Comedy and Experimentation in British Alternative Film: The Funny Peculiar Case of Ivor Montagu's *Bluebottles*

Seb Manley, University of East Anglia, UK

In the same year that Ivor Montagu's *Bluebottles* was released, the Film Society programmes note three major events that worked to support the society's stated aim of "reinvigorating" British cinema on a production level: a lecture class by Eisenstein (February 1929); a lecture class by Pudovkin (November 1929); and a film production course ran by Hans Richter, which would yield the film *Everyday* (1929). This attention to "hands on" activity within the Film Society was important; it was always the intention of Montagu and the other founding members that the society would act not just in getting non-mainstream films *seen* in Britain, but in getting them *made*, in order that British cinema might be technically and artistically advanced. The events noted above suggest that such an advancement (in 1929 at least) was to proceed in the direction of montage, of abstraction, and of filmmaking grounded in modernity. Eisenstein, Pudovkin and other Soviet filmmakers of the time stood as hero-like figures for many British cinéphiles. Films such as *Battleship Potemkin* (Eisenstein, 1925) and *Mother* (Pudovkin, 1926) generated discussion of montage as an entirely new and essentially "cinematic" form of filmmaking, and the directors drew large and excited attendances for their lecture visits. Montagu, as head of the Film Society, was responsible for the organisation of study groups involving Eisenstein and Pudovkin, and also for translating Pudovkin's theoretical writing into English, so that they could be of benefit to British filmmakers. In 1928, when enthusiasm for the Soviet films was beginning to peak both in the Film Society and the film journal *Close Up*, Montagu moved into film production himself. But where he might have been expected to make something formally and intellectually progressive along the lines of Eisenstein's montage films, he actually made a series of three slapstick comedies: *The Tonic* (1928), *Daydreams* (1928), and *Bluebottles* (1928, released 1929).

This essay will look closely at *Bluebottles* and its particular cinematic strategies, and offer some reasons why it was made (and received) in the way that it was. My approach treats Montagu and *Bluebottles* as key, in various ways, to the conception of cinema as art in 1920s Britain. It is a film that is exceptional in terms of British contemporaneous output, although many of its elements seem often comically over-familiar. Montagu's innovation as a filmmaker was to move confidently between the populist forms of a successful national industry, and the unorthodox transformations of cinematic language that were developing on the continent. While some of Montagu's "alternative" filmmaker contemporaries looked to German abstract animation (Len Lye, for example, channelled the work of Oskar Fischinger and Hans Richter in short films like 1929's *Tusalava*), Montagu privileged a more specifically British set of reference points -- the police chase, respected British actors. But *Bluebottles* nevertheless seems like a very "European" British chase film, and it works into its narrative and form some of the dreamlike absurdism found in French Surrealist and Dada films. Like the Surrealists, Montagu successfully forged new possibilities for film by combining popular comedy and slapstick with experimentations in film grammar. Unlike the

Surrealist films however, *Bluebottles* never received any great level of attention or veneration during its release, and nor has it since. I will suggest that this has something to do with the contemporaneous contexts of British filmmaking, intellectual film culture, and media coverage. Through investigation into these contexts, and an examination of the film's production and creative personnel, I hope to establish *Bluebottles*'s position and effect within a culture where both "British cinema" and "experimental cinema" were non-dominant, indistinct categories.

