

CECIL HEPWORTH

AND THE RISE OF THE
BRITISH FILM INDUSTRY 1899-1911



SIMON BROWN

EXETER STUDIES IN FILM HISTORY

Cecil Hepworth and the Rise of the British Film Industry 1899-1911

An industrial history of the formative years of the British film industry from 1899 to 1911, through a case study of Cecil Hepworth – one of the most celebrated pioneer British film makers. It offers a detailed picture of the workings of an early British film studio, charting alongside that the development of the British film industry itself.

1899 to 1911 saw the British film industry change from a cottage industry of artisans and inventors into a complex economic system of interrelated businesses with a global reach. Changes in exhibition and distribution caused production to suffer a major decline from 1908 to 1911, losing Britain its status as a world leader in film making, a position it has struggled to regain ever since.

This book challenges such assumptions by offering a detailed analysis of Hepworth's developing production methods and his strategies towards sales in the market together with an examination of the changing nature of the market itself. It demonstrates how these changes impacted on Hepworth's attempts to modernize, and in doing so offers a more accurate picture of this period in British film history.

Simon Brown's book is an industrial history of the early years of the British film industry from 1899–1911 presented through a case study of one of the most celebrated pioneer film makers, Cecil Hepworth. It provides a picture of the changing nature of daily life in Hepworth's film studio, alongside which it charts the development of the British film industry, in particular the development of exhibition and distribution.

Simon Brown is Director of Studies for Film and Television at Kingston University, London.

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Note

Some of the information and argument that forms Chapter 3 of this book is included in an article previously published as follows:

'From Inventor to Renter: The Middleman, the Production Crisis and the Formation of the British Film Industry,' *Early Popular Visual Culture* 11:2 (London: Routledge, May 2013).

Introduction

[W]hat happened to Hepworth and to the pioneer spirit in British film making, after 1905 . . . It's as if he and Smith and Williamson and the others ran the first lap, passed on the baton to the Americans and, then stopped exhausted.¹

Writing in 1991 Charles Barr, one of the most respected historians and scholars of British cinema, asked the above question about British film production in the latter half of the Edwardian period under the unequivocal heading 'The Long Decline'. The context of these comments was an evaluation of the film *Rescued by Rover*, produced by Cecil Hepworth in 1905 for his company The Hepworth Manufacturing Company, Ltd and directed by Lewin Fitzhamon, who by that point was responsible for the fiction output of the studio. Barr describes the film as 'possibly the high point historically for cinema in Britain relative to the rest of the world',² justifying this substantial claim by examining in detail the narrative construction of this demonstrably successful early British film (the oft-repeated story is that the film was so popular that the negative wore out, and Hepworth had the film remade twice in order to produce two new ones to cope with demand). In his view the film is constructed with 'machine-like efficiency' in which 'form and content are beautifully matched'. He concludes by suggesting that '*Rescued by Rover* seems the very model of the way mainstream popular cinema was destined to develop'.³

Directly after this analysis, Barr poses the above question as to why British producers in general and Hepworth in particular never capitalized on this success, going on to describe the story of British film production from 1905 up to 1926 as 'depressing'.⁴ In making this judgement Barr is echoing the opinions of two earlier, respected chroniclers of early British cinema. Rachael Low, in the second volume of her *History of the British*

Film covering 1906 to 1914 and first published in 1948, describes the story of production in those particular years as 'a humiliating period of stagnation'. In stark and disappointed terms Low refers to the period as one of 'decline' and 'arrested development', as 'embarrassing' and, ultimately, to British film production as 'a poor relation, and, moreover, not a very respectable one'.⁵ Writing three years later, in 1951, Georges Sadoul in his *Histoire Générale du Cinéma* dismissively refers to the years 1908 to 1914 under the heading 'stagnation britannique'.⁶ While Low and Sadoul's gloomy assessments do not extend into the 1920s as does Barr's, all three agree that the late Edwardian period until the start of the First World War was a bad era for British film production.

