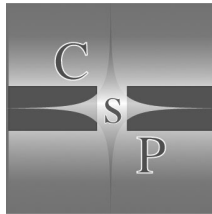


Sights Unseen

Sights Unseen:
Unfinished British Films

Edited by

Dan North



Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Sights Unseen: Unfinished British Films, Edited by Dan North

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INTRODUCTION

FINISHING THE UNFINISHED

DAN NORTH

There are numerous criteria by which a film might be deemed to be “unfinished.” It might simply be a case of a screenplay that was never filmed, a shoot that was shut down prior to completion, even an idea for a story that was mooted and discarded at the back-of-an-envelope stage. We might consider that, to have served its function as an active cultural product, a film must pass through channels of production, distribution, exhibition and consumption. That is to say, in order to become semiotically productive, and to contribute to the constituency of a national cinema or film industry, a film must have been shown, seen, examined and discussed. The British film industry can be notoriously brittle, and its productions prone to abandonment, neglect or pre-productive implosion, so it would seem that the study of only those films which made it to the screen and found an audience gives an inaccurate picture of the ideas and concerns in circulation amongst Britain’s film-making communities.

This is not to say that scholars have so far failed to find interest and value in the study of uncompleted films. It is not unusual for biographies of canonical artists, in building up a picture of their subject’s triumphs and failures, to examine the stories behind unrealised productions. Harry Waldman’s *Scenes Unseen: Unreleased and Uncompleted Films from the World’s Master Filmmakers* clearly relished the opportunity to agglomerate a store of scandal, gossip and conflict, especially since “people’s failures often contain stories more compelling than their successes.”¹ Where grand figures of Hollywood cinema are concerned, the failed film exerts a particular fascination. It seems strange that such an efficient, highly evolved studio system should ever have faltered, and yet prominent examples abound: after a staccato production schedule caused

¹ Waldman, *Scenes Unseen*, 2.

mainly by the erratic attendance of its star, Marilyn Monroe, *Something's Got to Give* was finally felled by Monroe's death on 5 August 1962 (although the script, already a remake of *My Favorite Wife* (Garson Kanin, 1940), was later used as the basis for *Move Over, Darling* (Michael Gordon, 1963) starring Doris Day and James Garner). Almost nine hours of footage had been shot for *Something's Got to Give*, and in 1999 a thirty-two minute assembly was made in line with extant scripts to give an impression of how the film might have looked had it been completed. It was screened as part of the TV documentary *Marilyn: The Final Days* (2001), and included in the DVD set *Marilyn Monroe: The Diamond Collection*. Re-integrated into the Monroe canon, the fragments of *Something's Got to Give* acquire a status that mitigates the film's destitution. They are recovered within a broader meta-narrative of the tragic star biography and put to work in solidifying her status as a tragic heroine. The reconditioned footage of Monroe provides everything that has come to be expected of her star body; the fading bioluminescence of her face, the poignant flickers of fatigue in her eyes, all of which are signposted, even imposed by the surrounding documentary and voice-over. Each reconstructed scene can now be read as redolent with dramatic irony, and made to foreshadow the star's impending death, thus fusing text and context in a pact of mutual reinforcement. The "unfinished" film thus reaches a form of completion, as it becomes as significant a part of the star text as any of her other roles. Its intertextual and cultural operations are not negated by its lacunae, even though they are crucial aspects of its constitution. Aside from anything else, whatever Monroe's nude skinny-dipping scene contributed to the film's narrative, it more than adequately served its function as freestanding erotic spectacle and filler for countless glossy magazines.

The death of a star is a jolting reminder of the humanness of the figure behind the (inter)textual object. Such occurrences have not always led to the cancellation of a film's production – *Saratoga* (Jack Conway, 1937) was finished following the death of Jean Harlow from uremic poisoning, using stand-in Mary Dees and the voice of Paula Winslowe to complete her scenes; after the death of its star, Brandon Lee in an accident on the set of *The Crow* (Alex Proyas, 1994), doubles were used, along with some digital face replacements, to fill the gaps in the star's performance. In both of these cases, the circumstances surrounding the films' completion could be used as part of the marketing campaign – their incompleteness became an integral part of their appeal and interpretation, particularly with *The Crow*, which is a story of a rock star rising from the dead to wreak vengeance on his own murderers.

Very often, the breakdown of a film is due to a less fatal cause, arising from the incompatibility of its personnel and its systems of production. Waldman summarises the failure of Josef von Sternberg's *I, Claudius* (discussed in chapter one of this volume by Brian McFarlane) as an insuperable clash of personalities: "[Laughton] can't complete the film because he is wrestling with his own emotional turmoil – and the haughty director is too unsympathetic or unaware to help."² However engrossing such tales of backstage contests of ego and influence might be, this quasi-auteurist approach, reducing systems of production to the whims and wills of powerful artists can never fully account for the factors behind a film project's demise.

