

Contextualising Biograph in Early Cinema

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The object of this day is to explore the history and meaning of one single film company, the British Mutoscope and Biograph Company, active in Britain and Europe between 1897 and 1903. It is a film company of which very little was known until recently, and by unfortunate extension, of which very little was thought worth knowing. Its re-emergence has helped to expand and redefine the boundaries of its particular field, both in terms of an understanding of production and distribution practices for film images at this time, but also simply by adding many more film titles to our national filmography. I can remember when I was at the National Film and Television Archive, a package of photographs arriving from the Nederlands Filmmuseum for our identification, around 1992. They were of films made by the Biograph company, we knew from their 70mm origins, but from their images they did not match any of the films listed in the filmographies that were available to us, filmographies that we had imagined were complete. Gradually we realised, and likewise the researchers whose subsequent studies we have now to thank for bringing us to this particular point here today, that the existing reference sources were incomplete, that early film history had to be re-written, that we had to go again over territory where others had looked before, but look that little bit harder.

Today the British Mutoscope and Biograph has a published history, a filmography, and a body of films from collections in the Netherlands, Britain and the United States which is of high aesthetic value in itself, but which also brings with it that history of highly distinctive production and distribution practices which has made British Biograph such a particularly rich subject of study. The point of my paper, however, is to look more broadly at the context of Biograph within a wider world of film studies. It used to be said of Francis Bacon, I think it was, that he was the last person ever of whom it could be said that he knew everything that was known. All branches of study, all the answers that were known, he knew. Still more, he knew of things that no-one else knew. Four hundred years on, and people devote themselves to the narrowest corners of the seemingly narrowest of single subjects and will still tell you that they cannot find all that their subject may have to yield. In the world of film studies, very few could claim any in-depth knowledge over the whole of film history, and those whose expertise may be on the hottest and newest directors of today probably have little knowledge of, and little shared language with those whose passion lies in the minutiae of the films of the

1890s. These are different worlds, speaking different languages. What have they to do with one another?

The title of this paper is 'Contextualising Biograph in Early Cinema'. I did not choose it, though it seems reasonable enough, but what exactly do we mean by early cinema? It is generally understood to cover the production of moving images between 1895 and 1914, yet for much of this period there was no such thing as a cinema. Films were exhibited in a wide variety of exhibition spaces, and – as the history of Biograph teaches us – in a wide variety of formats. There was no home for films as such, not until the latter 1900s, when the first nickelodeons and cinemas started to be constructed. There certainly was a need for such a home, and that need led ultimately to cinema construction, but the particular fascination of the so-called early cinema period is the solutions sought by those in the film industry as to where to situate their product. Was it part of a theatrical entertainment? Was it a fairground turn? Was it an educational medium? Did it belong in the home? Should it be exhibited on Sundays? Did it belong in shops, or holiday locations, or on board ships, or as part of a magic act? Was it a medium for propaganda? Was it dangerous? Was it worthy? Was it clean?

Such were the sort of questions that dominated this so-called early cinema period. They were not mere philosophical debates, however – everyone was ultimately looking for the key to financial success through motion pictures. This new medium, which had a so obviously strong appeal for audiences, if it could only be controlled, would surely offer rich and long-lasting rewards. Or not always long-lasting, for another lesson to be learned from the Biograph example is the short-termism that dominated much of the financial thinking in the early film industry. Who could say how long the craze for moving pictures would last? The answer was either to maximise profits while they were there to be had, or to anticipate public taste and to control what they saw and how they saw it. Again Biograph serves as an excellent example of this, with its multiple moving image formats, from the big screen presentations at the Palace Theatre to the single viewer penny Mutoscope, and with its board of directors with publishing backgrounds keen to diversify the product still further and to take it into the home, the same way that the newspapers and magazines that they understood were taken into the home.

