

The dying of the light: The blackout, cinemas, and cinemagoing in wartime Britain

Richard Farmer,
University of East Anglia, UK

Abstract:

Instituted at the start of World War Two in an attempt to prevent enemy pilots locating British cities, the blackout was one of the most immediate and obvious signs that Britain was at war. Altering perceptions of time and space, the blackout affected the ways in which Britons interacted with the built environment in general, and the cinema in particular. Because cinema is a technology of light – in terms of both the production and exhibition of films – light is an essential element of the cinemagoing experience, and in the 1930s, many British cinema designers used ‘night architecture’ to fuse form and function, creating an aesthetic that could only be fully comprehended after dark when buildings were brilliantly lit with floodlights and neon. The advent of the blackout extinguished these external lights and so both denied patrons one of the anticipatory pleasures associated with a trip to the cinema and affected a venue’s visibility within a given locale. This article shows how the blackout ensured that the cinema building itself was encountered and experienced according to the specific circumstances of wartime, transforming the nature of a night at the pictures and anchoring the cinemagoing experience firmly within the reality of life in a nation at war, thereby demonstrating that the film watcher’s relationship with and experience of the cinema is acutely sensitive to the shifting historical moment.

On the evening of 1 September 1939, Mea Allan of the *Daily Herald* stood on Hungerford Bridge and watched as London was transformed by arrival of the blackout:

The whole great town was lit up like a fairyland, in a dazzle that reached into the sky, and then one by one, as a switch was pulled, each area went dark, the dazzle becoming a patchwork of lights being snuffed out here and there until a last one remained, and it too went out.

For Allan, the switching off of London's lights was 'a fearful portent,' a sign that during the war light 'would be our enemy'.¹

Restrictions on lighting – introduced because of fears that nocturnal illumination might allow German bomber pilots to more easily locate British targets – were issued under Regulation 24 of the Defence Regulations, 1939:

1. No person shall during the hours of darkness cause or permit:
 - a. any light inside any roofed building, closed vehicle or other covered enclosure to be displayed unless the light is so obscured as to prevent any illumination therefrom being visible from outside the building, vehicle or enclosure;
 - b. any light, not being a light in a roofed building, closed vehicle or other covered enclosure, to be displayed.
2. No person shall, for the purpose of advertisement or display, cause or permit any sky-sign, fascia or advertisement to be illuminated, or any light to be displayed, outside or at the entrance to any premises, or on any hoarding or similar structure.²

Because many British cinemas used, in P. Morton Shand's words, 'a brilliant focus of artificial light' as both 'operating medium' and 'shop-sign'³ – that is, to project moving images within the darkened auditorium and to advertise themselves within their immediate environments through the use of decorative exterior lighting – these buildings might be understood to have been particularly affected by the blackout. The *Observer* was quick to note that the blackout changed the nature of the relationship between the exterior and interior pleasures offered by the cinema: 'the stars shine only within ... the outer blaze is darkened.'⁴ Such changes, in turn, altered the ways in which British cinemagoers accessed and experienced the cinema.

In this article, which emerges from my wider research into wartime cinemas and cinemagoing,⁵ I will explore some of the ways in which British cinemas were affected by, and responded to, the blackout, and will seek to demonstrate that because British cinemas were fully integrated within both everyday life and the urban environment, they were no more able to escape the realities and difficulties of the conflict than were their patrons. Looking first at street lighting (and its absence), and then more specifically at cinema lighting (and its absence) this article will think about the ways in which the blackout affected cinemas and cinemagoing in wartime. Because an audience's engagement with the cinema is not limited to the watching of films in the auditorium but also incorporates interaction with the cinema as a building situated in specific spatial and temporal locales, changes to the ways in which those buildings were approached, how they looked and the manner in which they were operated were capable of having profound effects on the experience of a trip to the pictures.

Almost every history of Britain during the Second World War discusses the blackout,⁶ with some offering more detailed investigations of its impact on specific aspects of wartime

life and society.⁷ Moreover, the blackout's close association with the start of hostilities meant that it came to be understood as a perfect synecdoche for the conflict, symbolising both the war and the impact that the war would have on pre-war social norms and patterns of consumption.⁸ Concomitantly, the much-longed-for end of the war came to be associated with the much-longed-for end of the blackout, with comingled anticipation of peace and illumination to be found in both popular culture (witness songs such as 'I'm Going to Get Lit Up When the Lights Go On in London') and more private observations (for example, the woman who was quoted quite early on in the war as saying 'Why don't they hurry up and kill old Hitler? Then we can have our lights again.')⁹ Indeed, generations of historians have been able to draw from an extensive range of contemporary accounts – published either at the time or subsequently – with vivid descriptions of reactions to the blackout speaking to the palpable and almost physical shock evinced by this most disruptive of wartime phenomena and the transformational effect it had on many different aspects of British life.¹⁰

However, although Guy Morgan's history of the Granada cinemas in wartime mentions the impact that the blackout had on that chain's theatres,¹¹ more recently, scholarship on British cinema in World War Two has tended to focus on the blackout as a thematic presence in British films, with Antonia Lant proposing that it became a common 'diegetic element' because 'it signaled national experience and so spoke to its audience as a national group.'¹² What I seek to do in this article is reposition the blackout as an integral element of wartime *cinemagoing*, combining evidence drawn from the contemporary record with a more theoretical approach to the meaning and status of nocturnal illumination in the modern city. In this, I begin – as do such scholars as Mark Bouman, Wolfgang Schivelbusch and Scott McQuire – from an understanding that electric light was not simply a technological marvel or urban utility (although it was obviously both of these things), but also had the capacity to radically reshape the built environment, thereby creating, and acting as the foundation of, 'another city, an oneiric city that exists only at night and whose dream forms have only tenuous connections to the prosaic spaces of the waking day.'¹³ The blackout clearly had significant potential to disrupt such dreams, and it is not surprising to find that the end of the war was accompanied by a veritable orgy of light, with the re-illumination of cinema neon contributing to the sense of joy and celebration.

