

Hollywood and the Americanization of Britain: From the 1920s to the Present

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In *When Hollywood Loved Britain* Mark Glancy used a trove of fascinating archival material to examine the ways in which propaganda and economic expedience shaped the American film industry's representation of Britain during the Second World War.⁽¹⁾ For his new book, Glancy returns to the history of British-American film culture, albeit with a rather different perspective. *Hollywood and the Americanization of Britain* explores the reception of Hollywood films among British audiences between the 1920s and the end of the 20th century. Focussing on the 'meanings and pleasures' (p. 3) which British audiences have found in Hollywood films during this period, Glancy tackles questions about the troubling popularity of American film exports around the world, the perception of their influence over audiences, and the extent to which Hollywood films should be regarded as 'American' at all once they have bedded into the local cultures of their global public.

In a very useful first chapter Glancy outlines the debates about the seemingly deleterious effects of Hollywood films on British culture. The term 'Americanization' was initially used to describe the acculturation of European immigrants after they arrived in America. However, by the 1920s, 'Americanization became so inextricably linked with films that that no one seemed to recall that the issue had ever been discussed without reference to the cinema' (p. 19). Most famously, a *Daily Express* columnist in 1927 claimed that 'we have several million people, mostly women, who, to all intent and purpose, are

temporary American citizens' (p. 14). The 'mostly women' comment is revealing. As Glancy notes, anxieties about American influence often came to focus on female, youthful and working class cinemagoers whose 'patriotism and mental fortitude were not so easily assumed' (p. 21). Hollywood's apparent promotion of egalitarian values and its rejection of social deference were seen as a threat by those on the right, while left-wing commentators in Britain objected to their dazzling consumerist spectacle and the ensuing erosion of 'authentic' working-class culture. However, Glancy concludes that Hollywood films are an 'unlikely conduit for Americanization' (p. 41). Those who accuse Hollywood of pro-American propaganda have tended to be vague about the actual processes through which films have indoctrinated their viewers with 'American values', or indeed what 'American values' actually are. In fact, some audiences in Britain regarded the foreignness of Hollywood films as a barrier to their enjoyment rather than a selling point. In a further irony, Glancy points out that Hollywood has rarely been associated with mainstream American culture within America itself, partly due to the immigrant roots of the film industry's founders and partly because the filmmaking profession was associated with debauchery and 'un-American' political values.

The remainder of the book is organised as a series of chronological case studies based on specific films or film cycles. In order to reconstruct the historical circumstances in which these films reached British cinemagoers, Glancy draws on a wide range of print sources, including film trade papers, fan magazines, national newspapers, audience surveys and polls, and publicity materials. Citing Janet Staiger's (1992) pioneering work on historical film reception, these materials are used to provide a 'historical explanation of the event of interpreting the text' (p. 7).⁽²⁾ However, as in many studies of historical reception, the responses and interpretations of the general audience are tough to obtain. Reactions from professional film reviewers are readily available, but critics are perhaps the least typical type of cinemagoer. The Mass Observation 'Cinema-going in Worktown' survey from 1938 contains some excellent audience responses, which Glancy draws on, but its scope is obviously limited. Letters from members of the public published in film magazines provide another source of information, but as Glancy notes, there is no way to be certain about the extent to which they were altered or even fabricated by editorial staff. In another approach, Jackie Stacey (1994) and Annette Kuhn (2002) have examined historical film audiences in Britain by gathering the present-day memories of the public in written or oral form.⁽³⁾ However, as Glancy observes, memory becomes a less viable source the further one looks into the past. Given these practical restrictions, the main challenge for a project of this type is the availability of sources which contain the ephemeral voices of the cinema-going public.

Despite this difficulty, *Hollywood and the Americanization of Britain* skilfully blends audience analysis with discussions of the various institutions which mediated between Hollywood films and the British public. Chapter two draws on British film fan magazines from the 1920s to examine the phenomenal appeal of American star Rudolph Valentino. Fan letters reveal that Valentino was appreciated in Britain as an actor as well as being eroticised as an idol. More generally, fan magazine discourses on the lives of Hollywood celebrities implied that stardom was accessible to anyone, regardless of economic circumstances or even innate talent. In this way, Hollywood culture allowed Britons to aspire to a lifestyle ostensibly free from class boundaries and economic deprivations (p. 50). This aspirational relationship to Hollywood culture may have been apparent in *Picturegoer* magazine's 1921 declaration that 'we are partly American. And it is the part of us that should have been American years ago!' (p. 48). Becoming a 'temporary American citizen' might not have been such a bad thing after all.

Chapter three explores the introduction of 'talking' films to Britain in the late 1920s. Predictably, the proliferation of American accents in British cinemas further inflamed those who feared the 'Americanization' of the British public. However, as Glancy suggests, not all British cinemagoers responded positively to the sound of American speaking voices. Britain was the first market outside North America to be wired for sound, but box office figures suggests that 'talkies' as *The Jazz Singer* (1927) were initially received with less enthusiasm than in the USA. When the first British-made talking film was released in 1929, audiences were invited to 'see and hear our mother tongue as it should be spoken'. But many cinemagoers also found the 'refined', RP version of English which dominated early British talkies

unappealing. Indeed, a cinema owner in Glasgow complained that certain British talking films incited his patrons to slash their seats with knives and razors (p. 99).

