

Kissing and Killing: A Short History of Brighton on Film

- Frank Gray

On 1 July 1896 Robert Paul presented a programme of around ten films at the Victoria Hall, King's Road, Brighton, a small venue which was opposite the West Pier. Paul was Britain's first commercially successful filmmaker and his show of what were then called 'animated photographs' appeared here daily for the next five months. These one-minute films, all made by Paul, were almost all produced on location. Here were moving images of London, work, leisure, transportation and a national sporting event, the Derby. For this Brighton show and to provide it with a sense of place, Paul made a one-shot local 'actuality', *On Brighton Beach*. It depicted children paddling, a beachcomber and a pleasure boat on the beach at low tide between the West Pier and the Palace Pier. This film appears to be the first to be made in the town and the first of the town to be commercially exhibited. Thanks to Paul, Brighton emerged on film for the first time wearing its familiar and established face as the pleasurable seaside resort.

After 1896, Hove quickly became a centre for early film production. The leading producers George Albert Smith and James Williamson used various locations in Brighton and Hove as sites for dramas and comedies in their films from 1897 to 1912. They also filmed everyday scenes such as the Volk Railway in 1897 and 'Professor' Reddish diving from the West Pier in 1902. Although some of these early films captured a seaside atmosphere of frivolity and play, many were of a serious nature not conditioned by Brighton's tourist identity. This is true of such Williamson films as *Fire!* (1901) and *The Departure and the Return of the Soldier* (1902). Their studios made films for a growing European and American film

market and made Hove, in this pre-Hollywood era, an important part of this new international entertainment industry.

The Hove studios came to an end by the outbreak of the First World War and were followed around 1950 by an attempt to establish a film studio in Brighton. Unfortunately, the optimistically named Brighton Film Studios could not rise above the production of B features and advertisements and closed in the early 1960s. Brighton and Hove's history as a significant centre of British film production is therefore relatively short, but the use of Brighton as a location for feature films made by American and British film companies is substantial and distinctive.

Over fifty feature films have been made either in or about Brighton. They range from films made exclusively in the town to those that have represented the town by studio sets and others which have used a mixture of Brighton locations and studio sets. A few of the Brighton films only feature a single Brighton sequence, but all of these films have contributed to popular understandings of Brighton's history and its character. Brighton appears as the day-trippers' paradise (*Carry On at Your Convenience*), as a sensuous and decadent Regency playground (*On a Clear Day You Can See Forever*), as a metaphor for Britain at war (*Oh! What a Lovely War*), as possessing a dangerous underworld (*Brighton Rock*) and as a battleground for rival youth cultures (*Quadrophenia*). The Brighton depicted in these fiction films becomes a site for extreme emotions and conflicts found within narratives that are always set either on the seafront or at the Royal Pavilion. The everyday world of



• *Brighton Rock* (1948): a town of corruption and violence.

Brighton, the Brighton as lived behind the seafront by its residents, has little or no part to play in these 'big-screen' identities. In fact, it can be argued that these Brighton films are not about Brighton at all, as they are vehicles, contrivances, for the expression of popular anxieties, concerns and desires. As such, they transcend the specificities of place and particular histories and become projections of what could be described as a national unconscious.

The Pleasurable Resort

Carry On at Your Convenience (1971) celebrates the joy of the day-trip to Brighton, epitomising that Brighton identity which revels in unrestricted play. Since the arrival of the railway in the 1840s and the commercial development of the Brighton seafront, the day-trip became not only feasible but also attractive. The visit was characterised as one of liberation, leaving the familiar and the ordinary in order to enjoy the pleasures and excesses of the English seaside resort. In *Carry On at Your Convenience* the management and staff of a lavatory-manufacturing company enjoys a work's outing to Brighton. They step onto the Palace Pier, and in doing so enter a carnivalesque world of drinking and ribaldry. Like that dream of the never-ending party, this *Carry On* film embodies the hedonistic delights to be found at Brighton. However, the pleasures of irresponsibility soon come to an end. The Brighton sequence concludes with the visitors

boarding their coach so that they can return to home and work and resume 'normality'.