'Swallowed up in the prevailing blackness'

The introduction and spread of electric street lighting in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries produced cities that were easier to use after dark. Between 1920-21 and 1938 the amount of electricity used to illuminate British towns and cities increased by more than 700%, with the second half of the 1930s seeing considerable expansion of the amount of power dedicated to street lighting.¹⁴ The blackout obviously brought an immediate reversal of this trend, but before the war the tendency in Britain was for more and brighter street lights. Consequently street lighting – in combination with other factors such as better wages and more extensive networks of public transport – became, in cities

across the world, 'the sine qua non for the expansion of urban "nightlife"'.¹⁵ Furthermore, street lighting facilitated movement through the urban environment and created both time and space by permitting individuals to more easily negotiate larger parts of the city for greater proportions of the day. 'In its material form,' as Frances Guerin points out, 'light itself came to constitute the modern technological world and shape the lives led therein'.¹⁶

As such, the citizen was no longer defined solely by the home and the workplace, and the movement between these two locales, but also, in many cases, by sites of entertainment such as cinemas that could be readily and safely accessed at night. In many instances, the city-after-dark came to be closely associated with leisure pursuits such as cinemagoing. The modern city was photosensitive: sunlight and artificial illumination produced different spaces and encouraged different conceptions of the possibilities offered by urban life; one could be a producer by day and a consumer by night. And whilst it should not be assumed that the coming of electric (or, previously, gas) street lighting created the nocturnal city – pubs, theatres and the like had, of course, been around for centuries – the advent of better lit urban spaces meant that nightlife came to be regarded as 'a *natural* component of city life'.¹⁷ Therefore, the blackout was for many people not so much a reversion to a previous mode of living as it was a 'a contradiction in our civilization',¹⁸ an immediate, abrupt and violent rupture with what had swiftly become the established norms of urban life.

At a stroke – or at the flick of a switch – the relationship between the citizen and their immediate environment, and their activities within that environment, had to be renegotiated, reimagined, re-learned. The vital rhythms of entire towns and cities were radically transformed as wartime Britons reverted 'to the time-space frameworks in which their great-grandparents had moved and had their being'.¹⁹ Indeed, the light offered by the full moon, which made it easier to navigate through the unlit urban environment, was held to increase the number of people who left their houses during the hours of darkness; some cinema managers felt that moonlit nights brought better box-office.²⁰

Although concessions were later introduced that saw the streets illuminated by a limited amount of very diffused lighting, the early weeks of the war were marked by numerous accidents and injuries:

London last week was blacker than ever ... In such darkness as this, the very gloom of earthquake and eclipse, the shapes of the streets had altered. London under a moonless sky, was muffled in black velvet, its contours gone. Night walkers found themselves tripping over sandbags, blundering into beacons, apologising to trees ... Crossing the road is as anxious a business as a Blondin-balance over Niagara.²¹

Those venturing out into the unlit streets in search of moving picture entertainment found themselves similarly inconvenienced, with one Cheshire cinemagoer reaching her objective only after 'crawling through the blackout using my "treasured" torch battery [and] peering

for black and white curb edgings.²² Rather than heading out alone, some Londoners developed a 'convoy system' whereby 'patrons assemble at the house of a stated person or perhaps at a local hostelry, and then proceed *en masse* to the kinema for their evening's entertainment.'²³

As Morgan noted of the Granada cinemas, the blackout brought about 'many strange changes':

Gone were the beckoning neons, the blazing canopy lights. Cinemas were swallowed up in the prevailing blackness, and even regular patrons, who had navigated unconsciously twice a week for years by such urban lode-stars, found that going to the cinema was now something of an adventure for which a strong sense of direction was necessary.²⁴

The same source observed that in Welling, some cinemagoers were so disconcerted by the 'prevailing blackness' that they stampeded towards the lights in the foyer when the doors were opened. Alterations to queue management were subsequently introduced.²⁵

For many, 'the sense of isolation, verging on panic, that could so easily descend if one missed one's way [in the blackout]' operated as a *de facto* curfew.²⁶ One survey found that more than half of those questioned had changed their leisure habits as a result of the blackout, with visits to friends, going for walks and going to the cinema and theatre amongst the most affected activities.²⁷ The Cinema Exhibitors' Association proclaimed that 'no-one can stand up to the blackout,' and in February 1940 estimated that the absence of street lighting had reduced patronage by 'at least an average of ten per cent'.²⁸ Elsewhere, the blackout was estimated to have cost the exhibition sector more than £100,000 per week in box office revenues.²⁹ Exhibitors were quick to notice the effect: 'evening business is very severely crippled ... and it is no secret, therefore, that the kinema can hardly expect to do more than break even.'³⁰ For many venues, the financial picture was bleak, and some, such as Poole's in Ipswich, were eventually forced to close because of a lack of trade.³¹ *Kinematograph Weekly*, trade paper for the British exhibition industry, published a satirical poem about the economic impact of the blackout which concluded with the lines '[The] black-out put us in the red / That's what it's been and done.'³²

