A Call For Arms! (1940)
Miss Grant Goes to the Door (1940)
Dangerous Moonlight (1941)
Since the 80th anniversary of the outbreak of war, the Northern Ireland War Memorial has worked with the Brian Desmond Hurst Estate to highlight the role of propaganda and filmmaking in the Second World War. This is the second in a series of publications which deals with the wartime films of Brian Desmond Hurst, Northern Ireland’s greatest film director.

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Northern Ireland War Memorial
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With thanks to
Allan Esler Smith
Mike Catto
Dr Des O’Rawe
Brian was one of the most delightful men I ever knew. I once told Frank Capra, ‘It’s a good thing Brian went back to Britain. He could have given us out here a run for the money.’

John Ford
Nazi and Soviet documentary films tended to depict their armed forces on land, sea and air as extensions of the machines they used. In the notorious Luftwaffe film *Stuka!*, all the crews, the ground staff etc. are portrayed as almost identical to their planes.

The British approach was different. Brian Desmond Hurst, along with co-directors Michael Powell and Adrian Brunel quickly made and saw the release of *The Lion Has Wings* just after war was declared in 1939 forget the somewhat obsolete aircraft of the Royal Air Force (RAF) at that early stage and concentrate on how the narrative structure gives prominence, through its ‘chapters’ to the RAF men and women and their families. People, from Ralph Richardson’s senior RAF officer and his wife, down through the ranks to civilians, all are given character and differences.

This was to be the template both for British feature films and short Ministry of Information (MoI) documentaries. Hurst’s *Dangerous Moonlight* (June 1941) is a love story between a Polish composer and, presciently, an American war correspondent. Told mainly in flashbacks, it recounts the devastation of Warsaw and of the gallantry of the Polish airmen who fought for the RAF. Deftly, Hurst and his writer (Shaun) Terence Young, create a hugely accessible box office hit in the UK and the US. All the ingredients of romantic and tragic fiction (plus the wonderful *Warsaw Concerto*) are there, but so too are the Hurst/Young trademarks of giving living and breathing space to the other characters.

A running time of 94 minutes can allow for that sweep, but Hurst was masterful in compressing the same concern for believable humans into documentary films as short as 7 or 8 minutes for the MoI. Too often, the early MoI shorts featured a man behind a desk telling the public what they must and must not do. Hurst’s *A Call For Arms!* and *Miss Grant Goes To The Door* (both 1940) are tiny gems of drama as documentary. Daringly, in *A Call For Arms!*, the two young women who volunteer as munitions workers are not ‘ordinary’ suburban housewives, but showgirls from a saucy revue. The war effort takes all sorts. The characters of sisters Caroline and Edith Grant are more middle-class but both are compassionate to a dying German paratrooper and brave and resourceful in unmasking a Nazi spy disguised as a British officer.

And, of course, there is *A Letter From Ulster* (1942) using real US soldiers playing themselves and commenting on this wee country of ours. It’s a documentary – praised on both sides of the pond – but it is more. It points towards what is still an extraordinary Hurst film using people-playing-themselves.
These little educational drama/docs show Hurst’s flair for combining action, serious content and the human spirit. But it’s his *Theirs Is The Glory* that is a masterpiece. Shot in 1945 and released in 1946, it uses the real locations, the actual men and Dutch civilians who fought the bloody Battle of Arnhem in September 1944. These are not actors; these are the human beings reliving the events of just a year before. By using non-professionals Hurst extracts but never exploits the sense of bravery, comradeship and palpable humanity of the participants.

*Mike Catto*
A Call for Arms! (1940)

A PUBLIC INFORMATION FILM
The work of women in the factories and a mission to produce ‘a million bullets for dispatch by the morning’

On 4 September 1939, the day after the United Kingdom’s declaration of war, the Ministry of Information (MoI) was established ‘to promote the national case to the public at home and abroad in time of war’. It did this through two main routes, firstly by issuing public information on posters and leaflets and secondly, by controlling news and information.

The opening credits of Hurst’s A Call for Arms! (1940) are set against the prominent MoI branding as then used for its output. Notable in the cast and crew is Hurst’s protégé now carrying a rank, Sgt. Terence Young who went on to direct the early Bond films; Dr. No, From Russia with Love and Thunderball. (His rank was not used in their subsequent 1941 film Dangerous Moonlight or for A Letter From Ulster in 1942 where he used his full name, Shaun Terence Young). Another name to look out for is Kathleen Harrison, who went on to play Mrs Dilber in Hurst’s most famous film, Scrooge (1951). In A Call for Arms! she plays Mrs James, a worker at the factory who displays the stiff upper lip in adversity. All actors ‘gave their services’ meaning they worked for free or for a nominal fee covering their expenses.

