



The North East of England on Film and Television

James Leggott

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PREFACE

It is 2020 and I am at home completing a book about the film and television representation of many places I happen to know well, as someone who has lived and worked in the North East of England almost all of my life. It has on occasion been put to me that a book on this subject might appear too parochial, too narrowly defined as a work of media and cultural history—and that just because I am intrigued whenever I see a Durham coalfield, a Northumberland castle or a Tyneside suburb on screen, it does not necessarily follow that others do, or that this would make for a substantial scholarly project. In response, I have argued that media historians have long been interested in the articulation of place, and, besides, if there have been valuable books by media scholars on, for example the representation of London, Liverpool, Blackpool and Cornwall, it seems reasonable that the North East—which arguably has as strong sense of identity as those other places—has a good claim for sustained attention.

But as I complete my first draft, during a period of fluctuating regional and national lockdown as a result of the Covid pandemic, I become aware of a strange irony. At times, many of the places I am looking at on screen, despite being almost on my doorstep, are now as exotic and unreachable as they might be to someone living in another part of the country, or another side of the world. In an episode of *Vera* from 2017 (ITV, 2011–), I watch an interview scene taking place in a part of my university campus that I’ve not been able to access for months. In an early 1960s thriller entitled *Payroll* (Hayers, 1961), I glimpse the

coastal spot my family likes to park up at when we fancy some fresh, restorative air away from the city crowds. And when I watch an Anglo-Polish romantic comedy from the early 1990s called *Paper Marriage* (Lang, 1992) I am thrilled to see the film's main protagonist arriving in the United Kingdom from Poland and heading directly for a house just a couple of streets away from where I live. For now, even the prospect of getting on a train, like Michael Caine's character does at the start of *Get Carter* (Hodges, 1971), seems alien, never mind an aeroplane to another part of Europe.

Watching the BBC documentary series *Wastemen* (2015), though, I realise I have had a lucky escape, given that this programme features scenes of waste disposal collectors examining recycling bins in the back lanes adjacent to my own terraced house in the suburbs of Newcastle; in other words, I have come dangerously close to having my rubbish displayed for all to see on national television. But then, digging deeper into the archives, the inevitable happens, and I finally see my own house on screen—not in an era-defining programme such as *Our Friends in the North* (BBC, 1996) or *55 Degrees North* (BBC, 2004–2005), alas, but in a 2012 episode of the fairly ephemeral lifestyle show *Phil Spencer: Secret Agent* (2012–), in which a resident of my street enlists the assistance of a TV property expert to make their 'unsellable' house appealing to buyers. Needless to say, I have mixed feelings on this.

It is not uncommon for those in the provinces, or those on the geographical peripheries, to rail against film and television producers and creatives for leaving parts of the world unseen or under-represented, in the same way that many have of late communicated their dissatisfaction with the political centre at the voting booth. It is true that there have not been as many films about, say, Sunderland or Durham, as there have been about London or Liverpool, but this is hardly surprising, given their relative economic and cultural influence and importance. But any claim that the North East as a whole has been utterly forgotten representationally can be challenged by my own experience of seeing my street, my neighbourhood, my favourite leisure spots and my workplace, all captured for posterity within a regional corpus of generically varied texts. However, this book is not about the personal mapping of my life on screen, nor an attempt to encapsulate or define what the North East of England means historically, politically and culturally, to myself or others. Although the reader will hopefully gain some knowledge and understanding of the region's geography, history and most significant works of representation, this is of secondary importance to the book's primary goal of texturing and

enlarging the existing topography of British film and television cultures so as to reveal more about the complex interrelationships between place, identity and history. And for those already familiar with the landscape and people of the North East, I hope this book also helps you to map your own world on screen.

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This book was completed in 2020, made possible by a period of research leave from the School of Arts and Social Sciences, Northumbria University. However, it draws upon research undertaken over a number of years prior to that—and is based on the viewing of audio-visual materials stock-piled over half a lifetime. I am particularly grateful to those who have helped me access film and television material, or who have shared aspects of their knowledge or research with me: Ian Greaves, Pauline Hadaway, Matthew Kilburn, Ben Lamb, Tom May, Paul O'Reilly, Leah Panos, Johnny Walker, members of the Amber film collective; and the staff of the North East Film Archive, BBC Written Archive, BFI Research Viewing Service, BUFVC Learning on Screen, Northumbria University Library, and the Special Collections of Newcastle University Library. Thanks to all at Palgrave Macmillan for making the process so smooth.

