

BRITTON ON FILM: THE COMPLETE FILM CRITICISM OF ANDREW BRITTON

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Book Details:

Andrew Britton, *Britton on Film: the Complete Film Criticism of Andrew Britton*, ed. Barry Keith Grant. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2009.

Note:

Although Andrew Britton studied under Robin Wood at the University of Warwick in the 1970s, Wood would repeatedly speak of their roles of teacher and pupil having become reversed. In the introduction to *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film: Hollywood and Beyond*, Wood suggests that Britton's "miscellaneous writings, critical and theoretical, scattered among various and often obscure periodicals, would, collected, amount to a book of incomparable distinction" (1). Going further in the introduction to *Britton on Film*, he asserts, "it is more important to read this book than to read my own collected writings" (p. xiii). As the review below will argue, we can surely agree with the first statement; but I find it necessary to balk at the second.

Robin Wood was one of the main causes of my learning to love writing about the cinema. The first piece of his that I clearly remember encountering was the article 'Rethinking Romantic Love: Before Sunrise'(2). It was with a beautiful, sharp shock that I read its first words: "I knew, the first time I saw *Before Sunrise*, that here was a film for which I felt not only interest or admiration, but love." Immediately, it was clear that this writer was determined to be open about something that was being problematically repressed in so much other scholarship: the absolutely crucial, unavoidable, importance of a critic's own emotions in guiding and shaping judgments. Never before had I been moved by film criticism. Yet Wood's sometimes startling honesty was not only valuable for the way it invited readers into what felt an intimate conversation with him; it was also fundamental to his critical philosophy. The last words of his *Before Sunrise* piece refer to a line from the film which speaks of the "magic" involved in "the attempt of understanding someone, sharing something". "The same might be said," Wood suggests, "of the critic's relationship to the films s/he loves." The personal nature of his writing here, and elsewhere, was not only a matter of frankness, but also a necessary response to the themes of a film, to the relationship between critics and films in general, and to the irreducibly social relationship between critic and reader, wherein two minds "attempt to understand someone, share something".

Wood has called Britton "a finer mind than my own" (p. xv). It is true that Britton possessed a towering intellect that was quite possibly more rigorous than his mentor's, and that he demonstrated a grasp of theory to which Wood readily admitted he was largely immune. Yet my relationship with Andrew Britton's body of work is one of utmost admiration; my relationship with Robin Wood's is also one of love. What follows can be understood as my tribute to them both.

Review:

Andrew Britton believed in setting out his stall. A merciless critic of hypocrisy and evasiveness in others, in his own work he sought always to declare his attitudes and assumptions as explicitly as possible, often opening articles with declarations of principle that served as landmarks for the field upon which battle was soon to commence. As he writes in 'The Philosophy of the Pigeonhole: Wisconsin Formalism and the "Classical Style"', "If readers do not know where the critic stands in relation to the work, they have no means of defining or assessing the critic's judgments" (p. 125). In tribute to such candor, let us begin this review with the conclusion I hope will be reached by anyone upon closing this book: the marginalization of the work of Andrew Britton by the field of film studies must be regarded as nothing short of a scandal. This review will in large part attempt to argue why I consider such a conclusion unavoidable.

In his tragically foreshortened career as a critic Britton produced a body of articles which, even if judged on subject matter alone, one might imagine would since have become obligatory reading for film studies students the world over. At the very least, a number of his coruscating attacks on reigning orthodoxies of 70s, 80s, and 90s film theory (e.g.: 'Screen theory', neoformalism, postmodernism, theories of the Culture Industry) deserve to have achieved classic status on modules teaching the historical development of the discipline. A conceivable reason for their current obscurity could be that much of his writing originally appeared in publications (predominantly *Movie, Framework, and CineAction!*) less concerned with following academic fashion than some of their peers, which were therefore sidelined from the mainstream of film studies discourse. Their institutional position may have caused Britton's pieces to simply go unread by those they targeted, thus meaning a lack of responses, and consequently the articles' relegation from the debates into which they promised to be such forceful interventions. As Robin Wood suggests in the introduction to this book, however, another possible explanation for Britton's sidelining is that his most explosive critiques did not in fact pass unnoticed so much as they were strategically ignored in the interests of avoiding critical dialogues from which the subjects of his attacks were unlikely to emerge unscathed (p. xiii). Of course, we can never ultimately know which of these explanations comes closest to the truth. One thing we may confidently say, however, is that it seems unlikely that a member of the editorial board of *Screen* could have read 'The Ideology of Screen' in 1979 and deemed it merely unworthy of comment; likewise for David Bordwell and 'The Philosophy of the Pigeonhole' in 1988, and for many other of Britton's targets.

