

Film in Camden Town: a valid source for historians to understand the past?

Mark McCarthy, November 2018

In an Institute of Historical Research monograph, Barber describes how fiction films can be viewed for their direct images of the world, for the ways they present their own times, and for re-presenting the past.¹ Almost all writing on film and history refers to specific films, for their exemplary nature². Three films using locations in Camden Town demonstrate these different uses of film as a source for history.

Alfred Hitchcock's 1956 film *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, a low-key thriller starring James Stewart and Doris Day, is set in Marrakesh and London. Apart from these outdoor locations, the film has a celebrated sequence in which Stewart, playing a rather foolish doctor, goes to Ambrose Chappell's taxidermy workshop in Camden Place. Inside, he feels 'menaced' by the stuffed animals – lions, tigers and a flying sword-fish – in this foreign setting away from the safety of the USA.

Hitchcock could have shot the sequence in studios, but chose to use a 'real' location. The workshop owed its position to being near London's Royal Veterinary College; and, for many years, also provided props to the film industry. The unexpected taxidermy shop was historically true in Camden; but it was only a blind-alley in the plot for the film's larger fiction about international spying.



Actor James Stewart [goes to Chappell's Taxidermist](#), *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, 1955.

¹ Sian Barber. Using film as a source. Institute of Historical Research, 2015.

² Marine Hughes-Warrington ed. The history on film reader. Routledge, 2009.

Hitchcock's films hold an important place in cinema history. His British origin, moving to Hollywood in the 1930s, as well as financing, underlie his using London for some of his films. His technique and development of the suspense genre, rather than location or story, have critical attention. Yet a real taxidermy workshop, in his home country, sparked a sequence that is remembered after the shop has gone – it was since demolished by the municipality and replaced by social housing. Place supporting memory is significant in this moment of Hitchcock's film history.

At the beginning of the 1900s, the Camden Theatre in the High Street doubled live theatre with showing silent films. In later years it became a BBC recording studio, and now as a music club 'Koko'. The British director Mike Leigh's film *Happy-go-lucky* (2008) has a sequence showing Camden Town at night. In an article for the magazine *Time Out*, Leigh describes revisiting some of his film locations with a reporter.³ 'We shot in Koko for real', Leigh said. 'We went in at 9pm but from 11pm onwards it was so full we had to get out.' Sadly, the historical parallel with an evening from the silent-film era was lost.

Leigh's films are in the cinematographic tradition of social realism. The reporter observed: "He barely ever shoots in a studio and the usual drill is that he, his cast and crew will take over a location and inhabit it fully." The screenplay is developed as the film progresses, and includes improvisation by the actors. Apparent 'naturalness' comes from seeing 'ordinary' people in events that are 'everyday'. Of course, Leigh points out, they seem 'ordinary' because they are very good actors.



Director Mike Leigh revisits a location

³ Time Out London. [Mike Leigh's London locations](#).

Leigh's earlier films were bleak, frequently leaving new conflicts unresolved at the end. This is contrary to convention in drama: yet is no less 'real' than the happy ending. Indeed, when viewed in the future, Leigh's openness, showing places in daily use, both outside or inside, will encourage reading the films for their documentary aspects.

Some fictional films place the characters in unexpected or difficult settings; Leigh's dramas work through seeing the ordinary afresh, in ways for us to recognise ourselves. (*Happy-go-lucky* was successful in the USA as well as Britain.) It has been his intent, through his career since the 1960s, to encourage reflection, on social as well as psychological concerns, rather than provide escape from the real world. Urban environments are recorded more than ever before in the digital age: but by placing them within a narrative, Leigh gives them an historical position, different from though parallel with the undeliberate accumulations of social media.

Barber¹ suggests that "one of the key characteristics of the modern English past represented in costume dramas ... is the display of heritage spectacle," and asks "... can these kinds of films be understood and used as historical sources in their own right?" In the early 1970s, the hall of the Greek Catholic church facing Rochester Road, in north Camden Town, was a cinema called the Venus.⁴ The name would have appealed to the road's namesake, the Earl of Rochester, John Wilmot, restoration courtier and poet, who "blazed out his youth and health in lavish voluptuousness".⁵ Rochester's life was portrayed in the 2006 film *The Libertine* starring Johnnie Depp and John Malkovich – and distributed by The Weinstein Company.

