

# How film lost its allure

FROM GOING TO THE CINEMA SIX TIMES A WEEK, THROUGH TO SEEING THE SAME FILM FOR FIVE CONSECUTIVE AFTERNOONS. WHAT EXACTLY WENT WRONG FOR THE SILVER SCREEN?

I have already told you how my maternal grandmother took me to the cinema six times a week during the dark days of World War Two. Some readers complained that I had been telling another of my porkies. Not so. The little town, where we spent the war years, had three cinemas all of which changed their bills twice a week. As all corporate treasurers should know, three times two makes six, and we were able to see a new film Monday through Saturday. Fortunately, back in these days, cinemas were not allowed to open their doors on a Sunday, else we would have had to see one film twice. Though, come to think of it, my maternal grandmother was a deeply religious person, who would no more have gone to the cinema on the Sabbath than she would have prised off the Sabbath-chains from the swings in the children's playground. No, sorry, that is an anachronism, for by that stage in the war the chains would have been melted down to make Spitfires, and an anti-aircraft battery sited in the children's playground.

My maternal grandmother was not a cruel woman. Lonely perhaps, but not cruel. At any rate, I do not remember making any protest when she met me at the school gates to take me to the cinema. I might have preferred to join my classmates in throwing stones at Italian prisoners-of-war as they were being marched off to pick potatoes, but I skipped happily by her side. Now, I was not a corporate treasurer in the 1940s, and did not understand that in these days film distribution was tied vertically to film production. I just had to accept that one cinema would always show Deanna Durbin and Carmen Miranda musicals; and the second one Errol Flynn sliding down the sail of a pirate ship with a cutlass between his teeth; and the third one – where my grandmother would always wipe the cinema seat with a handkerchief before she sat down – black-and-white gangster films with Edward G. Robinson and James Cagney.

I enjoyed every film that I saw then. After my six-new-films-a-week childhood, I should by now be a film buff, but I cannot remember which event came later – going to the cinema or catching a bus. Probably going to the cinema came later, for I can remember going to see *La Vie du Brian* avec Monty Python in Brussels in, I would guess, the early eighties. I remember that last visit well, for I was the only one in the cinema to laugh out loud when the dialogue was spoken, while the rest of the audience were still silently reading through the dual French/Flemish sub-titles.

Before that, I occasionally went to our local cinema in the centre of town but that could not compete with a multi-screen on the

edge of town, and the cinema building is now a branch of a Scottish bank, (and since then, incidentally, the multi-screen has now been knocked down to make way for a BMW dealership). I still watch films on television, and DVDs on my PC, but I realise that THIS IS NOT THE SAME, NOT THE SAME AT ALL, and it is sad to think that after my six-new-films-a-week childhood I should have become a non-cinemasgoer.

I trace my fall back to the days when I was apprenticed to a firm, who acted as secretaries to a local cinema. The cinema was part of an independent chain, owned by a Scottish tycoon, who had been knighted for his charitable works. By then, television had come to Scotland, cinema attendance had started to plummet, and our tycoon had started to worry about how he could afford to buy his next batch of crutches for handicapped children. Our tycoon decided that the answer lay in shutting his cinema in the afternoon, and, to keep his competitive advantage, persuade the other cinemas to do the same. To do this, he would need to prove to the other cinemas in town – all owned by national chains – that they could not make money from matinee performances. Everyone knew that the only people who went to the cinema in the afternoon were OAPs, trying to save on their fuel bills. Oh yes, there would also be some children bunking off school. Everyone knew that, but our tycoon wanted some HARD FACTS to present to the national chains.

So it was that all the apprentices in my firm were sent to rival cinemas each afternoon for one week to record audience numbers. We made no objection, for we were only apprentices, and it seemed a more pleasant way of spending the afternoon than adding up in the *heid* the payrolls of Auchenbothie Shipbuilders Ltd.

By then, cinema attendances had fallen so far that the bill was no longer changed in mid-week. As a result I watched for five consecutive afternoons *Night of the Demon*, starring Dana Andrews and Peggy Cummins.

By the fourth afternoon, I found that I could recite the dialogue, and snatches of it still come back to me at three in the morning. For instance:

"But what do these runic letters mean, Doctor?"

"It is better if you never learn."

"But look at the lettering on this little stone."

"For God's sake, man, do not touch it."

"Aargh."

It was then that my love affair with the cinema ended. J.F.

