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# FILM DISTRIBUTION IN SCOTLAND BEFORE 1918

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*Para mi papá  
en su cumpleaños*

## **Abstract**

This thesis proposes an empirical approach to the history of film distribution and exhibition in Scotland before 1918. It deploys geo-database tools as a way to collect and analyse data from a range of archival and print sources, and to engage with historiographical questions about the emergence of cinema as an institution in a non-metropolitan context.

The first part introduces the theoretical and methodological premises that underpin the project, situating it in relation to growing academic interest in early distribution and local film practices. A research method is outlined, involving the construction of a relational database documenting the places of film exhibition and the geographical variation in programming practices. This database, working alongside more detailed archival case studies, constitutes the foundation for broader discussions about the commercial, social and ideological roles of film and cinema.

The analytical framework incorporates notions such as the commodity nature of film and the tension between different conceptions of the social role and position of cinema within Scottish communities. The emergence of institutional practices and structures in Scotland is thus described as occurring in a complex field of forces where two main polarities appear as prominent: Firstly, a tension between decentralised, local practices and the increasingly globalised operations of the film industry; and secondly, a shifting balance between regularisation and distinction, or the ordinary and the extraordinary. It is in terms of this fluid equilibrium that two



overlapping moments in the history of the early Scottish film trade are described in the second and third parts of the thesis.

Part II follows the creation and expansion of the Scottish market and popular demand for moving pictures, showing how different forms of film supply enabled the coexistence of various types of itinerant exhibition, and then of a gradual transition to fixed-site shows. It starts by exploring the continuities between film exhibition and existing cultural forms such as lantern lecturing and the music hall. It highlights the significant level of agency exercised by local exhibitors and renters within an open-market model that allowed the outright sale of films, and which also established a commercial interdependency between city-centre and peripheral exhibition.

Part III argues that, once the market reached a relatively stable state with the regularisation of supply and the growing standardisation of the film product, the increasing concentration of capital and power in larger companies (both in the regional and the global scale) marked a shift in the balance of forces, away from unrestricted circulation and towards exclusivity. This is seen as a reformulation of the commodity status of film, associated with the emergence of feature programming. The consequences of the new textual and industrial trends for the Scottish distributors and exhibitors are considered, revealing geographical variation in their adoption, as well as incipient forms of resistance to the emerging institutional practices.

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## **PART I**

### INTRODUCTION



## **Chapter I**

### **From moving pictures to cinema**

In Scotland, as in many other parts of the world, the cinema was an integral part of everyday experience and an important form of sociality for most of the population during the first half of the twentieth century. This thesis seeks to understand the conditions under which this contact with the moving image took place: how it was possible for people in Scotland to gather and look at certain films. To understand the connection between text and event is to grasp the shifting relationship between the reproducible and the unique, the ubiquitous and the local. The present work aims to do this by documenting and analysing the ways in which films circulated and were traded in Scotland up to the end of the First World War. During those two decades, film went from being an attraction within existing cultural forms, to being the lynchpin of a distinct institution – cinema, associated with a growing network of specialised venues, discourses and social practices.

This thesis seeks to shed light on the material conditions of the institutionalisation of cinema in Scotland, and, through this prism, to engage with broader discussions regarding early cinema. By focusing on distribution, it connects existing knowledge of the rise of Hollywood as an industry, with the more recent interest in local histories of cinemagoing and reception. It provides the first detailed account of the early film trade in Scotland, while also contributing to a growing corpus of localised case studies within a comparative framework. It deploys innovative empirical approaches while addressing more theoretical questions from a

film studies perspective, touching on issues such as the commodity nature of film, the class position of early cinema audiences, and the emergence of particular (institutional) textual modes.

### **I.1. Distribution and institutionalisation**

A central argument in this project is that studying the history of distribution provides an empirical route into complex and important debates in film studies. The intermediary role of distribution brings to the fore issues of negotiation and resistance arising from the irruption of a modern object into the changing patterns of everyday life around the world. Distribution is, as Frank Kessler has pointed out, a *specific* element of the institution of cinema; it reflects those characteristics that are unique to film, such as a form of mechanical reproducibility where the profit is not necessarily related to the sale of a large number of copies.<sup>1</sup> The patterns of global circulation of film established during the first two decades are an essential component of institutional cinema, and one of the foundations for Hollywood hegemony.

