes. Finally, he wakes and returns to make his own pudding with his family. Invoking at once imperial exhibitions, dream visions and treatises on educational cinema, its various generic affiliations cohere around its protagonist's performance, characterised as the correct conduct for white, imperial citizens. This is very much gendered, as well as racialised, conduct, as it is men and boys who travel across the Empire through cinema, while women stay in 'domestic' spaces, whether they be the boy's home or Buckingham Palace itself. Yet a 'community', or more accurately a family, of British imperial whiteness overrides these distinctions, drawing white characters together in intimacy and inheritance of imperial produce and sentiment.

The unnamed boy becomes a cypher for the spectator through which the film's 'exhibition' is focalised. For Stollery, *One Family* is exhibitionary in its 'collapsing [of] the vast physical distances separating [the Empire's] disparate parts'.⁴⁶ The film's fantasy dimension, allowing the protagonist to move instantly from metropolitan centre to the Dominions, renders imperial infrastructure contiguous, as Trotter suggests of later documentary and colonial film. Yet in *One Family*, this imperial connection is as tangible as the Court Treatts' Cape-to-Cairo journey, achieved through the performance of the boy and those around him. At the film's beginning, he is distracted by a window

⁴⁶ Stollery, *Alternative Empires*, p. 159.

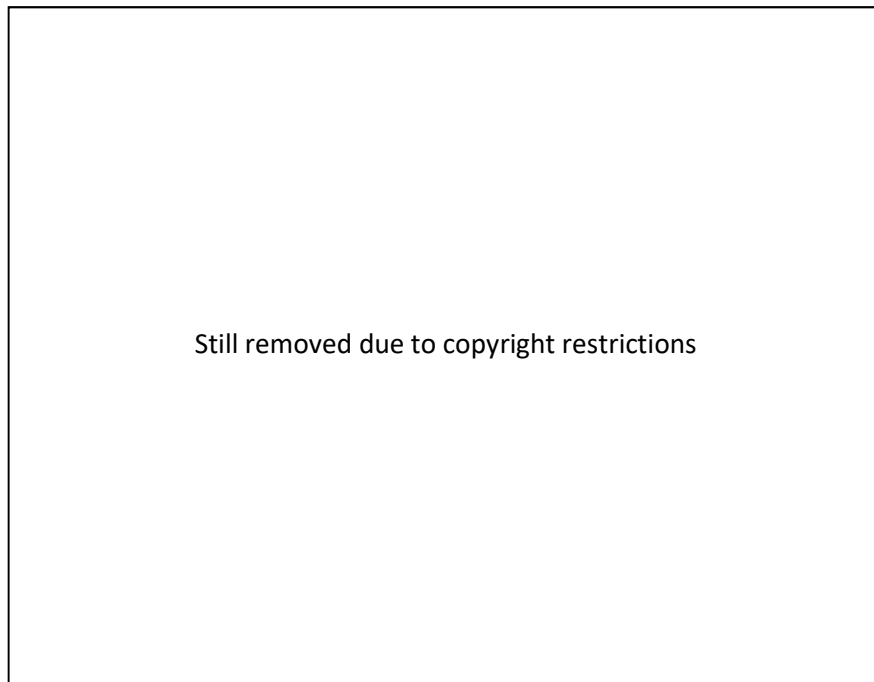


Figure 60: A window display advertising Christmas pudding as imperial product in *One Family*

display for Christmas pudding which visualises its provenance in ingredients produced across the Empire (Figure 60). A still, painted image, the boy moves around it, taking it in closely from different angles, almost engaging with it as tactile surface. It is analogous to a film screen, a 'proscenium for visual intoxication, the site of seduction for consumer desire', relying on 'distanced contemplation: a tableau, framed and inaccessible', but he seems to want to engage with it corporeally, through movement.⁴⁷ This is emphasised further when the camera cuts to a medium shot and he cranes to look more closely, his reflection visible in the glass. On this 'screen' is not just the product but the body projected onto and receiving it, brought into contact with the Empire through networks of commodity production and consumption. The boy's body, affect, and desires become the centre of the film's imperial display.

In concentrating on the performance of a schoolboy as stand-in for the spectator, the film also foregrounds its pedagogic aims.⁴⁸ If the boy is a central, individual performer who traverses the Empire, *cinema* brings the Empire close to him and renders it magically exciting. The early classroom setting is used to disparage conventional education in favour of experiential education through

⁴⁷ Friedberg, pp. 65, 68.

⁴⁸ Stollery, *Alternative Empires*, pp. 158-159.



Figure 61: The boy's obstructed view of the classroom

embodied performance. The classroom is a boring, even repressive setting for a boring educational performance by the geography teacher. The teaching materials are maps, two-dimensional images lectured and glossed over by a female teacher, unable to reach the young male student whose perspective is shown with an impeded low-angle shot (Figure 61). The disorienting montage sequence that follows, juxtaposing images of the teacher with the boy and sounds of his attempts to keep up with noises around the class, expresses his confusion and inability to ascertain his place in the Empire. Instead of the stern female teacher, the policeman (Sam Livesey), a symbol of British authority who earlier hurried him to school, appeals to him in his dream, chaperoning him to Buckingham Palace; the boy, the future prospect of manly vitality for the British Empire, requires a different kind of education, involving sensations of movement, adventure and spectacle. As he 'travels' through the Empire after reaching Buckingham Palace, he is posted through letter boxes, climbs through coal chutes, and views Australia, New Zealand and an ocean liner through the floor and doors of the palace (Figure 62). This is made visible through cinematic techniques: cuts across geographical distances, double exposures and superimpositions. Cinema becomes the medium to facilitate the adventurous curiosity required of the next generation of imperial citizens.



Figure 62: A liner viewed through a door at Buckingham Palace

Cinema allows for the boy's fantastical travel and his imperial education. This accords with a common analogy between the processes of cinema and dreams in the silent period by film theorists, psychoanalysts, and in more popular discourses about cinema as 'dream factory'.⁴⁹ Equally, however, according to Greenslade, daydreaming was associated, in late-nineteenth-century psychiatric discourses, with degenerate introspection, self-absorption, and stasis.⁵⁰ In *One Family*, dreaming is distanced from the degenerate and connected to healthy imperial curiosity and fervour, a desire to move through the Empire which could be enabled by cinema. The boy's performance itself is dreamlike, even as he interacts with the 'real' world, in his nonchalant acceptance of the imperial spectacle. He does not respond with wide eyes, open mouth, or exaggerated gestures of any kind, but with restraint implying the normality of his journey. The white child's dreamily nonchalant spectatorship of Empire forms his performance of whiteness, his racial right to and inheritance of these sights. Within the Palace and industrial settings, the boy is a tiny presence, but he is at home and comfortable. His performance—relaxed, restrained, not overawed but quietly interested, moving slowly, often humming or singing in curious distraction—frames him as unnamed

⁴⁹ See Laura Marcus, *Dreams of Modernity: Psychoanalysis, Literature, Cinema* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 178-197.

⁵⁰ Greenslade, *Degeneration*, p. 218.

ordinary ‘everyboy’, relaxed within this zenith of imperial grandeur and enabling the spectator’s entry and comfort. In promotional reports on the film, Beaumont’s everydayness is emphasised: ‘Douglas represents the rising generation, and the picture unfolds the story of a typical English boy’s dream’.⁵¹ His ‘everyboy’ status underpins his English dream to access and inherit imperial majesty, and is in turn underpinned by a performance style of nonchalant ordinariness that signals his easy, racially inflected acceptance of this inheritance.



Figure 63: Industrial machinery in a Yorkshire mine...



Figure 64: ...and a Welsh bakery

Alongside the magical techniques for evoking Empire, then, the film foregrounds the boy’s bodily experience. This makes tangible the magical cinematic spectacle, similarly to Fairbanks’ muscular engagement with the spectacular sights of *The Thief of Bagdad* or the bodily depredations of travel as a marker of the expedition film’s authenticity. This is partially achieved through the boy’s relationships with what the *Mirror*’s gossip columnist calls the film’s ‘Cast of Famous Society Beauties’ who help him on his journey while remaining firmly in the ‘domestic’, metropolitan space of Buckingham Palace.⁵² Through these aristocratic embodiments of colonial territory, this film attempts to make the star British—like *Cape to Cairo* or *The Rat* did in differing ways—rather than disavowing the star system as Grierson later would. As Robert Herring puts it, ‘the English quality and outlook of the picture is proved by the fact that these representatives are played by well-known

⁵¹ *Mail*, 13 November 1929, p. 18; *Telegraph*, 13 November 1929, p. 6

⁵² *Mirror*, 29 January 1930, p. 16.

society women famous for their beauty'.⁵³ These English 'stars' become the gateway into Empire. While on the one hand, they are framed as beautiful spectacle, they also coddle and care for the boy, holding him and, at one point, insisting he wear a hat to avoid sunburn. Through this motherly intimacy, the film opposes the perceived sexualised intimacies invited by Hollywood stars. As in films like *Beau Geste*, the film presents the spaces of Empire as homosocial spaces where boys can learn about the manly labours of Empire; this is enabled by the promise of desexualised female intimacy which stays 'at home'. In the Empire's outer spaces, this is replaced by proximity with male labourers and the landscapes themselves in documentary footage into which the boy is inserted. In the Yorkshire mine and Welsh bakery he visits, close-up shots depict machinery working rhythmically in the style of later industrial documentaries, where workers move in synchronisation with machinery and the film's editing (Figures 63 and 64). This is accompanied by music emphasising rhythm and order, and voices of workers who explain the processes and shout over the machinery to evoke this sense of being *in* the space, rather than watching from a distance. The dream narrative is structured by the boy 'entering' the documentary images and tangibly interacting with them. Cinema brings the Empire close and allows the boy, and thus the spectator, to interact with its reality. To introduce the mining sequence, the boy tells a young miner 'I want to see everything' as they stand close together in a medium shot. The miner's voiceover explains the processes we see and in some shots, the boy is literally present in the corner of the frame, emphasising a shared perspective. At the end of the sequence, he is cleaned of coal dust by his companions from the palace; he interacts tangibly with these spaces, coming into contact with the images of industrial life and thus blurring the boundaries between dream-world fantasy and industrial actuality. Adding the soundtrack after filming was completed also avoided the need to bring the film 'indoors'; the noises of machinery and male workers contribute to the sense of sensuous, bodily 'authenticity', achieved by physically moving into these imperial spaces. Through an emphasis on 'ordinary' performance and bodily engagement

⁵³ *Guardian*, 30 January 1930, p. 8.

with the sights of Empire, the images are authenticated and made accessible and tangible to the spectator too.

If later documentaries would attribute to the filmmaker or editor the role of connecting the Empire, *One Family* positions its central performer as the figure who does this connective work. This is not just visualising the economic flows of Empire but creating 'affective bonds'. Through the boy, the Empire becomes shared property, an 'inheritance', for white boys like the protagonist. The framed maxim, '[f]or they shall inherit the earth', hangs on the boy's bedroom wall, suggesting that adventurous, curious white boys will inherit the earth and Empire, as represented by imperial products and their consumption. This shared imperial and racial inheritance is evident if the film is contextualised with Grierson's 'Notes for English Producers'. Grandy uses this memorandum to demonstrate the 'racially bounded nature' of documentary 'human interest': Grierson's memorandum distinguishes between longer 'epic' films about imperial heroes and imperial history and shorter, 'minor' films about indigenous peoples of the Empire.⁵⁴ The first category 'ought to be dramatic in the usual sense with a powerful story and clear characters', whereas the latter would 'dispense' with story and appeal to 'the spectator's curiosity rather than to his emotions'.⁵⁵ Grierson envisages epic fictional narratives, 'the adventures of the great explorers' as well as 'phases of colonial life' and 'commercial and industrial enterprises'.⁵⁶ Beaumont's protagonist is not an explorer but is framed as the next in their lineage, imbued with the necessary curiosity and sense of adventure. The film does incorporate actuality footage, which accords more with the 'minor' form he imagines, but the exploratory dream narrative that structures it forms the grounds for Beaumont's performance of whiteness.

Of course, most of the workers and settlers viewed in the actuality footage are white themselves, potentially undermining this racial distinction by aligning them with ethnographic subjects, set apart from the boy and the camera. However, *One Family* mitigates this through a

⁵⁴ Grierson, 'English Cinema', pp. 72-73.

⁵⁵ Grierson, 'English Cinema', p. 72.

⁵⁶ Grierson, 'English Cinema', p. 72.

number of means. Firstly, other than 'India', all of the high society representatives of colonial territories are white. As Grieveson observes, India 'is the one space we do not visit', indicating, but concealing, the complex debates about making the territory a Dominion itself.⁵⁷ This also distances India from the territories racialised as white at the expense of their own indigenous communities, and bestows them with an aristocratic grace distinguishing these episodes from a conception of 'Unknown England' or 'Unknown' settler communities. For the white working-class subjects, the boy's interactions distinguish them racially. Through his nonchalance, he transcends spatialised class boundaries; he enters the Palace's kitchens and the King's bedroom, he travels to South African plantations and Yorkshire mines. The working-class boy shares *whiteness* with the King's cook, the society beauties, miners, colonists, and the King himself, permitting his easy travel and consumption of imperial sights and imperial puddings. Class and geography are erased in favour of unifying whiteness, a shared inheritance of this assembled and exhibited imperial spectacle through the democratising medium of cinema.