However, it was not only the blackout that was responsible for this downturn in ticket sales. Concerned about public safety and the difficulties associated with travelling home after dark, many town and city councils introduced local curfews, stopped running public transport at an earlier hour than had been the case before the war, and imposed stricter limits cinema opening times.³³ Even film critics were affected by such changes, with *Picturegoer's* Ralph Denton complaining that his review of *That Girl from College* (a.k.a. *Sorority House*, 1939) was less detailed than he might have liked because 'the blackout and curtailed bus service made us miss the last quarter of the film.'³⁴ *Kinematograph Weekly* pointed out that whilst alterations to timetables and opening hours they might be feasible, although restrictive, in late summer, 'with darkness falling soon after four o'clock during the

winter months, this would seem quite impracticable, and would deprive most workers of their film entertainment.³⁵

In an attempt to balance their books, exhibitors introduced changes to their pricing structures. Cinemagoers were informed that matinée prices were to become 'a thing of the past' as the discounted afternoon tickets that had previously encouraged patrons into cinemas at slower times of day were abolished – 'at all events until after the war'.³⁶ The blackout was blamed for limiting the number of patrons prepared to visit a cinema in the evening – until the outbreak of the war the busiest time of day – because of transport difficulties and the fact that 'people simply will not stand [in queues] in almost total darkness'.³⁷ It was predicted that matinées would soon become the 'main source of income' as the winter drew on and the hours of daylight became fewer.³⁸

By early October 1939, some 90 per cent of cinemas in Liverpool had abolished cheap afternoon screenings. The remaining 10% held out, determined to avoid accusations of profiteering, or concerned that raising matinée prices would damage business. Other exhibitors resisted what they saw as creeping centralized control of the cinemas, with one stridently opposing 'the idea of the [Cinema Exhibitors' Association] telling members how to run their theatres' and another flatly insisting that 'I would not raise my prices for King Dick.'³⁹

The issue of matinée prices was discussed in parliament. Walter Windsor, MP for Hull, asked whether the government would 'if need be, take powers to stop this high rise in the price of seats that inflict hardship on the poorest section of the people.' Sir John Anderson, the Home Secretary, refused to act, stating that he had 'no doubt that the lighting restrictions must have affected the attendances and receipts' and suggesting that the discounted afternoon tickets were not economically viable in time of war. Exhibitors were no doubt relieved to gain parliamentary sanction for their actions, although the issue of matinée pricing would remain contentious throughout the war.⁴⁰

Although most Britons became accustomed enough to the blackout to find ways to operate within the limitations it imposed, many were never fully reconciled to it. When Mass-Observation compiled its annual survey of wartime annoyances, the blackout came out on top every year between 1939 and 1941, and again in 1943.⁴¹ Indeed, the cinema actively sought to present itself as a means by which the British people could attempt to counteract the sense of isolation and fear instilled by the lack of light. Some Odeon halls took out newspaper advertisements proclaiming themselves to be 'the brightest spot in the black-out,'⁴² whilst in Stepney, east London, the Troxy let potential patrons know that they could 'escape the black-out blues *now* – by going to the pictures!'

Transported to warm and cheerful surroundings such as these, you are able to share your pleasures with hundreds of others, to mingle your laughing with theirs, to experience the same delights, thrills, fears and sighs of relief. Surely this is the very acme of enjoyment.⁴³

The notable growth of cinema ticket sales in Britain during the Second World War, from 990 million in 1939 to 1,585 million in 1945, suggests that the inconvenience presented by the blackout was not itself sufficient to dull the population's appetite for the cinema.⁴⁴ But these bold numbers should not be allowed to obscure the fact that certain events or phenomena – the Blitz of 1940-41 being an even more dramatic and violent example – had the capacity to temporarily undermine the appeal of a night at the pictures, and were capable of fundamentally altering the relationship between the cinemagoer and the cinema, and the relationship between the cinema and the built environment within which it was located.

Light entertainment

Just as light facilitated consumption, so light could be offered *for* consumption. More decorative forms of lighting were understood to possess 'an amusement value of their own' which could contribute in a very real sense to 'the gaiety of the town.'⁴⁵ For while the lighting provided by local authorities tended to have a utilitarian purpose, that erected by private companies on advertising hoardings or on buildings was often, as Carolyn Marvin has noted, 'a public spectacle before it was anything else.'⁴⁶ Illuminated signs came to symbolise the pleasurable, leisure-time activities offered by the modern town or city, and John Langdon, Secretary of the Master Sign Makers' Association, observed shortly before the start of the war that to urbanites such signs were 'essential to life.'⁴⁷ As Mass-Observation recognised, the blackout posed an existential challenge to this arrangement: 'when the bright lights of a city are turned off, bright life is turned off too'.⁴⁸