Out of the three branches of the film industry, however, distribution is the one that has attracted the least attention from historians. Nicolas Dulac argues that distribution has been side-lined because, when compared to textual analysis, production or reception studies, it does not appear to have ‘theoretical potential’. This interpretive poverty is, however, only the case when distribution is studied as

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Kessler, ‘Distribution - Preliminary Notes’, in *Networks of Entertainment*, ed. by Frank Kessler and Nanna Verhoeff (Eastleigh: John Libbey, 2007), pp. 1-3 (p. 2).

an isolated industrial practice within an ‘autarchic historiography’.<sup>2</sup> If, on the other hand, distribution is seen as a function that is essential to the existence of cinema as a cultural practice, its study becomes indispensable. As Paul Moore has argued, when studied on a regional scale, cinema can be understood as ‘a mass practice that connected all places in a region, not to each other so much as to the mass market’.<sup>3</sup> This thesis sees the regional film trade as ‘an important transitional scale’, an arena where broader historical forces interact in concrete and localised ways.<sup>4</sup> This approach intends to contribute to the understanding of the Scottish case by putting it in context, but also to add to larger historiographical projects, in particular regarding issues of continuity and change in the transition from pre-institutional to institutional cinema.

Tom Gunning’s concept of a ‘cinema of attractions’, alongside André Gaudreault’s idea of ‘monstration’ as the main mode of exhibition practice during the first two decades of moving pictures, have underpinned a wholesale reconsideration of pre-1915 film.<sup>5</sup> Where the previous wave of film historians saw the first two decades of moving pictures as primitive, the infancy of a medium that was destined for classicism, the Brighton generation of film scholars (so called after a pivotal conference that brought archivists and researchers together in 1978), with

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<sup>2</sup> Nicolas Dulac, ‘Distribution sérielle et synchronisation du spectateur aux premiers temps du cinéma’, in *Networks of Entertainment*, ed. by Kessler and Verhoeff, pp. 167-179 (p. 168).

<sup>3</sup> Paul S. Moore, ‘The Social Biograph: Newspapers as Archives of the Regional Mass Market for Movies’, in *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies*, ed. by Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst, and Philippe Meers (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 263-279 (p. 264).

<sup>4</sup> Moore, ‘The Social Biograph’, p. 265.

<sup>5</sup> Tom Gunning, ‘The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde’, in *Early Cinema: Space-Frame-Narrative*, ed. by Thomas Elsaesser and Adam Barker (London: BFI Publishing, 1990), pp. 56-62; André Gaudreault, ‘Narration and Monstration in the Cinema’, *Journal of Film and Video* 39.2 (1987), 29-36.

their enthusiasm for archive material, have rejected this teleological view.<sup>6</sup> Pre-institutional film practice is now recognised instead as something else, so radically different that even the term ‘early cinema’, with its suggestion of continuity, can only be used with caution.

For Gaudreault, motion pictures between the 1890s and the 1910s formed part of existing ‘cultural series’, rather than constituting the initial stages of a new one which can be called institutional cinema.<sup>7</sup> He refers to this period as ‘kine-attractography’ (*cinématographie-attraction*), which, when compared to ‘institutional cinema’, constitutes ‘an antagonistic pair of successively dominant paradigms clearly opposed to one another’.<sup>8</sup> Although Gunning and Gaudreault suggested a time frame within which the paradigm of attractions or kine-attractography prevailed, the radical otherness of the mode of address they theorise can only be maintained if it is seen as separate from the historical continuum. That is, it must be possible to find kine-attractography and institutional cinema overlapping in practice, because the second does not emerge, like a chrysalis, out of the first. The context in which these overlaps were more intense was identified as a period of ‘narrativisation’ between 1907 and 1914, but more recently it has been

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<sup>6</sup> The experimentation of the New York underground filmmakers with archive footage also had a role in reinventing approaches to early cinema, according to Gunning’s account: ‘Attractions: How they came into the World’, in *The Cinema of Attractions: Reloaded*, ed. by Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), pp. 31-39 (p. 34).

