
War, Class, and Escapism: A Study of the British Film Industry From 1917-1939

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The early twentieth century has historically been looked at as a dark age for film. Of all the major industries, the British film industry would suffer greatly from the overwhelming force of Hollywood. Many of the films produced were released to poor international opinion, and are still viewed as being exceptionally inferior. These films, particularly those developed after the invention of “talkies”, are often viewed as “muddled...cheap, [and] artless,” and “remained notoriously devoid of either inspiration or vitality.”¹ Though this description of the films is understandable, film historians often overlook the importance of these films to the people of the time, to British culture, and to the future of British filmmaking. Despite the dissenting opinions of critics and historians, the films of the early twentieth century were of great importance to the people of the time period.

Prior to 1917, the British film industry rivaled the Continental European film and the American film industries in terms of size and production. However, in 1910, the ten largest American film groups combined to form a monopoly on the industry, The Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC).² This company used patent litigations to control the distribution of films, and intimidated independent outfits into submission. Then in 1914 William Fox of 20th Century Fox, Carl Laemmle of Universal Pictures, and Adolph Zukor of Famous Players dismantled the MPPC, creating a power vacuum in the industry that allowed them to “make and sell pictures in any part of the world...and the part of the world they favored most...was Great Britain.”³ The distribution of American films in England would take over the British film industry for many years, marking the beginning of a dark age for the British film.⁴

During this time period, a moral crusade against the content of the films was started. The crusade for censorship was started by middle class moralists and clergymen, who claimed that the “darkened cinemas provided cover for couples to court and... that many were sensational ones about sexual indecency, crime, and violence.”⁵ The anti-film crusade went through several phases, ending during World War I. The social purists’ primarily focused on films that they thought were explicit. The moral panics of the wartime drew mostly from the fears that the war was weakening societal morals of the middle class, and the belief that these films were “making it more difficult to control working-class women and children.”⁶ It was also believed by these moralists that the war had caused a surge in attendance, jumping from seven million to twenty-one million tickets sold, leading the moralists to blame films and the war on the growing of “the film industry’s corrupting impact.”⁷ By the end of the boycott, many of the films that were accused of having a corrupting influence, such as

¹ Arthur Knight, *The Liveliest Art: A Panoramic History of the Movies* (New York: Mentor Books, 1979), 223.

² Formed by the combination of the Edison, Vitagraph, Biograph, Essany, Selig, Lubin, Kalem, Star Film Company, American Pathe, George Kleine, and Eastman Kodak.

³ Ernest Betts, *The Film Business: A History of British Cinema 1896-1972*, (New York: Pitman Publishing Corporation, 1973), 46.

⁴ The true beginning and end of this “dark age” is still disputed, but is traditionally assigned by British historians as beginning in 1914 and ending in 1927.

⁵ Dean Rapp, “Sex In the Cinema: War, Moral Panic, and the British Film Industry, 1906-1918.” *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned With British Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 4, (2002): 422.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

Five Nights, had been lost.⁸ There were many impacts that this film boycott had on British society. One was the early beginnings of the censorship movement, particularly by the London County Council.⁹ The council would ban certain films and place cinema opening bans on the Sabbath, leading to what historians have called the Great Boredom.

At the same time, the lower class also struggled with these films. Many of the working class felt that the cinema was an important part of life during wartime, but at the same time, there were complaints over the atmosphere of the cinemas themselves. There were reports of sexual abuse of children by patrons. These reports were supported by the Salvation Army, who claimed that they had received “letters and complaints from parents in London’s poorer districts that their girls had been molested...”¹⁰ Despite these occurrences, the working class was still very supportive of the cinema movements, claiming that these films were necessary for the day-to-day struggle of wartime society. However, the war continued to plague the British. This made it difficult for films to be distributed, but it also opened the door for many directors and producers to make their mark.

