

# Cinema on the Front Line

## A History of Military Cinema Exhibition and Soldier Spectatorship during the First World War

Submitted by Christopher Grosvenor, to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Film Studies, August, 2018.

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## **Abstract**

This thesis – ‘Cinema on the Front Line: A History of Military Cinema Exhibition and Soldier Spectatorship during the First World War’ - provides an overview and examination of an element of British cinema history that remains largely undocumented within the disciplines of Film Studies and military history. Built upon highly original and extensive research, the thesis documents how the cinema intersected with the lives of British and dominion soldiers at practically every stage of their military career: from recruitment drives to the front line and, finally, in the convalescent hospitals and camps that attempted to rehabilitate an entire generation.

By bringing this largely unknown history to light, the thesis dismantles many previously held assumptions regarding British cinema exhibition during the First World War, documenting how a significant percentage of the cinema-going public – British soldiers – still engaged with cinema entertainment outside of the commercial theatrical venue. As a study of historical exhibition, it documents the scale and orchestration of the British Expeditionary Force’s implementation of cinema entertainment on the Western front between 1914 and 1918. Significantly, it is also argued that, as a historically specific demographic, British soldiers represented an actively discerning and uniquely positioned body of wartime spectators, particularly in relation to the output of topical films and newsreels which purported to document the realities of the conflict.

Accounting for this hidden history of wartime film spectatorship within extraordinary and unconventional sites of exhibition, the thesis challenges established ideas regarding the practices and concerns of film exhibitors, the behaviour and preferences of wartime audiences, and the significance and impact of the material conditions in which films were exhibited.

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# Introduction

In early 1916, approximately a year after the declaration of war on 4 August 1914, this photo (Fig. 0.1) was taken of a column of British soldiers marching past a civilian cinema. At first, the image appears jarring, perhaps even alarming: an urban space, a busy and congested city scene in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century has been intruded upon by a column of men cutting through a once peaceful civilian setting. In the background, the tension between military regulation/order, and civilian day-to-day life is epitomised through the contrasting presence of a local cinema, here screening Charles Weston's *A Woman without a Soul* (1915). The cinema – a site of comfort, relaxation and amusement – seems to contrast with the immediate circumstances of the outside world: a continent at war, a generation of young men marching off to fight and perhaps die for their country, and their families anxiously awaiting the latest war news at home. In times of war the cinema and other forms of entertainment are often thought of as frivolous and distracting, unsuitable for the seriousness of the circumstances at hand. Such an image reinforces this sentiment, with the soldiers marching solemnly past the

cinema, a few men making eye contact with the photographer, the vast majority bearing a stern and serious expression.

Once enlisting in the British Expeditionary Force on the outbreak of the conflict or in the months or years after its declaration, many may be inclined to believe that British soldiers simply left behind the civilian entertainment of the cinema, finding on the front line, instead, other forms of entertainment or recreation – sport, music, reading and writing – to fill their time. This notion that soldiers remained absent from cinema audiences and disengaged from film culture for the duration of their active service is, in fact, incorrect. As this thesis will demonstrate, the cinema intersected with the lives of British soldiers at nearly every point of their military career, from their initial motivation to enlist following a patriotic recruitment campaign orchestrated by their local cinema's proprietor, to the provision of cinematic entertainment endorsed and implemented by over fifty different formations of the B.E.F. on the Western front between 1914 and 1918. From here, wounded soldiers returned to the UK to discover that once again, cinemas were implemented and utilised within the context of recovery and rehabilitation for soldiers in hospitals and convalescent camps across the country. Indeed, soldiers (or potential soldiers) engaged with and were engaged by the medium of cinema in a variety of different ways throughout the First World War. Distinct from the civilian audiences and commercial cinemas on the home front, cinema exhibition targeted specifically towards military audiences, be they in Britain or on the front line, represents a unique but largely unknown history of exhibition and spectatorship.

The history of cinema exhibition for military audiences during the First World War has for the most part not been told. Whilst references to cinema exhibition on the front line have been made in passing by scholars and historians such as J. G. Fuller and Kevin Brownlow, no comprehensive overview of the subject has been produced

within the discipline of Film Studies.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, where minor references have been made to the practice of cinema exhibition on the front line, such commentary is often marred by error and/or speculative conclusions. More recent scholarship on the subject, such as the work produced by Emma Hanna and Amanda Laugesen on YMCA cinemas on the front line have gone some way towards rectifying this gap in knowledge within the discipline, although there is still much that has not been documented about British soldiers' engagement with cinema entertainment during the First World War, particularly regarding the British Expeditionary Force's implementation of military-run cinemas on the Western front.<sup>2</sup>

The absence of extensive scholarship on the subject in question can be attributed to a number of factors, first and foremost being Film Studies' long-standing absence of studies upon domestic cinema exhibition during the war, as well as specific film productions from the period. This may partly be explained by the relative difficulty of researching this period of exhibition history, with company records and documentation, cinema venue information, personalities and even many of the films themselves now lost to the ages. Only within the last decade or so has crucial and insightful research been published on British civilian audiences and cinema culture of the First World War, in rewarding studies such as Michael Hammond's *The Big Show: British Cinema Culture in the Great War, 1914-1918*, and Hammond and Michael

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<sup>1</sup> See: Kevin Brownlow, *The War, the West, and the Wilderness*, (London: Secker and Warburg, 1979), pp. 44-47; J. G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies, 1914-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 110-113.

<sup>2</sup> See: Emma Hanna, 'Putting the Moral into Morale: YMCA Cinemas on the Western Front, 1914-1918', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (2015), pp. 615-630; Amanda Laugesen, 'Forgetting their Troubles for a While: Australian Soldiers' Experiences of Cinema during the First World War', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (2015), pp. 596-614.

Williams' edited volume *British Silent Cinema and the Great War*.<sup>3</sup> Such studies represent the necessary first steps towards the research presented by this thesis, setting the groundwork for an understanding of civilian audiences and cinema culture in Britain during the war, and are cited frequently throughout this thesis as a baseline and, often a counterpoint, for my analysis.

Many studies concerning the British military and/or government's use of the medium of film during wartime have also been produced, although these tend to focus upon the production of propaganda films for civilian audiences.<sup>4</sup> One recent publication, *Cinema's Military Industrial Complex* (2018), edited by Haidee Wasson and Lee Grieveson, has considerably extended scholarly research beyond the production of propaganda films in times of war. Although focusing upon the American military and its use of the cinema and film technologies, predominantly in the period during and after the Second World War, *Cinema's Military Industrial Complex* offers an insightful point of reference for a number of topics, including some commentary on the subject of cinema exhibition for military audiences from the 1940s onward.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the collection's outlook and conceptual approach to its object of study mirrors

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<sup>3</sup> See: Michael Hammond, *The Big Show: British Cinema Culture in the Great War, 1914-1918* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006); Michael Hammond and Michael Williams (eds.), *British Silent Cinema and the Great War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> See: Nicholas Reeves, *Official British Film Propaganda during the First World War* (London: Croom Helm, in association with the Imperial War Museum, 1986); Nicholas Reeves, 'The Power of Film Propaganda – myth or reality?', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (1993), pp. 181-201; Nicholas Hiley, 'Hilton DeWitt Girdwood and the Origins of British Official Filming', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (1993), pp. 129-148.

<sup>5</sup> Whilst there are a few chapters on US film production and industry during the First World War, Haidee Wasson's chapter 'Experimental Viewing Protocols: Film Projection and the American Military' (pp. 25-43) and Andrea Kelley's 'Mobilizing the Moving Image: Movie Machines at US Military Bases and Veteran's Hospitals during World War II' (pp. 44-60) are perhaps more relevant for their discussion of film exhibition for soldiers during the Second World War. Although both ultimately focus on specific portable technologies, their operation, and how they were adapted by the US military for entertainment and education, each highlight the importance of understanding the military's application of film within non-theatrical contexts, which offered, as Kelley suggests, soldiers 'diversion from work and reminders of home while in service' (p. 47).

that of my own to a certain extent, being a research project which aimed to show how 'the military embraced cinema as an iterative apparatus with multiple capacities and functions, some of which were intraorganizational and some of which extended beyond immediate military function'.<sup>6</sup>

Building upon these examples of prior research, this thesis offers the first major examination of cinematic exhibition during the First World War which was implemented for, or targeted military audiences specifically, in whatever form that may have taken and at whatever point in the soldier's military career that may have occurred. In essence, this thesis represents a significant new field of research and analysis, elucidating the specific values and deliberate uses of the medium within a military context during a time of war. In addition to engaging, where necessary, with several existing fields of research, this thesis's emphasis is on the wealth of primary historical research and evidence which underpins its arguments, showcasing through the conclusions it draws how much knowledge concerning the period in question has been absent within the discipline of Film Studies.

Fundamentally, this thesis has been informed by two overarching questions which have shaped and structured the research presented within the following chapters.

1. How and why did the cinema as a social and cultural institution shape and adapt its exhibition practices for military audiences during the First World War?

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<sup>6</sup> Haidee Wasson and Lee Grieveson, 'The Military's Cinema Complex', in Wasson and Grieveson (eds.), *Cinema's Military Industrial Complex* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), pp. 1-22 (p. 7).

2. How and why were military (or potential military) audiences thought of as a unique demographic of wartime film spectatorship? How were they conceptualised as film spectators by both the institutions/authorities which established cinema shows and by themselves?

As the questions suggest, this thesis can largely be characterised as a study of wartime exhibition practices and spectator demographics and reception. As a case study of a fundamentally unique or unconventional exhibition practice, the following chapters document how a somewhat impractical technological medium was implemented and used in a variety of locations, venues and spaces for the entertainment of soldiers far beyond the confines of the commercial theatrical venue, challenging some of the more conventional conclusions drawn about British cinema exhibition at this time. As an examination of historical spectatorship, the research presented here highlights how the practice of cinema exhibition for military audiences immediately prompts the re-evaluation of a number of previously drawn conclusions concerning film reception and wartime audience demographics of the period, being a demographic of spectatorship defined by experiential and ideological characteristics far removed from the civilian spectator. By drawing out such discursive nuances concerning exhibition and reception within a very specific historical context, this thesis contributes towards a more complete history of British cinema in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Whilst specific sections within chapters do examine and analyse individual films, the research questions I have sought to answer have dictated a largely empirical methodology, alongside some aspects of textual analysis. Unsurprisingly then, this thesis has been largely shaped and informed by what has been referred to within the discipline of Film Studies as the 'historical turn' which first originated in the early



1990s.<sup>7</sup> Broadly speaking, the ‘turn’ prompted a re-evaluation of the research methods and subjects with which the discipline had hitherto been preoccupied, followed by a wide-spread realignment towards ‘empirical’ research and non-textual objects of study.<sup>8</sup> Where many studies had primarily focused on the film text, researchers began to expand their attention outwards to the historical contexts of film production, distribution, exhibition and reception. The result of this historiographical shift of attention spawned a plethora of studies concerning the types of ‘social, economic and technological variables’ within film history that had once been ‘secondary to the analysis of the individual text’, to cite Douglas Gomery’s address on the state of the discipline back in 1992.<sup>9</sup> Front and centre now was an interest in the more concrete elements of the experience of cinema-going, such as exhibition venues and practices, audience reception and the social, economic and technological ‘variables’ which determine the conditions of historical spectatorship. For such objects of study, the historical turn prompted both the writing of previously unacknowledged histories within Film Studies and the rewriting of established ones.

Concerning the discipline’s understanding and conceptualisation of spectatorship and reception, new research, such as the work produced by Janet Staiger and Judith Mayne, sought to disrupt and dismantle the traditional focus on the abstract and speculative elements of psychoanalytical film theory, which posited an ‘ideal’ spectator, and replaced it with the desire to locate the historically specific, *real-*

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<sup>7</sup> See: Sumiko Higashi, ‘In Focus: Film History, or a Baedeker Guide to the Historical Turn’, in *Cinema Journal*, vol. 44, no. 1 (2004), pp. 94-100; Robert C. Allen, ‘Relocating American Film History: The Problem of the Empirical’, in the *Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1 (2006), pp. 48-88.

<sup>8</sup> As noted by Sumiko Higashi in the essay cited above it is important within the context of film studies to distinguish between ‘empirical research’ and ‘empiricism’, the latter term denoting work on the philosophy of writing history.

<sup>9</sup> Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), p.xvii.

*world* audiences that actually filled the seats of cinemas.<sup>10</sup> As such, the historical turn of the early 1990s has resulted in a wealth of scholarship concerning instances of historical exhibition and spectatorship. Many case studies have been produced over the last two decades or so, documenting and analysing exhibition spaces and practices within a variety of different times and settings. Frequently, such studies address how exhibition spaces and practices were shaped or defined by a variety of cultural, political and social spheres.

Particular mention should be given to those film historians working under the banner of 'New Cinema History', to whom this thesis owes much credit. In the seminal collection of representative essays edited by Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst and Philippe Meers titled *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies*, there exists a diverse range of exemplary case studies, including examinations of 'underground' cinema in New York in the 1950s/60s, the exhibition practices of the Colonel Light Gardens cinema in Adelaide, Australia in the 1930s, and the conditions of African American cinema attendance in Williamsburg, Virginia over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Such studies, predicated upon localised and temporally specific instances of historical exhibition and reception, represent the cinema as 'a site of social and cultural exchange', to borrow Richard Maltby's turn of phrase from his introductory chapter to the collection, arguably a manifesto of sorts for the 'New Cinema History', if not characteristic of its *raison d'être*.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, such 'microhistories', as Maltby refers to them, whilst predominantly fixated upon local and temporally

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<sup>10</sup> See: Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> Richard Maltby, 'New Cinema Histories', in Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst and Philippe Meers (eds.), *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 3-40 (p. 3).

specific instances of exhibition and reception, ultimately aim to contribute towards the larger project of film studies as a discipline. Importantly, microhistorical case studies reinforce the sentiment that attention should be given to *all* aspects of cinema history, incorporating histories that lie outside of the commonplace and routine. By researching such histories a platform is provided to tell tangential stories - those obscure episodes and events that took place alongside our conventional understanding of the cinema – a necessary practice if we are to ever truly comprehend the vast history and reach of the medium. Indeed, rather than replacing the so-called ‘master narrative’ of the medium’s role during the First World War, the research presented here is, first and foremost, positioned as a building block towards a greater understanding of the cinema’s role in wartime. I should state, however, that I conceptualise my research, not necessarily as a microhistorical study, but as an extended survey of multiple instances of exhibition and reception occurring across a span of four years and situated in a variety of locations, venues and institutional frameworks. Nonetheless, it should still be viewed as representing a further output within the disciplinary trend towards historicised and highly empirical research on cinema history, as typified by the ‘New Cinema History’ model.

Whilst sharing the general ambitions and methodological approaches of ‘New Cinema History’, this thesis is further underpinned by specific ideas and concepts found in recent studies of exhibition and reception. By shifting the focus of scholarly attention towards the concrete historical elements of reception, for example, we encounter a new set of questions beyond those concerning an individual text. In realigning this focus for the study of spectatorship, Judith Mayne foregrounded at the beginning of the ‘historical turn’ the type of questions to be asked regarding the newly historicised ‘real-world’ spectator:

What did film going represent for historically different audiences? Do different film genres address spectators in radically different ways? How are the cinema and individual films contextualized in a given culture? What are the different texts and institutions that define how individual films, groups of films, audiences, and film-going patterns are defined? In short, the central question raised is two-fold: what are the histories of spectatorship, and what is historical about spectatorship?<sup>12</sup>

Such questions broaden out our conceptualisation of spectatorship and cinema-going as an activity beyond a specific interaction with a select film. Indeed, in order to determine how and why military spectators were conceptualised and defined as a unique wartime demographic, it is imperative to consider how such spectators constituted a 'historically different audience' in the first place, defined by spectatorial experiences and identities which were shaped by the historically specific context of the First World War. Indeed, more recently, Mark Jancovich has outlined the potential effect on film reception that social determinants 'such as class, gender, race and age' can have. Additionally, the spectator's profession – i.e. soldier – must also be understood as an influential determinant in relation to cinema spectatorship. Such facets, Jancovich argues, determine how the spectator interprets and responds to individual texts as well as the institution of the cinema more broadly, foregrounding spectatorship as a contextually determined act of 'consumption'.<sup>13</sup> To consider how specific films and the overall experience of cinema-going was 'consumed' by historically specific audiences such as the British military during the First World War,

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<sup>12</sup> Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 63.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Jancovich and Lucy Faire with Sarah Stubbings, *The Place of the Audience: Cultural Geographies of Film Consumption* (London: BFI, 2003), p. 3.

we must consult and interpret a body of evidence often produced and found outside of the cinema venue: personal letters and diaries, written and oral testimony, contemporary journalism and other forms of documentation relating to the specific experience of cinema-going as articulated by historically specific audiences.

Of course, whilst it is difficult and potentially reductive to define integral characteristics within demographic bodies of spectatorship, the following chapters underline the broad distinctions in trends and attributes between civilian spectators and soldier spectators of the First World War, highlighting the importance of understanding the discursive differences within this historical binary as they occurred between 1914 and 1918. By synthesising the methodological approaches towards historical spectatorship as espoused by proponents of the 'historical turn' – that historical spectatorship must be understood as a contextually determined engagement with film, as well as an act of 'consumption' – the following chapters showcase how significant conclusions can be drawn about the body of historical spectatorship in this instance. In fact, central to this thesis is the argument that military spectators represented a wholly unique historical audience demographic, which was engaged by, and engaged with, the medium of cinema in fundamentally complex and ideologically significant ways. This in essence represents one of the thesis's core claims, dispelling certain previously drawn conclusions about film spectatorship of the period by foregrounding what has been previously unacknowledged or undiscovered within the discipline's understanding of this period in history, as shall be outlined in detail by Chapters Three and Four (discussed below).

To consider how studies of exhibition have influenced this thesis, one specific strain of exhibition studies which has provided a framework for the research that follows is the study and conceptualisation of non-theatrical exhibition. Research

recently produced by film historians such as Gregory A. Waller, Martin Loiperdinger, and the collaborative volume entitled *Beyond the Screen*, edited by Marta Braun, Charlie Keil, Rob King, Paul Moore and Louis Pelletier are all important points of reference for thinking about non-theatrical exhibition.<sup>14</sup> To cite Gregory Waller, sites of non-theatrical exhibition can be defined as ‘a place that was not primarily or even secondarily a site where audiences viewed moving pictures’.<sup>15</sup> Undoubtedly, cinema exhibition for military audiences can also be defined as an example of non-theatrical exhibition, due to the fundamental fact that such instances of exhibition often took place outside of the conventional movie theatre (in make-shift front line venues or hospitals and convalescent facilities back home). Such practices place the use of the cinema beyond the medium’s historically commercial concerns. A key element of non-theatrical exhibition, cinema exhibition for military audiences was often provided as a free entertainment within certain circumstances, or only charged admission prices to maintain and support its continued practice. The majority of exhibition venues studied in the following chapters can also be categorised as non-theatrical venues, and as such, such scholarship provides a useful framework for understanding their character and function in relation to the conventional theatrical venue.

Crucial to Waller’s concept of a non-theatrical venue is the question of ‘sponsorship’ – financial, ideological or otherwise – that the practice of non-theatrical exhibition connotes. The use of the cinema as an entertainment for soldiers and ex-servicemen in the First World War was instigated by a number of different authorities

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<sup>14</sup> Marta Braun, Charlie Keil, Rob King, Paul Moore and Louis Pelletier (eds.) *Beyond the Screen: Institutions, Networks and Publics of Early Cinema* (London: John Libbey & Co. Ltd., 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Gregory Waller, ‘Locating Early Non-Theatrical Audiences’, in *Audiences: Defining and Researching Screen Entertainment Reception*, ed. Ian Christie (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), pp. 81-95 (p. 91).

and individuals for a variety of different purposes within a number of different contexts and sites of exhibition. In other words, its use was 'sponsored' by a number of different bodies of authority. Writing about non-theatrical exhibition of the silent era in the USA, Waller argues that:

sponsorship affected, perhaps significantly, the audience's experience of these programs, particularly in contrast to attending a regular moving picture show. Sponsorship could, for instance, influence the behaviour of spectators during the screening, authorize and legitimate the experience of watching moving pictures, frame this experience as somehow beneficial, and situate it as outside the pay-per-view logic governing the movies as commercial entertainment.<sup>16</sup>

Here, Waller is discussing examples of non-theatrical exhibition implemented by religious, educational and governmental authorities in the USA, but, as shall be made clear, the idea that such sponsorship had an experiential effect upon non-theatrical audiences forms a crucial part of understanding military cinema exhibition. The idea that military cinema exhibition was implemented, shaped and defined by institutional or authoritative bodies beyond the commercial exhibition sector positions the practice within a very different framework of understanding. It calls into question the various motives and reasons behind the choice to implement the cinema as an entertainment for military audiences, as well as the consequences and effects such motives may have ultimately had.

This sentiment is also echoed by Jancovich, who argues that viewer reception and response can be influenced and shaped just as significantly by the physical conditions and practices of exhibition than as by the content of the films themselves.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>17</sup> Jancovich (et al), *The Place of the Audience*, p. 31.

Jancovich contends that ‘audiences built up identifications and disidentifications with places of exhibition, and different cinemas not only had meanings that exceeded their function as places to show films, *but even transformed the meaning of the films shown within them.*’<sup>18</sup> This idea is developed further when it is argued that:

Early film was often consumed in places of popular entertainment, such as amusement arcades, music halls and fairs, and the meanings of these locations affected the meanings of the activities within them. Similarly, the exhibition of films within churches provided an alternative set of meanings and identified them as instruments of education and edification.<sup>19</sup>

The argument that film reception is shaped by the conditions of exhibition venues and their practices, and that films could take on divergent or alternative meanings within different sites of exhibition, particularly in instances of non-theatrical exhibition (Jancovich provides the venue of a church as an example) is of particular importance to the present thesis, given the widespread implementation of front line exhibition in non-theatrical venues. As will be outlined in the following chapters, the fact that cinemas were established within settings which lacked the material comforts and regular practices of the conventional theatrical venue, often foregrounded the symbolic value of the more fundamental or basic elements of the cinematic apparatus itself: the venue, the content on-screen, the act of being an audience member amongst others, and the very function of that specific site of exhibition within a specific time and place.

Related to the notion of ‘sponsorship’ we may also consider a slightly different approach to the study of exhibition in such circumstances. Accordingly, one final perspective which has informed the conceptual framework of this thesis is the idea of

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 12. My emphasis.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 38.



‘useful cinema’, as defined by Charles R. Acland and Haidee Wasson in their edited collection of the same name.<sup>20</sup> In this collection, Acland and Wasson define ‘useful cinema’ as a specific implementation of the medium (often within a non-theatrical setting such as a school, factory, museum etc.) in order to ‘transform unlikely spaces, convey ideas, convince individuals, and produce subjects in the service of public and private aims’.<sup>21</sup> More than a simple instance of screening cinematic entertainment, Acland, Wasson and their contributors explore the variety of ways in which the cinema over the course of the medium’s history has been implemented for specific ideological, political, educational and/or generally didactic purposes, used to encourage and/or foster a particular mode of spectatorship within a particular context, as implemented by a particular institution or establishment. As Acland and Wasson explain, ‘the concept of useful cinema does not so much name a mode of production, a genre, or an exhibition venue as it identifies a disposition, an outlook, and an approach toward a medium on the part of institutions and institutional agents’.<sup>22</sup>

However, whilst Acland and Wasson’s focus upon the disposition/outlook/approach of different ‘institutions and institutional agents’ is of the utmost relevance here when considering how the military conceptualised the use of the medium within the context of the First World War, and informs much of the following chapters, this thesis offers a slight difference in nuance to this concept, instead discussing cinema exhibition for military audiences in terms of ‘value’ rather than ‘use’. This is done to facilitate a dialogical understanding of how both exhibitors *and* spectators valued the medium, rather than focussing solely on the overarching

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<sup>20</sup> Charles R. Acland and Haidee Wasson (eds.), *Useful Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

didactic motivations of the former and how cinema was deliberately 'used' by such exhibitors. Indeed, the interaction between these two distinct bodies – exhibitors and spectators – and the shared and/or different ways each valued the medium of the cinema within this context, offers a far more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the cinema's function during war, as it was perceived by a variety of different forces with slightly varying ambitions, desires and motivations behind its implementation, each having to negotiate and reconcile how the medium's 'values' came to be defined within this context.

Considering the discursive ideas surrounding non-theatrical exhibition and 'useful cinema', however, it is important not to dismiss the fact that the practice of cinema exhibition for military audiences, particularly on the front line, was still fundamentally informed by modes of domestic commercial exhibition. As Chapter Two demonstrates, even if the conditions of the front line cinema were necessarily makeshift and somewhat haphazard, their adherence to, or desire to emulate certain routines and practices of conventional theatrical exhibition shows that the practice was not wholly revolutionary in nature. On the contrary, I argue that a key function that military cinema exhibition fulfilled was the promise of continuity it offered between civilian and military life through its emulation of home comforts and civilian practices of leisure. The categorisation of cinema exhibition for military audiences (particularly on the front line) as a non-theatrical mode of exhibition must, therefore, be accepted with the understanding that the concept of non-theatrical exhibition is itself flexible and not necessarily defined by a strict binary between the theatrical and non-theatrical. Nonetheless, the academic discourses surrounding non-theatrical exhibition, 'sponsorship' and 'useful cinema' afford useful frameworks and points of reference to conceptualise military cinema exhibition from the outset which, to return to this thesis's

central research questions, help to articulate *why* and *how* cinema exhibition was adapted for military audiences.

Ultimately, 'Cinema on the Front Line' represents the culmination of exhaustive research on the subject of cinema exhibition for military audiences during the First World War, synthesising a number of key theoretical and methodological strands within the fields of exhibition and spectator studies for the purpose of providing a comprehensive history and analysis of the practice. At this point, it should be acknowledged that any methodology is ultimately dictated by the limitations and shortcomings of the archive. In this instance, extant material related to military cinema exhibition is for the most part fragmentary and widespread, although not completely impossible to uncover. Where it has survived, such material is dispersed across a range of diverse objects and forms. In order to answer the research questions this thesis poses, then, the following chapters consult a variety of sources including official military documentation, trade magazines, 'trench journals', newspapers and other periodicals, contemporary publications, and the papers, diaries, correspondence and artistic outputs produced by soldiers themselves. As such, this thesis will provide insight into the practice of military cinema exhibition from a multitude of different perspectives, giving a voice to a number of often conflicting viewpoints on the subject within its historical setting.

The thesis is structured around a broadly chronological history of the average British soldier's experience during the First World War, from his initial enlistment into the British Expeditionary Force (Chapter One), his deployment on to the front line (Chapters Two, Three and Four) and, if he was fortunate enough to survive the conflict, his return home as a (potentially) wounded, convalescent soldier (Chapter Five). As such, each chapter of the thesis offers an analysis and commentary on how the

medium of the cinema interacted with the average British soldier throughout his military career.

Chapter One – ‘Cinema, Recruitment Campaigns, and the Outbreak of War’ – begins with the declaration of war on 4 August 1914. Tracing the film industry and exhibition sector’s initial response to the conflict, this chapter documents the variety of ways in which the cinema became a platform for the voluntary recruiting movement, tasked with engaging and enlisting a generation of men in the nation’s time of need. By focussing on the cinema as a recruitment tool in the period between the declaration of war and the introduction of conscription in early 1916, this chapter foregrounds the significance of the British cinema’s first interactions with potential soldiers, rather than civilian audiences, as has been the case with the majority of previous scholarly research. Alongside the production of shorter topical newsreel pieces detailing the need for recruitment and the enlistment process itself, this chapter also puts forward a case study of ‘invasion films’ for understanding the manner in which the British film industry first attempted to encourage enlistment through the medium of film, documenting how the ideologically symbolic imagery of ‘German atrocity’ stories took centre-stage within cinematic recruitment propaganda. By establishing how the cinema first engaged with potential/new soldiers before their embarkation for the front line, Chapter One, ultimately, outlines how the industry and exhibition sector established an iconographic precedent for what warfare looked like and what soldiers should expect of combat, a concept which is engaged with and deconstructed from a number of different perspectives throughout this thesis (most readily in Chapter Four).

Having outlined how domestic British cinemas were used to recruit new soldiers, the second chapter – ‘British Military Cinemas and Film Exhibition on the Western Front’ – turns towards exhibition on the front line, providing a comprehensive

history, empirical overview and analysis of the British Expeditionary Force's implementation of cinema entertainment on the Western front between 1914 and 1918. Built upon an exhaustive consultation of official military documentation held at the National Archives, this chapter presents the first study of its type, building upon but ultimately revising the discipline's previously held conclusions about the scale, operation and popularity of cinema entertainment amongst British soldiers during the First World War. Offering new and significant statistical evidence regarding the overall appropriation of the medium within the hierarchy of the B.E.F., this chapter showcases how the cinema became of immense importance within day-to-day life on the front line, outlining the constituent elements related to its operation, including the type and location of front line cinema venues, the provision of films and film programming, projection equipment used and staff employed, admission pricing and financial orchestration, and the practice of live musical accompaniment. Also examined in this chapter is the sentiment behind its implementation, arguing that the B.E.F. valued the medium as an important and much needed form of recreation for its war-weary audiences within the context of modern warfare, just as much as any other form of entertainment, such as sport or musical performances, which have for whatever reason become synonymous with British popular culture's conceptualisation of the war and 'Tommy's' leisure-time whilst on 'rest' on the front. By dramatically revising pre-existing conclusions about the nature and scope of cinema entertainment on the Western front, Chapter Two evidences the previously unacknowledged scale and value of the medium in war.

Moving from a study of exhibition to a study of spectatorship and reception, Chapters Three and Four take as their primary focus the history of soldier spectatorship during the First World War. Chapter Three – 'Soldier Spectatorship on

the Front Line' – foregrounds the importance of understanding soldiers as a discreet and unique historical demographic of wartime film spectatorship, being distinct from civilian audiences of the home front in a variety of important and fundamental ways. Situated within a context far removed from the conventional exhibition practices of their civilian counterparts, soldier spectatorship on the Western front came to be defined and shaped by the immediate and exceptional conditions of the front line environment, with soldiers engaging with the cinema in a variety of ideologically and emotionally meaningful ways. Documenting how the average soldier valued the front line cinema as a psychological respite from the immediate dangers and horrors of trench warfare, this chapter outlines the fundamental determinants and characteristics that constituted the soldier spectator, arguing that soldier engagement with films, stars, genres, and their identity as film fans in general, took on significant meanings and modes of expression which were unique to this demographic of wartime spectatorship. Above all else, it is argued that this demographic demonstrated a clearly discerning critical engagement with the medium of cinema and its surrounding culture.

This point is developed further by Chapter Four – 'A War of Representation: Soldier Spectators and Topical Films' – through its examination of how the demographic of soldier spectators responded to a specific body of wartime filmmaking: topical films related to the war itself. Having established in Chapter Three some of the fundamental characteristics of soldier spectatorship, Chapter Four turns towards an evident point of tension and critical debate within the soldier community. Built upon a case study of the feature length documentary *The Battle of the Somme* (Malins and McDowell, 1916), it is argued that the soldier demographic was ultimately unable to reconcile on-screen representations of the war, disseminated through newsreels and longer films, with their own direct, lived experience of the conflict. Examining how

soldiers responded to such films in personal diaries and letters, as well as artistic expressions and outlets such as poems and trench journal publications, Chapter Four documents a largely forgotten history of wartime spectatorship, one which demonstrated an evidently discerning critical faculty in its engagement with the often manipulated and distorted representational strategies of mass media of the period. Utilising newly discovered evidence pertaining to the staging of footage in *The Battle of the Somme* and other topical films, this chapter ultimately highlights the political and cultural significance of ‘faking’ in topical filmmaking of the war, foregrounding the need to re-evaluate the discipline of Film Studies’ formerly drawn conclusions regarding the purported naivety of cinema audiences of this period.

Chapter Five – ‘The Cinema, Recovery and Rehabilitation’ – concludes the thesis with an examination of how the medium of the cinema, as a social and cultural institution, was utilised for the rehabilitation and social reintegration of wounded soldiers returning home from the front line. Having been recruited through the cinema during the war’s earlier stages, and then entertained and comforted by its presence on the front line, soldiers returned home across the country to find that the institution of the cinema welcomed them with open arms, utilising a variety of philanthropic schemes and practices to foster community-driven support for the care of the war-wounded. Examining the medium’s inclusion and use within convalescent hospitals and camps, as well as the widespread provision of free admission combined with complimentary drinks, food and more at a multitude of commercial cinemas across the country, this chapter evidences the strategies by which the cinema was incorporated into post-combat rehabilitation practices and healthcare for a generation of suffering men, distinct from its use as an immediate psychological respite on the front line.

Having collated, documented and analysed the history of cinema exhibition for military audiences through these five chapters, this thesis offers the first comprehensive examination of a topic which, until now, has remained largely unknown and forgotten within the disciplines of Film Studies and military history, as well as a broader knowledge and awareness of Britain's cultural and social history during the First World War.



# 1. Cinema, Recruitment Campaigns, and the Outbreak of War

War had been declared, and the following Sunday I went with a friend of mine to Shepherd's Bush Empire to see the film show. At the end they showed the Fleet sailing the high seas and played 'Britons Never Shall Be Slaves' and 'Hearts of Oak'. And you know one feels that little shiver run up the back and you know you have got to do something. I had just turned seventeen at the time and on the Monday I went up to Whitehall – Old Scotland Yard – and enlisted in the 16<sup>th</sup> Lancers.<sup>1</sup>

Private William Dove, 16<sup>th</sup> Lancers.

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<sup>1</sup> William Dove, cited in Max Arthur, *Forgotten Voices of the Great War* (London: Ebury Press, 2003), p. 9.

Like thousands of other men across the country upon the British declaration of war on 4 August 1914, William Dove was swept up in the ubiquitous atmosphere of patriotism and duty which spread across cities, towns and villages. For Dove, like many others, the initial prompt to enlist – the cause of ‘that little shiver’ which ran up his back that induced him to join the forces – was found whilst attending a cinema, looking up at the hastily produced and distributed cinematic images of Britain’s military might in the wake of the conflict. Seemingly overnight, the public spaces of Britain – streets, parks, town halls, theatres – were swiftly placed into use for recruitment propaganda and campaigning. Everywhere the British population looked, lecturers, posters, songs and recruiting officers could be seen or heard. As with innumerable other public institutions and spaces, the British cinema (of which there were an estimated 5,000 in 1914) was another public space in which civilians were confronted with and engaged by the rhetoric of war, one’s patriotic duty and the country’s need for able-bodied men to enlist and serve in its time of need.<sup>2</sup> As the novelist Edgar Wallace remarked of the sudden ubiquity of recruitment propaganda in those early days:

You could not get away from it. It was flashed upon the screens of picture theatres; it appeared on some of the boards before the picture doors; it was on the tram tickets; it was pasted on the windows of private houses; it appeared unexpectedly in the pulpit and on the stage, it was printed in neat little characters upon leaflets; it sprawled largely upon the gigantic posters with

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<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Hiley, ‘The British Cinema Auditorium’, in Karel Dibbets and Bert Hogenkamp (eds.), *Film and the First World War* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1995), pp. 160-170 (p. 160).

which private enterprise covered whole facias - 'Your King and Country needs you.'<sup>3</sup>

The 'you' to whom such declarations were explicitly addressed was the male population of Britain, aged between 18 and 38 (45 if they had previously served, and up to 51 by the close of the war), over 5 feet 3 inches in height and judged to be in good health by a medical examiner upon application. Of course, as the testimony of the underage William Dove cited above confirms, such regulations were not always strictly enforced, either deliberately on the part of an enterprising recruitment officer attempting to fill the ranks or passed through without the recruiting officer's knowledge. In short, alongside the existing strength of the British Army (244,260 total men, including Territorial Army, July 1914) the outbreak of war across Europe and beyond demanded the swift and unprecedented enlistment of hundreds of thousands of men into the ranks, an entire generation called up for the nation's defence.<sup>4</sup>

This first chapter examines how the cinema, both as a public institution and as a commercial industry, was utilised as a platform for recruitment to address and hopefully enlist a generation of young men – the potential soldiers of Britain's civilian population who had, in all likelihood, no prior of experience serving for their country in uniform. As such, this chapter focuses upon the period between the war's declaration and the early months of 1916 when the first conscription acts came into place and the practice of enlistment changed from voluntary to compulsory. Several scholars have produced articulate and insightful histories of the war's impact on film production and

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<sup>3</sup> Edgar Wallace, cited in John M. Osbourne, *The Voluntary Recruiting Movement in Britain, 1914-1916* (New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc.,1982), p. 85.

<sup>4</sup> John Osbourne, *The Voluntary Recruiting Movement in Britain, 1914-1916* (New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc.,1982), p. 134.

cinema culture during the First World War. However, most studies have tended to focus on the later years of the war and the major topical films produced and released by the War Office. Nicholas Reeves' account of the evolution of the War Office's use of cinema as a tool for propaganda, for example, foregrounds the government's gradual appropriation of the medium, noting the relatively minimal strides towards film propaganda during the first sixteen months of the war.<sup>5</sup> Turning from the political to the civilian sphere, Michael Hammond's study of cinema businesses and audiences in Southampton during the war, *The Big Show*, whilst providing an insightful commentary on how the War Office's later feature films were received and conceptualised by contemporary civilian audiences, focuses more explicitly upon how the exhibition sector shaped their programmes for civilian, predominantly female audiences and their response as spectators to topical films which sought to educate rather than recruit them, as well as later feature-length dramas and comedies such as *The Birth of a Nation* (Griffith, 1915), *Civilisation* (Ince, 1916) and *Shoulder Arms* (Chaplin, 1918).<sup>6</sup>

By realigning the focus of scholarly attention towards lesser known topical films (both fictional and non-fiction) produced during this earlier period of the war between August 1914 to January 1916, this chapter closely explores how the cinema targeted and engaged the generation of eligible men needed to fulfil the demands of the nation's military. It seeks to identify some of the primary methods by which the cinema was utilised for recruitment, and the extent to which these methods were successful in their goal. Amongst other questions, the following chapter seeks to provide an

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<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Reeves, *Official British Film Propaganda during the First World War* (London: Croom Helm, in association with the Imperial War Museum, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> Michael Hammond, *The Big Show: British Cinema Culture in the Great War 1914-1918* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006).

answer to the question: how did contemporary British film production and exhibition industries adapt their business models and strategies of public engagement for the crisis at hand?

This chapter also examines the type and content of recruitment propaganda disseminated through contemporary filmmaking of the period and exhibited across the country for the purposes of encouraging audience members to enlist. What type of films were produced and shown to aid such a purpose? How did such films represent the war itself, and how were such depictions utilised for the benefit of engaging the attention of the country's demographic of potential soldiers? By ascertaining how such films were constructed for certain ideological/politicised purposes, we can draw more concrete conclusions about the perceived function of cinema exhibition and the desired consequences of spectator reception during this period.

In line with the thesis's overarching research questions, this first chapter sets out to establish exactly how and why (potential) military audiences were first conceptualised as a distinct and unique demographic of wartime spectators, even prior to their enlistment and embarkation for the front line. By outlining how these early films established an iconographic precedent for the cinematic representation of the war, setting a significant ideological touchstone for all future engagements with the medium throughout the British soldier's military career, this chapter will document the pervasiveness and symbolic power of the type of imagery soldiers would later rally against following direct experience of the conflict itself. Consequently, this chapter's ultimate aim is to identify and document a specific historical audience: its inception, constitution and the fundamental elements which shaped its subsequent history. As Hammond has noted, the onset of the war prompted 'a shift in the industry and more generally towards a more heterogeneous perception of the cinema audience', outlining

the consequent 'creation of new audiences, particularly soldiers and women workers' in wartime Britain.<sup>7</sup> Establishing this argument, Hammond prioritises an analysis of the increasingly heterogeneous constitution of the civilian demographic of spectatorship within domestic exhibition culture. By building upon this analysis and examining how potential soldiers rather than civilians were engaged with, recruited by, and even trained by the medium of the cinema upon the outbreak of war, this chapter will outline how the cinema first intersected with the lives of soldiers prior to their enlistment and embarkation for the front line.

### **The Outbreak of War and the Voluntary Recruitment Movement**

Upon the declaration of war, the War Office quickly established an ad hoc department for the production of British war propaganda under the leadership of Charles Masterman (a department which would by then end of the war become known as the Ministry of Information). For the most part, the War Office's propaganda department focused upon the creation of pro-Allies material to be disseminated abroad amongst neutral, allied and dominion countries.<sup>8</sup> Lantern Slides, postcards, posters and gramophone records were all produced by the War Office for use abroad, in an attempt to shape a perception of the war as a justified and necessary conflict against an aggressive and dangerous enemy.<sup>9</sup>

However, the unprecedented scale of the international situation in the summer of 1914 understandably lead to a nationwide civilian engagement with the conflict

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 5; 13.

<sup>8</sup> Reeves, *Official Film Propaganda During the First World War*, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

beyond Britain's political and military bodies. In the first few weeks following Britain's declaration of war, the nation's social and cultural environment radically shifted towards an all-encompassing engagement with the conflict predicated upon a widespread (but not total) desire and sense of duty to support the war effort in any way possible. Up and down the country, patriotic meetings and lectures were hurriedly organised to promote the war effort and encourage the nation's eligible men to join the ranks. As Peter Simkins writes, the importance of these initial meetings and local campaigns 'lay not so much in the number of men which one produced as in the cumulative effect on recruiting figures and in the fact that, at this juncture, they were being organised spontaneously by local citizens rather than at the direct behest of the War Office'.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, the overtly patriotic response within the civilian sphere to the outbreak of war in August/September 1914 fostered a politically engaged citizenry and culture, an environment in which private citizens, cultural institutions and social groups banded together for the benefit of the war effort to recruit as many men across the country as possible. Ultimately, such an environment led to a significant voluntary recruiting movement in Britain between 1914 and 1916. Citing Basil Williams' 1918 book *Raising and Training the New Armies*, historian John M. Osbourne identifies three key periods of the voluntary recruiting movement in his analysis of the period. Described as the 'first rush', the two months following the initial declaration of war saw unprecedented enlistment figures (298,923 men enlisted in August, 462,901 men in September) prompted by the all-encompassing mood of the country, dictated by patriotism,

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Simkins, *Kitchener's Army: The Raising of the New Armies 1914-1916* (Barnsley, Pen & Sword Military, 2007), pp. 54-55.

enthusiasm and an overall sense of duty to one's country.<sup>11</sup> 'This war excitement', Osbourne suggests, 'coupled with an outpouring of patriotic enthusiasm, struck almost every urban area in Britain at the same time and in a similar fashion'.<sup>12</sup> There then followed a period between the end of September 1914 to mid-1915 described as the era of the 'recruiting rally'. Whilst enlistment figures would not again reach the heights of the 'first rush', due in part to the administrative confusion and relaxation of certain regulations during the earlier period as well as a growing belief that the Army had all the men they required, this second period witnessed a more organised approach to recruitment in which a variety of voluntary schemes and practices were implemented across the country to encourage recruitment. During this period, numerous civilian voluntary organisations were established, be they confined to local villages or in larger cities such as the Bristol Citizen's Recruiting Committee. Similarly, a variety of cultural institutions, companies, social and political groups all made concerted efforts to help the recruitment campaign. However, from mid-1915 onwards, with the static nature of modern warfare now realised and the potential for a prolonged conflict no longer a remote possibility, Britain entered the third and final phase of the voluntary recruiting movement – 'Organisation and Conscription' – in which the ever-decreasing enlistment figures gave rise to a decidedly more desperate political climate which saw the passing of the National Registration Act on 15 July (a census ostensibly created to determine the number of eligible men who had not yet enlisted), followed by the introduction of the Derby scheme in late October (requiring all eligible men to attest for service, but allowing them to defer their entry into the services until their particular

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<sup>11</sup> Osbourne, *The Voluntary Recruiting Movement in Britain, 1914-1916*, p. 74; 134.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.



group – determined by marriage status, age and profession – were called up).<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, this period concluded with the introduction of conscription via the first Military Service Act in January 1916.

Nonetheless, whilst voluntary recruitment ultimately fell short of what was needed, the voluntary recruitment movement, represented by hundreds of groups, schemes and practices across the country, undoubtedly contributed towards the B.E.F.'s total strength and their ability to fight the war. As John Osbourne argues:

The national response to the predicament the War Office faced in August 1914 demonstrated an active patriotism that reached all levels of society. Into the gap created by poor planning and the impact of full-scale war moved national civilian voluntary movement, largely decentralized and freed by the administrative failings of the Army from regulation and control, and unified at first only by the grasping of the opportunity to serve the nation in some capacity.<sup>14</sup>

Into this gap – this environment in which concerted efforts to organise and encourage recruitment amongst eligible men were so desperately needed – the cultural and social institution of the cinema was one more element within the growing network of cultural bodies which grasped ‘the opportunity to serve the nation in some capacity’ after 4 August 1914.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

## **The Cinema as a Platform for Recruitment, 1914-1916**

Upon the declaration of war, the British film industry and trade, like all other industries and institutions, suddenly found themselves in the midst of a chaotic and uncertain period for business. Trade papers such as *The Bioscope* and *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly* quickly published articles and features on the war and its potential impact on the British film industry. In its 6 August 1914 issue, the first issue after the declaration of war, *The Bioscope* led with an editorial titled 'Facing the Future', in which it was concluded that 'the issues at stake are colossal; their effect no man can at present prophesy', but argued that there 'must be no panic, and it behoves each one of us to carry on our business in a sane and clear-headed manner'.<sup>15</sup> Whilst the following few issues of *The Bioscope* featured much coverage on the war's potential impact on practical and economic concerns such as the subject of film supply, imports/exports and business hours, the periodical soon began to publish material commenting upon the ways the industry could extend itself beyond a 'business as usual' model to contribute and assist Britain during the unfolding crisis.<sup>16</sup>

Consequently, the cinema began to be viewed by both the trade and others as an ideal platform for recruitment campaigning and propaganda. In fundamentally practical terms, the cinema venue, like the town hall, theatre or music hall, afforded an easily accessible public space in which a mass audience could be addressed by a

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<sup>15</sup> 'Facing the Future', *The Bioscope*, 6 August 1914, p. 523.

<sup>16</sup> See: Langford Reed, 'The Cinematography and War', *The Bioscope*, 20 August 1914, p. 753; Evan Strong, 'The Duty of the Film Trade', *The Bioscope*, 27 August 1914, p. 823. 'The Cinematograph at the Front', *The Bioscope*, 3 September 1914, p. 860.

lecturer or recruiting officer. Calls for lecturers to visit entertainment venues and other public spaces accompanied much of the initial rhetoric seen in regional journalism during the period of the 'first rush' of recruitment. *The Devon and Exeter Gazette*, for example, argued in its 18 August 1914 edition that the local recruiting committee should 'secure speakers to attend theatres, cinema halls, and music halls, where they could address audiences for five or ten minutes, and so get hold of the people they could not, perhaps, meet elsewhere'.<sup>17</sup>

At least initially, the cinema was used as just that – a recruitment platform – in which a lecturer or recruitment officer would take to the stage or front of the auditorium to give a few words on the need for new recruits, the civilian's patriotic duty and the need to fight. In these instances, the cinema was utilised as a venue rather than a medium, with recruiting speeches often given in isolation from the film programme, if films were shown at all. Across the UK, venues such as the Cinema House, Bathgate in Scotland, the Rink Cinema, Finsbury Park in London, and the Selsey Cinema near Chichester, opened their doors to recruiting officers, local personalities and politicians to give recruiting speeches to audiences.<sup>18</sup> *The Edinburgh Evening News* reported in April 1915 how cinemas across Scotland had used lantern slides 'calling for recruits, while speakers had been willingly allowed to address the audiences on behalf of the various recruiting movements'.<sup>19</sup> Personalities as diverse as leading suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst, Members of Parliament and British film comedian Fred 'Pimple'

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<sup>17</sup> 'The Army. Recruits Wanted, Appeal to Exeter.', *The Devon and Exeter Gazette*, 18 August 1914, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> 'Recruiting Meeting at Bathgate', *The Scotsman*, 6 November 1914, p. 7; 'Under Nine or Over Ninety', *Manchester Evening News*, 15 February 1915, p. 7; 'Successful Recruiting Meeting', *The Observer and West Sussex Recorder*, 16 December 1914, p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> 'Edinburgh Cinema Exhibitors', *The Edinburgh Evening News*, 7 April 1915, p. 5.

Evans' all appeared in cinema auditoriums to give recruitment speeches.<sup>20</sup> Such events, rather than utilising the particular characteristics of the venue and the medium of the cinema, were simply used as a platform for a public speaker.

As the above comment from *The Devon and Exeter Gazette* suggests, however, the cinema also offered an ideal chance to engage with the target demographic of younger men eligible for active service – the kind of people recruiters 'could not, perhaps, meet elsewhere'. Indeed, whilst the demographic makeup of the British cinema gradually shifted towards a predominantly female audience throughout the 1910s (an idea that will be further examined and challenged in Chapter Three), scholars such as Nicholas Hiley have concluded that, prior to the war, the typical cinemagoer in Britain was a young, working class man.<sup>21</sup> That the cinema's primary demographic at the outset of the war coincided with the recruitment needs of the country was not lost on social commentators. In an editorial published in *The Times* on 26 August, it was suggested that this much sought after demographic of potential soldiers could be found 'shirking' their duty 'attending cricket matches and going to the cinema'.<sup>22</sup> Attendance at sports events was regularly blamed for the younger generation's indifference to the recruitment movement (Fig. 1.1). However, the association between cinemas and 'shirkers' also quickly took hold within the public sphere, with many commentators calling out the men who spent their time in such venues. 'Numbers of our young men have volunteered in a spirit of heroic sacrifice', wrote one journalist, but there are 'hundreds of young men in our midst to-day – on

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<sup>20</sup> See: "'An Opal Ring" at the Public Hall', *Hastings and St. Leonards Observer*, 7 August 1915, p. 5; "'Pimple's" Flying Visit to the Olympia', *Portsmouth Evening News* 22 May 1916, p. 3; June Purvis, *Emmeline Pankhurst: A Biography* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 269; 'Mrs Pankhurst's Patriotism', *Hull Daily Mail*, 21 May 1915, p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> Hiley, 'The British Cinema Auditorium', p. 161.

<sup>22</sup> 'Territorials and – Others.', *The Times*, 26 August 1914, p. 9.

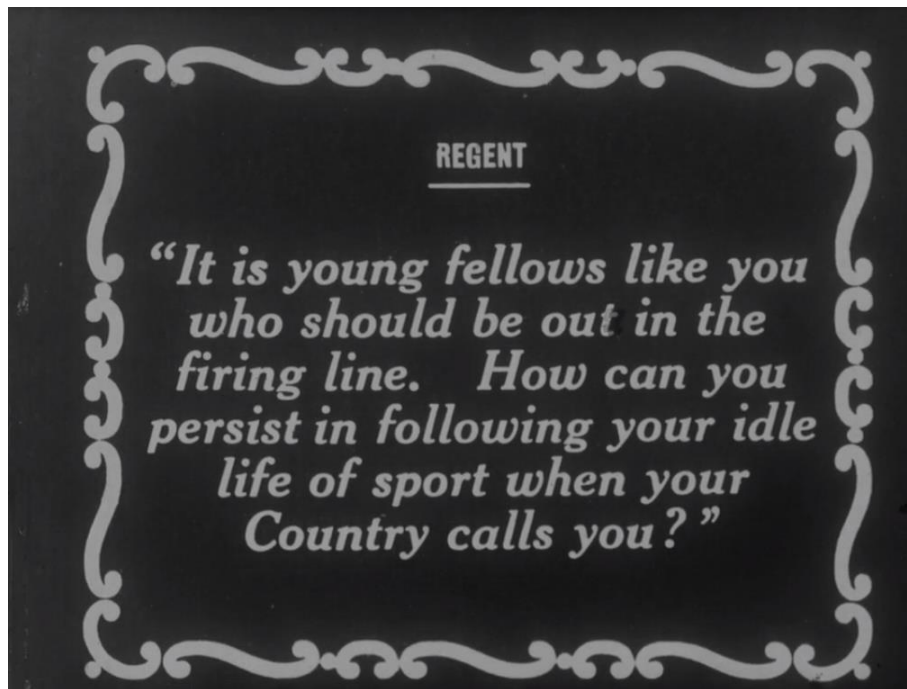


Fig. 1.1: An intertitle criticising men 'shirking' their duty to the country from *The Man who Came Back* (1915)

the golf links, the tennis courts, in the streets and the cinemas – who are apparently deaf to the cry which rings throughout the country for men'.<sup>23</sup> The notion that eligible men were hiding from their duty in cinemas continued long into the period of voluntary recruitment, a report for the *Liverpool Echo* titled 'Hunting the Slacker' published in September 1915 claiming that:

One favourite dodge [of] the slacker is to make a dash for the nearest picturedrome to spend the evening in peace with Charlie Chaplin. Alas! these cinemas are dangerous places! The Chaplin film may be awfully funny, but it's no fun when a speaker comes forward a few minutes later to remind the audience that there is a war going on, and to drop in a few home truths into the bargain.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> 'The Army of Shirkers', *Sussex Express, Surrey Standard, and Kent Mail*, 27 August 1914, p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> 'Hunting the Slacker. How Recruiters Pop the Question.', *The Liverpool Echo*, 29 September 1915, p. 5.

Elsewhere, *The Manchester Courier* reported in the same month that a local voluntary recruiting campaign in the city would specifically target cinemas 'so that no young man will be able to say that he not been appealed to to throw in his lot with his comrades in khaki'.<sup>25</sup>

Evidently, the cinema offered the recruiting officer or campaigner a prime platform to appeal for new recruits. More than just being used as a general stage for recruitment speeches, the cinema could be specifically adapted and shaped to have the utmost effect on a (relatively) captive audience who turned up to a cinema expecting a regular programme. One particularly early advocate for the use of cinemas as recruitment platforms was the Liberal MP and former Major-General of the British Army, Sir Ivor Hebert. In a letter circulated amongst local recruiting committees and published by the *Western Mail* on 29 August 1914, Hebert wrote how he had:

made a suggestion to the proprietors of cinemas in the county of Monmouth to assist in the work of recruiting by arranging, in co-operation with local defence committees, for special exhibitions, at which speakers would explain the nature of the present national crisis, and local bands would join by furnishing appropriate music.<sup>26</sup>

At a meeting of the Association of Monmouthshire Cinematograph Exhibitors held on the 22 August, it was decided following Hebert's plea that:

every member of the association [should] hold a great recruiting meeting in their halls on a chosen Sunday nigth [sic], that only men of recruiting age be admitted

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<sup>25</sup> 'Progress of Great Recruiting Campaign', *The Manchester Courier*, 21 September 1915, p. 5.

<sup>26</sup> 'Cinema Campaign', *Western Mail*, 29 August 1914, p. 6.

by tickets gratis, and that short entertainment of war pictures or slides be given, and the meeting to be addressed by speakers chosen by the local defence committees jointly [sic] with the exhibitor.<sup>27</sup>

Writing to the editor of the *Western Mail* a week after their first report, an unnamed cinema manager wrote to express his praise for Hebert's scheme, having secured speakers for his venue:

There are some 6,000 cinemas in this country, and it needs no imagination to realise what a tremendous agency this might easily become to help awaken the people of our land and secure the 500,000 men the Government need. We want recruits, but before we can get them at the rate Lord Kitchener requires we must create the atmosphere in which recruits are born, an atmosphere electric with the sense of the vast issues for good or evil to our Empire and to the world involved in this war; and surely every building where people regularly meet, whether for amusement or otherwise, should now be utilised to help in some degree to create that atmosphere.<sup>28</sup>

The notion of the cinema providing an 'electric' atmosphere arguably reflects the medium's reputation as a product of modernity, offering a way for recruiters and potential soldiers to engage in a dialogue with one another in a new and revolutionary way. As John Osbourne notes, 1914 was far removed from the days of recruitment campaigns during the Boer War. Now, in addition to more conventional resources such

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> 'Cinemas and the War. An Important Recruiting Agency.', *Western Mail*, 1 September 1914, p. 6.

as posters, leaflets and public speeches, recruiters had 'sophisticated new methods such as the motion picture' at their disposal.<sup>29</sup>

Echoing Hebert's early (if not leading) advocacy for the use of the cinema as a tool for recruitment, local newspapers across the country began to report specially organised film programmes which included topical material alongside recruiting speeches and other campaigning practices. Typical of this type of reportage was the *Liverpool Daily Post and Mercury's* report 'Recruiting by Cinema' published in February 1915:

War films have played a considerable part in the programmes arranged at the various picture-houses for some months past [...] Young men have visited a cinema show, seen a picture of the march past of the "Pals," or a picture of soldiers in training digging trenches, or of men gathered round a canteen waiting for their morning coffee, and the next time they have visited the picture-house the manager has observed that they were dressed in khaki. A few observations on the point has frequently elicited the information that they finally made up their minds to join the colours after they had seen on the pictures how other men were doing their duty to their country.<sup>30</sup>

Recruitment campaigners across the country became a commonplace sight in cinema auditoriums, often delivering an accompanying lecture or speech alongside the cinematic portion of the programme. Individual personalities travelled from town to town promoting the war effort through the medium of film.

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<sup>29</sup> Osbourne, *The Voluntary Recruiting Movement*, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> 'Recruiting by Cinema', *The Liverpool Daily Post and Mercury*, 13 February 1915, p. 8.



The war correspondent Frank Carlton, for example, toured cinemas in the southern counties of Surrey and Sussex presenting a combined film and lecture show titled 'The War, in Picture and Story'<sup>31</sup> In Scotland, Dove Paterson of the Aberdeenshire Territorial Association, ran a series of cinema recruitment events in the summer of 1915. Alongside an assortment of other topical 'patriotic pictures', a key element of Paterson's programme was a film depicting the men of the 1<sup>st</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> Gordon Highlanders, a regiment which included many local men. Indeed, a report on Paterson's screening in Braemar remarked that 'many of the men [seen in the film] were recognised by the audience, but the pictures of the men from each district, who were shown at some part of their drill, raised the enthusiasm of the audience to fever pitch'.<sup>32</sup> Alongside Paterson, various other local personalities and political authorities gave recruitment speeches during intervals of the film programme, finishing with a pair of recruiting officers joining the stage to receive enlistments – 'the first man to mount the platform', it was reported, 'received an ovation that rather surprised him'.<sup>33</sup> Although these events did not amass thousands of new recruits given the smaller populations of the villages and towns Paterson visited, the scheme did accomplish some relative success which can be read in the press of the period. On the 29 July 1915, the *Aberdeen Evening Express* listed twenty-four names who had enlisted at Paterson's exhibitions in the previous week, claiming that the programme 'created great enthusiasm in every district in which the film has been exhibited, and [that] the young men are beginning to wake up to their duty'.<sup>34</sup> A further twenty-seven men were

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<sup>31</sup> 'Recruiting Pictures', *Surrey Mirror and County Post*, 14 May 1915, p. 5.

<sup>32</sup> 'Recruiting by Cinema', *Stonehaven Journal*, 15 July 1915, p. 3.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> '3/7<sup>th</sup> Battalion Gordon Highlanders. Last Week's Recruiting.', *Aberdeen Evening Express*, 29 July 1915, p. 3.



Fig. 1.2 Advertisement for 4<sup>th</sup> Royal Scots' Grand Concert and Cinema Show, *Edinburgh Evening News*, 16 June 1915, p. 1.

listed as new recruits following Paterson's recruitment events in the following week on 5 August.<sup>35</sup>

Many recruitment campaigners seen giving speeches in cinemas across the country were themselves current or former soldiers, often representing individual formations of the B.E.F. which soon took advantage of the cinema auditorium as a platform to encourage enlistment into their own battalions or regiments. In Edinburgh, for example, 'a concert and cinema entertainment' was organised at the battalion headquarters of the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Royal Scots on 19 June 1915.<sup>36</sup> An advertisement in the *Edinburgh Evening News* proclaimed that 500 recruits were wanted 'for a new third battalion to support "The Queen's" at the front', and that alongside the film programme, 'First-Rate Bands and well-known Speakers' would be in attendance to encourage spectators to enlist (Fig. 1.2).<sup>37</sup> Whilst no further mention could be found of the event in this instance, the fact that the event was hosted at the

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<sup>35</sup> 'Further Enlistments', *Stonehaven Journal*, 5 August 1915, p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> 'Military Concerts', *The Edinburgh Evening News*, 19 June 1915, p. 7.

<sup>37</sup> Advertisement, *The Edinburgh Evening News*, 19 June 1915, p. 1.

battalion's headquarters suggests how the cinema was beginning to be endorsed and appropriated by military authority for the purposes of recruitment.

Evidence of the military's endorsement of the medium's recruitment potential can be seen more directly elsewhere. For example, in Glasgow a special exhibition of a film depicting the 'work and play' of the 13<sup>th</sup> Highland Light Infantry was exhibited at a local cinema in order to 'demonstrate the advantages offered to young men of enlisting in the battalion'.<sup>38</sup> The film itself was specially commissioned by the battalion's commanding officer Lieutenant-Colonel W. G. H. Stirling, whilst one Lieutenant Meikle of the battalion was reportedly in attendance at the theatre to enlist recruits from the audience. Featuring live music, appearances from local personalities and passionate recruitment speeches from local recruiting officers, politicians, those with military backgrounds or even current soldiers themselves, events such as those organised by the 13<sup>th</sup> Highland Infantry were frequently anchored by the screening of a specific, war-related film.

### **Recruitment Films**

Be it topical newsreels, educational shorts or fictional dramas representing some aspect of the war and/or soldiering life, cinemas interwove relevant film content into their recruitment driven programmes. However, it is important here to establish what type of war films were produced during this period, and by whom. As Nicholas Reeves has shown, the medium of film was not adopted by the War Office's propaganda

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<sup>38</sup> 'Cinema for Recruiting', *Daily Record and Mail*, 13 August 1915, p. 3.

department for some time after the declaration of war, not releasing its first official production *Britain Prepared* (Urban et al, 1915) until December 1915, just prior to the first Military Service Act in January 1916, due in part to the long-running period of negotiations between Wellington House, the film industry and the military itself.<sup>39</sup> In fact, the War Office initially banned all journalists from the front line in September 1914, including photographers and the film-makers, fearing that such reportage may damage the nation's morale and that the location of military formations or other strategic information could be ascertained by the enemy should such materials fall into their hands.<sup>40</sup> As such, the series of official feature films produced by the War Office beginning with *Britain Prepared* and followed by *The Battle of the Somme* (Malins and McDowell, 1916), *The Battle of the Ancre and the Advance of the Tanks* (Malins and McDowell, 1917) and *The German Retreat and the Battle of the Arras* (Malins and McDowell, 1917) bear little relevance to this chapter's concern with the influence of film on voluntary recruitment.

To understand the cinema's influence on the voluntary recruiting movement, attention should instead be allocated to the variety of 'unofficial' topical films produced outside of the War Office's control during the period between August 1914 and January 1916. Newsreel productions/companies such as Pathé, Topical Budget (later rebranded as the War Office Topical Budget in May 1917) and Gaumont flooded the market with short newsreel items on the war and its impact on culture and society, emphasising their patriotism whilst also benefitting economically from the exhibition sector's sudden and widespread demand for war-related films. Of the Topical Budget

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<sup>39</sup> Reeves, *Official British Film Propaganda during the First World War*, p. 89.

<sup>40</sup> Stephen Badsey, 'Battle of the Somme: British war-propaganda', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (1983), pp. 99-115 (p.100).

specifically, Luke McKernan has written that the production ‘kept up the diet of standard newsreel stories, but hardly anything was shown that was not coloured in some way by the war’.<sup>41</sup> So ubiquitous were newsreels that McKernan has estimated that two-thirds of all British cinemas exhibited one of the four main brands (Pathé, Gaumont, Topical Budget and Éclair Journal).<sup>42</sup>

Due to the War Office’s aforementioned ban on cameramen recording footage on the front itself (a ban that wouldn’t be lifted until late 1915), the content of early topical films produced outside of the War Office’s control mostly featured soldiers in training exercises or on parade. As Michael Paris has documented:

in those early months footage of the war did appear on screen. The newsreels were full of scenes at recruiting offices, of soldiers, laughing as they accepted cigarettes and flowers from the onlookers who cheered them on their way to the front. Filmmakers even found their way to France with the British Expeditionary Force, and recorded more smiling, laughing columns as they trudged along country roads looking for the enemy. But as soon as the armies came into contact and the retreat from Mons began, the generals sent the cameras home, fearful they would record information of ‘value to the enemy’.<sup>43</sup>

A selection of such films could highlight the country’s naval prowess, such as in Pathé’s *The Eyes of the Fleet* (1915), the Topical Budget’s profile of the B.E.F.’s newly enlisted forces titled *Citizen Army Inspected* (Topical Budget 219-1, 1915) which saw columns of new recruits from the district of Beckenham in London parade in front of

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<sup>41</sup> Luke McKernan, *Topical Budget: The Great British News Film* (London: BFI Publishing, 1992), p. 28.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>43</sup> Michael Paris, “‘Too Colossal to be Dramatic: The Cinema of the Great War’”, in Anne-Marie Einhaus and Katherine Isobel Baxter (eds.), *The Edinburgh companion to the First World War and the Arts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), pp. 326-338 (p. 327).



Fig. 1.3: Soldiers in formation in Topical Budget's *Citizen Army Inspected* (1915)

the camera (Fig. 1.3), or the celebration of an individual soldier being awarded the Victoria Cross medal in the Gaumont Graphic No. 440 in a piece called *Honouring a V.C.* (1915). Earlier films also utilised footage that was taken prior to the war, such as Charles Urban's *With the Fighting Forces of Europe* (Urban, 1914) which, amounting to thirty-four reels, was exhibited in 'Kinemacolor' at cinemas across the country, including a 10 month residency at the Scala, London.<sup>44</sup> It was these type of films which enticed William Dove, cited at the beginning of this chapter, and others across the country to enlist.

The cinema was also informally utilised for more specific training purposes. Inventively established in military and civilian shooting ranges, and implemented in

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<sup>44</sup> Luke McKernan, *Charles Urban: Pioneering the Non-Fiction Film in Britain and America, 1897-1925* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2013), pp. 125-126.

London by the Volunteer Training Corps, several institutions across the UK featured cinematic installations in which war-related images were projected onto disposable screens for target practice, documented amongst others by the *Sheffield Weekly Telegraph* which described the practice, worth citing at length here for its sheer absurdity.

Pictures of warlike incidents such as cavalry at the charge, or infantry attacking a fort, are thrown upon a screen, and the soldier must pick out his man just as coolly as if he were really on the battlefield. By an automatic telephonic attachment, the screen records the effect of every shot, and the effect of the explosion stops the machine for three seconds, allowing time to take rapid aim and fire again. By a special contrivance, a range of anything from 100 to 1,000 feet can be arranged, and thus the soldier is taught to shoot at aeroplanes, railway trains, motor-cars under exactly the same conditions as in war.<sup>45</sup>

At a similar institution, it was reported that images of the 'Kaiser and Crown Prince receiving his troops [...] came in for a good peppering from those who were fortunate enough to be holding guns at the time'.<sup>46</sup>

More generally, many conventional short films were similarly produced for their educational and/or training value. As a writer for the *Sheffield Weekly Telegraph* explained as early as October 1914: 'the man who, although anxious to enlist, has little idea of what branch of the service he is fitted for, has only to go and see these films at the picture house to make up his mind. Not only the life of the soldier in the fighting

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<sup>45</sup> 'Great Britain's Soldiers Learn to Shoot by the Cinema', *Sheffield Weekly Telegraph*, 17 October 1914, p. 14.

<sup>46</sup> 'The Volunteer Civil Force', *The Volunteer Training Corps Gazette*, 9 January 1915, p. 83.



Fig. 1.4: Civilians walk into a recruiting office in *Recruiting for the 5<sup>th</sup> Essex* (1915)

line, but the army cook, clerk, ambulance man, etc., [are shown], so that a man who thinks he is unfitted [sic] for actual fighting learns that he is serving his country just as usefully by cooking beef for Tommy Atkins as if he handled the musket'.<sup>47</sup> One useful example reflecting the educational property of film for recruitment can be found in a four minute film from the BFI collection titled *Recruiting for the 5<sup>th</sup> Essex* (1915) which actually depicted the process of enlistment itself. The film opens with a shot of a recruitment centre, outside of which stands a group of soldiers (potentially recruitment officers). Into the frame walks a determined group of around thirty young men in civilian, predominantly working-class dress, smiling as they are welcomed by the recruitment officers (Fig. 1.4). Following an intertitle which reads – 'Drawing Kits' – the next shot depicts the same recruitment office: the group of men now enlisted, they exit

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<sup>47</sup> 'How the "Movies" Help in War', *Sheffield Weekly Telegraph*, 17 October 1914, p. 14.





Fig. 1.5: Newly enlisted recruits in *Recruiting for the 5<sup>th</sup> Essex* (1915)

the building holding their uniform and equipment (Fig. 1.5). There then follows a sequence depicting the group's 'first appearance in uniform', with the newly enlisted men parading in strict formation in front of the camera, after which the film depicts 'Pay Day', showing the men approach a seated officer to take the symbolic 'King's shilling' one by one. The film also included a short sequence depicting the men engaged in physical exercise ('training'), ending with the dismissal of the men for the day, which sees the men break formation and run off screen, presumably to enjoy their well-earned rest. In four short minutes, the film depicts the process of recruitment as a swift, easy venture in which friends join up, are given complete uniforms and quickly paid. The image of the enlistment process the film presents is undeniably idealised, with no allusions made to the less than positive aspects of enlisting, such as the intrusive medical examination, or the reality that available uniforms, accommodation and pay were rarely allocated as efficiently (if at all) as the film would suggest.



Fig. 1.6: A group of marching soldiers in the Topical Budget's *On the March* (1915)

Significantly, the film also gives no sense of the war or armed conflict itself, instead depicting the soldiering life as one comprised of training exercises and parades. Evidently, films such as *Recruiting for the 5<sup>th</sup> Essex* showcase how cinema was utilised for the benefit of recruitment propaganda, in this case suggesting the ease with which a civilian could enlist with the services and receive his pay.

Elsewhere, newsreel companies produced similar images of soldiering life. In a piece titled *On the March* (Topical Budget 217-2, 1915), the Topical Budget introduced scenes of parading soldiers by claiming that 'nothing is more inspiring than to see some of the 'Boys' marching through the leafy Surrey lanes to the strain of martial music' (Fig. 1.6), whilst Pathé's *Animated Gazette* recorded soldiers ringing in the new year around a countryside camp fire in *Seeing the New Year In* (1915). In unofficial films such as these, the British film industry rather than the military or government began to establish an iconographic representation of the war – columns of troops,

inspections, the military's physical might – which offered a regulated and structured image of the B.E.F., the life and training of the soldier and the ideological promise of a just and necessary war. Few topical documentaries of this period showed actual combat, propagating a sanitised and strangely tranquil representation of the war. Indeed, as Pierre Sorlin writes, most of this 'material is tediously repetitive, mostly parades, long files of prisoners, tracking-shots of the seemingly inexhaustible build-up of supplies accumulated before offensives. A few shots deal with military actions but, when scrutinising them, we guess that they were taken during a period of training or were re-enacted'.<sup>48</sup> As such, the cinema's appropriation and dissemination of war imagery and iconography of this period seems to mark a point of continuity with the use of the medium during the Boer War of 1899-1902. As Roger Stearn has shown,

certain images and groups of images recurred until they became, arguably, the dominant, stereotypical images of the [Boer] war. These were images of leading British commanders, of South African scenes, of marching columns and oxen-hauled guns, of favoured units [...]<sup>49</sup>

The epitome of this type of imagery can be found in R. W. Paul's *Army Life, or How Soldiers are Made* (1900) which, running for over two hours, documented the recruitment process through to the soldier's initial training and camp life, punctuated with images of marching troops and the cavalry riding in formation. Whilst elements of technology had moved on, the fundamental iconographic elements seen in newsreel footage of the Boer War was maintained, at least initially, during the First World War,

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<sup>48</sup> Pierre Sorlin, 'Cinema and the Memory of the Great War', in Michael Paris (ed.), *The First World War and Popular Cinema: 1914 to the Present* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), pp. 5-26 (p. 11).

<sup>49</sup> Roger T. Stearn, 'Boer War Image-maker: Richard Caton Woodville', in John Gooch (ed.), *The Boer War: Direction, Experience and Image* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 213-223 (pp. 213-4).

highlighting the power of the film medium to establish conventions of imagery throughout popular culture.

Films such as *Recruiting for the 5<sup>th</sup> Essex* also reflected the broader trend for exhibitors and recruitment campaigners to produce and utilise regionally specific films featuring local military formations within the area in which they were campaigning. In Bradford, Yorkshire, for example, a 500ft film depicting the locally formed 'Pal's' battalion was produced, showing the recently enlisted troops in training in the city's scenic Peel Park.<sup>50</sup> *The Bioscope* reported how 'Several copies were printed, and the pictures were on show at the theatres in the centre of the city' to aid the recruitment effort, two days after they had been captured.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, 900 men from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, London Regiment was reported to have 'had the honour of being cinematographed' whilst in training. 'The 900 men in khaki and full kit', reported the *East London Observer*, 'made an impressive display, and the resulting picture, which is to be shown at various picture palaces in the East End, ought to have a good effect on recruiting'.<sup>52</sup> Again, a precedent for this type of practice had been established, not only by the more general genre or practice of 'local films' produced around the turn of the century, as documented by Stephen Bottomore, Vanessa Toulmin, Martin Loiperdinger and others, but marks another instance in which film production and exhibition practices of the Boer War were carried over on a much larger scale to the new European conflict.<sup>53</sup> As Toulmin has documented, volunteer regiments of the Boer

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<sup>50</sup> 'Bradford Recruiting Film', *The Bioscope*, 29 October 1914, p. 409.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> 'East End Recruiting', *East London Observer*, 22 May 1915, p. 5.