<sup>7</sup> André Gaudreault, *Film and Attraction : From Kinematography to Cinema* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), p. 64. This attention to other cultural practices contemporary to the first experiments in moving pictures has proved very productive. The main outlet for this branch of intermedial historiography is the journal *Early Popular Visual Culture* and its associated conference.

<sup>8</sup> Gaudreault, *Film and Attraction*, p. 7.

studied under the contested rubric of ‘transitional era’.<sup>9</sup> Defining a specific lapse as a transition risks restoring the kind of continuity that was challenged by the attractions model. Rather than a clean break or a logical development, the present work looks at the emergence of institutional practices as a dialectical process where both change and continuity were defining forces.

Since this is not a work about film production or textual changes, Noël Burch’s definition of an Institutional Mode of Representation that encapsulates the formal characteristics of mainstream Hollywood cinema will remain in the background.<sup>10</sup> Gaudreault offers a more pertinent formulation, arguing that the processes that converged in institutional cinema included regulation and standardisation, which promoted industrial stability; the separation of film from older cultural series in which it was embedded, that is, its emergence as a specific cultural practice; and finally, its discursive legitimation.<sup>11</sup> Part II of this thesis argues that the consolidation of structures and routines of film supply was an essential part of the story. The ad-hoc systems of film supply that characterized the first few years, when production was not industrialised or standardised, followed nonetheless the seasonal pattern of the entertainment practices that hosted moving

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<sup>9</sup> In his contribution to a collection about this period, Ben Singer argues that the term ‘transitional’ is ‘almost too tame, too measured’, and suggests ‘transformational’ instead: ‘Feature Films, Variety Programs, and the Crisis of the Small Exhibitor’, in *American Cinema’s Transitional Era: Audiences, Institutions, Practices*, ed. by Charlie Keil and Shelly Stamp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 76-100 (p. 76).

<sup>10</sup> Burch described the IMR as an illusionistic system, informed by the ideology of bourgeois realist drama, whereby the discontinuity and ambiguity of film space and time are made imperceptible to the spectator. This ‘zero point of cinematic style’ depends on forms of mise-en-scene and editing that only became widespread during the second decade of film production, and only in some Western countries. Noël Burch, *Theory of Film Practice* (London: Secker & Warburgh, 1973), pp. 9-11; *Life to Those Shadows* (London: BFI, 1990), p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> Gaudreault, *Film and Attraction*, p. 83.



pictures, as Chapter 3 will show. A major step in regularising the film supply was taken with the emergence of film renting, which allowed the new permanent venues of film exhibition in Britain to settle into a twice-weekly change of programme. This regularisation built a relationship with the audience that was based on repeat custom, but that differed from that offered by American nickelodeons, which changed their programmes daily. It depended on flexible forms of film supply permitted by an open-market form of trade that contrasts with the duopoly that held in the United States up to 1912 (and was only replaced by an oligopoly thereafter).<sup>12</sup>

As Nicolas Dulac has argued, the distribution function (*function-distribution*) seeks to synchronise production and consumption, in a way that allows producers to develop a reliable market outlet.<sup>13</sup> While the industry needed to embed cinemagoing in daily routines in order to maintain a predictable mass audience, an intensely competitive market encouraged product differentiation at several levels. In the following chapters, it will become apparent that this tension between regularity and novelty, standardisation and uniqueness, defined the field of forces on which the emergent practices were situated. As Robert C. Allen wrote recently, ‘the eventfulness of the experience of cinema’ is ‘always poised between the ordinary

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<sup>12</sup> On the formation and strategies of General Film and MP Sales Co., the competing forces in American distribution, the classical paper is Janet Staiger, ‘Combination and Litigation: Structures of US Film Distribution, 1896-1917’, *Cinema Journal* 23.2 (1984), 41-72. A more detailed view of the internal frictions that led to the collapse of the MPPC even before an anti-monopoly court order is provided by Scott Curtis, ‘A House Divided: The MPPC in Transition’, in *American Cinema’s Transitional Era*, ed. by Keil and Stamp, pp. 239-264. On the parallel history of the independents’ distribution company see Max Alvarez, ‘The Motion Picture Distributing and Sales Company’, *Film History* 19 (2007), 247-270.

