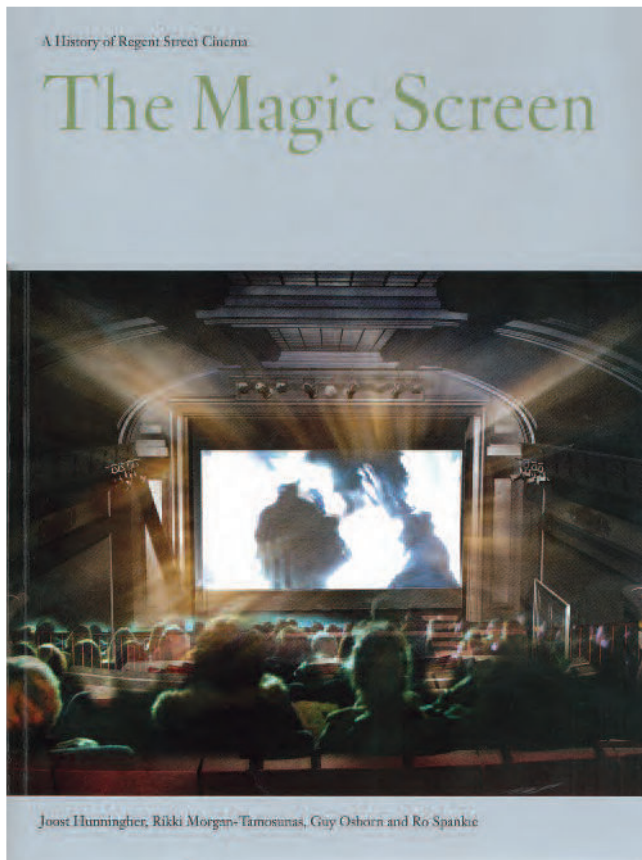


BOOK REVIEW

THE MAGIC SCREEN

Elaine Penn, ed.



The Magic Screen
Elaine Penn, ed.,
University of Westminster Press,
2015, 171pp,
£20

This is the fourth instalment of a series exploring the history of the University of Westminster. It is published to coincide with the re-opening of the 'old cinema', a remarkable structure cocooned within the University's Regent Street campus, better known to Society members as the theatre of the Royal Polytechnic Institution. Built in 1848 specifically to show magic lantern slides, the building has had a long association with the MLS; notably through the celebrations marking the birth of cinema in 1996, as the home of our 2009 convention and the venue for an excellent series of public lectures organised by former chairman Mervyn Heard. It was also the subject of our recent publication, *The Temple of Minerva*.

The book comprises three substantial chapters, with an Afterword by former deputy vice-chancellor Rikki Morgan-Tamosunas and an Introduction by series editor Elaine Penn. In the first chapter, Ro Spankie tells the story of the building from an architect's point of view. There is a very informative introduction which contextualises the Polytechnic within wider building schemes in the early nineteenth century, with some wonderful diagrams showing the evolution of the building drawn by Zuzana Horzakova. In the second, Guy Osborn shows how legislation around the granting of licences shaped the functioning of the building. This might sound like a rather dry subject, but this is far from the case. With access to a deep archive and marvellous illustrative material, Osborn weaves a fascinating

tale around such arcane matters as the 1909 Cinematograph Act, the Sunday Entertainments Act 1932 and the evolving influence of the British Board of Film Censors. The final chapter, by our own Joost Hunnigher, is an entertaining and quirky account of the cinema from a third perspective, that of a filmmaker. Each section is introduced with a short dialogue between Polytechnic luminaries of the past: Trewey, Hill, Professor Pepper, Tony Tensor and a chorus of ghosts. There is discussion of the old Polytechnic and its optical entertainments, and some beautiful Polytechnic slides, but the emphasis is on the building in its various incarnations as a cinema (at times with a reputation for somewhat outré French films) and the establishment of educational structures around cinematography.

This is a book with a story to tell. It launches an exciting period in the history of the University, symbolised by this ambitious project to revitalise the historic cinema – an achievement that can only be applauded. The University of Westminster is a recently formed entity, formally established in 1992. The purpose of this series of books is to create the impression of continuity with the past, and justify the claim to 175 years of existence. The old Polytechnic enjoyed at least two quite distinct incarnations in the nineteenth century; although close bonds unite the various institutions that have occupied the site, from Quintin Hogg's YMCI to the present day, they are also distinct entities.

Unfortunately, a few errors have crept into the text. We learn, for example, that Pepper's Ghost and the Phantasmagoria are synonymous (pp. 3–4), and that the projection of pond water was powered by a 'hydro-electrical microscope' rather than the more familiar oxyhydrogen variety (p. 26, and again on p. 31). There is also a repetition of the now entirely discredited account of Henry Langdon Childe's involvement within the Polytechnic from 1838. On a more substantive point, discussion of alterations in the 1890s appears to get confused between the theatre space (then known as the Great Hall) and the former Great Hall (now the gymnasium), and suggests that the proscenium was removed at this time and only later replaced. This seems most unlikely, and the supporting evidence on p. 39 shows the theatre from the stage-end and hence offers no evidence at all.

As someone deeply steeped in the Polytechnic, it is perhaps inevitable that I would find fault within my own subject area. Where this book really wins out is in the various contrasted approaches to the history of film within a precise geographical location. There are some excellent maps showing the location of the Polytechnic in relation to rival attractions, and almost every page is filled with full-colour illustrations, many published here for the first time. Despite my caveats, I would recommend this book as a valuable complement to *The Temple of Minerva*.

Jeremy Brooker