The two central characters, Irene and Joan, are dancers in a ‘Non Stop Nudes’ revue which promises ‘laughter, life, love’. Although in the context of the 1940s nude does not mean naked, they are simply showgirls in a stage dance troupe.
On leaving the theatre after a performance a young female worker from the local munitions factory collapses outside an *Evening Standard* news seller whose headline billboard messages ‘Latest War News. Bigger Arms, Speed Up. Go To It.’

Irene, Joan and the news seller rush to the unconscious girl on the pavement and the news seller delivers the film’s core message. Whilst kneeling down with the collapsed factory girl the news seller observes, ‘Twelve hour shifts take it out of some of these young uns.’

Edith and Joan are looking on and listening and Joan expresses surprise at twelve hour shifts. The news seller responds to Joan’s surprise ‘Well somebody’s got to do it. Supposing our boys went short of munitions? We’ve got to win the war you know.’

Cropping tightly on the face of the news seller the next message is delivered to the viewer, ‘If more people went and made bullets these girls would not have to work such long hours.’

Irene joins the factory the next day pausing only to look down at her fingernails before taking her place on the production line.

The next day on the factory floor Mrs James is introduced. She is worried about her husband as she has just learnt that he has been

‘Supposing our boys went short of munitions? We’ve got to win the war you know.’
reported as missing. Her co-workers look around as they know what this may mean but Mrs James works on telling her forewoman, ‘I expect I’ll feel better when I’ve had a cup of tea.’

The shopfloor scenes and machinery at work are a vital record of war production with Hurst using the Royal Arsenal at Woolwich.

Joan follows Irene onto the shop floor and on a particular long and difficult night they extend their shift to produce ‘a million bullets by the morning.’

The girls meet the challenge which is met with a fanfare, a cymbal crash and a happy thumbs up.

For Hurst, his job was also done as the film’s script writer Rodney Ackland explained in his memoirs (The Celluloid Mistress) ‘all MoI films had to be shown in every Odeon throughout the land … Labour Exchanges were besieged by young women demanding to be sent to munitions factories.'
Brian Desmond Hurst completed his next documentary for the MoI by 2 July 1940 and it was screened in cinemas throughout the UK following its release on 5 August 1940.

*Miss Grant Goes to the Door* is set during the summer of 1940 when the UK feared a German invasion. The need at the time was to get instructions to the nation about several simple steps they could take in such an event. Despite the context the tone is gentle, mildly humorous and not overly-alarmist but this was only after a complete reshoot and recast of the lead roles after input from the censor.

The film opens with two sisters, Caroline (Mary Clare) and Edith Grant (Martita Hunt) who are awakened by an air raid with Edith declaring, ‘these air raids are a damned nuisance.’ As Caroline scolds Edith for her carelessness for turning the light on during the blackout, they catch a German paratrooper looking through their window. The glimpse of his face through the window will have stayed in the audience’s mind throughout the late summer of 1940. It is a brief but immensely strong image that was allowed to remain by the censor.

After discovering that he is wounded and poses no threat, they hear church bells in the distance with Caroline coming to the realisation that, ‘Church bells - that means we’re invaded.’
‘During the Second World War the Ministry of Information commissioned hundreds of films, from the mediocre to the masterful. In the latter category, Hurst perfected the synthesis of officialdom’s need for propaganda and public information with the film industry’s powers of creative craftsmanship. I’ve seen Miss Grant Goes to the Door many times: a mini-masterpiece that always hits the spot.’

Patrick Russell, Curator of Non-fiction, British Film Institute, National Archive
Once inside, the sisters discover that the German has died of his wounds and Caroline commandeers his pistol as it may prove useful in an emergency. Meanwhile, a lost ‘British officer’ knocks on the door seeking directions and asks for a map so that he can find his way to Jarvis Cross. The officer however pronounces this as Yarvis rather than Jarvis and Caroline holds him at gunpoint whilst Edith cycles to the police station to report the discovery and capture of a German spy.

The Local Defence Volunteers (LDV) are tasked with the arrest of the spy (by the time the film was released in August 1940, the LDV had been renamed the Home Guard). Whilst on their way, they expertly destroy the parachutist’s ammunition container with a couple of well-placed shots from their moving vehicle as per their earlier briefing. In the meantime, the spy has overpowered Caroline and has attempted to make his escape only to be thwarted by the Grants’ immobilised car and bicycle. Due to the Grants’ diligence the German spy is recaptured by the LDV with ease.