The purity of this Brighton *Carry On* experience is actually found in very few of the Brighton films. In *Bank Holiday* (1938), *Genevieve* (1953) and *One Good Turn* (1954), the promise of the perfect Brighton experience is present at the outset, but complications arise which prevent it from being fulfilled. In *Bank Holiday*, Catherine (Margaret Lockwood), a nurse, arrives with her lover in the imaginary seaside town of Bexborough, which has been closely modelled on Brighton. His hope is that it will be a passionate weekend spent at the Grand Hotel, but they spend their first night sleeping on the beach and then she places her professional duty above pre-marital pleasure and returns to London because of her concern for the welfare of man who has recently lost his wife and child. She succeeds in preventing his suicide by not being seduced by 'Dr Brighton'. However, Brighton does cast its spell over her partner (John Lodge). As the film closes, he hardly notices her departure as he begins to enjoy the new company of a beauty queen from Fulham. In *Genevieve*, the McKims (John Gregson and Dinah Sheridan) intend to enjoy the drive and to stay at Brighton as part of the veteran car rally, but arguments and misunderstandings produce a crisis: they have to spend the night at a guesthouse instead of the grand Metropole Hotel. In *One Good Turn*, Norman (Norman Wisdom) is desperate to see the sea. 'I want to see to sea!' he cries. But on being presented with the winner's cup for the walking race, he faints and is carried off to an ambulance. Norman's simple wish is not to be fulfilled. Unlike the *Carry On* scenario and the experience of actual visitors, these films represent a very untypical experience of Brighton: the inability to find pleasure in the pleasurable resort. This contradiction provides them with their drama, period charm and gentle humour.

Pavilion Affairs

Before the Second World War, feature films were largely made in the studio. For example, *Bank*

Holiday did not employ any location shooting except for a few establishing shots. The use of locations within feature film production is a phenomenon that started to become more prominent during and after the War. This occurred because of the experiences many filmmakers had in working with 'real' places and people in the course of making documentaries. *The First Gentleman* and *Brighton Rock*, two Brighton films which both date from 1948, are very good early examples of this new interest in designing films for particular locations.

The First Gentleman was the first feature film to use the Royal Pavilion as a location. It initiated not only a history of films using Brighton's most famous building, but also the use of the Pavilion as a site for dramas devoted to either romance or troubled relationships. *The First Gentleman* was directed by Alberto Cavalcanti and made largely at the Nettlefold Studio at Walton-on-Thames. The film focuses on the Prince Regent (Cecil Parker) and his relationship with his daughter, Princess Charlotte (Joan Hopkins). She is desperate to marry Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg (Jean Pierre Aumont) but her father refuses to allow the marriage to proceed. His intention is that her marriage should be arranged, enabling it to have a political function. The Prince Regent's rejection of her desire to marry for love, and not duty, creates a rift that is not resolved until the concluding sequences. The tragedy of this drama is that she eventually does marry her beloved but then dies in childbirth, which leaves the Prince Regent without his heir.

The Brighton sequence is set within the Pavilion and out of doors on the east lawn. Throughout the film, the Prince Regent is presented as bumbling, vain, frivolous and utterly inept as a parent and a future King. Dressed to represent a Chinese Emperor in a dragon robe, he confronts his 'rebellious' daughter at dinner in the Banqueting Room. The sound of the people can be heard outside. They shout out in protest, revealing their anger with the Prince and what he and his Palace represent. The film's use of the crowd in this manner was very appropriate, since the years 1815 to 1817, which is roughly the period in which the film was set, were a time of

mass public unrest produced by a range of repressive government measures, including the suspension of Habeas Corpus and the creation of the Gag Acts.

In the film, the shouts of the people suddenly turn to cheers. The Prince steps outside to ascertain why the mood has changed. The reason is that Princess Charlotte is now waving to the crowd from the balcony on the first floor. The film presents Charlotte as a new spirit who will distance herself from her father's selfish exploitation of his position and his wealth. As a critique of the excesses and repression of the Regency years, one can argue that the film not only celebrates Charlotte but also her determination to challenge her father and his values. As such, *The First Gentleman* prepares the ground for the arrival of Victoria, her first cousin, to the throne in 1837.

The musical *On a Clear Day You Can See For Ever* (1970) was made at Paramount Studios in Los Angeles, with location work in New York and Brighton. It was directed by Vincente Minnelli, one of the great post-war figures in Hollywood. Known for his MGM musicals, this film united Minnelli with two major collaborators: Alan Jay Lerner and Cecil Beaton. Lerner wrote the screenplay, adapting it from his original stage play and Beaton created the costumes for the English sequences. *On a Clear Day* is set in contemporary New York with reincarnation as its fantastic and improbable subject. Daisy Gamble (Barbra Streisand) is hypnotized and begins to reveal her past life as Miranda Wells in Regency England. These sequences were shot in April 1969 on the Pavilion's east lawn and throughout the interior, including the Music Room, Saloon and Banqueting Room. This contrast between the present and the past enabled intriguing contrasts to be established between a familiar New York of the late 1960s and an exoticised and eroticised Brighton of the early nineteenth century.