When we talk about early cinema, we talk about a period of film production, distribution and exhibition that pre-figured the classical mode of cinema that emerged, with Hollywood at its head, from the mid-teens. It paved the way. Those early producers and filmmakers who made decisions that anticipated later successes in the classical cinema mode are deemed to have been 'right'; those who pursued other paths were sadly 'wrong'. This simplistic, Whiggish view of film history is now being continually overturned, and the urge to overturn it is what makes the field of early cinema studies so particularly active and stimulating. It is not a question of right and wrong, or being judged by how one may have anticipated future events – the period is judged according to its own merits, its own rules.

Yet the term 'early cinema' remains. We need a better one, though it is most certainly a convenient one. A better term might be one that is currently mis-used elsewhere – pre-cinema. The pre-cinema period is taken to be those experiments in moving image phenomena, optical trickery and sequence photography that pre-dated the 1895 birth of motion pictures as we understand them, and again is a period continually misinterpreted because it is judged too often in terms of how it anticipated future events. It was not 'pre-cinema' at all – it existed of itself, and the use of the word 'cinema' is quite misleading. So will 'pre-cinema' serve us better for our period of 1895 to 1914, or even for the narrower period of 1897 to 1903 represented by British Biograph? No, for again, it supposes too much – we have to lose that word 'cinema' altogether.

So if not 'early cinema', then are we safe enough with 'early film'? The example of Biograph shows that this is not necessarily so. The flip-card systems of the Kinora and the Mutoscope and others of that family were not intriguing minor by-products of a greater idea. They were solutions, practical and financial, or at least it was hoped that they might be so. And what of that word 'early'? It likewise suggests some pre-historical phase, when ideas as yet unformed were still dawning. It is equally misleading. It was not 'early' at the time. If there is one thing that we must do in studying and documenting this period of moving image history it is to restore its immediacy, to understand that it was driven by the thoughts of those living in the here and now of their times.

Such lessons are true for any form of history, and if they need emphasis when it comes to film history it is because this particular period – the pre-First World War period – has been so simplistically and misleadingly chronicled in the past. We have now thankfully gone beyond the easy time-line which starts with the Lumière brothers, acknowledges the fantasy cinema of Georges Méliès, then tells us that the movies were born with *The Great Train Robbery*, and whisks us away through the output of DW Griffith to some glorious epogée with *Birth of a Nation*. The irony of the Griffith example is that his filmmaking career began with the American Biograph company, but that was in 1908, and American Biograph had already been in existence for thirteen years, during which time it had discovered and nurtured the many different moving image strategies which it shared with its sister company in Britain. The effort of those thirteen years was not simply to pave the way to the greater glories of DW Griffith – it has its own story to tell.

Having laid assault to the phrase 'early cinema', I should at this point dazzle you with some new and all-encompassing term of my own devising that you will accept with loud cheering. Alas, I have no such term to offer you – my imagination is too poor. For all of its faults, the term 'early cinema' is at least readily understandable: mention it, and we generally know what we are talking about, its parameters, its topography, its familiar territories and those corners

that have to be explored further. Instead, we need to ensure that the work done in this area continually enlarges the general understanding of the word 'cinema'.

There is a moving image history which covers the progress and development of the popular fiction feature film, and it is rightly the dominant one. There are always going to be more people who buy *Halliwel's Film Guide* than a *Victorian Film Enterprise*. But it is not the only history, and it will only be imperfectly understood while it is seen as the only one. In other words, what do they know of movies who only the movies know? There are histories of actuality film, and documentary film, and medical film, and sports film, and newsfilm, and local newsfilm, and training film, and educational film, and amateur film. And film itself is not the only medium, merely a carrier of images that has been successful for a while and whose days are surely numbered. We have had video for a long while, it is the people's medium, and now digital projection is with us, and the idea of running a strip of clear plastic past a bright light through a Victorian construction based on the principle of the sewing machine will seem hugely quaint – it seems hugely quaint now.