The Great War saw a continuation in the drought of popularity for films in England, but it also saw the rise of the one of the first giants for the British film industry, George Pearson. Prior to Pearson, many filmmakers, actors, and writers had gone off to war, the remainder of which that stayed behind were among the older filmmakers, who had to sate the working class’s appetite for cinema. Pearson, a former schoolmaster from Oxfordshire, entered the industry in 1913 at age thirty-six, on the payroll of the American Pathe film company, believing that “British films...had reached a final twilight of surrender to their foreign competitors.”¹¹ Joining the company without any experience as a producer or director, he left the company after one year and joined with G. B. Samuelson. Samuelson was also an upstart director/producer who started out with short films, and the two of them made their first project together, *A Study In Scarlet*. After one year, however, Pearson had become disillusioned with Samuelson and the two parted. As a filmmaker, Pearson was described as someone who “understood popular taste and had a gift for original stories.”¹² Prior to their split, Pearson directed the short film *The Great European War* (1914)¹³ alongside Samuelson, which was his first turn as a writer and director.¹⁴ The film depicts the beginning of the Great War and the leaders of the nations that were fighting, such as Kaiser Wilhelm and Prime Minister David Lloyd George, and it was one of the very first nationalist films in England. Pearson would later leave Samuelson and create his own company with the assistance of Thomas Welsh, forming the Welsh-Pearson Company. In the latter part of the decade, Pearson directed Britain’s first feature film series, *The Ultus Series*,¹⁵ which tells the story of a man left for dead in the Australian Outback.¹⁶ The twenties were a new age with new movies, and new actors for Pearson to work with. In 1921, Pearson directed the first of another feature film series, *Squibs*, starring Betty Balfour as a flower girl who falls in love with a Piccadilly policeman. The rest of the series would star Ms. Balfour in different roles, these films were of the first escapism films. Escapism is a term that would be used to describe the popular films of the late twenties and thirties that allowed people to “escape” from their lives for a few hours. With these films, Pearson would become the master of the British silent film.

⁸ Victoria Cross, *Five Nights*, Directed by Bert Haldane, London: 1915.

⁹ Originally, the London County Council (LCC) only made sure that the cinemas being opened were safe. However, after the anti-film crusade the LCC gave more consideration to the banning of certain content.

¹⁰ Dean Rapp, “Sex In the Cinema: War, Moral Panic, and the British Film Industry, 1906-1918.”

¹¹ George Pearson, *Flashback: An Autobiography of a British Film Maker* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1957), 27.

¹² Ernest Betts, *The Film Business: A History of British Cinema 1896-1972*.

¹³ George Pearson, *The Great European War*, Directed by George Pearson, London: 1914.

¹⁴ This film was also billed under the title *The Cause of the Great European War and the Incidents of the Great European War*.

¹⁵ George Pearson, *Ultus, The Man From the Dead*, Directed by George Pearson, London: Welsh-Pearson 1915.

¹⁶ The Series follows in order: *Ultus, The Man From the Dead. Ultus and the Grey Lady, Ultus and the Secret of the Night, and Ultus and the Three Button Mystery*.

However, with the invention of “talkies” in 1927, and the depression beginning around the world, Welsh-Pearson began to drown in the sea of the dying British film industry. In 1929, Pearson directed his last film of significance, *Journey's End*. The film was highly profitable, but even with the its success, Welsh-Pearson closed and Pearson left the main stage of film. With Pearson's departure, fresh actors, directors, and producers came to prominence, such as Alexander Korda, Leslie Howard, and Alfred Hitchcock.

The 1930's are seen as the lowest point point in British cinema. It is a time period that is described as “trivial and without contemporary emphasis.”¹⁷ This description is understandable, due to the effect that the American film industry had on affecting the success of the films abroad. During the thirties, most American distributors “feared the potential damage to its domestic and foreign markets should the British film industry develop to any great prominence.”¹⁸ The thirties did bring a slew of other problems for the British, such as the “quota-quickies”, which were viewed as unimportant and undeserving of critical thought, and the schism between realism and escapism. Yet, even with these blemishes, the negative descriptions of the thirties films are, as described by film historian Stephen Shafer, “unfair, inappropriate, and inaccurate.”¹⁹ Shafer argues that criticisms of aspects such as the “quota quickies” were actually quite valuable in regards to the training that actors and directors received. Another reason for these films being mostly unknown is also due to the fact that they are hard to come by.²⁰ There are several reasons for this: one, the quality of the nitrate film reels decomposes after a certain amount of time, and two, many of the nitrate films were passed over for preservation in favor of ones deemed more important. Due to this, a great many films were simply discarded.

