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Author(s): Jon Burrows

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‘A Vague Chinese Quarter Elsewhere’: Limehouse in the Cinema 1914–36

Jon Burrows

Introduction

To help ‘set the scene’ for this essay, I will begin with an interesting example of self-reflexive cinematic scene-setting. The film in question, *Betty Chester the Well-Known Co-Optimist Star Singing ‘Pig-Tail Alley’*, is a sound short produced in Britain in 1926 using the DeForest Phonofilm system. It begins with the conceit of an off-screen voice telling Betty Chester, a musical comedy performer famous for her association with a long-running stage revue called *The Co-Optimists*, that she has accidentally wandered onto the wrong set. Chester finds herself in front of a backdrop representing a dingy side street in the East End dockside district of Limehouse. Forced to scrap her planned performance and come up with a new song that will suit the location, Chester thinks aloud about what material would be most appropriate. ‘I must do something about Pig-Tail Alley and Chinamen and dope and all really sinister things like that’, she says.

This is a telling demonstration of a point which Charlotte Brunston stresses in her recent book on *London in Cinema*: that ‘all cinematic geographies are generic’, whatever their connection to real locations (2007: 96), and that in such generic spaces ‘certain characters can be found and certain narratives take place’ (ibid.: 149). The association between setting and genre is particularly pronounced where Limehouse is concerned in the inter-war period; for its capsule summaries of the week’s new releases, one film industry trade paper used the term ‘Limehouse Melodrama’ to define what was clearly seen as a distinct cycle of relatively formulaic productions (*Kinematograph Weekly* 1925a). Limehouse melodrama is essentially a form of sensational melodrama, and, as Betty Chester makes clear, its trademark ‘sinister’ thrills are derived from the fact that Limehouse

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was where London's original 'Chinatown' was situated – a label which was first used to characterise the area, following the sporadic growth of its immigrant population of Chinese merchant seamen over ten decades, at the dawn of the twentieth century (Choo 1968: 18).

In several of the films which belong in this category, the requisite melodramatic villain is effectively Limehouse itself. *A Girl of London* (1925), for example, begins by outlining certain qualities of 'London, the flower of cities all', before it introduces any of its human characters. Its prologue comprises a sequence of actuality views of London landmarks (all of which are identified by Maurizio Cinquegrani, elsewhere in this issue, as historically privileged icons of the imperial city), accompanied by descriptive titles. There is, for example, a silhouetted shot of Tower Bridge ('Splendid') and a view across the River Thames of St Paul's Cathedral ('Imposing'). But this inventory is followed by an image of the 'Sordid' side of London: an East End slum. The main protagonist of the film, Peter Harriman (Ian Hunter) is self-consciously characterised as epitomising the faults of what would shortly come to be known as the decade's 'Lost Generation'; an intertitle describes him as part of the crowd of 'wild young post-war pleasure chasers ever in search of a new thrill'. When Peter and his equally irresponsible female cousin Vee Vee (Nora Swinburne) tire of the 'tame' West End nightclub scene, they try out the ultimate 'new thrill': a visit to a Limehouse opium den. Peter's 'dope' experience triggers a chain of narrative events leading to the imprisonment of the wife who has tried to redeem him in the same Limehouse haunt. As he rescues her in the film's climax, the den burns to the ground. Its destruction immediately lifts the curse of ennui and moral dissolution hanging over Peter. There is no logical explanation as to why anyone might confidently feel that he has permanently found the sense of purpose and virility he so conspicuously lacked before, but his father declares that 'There's a new London before you, my boy – a London you've found.' The cleansing reinvention of the city itself is symbolised by the final shot: a reprise of the opening image of glorious Tower Bridge.

A substantial body of socio-cultural historical analysis has been produced in recent years to explain why Limehouse's Chinatown was so feared, vilified and obsessively revisited by journalists, novelists and film-makers in the 1910s and 1920s. In part, it was a troubling space by virtue of the perception that it compromised the sacred binary divisions of East and West, and jumbled the centre and the extreme peripheries of Empire together; 'so that what had been remote was now inwrought... the Orient's signature found in the very blueprint of a

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London neighbourhood, in all its architecture and arrangement' (Case 2002: 22). Anxieties about a 'Yellow Peril' contaminating the imperial capital did not become widespread until the First World War, however. Lucy Bland has charted the emergence of new forms of cultural paranoia about miscegenation in the postwar era, and she attributes it to 'the legacy of the wartime liberalisation of gender roles and relationships, and the relatively large increase in numbers of resident men of colour' (2005: 30). It was popularly imagined that Limehouse acted as the main physical site of pollination between these two phenomena. Concerns about the hedonistic and libertine behaviour of young women in wartime partly motivated the criminalisation of opium and cocaine possession in July 1916. When it came to both the traffic in drugs and the traffic in immigrant men, all roads seemingly led back to Chinatown. Marek Kohn explains in his history of the moral panics over female drug use in the 1910s and 1920s that:

It did not especially perturb the British that the Chinese among them liked to gamble, or that they smoked opium. What they feared was the ability of the Chinese to attract white women; the dangers of the other vices were seen to lie mainly in their capacity to aid seduction across the racial divide. . . . The principal theme of the British discourse upon its Chinese communities in the first quarter of the twentieth century was the intrinsic evil of sexual contact between the races, and its issue. (2001: 57)