The closing scene sums up the stiff upper lip spirit of the day which Hurst had developed in his earlier The Lion Has Wings (1939).

Speaking to Edith and Caroline, the leader of the LDV declares,

‘Well if it hadn’t been for you, the Jerries might have got away with it... The great thing ladies is you kept your heads...You know, the front line is in every home nowadays.’

As with most Mol films, Miss Grant Goes to the Door develops the provision of information by direct instructions, tips and subtle messages. For example, Caroline simultaneously reminds Edith and the nation that, ‘The people who were hurt recently weren’t in their shelters.’ Intelligence is provided about how to spot a German paratrooper along with his ammunition container and its contents. Subtle messages are delivered on keeping maps locked away, disabling vehicles and on any captured German the message is clear, ‘I wouldn’t trust one of you an inch.’

In testament to the film’s influence, the premise of Miss Grant Goes to the Door, the enemy in the heart of an English village, was later reused in Ealing’s Went the Day Well (1944), arguably the most famous ‘invasion’ film of the war.

‘the front line is in every home nowadays.’
Dangerous Moonlight (1941)

The Polish Air Force, duty and the Battle of Britain

‘It’s not safe to be out alone when the moon is so bright’

Despite Winston Churchill’s endorsement of Mrs Miniver (William Wyler, 1942) as ‘worth a hundred battleships’, propagandistic cinema is rarely instrumental in shaping public opinion. If fiction films are influential in this context, it is because they have contributed something distinctive to the language and history of cinema, and not because they have simply parroted or advocated a given political message. Intelligent filmmakers are not only aware of this irony, they exploit it to find space for their artistic vision and sense of cinema (freedom), despite the ideological demands of the producers, commissariats, or political parties funding these productions (conformity).

Not surprisingly, most British propagandistic films from the Second World War era are only of interest to social historians and viewers of Talking Pictures TV. However, a small number of these films can still lay claim to being amongst Britain’s most important – and influential – contributions to cinema history: Michael Powell’s 49th Parallel (1941), for example, and its companion piece, One Of Our Aircraft Is Missing (Powell and Pressburger, 1942); or Fires Were Started (Humphrey Jennings, 1943), or The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp (Powell and Pressburger, 1943) … which Churchill wanted to ban. Brian Desmond Hurst’s Dangerous Moonlight (1941) can also be included in this category, a film in which his innate grasp of the melodramatic idiom combines patriotism and pathos with a more personal identification with the experiences of exiles, refugees, and deracinated ex-pats. As critics such as Ruth Barton, Brian McIlroy, and Lance Pettit have pointed out, Dangerous Moonlight is the wartime film that best captures something of the essence of Hurst’s ambivalent identity, and elusive biography.

Famed at the time for Richard Addinsell’s Rachmaninov-inspired score, Dangerous Moonlight is also noteworthy for the performance of Anton Walbrook (as the Polish concert pianist turned fighter pilot). An Austrian émigré living in England, Walbrook would go on to star in Colonel Blimp and Powell and Pressburger’s The Red Shoes (1948), as well as films directed by Max Ophuls and Otto Preminger.

Despite the Blitz and the everyday hardships of war, the making of Dangerous Moonlight also showed Hurst to be a highly efficient director, with a keen sense of how to entertain wartime audiences. It is especially fitting that this film is now being screened at the Strand Arts Centre as part of this year’s Belfast International Arts Festival, in the heart of Hurst’s East Belfast birthplace, which had itself been on the receiving end of intense Luftwaffe bombing raids in the Spring of 1941.

Dr Des O’Rawe  Senior Lecturer in Film Studies, School of Arts, English, and Languages, Film, Queen’s University Belfast
Hurst’s Obituary in The Times on 2 October 1986 positioned this film ‘His best-known picture was his romantic melodrama Dangerous Moonlight, made in 1941 starring Anton Walbrook as a Polish pianist who loses his memory after the Battle of Britain. A big popular success, the film featured Richard Addinsell’s Warsaw Concerto and launched a cycle of pictures with concerti as their theme music.’

In the USA the film was launched as Suicide Squadron and then, later in Canada and drawing on the success of the film’s music, it was marketed as Warsaw Concerto.