On a perhaps more frivolous note, another quality of Britton's work that makes his undeserved obscurity so surprising is its eminent quotability. How exactly is it that lines such as "the discourse of postmodernism as a whole reminds one of nothing so much as a game of Trivial Pursuit for highbrows" (p. 483), or "as a philosophical orientation, structuralism might be described as Marxism for queasy stomachs" (p. 395) could have failed to become well-worn epigrams? Retorts like these demonstrate Britton's sometimes devastating rhetorical wit, but are also employed in the service of arguments whose depth and rigor have guaranteed such quips never feel simply flip (Britton was nothing if not immensely serious), but rather emerge as penetrating, and witty, condensations of significant criticisms. The liveliness, elegance, and economy of Britton's prose, however, are nevertheless certainly key pleasures of this collection, and constitute further arguments for his work's reappraisal.

Take, for instance, his description of David Bordwell's attempts in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* to dismiss the 'non-classical' elements of film noir in order to defend his central thesis of studio-era Hollywood's "group style":

Consider the bloody snuffing out of film noir – an antagonist whose many obnoxious features, grimly enumerated by Mr. Bordwell between clenched teeth [...], foredoomed it, sooner or later, to his undying enmity: it is, indeed, the epitome of everything that a classical film cannot conceivably be. Mr. Bordwell appraises the loathsome heretical object with icy contempt for some moments, pondering the most efficient method of attack, and then opts boldly for a vicious surprise-assault on its exposed ontologicals: speaking ex-cathedra, he issues a Declaration of Total Oblivion whereby the object shall be deemed henceforth to have no finite existence. (p. 447) (3)

Quite apart from how delicious it is to read 'academic' writing this stylish and dynamic, the language here also serves an important descriptive function: through its emotional intensification it concisely lays bare the problematic theoretical and evaluative maneuvers underlying the "impartial discourse" (p. 425) Bordwell's rhetoric pretends to. Of course, Britton goes on to enumerate what he sees as Bordwell's critical failings in much greater detail, but it is a tribute to the holistic nature of his writing that such flourishes are seldom employed for their own sake, but rather embody within their very form the content they seek to express.

While style is certainly a too-often undervalued aspect of the critical act, however, Britton's work is finally less important for its achievements in rhetoric than for its ideas and, perhaps above all, its approach. Britton on Film is divided into four parts: 'Hollywood Cinema', 'Hollywood Movies', 'European Cinema', and 'Film and Cultural Theory'. Although this division is certainly welcome for the sake of clarity of reading, it is true enough to say that whatever films Britton wrote on, he was always also implicitly struggling with one question in particular: how most responsibly to carry out film criticism. To grasp his proposed answers to this question is to grasp what is most important and urgent in this collection.

