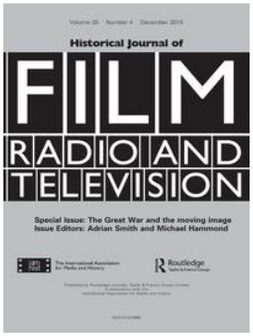

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INTRODUCTION

THE GREAT WAR AND THE MOVING IMAGE

Adrian Smith and Michael Hammond

The First World War is also the first cinematic war, its onset chiming with the necessary technology becoming widely available. There now existed a mechanical means of recording armed combat on film, and at a level of sophistication acceptable to a mass audience. Furthermore, almost all of the combatant nations possessed an infrastructure, however embryonic, to transmit the cine camera's celluloid record of events to suitably receptive viewers: the war prompted further private and public initiatives to maximise the accessibility and availability of a potentially powerful propaganda tool. That potential was rarely recognised at the start of the conflict, not least because agencies of state censorship failed to appreciate that allowing correspondents and cameramen access to the front line generated morale-boosting messages for news-hungry civilians back home. The British Expeditionary Force (BEF) was unusually blinkered in its commitment to controlling all information, not least an incipient photographic record of trench warfare. Notwithstanding an eventual change of heart, the Army's enthusiasm for censorship is ironic given that so many enduring scenes captured on film emanate from the British war effort.

Allenby entering Jerusalem, tanks rolling off the start line at Cambrai, the Lancashires having a last smoke on the first day of the Somme, the mines exploding at Messines, the canary girls filling shells at Woolwich Arsenal – the list goes on and on, feeding into a global catalogue of iconic footage. Here is a century-old cinematic record, much of it revolutionary in both coverage and content, whether that be Lenin addressing the Petrograd Soviet or the panoramic shots of a pulverised Dublin in the wake of Easter 1916. 'Iconic' is an over-employed, much devalued adjective, and yet particular scenes remain etched into our individual and collective memories, at the same time forming an integral part of specific national mythologies. Like any genuinely cataclysmic event, the 'Great War' – for Britain and its empire the 'war to end all wars' – is deeply rooted in myth; but, unlike the global contest of the great powers a century earlier, this conflagration could be relived courtesy of the silver screen. Here were powerful moving images which retained a force and intensity far beyond the emotions generated by the single

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snapshots in time which constitute photographic evidence of earlier campaigns, from the Crimea to South Africa (yes, film of the second Boer War survives, but it is both experimental and artificial).

Our familiarity with film from the First World War is of sufficient breadth and depth as to leave us reflecting ruefully upon those moments when the cameramen were absent – they were certainly present in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914, but far from the Latin Bridge. Our time would be better spent recalling the physical and emotional demands made of the men – and women – who captured on camera just about every aspect of the war, and often in the most appalling and dangerous conditions. Their technical competence paralleled the capacity of service personnel and civilian workers to utilise second- or third-generation industrial technology in a service or manufacturing role, irrespective of any formal training. At the dawn of the analogue age, with the advent of 'industrial war', the utilisation of new technology generated results inconceivable half a century earlier. These disproportionate consequences were especially evident in the second half of the Great War, and cinema confirms both sides' endeavours to maximise quantity and optimise quality. For example, when we view footage from 1918 of an SE5a in flight, we marvel at the evolution of such an efficient killing machine in four years *and* at the equipment employed to provide such a clearly defined, sharply focused set of aerial images.

The past twenty-five years have seen an explosion of scholarly interest in the filming of the First World War, digital technology facilitating a – literally – clearer picture of what contemporary audiences saw on the cinema screen. Individual films, widely available in fresh prints as a consequence of recovery and restoration, have been revisited and reappraised in the light of enhanced or additional footage. Crucially, successive waves of interdisciplinary scholarship have expanded our knowledge of the circumstances in which high-profile productions such as *The Battle of the Somme* were commissioned, shot, edited, censored, distributed and received (both at home and across the Empire, and beyond – most notably in the United States). Reappraisal of these ambitious attempts to convey a fuller, and in consequence more honest, portrayal of modern warfare has facilitated a clearer appreciation of the following: what audiences did or did not know about the harsh reality of the Western Front; what the authorities considered acceptable in terms of depicting real-life combat to non-service personnel; and the graphic detail displayed in individual scenes, not least the capture on camera of soldiers being killed.

However, Rebecca Harrison's contribution to this special issue of the *HJFRT* provides a sharp reminder of how far the military authorities were prepared to go in sanitising the bloody consequences of modern warfare. Her inquiry into cinematic representation of British and imperial ambulance trains constitutes a persuasive argument for revisiting films which were strikingly sophisticated in projecting an artificial – indeed downright deceitful – narrative of how well the wounded were treated between casualty station and hospital ward. Harrison demonstrates how newspapers and magazines, not least the *Illustrated London News*, conspired to reinforce the illusion that casualties were carried home in a suitably clean and sterile environment: skilled manipulation of monochrome film facilitated an intensity of light such that the overwhelming whiteness of the carriage interiors blocked out in the viewer's mind any disturbing images of disfigurement and dismemberment.