Past academic work done on *Bluebottles* has been, with the exception of recent writings by Jamie Sexton, quite brief and even dismissive. Paul Rotha, in his sizeable survey of world cinema *The Film Till Now*, mentions the film at the end of a generally derogatory chapter on British film, stating, "Three extremely amusing comedies directed by Ivor Montagu, *The Cure*, *Day Dreams*, and *Bluebottles*, from stories by H. G. Wells, with the ever-delightful Elsa Lanchester, were the best instances of comedy burlesque that I have seen" (Rotha, 1963: 322). Rachael Low, in *The History of the British Film 1918-1929*, mentions the three Montagu films in the context of H.G. Wells's involvement with film writing, and gives a few brief facts on *Bluebottles* in her list of films of "unusual interest" (Low, 1971: 199, 339). Roger Manvell notes that *Bluebottles* was one of the few British comedies "of an experimental nature" in his book *Experiment in the Film*, and praises its stylised settings over its story and situations (Manvell, 1949: 242). Studies devoted to experimental or avant-garde filmmaking such as A.L Rees's *A History of Experimental Film and Video* and Michael O'Pray's *Avant-Garde Film: Forms, Themes and Passions* tend to discuss British non-commercial cinema without reference to Montagu's films, although O'Pray's booklet essay for the BFI avant-garde compilation videos mentions *Bluebottles*, of course, since the film is included on the video. Here O'Pray describes *Bluebottles* as "relentlessly unpretentious with its pantomime-like broad humour ... it embraces comedy in a low-brow way", before acknowledging that "Although the story may not be in any way original, its treatment is a genuine experiment in the context of the late Twenties" (O'Pray, 2000). Jamie Sexton is the only academic to explore Montagu's film in detail, doing so in a chapter on burlesque and parody films in his thesis *The Emergence of an Alternative Film Culture in Inter-War Britain* (Sexton, 2002), and later (to a less thorough extent) in a chapter on the Film Society, "The Film Society and the Creation of an Alternative Film Culture in Britain in the 1920s," published in Andrew Higson's book of essays on early British cinema *Young and Innocent? The Cinema in Britain 1896-1930* (Higson, 2002). Sexton's work is valuable, and I will make reference to it over the course of the essay, but obviously his discussions of *Bluebottles* form only a part of larger topics; hopefully the more specific focus I will apply to the film here will reveal some additional points of interest.

Plot, performance and slapstick comedy

Bluebottles is a tale of chance and chains of action. After the opening credits end, an intertitle informs us that "from small events large causes spring" (the words are attributed to an old Spanish proverb), providing some idea of the escalatory nature of the narrative to come. The first shot is of a door; a hand knocks and the slat is opened from inside to reveal a watchful eye. The waiting man is let in, and several other similarly dressed men -- coded as thieves by their stripy jumpers -- approach and enter the house. A watching policeman investigates and is attacked and bundled inside -- but his whistle gets left behind.

At another location, the film's female lead Elsa (played by Elsa Lanchester) exits a cinema with a friend (*The Constant Nymph* [1928], starring Ivor Novello, has been playing). Elsa

says goodbye to her friend and walks home along some streets, where she stumbles across the whistle. Curious, she blows it. Her action sets off one of the film's most memorable and stylised sequences, as a series of close ups show one policemen blowing his whistle in response to the last, and the next in response to him and so on; a final shot presents us with a collage or "multi-image" of a policemen's face repeated many times over the screen. As an assortment of police cars and officers (a swarm of "bluebottles") rush out of the station, a number of communicatory devices including a fire bell and a bugle are shown, and a sequence of inserts depict the movements of army troops, planes, a tank, and finally a battle cruiser, as if they were also responding to the whistle. The assembled policemen storm the house, jostling Elsa on in with them. Trying to keep her head down, Elsa moves around the house, unwittingly catching crooks at every turn. Soon she has them all rounded up at the bottom of the stairs, and the police lead them away.

The next morning Elsa is woken by her mother; a policeman is waiting downstairs to return her hat (left at the criminals' house) and to accompany her to the station. At the station, she is congratulated by all for capturing the thieves, and receives a reward -- an old umbrella hastily dug out from lost property. The chief of police is told of her heroics, and congratulates her personally. Elsa walks home in a daze, stopping at a pawnshop to sell her umbrella. Here a boy listens to Elsa's warnings about the dangers of whistle-blowing, and proceeds to blow his own whistle as hard as he can. Elsa runs away in a panic down the street.

What should be clear from this synopsis is that *Bluebottles*, on a plot level at least, does not fit easily into the modes of filmmaking most revered by British intellectual film culture in the late 1920s. In terms of scale, locations, action, and characters, the film has little in common with any of the Soviet montage films privileged by Film Society members. Nor does it engage with the "psychologised" storytelling modes practiced by German "expressionist" filmmakers, although it does display some of the same lighting and camera-angle preferences (the German films -- regarded as the pinnacle of film art in the mid-1920s -- had become less well-regarded amongst film intellectuals by the late-1920s, although G.W. Pabst remained a respected director). The other type of film held as worthwhile "art" by Film Society members was the French avant-garde short, and here *Bluebottles* can be seen to bear some influence. In particular, *Bluebottles* is similar to René Clair's *Entr'acte* (1924) in its emphasis on chance events and the absurd progression of the storyline.

