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Reference Survey - Walter Murch and Tod Browning

Walter Murch began his career in the late 1960s; although he did groundbreaking work as an editor and sound designer in the decade that ensued, he wasn't exactly a household name, and didn't really become the focus of critical attention until the later 1990s. Since most of the printed references only go to about 1980, there's, unsurprisingly, little to find on Murch. His name did not appear in any of the printed subject indexes, but at least the titles of most of the films he worked on did. These references typically pointed to reviews, but I did find the occasional longer feature story that I might have followed up on if I was looking for material in earnest, although these types of general-interest articles tend not to focus on the technical personnel. This bias is reflected in the subject indexes, which tend to concentrate on actors or directors. Since directors at least merit attention in these guides, another possible avenue for information might be the various entries on Francis Ford Coppola, who, during this period, collaborated with Murch on The Rain People, The Conversation, both Godfathers and Apocalypse Now and is well-represented in these older volumes. However, I fear that trying to tease references to Murch out from these sources might be something of a needle-in-a-haystack search (minus the needle).

The hunt for Tod Browning references in the printed volumes was a bit of a mixed bag, though in this case there were at least references to be found. I suspected that the available references would wax and wane along with Browning's own reputation throughout film history, and found this largely to be the case. His work is reliably represented among indexes to film titles (with Freaks being the most common; curiously, Dracula, the only film of his with anything approaching a popular reputation in 2011, is missing altogether from several of the books!), typically as contemporary reviews. Only a few items from the silent era that were not explicitly related to a particular film directed by Browning showed up in my search (The Film Index proved to be the most valuable source here), the most intriguing of which was a 1917 Photoplay article about the direction of child actors to which Browning contributes some anecdotes.

He made his final film, Miracles For Sale, in 1939 and died in 1962; just after his death a new generation of film scholars found his work and reputation worthy of reevaluation. This trend is reflected in the other, post-1930s references I found to his work, all but one of which dates

from the early 1960s. Many of these are retrospective film reviews, usually of either Freaks (of the 31 citations of that film in The Film Review Index, only 11 date from the time of its release, the remainder are reevaluations many decades hence) or Dracula (whose contemporary-to-retrospective review ratio in that volume is a lopsided 6 to 29!).

The researcher looking for multiple points of entry into Browningiania might review the material on Lon Chaney Sr. in these guides. Chaney and Browning made ten films together in the 1920s and it is almost inevitable that more writing will have been produced on behalf of a famous movie star rather than a somewhat obscure director. I didn't look for Chaney entries in any systematic kind of way, but when I did, I found that the pattern fit my expectations. Searching even further afield, I looked up Universal Studios (Browning's employer for most of his career) and Carl Laemmle, Jr. (head of the studio during that time), finding very many entries, but none that explicitly mentioned Browning in the abstracts. Again, the truly dedicated researcher with time on her hands might be willing to follow these up, but the dangers of wandering into a blind alley are considerable.

Though broadly useful - and, admittedly, I think that they might be of more help in searching a general topic rather than a specific person or film title - I found some of the decisions made in the assembly of the printed resources to be fairly baffling. The Retrospective Index to Film Periodicals perplexingly refuses to include cross-references between the subject index and the book review index, the latter of which is, for some reason, alphabetized by author rather than subject! For example, Alan G. Barbour's biography *Karloff* is found in the book review index under Barbour's name, not Karloff's, with no corresponding cross-reference in the *Karloff, Boris* subject entry; this seems to imply that the editors thought there were more Alan G. Barbour scholars out there than Boris Karloff scholars. The New Film Index, meanwhile, insists on indexing its references chronologically by subject, requiring the prospective researcher to hunt and pick through every line of reference under the subject heading, rather than (say) scan the entries alphabetically looking for a name. Also, that volume's summaries of vague references leaves a lot to be desired - a typical entry:

Vinten, W., and A. S. Newman. "Looking Back." *S&S* 5 (No. 17, Spring 36) 54-46. Two early film-industry figures reminisce. (MacCann and Perry, 159)

Unless a researcher happens to be already familiar with Vinten and Newman, it is impossible to tell if this article is worthy of a follow-up or is superfluous. My hypothetical Browning scholar has nothing to go on with this entry (though the period in question easily covers Browning's active years as a director, there's no indication as to whether he - or anyone

else - is the subject of these reminiscences), or the dozens like it found under the "subj. 46. SILENT PERIOD" heading under which it appears.