<sup>53</sup> See: Stephen Bottomore, 'From the Factory Gate to the "Home Talent" Drama: An International Overview of Local Films in the Silent Era', in Vanessa Toulmin, Simon Popple and Patrick Russell (eds.), *The Lost World of Mitchell & Kenyon: Edwardian Britain on Film* (London: BFI Publishing, 2004), pp. 33-48; Vanessa Toulmin and Martin Loiperdinger, 'Is It You? Recognition, Representation and

War became the subject of films produced by the Mitchell & Kenyon company and others, acting as 'an extension of the local film' to encourage patriotism and support for the war effort.<sup>54</sup> In the First World War, such films similarly resonated with local audiences familiar with the subject on screen, imbuing the local with a larger sense of value and purpose within the nationwide events of the war. As Michael Hammond suggests of local films in the First World War, they 'depended upon a pattern of looking that suspended the tension between the placement of the local community within the public narrative of the nation and the displacement and disruption to those communities that made up the texture of individual, private experience during the war'.<sup>55</sup> Whilst Hammond here reflects more upon the local film's impact on civilian spectators, for potential soldiers sat in an audience, the presentation of local films validated the notion that individual, private contributions to the war effort could have an impact upon the nationwide crisis. In other words, the local film represented a visible result of local men being elevated and championed within the public sphere, an enticing notion for potential recruits.

Understandably, it was of the utmost importance that any recruitment propaganda or material had to make the highest possible impression on the potential recruit, and whilst local films achieved certain regional successes, they arguably left a lot to be desired. Commenting upon the need for accomplished and intelligent recruiting material in an editorial piece published on 7 November 1914, *The Times* argued that 'if the War Office wants recruits, it must let the public see more of the pomp

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Response in Relation to the Local Film', *Film History*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (2005), pp. 7-18; Vanessa Toulmin, *Electric Edwardians: The Story of the Mitchell & Kenyon Collection* (London: BFI Publishing, 2006).

<sup>54</sup> Toulmin, *Electric Edwardians*, p. 255.

<sup>55</sup> Hammond, *The Big Show*, p. 77.

and circumstance of war, utilize spectacular effect to the utmost'.<sup>56</sup> The value of spectacle for recruiting propaganda is undoubtedly relevant to the medium of cinema, a medium fundamentally built upon iconographic visual spectacle. Indeed, John Osbourne has remarked how 'recruiting tactics stressed explicitly the role of spectacle in maintaining war excitement'.<sup>57</sup>

The film industry and trade were similarly vocal about the need to utilise the cinema's potential for recruiting, a sentiment which they had promoted since the declaration of war. On 10 June 1915, *The Bioscope* published an editorial in which it was argued that the War Office had not yet seized the cinema as an effective tool for recruitment despite the 'overwhelming success' of the medium's unofficial influence across the country.<sup>58</sup> 'So much can be done with so little effort', the article suggested, 'that we can only think the resources of the cinematograph have, up to the present, escaped the attention of the authorities'.<sup>59</sup> *The Times* was even more emphatic in its praise for the cinema's potential as a recruitment tool in a piece titled 'The Film as an Aid to Recruiting', published on 14 April 1915. Criticising the absence of footage from the front line itself, the writer argued that:

There can be no gainsaying the fact that the realities of the war are not adequately realized by people in this country. Official accounts of battles do not grip the imagination of the masses; and that is where the cinema comes in.

An appeal made to the eye is the most effective which can be devised. If only our young men could see for themselves, through the medium of the film, the

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<sup>56</sup> 'Recruiting and the Remedies', *The Times*, 7 November 1914, p. 9.

<sup>57</sup> Osbourne, *The Voluntary Recruiting Movement*, p. 85.

<sup>58</sup> 'A "Live" Recruiting Agent', *The Bioscope*, 10 June 1915, p. 1.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

work which their comrades are doing in the trenches. I am certain that there would be no further talk of compulsory service. The men who are left behind are, for the most part, as good soldiering material as the men who rushed to the colours at first. It is not so much that they are lacking in patriotism as in imagination. The battle picture, the cinema proprietor will tell you, is the most popular he can film. If only the real thing were available – the light side as well as the more tragic side of war – recruiting officers would be working, I am convinced, at higher pressure than they are at present.<sup>60</sup>

Given the apparent shortcomings of topical documentaries and newsreels in relation to their influence on recruiting (primarily defined as lacking actual footage of front line combat), attention should therefore be given to the one type of picture the correspondent cited above suggested was successful, the ‘battle picture’, understood here through its distinction from ‘the real thing’ as dramatic, fictionalised films depicting or related to topical events.

Whilst British topical documentary filmmaking would continue to lack ‘actual’ footage of the conflict until early 1916, cinematic depictions of the war found their way onto British cinema screens with alarming speed after 4 August 1914. As Rachel Low has documented:

On the outbreak of war British companies rushed into the production of a large number of war dramas, searching their shelves at the same time for any news or interest films which could claim connections, however slight, with the war.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> ‘The Film as an Aid to Recruiting’, *The Times*, 14 April 1915, p. 5.

<sup>61</sup> Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film 1914-1918* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1950), p. 29.

Indeed, the pages of trade periodicals such as *The Bioscope* and *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly* readily highlight the ubiquity of war-related fictional filmmaking between 1914 and 1916. As early as 13 August, for example, *The Bioscope* featured advertising for a number of films ostensibly related to the war. In practice, these early films amounted to pre-war footage hastily edited together or staged reconstructions, such as the dramatic short *Called to the Front* (Weston, 1914) or the reconstruction-based *Incidents of the Great European War* (Pearson, 1914) which were released as early in the conflict as August and October 1914, respectively. *Called to the Front* was described in its advertisement as a ‘great film showing Britons fighting, Belgians fighting, Frenchmen fighting and Germans fighting’, asking the exhibitor to ‘help the cause by booking the film and creating patriotic enthusiasm’.<sup>62</sup> Two elements are important to isolate in this instance – firstly, that the producers were keen to foreground the fact that the film depicted combat and, secondly, that the film had contemporary cultural value and currency for the exhibitor seeking ways to capitalise on the outbreak of patriotic sentiment. In the same period, similar advertisements featured in the trade press for films such as *The Call to Arms* (1914) (Fig. 1.7) – ‘the greatest scenes of modern warfare even produced’ – *A Patriot of France* (1914) – ‘the acknowledged foremost film of the year’ – and *In the Ranks* (1914) – ‘world-famous military drama’.<sup>63</sup> By November, some enterprising distribution companies realising the vogue for topical content, such as London’s Express Film Service, were offering full programmes of war-related films to desperate exhibitors, ranging from 200 to 800 feet complete with promotional posters, purporting to show ‘actual scenes from the front’.<sup>64</sup> Of this trend

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<sup>62</sup> Advertisement for *Called to the Front*, *The Bioscope*, 13 August 1914, p. 652.

<sup>63</sup> Advertisement, *The Bioscope*, 13 Aug, p. 686; Advertisement, *The Bioscope*, 17 December 1914, p. 1178; Advertisement, *The Bioscope*, 10 December 1914, p. 1060.

<sup>64</sup> Advertisement for Express Film Service, Ltd., *The Bioscope*, 5 November 1916, p. x.




**Nordisk.**


Great **War Film**

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**THE CALL TO ARMS!**

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Length 3000 ft. approx.

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**The Greatest Scenes  
of Modern Warfare  
Ever Produced. :: ::**

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All are invited to view this film at our showroom.

**25 Cecil Court, Charing Cross Road,**  
**LONDON, \_\_\_\_\_ W.**

Fig. 1.7: Advertisement for *The Call to Arms* (1914), *The Bioscope*, 13 August 1914, p. 686.

in filmmaking, Rachel Low has suggested that most 'of the hundreds of war dramas were so similar that few need to be described. Many were plotless incidents set in Belgium' and 'there were large numbers of films whose chief reason for existence was an explosive battle scene.'<sup>65</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Low, *The History of the British Film 1914-1918*, p. 182.

Most films reflected an idealised, romanticised version of what war looked like. As Giaime Alonge and Francesco Pitassio note, the 'vast majority of fiction films produced during the war show heroic young men, sometimes armed with an obsolete weapon like a saber, who save the day on a battlefield which has not much in common with the reality of the battlefield of modern mechanized warfare—no impassable barbed wire barriers, no poisonous gas, no deep and muddy trenches, no storms of steel'.<sup>66</sup> As such, they conformed to a certain, culturally pervasive idea of warfare in late 1914. As Michael Paris argues:

For the British public most information about the fighting came from War Office dispatches and the artists' impressions of battle in newspapers and magazines, usually heroic figures gallantly charging the German lines, struggling hand-to-hand with the wicked Hun and performing heroic and courageous deeds. These images, of course, drew upon the experience of colonial warfare and confirmed the public imagining of the battle.<sup>67</sup>

Indeed, the first dramatic films of 1914 mirrored the early dramatic reconstructions produced during the Boer War, which, as Stearn documents, emphasised an idealised vision of warfare predicated upon 'dramatic, heroic, close-quarter fighting, charges, last stands and noble deaths'.<sup>68</sup> The cinema was not alone in establishing this type of imagery during the earlier conflict, but instead contributed to and confirmed an image of war and soldiering life propagated by illustrated

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<sup>66</sup> Giaime Alonge and Francesco Pitassio, 'Body Politics: National Identity, Performance, and Modernity in *Maciste Alpino* (1916)', in Tholas-Disset, Clémentine and Karen A. Ritzenhoff (eds.), *Humor, Entertainment and Popular Culture during World War I* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 41-57 (p. 42).

<sup>67</sup> Paris, 'Too Colossal to be Dramatic', p. 328.

<sup>68</sup> Stearn, 'Boer War Image-Maker', p. 214.

periodicals, picture postcards and literature aimed at children and adolescents, which as Vanessa Toulmin had shown, 'romanticised war and created the young idealistic boy hero who relied on his wits, greater intelligence and guile to overcome adversity and achieve glory, thus saving the Empire from her enemies'.<sup>69</sup> Emulating to a certain extent the iconography of the Boer War, the first dramatic films of late 1914 set a misguided precedent for potential recruits about the nature of modern, mechanised combat, ideas and images they would later rally against. As Paris suggests of such films, 'recreating the Western front in leafy Surrey, or in the Parisian suburbs, with a handful of actors provided audiences', and I would emphasise, potential soldiers, 'with a very limited and sanitised idea of what it might be like in France'.<sup>70</sup>

Nonetheless, such films became a key element of the British cinema programme during the first year of the war and were frequently utilised for their recruitment potential. Dramas such as *England Expects* (1914), for example, were described as 'a great aid to recruiting'.<sup>71</sup> The aforementioned feature drama *A Patriot of France*, when screened in Liverpool in July 1915 was similarly characterised as a 'great incentive to recruiting', although it is often impossible to determine just how successful such screenings were.<sup>72</sup> Typical of Low's description of these early dramas, the film, which had been advertised in the trade press since December 1914, told the story of a French soldier and his family, who are captured by the Germans and subsequently executed for not revealing the location of the man's regiment ('the

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<sup>69</sup> Toulmin, *Electric Edwardians*, p. 240.

<sup>70</sup> Paris, 'Too Colossal to be Dramatic', p. 328.

<sup>71</sup> 'Central Picture Theatre', *Folkstone, Hythe, Sandgate and Cheriton Herald*, 12 September 1914, p. 6.

<sup>72</sup> 'Films on the War', *The Liverpool Echo*, 2 July 1915, p. 8.



Fig. 1.8: A disguised 'shirker' is unmasked in the one-reel comedy *Conscription* (Aylott, 1915)

pictures did not actually represent the execution of these people'), alongside other scenes of a 'battle for a village and the accidental wounding of a spy'.<sup>73</sup>

Of course, not all fictional films concerning recruitment were necessarily dramas. For example, *Conscription* (Aylott, 1915), a one reel comedy produced by the J. H. Martin film company, depicted a group of 'shirking' men adopting disguises as women and old men, or pretending to be wounded or seriously ill to escape the introduction of conscription (still yet to be established upon the film's release), only to be exposed as slackers and rounded up by a group of recruitment officers (Fig. 1.8). Whilst comic in its depiction of the 'shirkers' controversy, the film reflected the widely held belief that it would be better to volunteer for active service whilst it was still

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

possible rather than be forced to do so upon the seemingly inevitable introduction of conscription. In fact, the film ended with an intertitle that read 'Don't wait for conscription, but come along and defend', followed by footage of actual soldiers on parade. Other short comedies and dramas, such as *Pimple Enlists* (Evans, 1914) or *The Man Who Came Back* (Weston, 1914), as well as topical cartoon series such as *John Bull's Animated Sketchbook*, all similarly reflected or commented upon the voluntary recruitment movement and the need for men to enlist. Such recruitment-focused films should also be understood as a part of a broader field of filmic propaganda produced at the time, targeting different portions of the British public, be they potential soldiers, women finding themselves in new wartime employment, businessmen or factory workers. As Pierre Sorlin suggests '66 flag-waving pictures were shot in 1914 alone. A few titles set the tone: *The German Spy Peril*, *Your Country Needs You*, *The War against the Huns*, *The United Front*, *Killed in Action*; cowards or indifferent people became aware of their duty, civilians proved vigilant and worked hard, while soldiers were heroic'.<sup>74</sup>

Alongside, topical newsreels, satirical comedies, cartoons, and patriotic dramas, one particular genre of fiction filmmaking in this period provides a clear sense of how the film industry and trade utilised film for the purposes of recruitment, namely, 'invasion films': a genre of films which shared the narrative trope of a German invasion of England, which experienced a short vogue in the first year of the war. By analysing a selection of these films, we can begin to understand how the cinema was utilised for recruitment propaganda in practice, and its real-world effect.

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<sup>74</sup> Pierre Sorlin, 'Film and the War', in John Horne (ed.), *A Companion to World War I* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), pp. 439-455 (p. 444).

## Invasion Films and 'German Atrocity' Stories

Commenting on the pre-war mindset of Edwardian Britain, John Osbourne suggests that the threat of an impending European war had long played upon the nation's consciousness, reflected in the notable trend of 'invasion literature' in the early 1900s and 1910s.

The invasion literature which sprang to prominence in the decade before 1914 and the accompanying discussion among military planners on how best to defend the home islands reminded the reading public that the confrontation to come would indeed be "The Great War." Novels such as William Le Queux's *The Invasion of 1910* (1906) - serialised in the *Daily Mail* - and H. H. Munro's *When William Came* (1914), along with the spectacularly successful play *An Englishman's Home* (1909), by Guy du Maurier, brought to the mind that the struggle would involve the lives and property of every man, woman, and child in the kingdom.<sup>75</sup>

Tellingly, the threat of a hypothetical German invasion was so pervasive that adaptations of popular invasion stories were amongst the first feature films to make their way onto British screens in late 1914. Le Queux's *The Invasion of 1910*, for example, was adapted and released by Gaumont as *If England Were Invaded* (Durrant, 1914). Interestingly, the film had been in production since 1913, but was quickly adapted to suit the unfolding international situation in the summer of 1914. Following the previously examined rhetoric of other fiction films of the period,

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<sup>75</sup> Osbourne, *The Voluntary Recruiting Movement*, pp. 13-14.

advertisements for *If England Were Invaded* proclaimed that it was the 'Finest Patriotic Film ever attempted. Sparkling with Dramatic and Surprising Incidents that will thrill every British Heart. Don't Fail to See the Magnificent TRIUMPH OF THE BRITISH TROOPS'.<sup>76</sup>

Similarly, Guy du Maurier's *An Englishman's Home* was also adapted for the screen. Thematically typical of the genre, the film was said to 'depict the arrival of a German force in England, their taking possession of an Englishman's home, the rough treatment of the family, how the Territorials discover the invasion, and finally the capture of the Germans by an English force'.<sup>77</sup> Journalists were unequivocal in their praise of the film and its potential for recruitment, with one commentator suggesting that 'it is a picture calculated to shame our young men to a sense of their duty and responsibility during the present crisis'.<sup>78</sup> The speculative, hypothetical nature of the film's narrative brought home the devastating possibilities of a German invasion during a national climate of unease and anxiety. In practice, this genre of filmmaking placed before civilian audiences an ultimatum: join the ranks and fight, or risk the loss of your family, friends and country, as well as your own life. This choice was relayed in no uncertain terms by the press, which suggested that an 'idea will be gathered as to what we might expect if England were invaded, but if all our readers emulate the pluck of John Brown and the Territorials in the film there will be no fear of an invasion'.<sup>79</sup>

Arguably, one of the most influential films of the invasion genre was *Wake Up! Or, A Dream of Tomorrow* (Cowen, 1914), the declarative sentiment of its title

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<sup>76</sup> Advertisement, *Burnley Express*, 2 December 1914, p. 1.

<sup>77</sup> 'Livermore's Picture Palace', *Western Daily Press*, 29 September 1914, p. 3.

<sup>78</sup> 'Leigh Assembly Rooms', *The Leigh Chronicle*, 9 October 1914, p. 7.

<sup>79</sup> 'The Empire', *The Yarmouth Independent*, 17 October 1914, p. 8.

reflecting the film's didactic ambitions. Whilst having some connection to the War Office, the film was produced by writer/director Laurence Cowen's own company 'Wake Up Exclusives'.<sup>80</sup> 'The story of "Wake Up!"', remarked the *Aberdeen Evening Express*:

is very powerful, Lord Pax [Britain's fictionalised Secretary of State for War] is seized with sleep, and lo! he dreams a dream. The statue of Britannia comes to life, and advances towards him, saying, "Hast thou thought of Britain invaded, my lord." He cannot reply. Then Britannia shows him what invasion would mean. Horrified with what he has seen in the dream, he goes and enlists and so will all young men when they see this picture.<sup>81</sup>

Whilst the film itself does not survive (nor do *If England Were Invaded*, or *An Englishman's Dream*), we can glean a clear sense of how the film adapted the story by writer and director Laurence Cowen in the promotional material and serialised story which was released in conjunction with the film. First advertised on 2 January 1915 and serialised over thirty-six parts between 5 January and 26 February, the *Daily Express* dedicated a substantial section of their publication to the story on the second or third page of each issue, as well as surrounding articles on its film adaptation, its use as a recruiting tool, and details of how exhibitors could book the film.

As alluded to above, the story is played out through the dream of Britain's Secretary of War Lord Pax, described as 'a pacifist by nature and conviction', who imagines what were to happen should the country be invaded by the fictional nation of

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<sup>80</sup> Low, *The History of the British Film 1914-1918*, p. 305.

<sup>81</sup> 'Lord Provost Taggart to Visit the Picturedrome', *Aberdeen Evening Express*, 15 May 1915, p. 6.



Vaevictia (a thinly veiled Germany).<sup>82</sup> In the dream, the Vaevictians land on England's eastern shores in a surprise attack, quickly making their way to the capital. Along the way, the invading army launches swift attacks on Britain's civilian population, engaging in 'barbaric, ruthless methods of warfare', showing no distinction between man, woman, or child.<sup>83</sup> In one particularly shocking scene, a woman narrowly escapes being raped by a Vaevictian soldier by scratching at his face, whilst her son stands helplessly by her side. Following her retaliation:

[The soldier] was mad with rage, and yelled a good Vaevictian oath. He threw the woman from him. She fell on the ground. The child screamed, "You wicked man!" louder than ever. Suddenly the soldier turned round, and drawing his bayonet from its sheath, plunged it viciously into the little body. He withdrew it bathed in blood, which he wiped away on his handkerchief. The child had fallen by the roadside, writhing strangely.<sup>84</sup>

In another sequence, another young boy is aggressively killed by a platoon of Vaevictian soldiers (Fig. 1.9):

Little Jack had been watching the men open eyed. He thought it would be great fun to play with them. So he called out in his childish treble: "I'll shoot you!" at the same time cocking his [toy] gun with a little click and bringing it to his shoulder.

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<sup>82</sup> Laurence Cowen, 'Wake Up! A Dream of Tomorrow', *Daily Express*, 5 January 1915, p. 2.

<sup>83</sup> Laurence Cowen, 'Wake Up! A Dream of Tomorrow', *Daily Express*, 15 January 1915, p. 2.

<sup>84</sup> Laurence Cowen, 'Wake Up! A Dream of Tomorrow', *Daily Express*, 4 February 1915, p. 2.



Fig. 1.9: Promotional Postcard for *Wake Up!* (1914). Author's Collection.

The soldiers turned and saw the child. With an oath, one of them raised his rifle and fired point blank at him. Little Jack fell dead without a cry.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

“ W A K E U P ”



**It shows the murder of the British Minister for War and the outrage of his daughter by the invading Enemy.**

*This is a scene from the great "Daily Express" Patriotic Film, "Wake Up," by Laurence Cowen.*

Fig. 1.10: Promotional Postcard for *Wake Up!* (1914). Author's Collection.

The potential 'spy peril' was another threat which echoed contemporary readers' concerns across the country during the first year of the war, with the story suggesting that:

Many of those settled in this country were undoubtedly spies, charged not only with the purveying of information, but with the commission of actual mischief.

How otherwise explain the damage done to railway bridges and railway lines in places which not even the advance guards of the Vaevictian army had come in sight of?<sup>86</sup>

Presumably designed to have the most emotional impact on potential recruits, sequences such as these were reproduced in a series of postcards by the *Daily Express* (Fig. 1.10).

Episodes and images such as these were evidently indebted to, and played upon, the pervasive images found in 'German atrocity' stories which were being increasingly disseminated throughout British culture during the opening months of the war. Beginning in late August 1914, the British press quickly began to document the growing number of reports coming out of France and Belgium following the German invasion. Reports featuring instances in which the French and Belgian civilians, including women and children, had been subjected to torture, mutilation, rape, and even death at the hands of German invaders, quickly swept across the nation. As John Horne and Allan Kramer have shown, many of these reported instances actually took place, but the pervasive image of 'German atrocities' took on a far more loaded, mythical stature:

Tales of 'German atrocities' derived their main force from their portrayal of actual occurrences. But like any interpretation they were also an expressive and creative act. They vented fear and trauma and helped impose some kind of narrative order, and hence meaning, on what were usually chaotic experiences. In some cases, the narration may have supplied the memory, as

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<sup>86</sup> Laurence Cowen, 'Wake Up! A Dream of Tomorrow', *Daily Express*, 23 January 1915, p. 2.

with the soldiers or civilians who claimed to have seen events of which they had really only heard. In others, the narration of real events provided a meaning which was not true, or not the whole truth.<sup>87</sup>

Indeed, the symbolic narratives and pervasive iconography of 'atrocities' stories came to define the civilian sphere's perception of the invading German army far more than documented fact. As Horne and Kramer argue:

The reports of massacres, incendiarism, human shields, pillage, and even the killing of Allied wounded and prisoners did not have to be invented. Witness evidence, military reports, and journalists' investigations provided a mass of fragments from which some larger picture could be built, though it remained incomplete during the invasion period. Yet the meanings which the press gave events were passionate and partisan. [...] Its language, and even more its iconography, were charged with moral outrage and hatred and it was this, rather than any fabrication or distortion of the major incidents, which shaped the terms in which it understood the 'German atrocities'.<sup>88</sup>

Consequently, it was this particular cultural climate (centred on the ubiquity and symbolic power of 'German atrocity' stories within the opening months of the war) into which *Wake Up!*, alongside other 'invasion films', established their cultural relevance and currency. In fact, the episode depicted in the film and described above in which a little boy playing with a toy gun is killed by the invading army appears to have been an explicit reference to an identical event reported by the French press as early as 18

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<sup>87</sup> John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 201.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.

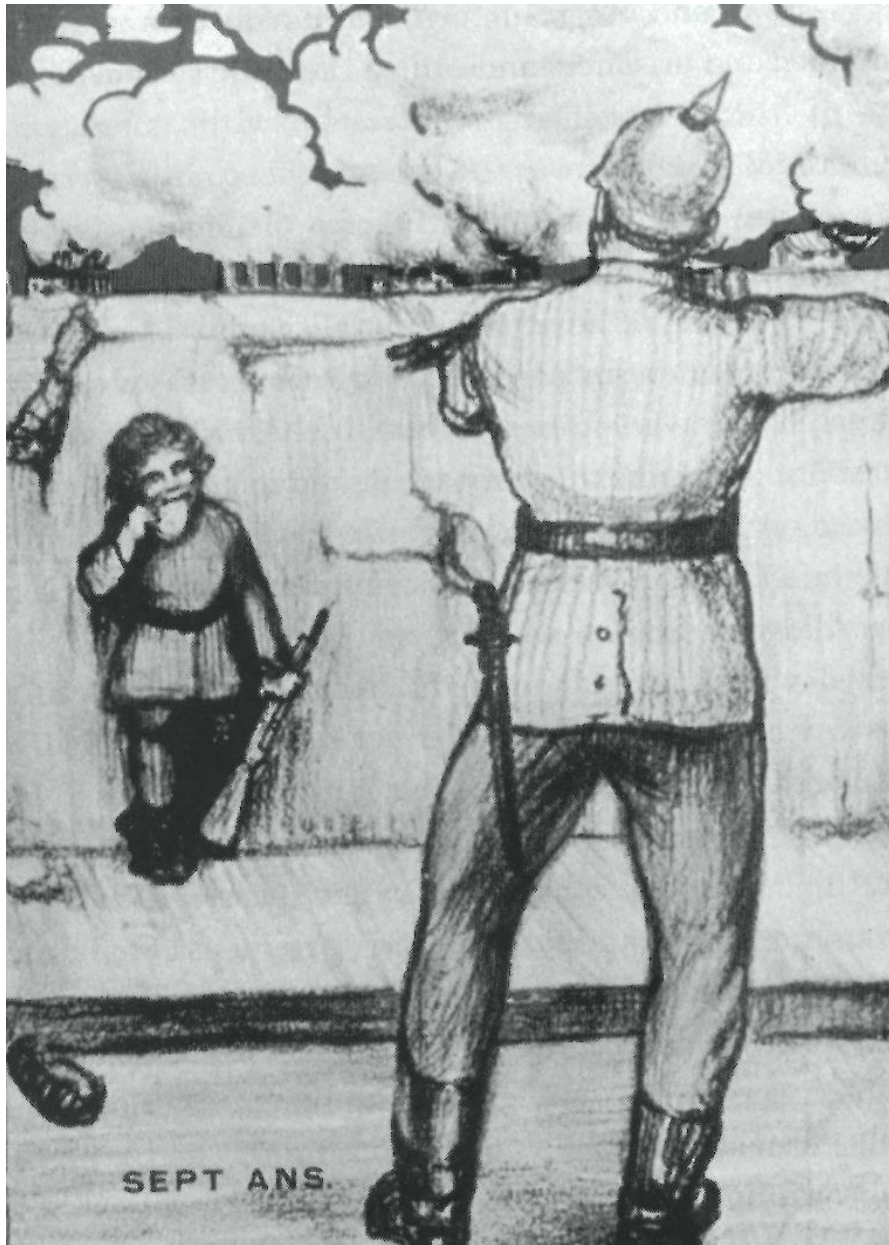


Fig. 1.11: French Postcard c.1914 depicting the execution of a small boy holding a toy gun. Published in John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001)

August 1914, which was quickly commemorated by an illustrated postcard (Fig. 1.11), highlighting the evident pervasiveness of the ‘German atrocity’ story and its associated iconography.<sup>89</sup> ‘The theme of ‘German atrocities’’, Horne and Kramer have noted, ‘was important for British opinion in August-October 1914 because it further justified

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 207.

intervention in the war. It also intensified existing anxieties about invasion and redoubled voluntary mobilization'.<sup>90</sup> *Wake Up!* undoubtedly played upon this existing anxiety.

Alongside these explicit episodes of violence and warfare against civilians, another thematic recurrence in the story was the reiteration of Britain's civilian population being unknowledgeable and/or indifferent to the threat posed by invasion. Several characters are said to resent 'the unconscious, unthinking attitude of the crowd', questioning why the civilian population were instead 'intent on their pleasures at such a crisis?'.<sup>91</sup> Echoing this sentiment, the character Field-Marshal Mars proclaims that amongst Britain's younger generation there 'was too much attention paid to games. Cricket, football, lawn tennis, and golf were excellent in themselves, but they occupied too great a place in the thoughts of the young men of this country'.<sup>92</sup> If such sentiments were replicated through the film's intertitles, it is certain that the Field-Marshal's meaning would not have been lost on the young men sitting in cinema audiences across the country. Combined with the appalling depictions of civilian deaths and the overall destruction of Britain, the film was designed to leave a devastating impression on those who had not yet enlisted.

Indeed, the film was met with enthusiasm from patriotic cinema audiences who were left with a chilling impression of what a potential invasion could look like. In the opening months of 1915 the film was screened in cinemas across the country, in Southport, Stoke Newington, Blackpool, Derby, Stratford, Woolwich, Maidenhead,

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<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>91</sup> Laurence Cowen, 'Wake Up! A Dream of Tomorrow', *Daily Express*, 15 January 1915, p. 2.

<sup>92</sup> Laurence Cowen, 'Wake Up! A Dream of Tomorrow', *Daily Express*, 5 January 1915, p. 2.

Coventry, Gloucester, Norwich, Brighton, Northampton, Portsmouth and more.<sup>93</sup> At a special matinee screening of the film at London's Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, in January 1915, it was reported that, alongside wounded soldiers from local war hospitals and representatives from the War Office, 'Recruiting Staff will be strongly represented' in an attempt to re-create the success of a recent series of screenings of the film at a cinema in Kentish Town which saw over 200 men in attendance enlist.<sup>94</sup> Elsewhere across the country, screenings of the film similarly prompted audience members to enlist. Following a three-day exhibition at the Electric Theatre in Burton upon Trent in April 1915, 60 men were reported to have enlisted as a result of the impression the film made upon them.<sup>95</sup> At the Coliseum in Haringay, 42 recruits were secured.<sup>96</sup> In Aberdeen, a special 'recruiting performance' of the film was orchestrated in May 1915, attended by the Lord Provost of the city, 150 boy scouts, and musical accompaniment from the band of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Gordons.<sup>97</sup> Later that month, a series of screenings of the film at the People's Palace, London, featured accompanying recruitment speeches from father of the Boy Scouts Association Lieutenant-General Robert S. S. Baden-Powell, and suffragette activist Emmeline Pankhurst.<sup>98</sup> Of the film, Pankhurst was reportedly 'impressed', remarking how 'A civilised nation [...] did not fight children and outrage women, but there was a country in Europe trying to impose

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<sup>93</sup> See: 'Where to see the film', *Daily Express*, 15 January 1915, p. 2; 'Where to see the film', *Daily Express*, 25 January 1915, p. 3; 'Where to see the film', *Daily Express*, 16 February 1915, p. 3; 'Where to see the film', *Daily Express*, 18 February 1915, p. 7.

<sup>94</sup> "'Wake Up!' Matinee', *Daily Express*, 21 January 1915, p. 6.

<sup>95</sup> 'Recruiting by Cinema', *Derbyshire Advertiser and Journal*, 17 April 1915, p. 6.

<sup>96</sup> 'Recruiting by Film', *Daily Express*, 24 February 1915, p. 7.

<sup>97</sup> 'Lord Provost Taggart to Visit the Picturedrome', *Aberdeen Evening Express*, 15 May 1915, p. 6.

<sup>98</sup> 'East End Recruiting. Big Effort Next Week', *East London Observer*, 22 May 1915, p. 5.



its rule and ideas of civilisation on the world, the deeds of whose soldiers paled into insignificance compared with those depicted in the film'.<sup>99</sup>

Such reports suggest that the content depicted in films such as *Wake Up!* alongside the pageantry and spectacle of their exhibition and accompanying recruitment appeals, and their relevance to the seemingly ubiquitous 'German atrocity' stories sweeping the nation, prompted many young men amongst cinema audiences to enlist for the armed services and join the war effort. Produced at a time in which actuality footage of combat was prohibited and the production of films based on actual events of the war's opening months suffered a time delay before going into production, these early invasion narratives, though fictionalised and hypothetical, presented a perceptually realistic portrayal of what might happen should this younger generation not respond to nation's call to arms.

As the war progressed and the initial enthusiasm for such narratives wore off, the film industry turned their attention towards the dramatisation of real-world events in the war for recruitment propaganda, capitalising on the British population's shock and dismay at the sinking of the *Lusitania*, the execution of Nurse Edith Cavell, or the pervasive paranoia over the threat of German spies on British soil. In short, the film industry, then, turned from speculative subject matter – the only kind of material it was possible to produce in those early months – to film content which dealt explicitly with the latest war news. Perhaps more than the hypothetical narratives of the invasion films, explicit engagement with real-world events afforded far more recruitment potential in British cinemas, with films like *Nurse and Martyr* (Moran, 1915), a

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<sup>99</sup> 'Mrs Pankhurst's Patriotism', *The Daily Mail: Hull Packet and East Yorkshire and Lincolnshire Courier*, 21 May 1915, p. 3.

dramatisation of Edith Cavell's final hours, culminating in an intertitle which poignantly read: 'The Blood of the Martyr call to YOU', an evident call for recruitment for those who had not yet joined the ranks.

Whilst later topical films, such as those produced by the War Office, warrant close academic research and discussion given their evident importance within British cinema culture during the latter half of the war, close examination of the topical filmmaking, both fiction and documentary, produced during the period between the declaration of war and early 1916 and outside of the government endorsed propaganda department at Wellington House, highlights the significant contributions made by the British production and exhibition sectors towards the recruitment effort, its engagement with potential soldiers, and the establishment of an iconographic representation of the front line and combat. Such elements, therefore, foreground some of the initial answers as to how and why the institution of the cinema shaped and adapted its exhibition practices during the First World War.

## **Conclusion**

Following the campaigning efforts of the voluntary recruitment movement as well as the general sense of patriotism and duty sweeping the country, hundreds of thousands of men enlisted in the armed services in the opening months of the war. As we have seen, the film industry and exhibition sector had played a significant part in the recruiting movement, and the recruiting movement's use of the cinema as a medium was itself further endorsed and supported by the British military. Indeed, as the weeks and months went by, the British military itself soon began to take notice of the medium's apparent efficiency for recruitment practices, whilst also acknowledging the



Fig. 1.12: Postcard of Larkhill Camp, Salisbury. The top of the 'Military Cinema' can just be seen on the righthand side (white building). Author's Collection.

broader popularity of film amongst the generation of men who had signed up for the war effort. An evident endorsement of the cinema can be seen, first and foremost, in the establishment of cinema venues in military camps and barracks across the country in late 1914. On the 24 December 1914, a correspondent for *The Bioscope* reported on the:

opening of a motion picture theatre in the military encampment of Bally Kinlar, Co. Down, where, just now, a huge number of recruits are being made into soldiers. The improvised hall has been open but a week or so as I write, but it has shown every sign of success. Bally Kinlar is a permanent encampment, and the fact that it is removed from any up-to-date town by many, many miles leads me to think it is some good investment'.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> 'Jottings from Ulster', *The Bioscope*, 24 December 1914, p. 1362

Elsewhere, the sizeable Larkhill military camp established on Salisbury plain erected its own Military Cinema around April 1915 for recruits in residence to enjoy before they departed for the front (Fig. 1.12).<sup>101</sup> Cinemas could also be found at Clondeboy Camp, County Down in Northern Ireland, and the Blandford Camp in Dorset before the close of 1914.<sup>102</sup> At Bordon Military Camp in Hampshire, a cinema was established and run by the Church of England Institute in early 1915. A correspondent for *The Bioscope* remarked how nightly shows were given to around 600 troops, and that the ‘performances were given by Mr. Percy Morgan, who evidently knows how to cater for the men, as the troops fully appreciate both him and the show’.<sup>103</sup> Representing the first major instance in which soldier spectators were clearly segregated as a demographic from civilian audiences, camp cinemas such as these set an early precedent for the B.E.F.’s endorsement and use of the medium, foreshadowing the widespread and ever-expanding implementation of military cinemas on the western front, to be discussed in the next chapter.

Ultimately, the research presented here regarding the topical filmmaking, both fiction and documentary, produced during the period between the declaration of war and early 1916 – the kind that continued to be seen by newly enlisted soldiers in camps and garrison towns awaiting their departure for the front – suggests that minor ‘unofficial’ films such as these should not be left unremarked upon within the histories of First World War cinema. Such films highlight the significant contribution made by the British production and exhibition sectors towards the recruitment effort and its

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<sup>101</sup> National Archives, WO 95/2098/1, 20<sup>th</sup> Division, Adjutant and Quartermaster War Diary, Notice dated 17 April 1915.

<sup>102</sup> ‘The Army and Pictures’, *The Bioscope*, 29 October 1914, p. 433; Liddle Collection, LIDDLE/WW1/DF/GA/ENT/3, Blandford Camp Cinema Programme, 1914.

<sup>103</sup> ‘Trade Topics’, *The Bioscope*, 18 February 1915, p. 585.

engagement with potential soldiers. As early in the conflict as 17 October 1914, a commentator for the *Sheffield Weekly Telegraph* proclaimed that:

The many uses of the picture houses in war time have been fully realised by the military and civil authorities during the present European War, and Mr. Picture House Manager has more than done his share in preparing Britain for war'.<sup>104</sup>

Certainly, as this chapter has shown, the use of the cinema at this early juncture had engaged, motivated and, indeed, prepared Britain and its newly enlisted soldiers for war – and would continue to do so – but for what kind of war? The broad iconographic style and characteristics established by these initial topical films, and the strategies of representation they employed in order to engage and motivate potential recruits, coupled with the period's overall absence of footage filmed directly on the front, had a monumental impact. In effect, the British production and exhibition sectors had, at this early juncture, targeted, isolated and defined a demographic of spectatorship distinct from the civilian sphere due to the nation's need of these young men in the present crisis. As the war progressed and those who had seen such early films depicting the conflict, and had perhaps enlisted as a consequence, would come to interpret, critique and ultimately dismiss the fallacies and artifice presented by such images following their direct experience of the war. For the time being, however, newly enlisted men began the journey from civilian life to that of soldiering life on the front line, where cinemas, against all odds, could also be found.

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<sup>104</sup> 'How the "Movies" Help in War', *Sheffield Weekly Telegraph*, 17 October 1914, p. 14.

## 2. British Military Cinemas and Film Exhibition on the Western Front

“Stand here a moment, Hanson” I said, “and realise the situation. Here we are on a pitch black night within 800 yards of the enemy lines standing outside a barn in which a kinema has been installed, to give an hour or two’s entertainment to the men who are fighting in this hell of Flanders.”<sup>1</sup>

After our pleasant meal the general asked me if I would come with him to see the cinema. I thought he meant to come outside and see the flashes of the guns and explosions of the shells in the darkness, which make a fascinating scene.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘The Kinema at Suicide Corner. How a Front Trench Show is Run.’, *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 7 February 1918, p. 47.

But instead I was taken into a great hall in which were seated about 300 soldiers, and there, sure enough, was a real cinema [...]²

Even after one hundred years, the extraordinary quality of the scenes described in accounts like these still have the power to prompt the same surprise and curiosity for the historian or general reader of today. In the midst of the nightmarish hell of a battlefield, using technology that was far more impractical and prone to failure than any used today, why would anyone set up a cinema just behind the front line trenches of the First World War? Putting to one side the surprise that the existence of such cinemas often occasioned, accounts such as those cited above also demand answers to more searching questions. Where were such cinemas established and by whom? What was film exhibition in such circumstances actually like?

Despite the unlikelihood of a cinema within this context, British soldiers routinely found themselves face to face with this echo of their pre-war civilian lives: a form of popular entertainment which had only been around for less than twenty years and only took hold as a widespread public pastime within the decade or so prior to the outbreak of war in 1914. Both accounts above capture the irony of the given scene: a cinema – a civilian space of social interaction, comfort and entertainment – residing within range of the ‘guns’, ‘shells’ and overall ‘hell’ of the battlefield. Such accounts would, perhaps, suggest that the cinema was something of a novelty. One may imagine a one-off cinema being temporarily set up for a few indifferent soldiers at some remote location on the periphery of the actual conflict. However, as this chapter will document,

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² Frederick H. Allen, ‘A Cinema Hall’, *Liverpool Daily Post*, 23 June 1916, p. 4.



Fig. 2.1: British Soldiers posing for the camera outside a 'British Cinema' in occupied Germany, c. 1919. Liddle Collection.

cinemas were established throughout the First World War in hundreds of locations across the Western Front and beyond.

As outlined in the introduction to this thesis, the history of front line British military cinemas and soldier spectatorship will be examined by three separate chapters. This current chapter will focus upon the practices and conditions of front line exhibition, examining the use of cinema entertainment as it was implemented by the British Army and its scope of use across multiple levels of the British military's hierarchy. Reflecting upon the ubiquity of the front line cinema, Captain E. C. Rycroft of the Royal Army Medical Corps, writing from Baghdad after the close of war, remarked:

Where our troops are there seems to be a cinema, so I suppose Charlie Chaplin has hopped through, and played the fool in, East African jungles, Mesopotamian deserts, and North Russian snows. And I've no doubt Mary



Pickford's moments of love, joy and anguish are not at all affected by similar surroundings.<sup>3</sup>

Whilst Rycroft's testimony gives some sense of the pervasiveness of cinema entertainment for British soldiers in the First World War, this chapter will focus solely upon cinemas found on the Western fronts of France and Belgium where the majority of the British Army was deployed. Moreover, whilst the British Army contained dominion troops – Australian, New Zealander, Canadian and Indian – sent from overseas to fight for Britain, attention shall almost entirely reside with British military formations.

Built upon an exhaustive analysis of primary documentation, this chapter will outline the immense, previously undocumented scope of cinema entertainment for British soldiers on the Western front. It will outline how, where and why the cinema was established on the British front lines by examining the provision of cinematic entertainment for soldiers as it was conceptualised and instituted by military authority from the top down. Attention shall be drawn to how the use of entertainment venues and the provision of film screenings and programmes were incorporated into the operational routines, ideological values and social and cultural landscapes of the British Army. Furthermore, this chapter will also shed light on how the provision of cinema entertainment related to other forms of recreation on the front line, including sport, music and theatrical productions and will conclude with an examination of why the cinema was valued and endorsed as a form of recreation on the front line by those who implemented it. Through its examination of such ideas and by providing a detailed overview of the more fundamental aspects of front line exhibition – venues, films,

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<sup>3</sup> Liddle Collection, LIDDLE/WW1/MES/092, Papers of E.C. Rycroft, Diary Entry 29<sup>th</sup> May 1919.

musical accompaniment and financial organisation – this chapter will produce a comprehensive history of cinema exhibition practices in the British Expeditionary Force on the front line. To begin, however, I will introduce and contextualise the environment in which such cinemas were established: namely, the ‘front line’.

### **The Front Line**

Typically associated with the Western fronts of France and Belgium rather than the Eastern theatres of war, the ‘front line’ literally referred to the furthest geographical point or line held by an Army on the battlefield, whilst symbolically, the ‘front line’ also came to represent the epicentre of soldier experience during the First World War: the end point of the soldier’s recruitment/conscription and training; the drudgery of day-to-day drills and routines; the hell on earth of the battlefield. References to the ‘front line’ itself do not necessarily refer to the foremost front trench. Rather, the ‘front’ was often used to refer to the entire expanse of the conflict, a zone stretching from initial base camps, moving ‘up the line’ through billeting towns and villages to support and reserve trenches and finally, the front line parapet. As the historian A. J. P. Taylor noted in *The First World War*: with the establishment of trenches, support areas and bases, ‘the opposing lines congealed, grew solid’, creating an environment of stasis and entrenchment.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, it is the scope and scale of this expanse which came to be known as the ‘front’ which warrants the use of the term ‘front line cinema’. Indeed, the nature of the front line and the conditions of the Western front in particular – the largely immobile opposing forces of Western Europe which had given up any idea of

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<sup>4</sup> A. J. P. Taylor, *The First World War: An Illustrated History* (London: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 34.

the conflict being a 'war of movement' – facilitated, even ultimately demanded, as we shall see, the establishment of recreational and amenity-focused institutions like cinemas.<sup>5</sup>

Those who served on the front became part of a generation bound by a common language, perception and understanding fostered by first-hand experience of trench warfare. As the war historian Malcolm Brown has suggested:

To have been 'in the trenches' put a permanent mark on a man: he had been admitted to a special, private world, the reality of which, as many were aware at the time, could only be fully understood by those who had been part of it.<sup>6</sup>

Theirs was an existence defined by the unprecedented conditions of modern warfare: the front line was an environment of unimaginable horror, only ever hinted at by journalistic reportage and other accounts often only disseminated in censored or sanitised first or even second-hand reports within the civilian sphere. Putting to one side the ever-present risk of death whilst on the front, the soldier also had to endure the horrors of the front line environment: the deteriorating and uncanny remains of the dead bodies that littered the battlefield; the constant barrage of ear-splitting shell-fire; beds, clothes and food infested with lice; rats; and the incredibly unhygienic environment which was the front line. Soldiers were also put through their paces by the pervasive sense of melancholy and despair which accompanied the day-to-day experience of front line life: witnessing friends and family killed, facing the indignity of a fellow soldier's cowardice in the face of death and the demand to hand over one's

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<sup>5</sup> The label 'war of movement' – being a war of noble charges, swift attacks and sweeping victories – continues to be a common turn of phrase to describe the antithesis of the type of warfare seen in WWI. As A. J. P. Taylor (see above) remarks whilst describing the transition from the early reactionary clashes between warring nations towards the state of entrenchment: 'Trench Warfare had begun. The war of movement had ended when men dug themselves in. They could be dislodged only by massive bombardment and the accumulation of reserves.' p. 34.

<sup>6</sup> Malcolm Brown, *Tommy Goes to War* (Stroud: Tempus, 1999), p. 46.

fate to military instruction and strategy no matter how absurd, no matter how suicidal. By enduring all of this, as Denis Winter writes, the soldier became part of a 'common membership, a particular way of life, a common landscape'.<sup>7</sup>

However, the 'reality' of this world, whilst monumentally dangerous and horrifying in those moments when a soldier actually climbed 'over the top' and into 'no-man's-land' or sheltered from shellfire, often amounted to a life of tedium, military routine and complaint. By most accounts, life on the front line was 'a time of unrelieved boredom punctuated by occasional heart-stopping moments of action.'<sup>8</sup> The perpetual sense of 'unrelieved boredom' here refers to the significant amount of time 'Tommy' would spend away from the actual front line trenches, either in support trenches or further back in billets or rest camps. In fact, it was common for a soldier to spend only two weeks in the trenches, alternating every four days or so between the front line and reserve trenches, followed by six days leave in a rest camp further back behind the line.<sup>9</sup> Whilst the four days spent in reserve trenches would still be spent engaging in 'fatigue duty', which usually meant carrying supplies or making repairs, actually going 'out on rest' to a rest camp several miles behind the front line trenches was a comparative godsend, a time in which men could sleep in better conditions, get some hot food, a bath and recover both physically and psychologically.

Describing such rest camps, Richard Holmes suggests that they 'initially consisted wholly of tents, but wooden huts quickly made their appearance, first for kitchens, cookhouses, latrines and messes, but eventually for sleeping quarters too.'<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Denis Winter, *Death's Men: Soldiers of the Great War* (London: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 234.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Van Emden, *The Trench: Experiencing Life on the Front Line 1916* (London: Transworld Publishers, 2002), p. 98.

<sup>9</sup> Brown, *Tommy Goes to War*, p. 48.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Holmes, *Tommy: The British Soldier on the Western Front* (London: Harper Collins, 2004), p. 336.

The amenities found in rest camps offered the soldier something of a support structure to fall back upon, a societal microcosm in which ‘Tommy’s’ desires and needs could be met (albeit within the structures of military life and routine). In such camps and their neighbouring villages and towns, men could find food, alcohol, entertainment and even sex to maintain morale and provide something of an antidote to the life of fear and suffering the war promised upon their return to the trenches. Adding to this list of venues and institutions located within the rest camps and areas of the British army, we can include Army, Corps and Divisional cinemas, Y.M.C.A. cinemas and local theatrical venues amongst some other minor institutional cinemas. It is within this context that the front line cinema found its home.

### **Army, Corps and Divisional Cinemas of the British Army**

Whereas some third-party cinemas (such as those run by the Y.M.C.A.) or civilian venues continued to operate across the war zones of France and Belgium, the primary cinemas catering for soldiers on the Western front were those organised and orchestrated by the British Army itself, established by various formations within the hierarchy of British military structure.<sup>11</sup> Under the authority of GHQ and the War Office, the British Expeditionary Force contained six Armies by the end of the First World War, which were themselves composed of a number of Corps that, in turn, contained of a number of Divisions. Divisions contained somewhere in the region of 20,000 men, each allotted into Battalions which were themselves under the command of a Brigade.

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<sup>11</sup> For more information about Y.M.C.A. cinemas on the front, see: Emma Hanna, ‘Putting the Moral into Morale: YMCA Cinemas on the Western Front, 1914-1918’, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (2015), pp. 615-630; Amanda Laugesen, ‘Forgetting their Troubles for a While: Australian Soldiers’ Experiences of Cinema during the First World War’, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (2015), pp. 596-614.

In order to ascertain precisely the number of cinemas established by the multitude of British military formations between 1914 and 1918, I have undertaken a full analysis of official military documentation produced by the British military during this period. Alongside the consultation of other primary sources such as contemporary journalism in newspapers, trade papers and fan magazines, as well as first-hand testimony from soldiers themselves, the research presented here represents the first exhaustive close examination of records held in the National Archives, and more specifically, of the war diaries produced by the Quartermaster General for each Army, Corps and Division of the British Army which served on the Western Front.<sup>12</sup>

Rather than a being a *personal* diary in the traditional sense, war diaries were documents which nearly every formation of the British military was required to produce for the duration of the conflict, noting strategic movements and deployments, casualty figures, promotions and various other aspects of military operation on the front line. A war diary for a Divisional Headquarters, for example, would tend to record the overall movements and engagements of its component brigades, whilst the war diary of a Divisional Assistant Medical Service would provide a more focused perspective on the Division's fighting strength and medical resources. Similarly, the Quartermaster General was responsible for the provision of equipment and supplies for their formation and was tasked with recording the status of food, baths, billeting and other aspects related to day-to-day life on the front. The Quartermaster General also recorded the establishment and/or orchestration of entertainment, canteens and recreational events for soldiers, and it is in such diaries that we find the most detailed evidence and records for military cinemas. Consequently, the war diaries held by the

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<sup>12</sup> These documents are held by the National Archives, Richmond, UK, in the War Office collection (WO 95).

National Archives offer the most reliable and comprehensive resource for ascertaining the scope of cinema entertainment on the Western front, although it should be stated that the record is not complete, given the fact that elements of some war diaries do not appear to have survived. Moreover, the diaries themselves differ quite radically in content and coverage: some Quartermasters were in the habit of providing detailed accounts of the day-to-day minutia of life on the front line, whilst others made only the briefest of entries, perhaps only recording the casualty figures or weather for a given day and little else.

'Routine Orders' present another valuable source for the researcher, being documents used to relay up-to-date information to soldiers. Such orders did not pertain to military actions or strategy. Instead, these sources can be characterised as a perpetually updated set of instructions and information for everyday life on the front, regarding, for example, the provision of gas masks, upcoming leave, the awarding of medals and other honours or instructions for the prevention of trench foot. Moreover, the information disseminated by Routine Orders were largely specific to the formations for which they were produced. For our purposes, the 'Notice' section of Routine Orders routinely featured information about entertainments and events, including cinemas (Fig. 2.2), unique to the formations being discussed. Again, complete records of Routine Orders have unfortunately not survived and, therefore, coverage for some formations is fragmented at best.

Nonetheless, the research presented below represents the first major scholarly consultation of military documentation to record and map the exhibition practices of front line cinemas during the First World War, as well as the general level of integration of film culture within the British army. In such instances where detail is lacking, I have

(2) Divisional Cinema Show.  
 The Divisional Cinematograph is now at the PORT-DE-NIEPPE  
 Variety Hall, where the Divisional Follies Show was.  
 Prices of Admission:-  
 Officers, 1 franc.  
 Other ranks, 50 centimes.  
 Performances 4 p.m. and 8 p.m. *10.30pm*  
 Special shows can be arranged for 2 p.m. and 8 p.m.  
 Seats can be reserved by arrangement with Major Bearne,  
 O.C. 4th Div. Supply Column.  
 Large bookings of 200 and upwards will be at 25% reduction,  
 provided money is paid in bulk. If paid by cheques, they  
 should be made payable to A.A. & O.H.G., 4th Division.  
 A message to O.C. 4th Div. Supply Column can be sent from  
 Divisional Signal Office.  
 Motor lorries take parties to and from the show if  
 required.

Fig. 2.2: Enlargement of 4<sup>th</sup> Division Routine Order dated 4 February 1915.

attempted to corroborate and confirm information using a variety of other sources, including soldier diaries/letters and contemporary journalism.

To provide an introductory overview of the scale of British military cinemas on the Western front between 1914 and 1918, the exhaustive analysis of military documentation undertaken reveals two major points. Firstly, military-run cinema entertainment for British troops on the Western Front was a wide-spread practice which was orchestrated on a number of different levels within the hierarchy of the British Expeditionary Force: most clearly within Armies, Corps and Divisions.<sup>13</sup> Secondly, the conclusions drawn by previous scholars who have written about the presence of cinemas on the front line needs to be radically re-evaluated and re-written, given the evidently wide-spread provision of cinema entertainment within the B.E.F.

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<sup>13</sup> It should be stated that there is some evidence for the existence of cinemas run by formations of the B.E.F. below the Divisional level. Unfortunately, detailed archival documentation does not exist for such formations (unlike the B.E.F.'s Armies, Corps and Divisions) and it is therefore impossible to document such outfits to any extent. In most cases, the existence of these cinemas has only been discovered through a single reference in another source, often in Army, Corps or Divisional war diaries, as well as photographs or other ephemeral materials. Nonetheless, it is my opinion that, considering the detailed examination of what amounts to several hundred years' worth of documentation in the form of Army, Corps and Divisional records and the near total absence of any reference to a cinema outfit orchestrated by a sub-Divisional formation, that such instances were rare exceptions. Those which have been discovered during the course of research are listed in Appendix 1.



For example, two different scholars have given statistics on the number of British cinemas on the Western front: Kevin Brownlow, who suggested that by 'mid-1916, there were twenty cinemas in the British sector', whilst more recently, Emma Hanna has claimed that by the same time there were '115 army cinemas along the lines of communication'.<sup>14</sup> The vast difference between these two figures is difficult to understand given that neither Brownlow nor Hanna cite any sources for their given totals, providing no further detail regarding what formations of the B.E.F. ran these cinemas nor how they were operated. Moreover, a single number gives no sense of the ebb and flow of exhibition practices on the front line, or the degree to which they were incorporated into the hierarchy of the B.E.F. which, as shall be outlined below, is far more useful in understanding the scale and endorsement of exhibition on the front line.

One of the few scholarly works to offer a more comprehensive overview of the provision of cinema entertainment on the Western front can be found in J. G. Fuller's *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies, 1914-1918*.<sup>15</sup> Fuller's work, an examination of popular culture and its influence within the B.E.F., in one chapter offers an examination of the different types of leisure and recreation enjoyed by soldiers whilst on rest from the trenches. From Fuller's perspective, the cinema was a relatively minor, insignificant form of recreation on the front when compared with the apparent popularity of other pastimes enjoyed by soldiers, such as sports, concert parties, or even more formal events such as military horse shows. Allocating no more than three pages to the subject, Fuller concludes that whilst

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<sup>14</sup> See: Kevin Brownlow, *The War, the West, and the Wilderness* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1979), p. 43; Emma Hanna, 'Putting the Moral into Morale', p. 619.

<sup>15</sup> J. G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies 1914-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

personalities such as Charlie Chaplin appear to have been popular amongst the troops, the medium ‘laboured’ under ‘handicaps’ which ‘seem to have limited its appeal’, suggesting that overall the cinema ‘seems to have made less impact on the troops than concert parties’.<sup>16</sup>

Supporting this statement, Fuller provides an appendix detailing information on the known concert parties and cinemas orchestrated by (solely) Divisions of the B.E.F., finding a total of 51 Divisional concert parties in contrast to 22 Divisional cinemas.<sup>17</sup> Admittedly, Fuller notes that his list of Divisional cinemas does not represent an ‘exhaustive count’, although the degree to which the provision of cinematic entertainment on the Western front has been underestimated is still problematic, to say the least, and undoubtedly informed his rather dismissive judgment of the medium. Indeed, the research that I have undertaken indicates that cinema entertainment was orchestrated by the British military on a far wider scale than previously accounted for by Fuller (see Table 1 – and Appendix 1 for a complete, detailed and referenced overview).

| <b><u>Formation</u></b>   | <b><u>Total Cinemas</u></b> |
|---|-----------------------------|
| Armies  | 2                           |
| Corps   | 10                          |
| Divisions   | 40                          |
| <b><u>Total British Military Formations with Cinemas on the Western Front</u></b> | <b>52</b>                   |

Table 1: British Military Formations with Cinemas on the Western front, 1914-1918

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<sup>16</sup> Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture*, p. 113.

<sup>17</sup> Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture*, pp. 186-191. The total number excluding Dominion formations and Divisions serving in other theatres of war.

To begin, the consultation of official war diaries has resulted in correcting Fuller's original count of 22 Divisional cinemas to a lower total of 19. The mistaken total Fuller provides appears to have stemmed from a slight misinterpretation of Divisional histories (records commonly written in the 1920s by military authorities), which he uses as sources for a large number of the Divisions he documents. As my research suggests, the existence of a military cinema cannot be taken for granted by its inclusion (or lack of) within a Divisional history, which were often more concerned with the overarching narrative of the war: details of battles, strategies and military deployments. Closer examination of Fuller's cited sources also reveals that some have been misinterpreted, such as the Divisional history referred to as evidence for the existence of a 58<sup>th</sup> Divisional Cinema, which actually refers to a cinema established by the 56<sup>th</sup> Division.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the Divisional history Fuller cites as evidence for a 19<sup>th</sup> Divisional Cinema actually appears upon closer inspection to be a general remark about the provision of cinema entertainment behind the lines and not confirmation of the Division's own institution.<sup>19</sup>

Consulting contemporary war diaries rather than just Divisional histories (which were far less likely to record matters deemed incidental – such as cinemas – within the grander ambitions of military history), I have not only corrected Fuller's original total to 19 Divisional cinemas, but effectively doubled the total known British Divisions which established cinemas on the Western front to a total of 40. Furthermore, consultation of Army and Corps records expands the total number of British military

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<sup>18</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/2936/3, 56<sup>th</sup> Division Routine Order 15 December 1917. Fuller cites the 58<sup>th</sup> Division's history's comment on cinema entertainment and the 'Bow-Bells' concert parties in the Ecurie wood in late 1917 as a reference to its own division, whereas these outfits both belonged to the 56<sup>th</sup> Division which was also stationed in this location at the time.

<sup>19</sup> Everard Wyrall, *The History of the 19<sup>th</sup> Division, 1914-1918* (London: E. Arnold & Co., 1932), pp. 23-24.

formations with cinemas on the Western Front out even further, with 2 Armies and 10 Corps also equipped with cinemas. Across the Armies, Corps and Divisions of the B.E.F., 52 different formations appear to have established a cinema on the Western front at some time during the conflict between 1914 and 1918. To put this into perspective: 40% of British Armies, 53% of British Corps and 73% of British Divisions serving on the Western Front (or in total, 66% of the total number of Army, Corps and Divisional formations) established a military cinema during the war. Given that Fuller's original total of 22 Divisional cinemas would only suggest that 40% of British Divisions operated a cinema on the Western Front (28% of total formations), it is evident that previous assumptions about the provision of cinema entertainment during the war was underestimated by Fuller's analysis, a conclusion which has been taken for granted and cited by other studies of exhibition during the war.<sup>20</sup>

Whilst these statistics alone suggest much about the ubiquity of military cinemas on the Western Front, the remainder of this chapter aims to provide a detailed analysis of the qualitative aspects of the B.E.F.'s cinemas and exhibition practices, examining details such as: the venues in which they were established; what type of films were shown and how they were acquired; musical accompaniment, and, how such cinemas were financed. By building up a complete picture of exhibition on the Western front, we can ascertain in far more detail the scale and character of cinematic entertainment on the front line, its perceived value as a medium as characterised by military authorities, its standing alongside other forms of recreation, and ultimately, its overall role within the organisation of the B.E.F. during the First World War.

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<sup>20</sup> See: Michael Hammond, *The Big Show: British Cinema Culture in the Great War 1914-1918* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006), p. 235; Amanda Laugesen, 'Forgetting their Troubles for a While: Australian Soldiers' Experiences of Cinema during the First World War', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (2015), pp. 596-614 (p. 601).

## Locations and Venues

Commenting on the ubiquity of cinemas on the front in 1917, industry figure and chairman of the Cinematograph Exhibitor's Association, A. E. Newbould, remarked in *The Kineweekly* after visiting the front himself, that:

Even in the most wretched wreck and ruin of what were once carefully-tended towns and villages my eye was caught by the hand-painted – often crude-lettered notice “To the Cinema.” It flashed on one from all sorts of unexpected places. In one village a shattered door had been tied to the wall and carried the familiar legend; in another case a lamp-post, shattered by shell-fire till its head bent like a candle that had been out in the sun, supported the side of a petrol tin with the letters CINEMA scrawled on it.<sup>21</sup>

The B.E.F.'s military cinemas were established in a variety of locations and venues, both pre-existing and purpose-built structures. Official records show that such cinemas were routinely set up in abandoned town halls, barns, purpose-built huts or simply in the open air, representing a range of shapes, sizes and seating capacities across the front line. Most often they were situated in places that were ‘most convenient for [the] men’ of the specific formation itself, in the villages or rest areas where component elements of the formation – Armies/Corps/Divisions/Brigades/Battalions etc. – were in residence or stationed whilst on leave from the trenches.<sup>22</sup> Take for example the

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<sup>21</sup> A. E. Newbould, ‘The Kinema and the War. Some Reflections on my Visit to the Western Front.’, *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 27 September 1917, p. 109.

<sup>22</sup> ‘Weekly Notes’, *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 20 September 1917, p. 75.

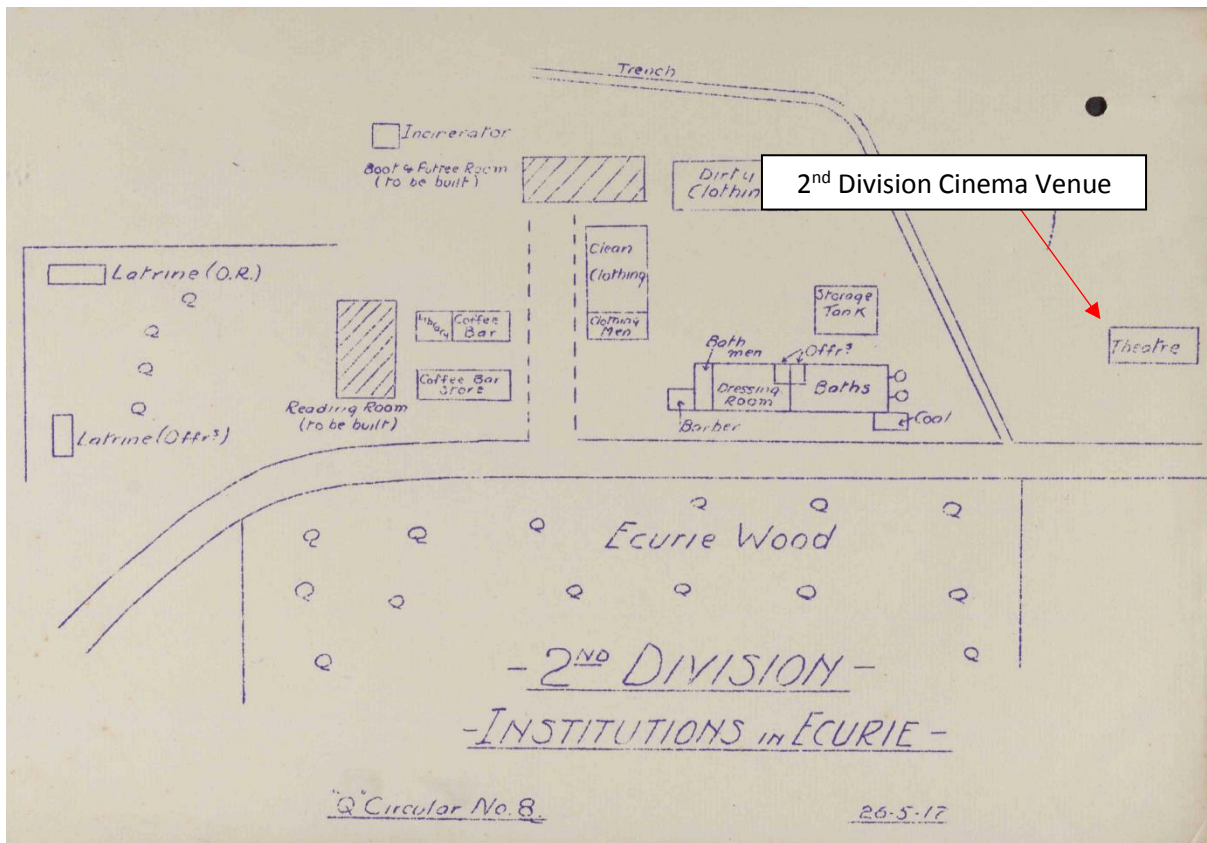


Fig. 2.3: Map showing 2<sup>nd</sup> Division Rest Area, Ecurie, France, May 1917, WO 95/1309/2.

hand-drawn map produced for the war diary of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division (Fig. 2.3). Alongside other Divisional institutes such as baths, a coffee bar and washing facilities, as well as the path to the front line trench system seen at top of the map, the Division's Theatre (the venue used for cinema screenings) can be readily seen within the confines of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division's rest area in Ecurie, May 1917.

By examining trench maps we can estimate that they were often only a few miles behind the front lines. For example, the 4<sup>th</sup> Division's cinema, established in the town hall of Steenwerck, Belgium, in early 1915, would have been located roughly 6 or 7 miles from no-man's land.<sup>23</sup> When the cinema relocated to the Variety Hall in Nieppe in February, it would have been even closer to the front line (see Fig. 2.4).

<sup>23</sup> 'Armentieres' [Digital scan of trench map of Armentieres area c.1915]. McMaster University Digital Archive, <<http://digitalarchive.mcmaster.ca/islandora/object/macrepo%3A67475/-/collection>> [accessed 22 June 2017].

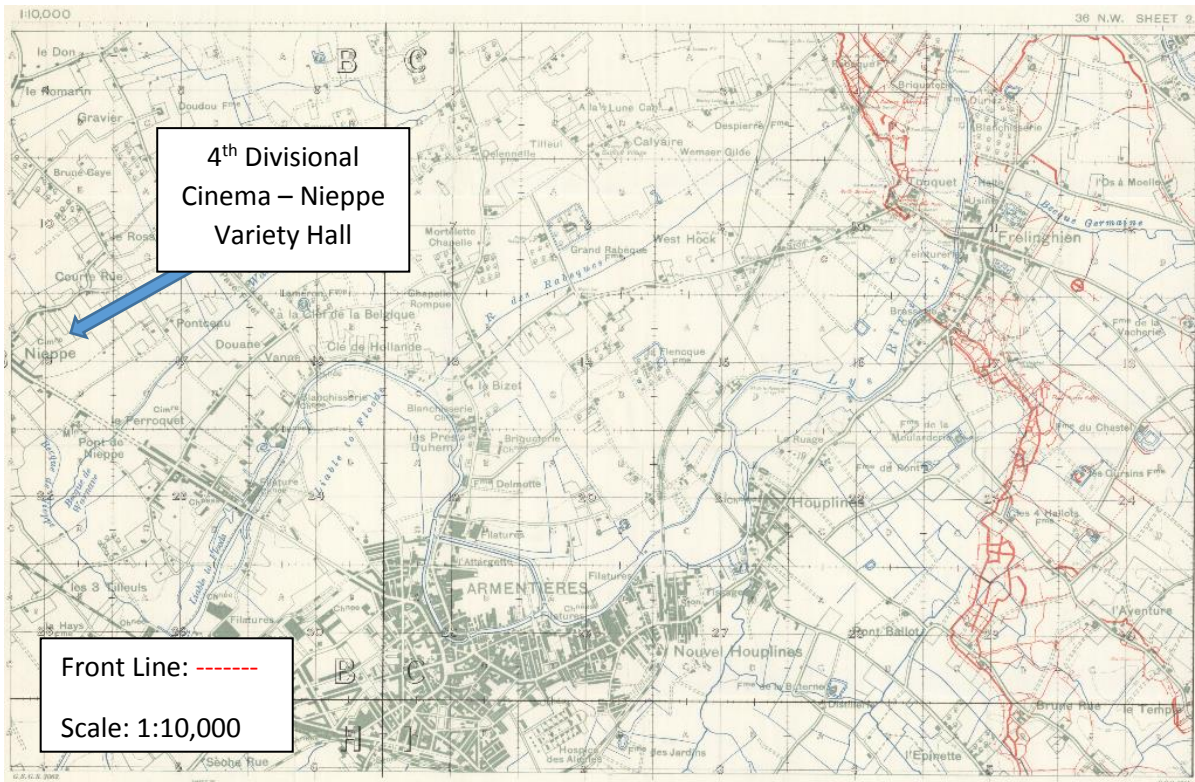


Fig. 2.4: A trench map showing the location of the 4th Division’s cinema at the Nieppe Variety Hall (estimated) in relation to the front line (red). Chasseaud Collection.

Similarly, reporting on another (unidentified) divisional cinema a year later in January 1916, the *Daily Mail* published an article titled “Tommy’s” Own Kinema. Picture House Seven Miles From Firing Line’.<sup>24</sup> Other reportage on front line cinemas suggest that some venues were established within a dangerously close proximity to ‘no-man’s-land’, although it is probable that such accounts were little more than journalistic embellishment. In *The Bioscope*, for example, the distance between the aforementioned 4<sup>th</sup> Division’s cinema and the front line was reduced from the estimated six miles to three, whilst another report even suggested that a Divisional cinema had been established ‘within 800 yards of the enemy lines’ at a location fittingly

<sup>24</sup> “Tommy’s” Own Kinema. Picture House Seven Miles From Firing Line’, *The Daily Mail*, 4 January 1916, p. 7.

nicknamed 'suicide corner'.<sup>25</sup> Army and Corps cinemas, however, tended to be established further behind the line in areas where the more organisational elements of military hierarchy were situated.

It is important to state that a front line cinema was not necessarily a permanent structure or fixture on the front, but continually relocated alongside its parent formation as the war progressed. For example, whilst it can be said that there were 40 Divisions of the British Army in total which operated a cinema at one point during the war, the number of different cinematic venues established during the same period amounts to a far greater number. Additionally, we should also distinguish between what I have termed 'fixed' and 'mobile' front line cinemas, as some discrepancy between the types of exhibition practice on the front line does appear to exist. Simply put, 'fixed' cinemas were established and advertised by Routine Orders as being situated in a single location (if only for a short period of time), whilst 'mobile' cinemas were advertised as touring outfits, visiting a variety of front line camps and rest areas in one week (Fig. 2.5).

For example, the aforementioned 4<sup>th</sup> Divisional cinema – the earliest Divisional cinema established in the war – represents a 'Fixed' cinema, despite the regularity with which it re-located. The 4<sup>th</sup> Divisional cinema first opened its doors to soldiers on 12 January 1915 in the town hall (or 'Mairie') of Steenwerck, a small commune located just to the west of Armentières in northern France.<sup>26</sup> A pre-existing venue (although not specifically designed for cinematic entertainment), Divisional records suggest that the Steenwerck Town Hall had a comfortable seating capacity of 200 men and

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<sup>25</sup> See: 'A Cinema at the Front', *The Bioscope*, 4 February 1915, p. 457; 'The Kinema at Suicide Corner. How a Front Trench Show is Run', *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 7 February 1918, p. 47.

<sup>26</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/1449/2, 4<sup>th</sup> Division Routine Order 12 January 1915.



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DIVISIONAL THEATRE COMPANY .

VARIETY ENTERTAINMENT & CINEMA.

|            |     |      |       |            |       |               |
|------------|-----|------|-------|------------|-------|---------------|
| Sunday,    | May | 7th  | ..... | BEAUMETZ   | ..... | 6.30 p.m.     |
| Monday,    | "   | 8th  | ..... | SIMENCOURT | ..... | 6.30 p.m.     |
| Tuesday,   | "   | 9th  | ..... | Do.        | ..... | 5.30 & 7 p.m. |
| Wednesday, | "   | 10th | ..... | BEAUMETZ   | ..... | 6.30 p.m.     |
| Thursday,  | "   | 11th | ..... | Do.        | ..... | 5.30 & 7 p.m. |
| Friday,    | "   | 12th | ..... | BARLY      | ..... | 6.30 p.m.     |
| Saturday,  | "   | 13th | ..... | SOMBRIN    | ..... | 6.30 p.m.     |

\*--\*--\*--\*--\*--\*--\*--\*--\*--\*--\*--\*--\*--\*--\*--\*--\*

Fig. 2.5: Programme of 55th Divisional Mobile Cinema, May 1916, WO 95/2908/2.

screened programmes three times daily (see Fig. 2.6). The impact this venue had upon the 4<sup>th</sup> Division during this period can be readily seen in the war diaries of the Division's battalions, several of which recorded the newly established venue. 'Parties of men' from the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Royal Warwickshire Regiment reportedly 'went to Cinematograph Show held at the Mairie, Steenwerck' on 7<sup>th</sup> January, whilst men from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Seaforth Highlanders 'were taken to cinematograph performance at STEENWERCK on 13<sup>th</sup> & 14<sup>th</sup>'.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, the war diary of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Royal Irish Fusiliers recorded how a 'Cinematograph in STEENWERKE [sic] arranged by H.Qs. much appreciated by the men.'<sup>28</sup> It should be noted that each of these Battalions were part of the 10<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the 4<sup>th</sup> Division and were deployed within the area at the time, unlike some other portions of the Division.

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<sup>27</sup> See: The National Archives, WO 95/1484/2, War Diary of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Royal Warwickshire Regiment, 7 January 1915; The National Archives, WO 95/1483/2, War Diary of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Seaforth Highlanders, 16 January 1915.

