



The Main Feature

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Downton Abbey – A New Era

UK 2022

125 mins. Certificate PG

Director	Simon Curtis
Screenplay	Julian Fellowes
Cinematography	Andrew Dunn
Music	John Lunn
Costume design	Maja Meschede, Anna Robbins

Cast

Hugh Bonneville	Robert Grantham
Maggie Smith	Violet Grantham
Elizabeth McGovern	Cora Grantham
Michelle Dockery	Lady Mary
Imelda Staunton	Maude Bagshaw
Laura Carmichael	Lady Edith
Penelope Wilton	Isobel Merton
Jim Carter	Mr Carson
Brendan Coyle	Mr Bates
Sue Johnston	Miss Denker



The scriptwriter for *Downton Abbey – A New Era*, Julian Fellowes, has form. He was responsible for the Oscar-winning screenplay of *Gosford Park*, which the club showed in September 2003 as the opening presentation for the 24th season. That film is a portrait of country house life in the early 1930s, with a murder mystery on the side. It has an ensemble cast, featuring Maggie Smith as the Dowager Countess of Trentham.

Later, Fellowes created the television series *Downton Abbey* which, over six series and 52 episodes, followed the fortunes of the aristocratic Crawley family and their domestic servants in the post-Edwardian era, from 1912 to 1926, and the effects the great events of the time have on their lives and on the British social hierarchy. These events include news of the sinking of the *Titanic*; the outbreak of the First World War; the Spanish influenza pandemic; the Marconi scandal (insider trading); the Irish War of Independence leading to the formation of the Irish Free State; the British general election of 1923 and the

Beer Hall Putsch. The sixth series introduces the rise of the working class during the interwar period and hints at the eventual decline of the British aristocracy.

The series was popular, with audiences of at least 9 million throughout. It tapped into our fascination with the aristocracy coupled to an interest in all human stories whether masters or servants, which Hugh Bonneville sums up as 'There's a universality about the characters and the scrapes they get into'. The ITV series *Upstairs Downstairs* (1971-75) had already tapped into this feeling with the programme covering a similar period (1903 to 1930) in 68 episodes over five series; and also the BBC's response *The Duchess of Duke Street* which aired in 1976-77.

After the TV series ended, a feature film *Downton Abbey* followed in 2019 (the plot featuring a visit from King George V and Queen Mary in 1927), and now a second sequel, *Downton Abbey – A New Era*.



The characters are familiar, of course, though the year has moved on to 1928. For those like me who did not follow the TV series or the first film, the plot relies on quite a bit of past knowledge, so some of the nuances are bound to be missed, especially where loose ends from the series or the previous film are tied up.

Not that the plot is complicated. It centres on two themes. The first is that Downton Abbey's roof is leaking and needs replacement at the same time as a film production company is looking for a location to make a silent film and whose fee will cover the cost of the roof. Add to that the disdain of Lord Grantham (Hugh Bonneville) for the kinema (pronounced like that), the transition from silent films to the talkies (cue some scenes reminiscent of *Singin' in the Rain*), a haughty leading lady and some hidden talents among the staff.

The second is that the Dowager Countess of Grantham (Maggie Smith) has inherited a villa in the South of France from the Marquis de Montmirail, recently deceased. This leads to a visit by Lord Grantham and his entourage to view the property and to try to work out why the Marquis left the property to the Countess shortly after she spent a week there in 1864. Lord Grantham is accompanied by his retired butler Carson (Jim Carter) who is determined to show the French staff how to do things *comme il faut*.

As to the critics, Peter Bradshaw of the Guardian said 'The second – and hopefully last – film spun off from Julian Fellowes's successful TV series is as hammy, silly, and undeniably entertaining as ever' whilst Wendy Ide of The Observer noted 'The title of the second *Downton Abbey* movie promises a new era, but in fact this is a reheated serving of reassuringly familiar comfort food for fans of the series. The same crusty class certainties under the same cold, Wedgwood-blue skies; the same light sprinkling of xenophobia and the same eager score that bustles in between lines of dialogue like an over-solicitous waiter'. Lewis Knight of Radio Times added '... the grand location, the costumes, the score, and the pithy one-liners are all there in spades - enough to satisfy long-time fans of the series and entertain newcomers'.

In watching the film, don't look for searing social comment, political insights, surprising characters or a car chase. Just sit back, relax, and be entertained by what seems like a group of old friends.

Michael Hipkins



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Club website: www.wncc.org.uk. Prefer to leave your comments on the film and your score online rather than on paper? Email to reactions@wncc.org.uk by Wednesday 20 December 2023
Discs of previous shows are available to hire for a modest fee.

UK cinemagoers hail return of intermissions as films hit three-hour mark

Nadia Khomami's piece in the Guardian spots a trend, but the club was there first. Enjoy your cake!

We have all felt it: that numbness in the back and legs, a full bladder, or desperately avoiding checking your watch to see how long is left of the film. But the experience seems to be happening more and more for cinemagoers, who say the growing trend for long movies is putting them off going altogether.

In the past year, blockbusters including *The Batman*, *Avatar: The Way of Water*, *Babylon*, *Oppenheimer* and *Killers of the Flower Moon* all hit the three-hour mark (with the latter clocking in at a whopping 206 minutes). But now, cinemas are taking matters into their own hands – by bringing back the 15-minute intermissions that were popular in the UK until the early 1980s. According to the cinema chain Vue, screenings of *Killers of the Flower Moon* that include a break halfway through have been a huge hit with customers, who have appreciated the opportunity to stretch their legs or go to the toilet.

