

The Literary London Journal

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B. S. Johnson, *You're Human Like the Rest of Them: The Films of B. S. Johnson*, BFI Flipside Dual Format, DVD and BluRay. London: BFI, 2013. 160 minutes. Catalogue number: BFIB1145. £19.99.

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The Literary London Journal, Volume 11 Number 1 (Spring 2014)

'The Londoner of Londoners'. This is Johnson – not B.S., but Samuel, as described by B.S. in his 1971 London Weekend film on his 18th-century namesake, one of the ten films he made that are collected in this BFI compilation. But B.S. himself was very much a Londoner who was born and raised in the capital (unlike Samuel) and who worked, studied, wrote, made films, married, begot children and died there. His second and sixth novels, *Albert Angelo* (1964) and *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* (1973), are set mainly in the capital, and London locations recur in his fiction. But there are two extra-metropolitan places that figure significantly in both his prose fiction and film work. One is Wales, especially the Llyn Peninsula, the setting of most of his first novel, *Travelling People* (1963), and of the longest film in this collection, the 40-minute *Fat Man on a Beach* (1974). The other location – unnamed in either his film or prose fiction – is Nottingham, where his friend Tony Tillinghast lived, whose slow, cancered dying is spelt out in the scattered leaves of *The Unfortunates* (1969) and which Johnson revisits in the 15-minute 1969 film about that novel in this collection. London, Wales and Nottingham are the triangulation points of Johnson's fictional and filmic topography, the main geographical markers for a mapping of his mind.

There is, however, another city that is significant to Johnson's fiction and film, though peripheral to its maps: Dublin. It is Dublin that is invoked in the first sentence

of his famous polemical introduction to his prose collection *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* (1973, 11-31) as the city whose first cinema was opened by none other than James Joyce. In that introduction, Johnson goes on to stage a contest between film and the novel as storytelling media in which film takes the palm: film can tell a story more directly, quickly and vividly than a novel. That is why the novel has to innovate in areas that film cannot so easily enter.

Given this state of affairs, Johnson might have ignored film completely, focusing on his innovative prose fiction. But this collection shows that he did not and proves that, in film as in prose fiction, he was energetically inventive, engaging in 'a continuous dialogue with form' (*Christie Malry*, 1973, 166). Johnson, of course, was never a formalist: the third participant in the dialogue between Johnson and form was life, in what he saw as its randomness and potential and actual aggression against its most sentient manifestation, human beings. In these films, as in his novels and short stories, Johnson, life and form – and sometimes politics – interact creatively.

The first film, the 17-minute *You're Human Like the Rest of Them* (1967), is not specifically set in London, though the credits thank the Ealing Mead Secondary School boy pupils who took part. But we stay off the streets: the film moves through three institutional interiors that are, paradoxically, sites of both surveillance and control, and healing and nurture: the first, a lecture room in a hospital; the second, a state school staffroom of the period; and the third a classroom in the same school. William Hoyland (b. 1943) plays the young man who moves through these interiors. In the hospital scene, he is a younger patient, with back problems, among much older male patients, all in pyjamas and dressing gowns, sitting in a white-tiled room where a rather stern physiotherapist (Anne Hardcastle) – an adumbration of the eponymous anti-heroine of his fifth novel, *House Mother Normal* (1971) – gives an illustrated talk on back care, the structure of the spine and the importance of bending the knees rather than the back when reaching down. As she talks of the pain that back strain may induce, there are almost subliminal still shots – blink and you'd miss them – of agonised faces. This near-subliminal tactic recurs later in this film and in the film on *The Unfortunates*. The physiotherapist's talk, we infer, heightens the young man's awareness of the vulnerability of the human frame – the spine, a symbol of willpower, cannot in fact bear much strain – and, through the other, older patients around him, of ageing and mortality.

