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Book Review: Brian McFarlane (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of British Film*, 5th edition (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021)

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Brian McFarlane (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of British Film*, 5th edition (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), pp. 968, ISBN: 978-1526159267, £133.20

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In his introduction to the first 2003 edition of *The Encyclopaedia of British Film*, editor Brian McFarlane states that the purpose of the book is ‘to fill a gap’ and function as the ‘first port of call for anyone wanting to pursue an interest in British cinema’ (p.xix). Looking back from the perspective of 2021, some eighteen years later and a further four editions published, it would be fair to acknowledge that the encyclopaedia has successfully addressed a gap in the market for a comprehensive reference book on British cinema. The encyclopaedia is an impressive undertaking in itself, spanning over 6,000 entries across nearly 1,000 pages with the latest, fifth edition, adding a further 350 entries. British film scholarship has long challenged François Truffaut’s quip that ‘British’ and ‘cinema’ were incompatible, and McFarlane’s encyclopaedia is an ever-expanding testament to the rich, diverse and fascinating history of the medium in Britain.

The fifth edition includes expected entries on film stars, well renowned studios and genre overviews, yet there is an emphasis, as laid out in McFarlane’s initial introduction, to include a much broader range of figures involved in British cinema, including ‘character actors, cinematographers, producers, editors, costume and production designers, special effects technicians, sound recordists and continuity personnel’ (p.xxiii). Such an approach shifts the emphasis in British filmmaking away from the singular presence of the auteur director or film star. Instead, the collaborative nature and often overlooked contribution of the wider film crew is given much needed prominence. However, as the encyclopaedia omits film entries there is a need to have significant prior knowledge of British cinema to find certain individuals. The drawback of such a process is that it lacks the exploratory potential of online databases like IMDb where one can seamlessly click through a film’s cast and crew with further links to their filmography. Despite this technical limitation, it does not negate the encyclopaedia’s positive role in providing specific entries for influential, but often overlooked, figures.

For film scholars there is plenty of interest to be found in the encyclopaedia, particularly in terms of the reference entries for specific organisations, movements and genres. For example, an entry dedicated to the Free Cinema Movement of the 1950s provides a succinct overview of its ethos and output, while the entry on Horror manages to squeeze a useful historical and thematic overview into one page. The thematic index is of great help in navigating the wide range of topics addressed. For the intrepid researcher these entries are valuable primers on specific topics, providing an effective entry point that opens further avenues of exploration, particularly within the encyclopaedia itself via relevant references italicised in the text. The fact that the encyclopaedia has been compiled via contributions from a ‘who’s who’ of British film scholarship, including Melanie Williams, Charles Barr, Bruce Babington, Kevin

Brownlow, Steve Chibnall, James Chapman, Jeffery Richards, and Sue Harper, to name just a few, provides an authoritative weight to the publication.

In terms of the entries themselves, there is an engaging balance between succinctly conveying information and breezy quips that both liven up proceedings and often provide greater insight. For example, an entry on the director Mike Hodges and his most famous film *Get Carter* (1971) suggests ‘to realise its merits, one has only to consider the dire Hollywood remake’ (p.377). On Cliff Richard’s short lived film career the entry amusingly concludes ‘whenever his name is invoked today it is inevitably with a heavy sense of post-modern irony; except of course by his ever loyal (mainly) female fans, like the two middle-aged women reported as sleeping eight nights in a car to ensure being first in the ticket queue for his 2002 Bournemouth performance’ (p.680). Aside from the encyclopaedia’s obvious informative value, there is an addictive pleasure in simply leafing through its ample pages and reading up on whoever springs to mind.

To fully chronicle over a century of British cinema into one publication is an impossible task and inevitably choices must be made around inclusion. Where the encyclopaedia feels most lacking is in reflecting the emerging contemporary talents of British filmmaking. While publication deadlines have likely led to the omission of outstanding upcoming British directorial talent, such as Mark Jenkins, Shola Amoo and Rose Glass, it is disappointing to see the likes of Clio Barnard, Yann Demange, Francis Lee, Peter Strickland and Joe Cornish missing from the list despite their critically and commercially successful work over the last decade. This reality stands in contrast to the first edition’s commitment to include new film-makers ‘where signs of real interest and promise have been discerned’ (p.xxiii). Furthermore, the fifth edition’s rightful inclusion of prolific international film, television and stage star Tom Hiddleston makes the exclusion of his contemporaries Daniel Kaluuya and John Boyega all the more jarring.¹ In a moment where issues of equality, inclusivity and cultural representation are at the forefront of British film and television, it would be desirable to see the encyclopaedia more actively promote some of the figures and voices challenging the often privileged status quo of the medium.

This said, the latest, fifth edition of *The Encyclopaedia of British Film* remains an impressive piece of work and the result of an ongoing, exhausting amount of research into British cinema’s long and illustrious history. There is plenty of value to be found in its 6,000 entries, particularly to early career researchers and those in search of short, incisive references, overviews or bibliographies to begin their projects. There are however noticeable absentees when it comes to some of the more contemporary figures working in British cinema. This is reflective of limitations inherent to a static publication, particularly in contrast to digital resources capable of constant updating,

but also representative of a selection process that is weighted to established, historical entries. Yet, to flick through its vast entries offers its own kind of pleasure, one that potently reminds us of the endless avenues left to explore in British cinema.

Note

¹ Boyega himself has had made powerful statements about the cinema's lack of diversity and wider issues around racial inequality (Famurewa, 2020).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Reference

Famurewa, J. (2020) 'John Boyega: 'I'm the only cast member whose experience of Star Wars was based on their race'', *GQ Magazine*. Available online: <https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/culture/article/john-boyega-interview-2020>.