<sup>13</sup> Dulac, ‘Distribution sérielle’, p. 174.

and the extraordinary'.<sup>14</sup> The viability of institutional cinema depended on a carefully maintained balance between these poles and between the industry interests that they benefited. Distribution was a crucial instance for finding and recalibrating this balance. The ordinary/extraordinary axis is therefore one of the transversal topics of this thesis.

Focusing on the rhythms and temporal patterns of film supply throws into relief the issue of the commodity status of film. Cinema as commercial leisure, which is to say institutional cinema, implies a form of commoditisation: a practice becomes a tradable good with an exchange value. This thesis addresses two aspects of this process: the crystallisation of the film reel as a commodity form through the development of a specialised market, and the subsuming of the live elements of the film show into more standardised forms. An important reference point for these discussions is Gerben Bakker's study of the displacement effect that cinema had in relation to other forms of entertainment.<sup>15</sup> Bakker's Schumpeterian approach emphasises the role of entrepreneurship and innovation (rather than unequal development or colonialism) in the emergent configuration of the international film industry, which in turn explains the textual characteristics of its products. While this perspective lacks a critical dimension, some of its insights are methodologically useful, such as Bakker's distinction between the producers' and distributors' stock-

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<sup>14</sup> Robert C Allen, 'Reimagining the History of the Experience of Cinema in a Post-Moviegoing Age', in *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies*, ed. by Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst, and Philippe Meers (Chichester: Blackwell, 2011), pp. 41-57 (pp. 51-52).

<sup>15</sup> Gerben Bakker, *Entertainment Industrialised : the Emergence of the International Film Industry, 1890-1940* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008). For a more extended discussion see María A. Vélez-Serna, 'Entertainment Industrialised: The Emergence of the International Film Industry, 1890 -1940, by Gerben Bakker [book review]', *The Kelvingrove Review*.5 (2009). [http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media\\_147467\\_en.pdf](http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_147467_en.pdf) [accessed 9 July 2012]

in-trade (films) and the product that exhibitors make and market, which is the 'spectator-hour'.<sup>16</sup> This concept takes into account the fact, highlighted by Michael Chanan, that the 'consumption' of a film does not deplete it or remove it from the market.<sup>17</sup> The separation between the film as a physical industrial product, and the experience that is offered to the cinemagoer, is crucial for the analysis of the period under study.

While a film is reproducible and potentially ubiquitous, each show is a localised and unique event. At the intersections with the ordinary/extraordinary polarity, this tension between the local and the international dimensions of the film trade constitutes the second axis in the field of forces that the present work tries to capture. Textual and institutional factors converged in a tendency that implied the loss of control by the exhibitor over the editing and meaning of the film, a process that has been studied by Joe Kember, Charles Musser, Pierre Chemartin and André Gaudreault, amongst others.<sup>18</sup> Thinking about the second moment of production, namely the production of a show, the main area where the struggle for control can be studied is programming practice. The use of the products of the international film industry in order to create a show is the prime moment for the enactment of the power relations between the different sectors and agents in the field.

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<sup>16</sup> Bakker, *Entertainment Industrialised*, p. 320.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Chanan, *The Dream That Kicks* (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 27.

<sup>18</sup> Joe Kember, 'The Cinema of Affections: The Transformation of Authorship in British Cinema before 1907', *The Velvet Light Trap*, 57 (2006), 3-16; Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907*, History of the American Cinema, vol. 1 (Oxford: Maxwell Macmillan, 1990); Pierre Chemartin and André Gaudreault, 'Les consignes de l'«editeur» pour l'assemblage des vues dans les catalogues de distribution', in *Networks of Entertainment*, ed. by Kessler and Verhoeff, pp. 193-202.