Advertising signs and decorative lights had become, from the late Victorian period onwards, a fixture of the towns and cities of Britain, assisting in the creation of ideas of what a modern built environment was and might be. The lights were not uniformly bright across a city, however, and blazed especially brilliantly in areas like London's West End, associated with more commercialised forms of entertainment and leisure and the crowds of people who sought them out. Locations such as Piccadilly Circus – 'as tawdrily "gay" as coloured and moving lights can contrive' – were especially noteworthy in this regard.⁴⁹

Places of entertainment, cinemas foremost amongst them, used light in very particular ways. Architectural critic P. Morton Shand viewed many modern cinemas as good examples of what he called 'night architecture' – that is, buildings that were designed to make their greatest impression when illuminated after dark. 'The cinema,' Shand suggested, 'sleeps by day as other buildings do by night.'⁵⁰ Shortly before the war, *The Kinematograph Yearbook* advocated the blending of form and function in cinema architecture, praising recently erected theatres which had managed to successfully achieve a 'note of cheerfulness and novelty [and] present a pleasing architectural appearance during daylight while providing a basis for elaborate illumination at night'.⁵¹ Such lighting was, the same publication noted the following year, 'one of the most distinctive forms of kinema publicity'.⁵²

Consequently, cinemas were an important and visible part of the nocturnal cityscape. Cinema architects and electrical engineers collaborated to produce ever more impressive lighting displays, with prominent architectural features floodlit or outlined in neon. One of the more notable trends in cinema design in the years immediately before the Second World War was the incorporation of ‘a strong vertical feature’ – a tower, say, or a fin – into cinema exteriors.⁵³ Rarely included because of their utility – although some did provide space for water tanks or, in one instance, a wireless studio – these features are better understood to have served as attractions and advertisements, especially after dark when they were illuminated. As *Ideal Kinema* suggested:

In a crowded area the high tower serves to lift itself clear of the moderately heightened building around, and the development of neon lighting has allowed towers to be capped by a name sign which compels the eye to travel in its direction.⁵⁴

In Kilburn in northwest London, the tower of Gaumont’s State cinema – said to be inspired by the Empire State Building in New York City – defined the building and dominated the surrounding area. Standing more than 100 feet high, the tower was, according to the operators’ proud boast, ‘visible for miles around’ when illuminated and helped focus attention on the cinema.⁵⁵ Less muscular lighting schemes were designed to be similarly attractive. The Embassy on Tottenham Court Road, renovations of which were completed just as the war began, presented itself to the world with a ‘distinctively simple façade ... in terra-cotta faience’. At nighttime, however, this frontage was arrestingly ‘outlined in green strip lighting’ – or at least it would be ‘when conditions enable its employment.’⁵⁶

Furthermore, the frontages of recently built cinemas had been designed to incorporate large amounts of glass, both in order to point to their modernity and openness, and also to flood the immediate environs with light. But because blackout regulations stipulated that light produced inside a building must not be allowed to escape, the cinemas had to cover up; many cinemas were ‘sadly affected’ by this enforced modesty.⁵⁷ Many cinemas simply painted their windows black paint or covered them with boards, but the multiple sets of swing doors that provided access to and egress from the foyer often necessitated more significant alterations to cinema facades that had a more pronounced effect on the patron’s experience.

George Coles, an architect responsible for designing some of Britain’s most striking cinemas, suggested ways in which these cinemas might adapt to wartime lighting conditions. He was quick to warn, though, that the alterations he suggested would most likely disrupt the appearance of effortlessness that had epitomised the running of many cinemas before the start of the war. If a cinema had a canopy over the main entrance, Coles proposed that exhibitors might ‘place a line of sandbags immediately underneath the front edge extending to the full length [and height]’. This scheme was also said to have the advantage of ‘protecting the vestibule from blast [damage]’, but had the disadvantages of

being aesthetically intrusive and of requiring a significant amount of labour to construct and maintain: 'The black-out of doors and entrances is mere child's play in comparison with having 3,000 or 4,000 sandbags stuck in front of your theatre,' noted one cinema manager.⁵⁸ What's more, such protective walls had the effect of giving a cinema something of the air of a military installation, and so novel was this new aesthetic that on 16 September 1939 the *Daily Express* carried a cartoon showing a picture house, protected by an aggressive-looking commissioner, which was largely obscured by a huge stack of sandbags. With biting irony, a poster for Chaplin's *City Lights* (1931), has been covered with a number of stickers marked 'Censored'.⁵⁹

Cinemas that did not want or were unable to construct walls of sandbags were encouraged to build 'light-locks,' so that patrons could enter and exit via 'a passage ... with two right-angle turns, one of which opens into the street and the other into the interior' of the premises.⁶⁰ Regulations stipulated that they be painted black, with two white horizontal stripes on the wall (one at a height suitable for adults, the other for children) to guide people through. For many cinema managers this meant a degree of structural work, possibly including moving the pay-box, which had often been incorporated into a cinema's frontage in a very prominent and brightly illuminated position. For cinemagoers, it meant that an evening's entertainment became the reward not only for navigating the blackout to get to the theatre, but also making for finding their way through the dark, labyrinthine, light-lock before entering into the cinema itself. Joyce Storey, a resident of Grimsby, remembered the way in which the building of light-locks transformed the way in which the patron entered the cinema:

A very full, pleated blackout curtain now draped the great doors at the entrance to the foyer. Once inside their voluptuous folds, you came face to face with a high plywood partition forming a corridor along which the patrons shuffled. A sharp turn to the right at the end of this makeshift entrance led to the dimly lit paybox.⁶¹