The German invasion of Poland began on 1 September 1939 with the knowledge that Hitler had a secret pact with Russia. This would see Poland swiftly defeated by a two-pronged attack with the Russian invasion of Eastern Poland commencing on 17 September 1939. Poland salvaged what it could, initially to Romania, and then mostly to the United Kingdom which became ‘home’ to the Polish Air Force and other military. Polish pilots went on to play a significant part in the Battle of Britain a year later and hence the context for the story was established.
Speaking in September 2015 at a 75th Anniversary of the Battle of Britain event at which Dangerous Moonlight was screened, Air Vice-Marshal Alan Merriman (retired) spoke about the attrition of the RAF during the summer of 1940 and how replacements were found including the Poles who flew and fought superbly at the Battle of Britain:

‘Some of these replacements were Polish exiles from German-occupied Poland. They were formed into two squadrons, number 302 and number 303 Squadrons and they were based at RAF Northolt just north-west of London. The Poles flew and fought superbly shooting down 203 enemy aircraft for the loss of 29 pilots killed. Number 303 Squadron became the most successful Fighter Command unit shooting down 128 aircraft in 42 days. Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding, who was the Chief of Fighter Command at that time was recorded later saying that had it not been for the magnificent contribution by the Polish squadrons I hesitate to say that the outcome of the Battle of Britain would have been the same.’

Hurst’s memoirs advance the context and provide more detail on his writing discovery, Shaun Terence Young.

‘In 1936, I had visited Cambridge and seen in the Footlights May week revue a young man called Terence Young singing a song dressed as a cowboy. Afterwards, he told me he was interested in working in films. Terence has the sort of intelligence I wanted to see in films so I agreed to help him. His father said that he should get his degree first, to which I agreed, but he used to visit me often when I was in Elstree. He started working regularly as one of my assistants on Prison without Bars (1938). Korda had told me, “Your unit is complete. If you want that young man, you’ll have to pay him yourself”, which I did.’

Hurst’s memoirs reveal how he had an extra incentive to get the story right as German air raids appear to have followed him around. At his London House (Bradbrook House, Kinnerton Street, Belgravia), at Denham Studios and at the Ritz where he dined.

‘While we were making the film, I had promised the producer, William Sistrom, under no condition would I go to London for the weekend. I disobeyed him and came in with Terence and Sally Gray, one of the stars of the film. We went to the Ritz and we were in a downstairs dining-room when a bomb fell and destroyed Green Park Station. A lot of foreign women panicked and were running about shouting, “Gaz, gaz, gaz”, because of the fuzz coming through the ventilators. The dead and the dying were carried into the foyer of the Ritz, which was soon awash with blood. The women were tearing their dresses and their underwear to bandage the wounded. We finally got everyone away into ambulances. The three of us came out of the Ritz and looked along Piccadilly. Long Acre was burning in the background and all the shattered glass was lying in the gutters with

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1 Merriman, Alan 75th Anniversary Battle of Britain event. Performance of Warsaw Concerto and Screening of Dangerous Moonlight. YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WT2j0tOxZQ
moonlight shining on it. As we stood there, along Piccadilly came some thirty or forty ranks of young people, ten deep, in uniform and out of uniform. As they came towards us, they were singing, “There’ll always be an England”. We went across to the Mayfair Hotel, where we stayed the night. We went back to Denham Studios next morning to discover firebombs had burned all our offices and dressing rooms and they were searching for our bodies. However, we continued work, although we were always getting bombed, sometimes six times in one day. When the sirens went, I have never seen electricians come down from the gantry so fast.

The story of the film
The film opens with an on-screen credit that sets the scene as London, November 1940, just after the Battle of Britain. A traumatised pilot with vacant eyes is playing disjointed notes on a piano. He is in hospital and has had the piano for three days. Searchlights probe the sky outside and the curtains have not been drawn. The medical specialist, doctor and the man’s wife all want to bring him back and we are told he is Stefan Radesky (Anton Walbrook), the great Polish pianist. Suddenly the atmosphere changes as the notes of Warsaw Concerto start rising from the piano and the film flashes back to an obliterated Warsaw and Carole Peters (Sally Gray) stumbling through the streets looking for shelter.

Amongst the chaos Carole hears and follows piano music, it is part of Warsaw Concerto then in its infancy of composition and being born out of the conflict. Stefan continues playing, glances up, and offers a word of advice to Carole, ‘It’s not safe to be out alone when the moon is so bright.’

They chat. Stefan is playing as it soothes his nerves. Carole is an American reporter working for the US Monitor covering what is happening in Poland and her voice is music to Stefan. She chastises him for not being up in the air fighting and Stefan’s mood changes. He explains that he has been in the air nine hours already, fighting with wood and string against real aircraft; that children are out scavenging the streets for fuel from abandoned cars for his few remaining planes and that only two of his men are left. He closes his retaliation with ‘Now go back home and write an article about the sufferings of Warsaw. They’ll pay you well.’