Glancy also provides some interesting insights into the ways in which the British Board of Film Censorship (BBFC) regulated public access to Hollywood films. The controversial Hollywood cycle of gangster films from the early 1930s were passed with minimal censorship precisely because 'they were so obviously American'. Conversely, British films which depicted a similar defiance of state authority and institutions were prohibited (p. 121). Glancy suggests that the BBFC's rather narrow, defensive view of British national culture had the unintended consequence of 'making British films seem staid and rigid while Hollywood's America was more exciting, and for some at least, more realistic' (p. 125). By contrast, the cycle of rebellious teen films from the 1950s, notably *The Wild One* (1953) and *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), received short shrift from British censors, a policy Glancy attributes the status they gave to teen characters and 'their willingness to cast doubt on the authority of adults' (p. 226).

Chapter five contains a fascinating discussion of *Gone With the Wind* (1939) in the context of the British wartime experience, highlighting the surprising confluence of social, economic and political factors which shaped the public's encounter with the film. Film critics frowned on the film's celebration of individualism, which was certainly out of step with the wartime promotion of consensus and community, while British film exhibitors attempted to boycott it entirely in protest of unreasonable charges levied by the American distributor. For audiences, on the other hand, *Gone With the Wind* provided a welcome escape from the strictures of wartime Britain, even if this escape did ultimately lead them to another war. At the same time, this discussion highlights the limitations of the sources available to the author. Glancy proposes that the British appeal of the film may have been related to the deterioration of Scarlett O'Hara's appearance and that her distressed glamour may have reassured ration-stricken women on the home front. A scene where Scarlett fashions a new dress from a pair of curtains is highlighted as an example of 'make do and mend' resourcefulness (p. 176–7). However, as the available audience responses make no mention of this aspect of the film, this interpretation remains hypothetical. Similarly, the discussion of gangster films in chapter four provides no support for the intriguing claim that films such as *Public Enemy* and *Scarface* appealed to male working class audiences as 'masculine fantasies of empowerment' (p. 141).

The final chapter is based on the American Revolution drama *The Patriot* (2000) and also takes in Hollywood's relatively infrequent depictions of the Revolution over the preceding period. This topic allows Glancy to survey the course of Anglo-American relations in film over the past century, a relationship which he attributes to Hollywood's economic self-interest rather than to sentimental attachment. In 1917 a film depicting the American Revolution entitled *The Spirit of '76* was deemed so damaging to American interests that its producer was imprisoned for ten years under the Espionage Act. In the years which followed, the Hollywood studios trod carefully in their depictions of the American Revolution, mainly in deference to the British export market. By the 1990s, however, the growth of Hollywood's global market made the defence of British sensibilities a lower priority. It was in this context that *The Patriot* was produced and released. Access to audience responses is much less of a problem in this period, and Glancy is able to draw on a wealth of online comment and discussion to reconstruct the film's British reception. An initially hostile pre-release response from the media, who identified the film as 'anti-British' and historically inauthentic, gave way to generally favourable reviews from professional critics. Perhaps surprisingly, a majority of film fans sided with the former response, revealing a sense of alienation and resentment towards Hollywood's cultural dominance, but also countering elite fears that audiences would be powerless to resist the ideological might of the American film industry.

Throughout his book, Glancy provides a historical grounding to models of reception which emphasise the centrality of the audience in the process of interpreting cultural texts. He suggests that while public interactions with films are shaped by a wide range of institutional factors – including censorship, marketing and media discourses – audience responses tend to be unpredictable and rooted in subjective experience. In addition, Glancy makes a strong case for the internationalism of Hollywood films. Rather than signifying the 'seductive appeal of the United States', he argues that the success of Hollywood films has been due to their

ability to ‘transport audiences beyond the confines of nationality’ (p. 276). Thus, while the book primarily concerns the impact of Hollywood in Britain, its central argument also relates to the success of the American film industry on a global scale. Clearly written and judiciously argued, this book is likely to be enjoyed and admired by a wide readership.

Notes

1. H. Mark Glancy, *When Hollywood Loved Britain: The Hollywood ‘British’ Film, 1939–45* (Manchester, 1999).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton, NJ, 1992).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Annette Kuhn, *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (London, 2002); Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (London, 1994).[Back to \(3\)](#)

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Monarchs of Britain 1603-present. Legal. Privacy Policy. Britain formally recognised the republic of Eire in 1948. Further afield, the principle of self-determination espoused by the victorious powers appealed to a growing sense of nationalism and assertiveness in the Empire. The 1920s and 1930s was also the period when radio came of age – wireless sets appeared in most people's houses, bringing global events and organised entertainment into living rooms for the first time. Hollywood began to dominate the fledgling pre-war cinema, introducing a new brand of popular hero, the movie star, and showing weary workers a wondrous world from across the Atlantic beyond the grime of everyday living.