Review of *Cinemas and Cinema-Going in the United Kingdom: Decades of Decline, 1945–65* by Sam Manning.

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Sam Manning's *Cinemas and Cinema-Going in the United Kingdom: Decades of Decline, 1945–65* is a much needed contribution to the growing literature that places British cinema-going and cinema within broader social, cultural, political, economic and spatial contexts. Informed by New Cinema History theory and methods, it charts the interplay between regional variations and national trends that shaped cinema-going. This includes considerations of the institutions of cinema exhibition, social practices of cinema-going, experiences of cinema-goers, and the meanings attached to visiting the pictures. Manning argues that cinema-going practices were more 'heterogeneous' than previous scholars thought.[1]

By focusing upon case studies of cinema-going in predominantly working-class areas of Belfast and Sheffield, Manning demonstrates the benefits of microhistory (and, indeed, mesohistory when he focuses upon communities rather than individuals) to historical studies of cinema-going. Through numerous and carefully considered archival and press sources as well as oral histories, Manning reads against the grain of existing national narratives that shape our understanding of the changing relationship between cinema, popular culture and wider society.

Resisting explanations of declining cinema attendances and cinema closures (with a corresponding diminishment of cinema's social significance) due to the rise of television, Manning provides a nuanced explanation of the decline of cinema-going in the post-War period. His comparative approach brings to the fore the sometimes shared but often distinct local characteristics of cinema closures (by 1961 cinema attendance dropped to a third of its highest post-War level and hundreds of cinemas had closed).[2] During the period of post-War urban reconstruction required after the Blitz, for instance, Manning uncovers how Belfast Corporation prioritised the construction of housing and factories over entertainment and leisure amenities to a much greater extent than Sheffield City Council. As a consequence, no new cinemas were built in Belfast until 1954, only a handful renovated and large film exhibition companies (such as the Rank Organisation) had limited access to the Northern Irish market compared to local chains. This unique context sets up Manning's explanations for the cinema closures that 'altered the social life of the city'.[3] He explains how Northern Ireland's Entertainment Duty caused rising costs, the start of Ulster Television provided alternative indoor entertainment, and the conversion of cinemas into other leisure and consumer spaces all contributed to turning punters away (or making their visits more infrequent) and, ultimately, cinema closures.

The book outlines similarities between Belfast and Sheffield—fewer major cinema exhibitors compared to local chains and independents, and the cost of Entertainment Tax to exhibitors alongside the rise of home television. However, Sheffield in 1958 was a city that had seen new cinemas constructed alongside some post-War housing estates. As Sheffield's cinemas closed ('fifty-two in 1955 to twenty-three in 1964') and older patterns of cinema-going became less ubiquitous,

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[1] Sam Manning, *Cinema and Cinema-going in the United Kingdom: Decades of Decline, 1945-65* (London, 2020), 2.

[2] Manning, Cinema and Cinema-going, 119.

[3] Manning, Cinema and Cinema-going, 108.

Manning is astute to note that a new plush city centre Odeon cinema, the epitome of modern cinema design, opened.[4] This reaffirmed—along with the six suburban cinemas that were built in Belfast as 18 Belfast cinemas closed between 1955 and 1962—that even in the 1960s there was demand for some sorts of cinema-going and particularly those that provided glamour, enjoyment and escapism.

Beyond institutional and business matters, Manning corroborates works that recover how place, class and social identity—gender and age in particular—impacted upon patterns of cinema going in twentieth century Britain. Chapter 4, 'Cinema exhibition, programming and audience preferences in Belfast', uses cinema-listings and box office data alongside Entertainment Duty summaries to recover clues to film preferences. Chapter 5, which focuses upon film exhibition in Sheffield, also exemplifies the usefulness of a mixed qualitative and quantitative approach to approach the relationship between cinema and social experiences.

Chapter Four complicates assumptions about the relationship between sectarian divides and film preferences in Belfast. Manning shows how certain films performed better in republican areas than unionist ones and vice versa as well as how, generally, British films fared less successfully in the six counties than in the rest of the UK. Films with Irish themes were popular—confirming arguments about the significance of local ties to cinema-going preferences, but noting this was more marked in Belfast than Sheffield—as well as Hollywood cinema. Interestingly, he shows that there seemed to be no complaints when *Captain Boycott* (1947), a film depicting the Irish Land War of the 1880s focusing on tenant farmers resisting English absentee landlords in County Mayo, was shown at the mostly Catholic-attended *Classic* with a supporting feature including film of the royal wedding of Princess Elizabeth and Philip Mountbatten.[5] Similarly, *the Quiet Man* (1952), which Manning argues portrayed an 'idealised' version of the Irish Free State of the 1920s, was popular in cinemas in unionist areas.[6]

However, it might be reasonable to question if the catholic (excuse the pun) preferences of the 1940s and 1950s were challenged as the region moved towards conflict. Therefore, perhaps more could have been made of Belfast's position on the brink of a civil war when considering patterns of cinema-going and film preferences particularly when making comparisons with Sheffield, however—a relatively peaceful city. Furthermore, considering the dynamic interplay between memories of the past and the present context, oral history participants from Belfast interviewed since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 might have overstated community cohesion in the post-War but pre-Troubles period and understated the discrimination suffered by Catholic communities in order to forget the reality of a divided and violent period. As Manning observed in an earlier chapter, there was de facto segregation at the Gaity theatre in the Belfast city centre; residents of the Shankhill Road visited three days per week and those from the Falls Road occupied other three (in Belfast cinemas were closed on Sundays unlike their counterparts in Sheffield).[7]

Responses to *Captain Boycott* might, for instance, have offered an opportunity to interrogate Protestant perspectives upon Catholic civil rights before the divisions intensified into war. This would have, however, required an approach that looks further past preference as a form of aggregated consumer choice to probe how choices and patterns of cinema-going might have related to cultural and political values. Nevertheless, just as Manning has provided template for further case

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[4] Manning, Cinema and Cinema-going, 91.
[5] Manning, Cinema and Cinema-going, 142.
[6] Manning, Cinema and Cinema-going, 143-144.
[7] Manning, Cinema and Cinema-going, 46-47.

studies of cinema-going in cities across the UK that will provide a fuller picture of cinema-going in the UK, this book might encourage research that considers the extent sectarian divides shaped cinema-going, leisure and entertainment in Northern Ireland immediately before and during the Troubles.

Manning has offered a detailed explanation of cinema-going habits in the post-War United Kingdom that provides a point of departure for further scholarship—much in the same way Annette Kuhn and Jeffrey Richards did for the 1930s' 'Golden Age' of British cinema-going.[8] The book is of great value to historians concerned with cinema-going in the United Kingdom and offers much for historians of leisure, entertainment and the cultural industries.

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[8] Anette Kuhn, *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (London, 2002). Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in 1930s Britain* (London, 2010).