The most obvious model for the film, however, lies outside of "minority" cinema. Slapstick film, particularly as performed by Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, was extremely popular in the late-1920s, and one of the few commercial genres that the British cinéphiles held in high regard. Indeed, Montagu was instrumental in the establishment of a serious discourse around Hollywood films in the mid-1920s, a time when most newspapers discussed such films purely in terms of their entertainment value, if they discussed them at all. Montagu, writing in 1925 for the *Observer* newspaper as their first film critic (and one of the first major-paper film critics in Britain -- only Iris Barry took an earlier position, with the *Spectator* in 1923), declared himself to be one of those "who believe that American films are the best in the world" (Montagu, 1925, quoted in Turvey, 2002: 312), and routinely wrote of the merits of filmmakers such as Douglas Fairbanks, De Mille, and Chaplin. The screenings at the Film Society reflected this critical enthusiasm, with Chaplin films shown alongside European "art" films. [1]

Bluebottles resembles the slapstick films of Chaplin and Keaton on a basic narrative level, where an innocent hero is propelled into a world where he or she does not belong, and

comedy arises from the hero's efforts to cope with the new and unfamiliar situation. But more important, certainly within the framework of British alternative film culture, are the visual performative similarities. Lanchester, in her movements and straight-faced acting, operates in some of the same ways as Chaplin, and this is something that a number of the contemporary reviews draw attention to. The *Daily News* for example, in an article entitled "Elsa Lanchester -- Film Star. A Female Chaplin?," observes that "[Lanchester] has something of the strange, semi-pathetic humour of Charlie Chaplin," and the *Sketch*, inspired by Lanchester's performance in *Daydreams*, describes her as "a sort of feminine Charlie Chaplin" (*Daily News*, 1929; *Sketch*, 1929). In fact, Lanchester's performance was generally the most admired aspect of *Bluebottles*, and nearly every review picks her out for special praise. The *Bioscope* remarks that "[Lanchester] acts not alone with her face and hands, but with every muscle in her body;" the *Liverpool Post and Mercury* declares that "'*Bluebottles* is remarkable for Miss Elsa Lanchester's personation. Her timid gravity is delightful;" and the *Morning Post* explains that Lanchester "brings into the humdrum life of backstreet and boarding-house the romance of unlimited imagined adventure" (*Bioscope*, 1929; *Liverpool Post and Mercury*, 1929; *Morning Post*, 1929). Clearly then, Lanchester was an aid to the film in terms of popular appeal, but did she also play a part in a strategy aimed at constructing *Bluebottles* as an advanced "artistic" text?

From Film Criticism to Film Production: Montagu's Move into the Film Industry

To answer that question, and also to explore the reasons why *Bluebottles* does not adopt the same focus as other European avant-garde cinema, we need to look at the nature of Montagu and his collaborators' entry into film production. Montagu was a film editor before he was a director, and a film critic before he was an editor. After leaving Cambridge University, where he was active in the formation of a film club and in writing film criticism, he turned his attention to creating a film exhibition club that would show the films commercial companies had refused, or the censors had disallowed. In October 1925 the club was established as the Film Society. Here Montagu continued to write film criticism in the form of the Programme Notes, and through a combination of Society philosophy (to "help the technical advance of film production," as stated in its constitution and rules [Sexton, in Higson, 2002: 292]) and personnel (many members were filmmakers), grew to be increasingly involved in the film industry itself. His point of official point of entry came in August 1927, when he joined with Film Society member Adrian Brunel to form the post-production film editing company Brunel and Montagu Limited. Brunel, who by 1927 was already a highly practised filmmaker with experience in both independent and commercial production, was also one of the few figures who had endeavoured to form an association for the appreciation of "alternative" cinema -- the unrealised Cinemagoers League -- *before* the arrival of the Film Society. Together Brunel and Montagu ran their firm as a repair service for completed films, which ranged from commercial features, to foreign imports, to struggling British-made films. They would add English-language subtitles, make cuts to please the BBFC, and sometimes alter films so that they might appeal more to British audiences. Thus, even before he moved into filmmaking, Montagu was involved in a negotiation between "alternative" film and British audiences: he wanted to expand British cinema exhibition to include foreign or "artistic" films, but he also wanted them to be booked, seen, and liked by audiences.