The absence of external lighting displays prompted some exhibitors to pay 'considerably greater attention to the lighting of auditoria and their approaches' in the hope that brighter cinema interiors might afford audience members 'some psychological compensation for the mental condition induced by black-out conditions.'⁶² Cinemas that installed light locks could maintain more 'brightly lit and arresting interiors,' and these were held to have a 'marked psychological effect' on their patrons.⁶³ The discombobulation that might result from patrons moving between the relatively well-lit interior of a cinema and the darkened streets led some halls to institute what became known as the 'Twilight Method,' wherein they prepared customers for the blackout by slowly dimming the lights, over a period of ten minutes, after the last show.⁶⁴

To enliven foyers and other internal spaces, exhibitors experimented with ultra-violet lights and fluorescent paints that were advertised by manufacturers as being 'almost a

box-office attraction in themselves',⁶⁵ in the hope that displays of artificial flowers and decorative abstract wall designs would help illuminate foyers and allow cinemas to 'remain the most cheerful spot in the neighbourhood'.⁶⁶ Managers working for the Granada chain were advised to keep their foyers as well-lit as conditions permitted, and were instructed to compensate for the loss of visual pleasure by ensuring that there was '*always* music ... We want the contrast offered by your theatre from the streets outside to be as noticeable and bright as possible.'⁶⁷ In Exeter, the Odeon, 'with the aid of a local chemist', applied luminous paint to the cuffs, collars, lapels and hems of employee uniforms to create both 'the illuminated commissioner'.⁶⁸

Yet despite all the ingenuity demonstrated by these promotional and experiential strategies, and their occasional successes, they were necessitated by the dramatic nature of the changes experienced by British cinemas as a result of the blackout. Cinemas were landmarks in a physical sense, but also within the psychological and cultural geographies of British leisure culture in the 1930s and 1940s. Cinemas were located in specific, concrete spaces, but they also stood apart from them; their prominence, especially after dark, was defined against the more prosaic buildings that surrounded them, giving 'a bright and colourful character to the most humdrum of streets'.⁶⁹

During the war, rather than standing out from their surroundings, casting as much light as possible in order to differentiate themselves from their surroundings, cinemas found that they had become, in a very real sense, anonymous. With external lighting switched off, there were concerns that 'the public would not have any idea as to where the [cinema] building is situated'.⁷⁰ There would have been few, if any, venues that before the blackout did not offer any form of lighting display. Discussing his visits to the cinema in the 1930s, Bernard Goodsall recalled that 'The anticipation of the feast to come started as you approached the cinema, the lights, the uniformed commissioner and it didn't matter what was on the screen.'⁷¹ It was as a result of the appeal and importance of such non- or extra-filmic pleasures that Roland Barthes found himself 'fascinated twice over' by the cinema, that is, by the image *and* its surroundings.⁷² When these surroundings change, the image remains, of course, but the experience of accessing and consuming that image is altered.

Conclusion – Light relief

The blackout had become so strongly associated with the war that when VE Day – or, rather, VE Night – duly arrived, it was celebrated with a festival of light. In London, searchlights that had sought to pick out German planes now threw huge Vs – for victory – into the sky above the city and bonfires were lit in the streets: 'The sky once lit by the glare of the blitz shone red with the Victory glow ... the capital was ablaze with enthusiasm.'⁷³ In Edinburgh, it was announced that many important buildings would be floodlit 'to celebrate the end of the European war'.⁷⁴ In Gloucester, noted a reporter for a local newspaper, 'people cheered as ... the overhead lamps were switched on' and 'brought us back from the dark era into the city of light'.⁷⁵ Bus, tram and train operators were permitted to remove the netting that had previously obscured their windows. Elsewhere, traffic lights were damaged as crowds

joyously wrenched off the masking installed to ensure that they complied with blackout regulations.⁷⁶

Cinema lights were switched on for the first time since September 1939. In Leicester Square, one manager reported that the crowd gathered outside his cinema ‘danced and cheered’ at the sight of a canopy light display dazzling enough to have recreated ‘pre-war days’.⁷⁷ On the Strand, the Tivoli cinema produced a red neon lighting display that was said to constitute a fitting ‘tribute to those who brought about victory.’⁷⁸ In London’s suburbs, the managers of several Granada cinemas ‘switched on everything he had got. The effect was magnificent after five years of theatres shrouded in gloom. The crowds converged like moths around a flame.’⁷⁹ For youngsters, the switching on of the lights was a change as dramatic and transformative as the introduction of the blackout had been for their parents, with children ‘brought from miles around in every district to witness the strange miracle of light.’⁸⁰

Even allowing for a degree of end-of-war hyperbole, it is evident that the return of the lights was a major and ‘positively thrilling’ event in many British lives.⁸¹ Cinemas were central to this transformation. In towns and cities all over the country, cinemas were lit up, floodlights and neon blazing, each light a statement of victory and deliverance. But perhaps more than anything, the lights provoked wonder. Whereas in 1939 street and public lighting had come to be taken for granted, by May 1945 a whole nation was ready to be initiated into the mysteries of the urban lightscape. In south London, a report contained in a local newspaper made clear the lights’ ability to transfix, their ability recast the nocturnal world as a place of excitement and possibility, but also hinted at the experiential pleasures lost to ‘the long tyranny of the blackout’:⁸²