Chapter 3 uses material from the article 'Fair Do's: Tom Hadaway and the Regional Voice in 1970s British television', published in 2017 in the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* (37: 4, pp. 683–702). Chapter 5 draws from the book chapter 'From Newcastle to Nashville: the Northern Soul of Jimmy Nail', published in 2017 in *Social Class and Television Drama in Contemporary Britain*, edited by David Forrest and Beth Johnson (London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 135–48).

As ever, thanks are due to my supportive family, especially Karen. And to Toby: I'm afraid I wasn't able to have any dinosaurs in this one, but I did manage to include a mention of *Star Wars*!

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

One of the most acclaimed British films of recent times, Joanna Hogg's semi-autobiographical *The Souvenir* (2019), begins with a sequence that potentially wrongfoots the expectations of its audience. Over a series of monochrome photographs of shipyards, dilapidated social housing and rubbish-strewn streets, we hear the main character, Julie (Honor Swinton Byrne), talking to a local radio DJ about why she has chosen to make a film about the northern industrial town of Sunderland. *The Souvenir* is set in the early 1980s, and Julie is a relatively well-to-do student living in Knightsbridge, London. Her planned film is about a teenage boy with an overwhelming fear about his mother dying, its central metaphor being, in Julie's words, that of the 'mother city of Sunderland dying and decaying and rotting'.

For any viewer already familiar with Hogg's oeuvre to date of films exclusively about the lives and neuroses of middle-class, metropolitan characters, these opening scenes of *The Souvenir* can seem like something of an in-joke. Quite frankly, Hogg is the last director one would expect to make a social realist drama about the declining industries and communities of North-East England, even if she did actually undertake such a project when studying at film school (O'Brien 2016). It is therefore unsurprising that *The Souvenir* quickly abandons the story of Julie's film-making intentions, in favour of a plot about a coercive romantic relationship. Given that *The Souvenir* is not just a rite-of-passage film,

but one explicitly about a film-maker learning her craft, it is hard not to read Julie's earnest student project about industrial decay as gauche, inauthentic and representationally stereotypical. Even if it is open to debate whether *The Souvenir* is itself perpetuating, acknowledging or challenging certain tropes associated with North-East England in cinema and television, the film clearly demonstrates the importance of regionality within UK film culture. As it happens, the city of Sunderland played a comparably fleeting yet significant part in another 2019 production, the six-part BBC drama *Gold Digger*, about a 60-year-old woman Julia (Julia Ormond) who incurs her family's suspicion when she embarks on a relationship with a man half her age. Filmed rather sumptuously in locations on Devon and London, there is an abrupt palette change in the penultimate episode, when Julia travels to a grey, monochromatic Sunderland to discover the hometown secrets of her lover. The establishing shots of the cityscape—clouds over shipyard cranes, rain-soaked streets—are comparable with the earlier scenes of *The Souvenir* in the way they 'other' the North East as a place of decay and complication. Furthermore, in an article in *The Sun* newspaper, it was claimed that fans of the programme had taken to Twitter to complain that Julia could not possibly have made a journey from Devon to Sunderland and back again in one day—which only emphasised further the notion of geographical alienation (Robinson 2019). A few months after *Gold Digger* was first broadcast, at least one reviewer of *Cobra* (Sky, 2019), a six-part apocalyptic drama about a solar flare wiping out Britain's power, considered the significance of the catastrophe being initially localised to the North East. Writing in the *Sunday Times*, Camilla Long alluded to the region's reputation as both the motor and victim of the 2016 EU referendum; 'what underlying message can there be if you portray the noble inhabitants of the northeast of England as violent, racist criminals and immigrant-hating thugs, other than some kind of allegory for Brexit?' (Long 2020).

