Film and the Historian

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The British Experience

by

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For Roz, with love

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PREFACE

Film tantalises us with glimpses of the past. It reveals the concerns of the time when it was made, how the public was addressed—and dressed—as well as a myriad incidental details those behind the camera took for granted. My aim is to entice historians of the twentieth century to take a fresh look at film as an increasing number of British titles from the 1940s and 1950s become available. The book is organised as a series of essays examining changes in British society since the Second World War as they appear on film. Issues including the end of empire, medical services and the place of woman are deserving of more attention, but space is always limited. Other films could be used as examples, but a privilege of being the author is making the selection.

This work complements my earlier studies *The British Working Class in Postwar Film* (2003) and *Forgotten British Film: Value and the Ephemeral in Postwar Cinema* (2017). These were concerned with how history can give an insight into film; here the perspective shifts to what film can offer the historian. Where titles have been examined previously, I shall only discuss those aspects relevant to the present topic. The films mentioned are British registered unless otherwise noted. The attentive reader will notice that some points of detail are not referenced. These are personal recollections from my childhood in the 1950s. Opinions and interpretations change over time, but factual details are constant if memory does not deceive—or are they? This is a discussion for another occasion.

I am grateful to the librarians at Exeter, Liverpool John Moores and Liverpool universities for their help, as well as the staff of Torbay Library Service, Leeds City Library and Liverpool City Library. My thanks extend to those long-suffering colleagues including Ian Douce, Rosalind Ellis, Martin Fuller, Kevin Hayes and Carole Leith who have commented on drafts. Needless to say, the errors are mine. Finally I must thank the staff of Cambridge Scholars Publishing who have made this book possible.

CHAPTER ONE

FILM AND THE HISTORIAN

Film studies and film as history

Documents have traditionally been the historian's best friend. If this has not changed, historians have become eclectic in their choice of sources, exploiting everything from reminiscences to picture postcards. Although film is in its second century, it has only been taken seriously as a primary source since the 1970s with the work of pioneers such as Nicholas Pronay and Arthur Marwick and the publication of the journal *Film & History*.[1] Robert Rosenstone in America along with Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards in Britain are among those who have developed and refined the initial approaches.[2] This has paralleled the emergence of film studies as a discipline, though the two developments are conceptually distinct: a film can be analysed for its technical and aesthetic qualities while ignoring the historian's prime concern, which is what it reveals about the period when it was made. In practice there is an overlap between the two approaches, the history of the cinema being fair game for the historian, while a growing interest among film studies researchers in the reception of films requires an exploration of the social context of cinemagoing, meaning recourse to primary sources and the methods of the historian. Even where data on box-office takings is available, contextual evidence is needed in order to hypothesise why a film succeeds or fails commercially. One difficulty is that audiences are not homogeneous. Aside from demographic differences, tastes may vary geographically with rural Irish audiences and those in a northern industrial city likely to have differing expectations and attitudes. Audiences in the West End of London might be expected to display a more liberal and cosmopolitan outlook than either group, but regional differences have been little explored.

Producers and the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC)—now replaced by the British Board of Film Classification—seek to satisfy audiences albeit for different reasons. The producers want to maximise box-office receipts, while the aim of censors is to keep films within

accepted social boundaries, however vague that remit, the assumption being that audiences are a microcosm of British society and representative of their values. The ideal for censors is a work that will not cause offence or stray into forbidden territory. Filmmakers and censors may come into conflict and which party is in the ascendant varies over time as society's values change. Examples will be considered where the censors' edicts have been ignored.

The circumstances of a film's production will influence what appears on screen. This can be seen most obviously in wartime films having propaganda value from *In Which We Serve* (Noël Coward and David Lean, 1942) to *Gert and Daisy Clean Up* (Maclean Rogers, 1942). The former received government endorsement, but elsewhere it is not always apparent how much filmmakers drew on topical themes because they appealed to audiences, the propaganda element being incidental. Most filmmakers were content to accept the status quo. Harold French never stretched the medium whatever the virtues of his work as director, though when required he could produce rousing propaganda material such as *The Day Will Dawn* (1942).

Sometimes film is in the vanguard of social change, with *Victim* (Basil Dearden, 1961) being released after the Wolfenden Report of 1957, but before the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality. Derek Jarman's subversion of the silver jubilee celebrations in *Jubilee* (1978) stood in opposition to the prevailing orthodoxy, while Lindsay Anderson's *If...* (1968) and Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985) offered dystopian visions of society. Peter Miles and Malcolm Smith prefer to emphasise the importance of community in British cinema, citing the example of George Formby: "George's gormlessness meant he could not solve problems on his own, but in Formbyland the incompetent still survived and prospered...because the community turned out to help, whether visibly or invisibly, ensuring that it would 'turn out nice again'."[3] Miles and Smith regard Ealing films as the culmination of this process of appealing to the community. *Passport to Pimlico* (Henry Cornelius, 1949) might seem epitomise this, though Tony Williams takes a darker view of the film, seeing independence turning into a nightmare, while social fragmentation as much as cohesion is evident in *The Cruel Sea* (Charles Frend, 1953).[4] Despite these reservations, Miles and Smith's conclusion from 1987 has the virtue of looking forward to a film history that takes account of the response to films: "The community is in fact the audience's collective sense of right and wrong as an audience, a neat self-congratulatory strategy to confirm the British sense of fair play and to reaffirm the audience's commitment to the innate values of their national family."[5]

This implies that audiences and filmmakers are complicit, the problem being how to test the proposition. Did disparate audiences or members of the same audience have shared values after all? Governments were interested in this question, particularly during the Second World War. Nina Schneider points out that the Nazis sent spies into German cinemas to report on audience responses to films.[6] Mass-Observation and the Wartime Social Survey did the same in Britain, though their observers were not called spies.[7] Schneider in her exploration of the military regime in Brazil during the 1960s and 1970s found material on propagandists and their intentions, but not on how such propaganda was received, which is a recurring dilemma for reception studies.[8] *Rock Around the Clock* (Fred F. Sears, US, 1956) became notorious, prompting newspaper editorials that demonised rioting Teddy boys, but how much the response was inflated by the media is unclear.[9] Comparing press reports with court cases and complementing this by interviews with former cinema staff and Teddy boys might yield insights, though without necessarily revealing the extent of copycat behaviour.