Figure 65: Another white family in a South Africa vineyard

⁵⁷ Lee Grieveson, 'The Cinema and the (Common) Wealth of Nations', in *Empire and Film*, ed. by Lee Grieveson and Colin MacCabe (London: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 73-113 (p. 97).

This is also evident in the South Africa sequence, the only part of the film which represents people of colour within the Empire. The boy enters a vineyard owned by a white settler who sits with his family in front of this agricultural landscape (Figure 65). Already, the emphasis is placed on ownership and the land's productivity, and equally on the nuclear family as a vision of whiteness. In voiceover, the settler father explains the process of fruit-harvesting by Swazi men and boys. An extra layer of distance is emphasised with this voiceover between these Black workers and the white performers in South Africa; they are not permitted to explain their own labour as the miners do, and the boy does not enter this space purely evoked through the father's words. In being able to interact with and contribute to the exhibitionary framing narrative of the film, white subjects are rendered storytellers and performers, unlike these indigenous Swazi men framed *only* as silent workers. This recalls Ezra's analysis of 1930s French colonial exhibitions. Ezra reveals the distinction between the staging of non-white workers and white workers at the French 1937 World's Fair. Both French and colonised workers performed their labour for exhibition-goers but the contextual information distinguished them: 'whereas the colonized artisans were represented in voyeuristic descriptions as *objects* that were valuable to the extent that they could be put to use, French artisans were represented as *subjects* for French visitors to identify with'.⁵⁸ This distinction was achieved by implying that the white French performers *knew* they were performing, as they were aware of their audience, and thus both *taught* and shared in the joy of artisanal labour with the spectator.⁵⁹ Colonised performers were denied these shared affects and could not teach in the same way. Correspondingly, in interacting with the boy in *One Family*, white labourers, and indeed white spectators who learn from them, are incorporated into this performance of the ordinary, and thus gain a sense of inheritance of this space, spectacle, and the products of the Empire denied to Swazi workers.

These labourers are also distanced through their consumption. As the father claims that '[t]hey pick and they pick and they pick', we see close-up shots of individual Swazi men eating

⁵⁸ Ezra, p. 33.

⁵⁹ Ezra, p. 34.

oranges. This chimes with Grieveson's 'harvest' trope from the perspective of consumption as well as production. These subjects are only depicted eating raw materials, distinct from the boy who collects raw materials to produce something from them. Collecting and conjoining the Empire's sights and products in the pudding and in the film also becomes a performance of whiteness, rendering these raw materials productive. This connects the imperial spectacle with his more mundane position in a working-class London home, again disavowing class divisions in favour of shared racial identity through imperial affect and shared perception and consumption, the literal taste of a Christmas pudding. As Grieveson observes, the 'industrial process narrative is enfolded within a domestic narrative', which connects the domestic to a 'geopolitical narrative of proposed Commonwealth unity, imagining a family of nations gathered together under the benevolent patriarch of the king and Britain'.⁶⁰ While this 'enfolding' is achieved through narrative structure and editing, it is also achieved through Beaumont's ordinary performance style and the emphasis on both production and consumption to distance this white 'family' from colonised subjects.

The main narrative concludes by implying that the King and the average family's pudding contain the same ingredients, that all white citizens consume, or at least *should* consume, the same products produced by the same Empire; they are linked in whiteness, in sharing the same 'family' and domestic space rather than distanced by class. The boy stares into his living room fire which is superimposed with the King's pudding and the royal family preparing to stir it. His father asks what he is dreaming about, if he is 'seeing pictures in the fire', and the boy responds, to his father's bemusement, by realising that 'they're a family too'. The boy is connected to the royal family through whiteness, through Empire, through distraction and curiosity, and, ultimately, through cinema: 'seeing pictures in the fire'. This is reinforced by the strange concluding scene in which a policeman gathers London 'types', from the 'gentleman' to the 'beggarman' and 'criminal', and buys them beer, another scene of shared consumption transcending class to emphasise national and racial solidarity. Again, this is an all-male scene, leaving women, from working-class mothers to

⁶⁰ Grieveson, *Cinema*, p. 190.

aristocratic 'society women', in the home to care for male Empire builders and labourers. *One Family* does not allow women the same access to the boy's curious, adventurous, but ultimately everyday, performance style. Yet this is framed as not just a masculine trait but a racial one, emphasised by its opposition to the only non-white figures in the film in the representative of India and the Swazi workers in South Africa. The boy's easy movement through the Empire, to consume its spectacle and produce the Empire pudding from raw materials, coalesces into a performance style that expresses a shared racial way of being and extends this to spectators, drawing upon the reproductive and connective capacities of the cinema in ways that British commentators and filmmakers proposed throughout the 1920s.

Work, Rest, and Whiteness in Drifters

One Family was unsuccessful commercially and critically. Critics decried its theatricality, with Herring distinguishing the film from the tattoo and instead comparing it to 'a revue in the stage sense'.⁶¹ The film was not medium-specific 'cinema', relying too much on fictional, theatrical acting; Herring aligns the film with the degenerate theatrical spectacle which Grierson would later decry, distancing it from traditional imperial forms. Equally, it is not 'documentary' enough: Herring concludes by arguing that '[t]he film is a dream, which is its greatest mistake. Facts are more interesting than dreams of this nature, and there are enough stirring facts in the film to make a real masterpiece'. *Drifters'* heavily edited vision of herring fishing in Britain was the alternative, purportedly providing these 'facts'. Whereas *One Family* bestows on its central performer the role of making Empire's economic and affective 'bonds', *Drifters* give this role to Grierson the filmmaker. After watching *One Family*, a *Guardian* critic wishes 'to see one of the great directors of the screen get to work on the sequences with a pair of scissors, cut them up, analyse and synthesise them, assemble them again in a different and exciting way'; the 'raw material' in the film is 'beautiful and dramatic', but it requires the presence of a filmmaker, *not* an on-screen performer, to make this valuable as art and imperial

⁶¹ *Guardian*, 8 July 1930, p. 6; *Telegraph*, 13 April 1931, p. 4; *Sunday Times*, 13 July 1930, p. 4.

propaganda.⁶² Grierson was one such filmmaker, invoking what is dramatised narratively in the connections and 'bonds' of *One Family* utilising formal techniques like montage editing. *One Family* represented an outdated form of imperial spectacle, but *Drifters* updates this, rather than transforming it; performances of whiteness and the affective connections they create still underpin both films. The filmmaker plays a key role in creating this connection, but this is still evoked through the collective performances of the fishermen.

In capturing and 'creatively treating' these performances, the ambivalence between ethnographic object and performing citizen remains in *Drifters*, captured in the travel film rhetoric promoting it. The film was framed as a battle between humanity and nature, and was photographed by Basil Emmott, most famous for accompanying Alan Cobham to film his flight from London to South Africa.⁶³ The travel film 'battle with nature' could, as explored in the previous chapter, be a battle between 'civilised' upper-class whiteness and a racialised landscape. However, as in films like the Court Treated's *Stampede*, *Nanook* or *Chang* (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, Famous Players-Lasky, 1926), it could represent indigenous communities battling to survive, with the film serving as salvage ethnography recording a disappearing race. Analogously, an anthropological view of the white documentary subject conflicts with the goals of the film to stimulate affective and economic connection between white subjects. For Colls and Dodd, this mode of interior, metropolitan 'exploration' and ethnographic study of white, working-class people still aimed to 'bring the two classes into one nation'.⁶⁴ Though a class-inflected tension remains throughout the film, and especially in its critical reception, whiteness still fulfilled this class-transcending unifying function.

Much of the film depicts repetitive, mechanical labour performed by a group of men. The fishermen are introduced as a group in long shot, exiting rural, British country cottages for the shots of crashing waves and the danger of the ocean. They are depicted as a single body, close-ups of their

⁶² *Guardian*, 13 July 1930, p. 12.

⁶³ For *Drifters* promotion as travel film, see *Times*, 8 January 1930, p. 10; *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 8 August 1930, p. 1; *British Journal of Photography*, 15 February 1935, p. 99; Rotha, *Documentary Film*, p. 106.

⁶⁴ Colls and Dodd, pp. 22-23.

legs emphasising their brave movement towards the sea, over their individual qualities, gestures or expressions. Like *Piccadilly* released in the same year, this is a silent film at the beginning of the sound era, and its silence contributes to this sense of de-individualisation and the stoic, speechless heroism of their everyday life. As he would argue in his writing, Grierson edits the film to disavow the 'actor', creating instead a representative body of workers. Sexton correspondingly argues that the film blurs workers into an image of labour in service of the Empire, their performances functioning as raw material to be shaped by Grierson. Sexton summarises his reading:

[t]he bodies of the men in the film are often fragmented and represented in a way that allies their body parts with machine parts. They only perform necessary activities and are not individuated. Their only respite from work is through occasional necessary functions like sleeping and eating.⁶⁵

However, the film's 'necessary activities' are also moments of humanity, intimacy, softness, and individuality which counterpoise the mechanical, even inhuman, representation of labour. In a rarely discussed scene, a cabin boy and an older man bake below deck. Before the work of fishing, we see a close-up of a man's hands pouring flour and water. The camera then cuts to a medium shot, framing them together, emphasising this intimate space as the boy adds another ingredient and begins stirring (Figure 66). This is a scene of diegetic education, in which the older man takes on a paternal, pedagogic role to guide the younger boy in producing food for consumption, resonating with the pudding-baking in *One Family*. The camera cuts to the captain above, and then back down as the man corrects the boy's mistake, helping him to spoon the correct amount. This intercutting continues until the man leaves the boy to open a container, giving him a friendly pat on the head before exiting the frame. Before the mechanical and repetitive labour occurs in outdoors space where the captain resides, tactile intimacy and indoor domesticity are foregrounded, appealing to the 'sensory' engagement with cinema that documentarists imagine of the medium's mass audience. This intimacy, familial domesticity, and care serve as the education for the next generation, an analogy for the documentary itself, training future citizens in imperial production and consumption.

⁶⁵ Jamie Sexton, 'Grierson's Machines: *Drifters*, the Documentary Film Movement and the Negotiation of Modernity', *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, 11.1 (2002), 40-59 (p. 51).

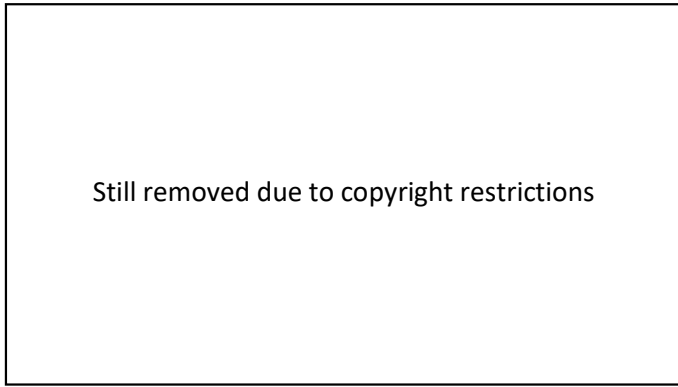


Figure 66: A boy learns to bake in a break from fishing in *Drifters*...



Figure 67: ...and later sleeps soundly in close-up

The film continues with further interruptions of patterned mechanical labour to reveal domestic, indoor intimacy. The film shows the fishermen asleep in close-up, awakening as dawn breaks. A title describes the men ‘called to the labour of hauling’, before a cut to the cabin boy asleep, curled under a blanket in another intimate close-up (Figure 67). Presumably aware of the camera in their cramped sleeping quarters, they perform non-performance and thus ordinariness. Cooking, eating, and sleeping are not simply ‘necessary activities’, but the opposite of work, and the signs of familiarity and the familial, a form of class-transcendent shared white identity in producing and consuming for Empire, but also doing ordinary ‘necessary activities’ and teaching the next generation to do the same.