Of course, these three admittedly arbitrary examples only support the most tentative thesis about North-East representation, but I would argue that they give some credibility and context for this book's interrogation of how the area, its people and its histories have been creatively configured in British film and television. An immediate, and quite reasonable objection to such a project is that it is in thrall to the idea of regional or cultural exceptionalism. However, this book does not have the aim, or the daring, to argue for a set of defining particularities either of place or representation, even though it does identify some recurrent themes and

emphases. Nor is it rooted in an exhaustive and empirical content analysis approach or concerned principally with the effect of representation on how viewers (or politicians) perceive the North East. Rather, this book is first and foremost a contribution to a strand of visual culture analysis that pays attention, in Rachel Moseley's words, to the 'materialization of region in the moving image' (Moseley 2018: 1). This has so far come in varying forms, from studies of regionally based television drama production (Cooke 2012), and broader analysis of regionality in media cultures from newspapers to pop music (Chignell et al. 2015), to books on the production and construction of identity in separate nations of the United Kingdom (for example: Berry 1996; Dave 2006; Higson 2011; Murray 2015; Hill 2019; Archer 2020). Ewa Mazierska's edited collection *Blackpool in Film and Popular Music* (2020) considers the representation of the North-West seaside resort in songs and movies. In addition, the *World Film Location* series published by Intellect has supplemented the existing body of work on 'cinematic cities' (for example Clarke 2005; Andersson and Webb 2016), with volumes on Liverpool (Conolly and Whelan 2013), London (Mitchell 2011) and Glasgow (Balkind 2013). However, Moseley's book *Picturing Cornwall: Landscape, Region and the Moving Image* (2018) is a rare example of a sustained examination of the filmic and televisual representation of a very specific English region, her analysis mobilising Rob Shields's concept of the 'place-myth', or the 'socially maintained reputation of a place or region', that emerges from an aggregate of 'place-images' (Shields 1991: 8). *Picturing Cornwall* is also unusual within British visual studies for its double focus on film and television, and in relation to other forms of pictorial and media representation—an approach that informs my own consideration of North-East texts in tandem with broader developments in popular culture.

Cornwall may be more peripheral in the strict geographical sense, but the counties of the North East have a double claim to existing on the 'edge' of England, in the way they occupy a terrain that stretches up to the border with Scotland, whilst also being (for the most part) disregarded or subsumed within broader and political-cultural conceptions of the 'north'. This marginalisation is also apparent in the media and literary scholarship on 'northern' identity, such as Ewa Mazierska's edited collection *Heading North: The North of England in Film* (2017), which contains no chapters concerning North-East examples, although does pay close attention to *Get Carter* (Hodges, 1971) in the introduction. In his book *Looking North: Northern England and the National Imagination*

(2004), Dave Russell devotes but a few pages to the North East, citing the comedy *The Likely Lads* (BBC, 1964–1966), followed by the historical drama *When the Boat Comes In* (BBC, 1976–1981), as beginning and accelerating the process of properly implanting the region within the national imagination as a place of various associations: toughness of landscape and labour, communal spirit, humour and so forth (Russell 2004: 193–195). Russell makes the brief but important point that journalistic discourses around programmes such as *When the Boat Comes In* conjured the possibility of a distinctive North-East identity, yet also helped to diminish the ‘exoticism’ of the region by pulling it ‘toward the mainstream as an exhibitor of a classic northern/working-class virtues’ (Russell 2004: 194).

Whilst media and cultural theorists of the ‘north’ have perhaps been inattentive to the North East, on the whole, a small but significant body of scholarship has emerged advancing a cultural history of the region. Robert Colls and Bill Lancaster’s edited collection *Geordies: Roots of Regionalism*, first published in 1992, was ‘the first book that seriously explored the subject’ (1992: viii), and, despite its Tyneside-referential name, actually engaged with the more general history and ‘reinvention’ of the North East. This was followed by other collections, such as the same authors’ *Newcastle upon Tyne, A Modern History* (2001), and T. E. Faulkner’s *Northumbrian Panorama* (1996a), which included some analysis of how ‘received notions of the region’s identity began to influence and be utilised in forms of cultural production, most recently in film and television, from about the eighteenth century onwards’ (Faulkner 1996b: x). In their introduction to *Geordies*, Colls and Lancaster set out their reasoning for defining ‘Geordies’ as those from the ‘old counties of Northumberland and Durham’ (Colls and Lancaster 2005: xi), not just those coming from Newcastle upon Tyne or the wider Tyneside area:

