
Going to the pictures: British cinema and the Second World War

Mark Glancy, Senior Lecturer in History, Queen Mary



Above: *Fires Were Started* (1943), a film about a London team of civilian firefighters in the Second World War. Below right, Michael Redgrave as Flight Lt. David Archdale in *Way to the Stars* (1945).

'What agent of Chancellor Hitler is it who has suggested that we should all cower in darkness and terror "for the duration"?' asked George Bernard Shaw in a letter to *The Times*.

Cinema closures were prompted by fears of bombing

Published on 5 September 1939, just two days after Britain declared war on Germany, his letter protested against the government order to close all places of entertainment, including cinemas. As Shaw put it, denying entertainment to soldiers and civilians was 'a masterstroke of unimaginative stupidity'. The order was soon rescinded: within two weeks cinemas in the provinces had reopened and within a month those in central London had

reopened too. The closure order had been prompted by fears of bombing rather than bureaucratic stupidity. Most cinemas were located in city centres – the prime targets of the predicted Nazi bombing campaign – and they held hundreds, if not thousands, of people in tightly packed spaces. If one should be hit by a bomb, carnage was likely to be the result. This nightmarish vision had already been foretold in film: *Things to Come* (1936) showed audiences that a future war would begin with the total destruction of cities by aerial bombing, and a sleek modern cinema is seen to take a direct hit. In reality, though, the bombers did not come during the first year of war, and when the Blitz did begin the devastation seemed so widespread and random that cinemas were not regarded as particularly dangerous places. In 1940, cinema admissions figures actually rose, to just over 1 billion for the year, and they continued rising

steeply for the next few years, reaching over 1.5 billion in 1943, 1944 and 1945. People did not cower in darkness and terror, as Shaw put it, unless they were seeing a horror film. They also laughed, cried, snickered and sighed at all manner





In *Which We Serve* (1942), the story of a British naval ship, the HMS Torrin, from its construction to its sinking.

of films. Cinema-going was the country's prime leisure time activity, and it proved to be an indispensable means of instructing and entertaining the nation in wartime.

The idea of a nation of devoted cinema-goers is inextricably linked with the number of classic films released during the war years. This was British cinema's 'golden age', a period in which filmmakers such as Humphrey Jennings, David Lean, Powell and Pressburger, and Carol Reed came to the fore and, for the first time, British films consistently rivalled Hollywood in terms of quality if not quantity. They offered accounts of the nation's own experience of the war. *In Which We Serve* (1942), *Went the Day Well* (1942), *Fires Were Started* (1943), *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943) and *The Way to the Stars* (1945) were among those that aimed to boost morale, and also to reflect on the meaning and purpose of the war. The use of feature films as propaganda is undoubtedly the aspect of wartime cinema that has been most fully documented. Since the 1970s, when the 30-year rule allowed the release of government documents relating to film policies and propaganda, historians have conducted extensive research into the Ministry of Information, its Films Division, and the production and reception of war-related films. A rich seam of historical writing has resulted, as well as a renewed appreciation of admirable films and filmmakers. However, as far as the cinema-going public is concerned, the focus on propaganda and government involvement tells only one part of a larger story. Early in the war it became apparent that audiences were wary of anything that might be regarded as

propaganda, and also that many would steer clear of all but the most notable war-related films. Thus, while war films may inform popular memory of the war, for many audiences they were not a crucial or preferred part of the cinema-going experience.

The challenge of reconstructing the popular film culture of the period – that is, establishing what pleasures people found in cinema-going, which films were seen, how issues of taste were determined, and how critical views impacted on tastes – has preoccupied film historians in recent years. What is perhaps most surprising is that, even at a time when annual admissions had passed the one billion mark, cinema-going was far from a universal habit. The Wartime Social Survey, conducted in 1943, found that 32% of Britons went to the cinema frequently (defined as once a week or more) and another 38% attended occasionally (defined as once a fortnight or less), but 30% of the population never visited the cinema at all. The survey also found clear lines of delineation between the enthusiasts and the indifferent. Interestingly, gender was not a key factor, despite the widely held assumption (among the public and also within the film industry) that women were the keenest cinema-goers. Income and education were more significant factors. People on low incomes went more frequently than people on middle and high incomes. People who had only an elementary school education attended more often than those with a secondary school education, and much more often than

those with a university education. Yet the most significant factors were region and age. Nearly half the people living in rural areas said that they never visited the cinema at all. This is most likely explained by the location of most venues. In cities, where cinemas were more accessible and numerous, only a quarter of people said that they never went to see films. The differences between age groups were even more pronounced. People over the age of 65, who were old enough to have grown up before cinema existed, were the least likely to be cinema-goers: 69% said that they never went and just 5% said that they attended once a week. The young, by contrast, were the keenest: 79% of teenagers and 43% of young adults reported that they went to the cinema at least once a week.