A person as complex as Rochester allows for many different representations of 'historical' fiction. The film was adapted from an earlier play by Stephen Jeffreys, which included lewdness, love and literature. Rochester's life is well known from contemporary sources, but his poetry only ever circulated around the Court in manuscript, and none was published in his lifetime. Although it was celebrated by Tennyson and Defoe, Voltaire and Goethe, the Victorians excluded it from their selections for offending taste. We don't know for certain if the poetry spoken in the film was written by Rochester.

⁴ Kentish Towner (monthly newspaper and [web](#) magazine) 2012.

⁵ Alexander Larman. Blazing star: The life and times of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester. Head of Zeus, 2014: x.



Film poster for *The Libertine*, 2005

The Libertine is a drama of a youth who tested, even for modern times, the limits of morality. But it includes period recreation, Britain's royal lineage and literary heritage: the difference between fact and fiction is narrow. To portray historical characters, film uses techniques of selection, enhancement and attraction. To have made an equivalent life-story for a fictional person could have 'felt' much less convincing: our knowledge that Rochester was 'real' enhances our self-deception.

A biopic joins period with entertainment for millions, compared with the few thousands who will see a play or read a biography. Film allows no footnotes (apart from extra material packaged in the CD). Screenplays pass through many versions; the director and the editing table vie for the final product; and the test of marketing is sales – not accuracy.

While a commercial film seeks to be understood by its audience, the conventions of drama allow differences of time and scene from the strict historical record. In its final minutes, *The Libertine* cuts between portraying Rochester's actual death and his 'fictitious' death in a play about him written by his friend and contemporary George Etherege. Our sensibility to Restoration drama reinforces a 'veracity' for the period in which film itself is set, and the enactment of the death. Using the historically 'real' play provides added pathos for the biographical dimension.

Nevertheless, Alexander Larman⁶, Oxford historian and author of the most recent biography of Rochester, describes the film having 'one of the more egregious

⁶ Alexander Larman. *Blazing star: The life and times of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*. Head of Zeus, 2014: x.

blunders in recent historical cinema'. In an earlier sequence, Rochester goes to the House of Lords and makes a stirring speech in support of Charles' brother, the Catholic James, in the succession crisis. But Larman points out it was a later Earl of Rochester, the unrelated Laurence Hyde, who historically gave the speech: John Wilmot was, by then, dead.

Hilary Mantel, in her recent Reith lectures, describes drawing from the historical record to write fiction, and then adapting fiction for television film. "The cinema is excellent with verisimilitude," she says, "but less good with the truth."⁷ Cinema has to limit the number of 'facts' to digest, develop ways to present what characters are thinking, create 'explanatory devices' for the images. "The adapter must put down the text and dream it," she says. Yet she is stern with those who abuse these facts: she includes a critique of a television series *Tudors* in which two historic characters were combined into one, for commercial exigency. A fictional film, she might say, is valid as history only if the screenplay is honest.

