General editor's foreword

Today more people than ever before are watching films. But they are not always watching them in cinemas. The experience of cinema-going is unique and that experience is the subject of this excellent book. The exhibition of films has developed from a lowly fairground attraction in the 1890s to the multi-million pound industry of today. That process of evolution is carefully charted by Stuart Hanson from the establishment of cinema-going as an essential leisure experience by the time of the First World War through the growth of cinema chains in the 1920s, the impact of the arrival of sound in the 1930s, the heyday of cinema-going in the 1940s (with 1946 as the all-time peak year of British cinema attendance), the steady decline of cinema-going in the 1950s, the acceleration of that decline in the 1960s to the dramatic revival of cinema-going in the 1980s with the rise of the multiplex. Every phase of this history is examined, analysed and explained.

But this book is far more than just a chronological account of the cinema exhibition industry, valuable though that is in itself. It is a broad-based social and cultural examination of the whole phenomenon of cinema-going. One of the critics cited by Hanson compares the building of the picture palaces in the twentieth century to the creation of the Gothic cathedrals in the Middle Ages, both building types allowing the masses a glimpse of heaven. To explain this, Hanson investigates the role of cinema-going in everyday life, exploring issues of gender, age and class in the mass audience. He looks at cinema design, changes in technology, marketing strategies, government regulation, the role of cinema in the dissemination of propaganda, censorship and moral panics, American competition to the British film industry and the debate about the Americanisation of society. Thoroughly researched, immensely readable, a model of intelligent and insightful analysis, this is a comprehensive and valuable study of a vital aspect of British popular culture.

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