Britton rejected outright "the myth of academic impartiality" (p. 464), instead responding to film in a way that was unavoidably personal, yet always written in the knowledge that the 'personal' reaction is never merely a rarefied expression of individual opinion, but the result of an encounter at a particular historical, cultural, and ideological moment. This fact necessarily led him to conclude that "the critical enterprise... is intrinsically – and should be frankly – political" (p. 426). For Britton, an awareness of the inherently political nature of criticism inspired two of his most deeply held, and most frequently reiterated, beliefs: (1) that any act of criticism is also always (regardless of frequent protestations to the contrary) an act of evaluation, and thus (2) that critical writing demands an informed knowledge of, and attitude towards, both the material historical processes informing artworks and the historical moment in which the act of criticism itself takes place. As he writes in 'In Defense of Criticism':

Criticism is the systematic reading (that is, evaluation) of texts. Like all other activities, it takes place in the present. Like all other critical activities, it presupposes a principled attitude to the politics which constitute the present. The business of the film critic is to arrive at an understanding, on the basis of that attitude – which ought to be as alert and as conscious as possible – of what is of value in the past and present of the cinema, and to ensure that this value is recognized for what it is, and has the influence it ought to have, now. (p. 376)

Britton's desire to determine what such influence could, or should, be pulses through every article in this book, and is linked always to a scrupulously materialist conception of history. Driven by the simple, yet absolutely fundamental, conviction that "all works of art represent an intervention in a culture and... interpretation is a process of defining what the nature of that intervention is" (p. 426), his analyses of films are always also implicitly responses to "the historical situation in which genre, artist, and audience intersect with each other" (p. 29). The combination of the personal and the political in Britton's writing lent his works an infectious passion and a rare humanity: a sentence such as "I wish to discuss *Now, Voyager* (1942) not only because I love it, but also because it seems to me to raise a number of important critical issues in a particularly suggestive form," (p. 24) catches well a sense of balance maintained throughout his work.

Of course, Britton was, like his mentors Eric Mottram and Robin Wood, indebted to the literary criticism of F. R. Leavis – a figure consistently vilified in the early years of film studies for a liberal humanism deemed antithetical to the 'science' promised by the numerous theoretical approaches informed by Saussurean linguistics. Britton's dedication to a criticism that was Marxist, yet nevertheless grounded more in Leavis than Saussure, served as a methodological line in the sand throughout his career. He inherited from Leavis, among other things, an essential humanism, a belief in the value of bourgeois artforms, a tendency to evaluate works in relation to their moral vision, and a commitment to close textual analysis (on which more shortly). Yet it should be said that Britton was by no means an uncritical 'Leavisite'. Quite apart from the fact that he saw criticism in a far more political and historical light than Leavis ever did (and that his love for popular culture clearly distinguished him further), he could also be explicitly hostile to his predecessor's work: see, for example, his flat repudiation of the central thesis of *The Great Tradition* in 'The Politics of Difference, or: How to Create a Socialist-Feminist Culture in one Capitalist Country Without Really Trying' (one of the pieces unfortunately absent from this collection)(4). While wary of the potential for essentialism in his methods, however, Britton in fact considered Leavis to have more radical potential than many of the structuralist-influenced theorists who decried his conservatism throughout the height of 'Screen theory'. Objecting to what he saw as the persistent misrepresentation of Leavis as advocating an unchanging "system for providing values", Britton writes,

Leavis' epistemology tends to suggest that "values" and "knowledge" are inseparably in process in language and that that process is at work in and on "a public world". The world comes to be present only through the process, and – one might go on to say – it is only through the process that the articulation of change becomes possible. (p. 392)

This possibility for "the articulation of change" allowed by Leavis is what sets him apart from many of the critics and theorists with whom Britton so frequently clashed throughout his career. For Britton, it was not Leavis but the collected acolytes of Adorno, Saussure, Althusser, Lacan, Barthes and Derrida whom he saw as adhering to various incarnations of an overarching and dangerous "idealist fallacy" (p. 392).