<sup>28</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/1482, War Diary of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Royal Irish Fusiliers, 10 January 1915.



Fig. 2.6: A postcard showing the Town Hall of Steenwerck, France, c. 1914. Author's Collection.

However, as the war progressed and the 4<sup>th</sup> Division became needed elsewhere, the Divisional cinema relocated too, moving from Steenwerck to a new fixed location – the Pont de Nieppe ‘Variety Hall’ – just over 3 miles away, less than a month later on 4 February 1915. Many fixed Divisional cinemas relocated frequently due to the constantly shifting placement and deployment of Divisions themselves. Indeed, the war diaries of the 4<sup>th</sup> Division’s Quartermaster General recorded sixteen separate locations for the Divisional cinema between it being established in January 1915 to the close of the war in November 1918. As can be seen in Fig. 2.7, the 4<sup>th</sup> Divisional cinema was relocated 17 times and established in 16 different locations roughly stretching over 70 miles from Proven in Belgium, southwards to the Somme Valley, following for the most part the curvature and boundaries of the front line itself. Importantly, the choice of venue in this instance was tailored specifically for the parent Division, relocating alongside the Division as it was deployed and stationed elsewhere



Fig. 2.7: Map showing the locations of cinemas established by the 4<sup>th</sup> Division (in sequence) in relation to the front line, 1914-1918.

across the Western front, a practice which was largely representative of most B.E.F. cinemas.

Consequently, it could be tempting to argue that ‘fixed’ cinemas were not a feature of frontline exhibition, given the frequent relocation of cinematic venues recorded by the 4<sup>th</sup> Division and others. Indeed, rather than a cinema ‘relocating’, is it not more simple to claim that it was the personnel, projection equipment and films which relocated and not the venue itself, mirroring the sort of itinerant exhibition practices of the turn of the century and onwards? Whilst such a point is valid, it is important to distinguish between the exhibition practices of fixed cinemas (however fleetingly) and mobile cinemas within the microcosm of front line exhibition practices.

Indeed, even if a military cinema's residence only lasted a month at a certain venue, the operational practices of the fixed front line cinema differ from that of the mobile cinema in its ambition and engagement.

One such example is the mobile cinema of the 1<sup>st</sup> Division. First acquiring projection equipment in late 1917, the 1<sup>st</sup> Division established a fixed Divisional cinema in August in what was described by Divisional records as the 'Cinema Hangar', which reportedly boasted a seating capacity of 600.<sup>29</sup> By October, however, the Divisional cinema appears to have changed its function, now described by the 'Notice' section of the Divisional Routine Order published on 3 October 1917 as the 'Divisional Mobile Cinema'. In the given week, rather than one fixed location, the 1<sup>st</sup> Divisional Mobile cinema advertised separate and geographically remote performances on separate days for: the Divisional Supply Column, Divisional H.Q., the Third Brigade Transport Lines and a venue named the 'CASINO'.<sup>30</sup> From this point forward, the 1<sup>st</sup> Division's mobile cinema, rather than staying put, toured around the multitude of camps in which different components of the Division (brigades, battalions etc.) were stationed, screening films in the open air, rest areas, hospital camps and local Y.M.C.A. huts alike. With a body of men amounting to somewhere in the region of 20,000, a single Divisional cinema had thousands of potential spectators to cater for, but significant portions of that Division may have been deployed in locations far away from Divisional HQ. Through the provision of mobile cinemas, Armies, Corps and Divisions enabled cinema entertainment to reach its disparate component formations.<sup>31</sup> As the Quartermaster Diary for the 38<sup>th</sup> Division notes, their Divisional cinema was purchased

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<sup>29</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/1236, 1<sup>st</sup> Division Routine Orders, 17 and 21 August 1917.

<sup>30</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/1237, 1<sup>st</sup> Division Routine Order, 3 October 1917.

<sup>31</sup> Refer to Appendix 1 for an overview of Fixed and Mobile cinemas.



Fig. 2.8: A postcard showing Poperinge's town square filled with British soldiers. Author's Collection.

and implemented 'to be of a mobile nature so as to provide entertainment *for all the troops* in the Division'.<sup>32</sup> As such the B.E.F.'s operation of cinemas evidently attempted to cater for the situation at hand, utilising mobile cinemas to *bring* cinema entertainment to temporary venues for soldiers situated in far off, potentially isolated billets and camps rather than remain in a single fixed location.

The actual locations in which cinemas were established were also of importance. For example, the Divisional cinema established in Poperinge (alternatively spelled 'Poperinghe' during the war), Belgium, by the 6<sup>th</sup> Division in September 1915, remained a permanent fixture of the Belgian town even after the 6<sup>th</sup> Division had moved on from the area. A central hub for British soldiers and home to the symbolic Talbot House, Poperinge became something of a haven for men on rest

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<sup>32</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/2541/2, 38<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary, 3 May 1917. My emphasis.

from the front lines of Belgium and Northern France (Fig. 2.8). Describing the town in a letter home dated 9 December 1915, John W. Gamble, a subaltern serving in the 18<sup>th</sup> Brigade, 6<sup>th</sup> Division, remarked:

I must tell you first, that there is a town (Poperinghe) about 9 miles behind, which inspite [sic] of occasional strafings [sic] and continual air-raids is quite a good place, and can be jolly gay, too. It is encumbered with own troops, and every Regiment in the B.E.F. seems to be represented there. They are well catered for, and by jove, they want it, when they come out of the firing-line anywhere near here.<sup>33</sup>

In addition to the local shops and estaminets, a military cinema was established in a hop barn close to the town's train station by the 6<sup>th</sup> Division, opening its doors sometime around 10 September 1915. A routine order from this period noted that the 'performance is continuous between the hours of 3. and 8.p.m. daily except Mondays.'<sup>34</sup>. As this example demonstrates, cinemas were not only established in remote locations, but often in the midst of towns and villages which served as rest areas for British troops, representing something akin to the urban/suburban spaces in which cinemas were traditionally found back home. For reasons which are not made explicit by the Divisional records, the barn Cinema was later taken over by the Guards Division on 15 March 1916, which continued to operate and fund the cinema as the 6<sup>th</sup> Division had done beforehand, the latter establishing a new cinema elsewhere after it had relocated. Later, the Poperinghe barn cinema would also be taken over and run for

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<sup>33</sup> Imperial War Museum Collections, Documents.12003, Papers of J. W. Gamble, letter dated 9 December 1915.

<sup>34</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/1585, 6<sup>th</sup> Division Routine Order, 10 Sep 1915.

periods of time by both the 29<sup>th</sup> and 55<sup>th</sup> Divisions.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps it was believed that a permanent cinema operated by a series of different Divisions had more use serving the Poperinge community of British soldiers and officers on rest from the front, being a highly concentrated centre of British presence and activity representing a variety of British military formations.

Concerning the types of cinemas present on the front line (fixed/mobile), it is also important to consider the apparent ebb and flow of military cinema operation. The war diaries and routine orders found in military records suggest that military cinemas in some instances did not remain open throughout the remainder of the war once established. Some, for example, traded hands, such as the aforementioned 6<sup>th</sup> Division barn cinema. Similarly, the 24<sup>th</sup> Division acquired their projection equipment from the 40<sup>th</sup> Division in October 1916.<sup>36</sup> Other cinemas appear to have spent periods of time out of action, sometimes due to equipment failure or the inability of the military formation in question to afford both time and manpower for the entertainment's operation. The war diary of the 4<sup>th</sup> Division's Quartermaster noted in April 1916, for example, that the 'cinema [was] again in working order' having not been alluded to since late January.<sup>37</sup> Likewise, having given their Poperinge cinema over to the Guards Division in March 1916, it wasn't until December of the same year that the 6<sup>th</sup> Division was able to establish a new Divisional cinema, now located roughly twenty-three miles to the south in Beuvry, France, during which time the Division had been

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<sup>35</sup> See: The National Archives, WO 95/2286/1, War Diary of the 29<sup>th</sup> Division Quartermaster General, 10 August 1916; The National Archives, WO 95/2909/2, 55<sup>th</sup> Division Routine Order, 11 November 1916.

<sup>36</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/2594/2, War Diary of the 40<sup>th</sup> Division Quartermaster General, 24 October 1916.

<sup>37</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/1450/1, War Diary of the 4<sup>th</sup> Division Quartermaster General, 12 April 1916.



Fig. 2.9: Postcard showing a Cinema housed in a dilapidated building. Courtesy of the Nicholas Hiley Collection.

involved in the battle of the Somme.<sup>38</sup> It is important, then, to recognise that military cinemas did not exist in isolation from the conflict itself and that operation was largely dependent upon the stability of their parent formations and the resources available. In other words, military cinemas did not necessarily stay open for the remainder of the war once they had been established, but had to adapt and modify their continued operation as demanded by the constraints and limitations brought about by the conflict itself.

Whilst there exists little uniformity between the physical venues used for military cinemas on the front line – barns, town halls, churches, Army huts – or the duration of their individual operation, each can be said to reflect the predominantly makeshift, utilitarian nature of venue construction or use of pre-existing venues for front line exhibition, standing in contrast to the increasingly luxurious picture ‘palaces’ found

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<sup>38</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/1586/1, 6<sup>th</sup> Division Routine Order, 17 December 1916.



back home in 'Blighty'. Indeed, many accounts of front line cinemas routinely emphasise the rudimentary nature of such venues (Fig. 2.9). As *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly* reported, '[s]ometimes the building where the pictures are shown is a primitive one'.<sup>39</sup> Elsewhere, certain front line cinemas were described as 'flimsy structures of wood and sheet iron or wood and canvas'.<sup>40</sup>

Suggesting a hierarchy of preference for the type of venue used, an article published in *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly* suggested that whilst a barn is 'often used', sometimes 'the kinema committee (usually several officers and an N.C.O., the latter an operator), is lucky and gets an empty building of generous size able to accommodate large numbers of men', presumably favouring the warmer and comparatively more comfortable conditions offered by such buildings.<sup>41</sup> The distinction between different types of venues is also foregrounded by the article's implicit comparison between a 'rough and ready' front line hut and a more sophisticated town hall commandeered by British troops and used as a cinema 'somewhere in France'.<sup>42</sup>

Inside the average military cinema, the rudimental nature of exhibition became even more apparent. Conventional seating, for example, was not often obtainable. In an article titled 'Back of the Front! A Description of Tommy's Cinema Shows', Sergeant C. G. Lilley similarly described his Divisional cinema as:

an old barn almost falling to pieces, with all the openings blocked up with sacks or anything that comes to hand that will exclude the light. The floor covered with

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<sup>39</sup> "'Firing Line" Kinemas', *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 4 January 1917, pp. 31-32 (p. 31).

<sup>40</sup> A. E. Newbould, 'The Kinema and the War. Some Reflections on my Visit to the Western Front.', *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 27 September 1917, p. 109.

<sup>41</sup> "'Firing Line" Kinemas', *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 4 January 1917, pp. 31-32 (p. 31).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

empty petrol boxes with pieces of old wood, all sizes and thicknesses, to take the place of tip-up seats.<sup>43</sup>

Elsewhere, in an article titled “Tommy” at the Pictures’ published by *Pictures and the Picturegoer* in December 1916, it was written that inside the (unidentified) Divisional cinema being profiled, there were ‘innumerable chairs (whose original homes might have been anywhere on earth, so great the variety of patterns and sizes)’.<sup>44</sup> Regardless, the interior layout of military cinemas were quite conventional, albeit on a smaller scale than domestic picture palaces. Upon entering one (unidentified) military cinema established in a barn on the front line, a correspondent for the *Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly* wrote: ‘The size of the place was about 100 feet long by 50 feet wide; a screen was stretched across the farther end, and looking to my right I observed the projector on a raised platform.’<sup>45</sup>

In some instances, cinemas were also constructed or set up to accommodate their higher paying customers, namely officers, sergeants and other men above the rank and file. For example, the aforementioned barn cinema in Poperinge went to some lengths to approximate the more luxurious elements of cinema spectatorship found in domestic theatrical venues. Writing in his diary in early 1916, Reverend W. P. G. McCormick, a Senior Chaplain of the Guards Division who had been tasked with running the newly acquired barn cinema, noted that: ‘It was really a very fine hall accommodating over a thousand, with the gallery all round, one side being used for officers and the other for sergeants. The officers could get tea in their gallery served

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<sup>43</sup> C. G. Lilley, ‘Back of the Front! A Description of Tommy’s Cinema Shows’, *The Bioscope*, 7 September 1916, p. xv.

<sup>44</sup> “Tommy” at the Pictures’, *Pictures and the Picturegoer*, 30 December 1916, p. 292.

<sup>45</sup> The Kinema at Suicide Corner. How a Front Trench Show is Run’, *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 7 February 1918, p. 47.

by two Belgian girls.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, the provision of this particular home comfort was clearly a point of pride for this particular venue; the 'Notice' section of the Guards Division Routine Order published on 25 March 1916 advertised the fact that the cinema offered 'DAINTY TEAS SERVED ON THE BALCONY FOR OFFICERS. TEAS, CAKES, CIGARETTES, etc., can be obtained by all.'<sup>47</sup> Arguably, what proves more interesting in this instance, above the actual conditions of the venue, is the fact that the type of rhetoric conventionally seen in advertising material for theatrical cinemas back home had made its way into the comparatively more conservative language and objective tone of military documentation. Such language could be seen elsewhere, such as in a Routine Order advertisement for the 4 Corps cinema, which boasted a heated venue supplied with 'New Orchestral Music !!! Up to Date Films !!!'<sup>48</sup> Such sources provide ample evidence of exhibition culture and its language blending into the day-to-day operation of the British army during the First World War.

Many accounts of front line cinemas also suggest that another vestige of theatrical exhibition practice was also carried over to the front: the use of posters advertising the venue and/or specific films adorning the building's entrance and exterior walls. One report for *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, for example, emphasises the fact that 'outside the "picture palace" there are the usual signs that "pictures are now showing."<sup>49</sup> As an example, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division produced a poster/advert for the opening of its variety performance/cinema entertainment in Ecurie, France, on 28 May 1917 (Fig. 2.10). However, such extravagances, home comforts and echoes of domestic cinemas found in venues like the 6<sup>th</sup>/Guards barn

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<sup>46</sup> Imperial War Museum Collections, Documents.12745, McCormick Diary, 23 March 1916.

<sup>47</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/1197. Guards Division Routine Order, 25 March 1916.

<sup>48</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/726/1, 4 Corps Routine Order, 3 January 1918.

<sup>49</sup> "Firing Line" Kinemas', *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 4 January 1917, pp. 31-32 (p. 32).

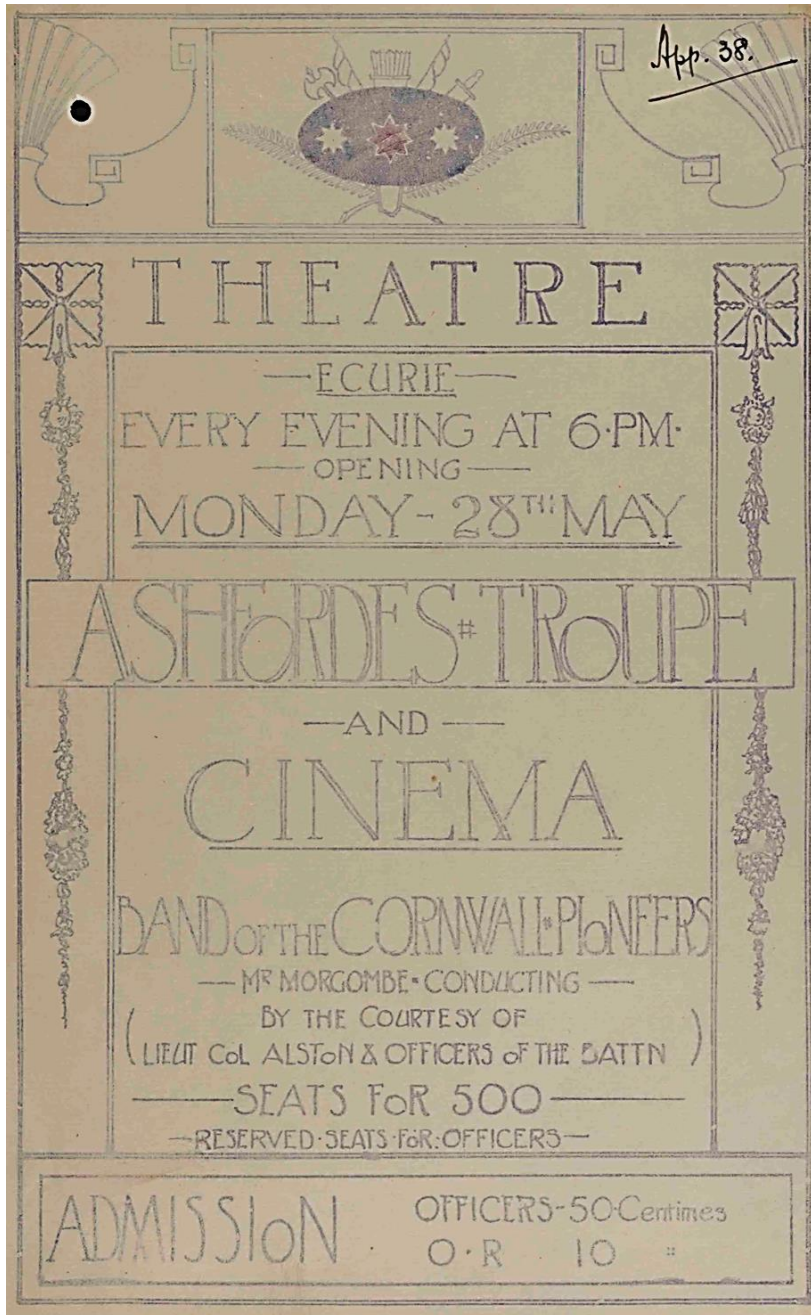


Fig. 2.10: Poster for the opening of the 2nd Division Theatre/Cinema, 28 May 1917, WO 95/1309/2.

cinema are not particularly representative of all front line cinemas, as other venues were comparatively worse off, such as the venue seen in Fig. 2.11. Another venue, the aforementioned 'Suicide Kinema', which was said to be located near 'Suicide Corner', had reportedly fared far worse within the context of the battlefield. Though still in operation, the *Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly* described how 'one corner of the building had been blown away earlier in the day by a German shell; close by the



Fig. 2.11: A still from the film *German Offensive* (produced by the Topical Film Company in 1918) showing a war-damaged cinema somewhere on the Western Front. IWM Collection, Catalogue no. IWM 188.

entrance door was a fresh shell crater large enough to bury a small cottage.<sup>50</sup> Inside, seating took the form of 'biscuit tins', 'old boxes, boards, barrows and pails'.<sup>51</sup> The war diary of the 14<sup>th</sup> Division noted that on 21 March 1918 its Divisional cinema was 'hit by a 5.9 shell [and] abandoned'.<sup>52</sup> Even the aforementioned 6<sup>th</sup>/Guards barn cinema was not immune from shelling, as reported by one soldier after the war: 'at Poperinghe they had a cinema in one of the warehouses by the station, and I went there once, and they started shelling the station and of course there was a bit of a pandemonium!'<sup>53</sup> Potentially referring to the same incident, the Reverend McCormick recorded in his

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<sup>50</sup> 'The Kinema at Suicide Corner. How a Front Trench Show is Run', *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 7 February 1918, p. 47.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/1880/2, War Diary, 21 March 1918.

<sup>53</sup> Imperial War Museum Collections, Catalogue Number 11044, John William Terrell Oral History Interview (transcribed by writer).

diary that: 'Whilst I was in the cinema on the 12<sup>th</sup> the Boche began to shell Poperinghe and I had to empty the house and tell them to go quietly and scatter in the adjoining fields, which gave me a shock as I was going home on Easter Monday.'<sup>54</sup> Generally speaking, however, although efforts were made to equip military cinemas with as many of the hallmarks of conventional theatrical exhibition as possible, the understandably limited resources of the front line environment paired with the utilitarian methods by which front line venues were constructed and operated meant that most front line cinemas contained little more than the bare essentials for exhibition. As one soldier remarked whilst describing queuing outside of a front line cinema, 'no pompous gold-braided individual stood at the door to overawe us with the palatial pretensions of the establishment. The doorkeeper was one of our own ilk, and any gold braid he may have had was worn on the left sleeve of his coat'.<sup>55</sup>

Ultimately, the venues chosen for front line exhibition represented a variety of exhibition spaces, many of which were little more than an abandoned barn or building adorned and organised with approximations of a more conventional theatrical venue's layout, amenities and decorations. The cinemas themselves were not necessarily permanent fixtures, and whilst some stayed put for a few months at a time, others were specifically designated as mobile cinemas which travelled across the front line.

### **Programmes and Films**

Unfortunately, very few of the military records consulted (Quartermaster war diaries or Routine Orders) ever recorded specific films by name. The cinema listings

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<sup>54</sup> Imperial War Museum Collections, Documents.12745, McCormick Diary, 11<sup>th</sup> April 1916 Entry.

<sup>55</sup> W. O. W., 'Rest and Recreation', *The Outpost*, 1 February 1918, p. 133.

found in the 'Notice' section of Routine Orders – what were in a sense the 'advertisements' for military cinemas – for the most part only mention screening times and prices of admission, whilst Quartermaster war diaries tend only to record the establishment/closing of a cinema alongside other operational details such as the purchase of equipment. Given the ever changing nature of the programme and the number of films shown at any one screening, it is unsurprising that military cinemas were not advertised within these sources using specific films. Such sources do, however, provide ample evidence regarding the frequency with which film programmes were screened and their duration: the vast majority of military cinemas appear to have screened programmes once or twice daily. A routine order for the 5<sup>th</sup> Divisional cinema, for example, announced that programmes were screened 'twice daily [...] commencing at 4 p.m. and 6 p.m. The duration of each will be 1½ hours.'<sup>56</sup> Some notices for military cinemas published in Routine Orders even boasted that the programme itself was frequently changed to offer new material to its audiences. The 61<sup>st</sup> Division, for example, claimed that their cinema offered a change of programme 'twice weekly, on Mondays and Thursdays'. The 1 Corps cinema similarly made the same claim for a large number of its weekly advertisements between November and December 1917, advertising a 'complete change of programme'.<sup>57</sup> How accurate these types of claims turned out to be is impossible to ascertain, although it is interesting to see another instance of conventional advertising rhetoric being reproduced here within official military documentation.

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<sup>56</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/1517, 5<sup>th</sup> Division Routine Order, 22 March 1915.

<sup>57</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/612/3, 1 Corps Routine Orders: 11 November 1917; 17 November 1917; 24 November 1917; 9 December 1917; 15 December 1917.

Fortunately, a small selection of military diaries and records do offer some insight into the selection and acquisition of films and specific titles. For example, a number of Corps and Divisional documents refer to special screenings of important British topical films such as *The Battle of the Somme* (1916) and *The German Retreat and the Battle of the Arras* (1917) which shall be discussed further in Chapter Four. For our present purposes, however, the documentation found in the Routine Orders of the 4 Corps, whilst being the only record of this type, gives a more general indication of the type of films screened in the B.E.F.'s front line cinemas. Beginning on 15 January 1918, the 4 Corps published the programmes of its weekly cinema shows for a period of over two months, ending on 18 March.<sup>58</sup> Amounting to 38 individual titles, the collected programmes published by the 4 Corps reveal clear trends in the selection and exhibition of film content for soldiers on the Western front (Table 2). Indeed, much can be ascertained from this selection. For example, 79% of the films screened were comedies, whereas only 18% were dramas and 3% cartoons. A staggering 92% of the films screened were produced in the USA, whilst 5% (2 films) were made in the UK and 3% (1 film) came from France. Two films starring Charlie Chaplin were screened (older films from his Keystone years) and in fact, the advertisement for the programme commencing 14 March 1918 refers to Chaplin by name in the space usually designated for the chosen film's genre (Fig. 2.12), perhaps the only known instance of a film personality being referred to in the B.E.F.'s Routine Orders. Although it is difficult to say with certainty where this particular military cinema sourced their films, 8 films (21%) appear to have been distributed by the Universal Film Manufacturing Company,

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<sup>58</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/726/1-3



| <u>Title</u>                                     | <u>Genre</u> | <u>Year</u> | <u>Country</u> | <u>Company</u>                  |
|--|--------------|-------------|----------------|---------------------------------|
| A Bare Living                                    | Comedy       | 1917        | USA            | Universal                       |
| A Dramatic Mistake                               | Comedy       | 1914        | USA            | Sterling Film Company           |
| A Forgotton Order [The Forgotten Train Order]    | Drama        | 1916        | USA            | Kalem Company                   |
| A Grand Old Knight [A Game Old Knight]           | Comedy       | 1915        | USA            | Keystone                        |
| Ambroses Cup of Woe                              | Comedy       | 1916        | USA            | Sennett/Triangle                |
| An Oily Scoundrel                                | Comedy       | 1916        | USA            | Sennett/Triangle                |
| At Danger's Call                                 | Drama        | 1916        | USA            | Kalem Company                   |
| Beauty and the Barge                             | Comedy       | 1914        | UK             | London Film Productions         |
| Between Midnight                                 | Comedy       | 1916        | USA            | Universal                       |
| Bombs and Bandits                                | Comedy       | 1917        | USA            | L-KO Motion Picture Company     |
| Bombs and Wheels [Mabel at the Wheel]            | Comedy       | 1914        | USA            | Keystone                        |
| Boontan Affair                                   | Drama        | 1917        | USA            | Universal                       |
| Bubbles of Trouble                               | Comedy       | 1916        | USA            | Keystone                        |
| Bull and Bullets [Bullets and Bull]              | Comedy       | 1917        | USA            | International Film Service Inc. |
| Bungling Bill's Dream                            | Comedy       | 1916        | USA            | Mutual (distributor)            |
| Capt. Bairnsfather's Cartoons (no. 5)            | Cartoon      |             |                |                                 |
| Capt. Jinks & His Wife's Husband                 | Comedy       | 1917        | USA            | Vitagraph                       |
| Cornered   | Drama        | 1910        | USA            | Thanhouser                      |
| Cupid's Rival                                    | Comedy       | 1917        | USA            | King Bee Studios                |
| Curse of a Flirting Heart                        | Comedy       | 1917        | USA            | Universal                       |
| Deacon Stop the Show                             | Comedy       | 1916        | USA            | Universal                       |
| Eat and Grow Hungry                              | Comedy       | 1916        | USA            | L-KO Motion Picture Company     |
| Footlight Faker [Footlights and Fakers]          | Comedy       | 1917        | USA            | Vitagraph                       |
| Hazards & Home Runs                              | Comedy       | 1917        | USA            | Vitagraph                       |
| Help   | Comedy       | 1916        | USA            | Metro Pictures Corp             |
| High Divers Curse                                | Comedy       | 1916        | USA            | L-KO Motion Picture Company     |
| Love and Liar                                    | Comedy       | 1916        | USA            | Universal                       |
| Max Faces the Footlights                         | Comedy       | 1910        | France         | Pathe Freres                    |
| Oh! For the Life of a Fireman                    | Comedy       | 1916        | USA            | Mutual (distributor)            |
| Secret of the Box Car                            | Drama        | 1917        | USA            | Wardour                         |
| Sweet Janitor [Potentially, Sweedie the Janitor] | Comedy       | 1916        | USA            | Universal                       |
| The Country [that] God Forgot                    | Drama        | 1916        | USA            | Selig Polyscope                 |
| The Stolen Jail                                  | Drama        | 1916        | USA            | Kalem Company                   |
| The Submarine Pirates                            | Comedy       | 1915        | USA            | Sennett/Triangle                |
| Their Quiet Honeymoon                            | Comedy       | 1915        | USA            | Universal                       |
| Very Much Married [His Trysting Place]           | Comedy       | 1914        | USA            | Keystone                        |
| Villa of [the]Movies                             | Comedy       | 1917        | USA            | Keystone                        |
| Wings and Wheels                                 | Comedy       | 1916        | USA            | Keystone                        |

Table 2: Films screened by 4 Corps cinema, 15 January – 18 March 1918.

CINEMA Programme for 14th., 15th., 16th., instant.  
LOVE AND A LIAR. (Comody)    AMBROSES CUP OF WOE. (Comody)  
HELP. (Comody)    Stolon Jail (Drama)    BOMBS AND WHEELS (Chaplin)

Fig. 2.12: Cinema Programme for 4 Corps Cinema commencing 14 March 1918. WO 95/726/3.

followed by 6 films (16%) produced by Keystone and 3 films (8%) each from Triangle, Vitagraph, L-KO Motion Picture Kompany and the Kalem Company.

Evidence for the military exhibitor's focus upon comedy films is set out directly elsewhere. For example, a Routine Order implemented by the 10 Corps titled 'Cinemas – Suggestions for Establishment of Regular Supplies of Films for Army Cinemas, Second Army Area' instructs military exhibitors selecting programmes to make certain that they are 'made up complete of from 6 to 7000 feet in length, lasting from 1¾ to 2 hours. Each programme contains five or six films. The subjects are nearly all comic or comedy of a light and amusing nature, and should prove eminently suitable for the purpose'.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, a programme produced for a Gala night programme (Fig. 2.13) held at the 6<sup>th</sup> Divisional Cinema on 27 November 1915 showcases an evident mix of comedy and drama, with films starring Charlie Chaplin, 'Fatty' Arbuckle and 'Broncho Billy' all being present.

Whilst the choice of the type of film screened for front line exhibition was relatively easy, the actual acquisition of films proved somewhat more difficult. Significantly, contemporary sources suggest that during the first few years of the war, films shown at military cinemas were often said to be of questionable quality and/or old product. In a letter published by *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, C. W.

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<sup>59</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/857/7, 10 Corps Routine Order, 9 May 1917.

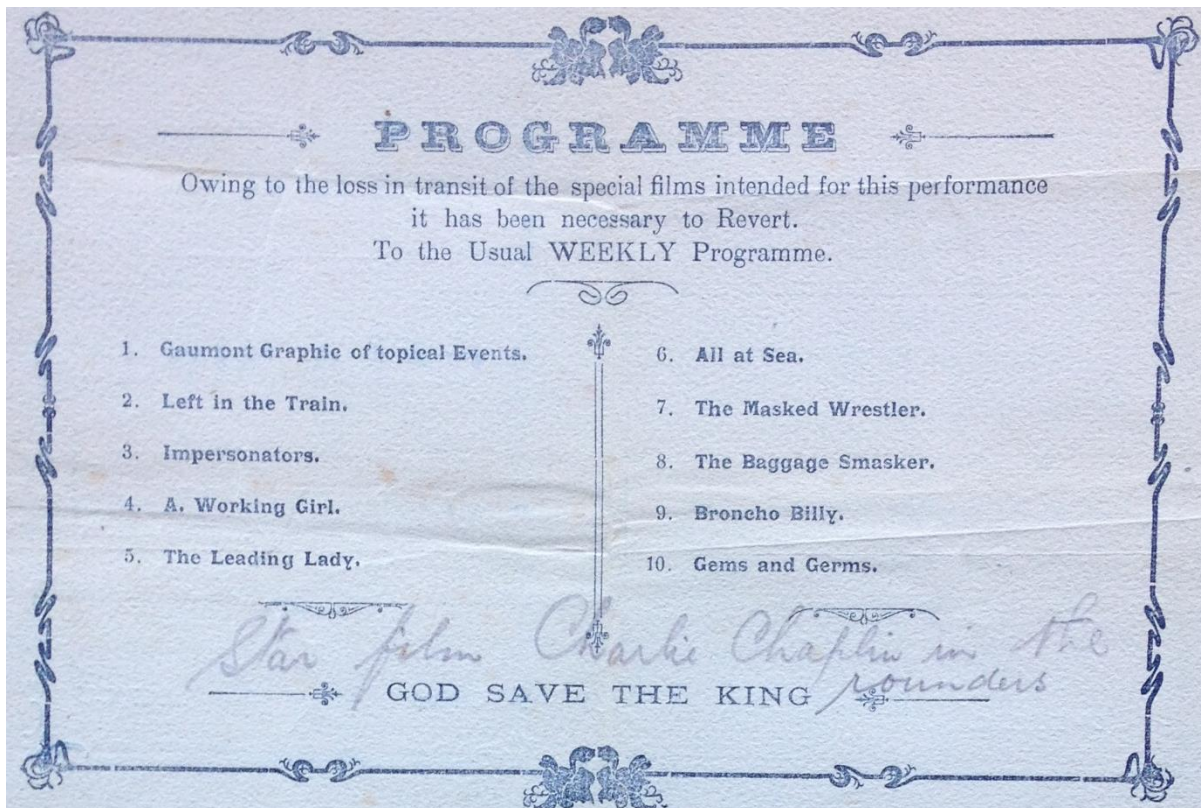


Fig. 2.13: Programme for the 6th Divisional Cinema's Gala Night entertainment, 27 November 1915. Courtesy of the Nicholas Hiley Collection.

A. Potter, a former 'electrician-operator at the Don Picture Palace, Sheffield' who found himself serving with the Royal Engineers in France and additionally tasked with the role of cinema projectionist, joked that 'some of the films shown are almost entitled to the Old Age Pension.'<sup>60</sup> Other accounts suggest that the programmes offered by some military cinemas were less than professional:

"Right! Get on with it." He gripped the handle and whirred it round for dear life. What this first picture was nobody knew: it hadn't got a title – dropped off on the way up possibly. Anyway, there was a murder in it before the first reel was through. [...] Ten minutes elapsed before the next reel was ready, then again the handle whirred. In what way this was connected with the previous reel I

<sup>60</sup> 'Weekly Notes', *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 23 November 1916, p. 3.

couldn't tell; as a matter of fact, I believe it was another picture altogether; but there were no complaints.<sup>61</sup>

The incremental development in the provision of quality product and programming for front line cinemas over the course of the war – a gradual shift from screening inferior or well-worn films to more recent releases – is hinted at in *The Bioscope's* profile of 'Battlefield Cinemas' published in October 1917. At the beginning of the war and the genesis of military cinemas:

Men went rummaging in second-hand stores and searched diligently through catalogues in quest of cheap projectors and accessories; the programs were occasionally comprised of junk films picked up cheaply in out-of-the-way shops; very rarely were the latest productions obtainable<sup>62</sup>

As the war progressed, cinemas began to screen 'all the best films – good quality copies, not the old rain-storm film, which in the early days was shipped across by the million feet.'<sup>63</sup>

Official documentation produced by the Fourth Army suggests that this may have been due to a more concerted effort on the part of military exhibitors to secure a larger supply of more recent, better quality films as the war progressed and the value of cinema entertainment for soldiers became more apparent. Indicative of this need for a more organised approach to securing films for front line exhibition, it was concluded by a representative of 3 Corps during a Fourth Army conference which took place on 26 December 1916, that the ability to secure films for military cinemas on the front line remained a challenge. It was noted that:

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<sup>61</sup> 'The Kinema at Suicide Corner', *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 7 February 1918, p. 47

<sup>62</sup> 'Battlefield Cinemas', *The Bioscope*, 4 October 1917, p. 11.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

There is great difficulty in obtaining films for Cinemas from England. The films are often a fortnight in transit each way, which means that for one week's use here they are out of the hands of the hiring firm for five weeks. This makes firms in England unwilling to undertake the supply of films and, when they do undertake it, makes them unwilling to supply good ones.

Films can be obtained in France but are not popular with the men, because the "lettering" is in French.

It is suggested that the supply of films should be undertaken by the Fourth Army, as has been done successfully in the Third Army, where this service had been organized by Major Heathcote.<sup>64</sup>

By January 1917, an unnamed officer from 3 Corps had been appointed the Fourth Army's 'Army Cinema Officer' and was sent to the UK to obtain a supply of films and establish 'favourable terms' with film distributors.<sup>65</sup> On 22 January it had been reported that a deal had been struck with a British distributor, and on 30 January it was noted that the Army Cinema Officer had returned with a new supply of films for the use of cinemas run by formations in the Fourth Army, such as the aforementioned 3 Corps, Guards Division and 4<sup>th</sup> Division cinemas.<sup>66</sup> This scheme was still in operation until at least September 1917, when it was reported that Lieutenant F. J. Dymond had been appointed the (now re-titled) Fourth Army 'Army Films Officer', who provided a supply of films from Britain stored at the 'Army Film Depot' located in the small commune of Malo-les-Bains situated in the coastal city of Dunkirk.<sup>67</sup> From here, new programmes were made available to Fourth Army cinemas twice weekly and were priced at 60

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<sup>64</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/441/5, Fourth Army Conference Notes, 26 December 1916.

<sup>65</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/442/1, Fourth Army Conference Notes, 16 January 1917.

<sup>66</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/442/1, Fourth Army Conference Notes, 30 January 1917.

<sup>67</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/443/5, Fourth Army Conference Notes, 25 September 1917.

francs per programme. This particular source represents the only significant document of this type to provide evidence of how military officials organised the acquisition of films for front line exhibition, although a variety of other minor sources similarly hint at this organisational effort.

For example, several minor sources refer to branches of Expeditionary Force Canteen (E.F.C.) serving as a repository for films sourced from Britain.<sup>68</sup> One source refers to the provision of films being orchestrated by the Army Service Corps (A.S.C.) for a specific military cinema.<sup>69</sup> Contemporary journalism also highlights the fact that military cinemas often relied upon connections with British production companies and/or distributors to provide films for front line cinemas. The 4<sup>th</sup> Division cinema, for example, appears to have been supplied with films by Hepworth Pictures, according to an article titled 'A Cinema Theatre at the Front' published in *The Bioscope* in which it was noted that Hepworth Pictures, 'a leading all-British firm of film manufacturers, at the request of military authorities, have lent, free of charge, a large selection of their films for exhibition in this picture theatre on the battlefield.'<sup>70</sup> Indeed, Hepworth Pictures would go on to proclaim that it had been the 'very first firm to send films out to France', donating to military cinemas 'an ever steady supply [of films], free of charge. Dramas, comedies, comics – all kinds.'<sup>71</sup> Other film producers and distributors were also reported as having donated films to British military cinemas throughout the war, including international companies such as Thanhouser Films Limited and Essanay, the latter enjoying the lucrative income generated from the comedian Charlie

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<sup>68</sup> See: The National Archives, WO 95/527/4, Fifth Army Routine Order, 27 February 1918; J. E. Stephens, 'With the Cinema near the Firing Line', *The Bioscope*, 28 February 1918, p. 63.

<sup>69</sup> W. Douglas Newton, 'The New Warriors: IV. – The Warriors of Laughter', *The Illustrated War News*, 24 October 1917, p. 28.

<sup>70</sup> 'A Cinema Theatre at the Front', *The Bioscope*, 4 February 1915, p. 457.

<sup>71</sup> "'Firing Line" Kinemas', *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 4 January 1917, p. 31.

Chaplin who was under contact for the company between December 1914 and December 1915.<sup>72</sup> Suggesting that programmes of donated films were circulated amongst different formations, *The Cinegoer* reported how 'every week the famous firm of Pathé turn over to them films of every description: they send, in fact, practically 100,000 feet of film to France every week. This consignment of film works its way from one division to another, from the sea right away through the long line of men'.<sup>73</sup> In contrast with the Fourth Army report cited above, one report on a military cinema even suggested that 'the picture agencies in France and England vie with each other in lending us their best and latest films.'<sup>74</sup>

When they were donated, such films were hugely appreciated by those who ran military cinemas, as well as their patrons. As Sergeant C. G. Lilley remarked in a letter to *The Bioscope*, the 'Trade in general have responded nobly in supplying films for our cinemas, and I hope they will continue to do so for such a good cause.'<sup>75</sup> Alongside the immediate impact the donation of films and equipment for military cinemas appears to have had, it should also be considered how such charity afforded participating companies a measure of good publicity value, which in turn, benefitted their own public standing and perceived war-time patriotism. Nonetheless, the ever-increasing supply of up-to-date films made available for front line cinemas as the scale of military cinemas grew and efforts were made to secure the latest films available, underlines the value of cinema entertainment for soldiers. But, as the programme of films

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<sup>72</sup> See: C. G. Lilley, 'Back of the Front! A Description of Tommy's Cinema Shows', *The Bioscope*, 7 September 1916, p. xv; 'Charlie Harasses the Enemy!', *Pictures and the Picturegoer*, 20 October 1916, p. 86.

<sup>73</sup> 'Films for the Front', *The Cinegoer*, 15 April 1916, p. 3.

<sup>74</sup> "'Tommy's" Own Kinema. Picture House Seven Miles from Firing Line.' *The Daily Mail*, 4 January 1916, p. 7.

<sup>75</sup> C. G. Lilley, 'Back of the Front! A Description of Tommy's Cinema Shows', *The Bioscope*, 7 September 1916, p. xv.

screened by the 4 Corps cinemas listed above suggests, some older favourites, such as Chaplin's 1914 release *His Trysting Place*, still found their way into programmes several years later.

### **Equipment, Projectionists and Staff**

Having decided upon a location and found a suitable supply of films to show to their soldier audiences, military cinemas still had to purchase the necessary technical equipment and find someone who knew how to operate a projector in order to run a front line cinema show. When compared with other elements of front line exhibition discussed in this chapter, relatively little information survives on the technical aspect of military cinemas, and where it does, it is often limited in detail. However, an idea of general trends can be ascertained to some degree.

It seems probable that those who worked as projectionists for front line cinemas most likely worked as a projectionist or in some technical role prior to joining the ranks. For example, C. W. A. Potter, a former projectionist from Sheffield who fulfilled the same duties for a military cinema 'somewhere in France' has already been mentioned above.<sup>76</sup> Elsewhere, the projectionist for the 4<sup>th</sup> Division's cinema in Steenwerck was none other than the official French interpreter for the Division who had been employed in a Paris cinema before the war.<sup>77</sup> Broadly speaking, it appears that any man in any role or rank would be employed as a projectionist if he had the necessary technical knowledge, such as one unnamed Sergeant documented by *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, seen 'tinkering with the machine' before he 'gripped the handle and

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<sup>76</sup> 'Weekly Notes', *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 23 November 1916, p. 3.

<sup>77</sup> 'A Cinema Theatre at the Front', *The Bioscope*, 4 February 1915, p. 457.



whirred it round for dear life'.<sup>78</sup> Calls for projectionists can be found in War Diaries and Routine Orders, such as 10 Corps call for a 'Cinema Operator' in its Routine Order of 22 December 1917, or the 14<sup>th</sup> Division's similar request, which read: 'A Cinema Operator is required to work the Divisional Cinema; names and qualifications will be forwarded through the usual channels to reach Divisional Hqrs [sic]'.<sup>79</sup> Tellingly, the 14<sup>th</sup> Division's call for a new projectionist marked the first reference to its Divisional cinema since its previous location had been struck by German artillery and abandoned some four months prior.<sup>80</sup> Perhaps nothing more than a simple coincidence, but the potential ramifications suggested by this request undoubtedly reflects the fact that the war drew no boundaries and projectionists were as vulnerable to the onslaught of the conflict as everybody else. Alongside projectionists, military cinemas would have also employed men for various other roles. The 'staff' of the 92<sup>nd</sup> Motor Transport Company cinema (Fig. 2.14) provides an idea of the scale of operation behind front line exhibition. Alongside the man holding the projector whom it may be assumed was the outfit's projectionist (centre right), nine other men are featured in the photo. In the dead centre we can see a man (looking away from the photographer) standing next to a ticket box, holding out a ticket stub (presumably the cashier), whilst behind him appears a man standing next to some piece of electrical machinery (potentially the group's electrician/technician). Other than those identified, it is impossible to ascertain what roles these men were given within the cinema's operation, although it is possible to speculate that they may have been musicians, ushers or a compère.

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<sup>78</sup> 'The Kinema at Suicide Corner. How a Front Trench Show is Run.', *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 7 February 1918, p. 47.

<sup>79</sup> The National Archives: WO 95/859/9, 10 Corps Routine Order 22 December 1917; WO 95/1880/3, 14<sup>th</sup> Division Routine Order, 6 July 1918.

<sup>80</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/1880/3, 14<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary, 21 March 1918.



Fig. 2.14: Photo showing the staff of the 92nd Motor Transport Company Cinema, c.1919. Courtesy of the Nicholas Hiley Collection.



Fig. 2.15: Two British soldiers standing beside a projector (most likely a Pathé 1913 model) c.1916. Courtesy of the Bill Douglas Cinema Museum, University of Exeter. EXE BD 84481.

Regarding the equipment itself, a number of resources refer to the purchase of technical equipment and projectors, albeit only in basic terms. From such sources we can deduce that the purchase of projection equipment required a concerted effort on the part of the military, requiring travel and expenses to French or Belgian cities further behind the lines where such items were sold (if they hadn't been purchased in Britain and transported to the front itself). On Easter Monday 1916, the war diary of the 38<sup>th</sup>



Fig. 2.16: Photo showing the Cavalry Divisional cinema's portable dynamo, c.1918. Courtesy of the Nicholas Hiley Collection.

Division recorded that 'Major H.M. Pryce-Jones returned from Paris, having bought a Cinematograph Machine. Special permission was obtained from the P.M., First Army, to send a lorry to fetch it from Paris'.<sup>81</sup> Similarly, the 29<sup>th</sup> Division purchased their projection equipment in Paris in August 1916.<sup>82</sup> A variety of projector brands and models appear to have been represented on the front, with Power's, Pathé, Butcher,

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<sup>81</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/2541/1, 38<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary, 24 April 1916.

<sup>82</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/2286/1, War Diary of the 29<sup>th</sup> Division Quartermaster General, 10 August 1916.

Brockliss and Gaumont all being companies mentioned by military sources or contemporary articles in relation to their use in military cinemas.<sup>83</sup> 1 Corps, for example, used a Gaumont projector powered by a 110 volt dynamo which had an estimated projection distance of 100 metres.<sup>84</sup> J. E. Stephens, a military cinema petrol-driven, 24 horse power dynamo which 'works very smoothly and can be relied on in every way'.<sup>85</sup> Another military cinema described in *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly* reportedly used a Pathé projector, probably similar to the one seen in Fig. 2.15. In fact, a Pathé projector was probably one of the best candidates for front line exhibition: not only could projectors be acquired locally from the Paris-based company, but their models were described as 'light weight, but [of] strong construction', necessary attributes for use within the demanding environment of the front line.<sup>86</sup> As these sources suggest, in most cases such projectors would have been powered by petrol-run portable dynamos (Fig. 2.16), rather than utilising a mains supply like conventional theatrical venues, but apart from this, military cinemas approximated the setups of their small-mid range domestic theatrical counterparts quite closely.

Projectors such as these were no small investment, costing somewhere in the region £30-£50 (approximately £2,600-£4,400 in 2017) excluding the cost of the various other technical elements and resources needed for even the most simple of

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<sup>83</sup> See: 'Battlefield Cinema', *The Bioscope*, 4 October 1917, p. 11; C. G. Lilley, 'Back of the Front!', *The Bioscope*, 7 September 1916, p. xv; The National Archives, WO 95/614/3, 1 Corps Routine Order, 29 April 1918.

<sup>84</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/614/3, 1 Corps Routine Order, 29 April 1918.

<sup>85</sup> J. E. Stephens, 'With the Cinema near the Firing Line', *The Bioscope*, 28 February 1918, p. 63.

<sup>86</sup> Colin N. Bennett, *The Guide to Kinematography: For Camera Men, Operators and all who "Want to Know"* (London: E.T. Heron & Co., Ltd., 1917), p. 165.

setups for exhibition, not to mention the films themselves.<sup>87</sup> That over 50 different British military formations allocated funds to purchase the equipment needed for front line exhibition attests to the wider incorporation and perceived value of the medium within military operation, particularly when compared to cheaper/free forms of entertainment. Money, however, was a necessary resource for the operation of military cinemas on the front, and it is towards this subject that we shall now turn.

### **Admission Prices and Financing**

Whilst some cinemas on the front line were free for soldiers to enter, like those run by the Y.M.C.A., military cinemas did, for the most part, charge an admission fee to their spectators. However, it should be understood that this was not straightforward profiteering, but a moderate attempt to recover the cost of establishing such entertainments and to guarantee their continued inclusion within military operation as the war progressed.

Many B.E.F. cinemas appear to have first been established using some portion of military funds allocated for the provision of a specific formation's entertainment and supplies.<sup>88</sup> A memo found in the 4<sup>th</sup> Division's Quartermaster diary dated eight months after their Divisional cinema had first been established, for example, states that both the Divisional cinema and other unidentified 'institutes', presumably a canteen or concert party, 'were started by an advance of 2000 francs from Divisional Funds. [...] The Cinema, which is installed at Sarton, has paid for the "Palace" in which it is

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<sup>87</sup> *Walturdaw Bioscopes: Price List of Everything Required for the Bioscope Business from the Theatre to the Films*, The Bill Douglas Cinema Museum, item no. EXE BD 19760.

<sup>88</sup> A. E. Newbould, 'The Kinema and the War. Some Reflections on my Visit to the Western Front.', *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 27 September 1917, p. 109.

installed, and 1500 francs profit have been paid in.<sup>89</sup> The 55<sup>th</sup> Division similarly started their cinema using Divisional funds, although part of this fund was supplied by a donation of £500 through the Lord Derby Fund with the ambition to form a 'Divisional Comforts Fund', which allocated £100 of this sum specifically to the 'Entertainment fund for the purpose of purchasing Theatrical Outfit, Cinema plant, etc.', the rest being given to the general Canteen Fund.<sup>90</sup>

Of course, much of the money needed for a military cinema to operate was accumulated through an admission charge for its patrons. Consulting the surviving war diaries and routine orders that include details regarding the prices of admission for Divisional cinemas, the first obvious point to be made is the difference in prices of admission between officers and other ranks. The average price for admission to military cinemas, appears to be around 30 centimes for men and 1 franc for officers. Holding a higher rank and earning a much larger salary, officers were clearly expected to pay more than the rank and file for entry, although in some cases, this would afford them superior seating, perhaps in the front row or, as seen in the Poperinge barn cinema, in a specially reserved gallery. Privates, however, would pay less, somewhere in the region of between 10 to 50 centimes. As an example, the aforementioned 4<sup>th</sup> Divisional Cinema, initially located in the Steenwerck Town Hall, charged officers 1 franc, whilst they charged men 50 centimes for admission.

To put this into perspective, an infantry private serving on the front line was paid on average the lowly sum of 1 shilling per day, roughly equating to just over a franc.<sup>91</sup> As the war historian Richard Holmes has noted: 'men looking for food and drink just

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<sup>89</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/1449/2, 4<sup>th</sup> Division Routine Order, 20 September 1915.

<sup>90</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/2908/1, 55<sup>th</sup> Division Memo, 'Lord Derby Fund', 13 March 1916.

<sup>91</sup> Holmes, *Tommy: The British Soldier on the Western Front*, pp. xxvi-xxvii.

behind the lines were usually short of cash, and found a wide range of estaminets which met their needs by providing the staple of egg and chips with white wine or (notoriously watery) beer for around 1 franc'.<sup>92</sup> For men on rest from the trenches in towns behind the lines where the price of a single meal could amount to that day's pay, a trip to the cinema such as the Guards' Barn Cinema in Poperinge (which charged 30 centimes for admission) could cost a substantial fraction of a budget which would otherwise be (perhaps better) spent on food and drink.<sup>93</sup>

Some found the existence of an admission charge problematic. As one soldier, W. M. Peto, wrote in a letter home, about a 'travelling' cinema established near to where he was stationed, '[t]hey are charging for admission, which considering it is run by soldiers, on a W. D. lorry, seems rather a shame.'<sup>94</sup> Nevertheless, the admission charge did not stop Peto from attending. Even if some took issue with the principal of charging for admission, the cinemas themselves were enormously popular, with most accounts of military cinemas making some mention of the fact that they were often packed to capacity or even had to turn people away. Indeed, the Reverend McCormick recorded in his diary that at one screening at the Guard's Cinema in Poperinge, 'we had to shut the doors because the house was too packed to let anyone else in. That meant a good deal [,] as I see in another letter that 1,190 officers and men paid for admission'.<sup>95</sup> The fact, therefore, that men were ready and willing to part with what little money they may have had suggests much about the importance and popularity of the cinema for them.

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 594-595.

<sup>93</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/1197, Guards Division Routine Order, 26 March 1916.

<sup>94</sup> Liddle Collection, LIDDLE/WW1/GS/1256, Papers of W. M. Peto, letter dated 5 April 1915.

<sup>95</sup> Imperial War Museum Collections, Documents.12745, McCormick Diary, 1 April 1916.



Some (if not all) B.E.F. cinemas also appear to have benefited from the relaxation of local tax laws. As reported by the 10 Corps, French law dictated that a tax could 'be levied on the prices of seats at all entertainments', but French authorities had decided that 'if money is devoted to charitable purposes an exemption can be granted to such entertainments conducted by the British Army, as entertainments organised for the benefit of Charity authorised by the French Home Secretary are exempted from the Tax.'<sup>96</sup> This, however, was on the stipulation that members of the local civilian population living in proximity to military cinemas further back behind the lines were not admitted (as some appear to have been in a few instances), leading to an advisory circular memo which appeared in a number of formation diaries which read: 'All films procured on hire from the [Expeditionary Force Canteen] are originally purchased under the guarantee that they shall only be shown to the Military Forces, and that if civilians are admitted to any Cinema Hall in which E.F.C. films are shown the guarantee is infringed, and further supply of films will not be forthcoming.'<sup>97</sup>

Unfortunately, only snippets of information pertaining to the actual financial aspects of military cinemas (rather than prolonged/continuous coverage) have survived in the diaries of B.E.F. Quartermasters, but from these few instances it is possible to ascertain some idea of their relative success and popularity. For example, a single balance sheet for the 1<sup>st</sup> Division's cinema for the month of November, 1917, is present in the 1<sup>st</sup> Division's Quartermaster diary. For that month, the Divisional cinema took 1258.70 francs, whilst only spending 320.00 francs on a number of items

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<sup>96</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/857/2, 10 Corps Routine Order, 15 March 1917.

<sup>97</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/527/4, Fifth Army Routine Order, 27 February 1918. See also: WO 95/899/3 13 Corps Routine Order, 25 February 1918; WO 95/379/3, Third Army Routine Order, 1 March 1918. For examples of civilian attendees, see: WO 95/2541/4, 38<sup>th</sup> Division Adjutant and Quartermaster War Diary, 18 October 1918: 'Children at Bertry given a free cinema show and tea party'; WO 95/2770/1, 49<sup>th</sup> Division Adjutant and Quartermaster War Diary, 31 December 1916: 'Preparations made to give cinematograph show to French children on 1<sup>st</sup> Jany [sic] 1917'.

(300 francs of which were said to have been spent on films), leaving a balance of 938.70 francs which was paid into the 'canteen fund'.<sup>98</sup> From this, we can deduce even more detail. For example, even though it would be impossible to determine the exact demographic make-up of the Divisional cinema's audiences in this instance, if we take the estimated ratio of 1 officer for every 30 men serving on the front line as a basis, for the month of November 1917, we can estimate that the 1<sup>st</sup> Divisional cinema attracted around 3 officers and just over 400 men daily (spread over two daily programmes), based on the price of admission for each rank.<sup>99</sup> The 49<sup>th</sup> Division cinema offers a similar source at a similar time, recording takings of 1,954.90 francs for the month of August 1917, during which time 28 documented individual screenings took place, but were charged at the admission higher price of 1 franc for officers and 50 centimes for other ranks.<sup>100</sup> Using the same calculation, we can estimate that this cinema attracted an average attendance per performance of around 2 officers and 135 men, suggesting a smaller venue or more limited scale of operation when compared to the 1<sup>st</sup> Division cinema, despite the larger takings recorded by the 49<sup>th</sup> Division.

A balance sheet found in the 1<sup>st</sup> Division's Quartermaster diary also elucidates some further details. The statement of the Divisional account for organised entertainments – the cinema, concert parties, sports, and the Divisional band – for the year July 1917 to June 1918 records that the cinema took a total of 7,683.05 francs in admission charges.<sup>101</sup> In this case it is interesting to note that the cinema was reported to have taken more than the Divisional concert party which, it should be noted, charged

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<sup>98</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/1237, 1<sup>st</sup> Division Routine Order, 4 December 1917.

<sup>99</sup> Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (London: Reaktion Books, 1996), p. 112.

<sup>100</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/2771/1, 49<sup>th</sup> Division Routine Order, 3 September 1917.

<sup>101</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/1238/1, 1<sup>st</sup> Division Routine Order, 14 August 1918.

roughly the same price for admission but amounted to only 4,583.60 francs in takings for the year.<sup>102</sup> Similarly, the 49<sup>th</sup> Divisional cinema recorded that its 'cash in hand' credit as it stood only a few months away from the end of the war on 11 September 1918, amounted to 1,953.75 francs, whereas their concert party's account only stood at 572.85 francs, despite both entertainments charging the same price for admission and scheduled with the same regularity.<sup>103</sup>

Despite the historical emphasis on the supposed popularity of concert parties and musical performances on the front, it would appear that statistically speaking, the 1<sup>st</sup> and 49<sup>th</sup> Divisional cinemas proved far more popular than their concert parties, although, admittedly these two examples can't necessarily be used to determine a broader pattern. Comparatively speaking, it should also be stated that military cinemas' profit margins were often very slim, with 7,383.45 francs being marked as expenditure for the 1<sup>st</sup> Division cinema – '[e]xpenses include the purchase of Pathé Engine, the hire of Films and payment for petrol' – amounting to 96% of the profits taken over the year.<sup>104</sup> Other military cinemas for which financial information has survived suggest that for the most part, the cinema recovered its costs and made some profit. For example, a surviving audit board report on the Divisional accounts of the 24<sup>th</sup> Division for the month of October 1917, note that the institution's expenses amounted to 465.80 francs whilst its takings totalled 857.25 francs. Similarly, the 4<sup>th</sup> Division was said to have effectively paid for itself within the first eight months of operation, as noted at the beginning of this section.

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/2771/1, 49<sup>th</sup> Division Routine Order, WO 95/2771/4, 49<sup>th</sup> Division Routine Order, 11 September 1918.

<sup>104</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/1238/1, 1<sup>st</sup> Division Routine Order, 14 August 1918.

Nevertheless, such takings were not thought of as simple profit, but the potential to continue a military cinema's operation on a self-supporting basis for the benefit of its patrons, not for any commercially driven proprietor. Money earned by B.E.F. institutions were in most cases put back into the B.E.F. institute's fund or distributed amongst units of the individual formation itself for their own funds, as appears to have been the case with the 4<sup>th</sup> Division.<sup>105</sup> As A. E. Newbould remarked in *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*: 'I do not for a moment suggest that the question is one of cash only. I believe the value of the kinema to the British Army cannot be reckoned in any cash balance sheet.'<sup>106</sup> Nonetheless, by analysing such sources, it becomes evident that such statistics further validate the popularity of such cinemas amongst soldiers.

### **Musical Accompaniment and the Soundscapes of Front Line Exhibition**

One final element of front line exhibition to consider is the presence (or absence) of live musical accompaniment as well as the general sound space found in front line venues. Many primary sources suggest – perhaps, surprisingly – that musical accompaniment for front line exhibition did occur. However, like nearly every other aspect of front line exhibition, live musical accompaniment appears to have been a make-shift, often rudimentary affair, largely dictated by the resources (i.e. instruments) and talent available (Fig. 2.17).

Much like the films that were screened, pianos and other musical instruments were sourced from a variety of locations. In an article published in the *Illustrated War*

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<sup>105</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/1449/2, 4<sup>th</sup> Division Routine Order, 22 December 1915.

<sup>106</sup> A. E. Newbould, 'The Kinema and the War. Some Reflections on my Visit to the Western Front.', *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 27 September 1917, p. 109.



Fig. 2.17: Photo of the 31st Divisional Motor Transport Company Cinema, c.1917. Members of the company can be seen holding violins, a trumpet and a clarinet. Courtesy of the Nicholas Hiley Collection.

News commending the efforts undertaken by the A.S.C. to amuse front line troops, we can see how obtaining such equipment was often dependent upon a certain type of ‘resourcefulness’:

stages and their concert-halls, if any, are commandeered, hired, borrowed, or “lifted” by the A.S.C. – and the A.S.C. also has spirited up a piano from the barren and houseless wastes of France for their benefit.

All the best pianos are unearthed by the A.S.C. They have an instinct for them – unless, perhaps, they also have special piano-diviners in their ranks.<sup>107</sup>

In one of *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly’s* feature reports on front line cinemas, it was noted how the conditions of exhibition benefited greatly from the ever welcome inclusion of musical accompaniment, claiming that when a piano or other

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<sup>107</sup> ‘The New Warriors: IV. – The Warriors of Laughter’, *Illustrated War News*, Oct 24 1917, p. 28.

instrument could be obtained, it added 'greatly to the attractiveness of the performance.'<sup>108</sup> Of course, it wasn't enough to simply procure such instruments, it was also necessary to find performers skilled enough to play them. As one report on the evolution of front line cinemas published towards the end of the war argued, expectations were high for the standard of musical accompaniment for front line cinemas:

With the bettering of conditions of projection, a demand for more talented and capable musical accompaniment became pronounced. Vampists [improvisers] of limited repertoire and musicians with no idea of appropriateness were discouraged, and other claimants to the honours invited to justify themselves. Some failed, but others succeeded, with a corresponding increase in the efficiency of the undertaking, whilst in other cases, the services of the regimental band were obtained [...]<sup>109</sup>

Elsewhere, a satirical article published in *Pictures and the Picturegoer* in 1917 purportedly reporting on the experience of front line cinemas reflected on the sorry state of a cinema in which the accompaniment was provided by a 'fat man with a wheezy hurdy-gurdy', a 'red-haired sapper who was to operate on the mouth organ' and another musician whose only apparent suitability for the role was his 'extended experience' as a 'vendor of "chocklits" in the village cinema' back home.<sup>110</sup> In another military cinema it was remarked how: '[a]t one corner of the platform a Tommy was trying to induce a much worn piano to be melodious, and his efforts so far as noise

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<sup>108</sup> "Firing Line" Kinemas', *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 4 Jan 1917, p. 31.

<sup>109</sup> F.L.H., 'The Growth of the Army Kinema', *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 24 October 1918, p. 76.

<sup>110</sup> Cecil Ayres, 'Fairyland', *Pictures and the Picturegoer*, 21 July 1917, p. 131.

was concerned were very successful.<sup>111</sup> Even in such circumstances, it would appear, spectators expected a certain standard of exhibition, approximate to that experienced in domestic cinemas.

Interestingly, the desire for suitable musical accompaniment for military cinemas can be seen in official documentation from certain Divisions. For example, the 12<sup>th</sup> Division publicised their need for pianists to accompany their cinema programmes in their own Routine Orders, where it was stated that '[v]olunteers as pianists in this theatre are badly wanted to take a turn in reliefs daily from 5 – 7.30 p.m. Any men willing to assist should send in their names to the A.A.&Q.M.G., Divisional Headquarters.'<sup>112</sup> It is uncertain whether this need was fulfilled, but the 12<sup>th</sup> Division cinema did continue operating regardless. The 1<sup>st</sup> Division, in a Routine Order dated 21 August 1917 (less than a week after the Divisional Cinema had itself been established), instructed that each Brigade in attendance 'will provide its own Band' to accompany their individually scheduled screenings.<sup>113</sup> One cinema that did succeed in finding appropriate accompaniment was the 4<sup>th</sup> Divisional Cinema, which reportedly employed the talents of a pianist who had been 'a professional picture pianist at a British cinema before joining the army.'<sup>114</sup> His 'accompaniments to the films', it was written, 'are much enjoyed.'<sup>115</sup>

A more detailed insight into the practice of providing musical accompaniment for films within the context of the front line has fortunately survived in the diary of Alfred Marsh, who served as an engineer or "Sapper" for the Royal Engineers on the Western

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<sup>111</sup> 'The Kinema at Suicide Corner', *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 7 February 1918, p. 47.

<sup>112</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/1829/1, 12<sup>th</sup> Division Routine Order, December 15<sup>th</sup> 1915.

<sup>113</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/1236/6, 1<sup>st</sup> Division Routine Order, August 21<sup>st</sup> 1917.

<sup>114</sup> 'A Cinema at the Front', *The Bioscope*, 4 February 1915, p. 457.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

front. Stationed in and around the Somme region in early June 1916, Marsh recorded in his diary how a theatre had recently opened in a nearby town hall. Evidently a keen musician, who had already played for Y.M.C.A. concert parties and other events throughout his war service, Marsh's diary reveals that he soon secured the job of pianist at this new cinema. Initially, Marsh was simply recruited on the spot – 'they fetched me out of the audience to [illegible] play for the pictures' – before being asked to take on the role permanently, a role for which he was paid 2 francs 50 centimes per performance, with performances taking place two or three times during the average week.<sup>116</sup>

Marsh's diary reveals the make-do nature of musical accompaniment for front line cinemas, with the writer frequently reflecting upon the lack of resources – 'no [sheet] music – rather a job to play 2 hours from memory' – or inadequacy of the equipment at hand – 'I think the Piano now wants tuning!' Marsh's diary also suggests that his playing ability was also largely dictated by his mood. On 7 July 1916 Marsh recorded how he 'was asked to play for pictures again tonight but cannot say I did very well as I have had a splitting headache all evening.'<sup>117</sup> In contrast, two days prior to the aforementioned entry Marsh reflected on how he 'felt in the mood for playing and got on okay', concluding that it had been a 'Good show'.<sup>118</sup>

Other anecdotes recorded by Marsh bring to light some rather interesting details concerning the conditions and practices of musical accompaniment for front line exhibition. On one occasion, for example, Marsh notes with some embarrassment how the

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<sup>116</sup> Liddle Collection, LIDDLE/WW1/GS/1053, Diary of A. Marsh, July 5<sup>th</sup> 1916.

<sup>117</sup> Liddle Collection, LIDDLE/WW1/GS/1053, Diary of A. Marsh, July 7<sup>th</sup> 1916.

<sup>118</sup> Liddle Collection, LIDDLE/WW1/GS/1053, Diary of A. Marsh, July 5<sup>th</sup> 1916.



evening passes very quickly. at the end I was not aware the pictures had finished + a picture of the King thrown on the screen as I was busy playing Bags whilst the audience were standing up waiting for “The King”!!<sup>119</sup>

Even in such circumstances, it is interesting to see how conventions normally found within commercial and domestic exhibition venues – i.e. a night of entertainment concluding with a rendition of ‘God Save the King’ – were carried over to the front line, an element corroborated by a number of other sources.<sup>120</sup> Another incident recorded by Marsh suggests that the selection of song or composition was often a considered choice, even if used for ironic effect. Describing a show on 10 October 1916, Marsh writes how:

The last picture by some accident was put in the wrong way round + in changing the film it caught light. [A] crowd of excitable french children started panic but there was nothing to be alarmed about – I couldn’t resist playing ‘Keep the Home fires burning!’ which was taken up & “King” finished the show.<sup>121</sup>

Other musical accompanists for front line cinemas also appear to have shaped their choice of song/composition according to the immediate contexts of exhibition and the content of the films being screened. For example, at one cinema described by the *Liverpool Daily Post*, ‘pictures of Verdun and the fighting going on about it’ were accompanied by one soldier on the piano and another on the ‘violincello’ [sic] who ‘showing the appreciation of the ordinary French soldier for what is fine in art and music’, played ‘one or two classical pieces’ that were ‘most vigorously applauded.’<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Liddle Collection, LIDDLE/WW1/GS/1053, Diary of A. Marsh, 20 July 1916. The piece referred to as “Bags” by Marsh could potentially be the popular music hall song ‘Pack Up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit-Bag’ which became a common marching song amongst British soldiers during the war.

<sup>120</sup> See: ‘The Kinema at Suicide Corner’, *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 7 February 1918, p. 47: ‘The film ended, the lights went up, the dear old piano played “God Save the King”’.

<sup>121</sup> Liddle Collection, LIDDLE/WW1/GS/1053, Diary of A. Marsh, 10 Oct 1916. [Sic].

<sup>122</sup> Frederick H. Allen, ‘Impregnable Verdun’, *Liverpool Daily Post*, 23 June 1916, p. 4.

In this instance, the choice of accompanying music was clearly dictated by the apparent seriousness of the content being screened and the desire to present such images with the utmost respect.

However, the soundscape and aural environment of the front line cinema should also be understood as extending beyond the isolated element of musical accompaniment. One of the earliest articles on front line exhibition, a report on a base camp cinema in France published in the *Daily Mail* in December 1914 describes how the men “sing and shout to the piano, whistle, and thoroughly enjoy themselves’ whilst the ‘pictures are shown in a large shed’.<sup>123</sup> Spectator noises and intrusions appear to have been a common, if not, welcome part of the front line exhibition experience. Laughter, heckles, jokes, applause and requests appear to have dominated the aural environment, a dynamic that was perhaps to have been expected given the demographic in question, free as they were from certain societal conventions. As Lise Shapiro Sanders has written, the shift in audience behaviour and regulation between the 1890s and 1910s was in some part influenced by ‘the wide-spread effort to “improve” the moral status of working class entertainments by encouraging women and children to join the audiences, thereby, differentiating new forms of leisure like the cinema from older ones like the pub.’<sup>124</sup> In contrast to cinemas back home, the front line cinema was an undeniably male-dominated space, unhindered by the restraints of social etiquette or the inclination to behave respectably in the company of female audience members. “Give us Charlie,” shouted someone below’ – ‘Terse were the

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<sup>123</sup> ‘Kinema Show at the Front’, *Daily Mail*, 31 December 1914, p. 3. My emphasis.

<sup>124</sup> Lise Shapiro Sanders, “‘Indecent Incentives to Vice’: Regulating Films and Audience Behaviour from the 1890s to the 1910s’, in Andrew Higson (ed.), *Young and Innocent? The Cinema in Britain 1896-1930* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2002), pp. 97-110 (p. 97).

remarks hurled at the poor man behind the scenes [...] “Get a move on” – “Well, boys, the shells are coming nearer, are you going out?” [...] a unanimous shout of “No”<sup>125</sup>

Spectator noises and intrusions were not only made to prompt a lazy projectionist or make requests between reels, but would accompany the film itself:

There was silence, deep silence, while the plot of the “feature” film gradually developed. The silence during the love-scenes could be felt, and when the villain began his deadly work the hisses were loud and prolonged, ending in final cheers when his machinations were overcome by the manly hero.<sup>126</sup>

Such an environment would in part counter the conceptualisation of sound space in early exhibition venues during the 1910s as put forward by Jean Châteauevert and André Gaudreault in their essay 'The Noises of Spectators, or the Spectator as Additive to the Spectacle', which argues that the sound space of early cinema exhibition gradually transitioned from an ‘unstructured’ to a ‘structured sound space’.<sup>127</sup>

It is a time during which the agents typical of the sound space of *first period cinema* [prior to 1908] were diverted from their original function as additives to the spectacle of moving pictures into instruments in the structuration of the sound space. Besides the fact that just their presence in the theater implies a public space at the opposite pole from the intimate space later required by the institution, these agents contributed to the establishment of rules and customs surrounding film screenings. Spectators were invited to remain silent during the

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<sup>125</sup> See: ‘The Kinema at Suicide Corner’, *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 7 February 1918, p. 47; “Tommy” at the Pictures’, *Pictures and the Picturegoer*, 30 December 1916, p. 292; “Tommy’s” Own Kinema.’ *The Daily Mail*, 4 January 1916, p. 7.

<sup>126</sup> “Tommy” at the Pictures’, *Pictures and the Picturegoer*, 30 December 1916, p. 292.

<sup>127</sup> Jean Châteauevert and André Gaudreault, 'The Noises of Spectators, or the Spectator as Additive to the Spectacle', in Richard Abel and Rick Altman (eds.), *The Sounds of Early Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), pp. 183-191 (p. 185).

lecturer's speech, to sing along as song slides were projected, to applaud at the end of the film, and so on.<sup>128</sup>

Of course, certain factors – a war-weary and boisterous all-male demographic, the unconventional environment of exhibition, the variety of the programme itself both in content and quality etc. – may explain the comparatively unstructured sound space described by accounts of front line exhibition in contrast to Châteauvert and Gaudreault's generalisations about the period in question, highlighting the importance of examining such aspects of film exhibition and spectatorship within their specific historical contexts.

However, one factor which both Châteauvert and Gaudreault suggest contributed towards the structuring of sound space during the period of early cinema deserves close attention in this context: namely, the immediate conditions and location of the exhibition venue itself. As Châteauvert and Gaudreault rightly note, the 'sound space was also structured by the nature of the very site of the screening – the fairgrounds tent did not lend itself as easily to diegetic absorption as did the movie palace.'<sup>129</sup> The idea of complete "diegetic absorption" for the soldier spectator within the environment of the battlefield is somewhat laughable, particularly given the aural characteristics of the battlefield itself serving as a constant reminder of the war. Indeed, the commentary from the *Liverpool Daily Post* cited at the beginning of this chapter concluded its account by stating that it 'was such a strange contrast, this quiet scene amidst the hell fire going on outside.'<sup>130</sup> Much of the journalistic coverage on front line cinemas alludes to the intrusive soundscape of the battlefield impacting upon

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>130</sup> Frederick H. Allen, 'A Cinema Hall', *The Liverpool Daily Post*, 23 June 1916, p. 4.

the immediate spectatorial experience of front line exhibition, noting the ever-present sound of gunfire and shelling. *The Kineweekly* described how such cinemas were ‘just out of harm’s way, yet within sound of enemy guns’, whilst a *Daily Mail* report recounted how ‘shells whistle over during the performance’.<sup>131</sup> Some accounts may amount to little more than journalistic embellishment or scene-setting, but the immediate contextual dynamic of the aural soundscape in which these front line cinemas were positioned undoubtedly represent a significant experiential element which contributed towards spectatorial experience and reception.