Another major problem for the industry came about when American film companies blocked most of the British films that tried to enter into the U.S. markets. These companies would only allow a tiny fraction in, usually through independent distributors and theatres. Alexander Korda was one filmmaker able to work out a deal with one of these independents, United Artists. Korda was a British director, writer, and producer who was able to get a few of his films to American audiences. Even with the help of United Artists and other independents, it was reported that “less than thirty percent” of these films were able to be released in America.²¹ However, even with these setbacks, many like Korda would go on to become prolific and talented directors in England, producing such films as *H.G. Wells' Things to Come*, and *The Scarlet Pimpernel*.

Korda was the first filmmaker to master the art in the thirties. He was a Hungarian who fled to England, and established his film company, London Films. One of his first films was the largely popular *Private Life of Henry VIII*,²² which chronicled the monarch's later life. This film was a large success at home, and garnered an academy award for Charles Laughton's portrayal of the titular king. As the thirties progressed, Korda would release several films such as the *Scarlet Pimpernel*,²³ and *Knight Without Armor*.²⁴ Many of the films of the thirties saw little financial success, but were effective at reflecting aspects of British society. However, the opinions of the consumer public still affected the films in a negative fashion.

The middle class voiced their dislike for these films, especially on how they portrayed classes. One journalist, Glyn Roberts, described the films as “depicting the picture of contemporary

¹⁷ Gerald Mast, *A Short History of the Movies*, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976), 413.

¹⁸ Stephen Shafer, *British Popular Films 1929-1939: The Cinema of Reassurance* (London: Routledge, 1997), 11.

¹⁹ Ibid, 13.

²⁰ It should be noted that during the course of research, only ten films were able to be located and viewed.

²¹ W.H. Mooring, “What Americans Think of British Films”, *Film Weekly*, January 15, 1938 XX, 438, p. 9.

²² Alexander Korda, *Private Life of Henry VIII*. Directed by Alexander Korda, London, September 23, 1933.

²³ Alexander Korda, *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. Directed by Harold Young, London, February 7, 1935.

²⁴ Alexander Korda, *Knight without Armor*. Directed by Jacques Feyder, London, July 23, 1937.

Knight Without Armor was a spy film that explored the time period of the Communist revolution in Russia.

Britain presented in our cinemas...” with “a working population” that was “remorselessly good-humored...and clowned about every damn thing that ever comes along.”²⁵ The working class was thought to be a hard working, friendly, quiet and, as described by Roberts, “chronically tired,” group.²⁶ The depiction of the working class continued to upset members of the middle class, feeling that the films in which the working class are depicted in overemphasize comedy. This overemphasis made the working class out to look like foolish compared to performers in other countries who would “specialize in working class...characteristics and remain dignified,”²⁷ as opposed to the ridiculous British actors.

Members of the working class also felt the same way as Roberts, writing to magazines and newspapers in opposition to films that portrayed the middle class. One woman wrote to *Film Weekly*, saying: “The people who run our picture industry are too class-ridden, too old-school-tie conscious ever to make or to want to make an honest and sincere working man’s film.”²⁸ Many other readers shared this opinion, and wrote to publications as well, going so far as to say that they “writhed at the mental deficients portrayed as workers in british films.”²⁹ While some of the working class had negative reactions to these films, many more found enjoyment in them. A number of the working class viewed the films of the 1930’s as excellent depictions of their own lifestyles. In fact, there were more complaints toward films depicting the seriousness and drama of the wealthy classes. The films depicting the lower classes, and cockney Brits in particular, were widely enjoyed by many. Gordon Harker was an actor who specialized at playing Cockneys, and was attacked by middle class filmgoers for being overly stereotypical. The lower class and cockneys defended Harker and other cockney actors, calling them “amusing, human, and plausible,”³⁰ in a word: realistic. It was this realism that would appeal to some filmgoers, no matter if the film was comic or dramatic. However, this realism was not universally preferred by the working class. There was a group that wanted the films they were viewing to depict people unlike them, wanting the films to help them escape from their troubles.