In the next scene, in the staff room, the young man is clearly the aggressive outsider, heir to John Osborne's Jimmy Porter: he goes up to a female teacher and makes a remark – outrageous today – implying she is sexually inhibited; a fellow male teacher accuses him – using the metaphor suggested by the hospital lecture – of spinelessness; he aims an imaginary rifle and shoots at three flying ducks (a cliché symbol of middle-class kitsch) on the wall (destabilising the boundary between imagination and reality, a duck falls to the floor and breaks, and liquid flows from one of the fragments).

Exiting with a pun, he next appears in the classroom, where one of those moments of disconnect occurs – do they still happen in today's thought-policed schools? – in which Sir takes off on a trip of his own, talking about things that matter urgently to him but are tangential to the topic of the lesson or the immediate interests

of the pupils, though they may provide the latter with welcome relief from routine and also offer an intriguing insight into the humanity of the adult authority figure. In this case, what matters urgently to the teacher is the intimation of mortality he has received at the hospital and which he wants to drive home to his pupils regardless of their sensibilities or the ostensible subject of the lesson. Flashbacks in the form of near-subliminal still shots of very aged faces and a skull reinforce his preoccupation with age and death. The film then goes full-colour and a fast-forward sequence shows the teacher gradually being covered with what look like medals, perhaps the symbols of the rewards he will gain if he becomes a good citizen and waits with docility for death – a fate that, despite his determination not to go gentle into that bad night, to fight as hard as possible against existential and physical death, may well lie in store for him.

Up Yours Too, Guillaume Apollinaire! (1968) is a two-minute silent animated film, commissioned by London's Institute of Contemporary Art, and drawn by John Furse, to mark the 50th anniversary of the French writer and artist Guillaume Apollinaire. In the film, the letter 'B' appears in a thought bubble above the head of a recumbent naked man and extends into the words 'Best', then 'Beast' and finally 'Breast'. This word multiplies, curves and shuffles to form the side-view of a female breast, which in turn releases, through its nipple, the word 'TIT'. The letters and words then become, first a female breast, and then a female face, in profile, whose eye discharges the letter 'I'. This turns into the word 'eye' that travels down to the naked man, descends to his genitals and enlarges into the word 'eyeball', a verbal pun that takes visual form when the man's left testicle acquires a winking optic. (This description is indebted to Dan Fox's article in the booklet accompanying the DVD (9-10).) Well before queer theory, and anticipating feminist analyses of voyeurism, *Up Yours* is fascinating for its queering of gender boundaries and definitions and its play with vision, language and sexuality. It also anticipates the use of concrete poetry, once more with mammary associations, in *See the Old Lady Decently* (1975).

Paradigm, a nine-minute colour film, opens with a shot of a (discreetly) naked William Hoyland, slender and smooth-skinned like an ephebe from ancient Greece, sitting on the lowest of a pile of five irregularly stacked rostra, solid rectangles coloured (in ascending order), magnolia, olive green, white, black and lilac, that suggest both minimalist sculptures and books. When Hoyland starts to speak, he does so in a language in which some fragments may seem familiar but which never becomes identifiable; it was, in fact, written by Johnson and is that Wittgensteinian impossibility, a private language. As the film goes on, Hoyland moves up to each successive level of the rostra pile, growing older, assuming different clothes and postures, until finally he is sitting on the top rostrum, dishevelled and silent. As well as the private language, the soundtrack is marked by an electronic whine that climbs to an uncomfortable pitch in the penultimate sequence. The film offers, as its title suggests, a paradigm of life in its complexity, incomprehensibility, irritation and beauty: it is perhaps Johnson's most concentrated statement of his view of the human condition.

The Unfortunates (1969) starts with Johnson in close-up, speaking direct to camera, and then evokes how the novel of the same name began in a moment of recognition when he arrived in a city to report a football match and realised that it

was a city he knew, where his close friend Tony Tillinghast had lived and died of cancer. The city is unnamed in both film and novel (one advantage of this, perhaps not consciously intended by Johnson, is that it avoids the strong literary associations with D. H. Lawrence and Alan Sillitoe that naming the city as Nottingham would have invoked). The film includes shots of the railway station, of Johnson having a drink in a Yates's Wine Lodge and going to report a football match, of Newstead Abbey which he and Tony once visited together, of the University where Tony worked, and almost subliminal still shots of Tony himself culminating in a more extended one in which Tony's face changes as the cancer eats into his body, and then Johnson's face changes in a similar way, accompanied by Hoyland's reading of a passage from *The Unfortunates* in a voice that approaches but never tips into hysteria.