Enough time has elapsed for the methodological problems of using film in historical research to become apparent. One issue already noted is the disparity between film studies and history. For the cinephile the historian's critical approach helps to guard against the pitfalls of venturing into the past including a reliance on received judgements and a tendency to adopt today's viewpoint when viewing a film. For the historian a catholic approach to sources overcomes the straitjacket of documents. Anirudh Deshpande considers that oral sources are particularly useful in colonial history, where documents come from the colonisers.[10] This prompts questions about screening films in the colonies: whose viewpoint were filmmakers putting across, who funded their work, who were the intended audiences and how were the films received?

In common with other emergent academic subjects such as town planning and environmental science, film studies borrowed from established disciplines. These included anthropology, sociology and literature, whose practitioners had fought their battles for acceptance. Another source of academic legitimacy was the French intellectual tradition of Saussure, Lacan, Althusser and Foucault. One consequence is that film has been analysed from semiotic, feminist, Marxist and psychoanalytic perspectives, among others.[11] Any academic credibility this bestowed was at risk of being sacrificed to infighting, while attempts to marry the approaches did not meet with conspicuous success. A further difficulty arose from employing an overly theoretical approach at the cost of readability. The consequence was that each school came to resemble a sect from which

non-believers were excluded. David Bordwell led the counterattack, arguing against reliance on grand theory and in favour of a more pragmatic approach, which has largely been achieved.[12]

History has its own fraught relationship with theory. Even that arch-empiricist Arthur Marwick would concede that a term such as Whig historian carries a set of assumptions and is a source of bias.[13] The gulf between disciplines can be a matter of language as Alun Munslow's use of the terms "postmodern" and "deconstructionist" demonstrates in his review of Marwick's last book.[14] Historians like to keep things simple.

Deshpande suggests that excised material can be more useful to the historian than what is left, for it represents what somebody does not want others to see.[15] The perpetrator in the case of film may be the director, the producer, the studio, the distributor, the censor or the exhibitor with the reason for excision being as innocuous as excessive length. Each party has an agenda, so who demanded cuts and who acceded to them need to be known if the exercise is to have more than curiosity value. In practice deleted footage from older feature films rarely survives, while BBFC records are incomplete. On the credit side, DVDs of some recent titles include deleted scenes, though without indicating why they were deleted. Shooting scripts can offer a tantalising glimpse of what might have been, an example being the missing clothing factory scene in *The Rocking Horse Winner* (Anthony Pelissier, 1949).[16] As in this case the reason for omission is apt to be less clear.

The supremacy of the written record is under challenge in the computer age. Digital storage allows increasing amounts of data to be retained, so that the problem becomes selecting what is relevant or deciding the keyword to use when searching a database, which is the difficulty Schneider encountered.[17] Among other disadvantages the genesis of a script cannot be followed if the only saved version is the final one and relevant emails have been deleted. Notwithstanding the abundance of data, if there are gaps in the digital record, then there may be no alternative sources to fall back on, as future historians will discover.

Despite Miles and Smith's faith in a shared sense of community, the fact that some films succeed at the box office and others fail suggests that filmmakers and audiences can have divergent ideas of what constitutes a good film. The academics who follow in their wake have their own priorities. As Robert Brent Toplin puts it, "We need to know more about the filmmakers' goals: were they aiming to deliver the messages historians have read into their movies…Did viewers actually draw the conclusions historians have assumed?"[18] Answering these questions poses a challenge given the ease with which films can be used to confirm prejudices. Toplin

cites Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove* (1963) as a film mentioned in discussions of the arms race and fear of a nuclear holocaust, but did audiences regard it in this way or as a vehicle for Peter Sellers?[19] *The Next of Kin* (Thorold Dickinson, 1942) was made as a training film for American troops arriving in Britain and was intended as a cautionary tale about the ease of letting slip sensitive information. The story was strong enough for the film to be released commercially, but after countless exhortations that careless talk costs lives, domestic audiences may have enjoyed it simply as a suspense story.[20]

How should historians approach a film? Describing it is akin to describing a piece of music, the result being inferior to listening to it. Traditionally the historian has relied on facts and is wary of an approach based on emotion, the trouble being that film is nothing if not emotive. While *Love on the Dole* (John Baxter, 1941) takes as its subject a love affair in an impoverished community during the 1930s; the historian is likely to approach the depression by examining the interwar domestic economy and statistics on poverty. Baxter and scriptwriter Walter Greenwood (also the author of the original novel) were making a polemical statement, prompting the BBFC to reject the script when it was submitted in 1936. There was no such proactive system of censorship for book publishers, whose only hurdle was to avoid falling foul of the Obscene Publications Act 1857. The difference was not the assumption that populist forms of entertainment such as the cinema needed a more stringent system of censorship, for stage plays with their smaller and generally wealthier audiences required the approval of the Lord Chamberlain. The release of Baxter's film five years after it was rejected illustrates that paralleling the drama of Greenwood's story was the political drama of how war prompted a change in censorship policy.[21]