Masha Salazkina has argued that, although it has often been neglected in studies of the director, Sergei Eisenstein's unfinished *Que viva México!* is still open to pertinent analysis and interpretation. Although Eisenstein himself never edited any of the 200,000 feet of film shot for the project once funding was withdrawn by primary investor Upton Sinclair, even as a set of reconstructed fragments, scripts and sketches, the film represents "a site of collision between, on the one hand, the Marxist dialectics of early 'constructivist' Eisenstein and, on the other, his later organic mythological conceptions. As such it sheds light on a central concern of Eisenstein scholarship, the shift between early and late Eisenstein, and further clarifies the differences between his work of various periods."³ The argument here is that the film helps to illuminate and augment existing scholarship, rather than threaten or subvert it – even in its unfinished form, it functions fully as a historical object. The distinction between finished and unfinished almost seems like an arbitrary one when the real object of study and celebration is not the film itself but a respected auteur. As Salazkina notes, "even those of Eisenstein's films which were never shot at all acquire a certain eerie stature in film scholarship because they bear the unmistakable mark of the director."⁴

² Ibid.

³ Salazkina, "Addressing the Dialectics of Sexual Difference", 46-7. For more information on the making of the film, see Geduld and Gottesman, *The Making and Unmaking of Que viva México!* The film is, at time of writing, undergoing extensive reconstructive work from original negatives by the Mexican Picture Partnership under Lutz Becker. Details of this work can be found at the company's official website: <http://www.quevivamexico.com/> [Accessed 15/08/2007] See also Eisenstein's published screenplay for the film.

⁴ Ibid., 46.

Plugging the historical and epistemological gaps in the career narratives of particular artists has been a key motivation for studying unfinished films. Take the example of Orson Welles, surely the pre-eminent master of failing to finalise a project. Discussions of the films he didn't make, or which a studio bowdlerised, are crucial components in the critical construction of Welles as a maverick genius thwarted by the intransigence of commercial structures adverse to the exertion of creative latitude. Charles Higham noted that: “[Welles’] downfall as the most important American film director has seldom been placed at his own door except by the industry itself”, presumably since Welles’ devotees would always interpret the director’s greatness as uncontainable by an industrial complex as a positive quality, a sign of his transcendence of systemisation, rather than as a defect of his creative character.⁵ Higham has suggested, rather lyrically, that Welles suffered from a kind of completion anxiety that links his thematic preoccupation with flawed greatness to the director’s own impossible ambitions:

Bucking at the approach of dissolution and the finishing of works of art, desperately impatient, the minotaur may laugh as loudly as he likes, but his eyes are pits of darkness. Welles’s is the tragedy of a man who fears the conclusions tragedy reaches: that men are mortal, their works imperfect, their lives and arts doomed.⁶

As is well known, *Citizen Kane* (1941) was the only one of his feature films on which Welles enjoyed freedom from studio interference, with *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942) suffering particularly vicious truncation and the destruction of its cut footage. The stories of his unfinished films sustain this picture of misunderstood talent; James Naremore lists thirty-seven titles on his “partial list” of Welles’ unrealised projects.⁷ As it had been for Eisenstein, Latin America was a site of defeat for Welles; his four-part documentary on life in Mexico and Brazil, *It’s All True*, was cut short when RKO withdrew funding in 1942. Naremore suggests that this was a studio strategy to escape their commitments to the unpredictable wunderkind, whose volcanic talent was failing to translate into recognisable box office worth.⁸ Most strikingly of all, Welles expended a significant amount of creative energy on adapting *Don Quixote* for the

⁵ Higham, *Orson Welles*, 333.

⁶ Higham, *The Films of Orson Welles*, 192.

⁷ Naremore, *The Magic World of Orson Welles*, 298-9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 85. See also Chapter 24 of Leaming, *Orson Welles*, 252-77, and Benamou, *It’s All True*.

screen. Attempts to film *Quixote*, itself a gargantuan story of pathetic folly and distended delusion, have more than once encapsulated the combination of romance and recklessness that characterises the unfinished auteur film.

Many adaptations of Cervantes book have been filmed, including versions directed by Maurice Elvey (1923), G.W. Pabst (1933), Grigori Kozintsev (1957) and Peter Yates (2000), but the version developed by Welles must stand as one of the most legendary unfinished films of all time. The unfinished film always raises the spectre of a “tantalising prospect” by coupling a significant artist to a great novel or intriguing concept. How, for instance, would Hitchcock have handled a film about the sinking of the Titanic? Charles Barr has discussed this very prospect in some detail, when Hitchcock considered directing a film about the disaster,⁹ but whatever the precise facts of the case, the combination of elements has already set off a sequence of associations; from what we know of the work of Alfred Hitchcock, and the stylistic patterns and thematic concerns of his *oeuvre* (as pre-directed and consolidated by the sheer weight of scholarship devoted to Hitchcock), it is immediately irresistible to begin imagining how those constituent parts might cohere into a completed whole. A speculative intertextual chain reaction has been initiated.¹⁰

The combination of Welles and *Quixote* is similarly inviting for speculation, since it matches a massively ambitious artist with an enormously famous and complex work of literature.¹¹ But it is arguably in its incomplete form that the adaptation takes on its most apt form. If Cervantes book was a colossal swipe at the shortcomings of genre fiction and its deleterious effects on the minds of its more “involved” (i.e. fanatical) readers, that level of irony and meta-narration (it is most certainly a story about stories) could be wasted on a film adaptation unless it were to come up with a comparable filmic meta-narrative. Welles was

⁹ Barr, “A Marvellously Dramatic Subject.” There is also a brief mention of this in Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood*, 198-9.

¹⁰ Contrast this with the differently enticing project that Hitchcock was embarking on in 1964, *Kaleidoscope*, which may have promised not a perfect match of material to artist, but a new, experimental direction for the director in the final decade of his career.