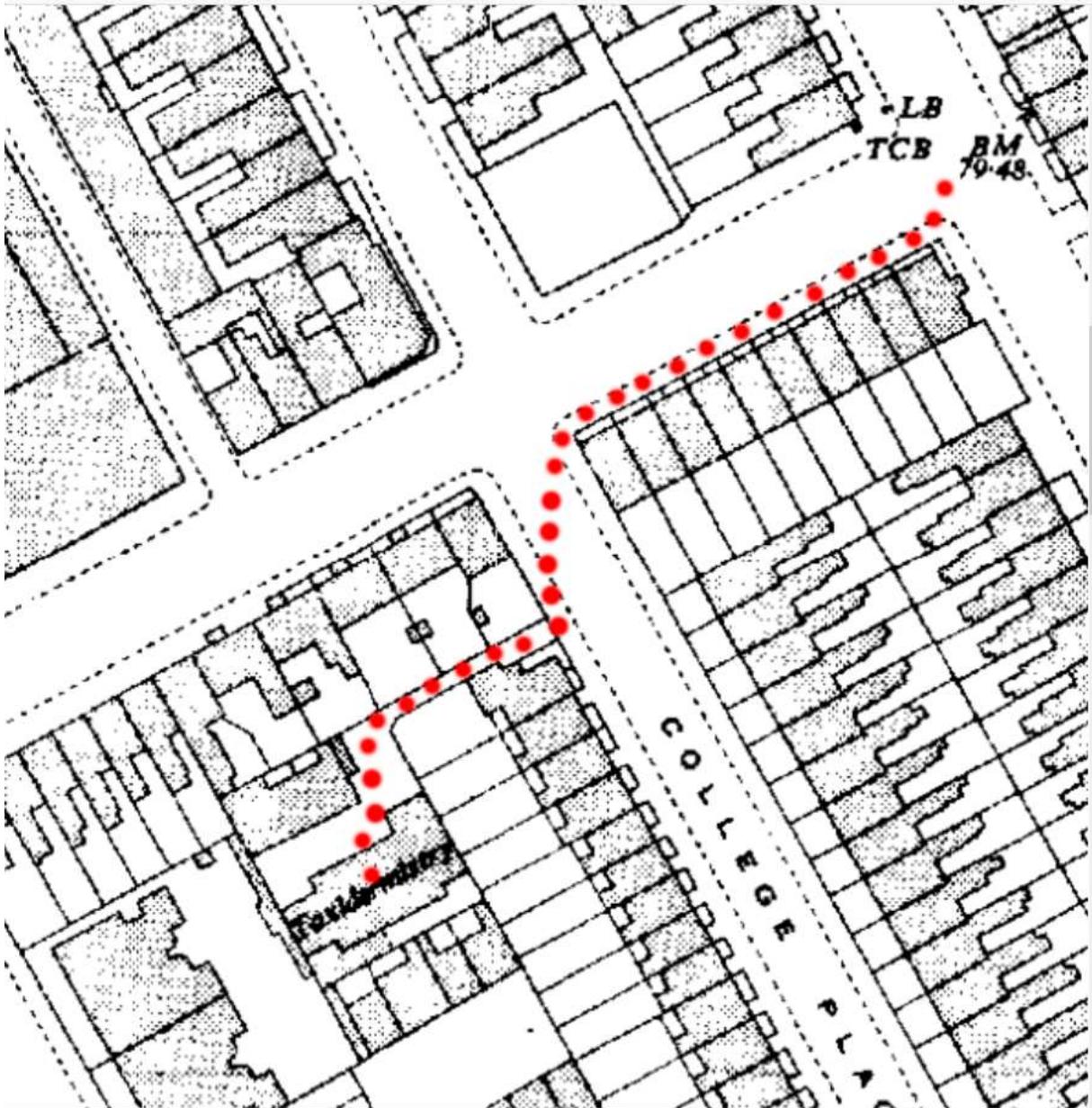
Out-takes



⁷ Hilary Mantel. The BBC Reith Lectures – [Adaptation](#): p4. Broadcast 11.07.2017.



<http://movie-tourist.blogspot.co.uk/2012/11/the-man-who-knew-too-much-1956.html>



https://the.hitchcock.zone/wiki/Plender_Street,_Camden,_London

"After James Stewart leaves the taxi on Royal College Street, he walks down Plender Street towards the Ambrose Chappell taxidermist on College Place.

...we cut to medium close up of Stewart stood in front of a row of houses — this row is in fact the rear of the houses on Royal College Street.

Stewart's approximate route from leaving the taxi to entering the taxidermist is shown below in red on a map of the area from 1954."



Located in the northwest London inner-city district of Kentish Town. The Venus Cinema opened in June/July 1970. It was located on the ground floor of a modern church hall building, at the rear of St. Andrew's Greek Orthodox Church which is at 122 Kentish Town Road.

It screened a mix of mainstream films and independent films, but did not prove a success, possibly due to its rather spartan conditions inside, which made it rather uncomfortable. In the summer of 1971, it was taken over by Contemporary Films, who operated the Paris Pullman Cinema in Kensington, and it began to programme first run off-beat films.

The Venus Cinema was closed in around 1975 and is now in use as St. Andrew's Church Hall.

Contributed by Ken Roe

<http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/30419>