Intimacy and everydayness are more closely juxtaposed with hard labour in *Granton Trawler* (John Grierson, New Era and EMB, 1934), a film described by Ellis as ‘a shorter version of *Drifters*’, also filmed by Grierson in the North Sea.⁶⁶ In this less feted documentary, sound creates the everyday. Shots from the boat rock with the ship as in *Drifters*, emphasising the dangerous journey. However, unlike *Drifters*, a fisherman’s calm whistling is also audible. The sound implies the ordinariness of this violent movement, visualising an alternative everyday life for these remote workers. Later, shots of fishermen gutting fish are soundtracked by quiet chatter. Work is made familiar through sound, the intimacy of quiet conversation. This is not noticeable *speech* of individual subjects but generalised talk, a representative, communal performance of domestic

⁶⁶ Jack C. Ellis, ‘*Granton Trawler*’, in *The Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of the Documentary Film*, ed. by Ian Aitken (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 317-318 (p. 317).

togetherness and intimacy. In *Drifters* and this later, shorter film, designed for distribution through the Empire Film Library and Film Societies (though also exhibited in theatres), the mechanical and domestic exist in the same frame. The imagined identification between spectator and subject in these films is twofold: on the one hand, they frame production and consumption of imperial products as heroic—if deindividuated—imperial acts; on the other, softer, intimate moments enable recognition of this production and consumption as ordinary, familiar. Domestic ordinariness, in and of itself, does not necessarily signify a racialised identity. However, the travel film framing racialises both modes of performance. If the mechanical nature and repetition of their acts of labour set the film's subjects at a distance, the intimate, indoor scenes remind of their humanity and closeness to a white, British spectator. In a perilous 'battle with nature', this familiarity and intimacy become a kind of restrained, 'civilised' domesticity in a wild setting. Furthermore, the film depicts the education of a younger man as the training of future generations to ensure the effective reproduction of a white heritage via 'traditional' work (i.e. baking), to counter the alienation and even primitivisation of modern labour.

Whiteness is articulated through the domestic in conjunction with muscular, mechanical labour, connecting these remote workers affectively to a broader white, imperial population working and consuming imperial products for the Empire. This was received differently depending on the film's exhibition context. Most published reviews were written by critics who were part of the alternative film culture that influenced *Drifters*. However, while there is less published evidence of it, the film's employment in educational and imperial contexts should not be forgotten. *Sight and Sound*, a publication interested in cinema's pedagogical potential, regularly reported on educational screenings of *Drifters*, and shorter re-edited 'classroom versions', throughout the 1930s.⁶⁷ On its exhibition at the Camden Hippodrome by the LCC Education Committee for instance, it is described merely as a 'geographical film'.⁶⁸ When it was discussed for its aesthetic choices, its depiction of

⁶⁷ *Sight and Sound*, Fall 1932, p. 87; *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1934, p. 86; *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1939, p. 136.

⁶⁸ *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1933, p. 120.

nature's violence was praised, reiterating the travel film framing.⁶⁹ Its presence in *Sight and Sound* recalls its continued role as colonial pedagogical film, educating and unifying white British children. Occasionally, critics and commentators in other arenas echoed Grierson's rhetoric about documentary opposing the degenerately 'effete' and 'lily-white'. In a 1931 lecture for the Royal Society of Arts, Scottish MP, Walter Elliot, cited *Drifters* as an example of the EMB's drive to 'show, not merely the historical but the present side of Imperial activities'; not 'an attempt to sell fish', it was 'an attempt to show the world, and ourselves first of all, the patient, heroic, hard-living men, still produced in as great numbers as ever in our history and doing better work than ever'.⁷⁰ Elliot minimised the film's presentation of labour to align it with travel films which evidence the continuing heroism of white British men and induct a new generation into this. Such ideas are echoed when *The Spectator* notes that the film was conceived of as an advert for the herring industry, 'conducted by a very fine body of men', because, since the Great War, 'there has been a flight from herring' in Britain: '[t]he spread of education, and so of a kind of false refinement, has militated against a delicacy which smacks, however remotely of Music Halls'.⁷¹ Unlike Elliot, this review did not completely disregard the herring industry but blurred this with a concern about over-refinement and falseness; the very production and consumption of herring became a marker of healthy virility. The film's use for imperial education is more difficult to establish, but these reviews asserted its exemplary potential through the performance of whiteness.

However, most critics did not view the film through this lens of racial education. For Herring, the film depicts 'the effort of men against the sea, and of the sea against them and against the ships. In turn, also, the effort of the men against the ships in order to beat the sea [...] This is natural conflict [...] The effort to live surrounds us on all sides'.⁷² Herring aligns the subjects of *Drifters* with the subjects of films like *Nanook* or *Chang*, rather than great white explorers of British expedition films, fighting to live rather than for imperial production. Instead, Grierson himself becomes imperial

⁶⁹ *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1934, p. 144; *Sight and Sound*, Fall 1937, p. 121.

⁷⁰ *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 26 June 1931, p. 740.

⁷¹ *Spectator*, 1 August 1931, p. 153.

⁷² *Guardian*, 14 December 1929, p. 7.

hero; the 'actuality' is minimised in favour of the director who 'creatively treats' it. In *The Spectator*, another critic writes that the photography is not only 'an artistic achievement' but 'a *physical* achievement', because the tempestuous sea meant that 'the fishermen's job was hard enough, and we should imagine the camera man's task was a really dangerous one'.⁷³ This ranks Grierson and Emmott's endeavour more highly, reflected in the focus on Grierson's artistic achievement in the rest of the review. This review appraises the Film Society's first screening of the film; *Drifters* is sandwiched between thoughts on *The Fall of the House of Usher* (Jean Epstein, Films Jean Epstein, 1928) and *Potemkin*. Watching *Drifters* at the Film Society, a central hub for British alternative film culture, informed the appraisal of the film as *Grierson's* art and labour. In his review of the same exhibition, Herring writes of the film's 'universal' theme of 'energy and labour', represented in a manner learned from *Potemkin* shown before it, rather than 'the merely mechanic inventions of Hollywood'.⁷⁴ For Herring, the film is *not* mechanical like commercial American productions; it is more 'vital' in its representation of 'energy and labour'. This is achieved through Grierson's 'true feeling for light and movement, and a knowledge of editing which, though a little complex for the content, brings out as only editing can the emotion behind events'. Grierson engendered this 'energy and labour', giving the film affective resonance. In fact, Herring suggests that the 'simple' subject of the film, the labouring of the fishermen, is over-served by Grierson's artful montage, but ultimately, it is on the level of post-production, not performance or the profilmic, that the film achieves its effect. Later, he would reiterate that *Drifters* was a 'simple film', wherein simplicity is 'allied [...] to feeling for mass and intelligent cutting'.⁷⁵ It showed the 'drama in the lives and labour of the men', but 'virile beauty' emerged from Grierson's work.

One review in the *Guardian* undercuts this binary between imperial and aesthetic functions on the film's exhibition at the Scala theatre with *The End of St Petersburg* (Vsevolod Pudovkin, Mezhrabpom, 1927). An unnamed reviewer celebrates Grierson's use of montage as a 'strongly

⁷³ *Spectator*, 16 November 1929, p. 712.

⁷⁴ *Guardian*, 11 November 1929, p. 17.

⁷⁵ *Guardian*, 16 November 1929, p. 11.

national' British aesthetic, but this British form of filmmaking is also a 'cinema of the Empire and of the Empire's resources', made visible through 'the everyday lives of our people, their problems and conflicts'.⁷⁶ The work of Grierson and the performer are connected in creating a vision of imperial whiteness. The writer explains that *Drifters'* Britishness is evident in its subjects' conduct: in Britain,

the labourer only takes himself seriously to a given point, arrives eventually at a certain moment when he stands back and becomes the master of himself and his work. That kind of detachment is our particular pivot in life, the spiritual resilience that gives us our adaptability for colonisation abroad and for quiet government at home.

This British detachment in everyday life, which also informed British film, denies passion in favour of rational analysis, blurring this restraint with imperial surveillance—to survey oneself and one's field of labour—evident in British expedition films. This detachment is thus a racialised, white mastery, permitting colonial rule and restrained British governance. *Drifters* uses montage to turn its labouring subjects into parts of an imperial machine, but it also entails moments of domestic intimacy which humanise these workers and assert the subjects' affective connection to white metropolitan audiences. The extent to which this was recognised differed depending on reception contexts: for reviewers proclaiming the film's status as cinematic art, the fishermen became 'raw material' to be edited by Grierson; other reviewers focused instead on them as performers of white heroism and imperial labour. Only this *Guardian* reviewer, who merged the film's roles as art and colonial educational tool, found the artfulness of the film *in* its representation of an imperial identity articulated through performance.

At *Drifters'* conclusion, the fishermen return their catch to shore and the market. A title elegises that 'the sound of the sea and the people of the sea are lost in the chatter and chaffer of a market for the world'. This is visualised in shots of crowds from behind, rendering this global imperial market a space of busy anonymity. These crowd shots are superimposed over shots of rolling waves (Figure 68). The people on land are not aligned with heroic fishermen, but the waves themselves, the difficult landscape transcended in their labour. The film turns from domestic intimacies to business, as men barter and large catches are apportioned. The performance of work

⁷⁶ *Observer*, 13 April 1930, p. 20.

and facilitating economic flows and connectivity are foregrounded. However, the film accompanies this with a mournful tone, acknowledging that the fishermen's performances of labour are lost to this fast-paced economic space. The film asks the spectator to remember the work which underpins the imperial system of production and distribution. While certain critics characterised *Drifters* as a film which viewed its subjects as raw material like the fish they transport, the film itself offers a slightly different perspective, insisting on the importance—if lost to the noise of a global imperial economy—of their performances. This includes not just their labour but their 'chatter'; in a silent film, this 'chatter' consists of what we see, the bodily intimacies and moments of education that induct young boys into this imperial system. For the spectator, the film itself performs this induction but it does so not just through anonymised images of labour but sensual images of intimacy and affective connection that represent these performances as heroic achievement—a different kind of heroism to that of upper-class expedition members, but one which is nevertheless to be passed onto or inherited by a younger white, male generation.



Still removed due to copyright restrictions

Figure 68: Herring buyers superimposed with waves

The Song of Ceylon's 'transcription of racial ideology'

Drifters is about white British subjects within Britain, but race is still implicitly invoked through its connection to the travel genre and its combination of scenes of mechanical labour and domestic intimacy and education. *Song of Ceylon* provides a counterpoint to *One Family* and *Drifters*. Like these films, it uses performance to establish racial 'bonds', the formation of communities. In this case, however, in a film designed for white spectators, it is a 'community' from which the audience is distinguished, even if they can briefly take pleasure in its 'primitive' Edenic alternative to the capitalist world system visualised in contemporary documentaries. Like Flaherty's 'ethnographic' films, *The Song of Ceylon* depicts a distanced racialised group, but it accords with the documentary movement's stated goals in two ways: firstly, it depicts this community's interaction with the modern imperial world and, secondly, it downplays the individual, the 'star' performer like Nanook or Moana, in favour of depicting 'community'. Lejeune writes that the film is a 'transcription of racial ideology'.⁷⁷ Unlike *Drifters* or *One Family*, it was promoted for its representation of a racialised group; to be precise, Sinhalese Buddhists in Sri Lanka, then Ceylon. The film combines music, sound, performance, image, and written text. In an important voiceover, Lionel Wendt, a Sri Lankan photographer and pianist of Burgher and Sinhalese descent, reads from *An Historical Relation of the Island Ceylon*, a seventeenth-century travel narrative by an English East India Company sea captain, Robert Knox. Race is 'transcribed' between sound, image, and writing. In one sense, this compromises the British documentary movement's central polemic of medium specificity. However, the film ultimately exalts cinema as the only medium capable of 'transcribing' the racialised performing body. From its premiere at the London Film Society, *The Song of Ceylon* has been debated for its structure and what Sexton calls its 'strange mixture of anthropological observation, travelogue, poetic rhapsody, and sound-image experimentation'.⁷⁸ Sponsored by the Empire Tea Marketing Board to advertise Ceylonese tea production, it has been read as primitivist critique of

⁷⁷ *Observer*, 16 December 1934, p. 12.

⁷⁸ Jamie Sexton, 'The Audio-Visual Rhythms of Modernity: *Song of Ceylon*, Sound and Documentary Filmmaking', *Scope: An Online Journal of Film Studies* (2004), 1-12
<<https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/scope/documents/2004/may-2004/sexton.pdf>> [accessed 1 July 2022] (p. 6); Trotter, p. 161.

capitalist modernity or alternatively celebration of the island's incorporation of this modernity through colonialism.⁷⁹ Certainly, the Empire Tea Marketing Board was not happy with its approach, and insisted that the film be re-edited into the four conventional educational travelogues they originally commissioned.⁸⁰ *The Song of Ceylon's* 'transcription of racial ideology' was thus perceived at a distance from the educational, colonial aims of the less 'prestigious' documentary films, but again, attention to performance and its creation of racialised communities relates to the EMB's wider aims and 1920s discourses discussed in this thesis.

The film is structured in large part around its three dance sequences, neglected by many critics, which depict dance as a form of labour and leisure simultaneously, both essential to the building of community. Only the 'performance' of Wright as filmmaker is generally considered in the film's critical reception, ignoring the formal, ritualised on-screen performances of the film's subjects. The film's structure is central to debates about its colonial and aesthetic functions. Lacking a clear narrative, it is split into four episodes. 'The Buddha' depicts a pre-Buddhist 'devil dance' and conversion to Buddhism; 'The Virgin Island' depicts everyday working life; 'The Voices of Commerce' continues this labour but juxtaposes it with sounds of modern technology, communications and commerce, and shows industrial colonial production alongside traditional work; and 'The Apparel of a God' returns to pilgrimage and another dance. However, critical readings of this structure do not take performance into account. Grierson critiques the 'shimmying (and otherwise discursive) exoticisms' of popular travel films in 'First Principles'.⁸¹ 'Shimmying' ethnographic dance scenes, alongside other 'discursive' markers of exoticism, are tainted by their association with theatricality, the 'exotic' rather than the authentic. Critics seem to follow Grierson's disavowal, often reducing these three dances to the episodes within which they come: the first 'devil dance' evidences pre-

⁷⁹ William Guynn, 'The Art of National Projection: Basil Wright's *Song of Ceylon*', in *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video*, ed. by Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski, new and expanded edn (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014), pp. 64-80; Ellis, *Grierson*, pp. 76-77; Sexton, 'Audio-Visual Rhythms', pp. 7-8.