“Our recent market analysis showed customers would like to see the return of intermissions,” Vue’s chief executive, Tim Richards, said. “And so far, we’ve seen 74% positive feedback from those who have tried our interval.” According to Richards, Vue was inspired by a precedent set by a handful of UK operators during *Oppenheimer*. “The way I see it, cinema is no different from live theatre and a lot of other sporting and entertainment fixtures,” he said.

“There aren’t many events left where you’re sitting in one spot for several hours. When you go see an amazing show at the theatre, the intermission doesn’t distract from it. In fact, it makes it that much more enjoyable because you get a little bit of a break and you can’t wait to get back in.” In particular, Richards said, younger and older audiences appreciated breaks. “Certainly, because of the very positive response we’ve had, I’m hopeful we’ll be able to offer intermissions more frequently with movies going forward.”

The move came as criticism of overlong runtimes continued to mount. This week, *Sideways* and *The Holdovers* director Alexander Payne criticised the phenomenon during an appearance at Middleburg film festival in the US. “You want your movie to be as short as possible. There are too many damn long movies these days” he said. Though Payne did not cite any particular offender, his comments came on the opening weekend of Scorsese’s *Killers of the Flower Moon*, which critics have said could have benefited from a tighter edit. A review in the *i* newspaper said the film was “ruined by its inordinate length¹”. For his part, Scorsese has passionately defended the runtime of his film, saying “you can sit in front of the TV and watch something for five hours ... there are many people who watch theatre for 3.5 hours ... give cinema some respect.” And the

gamble to make a long movie often pays off – most of the highest-grossing films in history fall between two and three hours (and every best picture winner at the Oscars has surpassed 90 minutes).



But while long movies have been staples throughout film history – think *Titanic*, *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Gone*

With the Wind, *Ben-Hur* or *The Godfather II* – they used to be the exception to the norm. These days, it’s not just magnificent works of cinema that push runtime limits – even superhero franchises have got longer. When the film website What to Watch looked at the runtimes of the top 10 movies for the past five decades, it found the average length was 141 minutes in 2022 and 131 minutes in 2021, compared with 110 minutes in 1981. It’s no surprise, then, that audiences have longed for the return of intermissions. Writing in the Guardian last year, Phil Hoad called them “a relic of a more civilised epoch”. “No one’s going to pretend that bringing back intermissions would suddenly reverse the post-pandemic malaise of movie theatres in the face of Netflix, Disney+ and others. However, especially compared with the degraded home viewing experience, interrupted by social media every 30 seconds, they might help bolster the status of cinemagoing as a prestige event,” he said.

Richards echoed this, saying the issue wasn’t one of long films but how cinemas can make the experience better for audiences. “We had a lot of customers who said they felt intimidated by the length of *Killers of the Flower Moon*. A lot of people actually write to me directly, and we have 100 million people going to our cinemas, so this is a lot of feedback. But when they found out we had an interval, they signed up.” Richards said intermissions “never went out” and were common practice in other markets, including in Europe, Asia and South America. “Some of the most successful movies of all time are long movies. This isn’t something new. For us, it’s about providing an element of choice and giving our customers the best possible experience. A large number of our customers just love a comfort break.”

Some of the longest popular films in history

Cleopatra (1963)
248 mins (4 hrs 8 min)
Gone With the Wind (1940)
238 min (3 hrs 58 min)
Dances With Wolves (1990)
236 min (3 hrs 56 min)
Once Upon a Time in America (1984)
229 min (3 hrs 49 min)
The Ten Commandments (1956)
220 min (3 hrs 40 min)

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2023/oct/28/uk-cinemagoers-hail-return-of-intermissions-as-films-hit-three-hour-mark>

¹ As Hitchcock is alleged to have said ‘The length of a film should be directly related to the endurance of the human bladder.’ Ed

Comments and reactions to: **Decision to Leave**

No of reaction slips received = 22

Average score = 4.59

Score	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	~	1	~	6	6	2	5	~	1	~	1

Dreadful. Didn't understand it!!

The fault was mine

Too convoluted, too confusing, too long

Weird film – job to follow

2nd half better than the 1st, and 1st half I didn't understand at all

Went home at half-time!

Too disjointed. Sorry, I did not understand what was going on. Not for everyone, certainly not for me

Very confusing – second half was better. Lovely cake!

Nothing to add

Slow burn but managed to keep me intrigued

I should have taken the Decision to Leave but stayed for tea and cake!

The triumph of style over substance. But she did it, didn't she?

Too complicated!!

Second time seen – much to think about!

Ying tong – yink tong ooh! 'Let's Eat'

Quite a few people made a Decision to Leave partway through the film. I might see it a second time, to enjoy the twists. Great acting and direction but too confusing. Might be better if we spoke Korean and got the tone of the voices as well as the words.

Position	Film	Average score
1	Mrs Harris Goes to Paris	7.58
2	The Lost King	7.38
3	The Banshees of Inisherin	7.06
4	Rams	6.40
5	Three Colours: Blue	6.18
6	Decision to Leave	4.59

Forthcoming attraction: 11 January 2024 – **Living**



The un-lived life is a great modern theme. Not reality's disappointments, but reality itself as a form of evasion, the wrong road taken... [Living] is a brilliant treatment of this theme, an essay on its mixed familiarity and elusiveness.

London Review of Books

Throughout, Bill Nighy carries the film effortlessly on his slender shoulders, reminding us of why he's an international treasure.

Chicago Sun Times

[Bill Nighy] has shed his trademark, twinkling charisma like snakeskin. What lies beneath is something almost spectral in its stillness.

Independent

Nighy's performance is understated yet precise, capturing the complicated nature of a man who's lived his life like a cross between George Bailey and Scrooge.

Scotsman