Given the pitfalls it is tempting for the historian to marginalise film in favour of traditional sources. This would be unfortunate, for film can offer unique insights. Marwick suggests five uses.[22] The first is the portraiture function of archive film. Photographs of nineteenth-century worthies offer little clue as to their subjects' bearing and behaviour given the difficulty of holding a pose for the long exposure needed and the formality of photographic sessions. From the late nineteenth century, moving pictures became a possibility and an increasing number of voices were captured on the phonograph. It was not until the late 1920s that the technologies converged. The talkies helped Hitler to promulgate his ideology; without film it would be difficult for us to appreciate his mesmeric effect on crowds. The obvious comparison is with Churchill, but his appeal was principally through his voice, given that most people heard his

parliamentary speeches repeated on the radio. A British example closer to Hitler in style is the British fascist leader Sir Oswald Mosley. Newsreels show him to be a spellbinding orator at public meetings, but he became stilted when deprived of his audience and speaking to camera. For most people the technique of appearing at ease on screen has to be learnt, which was something that public figures and a few actors had yet to discover in the early 1930s. Ordinary people were less likely to appear on film and when they did, their contributions were scripted.

Marwick's second use is the crash course function of archive film, which can give a sense of occupations and traditions that have disappeared. The women who followed the herring fleet from port to port to gut fish are a memory preserved in newsreels. The same applies to deep seam mining, which appears not only in newsreels and National Coal Board promotional material, but in several feature films including *Blue Scar* (Jill Craigie, 1949) and *The Brave Don't Cry* (Philip Leacock, 1952). These offer images of mining communities as well as showing conditions in the mines, though there is a risk that the sense of solidarity is emphasised for dramatic effect. A snag is that the choice of occupations shown on film is selective. Rent collecting and accountancy lack the photogenic and dramatic potential of mining or fishing and are not well served.

Third and allied to the crash course function, film can give what Marwick calls "the concrete reality of particular situations", the example he cites being life in the trenches.[23] This is an unfortunate choice given the difficulty of separating the real from the reconstructed in First World War newsreels. Safer examples are the General Strike of 1926 and the royal wedding of 1947. Public interest in the latter was immortalised in *Here Come the Huggetts* (Ken Annakin, 1948), with Pet Huggett (Petula Clark) clutching her cardboard periscope to see over the heads of other spectators. Three problems with the crash course function become apparent. First, events such as the Iranian embassy siege of 1980 have been dramatised, which creates potential distortions when reconstructions become merged with reality in the memory. Secondly, recurring events such as the Blackpool illuminations often appear in newsreels and promotional films, so that the years become elided. The Isle of Man TT races are vulnerable in both respects, being confused with fictional versions, notably *No Limit* (Monty Banks, 1935), while newsreel coverage from one year to the next looks similar. Thirdly, feature films unlike newsreels can explore the motivations of participants, though how much these motivations emanate from filmmakers' suppositions is another matter. How far could Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger enter the mind of the German Commander Langsdorff in *The Battle of the River Plate* (1956)?

Marwick is on safer ground with his fourth topic, which is the environment. Film can give an unrivalled impression of how places looked. In feature films the location is generally secondary to the events taking place, though the grandeur of buildings and how well they are maintained can establish the mood. The seaside location is integral to *Brighton Rock* (John Boulting, 1947). The Bradford of *Room at the Top* (Jack Clayton, 1958) and *Billy Liar* (John Schlesinger, 1963) is notable for its drabness and claustrophobic pubs, making Billy's desire to escape to London understandable. A country house in a state of benign neglect is a prerequisite of *Treasure Hunt* (John Paddy Carstairs, 1952) with its story of an aristocratic family fallen on hard times. The place and the event can come together vividly in newsreels, footage of the 1911 Sidney Street siege being a case in point. A snag is that in feature films as well as newsreels there is a location bias. London appears on celluloid at the expense of other British towns and villages, though on occasion a feature film is the only significant source of moving images from the past. *Sons of the Sea* (Maurice Elvey, 1939) offers glimpses of Dartmouth, while *Time Gentlemen Please!* (Lewis Gilbert, 1952) shows life in the Essex village of Thaxted. Cities change more rapidly. *The White Bus* (Lindsay Anderson, 1974) captures Salford in the throes of slum clearance; five years earlier or later the locations would be unrecognisable. *The Wind of Change* (Vernon Sewell, 1961) attempts to integrate the changing East End of London in a crime story, but with mixed results. The grimy Tyneside of *Payroll* (Sidney Hayers, 1961) is a different place from the world of the multi-storey car park seen in *Get Carter* (Mike Hodges, 1971). A caveat is that the location can be misleading: Liverpool stands in for New York in *Florence Foster Jenkins* (Stephen Frears, UK/France, 2016), while the French town seen in *Brandy for the Parson* (John Eldridge, 1951) is Torquay.

Marwick's final topic embraces lifestyles and patterns of behaviour. These include speech patterns (the films of John Baxter contain examples of London accents of the period, which cannot be heard in films with more notable stars); fashions in dress (few men appear outdoors in films from the 1930s without a hat or cap); the layout of shops before the coming of self-service stores; the levels of deference shown to people in uniform whether they be policemen or park keepers and as a legacy of the blackout the white paint on tree trunks and street furniture glimpsed in *It Always Rains on Sunday* (Robert Hamer, 1947) and still apparent in *Radio Cab Murder* (Vernon Sewell, 1954). The smaller the detail, the more likely it is not to merit a mention in conventional histories and to slip into oblivion were it not captured on film.

