

Thorold Dickinson: A life in film

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Though highly influential, Thorold Dickinson (1903-1984) remains a neglected figure in the canon of British filmmaking and film theory. Undertaking a variety of roles – from directing to editing, supervising films for the Ministry of Information and the UN to teaching film studies - Dickinson's work and interests are wide-ranging, and this diversity is reflected in the Thorold Dickinson Collection held at the University of the Arts London.

Dickinson interrupted his studies at Keble College, Oxford to begin a career in film in the mid-1920s, assisting in the making of silent films with George Pearson. Lending his hand to a number of tasks, Dickinson soon gained a reputation for his creative editing techniques, and between 1936 and 1955 Dickinson directed 13 films including *Gaslight*, and *The Queen of Spades* – important pieces in the history of British cinema. And yet frustrated by the constrictions of the film industry and the lack of emergence of a British art house cinema, Dickinson brought to an end his feature-film career.

During the Second World War Dickinson made a full-length propaganda film, *The Next of Kin*, and 17 military training short films for the Ministry of Information's Army Kinematograph Service. The archives contains scripts, daily progress reports, synopses, as well as notes and plans for these films. The archive additionally testifies to the extensive travelling Dickinson undertook from the 1930s until 1960, through which he developed an extensive interest in the film output of various countries, as well as their respective social and political climates. His 1937 journey to the Soviet Union resulted in the co-authorship of the volume *Soviet Cinema*, and his time in Spain in the mid 1930s produced *Spanish ABC*, a film about the social conditions under the Spanish Republic, a demonstration of his understanding of film as an educational and informative historical source.

The variety of his experiences with filmmaking, together with his intellectual concerns and interests being firmly grounded in an international perspective led to Dickinson's appointment as Chief of Film for the United Nations, a post he held from

1956 to 1960. During this period he supervised the making of a number of UN films on a number of subjects: for example, the Suez Canal, refugee camps, and international relief work. Papers within his archives suggest that Dickinson perceived the medium of film as being invested with the ability to communicate with people universally, beyond the restrictions of language or cultural differences. He understood film as having an active rather than passive entertainment capacity – be it in terms of the audience’s support for a more dynamic and creative national film output, or in terms of the educational capacity of film, a methodology he pursued whilst employed by the UN and continued in his role as Professor of Film.

In 1960, Dickinson began working at the Slade School of Art (London), and became the UK’s first professor of film in 1967, taking retirement in 1973. The multi-functional possibilities of cinema, as both an instrumental medium for the propagation of ideas and an art in its own right, lie at the heart of Dickinson’s pedagogy. This can be seen from the numerous course programmes and programme notes within the collection, which range from national cinema programmes, to courses titles such as ‘The Flexible Camera’ and ‘Subjective Film’. Of particular interest are the courses Dickinson ran in collaboration with the history department at UCL, where AJP Taylor contributed lectures to accompany several courses, for example, ‘War and Revolution in the Twentieth Century up to 1945’. These course programmes are very informative to Dickinson’s approach to film education; in one course Dickinson aims to teach North American history *through* factual and fictional film, where the programme asserts that the course is “not for passive viewing” but “an attempt at communication.” When perusing these programmes for Slade one can see Dickinson’s vast range of cinematic knowledge, additionally reflected in his library collection.

The various angles from which Dickinson approached film are still relevant today. He had an artistic relationship to cinema, but he also saw film as having a socio-political role: the war propaganda films, his films on Spain, Israel, and Africa, and his strong commitment to film education. Dickinson saw the importance of film as an historical document, prompting the creation of the Slade Film History Register, now under the title of the British Universities Newsreel Database at the BUFVC.

The Thorold Dickinson Cinema Collection consists of 18 boxes of his archives, including cinema programmes throughout each decade of his life, papers relating to his work for the Ministry of Information and the United Nations, letters, scripts, notes, press-cuttings and other ephemera. It also contains scripts and treatments for unrealised projects, such as a film called *The Denham Studio Mystery* and a film about India. Dickinson's library is a wonderful compliment to his papers: a collection of approximately 2,500 books and periodicals, topics including the history of cinema, biographies, film theory and filmmaking.

As one of Britain's pioneering film educators, Dickinson's collection has a highly appropriate home at the University of the Arts, where the collection as a whole is open to a variety of uses, each adhering to the principles that Dickinson himself followed: access to film and film related material that is educational without prescription.

Bibliography

Thorold Dickinson: A World of Film, Peter Swaab and Philip Horne (eds). Manchester University Press, 208. Forthcoming.

Thorold Dickinson and the British Cinema, Jeffrey Richards. Scarecrow Press, Inc., Maryland, 1997.

The Thorold Dickinson Collection is held at the Archives and Special Collections Centre at the University of the Arts London, and is open to all researchers. For further details about our collections, please visit our website at www.arts.ac.uk/library/archives.htm, or contact the centre at archive-enquiries@arts.ac.uk, tel: 020 7514 9333