The prevailing methodological priority within modern scholarly analysis of this discourse has been to systematically discredit its evidentiary basis by problematising the very concept of an empirically mappable Chinatown in Limehouse. Shannon Case's study of the literary construction of Limehouse stresses the point that 'the maps that emerge . . . remind us that place can be invented and made to signify' (2002: 22). John Seed argues that, contrary to contemporary newspaper estimates, the resident Chinese population of Limehouse probably constituted no more than a few hundred people at the very peak of its density in the 1920s (2006: 68); he is equally insistent that when it comes to the charting of this Chinatown 'we are dealing with an imaginary cartography, which projects onto the real cityscape its own shadowy ideological antagonisms and fears' (ibid.: 76).

Peter Stanfield has employed a complementary interpretive strategy in examining the cinematic incarnations of New York and San Francisco 'Chinatowns' in interwar Hollywood crime films. He emphasises how the concept of 'Chinatown' is discursively constructed as 'a *symbolic* space: in America's racially polyglot cities "Chinatown"

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functioned as an imaginary place in which dominant cultural definitions of racial and ethnic difference could be produced, contained and policed. Thus the location of “Chinatown” needs to be examined more fully to understand it as a *fabrication*’ (2005: 257).

Clearly, one could produce a comparable reading of the strategies used to make sense of modern urban space in a Limehouse melodrama such as *A Girl of London*. However, in my view there are very distinct factors which affected the distribution and reception of movies with a Limehouse setting within British film culture, which complicate the issues at stake and need to be prioritised.

The analysis which follows will show that the construction and consumption of the cinematic Limehouse was significantly shaped by (a) various policies for regulating controversial film content practised by the British Board of Film Censors and local councils, (b) important shifts in the status of film as a recognised form of art in the immediate postwar period, and (c) the profoundly transnational character of Limehouse imagery. I am alluding here to the fact that some of the most important and influential Limehouse melodramas were either Hollywood productions or films made by German émigré directors. I will argue that these issues served to create a context of film viewing in which acknowledgement of the fabricated and artificial character of the cinematic mapping of Limehouse’s ‘Chinatown’ was actually widespread and, in several respects, a precondition of mainstream circulation.

*‘Hullo Daddy! . . . I’ve had some cocaine’. (Intertitle in
Cocaine (1922))*

Given that the very first representations of Limehouse in the cinema—*A Chinese Vengeance* (1914), *London’s Yellow Peril* (1915)—were loosely inspired by Sax Rohmer’s hugely successful 1913 novel *The Mystery of Dr. Fu-Manchu*, it comes as a great surprise to find that two British serials adapted by the Stoll Film Company in 1923 from Rohmer’s initial trilogy of Fu-Manchu novels—*The Mystery of Dr. Fu-Manchu* and *The Further Mysteries of Dr. Fu-Manchu*—never once mention the name of Limehouse (or ‘Chinatown’). Each episode generally identifies its London locations with fastidious precision, but the marked reluctance to specify Limehouse settings (despite the fact that Fu-Manchu establishes lairs there on a cyclical basis in the early books) reaches a surrealistic peak in ‘The Man with the Limp’, the eleventh episode of the first series. Fu-Manchu’s operatives are

tracked to the Joy-Shop, a Chinese gambling joint-cum-opium den by the Thames. Although this is clearly located in Limehouse in the corresponding episode of Rohmer's *The Si-Fan Mysteries* (1917), the Joy-Shop we see on screen is situated in a semi-rural, verdant spot, connoting a location 'up river'. The incongruity creates a somewhat fantastical effect.

Such coyness suggests that the exploration of this territory on screen was subject to particular constraints. Playing down the connections between Fu-Manchu and Limehouse might actually be considered a prudent strategy in light of certain indirect associations that could be made between Sax Rohmer's villain and a notorious drugs scandal which had recently inspired national outrage.

On 6 March 1922, 21-year-old West End nightclub dancer Freda Kempton died from a cocaine overdose. The case aroused considerable and prolonged newspaper interest when it emerged that she had been an intimate associate of 'Brilliant' Chang, the manager of a Chinese restaurant in Regent Street, who was also alleged to have supplied the cocaine that killed her. Chang, his drug dealing and his relationships with young white women, became the focus of obsessive press scrutiny and speculation. Marek Kohn has persuasively argued that his media characterisation as the 'Dope King' who controlled London's drug traffic through a vast conspiratorial network was directly informed by the fictional model of Fu-Manchu (2001: 128–31, 173).

Stoll's policy of disavowing even nominal links between Rohmer's 'Yellow Satan' and any of London's real Chinese immigrants was probably guided in part by the controversy occasioned by a more opportunistic British film released two months after Kempton's death.¹ *Cocaine* tells the story of Madge Webster (Flora le Breton), a young girl from a sheltered background who is introduced to the racy culture of a West End nightclub, 'The Limit', by Jenny O'Hanlon (Hilda Bayley), a former school friend who has become an actress and cocaine addict. The elegantly dressed Chinese manager of the nightclub, Min Fu (Ward McAllister), supplies the cocaine to Jenny and his other female patrons. He obtains it from a Limehouse dealer called Lo Ki (Tony Frazer) – a deformed hunchback, who is clearly intended to represent the 'true' face of the Chinaman lurking behind the debonair façade of his associate. Fu has lascivious designs on Madge, though she instinctively flinches from his attentions on her first visit to 'The Limit'. But she is subsequently induced to sniff cocaine and immediately lowers her defences, welcoming Fu's attentions and permitting his caresses. She is saved from ruination by a police raid and takes refuge

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in a chapel next door, where Jenny dies an agonizing death from a cocaine overdose.

