

Institution: De Montfort University		
Unit of Assessment: 34		
Title of case study: British Silent Film Festival: Transforming Appreciation for Britain's Film Heritage		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2014–ongoing		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Laraine Porter	Reader in Cinema History	January 2009–present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: January 2014–December 2019		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Porter's research has transformed the appreciation and understanding of British silent cinema among the public, film industry leaders and cinema historians. Through public screenings at the British Silent Film Festival (BSFF), she has created an appreciation of this previously undervalued period of cinema history. Her research has informed the British Film Institute's (BFI) programme of digitisation for heritage films and contributed to the preservation of specialist skills in exhibiting analogue archive film. Her research has raised the prestige of British silent cinema by contributing to UK and international film festivals and its outreach programme has supported community organisations and specialist cinemas. Since 2014, 6,849 people have experienced 1,210 rare and previously unseen silent films at 102 separate events.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>With the transition from silent cinema to the 'talkies' in the late 1920s, British silent cinema, already struggling to compete with glossier Hollywood productions, faced demise. Many British producers collapsed and their back catalogues were lost. Porter's research has three strands: (1) primary archival research to rediscover British films, (2) research on the musical scores that accompany silent films and (3) an exploration of the cultural impact of the transition to sound.</p> <p>Porter's primary research with national and international film archives has unearthed hundreds of forgotten British films. She has been instrumental in rediscovering 227 feature films and 983 shorts, many of which had not been seen publicly since the 1920s nor featured in scholarly histories of British cinema. For example, her archival research in collaboration with the Gosfilmofond Collection (Moscow) in 2015, resulted in the discovery of a missing-believed-lost early Hitchcock collaboration, <i>Three Live Ghosts</i> (1922), which had lain hidden in the Soviet archive since the 1920s. A critical part of Porter's archival research is working with the BFI National Archive at Berkhamsted, tracing and checking film prints and tracking the rights holders. This work has resulted in rediscovered films being screened in public for the first time in decades including early British musicals <i>City of Song</i> (1931), <i>Tell Me Tonight</i> (1933), silent Crimean War drama <i>Balaclava</i> (1928) previously held only on flammable nitrate and the lost melodrama <i>The Puppet Man</i> (1920) [C5].</p> <p>Her primary research [R3, R2] has challenged existing orthodoxies on the quality and artistic merit of British silent cinema. Music was essential to the cinematic experience, but there were few original music scores composed for silent film. Porter researched the music that would have originally been used by musicians to extemporise using collections from the Light Music Society, the Royal College of Music and Birmingham Public Library. Working in close collaboration with musicians like Neil Brand, Porter was able to present silent films with musical scores based on these original styles and compositions. Her research with Brand has resulted in a major donation of silent cinema sheet music from the Light Music Society, currently being catalogued for public access with the University of Bristol.</p> <p>Porter's cultural and social research of silent cinema and the transition to sound was funded by a GBP466,668 AHRC grant (2014–2018). Applying a feminist critique, her research revealed the</p>		

hidden histories of women working in below-the-line roles, usually uncredited. Her analysis of personal testimony from the Broadcasting Entertainment Cinematograph and Theatre Union History Project and historical records of the Musicians' Union and Royal College of Music on the work of female scriptwriters and musicians repositions our understanding of gender in British silent cinema. Here research reveals that the rise of the talkies had a disproportionate impact on women, removing employment opportunities for female musicians [R1] but more fundamentally contributing to the marginalisation of female characters on film, as the male voice became dominant. The female voice was subject to scrutiny and criticism and the careers of many female silent film stars chosen primarily for their glamorous looks did not survive the transition to sound [R4, R5].

These three strands of Porter's research come together in the BSFF which she has organised since 1998. Since joining DMU in 2009, Porter's research is intimately intertwined with the festival, informing the film programming, curatorial strategies and the re-presentation of silent films to audiences.

3. References to the research

Porter's published research indicates the interdisciplinary nature of her work, embracing music history, studies in the human voice, the development of sound technology and film criticism refracted through a feminist perspective on British cinema history. The Routledge collection [R2, R3] is a major volume of revisionist British cinema history in the high-profile Routledge 'Companion' series. The peer-reviewed journal articles [R1, R4, R5, R6] are all in leading publications in their respective spheres.

- [R1] Porter, L. (2017) 'The "missing muscle": attitudes to women working in cinema and music 1910–1930', *Journal of Popular Music and Society*, 40(5): 499–517; <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2017.1348669>
- [R2] Porter, L. (2017) ' "Temporary American citizens": British cinema in the 1920s', in I.Q. Hunter, L. Porter and J. Smith (eds) *The Routledge Companion to British Cinema*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp 34–46; ISBN 9781315392189
- [R3] Porter, L. (2017) 'The talkies come to Britain: British silent cinema and the transition to sound, 1928–30', in I.Q. Hunter, L. Porter and J. Smith (eds) *The Routledge Companion to British Cinema*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp 87–98; ISBN 9781315392189
- [R4] Porter, L. (2018) ' "Have you a happy voice?" Women's voices and the talkie revolution in Britain 1929–1932', *Music, Sound and the Moving Image*, 12(2): 141–169; <https://doi.org/10.3828/msmi.2018.9>
- [R5] Porter, L. (2020) ' "The film gone male": women and the transition to sound in the British film industry 1929–1932', *Women's History Review*, 29(5): 766–783; <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2019.1703534>
- [R6] Porter, L. (2020) ' "Okay for sound?" The reception of the early talkies in Britain, 1928–32', *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 17(2): 212–232; <https://doi.org/10.3366/jbctv.2020.0520>

Grants

- [G1] AHRC: GBP466,668, 'British Silent Cinema and the Transition to Sound: 1927–1933' (2014–2018), PI: Porter, L. (This grant included GBP24,000 towards regional and national tours of BSFF events across the UK.)
- [G2] Three BFI National Lottery Audience Awards for BSFF: totalling GBP40,700 (2015, 2017, 2019).

