
Silent Cinema: Before the Pictures Got Small

By Lawrence Napper

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Reviewed by Patrick Adamson

In terms of introductions to its subject, the opening quote of Lawrence Napper's *Silent Cinema: Before the Pictures Got Small* does little to distinguish itself from its abundant popular and scholarly counterparts. Few lines on silent cinema are better known - or more oft-repeated, for that matter - than sad, overlooked former star Norma Desmond's defiant reproach from *Sunset Boulevard* (1950): "We didn't need dialogue. *We had faces!*"

However, where in many cases it is presented as a bold but futile obituary for an era of motion picture production happily confined to the past, here it is repurposed not to reinforce but as a corrective for today's dominant misunderstandings of silent film. It is by embracing the spirit of Desmond's defiance and acknowledging that Billy Wilder's aforementioned noir - alongside perhaps *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) - remains the primary lens through which many non-specialists perceive of the silent era as a whole that Napper justifies this contribution to an arguably crowded field. The result is a wide-ranging and authoritative celebration of the vibrancy and enduring power of its subject: put simply, silent cinema doesn't *need* dialogue; it is not "characterised by a lack".

A brief text though this is, it nonetheless provides a compelling testament to the breadth and diversity of global cinema cultures in the medium's first three decades. From its opening statement on, this book promises a new path to those approaching the period for the first time, one in which the familiar early landmarks of film history textbooks - Hollywood style, German expressionism, Soviet montage, British ineptitude - are relocated from their long established positions, now to be found as introductions of another sort: entry points to broader study of the popular cinemas of their respective nations.

Preceding these mini-studies is a comparatively short discussion of the diverse range of cinema-going experiences that emerged from the silent era, drawn here from a variety of sources and film cultures. Analyses of self-reflexive films, from *Those Awful Hats* (1909) to *A Cottage on Dartmoor* (1929), establish that the movie theatre will not in this text be read simply as a site for exhibition: it is also a social space and a political arena, providing a captive audience for both the conventionally

propagandist and the subversive. Moreover, at this early stage and throughout the text, the transnational circulation of this nascent, but already glamorous and uniquely pervasive, mass medium emerges forcefully as a theme. As it is presented here, the motion picture as we know it does not take shape in isolation, as a scattering of movements detached from their conditions of production, but as the product of a complex, emergent global cinema culture – one to be pursued from the ostensibly “low” world of the nickelodeon to the intellectual coterie of London film societies.

The first of the text’s four main national overviews – entitled, “Beyond Expressionism” – begins with a quite orthodox examination of Robert Wiene’s expressionist global-hit *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1919). The film’s most unshakably influential reading is here afforded its due discussion – Siegfried Kracauer’s famous socio-political hypothesis that *Caligari* is a projection of war-torn Germany’s collective trauma. But the persistence of its core themes is not then pursued at length through films such as *Der Golem* (1920) and *Nosferatu* (1922), as might be expected.

Drawing upon a growing body of scholarship that problematizes the unqualified usage of such multivalent terms as expressionism, Napper instead encourages the silent film newcomer to consider how its aesthetic and industrial identifiers overlapped and hybridised across a far broader cross-section of the Weimar cinema corpus. To such ends, his subsequent examination of a young Ernst Lubitsch’s whimsical post-war comic grotesqueries – in particular, *The Doll* (1919) and *The Oyster Princess* (1919) – is cast as “a useful corrective” to the common reductionist paradigm whereby war-traumatised Germany is viewed solely through the unsettling, expressionistic prism of Wiene, Murnau, and their ilk. In these, he notes that in their “play, spectacle and pleasure”, one “searches in vain for the kinds of macabre themes” delineated above.

Eschewing the heavy focus on the innovative “art” film commonly found in introductions to German silent cinema allows Napper to evince a fuller sense of everyday movie-going experiences in a nation whose film output was born of extensive political, social, and economic upheaval. Similar can be said of his second major case study: the Soviet Union. It is popular Hollywood directors and stars – as opposed to the “revolutionary” Eisenstein, Dovzhenko, and Vertov – that are shown to have been the most consistent draws for audiences living under Bolshevik rule. Hollywood royalty Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks’ promotional tour to Moscow in 1926 – along with the Sergey Komarov film it gave rise to, *A Kiss from Mary Pickford* (1927) – offers a suggestive testament to the transnational ubiquity of these American celebrities in the first decade post-WWI, while the author’s citation of intriguing forthcoming research into the adaptation of a recently rediscovered British

production, *Three Live Ghosts* (1922), for Soviet audiences connects with current interest in the transnational reworking and repurposing of nationally-coded films, trends, and stars. Noteworthy also is a prefatory discussion of pre-revolutionary cinema, in which Yevgeni Bauer's unique staging and complex use of depth engenders a revealing contrast with the language of contemporary American filmmaking.

Indeed, Hollywood looms large in many of the presented analyses. US cinema's singular dominance both internationally and abroad, alongside its formal consistency and conventionality, sees it positioned throughout as the standard against which other styles are defined. Yet, the section dedicated to it focusses instead on American silent moviemaking by those at its margins, produced at best contiguously to its dominant practitioners: the works of women filmmakers, whose film-industrial influence in the entire course of the twentieth century arguably peaked in the 1910s; and immigrant narratives made in a studio system built, from its very founding, on the results of migration. When discussing the former, the respective practices of Alice Guy and Lois Weber supplement and nuance the usual predominance of the professed "father of film", D.W. Griffith. From the latter, British-import Charlie Chaplin figures as the axiomatic star, incoming beneficiary of the new opportunities provided by the motion picture industry. Uniting these threads, the relatively democratic nature of stardom and its reflection of what was perceived to be a largely female viewership is then pursued through Clara Bow's definitive flapper film, *It* (1927).

Britain is the final nation to come under scrutiny - a choice that the author acknowledges might surprise some readers. Dismissed in the most disparaging terms by nearly a century of critical tradition, this national cinema has been afforded a welcome reappraisal in the last two decades. Alongside close readings of Anthony Asquith's sophisticated late silents, *Shooting Stars* (1928) and *A Cottage on Dartmoor* (1929) - both of which have benefitted from major BFI restorations in the past decade - this final section seeks to reclaim some of this oft-dismissed national industry's less revered productions. Sometimes accused of being sentimentally pastoral, if not reactionary in its realisation of British life, *Hindle Wakes* (1927) emerges favourably from such a revisiting. Comparison with the aforementioned *It* (1927) establishes this important work as a testament to the presence of a progressive social commentary in British silent cinema - one with which it has hitherto rarely been credited.

While Napper certainly departs from the canon in a major way, it is welcome that his analyses focus primarily on films which are currently available in quality home media editions - and, in many cases, *only* in quality editions, unlike some of the more familiar "classics" to which the uninitiated are often introduced in substandard form. Seeing the works of

Weber, Lubitsch, and Asquith in editions prepared from 35mm materials which retain any original tinting and toning and are accompanied by suitable musical scores is the surest way to reinforce this text's opening, and overarching, insistence: silent cinema is a form "complete in itself". And therein lies perhaps the greatest value in Napper's stance. A short introduction though this may be, in eschewing the common textbook structure of plotting a few disparate movements in film history, it manages to construct instead a nuanced and impressively cohesive picture of the diversity of silent cinemas and their cultures.