¹¹ Compare this, for instance, with Stanley Kubrick’s long-planned film about Napoleon Bonaparte, which aligns the great director with a major historical figure as well as an earlier cinematic masterpiece in Abel Gance’s 1927 *Napoleon*. See, for example, Mason, “The Greatest Movie Stanley Kubrick Never Made.”

indeed attempting to do so, relocating his characters to 20th century settings, and featuring a scene in which Quixote attacks a cinema screen to rescue the imperilled lead actress.¹² Without wishing to suggest that Welles wanted or intended the film to be unfinished, or that it is better that way, I would certainly consider Welles' *Don Quixote* to be as valid an object of study to historians of cinema as any other individual film might be. Confronting the vast expanses of the Mercury Theatre collections in the Welles archive at the Lilly Library in Bloomington, Indiana, James Naremore ponders the issue of how to define the "works" of a director whose films survive mostly as incomplete fragments, arguing that "his life's work denies us scholarly closure; a romantic artefact, its oneiric quality is heightened by a sense of unfulfilled possibility."¹³ The productive conclusion of this questioning is as follows:

Using terminology from one of Roland Barthes's most influential essays, we could say that Welles's artistic activity usually manifested itself somewhere between 'works' and 'texts.' That is, it never became a series of neatly finished commodities that signify his full intentions or conceptions; nor did it become a radicalised, collective or corporate discourse that bears no signs of an enunciating author. It operated instead in the 'provisional' zone of theatre, cinematic fragments, and archival material – a zone where, with varying degrees of success, he established an unorthodox way of speaking. In this zone his dramatic 'conceptions' and political attitudes were constantly at play, but they never assumed a definitive shape.¹⁴

Barthes was writing primarily about written works, but his ideas can be applied to films; if the "work" is the film, its characters and its situations that occupy a couple of hours at the cinema or sit on a shelf in a DVD case, then the "text" is not contained by such material classifications. It might encompass resonances from a number of works that inflect each other intertextually. A film is not watched in a cultural vacuum – it is always seen in comparison with others, and the presence of shared themes, generic traits, performers or aesthetic techniques puts those works in constant dialogue with each other. The text is "woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages (what language is not?), antecedent or contemporary, which cut across it through and through in a

¹² Naremore, *The Magic World of Orson Welles*, 236.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 264.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 268-9. The Barthes essay to which Naremore refers is presumably "From Work to Text."

vast stereophony.”¹⁵ In Barthes’ terms then, no film text is truly finished: it keeps on operating in a circuit of interpretations and re-readings that are not fixed definitively to a work. Perhaps, if this line of thinking is taken to a logical conclusion, it would not be necessary to dichotomise films as finished/unfinished at all, but instead to treat them all as textual equals.

The collapse of a film’s production need not disqualify it from exploitation as a commercial or cultural item. Continuing the Quixote theme, we can cite as one example *Lost in La Mancha* (Keith Fulton / Luis Pepe, 2002), a documentary about the ruination of Terry Gilliam’s *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote*, with Johnny Depp and Jean Rochefort.¹⁶ According to the film, Gilliam’s long-cherished project had to be abandoned due to a perfect storm of problems, including an ailing star in Rochefort, and weather conditions blighting location shoots that had to be carried out on a tight schedule to make the most of the limited budget (although only by Gilliam’s standards might US\$ 30 million be considered “limited” for a European film).

Aside from attracting considerable sympathy for the first assistant director Phil Patterson, who is lumbered with the task of playing pragmatic straight man to Gilliam’s intrepid non-conformist, *Lost in La Mancha* demonstrates how even a heavily-invested production can be defeated by bad luck and uncooperative weather; there seems to be an effort made to absolve Gilliam of responsibility, portraying him as a font of imagination operating on a level distinct from the more mundane realities of spread-sheeted, flow-charted schedule management. Patterson is even heard to proclaim:

The film is in ... complete disarray. But it is absolutely the correct way that it should be given that it’s Terry, given that it’s a Gilliam film, because Captain Chaos is completely in his element at the moment.

To further reinforce this, the memory of Welles’ failure to film *Quixote* is brought into service to align Gilliam with this iconic signifier of misunderstood cinematic greatness. *Lost in La Mancha* thus groups Gilliam into a pantheon of film-makers portrayed as committed artists battling nature in an inhospitable, “savage” land. For example, in *Burden of Dreams* (Les Blank, 1982), Werner Herzog is seen attempting to make *Fitzcarraldo*. The film was, of course, completed and distributed internationally to great acclaim in 1982, but this seems like a footnote to

¹⁵ Barthes, “From Work to Text”, 160.

¹⁶ James Caterer also discusses *Lost in La Mancha* in his essay for this volume.

the story of *Burden of Dreams*; the struggle is presented as far more important than the eventual achievement, and it almost seems as though the completion of the film had become rather irrelevant to the more dramatic scene of mounting tension in the Peruvian jungle.