⁸⁰ 'Song of Ceylon', *Colonial Film: Images of the British Empire* <<http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk/node/486/>> [accessed 14 June 2022].

⁸¹ Grierson, 'First Principles', p. 81.

Buddhist paganism and the scenes depicting teaching of dance in the second episode and the performance in the fourth episode form part of the ethnographic display of everyday and religious Sinhalese life. However, in an article about *The Song of Ceylon*, Wright describes three ‘highspots’ of filming: climbing Sri Pada or Adam’s Peak, visiting the Buried Cities of Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Sigiriya, and finally the dancing.⁸² *The Song of Ceylon*’s three dance sequences, depicting the Sinhalese dance style of Kandyan dance from the central Kandyan region, are crucial.⁸³ Gitlin provides a critical exception to the neglect of performance in the film, foregrounding Grierson’s emphasis on the ‘vitality’ of documentary in ‘First Principles’, with Wright’s film exemplifying this.⁸⁴ She suggests that vitality is invoked through the film’s invitation to *corporeal* engagement through the dance sequences.⁸⁵ The film’s ‘realism’ is phenomenological, ‘experienced’ rather than spectated. If *Drifters* offers minor moments of tactile intimacy, sensuousness becomes the centrepiece of Wright’s film—sensuousness based in *pleasure*, rather than difficulty, danger and fortitude as in the expedition films of the previous chapter. In his considerations of the different forms of ‘screendance’ in cinema history, Donald Rosenberg distinguishes ‘an aesthetic of screen performance in which the screen may be considered as a creative space rather than simply an archival one’.⁸⁶ If dance or ‘shimmying exoticisms’ typically played a key role in ‘salvage ethnography’ filmmaking, recording racialised ways of being and moving that were purportedly ‘dying out’, *The Song of Ceylon* accords dance a more structuring, ‘creative’ role in the film.

The Song of Ceylon does not valorise performances of whiteness, then, but explores the bodies of Sinhalese performers. It also undermines British cinema’s reliance upon imperial heritage. Wendt reads from an early colonial text but, in giving voice to this text through a Sri Lankan speaker, the film complicates any simple ‘inheritance’ of colonial knowledge. In fact, the voiceover almost

⁸² *Cinema Quarterly*, Summer 1934, pp. 231-232.

⁸³ Susan A. Reed, *Dance and the Nation: Performance, Ritual, and Politics in Sri Lanka* (Madison and London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), p. 26; Sicille P. C. Kotelawala, ‘Kohomba Kankariya’, in *The International Encyclopedia of Dance*, ed. by Selma Jeanne Cohen and the Dance Perspectives Foundation (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁸⁴ Gitlin, p. 30.

⁸⁵ Gitlin, p. 30.

⁸⁶ Rosenberg, p. 6.

always goes silent in the dance sequences, suggesting a kind of knowledge which can only be imparted by the racialised performing body. As Jon Hoare points out, 'Wright's focus on Sinhalese Buddhism emphasises a particular national identity for Ceylon and obscures the island's diverse population'; the film erases ethnic differences in favour of a more general opposition between white spectators and 'Ceylonese' performers.⁸⁷ Accordingly, Susan A. Reed demonstrates that Kandyan dance, from the late-nineteenth century, shifted from its ritual and religious purposes to become a form of staged dance for British and European colonists, ultimately embodying Sri Lankan nationhood.⁸⁸ These dances are not intended to impart ethnographic information but a more generalised 'sensation' of difference and racial boundaries. They inform the creation of 'racial community' analogous to *Drifters* or *One Family*, but in order to emphasise their difference from white British spectators while also opening the possibility for brief, pleasurable engagement with these different bodies. Wright explains that 'Kandyan dancing is an excellent example of primitive movements formalised and classicised by tradition and religion, yet retaining the vigour of prehistoric origin. Like good Orientals, they dance with their whole bodies'.⁸⁹ This bodily performance in a sound film resonates with Elisabetta Girelli's analysis of Harald Kreutzberg's 'dance of death' in *Paracelsus* (G. W. Pabst, Bavaria Film, 1943), which she argues is a moment of silent film performance within sound film and, through this, of 'irrationality in the midst of order'.⁹⁰ The focus on the body in these silent moments in one sense articulates the 'prehistoric' and 'primitive'. Equally, Wright explains that they aimed 'not merely for sensational or romantic effect; we aimed also at an analysis of at least three of their dances'.⁹¹ Wright's disclaimer is informed by the 'creative treatment of actuality'; if the dances are the actuality, Wright's camera 'analyses' it. *The Song of Ceylon* gives the film camera, its moulding and transforming of the body, the capacity to 'transcribe racial ideology'.

⁸⁷ 'Song of Ceylon', *Colonial Film*.

⁸⁸ Reed, pp. 96-97.

⁸⁹ *Cinema Quarterly*, Summer 1934, p. 232.

⁹⁰ Girelli, p. 91.

⁹¹ *Cinema Quarterly*, Summer 1934, p. 232.



Figure 69: A lone dancer's shaking body in *The Song of Ceylon*

Kandyan dance becomes the embodiment of 'racial ideology'. The dances offer not just a performance of racial difference but an alternative 'ideology' of working and being. In the second episode, Wendt explains that it is not 'held any disgrace for men of the greatest quality to do any work either at home or in the field if it be for themselves; but to work for hire, with them, is reckoned for a great shame'. Work is incorporated into daily life, and to work is to be part of this community; as William Guynn observes, 'work is seen as a shared social activity, and, the film suggests, the Ceylonese make little distinction between work and leisure'.⁹² Dance is a key example of this non-distinction, functioning as labour and leisure simultaneously and thus embodying this alternative 'ideology'. The three dance sequences tell the story of an alternative form of 'civilising' into this ideology, moving from 'primitive' individualism to performing bodies organised into community. The first dance sequence opens the film after tilting and panning shots of large palm fronds in close-up. The camera fades to dancers as Wendt's voiceover pronounces, before being silenced, '[i]n those days, the primitives did prostrate themselves by night to the honour and service of the devil'. After cutting between close-ups of shaking bodies, the camera finally rests on a single performer, tilting from his feet to his chest (Figure 69). With the scene's black background and a

⁹² Guynn, p. 76.

dating of 'those days', the spectator's only orientation is this body. The 'primitiveness' of the spectacle is matched by the spectator's uninformed position. The notion espoused by Carol Brown that dance can 'make space speak' is undermined as the dance occurs in a space-less, geography-less frame.⁹³ If *Drifters* locates its intimate, sensuous moments in a recognisably domestic space, *The Song of Ceylon* frames its first moments of bodiliness in silence and spatial difference, encouraging a different kind of interaction with the racialised bodies on display, based not on familiarity and recognition.



Figure 70: The boys dance in a line...



Figure 71: ...while the berava smilingly instructs them

However, at the end of this scene, Wendt narrates the Ceylonese people discovering Buddhism and the film cuts to a pilgrimage with close-ups of feet on the ground and wider shots of pilgrims. With Buddhism, the subject and spectator are visually and spatially oriented. Like *The Epic of Everest*, *The Song of Ceylon* raises Orientalist explorations of Buddhism as a viable alternative to Christianity rather than 'primitive' paganism. This spiritual enlightenment leads to a transformation in everyday life, which forms the subject of the second episode including the second dance sequence. After harvesting rice, children run across the field and frame, as the camera swings to follow their swerving path to the sound of their excited chatter. Wendt explains that the children must come to the house of the 'dancing master' (the berava) 'each day' 'to practice themselves in their art. For, if they be not exercised from childhood in this manner, their limbs have no skill in the postures of their dance'. This dancing is not child's play, then, but work, part of one's community

⁹³ Carol Brown, 'Making Space, Speaking Spaces', in *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader*, ed. by Alexandra Carter and Janet O'Shea, 2nd edn (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 58-72; Guynn, p. 71.

commitment. With its audience of elderly onlookers, a clearly defined stage space is outlined; children move from the paddy, the site of labour, to the classroom where they continue to work. Wendt also distinguishes this dance from the first episode's devil dances: it is 'art', requiring skill, practice and specific 'postures', a tradition to be passed on. The camera frames the boys in a line of moving legs, soundtracked with chanting voices. However, it interposes this with the smiling faces of the children and the berava (Figure 70 and 71). As *Drifters* offers moments of individual intimacy which educate the next generation, this film foregrounds the smiles of children and teacher as they are inducted into this alternative 'racial ideology', where work and leisure are blurred as performances for the community. It parallels the education in racialised conduct in *One Family* and *Drifters*, but depicts an education into an alternative ideology to capitalist imperialism. Again, though, this is marked as other through silence. The white, British spectator can see this alternative education but is not invited to fully share in it, to truly understand it as anything other than an embodiment of a (racialised) alternative way of being.

The last dance performance comes in the final episode, after the 'voices of commerce' have entered Ceylonese society. The dance begins with a single man ringing a bell in medium shot, then a drummer who also glistens with sweat as the camera moves over his body. The film moves outward from the individual to a montage of now adult bodies in patterned unison, a carefully practised and crafted ritual that serves the community as both work and play. The camera does occasionally pause on individuals but never stops, swerving between people moving around in their own right. The performance, finally, blurs into broader visual spectacle, including drummers, dancers, and audience members, all represented in the same frame (Figure 72). In her exploration of Rabindranath Tagore's anti-imperial dance practice, Esha Niyogi De argues that Tagore ruptures imperial visual conventions, critiquing the proscenium arch through emphasis on the haptic and the 'circular gaze of community performance'.⁹⁴ A similar circular, communal gaze at embodied performance is evident in *The Song*

⁹⁴ Esha Niyogi De, 'Empire, Vision, and the Dancing Touch: Gendered Moving Arts on Postcolonial Indian Screens', in *The Oxford Handbook of Screendance Studies*, ed. by Douglas Rosenberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 439-460 (pp. 447-449).

of *Ceylon's* final sequence, speaking to an alternative culture of working, living and being to Western capitalism and Western performance. The final sequence completes the establishment of a unified performing community or culture, erasing class and ethnic difference in favour of unified 'Ceylonese' identity (though an identity founded on the dominant Sinhalese ethnic group).



Figure 72: Dancer, musician, and audience in the same frame in the final dance

As the dance climaxes, the dancers are matched through dissolves with giant Buddha statues, shot from the same frontal position and at a scale that implies their similar size (Figures 73 and 74). In this final episode, Wright suggests a perfect synthesis between individual and racial/religious community and culture. Sexton argues that the film concludes not with the rejection of 'the voices of commerce', but with an adaptation of Ceylonese life to these new sounds, rhythms, and ways of working and being, evident in the slower, less frenetic rhythm of editing and sound.⁹⁵ Similarly, for Trotter, it depicts Ceylon's incorporation into the world economy, another link in the imperial chain.⁹⁶ Trotter finds that representing this contiguity through *sound* demonstrates cinema's inability to represent the intangible connectivity of wireless telegraphy and telephony.⁹⁷ However, the dance sequences evidence the shortcomings of other media in the face of cinema too.

⁹⁵ Sexton, 'Audio-Visual Rhythms', p. 8.

⁹⁶ Trotter, p. 161.

⁹⁷ Trotter, pp. 162-163.

Wendt's reading of Knox's travelogue still does not gloss the performances, so that only music, chanting, and singing of dancers and spectators can be heard. A gap in Knox's colonial record of Ceylon, these dances cannot be 'transcribed' into written text. Performance is what the camera can convey but writing and voice cannot. The film reveals the limitations of written texts, especially from a Western perspective, as well as dialogue. Wendt's reading is of course a performance, a recitation, in its own right but it falls silent in these moments of visual performance so that image and body take precedence. Ultimately, only the camera can represent the performer and the 'racial ideology' that they embody. Crucially, this ideology is framed to provide an alternative to the imperialist capitalism heard in the 'voices of commerce'.



Figure 73: The dancers shot frontally...