As this account should make clear, *Cocaine* presents a hysterically emphatic moral message. (At one point, there is an extended sequence of cross-cutting between scenes of dancing at ‘The Limit’ and the interior of a seedy opium den in Limehouse to illustrate the infection of the West End by the East End and the levelling of the normal racial hierarchy). Nonetheless, the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) judged it unfit for public circulation. The trade press reported that the BBFC President T. P. O’Connor ‘makes no criticism of its method, alleges no indecency nor, as far as we can understand, does he assert that it would tend in any way to inspire the drug habit in anyone witnessing it’. The objection made was that the subject matter was straightforwardly ‘unsuitable’ for popular screen entertainment, in that ‘it tends to familiarise the public with a vice confined to an inconsiderable minority of the population’ (*Kinematograph Weekly* 1922a). This was consistent with actions that the BBFC took in the aftermath of an earlier British drugs tragedy that attracted the interest of native film-makers. A couple of months after the 22-year-old West End musical comedy actress Billie Carleton died from some (disputed) combination of cocaine and veronal on 27 November 1918, a two-reel drama called *The Case of a Doped Actress* was produced, telling the very thinly fictionalised story of ‘Bobbie Barton’ (*Film-Renter* 1919). It was another scandal with a Limehouse/miscegenation angle that was duly worked into the film: Carleton’s associates regularly bought cocaine from a couple in Limehouse, Lau Ping You and his Scottish wife Ada, and Carleton visited Chinatown to take opium on one documented occasion (Kohn 2001: 78–9). This production was also refused a certificate by the BBFC (Robertson 1985: 186).

Further insight into the issues at stake in these decisions is made possible by the fact that the BBFC sought Home Office advice concerning their decision to reject *Cocaine* and the relevant correspondence has been preserved. After a private screening of the film, two Home Office representatives agreed that it should be refused a certificate on the grounds of its ‘sordid character’ and the fact that it would ‘create a morbid interest in the use of cocaine’ (Harris 1922). To the great consternation and embarrassment of the government and the censors, the local authorities in Cardiff and Manchester subsequently elected to ignore the BBFC’s decision and passed *Cocaine* as fit for general exhibition. Cardiff’s Lord Mayor wrote to the Home Secretary, Edward Shortt, explaining that his Chief Constable considered the film so remote from the realities of everyday life in that district (‘There are

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no Night Clubs of the type to be found in London') that it seemed to him entirely harmless (Taylor 1922). But one outcome of Cardiff's actions demonstrates the degree to which Limehouse films like *Cocaine* ran into conflict with both the most conservative and also the more liberal principles which informed BBFC policy. T. P. O'Connor's 'Code of Censorship' included as one of 67 grounds for rejecting a film 'scenes calculated to inflame racial hatred' (O'Connor 1922a). At the end of May 1922, Low Hing, a Chinese resident of Cardiff's dock district, wrote to the Chinese Consul General in London complaining that *Cocaine* was

an insult to the Chinese people, also they have newspaper cuttings of the dancing girl [Freda Kempton] and Mr. Chang's photo. outside [the cinema] and over all the newspaper cuttings they have written in blue lead: READ THIS FIRST THEN COME AND SEE THE FILM. and the picture of the Chinaman is put very ugly and leering and I think such pictures should be banned everywhere as this same picture was banned in London. (Hing 1922)

The Chinese Consulate forwarded a copy of this letter to the Home Office, who then brought it to the attention of the local authority. A Cardiff police inspector investigated and compiled a report which noted that the newspaper cutting pasted on the front of the cinema had 'caused considerable annoyance to the local Chinese residents'; he interviewed Low Hing, who reiterated his principal concerns about the cutting, and also objected that 'the Chinaman depicted in the film selling Cocaine is an ugly cripple' (Davies 1922). The Chief Constable consequently retracted his decision to pass *Cocaine*.

The specific impact of these controversies upon the screen treatment of Limehouse was considerable. A letter from T. P. O'Connor to the Home Secretary reveals that a further four films inspired by the Kempton-Chang case had been planned in its immediate aftermath, only to be abandoned following the proscriptive stand that was taken on *Cocaine* (O'Connor 1922b). The intensification of the BBFC's vigilance in this area is reflected in the fact that when its 'Code of Censorship' was revised into a list of 73 types of prohibited content in 1926, it added injunctions against 'equivocal situations between white girls and men of other races' and representations of opium dens (Robertson 1985: 180–2).