The Battle of the Somme is noteworthy for the shocking reality of the scenes capturing British infantrymen as they go over the top and are quickly gunned down. While some of these scenes are generally recognised to be re-enactments, the images of soldiers' faces staring at the camera as they wait to go into action and the stark footage of the wounded and the dead are genuine and as moving today as they were a century ago. *The Battle of the Somme* is also remarkable for the number of civilians – many not regular cinema-goers – who viewed the film following its release in August 1916.[1] Equally striking is the number that returned for a second or even third screening, if only hoping to catch a fleeting glimpse of a loved one.[2] The popularity, for whatever reason, of this pioneering epic eased fears in the War Office (and the Admiralty) that such a frank portrayal of war in the raw would undermine morale, at home *and* even in the front line. Satisfaction felt by senior staff explains the more relaxed stance adopted by the service ministries in the Second World War, culminating in each of the armed forces establishing its own film unit. The latter eschewed shots of the dying and deceased, allowing the late Arthur Marwick to suggest that for wartime cinema-goers in 1939–45, the absence of dead bodies rendered combat a remarkably septic affair.[3] At 'The Great War and the Moving Image' conference Toby Haggith, took the story on from the Somme: when screening *The Battle of the Ancre and Advance of the Tanks*, the Imperial War Museum's film archivist described the impact of the conflict across the Channel on cinema audiences which by 1917 had, albeit briefly, seen at second hand the violent termination of life.[4]

Note the references to cinema audience*s*. Papers given at the 'The Great War and the Moving Image' conference which inspired this special issue all made the point that from July 1914 to November 1918, the collective experience of viewing a film was multifaceted; and in consequence immune from generalisation, however, cautious.[5] Successive speakers emphasised just how much the actuality of cinema-going varied enormously on both sides, and within individual combatant nations. Particular attention was paid to how and why service personnel viewed films, and here the focus was upon entertainment and escape rather than education and enlightenment.

The unprecedented recording and transmission of a global conflict on celluloid is what makes film and the First World War so fascinating for *all* historians, not simply students of cinema; but not at the expense of understanding why entertainment on screen was so crucial to maintaining morale at home and on the front line. Hence, the value of Amanda Laugeson's and Emma Hanna's complementary perspectives on cinema provision for British Tommies and their Digger trench mates in France or Belgium, and also back home in Blighty. A remarkable range of voluntary bodies, whether already in existence or spawned by war, provided material – and spiritual – support for the soldiers and sailors of the Empire, none more so than the YMCA. Both of the articles on cinema and the Western Front identify the YMCA as first amongst equals, not least because of the scale on which the organisation operated. Behind the lines, the capacity to improvise was remarkable, and nowhere more so than in the screening of films; whether alone or in conjunction with other entertainment, invariably a concert party of visiting music hall artists and/or would-be variety acts briefly swapping khaki for costume. Especially popular on such occasions was the Charlie Chaplin impressionist, reflecting the

unique status of Hollywood's most important contribution to the Allied war effort. The ubiquitous Chaplin was an ever present in conference discussion of 'The Great War and the Moving Image'; and, as signalled by the Laugesen and Hanna articles, for so many soldiers and civilians, the comedic tramp was synonymous with 'the pictures'. In an age of silent cinema visual comedy cut across barriers of culture and language, reinforcing bonds of kith, kin and alliance, and even surmounting deep political and military divide – troops from Birmingham to Brisbane, let alone Bayonne or even Berlin, were united in the pure pleasure and brief release from reality that an Essanay one- or a Mutual two-reeler was guaranteed to provide.

In her insightful study of the Government's clumsy efforts to encourage food husbandry and thrifty cooking, Stella Hockenhull notes the aggregate size of Britain's weekly cinema audience: as many as ten million adults and children were attending a film show at least once a week. If something like a quarter of the population were enthusiasts for the new medium then it is scarcely surprising that by 1915, Whitehall propagandists were cultivating the nation's embryonic film industry; with the British experience mirrored in Paris, Vienna and Berlin. Hockenhull highlights how divisive her chosen films were, all too often reinforcing obsolete and prejudicial bourgeois stereotypes of the 'lower classes'. Purporting to exhort the nation to make even greater sacrifices in the kitchen or on the allotment, most of these 'advisory' or 'educational' films risked further alienating a suspicious working class. Their questionable record compares starkly with the inclusive approach adopted by the Ministry of Food and Ministry of Information in the instructional films produced from May 1940 to the end of the Second World War, and through to the end of the decade.