The ornate splendour of the Chinese-inspired Banqueting Room of the Pavilion provides the setting for Miranda's seduction of Robert Tentrees (John Richardson). By gesture and eye contact during the formal dinner, the couple

begin to convey their passion for each other across the dining table. On the soundtrack, to complement their arousal, Streisand sings:

My dearest love who existed in a dream to this evening,
 When a wave came and swept me out to sea,
 None of the loves that you have known could prepare
 you for
 The love raging everywhere in me.
 For all the arms that have covered you,
 The hands that have touched you,
 When the lips you have lingered on before,
 Added together would be less than an olive in the
 banquet of love I have in store.
 Love, Season to entice.
 Love with all the trimmings, filled with spice.
 Love, flavour to your whim,
 Served piping hot with all the trimmings.

In this magical world of the Prince Regent, where Beaton was responsible for the exaggerated and delightful costumes, this song's baroque lyricism brings a camp sensibility to an imagined Brighton. Unlike *The First Gentleman*, this is a film that presents the Regency world as an adult playground free from all complications. However, Daisy does wake up from her hypnotic trance and returns to the present. The sensuous and seductive Brighton with its dream-like Pavilion is returned to her unconscious. Her Brighton becomes an illusion created by Minnelli, Lerner and Beaton.

Emotionally and conceptually, Neil Jordan's *The End of the Affair* (1999) is a very different film. An adaptation of Graham Greene's novel of 1951, it is set in London during the Second World War and follows the affair that Maurice (Ralph Fiennes) and Sarah (Julianne Moore) cannot sustain. In a grey, dark and claustrophobic London, she turns to prayer for salvation and he becomes certain of the impossibility of love. After a period of separation, they are re-united for a final encounter. This takes the form of a trip to Brighton, an incident not found in the novel. Bathed in sunshine, they play on the Palace Pier and kiss as they stand on the shingle and consider marriage and children. However, cruelly and tragically, this happiness ends very abruptly as Sarah begins to cough.

Unlike the bright, seaside light found on their arrival at Brighton, the darkness in their lives now returns. That evening they attend a concert at the Pavilion, which Maurice refers to as 'this huge folly to impossibility'. The possibility of pleasure evaporates as Sarah's husband (Stephen Rea) arrives to inform them that Sarah is dying of cancer. Jordan's film presents Brighton as providing Maurice and Sarah with a brief respite from the pain that they are ultimately not allowed to escape. Michael Nyman's haunting and moving score underlines this sense of loss and sadness which cannot be overcome by the fleeting visit to the seaside. The presence of a private detective in this film, who is employed to gain photographic evidence of Sarah's adultery, connects *The End of the Affair* with that set of Brighton films which deal with the so-called 'divorce racket'. At a time when a divorce was a complicated and expensive legal procedure, incriminating events were sometimes staged in order to secure the necessary evidence of adulterous behaviour for the court. Other Brighton films of this kind include *The Gay Divorcee* (1934) and *Under Suspicion* (1991).

Crime Town

The representation of Brighton as a town of crime is the predominant feature in a history of Brighton on screen. This set of films, which includes *The Brighton Strangler* (1945), *Brighton Rock* (1948), *Jigsaw* (1962), *Mona Lisa* (1986) and *Circus* (2000), depicts a town of corruption and violence which seriously conflicts with Brighton's tourist identity. In the 1930s Brighton acquired a reputation as a town of villains and razor gangs who flourished in pubs, clubs and on the racecourse. A number of sensational crimes were largely responsible for creating this impression. In 1928, Ernest Friend-Smith was kidnapped while walking along Madeira Drive and taken to the Downs where he was badly beaten and robbed. He died soon afterwards. In 1934 a trunk was found at Brighton Station which contained a woman's torso. The legs were later found in a suitcase at King's Cross Station. Soon afterwards, and as a result of a separate

crime, another woman's body was found in a trunk. These two appalling crimes were unrelated but the 'trunk murders', as they were called, created great media attention and public interest. In the popular imagination, Brighton had now transgressed from being the Queen of the Watering Places to the Queen of the Slaughtering Places. The important fact is that Brighton's actual crime figures across the 1930s reveal the town to have had a relatively moderate level of crime. Across the decade, only six murders took place and most of the other offences were associated with gambling. The truth was that Brighton was not then, and has never been, a crime town.