Part III of this thesis examines a crucial moment in this balance of forces: the transition from a programming paradigm that emphasised variety and left ample space for the exhibitor's intervention, towards the 'feature programme' with its more rigid format. This shift was connected with the production trend towards longer films (lasting an hour or more), a practice that has been seen as an attempt by Hollywood studios to escalate production costs, restrict the access of potential competitors to the market, and regularise consumption – that is, an offer-led rather than demand-led process.<sup>19</sup> As a trend powered by the dynamics of the American market, the changes in the product and the programme had different consequences for non-metropolitan exhibition. Some studies, as well as the contemporary trade journals, suggest that variety programming was a preferred form of practice in rural or suburban exhibition. Writing about the North American context, Potamianos found that while film renting allowed exhibition to thrive in provincial locations, a segmented market emerged, where exhibitors in small towns received a lower quality film service and had very little bargaining power.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, as Ben Singer has pointed out, in the United States the exhibition and reception practices associated with feature and variety programmes were so distinct that they coexisted for some time, occupying different spaces and social niches.<sup>21</sup> The relationships between centre and periphery, and between the urban and the rural, enacted in the

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<sup>19</sup> Bakker, *Entertainment Industrialised*, p. xx; Ian Jarvie, *Hollywood's Overseas Campaign: the North Atlantic Movie Trade, 1920-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 430.

<sup>20</sup> George Potamianos, 'Movies at the Margins: The Distribution of Films to Theaters in Small-Town America, 1895-1919', in *American Silent Film: Discovering Marginalized Voices*, ed. by Gregg Bachman and Thomas J. Slater (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), pp. 9-26 (p. 20).

<sup>21</sup> Singer, 'Feature Films, Variety Programs', pp. 84-85.

rise of feature programming, constitute another aspect of the spatial configurations that a geographical approach can help explore, as the following chapter will argue.

Approaching the subject of distribution from the point of view of a relatively peripheral market like Scotland opens up a complementary perspective to that of more top-down accounts. Although most industrial histories include some mention of distribution, the first dedicated monograph was Kristin Thompson's 1985 study of the commercial strategies that secured the American dominance of the world film market, which contains several useful sections on the British case.<sup>22</sup> Ian Jarvie's more detailed analysis of the marketing of American films in Canada and Britain after the First World War describes free trade in films as the central issue in the struggle for control of national markets.<sup>23</sup> Although the period studied in this thesis is immediately anterior to the one covered in Jarvie's book, which is also more concerned with higher-level strategy (including international diplomacy), its foregrounding of distribution makes it an important precedent.

In recent years, however, interest in the history of distribution has taken a more local bent, following Ivo Blom's much-cited monograph about Jean Desmet, a Dutch fairground showman who became the country's first film renter, and left a substantial cache of documents.<sup>24</sup> Blom's book is a methodological sibling to Gunnar Iversen's research on the Norwegian distributor, Jens Christian Gundersen,

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<sup>22</sup> Kristin Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market, 1907-34* (London: BFI, 1985).

<sup>23</sup> Jarvie, *Hollywood's Overseas Campaign*, p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> Ivo Blom, *Jean Desmet and the Early Dutch Film Trade* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003).

and also to Luke McKernan's work on Charles Urban.<sup>25</sup> Rather than offering personal biographies of pioneers, these books use their main subjects as paths of entry into wider social contexts; their lines of enquiry are suggested initially by the extent of archival materials, but they tend to follow leads to other sources such as public records and the trade press. The 2004 Domitor conference, which took place shortly after the publication of Blom's book, constitutes a milestone as it focused on distribution. The proceedings were published by Amsterdam University Press in a collection that showcases the diversity of approaches and areas of study that are being pursued by researchers around the world.<sup>26</sup> With important hubs in the Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany, the study of early distribution has been taken up more intensively in Europe, while American scholars have continued lines of enquiry initiated in the 1990s by influential researchers like Douglas Gomery and Gregory Waller.<sup>27</sup>

As this fragmentary reading list suggests, recent work on early distribution has been piecemeal and localised. This is consistent with the current suspicion in the humanities towards 'grand theory', and with the trend towards a 'film history from below'.<sup>28</sup> A decade ago Michael Quinn argued that 'an in-depth analysis of distribution throughout cinema history has the potential to revise, if not transform,

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<sup>25</sup> Gunnar Iversen, 'Local Distribution: The Case of Jens Christian Gundersen in Norway', in *Networks of Entertainment*, ed. by Kessler and Verhoef, pp. 131-136. Luke McKernan, *A Yank in Britain. The Lost Memoirs of Charles Urban, Film Pioneer* (Hastings: The Projection Box, 2000).