Little has been done to address this perception. Practically the only major work to consider this is Jon Burrows' book, *Legitimate Cinema: Theatre Stars in Silent British Films, 1908–1918*. In the introduction he similarly outlines Low's criticisms, agreeing to them to the extent that he is prepared to acknowledge that post-1905 British film production was categorized by a 'marked lack of progress' which did 'contribute to the failure of the British production sector to convert its comparatively substantial influence in the early days of cinematography into a prominent role in the international leadership of the industry'.⁷ He does, however, challenge the idea of a continued period of stagnation, suggesting, as Low does herself, that the production industry experienced a revival after 1911. Considering the provocative nature of the question, more than twenty years on from Charles Barr asking why the pioneer British producers gave up after 1905 (himself reinforcing opinions written over sixty years ago) only one person has sought to respond. Even they have left unchallenged the accusation of stagnation for the period from 1905 to 1911, which is the focus of this book.

Barr suggests that this stagnation involved a lack of progress in film form alongside a dearth of advancement in the field of commercial enterprise. Aesthetically, he suggests, Hepworth 'turned his back on the line of development represented by *Rescued by Rover*',⁸ implying that he failed to capitalize on the stylistic innovations in the film which, he argues, prefigured narrative cinema. He then submits that commercially British producers also failed to match the kind of industrial organization taking place in America and France, resulting in a situation that, 'the cottage industry which produced *Rescued by Rover* could not survive'.⁹ In this he echoes Low who writes of British 'inferiority' being 'both commercial and artistic'.¹⁰ She highlights a lack of capital investment in film projects

as the major problem, resulting in films that appeared ‘tame and unexciting’ compared to those from abroad.¹¹

Low considers this lack of investment originated in the small size of the British market and both ‘a lack of opposition’ to new developments and a ‘lack of enterprise’ on behalf of the producers that led them to be merely ‘content’.¹² This contentment is generally accepted to have developed as a result of the British producers experiencing significant overseas sales of their films, especially in America. In 1907 the *Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly* (hereafter *KLW*) reported that:

The English makers’ best market is not in England at all but in foreign countries which are blessed with a greater demand for subjects and a much smaller supply to meet it . . . an English maker can sell fifties [*sic*] and hundreds of every film he puts out in America, France, Germany, Spain etc.¹³

These record sales led the pioneer manufacturers, so the story goes, to focus on quantity rather than quality, making as many films as possible to keep up with demand, and cutting corners along the way, failing in the process to notice that the quality of films from elsewhere were improving.

Current histories suggest that the British producers only noticed this situation when they found their revenues badly affected once their large sales to America collapsed, owing to the formation of the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC) in December 1908, prefigured in February the same year by its forerunner, the Film Services Association.¹⁴ The MPPC claimed the majority of the patents underlying cinema technology in America and served notice that ‘it would not “licence” any film producers but its founding members’.¹⁵ This effectively drove all but four international producers, Pathé, Méliès, Gaumont and Urban-Eclipse, out of the US market. In response, an independent sector outside the MPPC was formed to combat this monopoly, initially spearheaded by the International Producing and Projecting Company (IPPC) under John J. Murdock. British negotiations with the IPPC were led by Will Barker, at the time Managing Director of the Warwick Trading Company, who persuaded Hepworth and others including Robert Paul, Cricks and Martin, James Williamson and Clarendon to sign up with Murdock. While in April 1909 Barker could confidently inform the *Bioscope* that ‘I am quite safe in asserting that we English manufacturers have secured the largest orders from the American market which have been placed for about two years’ the orders never materialized and the IPPC was to

prove short-lived, although other organizations also sprang up with a view to combatting the MPPC.¹⁶ Before this the size of the US market, increased by the demand of the Nickelodeons for new films, meant that sales to the USA had provided a comfortable and regular financial base for British producers, with the result that they did not actively seek to either promote or improve their films. The formation of the MPPC and the closure of the American market compromised this substantial and predictable revenue stream in a very short space of time, meaning some British producers were forced to rely upon the UK market where, because they had not been actively engaging, they had been experiencing declining sales. Consequently they were unable to sell sufficient copies of their films at home, which prevented them from generating enough revenue to compete with those produced in Continental Europe and America.