After the real crimes, Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock*, has probably played the most significant role in the creation of this dark and dangerous identity for Brighton. The novel was published in 1938 and followed by the film version of 1948. In the screen version, Pinkie Brown (played by Richard Attenborough), is the young, alienated gangster who is tough, angry and disturbed. He demands obedience from his gang and uses violence to ensure that his 'clients' pay on time. Those who cross him, such as Fred Hale (Alan Wheatley), are murdered. In the film, the sequence shot on location depicting Fred Hale's last hours is one of the most iconic in British cinema. Using both camouflaged and moving cameras with fast cutting and low angles, Fred's run is set within everyday, contemporary Brighton. From Market Street up to the Station and then down to Church Street and the Palace Pier, Fred fails to escape from Pinkie's Brighton. He is finally killed by Pinkie while they travel together on the aptly named fairground ride, Dante's Inferno. Pinkie, the murderer, emerges from the ride and shows no remorse and no guilt. Greene's Pinkie is designed to embody evil. He cannot be saved by either his wife Rose (Carol Marsh) or his gang, or by the police. Only his eventual death protects Brighton and society from this teenage monster.

This raw, uncomfortable Brighton, with Pinkie at its core, was found by many to be highly disturbing and a threat to Brighton's reputation. A typical response stated, 'The film will circulate

throughout the kingdom, and no power can suppress or even retard the inevitable impression of hundreds of thousands of viewers who have never yet visited Brighton that the town is a hotbed of thuggery and corruptness'.¹ In the novel, and to a lesser extent in the film, a clear connection is made between crime and poverty. However, by 1938 and the publication of the novel, some of the worst jerry-built Victorian housing in the centre of the town had been demolished and inner-town regeneration continued into the immediate post-war period. This transformed streets such as Nelson Place, which Greene had used as the site of the tenement home of Rose and her parents. What Greene referred to in the novel as Brighton's 'shabby secret behind the bright corsage, the deformed breast' was beginning to disappear.² Greene later admitted, 'I must plead guilty to manufacturing this Brighton of mine'.³ His novel and his screenplay brought murder to a place known for pleasure, providing his uncomfortable and tragic narrative with this central and powerful contradiction. Pinkie and Rose, Greene's two working class teenagers, become outcasts because they do not and cannot conform to society's rules. In many respects their damaged lives can be understood, not by reference to the Brighton setting, but by locating them within a generation which was shaped by the First World War and the Depression.

Brighton's Wars

Death is also present in Richard Attenborough's return to Brighton as a director, with *Oh! What a Lovely War* (1969), which had as its subject Britain's involvement in the First World War and its tragic mismanagement. In this ambitious and imaginative anti-war musical, the lives of ordinary soldiers are placed in sharp opposition to the fantasy world of the military establishment. Brighton, and specifically the West Pier, represents this imagined Britain which has become painfully removed from the consequences of its actions. In the context of the radical ideas and anti-war protests of the 1960s, this film directly challenged those who claimed



• *Quadrophenia* (1979): the Mod life creates a sense of purpose.

that this was a just and necessary war, making *Oh! What a Lovely War* a provocative and confrontational work.

Quadrophenia (1979) addresses a very different kind of conflict through its depiction of rebel youth in the 1960s. This film version of The Who's 1973 concept album is a celebration of the Mod life, a working-class teenage subculture which was an important part of the wider and emerging youth cultures of the 1960s. Set in 1964, at its centre is the story of Jimmy the Mod (Phil Daniels). He and his fellow Mods use their free time to escape from parents and unsatisfying, alienating jobs. The Mod life creates a sense of purpose through the shared, male experience of parties, women, drugs, scooters, music and trips to Brighton. Being a Mod creates an identity through which there is escape from convention and restraint. The film contrasts London and Brighton. The London sequences represent weekdays, parents, jobs and all of the

other frustrations faced by the anarchic Mods. The Brighton section conforms to the pattern found in so many other Brighton films in that it presents the liberation from these familiar routines. Brighton therefore represents, in this instance, that place where you can really be a Mod.