Further down Mitcham Road, the Astoria, too, was lit up, and on the opposite side of each cinema, particularly the Granada, there was an admiring crowd of people just staring up at the lights, their happy faces illuminated in the glare.⁸³

Biographical note:

Richard Farmer is Lecturer in Film and Media Studies at the University of East Anglia. He has published widely on British cultural history, and is the author of two books on British cinema in the Second World War: *The Food Companions: Cinema and Consumption in Wartime Britain, 1939-45* and *Cinemas and Cinemagoing in Wartime Britain, 1939-45: The Utility Dream Palace* (both Manchester University Press). His most recent book, co-authored with Laura Mayne, Duncan Petrie and Melanie Williams, is *Transformation and Tradition in 1960s British Cinema* (Edinburgh University Press). Contact: R.Farmer@UEA.ac.uk.

Acknowledgements:

Parts of this article have been published, in different form, in *Cinemas and Cinemagoing in Wartime Britain, 1939-45: The Utility Dream Palace* (2016). I would like to express my

thanks to Manchester University Press for their permission to revise and republish this material. Thanks are also due to BFI Special Collections.

References:

Government papers and unpublished sources:

BFI Special Collections: Bernstein Papers.

British Parliamentary Papers, 1930-31, vol. xxix, Cmd. 3767, *Seventy-Fourth Statistical Abstract for the United Kingdom* (1931).

Central Statistical Office, *Annual Abstract of Statistics, No. 84: 1935-1946* (London: HMSO, 1948).
CEA Annual Report, 1939

Cinema-Theater Association Archive: London Suburbs.

Parliamentary Debates – House of Commons, 5th series.

Statutory Rules and Orders, 1939, No. 1098, Emergency Powers (Defence).

Published materials

Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards on *Let George Do It* (1940) in *Britain Can Take It: British Cinema in the Second World War* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007, new edn).

Roland Barthes, 'On Leaving a Movie Theatre,' in Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989). Trans. Richard Howard.

Mark J. Bouman, 'Luxury and Control: The Urbanity of Street Lighting in Nineteenth Century Cities,' in *Journal of Urban History*, 14:1 (1987).

Richard Broad and Suzie Fleming (eds), *Nella Last's War: The Second World War Diaries of Housewife, 49* (London: Profile, 2006).

H. E. Browning and A. A. Sorrell, 'Cinemas and Cinema-going in Great Britain', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 117:2 (1954).

Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain 1939-1945* (London: Pimlico, 2008 [1969]).

A. L. Carter, 'Equipment and Technique in 1938,' in *The Kinematograph Year Book 1939* (London: Kinematograph Publications, 1939).

John Costello, *Love, Sex and War: Changing Values* (London: Collins, 1985).

Richard Farmer, *Cinemas and Cinemagoing in Wartime Britain, 1939-45: The Utility Dream Palace* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016).

Juliet Gardiner, *Wartime, 1939-1945* (London: Headline, 2005).

Gaumont State Souvenir (London: National Advertising Corporation, 1937).

Felicity Goodall, *The People's War: Reliving Life on the Home Front* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 2008).

Frances Guerin, *A Culture of Light: Cinema and Technology in 1920s Germany* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

Vere Hodgson, *Few Eggs and No Oranges: A Diary Showing How Unimportant People in London and Birmingham Lived through the War Years 1940-1945* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1976).

J. H. Hutchison, *The Complete Kinemanager* (London: Kinematograph Publications, 1937).

Stephen King-Hall, *History of the War, vol. 2: September-October 1939* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1939).

Annette Kuhn, *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002).

- Antonia Lant, *Blackout: Reinventing Women for Wartime British Cinema* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).
- Norman Longmate, *How We Lived Then: A History of Everyday Life During the Second World War* (London: Hutchinson, 1971).
- Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).
- Scott McQuire, 'Immaterial Architectures: Urban Space and Electric Light,' in *Space and Culture*, 8:2 (2005).
- Mass-Observation, *War Begins at Home* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1940).
- Guy Morgan, *Red Roses Every Night: An Account of London Cinemas Under Fire* (London: Quality Press, 1948).
- Robert Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War* (London: Continuum, 2000).
- Terence H. O'Brien, *Civil Defence* (London: HMSO, 1955).
- Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialisation of Light in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Berg, 1988). Trans. Angela Davies.
- P. Morton Shand, *The Architecture of Pleasure Vol. 1: Modern Theatres and Cinemas* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1930).
- David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).
- William Shawn (ed.), *London War Notes, 1939-1945* (London: Longman, 1972).
- Edward Smithies, *Crime in Wartime: A Social History of Crime in World War II* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982).
- Joyce Storey, *Joyce's War, 1939-1945* (London: Virago, 1992).
- E. S. Turner, *The Phoney War on the Home Front* (London: Michael Joseph, 1961).
- Philip Ziegler, *London at War, 1939-45* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1995).

Notes:

¹ Quoted in Felicity Goodall, *The People's War: Reliving Life on the Home Front* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 2008), p. 8.

² Statutory Rules and Orders, 1939, No. 1098, Emergency Powers (Defence). Regulation 24 of the Defence Regulations, 1939 - Restrictions on Lighting, p. 161.

³ P. Morton Shand, *The Architecture of Pleasure Vol. 1: Modern Theatres and Cinemas* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1930), p. 27, p. 25.