Figure 74: ...dissolving into a Buddha statue shot from the same position

The Song of Ceylon relies upon an Orientalist vision of Ceylon which uses Sinhalese people to critique Western capitalism, but without completely reducing the island to a 'primitive' Eden; it is still a space with history and tradition, to be taught to its youth, that interacts with European modernity through the 'voices of commerce' and cinema. Cinema is the only means of understanding Ceylon, immediately and corporeally, and when the film ends, so does this knowledge. In this sense, Wright rejects cinema's function as a geographical tool, beyond marking out 'Ceylon' as a place separate from, but temporarily experienced by, the Western spectator. If British commentators and documentarists imagined non-fiction cinema mapping out the Empire and the performer and spectator's positions within it, Wright does not allow such a spatially stable

vision. Ceylon's relationship to the Empire is not expressed clearly or visibly; instead, it is a hermetically sealed space into which the spectator can glimpse. The film claims to dramatise the *denying* of its colonial function for its sponsors as 'work for hire', abhorred by Ceylonese people, and to focus instead on a more communal, but also artful, crafted, practised and carefully sculpted spectacle to replace this. Yet this mode still expresses and concretises race, not through staging, setting and space but through sensation, bodily performance, and the relation of the individual body to the wider community. Wright imbues cinema with the power to construct 'race' out of performances, images, and texts. As filmmaker, Wright and his camera dance with the film's performers in a new model of 'creative treatment of actuality', still articulating racial difference through bodily performance, camera movement and film editing, even as it claims to deny documentary's colonial functions of depicting organised imperial labour.

The Song of Ceylon collaborates with its performing subject; rejecting ethnographic description, the film suggests that only this collaboration can convey racial difference to the spectator effectively. Yet perhaps more than any other from this period, *The Song of Ceylon* was received at the 'film art' end of the documentary spectrum, winning prizes for best documentary and best film at the 1935 International Film Festival in Belgium. As such, critics generally focused not on Sinhalese performers but on Wright's performance as filmmaker. The *Times* describes the film as a 'lyrical interpretation of native life in Ceylon', while Rotha contends that it was 'an impartial representation of the facts, implying a philosophical and not a political intention'.⁹⁸ Philosophy and poetry outweigh 'political' or colonial interest; the film is positioned closer to subjective lyric than colonial critique or ethnographic document. Only added to the Empire Film Library in 1939, it was often distanced from the travel or educational film.⁹⁹ When it was exhibited for the Royal Empire Society in Bristol, Wright lectured beforehand to distinguish his work, even in this imperial context, from the 'travel and interest film' which contains 'the usual pictures of beauty spots'.¹⁰⁰ Similarly,

⁹⁸ *Times*, 12 September 1935, p. 10; Rotha, *Documentary Film*, p. 237.

⁹⁹ *Times*, 18 April 1939, p. 12.

¹⁰⁰ *Western Daily Press*, 14 December 1936, p. 10.

when *Sight and Sound* classifies the film as a 'travel film', it asserts that, within this genre, the film 'stands in a class apart'.¹⁰¹ Exhibited in festivals, regional film societies and theatrically with Soviet and European classics like *Drifters*, *The Song of Ceylon* became part of a European art cinema circuit, rather than a documentary educating children and adults in Ceylon tea production or imperial citizenship and whiteness.

In contemporary reviews, then, Wright's subjective, poetic vision was foregrounded. One *Times* reviewer writes that the film's 'object is to show how modern civilization has left unaltered the lives and faith of the natives'.¹⁰² Yet they go on to praise Wright's Degas-like use of angles and figuration, framing, and patterning; his compositional aptitude abstracts performers and setting, so that the Sinhalese people's dances and labour become raw material. After its Film Society exhibition, the *Times* praises Wright's 'sympathetic direction': he has 'not only photographed the natives of Ceylon, he has also understood them'.¹⁰³ Not content with a 'bare record of facts', he aimed at 'the discovery of the character and soul of these people'. Wright's skill inhered in 'transcribing' or 'interpreting' another 'race'; even Wendt's performance exemplified Wright's expertise in editing, transforming his speech into 'song'.¹⁰⁴ As a 'discoverer' of indigenous people, Wright's style of filmmaking became an imperial performance: his ability to understand and convey racial difference, not through his presence but his compositional and editing prowess. For these critics, Wright *mediated* the actions of the Sinhalese people in the film, revealing their racial essence. As such, for Graham Greene and the *Scotsman*, the film is a 'visual record of the effect on a sensitive Western brain of old communal religious appearances, not of a life which Mr. Wright pretends to *know*' or 'a rendering in film form of one man's experience'.¹⁰⁵ Erasing his subjects' performances completely, Wright and his 'lyrical' editing style became the *only* purveyors of meaning, and his comprehension of the Ceylonese people served only to further his aesthetic and subjective vision.

¹⁰¹ *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1934, p. 170.

¹⁰² *Times*, 23 September 1935, p. 10.

¹⁰³ *Times*, 17 December 1934, p. 10.

¹⁰⁴ E.g. *Times*, 17 December 1934, p. 10; *Guardian*, 14 December 1935, p. 6.

¹⁰⁵ *Spectator*, 17 April 1936, p. 703; *Scotsman*, 26 March 1935, p. 13.

Sexton suggests that Wright's 'use of sound, whose composed nature is explicitly foregrounded, acts as a marker of self-confession: an overt statement that the film is taking aesthetic liberties with its subject; that it is not a straightforward rendering of "how things really are"'.¹⁰⁶ This resonates with Bruzzi, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Brian Winston's arguments for more radical documentary practice, reliant on acknowledgement of its own status as a constructed image that lays claim to the 'real'; an ideal rather than an actuality.¹⁰⁷ Greene's reading of the film contains this possibility: that it is not a representation of Ceylon but one white, British man's limited perspective, refracted through centuries of Orientalism and colonialism. However, Trinh reminds us that self-reflexivity is not enough in itself; in fact, reflexivity is a technique of scientific legitimization, meaningless when it only serves the further accumulation of knowledge and does not challenge the 'positionality' of the filmmaker:

[l]eft intact in its positionality and its fundamental urge to decree meaning, the self conceived both as key and as transparent mediator is more often than not likely to turn responsibility into license. The license to *name*, as though meaning presented itself to be deciphered without any ideological mediation.¹⁰⁸

Acknowledging that the film 'transcribes' 'racial ideology' does not, in itself, render this 'transcription' any less of a colonial appropriation and restructuring of Ceylonese culture by a white explorer/filmmaker. Even in its limited screenings in colonial or educational contexts, it seems to have been viewed as an expression of Wright's artistic skill, a moulding and shaping of Sinhalese performances, rather than collaboration and an alternative form of labour, craft, and ultimately filmmaking. The performances of racialised bodies on screen are once more used to make claims for the aesthetic potential of (British) cinema—in this case, its ability to capture, but also mould, the real. The film opens the possibility for a new kind of documentary filmmaking, which still relies on Orientalist assertions of difference but valorises this difference and the fact that cinema provides brief sensuous access to this. However, as with *Drifters*, its contemporary reception demonstrates that these performances can be flattened through more typical discourses of expedition and

¹⁰⁶ Sexton, 'Audio-Visual Rhythms', p. 8.

¹⁰⁷ Winston, pp. 253-254; Trinh T. Minh-ha, 'The Totalizing Quest of Meaning', in *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. by Michael Renov (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 90-107 (p. 105).

¹⁰⁸ Trinh, pp. 103-104.

ethnographic filmmaking into representing only the vision, whether framed as individual and subjective or objective, of the filmmaker.

As Sexton argues, the film witnesses an adaptation to modernity, but an alternative modernity that shuts itself away from the Western world as the palm fronds close over the screen in its concluding moments. While the camera can only intrude and must eventually be shut out, for a brief moment, it is able to partake in this alternative modernity, one experienced through sensory and corporeal engagement with performers. However, this is always emphasised as racially distinct from the spectator through the framing, aural and visual, of the performances. A kind of intimacy is briefly invited but contained, articulating and asserting distinct racial 'communities'. If the sensuous pleasures of this alternative political economy and 'style of being' are briefly enjoyed, the closing of the palm fronds on this community emphasises what critics took from the film: that it could only be a vision of a white filmmaker, ultimately distanced from the performers he depicts. Again, then, the documentary movement utilises performance to establish and 'bond' racial communities, through difference rather than familiarity and intimacy.

Conclusion

While *The Song of Ceylon* survived the shift from EMB to GPO, the latter organisation's preoccupations inevitably turned from racial identity to national and class identity. With *Night Mail* (Basil Wright and Harry Watt, GPO, 1936), for instance, Wright and Harry Watt use the postal express train as a metaphor for national unity.¹⁰⁹ Yet the focus on working-class British life by the GPO also continued to raise tensions between 'anthropological' perspectives on an internal lower class—the miners in *Coal Face* (Alberto Cavalcanti, GPO, 1935), for instance—and this desire to instil national *and* racial unity through Britishness and whiteness. *The Face of Britain* (Paul Rotha, Gaumont, 1935) depicts the trajectory of industrialisation and craftsmanship in Britain, a heritage that ends with a 'new kind of worker' within a national system formed from organised planning and using electrical technologies. Shots of schoolchildren in physical education lessons, performing

¹⁰⁹ Orr, p. 9.

repeated exercises in unison, form part of this; another moment of pedagogy depicts children educated into a disciplined, physically (and racially) 'fit' national body.¹¹⁰ Over the 1930s, then, non-fictional, communal bodily performance still implied concern with the same issues that absorbed 1920s British cinema culture.

Critics have observed a rift growing among British documentarists towards the end of the 1930s, as Alberto Cavalcanti began to advocate for narrative 'story-documentaries', while Grierson preferred an 'objective' form without formal experimentation.¹¹¹ For Sexton, the former explores working-class social problems, whereas the latter approaches class on a more personal level.¹¹² No longer claiming to be merely representing the real, the story-documentary entails dramatic, fictionalised narrative, and thus individual acting closer to *One Family*. Around 1933, corresponding with the end of the EMB, Ian Aitken notes a shift from the local, regional, and intimate to representations of mass communications and networked modernity.¹¹³ This suggests that the documentary movement might have turned from intimate, shared racial feeling and solidarity to a globalised world linked not by affect or racial identity but by technology. However, the story documentary, in its focus on the individual, maintains intimacy and personal connection. In part, this is achieved through clear, gendered division. In *The Saving of Bill Blewitt* (Harry Watt, GPO, 1937), women exist in domestic spaces and shops, while men inhabit pubs, streets, the quarry, and the sea. Through this, acting by non-professional actors is framed, as Grierson earlier hoped, as 'virile', not 'effete': the gruff conversations in regional dialects between working men. Such films as this or *North Sea* (Harry Watt, GPO, 1938), which tell dramatic narratives of financial and literal precarity, require single locations. Consequently, national or racial unity is not achieved through the evocation of networking and connectivity; instead, the local or regional microcosmically represents the nation and Empire, recreating the identification through intimacy in certain moments of *Drifters*. These

¹¹⁰ For the racial underpinnings of degenerationist discourses of 'fitness', see Greenslade, *Degeneration*, pp. 41-44.

¹¹¹ Swann, p. 85-86; Sexton, 'Grierson's Machines', pp. 55-56.

¹¹² Sexton, 'Grierson's Machines', p. 56.

¹¹³ Aitken, p. 12.

‘story-documentaries’ permit explicit ‘acting’, the individualised performances, speech and gesture denied in early documentarist writings and film, and thus different articulations of national and racial identity. However, they still invoke a local community that serves as microcosm for the nation—and potentially whiteness itself.

The continuing importance of race and performance in documentary is beyond the remit of this study. Much important work on race and British documentary remains to be done, especially examining the representation of whiteness rather than considering British subjects purely through a lens of nation, class, and gender. In this chapter, I have connected early British documentaries to discourses of race and performance that preceded it, rather than accepting documentarists’ claims of a clean break with previous British cinema culture. The documentary movement and its founding definition of ‘creative treatment of actuality’ rely upon a denial of acting which places the power of ‘creation’ or film art in the hands of the documentarist. This denial operates in Grierson’s writing through racialised rhetoric of degeneration which characterises acting as effete, over-civilised, and artificial. In its place, he imagines a more ‘authentic’ style of communal performance to be crafted by the documentarist. After the disavowal of *One Family’s* theatrical spectacle, *Drifters* and *The Song of Ceylon* provide examples of documentarists’ engagement with the ‘authentic’ performance of race. *Drifters’* moments of intimacy and affection complement and contrast with machine-like and mechanical performance of labour to envision whiteness caught between muscular heroism and softer, everyday domestic tradition. In *The Song of Ceylon*, corporeality and intimacy take precedence: community is formed as an *other*, from which the assumed white, British spectator is excluded, but Wright uses dance to revel in this difference and the camera’s ability to capture it.