With the notion that "you can do other things for years -- editor, cameraman, art direction or script -- but director is the real breakthrough. In cash and prestige" (Montagu, 1968: 17), Montagu moved into film direction in 1927. He was offered backing for three short comedies by an American investor, on the condition that H.G. Wells would write original stories; Wells

in turn agreed on the condition that Elsa Lanchester would star in all three. Lanchester was thus imposed on the production, although Montagu recalls that he admired her as much as Wells did. Alongside Montagu and Brunel, Lanchester and her husband Charles Laughton made up a company formed especially for the production of *Bluebottles* and the other two shorts.

"Adaptation" and Visual Narration

Montagu was responsible for extracting the short stories for the three films from H.G. Wells, and in the book *With Eisenstein in Hollywood* he describes the rather hectic creative process conducted between himself and the writer:

> The only thing left was to get the stories. Easier said than done for H.G. was always writing something else. But at last I ran him to earth in a flat in Paris (it was the 'Dolores' period by then). I came straight from the overnight train and roused him out of bed. He gave me breakfast while, in his dressing gown, he wrote down 'Bluebottles'. The other two 'Daydreams' and 'The Tonic' were more difficult but I dug my heels in. Finally they emerged as about a paragraph each and I flew back triumphant to London on the afternoon plane. (Montagu, 1968: 19)

Thus although *Bluebottles* had a literary source, the text was short, and written to an extent "for the cinema" (that is, Wells knew his story would form the basis for a film). This is an important detail in the context of intellectual film culture, as most cinéphiles at the time regarded literary "adaptations" to be an unnatural meeting of two entirely different modes of storytelling: one based on words, and one based on pictures. When a film used too many intertitles or text inserts, it was seen as a failure for its neglect of cinema's unique visual qualities. Writers in the film journal *Close Up*, for example, dismissed films that were dependent on dialogue in favour of those that expressed ideas through formal elements such as camerawork, lighting, and set design. Montagu himself made a point of criticising long and redundant intertitles in his reviews, stating in one case (a review of a Seastrom film) that the film was seriously faulted in its "bad titling and verbosity," and the way "moods, emotional reactions, moral judgements which are clearly implied in the action and acting are none the less iterated by written words" (Montagu, *Observer*, 1926, quoted in Turvey, 2002: 311).

When adapting H.G. Wells's story for *Bluebottles*, Montagu, Brunel and Frank Wells (H.G. Wells's son, and credited for the film's screenplay) worked in accordance with these ideas of visual "cinematic" storytelling. Montagu describes the screenwriting process as "trying to think up visual jokes and turn them into scripts" (Montagu, 1968: 20), and both he and Brunel were familiar with the sparse and effective deployment of intertitles, having worked as retitlers in the Brunel and Montagu Limited editing company. (It is interesting to note, as Sylvia Hardy does in her essay "H.G Wells and British Silent Cinema: The War of the Worlds," that Wells's own film script, published in 1929 in the form of a book entitled *The King Who Was a King: the Book of the Film*, was full of intertitles and text inserts. Despite his enthusiasm for cinema as an important modern medium, Wells was unable to conceive of a film in visual rather than literary terms (Hardy, in Higson, 2002: 252).

As a result of the emphasis placed on visual narration and expressivity, *Bluebottles* has only ten titles -- two expository and eight dialogue -- and develops various innovative ways of

conveying information and expressing ideas without the use of dialogue or written plot details. For instance, the realisation by the police that an officer has been kidnapped and is now being held in a house -- the thieves' -- is conveyed in an entirely visual and very economic manner. After Elsa has dropped the whistle behind her back, it is found by an officer, and a camera shot shows us the whistle at the centre of a circle of light thrown by his torch. (This shot is nearly identical to an earlier one that showed the whistle to be lost: when the policeman is hauled into the house in the film's first scene, his whistle is left outside on the pavement, and the camera drops to observe it before an iris effect puts the whistle at the centre of a circle of light.) A reaction shot to the find reveals an officer to be puzzled and slightly suspicious. The camera now follows the light-circle thrown by the torch as it moves up the house steps and highlights first a button, and then a hat. The circle then moves slowly to the top of the steps and up the door; the officer's suspicions are confirmed when the door slat is seen to be open and filled by a shifty watching eye. The slat snaps shut in response and the police rush up to the door.