The history of British Biograph illustrates much of this, and while it is wrong to see the early cinema period as something only useful for how it may have laid the path for what followed, it is naturally valuable to compare what we experience today with what happened all those years ago. We do not need to draw lessons, but simply we can try to understand how we interact with moving images, what they can and cannot show us, why they are important to us. British Biograph is perhaps most interesting for its imperfect understanding of the ubiquity of moving images, how anywhere can be a auditorium. Today we can go to the cinema, we watch television, we rent videos, moving images are streamed and downloadable from the Internet, as I waited for my train to Brighton today a giant screen giving the ITN news was displayed over the railway platform, moving image advertisements ran in the next-door WH Smith's. We are now promised mobile phones with moving images. Wherever we go, a screen will follow us, and tell us what we want to know – stories, news, information, entertainment, contact with friends and family.

All of this was understood by the Mutoscope and Biograph companies, which took moving images into theatres, shops, homes, bars, Mutoscope parlours, piers, anywhere where people might congregate. They made images for large audiences, images that were of a size and a general appeal appropriate to such audiences. They made moving images for the home, intimate animated portraits of your loved ones to keep forever. They responded in each instance to a human need.

Why they responded to such a need was not altruistic, of course. They wanted to make money. Ultimately they failed, because they diversified too greatly, or they failed to anticipate the way that motion pictures generally would go, or because the technology could not match

their ambitions, or simply because people did not want moving images of their own that greatly at that time. And who is to say that mobile phones with Internet access and video will not similarly fail? The other, particular lesson to be drawn from British Biograph therefore is its value to us from an economic history point of view. The particular strategies of British Biograph at a particular time with their distinctive product makes for an individual economic history of great interest, but the general lesson again is how this must educate us away from the more perjorative understanding of the words 'early cinema'. This was not some primitive period, of ramshackle outfits making quaint little movies in the back garden that we laugh at now and wonder how our forebears ever found them convincing. There was a lot of money to be made in motion pictures from the outset, and a lot of money was made, and lost, and the strategies followed were those of standard business practices – and often sharp practices – of the time. Companies were formed, capital was raised, dividends were promised, stock rose and fell, everyone tried to understand, to second guess an emergent and evolving industry.

There is a final lesson to be learnt from the British Biograph example, which is the co-operation between film historians and film archives. It is undoubtedly true that a lot of our earliest film heritage has been preserved through the enthusiasm and understanding of film historians. When the films from this early period were considered of no account, they were too often thrown away or neglected. Once a body of work arose that documented their production and proclaimed their importance, so moving image archives started to acquire such films and to preserve them as artefacts of great importance. The films of themselves have a primary interest, of course, but it is the researches of the historian – and I mean both the theoretical and the empirical historian - that give them the greater value and the deeper meaning. There has been a particularly fortunate symbiotic relationship between film archives and historians in the re-emergence of British Biograph and the other European Biograph companies as subjects of importance. Certainly we would feel that a history of the company would be arid without the films that exist to support it. Not all of the films from the early cinema period survive, of course – indeed the greater majority are now irretrievably lost. It is possible to write a history from a single, short film, but there should always be that single film. The writing of the history of Biograph and the preservation of the films, in Britain, the Netherlands and the United States primarily, have gone hand in hand. If I can finish with another memory from my time at the National Film and Television Archive, in 1993, following an invitation from the Nederlands Filmmuseum to tackle our 70mm Biograph collection, we printed the 100 or so titles in our collection onto projectable 35mm. We invited a group of film historians, many of whom are here today, to sit through the whole lot, with a repeat screening in the afternoon, and the same programme shown twice the following day. We hardly knew what any of the films were, but the images alone were important and thrilling and compelled us to find out more. Resources were discovered – film catalogues, theatre programmes, company papers, newspaper reviews – and the all-important names of the people behind these films and their personal histories were uncovered, piece by piece. Eight years on, and many of those same

films are to be shown again to you today, only now we know the titles, the dates, who made them, why they were made, who saw them. And yet we have so much more to learn, not just about British Biograph, but about its related Biograph companies in France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and elsewhere. And we need to learn how to re-write our histories of early cinema, if that is what we must call it, and like Biograph celebrate the variety in our enduring moving image culture.