Recently, Andrew Moor has provided a fine example of how to reconstitute an unfinished film as a valuable site for historical, cultural and artistic exploration. In his examination of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's *Golden Years* project, Moor argues that, rather than a mere curio or missed opportunity, the planned film (a biography of the composer Richard Strauss told entirely in point-of view shots from a "first-person" perspective) stands as "an important and substantial component of Powell and Pressburger's collaborative work. *The Golden Years* forms part of their wider interest in life-writing and particularly in the relationship between fiction and autobiography."¹⁷ Moor is not interested in the business machinations that stunted the film's growth – he uses the film's detailed synopsis as an opportunity to read the film as another piece of the Powell-Pressburger authorial template, adding it to the roster of intertexts that add up to what we understand as the identity of "The Archers", in the process granting rare primacy to Pressburger the writer over Powell the visualiser. There is a potential problem in that films never transfer directly from page to screen in any simple sense, and such analyses of unfinished films will inevitably miss out on the kinds of insights that come from the intellectual interplay between the film and its spectators. But to deny *The Golden Years*, with its pre-imagined imagery and meticulous scripting the status of an associated text within the history of British cinema seems like a quite arbitrary disavowal of the importance of the non-visual, non-photographic elements of cinema. Perhaps, the lack of a finished film throws those non-filmic elements into even sharper focus, shifting attention to the intricacies of the creative process and to the context in which that creativity began.

The British Might Not be Coming

Most of the essays in this collection do not deal with tormented artists grappling with inner demons and capricious natural disasters, but with the often prosaic obstacles presented by the film industry in Britain. One example of a film snagged by finance is *Red Light Runners*, whose shoot was cut short in 2003. It's not as if audiences were crying out for another

¹⁷ Moor, "Autobiography", 16.

mannish, London-based crime drama, but the stalling of the film is instructive, in that it shows how even a film that is mindful of pushing the appropriate commercial buttons is not safe from fiscal quicksand. In the film, Michael Madsen (who also served as co-producer)'s character uses speed camera photographs to blackmail speeding motorists into undertaking illegal missions on behalf of the government. Not an entirely persuasive concept, but it does articulate something pertinent about surveillance culture in the UK, a cultural nerve teased with some success in *My Little Eye* (Mark Evans, 2002) and *Red Road* (Andrea Arnold, 2006). A tax advice website aiming to attract investment for *Red Light Runners* even tried to stress its social currency by describing it as a "sociological heist" film.¹⁸ Producer Clark Westerman proved highly adept at hype, raiding Madsen's address book to marshal a cast which at various stages boasted Harvey Keitel, Cillian Murphy, Roy Scheider, Mickey Rourke, Crispin Glover, Peter O'Toole, Dennis Hopper, Vinnie Jones, Minnie Driver, Eddie Izzard and Martin Kemp, as well as some stunt casting with Radio One DJ Sarah Cox, Tricky, Roland Gift and (almost) footballer David Beckham at the peak of his popularity.¹⁹ He even mysteriously promised the resurrection of a dead celebrity via the marvels of CGI, though the identity of said star was never revealed. British commercials director Nick Egan, an alumnus of Propaganda Satellite Films, which had also provided a starting point for David Fincher and Spike Jonze, was hired as director, insisting that he wanted to play a part in reviving British film-making.

In an interview during the early stages of production, Westerman cited the main reason for shooting in the UK as the availability of the necessary tax schemes, which represent "a vote of confidence by the UK government in the Arts."²⁰ He is referring to the Enterprise Investment Scheme (EIS), which allows for income and capital gains tax relief to be granted to investors. Investors were enticed with roles as extras in the film and invitations to the wrap party, and the film needed to raise £8 million (the largest amount ever sought under an EIS) to secure enough funding for a green light to shoot.²¹ Enterprise Investment Schemes are not necessarily,

¹⁸ "Red Light Film Goes Green." *TaxGuide.co.uk*. 22 July 2002.

<http://www.taxguide.co.uk/newsarticle.php?id=133&start=60>

¹⁹ "Beckham Turns Down Film Role." *BBC News*. Friday, 19 July, 2002.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/film/2138642.stm>.

²⁰ Heath, Paul. "Interview with Clark Westerman." *The Z Review*. 28 July 2002.

<http://www.thezreview.co.uk/comingsoon/r/redlightrunners.htm>

²¹ "Lights, Camera, Cash!" *BBC News*. Wednesday, 17 July, 2002.

as Westerman sought to suggest (promotion for the film became indistinguishable from appeals for money), risk free, tax rich opportunities – they are certainly not a “vote of confidence” in the Arts, but rather a shifting of risk onto the shoulders of investors themselves and an avoidance of direct state subsidy. Westerman claimed that the EIS was “a win-win situation with tax breaks even if the film doesn’t do well. We are the poster child for the EIS.”²² But many financial advisors warned that EIS was a far more fragile arrangement than Film Partnerships, which offer shelter to income and capital gains taxes for up to fifteen years, and despite a heavy promotional push, the producers failed to raise even half of the needed monies.

