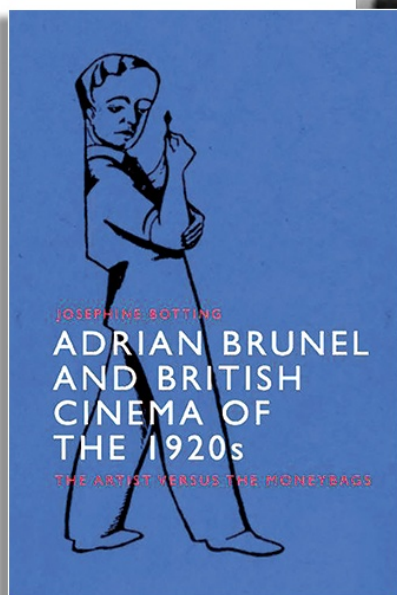


The British Buster Keaton

The career and the films of a forgotten master of satire is ripe for rediscovery says JAMIE BRITTON

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Buster Keaton and Lupita Tovar in Adrian Brunel's *The Invader* (1936) Photo: IMDb

Adrian Brunel and British Cinema of the 1920s — The Artist versus the Money Bags

Josephine Botting, Edinburgh University Press, £85

AS THE title of Josephine Botting's remarkable book suggests the director Adrian Brunel was, throughout his life, fighting the absurdities of British cinema, and especially those that funded it and wanted control of content and profits.

Brunel was born in 1892 in Brighton, but his liberal, anarchic ways soon made him beat a path into film. He directed major silent films for Gainsborough like *Blighty* (1927) and *The Constant Nymph* (1928) along with *The Man Without Desire* (1923) which all made profits and gained glowing reviews.

But the combination of Brunel's stubbornness and his left-leaning view of the world stopped him progressing far. Actions like setting up a Film Society in London with the communist film director Ivor Montagu, showing films such as Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* and *Ivan the Terrible* gave him the reputation within the industry of being highbrow and politically dangerous.

Working with actor Leslie Howard and the writer A A Milne to produce a series of short burlesques that lampooned all and everything was clearly seen as "biting the hand that fed him." *The Bump* (1920) sent up the pompous celebrity culture; *Crossing the Great Sagrada* (1924) spoofed the travel documentary (where Brunel played all the parts), *The Pathetic Gazette* (1928) parodied Pathe Gazette newsreels.

So *This is Jollygood* (1924) highlighted the cheapness of British films whenever they tried to take on Hollywood, while *Cut it Out* (1922) attacked (through humour) all forms of censorship, from the realistic depiction of the horrors of warfare to the kiss on screen. The beleaguered censor in the film ends up by being hit by a speeding train!

When work directing films dried up, Brunel turned to writing books on film and being brought in to fix other people's problems rather than directing in his own right.

He died in Gerard's Cross in 1958.

Botting rightly asks "Why study Adrian Brunel?"

This book gives you the answer. Brunel was a "systematic jackdaw," a man

who wrote "Bonzo the Dog" cartoon films, who could produce the box office smash if asked but, as a left-leaning satirical jester, fought for the arts and was destroyed by commercial conservatism.

After reading this book and rewatching his films you see clearly that Brunel's subversive aesthetic was the forerunner of The Goons and Monty Python.

With the publication of this book these remarkable films are ripe for rediscovery.