Take, for example, a *Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly* report titled ‘The Kinema at Suicide Corner’ and the manner in which it describes how the screening of a film depicting a boxing match was conceptualised aurally: apparently mimicking the punches of the contestants, ‘[t]he man at the piano thumped his loudest, and Fritz added to the effects by sending over a shell which burst, by the sound, very, very close by.’<sup>132</sup> In another fascinating article describing a rare front line screening of *The Battle of the Somme* (Malins, 1916), this interweaving of textual and immediate reality facilitated through the intrusion of the battlefield’s immediate aural soundscape can be seen quite readily. Describing a cinema situated in a location where ‘the windless air quivered and shrank under the shocks of our nearer guns – the 6-inch, the 9.2’s and 11-inch high-nosing giants’ which ‘wailed or whined or whimpered [...] as they streamed outwards towards the German lines’, the piece recounts how this particular screening of *The Battle of the Somme* acquired a more immediate reality for its soldier spectators due to the immediate sound space of their environment:

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<sup>131</sup> See: “‘Firing Line’ Kinemas”, *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 4 Jan 1917, p. 31; “‘Tommy’s’ Own Kinema”, *The Daily Mail*, 4 January 1916, p. 7.

<sup>132</sup> ‘The Kinema at Suicide Corner’, *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 7 February 1918, p. 47. My emphasis.

As the film rolls on it grows more and more realistic; for as the pictured shell-bursts crowd upon the screen, *the spectators not only see them but hear them*. The walls of the hall are shaking under what seem to be those pictured explosions. And at any moment one of those great shells, instead of bursting on the crest of yonder ridge may swoop through the roof above their heads, and blow the whole audience into eternity. It is not strange, therefore, if the breathing of the audience grows deeper as the show goes on, and for some the line between picture and reality becomes confused; for never before was pictured story brought to such close grips with life and death as in this turn in the cinema at ruined Albert on the Somme.<sup>133</sup>

Putting to one side the journalistic colouring, in this instance, the immediate aural environment of the battlefield facilitated a unique and potentially uncomfortable blending of the film's diegetic content with the concurrent conditions of exhibition and spectatorial perception. Perceiving the film in conditions where the 'pictured story' was brought to such close grips with life and death', one can only speculate upon the potentially devastating effect certain – already disturbing – sequences from *The Battle of the Somme* would have had on such an audience in such a context. The irony of the battlefield's aural soundscape affording a cinematic soundtrack far more appropriate than any pianist could accomplish was further embodied elsewhere by an illustration published by *Pictures and the Picturegoer* (see Fig. 2.18).

As such sources show, it is important to consider how the immediate sound space of the battlefield may have directly impacted upon front line film exhibition, to say nothing of spectatorial reception. At a fundamental level, such a sound space

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<sup>133</sup> Major Charles G. D. Roberts, 'A Cinema at the Front', *Canada in Khaki*, Vol. 2 (1917), p. 64.



Fig. 2.18: 'Ex-Cinema Pianist' from *Pictures and the Picturegoer*, 24 March 1917, p. 528.

could be characterised by the potentially frequent and disruptive aural intrusions of the battlefield, but on a far more complex level, the ever-present soundscape of the war would have served as an immediate reminder of the context in which both exhibition venue and spectator were positioned, potentially challenging the level of escapism or 'diegetic absorption' the cinema was said to afford in such circumstances. Similarly, the inherent meaning present in such sounds – the potentially immediate danger such sounds represented – could have significantly contributed towards the diegetic environment of the films being projected themselves, perhaps producing something of a discrepant, even comic effect – in the case of, for example, the aforementioned boxing film. Equally, such circumstances may have facilitated a far more loaded experience, as represented by the screening of *The Battle of the Somme* accompanied by live shell fire, contributing directly towards the perceived realism of the film. To

summarise, whilst the presence of musical accompaniment would have gone some way towards legitimising or standardising the experiential conditions of front line exhibition in a manner comparable to the experience of spectatorship back home, this superficial normalcy would have potentially been challenged by the far more intrusive aural aspects found on the front line and the immediate connotative associations – the immediate threat of danger, destruction or even death – such a soundscape represented. Indeed, it is in such an environment that the need for films to offer ‘escapism’ for their spectators was of the utmost importance – an idea and sentiment that shall be examined by the remainder of this chapter.

### **The Military Value of Recreation on the Front Line**

In late 1914, just as it began to become obvious that the war would not be ‘over by Christmas’, as many had mistakenly prophesied, *The Bioscope* published something of a call to arms for the cinema trade, reflecting upon what the medium could offer during the nation’s time of crisis:

War, with all its unutterable woe and suffering, is a subject which simply cannot be avoided in our ordinary life. It obtrudes its grim presence into even the smallest of our daily doings, whilst for many it has already spelt ineradicable grief and ruin. It is at such a time as this that we most urgently need the distraction, however slight and temporary, which is provided by the picture theatres. One of the best and highest functions of the drama has always been its power to relieve the oppressed mind of its troubles and difficulties. Putting purely entertaining qualities upon one side, the theatre may be regarded as a kind of mental tonic, giving our spirits strained to the breaking point, new



strength to battle with the stern facts of existence, so cruelly real to most of us at present [...] It is a duty both to ourselves and to our neighbours that we should keep our bodies healthy. How much more is it a duty, therefore, that we should also keep healthy our minds.<sup>134</sup>

The same sentiment was almost ubiquitously shared by members of the cinema trade and exhibitors across the country, with many championing the medium for its distinctively 'escapist' qualities, an immensely significant attribute within the circumstances at hand. In many ways, however, the cinema took on a much more complex role than simply that of a supplier of escapist entertainment. Certainly, this was one of its main functions, but within the pressured cultural climate of the period, the cinema also came to be seen by many as a direct window on to the war itself, relaying first-hand information of the conflict in topical films and documentaries in a manner which had no precedent and no equal in conventional war journalism or photography. At the epicentre of this environment in which tensions regarding the nature, or role of the cinema in wartime took hold within the cultural discourse, the industry became focused upon the question of whether the cinema had a duty to entertain or to inform the general public, with many opinion pieces like the one cited above advocating the opposite need to inform and educate rather than entertain. Indeed, the clash between the value of entertainment and educational films came to the forefront within civilian theatres across England, with clearly identifiable trends for each varying throughout the conflict. As Michael Hammond has suggested of domestic cinemas, whilst the 'cinema's function as a place for getting up-to-date information and actual pictures of the front did not diminish', the public's desire for and relationship

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<sup>134</sup> 'Amusements and the War', *The Bioscope*, 5 November 1914, p. 564.

with such films fluctuated dramatically between August 1914 and the Armistice, resulting in the industry's ever-present debate regarding 'the cinema's function as a form of entertainment and/or education'.<sup>135</sup>

Playing out against the same backdrop, a similar yet distinct debate regarding the function of the cinema as it was implemented on the front line became as fundamental to the conceptualisation of the medium within this context as it was back home. Having examined the physical attributes and practices of front line exhibition, this final section will examine the ways in which the cinema's function as an entertainment for British soldiers was conceptualised on the front line, outlining how the medium was viewed and valued by the military from a 'top-down' perspective, and how exhibition on the front line was shaped accordingly.

Fundamentally, the widespread implementation of the medium, established (as has been stated above) by 66% of the total number of Army, Corps and Divisional formations which served on the Western front, evidently implies an overarching level of military endorsement. The very fact that military cinemas were routinely listed alongside a formation's headquarters, medical facilities, supply depots and other more conventional military institutions on official location lists, and that recreation or 'amusement' officers were appointed to oversee their orchestration, again reveals the degree to which the cinema was incorporated into the operational hierarchy of the B.E.F.<sup>136</sup>

Official military documentation, however, offers only a few sources in which the reasons as to *why* the cinema was established on the frontline are discussed. Overall,

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<sup>135</sup> Michael Hammond, *The Big Show: British Cinema Culture in the Great War 1914-1918* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006) pp. 98-99.

<sup>136</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/965/6, '19 Corps Administrative Instruction No. 133. Recreation and Amusements', 28 August 1918.

there doesn't appear to exist a single overarching scheme for the implementation of cinema entertainment, brought about to fulfil certain demands or required to have a certain effect, although traces of such thinking can be seen in the Routine Orders and memos produced by some military formations. More broadly, when considering the military's provision of a variety of entertainments and leisure activities (including the cinema), it can be said that there existed a clear sentiment amongst military authorities that something needed to be done to keep soldiers happy and contented in their periods of rest. As such, recreation and leisure activities were inextricably linked with the desire to increase and maintain soldier morale.

The concept of 'morale' within the context of the First World War, is difficult to define accurately, and was often dependent upon the individual situations in which a soldier or military formation found him or itself. As J. G. Fuller notes, morale 'was much more than adequate food, weapons, and comradeship' but something more akin to the B.E.F.'s ever-fluctuating *esprit de corps*.<sup>137</sup> Correspondingly, Richard Holmes, decided to title his collection of chapters on soldier morale, behaviour, leisure pursuits and overarching world views in his monumental book *Tommy*, as 'Heart and Soul', confirming the idea that some facets of front line experience can simply not be accounted for through military strategies, maps and casualty lists alone.<sup>138</sup> Holmes is quick to dismiss identifying any one particular factor as the defining principle behind soldier morale and motivation in the British Army, arguing that such a 'deconstructivist' approach towards the history of the First World War is fundamentally problematic due to the black and white nature of its proclamations and conclusions.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies 1914-1918*, pp. 186-191; p. 29.

<sup>138</sup> Holmes, *Tommy*, pp. 487-612.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 489.

Nonetheless, first-hand accounts written by soldiers do suggest that the front line cinema did contribute in some small way towards the upkeep of soldier morale and that this attribute was the principal appeal behind its implementation by military authorities. Reporting upon the state of soldier welfare and stability in December 1916 after the close of the battle of the Somme, a conference held by the Adjutant and Quartermaster of the Fourth Army noted under the heading 'Health, Feelings and Well Being of Troops' that:

The morale of the troops, in spite of the hardships and discomfort inseparable from climatic and other conditions under which they have to work and live, is excellent. But continued discomfort and hardship must not be allowed to impair their morale, if the Administrative Staff can, by forethought and effort, ameliorate the conditions under which they have to live.

This can best be done by close attention to:-

- (a) Accommodation;
- (b) Sanitation;
- (c) Recreation;
- (d) Cookery;
- (e) Leave.<sup>140</sup>

Military authority evidently understood the value of recreation for soldiers on leave from the trenches, fundamentally linking such practices to the maintenance of soldier morale. In a report produced by the 25<sup>th</sup> Division, it was documented how 'special attention was given to amusing the men in order to keep up their spirits under trying conditions and distract their thoughts from any unpleasant experiences through which

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<sup>140</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/441/5, Fourth Army Notes on A and Q Conference, 11 December 1916.

they might have passed.’<sup>141</sup> The writer went on to stress how he did ‘not think the importance of this is sufficiently realised at times, and what difference it makes to a man’s fighting value if he can be cheered up after passing through the severe ordeal of the modern battle’, going on to note the success of the 25<sup>th</sup> Division cinema which attracted 50,000 men over an unspecified period.<sup>142</sup> It is significant here that, more than just the benefit such entertainments may have had on the psychological state of British soldiers, the writer directly links the benefits of recreation and entertainment to the soldier’s – and by extension, the Army’s – fighting strength or ‘value’. The evident desirability for morale and ‘fighting value’ to be maintained within the environment of the conflict resulted in the careful orchestration and curation of entertainment. Indeed, we have already seen how the Second Army instructed its cinema exhibitors to show programmes consisting of ‘nearly all comic or comedy [films] of a light and amusing nature’, highlighting the military’s broad view that the cinema should be used to entertain troops with escapist narratives rather than those dealing with more challenging or war-related subject matter.<sup>143</sup>

The need for entertainment and for cinema entertainment specifically is further reflected upon beyond official military documentation of the period. In a letter to *The Bioscope*, Sergeant C. G. Lilley summarised the appeal of the medium when proclaiming that his military cinema had fostered ‘300 happy, smiling faces, without a thought for what might happen tomorrow.’<sup>144</sup> On this subject, it was summarised by *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly* that it was ‘generally conceded’ amongst

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<sup>141</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/2228/3, 25<sup>th</sup> Division Quartermaster Report, 28 October 1916.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/857/7, 10 Corps Routine Order, 9 May 1917.

<sup>144</sup> C. G. Lilley, ‘Back of the Front! A Description of Tommy’s Cinema Shows’, *The Bioscope*, 7 September 1916, p. xv.

officers 'that the importance and value of kinemas at the front cannot be [o]ver-estimated', due to the fact that such cinemas 'had a wonderful mental and moral effect upon men who had freshly returned from the strain of the trenches.'<sup>145</sup> Sharing the same sentiment, Sir Cuthbert Headlam (future conservative politician) who served with the Bedfordshire Yeomanry and finished the war as a General Staff Officer (Grade 1) with the rank of lieutenant colonel, emphasised in his 1924 history of the Guards Division how the Guards Divisional Cinema in Poperinge served as 'an enormous boon to all ranks when they came out of the mud and squalor of the trenches to be able to go to a place in which they could find rest and refreshment, listen to good music and witness a show that was both instructive and amusing.'<sup>146</sup>

Thinking about the institutional desire to support and maintain soldier morale, it is important to acknowledge the fact that the cinema was not the only form of entertainment on the front line, but was part of a broader framework of recreations and support geared towards increasing the comfort of soldiers in their periods of rest away from the trenches – a framework which also included institutions and amenities such as canteens, laundries and showers, as well as recreational activities. Much like military cinemas, entertainments such as sporting competitions, theatrical productions and concert parties increasingly became part of military operation as the war progressed.

Many facets of front line recreation have accumulated a somewhat mythic stature within the history and cultural memory of the First World War, most notably the sport of football which, it has been said, 'went with the various expeditionary forces to

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<sup>145</sup> 'Weekly Notes', *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 20 September 1917, p. 75.

<sup>146</sup> Cuthbert Headlam, *The Guards Division in the Great War, 1915-1918 (Volumes I and II)* (London: John Murray, 1924), pp. 131-132.

every fighting front.<sup>147</sup> In fact, one of the most common images associated with the conflict other than that of the trenches is the infamous (mostly exaggerated) story about British and German forces playing games of football in the midst of no-man's-land during the Christmas truce of 1914. The infamous scenes of English and German forces playing football against each other which were, for the most part, 'rumours rather than reality', with many accounts suggesting minor separate kickabouts amongst each side, but have nevertheless become 'embedded [...] firmly in the collective memory of the truce'.<sup>148</sup> In this instance as in others, many forms of entertainment began life on the front line as impromptu events or activities, orchestrated by a few men in individual platoons without any real endorsement or support from authority. However, as the war progressed and military higher-ups began to see the need for the provision of entertainment and recreation in the midst of a war characterised by entrenched stasis and prolonged periods of rest and training away from the front lines, the organisation of entertainments soon took hold.

For example, alongside its Divisional cinema and canteen, the 4<sup>th</sup> Division organised boxing contests, lectures, rugby and football matches for its men at different times throughout the war.<sup>149</sup> The 4<sup>th</sup> Division could also boast of its own concert party, the 'Follies', and Divisional band. Concert parties were an immensely popular form of entertainment on the front, run in base camps and villages to the rear of the battlefield. Often, concert parties or theatrical productions would use the same venue as military cinemas, in some cases combining the two entertainments into one show, such as the 4<sup>th</sup> Division which ran what was billed as a 'combined Cinema and Folly Entertainment

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<sup>147</sup> Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies 1914-1918*, p. 85.

<sup>148</sup> Terri Blom Crocker, *The Christmas Truce: Myth, Memory and the First World War* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2015), p. 52.

<sup>149</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/1449/2.

[...] at 6 p.m. every weekday' in October 1915.<sup>150</sup> Elsewhere, the 25<sup>th</sup> Division ran (alongside its cinema) concert parties and four different musical and boxing events, suggesting that for many military formations, cinematic entertainment formed part of a larger programme of recreation akin to the programme of a British music hall back home, and could therefore be conceptualised as a multi-faceted entertainment experience (Fig. 2.19).

In fact, in some instances the different types of entertainment did overlap and influence one another. For example, historian of the 34<sup>th</sup> Division John Shakespear recalled in 1922 how the 34<sup>th</sup> Division's 'concert party [The Chequers] was started in March, 1916', which 'after four days rehearsing [...] produced a pierrot show, with the assistance of a six-reel Chaplin comedy, "Tillie's Punctual [sic] Romance"' (Sennett, 1914).<sup>151</sup> As J. G. Fuller also argues, the majority of Divisional concert party acts, bands and stage shows in their variety and tone 'reveal a large debt to music hall'.<sup>152</sup>

Of course, the use of shared venues for military entertainments speaks more towards the utilitarian urge to make do and accomplish as much as possible with the resources and venues available. As L. J. Collins has noted, the 'staple diet of all concerts was the songs, especially those in which the troops had the opportunity to join in the chorus; above all the soldier needed the chance to laugh, to sing and to give vent to feelings of release from the tensions of trench life, war and death.'<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/1449/2, 4<sup>th</sup> Division Routine Order, 5 October 1915.

<sup>151</sup> John Shakespear, *The Thirty-Fourth Division 1915-1919: The Story of its Career from Ripon to the Rhine* (London: Witherby, 1922), p. 305. The correct title is *Tillie's Punctured Romance* (Sennett, 1914).

<sup>152</sup> Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies 1914-1918*, p. 99.

<sup>153</sup> L. J. Collins, *Theatre at War, 1914-18* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), p. 102.



DIVISIONAL ENTERTAINMENT PROGRAMME.  
Week ending December 23rd 1916.

THE PIEROTS

|           |      |                                |           |
|-----------|------|--------------------------------|-----------|
| Saturday  | 16th | CAISSE D'EPARGNE, BAILLEUL.    | 6 p.m.    |
| Monday    | 18th |                                |           |
| Tuesday   | 19th | Divl. Theatre, PONT-de-NIEPPE. | 5.30 p.m. |
| Wednesday | 20th |                                |           |
| Thursday  | 21st | Concert Hut, ROMARIN.          | 6.00 p.m. |
| Friday    | 22nd |                                |           |
| Saturday  | 23rd | Divl. Theatre, PONT-de-NIEPPE. | 5.30 p.m. |

CINEMA.

|           |      |                                |             |
|-----------|------|--------------------------------|-------------|
| Sunday    | 17th | Divl. Theatre, PONT-de-NIEPPE. | 6.30 p.m.   |
|           |      | Matinee.                       | 2.00 p.m.   |
| Monday    | 18th |                                |             |
| Tuesday   | 19th | do                             | 7.15 p.m.   |
| Wednesday | 20th |                                |             |
| Thursday  | 21st | do                             | 5.30 p.m. & |
| Friday    | 22nd |                                | 7.15 p.m.   |
| Saturday  | 23rd | do                             | 7.15 p.m.   |

FULL BAND.

|           |      |  |            |
|-----------|------|--|------------|
| Sunday    | 17th | CAISSE d'EPARGNE, BAILLEUL.<br>(Corps C. of E. Service) BAILLEUL SQUARE. | 11.00 a.m. |
| Monday    | 18th | METEREN.   | 2.30 p.m.  |
| Tuesday   | 19th | The Square, NIEPPE.  | 2.30 p.m.  |
| Wednesday | 20th | Concert Hall, ROMARIN.<br>(Special Concert programme).                   | 2.30 p.m.  |
| Thursday  | 21st | Free.  |            |
| Friday    | 22nd | PONT-de-NIEPPE.  | 2.30 p.m.  |
| Saturday  | 23rd | Free.  |            |

REED BAND.

|          |      |                                |             |
|----------|------|--------------------------------|-------------|
| Thursday | 21st | Divl. Theatre, PONT-de-NIEPPE. | 5.30 p.m. & |
|          |      |                                | 7.15 p.m.   |
| Saturday | 23rd | do                             | 5.30 p.m.   |

ORCHESTRA.

|           |      |                                 |             |
|-----------|------|---------------------------------|-------------|
| Monday    | 18th | Divl. Theatre, PONT-de-NIEPPE.  | 5.30 p.m. & |
|           |      |                                 | 7.15 p.m.   |
| Tuesday   | 19th | 75th B e. Cinema Hall, ROMARIN. | 5.00 p.m.   |
| Wednesday | 20th | D. H. Q.                        |             |
| Thursday  | 21st | Divl. Theatre, PONT-de-NIEPPE.  | 5.30 p.m. & |
|           |      |                                 | 7.15 p.m.   |
| Friday    | 22nd | Concert Hall, ROMARIN.          | 6.00 p.m.   |
| Saturday  | 23rd | D. H. Q.                        |             |

ORGAN RECITAL.

|        |      |  |           |
|--------|------|--|-----------|
| Sunday | 17th | by Cpl. MOUNT, F.R.C.D.)<br>The R.C. Church, BAILLEUL. | 6.00 p.m. |
|--------|------|--|-----------|

BOXING.

|          |      |                             |  |
|----------|------|-----------------------------|--|
| Thursday | 21st | CAISSE d'EPARGNE, BAILLEUL. |  |
| Friday   | 22nd | do                          |  |

Fig. 2.19: 25th Division Programme of Entertainment for the week ending December 23rd 1916, WO 95/2228/3.

Arguably, what the concert party, theatrical production or musical performance afforded in contrast to the military cinema was a comparatively more immediate level of spectator engagement, offering audiences the chance to get involved in sing-alongs, discussion and other forms of participation uncommon to the experience of film spectatorship. The content of such entertainments could also be, in a certain sense, more topical or directly tailored to its audience in a way that the cinema never could. Collins notes how the lyrics of popular songs were often altered to comment upon military personalities, suggesting that ‘the soldiers obviously enjoyed the sending-up of themselves and the humorous irreverence directed at senior ranks’.<sup>154</sup> However, J. G. Fuller also suggests that the topicality of content often took on a more critical tone, and often meant that more ‘generalized grievances’ could be dealt with: ‘[t]here were jabs at the Home Front, at the support troops, at the scarcity of leave and of real rest, and at the endlessness of the war.’<sup>155</sup> The cinema also suffered in contrast to other forms of entertainment for its comparable impracticalities. The cinema required a venue, films, equipment and a number of other elements, all of which were prone to faults or breakdown, whereas a group of musicians or a single football and a couple of rudimentary goalposts would suffice whenever and wherever the mood struck. That being said, several military formations did establish cinemas long before establishing concert parties, such as the 38<sup>th</sup> Division, which opened its cinema on 6 May 1916 over a year before the first performance of their Divisional concert party, ‘The Welsh Wails’ on 2 December 1917.<sup>156</sup> Furthermore, the now corrected total of 40

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies 1914-1918*, p. 101.

<sup>156</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/2541/1;3, 38<sup>th</sup> Division Adjutant and Quartermaster Diary entries dated: 6 May 1916; 2 December 1917. See also: WO 95/778/4, 6 Corps Routine Order, 2 October 1916; WO 95/781/1, 6 Corps Routine Order, 6 January 1918.

British Divisional cinemas in operation on the Western front now stands as a far more comparable counterpoint to the 51 British Divisions with concerts parties on the Western Front, suggesting much about their shared standing within military operation.

Whilst each type of recreation had its fair share of strengths and weaknesses, one important facet shared by all forms of recreation organised by the military was that they were a far more innocent type of leisure activity when compared to the potential vices on offer on the front. Alcohol, for example, was one such vice. Whilst spirits were strictly forbidden to the rank and file, the ban was often bypassed by entrepreneurial barmen, whilst beer and wine was easily obtained in estaminets and canteens.<sup>157</sup> The estaminets themselves were similarly troublesome. Michael Brown has remarked how the 'estaminet was not at all like a British public house, but it provided a similar service: it offered drink, company, a chance to let the hair down, and, for the persevering, a brief oblivion'.<sup>158</sup> Many estaminets acted as brothels, and unsurprisingly proved to be incredibly popular amongst a generation of young men flung far from home and staring death in the face.

From a top-down perspective, the provision of entertainment, therefore, was in some sense orchestrated as an officially endorsed, 'safe' form of recreation designed to steer young men away from the more salacious forms of recreation. Indeed, as the Reverend McCormick – orchestrator of the Guard's barn cinema – remarked in his diary how military authority 'was very pleased' by the operation of the Divisional cinema 'as it kept the men out of the estaminets'.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Holmes, *Tommy*, p. 595.

<sup>158</sup> Brown, *Tommy Goes to War*, p. 99.

<sup>159</sup> Imperial War Museum Collections, Documents.12745, McCormick Diary, 8 January 1916 entry.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude this first chapter on front line exhibition, it can be surmised that the implementation of the medium and its use as a form of entertainment on the front represented a wide reaching and practically ubiquitous presence within the B.E.F., implemented and adapted on a significantly larger scale than has been previously acknowledged by scholarly research. Many of the exhibition practices instituted on the front, whilst in some ways adhering to conventional theatrical practices back home in the U.K., were primarily tailored more for the specific environment and context of the front line camps, rest areas and towns in which they were located. The B.E.F. was remarkably utilitarian in its approach to exhibition practice and implementation, utilising whatever venues and resources were at hand for use in their range of military cinemas at Army, Corps and Divisional level. As such, front line exhibition was shaped just as much by the conditions of war and life on the front itself, rather than shaping or moulding the environment of the front line to its own ends. Like all other structures on the front line, the cinematic venue was not exempt from the destruction and carnage brought about by the conflict, but nonetheless took hold within this environment in the most unlikely of circumstances. Despite the potential dangers facing the cinema on the front, the value of the entertainment and recreation it offered was clearly deemed worth the trouble of establishing and maintaining the use of the medium in such circumstances, viewed as it was by military officials as an intrinsically valuable form of recreation – escapist, morale-boosting, harmless – within the present environment.

Overall, the examination and analysis of film exhibition on the front line presented by this chapter demonstrates a widespread and clear endorsement of the medium and its demonstrable value during the First World War, at least from the

perspective of the institutions and authorities who instituted its use. This chapter, however, has only covered one half of the story of the cinema on the front lines of the First World War, namely, the practices of exhibition. Having established this basis, Chapter Three shall turn towards a group of figures that have remained largely silent to this point: the soldier audiences and spectators of front line cinemas.

### 3. Soldier Spectatorship on the Front Line

On 22 May 1915, not yet a year into the war, the British film fan magazine *Pictures and the Picturegoer* published an illustration titled 'Patrons' (Fig. 3.1). Captioned with the statement 'Our Artist Depicts the Real Picture Patron – And Some Others', the illustration features five different caricatured film spectators, whilst depicting at the centre of the image the 'real picture patron': 'Miss Picturegoer'. Representing the young female demographic said to be the increasingly core audience of British cinemas across the country, 'Miss Picturegoer' is depicted as a discerning and informed spectator, clutching a copy of *Pictures and the Picturegoer* which she has used to determine her film of choice for her next cinema outing. In contrast, the figures which surround 'Miss Picturegoer' are noted for their general indifference to the entertainment: a pair of elderly women visit the venue only to indulge in a cup of tea and a chat, whilst a courting couple place value on the cinema's privacy – 'Come on

OUR CINEMATOGRAPHIC CARTOONS. No. 36 : "PATRONS."



OUR ARTIST DEPICTS THE REAL PICTURE PATRON-AND SOME OTHERS.

Fig. 3.1: 'Patrons' Illustration from *Pictures and the Picturegoer*, 22 May 1915, p. 131.

Liza, let's 'ave two pennorth of 'old 'ands in the dark.' A dreary Vicar is depicted seeking the educative influence of the medium through 'an exhibition of kinematographic representations of recent occurences [sic]' whilst two old men simply want a refuge for 'an hour's sleep'. The fifth and final caricatured demographic of spectators is a pair of soldiers in khaki, depicted as the bumbling officer class who, it is suggested, look down upon the institution: 'I say dear boy, shall we bally well dwop into a beastly cinema for half-an hour – what?'

As Jane Bryan has remarked, the illustration 'clearly demonstrates that, whilst 'picturegoing' appealed to a broad sweep of society, and indeed functioned differently according to the needs of individual patrons, particularly at this stage of the First World War, there was a prevalence of women in contemporary cinema audiences'.<sup>1</sup> Bryan and others are correct to emphasise the increasing predominance of female cinemagoers in Britain (and, indeed, elsewhere) during this period, just as publications such as *Pictures and the Picturegoer* evidently foregrounded and played to the trend themselves. However, implicit in this illustration's depiction of wartime cinema spectatorship is the notion that these secondary and caricatured demographics of spectatorship were in some way inferior to that represented by 'Miss Picturegoer' and for the most part indifferent to the artistic or cultural value of the cinema as a medium and cultural institution. Such spectators were not thought of as 'the real picture patron'.

Statistical evidence, at least at first glance, would appear to bear this out. In his analysis of British exhibition spaces and practices, Nicholas Hiley notes that British cinema audiences were primarily made up of working class men prior to the war in the

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Bryan, "'The Cinema Looking Glass': The British Film Fan Magazine, 1911-1918' (unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of East Anglia, 2006), pp. 10-11.



early 1910s, but that after 1914 'the number of women in the audience did change dramatically, and it seems that by 1917 weekly attendance may have been divided between 55 per cent women, 35 per cent men, and ten per cent children'.<sup>2</sup> However, although perhaps implied in his analysis, Hiley does not directly attribute this shift in audience demographics to the evidently significant contextual forces at play in relation to the war and the practice of widespread enlistment and conscription.

During the entire war, 5.7 million men from the United Kingdom alone, served for their country, ultimately representing an age range of 18-51 years old (when factoring in the parameters of the various conscription acts).<sup>3</sup> Of course, the culturally mythologised history of underage soldiers who lied about their age in order to join the ranks expands this range out even further. Taking these figures into consideration, it should also be stated that the British population as whole on the eve of war has been estimated at 46 million, meaning that roughly 12% of the British population served for their country during the war.<sup>4</sup> Also consider the fact that, on average, soldiers serving in the military were only awarded leave every 15 months – and therefore unable to visit their local cinemas for a year or more, even if they did decide to spend their precious time away from the front visiting a civilian cinema rather than reuniting with friends and family.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, hundreds of thousands of men were killed in action and therefore never had the chance to return back home to civilian cinemas. In a

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<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Hiley, 'The British Cinema Auditorium' in *Film and the First World War*, ed. Karel Dibbets and Bert Hogenkamp (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1995), pp. 160-170 (p. 162).

<sup>3</sup> Richard Holmes, *Tommy: The British Soldier on the Western Front* (London: Harper Collins, 2004), p. 138.

<sup>4</sup> David Coleman and John Salt, *The British Population: Patterns, Trends, and Processes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 36.

<sup>5</sup> J. G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies 1914-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 72.

staggering amount of cases, cinemas on the front line would have been the last venues such men visited.

Considering these statistics, the reasons why Hiley's analysis foregrounds a demographic shift towards the dominance of the female spectator during the First World War becomes, from my perspective, quite obvious. Certainly, civilian cinemas during this period appear to have become a site of leisure particularly associated with female audiences and engaged in practices to attract such spectators. Generally speaking, the exhibition sector was also attempting to foster and present a more sophisticated image of the medium during the 1910s, geared towards attracting middle-class patrons rather than the working classes, even if, as Hiley has shown, the efforts to regulate and discourage the latter demographic's typically 'rowdy' behaviour had mixed results.<sup>6</sup> The influence of Hiley's analysis and his conclusions drawn about this period of British cinema history can be seen readily in the ubiquity of his work as a reference point for academics working within the field. Hiley's assessment of wartime audience demographics, for example, is cited as the baseline for Lise Shapiro Sander's research on audience behaviour and its regulation in British cinemas from the 1890s to the 1910s.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Hiley's work has had a significant impact on Michael Hammond's research for *The Big Show*, which makes the same point regarding the apparent shift in audience demographics.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Hiley, 'The British Cinema Auditorium', p.

<sup>7</sup> Lise Shapiro Sanders, "'Indecent Incentives to Vice': Regulating Films and Audiences behaviour from the 1890s to the 1910s" in *Young and Innocent? The Cinema in Britain 1896-1930*, ed. Andrew Higson (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002), pp. 97-110.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Hammond, *The Big Show: British Cinema Culture in the Great War, 1914-1918* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006), p. 28.

However, the lack of any reference to the absent demographic of British males serving in the military in Hiley's chapter underlines an implicit and somewhat problematic assumption that wartime cinema exhibition for British spectators begins and ends in the domestic theatrical venue. This same absence is echoed by Michael Hammond, noting how the circumstances of the war led to the 'creation of new audiences, particularly soldiers and women workers', but only really refers to the presence of soldiers in coastal towns, who may have potentially formed part of a civilian cinema audience before they left for the front.<sup>9</sup> As a demographic of wartime cinema spectatorship, it seems absurd that little academic attention has been given to the men who served in the military during the First World War. Perhaps it is unfair to critique the assumptions made in good faith by Hiley and others when the subject of this thesis falls outside of their individual remits, focusing, as they did, on home front audiences. However, even if this is the case, the research presented here upon the history and experience of the soldier spectator does, in part, refute or challenge some of the more broadly held assumptions regarding the wartime practices of exhibition and cultures of spectatorship. Ultimately, what follows highlights how fundamentally unbalanced the discipline's previous understanding of wartime spectatorship and contemporary audience demographics really is.

Both this chapter and Chapter Four aim to reclaim this lost demographic (defined here as those serving in the B.E.F. who had direct experience of warfare and combat either in the trenches or just behind the front lines, rather than administrative or support staff further behind the lines), a demographic created and shaped by the

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Hammond does make a fleeting comment about the popularity of Charlie Chaplin amongst troops at the front, but appears to follow J. G. Fuller's line of argument that front line cinema exhibition was rare and impractical. See: Hammond, *The Big Show*, p. 235.

contextual conditions of the war itself. By foregrounding this forgotten demographic, these two chapters will examine the unique experience of cinemagoing and spectatorship on the front line from the point of view of the men who attended such venues; they will examine the multitude of contextual forces and determinants which resulted in the inherently complex and multifaceted spectatorial figure of the soldier spectator. Contrary to Hiley's conclusion that early British cinema audiences were, for the most part, an unruly indifferent mass of working class men and women who placed more value on how the cinema could afford a warm refuge from the rain or a darkened/private space which courting couples could use for their benefit, this current chapter argues that soldiers were in fact astute and discerning spectators, who cherished the ideological and emotional comforts afforded by individual films and stars, whilst harbouring a broader appreciation of the medium within the extraordinary conditions of front line life and experience. For such spectators, the cinema was not a disposable or arbitrary way to spend their free time, but a much needed psychological respite from the immediate dangers of trench warfare: a cathartic, morale-boosting release from the ever-present, impending aura of doom that permeated life on the front lines. Such spectators, as shall be seen, were extremely discerning in their preference for the type of films shown and upheld certain standards and values for what cinematic exhibition could and should accomplish within this setting.

To take up Hiley's mantra that 'the history of film cannot be written without a parallel history of audiences', this chapter shall examine the very demographic of wartime cinema audiences omitted from Hiley's and others' research: soldier spectators of the First World War. By examining first-hand accounts and testimony, as well as reportage on front line exhibition (which unlike the previous chapter will encompass fronts, institutions and experiences beyond that of the B.E.F.'s cinemas

and the Western front), this chapter will showcase how soldiers – both individually and by consensus – responded to and interpreted individual films, genres and film stars, as well as the broader institution of the cinema and its role on the front line. To begin, attention shall be drawn towards soldier responses to the institution of the cinema on the front line and the general experience of soldier spectatorship. This is followed by a section examining how soldiers valued the cinema as an entertainment on the front line, asking: what did the cinema represent or mean to this specific group of spectators? Through a careful analysis of surviving testimony and accounts of front line cinema spectatorship, this section will aim to construct a clear overview of the ways in which the cinema was valued by soldiers. Finally, the last section of this chapter will examine the phenomenon of film fandom on the front line, tracing the ways in which soldier fandom manifested and expressed itself within the context of the war, integrating with trench culture and soldier experience in unique and fascinating ways. Having set forward the fundamental characteristics of soldier spectatorship on the front line, this chapter will lay the groundwork for Chapter Four's focused analysis of soldier spectators and their response to topical filmmaking of the period which engaged with the war itself. Throughout these two chapters the soldier spectator will be investigated and ultimately defined in relation to the demographic of civilian cinema spectators back home, establishing the importance of understanding this spectatorial demographic as distinct from our conventional understanding of civilian wartime spectatorship.

## Cinema Spectatorship on the Front Line

Attending a cinema on the front line offered the average British soldier a brief moment of respite during the weeks, months and years of intense day-to-day existence. On average, infantry soldiers (or 'Tommyes') would be rotated through three different placements whilst serving on the front line: in the trenches (either in the front line or support trenches), in billets behind the line (on reserve) and in 'rest'. Typically, a battalion would spend two weeks alternating between the front line and reserve stations, followed by six days rest.<sup>10</sup> If a soldier was in 'rest' this often meant being stationed in a town or village some distance behind the trenches, but it didn't mean a complete absence of work. Rather, soldiers were expected to undertake training exercises, fatigue duty and other military routines and jobs. Comparatively speaking, of course, this was a godsend for those who had made it out of the front line trenches alive, who had lived day after day in a constant state of fear and anxiety.

Being placed on 'rest' meant a return to some level of normality, a sense of comfort and safety simply unattainable in the trenches. As Denis Winter has written:

The march from the zone of destruction was the first part of the cure. Men came into an area of trees with branches and turf without shellholes [sic]. There was no need to strain the ears for shell sounds nor was stooping a condition of survival [...] They were like blind men recovering their sight, normalcy growing by degrees, and feeling coming in gradually from extremities of sensation.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Malcolm Brown, *Tommy Goes to War* (Stroud: Tempus, 1999), p. 48.

<sup>11</sup> Denis Winter, *Death's Men: Soldiers of the Great War* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 142.

Rest camps along the Western Front varied in terms of amenities and resources. Most, however, had Army-run canteens, baths and other military facilities, whilst local towns and villages offered civilian establishments such as shops, theatres and estaminets. For example, the city of La Gourg in France was said to have a Y.M.C.A. hut, a number of estaminets, a canteen, a theatre and a Divisional reading room.<sup>12</sup> In Belgium, just behind the much contested Ypres salient, the town of Poperinge has been described as ‘the Mecca of our troops’, where men on ‘rest’ sought out ‘omelettes, brothels and silk-embroidered postcards, in that order’.<sup>13</sup> Above all, such locations offered the soldier a chance to distract themselves from the horrors of the war in whatever manner most suited them. In extraordinary circumstances, ‘rest’ was a time in which, as Malcolm Brown has argued, ‘trench-hardened soldiers found supreme satisfaction in simple, ordinary things’.<sup>14</sup>

Such ‘ordinary things’ included theatres, restaurants, bars, brothels and, of course, cinemas. More than most other types of entertainment or institution found behind the front lines, the very presence of a cinema in such circumstances prompted much surprise for those on ‘rest’. Frederick Allen, a correspondent for the *Liverpool Daily Post* reported his surprise at the presence of a cinema on the front line. ‘After our pleasant meal’, wrote Allen in June 1916, ‘the general asked me if I would come with him to see the cinema. I thought he meant to come outside and see the flashes of the guns and the explosions of the shells in the darkness, which make a fascinating scene. But instead I was taken into a great hall [...] and there, sure enough, was a real cinema’.<sup>15</sup> For many, the idea that a cinema could be operating within an active war-

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Brown, *Tommy Goes to War*, p. 95.

<sup>15</sup> Frederick H. Allen, ‘Impregnable Verdun’, *Liverpool Daily Post*, 23 June 1916, p. 4.

zone was a peculiar notion indeed, one that needed to be seen to be believed. Such a sentiment was epitomised by a rather humorous account given by an Australian soldier named C. Thorp:

The battalion in the most forward positions was duly informed at its headquarters that a free Aussie Y.M. Cinems [sic] Show [...] would be available for men who cared to walk back to the “Support” Area, and instructions were accordingly given by the C.O. that parties could go down in turn after a relief had taken place.<sup>16</sup>

At first, only thirty men were reported to have shown up, with upwards of one hundred and fifty men being expected. A sergeant was said to have made his way around the troops in an attempt to entice interest and attendance, only to be met by a ‘barrage of jeering sarcasm’ from those who thought the show a trick to lure people into fatigue duty. ‘Yer can’t kid us that way, Sarge. No Y.M. ud ever run a cinema up here – ho, ho, here just behind the front line – stop yer kiddin’ [sic]’. Despite this disbelief, Thorp was taken aback when he discovered that it ‘was a dinkum free cinema show right enough, and a good one, given in an old farmhouse that was not under enemy observation, and after two hours of complete relaxation from the thoughts and sights of war, and a free drink of hot cocoa, the party returned to the front line’.<sup>17</sup> Elsewhere in the many theatres of war in which British soldiers were engaged, men were equally surprised by the existence and implementation of a cinema for their entertainment. Writing from Salonica, Gordon Williams, a projectionist working for the Y.M.C.A., noted in his diary how the local soldiers ‘could not believe that it was going to be a real

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<sup>16</sup> C. Hampton Thorp, ‘The Camouflaged Fatigue Jon’, *The Australian at Weymouth*, 10 October 1918, p. 29.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.



cinematograph' so he had to 'put up a note to that effect that it was a real one'.<sup>18</sup> However, once their doubts had been dismissed, the men flocked to the show. 'The boys did enjoy it they packed the tent', wrote Williams.<sup>19</sup>

Other accounts of front line cinemas highlight the apparent absurdity of the practice, the irony of establishing this venue of entertainment and comfort within the most extraordinary circumstances. 'Stand here a moment, Hanson', remarked an unnamed Lieutenant in a piece for *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 'and realise the situation. Here we are on a pitch black night within 800 yards of the enemy lines standing outside a barn in which a kinema has been installed, to give an hour or two's entertainment to the men who are fighting in this hell of Flanders'.<sup>20</sup> The surreal irony of the cinema's presence on the front line was not lost on those who attended them.

Despite being met with surprise and disbelief at their very existence, the cinema within this context became an important site of rest and recreation for soldiers. Whilst some sense of the cinema's popularity has already been ascertained by the previous chapter's examination of the financial success many venues accomplished, the popularity of the cinema amongst soldiers becomes far more evident when reading first-hand accounts and descriptions of front line venues themselves. Indeed, the vast majority of such accounts frequently emphasise the enormous crowds which gathered in anticipation of film screenings, with soldiers attending such venues as frequently as possible. As the *Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly* noted, in 'civil life many

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<sup>18</sup> Birmingham, Cadbury Research Library, Archive of the National Council of YMCAs (hereafter 'YMCA Papers'), YMCA/ACC51/F2, Diary of Gordon Williams, 24<sup>th</sup> January 1916.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> 'The Kinema at Suicide Corner', *Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 7 February 1918, p. 47.

thousands of soldiers had formed the habit of regular attendance at the picture shows, and they have maintained the habit since they donned khaki.<sup>21</sup> Commenting on his experience of front line cinemas in 1917, industry personality A. E. Newbould (Chairman of the Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association) reported to *The Bioscope* that the cinemas were 'always so crowded that one was never sure of getting in, and many thousands of our troops down from the trenches were disappointed week after week.'<sup>22</sup> Another report describing the experience of attending a front line cinema suggested that outside one particular venue:

you will see perhaps 300 men all lined up, and our capacity is 200, but they all manage to get in somehow. Once in they manage to make themselves comfortable. Then the show commences. Here you have 300 happy, smiling faces, without a thought for what may happen to-morrow.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, Harold S. Wright recalled after the war how they 'used to crowd about a hundred in a space for about twenty, took place in the various messes you know, used to pile the hammocks up and make a grand stand you see, used to stop in there until you nearly choked to death with the blimmin' air blue with smoke and could hardly breathe'.<sup>24</sup> Of course, such conditions didn't stop soldiers from attending. Writing to his mother in 1916, W. C. Christopher pronounced that:

We have discovered a Picture House about 20 minutes walk from our position so we go there pretty frequently as the admission is only 25 centimes or 2 1/2 d. It is quite a decent little show, with change of programme twice weekly, and

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<sup>21</sup> 'Weekly Notes', *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 28 December 1916, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> 'Battlefield Cinemas', *The Bioscope*, 4 October 1917, p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> 'Back of the Front!', *The Bioscope*, 7 September 1916, p xv.

<sup>24</sup> IWM Collections, Catalogue No. 9072, Wright, Harold S (Oral History).

a piano. It is run entirely by soldiers and needless to say it is packed every night.<sup>25</sup>

In addition, the makeshift conditions of the average front line cinema venue as described by the previous chapter did not appear to deter men from attending. Even if the cinemas themselves did not reflect the luxuries and comforts of the 'picture palaces' back home, soldiers still appreciated the minimal comforts of the venue and the content of the films themselves. One commentator, for example, remarked that soldiers referred to their local front line cinema not as a 'palace' as its owner did but 'allude to it in friendly tones as a "tin 'ut"', underlining the make-do, but endearing nature of front line exhibition.<sup>26</sup> But for the brief few hours soldiers sat in those cinemas, they made such venues their home. Soldiers would smoke whilst laughing or singing along to the musical accompaniment, heckling the screen at the sight of a villain or making their appreciation known for a beautiful actress.<sup>27</sup>

The evident popularity of the cinema and the regularity with which soldiers attended front line venues obviously had much in common with the civilian experience of the medium on the home front. Nicholas Hiley has noted that by 1917 weekly attendance amounted to 21 million tickets but suggests that over half of these were purchased by the same spectator – i.e. the same spectator visited more than once a week. Indeed, the civilian cinemagoing habit was becoming increasingly 'characterised by frequent attendance' rather than isolated instances.<sup>28</sup> Due to the nature of trench warfare, soldier attendance at front line cinemas was, in contrast,

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<sup>25</sup> IWM Collections, Documents.925, Private Papers of W C Christopher, Letter dated 8 March 1916.

<sup>26</sup> I. P. G., 'Some Screen "Khaki"', *Pictures and the Picturegoer*, 3 March 1917, p. 476.

<sup>27</sup> Edith F. Mitchell Sowerbutts, "'Tommy' at the Pictures', *Pictures and the Picturegoer*, 30 December 1916, p. 292.

<sup>28</sup> Hiley, 'The British Cinema Auditorium', p. 160.

inevitably staggered, with weeks in the trenches or in reserve passing before certain soldiers may have had the freedom to visit a front line cinema again. Whilst audiences rotated, however, the cinema itself remained full.

Attending a front line cinema was also one of the few instances in which, other than the front line trenches, rank mixed with rank, infantry with officers, and soldiers from one formation met those from another. Indeed, historian Paul Chapman has noted the broad divide between officers and infantry whilst on rest, suggesting that officers 'hunted, fished, enjoyed horse-riding outings and events, socialised and moved about the countryside fairly much as they liked'.<sup>29</sup> In contrast:

After cleaning-up, de-lousing, re-training, parading for this or that reason, acting as trench diggers, fetching and carrying parties, road building gangs and a general source of labour, the infantry enjoyed sports' days, football matches, boxing tournaments and concert parties organised for them, but obviously, were not allowed the freedom they would have liked.<sup>30</sup>

Despite this apparent divide between the activities of the officers and the rank and file whilst on rest, the cinema served as common ground for interaction between these two military classes, a common interest for 'Tommy' and officer alike. As alluded to by the previous chapter, military cinemas maintained a widespread practice of offering tickets for both men and officers (officers being charged a higher sum), but this interaction was also confirmed in the event itself. As one correspondent for a Y.M.C.A. publication reported, the 'Colonel and officers are generally present' at the cinema

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<sup>29</sup> Paul Chapman, *In the Shadow of Hell: Ypres Sector 1914-1918* (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 2001), p. x.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

shows established on the front line.<sup>31</sup> Of course, the officers were afforded certain luxuries which remained inaccessible to the rank and file. For example, the Reverend McCormick who orchestrated the Poperinge barn cinema profiled in the previous chapter, reported that the cinema accommodated 'over a thousand, with the gallery all round, one side being used for officers and the other for sergeants. The officers could get tea in their gallery served by two Belgian girls'.<sup>32</sup> Some military formations also organised dedicated screenings for officers and sergeants.<sup>33</sup>

Broadly speaking, however, the cinema appears to have brought together different ranks and units more than it ever divided them. In an interview for the Imperial War Museum, Harold Hayward was even more articulate about the value of the cinema as a social institution, remembering how the cinema offered:

the opportunity of meeting other people from other battalions in the Division because they would be out on brigade rest so we'd meet up with them. Which was a good thing, you know, so we'd get used to each other's badges, and we learned quite a lot, because we were the inexperienced lot where they had been out, you know, from 1914, so we saw there a good opportunity to mix in with the Division, and it was there we really got our Divisional sense of corporate capacity.<sup>34</sup>

The fact that the cinema offered a space in which disparate groups of men could interact, unwind and communicate highlights the value of the medium within this

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<sup>31</sup> YMCA Papers, YMCA/K/2/3, 'The Winter Push'.

<sup>32</sup> IWM Collections, Documents.12745, Private Papers of Reverend W P G McCormick DSO, Diary Entry for 23 March 1916.

<sup>33</sup> The National Archives, WO 95/2908/2, 55<sup>th</sup> Division Routine Order, 2 May 1916.

<sup>34</sup> IWM Collections, Catalogue No. 9072, Wright, Harold S (Oral History).

context, fostering the much needed – *esprit de corps* – which made or broke any Army in modern warfare.

Certainly, whilst men of varying rank mixed and interacted within the confines of the front line cinema venue, perhaps the most important aspect of this demographic to identify is the fact that it was made up entirely of men. Whilst a few sources mention the presence of French civilians or British nurses at front line screenings (and in such instances these tended to be at cinemas in the base camps further behind the lines such as those on the French coast) the front line cinema was patronised by a near-total male audience. Consequently, the audience of the front line cinema fundamentally differed in its demographic make-up, contrasting the increasingly predominant demographic of British civilian cinemas back home: young single women from the working and lower-middle classes.<sup>35</sup>

This unusual demographic composition found within front line cinemas inevitably had an immediate effect on the environment in question. As documented by the previous chapter, the absence of children, women and older members of the general public freed the soldier from the more conservative aspects of spectator behaviour and etiquette, resulting in an energetic environment of singing, laughter and heckles. Furthermore, the absence of female companions spelled the end for at least one type of cinemagoing activity privileged by the courting couple seeking a quiet, private retreat. However, there is nothing to suggest that front line exhibitors seized upon the circumstances at hand to solely exhibit film content which was stereotypically targeted towards a male audience, such as Westerns or films about crime. Rather, as

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<sup>35</sup> Sanders, 'Indecent Incentives to Vice', p. 98.

we will see, soldiers appear to have enjoyed much the same type of films as civilian spectators at home, albeit within profoundly different circumstances.

Despite their initial surprise at the very existence of cinemas in this context, soldiers quickly packed out venues established by the B.E.F., handing over what little money they had earned for the privilege of sitting or standing in what was perhaps a cold, shell-damaged barn or hut, in the midst of an audience of fellow soldiers who had each made the same decision to spend their money and time on a couple of hours' worth of a film programme. In contrast to the non-cinematic attractions and luxuries which accompanied the 'picture palace' experience back home, the fundamentally minimalist set up of the front line venue privileged a focused and engaged form of spectatorship which sought concrete effects from their cinema-going experience – to be entertained and laugh, to escape and forget the war. As the previous chapter has shown, the exhibition spaces of the front line stripped away all pretence of venue hospitality or luxurious surroundings found back home: what Michael Hammond has referred to as a venue's 'identity', as it was expressed in 'the cinema's décor, its front-of-house management, the live music and often the live acts'.<sup>36</sup> The basic apparatus of the cinema – the projector and the screen established in a barn or even in the open air – became the fundamental core of the exhibition practice. Some may have had refreshments or other comforts, but soldiers did not visit such places for their amenities and comforts as civilians did back home.

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<sup>36</sup> Hammond, *The Big Show*, p. 28.

## **Soldier Spectators and the Value of the Cinema on the Front**

As outlined in Chapter Two, military authorities implemented the practice of film exhibition on the front line for its perceived value as a form of recreation. In this regard, the cinema was not alone, being part of a wider framework of recreational activities and pursuits made available to the soldier on 'rest' from the trenches. Sporting competitions such as football matches and boxing tournaments, concert parties and theatrical performances as well as a variety of other activities took place behind the front lines for the entertainment of war-weary troops. Like these other forms of recreation, the cinema was specifically valued by the B.E.F., and deemed to be a form of entertainment worthy of the resources, finances and time allocated to its provision. Rather than examining the value of the medium as it was perceived from a top-down perspective, however, this section draws attention to how the cinema was specifically valued by soldier audiences attending front line venues. What exactly did the soldiers like about the cinema? What did the institution and act of cinema-going symbolise or mean to them? How did this differ from the beliefs or perspectives of civilian cinema-goers back home?

Examining soldier testimony and reportage on front line cinema exhibition, it becomes clear that the cinema was valued by these men for a variety of different reasons. *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, for example, reported that:

"The Pictures" are held in high favour by the soldier, partly because of their absorbing interest, the relief they bring from the daily round of parades, for their



humour, and for their educative influence; and partly because a really splendid period of enjoyment may be had at a cheap rate.<sup>37</sup>

However, more than the momentary entertainment value of individual films, a broader analysis of commentary regarding front line exhibition draws attention towards specific beliefs and perspectives held within the soldier community regarding the value of the cinema as a medium and a social and/or cultural institution. Significantly, numerous accounts of front line cinemas often emphasised the same characteristics for which the soldier spectator (as well as those who implemented its use) valued the medium. In such accounts we can establish broad trends of thought for why the cinema held so much sway over the soldier population and what it offered to those seeking respite from the horrors of the war. Whilst further, minor nuances of spectatorial response can be drawn out of such sources (such as admiration/interest in female stars or to enjoy the shared company of other soldiers. etc.) I have established two distinct categories of value which the cinema was thought to have provided on the front line. The first of these was the idea of the cinema being (what was often referred to as) a 'mental tonic': a distracting, escapist entertainment which offered above all else a psychological relief from the atmosphere of the war. This facet, as we shall see, was inherently bound to the content of films screened for soldiers. In contrast, the second 'value' to be examined is the notion that the cinema's presence on the front line offered a point of continuity with civilian life and the practices of leisure at home. This particular attribute related more to the environment of the cinema as a social space, an institution and site of leisure with which soldiers were familiar and felt comfortable.

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<sup>37</sup> 'Weekly Notes', *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 7 December 1916, p. 3.

## **A 'Mental Tonic'**

In the opening months of the war, the cinema trade routinely commented upon the value of the cinema as a comfort for the newly realised anxiety of the conflict. In an article for *The Bioscope* published in September 1914, for example, Joseph Best argued that the crisis of the war had showcased the 'belief in the permanence of the cinema'.<sup>38</sup> 'If the popularity of the moving picture was ephemeral – a mere passing craze – in a time of threatened calamities', wrote Best, 'it would be the first to suffer'.<sup>39</sup> Instead, Best argued that the cinema had prospered, championing the medium as 'a means of satisfying the demand of the times for an easy and recreative mental absorption'.<sup>40</sup> As it was presciently surmised by another editorial for *The Bioscope* just weeks after the declaration of war, the 'public will flock to picture shows to forget for a while at least the great trouble through which they are passing'.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, this became a common sentiment and practice amongst civilian audiences at home.

Whilst reflecting upon the value of domestic cinemas, the film trade's treatise on the benefits of the medium for war-weary minds was quickly adapted for those who were experiencing the war first-hand. Certainly, the notion that the cinema afforded a morale-boosting, escapist avenue of entertainment was perhaps the most obvious reason for its establishment and inclusion within the environment of the front line, and one of the primary reasons soldiers appear to have attended such venues. Life on the front line was a depressing, often horrifying existence in which death and destruction were ubiquitous. For most soldiers, the possibility of being killed would not have been

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<sup>38</sup> Joseph Best, 'The Permanence of the Cinema', *The Bioscope*, 10 September 1914, p. 973.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> 'Business as Usual', *The Bioscope*, 27 August 1914.

a question of 'if', but of 'when'. For this reason, the cinema's 'transformational powers', as Michael Hammond describes, the 'moral uplift' afforded by the spectator's absorption into cinematic entertainment in the midst of the climate of war, become a far greater influence on the front line than it did for civilian audiences back home. That is not to say that civilians who visited a cinema on the home front whilst suffering through the fear and apprehension prompted by the conflict – fearing the worst for a relative, loved one or close friend on the front line – did not benefit from this form of recreation. Nor do I want to claim that those who suffered in this way are in any way inferior to those who served on the front. Rather, the influence of the cinema's morale-boosting characteristics take on a far more direct value on the front line, alleviating the anxieties and fears prompted by a completely different type of experience: military combat.

This was a demographic of spectators who desired immediate relief from a very immediate reality and, potentially, immediate danger. Even before we consider the actual experience of combat, the environment of the trench was just as horrific, to say the least. Soldiers sleeping rough in the trenches suffered through freezing cold weather, water logged dug-outs, rats, lice and other vermin and diseases and afflictions like trench foot, dysentery, pneumonia and tuberculosis.<sup>42</sup> As Denis Winter suggests, such an environment led to 'mental depression and physical sluggishness which came from lack of sleep combined with a total lack of information, which added to the lack of a sense of purpose'. Within this nightmarish purgatory, the dangers and consequences of modern trench warfare compounded this depression even further. Machine-guns, sniper-fire, shells and gas were all confronted by the soldier on a day

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<sup>42</sup> Winter, *Death's Men*, p. 99.

to day basis whilst serving in the front line. And even if a 'Tommy' was lucky enough to survive another day without being killed or wounded in the line of duty, the ubiquitous presence of mutilated, unburied corpses of friends and brothers alike served as a devastating reminder of their own mortality. In such circumstances, the need for comfort and recreation was of the utmost importance, even if their influence was only slight.

Commenting on the dire atmosphere of the front line and the need for entertainments for the men serving, a Chaplain serving in a base camp in France remarked in late 1915,

There is much mud and much fatigue duty. The atmosphere is not inspiring. Some of the men are still somewhat homesick, and the lists of killed and wounded which appear from time to time are not inspiring. It would not be true to say that the men have ever been down-hearted: their natural good humour has triumphed over every difficulty, but it is evident that they stand in need of some enlivening influence.<sup>43</sup>

The cinema was one such influence. Such was the power of the medium that soldiers and commentators across the various theatres of war all commented routinely upon the ability of the cinema to distract men from the immediate conditions of the conflict. The cinema, for them, was a place 'where tired soldiers can drop in for an hour's relaxation and forget the unpleasant enemy, who is almost within rifle shot'.<sup>44</sup> One

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<sup>43</sup> 'Entertainments in Camp', *Newcastle Journal*, 5 November 1915, p. 5.

<sup>44</sup> 'Weekly Notes', *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 4 January 1917, p. 3.

soldier's strikingly eloquent remarks for the soldier-produced publication *The Outpost* captures this sentiment precisely:

“Hope deferred maketh the heart sick,” but at last the “picters” [sic] are fluttering fantastically on the screen before us. Under the magic spell of the film we become as putty in the hands of a glazier. The vociferous applause is deafening; we clap our hands in ecstasies of delight, and we stamp our feet on the ground to keep them from becoming chilled meat. This is our second childhood and the confused babel is as the sound of a mountain stream to our disordered minds [...] Owing to the intense excitement, our war aims for a just and lasting peace are forgotten and la guerre appears shadowy and indistinct.<sup>45</sup>

Percy Jones, writing in his diary whilst stationed on leave in Poperinge in November 1915, rendered the same sentiment in a more straightforward manner when he remarked that the 6<sup>th</sup> Division's barn cinema:

makes a cheerful change from 12, 16, or 20 days in the trenches, where we sleep in muddy holes, eat muddy food with muddy hands off muddy plates in muddy clothes, generally endure sordid discomforts, have the usual ration of casualties and sick, and crawl back for another six days at the huts.<sup>46</sup>

Soldier correspondents for trade and fan periodicals like *The Bioscope*, *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly* and *Pictures and the Picturegoer* as well as regional and national newspapers, all frequently characterised the cinema as a

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<sup>45</sup> W.O.W., ‘Rest and Recreation’, *The Outpost*, 1 February 1918, p. 134.

<sup>46</sup> IWM Collections, Documents.12253, Private Papers of P H Jones, entry dated 14 November 1915.

psychological comfort during their periods of rest from the trenches. As *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly* reported:

A soldier has so many days in the trenches and so many to rest afterwards, even though the former may rightly be supposed to exceed the latter. It is when “Tommy” is in need of his brief respite from the trenches that he goes to the “pictures”.<sup>47</sup>

*The Illustrated War News* similarly reported that the cinema was ‘of immense value at the front’ in this regard, by giving ‘so splendid a “buck-up” to the men, in re-stimulating the trench-worn, and keeping cheery the fighters’.<sup>48</sup> In their feature report on front line exhibition, special correspondent for *Pictures and the Picturegoer*, Edith F. Mitchell Sowerbutts, similarly described ‘the joy with which these tired men looked forward to the brief rest at the pictures after their turn in the trenches’.<sup>49</sup> Officers likewise perceived the value of the cinema as a psychological comfort for their world-weary men, noting the cinema’s ‘wonderful mental and moral effect upon men who had freshly returned from the strain of the trenches’.<sup>50</sup> Elsewhere, Lieutenant E. Burbidge wrote to *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly* to thank the Meteor Film Exchange company for their donations of films for the front line, proclaiming that ‘the grim realities of warfare are temporarily forgotten [by soldiers] during the performance’.<sup>51</sup>

As documented by the previous chapter, front line cinemas appear to have shaped their curation of films (when possible) for the benefit and interests of their

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<sup>47</sup> Edith F. Mitchell Sowerbutts, “Firing Line” Kinemas’, *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 4 January 1917, p. 31.

<sup>48</sup> W. Douglas Newton, ‘The New Warriors’, *The Illustrated War News*, 24 October 1917, p. 28.

<sup>49</sup> Edith F. Mitchell Sowerbutts, “Tommy” at the Pictures’, *Pictures and the Picturegoer*, 30 December 1916, p. 292.

<sup>50</sup> ‘Weekly Notes’, *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 20 September 1917, p. 75.

<sup>51</sup> ‘Weekly Notes’, *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 23 November 1916, p. 5.

audiences, who, in wanting to forget 'the grim realities of warfare' for as long as possible, naturally sought the comfort and humour of comedy films and stars rather than films of a more realist or dramatic nature. For example, the films and personality of Charlie Chaplin (whom shall be addressed shortly) was of the utmost importance in this regard. Indeed, the need for distraction was paramount, and in films of the comedy genre soldiers found a much needed respite from the horrors of the trenches: a light-hearted avenue of escapism that promised cheer and laughter in the most serious of circumstances.

Of course, such films could only offer a temporary distraction from the war. The contrast of environment between the perceived comfort and safety of the front line cinema venue and the battlefield itself was rendered in rather harrowing terms by a correspondent for *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, who wrote:

The film ended, the lights went up, the dear old piano played "God Save the King," in which everyone joined in singing, then we all filed out. All the boys looked happy; they had seen the show, and were now going out into the night where death held sway over every inch of ground where you could not say to your best pal that you would meet him in five minutes' time, for in that five minutes –aye, in five seconds – you could be a torn, shuddering mass of blood and bone strewn over the mud; a burying party would collect the remains, a short solemn service and a wooden cross. His pal would say, with tears trembling in his eyes, with bended knees and head uncovered, "Harry, we were

happy half an hour ago: you did laugh matey, and now – .” His sobs would choke him, he would stand up and turn away into the darkness.<sup>52</sup>

### **Continuity with Home Life**

A recurring sentiment within soldier commentary was the notion that the front line cinema reminded them of pre-war civilian life: of their homes and the loved ones to whom they hoped to return. Indeed, for one soldier Jock Bunnie, the cinema represented home life itself: ‘Already I can see visions of home, with Cinemas [and] Music Halls [...] forming a glorious background to the pictures’.<sup>53</sup>

The importance of ‘home’ as both a physical location and an abstract ideal for soldiers of the First World War has been the subject of much recent scholarship. For example, in his insightful analysis of the psychological lives of British soldiers titled *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War*, Michael Roper argues that the idea of ‘home’ had an immense ‘emotional significance’ for the average soldier.<sup>54</sup> Roper suggests that, for such soldiers, home ‘became, not a parallel existence, but another world, beyond the reach of the trenches.’<sup>55</sup> The fact is, as Roper notes, despite this illusion of the divide between the front and home, ‘home and the trenches were structurally connected and inter-dependant. Each revolved around basic bodily needs such as food and water, shelter, warmth and rest’.<sup>56</sup> ‘These dreams of home, however, were neither naive nor dysfunctional, but essential to their survival.’<sup>57</sup> For Roper, much

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<sup>52</sup> ‘The Kinema at Suicide Corner’, *Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 7 February 1918, p. 47.

<sup>53</sup> Jock Bunnie, ‘Memoirs of a Base Wallah’, *The Outpost*, 1 April 1918, p. 196.

<sup>54</sup> Michael Roper, *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 8.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.



of the connection between the front and home which was so essential to the soldier's psychological welfare was fostered through the practice of correspondence between soldiers and loved ones back at home, as well as parcels sent to the front (an estimated 60,000 a day) which contained home comforts such as food, tobacco and items of clothing.<sup>58</sup> Family photos were also important reminders of home life, whilst 'homely touches' such as 'mirrors, clocks and family portraits' were also common sights within officer dug-outs.<sup>59</sup>

Others have rightly commented upon the particular value of leisure practices enjoyed in civilian life, such as theatrical performances and concert parties established at the front. L. J. Collins, for example, argues that if 'the need for entertainment for the troops at home was important, it was doubly so abroad. The reason was not just the relief from the arduous task of fighting, or the chance to enjoy the therapeutic effect of laughter. The theatre reminded those serving on the Western and Eastern Fronts of home, another life'.<sup>60</sup> Sports like football or rugby were also crucial elements of this connection with home. However, in addition to these forms of recreation and leisure, the front line cinema also acted as an important link with pre-war civilian life.

First hand testimony produced by soldiers frequently articulate their enjoyment of the front line cinema in such terms. In a letter sent to his sister Elsie in January 1916, Private L. W. Gamble of the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion East Yorkshire Regiment commented that he had 'seen some moving pictures the other night in the Y.M.C.A. Hut there is here, and it was quite like being at home'.<sup>61</sup> Describing a military cinema established

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>60</sup> L. J. Collins, *Theatre at War, 1914-1918* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), p. 100.

<sup>61</sup> Liddle Collections, LIDDLE/WW1/GS/0603A, Papers of Lawrence W Gamble, Letter dated 5 January 1916. Gamble would lose his life in a gas attack only five months later.

in a large casino near Dunkirk in a letter to his parents, R. M. Charley similarly highlights this feeling of being at home when he wrote how his trip to the cinema 'was quite like being at a seaside town, which of course it is really, but at present it is in the war area. The casino itself was once hit by a long range German shell'.<sup>62</sup> Elsewhere, a wireless operator for the R.F.C. was reported to have visited a front line cinema where he was 'surprised and delighted to see the very picture he had viewed in "Blighty" the day before leaving for France', which he said acted 'like a glimpse of home'.<sup>63</sup>

Feature articles in trade papers were even more articulate about this idea, and despite their frequently sensationalist style of reportage, serve to corroborate and expand upon sentiments found in soldier-produced commentary. *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, for example, emphasised that the 'amount of good done in this manner is enormous, for the picture show is "Tommy's Link with the Homeland"'.<sup>64</sup> The link between the soldier spectator and his life at home was foregrounded even further by the article's closing proclamation, which suggested to the reader that 'even as you sit in your comfortable seat and enjoy watching your favourite star's acting, perhaps "he" [referring to 'Tommy'] is at "the pictures," too'.<sup>65</sup> In a later issue of the publication, it was similarly reported that the cinema 'is as much, if not more, a part of the soldier's life, as when he is at home. It forms a link with the homeland which no other means of entertainment could provide'.<sup>66</sup> Elsewhere, *Pictures and the Picturegoer* emphasised this link between the cinema and home through the personal importance the medium

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<sup>62</sup> Liddle Collections, LIDDLE/WW1/AIR/073, Papers of R. M. Charley, Letter dated 9 September 1917.

<sup>63</sup> 'Weekly Notes', *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 15 March 1917, p. 3.

<sup>64</sup> "'Firing Line" Kinemas', *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 4 January 1917, p. 31.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> 'The King and the Kinema', *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 22 August 1918, p. 48.

had for a soldier referred to as Bill. Describing a trip to a front line cinema, the article 'Tommy at the Pictures' comments on Bill's love for home comforts such as coffee, which 'reminded him of the stall at home, just round the corner in a neighbourhood quite near the Old Kent Road. But far, far greater was his affection for the picture show. Why? Well, that was where he "proposed" to Liza, in the days when trenches were never dreamt of [...] So the pictures were a connecting link with home and everything home stood for'.<sup>67</sup>

The content of films screened in front line cinemas was often just as important for fostering this link between the soldier and home than the fundamental practice of attending such a venue. *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, for example, reported how at the 4<sup>th</sup> Division's cinema, 'requests have been received for "homely dramas," with "heart interest" and "plenty of English girls in them"!' Elsewhere, A. E. Newbould suggested that when conversation amongst the ranks turned to the cinema, 'which rose naturally and incidentally to the lips of most of those with whom I came in contact', soldiers often spoke of the significance of certain images, such as 'a bit of English scenery' which 'stuck in the memory' once seen on screen.<sup>68</sup> Evidently, the cinema in these instances boasted the ability to transport its spectators, albeit temporarily, to their homes and past lives, reflecting how the medium of film could be used to construct a spectatorial engagement with specific, ideologically significant times and places.

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<sup>67</sup> Edith F. Mitchell Sowerbutts, "'Tommy" at the Pictures', *Pictures and the Picturegoer*, 30 December 1916, p. 292.

<sup>68</sup> A. E. Newbould, 'The Kinema and the War', *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 27 September 1917, p. 109.

Ultimately, however, the fundamental act of attending a cinema show on the front line served as an important reminder of pre-war civilian life, of leisure and recreation enjoyed in the company of family, loved ones and friends to whom 'Tommy' hoped to one day return. Indeed, on his final night in Poperinge which he described as having been 'quite a home to us', Percy Jones marked his departure with one final visit to the 'pictures' on 6 February 1916 before he left for the Somme area to train and prepare for the upcoming offensive in July, a battle which he would live through, but which resulted in his capture and internment as a prisoner of war, far removed from the comforts of home for remainder of the war. The medium's perceived 'link to home' was an aspect of soldier spectatorship which was, arguably, unique to this particular war time demographic. In contrast to civilian audiences who visited the cinema either to escape the anxieties of the war, or to learn more about it, valuing the medium's ability to connect an audience with the front line through the form of topical films and documentaries, the soldier inversely turned to the front line cinema to transport himself, albeit temporarily and incompletely, to the home front.

Soldiers valued the cinema for two fundamental reasons. Firstly, soldiers valued the 'mental tonic' effect which the cinema had on their war-weary minds, noting the psychological benefits of the medium's ability to offer escapism and a way to forget the spectator's present circumstances which, perhaps more than any other context, was overbearingly oppressive. Secondly, the cinema, both through its content and as an institution and leisure practice, offered the soldier a reminder of the homes and lives they had left behind and for which they were now fighting and perhaps even dying. Importantly, the value of cinema as articulated by these two categories further refutes Fuller's conclusion that soldiers were largely dismissive or indifferent to the cinema. It is evident that the average soldier valued the institution of the front line

cinema as much as they did the provision sports, concert parties or other forms of recreation. But how exactly did soldiers express their admiration?

### **Soldier Fandom**

Apart from personal commentary on films and film screenings, soldiers expressed their interest in the cinema and its surrounding culture in a variety of different ways. Obviously, the demographic in question was broad enough to encompass multiple perspectives and specific interests in film and film culture, and whilst broad trends may be detected it is important to remember that these were individual spectators and not a homogeneous mass. That being said, some general patterns do emerge within the soldier community's response and relation to the cinema and its surrounding culture, be this an overarching admiration for certain stars or genres of film, or perhaps more tellingly, their dismissal and criticism of certain cinematic strands such as topical filmmaking (to be discussed in Chapter Four). This section, however, will examine the phenomenon of soldier fandom as it was expressed in admiration for films, stars and film genres, and the institution of the cinema more generally.

Broadly speaking, journalistic profiles of military cinemas corroborate the idea that, whilst some variety was present, there existed an overarching preference for comedy films, not unlike theatrical venues back home. Reporting upon the earliest Divisional cinema, the 4<sup>th</sup> Divisional cinema, it was claimed that '[t]he most popular subjects, apparently, are knockabout and chase comedies, scenes of comic destructions and light humorous plays generally. Four or five sensational melodramas were also taken, however, besides a scenic film and the topical picture, "Men of the

Moment”<sup>69</sup> An account published in the *Picturegoer* summed up an average programme as such: ‘[a]nother drama, after that another comic. In a firing line cinema there is always an equal number of each kind of film. The men want comics especially.’<sup>70</sup> A commentator for *The Bioscope* reported that at an (unidentified) Divisional cinema, the programme ‘range[d] in length from seven to eight thousand feet [roughly 90 minutes], and usually quite equal a West End show, great favourites being the great Triangle four and five reelers, with now and again a Charlie Chaplin, which, of course, always brings the house down.’<sup>71</sup> Most reports highlight this preference for comedy films, often described as ‘comics of the knockabout kind’, referring to the films of Charlie Chaplin, Fred ‘Pimple’ Evans, John Bunny and others.<sup>72</sup> Reportage on the balance of programmes similarly appears to emphasise a certain leaning towards comedy: one commentator for *Pictures and the Picturegoer* suggests that the films of Charlie Chaplin were the ‘principal’ fixture of his local military cinema, whilst a Corporal’s letter published in the same paper speaks of the ‘rapid succession’ of comedians on screen – ‘Polidor’, ‘Prince Tontoline and other popular comedians’ – at a cinema, outside of which resided ‘a cut-out of the most popular man in the world – Charles Chaplin.’<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, the popularity of and preference for comedians, most notably Charlie Chaplin, is undoubtedly corroborated and confirmed by the letters, diaries and memoirs penned by soldiers themselves.

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<sup>69</sup> ‘A Cinema Theatre at the Front’, *The Bioscope*, 4 February 1915, p. 457. It is the inclusion of the film *Men of the Moment* – released with startling speed in only a matter of days after the declaration of war and described by Rachel Low as ‘a one-reel film’ which dealt ‘quite superficially with the forces and their leaders’ - which identifies the company in question as the Hepworth Pictures. See: Rachel Low, *The History of the British Film, 1914-1918* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1950), p. 29.