The on-off production was then hurried into shooting, in preparation for an April 2004 release, in order to take up an offer from Audi Cars, which would put up £6.6 million to promote the film, presumably with the promise that their automobiles would be clearly seen running red lights in a high-performance manner in the finished film.²³ The production, shot on location and at Pinewood Studios was stalled after five weeks shooting in November 2003, apparently when the funding ran dry. A rescue package from IAC films seemed to offer a lifeline that could re-float the project, but it was not to be. Things were not helped by the fact that tax loopholes were being shut down on British productions, scaring away the necessary investments that could have restarted the film. As late as the 2004 Cannes Film Festival, Madsen was still claiming that the film would get made, but that year also saw the cancellation of *Tulip Fever*, a \$47 million international co-production adapted from Deborah Moggach’s novel starring Jude Law and Keira Knightley, when the government closed a tax loophole that was allowing investors to shield their money from taxation by withdrawing it before the film in question reached cinemas.²⁴ Despite backing from Hollywood studios Dreamworks and Miramax, the change in the law caused the tax fund supporting the film to pull out, quickly

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/breakfast/2132098.stm> [Accessed 1 November 2007]

²² Quoted in Collinson, Patrick. “Golden Egg, or are you Buying into a Turkey?” *The Guardian*. 29 June 2002.

²³ “IAC rescues *Runners*.” *Variety*. Tuesday, 23 October 2003.

<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117894322.html> [Accessed 1 November 2007]

²⁴ “UK Movie Productions ‘Shut Down’.” *BBC News*. Friday 20 February 2004.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/film/3505767.stm> [Accessed 27 September 2007]; “Tax Fund Cut May Wilt *Tulip*.” *Variety*. Tuesday, 17 February, 2004. <http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117900331.html> [Accessed 5 October 2007]

followed by Steven Spielberg's company. Even though it has had major stars attached to it at various times, has a screenplay (re-)written by Tom Stoppard from a best-selling book, *Tulip Fever*, at time of writing has no green light. Recently applied government tax credits may have contributed to a rise in box office takings for British films and co-productions in 2006, but they may have introduced a kind of tax dependency that could make around three quarters of UK film productions contingent upon their continued application.²⁵

From this, one might extrapolate an argument about the paucity of state support for indigenous film production. Such studies are important for the mapping of industrial history onto the policies that influence it, but the other striking point that it brings into focus is how fragile an enterprise film-making has been. Lacking a powerful commercial base, either because of the size of the domestic audience or aggressive competition from Hollywood, British cinema has often been left to the mercy of investors for whom the successful distribution and consumption of the finished film is less important than the temporary concealment of funds from the Inland Revenue, and disproportionately sensitive to undulations in the tax laws.

One of the primary concerns in studies of British national cinema has been to diagnose the problem: which of the many industrial, cultural or economic impediments to production are the most damaging? Is it a distribution issue (making a film is the first hurdle, followed by the even more onerous task of getting it within viewing distance of a sizeable audience)? Is the British cinema audience just too small or uninterested to sustain a nationally-specific, culturally-introspective film culture? What is clear is that the multi-levelled impoverishment of the industry in Britain has shaped its development, throwing out the occasional models of thrift and efficiency such as Hammer Film Productions, and the *Carry On...cycle*, but more often producing an arena of opportunism, commercial risk aversion, or neglected talent.

Critics and cultural historians working in the field of British film studies have effected not only a critical recovery of the national cinema by championing its aesthetic and historical worth, but an ongoing debate about the definition of "national" cinema and the fiscal, legislative and artistic ingredients required for its perpetuation. Studies have sometimes seemed downbeat in their prognoses – see for example Peter Graham's *The Abortive Renaissance: Why Are Good British Films So Bad?*, James

²⁵ "Tax Incentives Boost U.K. Film Industry, Says Study." *Studio Briefing*, 24 July 2007. <http://www.imdb.com/news/sb/2007-07-24#film3> [Accessed 1 October 2007]

Park's less than optimistic *Learning to Dream: The New British Cinema* (in which the author summarises the history of British cinema as "one of unparalleled mediocrity"²⁶), with its downbeat follow-up *British Cinema: The Lights that Failed*, or Alexander Walker's exasperated final word on the matter, *Icons in the Fire: The Decline and Fall of Almost Everybody in the British Film Industry, 1984-2000*. It could be argued that a film is not finished until it has been watched by an audience, that the production of meaning takes place in that dynamic space where the film's emotional and instructive cues are received, appropriated and (re)interpreted by a spectator. John Hill has focused on the ways in which "texts are activated in relation to specific socio-historical contexts and, therefore, how particular films may be read in relation to the specific circumstances in which they were first produced and circulated."²⁷ Geoffrey Macnab has highlighted problems of distribution in British cinema by making case studies some of the many films made in Britain that have made it through the production gauntlet only to find themselves shelved for want of screen space at even the most capacious multiplex.²⁸

In making these assessments of difficulties facing an industry, it seems eminently sensible to focus from time to time on those films which were not made, those whose incapacitation can illustrate what the industry tries and fails to do, as opposed to simply assessing its problems from the deficiencies of those films which are able to reach an audience (or at least an exhibitor). However, this is not intended as a dour round-up of spectacular failures; aside from being a chance to tell fascinating stories from the hidden corners of British cinema history, the study of unfinished films can be a celebration of the power of archival research to revivify pieces of cinema out of the traces they create and usually discard. When a film is made, it generates masses of paperwork, from script drafts and contracts through correspondence and catering receipts; it produces hours of footage that is not included in the final cut, along with pre-publicity material, props, sets and costumes. Even an unfinished film will leave behind such a trail of objects while it is in preparation, and from these a textual fabric can be woven. Any scholar who has studied the archived papers of a director or producer will have noted the numbers of unfinished projects that nestle in between the completed, canonical works, and most likely been tempted to speculate on how the artist's career might have turned out differently; alternatively, we can presume that developing films

²⁶ Park, *Learning to Dream*, 13.