One trait shared by 'Screen theory', postmodernism, and theories of the Culture Industry that consistently raised Britton's ire was their use of the language and rhetoric of radicalism to "give a spurious political gloss to discourses which are in fact innocent of all politics" (p. 374). As he put it, in a line that could act as a rallying cry for committed socialist critics everywhere: "Marxism is politics – not just another academic hermeneutic" (p. 374). For theories to be "innocent of all politics" for Britton meant that they could have no conceivable

practical political purpose; that is: they displayed a “complete inability to propose an intelligible strategy of cultural/political resistance to the social conditions they describe” (p. 485). In keeping with his Marxist principles, Britton was unwaveringly dedicated to a view of history, culture, and man that allowed for the possibility of revolutionary change. As such – in an anticipation of accusations brought against ‘apparatus theory’ by audience researchers – a common cause for Britton to accuse critics of disingenuous radicalism was an adherence to theoretical frameworks that he considered to deny the potential for agency. It is this position that caused him to stringently oppose the remarkably numerous theories adopted by film studies that implicitly treated human subjects as so ‘interpellated’ as to be helpless, or which saw the various structures of contemporary capitalist society as so powerful as to be essentially unalterable.

For Britton, many idols of the different strands of mainstream film theory in the 70s, 80s and 90s, despite their differences, all ultimately displayed a deplorable “commitment to a model of the world in which the common people cannot but help appear as the drugged and stupid victims of a successful confidence trick” (p. 491), thus finally making them incapable of resistance. The overriding objection Britton made to such theory was its ahistorical, and tiresomely recurrent, assumption that “the mode determines the work determines the reader” (p. 417). That is to say: the ‘bad object’ in culture – be it embodied in Barthes’ ‘readerly text’, MacCabe’s ‘classic realist text’, Adorno’s ‘culture industry’, Althusser’s ‘institutional state apparatus’, or indeed Lacan’s ‘mirror stage’ – indoctrinates so fully those who experience it that any attempts at escape or resistance become futile. As Britton rightly says, this philosophical position on art, “in accounting for everything but itself... accounts for nothing at all: its existence is the tacit contradiction of its contents” (p. 492). He goes on, “if Adorno and Althusser have contrived to escape, why should not another?” (p. 492). Britton’s point is that any theory relying on the assumption that cultural products, capitalist society (or, even worse, human consciousness) deny the possibility for critique or opposition is destined to be immediately invalidated by the very existence of the theory itself. Followed to their conclusion, such assumptions mean that, “we cease to be able to account for structured conscious discourse – e.g.: a poem, or our own argument – or we assume that the structure is unconsciously motivated” (p. 396). The only possible explanation, then, for the theorist’s ability to stand outside such an ideological hall of mirrors is that, “covertly, we assume the immunity of our own self-consciousness, guaranteed by our access to science” (p. 396). Britton recognized that such arguments were based on an essential fiction – and not even a useful fiction, given the political and intellectual inertia it encouraged.

Clearly, for a book (or book review) to raise these debates today is to relate itself to a relatively distant context. Yet, as Britton might well say, the continual reassessment of the past is an invaluable part of the process of responsible film criticism. In the same way as what is of value in the cinematic past should be made to have “the influence it ought to have, now,” so should critical discourse receive the same treatment. One reason for revisiting this fraught period of film studies’ history, then, is to acknowledge the extent to which Britton was significantly ahead of his time in pointing out the flaws of such theories, as well as the fact that many of his objections anticipated those that would eventually bring about the near total abandonment of the various strands of ‘Screen theory’ during the 80s and 90s. Another motivation, however, is to bring attention to the proposed alternatives he called for, which were – and still are – appreciably different to anything in the mainstream of the discipline.

While many of the approaches to film history and cognitivism that followed the fall of ‘Grand Theory’ proposed a ‘middle-level research’ severed from radical politics(5), and much study

of spectatorship proceeded from the assumption that “apparatus theories are not completely wrong, but rather incomplete”(6), Britton instead advocated a criticism committed both to Marxist-feminist theory and to close textual analysis. In doing so, he gave the lie an accusation that was, and sometimes still is(7), repeatedly leveled at those critics influenced by Leavis, and latterly by what we might loosely call the ‘Movie tradition’: namely, that they were apolitical. Leaving aside the fact that this claim clearly requires an absurdly narrow interpretation of what it means to be ‘political’, it is also blind to the many pieces Movie published from the 1970s onwards which were explicitly concerned with matters of ideology – and, indeed, to the fact that the tradition could indirectly give birth to a journal such as this one, founded as it was upon the dual principles of close reading and radical critique. If there are still those who hold this misguided belief, however, one further argument for the contemporary significance of Britton on Film is that it has the ability to put paid to such allegations once and for all. As Britton puts it, in a characteristic moment of pointed parody and understatement: “I would certainly be unwilling to assume in advance that an interest in discriminating between one artifact and another is in itself incompatible with a radical position” (p. 495).