This was true in some cases. According to F.A. Talbot all of James Williamson's US standing orders were cancelled, leaving him entirely at the mercy of the British market and leading him to abandon production altogether.¹⁷ Hepworth fared better in that he claims his company managed to procure a standing order from the USA for thirty or forty copies of every film produced which lasted until 1914, and given that his production costs were generally low, even with discounts this represented a regular return on his investment in production.¹⁸ How, and indeed if, Hepworth secured this long-term deal is not entirely clear, although Martin Sopocy suggests that Hepworth 'inveigled a connection with the Patents Company some time in 1911, for which Hepworth may have been regarded, by some, as a "turncoat"'.¹⁹ Certainly in September 1911 Hepworth films were still being distributed by the Independents, and were announced as part of a package of films available, along with those of Clarendon and Cricks and Martin, from the National Film Distribution Company in New York, which had been founded in May to take over the work of another short-lived Independent venture, the National Film Manufacturing and Leasing Company.²⁰ I have found no record of Hepworth films being listed in the American trade press in 1912, but his production of *Sally in our Alley* was advertised by Selig, part of the Trust, in March 1913, suggesting that at some point between September 1911 and March 1913 he did indeed make some kind of deal with the MPPC.²¹ The absence of any mention of Hepworth films in 1912 does suggest that the situation in America was not as rosy as Hepworth's claim of a standing order would suggest, something Hepworth himself indicated in an interview in 1912 when he said that:

We had three or four very successful years paying in succession 10, 20, 30 and 40 per cent. Then, suddenly excluded from the American market by the operations of the Trust, which hit us very hard . . . we had two or three very lean years.²²

This is corroborated by the *KLW*, which stated in August 1908, 'except in America this firm is keeping up its sales'.²³

Regardless of the extent to which his sales to America continued, it is clear Hepworth did not suffer as Williamson did, although he argued that this also had a negative impact on him, since he failed to notice the precariousness of his position in the British market, thanks to the 'anaesthetising American standing order'.²⁴ As a result, according again to Hepworth, 'when we did begin to wake up and rub our eyes it was all we could do to keep our places in the race – little we could do to recover ground we had lost'.²⁵ The implication is that the standing orders from the USA created a sense of over-confidence, echoing Low's assertion that the pioneers became complacent and therefore did not develop their product or improve their businesses. The British pioneer producers themselves also supported this view. In 1912, shortly after abandoning film production in favour of distribution, James Williamson said, 'it is no use blinking that in these rushing times quality was often sacrificed. The continental makers were outstripping us in quality, both of photography and subject',²⁶ while, echoing Low, Hepworth stated, much later, that the problem with foreign films was that 'many of them were better than ours . . . Film production in this country had gotten into a rut and . . . seemed content to stay in it'.²⁷

The argument put forward by Low and Sadoul, after the pioneers, is that in order to fulfil demand British pioneer producers churned out film after film with scant attention to what was going on around them, noticing neither that films from overseas were getting better, nor that the British market was getting smaller. While this may well seem short-sighted, it must be noted that in August 1907 the *KLW* was strongly advocating the production of more films. It said:

So far from being an evil the larger output of subjects is therefore more nearly a blessing, for the exhibitor has a wider choice of subjects and is enabled to give a better show than if he were forced to take whatever was put on the market.²⁸

The closure of the American market however highlighted the fact that overproduction was increasingly becoming a problem in the UK as the market became flooded with films all jostling for sales. New films had little time to circulate before being crowded out by the next batch of titles, which left unsold films unlikely to find any purchase in the market, while any films that had sold were circulating for weeks in order to recoup the price paid for them by the renters, denying screen space to the new titles that came behind them. The *KLW* summed up the situation in September 1908, saying 'Much of the American market has been lost, the number of firms selling films well nigh doubled and the output of existing firms also doubled in many cases . . . unaccompanied by anything like the proportionate increase in the number of showmen'.²⁹ Furthermore, as John Burrows has argued, the proliferation of penny cinemas added to the problem. Many of these were operating on shoestring budgets and so relied upon sales of second-hand films to make up their programmes, extending the shelf life of circulating titles even further.³⁰

While overproduction was indeed a problem in the British market by the end of 1908, the previous year increasing production was seen as the best way forward for the development of the industry. Furthermore, it must also be noted that for a period after the formation of the MPPC, the optimistic predictions for the Independents in the USA would seem to indicate that a regular supply of subjects would continue to be not only advisable, but also necessary. Thus arguably British producers' emphasis on expanding production was not at all inadvisable at the time, and only became so with hindsight, leaving the question of quality as the next key issue to address.