Who the Geordies are depends upon who they imagine themselves to be. The ‘North East’ is essentially a state of mind to do with histories and feelings about itself. (Colls and Lancaster 2005: xiv)

In his introduction to *A Northumbria Panorama*, Faulkner takes issue with such thinking, evidently inspired by Benedict Anderson’s notion of the ‘imagined community’, and observes that the *Geordies* book, in prioritising Tyneside subjects, served to ‘perpetuate an urban, industrial, working class image’ (Faulkner 1996b: xvii).

It is at this juncture, therefore, that I should clarify that my own definition of the North East is indebted to the pragmatic approach taken by Dan Jackson in *The Northumbrians: North-East England and Its People* (2019), the first substantial single-authored historical analysis of the region's distinctiveness. He explains that he uses the term 'Northumbria' as:

[...] shorthand for the lands and people of what was known in the Middle Ages as either 'Northumberland,' or, in official documents, *comitatus Northumbriae*: a single royal county that began at the Tees [...] and ran all the way north from the Tees to the Tweed. This is an area of land that now encompasses the post-1974 local authority boundaries of Northumberland and County Durham, Newcastle and Gateshead, North and South Tyne-side, Sunderland, Hartlepool, Stockton-on-Tees and Darlington. (Jackson 2019: vii)

This is the definition of the North East I will be using, whilst acknowledging that the southern borders present an occasional category challenge, given that the borough of Redcar and Cleveland is within the authority boundary of the North East whilst being part of the 'ceremonial county' of North Yorkshire. I would recommend Jackson's book to any reader requiring a more thorough history of how the North East has been defined territorially since the Middle Ages, and indeed further back to Roman times. His thumbnail summary of the region's distinctiveness is also useful:

I contend that a distinctive Northumbrian culture is discernible, one that has always relied upon—and celebrated—toughness and hard work—firstly in a dangerous frontier zone which, after centuries of violence, transformed into a great crucible of the Industrial Revolution where the same qualities of endurance were relied upon and celebrated. This in turn bred an almost instinctive solidarity and friendly (but often claustrophobic) communalism, with offshoots in dry humour and treacly sentimentality. For despite the hardship, this was a people that remained cheerful and gregarious, or at least made a point of appearing so. (Jackson 2019: 3)

Unsurprisingly, these features that Jackson describes can be found reflected in the kinds of stories, imagery and characterisations that tend to reoccur in relation to the North East. We can see the glorification of

‘toughness and hard work’ in the line of films, dramas and documentaries relating to the region’s mining heritage, or in the adapted novels of Catherine Cookson that were broadcast on ITV between 1989 and 2000, and likewise the celebration of communalism and stoicism when faced with hardship or defeat. Implicit in Jackson’s summary is a veneration of masculine labour, and the bonds and culture that stem from it, and we can also see that aspects of this have crystallised into stereotypes about machismo or the code of the ‘marra’, in the same way that the supposed ‘gregariousness’ of Northumbrians has forged strong associations with Newcastle (in particular) and the pleasures of socialising, fashion, courtship and consumption—as evident in the *Geordie Shore* (MTV, 2011–) phenomenon. In his book *Akenside Syndrome: Scratching the Surface of Geordie Identity* (2014), Joe Sharkey, like Jackson, identifies certain ‘pillars’ of North-East identity—bluntly: class, accent, drink and football—but is more concerned with the ambivalence towards home experienced by some Tynesiders, particularly those who have left the region.