Indeed, it was Britton’s view that responsible political criticism can only be carried out in conjunction with close attention to the material realization of artworks; as he says: “no film theory is worth anything which does not stay close to the concrete and which does not strive continually to check its own assumptions and procedures in relation to producible texts” (p. 373). There are a number of reasons for agreeing with Britton on this point. Firstly, a criticism grounded in close analysis encourages a nuanced and detailed assessment of a film’s politics that stands in sharp contrast to approaches relying on “the subordination of interpretation to judgments of value, derived from idées reçues, which precede the act of analysis” (p. 426). It therefore also allows us both to move beyond any assumptions that “the mode determines the work determines the reader”, and forces us to question similar, more localized, assumptions about the ideological meanings of particular conventions. Take, for example, studio-era Hollywood. Britton saw classical Hollywood conventions as having been “arrived at through the yoking by violence together of the most contradictory and heterogeneous formal and ideological materials,” a genesis guaranteeing that “the resulting admixture is both exceptionally elegant and coherent and potentially explosive” (p. 456). As such, we should see no Hollywood convention as inherently ideologically conservative, just as we should view no convention as being inherently progressive, since a film’s politics can “be gauged not by the fact that it uses certain conventions but by its use of them” (p. 417). When applied with intellectual rigor (and with sensitivity to artworks’ historical specificity), a focus on realized meaning allows us to see through assertions such as Bordwell’s in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* that the “goal-oriented protagonist” of Hollywood cinema is “a reflection of an ideology of American individualism and enterprise,” and that Hollywood narrative constitutes the “[translation of] this ideology into a rigorous chain of cause and effect”(8). As Britton says in response to these claims:

Mr. Bordwell strategically ignores the possibility that a protagonist may have goals that are sanctioned by the culture but the pursuit and consummation of which turn out to be in, in practice, disastrous; or again, the protagonist might have difficulty in achieving the goal or in formulating any constructive goals at all, because, for example, she is a woman, and her powers of practical agency are very severely circumscribed. (p. 436)

The point is, of course, that one can only hope to discern which texts express these meanings through an analysis of the texts themselves. This therefore means that that such

analysis should always precede any attempt to read groups of individual films as conveying similar ideological meanings. Britton himself was by no means averse to grouping films under similar ideological banners – as seen, for example, in his work on 1970s horror cinema, ‘Reaganite entertainment’, comedies of the ‘democratic couple’, or the ‘Freudian-feminist melodrama’(9). The difference between his approach to groupings and many others’, however, is that it was always grounded firmly in the dual evidence of films’ textual detail and their particular historical contexts – a fact making his claims for the groupings persuasive, and the political significance of their similarities unmistakable.