4. Details of the impact

Porter's research has prompted a re-evaluation of British silent cinema, long ignored or dismissed by cinema historians as inferior to Hollywood and European cinema. Through Porter's organisation of the BSFF and its outreach programme, domestic and international audiences have discovered and enjoyed silent cinema as it was originally intended.

(1) TRANSFORMING APPRECIATION AND UNDERSTANDING OF BRITISH SILENT CINEMA

Since 2014, the BSFF has generated audiences of 6,849 [C1]. Porter's research has enabled cinema screenings of silent films that create an audience experience matching the original with live music and accurate projection, setting new standards for the exhibition of British silent films. Audiences have enjoyed classics such as *Jane Shore* (1915), a forgotten Richard III-themed film at Leicester Cathedral in September 2015 and *Metropolis* (1927) at St Mary de Castro Church in March 2017 where audiences witnessed a silent film with a live church organ.

Porter's work has transformed public understanding of Britain's cinema heritage. Qualitative research of 86 participants in 2017 indicated that 80% had their views about silent cinema changed favourably, and 100% would now recommend silent films to others [C2]. A BSFF attendee and musician explains how it has changed his view:

The British Silent Film Festival has transformed the way we understand British silent cinema. I have attended almost all of the British Silent Film Festivals since its inception, and it's been an incredible education, and I can safely say that it's transformed the way myself and many other people have understood British silent cinema. The format of the festival, with lectures and screenings gives fantastic depth to it – very often the lectures will open up new ways of seeing and understanding the films. [C2]

In a survey of 328 audience members conducted at the 2019 BSFF, 99% stated that they would see more silent films as a result of attending the festival; of these, 23% were first time or infrequent attendees, indicating that Porter's work is also growing audiences for silent cinema [C2].

The curator of silent film at the BFI acknowledges the important contribution that Porter's research has made to its digitisation of film heritage:

The BFI's own databases and well-used public online platforms such as BFI Player have benefited from knowledge accrued at the British Silent Film Festival by helping establish credits (which are often missing) for unidentified material and supplying contextual information. Films that have played well with audiences at the festival have gone on to be programmed at the BFI's own venues and online platforms, elevated for restoration projects, published on DVD/BluRay and distributed worldwide. [C3]

(2) CONTRIBUTING TO UK AND INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVALS

Porter's research has directly influenced the programming of Scotland's HippFest silent film festival (founded in 2011) by enabling them to showcase films rediscovered at the BSFF. Further, she directly contributed her research by delivering public lectures in 2014, 2016 and 2019. HippFest's founding director explains how Porter's research has shaped their festival:

Over the years the BSFF has been a must-do in my diary as an essential part of my research and development for the Hippodrome Silent Film Festival. The specialised programme content is unique in the UK and, as such, represents a singularly useful concentration of material to help inform my own programming. [C7]

Porter's research has resulted in rediscovered British films touring to international festivals including the world's oldest and largest silent film festival le Giornate del Cinema Muto in Pordenone, Italy. The festival's director says:

For decades, the work of all but a few British directors in the 1910s and '20s had been routinely dismissed, largely because their films were inaccessible, yet it's thanks to the British Silent Film Festival's vision and determination that this inaccurate assessment has been fundamentally changed ... and it's due to the festival organizers' ground-breaking curatorship that we at Pordenone were able to introduce international audiences to the riches of British silent cinema to a far greater degree than had been possible beforehand... This surely is the main goal for any organization involved in drawing attention to the riches housed in the world's archives? [C8]

(3) SUPPORTING COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS AND SPECIALIST CINEMAS

Leicester's independent Phoenix Cinema, home of BSFF, has benefited financially and technically from the partnership. The BSFF has contributed over GBP18,000 to the Cinema since 2014 and attracts an average of 81 people per screening, against an average of 37 to their regular programme [C4]. BSFF contributes technical expertise to ensure the Phoenix meets high standards set by the International Federation of Film Archives to exhibit analogue archive film, an area where digital technology has caused acute deskilling. The Phoenix is now one of the few regional cinemas in the UK able to meet these standards and provides skill-sharing to other organisations.

Head of Cinema at Phoenix explains the significance of the BSFF for the cinema:

Since the first edition at the new Phoenix in 2010, the British Silent Film Festival has continued to be a hugely important part of our programme. ... it is our mission to open up the whole of film history to our audience and the festival is a brilliant access point; ... [it] has helped to raise the profile and audience numbers of other archive work we do, from being one of the few cinemas still able to screen 35mm prints, to renewing and increasing our commitment to presenting local history reels from 16mm. [C6]

Porter has also delivered 24 separate screenings across 18 different community venues in Leicestershire, Rutland, Scotland and the Scottish Highlands and Islands [C1].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- [C1] Audience attendee numbers.
- [C2] 2014–2019 audience survey data – Excel spreadsheet available on request.
- [C3] Email from Curator of Silent Film at the BFI.
- [C4] Phoenix Cinema annual report 2017/18;
<https://www.phoenix.org.uk/content/uploads/2018/12/Phoenix-Annual-Report-2017-18-WEB.pdf>
- [C5] 2019 BSFF brochure; <https://britishsilentfilmfestival.com/2019-brochure/>
- [C6] Email from Head of Cinema at Phoenix Cinema.
- [C7] Email from Founding Director of Hippodrome Silent Film Festival.
- [C8] Letter from the Director of le Giornate del Cinema Muto silent film festival, Pordenone, Italy.