The advancement of the plot is here achieved by a combination of the striking visual isolation of key details (the torch light on the whistle and hat), a slowly moving camera that observes the details in a manner and order that links them into a sequence, and a single telling reaction shot. Later, during the gunfight inside the house, editing and staging work to convey a sense of disorientation and dislocation. Within the main location of the house, Elsa moves through a series of sub-locations: the entrance hall downstairs, and a series of smaller rooms upstairs. Not only is the location in this sequence constantly changing, but the police and thieves are always moving in and out of frame, usually through doorways. Action is never allowed to freeze into tableaux; movement breaks the frame and signals offscreen space and unknown events. Here Elsa's dazed bewilderment -- made worse by a knock on the head -- is emphasised by the positioning of the camera and direction of the actors. In these ways, *Bluebottles* realises a general attitude amongst British film intellectuals that privileged the "pure" visual aspects of fiction cinema.

Other parts of *Bluebottles* display a more self-consciously "experimental" manipulation of form. The sequence that shows a chain of communications between the policemen, the police station, and then the army, air force and navy, for example, makes use of extra-diegetic material in order to convey the authorities' overly hysterical reaction. Also in this sequence, the collage shot of a policeman's face replicated in rows provides a "trick" shot that de-familiarises the recorded image by multiplying it to fill the screen. This particular shot, which probably made use of a special multi-image lens [2], resembles shots in the French avant-garde film *Ballet Mécanique* (Fernand Léger, 1924). Léger's short, which was intended by the director to instil everyday objects with a new fascination through the gaze of the camera, would have been seen by Montagu and others at the Film Society screenings.

"Britishness": Comedy and The Chase Film

Such experimental effects, along with the broad style of *Bluebottles* -- which encompasses long dark shadows, and some unusual camera angles in the vein of German expressionist cinema -- constitute an engagement with modern, international avant-garde cinema. But *Bluebottles* does not seem to commit wholly to any avant-garde mode, and the contemporary reviews suggest that the film was treated primarily as a comedy or burlesque, and only secondarily as a film of formal experimentation. For example, *Kinematograph Weekly* identifies "one or two German camera angles," and the *Times* praises Montagu's use of "trick photography" and "unusual camera angles" (*Kinematograph Weekly*, 1929; *Times*, 1929).

Both these reviews also describe the film as "slapstick" or a "burlesque", and so highlight the way *Bluebottles* blends elements from different European experimental cinemas, along with the more traditionally populist form of slapstick filmmaking. Elsa Lanchester, as noted earlier, performs her role in a style similar to Chaplin, who was respected amongst cinéphiles as a highly visual "cinematic" performer. But the content of the film, and in particular the representation of the police chase, also looks back to earlier decades of British slapstick comedy. The period up to 1906 or 1907 was a successful time for British filmmaking, and levels of innovation and quality were in many quarters perceived to equal if not surpass those in the American film industry. One of the most important developments in Britain was the multi-shot chase film. With *A Daring Daylight Burglary* (Frank Mottershaw, 1903) and *A Desperate Poaching Affray* (William Haggar, 1903), British filmmakers were working out new ways of depicting action and creating drama within a longer narrative (*A Daring Daylight Burglary* had eight scenes, where previous chase films commonly consisted of one, two, or three -- three in the case of James Williamson's *Stop Thief*, 1901, for example), whilst at the same time retaining a comprehensible narrative. In such films, as Andrew Higson and others note, the chase provides a way of binding different shots together, so that the move between a succession of spaces can create dynamic energy without losing narrative continuity (Higson, 2002: 55-56). *Bluebottles* was a quite unusual example of the chase film, since it could also be classed as a "literary adaptation" -- a form usually thought to privilege dialogue as the prime narrative motor. That the process of adaptation I discussed earlier anticipated a film so grounded in the spectacle and visual momentum of the chase film is, ironically perhaps, testament to the skill and imagination of Montagu, Brunel and Frank Wells, as well as H.G. Wells, as film writers.

Bluebottles gives a great emphasis to the "dynamic cohesion" developed by the earlier chase films, particularly in the early scene where the police respond to Elsa's whistle-blowing. The sequence progresses as follows: a group of officers are shown running out of the station; officers are shown opening the garage doors to let out a stream of police cars; then one shot shows a group of officers running away from camera, and the next shows them running towards camera. The rapid movement between spaces and within spaces creates a sense of energetic urgency, yet the potentially disorientating shot organisation -- consecutive shots apparently show the group of officers to have abruptly changed direction -- is entirely comprehensible because we know this is a "chase" (or more properly, a fast response) towards a certain point.