As with any source, bias must be taken into account. Given the co-operative nature of filmmaking, this can come from a variety of sources, which increases its complexity. The studio had its own ethos, whether based on conviction (Ealing) or profit (the Danzigers), which coloured the material appearing on screen. In the case of the Rank Organisation this dichotomy was never resolved.[24] Ealing under Balcon was famously liberal, though the studio eschewed overtly political subjects, *His Excellency* (Robert Hamer, 1951) being an exception. ACT Films was founded by the film production workers union and though it avoided an overtly socialist stance, it released *Private Information* (Fergus McDonnell, 1952) with its criticisms of how the government's housing policy was implemented. Such a project would not come from a larger company such as the Associated British Picture Corporation (ABPC). The producer and director introduced their own perspectives irrespective of where they worked as the social problem films of the Michael Relph and Basil Dearden partnership exemplify, some being produced after their move from Ealing. A storyline may require one character to be foregrounded for dramatic effect, an example being Guy Gibson in *The Dam Busters* (Michael Anderson, 1954). *The Stars Look Down* (Carol Reed, 1939) personalises issues, which are presented in moral rather than economic or political terms. As Miles and Smith put it, "The audience could only make sense of the plot if it were implicitly understood that moderation and community were the features that needed to be defended."[25] This becomes problematic where a star's image needs to be accommodated as in the case of Boris Karloff, who demanded changes to the script of *The Sorcerers* (Michael Reeves, 1967) to make his character more sympathetic.[26] The difficulty assumes more significance in the portrayal of real people such as Mrs Henderson in *Mrs Henderson Presents* (Stephen Frears, UK/US, 2005). Different problems were presented when Paul Robeson was shoehorned into *The Proud Valley* (Pen Tennyson, 1940).

Filmmakers gravitate towards an environment they find congenial, which has artistic implications. Independent Producers was financed by the Rank Organisation, which gave considerable freedom to production companies working within it notably Powell and Pressburger's The Archers and Launder and Gilliat's Individual Pictures.[27] The result was some singular and interesting work. At ABPC, J. Lee Thompson formed his own production company with producer Frank Godwin and writer Ted Willis, the price being that he had to direct a tepid remake of *The Good Companions* (1956).[28] However benign the studio, the economics of film production could not be evaded, so that in *Cage of Gold* (Basil Dearden,

1950) praise for the newly established National Health Service (NHS) is incorporated in a crime story. The balance is less successful in *Chance of a Lifetime* (Bernard Miles, 1950), where worthiness is in danger of overshadowing the drama of workers who are given the opportunity to run their own company. Rank and ABPC had sound commercial reasons for their reluctance to screen the film, which was eventually foisted on the Odeon circuit.[29] John Harlow tackled a similar theme more successfully in *The Agitator* (1945), approaching it in personal rather than political terms.

For Robert Rosenstone film challenges written history, testing boundaries of what we can say about the past and how we say it, while pointing to new ways of envisioning it. He cites *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (Terence Davies, 1988) which "undermines the sentimental notion, deeply embedded in both academic history and British film, of the working class as the repository of all virtues—as composed solely of decent, honorable, homely people who overflow with feelings of class solidarity."[30] Rosenstone does not take into account *The Angry Silence* (Guy Green, 1960) or *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Karel Reisz, 1960), which hardly overflow with class solidarity, while Davies risks creating his own myths of the pub singsong and the violent, drunken father who has his antecedents in D.H. Lawrence's work.

Reality and the feature film

Another issue encountered when using film as a primary source is the difference between the documentary and the feature film. It is simplistic to view the former as presenting reality, while the latter is invented. Feature films may contain stock footage of landscapes, street scenes and sporting or political events, blurring neat distinctions. *The Shipbuilders* (John Baxter, 1943) and *Fires Were Started* (Humphrey Jennings, 1943) are among wartime works inhabiting the netherworld of the semi-documentary, but many feature films containing references to the war used newsreel clips to add verisimilitude. An accidental example of reality and fiction eliding occurs in the feature film *Yasmin* (Kenneth Glanaan, 2004). During the shooting of a scene in which Yasmin chases youths who throw milk at a Muslim woman, an old lady apologises to the victim for their behaviour. Shot on a Bradford shopping street, presumably with an unobtrusive handheld camera, this unscripted incident was left in the final cut and provides one of the film's most poignant moments.[31]

William Rothman approaches the issue of what constitutes reality by analysing a number of documentaries beginning with *Nanook of the North* (Robert Flaherty, US, 1921).[32] The film was sponsored by the fur trading

company Revillon Frères, which was a detail omitted from the credits.[33] Had this been obvious to the original audiences, attitudes might have been different. Did Flaherty include the shot of "a high wall of hanging pelts, too numerous to count" for the benefit of his sponsors?[34] It was an era when furs were fashionable; today a fur trading company would be unlikely to seek publicity, unless the aim were to emphasise its ecological credentials.

In common with other commentators, Rothman has to grapple with the fact that a drama is being enacted for the audience: Nanook's family is a construct for the camera and rifles are kept offscreen to emphasise the timeless quality of his way of life. Nanook smiles at the camera, but is he smiling with Flaherty or at him?[35] Sarah Pink suggests that "*Nanook* has had a changing presence in visual anthropology," meaning that academic concerns influence how the film has been received, shifting from "an apparently unmediated window into native Alaskan culture" to a fictionalised reconstruction.[36] The issues raised by *Nanook of the North* are applicable to other documentaries. How much happens spontaneously and how much is enacted for the camera? People today are less self-conscious about being filmed than at any time since moving pictures were in their infancy, but this creates its own problems if they play to the camera. One option is to use a hidden camera, but this can raise ethical issues.