Certainly contemporary correspondence indicates that quality was an issue. By 1909 the trade papers were full of articles and letters about British films. The *Bioscope* reported that 'it has become quite the fashion . . . to sneer at and belittle the productions of English firms'³¹ and letters were printed with titles like 'English Subjects and their Short-Comings'.³² Contributions such as these bemoaned a lack of development in British films compared to advances elsewhere. In January 1910, the *Bioscope* reprinted an article from the *New York Morning Telegraph* which commented on the 'marked improvement in the quality of the pictures that have been turned out' by Edison, Essanay, Kalem, Lubin, Méliès, Selig, Vitagraph and Pathé.³³ This was in contrast to a general feeling that 'people seem to look upon every English film subject as necessarily inferior to the foreign product'.³⁴ Accusations were levelled at the quality

of acting, stagecraft and dramatic construction,³⁵ while one correspondent simply described them as ‘trash’.³⁶

The picture painted by this history certainly suggests that British producers sat back and displayed a marked lack of drive and ambition, with calamitous results. A report in 1910 of an interview by William Selig in *Film Index*, reprinted in the *Bioscope*, represented British production as ‘in very bad shape’ and ‘practically closed down’, taking time to mention almost all of the major British manufacturers in relation to this statement.³⁷ In 1910 the *Bioscope* reported, ‘a large hiring firm . . . [has] received orders from their customers to put *no English films* in their programmes’ [emphasis in original].³⁸ As far as the trade were concerned, the producers only had themselves to blame. Comments from the *New York Dramatic Mirror* noted that, ‘the English public gives strong preference to the [*sic*] well-acted, intelligently constructed subjects . . . Why, then, should not the English producers cater to this demand?’³⁹

Thus the reputation of British producers in this period as stagnant, exhausted and inadequate derives from claims of poor quality filmmaking coupled with a naïve business model aimed solely at expanding production. This argument is put forward both contemporaneously in the trade press and retrospectively by historians and by the pioneers themselves. Given this authoritative primary testimony, it is not surprising that histories of the period suggest that a decline in fortunes was precipitated by the pioneers’ failure to change the way in which they operated. While quality was indeed a factor, as the existence of the trade debate proves, I would argue that it is too simplistic to accept that the problem was a collective inertia among the pioneers. These accusations of ‘stagnation’ are too generalized and lack understanding of, and engagement with, the situation within the film industry at that time, laying blame for what happened rather than examining the causes. Yet this was a period of significant change for the British film industry, witnessing, as I will discuss, the building and expansion of studios for film production, the arrival of fixed site cinemas, drawing business away from the music hall and fairground showmen, the shift from film sales to rental, and a large influx of new and foreign production companies into the British market. Each of these not only changed the nature of the industry, they also impacted upon British filmmaking in a manner that caused a decline in production.

The aim of this book is to reassess the state of British film production and the British film industry in the Edwardian period, with a particular, though not exclusive, focus on the years of success and then decline in

production, from 1904 to 1911. As I say, this decline has been categorized as both aesthetic and industrial, but it is not my intention here to look at the quality of the films but rather to focus upon industrial development. To do this the book will detail the growth of the British film industry alongside a case study of one British pioneer film production company, the aforementioned Hepworth Manufacturing Company, Ltd (hereafter the HMC) under its managing director, Cecil Hepworth. Hepworth was the son of a celebrated Magic Lanternist, T.C. Hepworth, and entered the film industry in 1899, setting up a business south west of London in Walton-on-Thames with his cousin Monty Wicks. The selection of this particular company for the case study is both by accident and design. On the one hand, through a combination of personal testimony, historical documents and the high regard in which the company was held by the trade press, that in turn led the HMC to appear often in reports, there is more information available about the day-to-day workings of the company in this period than for any other British pioneer film producer. On the other, it is precisely the high regard in which the company was held that makes the HMC such an ideal case study for the period. In its first issue, the *KLW* noted that HMC 'made some of the most successful films put out in the history of the trade',⁴⁰ writing later that year that 'their comics . . . embody some of the most original ideas put into film form',⁴¹ while HMC films consistently appeared in the *KLW*'s occasional reviews of what they deemed 'Remarkable Film Subjects'.

