

British Cinema and Middlebrow Culture in the Interwar Years.

By Lawrence Napper. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2009. 250 pp. \$85.00 cloth.

As snapshots of Britain's twentieth-century cultural history go, the image of the interwar petit-bourgeois commuter trundling home on the "tube" to the new suburbs on London's periphery, nose in a Penguin paperback, conjures little that is malevolent or threatening. For the intelligentsia of the period, however, both the cultural tastes and modes of living of those in the "middle" represented a minatory development: this was the wasteland of modernity manifest. First coined in a 1925 article in *Punch* magazine, the middlebrow—as an intermediate category between low and high culture—supplied the key term in the phrenological delirium of the "Battle of the Brows" that characterised British cultural debate of the interwar years. Yet whilst elite commentators such as Virginia Woolf and Queenie Leavis saw only moral degradation and spiritual deadening as outcomes of the mix of pleasure, social aspiration, and commercial savvy in middlebrow works, *British Cinema and Middlebrow Culture in the Interwar Years* offers a sympathetic take on both products and audiences identified as middlebrow. For Lawrence Napper, the middlebrow supplied a rapidly expanding lower middle class with an aesthetic that directly addressed their conditions of life, as well as providing the potential for a utopian moment—an articulation of a common national culture.

As recent writing on the subject suggests (e.g. Brown and Grover) the meaning of middlebrow culture alters across historical, geographical,

and formal contexts. For Napper, the Cinematograph Films Act of 1927 was central in fostering the British variant in the realm of film. A response to the near stranglehold of the domestic and imperial market by Hollywood, this legislation introduced a quota system to British cinema exhibition. With British film production shielded by protectionist intervention it was hoped a national cinema modelled along lines similar to the public service output of the “Reithian” British Broadcasting Corporation could emerge: able to eschew outright commercialism yet awake to public taste. That this project was, at least partially, successful is key to Napper’s argument, and he traces its development across three case studies of novels (or stage shows) adapted into films. The study moves chronologically from the post-Great War context of *The Constant Nymph* (published 1924, filmed 1928); to the depression era of *The Good Companions* (published 1929, filmed 1933); and finally to the cusp of World War II with *Me and My Girl/ The Lambeth Walk* (staged 1937, filmed 1939).

Now only familiar to the most committed of specialists (until recently *The Constant Nymph* and *The Lambeth Walk* were believed to be lost films), Napper’s chosen texts were immensely popular at their time of release. Reliant on the written word for source material and formal structure, a shared reading culture informed much British film of the era. In addition to being commercially pragmatic (both Margaret Kennedy’s *The Constant Nymph* and J. B. Priestley’s *The Good Companions* were best-selling novels) this adaptive approach marked out a territory between the populism of America and the avant-garde complexity of continental Europe, and Napper argues that British cinema developed as a national form through its literariness. Thus, in this incarnation the middlebrow can be seen as encompassing a geographic as well as a cultural dimension.

Whilst a modernist elite militated for innovation in form and for aesthetic differentiation between individual arts, Napper suggests middlebrow texts were far from conservative. If, for many, the 1930s was a period of transition—physical, social, or economic—the middlebrow successfully thematised this dynamism. Comprised of a hotchpotch of social and class types, the travelling troupe of performers in *The Good Companions* is read as metaphor for a nation on the move. Thus as “Oakroyd” the factory worker from the industrial North, “Jollifant” the public-school teacher, and “Miss Trant” the rural landowner journey across Britain together, an analogy of contemporary socio-cultural movement and mixing (e.g. the sale of Allen Lane’s Penguin books at Woolworths, rise of white-collar employment, demographic shift to South East England) is offered.

Extending this theme of transitioning social codes in his discussion of *The Lambeth Walk*, Napper argues that being able to “fake it” became a signal experience of the era. At the time, much attention was

directed at the status of the "Lambeth Walk" dance—that featured in the finale of the film—as an authentic document of working class culture. Even the Mass Observation project was implicated in endorsing its myth as a genuine expression of proletarian life, deploying observers to South London to trace its roots. For Napper, however, the piece is meaningful not as a recreation of organic community, but in its depiction of class "passing" in the characters of Bill and Sally (a cockney couple who must put on a convincing performance as members of the aristocracy in order to inherit a fortune), and the appeal of this act of personal transformation to a suburban lower middle class audience. As Northern Britain's heavy industry was replaced by the new service industry of the booming South Eastern consumer economy a new kind of embodied performance was required of workers staffing shops and offices. The appeal of Bill and Sally's inauthenticity to those for whom "passing" was a reality of working life and a key ingredient of social advancement was, states Napper, quite palpable.

Although the book is carefully argued and extensively referenced, a couple of areas of discussion might have been addressed in a little more depth. Whilst Napper states that he has "great faith in the potential of a national cinema" (15) and repeatedly points to the utopian possibility of articulating shared experience in such a notion, a more sustained exploration of the national as a category would have been welcomed. Relatedly, there is little recognition of the way key figures working in the British film industry during the interwar period could have their "foreignness" highlighted. As Andrew Spicer has recently demonstrated, Jewish involvement in the industry was significant, with representation from technical staff to production company board members. That this situation was acknowledged (sometimes using antisemitic discourse) in both the press and parliament is surely a tension worthy of comment given film's supposed role in the construction of a British national consciousness.

That said, Napper could hardly be said to be blind to the problematic nature of the British middlebrow, as he shows that all too often the voice of the national figured as middle class and located in the Home Counties. An engaging narrator, Napper reveals the alterity of the past by pointing to the radical unfamiliarity of the socio-cultural landscape of interwar Britain to its citizens. A host of illustrative material extending beyond the expected film stills to include some fascinating advertising ephemera is called in to support his argument, and an array of relevant commentators—Dan Lloyd LeMahieu, Jeffrey Richards, Christine Gledhill—are cited. Particularly rewarding is Napper's refusal to fetishise cinema; instead he moves across media and entertainment forms allowing for culture to be retained as the key category of inquiry. *British Cinema and Middlebrow Culture in the Interwar Years* will doubtless be of use to individuals working within the

period from the perspective of a variety of disciplines and, as such, is a title I would not hesitate to recommend.

Works Cited

- Brown, Erica and Mary Grover, eds. *Middlebrow Literary Cultures: The Battle of the Brows, 1920-1960*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Spicer, Andrew. "A British Empire of Their Own? Jewish Entrepreneurs in the British Film Industry." *Journal of European Popular Culture* 3.2 (2012): 117–29.

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