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Duncan Petrie: The British Cinematographer

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Duncan Petrie: The British Cinematographer

London: British Film Institute 1996, 182 S., pbk ISBN 0-85170-582-0, £14.99, hbk ISBN 0-85170-581-2, £40.00

The British Cinematographer adds itself to a small but growing number of books which acknowledge the creative input of the cinematographer in the collaborative process of filmmaking. It also situates itself as part of the critical re-evaluation of British film which has been taking place over the last 15 years.

'British cinema' has been considered a contradiction in terms by many of the most eloquent practitioners of the cinematic art, from Truffaut to Satyajit Ray. This miscomprehension has been fostered by the orthodox view of the cinematic establishment that British cinema is defined around the concepts of 'quality' and 'realism'. Anything successful is considered as lacking in 'quality', therefore no good and so un-British. It is true that the roots of British cinema can be found in literary and theatrical traditions, and words are often considered more important than the pictures. It is also true that from the films of Cecil Hepworth before the First World War, through the documentaries of the Crown Film Unit and the consensus films of the 30's and 40's to the kitchen sink dramas and 'cinéma vérité' in the 60's and 70's, authenticity has been praised and celebrated. However, a large body of commercially successful films have been critically ignored in terms of their aesthetics although British cinematographers have won 22 Oscars between 1940 and 1990. The cinematographer must be given credit for the artistry and innovation applied to that work as well as for producing realism in realist film.

The British Cinematographer is a simple book with a simple agenda. The first part traces the development of the art and craft of the cinematographer from the late 19th Century to today. It concisely charts technical developments and changing modes of production, and explains how these influenced the aesthetics of film. Advances in lighting, cameras, film stock, sound, colour and wide-screen processes all had a corresponding effect on „the nature of aesthetic possibility“ (p.3). It is honest enough to acknowledge the importance of technicians and technology from Germany, America, France and eastern Europe in the first 30 years. Most technical and artistic innovation came from Germany and America

because of under-investment in the indigenous film industry by British companies. The introduction of 'quota quickies', the break up of the studio system and the increasing importance of television changed the way cinematographers could learn their trade. The history of SFX photography has been omitted as the author feels, rightly so, it is the subject of another more technical book.

There is a lot of technical information but not to the detriment of the understanding or enjoyment of the reader. However, it does help if you have a basic knowledge of photography and developing. There is a selected glossary at the back to help you with some technical terms.

The second part features 50 in-depth career profiles and filmographies of cinematographers, many of whom have been interviewed by the author. This kind of reference work has been needed for many years. Although it is now possible to compile similar lists using the various CD-ROMs on the market, Petrie places the work of these cinematographers in a critical, aesthetic context. It is also interesting to read about how the shots were composed and the nature of the collaborative effort with the director. The language he uses is very effective in communicating the characteristics of the cinematographers work in what is fundamentally a visual medium.

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