This being not merely an article about the work of Andrew Britton but also a review of the book *Britton on Film*, it would be remiss to pass over the significant number of improvements that could be made to a volume whose subtitle, *The Complete Film Criticism of Andrew Britton*, proves somewhat misleading. I am fortunate, however, in that a number of reviewers have already ably enumerated instances of Barry Keith Grant’s occasionally troubling editing. Brad Stevens’ *Sight and Sound* review rightly notes the omission of Britton’s article on documentary, ‘The Invisible Eye’(10), as well as the fact that ‘A New Servitude’ still contains errors that Britton himself corrected in a letter to *CineAction*(11). Writing for *The Times Literary Supplement*, Alexander Jacoby expresses surprise at the exclusion of a piece on *The Lady From Shanghai* (1947) written for *The Movie Book of Film Noir*(12). James Zborowski comments in his review for *Screen* that only one *Reckless Moment* (1949) article Britton co-authored with the editorial board of *Framework* is included, and that Grant has printed a significantly shorter version of the article on *Pursued* (from *The Movie Book of the Western*) in place of ‘*Pursued: A Reply to Paul Willemen*’, which appeared in *Framework* many years earlier(13). Tony Williams also carries out an extremely thorough cataloguing of the collection’s errors in his review for *November 3rd Club* (freely accessible online), drawing attention to everything from the absence of Britton’s response to a review of Richard Dyer’s *Gays on Film* in *Screen Education*, to the misspelling of Timpanaro in the bibliography(14). Yet it should go without saying that these minor disappointments recede into insignificance when weighed against the service Grant has done us by overseeing the collection and republishing of the majority of Britton’s work in the first place. The value of this undertaking should not be underestimated. It is unusual for a university press to publish a large collection of this kind, dedicated as it is to a single author of film criticism – in particular one whose contribution to the field is yet to be suitably recognized – and we owe the editor a debt of gratitude for convincing Wayne State to do so in this case. While for those already familiar with Britton’s work the existence of this book seems an absolute necessity (and in fact long overdue), I can well imagine it did not always seem so to everyone Grant approached with the project. It is therefore a tribute to his judgment and dedication that he has managed to successfully bring this campaign to fruition.

The significance of the appearance of *Britton on Film* today lies in its potential to revive interest in a singular critic whose work has much to teach students of cinema. For eighteen years, Britton consistently demonstrated that there was another way to practise film criticism: neither journalistic nor stereotypically academic, neither auteurist nor blind to great artistry, fluent in both theory and close analysis, champion and critic of popular culture, deeply political and deeply humanist. Whether or not there is space for such a criticism today remains to be seen, but the contents of this book function as a powerful argument for its enduring relevance and desirability.

NOTES

1 Robin Wood. *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film: Hollywood and Beyond* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1998), v.

2 Robin Wood. 'Rethinking Romantic Love: Before Sunrise', *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film: Hollywood and Beyond* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp. 318–335.

3 For the sake of capturing its full effect I am quoting this text as originally published rather than as it is reproduced in *Britton on Film*, where editor Barry Keith Grant has changed all references made to 'Mr. Bordwell' instead simply to 'Bordwell'. Given the damage it does to Britton's style, this is one of Grant's less forgivable editorial decisions. I catalogue a number of others towards the end of this review.

4 Andrew Britton, 'The Politics of Difference, or: How to Create a Socialist-Feminist Culture in one Capitalist Country Without Really Trying', *CineAction!*, no. 17 (1989), pp. 3–15. Again, please refer to the end of the review for a list of further omissions.

5 David Bordwell and Noël Carroll, ed. *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 26

6 Judith Mayne, 'Paradoxes of Spectatorship', *The Film Cultures Reader*, ed. Graeme Turner (London: Routledge, 2002), 30

7 See: Peter Harcourt, 'The Movie Tradition', *Scope* (2001): www.scope.nottingham.ac.uk/confreport.php?issue=nov2001&id=954§ion=conf_rep.

8 David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, Kristen Thompson. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 16

9 See: 'The Devil, Probably: The Symbolism of Evil' (p. 64-73), 'Blissing Out: The Politics of Reaganite Entertainment' (p. 97–145), 'Cary Grant: Comedy and Male Desire' (p. 3–23), and 'A New Servitude: Bette Davis, Now Voyager, and the Radicalism of the Woman's film' (p. 24–63) respectively.

10 Andrew Britton, 'Invisible Eye', *Sight and Sound*, March 1992: 26–29

11 Brad Stevens, Review, *Sight and Sound*, April 2009: 93. The letter containing the correction appears in *CineAction* 29, (1992): 104.

12 Alexander Jacoby, Review, *Times Literary Supplement*, October 16, 2009:17–18

13 James Zborowski, Review, *Screen* 50:4 (2009): 450–53

14 Tony Williams, Review, *The November Club*, Fall 2009 (Online): www.wetdryvac.net/November3rdClub/2009/09-2009/nonfiction/williams.html.