The refusal to countenance certain subjects, irrespective of the form of treatment they received and without regard for the fact that such subjects might gain continuous lurid coverage in the popular press, was based on the supposition that moving pictures made a vividly

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direct, visceral appeal to the senses rather than the critical faculties. T. P. O'Connor continually asserted in annual reports and published statements of principle that the realism of the medium and its capacity to confuse distinctions between representation and reality created 'fundamental differences between the cinematic and other dramatic arts'. One might suggest that the cross-cutting between Limehouse and the West End in *Cocaine*, which aims to demonstrate the transgression of boundaries between realms that should remain distinct, epitomised the basic representational problem with such a film: it seems to have been assumed that moving images of sordid scenes in the East End brought the region into too close a proximity to the rest of the country.

O'Connor's favourite example of the clear distinction between modes of signification in the theatre and the cinema was the supposed fact that 'even the most ardent passion on the stage can be conveyed by the good actor or actress in the simple words, "I love you"; on the screen the same emotion must be expressed by some form of action' (1922a). The only exceptions that O'Connor would allow when it came to the principle of representing behaviour which breached the codes of law and social propriety were flagrantly exotic 'costume' films 'such as cowboy films and Mexican robberies, [which] are placed in a different category and regarded simply as dramatic and thrilling adventures with no connexion whatever with the lives or possible experiences of young people in this country' (1920). The fact that one of the most influential and successful films released in Britain during this era was a Limehouse-set story of the love of an opium-smoking Chinaman for a teenage white girl—namely D. W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (1919)—was contingent on the way in which this picture was seen to both redefine the relationship between stage and screen and to render Limehouse as an Americanised 'costume' fantasy with precious little connection to the realities of British life.

*'Kinematography beyond dispute at long last becomes an Art'.
(Kinematograph Weekly 1920a)*

It is, on the face of it, faintly miraculous that a film adapted from 'The Chink and the Child', one of the stories in Thomas Burke's 1916 collection *Limehouse Nights*, should have been deemed not only suitable for general release in the UK but also universally acclaimed as 'a really great picture play that lifts the art of the screen to a level it has not yet attained' (*The Cinema* 1920). The book was originally turned down by a dozen publishers, who thought it 'too shocking'; it was prohibited by a

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number of circulating libraries for its perceived immorality, and there was serious talk that Burke might face prosecution under the 1857 Obscene Publications Act (Witchard 2005: 164, 171). As Anne Witchard suggests, the challenge presented by Burke's work to contemporary readers inhered in its persistent representation of miscegenation as a fact of Limehouse life unworthy of moral indignation, and also because the picture it presented of the social co-habitation of whites and Chinese in the slums of Limehouse

undermined utterly the foundations of English culture by destabilising the Englishness of its institutions. Burke's portrayal of a hybrid East End where teenaged Cockney girls eat Chow Mein and Chop Suey with chopsticks in the local caffs, blithely gamble their house-keeping money at Puck-a-Pu and Fan Tan, burn joss-sticks in their bedrooms, and ritualistically prepare opium pipes in the corner pub, was the reason for the ban by Boots and W. H. Smith, whose policy was not to stock books that were salacious or corrupting. (Witchard 2004)

The challenge offered by D. W. Griffith's film to cinema audiences was arguably even greater. Working in a medium subject to much tighter regulation than literature, Griffith actively accentuated Burke's fondness for turning conventional values on their heads. In a departure from 'The Chink and the Child', *Broken Blossoms* straightforwardly inverts the logic of imperialism by presenting its tragic hero Cheng Huan (Richard Barthelmess) as a Buddhist missionary come to enlighten the 'barbarous Anglo-Saxons' who live in brutish ignorance in the 'jungles of East London' (none of these ironies being at Huan's expense). One incident invented for the film satirises a Christian missionary about to set sail for China, to 'convert the heathens' there by distributing pamphlets about 'Hell'. And in its materialisation of Burke's vaguely sexual-cum-lavatorial metaphor for the opium den Huan frequents as a place 'where the Orient squats at the portals of the West', *Broken Blossoms* embellishes the prose description considerably. It becomes a 'scarlet house of sin', where white women gaze wistfully at lascars and negroes smoking hashish, and a lingering close-up shows the face of a solitary woman in the throes of an opium trance, panting heavily and licking her lips. Her sexual suggestibility is underlined by the sight of the grinning Chinese character Evil Eye (Edward Peil) moving his chair closer to that of another white girl behind her.

But potential outrage over *Broken Blossoms* was (mostly) sublimated into veneration by the qualities of its cinematography, acting and distribution campaign—all of which were recognised as highly

innovative. Russell Merritt has noted that ‘For a time, *Broken Blossoms* vied with *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* as the ultimate example of the art film’ in the US (1993: 19). Because of a postwar embargo on German films, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* was not screened in the UK until 1923, so Griffith’s film alone represented ‘as high a point of development as has so far been reached in the art of the moving picture’ (*The Bioscope* 1920a). The most obviously avant-garde quality of *Broken Blossoms* was its unprecedented use of soft-focus photography. This was celebrated both for the way that it imparted a textured, painterly quality to the image, and also because of the degree of contemplative, aesthetic abstraction from reality which it permitted; as the British pressbook put it, this ‘marked departure from the old style of motion-picture photography... has opened new vistas of the possibilities of the screen. [Griffith] is able, by the deft magic of his art, to throw over certain of his scenes a mystic aloofness that has all the fine quality of a Whistler etching’ (Lawson 1920: 1).