⁴ *Observer*, 17 September 1939, p. 10.

⁵ This research was published as Richard Farmer, *Cinemas and Cinemagoing in Wartime Britain, 1939-45: The Utility Dream Palace* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016).

⁶ See, for instance: Terence H. O'Brien, *Civil Defence* (London: HMSO, 1955), pp. 319-324; E. S. Turner, *The Phoney War on the Home Front* (London: Michael Joseph, 1961), pp. 61-74; Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain 1939-1945* (London: Pimlico, 2008 [1969]), pp. 63-4; Norman Longmate, *How We Lived Then: A History of Everyday Life During the Second World War* (London: Hutchinson, 1971), pp. 35-47; Philip Ziegler, *London at War, 1939-45* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1995), pp. 67-70; Juliet Gardiner, *Wartime, 1939-1945* (London: Headline, 2005), pp. 53-75.

⁷ Crime and the blackout, for example, is discussed in Edward Smithies, *Crime in Wartime: A Social History of Crime in World War II* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982), whilst the sexual implications of the blackout feature in John Costello, *Love, Sex and War: Changing Values* (London: Collins, 1985).

⁸ Antonia Lant, *Blackout: Reinventing Women for Wartime British Cinema* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 114.

⁹ Mass-Observation, *War Begins at Home* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1940), p. 184.

¹⁰ See for example, Mass-Observation, *War Begins at Home*, pp. 181-221; Mollie Panter-Downes' letters to the *New Yorker* in William Shawn (ed.), *London War Notes, 1939-1945* (London: Longman, 1972); diaries written by e.g. Vere Hodgson – published as *Few Eggs and No Oranges: A Diary Showing How Unimportant People in London and Birmingham Lived through the War Years 1940–1945* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1976) – and Nella Last – published as Richard Broad and Suzie Fleming (eds), *Nella Last's War: The Second World War Diaries of Housewife, 49* (London: Profile, 2006).

¹¹ Guy Morgan, *Red Roses Every Night: An Account of London Cinemas Under Fire* (London: Quality Press, 1948), pp. 9-10, 23-5.

¹² Lant, *Blackout*. See also work on individual films, such as Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards on *Let George Do It* (1940) in *Britain Can Take It: British Cinema in the Second World War* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007, new edn), pp. 76-95; Robert Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War* (London: Continuum, 2000), pp. 21-2.

¹³ Mark J. Bouman, 'Luxury and Control: The Urbanity of Street Lighting in Nineteenth Century Cities,' in *Journal of Urban History*, 14:1, (1987); Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialisation of Light in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Berg, 1988, trans. Angela Davies), esp. pp. 81-154; Scott McQuire, 'Immaterial Architectures: Urban Space and Electric Light,' in *Space and Culture*, 8:2 (2005), quotation from p. 131.

¹⁴ British Parliamentary Papers, 1930-31, vol. xxix, Cmd, 3767, *Seventy-Fourth Statistical Abstract for the United Kingdom* (1931), pp. 270-71; Central Statistical Office, *Annual Abstract of Statistics, No. 84: 1935-1946* (London: HMSO, 1948), p. 136. The amount of gas used to light British streets at night also rose in the late 1930s, although less dramatically.

¹⁵ David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 6.

¹⁶ Frances Guerin, *A Culture of Light: Cinema and Technology in 1920s Germany* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p. xiv.

¹⁷ Bouman, 'Luxury and Control', p. 7. Emphasis added.

¹⁸ Mass-Observation, *War Begins at Home*, p. 187.

¹⁹ Stephen King-Hall, *History of the War, vol. 2: September-October 1939* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1939), p. 17.

²⁰ *Daily Mail*, 7 November 1939, p. 6.

²¹ *Observer*, 17 September 1939, p. 10.

²² Letter from Phillipa Auger. *Picturegoer*, 13 January 1940, p. 27. By the end of November 1939, the demand for torch batteries meant that they had become practically 'unobtainable'. Mollie Panter-Downes, letter to the *New Yorker*, 24 November 1939. In William Shawn (ed.), *London War Notes, 1939-1945* (London: Longman, 1972), pp. 27-8.

²³ *Daily Film Renter*, 15 November 1939, p. 2.