²⁷ Hill, *British Cinema in the 1980s*, xi.

²⁸ Macnab, "Unseen British Cinema."

which will not ultimately reach the screen is an inevitable, even necessary part of the creative process. In any case, these broken texts provide fertile ground for study.

Sights Unseen

In *British Cinema in Documents* (2000), Sarah Street argues for a conception of film studies which includes a greater focus on “non-filmic sources”, and which exploits the textual value of documents that surround the production, distribution and exhibition of films.²⁹ Even unfinished films generate a range of documentary fragments, and this book will assess the significance of a variety of “non-filmic films”, constructing their histories through their production documents. My aim in compiling this book was to invite contributors to apply a range of methodological approaches to the study of unfinished films. I had no agenda other than to approach the study of British cinema through the back door of its missing pieces, to reconstruct selected production histories from a range of archival atoms. There are clearly questions to be asked about the infrastructure of the British film industry, and the films which it couldn’t support, but in many cases this is also an exercise in reverse engineering; rather than beginning with a finished film text and breaking it apart to trace its connections to the industrial context in which it was made, most of these essays begin from the fragments to construct a picture of how the film might have operated as a text.

Brian McFarlane tackles perhaps the most famous of all unfinished British films, *I, Claudius*, which was produced by Alexander Korda with Josef von Sternberg directing Charles Laughton in the title role. This corralling of three powerful artists is indeed a dramatic instance of clashing personalities, but McFarlane is not distracted by the scandal and rumour about who might have been to blame for the film’s cancellation, and turns his attention to the documentary film *The Epic that Never Was*. This reconstructive exercise allows privileged access to the surviving footage, but also serves as a valuable document in itself, being a striking exercise in historical appropriation, reframing the film’s footage as an index of Laughton’s performance and the extra-filmic, personal drama it enacted. Above all, Korda’s announcement of an astonishing array of projects confirms his “boundless entrepreneurial urge”, showing how readily he embraced opportunities for international sales pitches.

²⁹ Street, *British Cinema in Documents*, 169.

Paul Newland and Gavrik Losey draw upon new interviews with Harold Pinter to relate the story of Pinter's collaboration with Joseph Losey on an ostensibly impossible adaptation of Marcel Proust's *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. Amazingly, the published screenplay seems to suggest that a means of conveying the sense of the novel in a visual medium had been found but, as Newland and Losey show, the film industry didn't know how to handle such esoteric material, finding no suitable space in the schedules for such a long, intellectually daunting work. The correspondence that records the dissolution of interest in the film articulates a serious communication breakdown between art and commerce.

The problems of adapting a best-selling novel for the screen are illustrated when Peter Hutchings unpacks the story of Hammer's failed attempts to film Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*. Using the Matheson screenplay, Hutchings explains the modifications made during the adaptation process, and how the meanings of the text are inflected in the process. He discusses the film's potential location within a literary and filmic heritage of horror cinema, conducting textual analyses that belie the film's unfinished status: *The Night Creatures* (as it was to have been retitled) is clearly an active participant in the history of British horror, offering a vision of vampirism as plague that might have contributed a new image of the mythical creature to complement or question the iconic presence of Hammer's *Dracula*.

Bill Douglas made precious few films before his untimely death, and he agonised over the shooting of all of them. Duncan Petrie expands Douglas's filmography to include the films he scripted but never shot, and shows how they develop the director's fascination with proto-cinematic devices and the particular kinds of looking and seeing they promote. A talent who had seemed to emerge fully formed from film school, his late scripts show him zeroing in on ideas which allow him to recreate pre-cinematic ways of seeing, especially in his planned film about chronophotography pioneer Eadweard Muybridge, which is surely a tantalisingly perfect match of artist and subject.

Andrew Spicer meticulously reconstructs the stories of some of the films which the British producer Sydney Box was prevented from making, and in the process illustrates the factors which curtailed and controlled film production in post-war Britain. With particular attention to the conservatism and censorship against which Box persistently railed, Spicer shows how access to production documents, diaries and correspondence can provide vivid articulations of the challenges faced by industry professionals.

It is little surprise that Derek Jarman's multimedia talent left some projects unfinished, especially when they were as ambitious and expansive as his apocalyptic *Neutron*. Fortunately, Jarman was a diligent chronicler of his own creative process, allowing Raymond Armstrong to pick up the threads of the lost film to show how its development was affected by the particularities of its star, David Bowie. Although *Neutron* was never filmed, Armstrong shows how its central ideas feed into Jarman's later work, giving a vivid picture of the artist's collage technique.

Karl Magee draws upon the valuable resources of Stirling University's archive of Lindsay Anderson's working papers to show how the director's diaries and personal correspondence concerning his unmade projects reveal his deepening cynicism about the film industry, particularly in Hollywood. Reading through Anderson's anxious or caustic commentaries on his fluctuating film-making fortunes offers a valuable insight into the emotional effects of artistic setbacks, and demonstrates in an affecting way how even the most respected artists might have to suffer rejection if their ideas don't fit the industrial template of the system within which they work.

Katerina Loukopoulou recovers the fragments of James Scott's *The Sea*, which was to have formalised his inclusion under the prestigious Woodfall banner. The film's incompleteness contributed considerably to Scott's under-representation in histories of British cinema: his promise was barely given chance to develop, although Loukopoulou also provides us with a detailed filmography of his works for future reference.