Defining the documentary is a treacherous business given that some are polemical, while others take on the character of a one-man show with the presenter assuming prominence over the subject. Bill Nichols braves the pitfalls:

> Documentary film speaks about situations and events involving real people (social actors) who present themselves to us as themselves in stories that convey a plausible proposal about, or perspective on, the lives, situations, and events portrayed. The distinct point of view of the filmmaker shapes this story into a way of seeing the historical world directly rather than into a fictional allegory.[37]

This is comprehensive if formal in tone. The filmmaker is regarded as creating the story, the essential point being that it is presented as reality rather than allegory. Henrik Juel confronts the problem of definition by placing more emphasis on the film's reception: the expectations of audiences, how opinion formers define the work and its relationship to major genres.[38] As Dirk Eitzen observes, such an approach says nothing about what makes the documentary distinct.[39] Following Carl Plantinga, he proposes a definition that is applicable across a range of sources,

though its lack of specificity might be considered a weakness: "A documentary is any motion picture susceptible to the question 'might it be lying?'"[40] *Nanook* lies. *Housing Problems* (Edgar Anstey and Arthur Elton, 1935) exemplifies the same commercial bias. Calling for the replacement of slums is a worthy aim, but the film was commissioned by the British Commercial Gas Association, which had a vested interest in better housing equipped with new gas appliances. Emmanuel Desirigos explores similar inherent contradictions in the work of the General Post Office Film Unit.[41]

The documentary represents one means of ordering reality; another is the newsreel. Marwick concedes that newsreels may contain stock shots, but despite this he discerns a nearness to actuality that is often absent from the more composed documentary.[42] This glosses over the complexities. Because a newsreel is produced to a deadline, it is hastily assembled by comparison with the documentary. Rothman examines the use of newsreels in *Night and Fog* (Alain Resnais, France, 1955) in what he calls an allegorical journey.[43] Documentaries and newsreels are contrivances, putting across a partisan view, because that is the nature of the editorial process. This becomes obvious in battlefield footage: a camera cannot be positioned in enemy territory, so newsreel shots of an Allied bombardment during the First World War cannot show its effect on German soldiers. Images of a field gun being fired can be shot in any battle and incorporated into the sequence, so that actuality becomes a nebulous concept. Naval battles present particular difficulties for the filmmaker, taking place over long distances or underwater, so that often the enemy may be out of sight. The Fairey Swordfish aircraft used to disable the *Bismark* could not accommodate a cameraman, while there is little to see when depth-charging submarines. Opportunities for filming are even more limited when naval battles take place at night. What have to suffice are stock shots of flashes as naval guns are fired.

In common with the newspaper editorial process the selection of what to include in a cinema newsreel will depend on the events of the day. If there are several newsworthy events, some may be omitted and others treated cursorily, the choice depending in part on the policy of the company. The chances of discarded newsreel material being preserved are small. The commentary puts a gloss on what is seen, so that a rout becomes a tactical retreat, unless it is the enemy who are being routed. Raymond Fielding considers that using newsreel as propaganda was more overt in America than in Britain, which if true is itself a source of interest to the historian.[44] Whether this says more about national character or the media in either country is another matter. In addition to the commentary

there is the accompanying music to set the mood, with a slow pace conveying despair as a defeated army marches to its destiny, while a quicker march offers a feeling of invincibility, whatever the reality of the situation. Irony or astringency can be intentional in feature films as well as newsreels. In *Meet Mr Callaghan* (Charles Saunders, 1954), Eric Spear's jaunty score counterpoints the dour persona of the detective, while Kenneth Alford's Colonel Bogey march in *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (David Lean, 1957) conveys a mood of disrespectful resistance.

Reportage raises another issue. As Robert Rosenstone puts it:

> All those old photographs and all that newsreel footage are saturated with a prepackaged emotion: nostalgia. The claim is that we can see (and, presumably, feel) what people in the past saw and felt. But that is hardly the case. For we can always see and feel much that the people in the photos and newsreels could not see: that their clothing and automobiles were old-fashioned, that their landscape lacked skyscrapers and other contemporary buildings, that their world was black and white (and haunting) and gone.[45]

The risk is judging the past by present day standards. Inevitably what is presented will seem dated when compared with the world today, exemplifying the ephemeral nature of fashion whether in clothes, cars, language or popular music. This may give rise to nostalgia or scorn, but neither has a place in historical scholarship. What skews our viewpoint and gives poignancy to Edwardian newsreels is knowing that many of those young men enjoying a day at the seaside or on the river perished in the First World War. This should not prevent us from attempting to view the flickering images with an innocent eye. We owe it to those men to uncover a generation's hopes and aspirations that were never realised.

Many aspects of the past remain unknown, so we fill in the blanks as best we can to create a convincing story. Assumptions must be made explicit. If it is impossible to avoid the distortions of hindsight, a caution should be that future generations will face the same problem when judging us. Occasionally a newsreel has its own eloquence, as in the case of footage shot on the liberation of Belsen in 1945. Here, commentary seems superfluous. Other wartime newsreels involve reconstructions, sometimes by those who have nothing to do with the fighting.[46] There may be good reasons for this: it can help to create a coherent narrative from fragmentary material, it allows for higher technical standards than are possible on the battlefield and it offers the opportunity for retakes. Sometimes the context provides a clue to what is real. Lisa Pontecorvo cites the cases of resistance fighters in occupied Europe and guerrilla fighters in Algeria, both of whom were unlikely to welcome filming, even if it were

practicable.[47] Clips from René Clément's *La bataille du rail* (France, 1946) too often stand in for reality in documentaries. The same might be said of Eisenstein's reconstruction of the Russian Revolution in *October* (USSR, 1928). Wartime documentaries can elaborate a myth during the course of its formation as in *Listen to Britain* (Humphrey Jennings and Stewart McAllister, 1942) with its depictions of stoicism and camaraderie. Documentaries may employ newsreels to make sense of the past, *The Sorrow and the Pity* (Marcel Ophüls, France/Switzerland/West Germany, 1969) being a case in point.[48] Whether Claude Lanzmann got nearer the truth of the Holocaust by relying on interviews conducted with participants decades after the event in *Shoah* (France, 1985) is controversial.[49] The variety of influences to which the participants had been exposed in the intervening years and the fallibility of memory mean that their recollections cannot necessarily be regarded as primary sources.