Favourable analogies with more established art forms dominated critical responses to the film. One reviewer suggested that ‘Mr. Griffith has employed pictures as a poet uses words to express ideas and sentiments... The tale progresses with the measured gait of verse’ (*The Bioscope* 1920a). Direct comparisons with the theatre were most common, though—in contradistinction to the BBFC’s view of the gulf between the two arts. Lillian Gish’s characterisation of Lucy, the abused teenage girl Huan falls in love with, prompted *The Times*’ critic to claim that ‘we have seen nothing on the English stage of the same kind since Mr. Dennis Eadie’s grim performance’ in a legendary 1910 production of John Galsworthy’s *Justice* (*The Times* 1920a). Another writer’s comment that *Broken Blossoms* was ‘the nearest approach yet to spoken drama’ inspired its distributor FBO to arrange for a special matinee performance for 40 leading drama critics, so they might ‘test the qualities of [the film] as a dramatic vehicle’ (Lawson 1920: 3).

The marketing of *Broken Blossoms* as an experience comparable to a night out at the theatre was more pointedly underlined by means of its initial pre-release screenings and various presentational accoutrements. FBO hired the Scottish theatre critic Robb Lawson to mastermind these arrangements. For its first six weeks in the public domain, a roadshow mode of exploitation was adopted: the film could only be seen at the Alhambra Theatre of Varieties in Leicester Square—with the cheapest seats costing nearly eight times the price of a regular cinema ticket—in emulation of the way that a new play would receive an exclusive West End run before touring the provinces. A variety of special arrangements were made for both

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the screenings at the Alhambra and most of the subsequent first-run engagements at suburban and provincial cinemas. *Broken Blossoms* was not accompanied by any supporting programme, this being regarded as 'the only way by which the film world will emerge from the rut of being a mixed-up show varying from Broncho Billy, Fatty Arbuckle and the ship that never returned' (Haywood 1920). Ushers were dressed in traditional Chinese costume, and the auditoria and foyers were festooned with caged birds and paper lanterns (*Kinematograph Weekly* 1920b). The projected image was bathed in special coloured lighting during performances, and, in the most talked-about departure from traditional showmanship, screenings were preceded by the live performance of a Prologue in an elaborate stage set which featured actors miming a scene in a Buddhist temple in China. Lawson explained the value of this as a means of helping the spectator to become acclimatised 'by imperceptible stages from the world of actuality into the kingdom of shadow dreams', and thus helping to divide the two realms more effectively (*The Bioscope* 1920b: 26).²

There is evidence that some viewers were not willing to make this leap and separate the cinematic fiction from social reality. When the film reached Birmingham, a local newspaper critic received a letter from a female reader in Edgbaston written on behalf of 'herself and friends' which challenged 'in unusually strong terms the claims put forward in regard to the merits of the picture... She describes it as "nothing but the lowest type of sordid drama", and is particularly horrified at the fact that the hero of the story was a Chinaman and the villain an Englishman' (*Birmingham Mail* 1920).

A more coordinated objection to the film was made in a report by an officer in the Women Police Service that was presented to the London County Council (LCC). The author felt that *Broken Blossoms* 'cannot serve any good purpose, [and] may exercise a subtle influence of a harmful nature upon unformed minds'. She was similarly perturbed about the fact that the film gives 'a very bad impression of the British male parent' of the East End working class, but this was not her principal concern: 'What I fear is that young girls may be attracted by the chivalrous Chinaman who worshipped the white girl and did not exact any return of his devotion.' The report recommends that the LCC's Public Health department and 'the Rev. Dempster' should be contacted about the matter, because they 'will be able to tell you a great deal about white girls and coloured men' (Gardiner 1920).³

FBO were sufficiently worried about the possibility of viewers comparing the moral implications of the film to issues affecting the real district of Limehouse that they included a section in their

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pressbook advising exhibitors how they might respond to the question ‘Is Limehouse Libelled?’ (Lawson 1920: 3). This was not a concern raised in the vast majority of published discussions of the film, however, because the consensus view insisted that *Broken Blossoms* presented a Limehouse that was entirely the product of Griffith’s imagination, and as playfully inauthentic as the costumed usherettes and quaint decorative chinoiserie which accompanied its screenings. Edwin Pugh’s judgement in 1917 that *Limehouse Nights* was ‘no masquerade. It is the real London’ (quoted in Witchard 2007: 230) had been widely shared by literary critics, but it was alleged that ‘when *Broken Blossoms* was shown privately, Mr. Thomas Burke saw on the screen a Limehouse like nothing he had ever seen in real life’ (*The Times* 1920b). This was the constant, insistent refrain of the film’s British reviews: ‘the Limehouse shown us on the screen is not quite the Limehouse we shall find if we travel to the East-End of London’ (*The Cinema* 1920); ‘it is not true to life’ (*Kinematograph Weekly* 1920a); ‘the play belongs essentially to no specific place or country’ (*The Bioscope* 1920a); ‘this is a Limehouse which neither Mr. Burke nor any other man who knows his East End of London will be able to recognize’ (*The Times* 1920a). Several commented that ‘the picture would be improved for English audiences if its setting were removed from Limehouse to a vague Chinese quarter elsewhere’ (*The Bioscope* 1920a), urging Griffith to add an opening intertitle to this effect and to delete all specific geographical references (*The Times* 1920a).