The vicissitudes of fate, even when fate is given a steer by National Lottery funding, are all too evident in James Caterer's account of the stalling of Benjamin Ross's *Jack Sheppard and Jonathan Wild*. A ribald piece of costume drama based on well-known historical figures made by a director with a feted debut under his belt must have seemed like a safe commercial proposition, but Caterer makes the case strongly that the various funding bodies supporting the project were themselves too fiscally tentative, or just too cash-strapped, to accommodate it. In 2001, while Ross was still struggling to get his film funded, it was announced that, of the eleven films that had so far been bank-rolled by the National Lottery (at a cost of more than £13.5 million), only one of them, *An Ideal Husband* (Oliver Parker, 1999), had turned a profit.³⁰ It must have been frustrating to note that, even as the Lottery funds were being given to the producers with reliable commercial track records, ahead of those with artistically

³⁰ "Lottery Funds Film Failures." *BBC News*. Wednesday, 3 January 2001. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/1097783.stm>

exciting projects, the resulting films were not even managing to hit their economic targets, let alone their artistic ones.

My own contribution examines the collapse of Don Boyd's film *Gossip* in 1982. Boyd had been a feted and controversial entrepreneur figure when he appeared on the industry scene in the late seventies, and *Gossip* would have been the film that cemented or diluted his reputation as a great hope for the revival of British cinema. As well as looking at the calamitous circumstances surrounding the film's halt a few weeks into shooting, I have tried to suggest that unfinished films, rather than being just a gap in cinema's historical record, might productively be considered as texts in their own right. Through consideration of the screenplay and surviving footage, I hope to show that it is not always essential for a film to have reached completion for it to become a useful case study. This has been my goal in assembling these essays, which I hope could stand as an instigation towards greater focus on the incomplete and the thwarted alongside the realised and the celebrated; the history of British cinema is by no means one of "unparalleled mediocrity" and it never has been, but it can only be viewed in its totality if we expand the picture to include the subjects, artists, themes and budgets that it was ill-equipped to nurture.

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CHAPTER ONE

ROME-ON-THE-COLNE: THE ABORTING OF *I, CLAUDIUS*

BRIAN MCFARLANE

“My greatest films are those I announced and never made”, Alexander Korda was quoted as saying in 1956.¹ Korda was British cinema’s nearest equivalent to the Hollywood moguls, though, from all accounts, a kind of courtesy and grace, cheek by jowl certainly with vaulting ambition, meant that he stopped short of the grossness one associates with, say, Goldwyn or Mayer. However, he also stops short of these *monstres* scarcely *sacrés* by dint of not achieving as much as they did and by running up a surely unique line of unrealised projects.

The full grandiosity of his intentions is encapsulated in a list provided as Part III of the filmography given by Korda’s 1975 biographer Karol Kulik, under the heading “Projects Announced by Alexander Korda.”² No fewer than 94 titles are listed, many of them adapted from literary sources, and often accompanied by illustrious names as screenwriters, directors and stars. It is worth looking briefly at the kinds of projects to which, however fleetingly, he was prepared to append his name. After his international success with *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933), he was determined that London Films, whose guiding spirit he was, should be a contender for world audiences on a par with the great Hollywood studios.

Can the people he named in these forthcoming productions which never eventuated have agreed to be part of such projects? Surely by the end of the 1930s they must have been having doubts about Korda’s credibility. Merle Oberon, for instance, was variously announced as starring in such enterprises as *War and Peace* (with Laurence Olivier in

¹ *Daily Express*, January 1956.

² Kulik, *Alexander Korda*, 385-7.

1937³; with Orson Welles in 1939), as both Elizabeth of Austria and Pocahontas in 1939, as Manon Lescaut in 1940 (Korda was first-named director, then Julien Duvivier) and as late as 1944-45 Korda was still promising to showcase Oberon in *The Life of Robert Louis Stevenson* and *A Habitation Enforced*, though their marriage by this time was virtually over. As for Laughton, Korda announced, *inter alia*, a sequel to *Henry VIII*, the role of Diaghilev in *Nijinsky* (1935, to be based on Romola Nijinsky's biography of her husband), and a version of *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1936). Others in the Korda star stable for whom grandiose plans were announced were: Olivier as Lawrence of Arabia, a role for which Walter Hudd and John Clements were also put forth, as *Cyrano* (1940) and as Odysseus in *The Iliad* (mid-30s, co-starring Vivien Leigh and scripted by Graham Greene); Leigh was also to play murderess *Lottie Dundas* (1944-45), and Robert Donat was slated to play *Hamlet* (1936), Lord Nelson (1936) and the lead in *Precious Bane* (1936). He also named directors including René Clair, Victor Sjöström, Anthony Asquith and Michael Powell as scheduled to steer some of these projects. In 1936, a columnist wrote of him: "He is, in fact, a Napoleon of dreams", having announced at least thirty-nine post-*Henry VIII* films "of which only eight have been made and shown."⁴

As well as planning star roles for actors, he was forever engaging in ambitious plans to use the services of other big names. Among the intended projects, he sought to retain such literary figures of the period as R.C. Sheriff, Evelyn Waugh, Noël Coward, James Hilton, G.B. Stern, Clemence Dane, Eric Linklater and James Hilton. There were also announcements about the filming of works by Jules Verne, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Georgette Heyer, L.P. Hartley, Kipling, Arnold Bennett and Damon Runyon (to star Bing Crosby no less!), but it wasn't just literary lions he had in his sights but other big game as well: he had approached the diplomat and statesman, Sir Robert Vansittart, to write *Burmese Silver* (1937-38) which was to be directed by Michael Powell (also planned for *Calcutta*, 1937) and, most notably, Winston Churchill.