The historical film

The feature film that dramatises history presents particular difficulties for the historian. This is the past shaped by the filmmaker and with the dull bits removed. The repeated reinforcement of an interpretation on the screen colours how events such as the Battle of the Alamo and the Battle of Britain are remembered, even if the films' relationship to the facts is tenuous. Once a myth becomes established it is difficult to dislodge. Dramatisation inevitably introduces distortions, adding characters to provide conflict or a love interest, or changing the chronology to create a coherent narrative that can be told in a hundred minutes. Rosenstone speculates whether professional historians absorb ideas from films about topics outside their expertise. As he puts it, "How many Americanists, for example, know the great Indian leader primarily from *Gandhi*?"[50] Recent history is particularly treacherous, being coloured by the filmmaker's predilections and prejudices. Rasmus Falbe-Hanson offers a thoughtful analysis, but cites *The Great Dictator* (Charles Chaplin, 1940) as a historical film.[51] The events depicted are contemporaneous with the period in which it was made, meaning that it qualifies as a primary source of wartime attitudes towards Germany from the perspective of an Englishman living in Hollywood. Reassessments of history can be rapid, so that the view of the British army in the First World War as lions led by donkeys has been introduced and questioned within a generation.[52] *Oh! What a Lovely War* (Richard Attenborough, 1969) and *Blackadder Goes Forth* (BBC TV, 1989) are works of their time. Attitudes to the Second World War have also changed. John Ramsden cites Colin McArthur in

noting differences between British war films made during hostilities and those from the 1950s. The former privileged women and emphasised consensus, while by the 1950s middle-class values held sway: "rather they tend to revert to the stock officers-as-heroes and other-ranks-as-comic-figures that was more characteristic of films of the 1930s."[53]

Clothing events in historical garb has traditionally been used as a means of sidestepping political controversy and censorship. Shakespeare could explore contemporary politics in history plays, Victorian painters such as Alma-Tadema used mythic scenes as an acceptable way of presenting the nude in Victorian society, while Verdi had repeated clashes with censors, which resulted in operas being relocated to politically acceptable periods, *Gustave III* becoming the innocuous *Un ballo in Maschera*.[54] The writing of Jin Yong is a recent example. For British filmmakers, censorship has never been a matter of life or death, though contemporary parallels should be considered whenever historical settings are evoked. This is obvious in the case of *Henry V* (Laurence Olivier, 1944), but the principle applies more widely. Jonathan Stubbs points out that Sue Harper and C.A. Lejeune distinguish fictional characters in melodrama from real people and events.[55] He cautions that any film restaging the past contains elements of fact and fiction. More pertinently those set in the nineteenth century or earlier are at risk of degenerating into costume dramas by emphasising secondary features, rather than being dramas that happen to be set in an earlier era. *Saraband for Dead Lovers* (Basil Dearden and Michael Relph, 1948) exemplifies this weakness and is atypical of the makers' work. The title is enticing, but the drama gets becalmed in Technicolor opulence with reality being left behind. How would Harper and Lejeune classify this?

A paper delivered by Harri Kilpi at Helsinki University in 2002 offers a functional classification of British historical films based on five modes.[56] The melodramatic mode encompasses Gainsborough melodramas and Hammer horror films. It is marked by a cavalier attitude to historical accuracy, so that history becomes a place of escape offering a release from convention and giving free rein to the visual elements. The monumental mode offers heroes to audiences and is canonical with turning points and victories helping to create a sense of national identity. Many films made during the war with their rousing endings are representative. The critical mode comes as a reaction to this, displaying more interest in military failures as in *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (Tony Richardson, 1968) or Joe Losey's challenges to social norms, but how would Kilpi classify the evacuation of Dunkirk and its cinematic representations? The antiquarian mode presents the past as frozen in time. It contains elements of nostalgia

while fetishising and commodifying the past, notably in heritage cinema, though *The Remains of the Day* (James Ivory, 1993) critiques frozen values rather than exemplifying them. The artistic/non-linear/disrupted mode embraces the work of practitioners as diverse as Ken Russell, Nicholas Roeg and Peter Greenaway. They display an anarchic streak, rejecting linear forms of history to produce works as diverse as *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (Terry Gilliam, 1975) and *Caravaggio* (Derek Jarman, 1986). Kilpi cautions that films may not fit exclusively into one mode, his example being *Tom Jones* (Tony Richardson, 1963), which contains melodramatic and critical elements. *Saraband for Dead Lovers* displays elements of melodramatic and antiquarian modes.

An aspect Kilpi does not explore is how modes are a response to changing times. *That Hamilton Woman* (Alexander Korda, 1941) was about a nation at war as well as being made in wartime, creating a sense of national identity in Kilpi's terms (monumental mode).[57] A film about adultery that involves a national hero would have received a cool response from the censor before the war. By the 1950s the battles of the Second World War could be refashioned as heroic myths for those who had played bit parts in hostilities and for the baby-bulge generation who came after them (monumental mode). This generation came of age in the more liberal world of the late 1960s, when cherished ideals were no longer taken for granted. *The Bed Sitting Room* (Richard Lester, 1969) illustrates the critical and disrupted modes. Nostalgia for what was lost came as a conservative reaction and was expressed in heritage cinema and television (antiquarian mode). Throughout the postwar years there have been mavericks who pursue their own paths (the artistic/non-linear/disrupted mode), so long as money is available to make films. This is dependent on financial inducements such as tax breaks and National Lottery funding, creating the paradox of the government helping to support the mavericks.