By far the best of the printed references was the first volume of The Film Index. In terms of scope of materials covered, comprehensiveness of its indexes and thoroughness of the interpenetration of its various subject categories, it was the only one that I felt could compete with the online search tools. Its back-of-the-book index casts an admirably wide net, greatly simplifying the search for a particular person or film title. The subsequent volumes were somewhat less satisfying, although, due to the nature of my search, their area of coverage would not have been much use to me in any case.

Searching for Browning under the "all text" feature in the Film & Television Literature Index gave up 317 hits, although it's not clear that each one would be of use. For example, link #110 is to George Pocari's review of Michael Almayreda's Nadja in Cineaction magazine, which contains the following sentence:

"In the only shot in the film reminiscent of Tod Browning's Dracula, we see Nadja's castle through streams of emblematic fog." (Pocari, 52)

No other mention of Browning or any of his films is made. Nevertheless, the abstracts at least offer some clue as to whether or not Browning appears as a significant figure or mere minor mention in a given article. The date-range setting was also helpful; out of curiosity, I narrowed the results down to those articles which appeared during the active part of his career and during his lifetime (though I found the process of re-setting this feature to be surprisingly difficult and counter-intuitive). There didn't seem to be much point in covering my bases after the fashion of my print search, since any article about (say) Chaney or Laemmle or Universal containing a mention of Browning would already have been caught in the net of my full-text search (though of course I do have the option of looking specifically for those pairs via a Boolean search).

The keyword search in the Film Index International database seems to be useful here, as, in the case of Browning, it can lead to less-obvious reference; in addition to revealing the list of films he directed, the results point to other credits he received as well (such as his credit for "story" in The Mystery of the Leaping Fish (1916)). Even more helpful is the fact that the site decorates with a small blue star the works in the reference list which explicitly have to do with the subject of your search. Of the string of entries under the reference section for Freaks, for example, six deal with Browning in a significant fashion (as least if the index's method are to be trusted); this simple addition could save the researcher from having to review each and every

piece of material. As with the other databases, there seems to be little point in refining the search when looking for general information; obviously, this might not be the case in other contexts.

The electronic databases' tendency to favor academic, scholarly and professional journals probably accounts for the richness of material on Walter Murch to be found there; as I said, fan magazines tend not to waste ink on technical personnel. While there are some scattered articles from the 1980s, the frequency of pieces increases sharply in the 1990s and 2000s. This probably has as much to do with the publication of both Murch's own 1995 manual on editing, In the Blink of an Eye and Michael Ondaatje's book-length interview with Murch, The Conversations as it does with his professional accomplishments. The Film Index International's practice of specifying which referenced articles deal specifically with the subject of the search is particularly helpful when the subject's name appears as far down in the credits as does Murch's. The Apocalypse Now entry is a good illustration of this: with nearly 140 articles cited in the references, it is an immense relief to know at a glance that only three deal properly with Murch's contribution. Whatever advantages the printed guides might offer, this is one area in which the electronic databases hold the inarguable edge.

Another excellent feature of the online indexes is the breadth of the material surveyed. It is enough to rely on publications and sources dealing explicitly with film when looking for information on a director like Browning, but for a subject like Murch, more technically-oriented publications like Soundtrack and DV: Digital Video can provide details about the principles and practices of editing that fan magazines don't. To be fair, there were far fewer such publications in existence during the period that the printed indexes covered, but the range of material covered was still narrower in any case.

Works Cited

MacCann, R. D., and E. S. Perry. The New Film Index: A Bibliography of Magazine Articles in English, 1930-1970. New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc.

Pocari, George. "We the Undead: Nadja." Cineaction 76, 2009: 50-53