This book sets out to bridge the gap between the screen studies scholarship that has only lightly addressed the North East of England, and the cultural histories of the North East that have given limited attention to its manifestations in popular media—or, as in the case of Natasha Vall’s valuable *Cultural Region: North East England 1945–2000* (2011), been more focussed upon the impact of policy and institutions upon vernacular culture, rather than detailed textual analysis. It would be wrong to claim this as totally unclaimed territory, given that a small group of texts with a North-East affiliation have been recognised as keynote works of British film and television culture. *The Likely Lads/Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads* (BBC, 1964–1966; 1973–1974), *Get Carter* and *Our Friends in the North* (BBC, 1996) have been excavated in detail because of their importance within the development of, respectively, the television sitcom, the gangster film, and the political television drama—and their canonisation is evident from the publication of individual scholarly books on them (Wickham 2008; Chibnall 2003; Eaton 2005). *Our Friends in the North* and *The Likely Lads* ranked respectfully (numbers 25 and 69) in the British Film Institute’s (BFI) 2000 poll of industry professionals to identify the greatest works of British television, whilst the comedy-drama *Auf Wiedersehen Pet* (ITV, 1983–1986; BBC, 2002–2004), which was ranked 46th, later topped a *Radio Times* reader poll to determine the nation’s favourite ITV programme. According to the magazine’s editor,

this show about a group of Geordies ‘getting on their bikes’ to find work in the construction industry in Germany showed how ‘Britain’s place in the world had changed while making the nation laugh and launching the careers of some of our favourite actors’ (Bennett 2015). The critical and popular recognition of these examples, all associated with the Newcastle area, points to the idea that Tyneside has dominated the representation of the North East. There is some truth here, but as Michael Pattison notes in an article on the BFI website, there is a ‘long lineage of film-makers—outsiders and otherwise—who have been drawn to the region’s urban, rural and coastal locales’ (Pattison 2017). His list of ‘ten great films’, which includes lesser-cited work such as *Men of Consett* (Stobart, 1959) and *Stormy Monday* (Figgis, 1988), acknowledges that the ‘north-east has proven to be a versatile cinematic setting, shaped by its strong sense of community and distinct (if far from heterogenous) cultural identity’ (Pattison 2017). As its name implies, Chris Phipps’s book *Forget Carter: Newcastle on Film and Television* is also valuable in its identification of less well known contributions to the Tyneside canon, such as *On the Night of the Fire* (Hurst, 1940) and *The One and Only* (Cellan Jones, 2002).

The chapters that follow offer case studies of North-East representation within particular eras or types of film/television production. The degree of attention given to specific examples is by no means proportionate to their critical or popular recognition, in part because of the aforementioned scholarship that exists already in relation to certain key texts and film-makers, such as the Amber collective, which has been examined by myself (Leggott 2020) and others. Furthermore, beyond its regional interests, this book seeks to contribute to the recognition and appreciation of some aspects of British visual culture that still remain insufficiently explored: for example, certain television writers of the 1960s and 1970s, the ‘workshop movement’ of exploratory film-making groups in the 1980s (which happened to have a very strong North-East contingent), and the comedy sketch show and live performance formats. But another impulse behind my consideration of some obscure or even ephemeral examples is the idea that representations are best understood in relation to a body of others. In his insightful chapter on the representation of North East in *Northumbrian Panorama*, Peter Hutchings considers the potency of certain stereotypes—such as the ‘flat caps and whippets’ trope—and reminds us that all individual representations are by nature limited and exclusionary, given that they cannot possibly encompass the ‘variety of social and cultural activities in the North East, in its

various towns and cities and in its rural areas' (1996: 275). It is clearly a pointless endeavour to categorise texts in terms of how regressive or progressive, good or bad, accurate or inaccurate, they are:

Instead, we should be thinking about these representations as a totality. That is to say, while retaining an awareness of the differences that separate them, we should be particularly sensitive to similarities and areas of interaction. In this way, a clearer sense can be gained of those images, types and representations which, for better or worse, contribute in significant ways to the region's sense of itself (and to the nation's sense of the region), and in relation to which any new representations will have to locate themselves. (Hutchings 1996: 276)