Carole says, ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t understand’ and Stefan says, ‘Forget it.’ He takes a seat back at the piano and is offered a cigarette as Carole discovers more. Stefan is a composer who has harnessed the trauma of the war as an artistic catalyst for the new piece he is picking out on the keyboard. A point Hurst was probably underlining when casting his mind back to his own experiences at Gallipoli which may have been the spark that propelled his mind to liberate its artistic talent which he followed in art schools in Canada, Paris and New York after the First World War.

The couple’s eyes engage and as the camera closes in, very slowly, Carole’s eyes seem to give Stefan the inspiration for the iconic mood change in the music – the most beautiful part of his whole composition and the piece that is today recognisable worldwide.

‘we were always getting bombed, sometimes six times in one day.’
The moment and genius is suddenly broken as a bomb explodes nearby. They are flung to the floor and rising in the dust their eyes meet again before they share their first kiss.

The scene changes and Stefan is back with his remaining men and their commanding officer is arranging their next steps in a battle where they are facing check-mate. Four men are needed to fly the remaining planes to Romania whilst the rest fly a suicide mission. The audience is also introduced to Mike Carroll, an Irishman (Derrick de Marney) fighting with the Polish Air Force.

All of the men volunteer for the suicide mission. The men then fix the resulting draw to ensure Stefan gets one of the safe tickets out as they believe
his artistry will do more to keep the spirit of Poland alive. Mike gets one of the other tickets out and so the story unfolds with Stefan finding love when he meets Carole again by chance when he is on a fundraising concert tour of the USA.

Stefan and Carole marry and she does all in her power to keep his thoughts from the war. With the Battle of Britain looming the call out is for pilots and the pressure is placed on love with Mike going back to fight for Britain and Carole asking him not to tell Stefan. But in the end, duty wins the day and Stefan flies to Britain’s call.

Carole is cross, heartbroken and inconsolable as Stefan leaves for England and she says things she later regrets.

Carole tries to reach out to Stefan through Mike but fate conspires and her message is not delivered as Mike is killed in action. Stefan is desperate. His best friend is dead and in the Officer’s Mess he tries to pick out the notes of the tune Mike used to hum – the Hurst favourite, The Rose of Tralee (hearing that his mentor, John Ford, was in failing health Hurst flew over to the USA to be with Ford again and sang this song to John and Mary Ford as the song is about the love for a Mary).
Stefan flies another mission. He is tired and alone and as he runs out of ammunition, he turns his Spitfire into his own suicide mission as he takes out another German plane by ramming it; however, he manages to parachute to safety. In the final scene, Stefan is traumatised in hospital and Carole won’t leave his side but her angst is clear. For three days the specialist has sat him at a piano in the hope of rekindling the embers in his devastated mind. Slowly the rifts of his composition come back to his damaged mind and slowly recognition breaks across his face. He smiles, looks at Carole and says, ‘It’s not safe to be out alone when the moon is so bright.’

Tears emerge with a loving look followed by a kiss as the film ends.
For more on Brian Desmond Hurst and his films see:

**WINNING THE WAR**

Hurst, Film & Propaganda
A series of booklets published by the Northern Ireland War Memorial with the Brian Desmond Hurst Estate to highlight the role of propaganda and filmmaking in the Second World War. The series looks at the Hurst films; *The Lion Has Wings*, *A Call for Arms!*, *Miss Grant Goes to the Door*, *Dangerous Moonlight*, *A Letter From Ulster* and *Theirs is the Glory*.

**THEIRS IS THE GLORY**

Arnhem, Hurst and Conflict on Film
Hurst’s *Theirs is the Glory* tells the story of the Battle of Arnhem. It not only features the real location of the battle but also the actual veterans who fought there. This book is the ‘directors cut’ looking in depth at Hurst’s work on conflict and shows that *Theirs is the Glory* is the definitive film on Arnhem.

**HURST ON FILM 1928–1970**

At over 600 pages and 1,000 images this new book brings together for the first time Hurst’s richly entertaining and sometimes scandalous memoirs with a wealth of hitherto unseen private photos, stills, press releases, lobby cards and posters from the official Hurst archives. Lavishly produced, this book is a visual treat offering fresh insights into British and Irish film history, which will appeal to film fans and film students alike.
Hurst made ten films on war and conflict. The *Winning the War: Hurst, Film and Propaganda* series explores many of the themes he linked to warfare, such as propaganda, enduring love, duty, self-sacrifice, unflinching loyalty to cause or comrades, the work of women in war, hate, injury and death.

**FUTURE SCREENINGS**
Look out for upcoming screenings of

**A LETTER FROM ULSTER**
(1942)

**THEIRS IS THE GLORY**
(1946)

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