<sup>26</sup> Frank Kessler and Nanna Verhoeff (eds) *Networks of Entertainment* (Eastleigh: John Libbey, 2007).

<sup>27</sup> Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (London: BFI, 1992). Gregory A. Waller, 'Situating Motion Pictures in the Pre-nickelodeon Period: Lexington, Kentucky 1897-1906', *The Velvet Light Trap*.25 (1990), 12-28.

<sup>28</sup> Richard Maltby, 'On the Prospect of Writing Cinema History from Below', *Tijdschrift voor Mediageschiedenis* 9.2 (2006), 74-96.

some widely held beliefs in cinema studies'.<sup>29</sup> To date the approach has been much more cautious, with an emphasis on bridging the gaps in evidence and historiography rather than offering theoretical revisions. Following Robert Allen's call for a non-metropolitan perspective on cinema history, the study of distribution at the moment takes the form of a multiplicity of local and regional investigations, to which the present thesis seeks to add. As Ivo Blom maintains, these micro-histories can be the building bricks of a transnational comparative approach, which is essential for our understanding of distribution.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, attention to distribution allows historians to address the methodological issues of connecting the abundant local histories of exhibition practice into a more general understanding of historical processes, such as institutionalisation or modernity.<sup>31</sup> The points of contact between Scotland as a case study and broader debates in film studies or historiography are multiple and help weave an interconnected narrative that makes sense of rich but disparate empirical material.

## 1.2. Scottish cinema historiography

If distribution is understood as the interface between exhibition as a local, decentralised phenomenon, and the centralised processes of film production within the institutional mode, its relevance with regards to national cinemas becomes evident. Shifts in power between different sectors of the industry can, and did,

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<sup>29</sup> Michael Quinn, 'Distribution, the Transient Audience, and the Transition to the Feature Film', *Cinema Journal* 40.2 (2001), 35-56 (p. 51).

<sup>30</sup> Ivo Blom, 'Infrastructure, Open System and the Take-Off Phase. Jean Desmet as a Case for Early Distribution In The Netherlands', in *Networks of Entertainment*, ed. by Kessler and Verhoeff, pp. 137-144 (pp. 137-138).

<sup>31</sup> Thunnis van Oort, '"Christ' is Coming to the Elite Cinema': Film Exhibition in the Catholic South of the Netherlands, 1910s and 1920s', in *Cinema, Audiences and Modernity*, ed. by Daniel Biltereyst, Richard Maltby, and Philippe Meers (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 50-63 (p. 54).

entrench geographical disparities in the access to the means of regional/national self-representation. Even after Andrew Higson's exhortation to reframe the idea of national cinema, taking into account 'the film culture as a whole, and the overall institution of cinema', distribution has so far made a very minor appearance in accounts of Scottish cinema.<sup>32</sup> This is despite the fact that, as Adrienne Scullion noted, 'in Scotland the skills fostered by cinema were those of the exhibitor and then of the distributor', not those of the producer.<sup>33</sup> Given the nation's scant production but enthusiastic consumption of the moving image throughout the twentieth century, paying attention to the structures that enabled this popular fervour is particularly rewarding in relation to Scotland.

As in other areas, Scotland seems to have been an exporter of talent. A case in point is that of John Maxwell, a Glaswegian lawyer who acquired an interest in a working-class cinema in 1912, moved into distribution, and by the 1920s was the owner of Associated British Cinemas, one of the most important vertically-integrated conglomerates in Britain.<sup>34</sup> If it can be argued, as Duncan Petrie has done, that 'the close association of *émigrés* like [John] Grierson and Maxwell with the interests and development of a London-based film industry is evidence of their own collusion', the process through which this specialization took place is not simple, and it is worth exploring.<sup>35</sup> Understanding how the institutions of cinema took form

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<sup>32</sup> Andrew Higson, 'The Concept of National Cinema', *Screen* 30.4 (1989), 36-47 (p. 38).

<sup>33</sup> Adrienne Clare Scullion, 'Media Culture for a Media Nation? Theatre, Cinema and Radio in Early Twentieth-Century Scotland' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Glasgow, 1992), p. 196.

