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Book Review: Jon Burrows, *The British Cinema Boom, 1909–1914: A Commercial History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017)

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REVIEW



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ABSTRACT

Jon Burrows, *The British Cinema Boom, 1909–1914: A Commercial History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 254, ISBN: 9781137396761 (hbk), RRP: £79.99.

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Jon Burrows's book is a step forward in the writing of British film history. Its relatively modest aim is to debunk various misconceptions about the origins of the film exhibition business in Britain that have established themselves in lieu of thorough historical research. But in doing so it opens up new perspectives on the major question of how American moving-image entertainment came to win the central place it continues to occupy in British popular culture. While Burrows sometimes refers to a 'consensus' view in need of correction, in more than one instance the consensus' chief representative is Rachael Low, whose research on this period was published in the late 1940s. To a surprising extent, the problems he confronts have scarcely been touched upon since, despite the boom in British cinema studies.

The book is organized into four principal chapters on four principal questions, bringing to bear fresh archival research on each. The first and probably most novel is on the financing of the pre-war boom in cinema-building. Who established the thousands of cinemas built in this period, who invested in them, and why? Judged by rate of expansion, the early 1910s were indeed a boom, but Burrows convincingly demonstrates that it lacked some of 'the classic attributes of an economic mirage artificially engineered by company promoters and share traders' (p. 14). Only about one in five cinema companies were publicly floated. The level of equity financing was low, and tended not to come from traditional sources. Burrows provides 'demographic' breakdowns of the entrepreneurs involved, showing the significant participation of builders and grocers; and of the investors, who were usually local, not infrequently women, and with a striking preponderance of clerical workers.

Burrows's second chapter concerns the interaction of this new business with the regulatory regime brought in by the 1909 Cinematograph Act, which empowered local authorities to control the trade, including the character of films shown in public, via licensing. Burrows's case study is the biggest and most influential of them, London County Council. Here, as elsewhere, Burrows takes on a 'consensus' that boils down to Low and Nicholas Hiley, according to whom the Act was a major impediment to cinema owners and -goers alike, pitting puritanical worthies against the desires of the mass audience. On the central issue of Sunday trading, which many local authorities used their new powers to prohibit, Burrows shows that in London what was at stake was workers' rights, not Sabbatarianism. However, in many places outside London, Sabbatarianism, as he admits, did indeed inspire the reformers' zeal. What is possibly a more interesting question – to what extent the passing of the Act was the trigger for the boom – is not given a comprehensive answer.

The third chapter, entitled 'Turnover' and perhaps the most surprising in the book, is an analysis of the exhibition business in action. Possibly because of its similarities

to and connections with the roller-rink boom that immediately preceded it, the cinema boom continued to be perceived as a fad by serious commentators as late as 1914; and there was evidence on the doubters' side. With only a lukewarm response from investors, the trade was built on debt financing; and, having grown up helter-skelter, there were many localities where there were too many seats chasing too few bums, leading to early closures. In this period the median longevity of cinema-owning companies, the vast majority of them operating a single cinema, was 9.2 years. The Hiley consensus, easily dispensed with, is that the trade was in fact doomed to extinction, only to be rescued by the First World War, which all but ended cinema construction and caused a spike in attendance that only ended after the Armistice.

More importantly, in this chapter Burrows takes on the question of who went to the cinema – or rather, of which audience the trade most needed to attract. Here he tells the story of one of the largest cinema chains, Provincial Cinematograph Theatres, which had twenty sites by 1914. PCT massively outspent its rivals in building its cinemas, and had a comparatively high minimum ticket price of 6d – and was by far the most successful chain as a result. Burrows uses this and other evidence to show that from an early stage, the 'middle-class' patron was vital to the cinema's survival. Not unrelatedly, he is able to challenge the fashionable view that audiences went 'to the cinema' rather than to individual films. There is a substantial body of evidence showing that even in the one-reeler era, even before the rise of the star system, a significant part of the British cinema-going public sought out the newest possible material, and their custom made the difference between profit and loss.

This leads Burrows in his fourth chapter to discuss the transition from short films sold outright on the 'open market' system, with little price differentiation, on an unlimited basis, to the long film rented on 'exclusive' terms, i.e. with local rivals barred from showing the same film. The question is so large that any answer has to embrace every branch of the industry, not just exhibition, and has to take in the growth and mutation of the American business in these years as well. Seen from the point of view of the British trade, it was the logical outcome of the intense competition among cinemas to show the same title for a short period of time, a situation which satisfied neither potential punters who could see everything their district had to offer in one evening, or indeed miss it; nor producers and distributors whose films were relegated to the bargain basement after three days of saturation play; nor exhibitors whose only way of competing was to slash prices. The exclusive system was not popular among exhibitors, for reasons Burrows goes into, but it had to prevail.

The chapter, and the book, ends on the brink of the modern American studio era, so intimately tied up with the question of the long feature; a sequel is needed to

address it in full. At the same time, the pre-war boom still requires more attention than it has had. Burrows's book is an advance on Low largely through its use of archives, some of them located in the US, evidence of a research culture that was virtually unthinkable seventy years ago. Her history was largely based on two trade papers. More basically, by devoting itself to a single branch of the industry it simply has more space for detailed discussion. Nevertheless, it resembles Low's book in its deliberate austerity; subtitled 'a commercial history', it concentrates on the trade to the exclusion, so far as is possible, to other factors.

The meaning of the boom is, however, more momentous than either Low or Burrows are prepared to say; it is the story, after all, of 'how the projection of moving pictures became a mass entertainment medium in Britain' (p. 1), as Burrows's states. Much of the work on this period in recent years, notably Andrew Shail's, has been to do with cinema's relationship with literary modernism, as if inspired by Virginia Woolf's famous (if strangely worded) notion of human nature changing 'on or about' December 1910 – just as cinemagoing began to click. But there are aspects of more prosaic social history that cannot finally be excluded from consideration. For example, Burrows's demographic breakdowns do not include ethnicity; but, as Gil Toffel has written, 'a significant proportion of cinema owners' of the 1920s and '30s were Jewish, and it would be interesting to know whether this was the case in the earlier period, not least because of how it might have shaped perceptions

of this new field of entertainment. Between the world of the modernists and the strictly commercial perspective of *The British Cinema Boom* – between Bloomsbury and Wardour Street – there is much ground to be explored.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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