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Chris Grosvenor, *Cinema on the Front Line: British Soldiers and Cinema in the First World War* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2021), pp. xii + 242, 29 illus., ISBN 9 781905 816736 (hb), £75.

In the opening scenes of *The Return of the Soldier*, Rebecca West's 1918 war novel, the narrator, Jenny recounts her nightmares about her cousin Christopher, the eponymous soldier who is serving overseas. In these dreams, Christopher pitches forward on his knees, echoing the images of men falling from trench parapets in death that Jenny has seen in films. This early reference to the power of film to shape Jenny's understanding of Christopher's war service is used by West to illustrate the distance between civilian women and male servicemen at war.

As a civilian woman Jenny is the archetypal wartime cinema goer in Britain during the First World War, as discussed by film historians such as Nicholas Hiley and Michael Hammond. It is, however, the male serviceman who is the subject of Chris Grosvenor's new volume, *Cinema on the Front Line: British Soldiers and Cinema in the First World War*. Identifying soldiers, particularly those serving overseas, as a specific and under-examined film audience demographic, Grosvenor considers how these men's encounters with the new medium of film shaped and was shaped by their military experience. He does this through the examination of the role of film in recruitment, the physical practicalities of frontline cinema-going, soldier audience responses to wartime films of different types, and the use of films in spaces of medical care and rehabilitation. His stated aim in this investigation is to close 'a significant gap within Film Studies by demonstrably and fundamentally changing our understanding of exhibition and reception during the period.' (82)

As this goal indicates, the primary audience for this study is film studies scholars, reflected in the theoretical literature cited in the introduction. For the cultural historian of the war reading this book, concepts such as non-theatrical exhibition and ‘sponsorship’ may be unfamiliar. While they were clearly explained, the extent of their historically specific relevance was not always made clear. The exception is the idea of ‘useful cinema’, used by Grosvenor in his framing in ways which provide original and enlightening insight into soldiers’ experiences as cinema audiences during the war. Grosvenor also makes good use of primary sources, with his use of film reviews in trench journals in particular providing novel insight into familiar source material.

The films studies context serves, perhaps, as an explanation for the significant weakness of the book, which is a lack of awareness of current historiography in relation to the social history of the war. Grosvenor’s definition of the ‘soldier’, the audience demographic that is central to his analysis, relies on rather outdated social histories of British servicemen at war, such as the works of Eric Leed, Richard Holmes and Dennis Winter. A series of implicit assumptions underpins the idea of the soldier audience, including that all soldiers served in the infantry (89) and that all soldiers served overseas (84). The resultant definition is monolithic, failing to acknowledge the diversity both of servicemen and service experience during the war. Even more problematic is Grosvenor’s reiteration of the idea that soldiers formed an ‘insular’ community, distinct from civilian audiences (138,148). In spite of references to Michael Roper’s *The Secret Battle* (2009), he appears unaware of the growing historiographic consensus that British servicemen in the First World War maintained a strong sense of connection to their civilian identities, even as they developed bonds of comradeship during their service. The comparisons that Grosvenor draws between civilian and soldier

audience throughout in order to make his case for the originality of his thesis are, in this light, less distinctive than he suggests.

The limits of Grosvenor's familiarity with current social and cultural histories of the war is also evident in the final chapter on film as part of wartime medical rehabilitation. The chapter includes interesting discussions of the way in which military patients were able to access film during treatment and convalescence, and the role of the cinema trade in offering work and training opportunities to the disabled. However, the final section, on the visibility of wounded and disabled servicemen in cinemas as entertainment spaces is confused. Grosvenor suggests that disabled ex-servicemen were at once a common sight and isolated from the public gaze (175). Not only is this argument contradictory, but it overlooks important scholarship by social historians of medicine such as Jeffrey Reznick and Eilis Boyle which demonstrate the extent to which the physically disabled were both objects of the public gaze and able to successfully reintegrate into post-war society. Again, there is a lack of nuance in the definition of the audience whose responses Grosvenor seeks to explore, reflecting the contemporaneous 'broad categorizing of the group' that he himself critiques (175). As a result, as the author himself acknowledges, the questions raised by the complex relationship between war disability and the visual culture of film are not, and perhaps cannot be, answered (172, 176).

Cinema on the Screen is clearly the produce of Grosvenor's PhD research, and written in a style which seeks to both demonstrate the originality of the research and speak to a predominantly academic audience. This can make it a challenging read, particularly in the sections setting out the theoretical framework and argument. When dealing with the primary source material, however, Grosvenor writes engagingly and well.

For all its historiographic, analytic and stylistic limitations, however, Grosvenor's work does, ultimately, succeed in its stated aim of illuminating overlooked facets of First World War cinema circulation and consumption. From the historian's perspective, it may not itself make a significant contribution to the cultural history of the war. It does, however, highlight the significance of exploring wartime film audiences in more depth, and suggests relevant archives that might be interrogated to do so. It thus has the potential to stimulate further historical analysis and is, therefore, a potentially relevant for historians working in the field.

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