Despite this engagement with performance in all three films, commentators, critics, and spectators did not read the films in the same way. With *Drifters* and especially *The Song of Ceylon*—perhaps because it depicts people of colour—critics flattened the performer’s work to emphasise the performance of the filmmaker; the subject was primitivised, denied a creative role, and reduced to ‘raw material’. This denigration of the performing subject—whether performing as fictional actor

in the more broadly denigrated *One Family*, as labourer in *Drifters*, or in ritualised, formal dances in *The Song of Ceylon*—has persisted even to the present in scholarship which has only recently begun to comprehend the role which performance plays in non-fiction film. Given that early British cinema culture was so invested in performance, it is also possible to argue that the distinction of British documentary from this culture stems from the same impulse. By being attentive to the role that performance continued to play in this movement, despite its disparagement, we can restore the important performative work of documentary subjects and gain greater understanding of how the movement fits in with a cinema culture which established the aesthetic and political goals of cinema, cinematic taste, and a national cinema through racialised spectatorship and performance.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored how race, and the performance of race on screen, influenced and underpinned filmmaking, discourses and debates about cinema, and constructions of cinematic taste in 1920s imperial Britain. I began with two quotations, from a poem in *Picturegoer* and a *Telegraph* article on British cinema by Alder Anderson, which raise the idea that how one performed articulated their racial identity and their position within the Empire. In calling for those involved with the movie industry to ‘act imperially’, Anderson was imploring film producers, advertisers, distributors, and spectators to ‘act’ by making and watching films with an eye to their role in asserting and promulgating the British Empire’s cultural, political and economic might. Yet I have shown throughout this thesis that such anxieties about the representation of Empire so often come down to how embodied subjects move, express, gesture, behave, and perform on screen. To perform racial identity on film according to British colonial constructions of race was, for British critics, commentators and filmmakers, a way to ‘act imperially’. Scholars have emphasised the importance of performance—primarily performance as ‘acting’, the interpretation of a fictional character—to British silent cinema culture. Yet a comprehensive understanding of film performance in British cinema culture requires recognition that this was always imperially and racially inflected, taking an approach which, in Said’s words, ‘regard[s] imperial concerns as constitutively significant to the culture of the modern West’.¹ In the case of interwar British cinema culture, performances were always understood in Britain to be racialised, a performance of racial essence, identity or community, and the criteria for evaluating them and evaluating cinema more broadly were thus undergirded by racial categories and hierarchies.

This was determined also by the spaces in which these racialised performances took place: formal diegetic stage spaces, colonial locations and geographies, and the space of the film frame itself. In interwar British culture, cinema was understood as a contact zone, a space for representing

¹ Said, *Culture*, p. 78.

and experiencing racialised encounter. Anxieties about ‘primitive’ spectators across the Empire discussed in Chapter 1 expose a preoccupation with how people performed on screen and what this implied about their racial identity, on a medium that transcended geographical distinctions and collapsed the boundaries between the bodies of performers and audience members through its immediate, sensuous address. These anxieties emerge from a post-war moment in which the stability of colonial geographies and, interrelatedly, the perceived ‘supremacy’ and vitality of the white body itself were undermined. Cinema became the locus for British anxieties about the visibility and vulnerability of whiteness and about how white people performed. This had implications for colonial rule and authority, but also for the cinematic medium itself, as is evident in the case study genres explored in Chapters 2 to 5. The reading of racial identity into film performance determines ideas of cinematic taste and decorum: how one should perform on screen and how spectators should respond; what kinds of film should be made and valued in Britain and for British colonial ends; and the ways that these performances embody British history and heritage.

If recent scholarship on British cinema’s colonial function has raised racial difference as one element of cinema in this period, this thesis has shifted the focus to bring race to the fore, positioning it as a key category of analysis. In doing so, it turns from the political and economic underpinnings of British cinema to foreground issues of style, decorum, taste, and sensuous and bodily feeling—what cinema is and does to and for spectators. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on fictional genres in which performances of racial identity provide the grounds for exploring the sensuous, affective, and corporeal dimensions of cinema, usually through characters of colour like Valentino’s sheik or Wong’s Shosho. Yet, when shifting from fiction to non-fiction, and from the genres and films which provoked such anxiety among British commentators to the films which were positioned as a resolution, the performance of race still serves to foreground cinema’s bodily sensations and effects. While modes of performance in non-fiction film inevitably change, these films and their critics are still preoccupied with performance and the performing body. Non-fiction British films purportedly offered more ‘healthy’ forms of bodily interaction and engagement, encouraging not interracial

contact but ways of ‘feeling’—and ideally imitating—white imperial endeavour by seeing it performed on screen. In British cinema culture, across modes and genres of film, performances of racial identity, including whiteness, became the locus for articulating how cinema-going *felt* and how it should feel, the ways in which it addressed or was experienced through the body as a whole, and thus the tangible impacts it might have on spectators, for better or worse.

Racialised performance was also a locus for imagining the relationship of cinema to British imperial heritage and the forms and media used to represent it. For British cinema to ‘act imperially’, critics almost unanimously agreed, it must incorporate British colonial heritage, drawing a connection to the heroics and achievements of imperial generations past. Again, this was accomplished through the performing body. Cinema’s ability to reproduce the body and reproduce certain behaviours in spectators was tied intimately with its capacity to reproduce and disseminate history and heritage, and the need to do so ‘correctly’ (i.e. according to a British colonial ideology). These performances and the ways in which films framed them articulated the cinematic medium’s relationship to other forms and traditions of representing and disseminating whiteness, racial difference, and British colonial endeavour. This applied not only to fictional works, novels and plays from which films were adapted, but other imperial forms: monuments, histories, exemplary lives, parades and exhibitions. It is true that the British documentary movement stands at a remove from this intermedial connectedness in its insistence on medium specificity and cinema’s unique attributes. However, this distinction was still expressed through a rejection of the individual performer in favour of communal performances of labour, leisure, and intimacy—communal performances which remained ‘racially bounded’ in Grandy’s words. Across fiction and non-fiction film, the way in which bodies performed race and the way this was framed on film, its perceived capacity to transmit imperial heritage ‘correctly’, informed conceptions of the medium’s utility, artistic value, and relationship to other media.

These findings have significant implications for British silent cinema studies. British cinema of the 1920s has been understood as a cinema of distance, decorum, and reserve, in which the body

and sensory interaction on screen and by spectators are contained and disavowed. This thesis reveals that this, in itself, was a colonial construction, forged through associations of restraint, decorum and taste with middle-class whiteness. Understanding this, we can recover the constructions of the corporeal in silent British cinema history. The affective and sensory nature of cinema that concerned modernist interwar film theorists actually preoccupied mainstream, middlebrow British cinema culture too, but as an anxiety, to be displaced onto the bodies of racialised subjects and moments of colonial encounter and contact, or as a corrective to this in 'healthier', restrained or 'civilised' performances of whiteness. Foregrounding racialised performance in British cinema culture enables us to recognise that this cinema of restraint, of 'refinement' and 'cultivation', was still a bodily cinema.

Attention to the racialisation of performance also enables transcendence of the distinctions between fictional and non-fictional performance. Most scholars have focused on British fiction and non-fiction film separately, with some exceptions in studies of British colonial cinema.² By drawing them together, while remaining attentive to the distinctions between their modes of performance, it becomes clear that there are broader continuities in how bodies were read and racialised on screen in Britain, and in the implications this had for conceptions of cinema. In all genres and forms of film, questions of the racialised body, and of modes of restraint and cultivation contrasted with corporeality and excess, preoccupy filmmakers and critics. This broader conception of performance reveals continuities across forms and modes, and thus a more holistic picture of how 'cinema' was constructed and conceived in interwar Britain.

I have also argued that British cinema's relationship to British history and heritage as a *national* quality should equally be conceived as a *racial* quality, something often missing from scholarly accounts of British heritage and historical cinema. This builds on transnational cinema studies which assert that 'British' cinema was never simply 'British'. This work has demonstrated the

² Grandy, for instance, argues that looking across fiction and non-fiction film is 'vital for furthering our understanding of how empire was constructed through film for ordinary people in Britain and the colonies'; Grandy, p. 511.

British film industry's imbrication with imperial concerns and with other industries across Europe, America, the Empire and the world.³ I have further demonstrated that *whiteness itself* was another transnational element of British cinema culture, which underpins this purportedly 'national' cinema and which was occasionally seen to unite Britain, America and European nations on racial lines as opposed to their usual distinction as competing powers.⁴ British cinema, as it was understood contemporarily in interwar Britain, was *white* cinema. If scholars have demonstrated that gender, class and national identity markers have proven central to establishing a British performance style and, more broadly, a British style of filmmaking, we must also be attentive to the ways that racial identity and whiteness also always underpin this 'Britishness'.

The findings of this thesis can be extended in scholarship on British cinema, synchronically and diachronically. To impress the significance of performances of race and whiteness in British cinema, this thesis has focused primarily on films which stage racialised encounters, in which racial difference is most foregrounded and emphasised. However, I have also examined films like *The Rat*, *The Great White Silence*, and *Drifters* which concentrate entirely on white subjects. By incorporating these, I have demonstrated that such films were still understood to entail performances of whiteness, and thus that the preoccupation with racialised performance pervades *all* British cinema. Future research could delve into this further: how is whiteness made manifest in interwar British films which appear to be concerned with domestic, British narratives, settings, and people? An awareness of the ways in which performance was read as racialised and the perceived significance of performing whiteness appropriately can nuance future scholarship on 'domestic' British cinema.

³ For assertions that 'British' cinema is always transnationally imperial cinema, see e.g. Colin MacCabe, "'To take ship to India and see a naked man spearing fish in blue water': Watching Films to Mourn the End of Empire", in *Empire and Film*, ed. by Lee Grieveson and Colin MacCabe (London: BFI, 2011), pp. 1-17 (p. 11); Jaikumar, *Cinema*, pp. 1-3.

⁴ The idea of race and whiteness as transnational categories stretches back at least to W. E. B. Du Bois' evocation of the twentieth-century 'colour line' that transcended national borders to determined racial difference and white supremacy globally; W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* [1903], ed. by Brent Hayes Edwards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 3; W. E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* [1920] (London and New York: Verso, 2016), pp. 17-29. See also Katrina Quisumbing King, 'The Global Color Line and White Supremacy: W. E. B. Du Bois as a Grand Theorist of Race', in *The Oxford Handbook of W. E. B. Du Bois*, ed. by Aldon Morris et al., online edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190062767.013.54>> [accessed 20 May 2023].

Moreover, this thesis focuses on American and British films which represent colonial territories or spaces on the edges of Empire, demonstrating the tensions surrounding racial solidarity between Britain and America and their competing imperial projects. America as settler colony with its history of chattel slavery engenders different kinds of racialised and racist encounter that may nevertheless impact upon understanding of cinema aesthetics in Britain. For instance, westerns depicting encounters between indigenous Americans and white settlers or representations of Black American life could also be analysed through their British reception, refining the configurations of colonial space and colonial bodies I have outlined. Beyond America, it would also be useful to consider other European empires, including Soviet Russia, and their national and colonial cinemas' reception in Britain.⁵ Equally, films produced by people of colour, for instance those produced by the Indian film industry and exhibited in Britain, could nuance the arguments of this thesis further and potentially reveal other modes of performance and ways of constructing cinematic taste to those dominant in British cinema culture.

Finally, the continued inheritance of colonial racist ideologies, even as British cinema aesthetics moved away from 1920s 'performed cinema', suggests that the performance and staging of racialised identity, encounter and difference may continue to structure British film. In Chapter 5, I argue that the British documentary movement provides one important avenue for this, examining its origins to lay down the foundations for further research into the continued relevance of racialised performance in this movement that continued into and beyond the Second World War. If film historians like James Chapman and Nicholas J. Cull demonstrate that imperial cinema persists long after the formal dissolution of the majority of the Empire, colonial constructions of performance and spectatorship must still play a fundamental role in their political and aesthetic effect.⁶ As such, these

⁵ Stollery has provided crucial insight into the reception of Soviet cinema—particularly *Turksib* (Viktor Turin, Vostokkino, 1929), a film about imperial infrastructure building, and *Storm over Asia* (Vsevolod Pudovkin, Mezhrabpomfilm, 1928) which depicts competing Russian and British colonial interests in Mongolia—in imperial Britain; see e.g. Stollery, *Alternative Empires*, pp. 144-150; Stollery, 'Transnationalism and imperialism'.

⁶ James Chapman and Nicholas J. Cull, *Projecting Empire: Imperialism and Popular Cinema* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009).

conclusions about the racialised performing body on film might provide insight into later periods, including what Jaikumar calls ‘colonial modernist’ films addressing the crisis and dissolution of Empire, or the much-discussed ‘boom’ in British heritage films in the Thatcherite 1980s—a period of intense imperial nostalgia.⁷ Though the explicitly racist and white supremacist underpinnings of British heritage film might have been suppressed in these post-imperial moments, the performance, and reproduction, of whiteness remain significant in understanding how and why they are produced and received in Britain. Future scholarship might also explore how filmmakers of colour in later periods have appropriated, subverted or undermined the racialisation of performance in British cinema culture and transformed configurations of cinematic taste and decorum through this. Critical evaluation of such filmmakers should account for the extent to which they play with and subvert the racialised dictates of British cinema culture as it has transformed since the 1920s.