Whilst this book, as I have mentioned, cannot claim or hope to be at all comprehensive, its analysis is grounded in the conviction that the articulation of an specific place in film and television is best understood through an appreciation of the 'totality' of representation. It begins with a broadly chronological approach, with the next chapter dealing with the visualisation of the North East in film and television up until around the 1970s (although I include some later examples). I identify the late 1960s and early 1970s as a watershed moment for the 'mainstreaming' of the region in the popular imagination, as exemplified by the broadcast of the groundbreaking *Close the Coalhouse Door* (BBC, 1969) and the successful period drama *When the Boat Comes In*. With hindsight, this period can be identified as one of rare opportunity for the 'regional' television writers who are the subject of the third chapter. In a similar way, the arrival of Channel 4 in the early 1980s gave a boost to independent, oppositional film culture, and the fourth chapter pays attention to the considerable achievements of the North-East contributors to the workshop movement, such as Trade and Amber. There follows three chapters looking at particular types of film and television culture: comedy (including sitcoms and sketch shows as well as the contributions of North-East comedians and humour), dramas and documentaries pertaining to the past, and crime and police dramas and documentaries. A final chapter makes some observations on more recent trends in twenty-first-century representation, such as the rise of reality television, with its various formats of observational and 'constructed' non-fiction.

There are some forms of representation that I generally do not consider, for reasons of space as much as practicality, such as news, music

formats, lifestyle, schools and sports programming. Nor do I engage with interstitial elements on broadcast television, like the pre-programme ‘bumpers’ that sometimes show iconic regional imagery, such as the Newcastle riverscape or Anthony Gormley’s ‘Angel of the North’ (1998) sculpture. I have mostly restricted my case studies to programmes and films that have been broadcast or been commercially available at some stage, with only the occasional contextual reference to other forms of distribution and exhibition. However, there is admittedly more to be said in reference to ‘local interest’ home videos and user-driven online material (such as videos uploaded to YouTube), as well as community, education and industrial films. Furthermore, I have tended to avoid television made purely for the North-East audience, as I am more concerned with how British television and cinema speaks of the region to the nation than how the region speaks to and for itself (which would be another worthy project). A final caveat relates to my equal consideration of texts that have been popular (in the sense of reaching a large audience), or which have had an afterlife in the form of repeats/recirculation or cultural prominence, and those that have fallen beneath the popular or critical radar for various reasons (which can sometimes be happenstance and unavailability/invisibility as much as perceived quality or through not capturing the zeitgeist). In my analysis, which is not primarily concerned with reach and reception, there is no prioritising of films and television programmes with greater circulation or commercial prominence as a higher order of representation. Nor are the more exploratory or experimental works discussed to be assumed of greater scholarly value, even where their deconstructive approaches to representation happen to provide richer material for intellectual engagement.

My findings in this book are based on an extensive and broad range of viewings as I could undertake, which has involved looking at a large amount of material that is not commercially available, and therefore accessible only via archival and institutional holdings, or via mine and other people’s collections of off-air television recordings. I have also leant upon the BFI’s *Britain on Film* and Mediateque collections, as well as the archival material of the North East Film Archive, online *Radio Times* and *TV Listings* (courtesy of the BBC Genome website and the British Universities Film & Video Council’s *Learning on Screen* resource, respectively), and the data in Kaleidoscope’s *TV Brain* resource of archival holdings and information. This has led me towards an identification of recurring tropes and tendencies that I will return to across my various

case studies. The first is the repetition of stories and scenarios dramatising journeys of arrival or departure, or thwarted dreams of leaving. It so happens that some of the most famous North-East films and programmes, such as *Get Carter*, *The Likely Lads*, *Auf Wiedersehen Pet* and *Billy Elliot* (Daldry, 2000), are those proffering a variation on the theme of entrapment versus escape, and they aggregate into a general ambivalence with regard to identity and belonging, whilst perpetuating the notion of the area as a region apart, and indeed on the periphery. A related trope, which pulls together disparate texts such as *Billy Elliot*, *When the Boat Comes In*, *Days of Hope* (BBC, 1975), *Stormy Monday*, *Our Friends in the North* and others, is that of the region's people—predominantly its working-classes—at the mercy of political and economic forces at a national or international level. Proud traditions of labour (particularly mining), union activity and protest are much celebrated, and often used as shorthand for the betrayal of the working-class. A second observation is that the corpus of North-East representation reflects and critiques the shift of the region from an industrial to post-industrial economy, and thus constitutes a meta-narrative of national as much as regional history. An elegiac, retrospective tendency in documentaries, dramas and comedies becomes prominent from the 1960s onwards, and lamentations for the decline of the region's traditional industries, and communities around them, are supplemented by texts that either challenge or exemplify the political project of 'cultural regeneration'. A third trope that becomes apparent from an immersion in film and television about the North East is an interest in the mechanics and legacy of representation itself. It is of course a truism that all representations speak, explicitly or implicitly, to other representations, but time after time we see documentaries, dramas and comedies that acknowledge, parody or challenge certain stereotypes around gender, class, labour traditions, landscape and history. This book's goal is to place over a hundred years of representations in dialogue with each other, so as to join a wider conversation about the cultural articulation of place—but it is clear that this is a conversation already underway between the texts I will now turn my attention to, beginning with some of the very earliest examples of the North East on-screen.