With Churchill, he had launched the idea in 1934 of a series of factual short films with titles such as "the Rise of Japan" and "Marriage Laws and Customs". The idea seems to have come from Churchill, but foundered on the big cinema circuits' saying they would refuse to show them: "the public, they told him, wanted entertainment, not education".⁵ Faced with

³ Dates refer to time of official press announcements.

⁴ Wallace, "Korda's Castles in the Air", 43.

⁵ Drazin, *Korda*, 113.

this negative response, Korda then proposed that Churchill “could write a feature-length scenario of “the Reign of George V” to mark the following year’s Silver Jubilee”.⁶ He had previously paid Churchill £10,000 for the film rights to his book, *Marlborough*, which, according to Martin Stockham, “he seems to have had little intention of turning into a film.”⁷ It was to incorporate significant events in the history of Britain and the Empire during that time, and Asquith would direct. Unsurprisingly, this very unlikely venture also came to nothing, though the two men remained friends. There were rumours of Korda’s being engaged in work for British Intelligence work during the War at Churchill’s behest, and Churchill always claimed that Korda’s 1941 Hollywood production, *That Hamilton Woman* (released as *Lady Hamilton* in the UK), a film that actually got made, was his favourite. Indeed, a major speech in the film, about not making “peace with dictators”, has, as Michael Korda notes, a “faintly Churchillian” tone to it.⁸

In the light of this extraordinary catalogue of uncompleted or, in most cases, unstarted productions, we should be less surprised at how little of *I, Claudius* survives than grateful that any of it ever got shot in the first place. What these titles and names signify above all is Korda’s boundless entrepreneurial urge. It is not as if the film titles indicated seemed to promise small films for the domestic market: they have about them a strong whiff of international aspiration. They seem aimed both at the kind of audience Hollywood had made its own *and* at the European market. They hint at the prospect of extravagant spectacle *and* at the prestige he believed attached to the literary. He seems, indeed, to have wanted it all ways, to achieve widespread popularity *and* critical *réclame*. In the context of 1930s British cinema, Hitchcock, Asquith and Victor Saville are more accomplished film-makers; but none equals Korda for aspiration, for thinking big. He had had a surprise international hit with *The Private Life of Henry VIII* and was bent on repeating it. He was clearly not interested in the usual generic range of British cinema of the decade – Aldwych farces, crime thrillers, Ruritanian musicals, and so on – but wanted to make his mark as a quality producer and as a purveyor of irreproachably British/Empire fare. Despite all the jokes and gibes about how the only qualification needed for work at Denham was to be Hungarian, he had Anglicised himself to a very considerable degree and his respect for what

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Stockham, *The Korda Collection*, 25.

⁸ Korda, *Charmed Lives*, 154.

the British respected in areas such as literature and theatre seems to have been considerable.

Another key element in the context of the production of *I, Claudius* was Korda's creation of Denham Studios as a version of "Hollywood-on-the-Colne" in Buckinghamshire, where it was envisaged that London Films would become "a major producer of films intended to storm world markets, an unusual feat when British films normally found it almost impossible to get a showing in the States."⁹ To achieve this end, Korda enlisted the financial backing of the Prudential Assurance Company, which saw in him a film-maker "particularly interested in the larger class of character pictures".¹⁰ Like all Korda's plans, the building of Denham Studios was on a scale far more grandiose than was usually associated with British films at the time, and even Prudential was beguiled by his ambitious agenda – and by his affiliation with the Hollywood company, United Artists. Denham eventually failed to live up to its grandiloquent promise, but it is part of the setting for the film that seemed to promise so much but was so dramatically aborted.

When one turns to *I, Claudius* itself, one is struck by the diversity of points of view about what happened, how it came to be filmed and why the filming ceased. The several biographies of Korda, the letters and other writings by and about author Robert Graves, the autobiography of director Josef von Sternberg, the biographies of Charles Laughton, Merle Oberon and Flora Robson, research work on the screenplays and on the British film studios, and the documentary *The Epic That Never Was* (1965, directed by Bill Duncalf): there is a multiplicity of information sources of varying degrees of reliability about this fascinating chapter in British film history. And merely naming these sources probably hints at the way in which the project represents the matrix of a group of major creative talents working at somewhere near the height of their powers and renown – and of some formidable egos likely to come into collision as well as collusion.

Korda, despite the great success of *Henry VIII* and the critical (if not popular) approval of *Rembrandt* (1936), had no wish to direct Charles Laughton again. Indeed, from several accounts, Laughton does seem to have been difficult to work with, not from conventional tantrums but because of his curiously introverted approach to acting. Nearly forty years later, John Mills recalled working with him on *Hobson's Choice* (David Lean, 1953), Laughton's last brush with Korda and London Films: "Charles was a unique, enormously gifted actor, capable of doing the most

⁹ Street, "Denham Studios", 117.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*