Examining these shifts, as well as the continuing significance of race, restraint and performance, in British cinema culture after the Second World War is beyond the limits of this thesis. Such studies would need to account for the profoundly different cinema culture and political, cultural and economic contexts of the second half of the twentieth century. However, to conclude, I now explore two late-1930s fiction films which gesture towards the Second World War and beyond, while also harking back to the period I have covered in this thesis. Two British remakes of American fiction films discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, *Broken Blossoms* (John Brahm, Twickenham Studios, 1936) and *The Thief of Bagdad* (Michael Powell, Ludwig Berger, and Tim Whelan, London Film Productions, 1940), bear the marks of their late-1930s production and a world embroiled in war again. Reflecting the experiences of migrants and refugees, they articulate these through silent performance of racialised characters in sound films. British cinema culture of the 1920s and its preoccupation with the embodiment and performance of race reflected a post-war anxiety about an

⁷ Jaikumar, *Cinema*, p. 26. On 1980s colonial heritage cinema, see e.g. Chapman and Cull, pp. 189-203; Elena Oliete-Aldea, *Hybrid Heritage on Screen: The ‘Raj Revival’ in the Thatcher Era* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Geoff Eley, ‘History, Heritage and the National Past in British Cinema of the 1980s and 1990s’, in *A Companion to British and Irish Cinema*, ed. by John Hill (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019), pp. 127-139 (pp. 129-130).

upturned colonial order and the ravaged white, male body. These late-1930s films, implicitly concerned with the rise of fascism, a return to war, and the geographical and cultural transformations this would engender, think through these changes via performance. In doing so, they point back to their origins in silent cinema. Cinema itself, then, is once more constructed, and remembered, through racialised performance, evidencing the continuing legacy of 1920s discourses and anxieties about race and the role and function of cinema. Associating silent film performance with outdated technologies swept aside by a more modern, sound and colour cinema, these remakes align whiteness with this more modern cinema. They demonstrate the continued role that racialised performance played as the Second World War began not only in articulating the changing geographies and functions of Empire but the effects and value of cinema too.

Nostalgia for Silence, Transcendence of Silence: *Broken Blossoms* and *The Thief of Bagdad*

After their release in 1936 and 1939 respectively, the remakes of *Broken Blossoms* and *The Thief of Bagdad* were both exhibited across the country throughout World War II.⁸ Gábor Gergely argues that *The Thief of Bagdad* is an expression of wartime British politics and perceptions of ‘exilic’ figures in Britain, while Jon Burrows sees *Broken Blossoms* reflecting contemporary violence perpetrated on Jewish Germans.⁹ Yet while these films speak to their contemporary moment, they also look back as remakes of American silents, recalling earlier anxieties and debates about American and British representations of the Empire, race, and racialised encounter. They articulate some of the key contentions of this thesis, pointing towards the continued operation of 1920s discourses of racialised performance as the Second World War began. In her work on this war, historian Sonya O. Rose has outlined a wartime narrative of ‘national unity’, overcoming class division, in Britain, arguing that this unity relied upon the exclusion of groups like women, Jewish people and colonised

⁸ For *Broken Blossoms* listings, see e.g. *Birmingham Mail*, 28 April 1941, p. 1; *Staffordshire Sentinel*, 16 October 1943, p. 2; *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 17 February 1945, p. 2. For *The Thief of Bagdad*, see e.g. *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 9 January 1943, p. 2; *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 18 November 1944, p. 2; *Nottingham Evening Post*, 18 January 1945, p. 2.

⁹ Gábor Gergely, ‘The Nature of the Exile: Discourse and Power in *The Thief of Bagdad*’, *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 9.2 (2012), 159-176; Burrows, ‘Limehouse’, pp. 296-299.

subjects.¹⁰ In these remakes, excluded subjects are embodied by racialised and silent performers. Race determines performance, facilitating constructions of sound cinema and its impact on spectators as the world went to war once more.

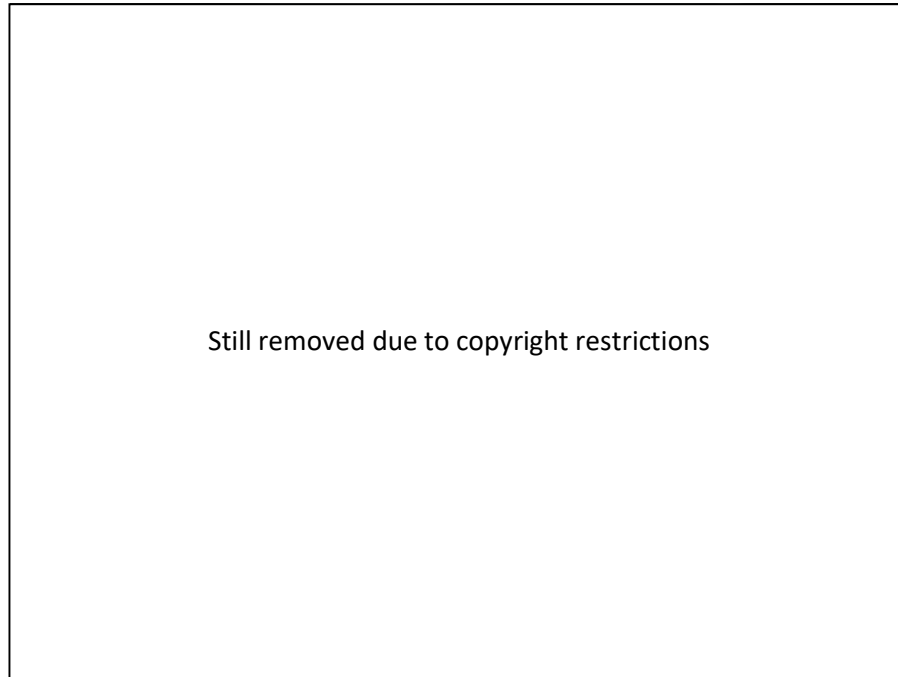


Figure 75: Chen sermonises to the East End in *Broken Blossoms*

Broken Blossoms depicts the restrained, 'Oriental' silence of its protagonist (Emlyn Williams), now named 'Chen' rather than Cheng, opposing him to the noise of whiteness and associating him with the silence of silent cinema; the mystical, Orientalised racial 'Other', out of place in 1930s London, is aligned with the cinematic 'Other', the medium's silent past. When he is first introduced, his silent worship in China is only interrupted by white missionaries watching him from afar, who talk about not understanding him and debate the 'nonsense' or 'beauty' of his 'simple-hearted' (i.e. primitive) conduct. In a scene in which he sermonises to an East End audience, the camera begins behind Chen, rendering him a black shadow projected onto the crowd (Figure 75). We share his perspective on an image which functions as a mirror, a reflection of white, British spectatorship. However, this crowd is defined by its noisy violence. We do not hear Chen speak but only their rumblings, racist jibes, and finally actual violence as a brick is thrown at Chen. This foreshadows the

¹⁰ Sonya O. Rose, *Which People's War: National Identity and Citizenship in Britain 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 1-7.

violent crowd at the film's conclusion when Burrows (Arthur Margetson) brings another angry racist mob—rather than arriving with two accomplices as in the 1919 film—to snatch Lucy (Dolly Haas) and destroy the room in which she had been sequestered with Chen. After he brings her downstairs, the mob continues Burrows' work, smashing through the window and destroying the shop. Chen's mystical and 'inscrutable' silence and restraint is juxtaposed with a violent, noisy, unrestrained white mass.

This white, working-class crowd serves to critique white colonial and fascist thinking, but also reflects classed anxieties about the cinema-going 'masses'. As Jon Burrows suggests, this moment is horrifyingly reminiscent of atrocities perpetrated by fascists across Europe, especially Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists and violence against Jewish Germans in the late 1930s.¹¹ The destruction of the shop also connects contemporary racist violence to earlier colonial violence like the sacking of the Summer Palace discussed in Chapter 3. This imperial history is not framed as heroic overcoming of Chinese rule, but as senseless destruction of art, beauty, and romance. After a decade and a half of concern that American films were representing white Britishness too negatively, this British film disavows white Britain's colonial history from the obnoxious, pith-helmeted settler in China at the film's beginning to the violent racism depicted in its conclusion. Breaking through the plate glass window, however, connects this crowd to cinema spectators. As in the original, the glass into the shop becomes a cinematic screen, onto which both Lucy and Cheng/Chen spectate and project an image of the other. When the mob breaks through this window, they disrupt the appropriate distance of the central romantic relationship. The white crowds in the film are presented as a corporeal mass getting too loud and too close, unable to appreciate Chen's performance style, and thus the restrained art of silent cinema. The film proposes an alternative British 'heritage' of imperial arrogance and violence, culminating in contemporary fascism and aligned with bad aesthetic taste. However, it cannot actualise this critique. The white crowd still has to suppress and exclude the othered Chinese figure; the reassertion of racial

¹¹ Burrows, 'Limehouse', pp. 297-298.

hierarchies and white supremacy prevails, even as the working-class mass, with Burrows at its head, is presented as the melodramatic villain in this narrative. Chen must still die and the interracial relationship cannot flourish as an alternative. Instead, the elimination of the Chinese figure serves as a lament to a lost restrained language of the body found in silent cinema and embodied in Chen, a 'primitive' relic out of time and out of place. Chen's mystery, 'inscrutability', and silent, 'Oriental' distance is aligned with an already antiquated, but beautiful and refined, silent cinema. By contrast, sound film is associated with the white mob, with corporeality, unruliness and a failure to maintain restraint, repose and appropriately decorous distance. If cinema has developed technologically with sound, this film suggests that it loses a restrained beauty and subtlety in the process, using racialised performance and white violence to articulate this.

By contrast, *The Thief of Bagdad* celebrates both sound and Technicolor, positioning itself as a modern, British spectacle that could rival and appropriate from Hollywood.¹² Again, it does so through racialised performances associated with outdated silent film and the body, rather than the voice. *The Thief of Bagdad* was part of Korda's 1930s and 1940s cycle of imperial epics, British films with large budgets which made a spectacle of Empire, like *Sanders of the River* (Zoltan Korda, London Film Productions, 1935), *The Drum* (Zoltan Korda, London Film Productions, 1938), *The Four Feathers* (Zoltan Korda, London Film Productions, 1939), and *The Jungle Book* (Zoltan Korda, Alexander Korda Films, 1942). While some of these aimed for ethnographic or historical 'realism', this film follows the original in using Iraq as a fantasy space for demonstrating cinematic technique.¹³ In part, it achieves this by eliminating characters of colour from Iraq, constructing it as a white space. The villain Jaffar (Conrad Veidt) and the protagonist Sultan Ahmad's sidekick Abu (Sabu) are connected and excluded through their racialised identities, expressed by their comparisons with animals and their non-British accents.¹⁴ Through these characters, the film distances itself

¹² Gergely, p. 160.

¹³ See Jaikumar, *Cinema*, pp. 109-123, 139-140

¹⁴ Gergely, pp. 167-168.

enthusiastically from silent, black-and-white cinema, unlike *Broken Blossoms*' elegiac mode, aligning modern technologies of sound and Technicolor with whiteness, modernity and speech.

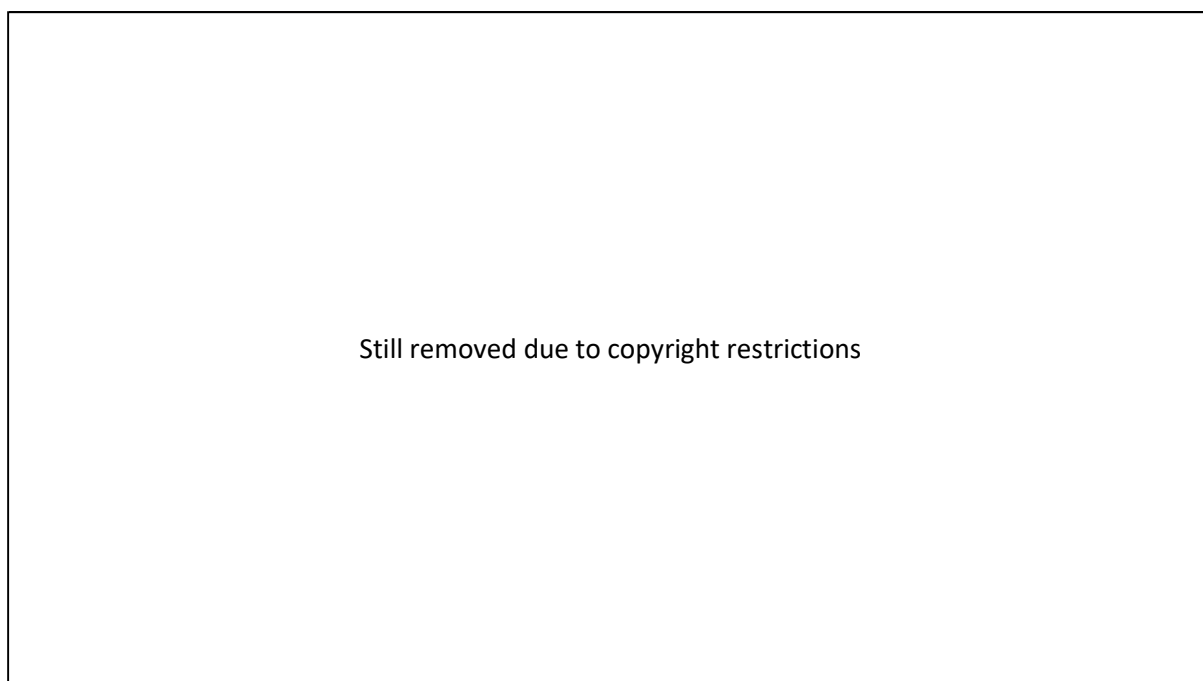


Figure 76: Jaffar's silent, corporeal magic in *The Thief of Bagdad*

As Gergely argues, Jaffar's introduction marks his exile status. Dressed in black and white with only the burgundy turban and veil connecting him to the brilliantly colourful opening scene, his monochrome costume signals his out-of-place position, as well as the fact that he is played by the German Conrad Veidt.¹⁵ Veidt crossed the silent-sound divide, starting as a German silent star and leaving Germany with his Jewish wife when Hitler came to power.¹⁶ His exile status and, in this film, his racialised identity are aligned with his silent film performance style. Jaffar's most powerful expression comes through his eyes. Ahmad (John Justin) is deceived and deposed by Jaffar, leading to his fall from rule into fugitive status after escaping from the jail in which Jaffar holds him. On finding Ahmad in the palace of the Sultan of Basra, Jaffar magically blinds him and turns Abu into a dog. Jaffar shouts Ahmad's name, but his terrifying power is expressed not in his voice but through his raised arms and widened eyes, while his dark shadow is projected onto the wall (Figure 76). When cursing Abu, his gestures are magnified and his eyes are wide again. In both cases, his *body*

¹⁵ Gergely, p. 168.