Bluebottles should also be situated against the background of peculiarly British representations of the police force in early comedy films. Most of the films from this period to depict police officers or a police force do so in a negative light. The police might be simply flawed, as in *A Daring Daylight Burglary*, one of the many chase films produced by the Sheffield Photo Company. The narrative here centres on a burglar caught breaking into a country house. Two policemen engage in pursuit, but the burglar escapes them (wounding one in the process) and outruns a further two policemen who chase him across the countryside. As he boards a train leaving the station platform, the burglar seems to have triumphed, but is eventually overpowered when he meets with another officer further down the line. In this and similar films, such as Alfred Collin's *The Pickpocket*, and *A Chase Through London* (1903), the criminal is positioned as a figure of identification; the chief pleasure for a viewer comes from watching someone (often someone of a lower class) "getting away with it" in the face of a powerful authority.

Alternatively, the police might be incompetent or ridiculous, as in Cecil Hepworth's trick film *The Exploding Motorcar* (1900). The main focus of Hepworth's film is the spectacular explosion: a simple jump cut allows the transition from an image of a car with four passengers to an image of an exploding car. Wreckage and body parts fly up into the sky, and fall back to earth at an exaggeratedly slow rate. The humorous punchline, however, comes at the expense of the watching policeman who, after witnessing the explosion and subsequent dismemberment of its passengers, takes no action beyond making a note of the limbs as they fall from the sky.

In *Bluebottles*, the police are both limited in ability and absurd in organisation and attitude. Not only do react to the whistle in ludicrous numbers and with no discretion, and then misapprehend Elsa as first a crook, and then a hero (she is neither), but they are incapable of capturing any criminals. Had Elsa had not been at the house with her uncanny ability to round up the villains, the police would have no doubt been easily defeated. Like the officer in *The Exploding Motorcar*, the police also cling to a bizarre and unhelpful formalised procedure. Following a speech of commendation given by a head officer barely aware of his surroundings, Elsa is ceremonially rewarded with a faulty umbrella. *Bluebottles* also takes from the earlier films the humorous stereotype of an authoritative policeman with an emphasised moustache; the officer at the desk in the station models a preposterously elongated pencil-moustache.

In these ways, *Bluebottles* represents an attempt to "reconstruct" a specifically British mode of alternative cinema. Such "Britishness" may also account for the failure of *Bluebottles* to enter into academic discourses, since intellectual film culture in the 1920s tended to associate distinctively "British" qualities with traditionalism and nationalism -- and *Close Up* and the Film Society were committed to modernism and internationalism. *Close Up* never covered Montagu's film, and though it was shown at a Film Society screening, it was not discussed in the same way as the "artistic" works of Germany and Russia. I would also suggest that critics, then and now, respond more to the strongly "authored" and singular films of (say) Fernand Léger or René Clair than to Montagu's more ranging medley. A close textual examination of *Bluebottles* reveals a variety of cultural and stylistic inspirations, marshalled into an unusual but also entertaining whole. The form and content of the film suggests a director less concerned with a singular vision than with collaboration, negotiation and invention through cross-fertilisation. We might also read *Bluebottles*'s scheme of characterisation as a commentary on the place of the "alternative" film within the British industry. In the character of Elsa, *Bluebottles* suggests that an inexperienced amateur (as Montagu was as a filmmaker) can achieve things through experimentation and accident that a more standardised force -- the police, mainstream cinema -- cannot.

Commercial failure: Conclusion

As I hope I have demonstrated, *Bluebottles* represents a particularly complex case of compounded cinematic modes -- a "merg[ing] of deconstructive and reconstructive strategies" as Sexton puts it (Sexton, in Higson, 2002: 301) -- and its engagement with British chase films, American slapstick, French avant-garde absurdism and German expressionism make it a difficult film to approach, whether from the angle of British filmmaking in the 1920s, or its makers as film intellectuals. *Bluebottles*'s ambivalent status has almost certainly contributed to a general lack of coverage from any of the discourses surrounding a range of relevant cinemas. To this cinematic eclecticism I will add a final contributing factor to *Bluebottles*'s low profile: the film's commercial failure on release. Montagu's activities within

the film industry were at least partly grounded in populism, and he was concerned with making *Bluebottles* in such a way that it would appeal to a British audience. As we have seen, the post-production editing work Montagu carried out with Brunel made him sensitive to the tastes of British audiences, and both filmmakers were used to tailoring films for an improved chance of bookings and high attendances. *Bluebottles* was shaped for success in much the same way. A letter from Montagu to Angle Pictures (*Bluebottles*'s production company) describes audience try-outs for the film, and shows Montagu's general willingness to compromise his ideas in order to impress audiences:

> I have to report as follows about the try-outs.
>
> BLUEBOTTLES was certainly successful. This was in part due to the very excellent music which induced the audience to cheer, whistle and hum the tunes, etc.
>
> DAYDREAMS AND TONIC produced a number, much less, of laughs ... As a result I have made some new trims, and sanctioned a number of cuts I formerly disapproved of. (Montagu, Special Collection item 24)

Despite such commercial considerations however, *Bluebottles* failed to make a profit (though it did have considerable success in Germany [Montagu, 1968: 23]). This failure might be attributed again to the film's distinctly eclectic nature, where audiences responded negatively to ambiguous or conflicting reviews. Another possible reason is the release date, which due to the distributor's programme came nearly a year after completion, and placed *Bluebottles* in a world of sound film where silent film was regarded by some as outdated. In any case, *Bluebottles* missed out on commercial success just as it missed out on intellectual respectability. Considered from a later perspective, the film's most commercially and intellectually problematic elements -- where experimentation intersects with British comedy -- are precisely what make *Bluebottles* such a fascinating film to study -- now, and hopefully in the future.

Notes

[1] See, for example, programme 1 (25 October 1925), which included Paul Leni's German "expressionist" film *Waxworks* (1924) alongside Chaplin's *Champion Charlie* (1916).

[2] An article by Chris Brunel (Adrian Brunel's son) in the *Film and TV Technician* newspaper discusses the "optical effects" that may have been used in this shot. See *FTT* February 1985.

References

Balcon, Michael (1969) *Michael Balcon Presents ... A Lifetime of Films*. London: Hutchinson and Co Ltd.

Barr, Charles (ed.) (1986) *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema*. London: BFI Publishing.

Brunel, Adrian (1933) *Filmcraft: The Art of Picture Production*. London: George Newnes Limited.

Brunel, Chris (1985) A Lot of Bluebottle, *Film and TV Technician* (February).

Burton, Alan and Laraine Porter (eds.) (2000) *Pimple, Pranks and Pratfalls*. Trowbridge: Flick Books.

Donald, James, Anne Friedberg, and Laura Marcus (eds.) (1998), *Close Up: Cinema and Modernism*. London: Cassell.

Film Society (corporate author) (1972) *The Film Society Programmes 1925-1939*. New York: Arno Press.

Hardy, Sylvia (2002) H.G Wells and British Silent Cinema: The War of the Worlds, in Andrew Higson (ed.), *Young and Innocent? The Cinema in Britain 1896-1930*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press.

Higson, Andrew (1995) *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Higson, Andrew (ed.) (2002) *Young and Innocent? The Cinema in Britain 1896-1930*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press.

Higson, Andrew (2002) Cecil Hepworth, *Alice in Wonderland* and the Development of the Narrative Film, in Andrew Higson (ed.) *Young and Innocent? The Cinema in Britain 1896-1930*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press.

Kuenzli, Rudolf E. (ed.) (1987) *Dada and Surrealist Film*. New York: Willis Locker and Owens.

Lanchester, Elsa (1983) *Elsa Lanchester Herself*. London: Michael Joseph Limited.

Le Grice, Malcolm (1977) *Abstract Film and Beyond*. London: Studio Vista.

Low, Rachael (1971) *The History of British Film, 1918-1929*. London: George Allen and Unwin.

Manvell, Roger (1949) *Experiment in the Film*. London: The Grey Walls Press Limited.

Montagu, Ivor (1968) *With Eisenstein in Hollywood*. Berlin: Seven Seas Publishers.

Montagu, Ivor (1970) *The Youngest Son*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Murphy, Robert (ed.) (2001), *The British Cinema Book*. London: British Film Institute.

Nowell-Smith, Geoffrey (ed.) (1996) *The Oxford History of World Cinema*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

O'Pray, Michael (1996) *The British Avant-Garde Film 1926 to 1995*. Luton: University of Luton Press.