<sup>70</sup> “‘Tommy’ at the Pictures’, *Pictures and the Picturegoer*, 30 December 1916, p. 292.

<sup>71</sup> J.E. Stephens, ‘With the Cinema near the Firing Line’, *The Bioscope*, 28 February 1918, p. 68.

<sup>72</sup> “‘Firing Line’ Kinemas’, *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 4 January 1917, pp. 31-32 (p. 31).

<sup>73</sup> See: “‘Pictures’ in the Trenches’, *Picture and the Picturegoer*, 14 July 1917, p. 116; Corporal W. Hardman, ‘A Theatre Behind the Firing-line.’, *Pictures and the Picturegoer*, 30 October 1915, p. 86.

As such, military cinema exhibitors appear to have shaped the content of their programmes to meet the desires and interests of their intended audience. This point becomes all the more apparent when it is taken into consideration that one type of film is notable for its absence from the front line cinema programme, at least when consulting journalistic reportage: namely, the documentary, topical and/or newsreel. Despite the increasing importance and informational value that topical films and newsreels had in domestic cinemas back home, only a few sources consulted refer to the screening of such films on the front line. In instances where topical films or newsreels depicting war news or information were screened – notable as they are for the clash and contrast of spectatorial response they prompted – the commentary that surrounded such screenings tend to reaffirm the cinema’s perceived role to provide escapism, laughter and comfort in the form of comedies and drama. Indeed, as Sergeant-Major W. F. Martyn, an operator for a military cinema cited by *The Cinegoer* argued, ‘the more intimately people are connected with the War the less they want to see it on the films. It’s the one Film subject the Tommies at the Front won’t stand; everything else they enjoy’.<sup>74</sup> However, a more detailed analysis of this element of front line exhibition will have to wait until Chapter Four, dependent as it is upon a broader understanding of the soldier spectator in relation to their particular experience, world view and burgeoning cine-literacy.

Of course, whilst broad preferences undoubtedly existed, the consultation of commentary produced by soldiers reveal further levels of interest in the cinema. In letters written to his sister, for example, Maurice Gower of the Rifle Brigade, 4<sup>th</sup> Division, took the time to provide his take on literary adaptations for the cinema. ‘I went

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<sup>74</sup> Untitled news item, *The Cinegoer*, 18 March 1916, p. 2.

to the Pictures on Saturday night', remarked Gower, 'and saw "The Mill on the Floss" [Moore, 1915] filmed, it seemed a curious sort of thing to put on and made for a very poor show. I don't think books make very good subjects and I should never want to read a book after seeing it on the film'.<sup>75</sup> Gower himself appears to have been particularly discerning in his view of how the cinema adapted classic and contemporary literature for its content, to a degree which betrayed a certain idiosyncratic snobbishness. Shifting his attention from the screen to its audience, Gower remarked in one instance how, when visiting a military cinema:

the remarks of the audience themselves are worth going to hear. I saw the film of 'Flames' [Elvey, 1917] by Robert Riches, it deviated from the book a good deal. Owen Nares taking the part of the hero, it was a bit beyond the troops, especially the explanatory part, nevertheless a good deal of amusement was extracted. All films are humorous [sic] to soldiers.<sup>76</sup>

Gower's arrogance aside, his account further corroborates the notion that soldiers visited the cinema to laugh and be entertained above all else. This sentiment is further reinforced by the specific commentary offered by (then) Private F. Bass of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cambridgeshire Regiment, 6<sup>th</sup> Division, who recorded in his diary how at one packed screening at a military cinema, the films were in French but 'translated by a man at the back – very humorous remarks he made. Great idea in French pictures seems to be for dreams and hallucinations which occur in every scene. Rather a change and we enjoyed it'.<sup>77</sup> In certain instances where the film being screened perhaps proved too

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<sup>75</sup> IWM Collections, Documents.255, Private Papers of M F Gower, letter dated 15 January 1917.

<sup>76</sup> IWM Collections, Documents.255, Private Papers of M F Gower, letter dated 8 October 1918.

<sup>77</sup> IWM Collections, Documents.7085, Private Papers of Lieutenant F Bass MC, diary entry dated 18 September 1916.



obscure or indecipherable, soldiers appear to have drawn entertainment (often comedy) from its content regardless. However, such reactions shouldn't be viewed as reflecting a wider indifference or blasé attitude towards film content, rather, they represent a minority of instances in which a specific film's content simply didn't appeal (or, quite literally, translate) to the interests of its spectators.

Indicative of the soldier spectator's discerning interest in the cinema and its culture, it is evident that soldiers frequently expressed their admiration for specific stars. For example, *Pictures and the Picturegoer* published several letters from soldiers serving on the front line. Writing from 'Somewhere in France' (as soldiers were obliged to do), J. M. remarked:

The principal pictures we saw when we were further back were those showing the renowned Charlie [Chaplin]. Sometimes we saw the same picture for about a week. Vitagraph films sometimes came out, and we also saw a Hepworth, with Stewart Rome in the lead. He is a great deal admired by the boys out here, as also is Alma Taylor. We never had the luck to see a Mary Pickford one, but we had to be content with what we could get.<sup>78</sup>

*Pictures and the Picturegoer* also published several letters from soldiers describing how they had decorated their dug-out with star portraits. Said one 'Tommy':

Say – it would do your heart good to have a peep into my dug-out! It's film-land absolutely. I have written over fifty British and American actors and actresses since I came over and have had photographs from them nearly all – with which

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<sup>78</sup> J. M. "Pictures" in the Trenches', *Pictures and the Picturegoer*, 14 July 1917, p. 116.

I have decorated my “chateau”! Pauline Frederick has the place of honour, and a *frame*, made from a Hun-shattered gate!<sup>79</sup>

Elsewhere under the inflammatory title “‘Mary Pickford’ Shot’, a letter from the trenches reported how gun fire upon a similarly decorated dug-out had resulted in some cinematic casualties. ‘Mary Pickford has had two bullets through her head, and half her frock is shot away; Charlie Chaplin (this is one of those big cut-outs) has had his head and hat completely shot off’.<sup>80</sup>

Of course, such stories were perhaps somewhat apocryphal, embellished or even invented for journalistic purposes. As Janet Staiger has suggested, ‘letters to editors of periodicals are bound up with an apparatus of perpetuating the pleasure of the cinematic institution’ and that a certain level of ‘mediation and distortion’ is to be expected. The topical nature of the war obviously proved fertile ground for editors in search of content for their readers and so it is not outside the realms of possibility that certain liberties were taken with the truth in such instances.<sup>81</sup> Indeed, *Pictures and the Picturegoer* published several letters purportedly written by soldiers who professed their admiration for the magazine and their regular receipt of new issues on the front line, exemplified in one instance by an illustration depicting ‘Tommy’ reading the magazine in a trench (Fig. 3.2). On the popularity of the magazine amongst soldiers, ‘A Soldier Reader’ wrote in to say that ‘I have one good consolation and means of keeping in touch with my screen favourites, and that is the bright little paper, PICTURES, which is a blessing to me’.<sup>82</sup> The evident publicity to be gained from

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<sup>79</sup> ‘Film-Land in a Dug-Out’, *Pictures and the Picturegoer*, 11 August 1917, p. 207.

<sup>80</sup> T. S., “‘Mary Pickford’ Shot’, *Pictures and the Picturegoer*, 13 November 1915, p. 144.

<sup>81</sup> Janet Staiger, “‘The Handmaiden of Villainy’: Methods and Problems in Studying the Historical Reception of a Film’, *Wide Angle*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (1986), pp. 19-27 (p. 21).

<sup>82</sup> ‘Pictures in the Trenches’, *Pictures and the Picturegoer*, 16 December 1916, p. 246.



Fig. 3.2: 'A Good Thing in the Trenches' illustration from *Pictures and the Picturegoer*, 17 November 1917, p. 550.

soldiers proclaiming their appreciation for their publication would surely prove to be patriotic gold for the entrepreneurial editor. In this particular case, Jane Bryan has identified the close links between *Pictures and the Picturegoer* and the Hepworth Company, the former featuring numerous profile pieces, star portraits and positive reviews within its pages.<sup>83</sup> The inclusion of Alma Taylor and Stuart Rome amongst the

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<sup>83</sup> Bryan, 'The Cinema Looking Glass', p. 144-145.

aforementioned sources citing soldier fandom, both of whom were Hepworth personalities, may betray a certain bias at hand.

Whether or not such reports had any basis in reality is impossible to ascertain at this point. Nevertheless, certain trends can be seen across multiple sources, corroborated by a range of perspectives beyond the confines of individual biases and in the first-hand testimony of soldier spectators themselves. One such trend was the admiration the soldier community felt for a short man in a bowler hat, baggy trousers and big shoes.

### **'Chaplinitis' amongst the Troops**

In his 1915 novel *The First Hundred Thousand* (a journalistic, albeit sanitised depiction of life on the front line in the first few months of the war), Ian Hay (Major-General John Hay Beith) who had served with the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders as a second lieutenant in France during the early stages of the conflict, describes a scene in which a battalion, whilst on rest in billets, shifts the conversation towards the subject of Charlie Chaplin.

“Who is Charlie Chaplin?” inquired several voices.

[Captain] Wagstaffe shook his head.

“I haven't the faintest idea,” he said. “All I know is that you can't go anywhere in London without running up against him. He is It. The mention of his name in a *revue* is greeted with thunders of applause. At one place I went to, twenty young men came upon the stage at once, all got up as Charlie Chaplin.”

“But who is he?”

“That I can’t tell you. I made several attempts to find out; but whenever I asked the question people simply stared at me in amazement. I felt quite ashamed: it was plain that I ought to have known. I have a vague idea that he is some tremendous new boss whom the Government have appointed to make shells, or something. Anyhow, the great British Nation is far too much engrossed with Charles to worry about a little thing like Conscription. Still I should like to know”.<sup>84</sup>

Whilst it is certainly possible that British soldiers serving on the front line in the early months of the First World War may not have been familiar with the comedy star Charlie Chaplin, (one suspects that Hay’s comic vignette served to underline the ubiquity of Chaplin rather than a genuine lack of familiarity amongst the troops), they soon would be.

As we have seen, the context of the First World War facilitated an overarching demand for the kind of films produced by Chaplin: ‘knockabout’ or slapstick comedies which, for the duration of the screening, allowed spectators to forget the horrors of the war. For civilian audiences, the ability to escape from the day-to-day anxieties of the conflict – the ever present fear that news would reach them of a loved one or friend who had lost their life on the battlefield – was of the utmost value. As Michael Hammond notes, the desire for escapist entertainment for civilian audiences was taken up by the industry. ‘As the war progressed’, Hammond writes, ‘the emphasis on the nature of the recuperative powers of cinema and the comic film became more evident in the advertising discourse of the trades and fan magazines.’<sup>85</sup> In Chaplin,

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<sup>84</sup> Ian Hay, *The First Hundred Thousand* (Glasgow: Richard Drew Publishing Ltd., 1985), pp. 230-231.

<sup>85</sup> Hammond, *The Big Show*, p. 177.

civilian audiences found their saviour, an often vulgar but ultimately loveable tramp who, for the price of admission, could alleviate the suffering and anxieties of British cinema audiences across the country.

For one civilian film fan, Chaplin's comedy had a higher calling. In a letter to *Pictures and the Picturegoer*, 'J. M'Q' of Edinburgh proclaimed:

I have just seen the Hepworth Comedies as shown to our Tommies at the Front, and it is my opinion, and the opinion of many others, that the cinema must now play a very prominent part in the entertainment of our heroes. What is more likely to raise the drooping spirits of a jaded soldier than a good, rousing comedy? Now my word is – Chaplin must go. He is wanted 'somewhere near the fighting line.' He is great – inimitable – the One and Only. Wounded soldiers home from the Front have rapidly developed severe attacks of Chaplinitis, and have communicated it to their pals on their return to the trenches. It is the duty of the great [British Public] to supply all the wants of their defenders, and the greatest want of these is Charlie.<sup>86</sup>

Predictably, the near-limitless extent of Chaplin's popularity on the home front readily carried over to the trenches. For those serving on the front lines, Chaplin's comedy helped to alleviate the depression and anxiety which affected the average soldier in his direct day-to-day experience of the conflict, rather than the remote experiences of those on the home front. As a writer for a Y.M.C.A. publication concluded, the soldier 'can watch the antics of Charlie Chaplin, and get a good laugh in these times when laughing is such an imperial asset'.<sup>87</sup> It is telling that, whilst numerous other film stars

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<sup>86</sup> 'Wanted at the Front', *Pictures and the Picturegoer*, 2 October 1915, p. 13.

<sup>87</sup> 'How To Spend Your Weekend', *The British Empire Y.M.C.A. Weekly*, 1 September 1916, p. 810.

and genres of films were projected for soldier audiences across the Western front and beyond, Chaplin was the only personality to be namechecked with widespread regularity by soldier-produced commentary and other accounts of front line cinema spectatorship. As Kevin Brownlow has suggested, more than 'any general or politician, it was a motion picture star who raised morale. Charlie Chaplin was a true war hero, for his films did nothing but good'.<sup>88</sup>

Indeed, Chaplin's incomparable ability to raise troop morale positioned his films as the cornerstone of front line programming. 'Charlie' was the foremost desired and most cherished personality of the cinema screen amongst soldier spectators, a fact which is readily attested to by first-hand accounts of soldier spectatorship. Speaking after the war, Sibbald Stewart of the 238<sup>th</sup> Company Machine Guns Corps, for example, remembered during an interview for the IWM's oral history project how he visited a cinema behind the line on the Mesopotamian front and, laughing with joy at the memory, recalled seeing 'Charlie Chaplin, the silent fool' in the midst of a packed venue in which the audience continually called for 'Charlie! Charlie!'<sup>89</sup> Calls for 'Charlie' appear to have been a regular feature of front line cinemas, as reflected by a report published by *Pictures and the Picturegoer*. "Charlie –" yelled somebody from the rear. "Charlie Chaplin!" [...] The cry caught on. Charlie is always a favourite at home and in the firing line'.<sup>90</sup> Chaplin's films proved to be the greatest draw anywhere that a front line cinema was established. Major W. F. Martin reported to the *Daily Mail* how at his military cinema on the Western front, they 'specialise, of course, in comics, particularly

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<sup>88</sup> Kevin Brownlow, *The War, West and the Wilderness* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1979), p. 3.

<sup>89</sup> IWM Collections, Catalogue No. 10169, Sibbald, Stewart (Oral History).

<sup>90</sup> Edith F. Mitchell Sowerbutts, "Tommy" at the Pictures', *Pictures and the Picturegoer*, 30 December 1916, p. 292.

“Charlie Chaplin.” That is what the “boys” come to see’.<sup>91</sup> In one account, Chaplin’s short comedy *The Property Man* (Chaplin, 1914) took the top billing at a front line cinema rather than a feature. Emphasising the escapist qualities of Chaplin’s comedy, the correspondent for *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly* reported how, following a film of a boxing match: ‘On came the next, which proved to be the star turn: it was “Charlie.” Everybody yelled and clapped (Charlie the Property Man). Within a short time the place was rocking with laughter; the antics of this prince of comedians were a fine tonic to these war-worn fighters’.<sup>92</sup>

Significantly, Chaplin’s popularity amongst soldiers was also recorded by official military histories published in the years after the war. The Divisional history of the 8<sup>th</sup> Division, for example, noted that ‘Chaplin had been “featuring” at their Divisional cinema to packed audiences, whilst the 9<sup>th</sup> Division historian John Ewing reported that ‘it is needless to mention that the film most in request from one end of the line to the other was “Charlie Chaplin”’.<sup>93</sup> Indeed, military authority appears to have endorsed Chaplin’s ability to distract and entertain the rank and file. Rowland Fielding, an officer in the Connaught Rangers (16<sup>th</sup> Irish Division), wrote in a letter to his wife in April 1917 in which he explained how he had visited a Divisional cinema the night before:

Charlie Chaplin was there, figuratively, and at his best. I confess I am getting to appreciate him; and if you could see how the soldiers love him you would like him too. When his image appears upon the screen they welcome it with such

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<sup>91</sup> “‘Tommy’s’ Own Kinema’, *Daily Mail*, 4 January 1916, p. 7.

<sup>92</sup> ‘The Kinema at Suicide Corner’, *Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 7 February 1918, p. 47.

<sup>93</sup> See: Lt. Colonel J. H. Boraston and Captain Cyril E. O. Bax, *The Eight Division in War 1914-1918* (London: The Medici Society, Ltd., 1926), p. 60; John Ewing, *The History of the 9<sup>th</sup> (Scottish) Division 1914-1919* (London: John Murray, 1921), p. 455.



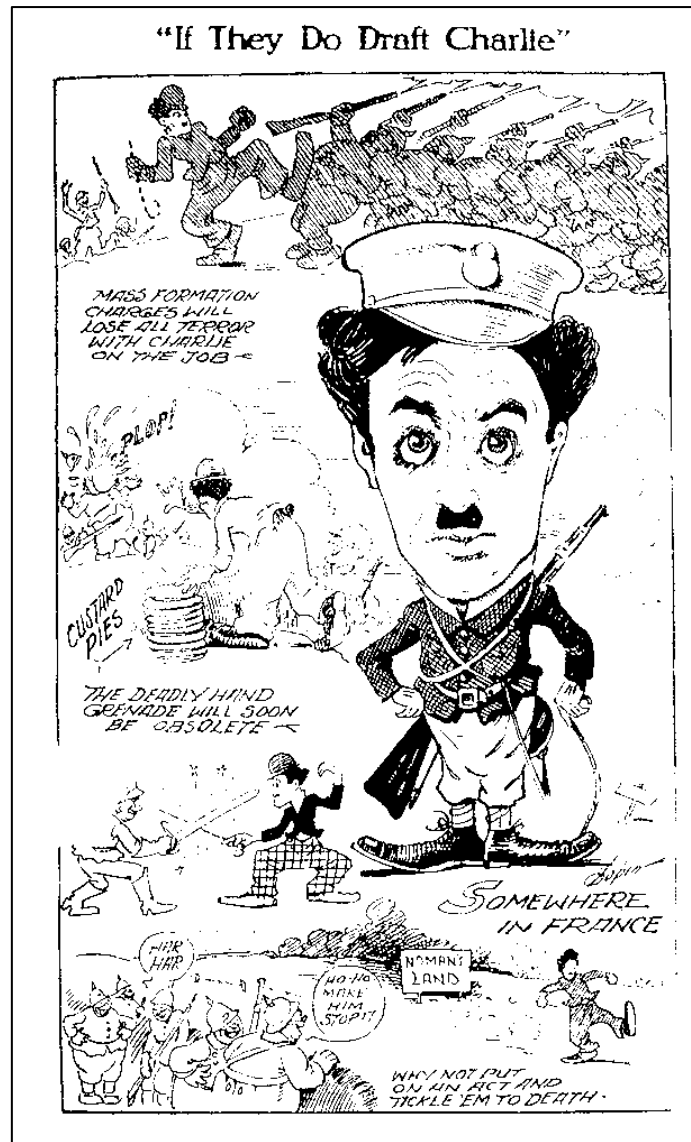


Fig. 3.3: 'If They Do Draft Charlie' illustration published in Simon Louvish, *Chaplin: The Tramp's Odyssey* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 2009), p. 127.

shouts of approval that it might be the living Charlie. The men all flock to these shows, and hundreds are turned away nightly'.<sup>94</sup>

Major W. Murphy, commanding officer of the 6<sup>th</sup> Divisional Supply Column, shared the same sentiment with *Pictures and the Picturegoer* upon receipt of a donation of Chaplin's films from the Essanay company in 1915: 'It is impossible to make you

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<sup>94</sup> J. G. Fuller, *Troops Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies, 1914-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), p. 111.



Fig. 3.4: Photo of a Chaplin impersonator on the front line, IWM Collection, Catalogue No. Q5524

realise how they were appreciated, and I truly wish you could have heard the cheer that went up when Chaplin appeared on the screen'.<sup>95</sup> Even Edward VIII, then the Prince of Wales, was said to have 'fairly roared at Charlie Chaplin' when he visited the Guards Division cinema in Poperinge in early 1916, and noted his disappointment when he learned that no new Chaplin film was to be found amongst a batch of new films delivered to the venue.<sup>96</sup>

Whilst Chaplin the man never set foot on the front line, 'Charlie' the character did in numerous ways. As David Robinson suggests, the 'notion of Charlie at war was irresistible. From the time of the "slacker" campaign against him (during which there were calls for Chaplin to return to Britain and enlist), newspaper cartoonists in every

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<sup>95</sup> W. Murphy, 'Charlie Harasses the Enemy!', *Pictures and the Picturegoer*, 30 October 1915, p. 86.

<sup>96</sup> IWM Collections, Documents.12745, Private Papers of Reverend W P G McCormick DSO, Diary Entries for: 21 January 1916; 4 February 1916.

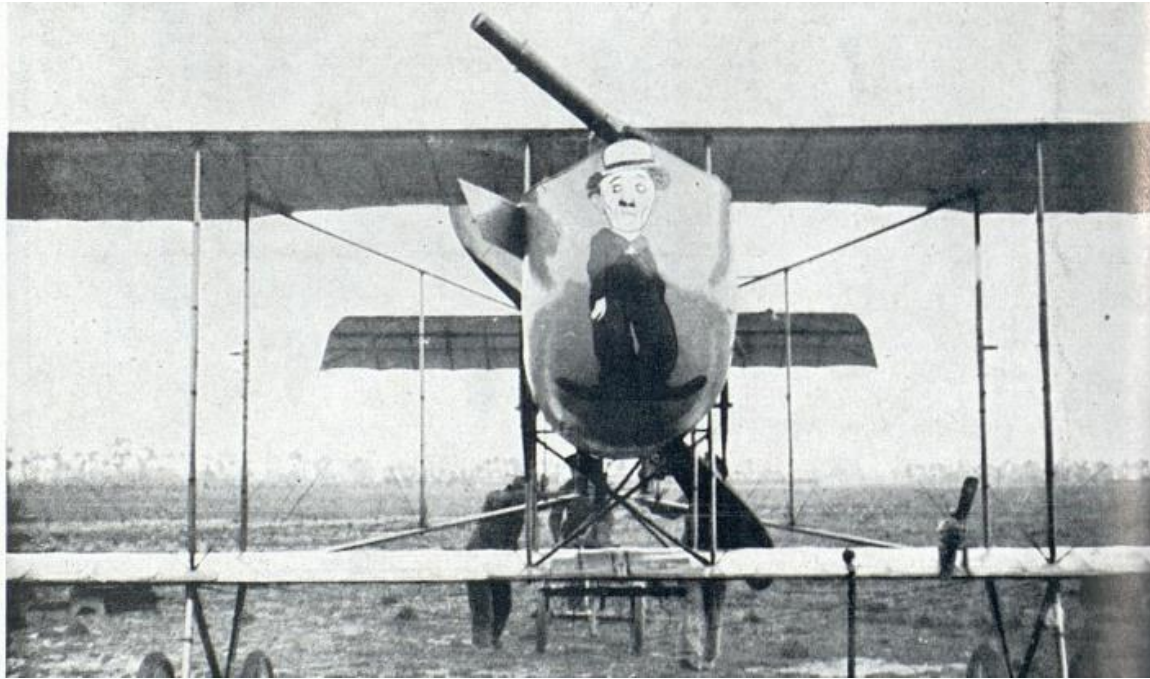


Fig. 3.5: Photo of a Chaplin mural on a Belgian Fighter Plane from *The Illustrated War News*, 20 September 1916, p. 38.

country had delighted in speculating on the possibilities of a confrontation between Charlie and the Kaiser' (Fig. 3.3). Indicative of his popularity, the image of 'Charlie' intersected with trench life and culture in a variety of ways outside of the actual front line cinema venue, reflecting the active fandom and engagement of his soldier fans on the front line. Indeed, Kevin Brownlow has written about how cut-out figures of 'Charlie', the kind traditionally used as advertisements outside of civilian cinemas, made their way to the trenches. 'These life-size models were popular with the troops, who would stand them on the parapet during an attack. The appearance of a crudely painted tramp, with baggy trousers and a bowler hat, must have bewildered the Germans, who had no idea who he was'.<sup>97</sup> 'Charlie' impersonators were a regular feature of concert parties (Fig. 3.4), whilst others created mascots in his likeness. Chaplin could also find his cinematic creation honoured with a namesake tank (Fig.

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<sup>97</sup> Brownlow, *The War, the West and the Wilderness*, p. 41.



Fig. 3.6: Photo of a British tank bearing the name 'Charlie Chaplin', IWM Collection, Catalogue No. Q 3237

3.6) as well as a mural painted on the nose of a Belgian fighter plane (Fig. 3.5) amongst other products of the war. For the latter, the *Illustrated War News* commented that 'the humour of the famous quaint and world-popular cinema star, seen in such conditions, will scarcely be appreciated by the enemy who finds himself confronted with this grotesquely decorated plane'.<sup>98</sup>

Long before Chaplin's own cinematic depiction of the trenches in 1918's *Shoulder Arms*, the 'Charlie' character was also seen to don khaki in a variety of unofficial forms to whet the appetite of those who longed to see the tramp stand up against the Kaiser. Illustrated postcards featuring 'Charlie' in Khaki wreaking havoc on

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<sup>98</sup> 'Aeroplane "Figure-Heads": Belgian Aviators' Humour', *The Illustrated War News*, 20 September 1916, p. 38.



Fig. 3.7: Postcard titled 'Watch Him Jump' c.1916. Courtesy of The Bill Douglas Cinema Museum, BDC EXE 86149.

German soldiers or flirting with military nurses were produced and sold by one London company in a series titled 'At the Front' (Fig. 3.7), some of which appear to have made their way to the front line and were used by soldiers (one such postcard in the Bill

Douglas Cinema Museum collection features a message written from a soldier to his mother whilst serving on the front).<sup>99</sup>

That Charlie was so readily appropriated and embraced by the British army and its trench culture in the First World War – introduced through illustration, imitation and prose to the environment of the front – further confirms a fundamental element of the character’s value as articulated by Chaplin scholarship. Indeed, many scholars of Chaplin have suggested that the character’s popularity and his rise to fame and cultural ubiquity in the mid 1910s broadly stems from his ‘everyman’ persona, a blank slate onto which multiple identities, values and meanings could be written, due to the character’s relatively unstable identity as represented on screen. André Bazin, for example, suggested that ‘Charlie is a mythical figure *who rises above every adventure in which he becomes involved*. For the general public, Charlie exists as a person before and after *Easy Street* and *The Pilgrim*’.<sup>100</sup> In 1931, Siegfried Kracauer identified the same character trait when he remarked:

Who is this man, who can become such common property without getting worn out? A few typical insignias give him away: his crown is a threadbare hat, his scepter a walking stick. This great victor is a tramp, a have-not; his homeland is everywhere and nowhere. And the fact that he lacks what others have is of course one of the mysteries of his power. Denomination, nationality, wealth and class affiliations erect barriers between people, and only the outcast, the person on the outside, lives untrammelled by restriction. Wherever he can he forces

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<sup>99</sup> For more detail on these postcards, see: Chris Grosvenor, ‘At the Front’ postcard series c.1916, the Bill Douglas Cinema Museum collection’, *Early Popular Visual Culture*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (2017), pp. 500-507.

<sup>100</sup> André Bazin, ‘Charlie Chaplin’, *What is Cinema Vol. 1* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), p. 144. My emphasis.

himself through pores and cracks and settles, like dust off the street. And if, like Chaplin, he has at his disposal a language without words, then his realm is boundless. One kind of world domination imposes itself on the world from above, concentrating all power within itself. As one who represents nothing, Chaplin rules the world from below.<sup>101</sup>

Charlie's 'everyman' status, what I would refer to as the discontinuous construction of his character (referring to the apparent discontinuity of the character's class, profession, wealth, family relationships, etc.) enabled him to be situated within any narrative, environment or situation without the risk of defying the expectations of his audience. A cursory glance at the character's introduction to an assortment of roles during the Mutual period (1916-1917) (fireman, policeman, upper-class alcoholic, waiter, pawnbroker's assistant), for example, readily embodies this notion as it was realised throughout the character's diverse and varied filmography. Despite the variety of situations, jobs or family units the character is depicted within, he is still undeniably recognisable as the character 'Charlie'.

Understanding this, the appropriation of the character within the trench culture of the British Army suggests one logical end-point of the character's construction in these terms. A character seemingly bound to no nation, class or ideology yet immediately recognisable by his visual markers of continuity, Charlie could be readily politicised and co-opted into the ideological discourses of warfare, trench culture and propaganda without the need to re-write or ignore any biographical limitations or counter audience expectation. Rather than a stable subject/identity, the use of the

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<sup>101</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, 'Two Chaplin Sketches', *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (1997), pp. 114-120 (p. 118).

Charlie iconography (hat, moustache, baggy trousers) within the material artefacts of trench culture seen above, affirms the character's status as an easily adaptable cultural 'object', to be used and appropriated by anyone who desires to, to cite Jennifer M. Bean's distinction in her analysis of the character.<sup>102</sup> As Bean surmises: '[a] bit grotesque, and lacking the coordinates of geographical and cultural identity we so often associate with selfhood, the Tramp figure – replete with baggy trousers, oversized shoes, bowler hat, short moustache, and limber cane – could be anyone'.<sup>103</sup>

Consequently, in the same way that Charlie took on specific national and cultural meanings for the French *poilu* (soldiers) and civilians as 'Charlot', within the context of the B.E.F.'s front line and British trench culture, Charlie came to embody another 'Tommy', fighting the Kaiser and the 'Hun' alongside British soldiers who cherished and admired the character on screen.<sup>104</sup> In a variety of ways, be it through Charlie cut-out figures, imitators, murals or soldier-produced commentary, the tramp became a widely recognised mascot for the B.E.F. The speculative 'Charlie as Tommy' motif had been a common feature of civilian publications and entertainments, as documented by Michael Hammond, but in sources such as those encountered above, the same motif can be seen to extend beyond the confines of the civilian sphere to the culture and environment of the front line itself.<sup>105</sup> Ultimately, Chaplin could be found everywhere: as ubiquitous on the front line as he was at home.

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<sup>102</sup> Jennifer M. Bean, 'Chaplin: The Object Life of Mass Culture', *Flickers of Desire: Movies Stars of the 1910s*, ed. Jennifer M. Bean (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 2011), pp. 242-263 (p. 243).

<sup>103</sup> Jennifer M. Bean, 'Introduction: Stardom in the 1910s', *Flickers of Desire: Movies Stars of the 1910s*, ed. Jennifer M. Bean (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 2011), pp. 1-21 (p. 17).

<sup>104</sup> On the national significance and value of 'Charlot' in France, see: Libby Murphy, 'Charlot français: Charlie Chaplin, The First World War, and the Construction of a National Hero', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (2010), pp. 421-429.

<sup>105</sup> Hammond, *The Big Show*, pp. 229-231.



## **Film Culture and Trench Journalism**

As we have seen, film fandom amongst soldiers manifested itself in a variety of incarnations and outlets throughout the First World War. Arguably, however, this strand of fandom expressed itself most emphatically within the pages of the war's most literary of soldier-produced ephemeral productions. Indeed, alongside direct commentary on the cinema and film content itself, soldier engagement with cinema culture can be seen frequently in 'trench journals', which contain frequent allusions to the experience of cinema spectatorship, popular on-screen personalities and other film-related content.

As soldier-produced publications created in very close proximity to the front line, trench journals are significantly important historical artefacts. Printed or handwritten, such publications were predominantly created for the specific readership of soldiers themselves, often targeted towards specific Divisions, Brigades or Battalions, or said to represent them. As such, they provide a fascinating insight into the day-to-day lives and experiences of those serving on the front line. However, distinct from the bureaucratic uniformity of the war diaries, the censored and/or euphemistic tone of letters written for loved ones back home or the insular musings of personal diaries, the content of trench journals represent a peculiar combination of fact, fabrication, satire and literary or artistic creation. As Graham Seal, author of *The Soldier's Press: Trench Journals in the First World War*, notes: trench journals were 'manifestations of their time and place and very much reflect the circumstances of their creations as well as

the concerns of those who edited and contributed to them.<sup>106</sup> They existed in a variety of forms and styles and their frequency of publication was largely dependent on the location and condition of their contributors as well as the resources available to them. Individual titles were produced predominantly by infantry battalions, but cavalry, artillery, field ambulance and even cyclist units could all boast their own periodicals. Whilst some publications were produced using conventional methods, such as *The Wipers Times*, which originated in an abandoned printing works in Ypres after being requisitioned by men from the 24<sup>th</sup> Division, others were painstakingly handwritten and sketched.

Equally, the style and tone of the content produced differed between individual titles. Whilst some titles sought to provide legitimate news or showcase serious artistic endeavours such as short stories and poetry, many instead distorted the medium and genre of press journalism for humorous and satirical ends. All of them, however, represented different elements of the front line experience, day-to-day life and the more harrowing aspects of the conflict itself. Such publications were very much a production of what has been termed 'trench culture', a culture produced by the contextual conditions and determinants that defined soldier experience and perspective on the front line. As Seal argues, the front line experience brought into confrontation the 'spatial and psychological realities of life and death, hope and fear, love and hate'.<sup>107</sup> They also marked another point of continuity with home life, emulating 'something of the everyday normality of home to feed the 'Blighty Hunger' of the troops'.<sup>108</sup> For men seeing active service for the first time in their lives,

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<sup>106</sup> Graham Seal, *The Soldier's Press: Trench Journals in the First World War* (London: Palgrave, 2013), p. 2.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p.55.



Fig. 3.8: 'Some Chaplinisms' Illustration from *The Whizz-Bang: A Monthly from the Front*, 1 January 1916, p. 7.

particularly for Britain's largely non-professional army, the 'patterns and practices of everyday life, such as were able to be maintained or recreated in the circumstances,

existed side by side with a range of new concerns, interests and activities that together made up the lineaments of trench culture'.<sup>109</sup>

It is therefore no surprise that trench journals, the primary literary output of trench culture, came to reflect the interests and passions of its editors and contributors. Alongside direct references to front line cinemas themselves, certain elements of cinema culture and spectatorship became part of the common vocabulary and cultural exchange documented by trench journals. Such instances may be as inconsequential as utilising the cinema as a setting for a joke or a passing reference to an actor or actress. A contribution to *The Whizz Bang* simply featured a crude illustration of the ubiquitous Charlie Chaplin in a number of different poses (Fig. 3.8) presented with the caption 'Some Chaplinisms'.<sup>110</sup> Elsewhere, in *Poison Gas: The Unofficial Organ of the 3rd Battalion Queen Victoria's Rifles*, an illustration featuring 'Sergeant Pimple', most likely a reference to the British comedian Fred 'Pimple' Evans, depicts the character being blown sky-high by a bomb he himself had planted (Fig. 3.9).<sup>111</sup> This illustration is of particular significance in that, whilst its humour derives largely from the kind of slapstick imagery prevalent in the films of Pimple, it exhibits a direct conflation of cinematic imagery and culture with the conditions of the war itself. Indeed, within the medium of the trench journal, references to the medium of the cinema and its culture are frequently shaped and informed by the contexts of war and soldier experience. Seal writes: the 'trench press did not project an unmediated representation of the world to its readers. Within its many thousands of pages we read a very particular, select

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> 'Some Chaplinisms', *The Whizz-Bang: A Monthly from the Front*, 1 January 1916, p. 7

<sup>111</sup> Untitled Illustration, *Poison Gas: The Unofficial Organ of the 3rd Battalion Queen Victoria's Rifles*, 1 February 1916, p. 5.

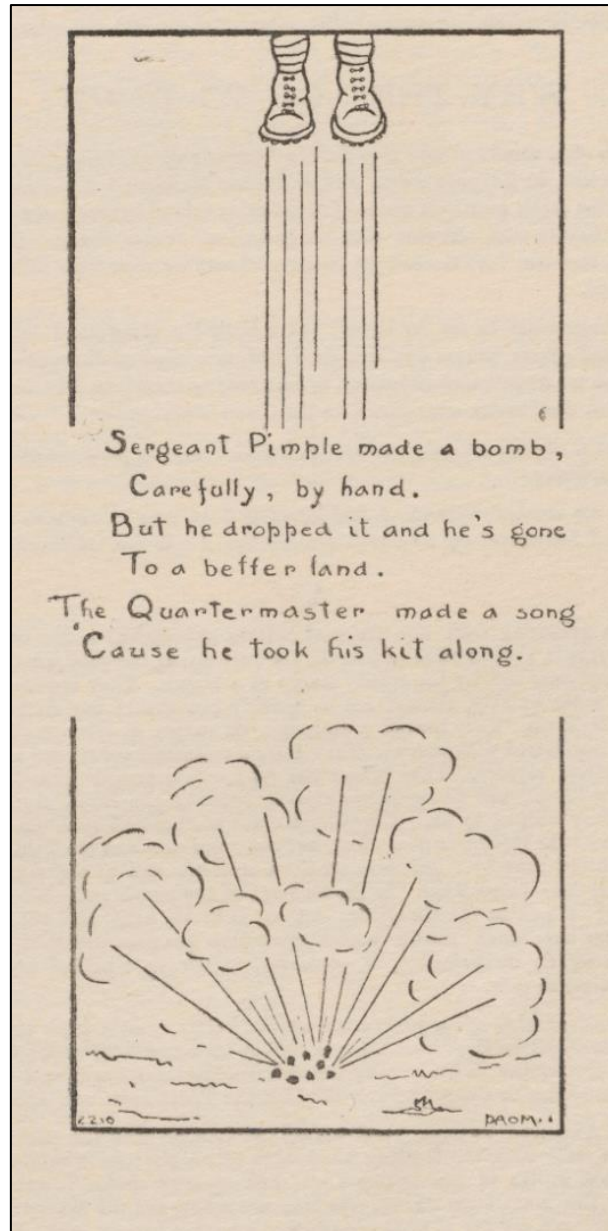


Fig. 3.9: Untitled Illustration from, *Poison Gas: The Unofficial Organ of the 3rd Battalion Queen Victoria's Rifles*, 1 February 1916, p. 5.

and often ameliorated version of the trench experience, one riddled with contradictions, anomalies, absences and elisions.<sup>112</sup> He continues:

Despite its appearance and the implicit or explicit assertions of its editors and contributors, the trench press was not an 'authentic' reflection of trench culture

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<sup>112</sup> Seal, *The Soldier's Press*, p. 3.

but a refraction of it. Trench newspapers selected elements of the experiences, emotions and articulations that inhabited the zones of war and presented them in partial and particular ways.<sup>113</sup>

The Pimple illustration is a clear example of this refraction of the truth of front line experience. In reality, the loss of life, self-inflicted or otherwise, was an inevitable and devastating consequence of warfare. However, co-opted into the cartoonish tropes of slapstick comedy, the illustration in question represents a cathartic, if cynical use of comedy to alleviate the situation at hand, masking the actualities of war through the appropriation of an established visual language fundamentally built upon the expectations of comedy associated with the Pimple character. By necessity and by design, British trench culture was built upon this sentiment of dark satirical humour, irony and cynicism. The release valve afforded by satire and comedy provided a method through which the soldier could continue to assert agency within a situation and against forces that were ultimately out of his control. As historian Martin Taylor has argued, the humour present in trench journals provided a platform to dismantle and disarm the impositions of 'official deception, petty regulations, physical discomfort, mental exhaustion and [the] ever-present threat of death'.<sup>114</sup>

As such, the tropes, expectations and conventions of certain aspects of cinema culture came to be utilised in this effort to negotiate the fears and anxieties prompted by front line experience, and these can be readily seen in many trench journals. Most prevalent in this regard are the numerous spoof cinema advertisements that were frequently featured in the pages of trench journals, primarily shaped by satire and

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>114</sup> Martin Taylor cited in Seal, *The Soldier's Press*, p. 2.

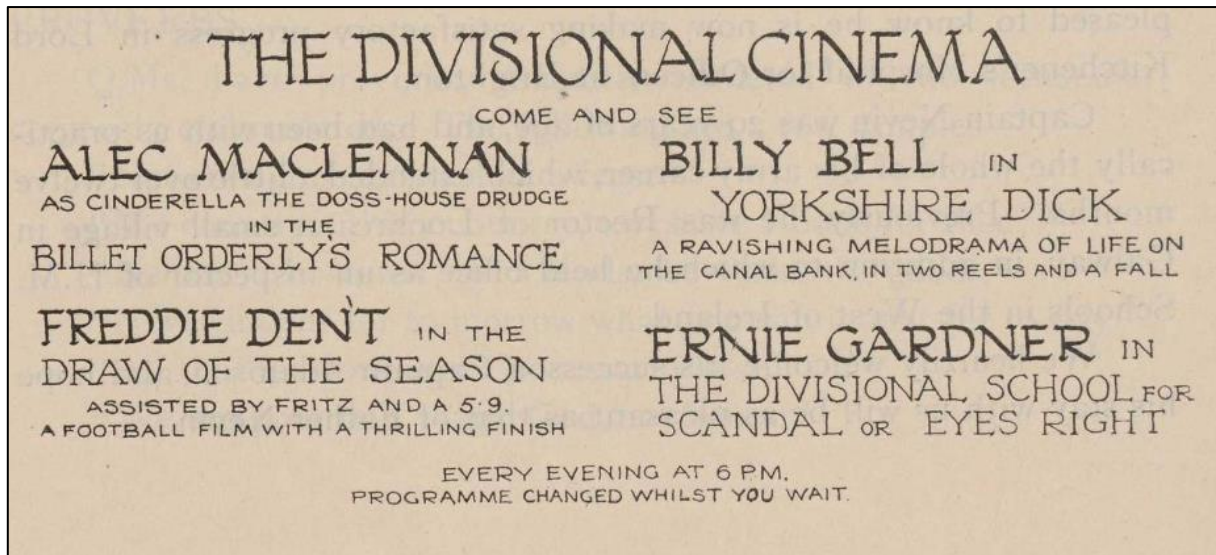


Fig. 3.10: 'The Divisional Cinema' from *The Lead Swinger. The Bivouac Journal of the 1/3 West Riding Field Ambulances*, 15 April 1917.

humour rather than fact. At a fundamental level, such advertisements reflect an editorial awareness of periodical conventions and form, conforming to the not unreasonable expectation that legitimate periodicals of this type would feature advertisements for cinemas and other recreations and businesses.

However, such advertisements also embody the range of tensions and complexities encapsulated by the soldier as an experienced cinematic spectator and consumer in his own right and should not, as Koenroad Du Pont argues, 'be mistaken for a sign of carefree youthfulness'.<sup>115</sup> Many trench journals feature such advertisements, such as *The Lead Swinger. The Bivouac Journal of the 1/3 West Riding Field Ambulances* which featured the 'advertisement' seen in Fig. 3.10.<sup>116</sup> A typical spoof advertisement, 'The Divisional Cinema' is here said to be screening a number of films all of which, upon closer inspection, are completely fabricated. Written

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<sup>115</sup> Koenroad Du Pont, 'Nature and Functions of Humor in Trench Newspapers (1914–1918)', in Clémentine Tholas-Disset and Karen A. Ritzenhoff (eds.), *Humor, Entertainment and Popular Culture during World War I* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 107-121 (p. 111).

<sup>116</sup> 'The Divisional Cinema', *The Lead Swinger: The Bivouac Journal of the 1/3 West Riding Field Ambulances*, 15 April 1917, unpaginated.

in the style and language of advertising rhetoric, 'Yorkshire Dick' is described as 'a ravishing melodrama of life on the canal bank, in two reels and a fall', whilst 'The Draw of the Season' (it is uncertain whether this is a description or the title of the alleged film) is said to be 'assisted by Fritz and 5.9', a reference to the German howitzer artillery gun and portrayed as if it were a musical accompaniment. In a different issue, the 'New Hut Empire' is said to be screening a film depicting 'The 240 thieves in their great nocturnal manoeuvre entitled The Magic Stones' as well as 'The Road to Ruin or its [sic] never too late to mend'.<sup>117</sup> These two adverts are, to an extent, too enigmatic to decipher as they most likely refer to events, people and locations known specifically to the periodical's primary readership. In effect, such instances are perhaps best understood as in-jokes, only relevant to a specific military formation. As Patrick Beaver notes in his introduction to the facsimile reprint of *The Wipers Times* published in 1973, many of the facts and details hinted at by the content of trench journals 'are now obscured by time and could only be grasped by those who were there.'<sup>118</sup> Nonetheless, we can grasp that the sensationalist and exaggerated rhetoric typically found in cinema promotion was being utilised in such instances for the effect of satire.

Other examples of spoof advertising are perhaps more easily interpreted. For example, the aforementioned *The Wipers Times* frequently included advertisements for a variety of fake institutions and products, as well as non-existent cinemas and films, which were often used to comment directly upon the experiences of the 24<sup>th</sup> Division and the broader progress and conditions of the war itself. Compared to *The*

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<sup>117</sup> 'The New Hut Empire', *The Lead Swinger: The Bivouac Journal of the 1/3 West Riding Field Ambulances*, 27 November 1915, unpaginated.

<sup>118</sup> Patrick Beaver, *The Wipers Times: A complete facsimile of the famous World War One trench newspaper, incorporating the "New Church" Times, the Kemmel Times, the B.E.F. Times, and the "Better Times"* (London: Peter Davies, 1973), p. xx.



*Leadswinger*, the advertisements featured in *The Wipers Times* embody a more overt strain of satirical cynicism and irony. Titles said to be screening at (what is referred to in one instance as) the absurdly named ‘Dead Cow Farm’ Cinema (a probable echo of the ironic names given to the trenches that shaped the battlefield) include: *He Didn’t Want to Do It*, featuring ‘Wata Funk’ the conscientious objector (‘funk’ being a slang term for fear/depression); *Attila. The Hun*, featuring Intha Pink (“in the pink” a slang term for “feeling fine” and used sarcastically in the circumstances); *Transport Bill*, starring Tommy the Mule who is described as a ‘highly trained animal, and; a pair of films sharing the same bill titled *Over the Top* (‘A Screaming Farce’) and *The Empty Jar* (‘A Rum Tragedy’).<sup>119</sup> Be it the perceived cowardice of conscientious objectors, the belief that the average soldier was being treated like an animal, the insufficient supply of rum rations or the horror of inevitably going over the top and into no-man’s land, such advertisements reflect the multitude of anxieties and concerns prompted by front line experience. As Du Pont notes, the function of humour in such advertisements was to ‘express soft criticism on precise aspects of life in the trenches and barracks: the mud, the dangers, the eternal desire to go on leave, drinking habits etc.’<sup>120</sup>

In *The Wipers Times*, actual personalities of popular cinema culture were co-opted for use in this mediated refraction of front line experience. For example, many adverts in the *Wipers Times* namecheck or allude to Charlie Chaplin, normally for fabricated films that appear to introduce the Charlie character – his name often deliberately misspelled – to the environment of the front line. Titles include ‘Charley [sic] Goes Gunning’, ‘Charlie Taplin [sic] in that stirring drama entitled: The Rusty Dud

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<sup>119</sup> Beaver, *The Wipers Times*, p. 35; 47; 49; 61.

<sup>120</sup> Du Pont, ‘Nature and Functions of Humor in Trench Newspapers (1914-1918), p. 112.

**DRANOUTRE ELECTRIC PALACE**  
 —o—o—o—o—  
 This Week—That Stupendous Film Play  
**G A S**  
 Will be Released.  
 IN THREE PARTS—10,000 FEET LONG.  
 Featuring TWEN TEFORTH in an entirely new role.  
 —o—o—o—o—  
**OTHER ITEMS.**  
 —o—o—o—o—  
**EVE AT THE FRONT.**  
 IN TWO PARTS.  
 —o—o—o—o—  
**PEASANTS LEAVING HOOGE, etc., etc.**  
 —o—o—o—o—  
 PRICES AS USUAL

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Fig. 3.11: 'Dranoutre Electric Palace' from *The Kemmel Times*, 3 July 1916, p.102.

or All is not Dead that's Dirty', and an advertisement which simply reads 'Marley Taplin'.<sup>121</sup> Much like the Pimple illustration, the titles here suggest a conflation of fact and cinematic fiction, although the details of how the Charlie character may deal with an unexploded bomb or 'dud' are left to the reader's imagination. Again, it is difficult to determine what point is being made by the creators of such advertisements. Are the aforementioned Chaplin titles a critique of the actor himself (unlikely given his almost universal popularity amongst soldiers) or an instance of wish-fulfilment in which the popular character is seen trying his own hand at the front line experience?

Elsewhere, the conflation of fact with cinematic fiction, framed by the type of language and promotional rhetoric usually associated with cinema advertising, can be more readily seen as a satirical indictment of front line experience. One particularly

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<sup>121</sup> Beaver, *The Wipers Times*, p. 14; 35; 74.

pointed use of this type of satirical commentary can be seen in an advertisement for the film *Gas* said to be screening at the 'Dranoutre Electric Palace', which was included in the 3 July 1916 issue of *The Wipers Times* (then renamed, *The Kemmel Times*) (Fig. 3.11).<sup>122</sup> On the 17 June 1916 German forces perpetrated a deadly gas attack on British forces near Ypres where the 24<sup>th</sup> Division were situated holding the line near the village of Dranoutre. The 24<sup>th</sup> division alone suffered 562 casualties as a result of the attack, 95 of whom died. Frederick John Roberts, editor of *The Wiper's Times* and primary creator of the spoof advertisements, was himself hospitalised either from the effects of the gassing or a wound sustained during the attack. Playing with the language of film promotion, the advertisement proclaims that *Gas* 'will be released' that week and will feature the actor/actress 'Twen Teforth' – i.e. the 24<sup>th</sup> Division – in 'an entirely new role'.<sup>123</sup>

To dismiss the advertisement as an inappropriate joke would be to miss the point of its inclusion. Resentful and cynical, the creator of the advertisement can be seen here using the sensationalist rhetoric of cinema advertising to underscore the absurdity and spectacle of the events which the 24<sup>th</sup> Division had recently witnessed and suffered through. Moreover, the refraction of actual events as documented through the rhetoric of film advertising seen here could potentially hint at the notion that such distancing – to treat the gas attack itself as an invention/creation of the cinema - may have been a suitable method of coping with the event itself.

Ultimately, the inclusion of references to the cinema in trench journals reflected a continued engagement with cinema culture and personalities outside of the actual

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<sup>122</sup> Beaver, *The Wipers Times*, p. 102.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

theatrical venue. Soldiers used such platforms to comment upon the presence of the cinema on the front line, but significantly, to also utilise the characteristic tropes and images of certain films and cinema culture to comment upon the front line experience. Soldiers, therefore, should be seen and understood as discerning film spectators during this period, engaging with film culture, its trends and rhetoric to a degree that was far more developed and considered than the conclusions drawn by Fuller would suggest about soldier spectatorship in the First World War. Interestingly, such publications were also used more pointedly by soldiers to comment upon and criticise topical and fictional film-making about the war, a subject which will be examined further in the next chapter.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, this chapter has demonstrated that soldier spectatorship on the front line represents a unique instance of war time spectatorship. Whilst in many ways soldiers shared cinematic interests and pleasures with civilian audiences back home, soldier spectatorship should be understood as being distinct from the experiences of the civilian demographic in conventional theatrical venues. Defined by the immediate contexts and determinants of life on the front line and the conditions of the front line venue itself, soldier spectators chose to visit the front line cinema to alleviate the oppressive atmosphere of the war, the dismal conditions of living rough on the front line, and the inescapable reminders of death and bodily pain that were only ever a moment away. More than a simple form of arbitrary entertainment, the front line cinema offered soldiers an immediate 'mental tonic' from the effects of war whilst also serving as a symbolic connection to the homes and lives they had left behind. So

popular was this form of entertainment that, even in the midst of a conflict, soldiers took time to express the admiration for the medium, film genres and personalities, demonstrating a strand of film fandom which reflected the soldier demographic's profound and discerning intellectual engagement as spectators. However, the soldier spectator's capacity for critical engagement with the cinema and its surrounding culture came to the fore in their response to and engagement with topical and fictional film-making of the period which concerned the war itself. It is this facet of soldier spectatorship which the next chapter will examine.

## 4. A War of Representation: Soldier Spectators and Topical Films

There is no cause, sweet wanderers in the dark,  
For you to cry aloud from cypress trees  
To a forgetful world; since you are seen  
Of all twice nightly at the cinema,  
While the munition makers clap their hands.<sup>1</sup>

‘Somme Film 1916’, C. H. B. Kitchin.

Published in 1919, Clifford Kitchin’s poem ‘Somme Film 1916’ highlights in five simple lines the power of the cinema to excavate and preserve the past. Those who died on the Somme – the ‘sweet wanderers in the dark’ – a description which invokes the monochromatic ghosts of the silver screen as much as it does the realm of the dead,

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<sup>1</sup> C. H. B. Kitchin, ‘Somme Film 1916’, in Dominic Hibberd and John Onions (eds.), *The Winter of the World: Poems of the Great War* (London: Constable & Robinson Ltd., 2008), p. 130.

are asked not to worry, for the cinema allows long lost souls the chance to be brought back to 'a forgetful world', never to be forgotten again. Kitchin's poem, although perhaps tinged with a hint of bitter cynicism in its depiction of dead soldiers transformed into a commercialised product to be applauded by those who remained at home, nevertheless underlines the fundamental purpose behind the topical documentary *The Battle of the Somme* (Malins and McDowell, 1916). '[Y]ou are seen' assured Kitchin, by the millions of civilians who flocked to screenings of the feature-length, record-breaking film across the country in the late summer of 1916. The film's power lay in its apparent ability to compact the distance between civilian audiences and the experiences of those who were living and dying on the Western front – those who had been part of the 'big push' and had been immortalised by the medium of film in the process. Civilian audiences, however, were not the only ones to see such films.

As we have seen, the oppressive conditions of the front line environment dictated the need for morale-boosting films: comedies, light dramas or anything that would remind the soldiers of home and their loved ones. The need for comic, escapist films appears to have remained the consensus for front line cinemas, with the vast majority of evidence highlighting the predominance of such material within front line cinema programming. However, as any history of British cinema during the First World War makes abundantly clear, some of the most culturally significant films of the period were those which dealt directly with the war.<sup>2</sup> In fact, it is these films which have

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<sup>2</sup> See: Michael Hammond, *The Big Show: British Cinema Culture in the Great War 1914-1918* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2006); Nicholas Reeves, *Official British Film Propaganda during the First World War* (London: Croom Helm, 1986); Rachel Low, *The History of the British Film 1914-1918* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1950).

maintained a far greater importance and afterlife than any British fiction filmmaking from the period.

Such films, as will be shown, were not primarily produced for soldier audiences but civilians, although this did not stop soldiers from seeing topical output both at home and, in some instances, on the front line. This chapter will demonstrate how the screening of such films for soldier audiences resulted in a spectatorial dynamic fraught with an inherent tension between the soldiers who viewed them and the content of films *purporting* to document – authentically and without manipulation – their own lives on screen: lives and experiences supposedly defined by notions like ‘honour’, ‘glory’ and a ‘soldier’s duty’. This, the chapter will argue, led to a strand of ‘expert spectatorship’ within wartime cinema audiences which quickly grew to denounce such sentiments. Primed by their own lived experience of the front line and the realities of war – experience which civilian audiences lacked – soldiers were intellectually equipped and culturally positioned to perceive topical and fictional war films in a fundamentally different way to their civilian counterparts. Indeed, this sort of reaction was emblematic of a broader pattern of criticism and cynicism located within the soldier community of the First World War, as outlined by Eric Leed in his *No Man’s Land: Combat and Identity in World War I*, which is worth quoting here at length:

The war experience established the boundaries within the larger “generation,” between those who fought and those who were “too old or too young” to fight in the Great War. But the knowledge acquired in battle is disjunctive in another sense, in the sense that it segments the lives of combatants into a “before” and an “after.” The knowledge and “self” acquired in war could only with difficulty be integrated into a continuous self. It is significant that in combat men learned things that were not cumulative, things that did not enhance but devalued what



they formerly thought they knew, things that made initial attitudes, truths, and assumptions into lies, illusions, and falsehoods. The character of the knowledge is reflected in the image of the veteran who is conventionally “cynical,” suspicious of general truths, resistant to the pressure of big words like “honor,” “glory,” “truth,” for this experience has taught him the sheer relativity of the things he once believed to be true.<sup>3</sup>

The culture of the war itself prompted an environment in which everyday people were suddenly confronted by images of themselves within the cultural sphere. As Paul Wombell has argued about photography during the First World War, '[e]verybody had been allocated a place in the vast army, either working on the home front or the battle front. Now they would see ‘themselves’ in magazines, newspapers, on postcards, and in exhibitions. Women would see ‘themselves’ working in factories making shells. Men would see ‘themselves’ going off to war.’<sup>4</sup> For soldiers, however, such images (be they photographic or, as we will see, cinematic) were often difficult or even impossible to reconcile with their actual experience of the front line. In October 1916, future historian R. H. Tawney, who had fought and been wounded during the battle of the Somme, underlined this tension between image and reality in an essay titled ‘Some Reflections of a Soldier’, in which he rallied against the civilian sphere’s ignorance of war’s realities:

I read your papers and listen to your conversation, and I see clearly that you have chosen to make yourselves an image of war, not as it is, but of a kind

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<sup>3</sup> Eric J. Leed, *No Man’s Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 74.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Wombell, ‘Face to Face with Themselves: Photography and the First World War’, ed. Patricia Holland, Jo Spence and Simon Watney, *Photography/Politics – Two* (London: Comedia Publishing Group, 1986), pp. 74-81 (p. 78).

which, being picturesque, flatters your appetite for novelty, for excitement, for easy admiration, without troubling you with masterful emotions. You have chosen, I saw, to make an image, because you do not like, or cannot bear, the truth; because you are afraid of what may happen to your souls if you expose them to the inconsistencies and contradictions, the doubts and bewilderment, which lie beneath the surface of things.<sup>5</sup>

Crucial here is Tawney's idea of the 'image' of war – rendered according to him through journalism and conversation, if not film – being produced for and consumed by civilians lacking actual experience of the conflict itself. As this chapter shall demonstrate, the cinema – perhaps the ultimate image-making medium – and its output of topical filmmaking, was another device that only served to highlight the 'lies, illusions, and falsehoods' of soldier life and experience as it was represented within the civilian sphere.

The proliferation of topical films being produced by the British industry at the time had a monumental effect on the public's perception of the soldier community and the war itself, although it is important to emphasise the gradual evolution of this practice rather than the idea of an immediate proliferation. As we have seen in Chapter One, upon the outbreak of war Lord Kitchener placed a ban on all cameramen and journalists on the front line, meaning that the content of topical newsreels depicting war-related subjects had to draw primarily upon events and sights found on the home front, although many of these films did include footage of soldiers in training or on marches.<sup>6</sup> It was only in late 1915 when the ban was lifted and the War Office allowed

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<sup>5</sup> R. H. Tawney cited in Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: Pimlico, 1992), p. 117.

<sup>6</sup> Reeves, *Official British Film Propaganda during the First World War*, p. 48.

the first official cameramen to journey out to the front line that civilian audiences began to glean an idea of life on the front lines through the cinema. Films such as *Britain Prepared* (1915) and the series of short 'official' films produced by the War Office beginning in 1916, documented different aspects of life on the Western front, from training exercises to Royal visits and even some which purported to show conflict itself. However, whilst such films made claims for 'realism' and 'authenticity', the practice of manipulating, staging and even faking film content was rife amongst topical film-making, executed by a group of filmmakers tasked with providing both their War Office bosses and civilian audiences across the country with the kind of images they craved most: actual footage of the fighting. As Nicholas Reeves suggests, official film-makers 'knew what they wanted, they knew what the cinema audiences at home wanted, and yet it was almost impossible to provide it'.<sup>7</sup> Be they censored, reconstructed or faked, such films nevertheless became part of the British cinema programme during the war, producing specific, often highly manipulated images of the war for civilian audiences who often naively (though not completely) treated the cinema screen as a direct window onto the conflict, a chance to see and comprehend the nature of modern war and soldier life through the visual medium of cinema.

For soldiers, however, the cinema screen became a mirror rather than a window, albeit a fun-house mirror producing a distorted image: a recognisable, but uncannily warped picture of soldiering life, twisted into falsehoods and exaggerations which the soldier spectator struggled to reconcile with his own lived experience and sense of identity. It is this cinematic distortion and the soldier spectator's response to such imagery which is the subject of this chapter. That being said, it is important to

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<sup>7</sup> Reeves, *Official British Film Propaganda during the First World War*, p. 147.

remain aware of the dangers of constructing an 'ideal' spectator from the archives of history and whilst the focus of this chapter may appear to put forward an enclosed reading of this historically specific demographic, attention shall also be drawn towards the discrepancies of response within the soldier community. Moreover, the nuance to be emphasised here relates more to the soldier community as a distinct entity in relation to the civilian community, in their responses to topical filmmaking, identifying broader trends rather than specific uniform responses.

This chapter will begin with an examination of the exhibition culture surrounding the production and consumption of topical films during the First World War. This is done in part to ascertain how civilian audiences responded to such films, providing an intellectual baseline to which soldier responses can be compared. There then follows an analysis of the general trends found in soldier responses to the practice of topical and fiction filmmaking related to the war, underlining how the contextual determinants which shaped soldier spectatorship – i.e. their first-hand experience of the war itself – came to define their response towards certain strands of wartime filmmaking. Having defined some of the key factors found in soldier responses towards this strand of wartime filmmaking, the chapter will conclude with a close examination of the topical documentary *The Battle of the Somme*, which serves as a useful case study highlighting the discrepant responses which existed between civilians and soldiers. By studying these responses, this chapter will ultimately demonstrate that there is much to be learned about the role and function of propaganda filmmaking and war-related film content during the First World War when examined through the lens of the soldier demographic, representing as they did the ultimate spectatorial litmus test for cinematic veracity.

## **Topical Films, Exhibition Culture and Civilian Responses**

Whilst civilian interest remained predominantly with the fiction film, non-fiction filmmaking occupied a smaller but important portion of the average cinema programme during the 1910s, made even more significant by the onset of the war and civilian desire for war news. Michael Hammond's synecdochal study of cinema-going in Southampton during the First World War provides an insightful and comprehensive analysis of civilian cinema-going during the period, noting the perceived value of particular types of film.<sup>8</sup> The British public, as Hammond suggests, visited their local cinemas to both escape the day-to-day anxieties and fears of wartime life, whilst also valuing the chance to be informed and educated about events on the front lines. In a certain sense, this was nothing new, as the cinema had, to a more limited extent, played a similar function during the Boer war of 1899-1902. As Michael Paris has documented:

War was always a good subject for the filmmaker: dramatic, exciting and popular with jingoistic audiences. The short imaginative accounts of contemporary wars of colonial conflicts created in studios were soon overtaken by coverage of real events, and when the British Army went to South Africa to fight the Boers filmmakers went with them.<sup>9</sup>

However, during the First World War, the relationship and interplay between the cinema and conflict developed on a much larger scale, due to the comparatively

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<sup>8</sup> Hammond, *The Big Show*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Paris, "'Too Colossal to be Dramatic: The Cinema of the Great War', in Anne-Marie Einhaus and Katherine Isobel Baxter (ed.), *The Edinburgh companion to the First World War and the arts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), pp. 326-338 (p. 327).

unprecedented nature of modern warfare in the 1910s, combined with the overall development of the film industry since the turn of the century.

Although public interest in topical films and other films depicting the war wavered as the conflict progressed, the civilian audience's understanding of these films and their function on the home front remained generally constant, recognising them as important, albeit depressing and often horrifying reminders of the sacrifices their loved ones were making overseas. This was also the view of exhibitors who argued that the cinema could function as an 'effective' platform for 'educating the populace about the events of the war at the front'.<sup>10</sup> Of course, exhibitors also recognised the potential commercial benefits of screening such films, capitalising upon the growing demand for actual footage from the front and their own desire to be seen as patriotic businesses, an all important factor within the wartime economy.<sup>11</sup>

Alongside shorter newsreels, feature-length propaganda films such as *The Battle of the Somme* – and, to a lesser extent, its sequels *The Battle of the Ancre and the Advance of the Tanks* (Malins and McDowell, 1917) and *The German Retreat and the Battle of Arras* (Malins, McDowell and Baldwin, 1917) – broke records for cinema attendance and ticket sales across the U.K.<sup>12</sup> Different types of films represented the war in different ways. Newsreels disseminated up-to-date news and information about the conflict, such as the Topical Film Company's *The Battle of Lebbeke* (1914) which documented the efforts of the Belgium army during the opening months of the war, or Gaumont's *The Sinking of the Lusitania* (1915) which brought home the impact of

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<sup>10</sup> Hammond, *The Big Show*, p. 71.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> For a concise but informed overview of the initial release and box office success of *The Battle of the Somme*, see: Stephen Badsey, 'Battle of the Somme: British war-propaganda', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (1983), pp. 99-115 (p. 108).



Fig. 4.1: Frame from *The Leopard's Spots* (Hepworth, 1918) depicting a staged sequence in which two German soldiers harass a French woman before killing her child.

civilian casualties of the war. Propaganda films such as the Ministry of Information's notorious short *The Leopard's Spots* (Hepworth, 1918) (Fig. 4.1) and educational films may have used staged sequences and performances to put across their message, whilst animated productions such as the *John Bull's Animated Sketch Book* series used humour and satire to target the nation's enemies.

The medium of film was also used to commemorate the dead in the form of 'roll of honour' films which, as Michael Hammond has shown, were produced and valued at a local level in towns and cities, emulating 'the common newspaper practice of publishing photographs and listing the names of local men who were serving'.<sup>13</sup> Importantly, such films were produced by both independent film companies and by the

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<sup>13</sup> Hammond, *The Big Show*, p. 72.

British government in the form of 'official' war films, which suggests that at a fundamental level there existed a marked distinction between officially endorsed and unofficially produced cinematic imagery depicting the war.

As previously alluded to, cameramen (photographers and cinematographers) were banned from the front lines due to the War Office's fear that vital strategic information (such as unit positions) may be leaked to the enemy should it be recorded on film. Topical film producers, instead, had to settle for footage filmed far behind the front lines (although even this wasn't often allowed in the war's early stages). Beginning in mid-1915, however, such restrictions were relaxed, and the War Office allowed the cameraman Hilton DeWitt Girdwood to travel to the front in July to take photos and film footage of the conflict, followed in November by Geoffrey Malins and Edward Tong. Here, the visual construction of the war as endorsed by the War Office began to take form, produced as it was through a number of short newsreel items which eventually made their way on to domestic screens in 1916. Malins' and Tong's series of films were the first to reach civilian audiences in January 1916, but both these and Girdwood's output, although factual in part, were in equal part staged reconstructions of combat or other aspects of life on the front line. As Stephen Badsey writes, these 'first films were generally well-received, but contained scenes which had clearly been taken in training camps or even deliberately staged to masquerade as the front lines'.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, Nicholas Hiley corroborates this sentiment, noting how the War Office 'had no initial objections to the use of fiction in depicting the activities of the BEF' and

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<sup>14</sup> Badsey, 'Battle of the Somme: British war-propaganda', p. 104.





Fig. 4.2: Frame from *The Destruction of a Fokker* (Malins and Tong, 1916) depicting a group of British soldiers purportedly spotting a German plane overhead. IWM Collection, Catalogue no. IWM 470.

that such early ventures ‘were indeed a mixture of fact and fiction’.<sup>15</sup> Again, this precedent was set by filmmaking practices during the Boer War, as Paris notes:

constrained by the limitations of their equipment, [cameramen of the Boer War] recorded only posed groups of soldiers or passing columns of men and guns going into action. For the face of battle audiences at home had to turn to representations of war made by filmmakers eager to exploit the public's interest. Films like *The Attack on the Red Cross Tent* (1900) and *The Sneaky Boer* (1901), both from the Mitchell & Kenyon studio, posed scenes of plucky Britons

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<sup>15</sup> Nicholas Hiley, ‘Hilton DeWitt Girdwood and the Origins of British Official Filming’, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (1993), pp. 129-148 (p. 129).

and vicious Boers fighting, man-to-man, in close detail - detail which cameramen filming the 'real' war were unable to match.<sup>16</sup>

In the First World War, official films such as *The Destruction of a Fokker* (Malins and Tong, 1916) (Fig. 4.2) or *With Our Territorials at the Front* (Malins and Tong, 1916) readily highlight the continuation of this practice, the former, for example, depicting a clearly staged episode in which British soldiers spot a German plane in the air, mount an attack using anti-aircraft artillery and then proceed to shoot the plane down, the film culminating with a shot of a wrecked plane which is in actuality neither German or, in all probability, a real plane at all. Another film from this first series of official war films, *Liveliness on the British Front* (Malins and Tong, 1916), also includes a staged sequence of men going 'over the top', although unlike *The Battle of the Somme*, no men are depicted as being shot or wounded during the 'charge'.

The precedent set by this early inclusion of 'faked' or 'staged' footage within supposedly factual films is important to emphasise in relation to later civilian reception of *The Battle of the Somme*, which was favourably compared to prior topical films for its perceived 'authenticity' despite its use of staged scenes. Nevertheless, such films contributed in no uncertain terms towards the general public's conception of the war and the soldier's life at this early juncture, despite their apparent artificiality, producing an iconographic rendering of the front line, albeit one which had been refracted, as Hammond suggests, 'through a dramatic frame'.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Paris, 'Too Colossal to be Dramatic', p. 327. See also: Vanessa Toulmin, *Electric Edwardians: The Story of the Mitchell and Kenyon Collection* (London: BFI Publishing, 2006) p. 250-251.

<sup>17</sup> Hammond, *The Big Show*, p. 105.

As such, the production and consumption of these filmic representations of the war were largely predicated upon a negotiated ideal/image located between audience expectation of what war should look like, and film producers' attempts to match those expectations. As Hammond argues:

the image of the war in the imagination of the public, as the government and the trade perceived it, had implications for the form the films from the front took. These perceptions were based on images of war from the 'death and glory' style of war artist reporting in the late nineteenth century and also from popular literature and pre-war cinema.<sup>18</sup>

Extant newsreel footage from the period prior to the release of *The Battle of the Somme* confirms this idea aptly, although arguably, 'death' is largely omitted whilst 'glory' remains. Certain images – long lines of marching soldiers, shots of munitions and weaponry etc. – became fixtures within the iconographic representation of the front (Fig. 4.3). Some, such as the aforementioned *Destruction of a Fokker*, did purport to document actual fighting of a kind (artillery guns firing on aircraft) although films of this type were few and far between and may have potentially been recognised as staged re-enactments. Discussing the first series of official films produced by the War Office and released in early January 1916, a writer for the *Evening Telegraph and Post* remarked that '[to] be frank, most people were disappointed [...] Of trench life they gave not a glimpse. Except for the mud on the uniforms of a battalion of Territorials, Europe might have been plunged in profound peace. In no one of the five films was there any sign that the operators who we were assured had gone in daily fear of their

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.



Fig. 4.3: Frame from *London Scottish* (Topical Budget 167-1, 1914) depicting a shot of soldiers marching in formation, a typical image in newsreels of the period. BFI Collections.

lives from bursting shells had got within less than several miles of the firing line'.<sup>19</sup> As Rebecca Harrison suggests:

an unlikely picture emerged on the British home front that showed order where there was chaos, and sturdy trenches where there were swamps. Footage and images released to the public often showed the BEF carrying out training exercises, maintenance work or routine daily tasks. Still and moving images alike protected those at home from the real horrors taking place in Europe's trenches and towns.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> 'War As Seen by the Camera', *Evening Telegraph and Post*, 11 January 1916, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Rebecca Harrison, 'Writing History on the Page and Screen: Mediating Conflict through Britain's First World War Ambulance Trains', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (2015), pp. 559-578 (p. 564).

Civilian audiences, lacking direct experience of the conflict itself, and having no point of comparison for the unprecedented nature of modern industrialised warfare, initially thought of the war and the front line as a somewhat idealised environment in which bravery and courage held sway over a battlefield characterised by gallant charges, acts of individual heroism and sweeping victories, ideas which were for the most part confirmed by the largely sanitised and/or censored footage being disseminated throughout the nation's cinemas, as I have also examined in Chapter One. This notion was bolstered by official endorsement from the War Office which supplied such films with what Michael Hammond has termed, 'an aesthetic of authenticity', something which at the time held more commercial and propagandistic value than it did ontological authenticity.<sup>21</sup>

In a sense, such films fed straight back into the feedback loop of British patriotism as it was articulated and disseminated by cinematic imagery, promoting an idealised view of the war and its supposed successes, despite the fact that there had been very little in the way of victories or strategic accomplishments to celebrate. Nicholas Reeves, discussing civilian reception of the propaganda film *Britain Prepared* (1915), suggests that such audiences were pre-disposed towards praising topical films which confirmed their view or idea of the war and Britain's role within it. 'In other words,' Reeves writes, 'the audience was only too convinced that Britain was prepared, and almost any film which confirmed that assessment was likely to be very well received.'<sup>22</sup> Above all, such films were made for a specific audience – civilians – who obviously had a keen interest in the conflict and a desire to see film footage from the front, but

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<sup>21</sup> Hammond, *The Big Show*, p. 102

<sup>22</sup> Nicholas Reeves, 'The Power of Film Propaganda – myth or reality?', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (1993), pp. 181-201 (p. 191).

lacked any sort of first-hand knowledge for interpreting and measuring the purported authenticity of the imagery and arguments which they presented. That being said, it is naïve to suggest that the civilian audience of the period were wholly unaware of film's artifice and that elements of life on the front were being routinely censored for the general public. However, by examining how the soldier community responded to such films and their imagery, we begin to understand how the cinematic depiction of the war took on a problematic meaning for soldier spectators. Distinct from civilian spectators who, for the most part, viewed such films as authentic documents of soldiering life, soldiers came to view such films as presenting a manipulated and ideologically compromised view of the war, one in which they often could not recognise either the conflict or themselves.