Of the films that were released in the thirties, a great number were dubbed as “escape” films by the working class. This was the depression, and people sought a distraction from the realities of life. Many filmgoers wrote to periodicals, such as *the Picturegoer*, with statements describing their need for the cinema, one of which was written in 1933, “Plain men and women are turning with almost a sign of thankfulness to the cinema, which has become...a stark necessity, taking their minds off the continual struggle...and strain.”³¹ The working class viewed the films of this time period with a certain degree of reverence. The films took their minds off their troubles, and gave them an outlet to relax. However, many of the films would later become reminders of the times.³²

At the close of the decade, British films were still suffering from mediocre performance, and American boycotts. There were few films that were successful commercially, with most of the films produced having little financial success. However, there is one film that is widely considered the most important of the time: the adaptation of George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion*.³³ This film serves as a culmination of many great British filmmaking techniques and offers great acting. Directed by and starring Leslie Howard as Professor Henry Higgins, *Pygmalion* became the autere film, garnering an

²⁵ *Film Weekly* 20, no. 497, (1938): 11.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid 20, no. 499 (1938): 11.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ *Picturegoer Weekly* 3, no. 158 (1934): 34.

³¹ *Picturegoer Weekly* 2 no. 132 (1933): 34.

³² An example is *Things To Come* (1936). Filmgoers would look back on this film in the forties and fifties as being extremely forward thinking for society.

³³ Gabriel Pascal, *Pygmalion*. Directed by Leslie Howard and Anthony Asquith. London, 1938.

academy award for Bernard Shaw. The film also became the premiere example when it came to comparing the lower and middle classes. The principal characters are members of the working class who become “tied up in middle class morality”³⁴ when they are elevated to a higher economic status. *Pygmalion* was the definitive British film of the time period, the success of which led to the musical *My Fair Lady* and the subsequent film adaptation.

Of all the additions to the film industry that the British made, the single most important contribution to the film industry was the invention of the Documentary Film.³⁵ The earliest documentaries date back to the mid twenties, but were not listed under a specific genre. These films were not categorized until John Grierson coined the term in 1926 while reviewing another film released, *Moana*.³⁶ Under Grierson, the British film movement had found its impetus with the creative and memorable films put out by the new group of documentarians. The documentary film is still considered one of Britain’s largest contribution to the global film industry.

Of all the film producing countries in the world, Britain is looked down upon as having a mediocre early filmography. The films of the early twentieth century were plagued by American interference in the market, class conflicts among the masses, and economic turmoil. The films that were produced were seen as vastly inferior to the rest of the world and the British industry barely held on. With the help of filmmakers like George Pearson and Alexander Korda, Britain’s industry was given some relief from the troubles it had. This time period is often looked down upon as being unimportant in the history of film, but in fact it was one of the most important times for film. This was the time of the first war films, the first comedies, and the first screen adaptations of plays and novels. It was a time of changing ideas and morals, with the lines beginning to blur between the middle and working classes. This was a time of realistic, human stories, of the class-based analogues that had begun to polarize viewers, such as *Pygmalion* and *Knight Without Armor*. The films of the early twentieth century are often called “muddled...cheap, [and] artless”, and while in some cases this is true, it is equally true that the 1920’s and 30’s produced some of the finest examples of cinema in history.

³⁴ Gabriel Pascal, *Pygmalion*. 1938.

³⁵ Arguably the main reason why the rest of the decade is so overlooked.

³⁶ Ann Curthoys, Marilyn Lake, editors. *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational Perspective, Volume 2004*. Australian National University Press, (2004), 51.