O'Pray, Michael (2000) *British Avant-Garde Film in the Twenties and Thirties* (booklet). London: BFI Video.

O'Pray, Michael (2002) *Avant-Garde Film: Forms, Themes and Passions*. London: Wallflower Press.

Rees, A.L. (1999) *A History of Experimental Film and Video*. London: British Film Institute.

Rotha, Paul (1963) *The Film Till Now*. London: Vision Press Limited.

Ryall, Tom (1996) *Alfred Hitchcock and the British Cinema*. London: Athlone.

Sexton, Jamie (2002) *The Emergence of an Alternative Film Culture in Inter-War Britain* (PhD thesis). Norwich: University of East Anglia.

Sexton, Jamie (2002) The Film Society and the Creation of an Alternative Film Culture in Britain in the 1920s, in Andrew Higson (ed.), *Young and Innocent? The Cinema in Britain 1896-1930*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press.

Turvey, Gerry (2002) Towards a Critical Practice: Ivor Montagu and British Film Culture in the 1920s, in Andrew Higson (ed.), *Young and Innocent? The Cinema in Britain 1896-1930*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press.

From the Ivor Montagu and Film Society Special Collections, available at the BFI National Library, London

Bluebottles (review), *Bioscope* 18 September 1929, Ivor Montagu Special Collection, item 25.

Bluebottles (review), *Kinematograph Weekly* 19 September 1929, Ivor Montagu Special Collection, item 25.

Bluebottles (review), *Liverpool Post and Mercury* 4 November 1929, Ivor Montagu Special Collection, item 25.

Bluebottles (review), *Morning Post* 12 September 1929, Ivor Montagu Special Collection, item 25.

Bluebottles (review), *Times* 12 September 1929, Ivor Montagu Special Collection, item 25.

Constitution and Rules of the Film Society Limited, Film Society Special Collection, item 2.

Daydreams (review), *Sketch* 30 October 1929, Ivor Montagu Special Collection item 25.

Elsa Lanchester -- Film Star. A Female Chaplin?, *Daily News* 12 September 1929, Ivor Montagu Special Collection item 25.

Letter from Ivor Montagu to Angle Pictures, Ivor Montagu Special Collection item 24.

Websites

McFarlane, Brian, Elsa Lanchester (profile) *Screenonline* [online]. Available at http://www.screenonline.org.uk/people/id/486033/index.html [Accessed 30 December 2006]

Ryall, Tom, Ivor Montagu (profile) *Screenonline* [online]. Available at http://www.screenonline.org.uk/people/id/446857/index.html [Accessed 30 December 2006]

Sexton, Jamie, *Bluebottles* (profile) *Screenonline* [online]. Available at http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/439829/index.html [Accessed 30 December 2006]

Sexton, Jamie, 20s-30s Avant-Garde (profile) *Screenonline* [online]. Available at http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/445895/index.html [Accessed 30 December 2006]

Filmography

Ballet mécanique. 1924. Dir. Fernand Léger.

Battleship Potemkin. 1925. Dir. Sergei Eisenstein. Goskino.

Bluebottles. 1928. Dir. Ivor Montagu. Angle Pictures.

A Chase Through London. 1903. Dir. Alfred Collins. Société des Etablissements L. Gaumont.

A Daring Daylight Burglary. 1903. Dir. Frank Mottershaw. Sheffield Photo Company, Charles Urban Trading Company.

Daydreams. 1928. Dir. Ivor Montagu. Angle Pictures.

A Desperate Poaching Affray. 1903. Dir. William Haggar. Haggar and Sons.

Entr'acte. 1924. Dir. René Clair. Les Ballets Suedois.

Everyday. 1929. Dir. Hans Richter. The Film Society.

The Exploding Motor Car. 1900. Dir. Cecil Hepworth. Hepworth.

Mother. 1926. Dir. Vsevolod Pudovkin. Mezhrabpom.

The Pickpocket. 1903. Dir. Alfred Collins. Société des Etablissements L. Gaumont.

Stop Thief. 1901. Dir. James Williamson. Williamson Kinematograph Company.

The Tonic. 1928. Dir. Ivor Montagu. Angle Pictures.

Tusalava. 1929. Dir. Len Lye. The Film Society.