From the survey we can deduce that the cinema audience was largely young, urban and working class, and this explains the government's

Cinema offered a means of reaching the young, urban and working class

interest in the medium. These were the demographic groups considered least likely to read newspapers and books. The cinema offered a means of reaching them, and reaching them through a medium that was considered powerfully influential and persuasive. Nevertheless, the popular film culture of the era was dominated by Hollywood. While box-office statistics were rarely

London's Troxy Cinema. Designed by George Coles for Hyams & Gale in 1933, it suffered damage during wartime and closed its doors in 1960. It gained Grade II listed status in 1990 and is now run as a conference venue.



published in this period, there is ample evidence in other forms (popularity polls, Mass Observation surveys, film trade paper reports, fan magazines, a few surviving cinema ledgers, etc.) to substantiate this. These sources indicate that, particularly at the outset of the war, British films were preferred by middle-class audiences, but a large swathe of working-class audiences actively avoided them. People sought glamour and escapism at the cinema. This is plainly evident in the pages of the leading fan magazines, *Picturegoer* and *Picture Show*, which routinely and prominently featured glamorous photographs of Hollywood stars and stories about their wealth, beauty and enviable lifestyle. When *Picturegoer* polled its readers in August 1942, asking them to name the ten best films ever made, all of the top-ranking films were Hollywood productions and none was British. Worse, as far as cinema patriots would be concerned, the list was dominated by Hollywood's own British-set dramas, including MGM's *Mrs Miniver* (1942). This fanciful portrait of a middle-class English family heroically suffering through the Blitz was derided by many critics, but surveys reveal that audiences recognised it as a form of tribute, and, at any rate, they were charmed by the film's serenely beautiful star, Greer Garson, and flattered by the notion that she represented them.

It was in the second half of the war that truly British films began to win the hearts and minds of both critics and audiences on a regular basis. If the *Picturegoer* poll had been conducted

Audiences sought glamour and escapism at the cinema

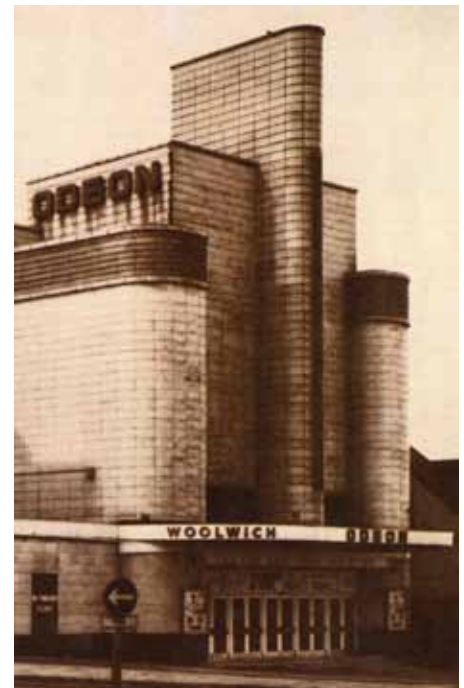
just a month or two later, it almost certainly would have featured *In Which We Serve*, which was released in September 1942. It was a landmark in the changing fortunes of British films, and one of the few films with combat scenes to prove popular this late in the war. Many of the British films that attracted the largest audiences between 1942 and 1945 were not war films at all, but the Gainsborough melodramas that featured a new generation of stars, including James Mason, Margaret Lockwood, Stewart Granger and Patricia Roc. The country's leading critics loathed films such as *The Man in Grey* (1943), *Fanny by Gaslight* (1944), *Madonna of the Seven Moons* (1944) and *The Wicked Lady* (1945); they preferred documentary realism and restraint over melodramatic excess.



In Mrs Miniver (1942) the Minivers, an English middle-class family, experience life in the first months of World War II.

Audiences, however, were delighted by British films that matched Hollywood for escapism, star power and salaciousness. Of course, Hollywood was not doing so badly itself, and *Gone with the Wind* (1939), *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), *Rebecca* (1940), *Citizen Kane* (1941), *Random Harvest* (1942), *Casablanca* (1943), *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *National Velvet* (1945) were just a few of the highlights of the war years. *Gone with the Wind* was probably the most popular film of the period. It played in Leicester Square for four solid years, lasting from the tail end of the 'phoney war' in 1940 until D-day in 1944. At the height of the Blitz, audience queues reportedly formed outside the cinema first thing in the morning, even as nearby fires from the previous night's bombing were still burning.

Of course, not all wartime cinema-going was centred on individual and noteworthy feature films. People also went to the cinema for the newsreels, the cartoons, the second string 'B' features and serials, or simply as a matter of habit. Ticket prices were cheap, ranging mainly between one and two shillings, but in the backstreet, neighbourhood cinemas they could be significantly less than that. At a time of full employment and rationed goods, there was not always much else to spend money on. Hence, many people went to the cinema simply to stay warm, to see friends, because they did not like pubs, to get away from their family or fellow lodgers in crowded accommodation, or, if they were away from home, to find comfort in a familiar form of entertainment. Some lofty critics, who complained about the poor



Woolwich Odeon, opened 1937.

quality of most films, warned that the boom in cinema-going would not last; that it was a war-induced phenomenon that would end as soon as life got back to normal. They were correct to some extent. Admissions did begin to decline in the late 1940s, but unlike the United States, where ticket sales plummeted immediately after the war, the decline in Britain was very gradual. It was not until 1957 that the annual tally of tickets sold fell below 1 billion again. For many Britons, going to the pictures had become a routine part of life. It was enjoyed more often and perhaps more intensely amid the privations of war, but it was not a pleasure readily given up with the arrival of peace.