Another sequence in the film has Johnson talking direct-to-camera about the book and shows the cover of the famous first-edition box, with its pleasing purple-and-white pattern that is in fact a close-up photograph of cancer cells. This sequence demonstrates Johnson's readiness to explain his books, justify his artistic practices – very different, in this respect, from his hero Samuel Beckett or from many other innovative artists who have eschewed explication and seen it as a sign of a failure in the work itself. Johnson was quite ready to explain – and this suggests that his avant-garde impetus was accompanied, and complicated, by a democratic impulse that links to his socialism.

Johnson's socialist commitment is evident in the next two films in the collection, the 8-minute black-and-white film *Unfair!* (1970), written by Johnson and his fellow innovative fictioneer, Alan Burns, and *March* (1971). *Unfair!* opens with a working man (Bill Owen) hand wrestling with an employer (Freddie Earle), an evident symbol of class struggle, and then moves into an attack on the Heath government's Industrial Relations Bill (not yet an Act), with Owen confronting a judge (George Colouris) interpreting this. The film may be agitprop but it turns on a complex linguistico-legal debate about the meaning of a key word in the Bill, 'unfair', with the implication that the Bill designed to promote fairness is unfair to the working man.

The 13-minute colour film *March!* (1971), made for the TUC by the Freeprop Film Group of ACTT (Association of Cinematograph Television and allied Technicians), is about the TUC-initiated march on 21 February 1971 against the Heath government's Industrial Relations Bill. While *Unfair!* was all-male, this film does show women on the march as well, though the leaders and speakers are all men. The film is very vividly set in London, with plenty of capital sights on a sunny day to distract the agitprop eye, and the commentary, probably written by Johnson, is salutary in its attempt, suasive rather than stentorian, to present, against heavy media as well as governmental bias, a positive picture of trade unionism. As Jim Dempster observes in the booklet accompanying this collection, the policing of the march is very casual by 21st-century standards – no riot gear – and the commentary stresses the orderliness of the marchers, the absence of violence and arrests: nothing to raise calls for water cannon. But *March* has an air of pathos now, in light of the way trade union power, would be crushed, without too much trouble, by a determined right-wing government led by that 'woman Prime Minister' evoked as the pretext for a heteronormative slur on Edward Heath in *Unfair!*

Poem (1971), in a mixture of black-and-white and colour, with an actress who looks vaguely familiar but whose identity remains uncertain, lasts only a minute, and offers a visual accompaniment to the fourth of Samuel Beckett's *Quatre Poèmes* (1948), spoken by William Hoyland. It is a haunting, enigmatic piece, evoking, through its words, and through images of a lone woman and urban detritus, a sense of desolation and loss.

B.S. Johnson on Dr. Samuel Johnson (1971) is a 26-minute cultural documentary, in an ITV series called 'On Reflection', that includes the description of Dr. Johnson as 'the great Londoner' quoted at the start of this review. As B.S. points out, despite Sam's identification with London, he was in fact born and brought up in Lichfield, went to Oxford, worked briefly in Leicestershire and did not come to live in the capital until he was 28. But it was in London that he established himself, and most of the documentary is set there – we see Sam's statue (which B.S. dislikes) outside St Clement Danes church in the Strand; the approach to his house from Fleet Street via narrow alleys; and the interior of his house, where B.S. sits and talks about Sam. The documentary format is disrupted, amusingly, by a range of devices: for instance, visual summaries, in the form of football match scores, of the results of Sam's verbal run-ins (e.g., JOHNSON 2 BOSWELL 0); a placard that says 'Publishers are PARASITES'; and a visual précis of Sam's great sardonic letter to his parsimonious patron Lord Chesterfield that takes the form of two fingers giving a V-sign. Sam himself might well have responded to such devices by declaring 'Nothing odd will do long' (20 Mar 1776; Boswell vol. 1, 618-19) – Sam's example was Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1760-67), a favourite novel of B.S. But B.S.'s devices still work well in conveying an essential aspect of Sam's life and character in the bear garden of 18th-century literary production.