The recognition by governments of the potential to reach audiences did not necessarily mean that audiences, or the exhibitors, were always enthusiastic about them. Exhibitors on both sides of the conflict sought to provide programmes their audiences wanted to see. While official feature films such as Britain's *The Battle of the Somme* generated unusually wide engagement and prolonged attention, the shorter newsreels with footage of the front were the preference of exhibitors and audiences. Three case studies of local towns – Louvain in Belgium, Southampton in England and Stevens Point in Wisconsin – demonstrate the different (yet surprisingly similar) ways that exhibitors utilised the war as an opportunity to render cinema, and local film theatres, respectable forms of entertainment and escape. Louvain's near destruction in August 1914, and its resulting occupation by the Germans, presented a difficult and unique set of problems for exhibitors, notably different from the experience of Southampton and Stevens Point. Southampton, directly touched by the war like almost all British localities, was unique in its role as the Army's principal transit port. Its population filled with passing soldiers and an influx of women war workers, which exhibitors worked hard to attract. Exhibitors in Stevens Point, with its high percentage of German and Polish immigrant populations, sought to engage their audiences against the background of American isolationism and an increasing momentum to join the Allies. In all three locales, exhibitors had similar challenges, from acquiring films or incorporating live acts to remain competitive, to meeting the requirements of government regulation, as well as the threats and dictates of informal moral regulation. The war seems to have had the effect of providing a background for establishing the cinema as a respectable element within the social fabric of each community.

The war's legacy for the commercial film industry seems primarily to have been to usher in social acceptance of cinema as a modern mode of entertainment and information; and increasingly once the war was over, as a means of memory and myth making. Those myths are the basis for Chris Kempshall's discussion of video games' present-day role in perpetuating and augmenting public memory of the Great War. With their good versus evil template for heroic action, Second World War narratives have dominated the video game market. However, the construction of heroes in video games based upon the Western Front is more downbeat. Echoing prevailing myths of futility, and of 'lions led by donkeys', the characters in these games are often solitary figures cast against a background of a myriad of faceless comrades. The role of these individuals is to engage in suitably heroic action despite the demonstrably senseless missions they have been tasked to undertake. Kempshall outlines how in certain cases these narrative structures facilitate a deeper sense and understanding of the front line experience, in that the game player more fully understands and empathises with the plight of the ordinary soldier caught up in a brutal and brutalising combat scenario.

The war's immediate impact on the cinema industry was profound at every level, whether production, distribution or exhibition. Production in Europe and Britain was curtailed, and distribution networks were disrupted and reorganised in ways which ultimately favoured the competing industrial might of Hollywood. Paradoxically, on both sides of the Atlantic exhibition ultimately benefited, in both achieving a degree of respectability and competing successfully with live popular theatres, such as vaudeville and music hall. At the same time, the role of cinema in constructing individual and collective memory and perception of the First World War began with the first footage shot at the front; and this continues on screen through to the present day via both fictional and non-fictional portrayals of the conflict. However, this has never been an easy relationship. After visiting the trenches on the Western Front to research his 1918 film *Hearts of the World*, which Britain's War Office partly funded, D.W. Griffith famously noted to a *Photoplay* journalist that when, 'viewed as a drama, the war is in some ways disappointing'. The barren landscape, and the soldiers' troglodyte existence in the trenches, offered little by way of the sweeping battle scenes Griffith had depicted in his epic *The Birth of A Nation* three years earlier. And yet real drama abounded in the private hopes and fears of soldiers on and behind the front line, displaced refugees far from home and nursing staff on packed hospital trains; not forgetting the volunteers of the YMCA and its partner charities, all striving to ensure their crowded cinema huts could offer brief respite from the grim reality of total war. Cinema's ability to depict apparently realistic images contrasts with its almost limitless plasticity and capacity for manipulation. That paradox was premiered emphatically with the coming of the Great War.

Notes

1. *The Battle of the Somme* (British Topical War Films, UK, 1916); restored and rereleased by the Imperial War Museum on DVD in 2008.

2. Michael Hammond, *The Big Show, British Cinema Culture in the Great War 1914–1918* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2006), 98–127.
3. Arthur Marwick, 'The Home Front 1939–45', lecture to Canterbury Historical Association, [?] 1978.
4. On the Imperial War Museum's restoration of *The Battle of the Ancre and Advance of the Tanks* (British Topical War Films, UK, 1917), see: //blogs.iwm.org.uk/research/2012/11/restoring-the-first-world-war-film-the-battle-of-the-ancre-and-advance-of-the-tanks-1917/.
5. 'The Great War and the Moving Image' (joint conference of the University of Kent and the University of Southampton, held in Canterbury, 15–16 April 1916) under the auspices of the AHRC-funded 'Gateways to the First World War' project [see www.kent.ac.uk/ww1/].

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