The attractiveness of the perceived fantastical vagueness of Griffith’s Chinatown, as a way of negotiating the representational pitfalls of dealing with the ‘sinister’ thrills of Limehouse on screen, is demonstrated by the way in which a British film made a few years later openly declared its indebtedness to *Broken Blossoms*.⁴ The 1923 adaptation of Arthur Conan-Doyle’s second Sherlock Holmes novel *The Sign of Four* added a sequence set in Limehouse that has no pretext in the original source. The interpolated material begins in a set which bears more than a passing resemblance to the ‘Pennyfields’ where Cheng Huan lives. Children of different races dance in front of a Chinese hurdy-gurdy man while a toothless black woman claps along. A young female ‘copper’s nark’ (one of Thomas Burke’s favourite character types) is told to scarper by police before they raid a bar in which whites and Chinese drink and dance together, and prostitutes occupy the upper floors. One might see this as a very apt contemporary setting for a story centrally concerned with the way that sins of past colonial plunder come back to haunt the mother country, but a promotional feature on the making of the film disavowed any interest

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in presenting authentic local colour. It explained that the 150-foot-long set which had been built

does not represent Limehouse as one would actually find it down east; it is more the Limehouse of 'Broken Blossoms'—the Limehouse as imagined by D. W. Griffith. The real Limehouse is more squalid than picturesque; the most prominent features of London's Chinatown are the narrowness of Limehouse Causeway and Pennyfields and the dreary sameness of their bricks and mortar. So this fragment, which is to be fraught with thrills on the screen, has been fashioned differently. The buildings, instead of being all alike, are all different; instead of being practically characterless they each have a character of their own; and although there is only one archway in the whole of real Limehouse—and that at some distance from the Chinese quarter—there are two archways in this set. . . . Maurice Elvey, who is producing this big film play, gives some interesting reasons for the difference. 'To film the sort of scenes we want to film in the real streets of London's Chinatown,' he says, 'would be to court all sorts of trouble; but quite apart from that, the results would look most unconvincing on the screen. D. W. Griffith has provided the whole world with an idea of Limehouse which would make the genuine article almost ridiculously commonplace, and so, perforce, we must follow more or less in his footsteps . . . It's a very quaint position, really, when you come to think of it, that Griffith should be able to make Limehouse so completely what it isn't that no one else can now make it what it is'. (*Kinematograph Weekly* 1922b)

The reception of each subsequent film derived from the work of Thomas Burke helped to avoid the 'sorts of trouble' to which Elvey alludes by judging their respective Limehouses to be equally remote from reality. When Griffith himself adapted two further stories from *Limehouse Nights* to make *Dream Street* (1921), he followed the advice of his British critics by discouraging comparison with the genuine Limehouse in an opening title card: 'Dream Street – Some may say London – Limehouse, Poplar or High Street – but we do not claim any of these.' One reviewer highlighted 'the little rustic arbours which lean against the tumbled doors in a sordid slum' as evidence of its fairytale character (*The Bioscope* 1921). *Curlytop* (1924), which was very loosely based on a story in *Whispering Windows: Tales of the Waterside* (1921), was seen as having 'reproduced the "Broken Blossoms" screen convention of Limehouse atmosphere, which although officially based on Thomas Burke's stories, bears about as much relation to actuality as the Sheik tradition does to Africa and Arabia' (*Kinematograph Weekly* 1925b). *Twinkletoes* (1926), adapted from Burke's 1917 novel of the same name (and with an opening sequence clearly derived from the

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‘Gina of the Chinatown’ story in *Limehouse Nights*), was seen to offer ‘A typical screen Limehouse’, in that the setting was ‘depicted in rather unbelievable colours’ (*Kinematograph Weekly* 1927b). The fact that all of these films were Hollywood productions made it easy to refute any suggestion of authenticity, but the same verdict was also bestowed upon the only British silent film to be based on a Thomas Burke story. *London* (1926) boasted a scenario specially written for the film by Burke, and featured Lillian Gish’s sister Dorothy in the leading role. It was perceived to offer the familiar Limehouse ‘of the studio’ (*Kinematograph Weekly* 1927a), and even the fact of its Britishness was seen as open to dispute, with one critic suggesting that the film seemed to ‘savour very much of Hollywood’: the London ‘which we are shown, is hardly familiar, but it presents scenes with which we have become familiar in a type of production, and which, we may presume, have calculated possibilities for audiences on the other side of the Atlantic’ (*The Cinema* 1926).