### **Soldier Responses to Topical Filmmaking and Fictional War Films**

Evidence of the soldier community's problematic relationship with topical films and war-themed fiction films can be seen in a variety of different sources dating from throughout the war period. Indeed, much of the surviving historical record suggests that soldiers regarded such films with mixed feelings and very rarely were such feelings positive. On a fundamental level the content of topical or war-related films stood at odds with the spectatorial desires of the soldier demographic. As we have seen, topical or war-related films were, by design, almost entirely absent from the programmes of front line exhibition. Rather than offering morale-boosting, light-hearted entertainment, films depicting the war only served to remind soldier spectators of their present situation, the horrors of the conflict and the ever-present threat of their imminent death.

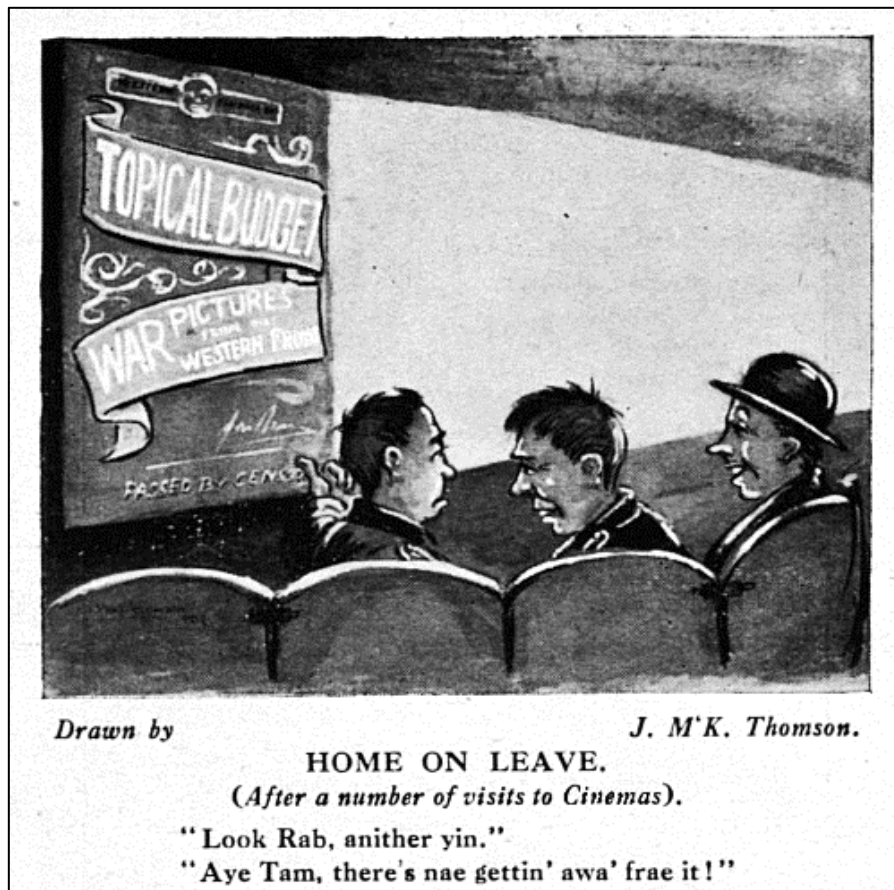


Fig. 4.4: 'Home on Leave' illustration by J. Thomson, *The Outpost*, 1 February 1918, p. 138.

An illustration published in the troop periodical *The Outpost* highlights the soldier's problematic relationship with topical films well (Fig. 4.4). Titled 'Home on Leave (After a number of visits to Cinemas)' the image depicts three soldiers sat in a civilian cinema each with sullen expressions on their faces. Pointing to the screen, upon which the title card for the Topical Budget newsreel's 'War Pictures from the Western Front' is being projected, one soldier remarks – 'Look Rab, anither yin'. 'Aye Tam, there's nae gettin' awa' frae it!' Elsewhere, the same sentiment was captured in a similar illustration published by the fan magazine *Pictures and the Picturegoer* (Fig. 4.5). Titled 'Out of the Frying Pan', the image depicts, in four panels, the journey three soldiers take from the front line parapet to a civilian cinema back home having been granted leave. The soldiers discuss their admiration for Charlie Chaplin and their

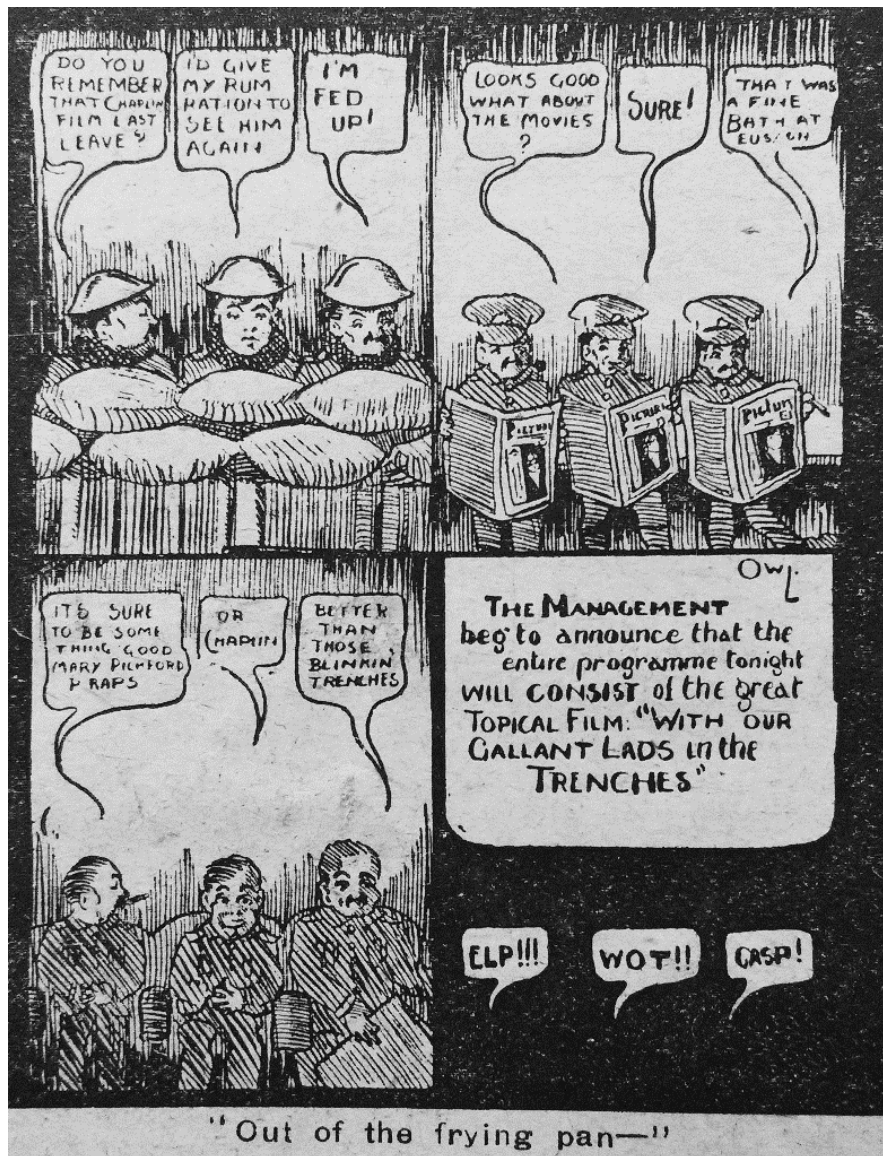


Fig. 4.5: 'Out of the frying pan' Illustration, *Pictures and the Picturegoer*, 20 April 1918, p. 406.

desire to watch his films – 'I'd give my rum ration to see him again' – and then, whilst on a train home, agree on a trip to their local cinema once they arrive. Sat in the cinema, one soldier proclaims 'It's sure to be something good[,] Mary Pickford perhaps' – 'or Chaplin' another replies. The third soldier concludes that anything would be 'better than those blinkin' trenches'. To the sound of gasps and cries of frustration from the soldiers, the last panel depicts a title card projected onto the cinema screen which reads: 'The Management beg to announce that the entire programme tonight will consist of the great Topical Film: "With Out Gallant Lads in the Trenches"'. Such



sources embody the disappointment and frustration many soldiers suffered in civilian cinemas whilst seeking to distract themselves from the war through escapist entertainment, only to be met with the very images from which they were trying to escape.

However, alongside the soldier community's general frustration regarding such screenings as it was embodied by illustrations such as those analysed above, the content of topical films also became the subject of a more targeted strand of satire produced by soldiers themselves in trench journals. For example, spoof advertisements or articles – of the kind documented by the previous chapter – were also used to interrogate the perceived discrepancy between cinematic representations of the war and the soldier's first-hand experience of the conflict. Indeed, the unique positioning of soldier spectators as a historically specific demographic is clearly reflected in the use of satire within trench journals as a method to challenge and dismantle the purported authenticity of topical and/or fictional films depicting the war. Consequently, it is vital that such artistic and/or journalistic creations should be understood in the same manner as the far more documented body of soldier poetry responding to the war. As Samuel Hynes has written of soldier poetry and its defining 'authority of direct experience':

The implications of this aesthetic of direct experience for war art are obvious: true art will be that which renders what has been known and seen, so only soldiers will be qualified to create it. And it will only be understood by those who have shared the experience, so that only soldiers will be able to appreciate and understand it. It is the absolute separation between the men who fight and those they are fighting for, applied to the arts. This separation will be evident in war poems [...] both as a structural principle - an 'I' who has experienced war

addresses a 'You' who has not, and as a theme - the 'You' cannot understand, is unworthy, ignorant, insensitive, old, or female, in any case a non-combatant and therefore excluded both from the experience rendered and from the rendering.<sup>23</sup>

Whilst official cameramen gained unprecedented access to the front line, and topical films contained much that could be termed 'authentic', such films were still commissioned, produced and disseminated by forces and institutions far removed from the perspective of the British soldier. In part, such films could perhaps only ever capture what was 'seen', but not what was 'known' in the sense of a soldier's total, accumulated experience of the conflict. Lacking the ability to create a film, soldiers instead took to artistic and satirical means in order to respond to topical filmmaking – the target of criticism or, to use Hynes' approach, the 'You' of the soldier's critical address – as they had used poetry and prose to combat those same mediums of communication within the civilian sphere. As we shall see, soldiers responding to such films recognised the fallacy of the cinematic medium's purported ability to offer direct experience or unmediated reality – the type of characteristic that topical filmmaking was often imbued with by the trade or press – by foregrounding their own experience in contrast to the constructed images and meanings disseminated by topical and fictional filmmaking about the war.

To offer an introductory example, the 'advertisement' (below) printed in the trench journal *The Lead Swinger* for 'The Battle of the Somme' (Fig. 4.6) highlights this tension precisely. Making a clear distinction between reality and mediated

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<sup>23</sup> Hynes, *A War Imagined*, p. 159.



Fig. 4.6: Advertisement for 'The Battle of the Somme', *The Lead Swinger*, Vol. 2, Issue 5, 26 October 1916.

cinematic representation, this 'Battle of the Somme' is described as taking place 'every day in reality' and as being 'better than the cinema film'. The fact that the film was being satirised in this manner for its supposed lack of relation to the 'reality' of the conflict is a revealing sentiment, foregrounding the notion that soldier audiences were aware of the film's artificiality and manipulation because they were living through the real thing. Elsewhere, a spoof advertisement published in the Australian trench journal *The Aussie*, highlights soldier criticism of the cinema's representation of war even more acutely. Announcing a production of an upcoming film titled 'What the Dinkums Did', the spoof advertisement published in September 1918 again draws attention towards the inability for some soldiers to reconcile on-screen representation with documented fact and lived experience. Purporting to be a film 'of the GREAT SOMME STUNT', a probable allusion to *The Battle of the Somme*, the advert claims 'THERE

ARE NO GUTZERS [meaning failure or disappointment – the actual battle of the Somme had, of course, been a monumental failure] IN THE MOVIES! CINEMA WARS ARE THE BEST!’ The advert then asks the question: ‘Why not Resign from the A.I.F. and Join Up with Us?’ stating that the reader can become ‘a star without the starshells [sic]’ and ‘get into the limelight without the risk of stopping one’. Lampooning the apparent artificiality of on-screen representations of the war, the advert continues: ‘We have Feathers for Snow, String for Wire Entanglements. Tin Howitzers, “Safety First” Aeroplanes, and the mud is considered almost equal to the Continental Variety.’ It then provides a ‘synopsis’ for the film’s five parts, beginning with the initial march into battle headed by the regimental band, a scene in which ‘MADEMOISELLE VANBLONG’ is rescued by an Army Service Corps (A.S.C.) driver who ‘successfully crosses and recrosses [sic] the SOMME, under concentrated fire from RIFLES, MACHINE GUNS, AEROPLANES, and HEAVY HOWITZERS’, and finally culminating in the ‘Grand Finale’ which sees the ‘Aussies handing over France to the French after the entire evacuation by the Huns.’ Albeit presented in a rather heavy-handed manner, the creator’s point is clear: on-screen representations of the war, particularly fictional dramas, were artificial, superficial and bear little resemblance to the actualities of front line experience.

Significantly, the practice of faking or re-enacting scenes in topical films also became the focus of soldier commentary, often bearing the brunt of the harshest strands of soldier criticism. A satirical piece produced by the trench journal *The Listening Post: 7<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion* comments directly upon the issue of faking in topical films. In an article titled ‘How Battle Pictures are taken on the Western Front’ written by ‘Licensed Liar’ – a clear slight towards those who endorsed such

filmmaking – the piece recounts how a topical cameraman or ‘film manipulator’ set about capturing front line footage.

“The title of this picture will be **Canadian soldiers preparing dinner five minutes before going over the top.** (how he figured we were going over the top in five minutes, beats me, the front line being at least two kilometres away). You in the foreground with the cheese sandwich” he said to Fatty Maguire “register emotion. Remember, I rely on you to show by manipulation of the facial muscles that you lost your half sister’s husband on the Somme, but in spite of that you are determined to go on to the end”.<sup>24</sup>

Moving onto another film, the cameraman was heard to proclaim:

“The next picture will be RED CROSS HERO RESCUING WOUNDED COMRADE UNDER FIRE.”

“Tain’t done in this war” said Fatty Maguire.

“But it’s got to be” insisted the picture man.

“The patrons of the silent drama must have what they have been educated to expect.”<sup>25</sup>

This source is of particular interest. Despite obviously being embellished to a certain extent for the purposes of the article, perhaps drawing upon multiple interactions between soldiers and cameramen, one suspects that the sentiment captured by this piece has some basis in reality, even if such criticism wasn’t directly articulated

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<sup>24</sup> ‘How Battle Pictures are Taken on the Western Front’, *The Listening Post*, 22 March 1917, p. 157. Emphasis in original.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

towards the cameramen themselves. Of particular insight is the soldier community's evident awareness of film producers orchestrating certain elements of films depicting the war for civilian audiences in order to meet their expectations and further promote certain idealised images of the soldiering life and the war itself. The fact that the cameraman is said to have suggested that the 'patrons of the silent drama must have what they have been educated to expect' highlights a particularly insightful example of soldier commentary reflecting upon the artificiality of topical material being driven by spectator expectation. Meeting civilian expectation, the article suggests, can only be achieved through the use of faking: staging scenes of life on the Western front, most of which would have proven too difficult or too dangerous to record in reality, or represented the kind of scenarios which simply did not happen on the front line. Implicit here is the sense that the use of faked sequences devalued the authenticity and overall value of the finished product and was in many ways an insult to those who were actually living through and perhaps dying in the type of events which faked footage was only ever able to recreate.

Indeed, some soldiers would not camouflage their disapproval through humour and satire. Describing his first-hand experience of witnessing official cinematographers faking scenes on the front, John MacLeod of the Cameron Highlanders remarked in a letter home to his mother how:

The official army cinematographer has been round here. He is a yankee; and all his pictures are fakes. He took Battery which was supposed to be in action with the Bulgar. As a matter of fact its guns were pointing South, and it was firing blank [sic]. He also took a picture of machine guns in action. As a matter of fact they were instructional trenches quite 50 miles away from any Bulgar.

That is the sort of trash with which the British public are doped. Isn't it nauseating?<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, Rifleman Maurice Gower remarked in a letter to his sister that "I saw the War film showing the Tanks in action [*The Battle of the Ancre and the Advance of the Tanks*], it looked to me like a fake and was not nearly so good as the Somme'.<sup>27</sup> The issue of faking in topical films and how soldiers responded to the practice of faking material is crucial to our understanding of this wartime demographic of spectators, something which will become more apparent shortly when we come to examine *The Battle of the Somme*.

Soldier criticism also extended beyond topical/documentary filmmaking to encompass the emerging body of fiction filmmaking depicting the war as well. Unsurprisingly, soldiers were particularly damning of such films. For example, in a large article published by *Pictures and the Picturegoer* titled 'Some Screen "Khaki"' a soldier correspondent outlined the audience's dismissal of a fictional war film being screened at a front line Divisional cinema. Highlighting the soldier community's distrust of war films, the writer claimed that 'military pictures are things to be approached with caution [...] but occasionally these thrilling dramas creep into the bill'.<sup>28</sup> However, rather than 'cheer the deeds of their mimic brothers' in such dramas, soldiers were said to 'laugh heartily with a mirth that even Charlie Chaplin cannot rouse in them'. The writer goes on to outline how the soldier audience took issue with the dramatic rendering of the front, laughing at the depiction of various episodes of soldier life: for

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<sup>26</sup> Liddle Collections, LIDDLE/WW1/GS/1027, Papers of Jock Dunning MacLeod, Letter Dated 13 July 1916.

<sup>27</sup> IWM Collections, Documents.255, Private Papers of M F Gower, Letter Dated 7 February 1917.

<sup>28</sup> I. P. G., 'Some Screen "Khaki"', *Pictures and the Picturegoer*, 3 March 1917, p. 476.

example, 'The "army" tittered, laughed, guffawed, howled, and finally rolled about in its [seats] in a state of tearful ecstasy' whilst watching a supposedly wounded soldier having the bloody bandage around his head removed by a nurse only to reveal that between 'the first fold of that bandage and the hideous wound [...] there was not another spot or stain of blood'. Under the heading 'Silly Sights Make Soldiers Scream', other elements were similarly criticised, such as the film's incorrect depiction of soldier uniforms, soldier haircuts, an unjustified awarding of the VC medal and much more. After that particular screening, it was noted that this specific front line cinema was now 'exempt from films of a military character for some time to come'.<sup>29</sup> Other dramatic films were similarly ridiculed for their inauthenticity or the histrionic or exaggerated efforts of the average soldier transformed into a romanticised war hero. At a soldier cinema in occupied Cologne after the war, an article in the *Cologne Post* similarly highlighted the soldier's dismissal of fictional representations of the war, a piece it would be useful to cite in its entirety:

It is not to be supposed that the firm responsible for a certain war film, now showing not a hundred miles from Cologne, knew that it would be screened before a hypercritical audience of "Tommyes," or they would have paid more attention to detail. As it is, a would-be pathetic two-part film becomes a screaming farce. "For example the officer-hero departs to fight his country's battles amidst tears, and we next see him at Mons single handedly holding up the German hordes, and sporting the badge of a non-combatant battalion. Wounded and left behind, he gets through the German lines by "doing in" a sentry with a small pen-knife and arrives home in England in a peasant's

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.



disguise and with a healthy growth of whiskers. This mirth provoking picture ends by the officer donning his uniform which the Germans have apparently forwarded, and his wife stating that as he has been badly wounded he won't have to go back. Needless to say, all the while this picture was being shown the house echoed with the laughter of a military audience.<sup>30</sup>

Again, the screening of such films before a soldier audience underlines the fact that the demographic in question was not a passive, undiscerning body of spectators, but a hypercritical audience positioned to pick apart the artifice of what was screened before them. Like the previous example, the film here becomes the subject of ridicule rather than a dramatic text to be regarded seriously, due to the inaccuracies, exaggerations and flat-out falsehoods the soldier demographic were primed to perceive.

Consequently, the sources analysed in this section reflect the apparent awareness many soldiers had of the discrepancy between fact and cinematic representation in fiction films and even in non-fiction films which claimed to provide an accurate representation of the real thing. Founded upon a discerning critical faculty and inherent cynicism towards the type of imagery being presented to civilian audiences back home, such sources mark examples of how first-hand experience primarily positioned soldier spectatorship to interrogate and dismantle cinematic depictions of the war itself. Significantly, this spectatorial disposition was consequently fed back into and disseminated by the cultural productions and discourses of trench culture, for example, trench journals. The fact that trench journal editors and

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<sup>30</sup> 'More Cinema "Screams."', *The Cologne Post*, 10 July 1919, p. 4.

contributors could trust their readership enough to understand the satirical and critical points raised by spoof advertisements, feature pieces or comedic cartoons about the war's cinematic representation suggests that the critical sentiment displayed was a widespread one. Significantly, the type of rhetoric produced by the soldier community in response to topical films we have examined so far was even more pronounced and critical when regarding the release of one of the war's most important films, *The Battle of the Somme*.

### **The Battle of the Somme**

As has been noted by a number of scholars, the representation of the war on-screen and its impact upon civilian audiences came to a head with the release of *The Battle of the Somme* in August 1916, itself a depiction of one of the British Army's most significant battles up to that point of the conflict, the first day of which claimed the lives of nearly 20,000 British men alone.<sup>31</sup> Released simultaneously in thirty-four London cinemas on 21 August 1916 before opening nationally the following week, the film depicted the preparation for and first day of the battle of the Somme as it had played out earlier in the year on 1 July. In fact, the battle itself was still taking place upon the film's release, finally reaching its concluding phase in November. Running at an hour and ten minutes, the film was organised into five different parts. Parts One and Two document the lead up to 1 July, depicting columns of soldiers marching towards the

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<sup>31</sup> For a representative selection of scholarly work on *The Battle of the Somme* and its impact, see: Badsey, 'Battle of the Somme: British war-propaganda'; Nicholas Reeves, 'The Power of Film Propaganda – myth or reality?', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (1993), pp. 181-201; Roger Smither, "A Wonderful Idea of the Fighting": The Question of Fakes in 'The Battle of the Somme', *Historical Journal of Film Radio and Television*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (1993), pp. 148-168.

front line, speeches being given by military authorities and munitions being stockpiled for the offensive, as well as several shots of trench mortars and larger artillery guns being fired. Part Three depicts the actual attack and its aftermath, beginning with the infamous 'over the top' sequence and concluding with sequences depicting the wounded being cared for and transported back behind the line. Part Four contains some of the film's most haunting images, including shots of the dead and a long procession of German prisoners captured during the battle, whilst Part Five concludes with shots of the physical devastation endured on the front line and an image of cheerful marching soldiers 'seeking further laurels [...] off to continue the advance'.

Civilian response to the film was unprecedented in terms of attendance and ticket sales. Although the ability to ascertain precise attendance figures remains difficult and in some senses marred by contemporary sensationalism, reportage at the time undeniably emphasises the scale of the film's success. As Nicholas Reeves surmised in his analysis of the film's contemporary domestic reception, cinemas across the country which screened the film in its opening week 'were simply unable to cope with the scale of demand'.<sup>32</sup> Reports suggest that in metropolitan centres across the country, crowds of people were turned away from full houses.<sup>33</sup> At one London cinema, the police were even called in to 'control the crowds'.<sup>34</sup>

The film was an instant success, with periodicals such as *The Times* reporting that there had never before been 'so large a demand for a long film'.<sup>35</sup> The *Daily Mail*

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<sup>32</sup> Nicholas Reeves, 'Cinema, Spectatorship and Propaganda: 'Battle of the Somme' (1916) and its Contemporary Audience', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (1997), pp. 5-28 (p. 14).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> 'War's Realities on the Cinema', *The Times*, 22 August 1916, p. 3.

even went as far as to publish testimony from various cinemas across the country, each of which commented upon the 'record business', 'full houses' and 'long queues' which the film had prompted.<sup>36</sup> However, Nicholas Reeves goes on to ask: 'millions of people may have seen the film, but what did it mean to them?'<sup>37</sup> The importance of identifying the film's meaning, as interpreted and constructed by its contemporary civilian audience is of the utmost importance for our understanding of how soldier audiences did the same.

Two elements are, I believe, central to our understanding of the film's contemporary meaning and value as perceived by civilian audiences. Firstly, scholars such as Toby Haggith have noted that the majority of reviews emphasised the central importance of the film's 'authenticity' or 'realism' as a reason for its successful reception.<sup>38</sup> I too would like to foreground this almost ubiquitous emphasis on the film's perceived authenticity within contemporary civilian discourse, particularly in light of the retrospective scrutiny which has been placed upon several of the film's most notorious sequences (most notably, the 'over-the-top' sequence) which are now generally believed to have been 'faked' for the camera. A second nuance of the film's construction that I would like to examine is its implicit mode of address towards civilian audiences, functioning to compact the distance between civilian spectators and the lives and experiences of the soldier on the front line through the use of the cinematic

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<sup>36</sup> 'Somme Battle Film: Record Crowds at the Picture Houses', *The Daily Mail*, 28 August 1916, p. 3.

<sup>37</sup> Reeves, 'Cinema, Spectatorship and Propaganda', p. 15.

<sup>38</sup> Toby Haggith, 'Official War Films in Britain: *The Battle of the Somme* (1916), its Impact Then and its Meaning Today', in Anne-Marie Einhaus and Katherine Isobel Baxter (ed.), *The Edinburgh companion to the First World War and the Arts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), pp. 305-235 (p. 319).

image. By examining these two elements we can measure the extent to which soldier spectators interpreted and critiqued the film in contrast to civilian spectators.

### **'Authenticity' and Fakery**

Many historians have commented upon the subject of 'fakery' in *The Battle of the Somme*, although Roger Smither's analysis in "A Wonderful Idea of the Fighting": The Question of Fakes in the "The Battle of the Somme" provides one of the most comprehensive accounts.<sup>39</sup> Considering the film, it should be stated that many shots and sequences have been called into question, although it is certain that the famous 'over-the-top' sequence has by far prompted the most scrutiny (Fig. 4.7). 'The case against [the sequence]', Smither writes, 'is extremely strong', citing the suspiciously pristine condition of the trench and the questionable movements (perhaps, performances) of the soldiers advancing, several of which appear to make themselves comfortable after falling to the ground having been 'hit' by gunfire.<sup>40</sup> 'The shallow, unwired trench and the lush grass below the wire through which the men advance do not look convincing as part of a battle zone', Smither proclaims, as others have done.<sup>41</sup>

Alongside the sequence's questionable visual attributes, testimony relayed to the film historian Kevin Brownlow for his book *The War, the West and the Wilderness* has also been cited as evidence of the sequence's artifice. Brownlow reports how in an interview with war cinematographer Bertram Brooke Carrington after the war, the

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<sup>39</sup> Smither, "A Wonderful Idea of the Fighting".

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*



Fig. 4.7: Frame from the 'Over-the-top' sequence of *The Battle of the Somme* (Malins and McDowell, 1916), generally acknowledged to have been faked for the camera.

cameraman remarked how he had met a soldier who, whilst in training at a Trench Mortar Training school near St. Paul, France, described himself as 'one of the blokes that fell down dead in the trench' for *The Battle of the Somme*.<sup>42</sup> 'I wonder how [Malins's] pictures came out', the soldier reportedly asked, '[h]e did a lot here at the battery school'.<sup>43</sup> Of course, this is just one instance of second-hand testimony recorded decades after the war, and Smither is quick to argue that the 'testimony quoted by Brownlow is no more automatically credible than Malins's own account, being hearsay perhaps motivated by professional jealousy'.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Kevin Brownlow, *The War, West and the Wilderness* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1979), p. 65.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Smither, "A Wonderful Idea of the Fighting", p. 150.

However, before examining newly consulted evidence which corroborates this claim and further responses towards the film from soldier spectators, it is important to establish in detail what civilian audiences made of the film's purported authenticity. At first glance, this analysis may seem overly laborious or even redundant given the near unanimous scholarly consensus reached on the subject of civilian responses towards the film. However, in order to situate the following analysis of soldier responses to the film in question, it is of the utmost importance here to outline the historiography behind our current view of civilian reception of the film in 1916. For the most part, analysis of civilian reception of the film betrays very little hint of contemporary suspicion. Indeed, Nicholas Reeves concluded that 'the contemporary audience was quite unaware' of the possibility of fakery within the film.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, Michael Paris makes the unequivocal assertion that 'as we now know, but contemporary audiences did not, the attack sequence was faked'.<sup>46</sup> Instead, *The Battle of the Somme* was almost unanimously upheld as a model of authenticity in documentary filmmaking. The film at the time was described as representing 'real pictures of the battle', 'genuine moments in history', and a presentation of 'war's realities on the cinema'.<sup>47</sup> 'It is all so real', proclaimed the *Yorkshire Evening Press*, 'that its very reality comes as a shock to a person who does not know the fearful toll which war demands'.<sup>48</sup>

Ironically, it was often the 'over-the-top' sequence which was itself foregrounded as proof of the film's ultimate accomplishment in veracity. Commenting

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<sup>45</sup> Reeves, 'Cinema, Spectatorship and Propaganda', p. 16.

<sup>46</sup> Paris, 'Too Colossal to be Dramatic', p. 329.

<sup>47</sup> See: 'Battle of Somme', *Thanet Advertiser*, 12 August 1916, p. 6; 'Notes of the Day', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 1 September 1916, p. 6; 'War's Realities on the Cinema', *The Times*, 22 August 1916, p. 3.

<sup>48</sup> *Yorkshire Evening Press*, 25 August 1916, p. 26, cited in Reeves, 'The Power of Film Propaganda – myth or reality?'

upon previous topical films and their depiction of the front line, the manager of Ramsgate's King's Theatre, having seen *The Battle of the Somme*, argued:

We have had battle scenes before shown upon the screen. Some have been real, some have been stage-managed. With the latter there has been unreality. The men have dashed on through shell and smoke to the cloud effects in the background. Some have fallen on the way, but there has never been the grim reality of red war about them. In "The Battle of the Somme" we see war as men fight it with cold steel and deadly lead [...] The supreme moment has arrived. The order is given to fix bayonets. Fifty or more men climb the sloping side of the trench [...] Across the desolation which we have come to call "No man's land," our brave men charge [...] There is no make-believe. This is the real thing. This is war, rich with death.<sup>49</sup>

A writer for *The Spectator* similarly proclaimed that the 'over-the-top' sequence was 'a wonderful example of how far reality – remember this is no arranged piece of play-acting but a record taken in the agony of battle – transcends fiction'.<sup>50</sup> Elsewhere, a correspondent for *The People's Journal* remarked of the 'over-the-top' sequence that 'this is realism indeed', placing the scene in contrast to the 'cleverly worked-up fake' of 'Wild West fighting', presumably referring to scenes of warfare and conflict found in contemporary fiction filmmaking.<sup>51</sup> In *The Battle of the Somme*, the writer proclaimed, 'we see war, grim, unromantic and brutal, shorn of all its trappings; here we see what our soldiers are up against far better than by reading about it.'<sup>52</sup> Alongside journalistic

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<sup>49</sup> 'Battle of Somme', *Thanet Advertiser*, 12 August 1916, p. 6

<sup>50</sup> 'News of the Week', *The Spectator*, 26 August 1916, p. 3.

<sup>51</sup> 'War as Seen by the Cinema', *The People's Journal*, 2 September 1916, p. 5.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*



reportage we can read the same kind of language within civilian produced commentary. For some the 'realism' was too much. 'Many [...] found the scenes so gruesome in their realism as to be hardly bearable', wrote J. A. Farree in a letter to the editor of *The Manchester Guardian*.<sup>53</sup> 'How especially will children be the better for this nearer sight of men dying as they leave the trenches, or the "rushing ecstasy" of the attack'.<sup>54</sup>

Whilst civilian commentary, as far as can be ascertained, suggests that the contemporary audience subscribed to the belief that the film was authentic, a minority of historians have countered this idea, suggesting that there was in fact a widespread distrust of the film's purported authenticity. Roger Smither, for example, suggests that the contemporary audience 'was not wholly naïve', emphasising the presence of "negative evidence" to suggest the existence of some suspicions', in the form of advertising rhetoric for the film's follow-up *The Battle of the Ancre and the Advance of the Tanks*.<sup>55</sup> In such advertising, it was stated that 'General Headquarters is responsible for the censorship of these films and allows nothing in the nature of a 'fake' to be shown. The pictures are authentic and taken on the battlefield', a point which Smither takes as an 'implied criticism of earlier films'.<sup>56</sup> This may very well be true, although it is difficult to say conclusively that such rhetoric was a direct response to criticism levelled against *The Battle of the Somme*, rather than the multitude of other topical films which purported to present images from the front lines, despite their artificiality.

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<sup>53</sup> J.A. Farree, 'The War Office Battle Films', *The Manchester Guardian*, 15 August 1916, p. 10.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Smither, "A Wonderful Idea of the Fighting", p. 151.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

It is, for example, significant that the film *With Our Empire's Fighters* (Girdwood, 1916) was released in the period between the release of *The Battle of the Somme* (August 1916) and *The Battle of the Ancre and the Advance of the Tanks* (January 1917). *With Our Empire's Fighters*, a film which had begun life as an official film endorsed by the War Office, had been unceremoniously maligned by the organisation following disagreements with the film's director and cameraman Hilton DeWitt Girdwood surrounding the film's copyright and exhibition. The film itself focused upon the life of Indian soldiers serving on the British front lines, but contained 'elaborate fakes with the help of soldiers dressed in British and German uniforms', culminating in a scene that purportedly documented Indian soldiers capturing a German trench.<sup>57</sup> Nonetheless, such scenes were intended to be presented as authentic.<sup>58</sup> The film ultimately received its long-postponed premiere on 11 September 1916, but stripped of its endorsement as an 'official film' and released in the immediate wake of *The Battle of the Somme's* momentous success since its premiere on 21 August. As Nicholas Hiley suggests, alongside the impact of the film's direct competition with the far more popular *The Battle of the Somme*, the film probably also failed to attract an audience due to its 'liberal use of fakes, which were [by then] badly out of date'.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, whilst praising many of the film's qualities, a commentator for *The Manchester Guardian*, perhaps unknowingly, if not tactfully, highlighting the film's apparent artifice, remarked of the trench capture sequence that it gave 'the impression that the camera must have been unusually near the subject taken'.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, the film was aggressively marketed as 'the greatest of all war films' by Girdwood, who toured and lectured with

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<sup>57</sup> Hiley, 'Hilton DeWitt Girdwood and the Origins of British Official Filming', p. 129.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>60</sup> 'With the Empire's Fighters', *The Manchester Guardian*, 1 June 1917, p. 8.

the film personally.<sup>61</sup> Tellingly, advertisements for the film also suggested that the film contained ‘all that the “Somme” lacked’, reflecting Girdwood’s embittered relationship with the War Office and its far more popular product.<sup>62</sup>

Arguably, the rhetoric seen in the advertising for *The Battle of the Ancre and the Advance of the Tanks* may be more likely understood as a reaction towards unofficial filmmaking of the kind produced by Girdwood and others: an added stamp of authenticity which the War Office used as a means to separate their own product from the output of amateurs or embittered former employees. Indeed, advertisers and journalists repeating the War Office’s line that ‘nothing in the nature of a “fake” [is] to be shown’ often did so in dialogue with the film’s precursor *The Battle of the Somme*. For example, *The Looker-On*, citing the film’s proclamation that ‘nothing in the nature of a “fake” has been permitted’, argued that *The Battle of the Ancre* was ‘a worthy successor’ to *The Battle of the Somme*, due in part to the involvement of the ‘intrepid operators’ Malins and McDowell whom, the writer claims, are ‘above suspicion’ in matters relating to fakery or staging.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, commentary within the film trade and mainstream journalism had discussed and dismissed notions of ‘fakery’ within topical film-making since the outset of the war. As early in the war as October 1914 commentators remarked upon the protests made against ‘certain “fake” war films’ which were being ‘palmed off upon an unsuspecting public as the genuine thing’.<sup>64</sup> Proclaiming new topical films as ‘authentic’ quickly became a standard part of advertising rhetoric regardless of the veracity of such claims.

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<sup>61</sup> Andrews’ Pictures Advertisement, *Burnley Express*, 29 September 1917, p. 4.

<sup>62</sup> Cosy Theatre Advertisement, *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 6 January 1917, p. 1.

<sup>63</sup> ‘Ancre Battle on the Screen’, *The Looker-On*, 20 January 1917, p. 12.

<sup>64</sup> “War” Pictures’, *The Bucks Herald*, 17 October 1914, p. 7.

In fact, the only major element of controversy which surrounded the release of *The Battle of the Somme* stemmed from what the faked images (alongside real images of the dead) purported to show: death and violence. Whilst by no means the only dissenting voice, the Dean of Durham H. Henson's often cited letter to the editor of *The Times* epitomised this particular strand of criticism, proclaiming that the film 'wounds the heart and violates the very sanctities of bereavement', making an entertainment out of 'war's hideous tragedy'.<sup>65</sup> However, dismissing the 'few who have protested against the Somme films' for its apparently 'morbid' and 'bestially horrible' content, *The Times* soon countered that the 'films need no defence', citing the existence of a 'preconceived notion' within the minds of those who protested against the film that 'the cinematograph, because it is cheap and popular, is unworthy to be taken seriously.'<sup>66</sup> For the majority of the civilian population it would appear that the film was taken seriously, to the extent that civilian audiences saw the film as an authentic, unmediated presentation of war's reality, and therein lay one of the film's primary values for civilian audiences.

Consequently, the discursive tension between the film's purported 'authenticity' and its documented 'fakery' is absolutely crucial to contextualise and refer to when considering how soldiers responded to the film. Nonetheless, even as recently as 2017, Toby Haggith of the Imperial War Museum, has suggested that our more critical conceptualisation of the film's faked sequences should be re-evaluated, re-conceptualising those specific sequences as "staged", "re-enacted" or even "improved", arguing that by doing so we would 'confer a certain ethical justification on

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<sup>65</sup> H. Henson, 'A Contrast and a Protest', *The Times*, 1 September 1916, p. 7.

<sup>66</sup> 'The Film Coming into its Own', *The Times*, 6 September 1916, p. 11.

the filmmakers and [...] reinforce the point that the majority of the action in the film is what it is claimed in the titles'.<sup>67</sup> Whilst the argument itself is understandable, the explicit use of the term 'fake' and its derivatives, as frequently used by soldiers whilst commenting on the film, highlights the discursive importance of the film's construction as it was perceived by contemporary soldiers.

### **The Distance between Spectator and Subject**

In addition to the contemporary discourse on the film's supposed authenticity and the surrounding concept of 'fakery', I would like to suggest a second nuance of civilian rhetoric which is clearly identifiable across commentary regarding the film, and a secondary reason for its perceived cultural value amongst civilian spectators. That is, the notion that the film functioned to compact the distance between civilian spectator and soldier. Indeed, then Secretary of State for War, David Lloyd George, highlighted the film's intended purpose when he wrote in his letter that accompanied the film's first trade screening that:

I am convinced that when you have seen this wonderful picture, every heart will beat in sympathy with its purpose, *which is no other than that everyone of us at home and abroad shall see what our men at the Front are doing and suffering for us*, and how their achievements have been made possible by the sacrifices made at home.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Haggith, 'Official War Films in Britain', p. 321.

<sup>68</sup> Cited in Badsey, 'Battle of the Somme: British war-propaganda', p. 99. My emphasis.

Much of the critical commentary surrounding *The Battle of the Somme* which emanated from civilian quarters echoed this sentiment, reflecting upon the film's apparent ability to provide an insight or create a connection with soldiers and soldiering life on the front line. In a letter to the editor of *The Times*, Lucy Clifford remarked upon the film's ability to form this connection with soldiering life, noting how the film had highlighted the 'courage, the magnificence, of the men *to whom we had suddenly felt so near*'.<sup>69</sup> Other civilian commentators likewise emphasised the film's ability to provide 'an *insight* into the horrors and discomforts our troops are suffering' rendering this facet of the film's construction as its chief value or function.<sup>70</sup> In fact, this same idea can be seen again and again within contemporary commentary surrounding the film. The distance between civilian spectator and soldier subject was reduced even further by *The Daily Mail's* initial review of the film, which stated that: 'While you watch these next pictures [referring to the 'over-the-top' and attack sequence] you are not in London but at the front of the Front. Before your gaze British Tommies rescue a comrade under shell fire. He is brought past – so close that the stretcher seems to brush you [...]'.<sup>71</sup> Elsewhere, civilian commentators almost ubiquitously articulated the film's supposed ability to bridge the gap between civilian and soldier by providing what they deemed to be first-hand experience and authenticity through the cinematic image. 'The battle is brought home to us', wrote one commentator.<sup>72</sup> '[The] film is bringing the meaning of the war home to the unimaginative', remarked another.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Lucy Clifford, 'The Somme Pictures', *The Times*, 6 September 1916, p. 11. My emphasis.

<sup>70</sup> Robert Heatley, 'The Somme Film', *The Manchester Guardian*, 2 September 1916, p. 4. My emphasis.

<sup>71</sup> Twells Brex, 'Real War Film', *The Daily Mail*, 22 August 1916, p. 5.

<sup>72</sup> 'The Somme Picture', *Thanet Advertiser*, 16 September 1916, p. 3.

<sup>73</sup> 'Bystander War Comments', *The Bystander*, 30 August 1916, p. 356.

Like the idealised images of the war seen in prior newsreels referred to above, the notion that *The Battle of the Somme* afforded a direct, unmediated window onto the war and the lives of soldiers on the Western front is, of course, a fallacy. However, in accounts which highlight this particular function for civilian audiences we can read confirmation of the film's intended primary mode of address, that is, its intended address towards a civilian audience. Of course, the idea that the film was intended for civilian audiences is not in itself absurd or peculiar: this was, after all, a propaganda film tasked with informing civilian audiences about the war's progress whilst attempting to negate the ultimate failures of the Somme offensive. The point to be made here is that this function or mode of address – that it was designed for civilian audiences who were largely unknowledgeable about the conditions of front line life – was innately bound to the film's perceived cultural meaning and value. Indeed, even the accompanying description of the film written to mark the film's inclusion within UNESCO's 'Memory of the World' heritage programme in 2005, proclaimed that *The Battle of the Somme* 'allowed the *civilian home front audience to share the experiences of the front-line soldier*'.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, scholarly writing on the film has arrived at the same conclusion, with Nicholas Reeves proclaiming that:

The battle was being fought by hundreds of thousands of ordinary working men and this is their film [...] These are ordinary men enduring the unendurable, men who in the face of apparently impossible odds retain their dignity, their self-respect, even their humanity. This is the nature of the war on the Western front to which *Battle of the Somme* gives the audiences today [...] direct access.

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<sup>74</sup> UNESCO Memory of the World Register [online]. *The Battle of the Somme*, 2005 [cited 9 January 2018]. Available from <[www.unesco.org](http://www.unesco.org)>

Moreover, that access is so direct precisely because the film is, in so many ways, so apparently simple, so apparently unsophisticated, so apparently “naïve”.<sup>75</sup>

Even in Reeves’s scholarly analysis, the fallacy of ‘direct access’ is put forward without recognising that this was in some sense a construct established for civilian audiences. As we shall see, the notion that film afforded ‘direct’ unmediated ‘access’ to the lives of those serving and dying on the Western front comes undone when we take into consideration the responses to the film from the soldier community rather than the civilian sphere, which render such readings problematic.

Arguably, the two elements of the film’s construction hitherto discussed – firstly, the film’s apparent ‘authenticity’ and, secondly, its ability to bridge the gap between spectator and subject – were largely interconnected and relied upon one another to facilitate a seamless and meaningful viewing experience for civilian spectators. For soldier spectators, however, the fallacy of the film’s purported authenticity was negated by their actual experience of front line life, whilst any notion that the film compacted the distance between spectator and subject obviously short-circuits within this spectatorial scenario, by positioning the soldier as the subject of their own gaze, prompting an inevitably intense mode of analysis, interpretation and criticism: an ability to recognise truth and falsehood. It is towards an understanding of this phenomenon of soldier spectatorship of *The Battle of the Somme* that I shall now turn.

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<sup>75</sup> Reeves, ‘Cinema, Spectatorship and Propaganda’, p. 9.



## **Soldier Responses to *The Battle of the Somme***

Given the level of prestige surrounding the film and its popularity amongst civilian audiences, it is unsurprising that prints of *The Battle of the Somme* made their way to the front line. Screenings of the film appear to have warranted special attention by military authorities, with some Routine Orders advertising its upcoming exhibition, a rare exception of military documentation advertising a specific film by its title (Fig. 4.8). A number of Quartermasters also noted screenings of the film in their war diaries, again highlighting the significance of its exhibition within such a context.<sup>76</sup> At least one copy of the film appears to have found its way to the front as early as 26 August, just over two weeks after its first press/trade screening at the Scala Theatre in London on 10 August, five days after its wide release in London on 21 August. Setting a precedent for the soldier community's broadly critical and/or suspicious response to the film, however, Second Lieutenant Frank Wollocombe noted in diary that on 26 August 'there was a cinema show of "The Battle of the Somme" which they are showing at the Scala, most interesting, but Doe saw it in Amiens before it was censored and says it very much watered down [sic].'<sup>77</sup> The notion that some soldiers had been shown a censored or 'watered down' version of the film is fascinating, although I have found no further evidence of a censored print in circulation on the front. Nevertheless, even at this early juncture, soldiers were clearly responding to the film with an evidently critical eye, comparing the film's imagery to their own experiences of the front line.

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<sup>76</sup> See: The National Archives, WO 95/2194/1, 24<sup>th</sup> Division Adjutant and Quartermaster Diary entry dated 18 January 1917; WO 95/2541/2, 38<sup>th</sup> Division Adjutant and Quartermaster Diary entry dated 2 April 1917; WO 95/2909/1, 55<sup>th</sup> Division Adjutant and Quartermaster Diary entry dated 16 September 1916.

<sup>77</sup> IWM Collections, Documents.3331, Private Papers of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant F Wollocombe, diary entry dated 26 August 1916.

882. (CINEMAS) "BATTLE OF THE SOMME" FILM.

A set of cinematograph films of the "Battle of the Somme" will shortly be available.

Units with Cinemas who would like to show the film should apply to Corps H.Q. through the usual channels.

Only Units with thoroughly competent operators will be allowed to use these films.

Fig. 4.8: Enlargement of 11 Corps Routine Order dated 2 December 1916. WO 95/885/7.

From its initial release, soldiers, having seen the film on the front or whilst on leave back in Britain, expressed their reactions to *The Battle of the Somme* in a number of different ways, both in public and private forms. In such accounts, we can read a broad trend of responses, with many soldier commentators expressing an evident level of distaste or suspicion of the film in question. Some, as we shall see, even articulated an outright indictment of the film's supposed authenticity.

Firstly, reportage on soldier audiences in attendance at screenings of the film, be they at the front or at home, tend to highlight the peculiar spectatorial dynamic at hand. Describing a screening of the film in a cinema located 'in a side street of shell-shattered Albert', Major Charles Roberts drew attention towards the inherent irony found in screening a topical film to soldiers.<sup>78</sup> Roberts, wrote:

[The soldiers] were engrossed in the moving pictures which passed before them on the screen. And what were the pictures that could so rivet their attention while swift death roared and screamed about them? They were scenes of an earlier portion of the tremendous conflict going on even now just beyond their walls. For the film was the great battle-film of the fighting on the Somme.

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<sup>78</sup> Major Charles G. D. Roberts, 'A Cinema at the Front', *Canada in Khaki*, Vol. 2 (1917), pp. 64-66 (p. 64).

[...] now, here in the shadowed hall, they were getting really acquainted with the magnificence of their own achievement. They were learning to apprehend the Battle of the Somme. As he who is in the forest cannot see the forest for the trees, he who is in the thickest of the fight sees least of it as a whole. His senses are absorbed in the immediate details which mean life or death to him, and what his fellows in the next ditch are doing must take on faith. Here, however, before the flickering film, he feels himself on a watch-tower high above the gasping fury of the battle. He sees now what he looked like – and perhaps remembers what he felt like – as he plunged forward with the attacking wave, and followed the barrage, and broke with reddening bayonet into the German trenches.<sup>79</sup>

Removed from the immediate experience of the conflict, Roberts' account of the screening underlines the marked distance between reality and representation, implicit in the account's rendering of the spectatorial response to the film, contrasting the film's conventional rendering of distance between civilian spectators and soldier subjects. The film, it is suggested, afforded these spectators something of a bird's-eye view of events, an ability to see the entirety of the conflict in which individual soldiers only took a small part. The fact that the film is said to enable the soldier to 'see now what he looked like' suggests some level of disconnect between lived reality and mediated representation and draws attention to the inherent instability within the film's presumed mode of address towards civilian audiences.

First-hand commentary from the soldier community published in newspapers and magazines highlights this notion of disconnect between reality and representation

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., pp. 65-66.

in more detailed terms. Whilst the general public vocalised their praise for *The Battle of the Somme* and what they saw as its authentic representation of the war and soldiering life, soldiers themselves offered a more nuanced analysis and critique. Many soldiers spoke of the film as a pale imitation of the real thing, noting that the medium, even before the act of censorship or tactful sanitisation, lacked the ability to render the conflict with absolute authenticity. As we have seen, this type of response from the soldier community did exist before the release of *The Battle of the Somme*. Writing in April 1916, Bernard Ayre wrote to his mother to say that 'nine-tenths of the horrors [of the war] are not at all in these pictures' referring to depictions of the front line in other topical films.<sup>80</sup> Soldier criticism, however, became even more pronounced upon the release of the feature documentary.

A correspondent for *The Manchester Guardian*, for example, remarked how during a conversation with a friend – a wounded soldier who had returned home from the front – he had sought confirmation from this soldier acquaintance that the film was 'like the real thing, isn't it?' The wounded soldier was said to have replied:

Yes, [...] about as like a silhouette is like a real person, or as a dream is like a waking experience. There is so much left out – the stupefying din, the stinks, the excitement, the fighting at close quarters. You see enough to appreciate General Sherman's remark that war is hell, but the hell depicted is as mild to the real hell out there as Homer's hell is to Dante's.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Bernard Ayre, cited in William Philpott, *Bloody Victory: The Sacrifice on the Somme* (London: Abacus, 2010), p 302.

<sup>81</sup> 'Miscellany', *The Manchester Guardian*, 1 September 1916, p. 3.

Here, the soldier in question, whilst not directly alluding to the staged sequences of the film (either out of choice or ignorance), nonetheless highlights the apparent distance between lived experience and cinematic representation, arguing that the film was but a shadow of the actual war. In a later issue of *The Manchester Guardian*, a correspondent on the front line outlined a similar criticism of *The Battle of the Somme* based upon its cinematic sanitisation of the conflict, stating that:

In these film pictures [civilians] have only a little glance or two of the agonies of war – nothing of the real horror of the battlefield in which our men are fighting.

It is because the ugliness of war has been hidden that war goes on. The realities are glossed over. If the kinema were to give the full image of this war it would not tell all there is to tell. It would not give the stench nor the noise nor the lurid colour of war.<sup>82</sup>

The unnamed correspondent cited here highlights the evident level of censorship within the film's production – 'the realities are glossed over' – whilst additionally suggesting that the medium of film could not completely capture the experiential nature of the soldiering life, drawing attention to towards the senses of smell, hearing, and sight and film's inadequacies in replicating the 'stench', 'noise' or 'colour' of the war. Importantly, this account draws attention towards the film's measured strategies of representation of the war for civilian audiences – 'they have only a little glance or two of the agonies of war' – suggesting that the film had in some sense failed to fully capture the conflict. This was a recurring sentiment within the soldier community, which often remarked that the film could 'only give you a small idea of what things are

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<sup>82</sup> 'The Desperate Struggle for Ginchy', *The Manchester Guardian*, 9 September 1916, p. 7.

really like'.<sup>83</sup> Surmising this sentiment in perhaps more embittered words, one Private Vaughan Paul argued that the 'Somme film, which I have seen, certainly gives a certain view of war, but a subdued view. No blood, no anguish, no screams of men, as if death mattered – the only thing that matters is how best we can serve the State', perhaps in part alluding to the film's fundamental function as nationalistic propaganda, if not simply towards his perception of the individual soldier's infinitesimal stature within the larger machinery of war.<sup>84</sup> The film's omission of the war's inevitable victims was even commented upon by Sir Henry Rawlinson, General of the Fourth Army, himself, noting that 'some of [the film is] very good but it cut out many of the horrors in dead and wounded'.<sup>85</sup>

Diaries and letters written by soldiers themselves perhaps offer the clearest insight into the soldier community's response to *The Battle of the Somme*. Clearly, some exhibited a deep-seated mistrust of the medium's ability to record the battle authentically, often focusing upon the issue of authenticity and the film's apparent inability to represent the realities of war accurately. For example, a letter reprinted in the trench journal *The Fifth Glo'ster Gazette*, from a soldier named Will and addressed to his mother and father, proclaims: 'so you seen the Somme film on the pictures but we whats been through it knows as it can't be like the real thing as you cant imagine what its like like we seen it [sic]'.<sup>86</sup> The same sentiment was echoed by the Canadian soldier John Sudbury in a letter to his mother, in which he suggested that the film

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<sup>83</sup> IWM Collections, Documents.22070, Private Papers of Major G B McTavish, letter dated 21 October 1916.

<sup>84</sup> 'Pte. Vaughan Paul Visits Wounded Comrades', *The Cornishman and Cornish Telegraph*, 15 March 1917, p. 4.

<sup>85</sup> Rawlinson, cited in Philpott, *Bloody Victory*, p. 302.

<sup>86</sup> 'Editor's Post Bag', *The Fifth Glo'ster Gazette*, 15 October 1916, un-paginated.

'certainly gives a good idea of things over here but believe me, seeing it and doing it are very different things - but then you know that.'<sup>87</sup>

It should be stated that some soldiers praised the film, although particular attention should be given to the context of such responses. Interestingly, those who found themselves serving in theatres of war other than the Western front often found the films of the utmost interest, offering an insight as they did into what their counterparts were involved in, in France. Captain E. Wingham, who was stationed in Salonica at the time, wrote to his future wife Miss Nellie Cobden to say that 'I have now seen the famous picture 'The Battle of the Somme' [...] and I want you, [Nellie], to make a special effort to see it. There is nothing horrid about it. I want everyone to see it. I want you to realise what some of your friends have gone through'.<sup>88</sup> Tellingly, Wingham also stated that 'of course the picture has been censored' but, nonetheless, signed the letter off: 'Much love from a most weary Bob. Don't forget to see "The Battle of the Somme"'.<sup>89</sup> Others stationed in locations other than the Western front similarly recorded their praise for the film. Frank Day of the Royal Engineers wrote home from Egypt about how the film was 'simply full of interest though naturally very sad at times to see the poor chaps getting knocked over', expressing a keen 'thankfulness that we were in Egypt' rather than the Western Front.<sup>90</sup> F. J. Smith, whilst residing in a military hospital in Nairobi similarly remarked that he 'was glad to have seen it, although I thought it rather a morbid and grisly picture'.<sup>91</sup> Whilst I do not want to suggest a strict

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<sup>87</sup> Canadian Letters [online]. John Sudbury, letter dated 9 September 1916 [cited 9 January 2018]. Available from <[www.canadianletters.ca](http://www.canadianletters.ca)>

<sup>88</sup> Liddle Collections, LIDDLE/WW1/GS/1772, Papers of E G Robert Wingham, letter dated 5 July 1916.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Liddle Collections, LIDDLE/WW1/EP/015, Papers of Frank Doughty Day, letter dated 10 January 1917.

<sup>91</sup> Liddle Collections, LIDDLE/WW1/AFE/29, Papers of F. J. Smith, letter dated 1 August 1917.

binary distinction between the responses of those soldiers who served on the Western front and had been involved in the events depicted on screen and those serving in other theatres of war, it is interesting to read such accounts in light of the latter group's distance from the Western front. Like civilian audiences in Britain, their intellectual response to the film appears to have focused upon their apparent distance between on-screen content and their own experience, removed as they were from the environment of the conflict the film presented.

Indeed, those with direct experience of the conflict as it progressed in France and Belgium were perhaps better equipped to interpret and/critique the vision of the war as produced by *The Battle of the Somme*, and it is in such accounts we can read the most condemning responses, particularly in relation to the controversial 'over-the-top' sequence. The level to which the film was criticised or even dismissed by the soldier community is understandably impossible to ascertain, although traces of soldier sentiment can be found across a variety of different sources. The war poet Wilfred Owen, for example, suggested in a letter to his mother that the "Somme Pictures" are the laughing stock of the army – like the trenches on exhibition in Kensington', suggesting some level of artificiality or construction.<sup>92</sup> Some accounts, if not immediately condemning the film for 'fakery', drew attention to the peculiar visual characteristics of the front line parapet depicted in the film, as historians would do decades later. For example, J. M. Rymer Jones (speaking after the war) remarked that in 'eight months in various sectors of the line I never served in trenches as depicted in

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<sup>92</sup> Wilfred Owen, *Wilfred Owen Selected Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 215. Whilst there is some disagreement over what exactly Owen is referring to here, I concur with Michael Hammond that the most likely candidate is *The Battle of the Somme* (1916). See: Hammond, *The Big Show*, p. 95; 262.



films, open to sniper fire and no protection against artillery'.<sup>93</sup> Having 'seen pictures in the movies and in pictorial papers of the boys going "over the top"', Private W. C. Millar similarly proclaimed that 'personally, I have grave doubts as to where these pictures were taken'.<sup>94</sup>

Others directly alluded to some level of staging in the film. A letter published by the trench journal *The Outpost* in February 1917, for example, suggests that in the film the 'same men would pass across the film or stage a dozen times to give you the impression of numbers'.<sup>95</sup> Some soldier's accounts foreground the notion that the film's content had been orchestrated and cherry-picked to portray a very specific vision of the war, one which conformed to civilian expectations of soldiering life. Interviewed by the IWM after the war, Donald Price, who had seen the film in a front line cinema, surmised that much of the film was 'nonsense'.<sup>96</sup> 'It was nice to see it, to think that I had been there', Price proclaimed, 'but [the film] was very amateurish [...] more often than not it was nothing to do with the attacks, it was people behind the line'.<sup>97</sup> Pressed by the interviewer on what exactly in the film he thought was 'nonsense', Price remarked: 'well, people cheering to go in the line and troops marching and singing songs, nobody going anywhere near that lot sang songs, believe me'.<sup>98</sup>

However, the most damning response to the film I have found comes in the form of a diary produced by Alfred Marsh of the Royal Engineers whom we have previously encountered in Chapter Two. Incredibly, Marsh, a pianist for a front line

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<sup>93</sup> J. M. Rymer Jones cited in Smither, "A Wonderful Idea of the Fighting", p. 149.

<sup>94</sup> W. C. Millar cited in Tim Cook, *At the Sharp End: Canadians Fighting in the Great War 1914-1916* (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2007), p. 371.

<sup>95</sup> Untitled Letter, *The Outpost*, 1 February 1917, p. 130.

<sup>96</sup> IWM Collections, Catalogue No. 10168, Price, Donald (Oral History).

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

cinema located within the vicinity of St. Paul, France (which was where the Trench Mortar school thought to be used by Malins to stage the ‘over-the-top’ sequence was located), recorded how in early December 1916, his front line cinema had acquired *The Battle of the Somme* and had screened it for its soldier clientele. Marsh, a keen fan of the cinema outside of his duties as an accompanist, remarked:

Had the “Battle of Somme” film during early part of week – don’t think much of it as big part is “faked” – “going over the parapet” + “shells bursting” “Trench mortars” were all taken close here! at the T. M. [Trench Mortar] school.<sup>99</sup>

This piece of evidence is of the utmost importance for the case against the sequence in question. Unlike the often cited testimony provided by the cameraman Carrington in his interview with Kevin Brownlow in the 1970s, Marsh’s account is a primary piece of contemporary evidence. Moreover, Marsh himself is, comparatively speaking, an unbiased third-party, or to use Nicholas Reeves’s term, a ‘disinterested commentator’, when compared with the potential conflict of interest posed by the figure of Carrington. As a rival cameraman, Roger Smither argues, Carrington could have potentially been ‘motivated by professional jealousy’ when he made such claims against Malins.

However, Marsh’s account appears to corroborate Carrington’s in a number of significant ways. Firstly, Marsh’s vicinity to St. Paul and the Trench Mortar school during the period in which *The Battle of the Somme* was filmed (a fact confirmed by diary entries he made in June/July 1916) and the fact that he directly identified the Trench Mortar school in the cited entry as the stage Malins used for his faked

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<sup>99</sup> Liddle Collections, LIDDLE/WW1/GS/1053, Papers of Alfred Marsh, diary entry 17 December 1916.



Fig. 4.9: Above: Still from *The Battle of the Somme* purportedly showing a bombardment of German lines. Below: Photo titled 'Shell Bursting at the Trench Mortar School at St. Pol, July 1916'. IWM Collection, Catalogue No. Q784. Note the identical shape of the explosion and debris.

sequences, adds weight to the suspicions surrounding the institution. Secondly, it is significant that Marsh claims that, not only was the 'over-the-top' sequence faked, but that the sequences depicting 'shells bursting' and 'trench mortars' firing were also staged at the school. The inclusion of these latter two sequences in Marsh's indictment are revealing as they confirm lesser known suspicions recently articulated but not confirmed by Roger Smither's analysis of the film. Indeed, Smither notes how the shot of bursting shells 'exactly matches a still photograph with the caption, "shell bursting at the Trench Mortar School St Pol, July 1916"', and thus seems likely to be a stock

shot' (Fig. 4.9).<sup>100</sup> Similarly, Smither remarks of the suspicious trench mortar shots that, alongside the presence of a 'foot of someone apparently standing on the rim of the mortar pit at the end of the scene – an unlikely position in genuine combat', 'it is noteworthy that the context recalls the trench mortar school' associated with the film's apparent staging.<sup>101</sup>

Alongside the additional evidence of fakery present within *The Battle of the Somme* which this account provides, Marsh's thoughts on the film are also significant for the fact that he dismissed the value of the film based on this apparent artificiality: 'don't think much of it as big part is "faked"'. For Marsh, the notion that footage had been faked evidently devalued the film in his eyes, serving as a clear instance in which soldier experience and knowledge of the conflict and the manipulative strategies of topical filmmaking led to a clear indictment of the film in question, again underlining how Samuel Hynes' assessment of the value and authority of 'direct experience' within the soldier community can also be perceived within its response to topical filmmaking.

Interestingly, the Trench Mortar school at St. Paul also appears to have been the location for one of the war's other most famous examples of faking imagery, a photograph titled 'Over the Top' produced by the Canadian Official War photographer Ivor Castle during the battle of the Somme (Fig. 4.10).<sup>102</sup> Indeed, taking a moment to expand our examination beyond the medium of cinema to encompass that of photography, soldiers appear to have been just as critical of still images purporting to

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<sup>100</sup> Smither, "A Wonderful Idea of the Fighting", p. 155.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Peter Robertson, 'Canadian Photojournalism during the First World War', *History of Photography*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1978), pp. 37-52 (p. 43).



Fig. 4.10: Photo titled 'Over the Top' by official war photographer Ivor Castle.

depict the conflict as they were of film. Much like topical films, civilians at the time do not appear to have been aware of the presence of fakery and staging within the profession of war photography when they visited high-profile exhibitions such as those hosted by the Grafton Galleries in London. In contrast, soldiers routinely called out such representations, similarly stating that 'they are not as bad as it is in reality' or that they had been manipulated or staged.<sup>103</sup> Interestingly, William Rider-Rider, an official photographer who was resolutely against the production of faked photographs, found himself cast under suspicion when following in the footsteps of Ivor Castle. 'I had a lot to live down when I visited some units' remarked Rider-Rider after the war, remembering how embittered soldiers would heckle him with comments like: "Want to

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<sup>103</sup> Canadian Letters [online]. 'Chas', letter dated 17 December 1917 [cited 8 May 2018]. Available from <[www.canadianletters.ca](http://www.canadianletters.ca)>

take us going over the top? Another faker?’<sup>104</sup> It is not outside the realm of possibility that Malins was met with the same criticism from the soldier community in his role as a cameraman on the front.

Arguably, the final question to address is that which posits that the soldiers were themselves complicit in the creation of such films and, therefore, responsible for idealised imagery that was produced. This, in my opinion, is an unfair assessment. Indeed, those who appeared on the silver screens of Britain’s cinemas and beyond, particularly those who appeared in ‘faked’ sequences, did not necessarily do so of their own accord, but were instructed to do so just as much as they were ordered to go ‘over the top’ during actual combat. Such instructions were presumably given either by the official cameraman, temporarily placed ‘in charge’ of a group of men by the military authorities who oversaw them, or perhaps instructed by those military authorities themselves. Soldiers in their diaries noted how they ‘paraded for moving picture affair’, evidently upon the instruction of some military higher-up.<sup>105</sup> Some, it would appear, were enticed to help out with the promise of material reward. Speaking after the war, Corporal George Ashurst of the 1<sup>st</sup> Lancashire Fusiliers remembered how whilst playing a game of cards on rest, he and his men were ‘requested to go out into the trench and be photographed, presumably just fixing bayonets ready to go over the top. It was only a few minutes of a job and we soon obliged, specially as the photographer [...] promised us a tot of rum and a pack of cigarettes for our trouble.’<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Rider-Rider cited in Robertson, ‘Canadian Photojournalism in the First World War’, p. 43.

<sup>105</sup> Liddle Collections, LIDDLE/WW1/EP/046, Papers of Harold Lowe, Diary entry dated 9 June 1917.

<sup>106</sup> George Ashurst cited in Jane Carmichael, *First World War Photographers* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 52.



Fig. 4.11: Frame from *The Battle of the Somme* showing soldiers on the front and their curiosity for the camera.

Sequences that were not outrightly faked or orchestrated highlight the discrepancies between soldiers who had been instructed and those who were simply recorded. During instances in which soldiers were simply recorded, those who did find themselves the focus of the camera's attention often had a hard time acting naturally, often making eye contact with the camera itself (Fig. 4.11), whereas those who were acting out a 'scene' were clearly instructed to act as if the camera wasn't present. Many, in a sense, performed for the camera in a manner which suggests that few took the matter seriously, or that they intended to present themselves on their own terms. As the *Daily Mail* reported:

The soldiers no sooner catch sight of the operator at work than they begin to pose. As a rule the first step is to light a cigarette, to set the cap at a rakish tilt,

and to adopt a general air of extreme nonchalance. Others handle their rifles with heroic ferocity. A few affect the "Charlie Chaplin" style, but the great difficulty is to get them to preserve a natural expression, the instinctive tendency being to wear a broad grin, which, of course, imparts to the most realistic picture a suggestion of "fake".<sup>107</sup>

Elsewhere, a correspondent for *The Cinegoer* reported that:

On the whole, [the filmed soldier] quite enjoys doing it. Just occasionally a man will be heard loudly protesting that he doesn't mean to let his face appear on the Film; but, curiously enough, the Cinema man has noticed that such a protester invariably chooses a position in which he will be about the most prominent person in the picture.

A broad grin is the expression which seems to be instinctively assumed when Tommy knows that he is being photographed for the Pictures. This gives a nice, cheer "Are we down-hearted? No!" kind of feeling to audiences at home, but at the same time it rather detracts from the naturalness of the effect if every man in a large group is grinning at one and the same moment, when there is no obvious joke.<sup>108</sup>

Obviously, there were few jokes to be had within the environment of the war. Instead, the type of soldier behaviour reported in such accounts reflect the presence of the camera within such extraordinary circumstances. The vast majority of soldiers were men of modest ambitions from working class backgrounds who suddenly found

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<sup>107</sup> 'Trench Poses for Kinema', *Daily Mail*, 12 February 1916, p. 6.

<sup>108</sup> 'Tommy Posing for the Moving-Picture Man', *The Cinegoer*, 8 April 1916, p. 16.



themselves front and centre on an international stage, the subject of a nation's attention and the hope for its future. The camera catapulted these men into what for them must have felt like stardom, a moment in time in which the sacrifices and efforts they were making were being recorded for all the world to see. At its most fundamental level, the camera offered a way to communicate with loved ones back home, to tell them that they were okay. Tellingly, lip readers studying *The Battle of the Somme* have noted the frequency with which soldiers on screen were saying 'Hello, Mum' or 'Hello, Mum, it's me'.<sup>109</sup> Again, this adds further confirmation to the notion that the film served to compact the distance between soldier and civilian, and perhaps, isolated outside of its broader textual and ideological context, these individual moments in which soldier and loved one are symbolically brought together are what enticed the former to step in front of the camera to play his part in the first place. Rather than believing in any grander vision of what topical film-making could accomplish, soldiers were enticed by the simple novelty of the camera's presence and the potential joy it could bring to friends and family back home. As we have seen, it was only when viewed within the larger context of the film's strategies of representation and rendering of front line life, did soldiers find a problem.

## **Conclusion**

How widely soldiers like Alfred Marsh (and presumably others in the vicinity of the Trench Mortar school) shared their knowledge of the fakery in *The Battle of the Somme*

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<sup>109</sup> Alastair H. Fraser, Andrew Robertshaw and Steve Roberts, *Ghosts on the Somme: Filming the Battle, June-July 1916* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2009), pp. 152-153.

amongst fellow soldiers further afield is, of course, impossible to ascertain. What these sources do suggest, however, is that a contingent of soldiers serving on the Western front were directly aware of the artifice of *The Battle of the Somme's* imagery. Moreover, even if some soldiers were not directly aware of the film's evident fakery, many still voiced dismissal or criticism of the film on the grounds that it was in some undefinable way, manipulated: a sanitised or 'subdued' vision of the war which they could not entirely reconcile with their own lived experience. Rather than compacting the apparent distance between spectator and subject – offering direct and unmediated access – as it purported to do for civilian audiences, for soldier audiences *The Battle of the Somme* only drew attention to the cinematic mechanisms and representational strategies which worked to obscure the reality of the war which they had experienced. As we have seen, such criticism was equally extended to other topical films released throughout the war (indeed, we will see another example of this 'expert spectatorship' in Chapter Five), suggesting that their reaction to *The Battle of the Somme* wasn't an isolated instance but a widespread characteristic or phenomenon of soldier spectatorship. As much as soldier-produced poetry, prose or reportage, soldier responses to the cinema and topical-filmmaking, be they artistic or purely personal commentary, reflect a wider vindication of the value of 'direct experience' as a criterion for all discourse on the war in the eyes of the British soldier.

Of course, it is important to state that such commentary and criticism, particularly those which addressed the artificiality of official propaganda, were mostly relegated to peripheral publications or personal papers which were often produced and/or read solely by soldiers themselves. That is not say, however, that such commentary was consciously suppressed, but that it remained within the already insular community of soldiers and veterans: a generation bound by their shared

experience of the war in their disillusionment and complaint; a common language and perception of the world, often characterised by cynicism, criticism and satirical humour, born as it was out of the oppressive conditions of trench warfare. As Nicholas Reeves has written, the 'myths and fantasies were all too quickly dispelled by the actual experience of war and one might have expected men home on leave to have shared their experiences with their friends and relatives; in practice it seems that few did'.<sup>110</sup> By examining soldier commentary, this chapter has demonstrated how we can formulate a more nuanced understanding of British wartime propaganda and topical filmmaking – its power, its failures and its successes – from a unique, but fundamentally important perspective. As we have seen, such a perspective places emphasis on the importance of authenticity and historical fact within wartime film production, demonstrating an awareness of film's artificiality and a critical faculty equipped to interpret and dismantle such artifice.

To conclude, both this chapter and Chapter Three have highlighted the evidently unique characteristics and traits of the specific historical demographic of soldier spectators during the First World War. Soldier spectators were a discerning and critically engaged demographic, which cherished the cinema for its escapist content and its home-like comforts, whilst critiquing and/or denouncing the medium for its manipulative representational strategies regarding the depiction of soldiers and the war itself. Ultimately, the evidence and arguments presented by these two chapters have demonstrated the need to reclaim this forgotten demographic of wartime spectatorship and to reformulate our understanding of First World War cinema culture

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<sup>110</sup> Reeves, *Official British Film Propaganda during the First World War*, p. 183.

and experience by incorporating this strand of spectatorship into the disciplines of Film Studies, Military History and War Studies.

## 5. The Cinema, Recovery and Rehabilitation

On Saturday 10 August 1918, three months before the Armistice, *The Illustrated London News* used this drawing (Fig. 5.1) for the front cover of that day's edition. Three bed-bound soldiers, one of whom appears to have suffered some sort of head injury, another who appears to have had his legs amputated, stare up in amazement and joy at the recognisable image of Charlie Chaplin being projected onto the ceiling of their hospital ward. Whilst two nurses are seen close at hand, none of the three soldiers appear to be giving a second thought to their present circumstances. Each appears to be completely enthralled by their own private picture show. Although only an illustration, the image of the 'ceiling cinema' represents an actual historical practice that took place during the First World War in which films were projected onto hospital ward ceilings for 'the amusement of wounded men who are unable to sit up or leave



Fig. 5.1: 'Ceiling Cinema', *The Illustrated London News*, 10 August 1918

their beds'.<sup>1</sup> 'Thus they are enabled to enjoy the antics of Charlie Chaplin and other heroes and heroines of the "movies," like their more fortunate comrades, who can move about and attend the ordinary type of kinema entertainment.'<sup>2</sup>

By way of an introduction to this chapter, it can be said that this illustration is emblematic of a number of different ideas and factors relating to the cinema's wartime role within the context of recovery and rehabilitation for the war wounded. The use of the cinema in this illustration suggests the promise of escapism, an escape from the immediate and often devastating realities of convalescent life. Much like the front line cinemas documented in Chapter Two, we see here the presence of the cinema reaching beyond the confines of the commercial theatrical venue, used and implemented in unusual and unconventional ways. The image also implicitly hints at the medical profession's endorsement of the medium within the context of rehabilitation. But for what purpose? Were the benefits of cinema entertainment only temporary, lasting only for the duration of the films being shown, or was the cinema part of a wider framework predicated upon the rehabilitation of wounded and disabled soldiers both during and after the war? How did commercial cinemas cater for convalescent audiences and how was this different from the dedicated cinemas established in convalescent camps by the patients themselves? The comedy genre, epitomised by the figure of Chaplin, appears to take centre-stage here, but what of the film industry's topical and official wartime output? Such questions place emphasis on how the cinema affected wounded and disabled audiences, but it is also crucial to

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<sup>1</sup> 'Ceiling as a Screen', *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 22 August 1918, p. 49.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

determine how the presence of the war wounded in domestic commercial cinemas affected such spaces as sites of public interaction and exchange.