¹⁶ Gergely, p. 163.

enacts his villainous, magical actions. As Gergely puts it, in his villainy, 'Jaffar exudes a cerebral intensity with his rigidly held, controlled body and darting, piercing eyes'.¹⁷ His body expresses what he cannot say verbally in a land in which he does not belong, a land of colour and speech. 'The other' Jaffar, Gergely continues, 'cannot speak like "us", so he cannot cause things to happen by speaking them'; his curses have an effect not through 'civilised' speech but through his body and his connection to the 'primitive'.¹⁸ His primitiveness is evoked in his silent magic, his use of expression and gesture, to communicate and transform the world around him in ways which must, of course, ultimately be fixed and eliminated, allowing for the Princess (June Duprez) and Ahmad to marry, and for sound and Technicolor spectacle to win out over this silent remnant.

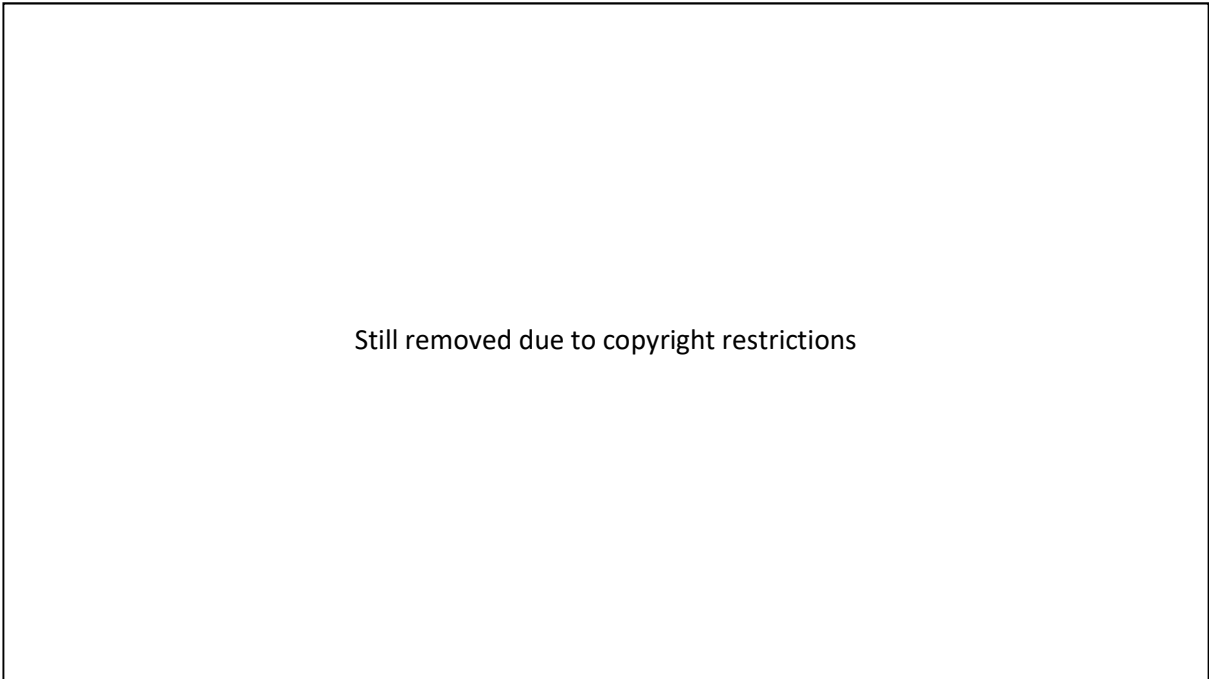
Abu is introduced in a direct allusion to Fairbanks' original, in a scene in which he steals fish, recalling Fairbanks' cunning bread thievery. Like Jaffar, he appears in close-up, focusing on his eyes. Silently, he steals the fish and throws it into the laps of two beggars, his arm reaching into the frame to emphasise his marginal position (Figure 77). This instigates a chase through Bagdad, again closely following the original film, in which he demonstrates his athletic ability and wit. As Veidt is connected to silent film through his own screen performances, Sabu is connected to silent film in his performance's echoes of Fairbanks' Thief. His character Abu only speaks in a later scene when Jaffar has tricked Ahmad and placed him in prison with Abu. Ahmad thus gives Abu the power to articulate himself. Equally, though, Abu gives Ahmad the ability to use his body, athletically and sensually in ways that he has not previously explored. As scholars have shown, Sabu's body, shot in Technicolor in a series of films for Korda to emphasise his skin tone, served as an exoticised and (homo)eroticised Orientalist spectacle.¹⁹ Abu's bodiliness enables Ahmad to see the Princess, creating a kind of love triangle through varying relationships of mediation, erotic contact and distance. Abu helps Ahmad access the palace, where he pretends to be a genie by showing himself

¹⁷ Gergely, pp. 169, 171.

¹⁸ Gergely, p. 171.

¹⁹ Jaikumar, *Cinema*, pp. 158-159; Priya Jaikumar, 'Sabu's Skins: The Transnational Stardom of an Elephant Boy', *Wasafiri*, 27.2 (2012), 60-67; Michael Lawrence, *Sabu* (London: BFI, 2014); Babli Sinha, 'Managing Orientalism: Biography, Performance and the Films of Sabu and Merle Oberon', *South Asian Diaspora*, 9.1 (2017), 83-98

to the Princess as a reflection in a palace garden pond. Talking in this mediated form, as reflections and in disguise, they fall in love at a distance. Physical contact is deferred, but as playful fantasy rather than *Piccadilly*'s erotic deferrals. When he finally reappears, he swings down from a tree and reveals his true identity as 'your slave', repeating Abu's own line towards Ahmad and his performance of muscular acrobatics. Their relationship is characterised by distance and deferral, with mediation only challenged when Ahmad acts like Abu—and indeed, like Douglas Fairbanks.



Still removed due to copyright restrictions

Figure 77: Abu stealing fish

As in British cinema culture in the previous decade, the outsider status of silent figures is connected to racial reproduction as a kind of passing down of a heritage. Gergely observes that the greatest evil Jaffar proposes in the eyes of the Princess is his desire to 'set up a dynasty': 'a threat to her and by extension [...] to the nation's bodily integrity and hegemony'.²⁰ This is also about the integrity of modern colour and sound cinema as a means of representing imperial spectacle. Jaffar and Abu are racialised outsiders that represent a connection to silent cinema heritage. As such, they must be eliminated from the film. Jaffar is murdered as the film's villain but Abu's exit is more complicated. His silent athleticism and erotic appeal, temporarily imitated by Ahmad, are nevertheless incongruous in this white, British world of speech and colour. At the end of the film,

²⁰ Gergely, p. 173.

Ahmad is restored to rule and married to the Princess, uniting Bagdad and Basra in a vision of national unity suitable for wartime Britain. Ahmad announces that Abu is to become his Grand Vizier once he 'grows up' after a long, arduous education. On hearing this, Abu walks out of the frame, transgressing the boundaries of the film's end as easily as he has clambered over walls and barriers. He shouts to Ahmad from a flying carpet that he is 'going to find what I want: some fun, an adventure at last'. Abu refuses this command to 'grow up', to become civilised and communicate only by speech, and leaves Bagdad instead. As a racialised, corporeal presence, he must be eliminated from the fantasy 'white' Iraq of the film, flying away from the city in its final shot. As a well-known Indian actor playing the role of a Bagdadi local who is ardently loyal to Ahmad, Sabu simultaneously contains Second World War-era discord in Iraq and India, where political groups refused, or protested against, fighting with Britain.²¹ Nonetheless, his exoticised performance is excised. Abu 'grows up' somewhat by being taught to speak, according with contemporary shifting colonial rhetoric from 'rule' and 'trusteeship' to 'development' and 'Commonwealth'.²² However, he cannot shed his bodiliness, his primal desire for adventure and movement; like Chen and like Jaffar, he 'inherits' a tradition of 'primitive' bodily expression which cannot be subsumed into the (white) modern, sound and colour worlds of British cinema of 1940.

Broken Blossoms differs from the films celebrated by pro-Empire British commentators in the 1920s in that it critiques whiteness, contravening the perceived necessity of representing only a better class of 'conduct' by white people in British film. Yet it still relies on Orientalist associations of East Asian identity with silence and inscrutability, even as it valorises this over the noise of white Londoners. By contrast, *The Thief of Bagdad* revels in the triumph and rule of whiteness, associated with speech and bright colour, over the silent figures. In both films, the performance styles of people of colour are framed as out of place and out of date. They reflect the fact that a return to war will

²¹ While the original *Thief of Bagdad* was released in Britain in the British mandate period of rule of Iraq, this remake was released as the now-independent Iraq experienced a series of coups, leading to a short pro-Nazi government and, in 1941, the Anglo-Iraqi War which saw it defeated; see Hunt, pp. 71-72. On Indian resistance in World War 2, see Rose, pp. 277-280. On Sabu's role as an embodiment of the ideal colonised subject and 'domesticated unruly body', see Jaikumar, 'Sabu's Skins', pp. 61-65.

²² See Rose, pp. 281-283.

entail another reorganisation of colonial geographies and racialised bodies, but they also indicate attitudes towards *cinema* in the late 1930s. Whether positively or negatively, they align whiteness with a modern sound (and colour) cinema and Chinese or Arab identities with older, silent cinema. As the Second World War began, then, the performance of racial identity, and thus of restraint or unrestraint, primitiveness or cultivation, underpinned the construction and valuation of the cinema medium.

*

In these sound films, the performance of racial identity is used to comment on the nature of cinema itself. The characters distanced from whiteness in their silent, corporeal performances perform important functions through, but beyond, their racial inscription: while Chen serves in *Broken Blossoms* to lament the passing of an artful, restrained silent cinema, Abu and Jaffar in *The Thief of Bagdad* enable the film to revel in technological advancements in sound and colour. The racialised conception of film performance that underpinned British cinema culture of the 1920s persists in the silent presences of Chen, Abu and Jaffar who have to be eliminated to present a modern, implicitly white cinematic world of sound and colour.

I have shown in this thesis the ways in which film performance made race visible for British audiences on screen, in fiction and non-fiction film across a variety of genres, and how this contributed to conceptions of the medium in interwar British cinema culture. This was uniquely determined by the anxieties and ideologies of imperial interwar Britain, responding to a war which seemed to destabilise colonial geographies and racial hierarchies and imperil the white body itself. World War II precipitated independence movements across the Empire and its ultimate dissolution, ushering in reconfigured postcolonial or neo-colonial systems. The relationships between Britain and its ex-colonies dramatically shifted—economically, politically, demographically and culturally.²³ These changes have also transformed the film industry and British cinema culture, and thus the role

²³ See e.g. Ashley Dawson, *Mongrel Nation: Diasporic Culture and the Making of Postcolonial Britain* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007); John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World-System 1830-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 514-648.

of racialised film performance, in ways that are beyond the scope of this thesis.²⁴ However, these two films evidence the continued relevance of connections between race, performance, restraint, and taste in cinema, so profoundly concretised in the 1920s, in British cinema culture. How and where such traces have persevered in British cinema into the latter half of the twentieth century and even the twenty-first remains to be examined. However, these exiled figures remind us that we must remain attentive to the ways in which film performance can be coded and understood according to racist logics that might continue to inform our understanding and evaluation of the very aesthetics of British cinema. As spectators and critics, perhaps we must act *anti-imperially* when reading such performances from the 1920s and beyond, locating and questioning the ways in which racial hierarchies and colonial ideologies have determined, and continue to determine, our understanding of film performance, film taste, and the very capacities and possibilities of the medium of cinema.

²⁴ See e.g. Lee Grieveson and Colin MacCabe (eds), *Film and the End of Empire* (London: BFI, 2011).

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