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Early Representations of the North East

2.1 1896 TO THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The history of the representation of North-East England on-screen begins, almost, with the dawn of British film production itself. Denis Gifford's *British Film Catalogue* (2019) suggests that the first filmmaker to visit the region was the pioneering Robert Paul (R. W. Paul), whose experimentations with projection occurred around the same time as those of the Lumières in Paris. The first traceable North-East films—the Newcastle-shot *Turn-Out of a Fire Brigade* and *Football Match*, and *Sunderland* (which contained ‘street scenes’ of the town)—are all dated 1896, and attributed to ‘Paul’s Theatograph’, named after the filmmaker’s 35mm projector system, which was toured around the country and played a significant part in the popularisation of early cinema.

The majority of these early examples were ‘see yourself on screen’ films, records of people, places or events that were developed and exhibited locally to their participants. Most of the oldest North-East ‘actualities’ archived on the BFI’s online *Britain on Film* website are productions by the Blackburn-based Mitchell and Kenyon company.¹ The chance re-discovery (in 1994) and subsequent restoration and distribution of a cache of forgotten Mitchell and Kenyon films was truly a gift to

¹The BFI *Britain on Film* website can be accessed via <https://www2.bfi.org.uk/britain-on-film>.

social historians, and led to a re-evaluation of the company's significance within UK cinema culture, but it is also a reminder of the challenges of constructing a narrative of representation when certain film and television texts are unavailable, missing or have fallen into obscurity. In his analysis of the earliest films produced in the North East by Mitchell and Kenyon, and other associated showmen, David Williams identifies three distinct genres: 'factory gate' films such as *20,000 Employees Entering Lord Armstrong's Elswick Works, Newcastle upon Tyne* (1900) and *Employees Leaving Eastern Engine Works, Gateshead* (1901), films recording events and processions such as *Military Sunday in Newcastle* (1900) and *Lord Durham at Sunderland* (1901), and 'panoramas' like *Rough Sea at Roker* (1902), *Panorama of the River Tyne* (1903) and *Tram Ride Through Sunderland* (1904). Whilst none of these genres or individual films could be said to have significant regional peculiarities, some have sporadically been singled out for attention. For example, *North Sea Fisheries, North Shields* (1901) was included in the three-part BBC documentary series *The Lost World of Mitchell and Kenyon* (2005). In the latter, the commentator Dan Cruickshank notes the unusual life and demeanour of the Cullercoats women who followed the fishing fleets; the two-minute film captures something of their rapid gutting techniques, as well as an unsuccessful attempt by the film-maker to goad the trawlermen into a brawl. For Williams, the 'factory gate' films demonstrate the 'good-naturedness of urban, heavy-industrial workers' of the North East (Williams 2004). But the likes of *20,000 Employees Entering Lord Armstrong's Elswick Works*—with its impressive shots of workers thronging great factories of the Tyne that supplied parts for armaments, locomotives and ship-building—also convey the scale, prosperity and expansion of the region's industries at the turn of the century; within fifty years, as we will see, the dominant representation will be that of irrevocable decline.

A flavour of the films made in or about the North East in the years leading to the Second World War can be gained from a consultation of Gifford's catalogues of fiction and non-fiction production (2017; 2019), in conjunction with the BFI's *Britain on Film* database, as well as that of the North East Film Archive, whose holdings include industrial collections, newsreels, and amateur material shot by home movie enthusiasts and local cine clubs.² Given the dominance of imagery and stories

²The North East Film Archive website can be accessed via <https://www.yfanefa.com/>.