This chapter will examine the role of the cinema within the context of recovery and rehabilitation, outlining the many ways by which the medium intersected with the lives of the war wounded returning from the front lines. 'Rehabilitation' can be framed in a number of different ways, although it should be stated here that the immediate concerns of this chapter reside beyond the fundamental processes of medical treatment and after-care experienced by those returning from the front, even if it takes as its subject those soldiers and ex-servicemen who were undergoing such treatments. The processes of 'rehabilitation' to be discussed here are more peripheral. They are the processes and practices concerning the *psychological* well-being of the war wounded and the maintenance of their morale and spirit. 'Rehabilitation' shall also be addressed as the process by which war wounded were re-integrated back into society.

Much of the material consulted for this chapter is specific to certain venues and institutions. Consequently, it is important to bear in mind that some sources, for example, patient-produced magazines originating in convalescent institutions, would have only had a very limited readership and impact upon the wider convalescent and military communities. That being said, the examples and ideas cited throughout are largely representative of trends in convalescent exhibition practices and spectator reception across the country. Indeed, three broad facets essential to the practice of cinema entertainment for the war wounded have surfaced whilst researching the diverse range of sources represented here. First and foremost, this chapter will examine the seemingly ubiquitous assertion within much of the primary evidence consulted, that as a form of escapism, the cinema provided a type of therapeutic relief



for the war wounded, a relief characterised by the spectator's ability to 'forget' their present circumstances whilst engaging with cinematic entertainment. The second key idea is that the cinema was routinely positioned as a marker of continuity between civilian and military life, in keeping with its role on the front line as documented in Chapter Three. Building upon this notion of continuity between civilian and military life, as propagated by cultural historians such as J. G. Fuller and, more recently, Michael Roper in his *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War*, this chapter will outline how the cinema's presence within the context of rehabilitation reflects the importance placed upon the implementation of pre-war leisure practices with regard to the structures of continuity and the goal of reintroducing the war wounded back into civilian life.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, the third essential concept is that the implementation of the cinema as an entertainment for the war wounded was conceived of by the film trade as a philanthropic act. Central to our understanding of the cinema within this context is the continual negotiation and renegotiation of how the commercial cinema trade engaged in 'war work'. Deborah Cohen, in her *The War Come Home: Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany, 1914-1939*, paints a troubled picture of Britain's immediate response to the war wounded, foregrounding a government grappling with the question of responsibility, asking: '[w]hat were the state's obligations to the victims of the war?'<sup>4</sup> Central to Cohen's understanding of Britain's successful post-war reconstruction is the resourcefulness and support structure of 'civil society' rather than

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<sup>3</sup> See: J. G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies, 1914-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990); Michael Roper, *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Deborah Cohen, *The War Come Home: Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany, 1914-1939* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2001), p. 39.

the state, which she defines as the 'dense network of voluntary, and especially philanthropic, organizations that mediated between the individual and the state', emphasising the significant contributions towards reconstruction made in 'arenas of *broad public participation*, in soup kitchens and makeshift local pension offices, homes for orphaned children and villas turned lazarets.'<sup>5</sup> Within the context of rehabilitation, the cinema, understood as both a social institution and trade, should also be seen as a part of that civil society. Indeed, the charitable efforts of the film trade and other institutions positioned the cinema as a significant focal point of philanthropy and caregiving: a site of 'broad public participation' and exchange between convalescent audiences, exhibitors, philanthropists, social commentators and more.

Also crucial to this context is an awareness of what the exhibition sector stood to gain in terms of publicity by catering to the needs and desires of the returning wounded. Finally, this chapter will also examine the potential effect that convalescent audiences had upon the commercial cinema venue and its civilian audiences. As shall be seen, the presence of the war wounded in commercial cinemas threatened to radically alter the experiential conditions of conventional cinematic spectatorship for convalescent patient and civilian alike, facilitating an environment of mixed emotions and conflicting perspectives.

Whilst those who returned may have escaped the immediate dangers of the front line, a completely different type of conflict - complete with its own horrors and harsh realities - was fought by and for convalescent patients across the country. Examining the use of the cinema as an entertainment for the war wounded in both

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 4. My emphasis.

commercial cinemas and convalescent institutions, making use of two substantial case studies whilst painting a broader picture of the practice across the country, this chapter will ultimately demonstrate that the institution of the cinema did not just stand idly by whilst a generation of young men suffered.

### **The Cinema, Convalescent Audiences and the Contexts of Rehabilitation**

As the war began to draw to a close, the film trade was keen to demonstrate that the cinema had a role to play in the post-war lives of those undergoing recovery and rehabilitation. Moreover, convalescent hospitals and camps began to incorporate cinema exhibition for their patients alongside other modes of recreation. From 1915 onwards the pages of news and trade papers were filled with reports on the charitable comfort provided to returning sailors and soldiers by domestic cinema exhibitors in the form of discounted or even free tickets, as well as special fundraising events and programmes. Of particular importance is the apparent attention given to those who had been wounded or even disabled in the line of duty. Article after article details how thousands of wounded men were routinely invited to cinemas across the country (particularly those in close proximity to convalescent institutions), frequently on behalf of the venue's manager, where they were treated to a free programme of the latest films and other entertainments. Indeed, Harry Patch, the last surviving soldier of the First World War (1898-2009) recalled in his memoir how permission was granted by his Liverpool convalescent hospital to leave the premises for exercise once they had recovered sufficiently: 'Down the road from us was a cinema, free to any soldiers in

hospital blue; you could just walk in'.<sup>6</sup> The practice of entertaining the returning wounded was not limited to big cities. From the urban centres of London, Leeds, Birmingham and Bristol to smaller villages and towns, convalescent soldiers became a familiar sight for the British public in commercial cinemas. The trade press was emphatically praiseworthy of the individual cinemas that sought to provide comfort for the returning wounded and celebratory of the medium of film itself and the perceived good it was accomplishing for the war effort. The sentiment captured in the following passage from *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, for example, is typical of the trade's coverage:

Mr Ellis Parker, the managing director of the Stockwell Palladium is so unique and praiseworthy that it would ill become me not to make it the subject of special notice. At his invitation last Saturday afternoon, I participated in the weekly treat of pictures, song and story, with an incidental tea and smokes, given by him to two hundred warriors who are inmates of the Wandsworth General Hospital. As has been the case for more than three months, the proceedings were in the highest sense enjoyable.<sup>7</sup>

Elsewhere, Mr. James George of Cambuslang, Scotland, was said to have 'delighted the hearts of a hundred heroes from the local hospital' at his cinema.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Mr. Blacker, manager of the Royal Pavilion cinema in Blackpool, reportedly entertained wounded soldiers residing at a nearby convalescent camp with a concert and a programme of films.<sup>9</sup> Such reports bear many of the hallmarks that would come to

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<sup>6</sup> Harry Patch with Richard Van Emden, *The Last Fighting Tommy: The Life of Harry Patch, Last Veteran of the Trenches, 1898-2009* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009), p. 115.

<sup>7</sup> 'Weekly Notes', *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 23 November 1916, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> 'Entertaining the Wounded', *The Bioscope*, 3 August 1916, p. 435.

<sup>9</sup> 'Helping the Wounded', *The Bioscope*, 17 August 1916, p. xiii.

define the journalistic representation and disseminated public image of the exhibition sector's support of the returning wounded. First and foremost lies the apparent human touch behind the charitable act. Many advertisements for, and reports of such events often stressed the fact that a manager or business owner had arranged and financed the events personally.

It appears that the motive for providing such entertainment was based on the idea that the cinema could offer a form of escapism and comfort for those in attendance. The idea of escapism for the returning wounded and disabled, however, must be differentiated from the notion of escapism that the front line cinema afforded, being a respite from the immediate dangers of the battlefield. In the context of rehabilitation, the cinema was positioned as offering an avenue of escapism from something that had already happened, an attempt to alleviate the pain of men who had been physically and/or mentally scarred by their wartime experiences. The use of 'Dr. Kinema', as it was referred to in one instance, was specifically utilised within the context and process of rehabilitation as a therapeutic aid for the returning wounded.<sup>10</sup>

In many cases, screenings organised and hosted by commercial cinemas were also framed as a reward or as a gesture of recognition for the actions and sacrifices that those in the audience had already made. Consequently, the provision of free refreshments and gifts for those in attendance became a crucial component of the cinema in this context, alongside the conventional choice of the film programme. Tea, chocolate and cigarettes were commonplace in such instances. For example, when '200 wounded soldiers from hospitals in Exeter attended [...] an entertainment at the

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<sup>10</sup> 'Dr. Kinema', *The Era*, 1 November 1916, p. 20.

City Palace, in Fore-street', it was said that 'Charlie Chaplin, Billie Richie and other favourite comedians figured in the attractive films, and the enjoyment of the numbers was enhanced by the distribution of dainties and the presentation to each soldier of a packet of cigarettes and a box of chocolates.'<sup>11</sup> For an event organised by the De Luxe Cinema in Stevenston, Scotland around Christmas 1917, those in attendance were treated to a whole assortment of different gifts, including 'fountain pens, pipes, tobacco pouches, cigarette cases [and] purses', alongside the evening's cinematic entertainment.<sup>12</sup> Some cinemas even ran competitions or offered additional prizes, such as the Stoll Picture Theatre, Kingsway, which reportedly awarded 10s notes to twelve lucky ticket holders amongst the crowd of 1,000 wounded soldiers (who had already each received a parcel of 'comforts') in attendance at the venue's 'cheery party' in mid-December, 1917.<sup>13</sup>

Transportation, if not organised by the venues, would be orchestrated by the hospitals or convalescent facilities themselves, often supported by the patronage of donors or fundraising schemes. For a lecture series featuring 'cinema illustrations' at the Royal Albert Hall in August 1916 and presented by one Mr. Herbert Garrison, 3,000 wounded soldiers were transported from various hospitals through London thanks to 'the generosity of the General Omnibus Company, who placed 150 omnibuses at their disposal, and the Asiatic Petrol Company, who have given the petrol.'<sup>14</sup> On the opposite end of the spectrum, transport may have been personally offered by the staff of medical facilities seeking ways to entertain their patients. At the No. 1 Temporary

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<sup>11</sup> Untitled, *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 18 August 1915, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> 'Stevenston de Luxe Fund Wounded Heroes' Outing', *The Bioscope*, 8 Jan 1918, p. 81.

<sup>13</sup> 'A Soldier's Tea Party', *The Times*, 13 December 1917, p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> 'The Fourth of August. 3,000 Wounded at Albert Hall Meeting.', *The Times*, 3 August 1916, p. 3.

Hospital, Exeter, 'those patients well enough were taken for drives by the Medical Officers, to tea and Picture Palaces at Torquay & Teignmouth.'<sup>15</sup>

Much like cinemas on the front line, the choice of films screened for the returning wounded in convalescent facilities and commercial cinemas can only really be ascertained on a case by case basis. In terms of allocation, convalescent facilities such as camps and hospitals appear to have relied heavily upon donations of unwanted or second-hand product from local cinemas and distributors, as well as film companies themselves, whilst commercial cinemas organising screenings for the wounded obviously had a ready supply of films. In both instances, however, it is important to account for the possibility of film selection and why certain films may have been chosen over others. Like the front line cinemas, the historical archive attests to some content curation for convalescent audiences. Indeed, broad patterns of preference for certain types of films or genres can be determined.

The need to offer escapism, comfort and even a sense of therapeutic relief often meant that the comedy genre became the logical focus of content being screened for wounded and disabled audiences, both in commercial cinemas and convalescent institutions, and this preference is clearly reflected in first-hand accounts of convalescent spectatorship cited here and throughout this chapter. Written from his hospital bed in Malta, Lt. Jock Macleod of the Cameron Highlanders bemoaned any other sort of entertainment, as well as what he described as the 'modern Cinema play', perhaps alluding to the feature-length dramas that were at that point becoming ubiquitous. Instead, Macleod proclaims his preference for 'the good old type [of film]

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<sup>15</sup> 'News of the Month', *The Tittle Tattle: No. 1 Temporary Hospital*, May 1916, p. 1.

in which one man slashes another with a bludgeon, upon which the victim disappears in a cloud of smoke.’<sup>16</sup> Another clear example of this preference can be seen in the recorded cinematic taste of the Indian convalescent patients in residence at the Royal Pavilion Hospital, Brighton. Dismissing Western-produced ‘Thrilling Dramas’ and ‘Romantic Tales’, ‘involving as they do considerable knowledge of our customs and language,’ it was reported that the ‘misadventures of Charlie Chaplin or the Fat Boy [...] were more to the taste’ of the Indian troops attending commercial cinemas whilst convalescing in Brighton.<sup>17</sup> Broadly speaking, slapstick comedy, the kind typified by Chaplin and other comedy personas, was a universally accessible source of entertainment.

Another method of discerning the preferences of convalescent audiences is to examine the type of content being emphasised by advertisements for commercial cinemas placed in periodicals targeted towards the convalescent demographic. For example, advertisements for the Victoria Cinema placed in the *First Eastern Gazette* - the patient produced journal of the First Eastern General Hospital, Cambridge - suggest the popularity of Mary Pickford, Charlie Chaplin and Marguerite Clark, all of whom, it is promised, make ‘frequent visits’ to the venue (Fig. 5.2). This section of the Victoria Cinema’s advertising remained unaltered for all of its placements between Vol. 1, No. 24 (29 February 1916) and Vol 2, No. 17 (7 November 1916). In a similar manner, advertisements for the Palace Picture House placed in *The Hydra*, the

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<sup>16</sup> Liddle Collection, LIDDLE/WW1/GS/1027, MS Jock Dunning MacLeod, letter dated 30 November 1916.

<sup>17</sup> H. R. Woolbert, ‘What the Indian Soldiers thought of Brighton’, *The Pavilion ‘Blues’*, 1 June 1916, p. 4. The allusion to the ‘Fat Boy’ is presumably a reference to Roscoe ‘Fatty’ Arbuckle.



The Most Up-to-date Picture  
House in Cambridge—

**THE VICTORIA**  
CINEMA

MARKET HILL, CAMBRIDGE

—Always an—  
**ALL-STAR**  
Programme  
Showing  
DAILY FROM 3 TO 10-30.  
Continuous.

Frequent Visits of.—  
Mary Pickford  
Charlie Chaplin  
Marguerite Clark  
and all  
The Film Celebrities.

**COMING!!**  
May 1st,  
The  
Very Latest  
**Chaplin**  
Film :  
**Dough and  
Dynamite.**  
Such a . .  
Scream.

Fig. 5.2: Advertisement for the Victoria Cinema, Cambridge,  
*The First Eastern Gazette*, 25 April 1916.

patient-produced journal of Craiglockheart War Hospital, Edinburgh, made certain to include Chaplin's films in its advertised programmes. An interesting semantic coincidence: when advertising re-issues or repeats, the Palace Picture House also referred to Chaplin's presence as 'return visit[s]' of the comedian.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> 'The Palace Picture House', *The Hydra: The Magazine of Craiglockheart War Hospital*, No. 7, May 1918, p. xi.

Journalistic coverage of both convalescent cinemas and commercial cinemas catering to convalescent audiences also appears to validate the general predominance of comedy films taking centre-stage within programmes for convalescent spectators, who in turn recorded their preference for them. Take for example, this report published in the 12 October 1915 edition of *The Times*, titled 'The Laughter of Courage', which is in many ways emblematic of the sentiment towards the power of comedy. In the article, an unnamed correspondent describes the scene at a city cinema where, in the midst of a 'comic story', a 'sound was heard, a sound that presently dominated the entire house. A man was – laughing.'<sup>19</sup> He continued:

At first so concentrated was attention on the screen that his laughter did not attract attention. It merged in the general murmur of the crowd. But gradually it differentiated itself from this general murmur, and rose above it. It became a sound apart. More than mere amusement, more than a pleasant sense of the ludicrous made audible, it drew attention to itself. It was laughter – genuine, hearty laughter [...] No grown-up could forget himself for so slight a cause. It was certainly unaffected laughter, the man was un-self-conscious!

Piquing the interest of everyone in the cinema, the writer described how the source of this laughter continued in 'ceaseless' intensity. '[E]very one who heard it shared one longing – for the story to end and the lights to be turned up that the laughter might be visible. For it seemed that no one cared any longer what happened on the screen; all wanted to see the jovial face of the jolly, happy man who had cheered them up without

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<sup>19</sup> 'The Laughter of Courage', *The Times*, 12 October 1915, p. 11.

knowing that he did so.' Finally, after the show ended and the lights went up, the correspondent remarked:

I shall never forget him. He was still laughing, though not loudly now. He leaned over to a pal to talk about the pictures. He was utterly oblivious of the sensation that he caused – this happy, cheerful, jolly man who was a wounded soldier, holding two crutches lightly against his shoulder. I saw his grim, determined face; I saw his bright blue eyes, laughter still in them; and, when the performance ended, I also saw him carried out tenderly by his two pals. He was young, perhaps 26 at most, and his body ended at the knees. And a sigh went through the great silent audiences as, without watching, they yet saw – a sigh of wonder and admiration, or gratitude, also, I think, of love. There was a feeling of reverence; there were certainly moistened eyes.

The wounded soldier at the heart of the episode became the focal point of civilian attention largely due to a kind of behavioural transgression, but one that was ultimately tolerated by the audience. 'No grown-up could *forget himself* for so slight a cause', the writer suggests, '[i]t was certainly unaffected laughter, the man was *un-self-conscious!*' Significantly, the wounded soldier *forgets himself* within the public sphere of the cinema; his behaviour suggests a total absorption into the content of the 'comic' film being screened. He is 'un-self-conscious' - oblivious to his surrounding environment, how he may be affecting it, his own current condition as a victim of the war – all because of the comedy on screen and the consequential laughter it prompts.

This account highlights the distractive quality of comedy films and the act of laughing in particular as a means of forgetting one's-self. Comedy films came to be seen as a remedy for those who wanted to forget the horrors of the war and the act of

'forgetting' appears to be intricately bound up with the presentation of comedy films for the returning wounded. One account published in *Pictures and the Picturegoer* titled 'The Cinema Cure' (also cited by Michael Hammond in his analysis of Chaplin's comedy) highlights this phenomenon, when it was described how a wounded soldier 'laughed so much at Charlie Chaplin that he was caught leaving the hall without his crutches. "I've never laughed so much in my life," he gasped when told of his *absent-mindedness*'.<sup>20</sup> Elsewhere it was reported that 'Four hundred happy wounded warriors *forgot their hurts*' when they were treated to a programme of films by the Essanay Film Company at the Savoy Hotel in November, 1916, where the venue was said to echo with 'spontaneous laughter and lusty applause'.<sup>21</sup> At the Harefield Hospital, Hillingdon, it was reported that 'for an hour [convalescent patients] *forget their troubles* in the joy of seeing Charley Chaplin [sic] on a moving staircase.'<sup>22</sup> Chaplin, it was stated, acted like 'a tonic on their spirits'.<sup>23</sup> One contributor to *The Ontario Stretcher*, a magazine produced by the patients of the Ontario Military Hospital, Orpington, was particularly articulate on how entertainments for convalescent patients were connected to the process of 'forgetting'. The provision of such entertainments help:

the boys forget their troubles - for a time at least: of taking them out of themselves, as it were, and placing them in surroundings familiar and dear to them; of awakening in their minds pleasant memories and recollections of the past, and bright hopes for the future. This spirit is transmitted to their less fortunate brothers who are unable to leave their beds, and thus the whole

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<sup>20</sup> 'The Cinema Cure', *Pictures and the Picturegoer*, 13 November 1915, p. 126. My emphasis.

<sup>21</sup> 'Savoy Hotel as Kinema', *The Era*, 15 November 1916, p. 24.

<sup>22</sup> 'For the Cot Cases and "Hoppies."', *The Harefield Park Boomerang*, 1 September 1917, p. 14. My emphasis. In all likelihood, the film alluded to is *The Floorwalker* (Chaplin, 1916).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

atmosphere of the place is improved. The boys have been cheered in soul though sore in body.<sup>24</sup>

Also crucial here alongside this process of 'forgetting' is the notion that such entertainments took place in, or reminded convalescent patients of, familiar venues of leisure and entertainment that they had enjoyed prior to the war. The chronology presented by this passage, its evocation of comforts enjoyed in the pre-war past coupled with a hope for the post-war future, also underlines the use of the cinema as a way to distract convalescent patients from the immediate present and to facilitate their reintroduction to civilian life and society. Furthermore, the distinction made between body and soul suggests that, whilst the cinema may not be able to assist in the physical recovery of convalescent patients, it is able to comfort them in a more spiritual manner.

Beyond the choice of films being presented it is important to consider what the cinema offered as an entertainment for the returning wounded in broader terms. The fact that disabled men who had lost arms or legs could engage in a communal recreational activity, positioned the cinema as being far more inclusive and accessible for the entire convalescent community, when compared with other potential forms of popular recreation. Physical recreations, such as football and other sports, or even simple excursions outside of convalescent facilities, posed far more problems than could be simply achieved with the projection of a film on screen. The implementation of cinema entertainment for patients confined to their beds, as represented by the 'ceiling cinema' illustration at the beginning of this chapter, demonstrates this idea well.

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<sup>24</sup> 'To and Fro', *The Ontario Stretcher*, 1 September 1916, p. 4.

Incredibly, the idea that the cinema could entertain the entirety of the convalescent community was so pervasive within the exhibition sector that efforts were even made to engage those who had been blinded during the conflict. Perhaps best identified as an early example of audio description, several instances in which blind soldiers were entertained with a film screening aided by the presence of a lecturer providing a description of the event on screen were documented by the British press. In late December 1916, for example, it was reported that one Lady Waterlow had ‘hit upon a novel idea whereby our blinded soldiers can visit the pictures and enjoy them’ if someone were to describe ‘the pictures as they appeared on the screen.’<sup>25</sup> As such, patients from St. Dunstan’s Hostel, London, a dedicated hospital for the blind, were invited to a local cinema to be entertained. Lady Waterlow, who described the films presented herself, argued that ‘these afflicted men can enjoy a cinematograph show if they are accompanied by a capable guide who has a gift for concise picturesque description.’<sup>26</sup> Supposedly, such description differed in some way from the (admittedly disappearing) practice of a lecturer accompanying a film with spoken commentary, although it is unfortunate to state that little historical documentation regarding Waterlow’s practice survives to elucidate how.<sup>27</sup>

Nonetheless, specific examples such as the aforementioned screenings for the blind, as well as the practice of engaging wounded soldiers with cinema entertainment more generally, give credence to my broader argument that the cinema was utilised as a method of reintroducing the wounded to practices of leisure enjoyed prior to the conflict. The success or realities of such a practice is, to a certain extent, hard to

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<sup>25</sup> ‘Sightless Heroes at the Pictures’, *The Era*, 20 December 1916, p. 19.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> See: ‘In Aid of Blinded Heroes’, *The Era*, 2 May 1917, p. 19; Untitled, *The Times*, 2 September 1919, p. 8.

measure, but its impact can frequently be read in the remarks and language of those who were invited to film screenings whilst undergoing recovery in convalescent facilities. In a letter published in the *Sheffield Evening Telegraph* on 15 October 1917, one convalescent patient wished to express his gratitude to the city that had welcomed him back with open arms. Praising the free cinema and theatre tickets available to the returning wounded, as well as the regular citizens who invited them into their homes, the unnamed contributor remarked how such efforts 'give us a taste of that home life we have never ceased to crave for since we left our good homes and situations in the early days of our country's peril.'<sup>28</sup>

Elsewhere, one unnamed contributor for *The Tittle Tattle Magazine*, the patient-produced publication of the aforementioned Exeter Temporary hospital, was particularly articulate on the connection he perceived between the cinema and home life. After he and his fellow patients, under the supervision of hospital staff had 'adjourned to the cinema & thoroughly enjoyed ourselves for an hour & a half', he remarked that the trip 'took us back in fancy to pre-war days when we used to spend a night or two weekly in the places to which we belong'.<sup>29</sup> The implicit distinction made here between '*the places to which we belong*' – i.e. cinemas and other entertainment venues of peacetime social life – and the hospital ward where this young man primarily resided, suggests much about the dashed expectations and hopes of an entire wartime generation.

The process of 'forgetting' and the strategy of reintroducing the returning wounded to civilian society and its practices of leisure were also particularly important

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<sup>28</sup> 'Privileges for our Wounded', *Sheffield Evening Telegraph*, 15 October 1917, p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> 'Letter to Editor', *The Tittle Tattle Magazine: No. 1 Temporary Hospital*, May 1916, p. 8.

for those who came back from the front with severe disfigurements, amputations or other forms of physical and psychological disability, all of whom risked not being reintegrated successfully. As shall be documented later in this chapter, the cinema, when situated as a space of social interaction between soldiers and civilians, became an important site for the negotiation of a range of tensions and complexities facing the returning wounded. Also significant in this context were the efforts made by the commercial exhibition sector. The outreach and hospitality afforded to the returning wounded by commercial cinemas highlights the presence and effect of what Deborah Cohen has termed 'broad public participation' within the process of rehabilitation. As one Colonel remarked about the provision of comforts such as cinema entertainment, '[...] it was these little things done by the people who were obliged to remain at home that touched the soldiers and made them feel that their efforts in defence of their country was being appreciated.'<sup>30</sup> In such instances, the exhibition sector and other fundraisers (both individual and institutional) were contributing towards the war effort in immediate and concrete terms.

However, the use of the cinema as an entertainment, the apparent preference for comedy films (prescribed or desired) and the need to 'forget' rather than confront the circumstances of the era did meet with criticism from some quarters. Within this context it is important to consider the use of cinema entertainment for convalescent audiences in light of the larger cultural debates regarding the role of the cinema, and entertainment more broadly, in war. During this period, for example, medical authorities were in a continual state of debate over the best courses of treatment for various sections of the convalescent community. Britain's leading medical journal *The*

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<sup>30</sup> 'Soldier Guests', *Perthshire Advertiser*, 5 April 1916, p. 3.



*Lancet* attests quite readily to this fact. On the subject of additional support structures, T. E. Sandall, commander of the B.E.F. No. 15 Convalescent Depot, proclaimed that the ‘value of healthy amusement and enjoyment to distract men’s thoughts, to cheer their spirits, to relieve the ever-present strain of active service, is very great’.<sup>31</sup> In *First Aid: The Independent Journal for the Ambulance and Nursing Services*, it was similarly advised that ‘[t]he one great aim should be to help the men to forget the war. In an entertainment for the sick, it is best to have very light subjects that do not require much strain to follow.’<sup>32</sup>

For victims of shell shock, however, medical authority was conflicted. In his ‘A Final Contribution to the Study of Shell Shock’, Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Myers of the Royal Army Medical Corps contested the benefits of ‘forgetting’, claiming that ‘it is usually disastrous to send a patient to employment or amusement in the hope that he may forget all his worries and solve his conflicts by neglecting them.’<sup>33</sup> One ‘disastrous’ occasion had been reported by the journal itself in the previous year within a case study of one-hundred patients suffering from war-related psycho-neuroses. The study argued that recovering soldiers afflicted by shell shock and other neuroses would risk relapsing if they were to experience a situation similar to that which initially prompted their condition. Significantly, one soldier who was said to be recovering steadily from shell shock – which had developed following an experience in which he was almost

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<sup>31</sup> T. E. Sandall, ‘Treatment of the Convalescent Soldier’, *The Lancet*, Vol. 195, No. 5052 (1920), pp. 1352 – 1356 (p. 1354).

<sup>32</sup> ‘The Women’s World’, *First Aid: The Independent Journal for the Ambulance and Nursing Services*, Vol. 22, No. 257, November 1915, p. 95.

<sup>33</sup> Charles S. Myers, ‘A Final Contribution to the Study of Shell Shock. Being a consideration of unsettled points needing investigation’, *The Lancet*, Vol. 193, No. 4976 (1919), pp. 51-54 (p. 54).

buried alive under the debris of a nearby exploding shell – ‘was permitted to view a cinema which showed an aeroplane in action.’<sup>34</sup>

As it seemed to fly near and to grow large, a bomb was dropped, and as it landed, in order to make the scene more real, a drummer in the orchestra hit a resounding peal on the bass drum, and our patient, taken unawares, promptly became aphonic, darted out of the theatre in a dazed condition, and was brought back to the hospital in a worse neurotic state than in his first attack. This relapse lasted 36 hours.<sup>35</sup>

In the most unfortunate of circumstances, the cinema in this instance directly contributed towards the soldier’s psychological instability, brought on by the film’s direct and immediate relevance to the origins of the patient’s psychological crisis. Here, in what appears to be a dramatic film rather than a comedy, the cinema prompted a confrontation of war’s harsh realities rather than offering a chance to escape and forget such images.

Whilst medical authority encompassed a variety of contested perspectives on the uses of entertainment within the process of convalescent rehabilitation, other public watchdogs took issue with the content of cinematic entertainment itself. Although in all likelihood representing a small minority of those who supported and funded convalescent facility cinemas, it is interesting to note the perspective taken in this letter to the editor, published in *The Observer*, 17 September 1916:

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<sup>34</sup> Julian M. Wolfsohn, ‘The Predisposing Factors of War Psycho-Neuroses’, *The Lancet*, Vol. 191, No. 4927, pp. 177-180 (p. 180).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

Sir – Having subscribed to a wounded soldiers' entertainment my wife and I dropped in to the cinema hall in which our guests were being entertained.

The first item on the programme was, of course, cinema pictures. No. 1 was, briefly summarised, the story of a poor girl graduated from a factory hand to a restaurant singer and dancer, and became the victim of a rich villain, whose attempts at outrage are vividly shown up to the limit. She is rescued in the nick of time by her lover (of her own class) with the aid of a revolver, the villain falling prone across the girl's bed. A Bachanalian [sic] scene leads up to this happy ending, with the girl drunk and dancing on the dining table.

No. 2 is a Charlie Chaplin banality. Anyhow, harmless.

No. 3 is labelled a farce, but includes an attempted horrible murder, the victim being tied to the rails while the would-be murderer prepares to run a giant locomotive over her. She is shown several times in extreme agony. The sensation is piled up all round with motor-cars running amok, pistols and other frightfulnesses [sic] – and we don't really breathe until it is all over.

When one thinks of what the cinema might have been and how positively repulsive it is! It is one of the most potent immoral and criminal agencies alive to-day.

I am, Sir, yours,

A Father <sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> 'Degraded Cinema Pictures', *The Observer*, 17 September 1916, p. 14.

Elsewhere, a convalescent patient residing at the Lancashire Military Convalescent Hospital, Blackpool, whilst praising the efforts made entertaining the returning wounded, questioned what comedy films could actually accomplish in the long term.

Writing about hospital life, he advised:

We must not lose sight of the fact, however, that ours is a varied community. It embraces all classes, and every kind of disposition. The optimist and the pessimist are amongst us. It is, therefore, a rather difficult matter to please everyone. The tastes of the majority will, whenever possible, be catered for in the pictures thrown on screen. Let the grumbler remember that Chas. Chaplin films are not inexhaustible, and that everyone does not worship at his shrine with undying ardour.<sup>37</sup>

The writer concludes by saying '[l]et us show that we appreciate their efforts, even if they do not exactly meet with our approval.'<sup>38</sup>

Other commentators were quick to satirise those who criticised the cinema as a low-brow and inconsequential entertainment, calling attention to the fact that the simplistic or escapist qualities of such films were exactly what were called for by the situation. In an article titled 'An Interesting Revelation' (published in the same Hospital magazine that featured the critique of Chaplin cited above), it is stated that the writer was tasked to 'rake up all he could about the cinema, what and why it was, and in particular to collect opinions from several representative people.'<sup>39</sup> What follows is a humorous parody of the anti-cinema sentiment stereotypically espoused by cultural

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<sup>37</sup> 'To the Editor', *The Return: The Journal of the King's Lancashire Military Convalescent Hospital*, 23 June 1916, p. 17.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> J. H. Whatnall, 'An Interesting Revelation', *The Return: The Journal of the King's Lancashire Military Convalescent Hospital*, 15 March 1918, pp. 10-11, p. 10.

figureheads and commentators. A novelist exclaims: 'I am assured that the stories these pictures visualise are of the very lowest kind. I have never seen one, but have submitted several plays to the various firms, and as they were all rejected, I am convinced that their editors and producers have no appreciation of Art.'<sup>40</sup> A publican, 'Mr. I Servum Booze', bemoans 'the effect of these places, which not only deflect the working man's money from its natural channels, but, in addition, preach sermons against drink, gambling and other harmless diversions.'<sup>41</sup> The final word is given to a minister, who was reported to have said:

I have no hesitation in saying that moving pictures are a manifestation of man's increasing wickedness and religious alienation. Cinemas are ante-chambers to the region of darkness. There is one next to my church; and often on the occasion of my services to exempted young men have I stood in the porch, stricken with grief to see my unfortunate brethren lured through the portals of that cinema by a cardboard idol, one Chaplin, an emissary of the devil!<sup>42</sup>

Even if comedy films and cinema entertainment more generally were to be decried by various authorities and higher-ups as being low-brow or counter-productive, the evident popularity of the cinema within the context of rehabilitation would suggest that convalescent patients were ultimately dismissive or unaware of any argument suggesting that the entertainment was not suited to their current circumstances.

As alluded to by the study published in *The Lancet*, the ubiquity and prescribed use of comedy films and light entertainment was also challenged by the potential effect

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 11.



Fig. 5.3: Illustration titled 'Or, Offering Coals to Newcastle', *Pictures and the Picturegoer*, 31 June 1915, p. 344.

that topical films which dealt directly with the war may have had on convalescent spectators (Fig. 5.3). The rare inclusion of such films within convalescent programmes coupled with the ease with which they could be seen by convalescent patients in commercial cinemas, threatened to undermine the efforts made to offer an entertainment that would allow such audiences to 'forget' the immediate concerns of the war and the conditions of their recovery. As shall be made clear by the case study of Summerdown Convalescent Camp presented in this chapter, the inclusion of non-fiction films depicting the war challenged the desired comfort and distraction afforded

by the cinema within the context of rehabilitation. Again, the presence or non-presence of topical films can only be ascertained on a case by case basis, but it is possible to determine a broad pattern of conscious suppression at work. That is to say, efforts appear to have been made by many cinema venues, be they commercial or non-theatrical, to spare convalescent audiences from films depicting the war itself.

An example of this pattern of suppression can be seen in the curation of content for programmes and charity events hosted by the Hippodrome, Exeter. Whilst the venue itself was more of a music hall or variety theatre than it was a cinema, topical films and newsreels became a regular feature of the venue's programme as early as October 1914 and continued throughout the war years.<sup>43</sup> Placed alongside live comedy sketches and musical performances, the Hippodrome's programme routinely ended with a screening of topical films which were said to have supplied 'all the latest war news'.<sup>44</sup> In all cases where the projection of films was reported to have taken place at the Hippodrome, such films appear to have been topical newsreels rather than fiction films. Specifically, they were advertised as 'special war pictures' or described as having some relation to the war.<sup>45</sup> Whilst the Hippodrome continued to operate as usual for civilian audiences throughout the war, like many venues, it also invited convalescent patients in residence at the various hospitals around Exeter to special matinee programmes of entertainment. It is therefore significant that no mention of the Hippodrome's regular feature of topical newsreels is to be found in any of the coverage regarding the venue's special matinee programmes for the wounded between 1914 and 1918. In advertisements, listings and reports concerning these matinee

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<sup>43</sup> 'Exeter Hippodrome', *The Devon and Exeter Gazette*, 20 October 1914, p. 7.

<sup>44</sup> Untitled, *The Devon and Exeter Gazette*, 4 December 1915, p. 4.

<sup>45</sup> 'Exeter Hippodrome', *The Devon and Exeter Gazette*, 19 September 1916, p. 6.

programmes, the cinema simply isn't mentioned at all. Consequently, and with some degree of certainty, it can be assumed that the choice was made to omit topical newsreels – the only form of film content included in the venue's regular programming – from the programmes of entertainment specifically geared towards convalescent audiences at Exeter's Hippodrome.

The context of rehabilitation into which the cinema was placed was one of competing and often contradictory opinions and interests. Convalescent patients, the exhibition sector, military and medical authorities all had different desires and interests, and it is, to a certain extent, impossible to suggest any one body was uniform or homogenous in their perception of what the cinema's role should be within this context. In order to examine some of the ideas I have outlined so far in more detail, let us now turn our attention towards the first of this chapter's extended case studies.

### **The West End Cinema**

Opened on 18 March 1913 in Coventry St. near London's Leicester Square, the West End Cinema has since been described as 'the finest of the early central London picture houses' and, for our concerns here, represents a cinema dutifully stepping up to the call of wartime service to offer what it could alongside its day-to-day commercial business.<sup>46</sup> Upon the outbreak of war, cinemas across the country immediately felt the impact of their newfound circumstances. Alongside the temporary drop in attendance, the fear of aerial bombardments in London also had an effect on cinema venues after blackouts were called for in the hope that the darkened cityscape would diminish the

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<sup>46</sup> Allen Eyles and Keith Skone, *London's West End Cinemas* (Swindon: English Heritage, 2014), p. 55.



enemy's ability to distinguish important targets from the air. As Jerry White writes in his history of wartime London, the 'dark streets hit theatreland [sic] hard. All advertising signs were switched off and foyer lights dimmed. Some theatres opened in the afternoons and closed in the evenings a few days a week; most brought forward their opening hours to accommodate the new darkness.'<sup>47</sup> Presumably, this put a stop to the use of the West End Cinema's illustrious neon sign, the first cinema to use the type of lighting anywhere in the country.<sup>48</sup> Despite this superficial impact on the venue, however, the cinema itself had more pressing concerns, namely the threat of a potential boycott.

Indeed, in London and across the country, businesses owned or part-owned by Germans or those of German heritage were soon singled out as the enemy and designated as premises to be boycotted, or worse, harassed and attacked. In late 1914, following the rising circulation of 'German atrocity' stories reported from German-occupied Belgium, a ubiquitous sense of 'Germanophobia' swept the country, particularly within areas highly populated by people of German heritage. In London alone, there were 57,500 people of German heritage in 1914, a figure which would drop to 22,254 by 1919.<sup>49</sup> On 21 October 1914, *The Manchester Guardian* reported that a 'disturbance took place in Coventry Street, London [...] when a large crowd surged round the West End Cinema, shouting out that the proprietors were Germans, and demanding that the front lights should be put out. So threatening was the attitude

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<sup>47</sup> Jerry White, *Zeppelin Nights: London in the First World War* (London: Vintage, 2015), p. 44.

<sup>48</sup> Eyles and Stone, *London's West End Cinemas*, p. 55.

<sup>49</sup> Panikos Panayi, 'Anti-German riots in Britain during the First World War', in Panikos Panayi (ed.), *Racial Violence in Britain in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London; New York: Leicesters UP, 1996), pp. 65-91 (p. 66). See also: Panikos Panayi, *The Enemy in Our Midst: Germans in Britain during the First World War* (Oxford: Berg Publishers Ltd., 1991).

of the crowd that the house had to be closed'.<sup>50</sup> From that point on, the cinema became the victim of boycotts due to its perceived connection to the 'alien' threat. Reporting from across the Atlantic, *The Moving Picture World* claimed:

The immediate effects of the war have been strange. For instance there is a boycott of all German theaters in Great Britain. This was engineered by an important evening newspaper [*Evening News*], which foraged through the records at Somerset House and discovered that one great company, the London and Provincial, which has numerous theaters in the capital and throughout the country has but one British name on the list of directors and shareholders, the rest are German, mostly inhabitants of Mannheim. Following this "All British" notices in red have appeared outside many theaters. The chief theater in London, the West End Cinema, Piccadilly, has been hard hit by the boycott along with others.<sup>51</sup>

Whilst the consequences resulting from this boycott are difficult to quantify, we can glean some information from the venue's presence (or absence) in British newspapers from the period. For example, the West End Cinema routinely advertised itself in the pages of *The Sunday Times* up to and including the 2 August 1914 edition of the newspaper, the last edition before the British declaration of war on 4 August. There follows an eight month absence of advertising from the newspaper, only for the venue to surface again on 4 April 1915, where it is stated that the West End Cinema is 're-opening under entire British proprietorship on Tuesday next [6 April]' (Fig. 5.4).<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> 'Scene Outside a West End Picture Palace', *The Manchester Guardian*, 21 October 1914, p. 10.

<sup>51</sup> Evan Strong, 'War's Black Mark. European Trade Strangled and Throttled – Britain Hopeful, But in Doubt', *The Moving Picture World*, 12 September 1914, p. 1515.

<sup>52</sup> 'The Picture Theatres', *The Sunday Times*, 4 April 1915, p. 4.

**WEST END Cinema,**  
**Coventry Street, W.**

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RE-OPENING UNDER ENTIRE BRITISH PROPRIETORSHIP  
on Tuesday, April 6th, at 6 p.m., and then Daily from 1 p.m. to Midnight.

Select Programme, including, at 3 and 9 p.m.,  
**CHERRY KEARTON'S CINEMA LECTURE:**

**"THROUGH CENTRAL AFRICA"**  
**FROM EAST TO WEST.**

An interesting Moving Picture Record of a Naturalist's Journey through the  
Heart of Mysterious Africa.

This shows you in two hours the same journey that took Stanley and  
Livingstone 999 days to traverse.

Prices 1s. to 3s.      Boxes 10s, 6d.      Telephone : Regent 2588.

Fig. 5.4: Advertisement for the West End Cinema, London, *The Sunday Times*, 25 April 1915.

A similar gap in advertising also occurred in *The Manchester Guardian*, from October 1914. Whilst the reason behind its closure does not appear to have been made public, it can be assumed with some certainty when we acknowledge the aforementioned coverage of the cinema's misfortunes in *Moving Picture World*, as well the emphatic claim that the cinema now presides under 'entire British proprietorship', that the anti-German boycotts of the previous year had been a decisive factor in the venue's temporary closure. Indeed, it is telling that in the wake of more anti-German violence and public paranoia following the death of Lord Kitchener on 5 June 1916 (a period in which the *Evening News*, the paper that had previously called for the boycott of the West End Cinema, published the incendiary headline: 'INTERN THEM ALL!'), the venue's new owner George F. Sexton felt the need to publicise in *The Sunday Times* that he had been 'instrumental in eliminating all German interest from theatres under

his control'.<sup>53</sup> Reinforcing the venue's commitment to the Allied cause further, it was also stated elsewhere that the venue 'gave prominent place to films produced by British, French and Italian makers.'<sup>54</sup> It is important to consider the West End Cinema's enthusiastic public outreach, fundraising and war work throughout the remainder of the conflict in the light of this initial episode of boycott controversy. In large part, the venue's reactionary shift towards the prioritisation of a desirable public image, seen immediately in the assertion that the cinema was entirely in British hands, coincides with the appointment of the aforementioned George F. Sexton.

Having 'rescued this beautiful house from the Huns', Sexton made immediate strides towards re-establishing the West End Cinema's reputation.<sup>55</sup> Beginning with a benefit for the Incorporated Soldiers and Sailor's Help Society on 2 May 1915, Sexton devoted himself to the organisation of fundraising events such as matinee charity screenings which took place throughout the war to raise funds for institutions like the Charing Cross Hospital, the Middlesex Hospital, Lady Monro's War Hospital Supply Depot and Queen Mary's Convalescent Auxiliary Hospitals.<sup>56</sup> On Bastille Day in 1916, the cinema hosted a charity screening of *The Defence of Verdun* (1916) to commemorate France as an ally, whilst a similar fundraising event took place for the Irish forces on St. Patrick's Day of the same year.<sup>57</sup> Be it themed screenings, special events or even novelty ideas such as the 'pay what you please' fundraiser for British-

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<sup>53</sup> For information on the anti-German riots of June 1916, see: Panayi, *The Enemy in Our Midst*, p. 253-254. For the article cited in *The Sunday Times*, see: 'News in Brief', *The Sunday Times*, 2 July 1916, p. 11.

<sup>54</sup> 'Town Topics', *Fall In: The Duke of Cambridge's Own Middlesex Regiment*, 22 April 1916, p. 209.

<sup>55</sup> 'A Generous Irishman', *Bedfordshire Times and Independent*, 11 April 1919, p. 2.

<sup>56</sup> See: *The Times* Oct 17 1917 p. 6; *The Times* April 12 1918, p. 10; *The Times* February 13 1919, p. 3; Exeter, The Bill Douglas Cinema Museum. Item no. 18675, West End Cinema Programme, 25 December 1916.

<sup>57</sup> See: *The Times*, July 13 1916, p. 5; *The Times*, March 18 1916, p. 5.

American Overseas Field Hospital Ambulance fund, Sexton was prolific in his war work.<sup>58</sup>

Relevant to this chapter's concern is the evident level of hospitality that the West End Cinema extended towards the returning wounded. An early example can be read in the 31 October 1915 edition of *The Times*, where it was reported that Sexton himself 'is reserving each day (Saturday excepted) two rows of seats for convalescent soldiers to witness' *Cabiria* (Pastrone, 1914).<sup>59</sup> This relatively small courtesy towards convalescent audiences was only the beginning of the West End Cinema's hospitality. Dedicated screenings for the returning wounded soon took centre stage within the cinema's scheduled programming. The aforementioned special matinee on St. Patrick's Day 1916, for example, was attended by '500 wounded Irish soldiers from the London Territorial Battalion' upon the invitation of Sexton. On Valentine's Day 1917, it was similarly reported that profits made on that day 'without deduction [are] being handed over to this great war and emergency hospital [Charing Cross Hospital] as a valentine' and that 'several hundred wounded boys from various London hospitals have been invited to the afternoon performance, when they will be entertained to tea before returning to hospital.'<sup>60</sup> Alongside its standard programming, strides also appear to have been made towards curating a selection of films deemed to be beneficial to the wounded and disabled. For example, in February 1915 'over three hundred wounded Tommies' were invited to a programme of films that included the screening of an educational production titled *The War-Time One-Armed Handy Man*, which, it was claimed, demonstrated 'how one arm can be made to do the work of two',

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<sup>58</sup> 'Pay What You Please', *The Era*, 8 August 1917, p. 17.

<sup>59</sup> See: *The Observer*, Oct 31 1915, p. 14.

<sup>60</sup> 'St. Valentine's Day', *The Era*, 7 February 1917, p. 19.

in a bid to provide guidance to any amputees amongst the wounded spectators.<sup>61</sup> The film itself was the product of a London journalist named George White who had lost his right arm in an industrial accident prior to the war, who toured the film, visiting 'hundreds of military hospitals', where he 'brought happiness to many who have suffered in the war' by using the film as an educational tool.<sup>62</sup> Going one step further, Sexton also allowed those training under the Cinematograph Training and Employment Bureau (discussed later in this chapter) 'the use of the operating-box at his theatre [...] to enable the more advanced pupils to pursue their studies.'<sup>63</sup>

Sexton's hospitality was not only limited to one-off events. In fact, advertising for the West End Cinema in newspapers, troop journals and its own programmes, all proclaimed an 'Open Door' policy for wounded and disabled soldiers and sailors, be they officers, N.C.O.s or the regular rank and file.<sup>64</sup> A surviving venue programme for the week commencing 14 May 1917 states on the second page that:

The Proprietor presents an "Open Door" to wounded men of every nationality. The "Honour of the Blue" assures its wearer of a cordial welcome to all the House affords in luxurious rest and pleasant entertainment. Hundreds of our wounded boys have gladdened him by visiting his Theatre. Hundreds more, unhappily, may qualify to wear the Blue, but all of these who have an afternoon

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<sup>61</sup> 'Weekly Notes', *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 15 February 1917, p. 2.

<sup>62</sup> Untitled, *Pictures and the Picturegoer*, 17 February 1917, p. 434.

<sup>63</sup> Untitled, *The Era*, 7 March 1917, p. 19.

<sup>64</sup> 'Town Topics', *Fall In: The Duke of Cambridge's Own Middlesex Regiment*, 29 January 1916, p. 83. Later on in the war, it appears that the policy of free admission was also extended to include hospital nurses.

to spend in quiet enjoyment may rest assured that “*West End*” spells an Open Door and a hearty invitation.<sup>65</sup>

It should be noted that the ‘Honour of Blue’ refers to the blue uniform worn by patients of hospitals and convalescent facilities. As Jay Winter has documented, in ‘military hospitals and associated convalescent homes of London and other British cities, a soldier’s processing began in part with the requirement that he always wear a distinctive blue uniform, no matter where his location inside or beyond the institution.’<sup>66</sup> The language used by in the West End Cinema programme presented here strongly focuses on the creation of a personal connection between Sexton and his clientele, seen prominently in the statement that ‘wounded boys have gladdened *him* by visiting *his* Theatre’. An advertisement placed in *Canada in Khaki* and other troop periodicals was even more emphatic in its message that Sexton was working tirelessly to provide comfort and support for those who had fought and been wounded, not only for Britain, but for any of the allied forces (Fig. 5.5). Supposedly written by Sexton himself and addressing ‘Wounded Soldiers and Sailors’ directly, the advertisement advises convalescent patients:

Don’t hesitate to come in here and spend a pleasant hour. It costs nothing!

I am doing you no favour – on the contrary, you are honouring me with your company.

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<sup>65</sup> Exeter, The Bill Douglas Cinema Museum. Item no. 18332, West End Cinema Programme, 14 May 1917.

<sup>66</sup> See: Jay Winter, ‘Hospitals’, in *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin 1914-1919, Volume Two* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), pp. 354-382 (p. 358); Jeffrey S. Reznick, *Healing the Nation: Soldiers and the Culture of Caregiving in Britain During the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

# West End Cinema Theatre

COVENTRY STREET, PICCADILLY CIRCUS, W.C.

Weekdays, 2 till 11. Sundays, 6 till 11.

## To Wounded Soldiers and Sailors!

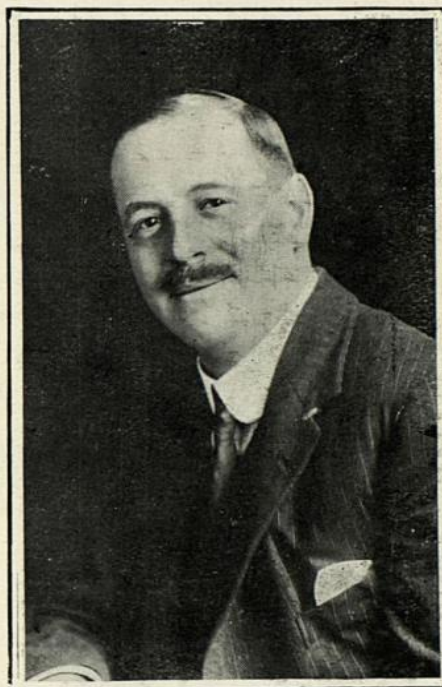
Don't hesitate to come in here and spend a pleasant hour. It costs nothing!

I am doing you no favour—on the contrary, you are honouring me with your company.

Walk, hop, crawl, or be carried in as though the theatre belonged to you—it does, so long as I am its Proprietor!

I have already entertained more than **15,000 Wounded Boys**, and have arranged Matinees which have benefitted charities to the extent of **over £7,000**, for which I thank my Patrons for allowing me to help towards the cheering up of our Boys in Blue.

G. F. SEXTON.



G. F. SEXTON, Sole Proprietor.

## Some Forthcoming Attractions:

"THE GAY LORD QUEX."

"THE QUESTION."

"A GAMBLE FOR LOVE."

"DADDY."

"JACK AND THE BEANSTALK."

"THE WHIP."

"MY LADY'S DRESS."

"HOLY ORDERS."

"A LAUGHING CAVALIER."

"MASTER OF MEN."

"DOMBEY & SON."

"RICHARD THE BRAZEN."

**Grand Orchestra.**

**Dainty Teas.**

**Luxurious Surroundings.**

CORYTONS

Fig. 5.5: 'To Wounded Soldiers and Sailors!' advertisement for the West End Cinema, *The Buzz: The Organ of the Bizzie Bees*, 1 December 1917, p. xxi.



Walk, hop, crawl or be carried in as though the theatre belonged to you – it does, so long as I am its Proprietor!

I have already entertained more than **15,000 Wounded Boys**, and have arranged matinees which have benefited charities to the extent of **over £7,000**, for which I thank my Patrons for allowing me to help towards the cheering up of our Boys in Blue.<sup>67</sup>

Positioning its offer of hospitality to wounded soldiers before listing the films being screened (the majority being dramas unrelated to the war), this advertisement is in many ways the epitome of the exhibition sector engaging in the practice of ‘broad public participation’. The personal presence and assurances of the venue’s owner – both through the written word and the prominent photograph included in the advertisement – mark the West End Cinema as offering a personal connection with its clientele, a connection prioritised above the conventional demands and practices of commercial cinema business. We can clearly discern from this advert that a key motivation for Sexton – i.e. what he deemed to be his cinema’s wartime duty - was to ‘help towards the cheering of our Boys in Blue’. It is also significant that the advert stressed the fact that anybody with disabilities or physical limitations, those who would ‘hop, crawl, or be carried in’, should not feel hesitant to attend, and that their presence would not only be catered for, but actively encouraged. Again, the sentiment expressed here underlines the industry’s belief in the medium’s universal inclusivity.

The wording of the third paragraph is also of particular interest in how it conceptualises the space of the cinema. Sexton asks patrons to enter the cinema ‘as

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<sup>67</sup> ‘To Wounded Soldiers and Sailors!’ advertisement for the West End Cinema, *The Buzz: The Organ of the Bizzie Bees*, 1 December 1917, p. xxi.





Fig. 5.7: Photo of George Sexton (front row, second from left) amongst wounded men, printed in *Fall In*, 26 May 1917.

refreshing half-page advertisement which appeared in last week's *John Bull*.<sup>68</sup> Citing the same invitation to 'wounded soldiers and sailors' quoted above, the writer remarks that the sentiment is 'typical of the bubbling optimism of the man who has made himself the genuine friend of thousands of our heroes on their visits to London.'<sup>69</sup>

Sexton's efforts were duly noted in periodicals like *The Times* and *The Era*, where he was often referred to as 'Tommy's Friend', routinely described as being 'indefatigable' or 'enterprising', and championed for the personal connection he fostered with the returning wounded, as illustrated by the photo above (Fig. 5.7).<sup>70</sup> Sexton's charity work also saw him being appointed as the vice president of Charing Cross Hospital Council for his support of the facility's patients, alongside other accolades and public gestures of recognition. By the end of the war Sexton had reportedly raised £26,000 for charity and had entertained over 110,000 wounded men.<sup>71</sup> Even after the signing of the Armistice and the end of hostilities, Sexton placed

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<sup>68</sup> Untitled, *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 28 June 1917, p. 6.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> See: Untitled, *The Era*, 7 March 1917, p. 19; Untitled, *The Era*, 2 May 1917, p. 20; Untitled, *The Times*, 17 October 1917, p. 6.

<sup>71</sup> 'A Cinema's War Work', *The Times*, 2 June 1919, p. 16.

advertisements similar to those he had utilised in prior years to state that '[m]y open door is still open to Wounded Boys of both Services, also their Nurses'.<sup>72</sup> In a profile piece about Sexton and his war work published in January 1919, one commentator went so far as to say: 'God Bless you G.F.S. Wars after all are not such bad things provided they unearth such real men as yourself.'<sup>73</sup>

### **The Exhibition Sector's Motives**

As we have seen, the philanthropy practiced by commercial exhibitors and cinema venues contributed much towards the war effort, both in terms of concrete fundraising and the provision of comfort and recreation for the returning wounded. It is in such examples of the exhibition sector reaching outwards towards the convalescent community that we can see the presence of 'broad public participation' as defined by Deborah Cohen. However, whilst Cohen's terminology is helpful for thinking about the impact and influence of the public sector upon convalescent audiences and their reintegration into society, it is also important to consider the impact that those same audiences had on the exhibition sector itself. Undoubtedly, the provision of free entertainments and other comforts provided by the exhibition sector were also instrumental for the entrepreneurial businessman to build and maintain a venue's reputation and public image during the war years.

To a certain extent it becomes somewhat difficult to separate examples of such philanthropy from the idea of self-congratulatory or self-serving showmanship,

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<sup>72</sup> *The Quirk*, 30 November 1918, p. 33

<sup>73</sup> H.C., 'Cinema Sexton', *The M. T. V. Monthly Magazine*, 1 January 1919, p. 5.

particularly when we regard personalities like G. F. Sexton, who so boldly presented himself as the self-fashioned 'Tommy's' friend'. Moreover, such a notion is hard to ignore considering the discernible level of competitiveness recorded by the press coverage of such philanthropy. A report published by the *Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly* in February 1917 is typical of this competitive stance, boasting that '[e]ntertaining wounded disabled soldiers to pictures and incidental refreshment is now quite the accepted thing, but nowhere round London do I find it carried out so generously as at the Globe Electric Theatre'.<sup>74</sup>

Consequently, it is also vital to take into consideration what Leslie Midkiff DeBauche has termed 'practical patriotism'. In her monograph *Reel Patriotism: The Movies and World War I*, which primarily focuses upon the USA's wartime exhibition sector, DeBauche identifies the tension between serving one's country in a time of war and serving one's own business interests. In order to reconcile these two potentially conflicting concerns, DeBauche argues that the North American film industry and exhibition sector adapted its business practices in such a way as to emphasise their patriotism and commitment to the war, but in a manner that would contribute directly to financial success.

Indeed, such arguments are easily transferable to a British context. As DeBauche states, 'it was appropriate and reasonable to combine allegiance to country and to business. In fact, it was understood that being seen to 'enlist' in the war effort on the home front would likely benefit the film industry's long-term interests.'<sup>75</sup> By decorating their venues with patriotic material such as flags and recruitment posters,

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<sup>74</sup> 'Weekly Notes', *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 1 February 1917, p. 3.

<sup>75</sup> Leslie Midkiff DeBauche, *Reel Patriotism: The Movies and World War I* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), p. xvi.

showing likeminded content on screen, hosting fundraising events and offering free admission and other comforts for the military and returning wounded, the British exhibition sector hit upon a method by which they could be seen to be contributing towards the war effort and be financially rewarded in the process by securing the regular patronage of cinema-goers who identified a particular venue as patriotic. Case in point, one commentator on the philanthropic activities of the West End Cinema remarked, '[s]plendid, isn't it! Makes you feel they are worth patronising!'<sup>76</sup> As DeBauche notes, free admission for the returning wounded was an easy way for exhibitors to 'demonstrate their civic-mindedness'.<sup>77</sup> Handing out free tickets to the wounded and showering them with free gifts may not have been financially sound in the short term, but 'the long-term hope was that [such efforts] would function strategically and help to institutionalize the theater within the community.'<sup>78</sup> The frequent 'good press' such events fostered in both local and national press certainly attests to this idea, attracting paying clientele to the venue's regular programming.

The argument that financial aspirations within the commercial exhibition sector may have prompted the practice of certain philanthropic acts rather than altruistic reasons, is an important point to consider within the context at hand. Whilst the returning wounded undoubtedly benefitted from such practices, it is certainly arguable that they were also knowingly or unknowingly part of a two-way exchange, wherein members of the exhibition sector sought to exploit the inevitable positive publicity that would stem from their outreach towards convalescent audiences. In the case of G. F. Sexton, I personally believe that the practices of the West End Cinema may not have

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<sup>76</sup> Town Topics, *Fall In: The Duke of Cambridge's Own Middlesex Regiment*, 29 Jan 1916, p. 83.

<sup>77</sup> DeBauche, *Reel Patriotism*, p. 78.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

been as manipulative as such a reading would suggest. Rather than pure commercial gain, it is more tempting to interpret Sexton's energetic philanthropy as a symptom of the boycotts that initially threatened to close the venue in the earlier years of the war: a bid to salvage the reputation of the cinema rather than make a profit. Other cinemas and managers, however, may have had other motivations.

Nonetheless, even if such practices were self-serving to a certain extent, it cannot be said that the trade contributed nothing towards the war effort. Putting to one side the practice of free screenings for the wounded, various large-scale fundraising efforts were spearheaded by the trade itself. A report published in the *Evening News* and reprinted as a point of pride in *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, highlights some of the film trade's most prolific attempts to contribute towards the war effort, from their initial recruitment drives to their acts of charity and fundraising:

[There] seems to be no end to the real patriotic usefulness of the kinemas. At the present moment they are far and away the most effective instrument of national utility that we have, so far as the recreations of the people are concerned. Their work in assisting in the war did not end with the raising of £47,000 for the purchase of an ambulance convoy, £7,000 of which went to the Red Cross funds after the convoy had been provided. It merely began.

The kinemas were among the best recruiting agencies; when voluntary service was in being they freely advertised the needs of our armies; they have done equally fine service in advertising the War Loan; they are playing a big part in helping to get women workers, and will do the same for national service. The many men who are concerned with the making, hiring, or showing of pictures are giving invaluable services with their motor-cars in carrying the wounded to

the hospitals and in other useful work, and are following it up by training disabled soldiers for skilled work in operating boxes.<sup>79</sup>

The final example given alludes to what was, perhaps, one of the film industry's most far-sighted acts of charity for the wounded soldiers returning from the front; to offer them a career in the very industry that had entertained them throughout their active service. Once released from convalescent homes and hospitals, those who were no longer able to fight for their King and country were discharged from active service and left to carry on with their lives. Whilst many remained physically unscathed by their experience on the front, the prospect of finding employment having been severely wounded in the war, perhaps having lost one or more limbs, was a daunting notion. Estimates place the combined number of British and Irish casualties left permanently disabled by the conflict at a staggering 755,000.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, it is believed that around 41,000 men had at least one limb amputated.<sup>81</sup> Finding suitable employment became a monumental challenge and government initiatives spearheaded by the Ministry of Pensions (and later the Ministry of Labour) fell far short of what was required. As Deborah Cohen writes, however, voluntary institutions soon took charge throughout the country and attempted to assist wounded and disabled ex-servicemen through the establishment of training schemes and workshops founded upon public-driven volunteering and philanthropy.<sup>82</sup> Paired to this undertaking was the concept of 'occupational therapy'. Contemporary literature of the period, such as *Reclaiming the Maimed: A Handbook of Physical Therapy* (1918) by R. Tait McKenzie, an important

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<sup>79</sup> 'How the Trade is Training Disabled Soldiers', *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 22 February 1917, p. 105. My emphasis.

<sup>80</sup> Cohen, *The War Come Home*, Appendix: Table 1, p. 193.

<sup>81</sup> Gerard J. DeGroot, *Blighty: British Society in the Era of the Great War* (London: Longman, 1996), p. 258.

<sup>82</sup> Cohen, *The War Come Home*, p. 29.



medical practitioner of the First World War and an early pioneer of what we would now term physiotherapy, attests to the importance of re-introducing wounded and disabled ex-servicemen to civilian life through occupational therapy. McKenzie stated:

The purpose of occupational therapy is threefold:

1. Physical: To carry on the improvement in muscular strength and control, obtained by treatment, and to apply it to the varied movements that the carpenter uses in handling his tools or the gardener in cultivating his land.
2. Vocational: To give him an education directed to make him able to keep a set of books, or take a position in business where the handicap of a missing leg or an impaired arm will not be felt.
3. Moral, or self-disciplinary: To give courage to begin life over again, sometimes in a new trade or business. To give him that self-respect that makes him want to stand on his own feet, and not be dependent on charity or the efforts of others, to give him ambition to shake off the deadening effects of his long period of enforced idleness, and to undertake the necessary training for a trade or occupation from which he can make a living.<sup>83</sup>

Elsewhere, it was surmised that a 'long view must be taken unless a vast number of these men are for the rest of their lives to sigh for what might have been, and the whole community is to lose for the greater part of one generation a valuable quota of "output," to use that word in a broader than the strictly industrial sense.'<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> R. Tait McKenzie, *Reclaiming the Maimed: A Handbook of Physical Therapy* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1918), p. 106.

<sup>84</sup> M. A. Cloudesley Brereton, *The Future of our Disabled Sailors and Soldiers: A Description of the Training and Instruction Classes at Queen Mary's Convalescent Auxiliary Hospital, Roehampton and*

Emblematic of the idea of 'broad public participation', the film exhibition trade was one such institution which attempted to introduce or re-introduce returning soldiers into jobs within the exhibition sector through the use of occupational therapy. First announced by the trade press in late 1916, a scheme 'whereby disabled soldiers will be given special training and helped to find employment in the Cinematograph Industry' was initiated.<sup>85</sup> Later organised as the Cinematograph Training and Employment Bureau, the scheme operated branches in a number of cities across the United Kingdom, including London, Cardiff and Glasgow. Across various volunteer-led training facilities, disabled ex-servicemen were prepared for a variety of tasks including managerial or assistant roles, whilst others were trained to be projectionists. The scheme itself was reported on with much enthusiasm by trade papers like *The Bioscope* and *The Kineweekly*, which noted how the scheme 'teaches them the hundred and one things that a picture theatre manager ought to know, not forgetting the keeping of accounts, selection of suitable programmes, and the importance of effective advertising.'<sup>86</sup>

The London scheme, which was particularly focused on training potential projectionists, was organised by Captain Paul Kimberley and held in the offices of Wardour Street as well as the electrical workshops of the Regent Street Polytechnic. Kimberley, who worked in conjunction with the Ministry of Labour and secured much of the funding for the training himself, was frequently portrayed by the press as a central driving force behind the scheme across the country. Driven in his ideals and goals for charity work and rehabilitation, Kimberley was praised for the 'philanthropic

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at *Queen Mary's Workshops, Pavilion Military Hospital, Brighton* (Queen Mary's Auxiliary Hospital, 1917), p. 7

<sup>85</sup> 'News of the Week', *The Bioscope*, 2 November 1916, p. 1.

<sup>86</sup> 'Filling up the Gaps', *The Bioscope*, 19 April 1917, p. 215.

endeavours' undertaken by the training scheme.<sup>87</sup> On the occasion of a trade dinner held in order to raise awareness of the scheme, Kimberley was reported to have been uplifted by the 'deep appreciation of [the] wounded men' who had been part of the scheme, and that such work had made him feel 'there were something far greater than the acquisition of money. His great object had been to thoroughly train the boys until they became really efficient workers.'<sup>88</sup>

Whilst the sincerity of Kimberley and the larger scheme's ambitions are without doubt, it is difficult to ascertain how much the scheme actually accomplished. Many of the reports found in the trade papers allude to only a handful of men who had completed the scheme and who 'were now progressing very favourably' within the exhibition sector. One article published in February 1917 (only a few months after the scheme's inception) made the claim that '[u]p to the present every operator sent out has proved himself very efficient', although solid numbers, let alone statistical evidence pertaining to the ultimate employment rate of the scheme, are difficult to determine.

Whether this was a conscious act of concealment enacted by an over-zealous trade press in search of good publicity is open to debate, although the possibility of the scheme having a minimal level of success would not be surprising given the economic climate of the time. In the years immediately following the war, the Ministry of Labour helped create over fifty instructional facilities whilst continuing to oversee and shape the work of pre-existing schemes such as the Cinematograph Training and

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<sup>87</sup> 'Ministry of Labour & Kinema Trade', *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 28 June 1917, p. 7.

<sup>88</sup> 'The Trade Advisory Committee Dinner', *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 21 June 1917, p. 7.

Employment Bureau.<sup>89</sup> On a broader scale, Deborah Cohen notes that whilst ‘the Ministry eventually trained 82,000 men in receipt of a pension (most of whom were not severely disabled), it is doubtful that more than half of these found work in their trades’, owing to the trade depression of the early 1920s and the reactionary measures taken by industries ‘fearing an influx of disabled workers into already ravaged trades’.<sup>90</sup> Lawrence Napper has documented *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly’s* own ‘startling volte-face’ on the matter of the training scheme in his *The Great War in Popular British Cinema of the 1920s*, noting how in the tense climate of the period, priority was given back to those who had been previously employed within the exhibition sector, leaving no room for the newly trained disabled men.<sup>91</sup> Nonetheless, the trade initially championed the scheme as an example of their philanthropy, epitomised by the cartoon below, published in the *Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly’s* 1917 yearbook captioned ‘The Trade’s “Little Bit”’, in which an anthropomorphised film reel is depicted introducing a wounded soldier to a film projector (Fig. 5.8).<sup>92</sup>

Putting to one side the undeterminable impact of the training scheme, the exhibition sector’s various charitable efforts and endeavours highlight a widespread trade-endorsed implementation of the cinema for the benefit of the returning wounded. Whilst free screenings may have only offered a short-term outlet for escapism from the immediate grievances of their stricken audiences, the ubiquity of the exhibition sector’s efforts to cater for convalescent audiences hints at a humble belief in the

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<sup>89</sup> Cohen, *The War Come Home*, p. 27.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>91</sup> Lawrence Napper, *The Great War in Popular British Cinema of the 1920s; Before Journey’s End* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 17-20, p. 19.

<sup>92</sup> G. Mitchell, ‘1916. A Pictorial Review’ in *The Kinematograph Year Book, Program Diary and Directory 1917* (London: E. T. Heron & Co., Ltd., 1917), n.p.

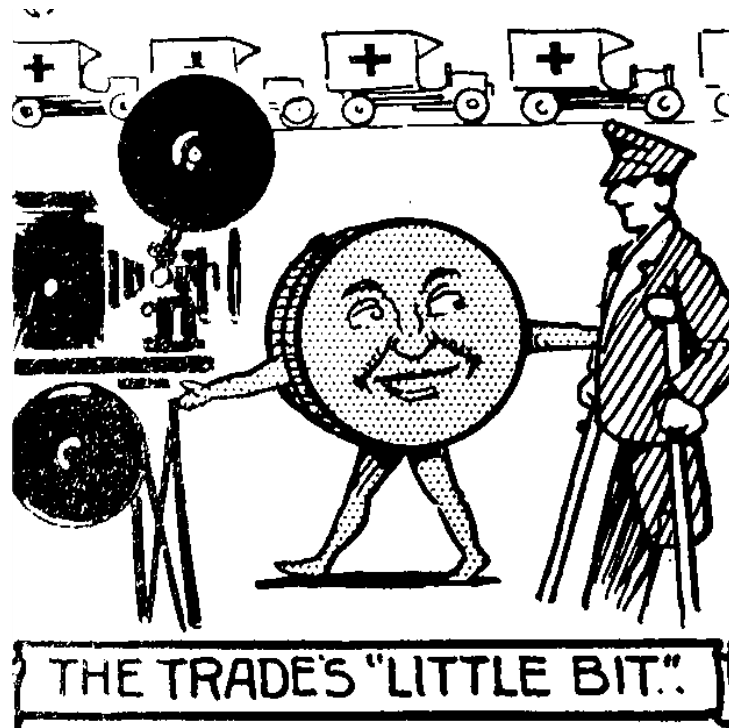


Fig. 5.8: 'The Trade's "Little Bit".' *The Kinematograph Year Book 1917.*

medium's comforting, even rehabilitative qualities. As unquantifiable as it may be, it is evident that the trade conceptualised their own cinema entertainment – either for self-serving publicity or out of sincere belief – as fulfilling a necessary role within British society.

### **Convalescent Camps, Hospitals and Homes**

As we have seen, hospitals and convalescent institutions were often engaged by cinemas in their locality. Many of these hospitals and convalescent institutions, however, introduced or implemented their own purpose-built, often permanent cinemas. These should be seen as distinct from the practices of legitimate venues catering for wounded soldiers for a number of reasons. First and foremost, the inclusion of a purpose-built cinema within the grounds of a convalescent or hospital facility suggests a deliberate or sanctioned endorsement of the medium within the

context of rehabilitation and recovery. These were not third-party venues which had existed prior to the war and predominantly dictated by commercial interests despite the extent of their potential philanthropy, but a considered implementation of the cinematic medium within a non-theatrical setting.

Much like the cinemas established on the front line, cinemas found in convalescent camps, hospitals and homes were removed from the civilian sphere. With the possible exception of doctors or nurses, soldiers did not share the venue with a civilian audience. Similarly, they were also a comparatively makeshift affair, largely orchestrated by volunteers, often spearheaded by the patients themselves, and supported by the patronage of donors associated with the institute in question. In some instances film distributors supported these burgeoning, DIY cinemas themselves, undoubtedly keen to secure some good publicity. The convalescent cinema of the Ontario Military Hospital, Kent, for example, was supported with donations from the New Agency Film Co., the New Bio Film Co. and Jury's Imperial Pictures, all of whom lent their films free of charge.<sup>93</sup> In order to secure the hospital's own projection equipment, however, a:

search was made, and successfully made, for a moving picture machine to be sold at a reasonable figure. The interest of the Canadian Red Cross was secured, and then the machine was secured. Personal labour for many nights resulted in the restoration of the machine to working order and in its complete equipment with all accessories.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> 'Our Hospital', *The Ontario Stretcher*, 1 August 1916, p. 3.

<sup>94</sup> 'Here and There', *The Ontario Stretcher*, 1 August 1916, p. 4.

Many convalescent cinemas boasted that their venue could rival that of any legitimate commercial theatre. The convalescent cinema of the 1<sup>st</sup> Southern General Hospital, Birmingham, for example, claimed that their picture 'is the equal of any in the city, in steadiness and clearness of focus.'<sup>95</sup> Some institutions were late to the game, such as the Star and Garter Home, Richmond, which was only able to install cinema equipment as late in the conflict as 1918 after a donation of £500 was given to the home by the Cinematograph Trade Benevolent Fund.<sup>96</sup> William Jury also donated a regular supply of free films to this institution as well, alongside the sum of £104 12s 3d for the installation of the institution's projection equipment.<sup>97</sup> Although films were soon screened, the Star and Garter Home initially struggled to get a cinematograph license from Surrey County Council, which was said to be a 'great disappointment to the men, after having all the apparatus ready, we should not be able to use it'.<sup>98</sup> Other institutions don't seem to have been made to adhere to such regulations.