<sup>34</sup> Allen Eyles, *ABC: The First Name in Entertainment* (Burgess Hill: Cinema Theatre Association / BFI, 1993), pp. 11-15.

<sup>35</sup> Duncan Petrie, *Screening Scotland* (London: BFI, 2000), p. 28.



in Scotland is a way to reveal the structures that supported its popularity, but also contributed to marginalise production.

A historical perspective on the film trade provides elements for a more informed and nuanced engagement with contemporary questions. Most writing on Scottish cinema in the past two decades has focused on films of the late 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, and the institutional structures that have financed them. The complexities of nation-building within a larger state, and the dimensions of political change that have occurred since the establishment of a devolved Scottish Parliament in 1999 (with policy-making powers regarding the arts and cultural industries), have encouraged engagements with particular films or groups of films through textual and institutional analysis.<sup>36</sup> The inescapable point of reference is a slim volume, *Scotch Reels*, which set out the terms of a polemic that is still central to critical approaches to Scotland and cinema.<sup>37</sup> While issues of representation and misrepresentation have dominated the discussion of Scottish film as a national cinema, more recent work in the research area of ‘cinema of small nations’ has generated new perspectives and productive comparisons to countries such as Ireland or Sweden, and a transnational approach has contributed to complicate questions of cinematic identity.<sup>38</sup>

Historical research, on the other hand, remains underrepresented. This might be because there is little material for textual analysis in a more canonical vein, since

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<sup>36</sup> See for instance Petrie, *Screening Scotland*; Colin McArthur, *Brigadoon, Braveheart and the Scots: Distortions of Scotland in Hollywood Cinema* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003).

<sup>37</sup> *Scotch Reels*, ed. by Colin McArthur (London: BFI Publishing, 1982).

<sup>38</sup> Jonathan Murray, ‘Scotland’, in *The Cinema of Small Nations*, ed. by Mette Hjort and Duncan Petrie (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 76-92; David Martin-Jones, *Scotland: Global Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

Scottish feature film production was very scarce before the 1980s. When looking back, however, researchers have uncovered a rich variety of work that does not correspond with mainstream commercial filmmaking, and is hard to reconcile with the larger narratives of national cinema. From the ground-breaking developments in documentary and educational films of the 1930s, to the radical explorations of Margaret Tait and Norman McLaren; from the fascinating docu-dramas sponsored by the Glasgow Corporation to the wealth of amateur production all around the country, the history of filmmaking in Scotland seems to have a distinctive off-kilter character.<sup>39</sup> The struggles of Scottish filmmakers to challenge the reductive representations of Scotland that abound in mainstream film have often taken the route of an intensified engagement with the local. The earliest manifestation of this can be found in turn-of-the-century 'local topicals', which constituted the only sustained form of film production in Scotland during the silent period.<sup>40</sup> The 'national' is therefore articulated in the tension between the exogenous use of Scotland as an international signifier, and the grounded, small-scale attempts at representation from within – a polarity that has dominated critical discussion.<sup>41</sup> This tension in textual production resonates with the parallel polarity, described in the previous section, between the local, the national and the international in distribution, programming and exhibition.

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<sup>39</sup> Sarah Neely, 'Stalking the Image: Margaret Tait and Intimate Filmmaking Practices', *Screen* 49.2 (2008), 216-221; Elizabeth Lebas, 'Sadness and Gladness: The Films of Glasgow Corporation, 1922-1938', *Film Studies*.6 (2005), 27-45; Ryan Shand, 'Amateur Cinema Re-Located: Localism in Fact and Fiction', in *Movies on Home Ground: Explorations in Amateur Cinema*, ed. by Ian Craven (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), pp. 156-181.

<sup>40</sup> Janet McBain, 'Mitchell and Kenyon's Legacy in Scotland - The Inspiration for a Forgotten Film-making Genre', in *The Lost World of Mitchell & Kenyon*, ed. by Vanessa Toulmin, Simon Popple, and Patrick Russell (London: BFI, 2004), pp. 113-121.

<sup>41</sup> Ian Goode, 'Mediating the Rural: *Local Hero* and the Location of Scottish Cinema', in *Cinematic Countrysides*, ed. by Robert Fish (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 109-126.

