



## V.F. PERKINS 1936–2016

### Obituary

The film scholar Victor Perkins, who has died at the age of 79, played a key role in laying the foundations for a new academic discipline. Few British universities now lack a department of film and / or media studies; a stream of books on film history and theory flows from the press. This was unimaginable in the late 1950s, when Perkins published his first writings as an Oxford student, and indeed for many years after: he was arguably the single most influential figure in validating this new field, both as writer and as teacher.

His Pelican book *Film as Film*, first published in 1972 and many times reprinted, has had an influence, in Britain and beyond, that continues to this day. Its 200 pages are devoid of images, an austerity somehow reinforced by his use, as always, of initials rather than his first name. The byline V.F. Perkins carried an echo of F.R. Leavis, who in an earlier age had done comparable work in helping to give the upstart subject of English its secure academic place. Perkins wrote with a similar seriousness and analytic rigour, and the clarity of his prose in describing film images and film sequences more than compensated for the lack of pictures. The book's classic status was affirmed by a new American edition in 1993, with an introduction by Foster Hirsch, who praised its 'language of refreshing clarity, directness, and simplicity. Written before

the French heavy-hitters had inundated the academic market-place, here is film theory cleansed of jargon.’

*Film as Film* had made it harder than ever to write off the study of cinema and its history as some kind of educational soft option. But it was some time before academia took this properly on board, and again Perkins was central to this process of change. He worked first in the British Film Institute’s Education department in London, liaising with schools and colleges; then by training teachers at Bulmershe College of Education, Reading (now part of Reading University); and finally at the University of Warwick, where he moved in 1979 and where he stayed for the rest of his life, even after official retirement in 2004, becoming the best-loved kind of elder statesman.

It was typical of him to write, on the inside cover of *Film as Film*, that his education had begun at Alphington Primary School, Devon – not many authors reach back that far. His father worked in a local department store. Going to Oxford to read Modern History, after National Service, was a big step in terms of both class and geography, akin to that taken, in those increasingly fluid times, by a range of contemporaries such as Dennis Potter, Melvyn Bragg, and Alan Bennett. Already captivated by cinema, Perkins linked up with other enthusiasts, notably Ian Cameron and Mark Shivas, who went on to distinguished careers respectively in publishing and in TV production, to produce some outspokenly combative issues of the film section of the magazine *Oxford Opinion*, challenging the complacent critical orthodoxies of the time. In those days, an Oxbridge publication could make national waves, and this one did so. It led to the setting-up by this trio, in London in 1962, of *Movie* magazine, for whom Perkins wrote the initial unforgettable, coruscating, editorial, expressing scorn for the vaunted ‘New Wave’ British cinema of the time – and a vision of alternatives.

Some of those alternatives, basis of his vision for a liberal education in film studies, would stay displayed on his Warwick webpage up to the time of his death: ‘My main academic aim is to develop a deeper and more clearly articulated appreciation of the work of some great film artists. I have a continuing engagement with films by, for instance, Alfred Hitchcock, Fritz Lang, Max Ophuls, Yasujiro Ozu, Nicholas

Ray, Jean Renoir and Orson Welles.’ This manifesto, which has echoes of the F.R. Leavis model of a ‘Great Tradition’ in literature, had become the basis of his later career as writer as well as teacher. He wrote eloquently about all of these directors, including studies of Welles’ *The Magnificent Ambersons* and Renoir’s *La Règle du Jeu*. Part of the ‘BFI Classics’ series, they are themselves, like *Film as Film*, classics of their kind. Earlier, he developed a script in collaboration with the Hollywood director Nicholas Ray, but it was never shot, nor did he complete his long-planned book on Ray’s films.

The great irony of Perkins’ career is that, while he was so instrumental in opening up the field of academic film studies, he never benefited to the extent of himself becoming a full Professor, as so many less substantial, less influential, figures have done. One reason was the long hard slog of building up, at Warwick, the structure of a pioneering new degree programme in Film and Literature: colleagues attest to his selflessness in taking on the main burden, at the expense of his own writing. But he was never a quick writer, and he never cared to adjust to the modern academic necessity of accumulating a mass of peer-reviewed publications and of putting together lucrative grant applications. Teaching always came first, and he did this with care and dedication, as a mass of students have, since his death, been quick to recall on social media. Warwick made him an Honorary Professor on his retirement.

His marriage to Tessa, who died in 2004, had ended in divorce. He is survived by the two children of the marriage, Toby, Labour MP for Chesterfield, and film-maker Polly; by his second wife Liz; by his brother Brad and sister Shirley; and by three grandchildren.

Victor Francis Perkins, born Alphington, Devon, 22nd December 1936, died Coventry 15th July 2016.

**CHARLES BARR**