-
- ²⁴ Guy Morgan, *Red Roses Every Night*, p. 23.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Longmate, *How We Lived Then*, p. 45.
- ²⁷ Mass-Observation, *War Begins at Home*, p. 193.
- ²⁸ *CEA Annual Report, 1939*, p. 21; The National Archives: CUST 118/405: letter from W R Fuller to Sir John Simon, 13 February 1940.
- ²⁹ *Daily Mail*, 7 November 1939, p. 6.
- ³⁰ *Kinematograph Weekly*, 21 September 1939, p. 7.
- ³¹ *Kinematograph Weekly*, 18 January 1940, p. 5.
- ³² *Kinematograph Weekly*, 9 November 1939, p. 5.
- ³³ *Today's Cinema*, 14 November 1939, p. 1. In the early weeks of the war, an 8.30 p.m. transport 'curfew' was introduced in Southampton and was held to have had a 'serious effect' on the cinema trade. *Kinematograph Weekly*, 19 October 1939, p. 17.
- ³⁴ *Picturegoer*, 25 November 1939, p. 12.
- ³⁵ *Kinematograph Weekly*, 7 September 1939, p. 15.
- ³⁶ *Kinematograph Weekly*, 21 September 1939, p. 4.
- ³⁷ *Kinematograph Weekly*, 22 February 1940, p. 21.
- ³⁸ *Kinematograph Weekly*, 5 October 1939, p. 10.
- ³⁹ *Kinematograph Weekly*, 5 October 1939, p. 10.
- ⁴⁰ 4 October 1939. *Parliamentary Debates – House of Commons*, 5th series, vol. 351, col. 1352.
- ⁴¹ Farmer, *Cinemas and Cinemagoing in Wartime Britain*, p. 36. The fact that the survey was conducted in December, when early sunsets meant that the blackout was at its most disruptive, might have had some bearing on the results.
- ⁴² *Kinematograph Weekly*, 1 February 1940, p. 30.
- ⁴³ CTA Archive: London Suburbs: Stepney: *Troxy Magazine*, February 1940, p. 5.
- ⁴⁴ H. E. Browning and A. A. Sorrell, 'Cinemas and Cinema-going in Great Britain', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 117:2 (1954), p. 134.
- ⁴⁵ Letter by C. H. Reilly, *The Times*, 19 February 1934, p. 13.
- ⁴⁶ Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 175
- ⁴⁷ *Light and Lighting*, 32: 7 (July 1939), p. 140.
- ⁴⁸ Mass-Observation, *War Begins at Home*, p. 187.
- ⁴⁹ *The Times*, 28 June 1933, p. 5.
- ⁵⁰ Shand, *Architecture of Pleasure*, p. 27.
- ⁵¹ A. L. Carter, 'Equipment and Technique in 1938,' in *The Kinematograph Year Book 1939* (London: Kinematograph Publications, 1939), p. 264.
- ⁵² A. L. Carter, 'Equipment and Technique in 1939', *The Kinematograph Year Book 1940* (London: Kinematograph Publications, 1940), p. 210. Other, more conventional forms of advertising were also affected by the blackout, as posters that would previously been illuminated at night became readable only during daylight hours. The manager of the Astoria in Old Kent Road took to pasting thick strips across his posters which bore the slogan 'Read this before the black-out,' a 'dodge,' claimed *Kinematograph Weekly* (18 April 1940, p. 42), 'which at once caught the attention.'
- ⁵³ *Ideal Kinema*, 4 November 1937, p. 3.
- ⁵⁴ *Ideal Kinema*, 4 November 1937, p. 3.

-
- ⁵⁵ *Gaumont State Souvenir* (London: National Advertising Corporation, 1937), p. 3.
- ⁵⁶ *The Ideal Kinema*, 14 September 1939, p. v. The Embassy's reopening was delayed by the enforced closure of all British cinemas at the beginning of the war.
- ⁵⁷ *Kinematograph Weekly*, 2 May 1940, p. 42.
- ⁵⁸ *Ideal Kinema*, 12 October 1939, p. i; *Kinematograph Weekly*, 5 October 1939, p. 10.
- ⁵⁹ *Daily Express* 16 September 1939, p. 4.
- ⁶⁰ *Lights and Lighting*, 32:9 (September 1939), p. 188.
- ⁶¹ Joyce Storey, *Joyce's War, 1939-1945* (London: Virago, 1992), p. 31.
- ⁶² Carter, 'Equipment and Technique in 1939', p. 221.
- ⁶³ *Kinematograph Weekly*, 16 November 1939, p. 29.
- ⁶⁴ *Daily Film Renter*, 14 October 1940, p. 1.
- ⁶⁵ Advertisement for Philips' 'Philora Black Lamps', *Kinematograph Weekly*, 30 November 1939, p. 30.
- ⁶⁶ *Kinematograph Weekly*, 16 November 1939, p. 28.
- ⁶⁷ BFI Special Collections: Bernstein Papers: Box 78 – Wandsworth Road (1939) – Undated memo from head office (September 1939?). Emphasis in original.
- ⁶⁸ *Kinematograph Weekly*: 5 October 1939, p. 4; 2 November 1939, p. 20.
- ⁶⁹ *Kinematograph Weekly*, 7 December 1939, p. 4.
- ⁷⁰ *Kinematograph Weekly*, 18 January 1940, p. 8.
- ⁷¹ Bernard Goodsall, quoted in Annette Kuhn, *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002), p. 220.
- ⁷² Roland Barthes, 'On Leaving a Movie Theatre,' in Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989). Trans. Richard Howard. P. 349. Emphasis added.
- ⁷³ *Daily Mail*, 8 May 1945, p. 1.
- ⁷⁴ *Today's Cinema*, 13 April, p. 26.
- ⁷⁵ *Gloucester Echo*, 10 May 1945, p. 3.
- ⁷⁶ *Daily Mail*, 8 May 1945, p. 1.
- ⁷⁷ *Today's Cinema*, 11 May 1945, p. 3; *Kinematograph Weekly*, 17 May 1945, p. 28.
- ⁷⁸ *Kinematograph Weekly*, 17 May 1945, p. 28.
- ⁷⁹ BFI Special Collections: Bernstein Papers: *Granada News Letter*, June 1945, p. 1.
- ⁸⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁸¹ *Surrey Mirror*, 11 May 1945, p. 5.
- ⁸² Calder, *People's War*, p. 563.
- ⁸³ *Balham, Tooting and Mitcham News and Mercury*, 12 May 1945, p. 1.