Hepworth's production company made films for an unbroken period of twenty-five years, longer than any other pioneer production firm.⁴² The only comparable company in Britain was Gaumont, which was a subsidiary of its French parent company from its formation in 1897 until 1922, when Alfred Bromhead bought them out. Even then British Gaumont did not go into film production until 1902, three years after Hepworth, meaning that in 1923 Hepworth Picture Plays Ltd, as it was then known, was the longest running British production company in continuous operation, and the only one still in business which had been making films before 1900. Hepworth's longevity alone calls into question charges of inertia or ineptitude. He was by no means always successful, hitting a profit low of a mere £17 in 1917. But by 1920 Hepworth Picture Plays Ltd had turned a profit of £10,734, a figure exceeded by over £3000 the following year.⁴³ The fact that all of his pioneer contemporaries, including Paul, Williamson, Urban, Cricks and Martin, Clarendon and Will Barker ceased film production before him indicates that there was

considerable difficulty in maintaining a film production business in an industry that was undergoing constant change.⁴⁴

The reason for using an individual case study is to present a detailed analysis of the advancements made by this company in the context of the developments that took place within the wider industry, and thus examine the proactivity of Hepworth as a pioneer producer relative to what was happening elsewhere in the film business. The evidence presented in this book will demonstrate Hepworth's adaptability, showing that between 1904 and 1911, like many other production companies, the HMC developed its studio complex, expanded its showrooms in London, moved into larger premises, changed the way in which it packaged and marketed its films and also tailored its output to the prevailing trends in the industry. I will conclude by looking beyond the period of decline to the renaissance in British film production that took place in 1911, in which Hepworth played a leading role. He was one of the principal British representatives at the Paris Congresses of 1909, where producers tried to regulate the industry, and was one of the two main producers to spearhead a revival in British production in 1911. Indeed, Low places the revival directly at Hepworth's feet, claiming that the 'noticeable but only partly successful effort . . . to re-establish the former status of British production . . . may be said to date from a Hepworth drama of 1911, *Rachel's Sin*'.⁴⁵ Hepworth also fostered some of Britain's first film stars, and built a considerable reputation for himself and his company in Britain in the process becoming, in Low's words, 'indisputably the only English firm in the same class as the now flourishing Italian and American companies'.⁴⁶

The HMC was making advances under Hepworth, and it was despite these efforts, rather than because he made no effort at all, that it underwent a decline along with all the other producers. It is therefore clear that existing histories of this period must be challenged, not necessarily because they draw the wrong conclusions—the fact of the decline is undeniable as is the fact that the relative quality of British films was under debate—but by merely electing to blame the producers they fail to fully examine the complexities of the situation. I am not suggesting that the HMC is representative of all other British producers, but the company's position as the leading British producer in terms of both output and reputation makes it an ideal case study for the exploration of the position of British production within the wider industry. Of its main rivals, Cricks and Martin and Clarendon were, like the HMC, committed to fiction film production but operated on a much smaller

scale and released fewer films. The main comparable companies to the HMC in terms of output and size were The Charles Urban Trading Company and Will Barker's Warwick Trading Company, but while Urban and Barker were successful businessmen, during this period both companies devoted their energies to the production of non-fiction, while the industry was moving very definitely towards fiction as the main subject for films. This was something the HMC embraced early on, making it more representative of the general direction film production was taking. By focussing on the developments taking place within one company, and their place within the wider industry structures that were emerging and consolidating at this time, it is possible to present a more nuanced picture of British production in this period.

The Pioneer Myth

In order to do this it is first necessary to address the fact that, as we have seen, the pioneers themselves, including Hepworth, joined the chorus of voices bemoaning their performance in this period. While the facts outlined above demonstrate that there is an element of truth in what they say, nevertheless they do not represent the whole story. The comments from the likes of Hepworth and Williamson quoted above were part of an image that the pioneers deliberately fostered, both at the time and later, of themselves as gentlemen amateurs, uninterested in either the cut-throat world of business or the growing complexities of filmmaking. As Richard Brown and Barry Anthony have pointed out. 'Film pioneers in their later reminiscences assiduously cultivated the impression that the early days were rudimentary and disorganized'.⁴⁷ They also note that 'most [memoirs] prove to be overlaid with a depressingly similar formulaic pattern of myth creation'.⁴⁸ Hepworth certainly used his autobiography and various other recollections to paint a picture of his studios as being one of unchanging simplicity and such a picture was not entirely retrospective. Contemporary articles about Hepworth, his studio, and its base in Walton-on-Thames similarly use language that reinforces the old-fashioned and nostalgic air he himself promoted. In 1911 a reporter from the *Bioscope* visited the studio which he described as being:

Situated on the banks of the Thames in the old-world little town of Walton, which is in the heart of delightful country – hills, woods, valleys, river scenes, sporting centres, picturesque homes of the



1. Walton-on-Thames High Street c.1919
*Courtesy of Elmbridge Museum, part of Elmbridge Borough
 Council's Leisure and Cultural Services*

wealthy, and in fact practically all that is beautiful and interesting in England.⁴⁹

A 1912 visitor to the studio wrote of Walton as a 'sweet old-world country town . . . unwilling to be drawn into the vortex of modern life [containing] rustic scenery of the most charming description'.⁵⁰ On a visit to the studio in 1919, *Pictures and Picturegoer* noted the studio's 'long quaint windows' that were part of a 'long row of creeper-covered structures which to the passer-by might represent an old country mansion'.⁵¹ On another visit five years later, the same magazine noted that the outside of the studio 'looks exactly the same as it did some twenty years ago'.⁵² Such reportage painted a similar picture to Hepworth's own of his studio being an unspoilt, semi-rural community of craftsmen and artisans outside the urban and industrial world of the modern.

This kind of language also indicates, by extension, his anti-modern working methods. In 1924 Hepworth declared to *Pictures and Picturegoer* that the filmmaking world he created changed very little in the twenty-

five years it was in business and that he worked in exactly the same way as he did in 1906, except for the fact that the films were longer.⁵³ To a certain extent this is true, especially in terms of how he himself directed films. For example, in his autobiography, published in 1951, he bemoaned the industrialization of the film industry, and the fact that a cameraman will have four assistants, 'a camera loader, a camera un-loader, a camera operator and a man to focus the camera for him'.⁵⁴ He responds thus, 'Rubbish! I can do all those things myself and *then* have time on my hands' [emphasis in original].⁵⁵ Hepworth always claimed his working methods were not industrialized, refusing to abandon his old-fashioned, pastoral image in favour of a modern, commercial one. He was dismissive about contemporary practices in film style in the same way that he was, implicitly, about modern business methods. In his autobiography he stated, 'My practice was then and afterwards to discourage and indeed refuse all stage make-up of any kind'.⁵⁶ In an interview with *Pearsons Magazine* in the early 1920s Hepworth offered the same opinion, 'I maintain that the human face cannot portray all the emotions when it is covered up with grease paint'.⁵⁷ Similarly he claimed a strong affinity for natural light, writing in 1920 that, 'I always work in daylight. I use the bright electric arc lamps as seldom as possible, and then only when absolutely compelled'.⁵⁸ Hepworth also had an old-fashioned attitude to film language such as his preference for using fades between shots instead of cuts, which caused a critical lack of pace in his later films. As far as Hepworth was concerned, a straight cut between two shots caused an unpleasant jerk and a fade was much gentler.⁵⁹ As Andrew Higson rightly points out, by 1924 such opinions about cinema were 'the product of the film culture of the 1910s' or possibly even earlier than the 1910s, but Hepworth clung to them vigorously.⁶⁰

The language used by Hepworth and others to describe his studio and working methods is also very similar to that which has been used to discuss the films which his company produced, and in particular those which Hepworth himself directed. The description of his films, again by *Pictures and Picturegoer*, as 'representative of English thought, ideas and character' echoes the rural description of Walton and his ivy-covered studio.⁶¹ Higson has been particularly prominent in considering the work of Hepworth as a director, and the output of his studio more generally, as representative of a certain type of 'Englishness' in relation to his discussion of the British heritage genre where he concentrates upon later picturesque dramas like *Comin' Thro' the Rye* (1923). For Higson, heritage

films are set in the past and have an emphasis upon the physical attributes of antiquity such as costume and sets, using predominantly Victorian and Edwardian novels as source material. What defines such dramas as heritage films is the way they articulate, much as the Hepworth studio did for its visitors and Hepworth did himself in his autobiography, 'a nostalgic, pre-modern, semi-ruralist sensibility'.⁶² Discussing Hepworth's 1903 adaptation of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, Higson refers to the film as 'quaint' and full of 'Home Counties respectability',⁶³ while he notes that '[c]ontemporary descriptions of films such as the *Thames River Scenery* series of 1899 stress the pictorial beauty of the image. They also present England as picturesque, semi-rural and of historic interest'.⁶⁴ These descriptions again bring to mind those of the studio penned by visiting journalists.