Similar reactions also greeted Limehouse melodramas that had no direct derivation from Burke’s writings. The most famous of these, the 1929 Anglo-German co-production *Piccadilly*, could be conveniently discredited as an inauthentic representation of Limehouse on account of the German nationality of its director E. A. Dupont. As one critic put it: ‘unfortunately Herr Dupont has not troubled to accurately reproduce these phases of London life, nor is he sound in familiar detail’ (*The Cinema* 1929). Although the script for *Piccadilly* had been written by an English literary giant, Arnold Bennett, commentators saw his version of Limehouse as wholly generic; where Bennett normally took ‘so much material for description’ from ‘the world’, the ‘waste lands’ of Limehouse only referenced ‘the world of the films’ (*The Times* 1929). By this interpretation, the cinematic Limehouse is a purely self-reflexive and hermetic space

The nearest that any Limehouse film passed by the BBFC came to being positioned, by design, as a conduit for topical concerns about the real Limehouse was when *Broken Blossoms* was re-released shortly after the death of Freda Kempton (the timing being possibly more than a matter of coincidence). An advertisement for the reissue featured a line drawing of Richard Barthlemess staring ahead with an inscrutable expression, and with his hand, posed unnaturally like a claw, gripping a Chinese tobacco pipe of the type often popularly confused with opium pipes—as, indeed, they are in the ‘scarlet house’ sequence of the film (*The Bioscope* 1922). In this one ephemeral publicity image, there is a cynical ‘disclosure’ of Cheng Huan’s latent sinister kinship with ‘Brilliant’ Chang.

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Coda: Kristallnacht in Limehouse

Marek Kohn argues that Limehouse began to lose its aura of dangerous mystery at a point in time ‘roughly coterminous’ with the emergence of talking pictures; perceptions of the immigrant Chinese had ‘turned full circle’, he suggests, ‘back to the turn-of-the-century Cockney John Chinaman; a “most peaceable, inoffensive, harmless character”’ – as a famous article by George A. Wade had put it in 1900 (2001: 174). The chronological analogy is undoubtedly a bit too neat, but it is reliably documented that by 1931 the Chinese dockside community was in steep decline following a major slump in shipping business in the area (Seed 2006: 67), and Limehouse as a narrative setting did come to occupy a more marginal positional in the early sound era, typically featuring as a colourful backdrop for routine crime films (for example the serial *The Ace of Scotland Yard* (1929), *Down River* (1931), *Limehouse Blues* (1934)) or even as the subject of parody, as in *Lost in Limehouse* (1933).

The one notable exception to this trend is a 1936 British remake of *Broken Blossoms*, which was the most ambitious production ever undertaken by Julius Hagen’s Twickenham Film Studios. This film affords us the clearest available insight into BBFC attitudes towards the representation of Limehouse because the censors’ scenario reports on two versions of the screenplay have been preserved. It is interesting to find that the district was still regarded as a hugely problematic setting for popular screen entertainment. The film itself actually mocks the anxieties Limehouse once provoked by showing a tour bus (‘See Chinatown by night’ blazoned above its windscreen) visiting the area; one elderly female sightseer is ridiculed for fretting that ‘they say that no white girl is safe here’, and the tour guide wistfully apologises that the area has now been ‘in some slight measure cleaned up’. But Miss N. Shortt’s report on the first script (written by D. W. Griffith himself with the intention that he would direct it) argued that ‘this is a sordid horrible story and in my opinion unsuitable for production as a film. . . . I know the silent version of this film drew numbers of people, but my own experience was that my friends who saw it said to me: “It is horrible, don’t go”’ (1935).

Griffith was subsequently fired from the project in a disagreement over casting (Schickel 1996: 579–80) and a new script written by the actor/playwright Emlyn Williams (who would also play the part of Cheng Huan) was submitted in October 1935. Another examiner, Colonel Hannah, complained of the second screenplay that ‘I am afraid, from our point of view, that the sordid side of it has been

much more prominently exploited' (Hannah 1935b); but he had taken the view in his report on Griffith's script that the story could not be easily prohibited after having been passed as acceptable fifteen years earlier (Hannah 1935a). A variety of cuts and changes were insisted upon, though, including the removal of a setting resembling an opium den and two colloquial references made to castor sugar that were taken as allusions to cocaine. And, in an official ratification of the suggestion urged in 1920 by critics of the original version, the BBFC demanded that all specific references to the location as Limehouse must be removed.

What the BBFC patently failed to realise when they came to examine the finished film was that it had committed a different form of transgression concerning one of the organisation's most sacred creeds in the 1930s: that no allusion should be made to current political controversies. The 1936 version of *Broken Blossoms* was, like *Piccadilly*, very much an émigré production, but under very different auspices. Though its producer, Julius Hagen (né Kleimenhagen), had come to Britain from Hamburg in his youth, the director Hans (later John) Brahm, leading actress Dolly Haas, cinematographer Curt Courant and musical composer Karol Rathaus were all Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany. The rise of fascism in Europe clearly informs their treatment of the subject. Cheng Huan is positioned as the principal tragic victim of the piece rather than Lucy (Haas). In the opening sequence in China, he is told by his English teacher that 'you're a child. You always will be a child', whereas Lucy, the 'child' in the title of Burke's original story, is considerably more plucky and resourceful than she had ever appeared previously, cheerfully opining at one point that 'If you ain't got nothin' it's no use sittin' down and cryin' is it?' When Huan attempts to preach the teachings of Buddha in the streets he is confronted by a hostile crowd who hurl both insults ('Dirty heathen'; 'Send 'im back where 'e belongs', and the like) and brickbats. After Huan serves a prison sentence for causing a public disturbance, a waitress in the nightclub he visits to drown his sorrows does her best to make him feel unwelcome by railing against 'blinkin' half-castes dressed up as Europeans. I can't abide half-castes. I'd sooner drown than marry a person with coloured blood.'