Not Counting the Savages (1972) is a TV play in the BBC's 'Thirty Minute Theatre' series, originally in colour but now only available in black and white. It features an unnamed husband (Hugh Burden) and wife (Brenda Bruce) and their adult son Jerry (William Hoyland) and daughter Rosa (Fiona Walker), who arrive later. Its portrayal of dismal family dynamics centres on a topic that resonates more strongly today than it would have in the early 1970s: the belittling of a woman's traumatic encounter with a male sex offender. The wife has been deeply upset by a flasher when visiting a grave at the local cemetery; but her greedy and disagreeable husband coarsely dismisses the incident, her son probes it with voyeuristic delight, her daughter thinks it's no big deal and the police are disinclined to pursue it. Flasher, husband, daughter, son and police all, in their different ways, count as savages, and the wife is peculiarly vulnerable because she cannot release her own savagery against others, but turns it, cancerously, back on herself. Then, in the last part of the play, our perspective on the husband changes when, ignoring his wife's distress, he sets off for work and turns out to be a cancer surgeon who reassures the patient on whom he is about to operate. There is a contrast between his professional commitment and his contempt for his wife, and an analogy between his cancered marriage, which seems inoperable, and his patient, whom he may cure. *Savages* is an effective play that, from a present-day perspective, provides an anticipatory corrective to the portrayal of the surgeon as paragon of late-bourgeois virtues in Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005).

The last film in the collection is *Fat Man on a Beach*, Johnson's most celebrated and congenial movie. The beach is Porth Ceiriad on the Llyn Peninsula in Wales – the third point of Johnson's topographical triangle – and the fat man is Johnson himself. But the titular adjective, with its connotations of ludicrousness and clumsiness, is too self-deprecating: Johnson's physical presence in the film is reassuring, even sometimes cuddly, and, despite his girth, he is nimble, light on his feet. He drops his usual jacket and tie here and sports quite a wardrobe of clothes, including a selection of coloured and patterned shirts (the Great Fatsby, perhaps). His screen persona is engaging and often genial, cracking jokes, telling anecdotes, reading his poems, embarking on philosophical reflections, expressing his cherished ideas, starkly stressing human vulnerability and mortality, exposing the film as a construction. It is a virtuoso one-man performance, a compendium, a Johnson annual. But at the end, in a high shot taken from a helicopter, he walks into the sea, so that it seems, with hindsight, as if he is anticipating his own imminent exit from life.

These films, like Johnson's novels and short stories, show us what we lost by that exit. But with the films as with the prose fiction, it is important to stress what he did achieve; and this collection demonstrates the range, strength and inventiveness of his screen work. An extra 16-minute film on this disc takes us back to where we began this review, to London, where British Library curator Joanna Norledge gives a fascinating talk, with examples, of the Johnson archive acquired in 2008. It seems fitting that Johnson's literary remains should lie in the capital. The archive, along with *Well Done, God!*, a substantial selection of his short prose and drama published in 2013, and this BFI collection of his screen work, with its informative accompanying booklet, should help to ensure that Johnson's books and films enjoy a long and fruitful afterlife.

Works Cited

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Note

Although *You're Human Like the Rest of Them: The Films of B. S. Johnson* is a Dual Format edition, with both DVD and BluRay discs, *The Unfortunates* and *Not Counting the Savages* are available only on DVD.

To Cite This Article:

Nicolas Tredell, 'Review of B. S. Johnson, *You're Human Like the Rest of Them: The Films of B. S. Johnson*'. *The Literary London Journal*, Volume 11, Number 1 (Spring 2014): 62–67. Online at <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/spring2014/tredell.pdf>.