An alternative classification comes from Rosenstone, who delineates six aspects distinguishing the classical Hollywood historical film from history.[58] What applies to Hollywood is not necessarily applicable to Britain, though the differences are of interest. Rosenstone's first aspect is that the historical film presents a story with a beginning, middle and an end, allied to the assumption that things are getting better. This leads to the happy-ever-after ending, which might apply to some Hollywood titles, but not to *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, US, 1979) or Kilpi's critical mode films. Secondly, the historical film is the story of individuals, so that social problems are sidelined, Rosenstone's example being *The Last Emperor* (Bernardo Bertolucci, Italy/Hong Kong/UK, 1987), in which the happiness of one man stands for the entire Chinese

people. Cinema finds it hard to avoid the story of the individual given the dominance of the star system. *Dunkirk* (Christopher Nolan, UK/Netherlands/France/USA, 2017) comes close to bucking the trend; *Oh! What a Lovely War* manages it. Thirdly, history is presented as closed and complete, with no alternative interpretations being allowed. This is a consequence of the story-telling function of historical film and distinguishes it from the academic approach in which history is regarded as a process. Fourthly, the story is emotionalised and dramatised. We experience events along with the participants and share their feelings. James Cameron's *Titanic* (US, 1997) comes to mind. This prompts the question whether historians require empathy with their subjects. There is a need to understand the emotional world of the period, which might involve belief in witches or the innate superiority of the British Empire. In this respect the historian has to emulate the filmmaker in exploring the motivations of a character, while retaining a measure of objectivity. What was in the mind of Matthew Hopkins, whose exploits Michael Reeves dramatised in *Witchfinder General* (1968)? Reeves offers one interpretation, but the filmmaker has more latitude than the historian. Fifthly, film can give us the look of the past, the risk being that the look becomes paramount. Though *Jabberwocky* (Terry Gilliam, 1977) glories in grime, most heritage films present a sanitised past. Rosenstone's final aspect is that while the historian separates such features of society as class and politics for analytical purposes, the filmmaker integrates them in the interests of providing a coherent story. It could be argued that having separated aspects of society, the historian has to reintegrate them to create a coherent narrative. Rosenstone is enthusiastic about experimental films that expand the genre. Among these he cites Eisenstein's collectivist history films and Lanzmann's *Shoah,* which is devoid of archive footage.[59] This emphasis on the experimental is echoed by other commentators: Eric Täugerstad argues that in the television film *Death in the Seine* (France/Netherlands, 1988), Peter Greenaway presents history in an alternative mode to the written text, precipitating a crisis of historiography.[60]

The classifications of Rosenstone and Kilpi overlap. Both have their virtues and one is not necessarily superior to the other: what matters is their usefulness. The prudent course is to consider historical films as reflecting attitudes towards the past at the time of their production, despite Falbe-Hansen's plea for a more flexible definition.[61] More precisely the attitudes are those of a particular social group seeking to put across a viewpoint for their own purposes. The furore over *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1943) is a case

where official and artistic views clashed, the latter proving victorious.[62] *The Battle of Algiers* (Gillo Pontecorvo, Algeria/Italy, 1965) incurred the hostility of the French government, though it is generally considered a balanced film, even if it was made by a former communist.[63] Leslie Norman's *Dunkirk* (1958) aims for social balance, but maintains a resolutely British perspective, which is an obvious risk with war films that *The Battle of the River Plate* avoids.

Film and historical scholarship have different audiences, so the divide between the two forms should come as no surprise. War represents a situation where filmmakers and historians may find common ground, with films made in wartime offering a dramatisation of events as well as being a primary source on attitudes. *The Battle of the Somme* (1916) can be approached in this way. As with any source it cannot be accepted uncritically given that scenes were reconstructed and there is the inevitable British bias, but it shows how the battle was perceived.

For the historian, film is one source among many. Historical film is a contentious issue that raises particular problems. Contemporaneous material, or drama set close to the period in which it is made offers a sense of verisimilitude and can be treated as a primary source. Newsreels are useful, but they are produced with a particular agenda. For a story about the effects of wartime bombing, the cameraman might concentrate on the most heavily bombed areas, which may be atypical, or censorship might mean that the worst of the bombing is not seen. A bias towards London and south-east England is apparent in all media. What is typical for London is not necessarily characteristic of other towns and cities with Birmingham and Bristol being little seen on screen, the Bristol of Clive Donner's *Some People* (1962) providing an exception. Countryside in feature films is apt to be a generic Home Counties location, creating a stereotype for urban cinemagoers.

A major limitation for historians is that they communicate primarily in books and journals. The imprecision of words means that written sources are inherently limited in their potential for evoking scenes when compared with visual sources. Viewing film requires the same critical approach that the historian gives to a novel or a painting. A case can be made for including audio-visual presentations with books on modern history, which would allow historians to escape the confines of the written word. There are copyright problems and cost implications, but at some point the difficulties must be confronted if historical scholarship using film is to move forward.

