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Sound and Vision: British Filmmakers and the Politics of Pre-War Hollywood

The British at home

From the very beginning, producer Michael Balcon knew where the centripetal force of filmmaking lay and was, as Philip Kemp reminds us, far more complex, ambiguous and internationalist than many a recollection of him would allow for. The moment he formed Gainsborough Pictures in 1924 with his partner Victor Saville, Balcon set about giving his pictures the best possible chance of securing a distribution deal in the marketplace that he understood to be the most profitable and expansive in the world: the United States. “Unpalatable as it may be, we must recognise that America produces by far the best pictures,” he asserted in an article for the trade paper, *The Film Renter and Moving Picture News*, in 1925. Ironically, while Balcon’s commercial sensibilities pointed him across the Atlantic, his technical and industrial focus sent him into Europe, Germany in general, and the studios of Ufa in particular, which he visited for the first time in 1924.

At the Ufa studios in Neubabelsberg, Balcon spent his time soaking up the organisational, creative and artistic energies and talent that abided in every part of the company. He established relations with Eric Pommer and it was here that he encouraged the young Alfred Hitchcock to study the art and technique of German productions, notably F.W. Murnau’s work at the studio in the mid-1920s. As Tim Bergfelder asserts, one key to Balcon’s education in European cinema was the way he adapted the techniques and stylistic nuances of those working at Ufa without necessarily importing any distinct national identity from the studio. Indeed Bergfelder suggests that what Balcon and Gainsborough were able to translate into their work back in Britain were films that operated as “cultural hybrids”. Many of the expressionistic flourishes that
were so much a part of Ufa's output remained intact but the prevalence for story-telling, wit and melodrama remained as latent and unassailable British characteristics.

During Gainsborough's brief reign as the most influential and daring of English studios in the 1920s, it was Balcon's tactic of using European film techniques and personnel but then importing American rather more than German or French actors back to Britain that worked wonders for the reputation of him and the company. Put together with a series of Anglo-German agreements tied up through Ufa to produce features during the decade as well, the final piece in the company's artistic and financial jigsaw seemed to be secured when Balcon was eventually offered the golden opportunity of joining forces with MGM in Hollywood. Meeting with Louis B. Mayer's representative in London, Sam Eckman, Balcon was guaranteed £30,000 a film for production and marketing of a series of pictures featuring Ivor Novello. He thought it over and then turned Eckman down, wanting the company and British films to remain firmly in British hands. The truth of the matter was that whatever he felt about the quality of American movies, he remained deeply suspicious of Hollywood and its growing force as an industry. Balcon was suspicious on a number of levels; not least the threat of commercial takeover, in Britain and elsewhere, in part derived from a feeling in his mind that American-sponsored films – even those made in Britain – were not truly indigenous British products. But he was wary also of the limits of control that might be placed on a producer like himself. He was plainly hands-on, instrumental in every part of a feature's construction, integral to the day-to-day running of a movie set. In the studio system of Hollywood, he wondered, what would he have to do and who would he be responsible to? Balcon worried that with a Hollywood studio in tow that already had the reputation of being more conservative in its tastes than a number of others, the lines of distinction between making pictures and making money would be all too quickly blurred and he wasn't yet ready to sacrifice art over profit. In the later 1930s, Balcon would have to eat his words, but for the time being, he concocted one of the most endearing and enduring collections of British movies made at any time in the industry's history.

But it was still somewhat ironic given Balcon's natural proclivity, to see the state of affairs in the British and American film industries move at the end of the 1920s in the direction they did. A number of American producers in Hollywood, many operating under the same guise as Balcon himself, actually gained more power and authority as the silent era passed into talkies, while Balcon found Gainsborough, through a