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***Underground*, Dir. Anthony Asquith, London: BFI, 2013, DVD and BluRay, black and white and tinted. 94 mins. Catalogue number: BFIB1036. £19.99.**

Reviewed by

Simon Goulding
(Independent Scholar, UK)

For all the presence and effect that the Underground has on the daily life and image of London it would at first glance seem that it has been somewhat under-represented on screen. Yet an examination of British Film Institute records shows that at least 45 feature films as well as television series (mostly *Doctor Who*) have been set on the system. The conceived purpose and recognised role of the Underground is the simple function of moving people from A to B. Beneath the streets it is out of sight and therefore beneath our sense of recognition as a place of fictional drama. As any commuter knows, and as Richard Dennis's paper at the 2013 Literary London conference ably demonstrated, real life can be more than enough. While the Underground has a well-established and deserved reputation for graphic representation, it has not always been accorded quite the same attention as a dramatic stage.

Anthony Asquith's 1928 film *Underground* – recently restored and reissued on DVD and Blu-Ray by the BFI National Archive – was the first feature film to be made on the system. The son of former Prime Minister Herbert Asquith, he had made one previous film. The story itself is typical of the period; billed as a story of 'ordinary workaday people' it is a basic love triangle. Bill, an underground porter, and Bert, an electrician at Lots Road Power Station, fight for the attentions of Nell, a shop girl. Kate, a seamstress who lives in the same boarding house as Bert, becomes entangled in the three-way relationship. Accusations are made, punches are thrown and a shot-for-real fight across the roof of the power station is the climax of the film. The story itself is basic. What makes *Underground* distinctive is that it is shot on the platforms of the Northern line at Waterloo as well as on the streets, in the parks and at the

power stations of London to portray the working class and that it reflects British cinema's willingness to learn from European cinema to create a syntax of its own.

The London Underground that is featured in this film is the one that we know and yet don't recognise any more. The crowds on the platform, the multiplicity of the posters over the walls, carriage etiquette and the driver's eye view are all there. The man reading over another's shoulder, the fight for seats, the non-verbal communications we employ are all present. It is also an underground with the station signs that we recognise (the Johnson typeface was introduced in 1916) but the Northern line map is a basic vertical line drawing which ends at Golders Green and Archway, and there are porters at the bottom of the escalators in full livery to guide passengers. Harry Beck's map of the underground is still five years away; Frank Pick's reign at London Underground is only just beginning but Charles Holden has begun his design programme. A new era has begun.

In cinema a new era is also dawning. *The Jazz Singer* was released the previous year bringing sound to cinema. The following year Alfred Hitchcock would make *Blackmail*, the first British sound film. Oscars were first awarded in 1928. The previous year F.W. Murnau had made *Sunrise* while Sergei Eisenstein's *October* and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* were making their way across the world. It was the apotheosis of silent cinema and the beginning of sound. Asquith therefore made a film that sits at a crossroads both culturally, visually and architecturally; how then does it fare as a piece of cinema?

The story may be rudimentary in *précis* but then so are the novels of Patrick Hamilton. The boarding house scenes are reminiscent of his work, a London of the lonely paying weekly rent for basic furnished flats. For the men who live in these places drink and chasing women provide a means of escape; for the women there is the solo drudgery of piece-work. The pub culture of London is available, as Hamilton notes, only for the barmaid and the prostitute. Kate is neither. Trapped in a small room at the top of the house she is a prisoner of the room and the life she leads. Bert offers her a small chance of escape. Her happiness at this possibility, of 'love' and marriage, is ultimately tragic. Asquith always carefully films her room in an expressionistic style. The lighting creates prison-like bars across the wall; Bert's face is in shadow when he makes his offer of marriage to her. We know that the man is no good. Her pleasure when out shopping after her proposal is tinged with pathos, a knowledge that this is not going to end well. When Kate does realise that Bert has betrayed her Asquith gives the actress, Norah Baring, a very long close-up of her psychic disintegration. It is a tough scene to watch, the unflinching camera offering us no escape from the betrayal that this woman has experienced. It suggests a psychological depth that Asquith could have continued to explore.

Nell is a shop girl, a familiar type in fiction, but in *Underground* she seems to be a new representative of the model. As we have seen from the opening scenes on the tube she is a smart, sassy, confident professional. She is perhaps more casually dressed behind the counter than previous generations of shop girls but this does not make her casual in her work. What attracts her to Bill is his respect for her as well as his position. When he is wrongly accused of forcing himself on Kate she stands by

him. Now dressed in black she stalks the streets of London like a be-skirted ninja in an attempt to discover the truth of what has happened and to save her man.

Interestingly, less depth or subtext is accorded the men. Bert is a 'rotter' and Bill a good bloke. Bert likes a drink and a pretty girl to hang around with, and he may not be that good at his job. Bill may like a pint but for him love is the thing, and he is popular and capable at his job. As the final scene suggests this is something his managers eventually realise. The men are physical presences, part of an everyday London that exists beyond the familiar sights of the capital, of which there are few in the film. The men are part of the working city that undergirds London as capital and seat of empire: the power worker and the transport worker: heroes of Soviet cinema – and Asquith was a Communist sympathiser – now given a presence, if not quite yet a character, in British cinema.

Asquith had helped establish The Film Society in 1925 and *Underground* reflects a growing awareness of other film cultures. Soviet realism is reflected in the use of working-class characters and scenes focusing on the everyday working practices of the principals. Eisenstein montage techniques are employed, and German expressionism is freely used within the film. The climax of the film, a fight across the roof of Lots Road Power Station and into the tubes lines below, may play like an anglicised version of *Metropolis* but is none the worse for it. There is some use of the chiaroscuro that Lotte Eisner suggests as a key element of Expressionism, and there are some attempts at freeing the camera from the tripod, the unchained camera of F.W. Murnau brought to London. Strange, elongated shadows and light-play offer a vision of the city and its spaces as venues of unseen and half-understood sexual tensions. The stage-bound traditions of British filmmaking are here challenged and subverted, the flat planes of sets broken by strange lighting effects or by the movement of the crowd.

Asquith borrows but he borrows well. This is the strength and the weakness of *Underground*. Apart from Hitchcock he would have no other serious competitor working in British film during the 1920s. The Hitchcock comparison is the problem. Asquith may have watched the German films; Hitchcock got to make them. Asquith borrowed, Hitchcock invented. Asquith would continue to make at least one film a year for the rest of his life but they would lose the edge of *Underground* and become staid representations of Oscar Wilde plays and Terrence Rattigan dramas. The well-made play would become the well-made film. They are excellent in their own way, but they are also studio-bound pieces with re-creations of London streets built on sound stages at Denham. Technicolor brilliance and studio artifice has replaced black-and-white realism and location verisimilitude.

The BFI set comes with the usual excellent extras. There are cab shots from 1910 on the Metropolitan line. Do check out the arrival into Uxbridge, scenes of nightlife on the lines in the late 1950s and short promotional films about the Central line extension in 1948. As with the recent BFI release *Wonderful London* this offers a chance to see a city that has now gone. *Underground* is also an opportunity to witness a cultural form in development and to recognise a talent that could have offered so much more.

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