Such arguments are the basis of the ambiguous place that Hepworth occupies in British film history. For many years he was considered by the trade to be the finest that Britain had to offer, while at the same time his films were criticized for their atavistic tendencies. As Low suggested, 'He proceeded aloofly on his own lines. It is hard not to conclude that the great regard in which he was held by the trade and by much of the British film public was more a tribute to his personal integrity than to any great vitality in his work'.⁶⁵ *Variety*, which had no reason to hold Hepworth in any regard, savaged *Comin' Thro' the Rye* by saying 'it is just as much a picture as the average English production was back in 1912. They haven't advanced a bit'.⁶⁶ Higson has argued that Hepworth was defining his own type of essentially British cinema with his old-fashioned ideas, but to *Variety* Hepworth's style did nothing but promote the idea of Hepworth being a poor filmmaker whose stylistic development had frozen in the early 1910s, which, ironically, is also categorized as a period of stylistic non-development.

The overall implication is that in the face of an industry which was growing ever more industrialized and professional, initially through developments by companies like Pathé and later Vitagraph, Hepworth, the gentleman amateur British producer, faltered both aesthetically and economically; clinging to the past, unsure and inadequately equipped to deal with increasingly complex filmmaking requirements and commercial pressures. Aldo Bernadini draws more broadly on the prevailing idea of the gentleman amateur suggesting that the enthusiastic amateur pioneer was the first generation in the film business and that he fell foul of the second generation, bankers and businessmen who were 'interested in the cinema for profit'.⁶⁷ Hepworth agreed, arguing in 1918 that:

[o]ur art has been hampered in the past by the tyranny of the business man. The producer has worked with the fear of the sales manager in his heart, where he should have been inspired only by the strength of his personal idea and the joy of artistic creation.⁶⁸

Despite this we must nevertheless reconcile the image of Hepworth the amateur pioneer with his role as the managing director of a company that, through adapting to circumstances, operated more or less successfully for twenty-five years. Likewise we cannot consider his company and product in such a way as to disavow the fact that production was independent from, but linked to, the industry, and so should be considered separate to, but not isolated from, market forces. By taking this approach it is possible to demonstrate that there *were* changes taking place at the HMC. As I shall show, Hepworth was adapting, refining and developing all aspects of his business, from film content to the industrialization of his studio and his interaction with the market. A more detailed analysis of that market and of one company's place within it allows for a consideration of what it was doing and how, in the light of these efforts on Hepworth's part, a decline still took place.

Periodization and Early British Cinema

Before commencing it is necessary to address the often-difficult problem of periodization. As stated above it is my intention to focus primarily upon the period from 1904 to 1911, which was a crucial time of change in the industry. But in order to do so, especially with regards to how these changes affected the HMC, it is also necessary to look back into the years before 1904, specifically to the formation of Hepworth and Co. in 1899, and to look forward into the years after 1911 at Hepworth's role in the revival. The reason for this is that although the majority of the argument of this book draws upon events taking place in those key eight years, it is reductive to suggest that they can be isolated from events taking place before and afterwards, nor that any kind of historical study can justifiably delineate hard boundaries from one year to the next, when historical events are far more porous. In this respect I agree, to an extent, with André Gaudreault who, in attempting a redefinition of the parameters for the historical study of film, refers to the notion of periodization as 'the great debate' and 'the Achilles heel of traditional film historians'. He takes Lewis Jacobs politely to task for dividing the chapters of his book *The Rise of the American Film* by specific years that implicitly suggest that