The cinema in this context was positioned as a post-event avenue for escapism, utilising its ability to entertain and comfort those suffering from injuries endured in the war, but within a setting that could be shaped and regulated for the target demographic of the recovering wounded to a much higher degree than commercial cinemas, which still had to prioritise conventional business practices. These hospital cinemas could be attended by any patient, regardless of the extent of their injury or disability, as made clear by the implementation of the 'ceiling cinema' documented at the beginning of this

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<sup>95</sup> 'Entertainment', *The Southern Cross: The Journal of the 1<sup>st</sup> Southern General Hospital R.A.M.C.T. Birmingham*, 1 September 1917, p. 232.

<sup>96</sup> Papers of the Star and Garter Home. 8711/961/PP/19, Minutes of 42<sup>nd</sup> Meeting of Star and Garter Committee, 9 January 1918.

<sup>97</sup> Star and Garter Papers, 8771/MHC/3, Minute Book, 9 March 1918, p. 147.

<sup>98</sup> Star and Garter Papers, 8711/961/PP/19, Letter Dated 12 March 1918 to Arthur Stanley.

chapter. The same notion is also epitomised by an article titled ‘For the Cot Cases and “Hoppies”’, published in *The Ontario Stretcher*, where it was surmised that:

It is not often that cot cases are to be envied, but on certain Monday afternoons they now might be, for it their privilege to be asked to a special Cinema Entertainment and Tea in the Concert Hall. For an hour before their party starts there are beds and boxes on wheels being pushed along the “ramps” and getting stuck round corners, but the patients take it with a smile, for, after all, even if they are wedged in between a door whilst the bed refused to go either in or out, this is some excitement after having lain for weeks looking at the same boards in the same ceiling without ever a change.<sup>99</sup>

However, the institutional purpose and design of a convalescent facility was an issue that pervaded debates surrounding medical support and aftercare throughout and after the war, particularly when it came to the question of how those in the process of rehabilitation should spend their time. The novelist and playwright John Galsworthy, in his role as the editor of *The Reveille: Devoted to the Disabled Sailor and Soldier*, argued that ‘the wounded man in hospital is rusting mentally; he is, automatically, encouraged thereto by every condition of his life’.<sup>100</sup> Criticising the ‘monotony of the routine’ and the soldier’s ‘anxiety about his future’, Galsworthy also blamed ‘aimless walks and amusements in his hours of leave’ as factors contributing towards the decline of the convalescent patient’s ‘mental energy’.<sup>101</sup> In contrast, the authorities of the Bear Wood Convalescent Hospital, Wokingham, believed that a ‘Convalescent

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<sup>99</sup> ‘For the Cot Cases and “Hoppies”’, *The Harefield Park Boomerang*, 1 September 1917, p. 14.

<sup>100</sup> John Galsworthy, ‘The Gist of the Matter’, *The Reveille: Devoted to the Disabled Sailor and Soldier*, Vol. 1, No. 1, August 1918, pp. 3-15, p. 9.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*



Home must be recreative [sic], and to be recreative it must be furnished with up-to-date facilities for recreation.<sup>102</sup> To this end, the institution proudly declared the use of the cinema as a means for patient recreation.

Of course, the exhibition sector was quick to praise the use of the medium within convalescent institutions. Notes of thanks from convalescent institutions or patients or requests for donations of films or cinema equipment became a regular feature in the pages of trade journals and newspapers. Arguably, such notices were a useful way to publicise the value of the medium, even if such examples of the medium's use resided outside of commercial concerns. After publishing an open letter of gratitude to the Hepworth company for their services, a writer for *The Era* remarked that it was 'only one of many received expressing the same sentiments – and the sum total of it all points to the fact that medical men of to-day are convinced that, not only is the cinema a form of entertainment, but also a necessity for men in hospital and camp.'<sup>103</sup>

Although, as we have seen, medical authorities remained conflicted about the long-term benefits of escapist amusements and recreation for convalescent patients, the presence of the cinema in convalescent institutions across the country does suggest a level of medical endorsement. Descriptions and accounts of such cinemas frequently share a common language emphasising the therapeutic qualities of the medium. For example, at the 1<sup>st</sup> Southern General Hospital, Birmingham, it was remarked that the installation of a cinema involved:

the expenditure of a vast amount of time and trouble, but with ample compensation afforded in the measure of appreciation with which the

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<sup>102</sup> *The Canadian Hospital* (London: The Times Publishing Company, c.1918), p. 5.

<sup>103</sup> 'Filmland Gossip', *The Era*, 2 May 1917, p. 19.

“Tommy” greeted all efforts. And who can assess the tonic effect of those hundreds of hours, when for the time, at any rate, thoughts of wounds and sickness were banished from the minds of patients?<sup>104</sup>

At the Beckett’s Park Hospital, Leeds, it was similarly remarked that the ‘importance of keeping the patients cheerful was not forgotten, and in that regard [...] a large recreation hall, thoroughly furnished and equipped with a complete cinema apparatus was opened’.<sup>105</sup> Elsewhere, at the Ontario Military Hospital, Kent, it was argued that the ‘entertainment of the patients, in itself a matter of great import, has been well provided for, and there is a permanent cinema machine built in off the big recreation hall where pictures are shown every week. The men are very appreciative, and thanks to the generosity of certain firms, they are given good films.’<sup>106</sup> Sergeant Banks, who ran a cinema at a convalescent institution in Surrey, also emphasised the fact that he had ‘taken every precaution that these entertainments will be given in accordance with medical officers’ advice’.<sup>107</sup> Such accounts reinforce the idea of the cinema being deemed as something of a necessity within the context of rehabilitation, a beneficial ‘tonic’ utilised to alleviate the patients of their pain and troubles. The therapeutic qualities of the medium are particularly emphasised by the claim made in the account of the 1<sup>st</sup> Southern General Hospital’s cinema, that ‘thoughts of wounds and sickness were banished from the minds of patients’, another instance in which the benefits of

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<sup>104</sup> Reginald H. Brazier and Ernest Sandford, *Birmingham and the Great War 1914-1919* (Birmingham: Cornish Brothers Ltd., 1921), p. 157.

<sup>105</sup> William Herbert Scott, *Leeds and Great War, 1914-1918. A Book of Remembrance* (Leeds: Jowett & Sowry Ltd., 1923), p. 209.

<sup>106</sup> ‘A Model Hospital’, *The Times*, 10 April 1917, p. 9.

<sup>107</sup> ‘Wanted – Films for Wounded’, *Pictures and the Picturegoer*, 20 October 1917, p. 452.

the cinema in this context are inherently bound to the notion of forgetting one's self and condition.

The particulars of hospital cinemas can differ depending on the size and type of institution, as well as the specific venue afforded for cinematic exhibition within, although it is my hope that an in-depth look at a single case study may go some way towards understanding trends and patterns across the entire practice of cinema entertainment for the wounded in convalescent facilities.

### **Summerdown Military Convalescent Hospital, Eastbourne**

Summerdown Military Convalescent Hospital opened on the southeast coast of England in Eastbourne during April 1915 (Fig. 5.9). At first, the establishment consisted of little more than a few tents, but by the end of the conflict, could accommodate up to 3,500 men. Alongside the residents' huts, the camp included multiple dining halls, a skittle alley, a post office, a dentist, Y.M.C.A and church huts and an entertainment hall. The camp also produced a patient-written magazine, *The Summerdown Camp Journal: The Representative Organ of the Summerdown Military Convalescent Hospital*, in which it is evident that the cinema played an integral role within the day to day life of those who lived at the facility both during and after the conflict.

The earliest issues of the journal available to the researcher (Vol. 2, No. 1, 9 August 1916) include frequent references to a 'Cinematographic Performance in the Camp Theatre' under the 'Weekly Programme' section of the journal. In this first issue,

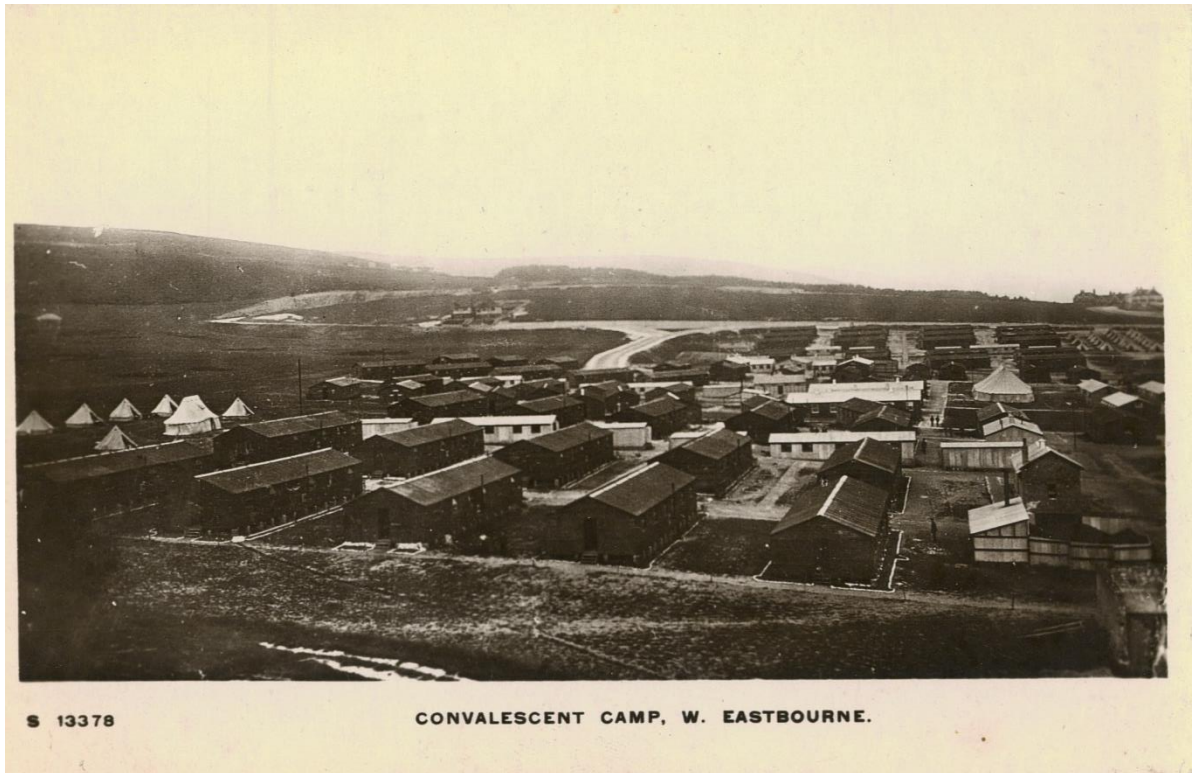


Fig. 5.9: Postcard depicting Summerdown Convalescent Camp, Eastbourne. Author's Collection.

a single performance is listed as upcoming for the following Tuesday. By issue No. 5 (30 August), the Weekly Programme lists two cinematograph performances per week, a practice maintained almost constantly from that date onwards. Whilst it is unclear when exactly the camp cinema began, due to the unavailability of the journal's first volume, it can be assumed with some certainty that the second half of 1916 marked a period of establishment and development for the entertainment at Summerdown. The exponential rise of references to the cinema within the pages of the *Camp Journal*, be it Summerdown's own camp cinema or advertisements for local cinemas, clearly attest to the increasing ubiquity (if not also the popularity) of the medium. Indicative of this rise is an article published in issue No. 8 (20 September), in which the camp cinema is mentioned outside of the Weekly Programme for the first time, under a section titled 'Matters Musical and Concert Notes':

The Cinema of the Camp Theatre is now going strong, and the frequent shows are attended by ever increasing numbers. Congratulations to Sergt. Sanders and Lc.-Corpl. Bax, the electricians, who have successfully overcome many difficulties and made the Camp Pictures so popular.

The following films, amongst many others, have been put on the screen :- *A Page from Life*, *A Messenger of Death*, *Charlie Shanghai-d*, *Charlie at the Bank*, and *The Pipe Dream*. It is hoped shortly to run a serial extending over four weeks. We are indebted to the Meteor Film Exchange Co., and the Essannay [sic] Film Co. for the regular supply of films arranged by Sergt. Sanders.<sup>108</sup>

Spearheaded by Sergeant Sanders, Summerdown's camp cinema appears to have shown a variety of films free of charge. The titles listed here suggest a mix between comedy and drama, with Chaplin being a particular favourite. Moreover, the potential screening of a serial over a number of weeks attests to a more permanent, structured approach to operation and programming when compared to front line cinemas, as well as commercial cinemas offering one-off matinees for convalescent audiences. In an open letter to the Essanay Film Co. which received coverage in both *The Bioscope*

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<sup>108</sup> 'Matters Musical and Concert Notes', *The Summerdown Camp Journal*, 20 September 1916, p 5. The majority of the films listed here are quite easy to identify. Both *Charlie Shanghai-d* and *Charlie at the Bank* are clearly alternative titles for *Shanghaied* (1915) and *The Bank* (1915), respectively. Based on the apparent arrangement with the Essanay Film Co. *The Pipe Dream* is most likely Essanay's own 1915 release, described in *Motion Picture News* as a comedy in which 'a tramp, in his pipe dream, is consorting with a beautiful fairy queen. He awakes when he falls out of the tree' (*Motion Picture News*, Vol. 12, No. 2, p. 121). *A Page from Life* looks to be the 1914 drama, described as the story of 'a man who is forced to turn crook' (*Motion Picture News*, Vol. 10, No. 25, p. 50). *A Messenger of Death* was described as a 'modern society drama' (*Sevenoaks Chronicle and Kentish Advertiser*, 18 June 1915, p. 5).

and *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, Sergeant Sanders reflected on the recuperative aspects of Chaplin's comedy:

Allow me to thank you on behalf of, and at the request of 3,000 boys in hospital here. I am sure if you could hear their screams of laughter at Charlie's antics, and their three times three cheers for the Essanay Company at the end of the show, you would then have a good idea of what you are doing for Tommy Atkins. I find the Kinema so popular that I shall have to commence my shows at Six, and run them continuously until 9 p.m., and have two houses instead of one, to accommodate all the boys. I am sure the boys on their return to civil life will have many pleasant memories of the camp kinema and the Essanay Company.<sup>109</sup>

In addition to the letter, the editor of *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly* commented that '[s]uch expert advice as to the curative effect of the kinema is – after the way the “pictures” have been attacked lately by various critics – indeed gratifying.'<sup>110</sup> Evidently, Sanders publicised the use of the cinema as an implement or tool of rehabilitation, contributing towards the morale of the men by providing them with entertainment and escapism.

It is also interesting to note the last line written by Sanders – 'I am sure the boys *on their return to civil life* will have many pleasant memories of the camp kinema' – as this marks their time at Summerdown as a transitory phase. Indeed, this much is true, but the very presence of the cinema within this context also acted as a point of continuity with civilian life itself, being a leisure practice enjoyed prior to the conflict.

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<sup>109</sup> 'Weekly Notes', *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 30 November 1916, p. 5.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.



Fig. 5.10: 'Picture Palaces' Advertisement, *The Summerdown Camp Journal*, 27 September 1916.

The prescribed implementation of the cinema at Summerdown suggests the medium's ability to foster a sense of continuity between civilian and military life: the ordinary within otherwise extraordinary circumstances. In fact, Summerdown's *Camp Journal* hints at this normality quite readily, simply through the rather quotidian presence of critical commentary, listings and reviews of the films being screened in and outside of the camp, as if it were a film/entertainment periodical.

The next issue (27 September) finds the camp cinema listings separated from the Weekly Programme and relocated to a dedicated section titled 'Picture Palaces', alongside advertisements for local venues such as the Devonshire Park Pavilion, the Old Town Cinema and the Tivoli (Fig. 5.10). Here, the camp cinema is advertised as providing 'Grand Cinema Entertainment' (and features no admission charge in contrast to the local venues which are also featured). However, this dedicated advertising space was soon abandoned by the next issue of the journal, in which a significant shift in the content of local advertisements could be seen to take place,

perhaps due to the increased presence of cinema entertainment and its coverage within the pages of the *Camp Journal*.

Beginning at least with Vol. 2 of the journal, a large portion of the journal's advertising space had been allocated to local theatrical venues on the back page under the heading of 'Theatres and Amusements'. Whilst venues such as the Royal Hippodrome, the Pier Theatre and the Devonshire Park Theatre initially gave priority to their theatrical productions and other variety acts, the focus of their advertisements soon began to shift, with notices for film screenings seen regularly from issue No. 10 onwards. As documented earlier in this chapter, the presence of commercial cinema advertisements and listings in such publications is clearly indicative of the exhibition sector attempting to market themselves towards the convalescent demographic.

For example, the Old Town Cinema (one of the first to advertise in the *Camp Journal*) boasted that it was 'the nearest cinema to the camp' and set 'Special Reduced Prices of Admission to Convalescent Soldiers' (Fig. 5.11).<sup>111</sup> Whilst lacking any mention of specific film titles, the Old Town Cinema also asserted within its advertising that the 'Cinema affords one of the most agreeable as well as the brightest form of modern recreation', emphasising the morale-boosting elements of the cinema within its advertising rhetoric.<sup>112</sup> The Tivoli Cinema, also lacking any specific film titles, claimed that 'All the Finest Exclusives and Up-to-date Topicals shown at this House.'<sup>113</sup> Meanwhile, the Pier Theatre could boast screenings of bigger prestige productions, such as 'D. W. Griffith's Mighty Spectacle, "The Birth of a Nation" 18,000

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<sup>111</sup> Advertisements, *The Summerdown Camp Journal*, 13 December 1916, p. 8.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*





Fig. 5.11: Old Town Cinema advertisement, *The Summerdown Camp Journal*, 13 December 1916

People. 5,000 Horses. Took 8 Months to produce. Direct from Drury Lane Theatre, London.<sup>114</sup>

The very first instance of film advertising in this section of the journal, however, was for the official war film *The Battle of the Somme*, which was screened twice daily at the Devonshire Park Winter Garden in early October, and accompanied by the venue's own Devonshire Park Orchestra.<sup>115</sup> It is this local screening of *The Battle of the Somme* followed by a presentation of the film in the camp cinema itself and the resulting commentary within the pages of the *Camp Journal* that singles out Summerdown Military Convalescent Hospital as a particularly significant case study. Whereas many cinemas catering for servicemen, as we have seen, appear to have refrained from screening *The Battle of the Somme* (or similar topical and newsreels), preferring instead to screen comparatively light-hearted comedies and dramas, Summerdown's proximity to legitimate cinema venues meant that soldiers in residence

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<sup>114</sup> Advertisements, *The Summerdown Camp Journal*, 8 November 1916, p. 8.

<sup>115</sup> Advertisements, *The Summerdown Camp Journal*, 4 October 1916, p. 8.

at the camp still had the opportunity to view the official war films. Moreover, the patients residing at Summerdown were specifically targeted for such screenings of these films. Issue No. 10 of the *Camp Journal* records in the 'Acknowledgements' section how the 'Gallery Kinema kindly entertained 300 Convalescents from Summerdown Camp to see the film entitled the "Battle of the Somme"'.<sup>116</sup> In the following issue, under a new section titled 'Cinema Notes', it is reported that the management of the Gallery Kinema went one step further and allowed their print of the film to be screened at Summerdown's own camp cinema for 'the benefit of the boys who could not attend [the previous] shows [...] so that everyone has now had the opportunity of seeing the film'.<sup>117</sup>

By the publication of the next issue (Vol. 2, No. 12, 18 October 1916), it is apparent that the decision to screen *The Battle of the Somme* had become the subject of much discussion and debate at Summerdown and throughout the country, as the following editorial piece testifies:

There have been many interesting and controversial opinions expressed on the exhibition of the cinematographic pictures of the Battle of the Somme which were recently on view in Eastbourne. It is held by some that the whole exhibition was, from first to last, a mistake. Why, why, say they, when we are doing our very best to hide these horrors and the ugly facts of war from our nearest and dearest, should our well-meant endeavours be frustrated by mere money-making commercialists. And yet the very people who offer this criticism are those who, a year or so ago, were loud in the assertions that nothing short of a

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<sup>116</sup> 'Acknowledgements', *The Summerdown Camp Journal*, 4 October 1916, p. 4.

<sup>117</sup> 'Cinema Notes', *The Summerdown Camp Journal*, 11 October 1916, p. 5.

good invasion or, at the least, a few more Zeppelin raids would wake up the sleepy folk at home to the real significance and meaning of war.

It now seems to us that this scheme of exhibiting the pictures gives practically all the advantages, with none of the disadvantages, of an actual raid, and seems thoroughly well to open the eyes of blind folk who will not see.

Moreover, it seems more honest that we should see what our boys are doing for us, than that we should send them out to do it in the dark, so far as we are concerned. And surely whilst nations still find it necessary to settle their disputes by recourse to war, it is as well that every man, woman, and child should realize to the full where they really stand, and then they will not be quite so pompous, or talk so glibly of the march of civilisation and such like high-faluting stuff. Our own opinion, after seeing these pictures exhibited in a large theatre in London, and carefully noting their effect on the audience, is that the admiration and sympathy of the audience for our truly marvellous boys at the front was even greater and probably much more practicable after they had left the theatre, than before they entered it, and that this fact alone more than justified the exhibitor. As for the show being merely the speculation of a few commercialists, we have the word of the Government and military authorities that this is something very much more than that. And it can scarcely be called a speculation, although it is certainly not without its risks.<sup>118</sup>

The editorial is of interest in many ways, most notably, for its avowedly pro-screening argument, representing an oppositional stance to the more commonplace belief in

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<sup>118</sup> 'Editorial', *The Summerdown Camp Journal*, 18 October 1916, p. 1.

concealing such images for the returning wounded. Rather than hiding from the 'horrors and ugly facts of war', the editor suggests that the cinema had a duty to show civilians and new recruits the actualities of the front line rather than to obscure such actualities from them. However, whilst the editor defends the choice to screen the film, it is clear that the decision was still criticised by a sizeable group on the grounds that it would not be suitable to show new recruits. Whilst the piece does not exactly make it clear who these critics are, the editor does not appear to be referring to the patients of Summerdown themselves. Additionally, whilst the editors of the journal undoubtedly had first-hand experience of the war itself, it is interesting to note that the piece lacks any sort of reflection based upon the spectatorship of the experienced soldier, choosing instead to focus upon the film's effect on the general public. It is the civilian need to confront the realities of war as presented by *The Battle of the Somme* which is being advocated by the editor.

Following the screening of *The Battle of the Somme*, a period of increased coverage of cinema entertainment began within the pages of the *Camp Journal*, epitomised by the introduction of a short-lived, dedicated cinema section (alternatively titled 'Cinema Notes' or 'Camp Cinema'), which provided synopses and details about upcoming films to be screened in the camp. Frequently, this section would amount to little more than a paragraph but would stress the excellence of the films on offer, promoting 'exclusives' such as *The Nation's Peril* (Terwilliger, 1915) whilst also guaranteeing the presence of the ever-popular Charlie Chaplin. The type of critical commentary seen after *The Battle of the Somme* surfaced again following a screening of the film's 'sequel', *The Battle of the Ancre and the Advance of the Tanks*, although the effect of the latter screening was far different to that of the first and worth quoting here at length:

It was really quite a unique occasion, not only by reason of the subject matter and excellence of the entertainment offered, but also by reason of the audience, consisting as mostly it did of those *who had been there*. Here was an audience flocking to see, not what things are like in France, but what they are like on film. With the exception of the actual Tank pictures themselves, everything shown on the sheet was, or should have been, familiar to Tommie, and greeted by him as an old friend! But alas, this was not always so. Whilst none of the pictures were “fake” in the broadest acceptance of the word, one or two of them were “obviously arranged” by an enterprising cinematographer [...]

It was easy to tell when some picture was a little, so to speak, “off the map,” for it was greeted with howls of derisive laughter. Such instances were the following:-

“Serving out rubber thigh-boots as a protection against frostbite before going into the trenches!

“Hot coffee and sandwiches being handed round to friend and foe alike!!”

“Tired Tommies waiting for a motor-bus to convey them back to their rest-billets!!!”

From the shouts of laughter which greeted these pictures it was fairly obvious that such good fortune had not befallen every one of the many hundreds that packed the Camp theatre.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> ‘The Tanks’, *The Summerdown Camp Journal*, 31 January 1917, p. 4. My emphasis.

Here we can see another instance of topical British filmmaking dismantled by the first-hand experience of soldier spectators, negotiating the artifice and manipulation of cinematic imagery primarily intended and constructed for an unknowledgeable civilian audience. Dismissing the film with 'howls of derisive laughter', those who attended this screening occupied a privileged position, having been part of the events depicted on screen themselves and therefore able to distinguish between reality and fabrication. Note how the author suggests that this historically specific audience was 'flocking to see, not what things are like in France, but what they are like on film', explicitly distinguishing between reality and cinematic representation.

Here, the phenomenon of experienced soldier spectatorship highlights another instance in which contemporary film production failed to accommodate for this historically specific demographic, betraying within this context of exhibition its artificiality and deceptive strategies of war's on-screen representation. Presented with images of a fraudulent nature within this supposedly factual film, the convalescent audience at Summerdown were uniquely positioned to dismiss the original purpose of the film – to inform civilian audiences – and located within it instead a comedic, entertaining quality. As we have seen in Chapter Four, such a response originates from a perspective of irony and cynicism, representing a critical community bred in the horrors and attendant coping mechanisms of trench life and culture. Nonetheless, the fact that the *Camp Journal* was a periodical written by and primarily for soldiers means that the spectatorial critique this account represents would not have been that widely disseminated throughout civilian circles, if at all, highlighting how the phenomenon of soldier spectatorship remained a largely hidden or peripheral experience.

As the cinema continued to become a more significant facet of life at Summerdown, so too did the camp cinema's relationship with the wider community.

December 1916 saw the beginning of a partnership of sorts between the camp cinema and the local Tivoli Cinema. Announced in the Tivoli's first advertisement in the *Camp Journal*, it is stated that the 'Management of the above Theatre gives a Free Sunday Evening Picture Entertainment once each Month during the Winter in the Camp Theatre' an arrangement that continued until (at least) the end of the war.<sup>120</sup> It would appear that the arrangement allowed films first screened at the Tivoli to then be screened for free at the camp cinema, undoubtedly after the Tivoli had exhausted the film's immediate commercial potential for itself. The *Camp Journal* also documents a similar arrangement with the local Pier Theatre, which organised the screening of films such as *The Dumb Girl of Portici* (Weber and Smalley, 1916) and 'the splendid film of Britain's Navy' at Summerdown for free.<sup>121</sup> Without doubt an exercise in building good publicity for the local cinemas themselves as well as a generally philanthropic act, such arrangements were nonetheless appreciated by the convalescent patients of Summerdown and mark another instance of 'broad public participation' playing into the processes of rehabilitation and recovery.

Summerdown's camp cinema, therefore, became more than just an isolated instance of makeshift cinema, but a permanent fixture of the convalescent camp, fostering an atmosphere of lively debate and critical commentary originating from a regular and habitual body of spectators. Such a culture was bolstered by the patronage and support of local entertainment venues as well as the advertising opportunities

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<sup>120</sup> Advertisements, *The Summerdown Camp Journal*, 13 December 1916, p. 8.

<sup>121</sup> 'Camp Cinema', *The Summerdown Camp Journal*, 14 March 1917, p. 5. The 'splendid film of Britain's Navy' alluded to is difficult to determine. Bearing in mind that Summerdown could have potentially received such films long after their initial release, it is possible that the film being referred to is the official film *Britain Prepared* (Prod. Charles Urban, 1915), which was still being screened in commercial cinemas throughout 1916 and into 1917. The film in question could also possibly be one of the five parts of the serial production *Our Navy* which was screened throughout 1916.

facilitated by the *Camp Journal*. The fact that the *Camp Journal* included frequent commentary on the cinema in addition to its basic listings highlights the importance of the medium within the convalescent facility, but also its normality, representing the deliberate inclusion of leisure practices from civilian life. The camp cinema at Summerdown, like many implemented within institutions across the country, quickly stopped being a simple novelty and developed into a fully integrated element of convalescent life. Above all, the audiences of Summerdown represent convalescent soldiers as engaged and discerning spectators, appreciative of the more escapist fare offered in the form of comedy films and light drama but positioned by experience to interrogate and dismantle the on-screen representation of warfare and military life circulated by British film production during this period.

### **The Returning Wounded in Public**

The remainder of this chapter will examine a concern which, in many ways, is perhaps impossible to address or ascertain satisfactorily. Specifically, this refers to how the presence of the returning wounded, particularly those with severe disabilities and disfigurements, affected the physical and conceptual space of British cinemas. Hitherto, this chapter has demonstrated how the presence of the returning wounded in public spaces such as cinemas became a ubiquitous sight for civilians living on the home front throughout the conflict and into the post-war era. It has also addressed how the cinema affected and influenced the lives of the returning wounded. But how did such men affect the environment of the cinema itself?

Indeed, the presence of the returning wounded amongst the civilian population became a national concern. As John Galsworthy wrote at the time, '[o]ur eyes look out



on a Britain daily more and more peopled by sufferers in this war. In every street, on every road and village-green we meet them - crippled, half-crippled, or showing little outward trace, though none the less secretly deprived of health.<sup>122</sup> Explaining the issues represented by the returning wounded, Jay Winter writes:

Could they be seen in public? Or was it too dangerous for them to appear on metropolitan streets? In every city large and small public visibility of the disabled soldier was both unavoidable and potentially dangerous for civilian morale. There was a consensus as to the need to keep out of the public sight the most severely injured, lest their wounds who would make anyone wonder what could possibly justify such mutilation and pain. Visibility and invisibility not only figured in hospital triage but was central to life within and around metropolitan hospitals.<sup>123</sup>

The tensions prompted by the presence of the severely disabled can also be extended to the specific public space of the commercial cinema. In this setting, the returning wounded also had to negotiate the binary between visibility and invisibility. As Jan Rüger has argued, the presence of disabled soldiers in cinemas 'offered a view that most urban audiences had not been exposed to before.'<sup>124</sup> Such interactions had the potential to disrupt the conventional cinematic experience, the presence of such men becoming the focus of the civilian gaze rather than the screen. Indeed, it is ironic that much of the literature on the subject of the returning wounded is couched in terms familiar to the discipline of Film Studies and the concepts of the spectator and gaze.

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<sup>122</sup> Galsworthy, 'The Gist of the Matter', p. 14.

<sup>123</sup> Winter, *Capital Cities at War*, p. 356

<sup>124</sup> Jan Rüger, 'Entertainments', *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin 1914-1919, Volume Two* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 105-140, p. 117.

As Richard Van Emden and Steve Humphries note, '[f]rom the earliest days of the war, the arrival of wounded soldiers drew a crowd of spectators' who would often await the arrival of trains at central railway stations to 'watch the wounded being carried on to waiting ambulances.'<sup>125</sup> Many were family members 'trying to catch a glimpse of wounded relatives, but more often civilians were simply fascinated to see and to cheer brave heroes.'<sup>126</sup>

If we return to the account given in 'The Laughter of Courage', we can see how the presence of a disabled soldier altered the conditions of that particular screening to the extent that the vast majority of the audience appear to have focused upon him, rather than the film being screened. The reason for the audience's initial realignment of focus – the soldier's laughter – was not immediately related to his physical condition. Yet, upon the realisation of the soldier's corporeal state, there was a collective reaction amongst the 'great silent audience': there 'was a feeling of reverence; there were certainly moistened eyes.'<sup>127</sup> The civilian reaction depicted here is for the most part sympathetic, but one that disrupted the cinema screening and environment nonetheless. Reflecting upon how the physical disability and disfigurement could attract the civilian gaze, Horace Gaffron, a veteran of the Battle of the Somme who had his leg amputated, describes a trip to the cinema in the company of several nurses during his convalescence: '[...] of course we got in for nothing. Being a wounded soldier, you were a bit of an eye-catcher. Crowds would watch soldiers being moved

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<sup>125</sup> Richard Van Emden and Steve Humphries, *All Quiet on the Home Front: An Oral History of Life in Britain during the First World War* (London: Headline Book Publishing, 2003), p. 121.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> 'The Laughter of Courage', *The Times*, 12 October 1915, p. 11.

[...] People would stop you in the street, or come up and talk to you, get you a packet of cigarettes or chocolate.<sup>128</sup>

Elsewhere, the emotional impact of the returning wounded upon commercial cinema audiences could prompt some difficult exchanges and interactions. 'It is sad to reflect that it often carries us to tears in the presence of some emotional reminder – sometimes in a church, sometimes in a theatre or a cinema', wrote one ex-soldier reflecting upon civilian reactions to disabled ex-servicemen in the aftermath of the war.<sup>129</sup> 'The general tendency', he wrote, 'is to let the emotion desert us when we leave the presence of the said reminder. Back again in the dull, dreary humdrum of life, we forget – we forget our debt to these men.'<sup>130</sup> Clearly, the disabled ex-soldier's desire to forget the war was a desire shared by the general public. But whilst the returning wounded could turn towards the escapist comforts provided by the cinema in order to forget, their very presence amongst civilian audiences served as a potent reminder of the conflict for the latter group. In turn, civilian discomfort could generate or accentuate the same feeling in convalescent audiences. One account published in the patient produced magazine, *The Pavilion 'Blues'*, directly comments on the complexity and tension created by this mixing of convalescent and civilian audiences:

One of 'ours' visited a neighbouring cinema theatre the other day, and chanced to sit down next to a dear old lady, who, catching sight of his empty sleeve, filled the ten minutes wait for the appearance of the first 'picture,' with sympathetic remarks about his misfortune, which he hated to hear, and a sorrowful recital of her own private woes, which made him uncomfortable, though he pitied her

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<sup>128</sup> Van Emden and Humphries, *All Quiet on the Home Front*, p. 145.

<sup>129</sup> James Quinn, 'The Symbol of a Great Sacrifice', *The Burnley News*, 18 November 1920, p. 12.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

distress. Much of the gloom that her confidences had created were dispelled, however, by her closing remark as the first picture began. This was worthy of Mrs. Malaprop herself, the dear old lady's remark being, '*So I comes to the pictures to drown my sorrows.*'<sup>131</sup>

The clash of worlds that ensued from the presence of the returning wounded amongst civilian audiences within commercial cinemas appears to have prompted discomfort and anxiety in some cases, a reminder of the war being fought and the sacrifices being made by an entire generation. In this account, the promise of the cinema providing an environment in which the horrors of the war could be forgotten ultimately went unfulfilled. In all likelihood, instances such as this were experienced in cinema venues and other public spaces throughout the country.

Whilst the presence of the returning wounded may have provided an abject reminder of the horrors of the greater conflict, it is also important to note how the actual sight of the men themselves often prompted aversion from the general public. Soldiers with amputated limbs were a common sight amongst the general public and routinely documented by the wartime press, but Suzannah Biernoff has drawn attention towards the 'hidden history' of those who returned from the conflict with severe facial disfigurements and injuries.<sup>132</sup> 41,000 British soldiers were estimated to have had one or more limbs amputated, over 60,000 suffered injuries to the eyes and/or head.<sup>133</sup> Such injuries were devastating to those who endured them, both in terms of physical pain but also the inevitable societal isolation and exclusion such wounds provoked.

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<sup>131</sup> 'A Mixed Metaphor', *The Pavilion 'Blues'*, 1 March 1917, p. 156. Emphasis in original.

<sup>132</sup> Suzannah Biernoff, 'The Rhetoric of Disfigurement in First World War Britain', *Social History of Medicine*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (2011), pp. 666-685 (p. 666).

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 666.

'Patients refused to see their families and fiancés; children reportedly fled at the sight of their fathers; nurses and orderlies struggled to look their patients in the face.'<sup>134</sup>

Whilst some argued that the presence of such men had no effect on those who treated them, the pervasive culture of silence and aversion from the realities of such injuries is apparent throughout the journalistic coverage of the returning wounded. The reports cited throughout this chapter make little reference to the actual corporeal condition of those who were entertained in commercial cinemas, other than broadly categorising the group as 'wounded' or 'disabled'. Yet, men suffering injuries of all kinds would have been present at such screenings. Biernoff's own central case study, the Queen's Hospital, Sidcup, a specialist institution for the care and reconstruction of those with severe facial injuries, appears to have provided cinema entertainment for those in residence.<sup>135</sup>

Although I have not come across any tangible evidence to suggest as much, it is tempting to consider how the broad practice of offering cinema entertainment to the returning wounded consciously or unconsciously played into the culture of invisibility and aversion surrounding the returning wounded. As this chapter has noted, the cinema offered an entertainment that could be inclusive of all men regardless of the extent of their disability or injury. But it could also offer a large-scale communal event whereby the returning wounded were effectively removed from the public sphere and distracted for the duration of the programme. For those instances where a commercial cinema was given over entirely to the entertainment of the wounded and disabled, is it not possible that the cinema was being utilised in a manner to hide such men from

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p. 668.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p. 677.

the public gaze? The commercial cinema is, to a certain extent, a simultaneously public and private space, and if utilised for the purpose of entertaining an audience comprised solely of the returning wounded, is it not fair to classify the commercial cinema in this instance as an extension of the isolated confines of the hospital or convalescent institution, whilst providing the illusion of participation within the public sphere for the convalescent patient? Removed from the curiosity and/or revulsion of the public gaze, would not the darkened and confined environment of the cinema have lent itself well to the active concealment of society's foremost visual reminders of the war? Moreover, could the training schemes that placed wounded soldiers in cinema projection rooms behind closed doors not be seen in a similar light? Such questions are perhaps impossible to answer, given the already fragmented and incomplete condition of the surviving historical record. Moreover, the issues embodied by the returning wounded were taboo in and of themselves, and often handled through euphemism or straightforward suppression.

To further determine how the presence of the returning wounded affected British cinemas, it is also important to consider their cinematic representation on screen, as the cinema was itself utilised to publicise and document the efforts made supporting the wounded and disabled across the country. Newsreel segments and topical films frequently included footage purporting to portray the lives of the returning wounded as they began the processes of rehabilitation. In the *Pathé Gazette* alone, wounded soldiers appear to have been the subject of over 200 films between 1914



Fig. 5.12: Frame enlargements from *Wounded Soldiers Visit Cinema* (1917)

and 1918.<sup>136</sup> In continuation of the analogy utilised above, the returning wounded had now literally become the subject of the cinematic gaze. However, when viewing extant newsreel and documentary footage of the returning wounded, one cannot help but discern a certain element of sanitisation, coercion and censorship at play. Of particular relevance here, for example, is the content and composition of shots from Pathé's *Wounded Soldiers Visit Cinema* (Fig. 5.12), in which the wounded men depicted are seen smiling at the camera.<sup>137</sup> Apart from one man with an amputated leg and another in a wheelchair, the majority of the men depicted in this short piece of footage exhibit no immediate signs of injury or disability.

Elsewhere, in a Topical Budget segment titled *Wounded at Kew* (1915), the sense of orchestration and staging is even more apparent.<sup>138</sup> In this short film, we see a bandaged soldier being hand-fed strawberries, a young girl pin a flower to the lapel of an apparently wounded man and another girl dressed in the Union Jack flag held up by a pair of wounded soldiers who, again, don't immediately appear to bear any signs of injury or disability (Fig. 5.13). The film's patriotic message - that everything is being done to entertain and support the returning wounded - is constructed through the use of these evidently staged vignettes. As we have already seen, the practice of staging scenes and images within topical footage was commonplace, and even extended to 'faking' significant portions of more important films like *The Battle of the*

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<sup>136</sup> This figure is based upon the preserved newsreels digitised and hosted by [www.britishpathe.com](http://www.britishpathe.com). [Accessed 2 November 2016].

<sup>137</sup> *Wounded Soldiers Visit Cinema*, Pathé, online video recording, Youtube, 13 April 2014, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y2HLpXV8ei0>> [accessed 23 August 2016]. Pathé have not provided an accurate date for the footage, although, when examining the footage itself, the feature film seen advertised on the exterior of the cinema hosting the event, *Cheerful Givers* (Powell, 1917), would suggest this piece of footage dates from around 1917.

<sup>138</sup> *Wounded at Kew* (1915), Topical Budget, online video recording, Youtube, 7 November 2008, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D6SaQUTdbaM&list=PL3E0A39555C36851D>> [accessed 23 August 2016].





Fig. 5.13: Two wounded soldiers hold up a young girl in *Wounded at Kew* (1915)

*Somme*. Nonetheless, even if a certain amount of dramatic license was expected and ultimately accepted of non-fiction filmmaking at this time, it is important to address the discrepancy between the 'reality' portrayed by the cinema and the harsh truths of convalescent existence. None of these images either attest to the suffering faced by the returning wounded, or document those with more severe injuries and afflictions. The vast majority of wounded men, as represented on the cinema screen, do not appear to represent the multitude of those suffering. Again, attention is drawn here to the binary between visibility and invisibility, with the cinema being used to propagate a certain image of the returning wounded whilst rendering certain portions of that demographic invisible.

The tensions surrounding identity, visibility and invisibility were particularly apparent to the convalescent patients of hospitals who became the subject of documentary films themselves. Indeed, in a number of convalescent facilities across

the country, films were commissioned in an attempt to document or publicise the work of war hospitals and the lives of patients in residence. Sometimes, these were commissioned for the benefit of dominion nations, who wished to 'see' the conditions of their men living and fighting abroad. Those in residence at the Ontario Military Hospital, Kent, for example, highlight the fragmented identity of the convalescent patient when they asked whether 'we will "see ourselves as others see us" when the cinema people finish taking the film of the Ontario Military Hospital?' <sup>139</sup> Such a question clearly touches upon the variety of subjective perceptions of identity pertaining to convalescent patients. This negotiated construction of identity surfaced again after the film had been completed and screened for the patients at the hospital's cinema: it was remarked that:

We have seen ourselves "as others see us," and whether we were pleased with ourselves – be it through modesty or otherwise, we will not say – we will leave it to the people of Canada, and Ontario especially, to pass judgement.<sup>140</sup>

The idea of 'judgement' in this case is fascinating, although it is unfortunate that the writer did not clarify exactly *how* it is believed others see convalescent patients.

Another, perhaps more revealing example, is the film documenting the 3<sup>rd</sup> London General Hospital, Wandsworth, which housed the 'Masks for Facial Disfigurements Department', opened in 1916 and managed by Francis Derwent Wood. Aided by the Gaumont Company, filming appears to have taken place in 1917. A synopsis of the film provided in the hospital publication *The Gazette* lists some of the scenes presented, including a general tour of the hospital, scenes of patients enjoying

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<sup>139</sup> 'Officers' Mess Room Chatter', *The Ontario Stretcher*, 1 August 1916, p. 5.

<sup>140</sup> 'To and Fro', *The Ontario Stretcher*, 1 September 1916, p. 4.

# Unfilmed Hospital Scenes.

By Pte. R. B. Ogle.

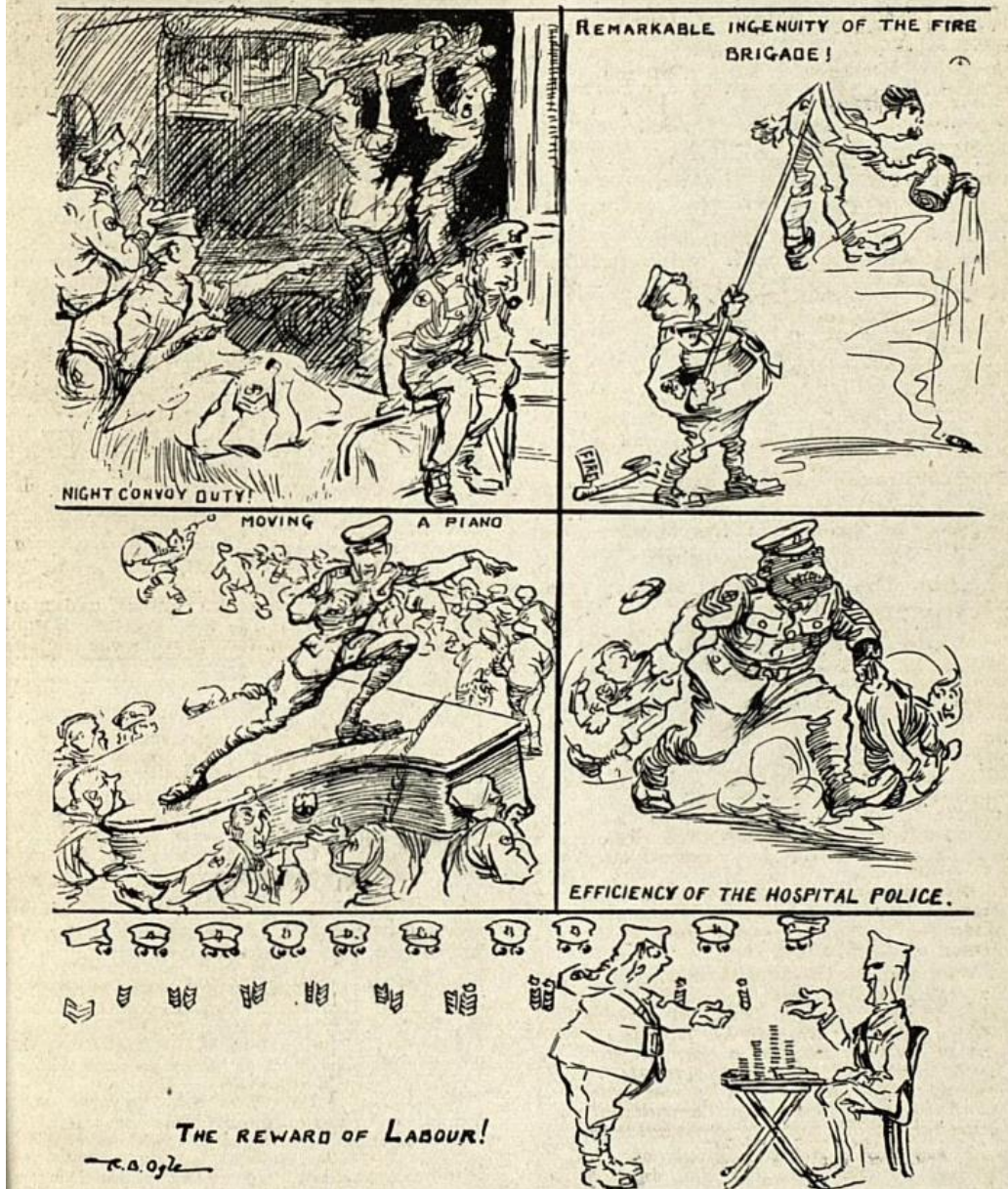


Fig. 5.14: 'Unfilmed Hospital Scenes', *The Gazette*, October 1917.

sporting events and other forms of recreation. Significantly, the synopsis is prefaced by the statement that the 'usual startling incidents of cinema life are left out on purpose. We do not want to show incidents which can only be of interest to a few. Rather we have aimed at giving the general atmosphere of the 3<sup>rd</sup> London.'<sup>141</sup> Although a rather

<sup>141</sup> H. E. Bruce Porter, 'The Hospital Film', *The Gazette: 3<sup>rd</sup> London General Hospital T. F.*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (November, 1917), pp. 1-3, p. 1.

enigmatic statement, it is evident that some form of censorship or selective editing took place. The synopsis does make one passing reference to a blinded soldier, but apart from this, no reference to the facial disfigurement ward or its patients is included. The idea that certain aspects of hospital life were censored from public view was later hinted at by an illustration titled 'Unfilmed Hospital Scenes' published in *The Gazette*, which contained scenes such as 'Night Convoy Duty!' and a brutish depiction of the 'hospital police' (Fig. 5.14). Whilst satirical in nature, the illustration alludes to a patient-perceived discrepancy between public representations of hospital life and the reality of the situation behind closed doors: a discrepancy that, in the case of the 'hospital film', was wholly disseminated and reinforced by the cinema. More telling, perhaps, is the assertion made by Ward Muir, an orderly at the institution in question, who wrote in his book *The Happy Hospital* how:

Walking through the corridors of the hospital the visitor beholds a certain number of "horrors" of such an institution. Bandaged heads and limbs, crooked bodies on crutches, blinded men, and so forth. But the public are accustomed to this nowadays; and the "horrors" alluded to by the curious questioner are rather those which are displayed only in the privacy of the wards and the operating theatre, and with which no outsider comes into contact.<sup>142</sup>

Judging from Muir's contemporary account and later historical research on the subject, it would appear that the film of the 3<sup>rd</sup> London General Hospital only scratched the surface of the realities of wartime rehabilitation.

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<sup>142</sup> Ward Muir, *The Happy Hospital* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co., Ltd., 1918), p. 101.

In summation, select sections of the convalescent demographic were not overtly represented on film, whilst those who were represented were often aware of the cinema's tendency to distort or censor certain realities of convalescent life. In instances such as these, there is an apparent disconnect between reality and cinematic representation. If, as Rüger argues, the cinema 'offered a space for the negotiation of wartime experiences and emotions between people whose ideas of the war could be radically different', it is arguable that the cinematic representation of the returning wounded contributed towards the contrast of ideas between civilian and soldier.<sup>143</sup>

## **Conclusion**

As has been stated, the effect that convalescent soldiers (particularly those with severe injuries) may have had on commercial cinemas and civilian audiences is difficult to quantify. Whilst civilian audiences would have watched somewhat idealised depictions of convalescent rehabilitation on screen, many would have also been confronted by the physical presence of the returning wounded and the uncensored reality of the convalescent experience. After the Armistice, the provision of cinema entertainment for the returning wounded, alongside other entertainments and comforts, appears to have slowly but surely dropped by the wayside, if the lack of newspaper coverage is any indication of the climate of post-war philanthropy. As Joanna Bourke notes, the 'sentimentalization of the war dismembered did not [...] last' and '[t]hose who remained in hospital after the war found that many of the privileges

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<sup>143</sup> Rüger, 'Entertainments', p. 119.

that they had enjoyed before the Armistice were removed.<sup>144</sup> Most notably, the philanthropic efforts, donations and support of civic society paled in comparison with its wartime heyday. As soon as 1920, an appeal published by *The Times* asked for the organisation of entertainment for the men still living in hospitals, 'perhaps a visit to a cinema or other place of entertainment', reminding readers that 'similar arrangements were made on a large scale during the war, and that there should be no difficulty [...] in reviving the organization [sic].'<sup>145</sup>

Nonetheless, the cinema was utilised in a number of different ways within the context of recovery and rehabilitation during and for a time after the First World War, co-opted into a number of different processes through which, it was hoped, the returning soldiers would benefit. From the exhibition sector's enthusiasm to demonstrate the inherent value of the cinema for the purposes of rehabilitation, to the medium's inclusion in a variety of convalescent institutions across the country, the widespread presence of the cinema within the convalescent experience of rehabilitation during this period highlights an extensive endorsement of the medium and its potentially therapeutic benefits. Whilst it is important to consider the exhibition sector's motivations behind the provision of the free cinema entertainment, it is also clear that fundraising drives and schemes such as the Cinematograph Training and Employment Bureau did make an immediate impact on the lives of those injured in the war. Ultimately, however, it is also vital to remember that the cinema was not some miracle device, able to cure depression, trauma and physical disability alike. For every

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<sup>144</sup> Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (London: Reaktion Books, 1996), p. 60.

<sup>145</sup> 'Motor Trips for Wounded', *The Times*, 4 June 1920, p. 13.

man the cinema entertained and helped to forget, there were surely as many that the medium could not reach.

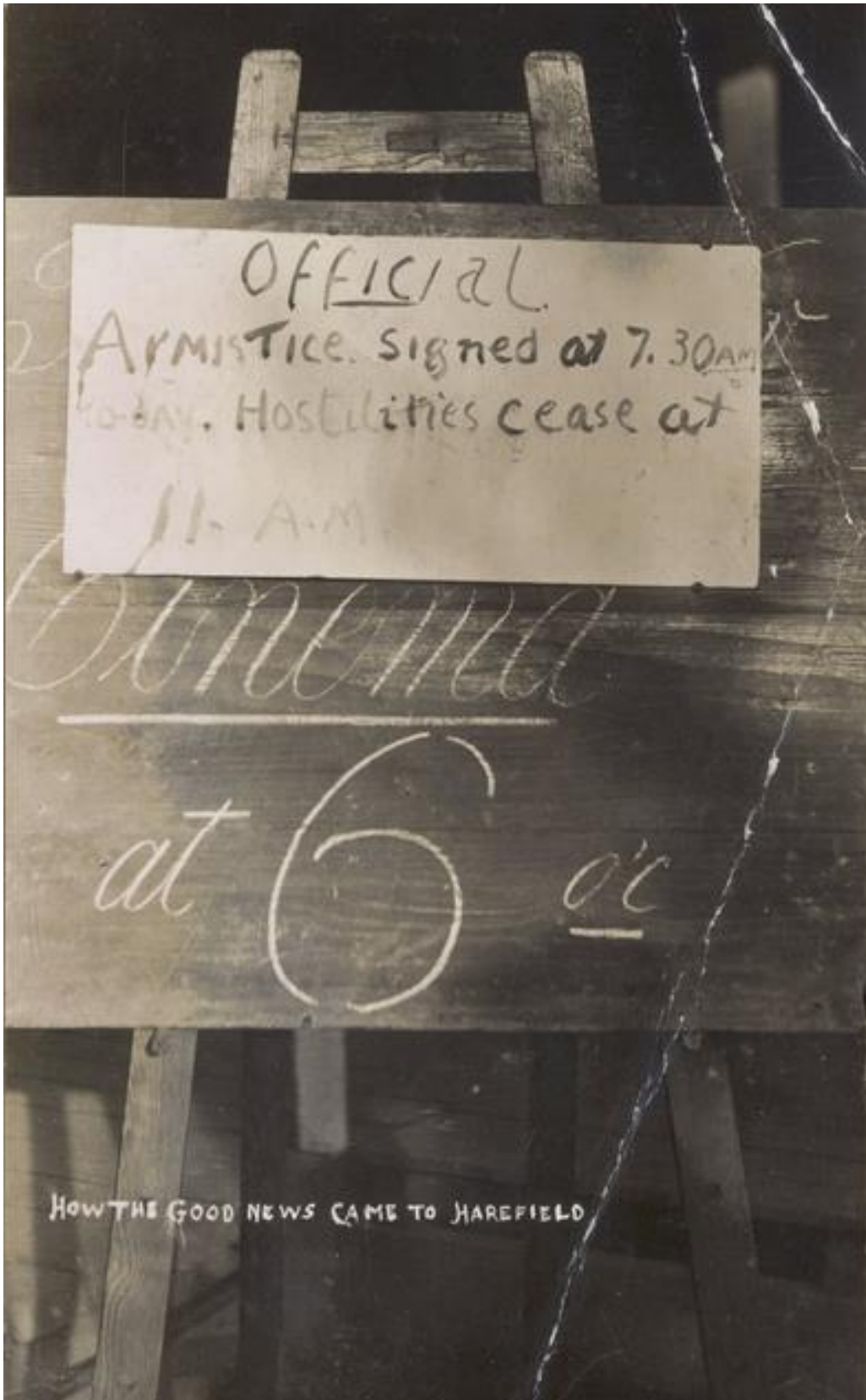


Fig. 6.1: 'How the Good News came to Harefield' photo c.11 November 1918. Australian War Memorial Collection.



## Conclusion

At 11 am on 11 November 1918, four years of unprecedented, devastating warfare came to an end. Around 18 million military personnel and civilians had been killed, millions more would be wounded and/or disabled for the rest of their lives. At the Harefield Park convalescent camp in Middlesex, the Armistice was announced with a simple, solemn, handwritten placard which read: 'Official: Armistice signed at 7.30am to-day. Hostilities cease at 11 a.m.' The announcement itself was mounted upon the notice board for the camp's cinema, the phrase 'Cinema at 6 o'clock' just about visible in Fig. 6.1. Whether or not the advertised cinema programme ran that day is impossible to know, although the image seen above is still highly symbolic of the medium's role within the First World War. Indeed, behind the immediate circumstances and horrors of the conflict, the monumental battles, victories and losses on the front line, up to and including the signing of the Armistice on that November morning, the medium of the cinema remained an important and highly adaptable medium of popular culture, implemented within a variety of situations and contexts for the benefit, however minor

or temporary, of British soldiers at home and on the front line. In rickety barns, abandoned town halls and hospitals, the cinema made its home, offering a much needed respite from the horrors of the conflict, and a reminder of civilian life and the country for which soldiers had fought and died.

Such was its value that in a meeting held in late 1917, still a year out from the end of the war, the British War Office's committee on 'Overlapping in the Production and Distribution of Propaganda' recorded the following note on the use of the cinema up to that point of the war:

When war broke out the Cinema was almost universally regarded as an instrument for the amusement of the masses: the educated classes thought of "the pictures" as responsible for turning romantic shopboys [sic] into juvenile highwaymen, as a sort of moving edition of the "penny dreadful". Here and there its vast potentialities were beginning to be recognized before the War, but it is only now that its value and importance as an agent for good or for evil is being slowly appreciated both by the public and by the government.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the 'good' it accomplished for both the public and the government, this thesis has thoroughly demonstrated that for tens of thousands of men who served in the B.E.F. between 1914 and 1918, the cinema had also played its part. For many, the cinema's wartime role was an important, emotionally significant factor behind their continued psychological health and personal ability to escape from the horrors of the front. The cinema coerced them into joining the ranks, entertained them on those cold and shell-soundtracked evenings, and offered a safe, inclusive form of entertainment

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<sup>1</sup> The National Archives, CAB 27/17, 'Cinema Industry and its Relation to the Government', War Cabinet Committee on Overlapping in the Production and Distribution of Propaganda, 13 October 1917.

for a generation of men left wounded and/or disabled by the ravages of war. Such men came to see themselves in the films projected on screens across the country. At their best, such images only ever offered a harsh and unwanted reminder of the sacrifices these men had made in the name of King and country; at their worst, they came to represent the epitome of the manipulative and highly idealised image-making strategies of popular culture and the British press and government. But within its more light-hearted output of comedies and dramas, soldiers valued the cinema for the morale-boosting entertainment it could provide. As we have seen, this sentiment was not lost on the B.E.F. itself, which incorporated the medium into the hierarchy of the British army on the Western front to a monumentally significant degree.

By uncovering and documenting the multitude of ways in which the cinema was used and appropriated by and for the British military during the First World War, this thesis has closed a significant gap within Film Studies by demonstrably and fundamentally changing our understanding of exhibition and reception during the period. It has foregrounded the historical significance and value of the cinema's use within this specific context, and the need to re-evaluate our previously held assumptions and conclusions regarding the use of the cinema and the conditions of spectatorship during wartime. The research presented in Chapter One has foregrounded the concrete methods and success of the cinema's use within the voluntary recruitment campaigns which swept the country following the outbreak of war. By examining how cinema exhibitors adapted their exhibition practices in order to entice and encourage their younger male audience members to enlist in the B.E.F., Chapter One has shown how the medium of cinema quickly became a significant instrument within the British war effort as a tool to disseminate recruitment propaganda and patriotic sentiment. Furthermore, Chapter One has identified how the first major

steps were undertaken by the production and exhibition sectors of the British film industry to segregate and engage with the contextually determined body of wartime film spectators – soldiers/potential soldiers – for the purposes of ideological coercion, education and support.

Chapter Two has extensively revised and re-written previously held conclusions concerning the provision and scale of cinematic entertainment on the Western front for the British military during the First World War. Through its consultation of alternative and obscure sources of primary evidence (official military documentation, soldier letters and diaries etc.) this chapter has produced a comprehensive account of how and why the medium of the cinema was implemented for British forces on the front line, foregrounding the widespread endorsement of the medium by the B.E.F. in equal standing with other forms of recreation such as sport or theatrical performances. At its core, the conclusions drawn by this chapter represent a significant contribution towards the fields of Film Studies and military history, expanding what has hitherto been covered by little more than a footnote in the history of popular culture and recreation on the front line.

What Chapter Two has done for studies of cinema exhibition during the First World War, Chapters Three and Four have equally accomplished for studies of reception. Indeed, through detailed analysis of primary materials produced by and for soldiers themselves, these two chapters have offered a fundamentally new understanding of audience demographics during the period. By highlighting the multitude of ways that soldier spectators engaged with (and were engaged by) the institution of the cinema during the conflict, this thesis has provided a hitherto absent analysis of, and insight into, a sizable percentage of the British cinemagoing population of the 1910s. Each chapter has foregrounded how the soldier demographic

was conceptualised, by themselves and by authorities and institutions – such as the government, the B.E.F., the British film industry and the public at large – as a discrete and discerning body of film spectators who valued the cinema for distinct and ideologically significant reasons, including its power to provide an outlet for ‘escapism’ and its emotional value as a form of pre-war civilian recreation. Whilst Chapter Three has evidenced how film fandom within the soldier community continued to manifest itself behind the front lines, the research presented in Chapter Four stands to radically alter the discipline’s understanding of contemporary audiences’ perceptions of propaganda and topical filmmaking, dismissing through its highly original use of soldier commentary and memoir any notion that this was a naïve and undiscerning audience, unlike (broadly speaking) their civilian counterparts back home.

Finally, Chapter Five has evidenced how the British exhibition sector and institutions of rehabilitation continued to adapt, shape or even introduce exhibition practices to accommodate and comfort a generation of men returning from the front. Such work was practiced in an effort to rehabilitate the wounded and disabled by providing a psychological respite and, in some cases, an educational tool for the reintegration of the returning wounded back into society. Beyond the conventional concerns of the commercial exhibitor, the cinema in this context, as has been shown, rose to facilitate and support recovery for a sizable body of men, in some cases even providing them with a future career for their post-military life.

Whilst other histories are yet to be told, first and foremost being a similar analysis of cinema exhibition for military audiences in other belligerent nations of the First World War, such as France, Russia and Germany, the research presented here represents the first major contribution towards a greater, all-encompassing history of cinema exhibition and reception during one of the most momentous conflicts of

modern history. In its use of primary evidence not usually consulted by the field of Film Studies (official military documentation) it has, furthermore, provided a model for further research into the provision of cinematic entertainment within other belligerent nations of the First World War and indeed, by the same or different nations in future conflicts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. Above all, I believe that this thesis has gone some way towards bridging the seemingly unfathomable gap between cinema audiences of today, and cinema audiences of a century ago, a sobering and meaningful thought as I write this conclusion in the closing year of centenary commemorations for the First World War.

## Appendices

### Appendix 1: British Army, Corps and Divisional Cinemas on the Western Front, 1914-1918

This appendix collates the evidence for the all known Army, Corps and Divisional formations of the British Expeditionary Force which established and operated a cinema at some point between 4 August 1914 and 11 November 1918, primarily compiled using official military documentation held by the National Archives. Whilst it is impossible to say with certainty that this list is complete given the fragmentary condition of the surviving archival sources, it is my belief that this represents the best achievable record of B.E.F. cinemas during the First World War.

#### Army Cinemas

| <u>Army</u>     | <u>Type</u> | <u>Date Established</u> | <u>Notes</u> | <u>Source</u> |
|-----------------|-------------|-------------------------|--------------|---------------|
| 2nd             | Mobile      | c. September 1918       |              | WO 95/284/2   |
| 5th             | Fixed       | c. June 1918            |              | WO 95/528/1   |
| <b>Total: 2</b> | <b>F: 1</b> | <b>M: 1</b>             |              |               |

#### Corps Cinemas

| <u>Corps</u>     | <u>Type</u> | <u>Date Established</u> | <u>Notes</u>   | <u>Source</u> |
|------------------|-------------|-------------------------|--|---------------|
| 1                | Mobile      | Uncertain               | First referred to as being in operation August 1917.                                   | WO 95/611/3   |
| 2                | Mobile      | 26/11/1917              |  | WO 95/649/7   |
| 3                | Fixed       | c. November 1916        |  | WO 95/685/1   |
| 4                | Fixed       | Uncertain               | First referred to as being discontinued in July 1917, then re-opened in December 1917. | WO 95/725/1   |
| 6                | Fixed       | 5/10/1916               |  | WO 95/778/4   |
| 7                | Fixed       | 26/12/1916              |  | WO 95/809/4   |
| 8                | Mobile      | c. October 1918         |  | WO 95/823/5   |
| 10               | Fixed       | 10/9/1918               |  | WO 95/860/7   |
| 18               | Mobile      | c. June 1918            | Lent by the Expeditionary Force Canteen.   | WO 95/954/3   |
| 19               | Fixed       | 4/9/1918                |  | WO 95/966/1   |
| <b>Total: 10</b> | <b>F: 6</b> | <b>M: 4</b>             |  |               |

#### Divisional Cinemas

| <u>Division</u> | <u>Type</u>      | <u>Date Established</u> | <u>Notes</u> | <u>Source</u> |
|-----------------|------------------|-------------------------|--------------|---------------|
| 1               | Fixed and Mobile | 17/8/1917               |              | WO 95/1236/6  |
| 2               | Fixed            | 28/5/1917               |              | WO 95/1309/2  |

|    |                  |                   |   |   |
|----|------------------|-------------------|---|---|
| 3  | Fixed            | 25/10/1915        |   | WO 95/1383/6  |
| 4  | Fixed            | c. January 1915   |   | WO 95/1449/2  |
| 5  | Fixed            | Uncertain         | First reference to cinema notes that the cinema was 're-opened' on 25 June 1917.          | WO 95/1519/2  |
| 6  | Fixed            | 9/9/1915          |   | WO 95/1585/4  |
| 7  | Fixed            | 10/11/1915        |   | WO 95/1636/4  |
| 8  | Fixed            | c. November 1915  |   | Lt. Colonel J.H. Boraston and Captain Cyril E. O. Bax, <i>The Eighth Division in War 1914-1918</i> , (London: The Medici Society Ltd., 1926), p. 60.                  |
| 9  | Mobile           | 3/4/1916          |   | WO 95/1744/3  |
| 11 | Mobile           | c. Winter 1917/18 |   | WO 95/1793/5-6  |
| 12 | Fixed and Mobile | 12/12/1915        |   | WO 95/1829/1  |
| 14 | Mobile           | 26/10/1917        |   | WO 95/1880/1  |
| 15 | Fixed            | c. September 1917 |   | WO 95/1918/1  |
| 17 | Mobile           | 5/8/1916          |   | WO 95/1986/5  |
| 18 | Fixed            | Uncertain         | First referred to as in operation in August 1918  | WO 95/2018/3  |
| 20 | Unknown          | Uncertain         | Referred to in 4 <sup>th</sup> Army diary, December 1916.                                 | WO 95/441/5 (4 <sup>th</sup> Army Diary)  |
| 23 | Unknown          | 12/12/1916        |   | WO 95/2170/1  |
| 24 | Fixed            | 11/10/1916        |   | WO 95/2193/3  |
| 25 | Fixed            | 20/8/1916         | Operated two cinemas c.November 1917.   | WO 95/2228/2  |
| 29 | Fixed            | 10/8/1916         | Took over from 6 <sup>th</sup> Division (Poperinge)                                       | WO 95/2286/1  |
| 31 | Fixed            | Uncertain         | Referred to in February 1918 by 13 <sup>th</sup> Corps Diary.                             | WO/95/899/2   |
| 33 | Mobile           | c. November 1916  |   | WO 95/2408/5  |
| 34 | Fixed            | Uncertain         |   | Mack, Issac Alexander, <i>Letters from France</i> (Private Printing, 2010), < <a href="http://www.gutenberg.org">www.gutenberg.org</a> > [Accessed 2 May 2018] p. 24. |
| 36 | Fixed            | Uncertain         | First reference to cinema notes that the cinema was 're-opened' on 25 May 1916.           | WO 95/2493/1  |
| 38 | Fixed            | 6/6/1916          |   | WO 95/2541/1  |
| 40 | Unknown          | Uncertain         | First mention of 40 <sup>th</sup> Div. cinema states that it was being handed over to the | WO 95/2594/2  |



|                            |                 |                  |  |   |
|----------------------------|-----------------|------------------|--|---|
|                            |                 |                  | 24th Div.<br>(24/10/1916)  |   |
| 46                         | Fixed           | c. December 1916 |  | W. C. C. Weetman,<br><i>The Sherwood Foresters in the Great War, 1914-1919</i><br>(Nottingham: Forman, 1920), p. 162. |
| 48                         | Unknown         | Uncertain        | Referred to in 4 <sup>th</sup> Army diary, December 1916.  | WO 95/441/5 (4 <sup>th</sup> Army Diary)  |
| 49                         | Fixed           | 16/5/1916        |  | WO 95/2769/2  |
| 50                         | Unknown         | Uncertain        | Referred to in 4 <sup>th</sup> Army diary, December 1916.  | WO 95/441/5 (4 <sup>th</sup> Army Diary); Fuller's Source.  |
| 51                         | Mobile          | 8/4/1916         |  | WO 95/2848/2  |
| 55                         | Mobile          | c. March 1916    |  | WO 95/2908/1  |
| 56                         | Fixed           | Uncertain        | First reference to cinema notes that the cinema was 're-opened' on 22 December 1917.   | WO 95/2936/3  |
| 59                         | Fixed           | 24/7/1917        |  | WO 95/3012/2  |
| 61                         | Fixed           | Uncertain        | The 4 <sup>th</sup> Army diary lists a cinema for the 61 <sup>st</sup> Div. although no mention is to be found in the Div.'s diary. The 61 <sup>st</sup> Div. does note the [re]opening of their Div. Cinema on 8/10/1917. | WO 95/441/5 (4 <sup>th</sup> Army Diary); WO 95/3036.   |
| 62                         | Fixed           | Uncertain        | Minor references to a 62 <sup>nd</sup> Div. travelling cinema in June 1917 and a fixed cinema in June 1918.  | WO 95/3072/1-2  |
| 63<br>(Naval)              | Fixed           | Uncertain        | Referred to as being in operation June 1917.   | WO 95/3098/3  |
| Guards                     | Fixed           | 24/3/1916        | Uncertain as to whether this is the same venue used by 6 <sup>th</sup> and 29 <sup>th</sup> Divisions.   | WO 95/1197  |
| 1 <sup>st</sup><br>Cavalry | Fixed           | c. January 1918  |  | WO 95/1100/2  |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup><br>Cavalry | Fixed           | c. Summer 1916   |  | WO 95/1119/3-4  |
| <b>Total:</b> 40           | <b>F:</b><br>28 | <b>M:</b> 9      |  |   |

|   |    |
|---|----|
| <b>Total British Army, Corps and Divisional Formations with Cinemas on the Western Front, 1914-1918</b> | 53 |
|---|----|

### **Miscellaneous Formations with Cinemas**

| <b><u>Formation</u></b>                        | <b><u>Type</u></b> | <b><u>Date Established</u></b> | <b><u>Notes</u></b>  | <b><u>Source</u></b>                          |
|--|--------------------|--------------------------------|--|---|
| 14 <sup>th</sup><br>Ammunition<br>Sub-Park     | Fixed              | 22/3/1916                      | Referred to in 6 Corps<br>Routine Order dated<br>21/3/1916 | WO 95/777/3                                   |
| 14 <sup>th</sup><br>Brigade                    | Uncertain          | Uncertain                      | Referred to 2 Corps Routine<br>Order dated 4/3/1918        | WO 95/650/2                                   |
| 31 <sup>st</sup> Motor<br>Transport<br>Company | Uncertain          | Uncertain                      | See Fig. 2.17  | Photo from<br>Nicholas<br>Hiley<br>Collection |
| 92 <sup>nd</sup> Motor<br>Transport<br>Company | Uncertain          | Uncertain                      | See Fig. 2.14.   | Photo from<br>Nicholas<br>Hiley<br>Collection |
| 96 <sup>th</sup><br>Brigade                    | Uncertain          | Uncertain                      | Referred to 2 Corps Routine<br>Order dated 4/3/1918        | WO 95/650/2                                   |
| 97 <sup>th</sup><br>Brigade                    | Uncertain          | Uncertain                      | Referred to 2 Corps Routine<br>Order dated 4/3/1918        | WO 95/650/2                                   |
| <b>Total: 6</b>                                |                    |                                |  |   |

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Imperial War Museum Collection, London

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Papers of the Star and Garter Home, Surrey History Centre, Woking

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*The Bioscope*

*The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*

*The Kinematograph Year Book, Program Diary and Directory 1917* (London: E. T. Heron & Co., Ltd., 1917)

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*The Cinegoer*

*Motion Picture News*

*The Moving Picture World*

*Pictures and the Picturegoer*

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*Aberdeen Evening Express*

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*Derby Daily Telegraph*  
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*The Edinburgh Evening News*  
*The Era*  
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*Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*  
*Folkstone, Hythe, Sandgate and Cheriton Herald*  
*The Harefield Park Boomerang*  
*Hastings and St. Leonards Observer*  
*Hull Daily Mail*  
*The Illustrated War News*  
*The Leigh Chronicle*  
*The Liverpool Daily Post*  
*The Liverpool Echo*  
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*The Manchester Guardian*

*Newcastle Journal*  
*The Observer*  
*The Observer and West Sussex Recorder*  
*The Ontario Stretcher*  
*Pall Mall Gazette*  
*The People's Journal*  
*Perthshire Advertiser*  
*Portsmouth Evening News*  
*The Scotsman*  
*Sevenoaks Chronicle and Kentish Advertiser*  
*Sheffield Evening Telegraph*  
*Sheffield Weekly Telegraph*  
*The Spectator*  
*Stonehaven Journal*  
*The Sunday Times*  
*Surrey Mirror and County Post*  
*Sussex Express, Surrey Standard and Kent Mail*  
*Thanet Advertiser*  
*The Times*  
*Western Daily Press*  
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*The British Empire Y.M.C.A. Weekly*  
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*The Cologne Post*  
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*The Fifth Glo'ster Gazette*

*The Gazette: 3<sup>rd</sup> London General Hospital T. F.*

*The Harefield Park Boomerang*

*The Hydra: The Magazine of Craiglockheart War Hospital*

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- Capt. Jinks and His Wife's Husband* (USA, Vitagraph Company of America, d. Van Dyke Brooke, 1917)
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*Nurse and Martyr* (UK, Phoenix Film Agency, d. Percy Moran, 1915)

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### **Newsreel Items**

#### Gaumont Graphic

- *Honouring a V.C.* (1915)
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#### Pathé's Animated Gazette

- *Eyes of the Fleet, The* (1915)
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- *Wounded Soldiers Visit Cinema* (1917)

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- *Battle of Lebbeke, The* (1914)
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### **Animated Series**

*John Bull's Animated Sketchbook*