The widespread racism Huan encounters in Limehouse is a marked departure from the film's source texts, and is surely referencing the concerted contemporaneous attempts being made by Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists (BUF) to solicit support amongst indigenous white working-class communities in East London. The BUF had established branch offices in Bethnal Green and Poplar in

1933 and 1934, respectively; Jewish shopkeepers and market traders were repeatedly intimidated and harassed by its members throughout 1935. Mosley would later declare that support for him was stronger in Limehouse than practically anywhere else in the East End, and the Limehouse Mosleyites were felt to be the most willing to undertake acts of political violence (Linehan 1996). When Battling Burrows (Arthur Margetson) learns that Lucy is 'with a chink', he is accompanied in his quest for vengeance by an angry mob who smash the windows of Huan's shop and wreck its contents in an echo of the pre-Kristallnacht smashing of shop windows that accompanied various anti-Jewish riots in Germany—which had been extensively chronicled in the British press (*The Times* 1933, 1935). The film does not end, like its precursors, with Huan committing suicide. The last shots show him praying to a Buddhist idol in his shop as it melts from the flames of a conflagration started by the mob. There is then a dissolve to an image of the giant statue of Buddha seen in China at the start of the film; an optical trick makes it appear as if the latter is itself on fire, only for it to snap into focus, untouched by the flames—symbolising the persistence of a faith that cannot be extinguished through violence.

This film constitutes yet another instance where the intended signifying power of a screen representation of Limehouse resides in the fact that it shows something which has little to do with the 'real' Chinatown of East London—the degree of abstraction partly telegraphed in this case by the extreme stylisation of the crudely plastered and misshapen walls of the sets, which evoke the expressionist production designs of Paul Leni for *Das Wachsfigurenkabinett/Waxworks* (1924). However, we must not lose sight of the fact that the meaning and potential resonance of the 1936 version of *Broken Blossoms* is activated only by acknowledging direct connections with real places and events. As I have shown, concerns about bringing British audiences into too vivid a contact with what was repeatedly characterised as a virulently 'sordid' realm provoked a crisis of regulation concerning films about Limehouse. This was only ameliorated by the beginnings of a shift in perceptions of the medium's capacity to artfully recode actuality and the fact that certain dimensions of the representation of contemporary British life were so effectively colonised by Hollywood during this period as to mean that the image of Limehouse could be seen as another transatlantic import, no more indexically linked to native reality than a western. The cinematic construction of Limehouse was, in part, directly informed by existing literary templates, but it is essential to understand the degree to which it was subject to medium-specific constraints. In this case,

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contemporary commentators' categorisation of the Limehouse they saw on screen as 'imaginary geography' was part of an interpretive strategy intended to avoid and conceal the more troubling implications of representing London's non-Caucasian migrant population via a technology famed for its powers of verisimilitude and magnification.

Notes

1. In his 1925 Limehouse-set novel *Blinkeyes*, Oliver Sandys gave the name of 'Brilliant Chang' to the Chinese villain who lusts after the white eponymous heroine. The book was made into a film of the same name the following year by the British company Welsh-Pearson, but it is worth noting that it rechristened the character as the more generic 'Chang'.
2. A similar strategy for marketing and presenting *Broken Blossoms* had previously been followed in the US (Kepley 1978: 42–5). Arthur Lennig's study of the making of the film quotes archived correspondence from a United Artists employee commenting on the elaborate screening arrangements thus: 'I believe if the picture is properly staged we can make an atmosphere which will make it difficult for anybody to offer criticism of this picture, because no one will want to run the risk of being classed as a low-brow' (1972: 11).
3. In response to this complaint, an inspector from the LCC's Theatres and Music Halls Committee subsequently attended a screening of *Broken Blossoms* at the Alhambra. His report concludes that the 'pretty' treatment of the story in this 'novel film' seemed 'unobjectionable' and stresses that this 'so far as I could judge, represented the feeling of the audience' (Imeson 1920). A BBFC file from the following decade indicates that *Broken Blossoms* was not submitted for review until May 1920 (after its run at the Alhambra ended) and that the version which went on general release was passed only 'after considerable cutting' (Hannah 1935a).
4. The influence of *Broken Blossoms* is also evident in another Conan Doyle adaptation directed by Maurice Elvey. In 'The Man with the Twisted Lip', the second episode of Stoll's 1921 *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* series, Holmes visits a Limehouse opium den to investigate an alleged murder. But in place of the haunt of sybaritic Victorian gentlemen-explorers described in Conan Doyle's original 1892 story, Elvey presents a scene of haggard white women in the company of black sailors. The sizeable impact of *Broken Blossoms* on British popular culture is also evidenced by music hall comedian Leslie Henson's two-reel satirical parody of the film, *Broken Bottles* (1920), and the creation of the classic song 'Limehouse Blues' (which declares its homage in the line 'Poor broken blossom and nobody's child') for a musical number in André Chariot's 1921 revue *A to Z* at the Prince of Wales Theatre.

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Jon Burrows is an Associate Professor in the Department of Film and Television Studies, University of Warwick. He has written numerous essays on different aspects of British cinema in the silent era, and is the author of *Legitimate Cinema: Theatre Stars in Silent British Films, 1908–1918* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2003).