CHAPTER TWO

IN THE AFTERMATH OF WAR

The ending of a war should be a time of rejoicing for the victors, but VE-Day celebrations in 1945 proved to be a brief respite for a British population confronting the aftermath of hostilities. The destruction caused by bombing disproportionately affected densely populated ports and industrial cities, increasing pressure on the remaining schools, hospitals and housing stock. Filmmakers exploited the opportunity, using bombsites as locations long after the war ended, *Escape by Night* (John Gilling, 1953) and *Calculated Risk* (Norman Harrison, 1963) being representative. Shortages of raw materials and delays in demobilising skilled labour limited the ability of private enterprise and local government to begin large-scale rebuilding, notwithstanding the glimpse of flats under construction in *Hue and Cry* (Charles Crichton, 1947). The scale of the housing problem can be gauged from census data, though the absence of the 1941 census is a handicap for researchers. Slum clearance schemes during the 1930s and postwar rebuilding reduced the number of shared dwellings in England and Wales from 838,695 in 1931 to 798,694 in 1951, the housing stock increasing over this period from 9,400,000 dwellings to 12,389,000 despite the bombing. On the debit side, 20 per cent of non-sharing and 79 per cent of sharing households in 1951 were still lacking one or more basic facilities defined as running water, a cooking stove, a kitchen sink, a WC and a fixed bath.[1] In Glasgow, half the population had homes without a bath in 1944, while a third shared a WC with up to six other families. Shared houses were concentrated in larger cities, where housing demand was greatest as a result of bombing. Greater London had the highest proportion at 34.2 per cent of usable housing.[2]

Shortages were not confined to the construction industry. The abrupt ending of US lease-lend in 1945 and the stringent terms of subsequent US loans made it imperative to reduce imports and develop export markets at the expense of domestic consumption. The impact on everyday life was compounded by the great freeze of 1947, which disrupted the movement of coal needed for heating, electricity generation and gas production as

well as for steam engines, which were the mainstay of the ageing railway system. Blackouts in the home became common as coal stocks were diverted to industry, but this measure was not enough to prevent two million workers from being laid off. Cinemas remained open and were often the only warm places. Newspapers shrank to their wartime quota of four pages, while the duty on tobacco was doubled and football pools were taxed. Food shortages continued after the war with bread being rationed for the first time in 1946, so that grain could be diverted to central Europe.[3] As things seemed to improve in 1949, devaluation set the process into reverse, with confectionery going on ration again after a brief respite when demand outstripped supply.[4] Hostilities were over, but though the population was spared the bombing, living conditions for many showed little improvement during the austerity years.

In addition to the legacy of war there was unfinished business inherited from the 1930s. The boom in demand created by hostilities allowed the structural problems of older industries including shipbuilding and textiles to be set aside. For a while there was full employment.[5] Welfare issues including the universal provision of healthcare and the relief of poverty were addressed in the Beveridge Report of 1942. This caught the public's imagination and provided a rallying point for social reformers as the war ended. The support of the middle classes may have been influenced by self-interest from the welfare provision they experienced when they were injured or their homes were bombed, with evacuation and conscription giving them an insight into how the other half lived.[6] No postwar government of whatever political persuasion could ignore the electorate's expectation of change, with Labour's decisive victory in 1945 indicating the strength of feeling.

Irrespective of government policy there could be no reversion to the employment patterns of the 1930s. Of the four million men who returned to civilian life, some had matured beyond posts intended for juniors, some were disabled, while others found that their former employers had gone out of business. One growth area was the Civil Service, the number of full-time equivalent posts rising from 31,300 in 1939 to 166,600 in 1950, which is indicative of the government's growing involvement in people's lives.[7] Some demobilised men found it difficult to settle into routine jobs after life in the services, which may have contributed to the worsening figures for violent crime with recorded cases increasing from 8,026 in England and Wales in 1938 to 20,455 in 1950, while burglaries jumped from 48,653 to 114,279.[8] Nigel Walker dates the steep rise to the war years or the ensuing period of austerity, though he cautions that the data is incomplete.[9] Among boys aged between 14 and 17 the number guilty of

indictable offences per 100,000 of the cohort showed a smaller rise from 1,131 in 1938 to 1,967 in 1945.[10] Subsequently the annual total for this cohort declined, likely causes being greater parental control as fathers returned from military service and the lifting of the blackout, which had provided increased opportunities for petty crime. The conclusion is that the increase in crime was not primarily a youth phenomenon. Maureen Waller records that although the population of Greater London dropped by nearly two million between 1938 and 1945 (over 20 per cent), the number of indictable offences per 1,000 of the population almost doubled, with a spike in 1945.[11] Urban centres offered plentiful opportunities for crime including looting, the black market and shoplifting, so career criminals were concentrated there.

The psychological effects of war were notable in the domestic sphere. Couples became accustomed to living apart and women assumed new roles as paid workers, which gave them financial independence and increased confidence. As servicemen returned home, wartime marriages were tested, while for established couples relationships had to be remade. A child might see the father as an interloper and a rival for maternal affections, creating tensions within the family.[12] The strains could prove too great, with divorce rates in England and Wales increasing from an average of 7,535 per year in 1936–40 to 38,901 per year in 1946–50.[13] Divorce rarely figured in films, as though there was a fear that airing the issue as entertainment was unseemly, or might exacerbate the situation. The exceptions involved children. In *No Place for Jennifer* (Henry Cass, 1950) the child runs away when her parents divorce. In *Background* (Daniel Birt, 1953) the adults try to win their children's affections, but should the three children be kept together? The children have widely differing ways of handling the situation from seeing it as material for gossip to wanting to kill the potential stepfather. There is plenty of agonising before the socially acceptable solution of staying together for the sake of the children is reached. This is also the resolution achieved in *A Child in the House* (Cy Endfield, 1956), where the father is a criminal and the mother is seriously ill.

Waterloo Road (Sidney Gilliat, 1944) introduced audiences to what war could do to a marriage. Jim Colter (John Mills) is so concerned about rumours of his wife's infidelity that he deserts. Three films from 1946 echo this theme of readjustment. *I'll Turn to You* (Geoffrey Faithfull) follows Aileen Meredith (Terry Randall), who comes from a middle-class family, but is intent on being independent. She has problems finding a flat in London as a lengthy montage sequence shows, the stumbling block being that she can only afford two guineas (£2.10) a week and rents for the