‘empirical reality should conform to the dates of a calendar’ and argues that it is imperative to base any form of periodization on ‘a true analysis of the issues at stake’.⁶⁹ He then goes on to do just that, drawing upon his previous work and marking the year 1908 as a transitional point between what he calls the ‘system of monstrative attractions’ and the ‘system of narrative integration’.⁷⁰

Ironically, in taking the trouble to point out what he sees as inherent problems associated with the very idea of periodization, he then defines a model which is more or less ubiquitous in early cinema studies in which 1907–1908 is seen as a key period of transition. In addition to Gaudreault these include Noel Burch’s concepts of primitive and institutional modes of representation, Kristin Thompson’s pre-classical and classical cinema, and Tom Gunning’s cinema of attractions and cinema of narrative integration.⁷¹ Similarly volumes one and two of *The History of the American Cinema* are split by the year 1907,⁷² while John L. Fell and again Kristin Thompson, have considered the state of film narrative in 1907, a year they see as representing the cusp between early cinema and the burgeoning classical narrative.⁷³ More recently Charlie Keil has made a case for the importance of what he calls a transitional period in America, which he considers began in 1907, the years up to 1907 being pre-transitional.⁷⁴

This 1907–08 split invokes the hegemony of Griffith’s narrative style in the study of early film, 1908 being the year in which he started making films at Biograph. Griffith plays a central role in the consideration of early cinema as a linear history of narrative development toward the conventions of Classical Hollywood. Such examinations of early cinema concentrate upon developments in film language such as close-ups or matches on action or direction, charting their course from early cinema, through Griffith, and beyond. This, however, overemphasizes the importance of Griffith and his innovations. Barr’s suggestion, which opens this introduction, that British pioneers gave up their pioneer spirit and ‘stopped exhausted’, is based upon the opinion that the HMC’s *Rescued by Rover* was ‘a clear precursor of the short films made by D.W. Griffith’, because it was ‘a visionary model of economy in filmmaking’.⁷⁵ For Barr the significance of *Rescued by Rover* is that it anticipated the narrative advances of Griffith, which would go on to define narrative cinema. Not only did it prefigure the way in which popular film would come to be constructed for audiences, it was also one of the most popular British films of the time, a confluence of evidence which leads him to ask why Hepworth and the other British filmmakers did not continue

on this path, leaving it instead to Griffith to create the language of cinema. Here Barr is offering a retrospective account of history, informed by the knowledge that the kind of stylistic innovation which Griffith accomplished would develop into the paradigm of the dominant classical narrative system, but such an approach is problematic for a number of reasons; two in particular. First, it fails to recognize that Griffith's style developed several years after *Rescued by Rover* was made, and its influence came later still, and so there is no reason to assume that *Rescued by Rover* was successful because of the way in which its narrative was constructed. Secondly, because it would become the dominant form, Barr's account gives preference to Griffith's particular use of film language and dismisses the cinematic styles that ultimately did not predominate in the same way as the system of representation that Hollywood developed from Griffith. Around the same time that Griffith started working at Biograph for example, France and Italy saw changes in film structure, albeit in a very different form, with the rise of Film D'Art and Film D'Arte, taken up in Britain by Gaumont with its English Art Films. While these ultimately did not contribute to what would become the dominant form of narrative cinema, they did have a far greater influence on British production, particularly in relation to the revival in 1911, with their focus on famous actors in significant dramatic works. Thus while retrospectively Film D'Art and its influence on British producers like Gaumont, followed by Will Barker and Hepworth might be considered unsuccessful, nevertheless in order to objectively analyse their impact, it is important to examine them not with hindsight but within their original context.

To do this it is therefore equally necessary to recognize that British and European/American production did not undergo parallel changes, and so this standard model cannot be unproblematically applied to the history of British filmmaking. For example, drawing upon Keil, Burrows has attempted to apply it to British cinema by suggesting that although the 1907–08 model stylistically stems from a discussion of American films, it is nonetheless suitable for British cinema because 'although Keil's [transitional cinema] takes American cinema as its sole reference point, many of the economic and cultural developments which underpinned the transitional era in the United States were experienced in Britain as well'.⁷⁶ Burrows' claim is that the economic growth undergone by the British industry, beginning in 1907, justifies the application of this model, principally because the rise of the penny cinemas echoed the emergence of the Nickelodeons in the USA, and also the industries in both countries