1964 represented a key year in Mod history because of the violence which broke out between the Mods and that other tribe, the Rockers, during the Whitsun Bank Holiday weekend of 17 and 18 May. The *Evening Argus's* headline was, 'Battle of Brighton. Mods let fly at the Rockers in fierce seafront clashes. Fifty arrested.' Terrific violence broke out on the seafront between the Piers, but there were no major injuries. This event, like the trunk murders, returned Brighton to the nation's front pages and created once again an unwelcome identity for the town. The film used this historical event as its point of reference and staged its beach battle in the

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original location. In *Quadrophenia*, the Mods' victory over the Rockers and the Brighton Police confirms their sense of purpose and identity. It becomes an act of youthful anarchy that signifies a threat to conventional and respectable behaviour. Brighton, in this case, provided a stage for this war of youth cultures.

Bank Holiday disturbances at Brighton continued into the early 1970s, involving what the local press referred to as Mods, Rockers, Skinheads, Greasers and Beatniks. These challenges to law and order provoked hostile reactions in the Brighton press from an older generation who were committed to the preservation of good manners and good behaviour. This era of beach battles was relatively short-lived but the spirit of being part of a youth tribe in Brighton continues to this day and is found every weekend in clubs located in and around the seafront.

On and Behind the Seafront

Alongside the Brighton identities found in these commercial feature films, there are other sources of moving images of Brighton that provide this history with both complementary and contrasting imagery. Newsreels are one significant resource. The Pathé Company, for instance, produced news items about Brighton from the 1920s to the 1960s for inclusion in its newsreel programmes for cinemas across Britain. These newsreel stories depicted not only the pleasurable resort but also historical events such as the Prince of Wales at the dedication ceremony of the Chattri War Memorial in 1921, the electrification of the mainline railway in 1933 and the presentation of the Honorary Freedom of the Borough of Brighton to Winston Churchill in 1947. From 1945, Pathé also documented Brighton's political identity, through its role as host to political party and trade union conferences.

Television programmes have been made in Brighton since the 1950s but this is a limited history as the town has never been a centre for television production. Television fiction and non-fiction material includes episodes of *Eastenders*



• *Mona Lisa* (1985): Brighton as a sanctuary.

and *Coronation Street*, as well as documentary portraits of Brighton's gay culture. Very little of this history of broadcasting is available for public viewing, a fact which seriously constrains our ability to understand Brighton's place within television. More recent years have seen the production of publicly funded short films set in Brighton. An excellent example of this development is Andy Heathcote's *Sound Like Sunlight* (1997), his portrait of St Dunstan's Institute for the Blind. Films of this kind provide emerging filmmakers with much needed professional experience and signal a new regional commitment to invest in film training and production.

Screen Archive South East, part of the University of Brighton, collects, preserves and provides access to moving images made in the region. Its Brighton collection of amateur and professional material not only reflects life on the seafront through family holiday and publicity films but also presents life behind the seafront. Here are found films of wartime, the Railway Station, weddings, schools, life at home, the Coronation of 1953, ice hockey, carnivals and Brighton Festival. In conjunction with CINECITY, the Brighton Film Festival, the archive is actively involved in promoting a collection of new short films made in the city.

However, in spite the existence of these moving images of the everyday world behind the seafront, it is the 'imagined' Brighton found in the feature films that will always have the greatest cultural impact. This highly charged Brighton commands attention because it is

intense, complex and dynamic. As we begin the twenty-first century, filmmakers continue to find Brighton an attractive site for kissing and killing stories which can be staged in front of the ever-changing beauty of the sea and sky. For instance, Paul Andrew Williams' *London to Brighton* (2005) is an impressive debut feature, but in terms of its representation of Brighton, and especially the narrative relationship between London and Brighton, it follows a very familiar pattern. Williams' film has a close kinship with Neil Jordan's *Mona Lisa* (1985), since both films first present Brighton as a sanctuary – a place of refuge for women escaping from the criminality

of London – and then as a site of conflict between the women and their male oppressors. In both cases, the dialectic is very obvious – beautiful Brighton provides the stage for an ugly confrontation.

Notes

- 1 Letter, *Brighton Herald* (17 January 1948), p. 6. See also: Maire McQueeney, *The Brighton Rock Picture Book*, Brighton: Dining Table Publications, 1999.
- 2 Graham Greene, *Brighton Rock* (1938), Penguin, 1970, p. 140.
- 3 Graham Greene, *Ways of Escape*, Vintage, 1999, p. 78.