

Technicians of the unknown cinema: British critical discourse and the analysis of collaboration in film production.

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Abstract

Since the early 1970s British cinema history has conventionally been characterized as an unknown landscape, a tradition for which even those who created it knew little and cared less. This essay argues instead that especially in the mid 1930s and late 1940s there was an active discourse with the film industry's technical community, a debate that was particularly concerned with issues of collaboration and authorship. Concentrating on the work of Adrian Brunel and Ivor Montagu and their associates, notably film editor Ian Dalrymple, the essay outlines one aspect of this debate, and observes its traces on the production of Berthold Viertel's *Little Friend* (Gaumont-British, 1934).

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Film theorists and philosophers such as Beys Gaut and C. Paul Selors have, without denying the centrality of the director, recently made useful contributions to debates about collaboration and collective authorship within film production.¹ Given the historical diversity of production contexts, even just within mainstream feature film-making, writers such as Gaut and Selors accept the need to test and refine their general concepts through empirical analysis of a range of different examples. Conversely, historical work on film technicians stands a greater chance of moving beyond being a relatively marginal concern within film studies if it illuminates and poses questions for theoretical and methodological debates.² Yet, with the notable early exception of Dai Vaughan's pioneering book on the British film editor Stewart McAllister, there has been little sustained dialogue between debates about collaboration and authorship and specific historical work on film technicians.³ British film history is fertile ground for this type of investigation, especially if we look again at some of the standard accounts of its historiography and prominent critical discourses.

Alan Lovell famously described British cinema as an "unknown cinema" in his eponymous seminar paper, first presented at the BFI in 1969 and published in *Cinema Journal* in 1972. Lovell complained about the lack of any rigorous methodology for discussing British cinema, and of large "gaps at the level of both basic information and critical discussion".⁴

British film historians from the early 1970s onwards have ritually cited this paper as a benchmark for how far things have progressed since it was written.⁵ Revisiting the idea of British cinema as an unknown cinema in an essay published some thirty years later, Lovell concurred that much had changed in the interim. Nevertheless, he still wondered whether British cinema could now be described as a "known" cinema. First in his list of specific "priorities for further investigation" was "the contribution of cameramen, editors, sound recordists, set and costume designers, special effects – and of their union, ACT (later ACTT, now BECTU)".⁶ Lovell's focus was on film production workers who occupy what have been referred to as "technical grades".⁷ Lovell acknowledged that a start had already been made in recent years, but more remained to be done.⁸ In fact, a start was made many decades before, but the assumption that British cinema was largely unknown to serious scholarship prior to the late 1960s has helped to obscure this. Two clusters of writing, one from the early to mid-1930s, another from the late 1940s and early 1950s, are especially interesting in this respect.

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