Indeed, an important part of the historical research on Scottish cinema dwells on the intensely local experiences of individual cinemagoing. It is not hard to find nostalgic accounts of the great popular fervour for the movies, said to be even stronger than elsewhere in Britain.<sup>42</sup> Janet McBain, founder and curator of the Scottish Screen Archive, established the groundwork for an understanding of Scottish audiences of the past through her irreplaceable collection of oral history interviews. In resulting publications, McBain has managed to integrate personal memories into a broader narrative that touches on industrial aspects as well as social context.<sup>43</sup> Drawing on other sources such as the contemporary trade press and the *Educational Film Bulletin* of the 1940s, which frequently published retrospective pieces, McBain's account of early exhibition practice has been influential. Furthermore, her work at the Archive has found, rescued and brought to light not only the films, but also the primary sources that make it possible to ask the kind of questions raised in this thesis.

The abundance of local history projects, plus the popular interest in particular venues reflected in the admirable Scottish Cinemas Database website, and in online forums such as Hidden Glasgow, means that the sites of cinema exhibition are increasingly well documented.<sup>44</sup> Although these projects do not pursue

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<sup>42</sup> David Hutchison, 'Flickering Light: Some Scottish Silent Films', in *From Limelight to Satellite*, ed. by Eddie Dick (London: BFI Publishing/Scottish Film Council, 1990), pp. 31-40 (p. 32).

<sup>43</sup> Janet McBain, *Pictures Past* (Edinburgh: Moorfoot Publishing, 1985).

<sup>44</sup> Examples of local history approaches include Vincent P. Gillen, *Going to the Pictures : 100 Years of Cinema in Inverclyde* (Kilmacolm: David Roe Publishers, 1997); Mike Taylor, Julia Walton, and Colin Liddell, *A Night at the Pictures* (Dumbarton: Dumbarton District Libraries, 1992). The Scottish Cinemas Database, maintained by Gordon Barr, can be accessed at <http://www.scottishcinemas.org.uk/index.html> [accessed 25 February 2012]. The Hidden Glasgow message boards are searchable at <http://www.hiddenglasgow.com/forums/index.php> [accessed 25 February 2012].

scholarly aims, they provide much useful information, and, crucially, sustain and motivate an interest in historical cinema practice that transcends the built heritage.<sup>45</sup> However, existing publications aimed at a general public often combine design history with oral accounts, and are therefore concentrated on the 1930s and 1940s, the age of the picture palace.<sup>46</sup>

More scholarly works by Adrienne Scullion and Paul Maloney have drawn on the expertise and resources built up by the Scottish Screen Archive to study the early years of film exhibition in Scotland as part of broader cultural concerns: the emergence of mass media and the traditions of popular entertainment.<sup>47</sup> Their works situate moving pictures as part of complex and changing practices of modernity and, in some cases, of resistance to metropolitan modernity, with an interconnected approach that I have tried to maintain while adopting a narrower focus. However, the most immediate referent for the present thesis, and a book that could be read alongside it, is Trevor Griffiths' *The Cinema and Cinemagoing in Scotland, 1896-c.1950*.<sup>48</sup> In this contribution to the historiography of early film culture in Scotland, and more generally to the social history of leisure, Griffiths' book explores 'Scotland's engagement with the modern' through the conflicts and debates sparked

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<sup>45</sup> One excellent local study that already did that is Michael Thomson, *Silver Screen in the Silver City: a History of Cinemas in Aberdeen, 1896-1987* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988).

<sup>46</sup> See for instance the works of Bruce Peter, in particular *100 Years of Glasgow's Amazing Cinemas* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996), and the recently published *Scotland's Cinemas* (Isle of Man: Lily Publications, 2012), as well as the abundant publications of Brian Hornsey, too many to list here.

<sup>47</sup> Adrienne Clare Scullion, 'Media Culture for a Media Nation?'; Paul Maloney, *Scotland and the Music Hall 1850-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

<sup>48</sup> Trevor Griffiths, *The Cinema and Cinemagoing in Scotland, 1896-c.1950* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming [2012]) At the time of writing, this important volume was still in press, but the author was kind enough to allow access to his proofs, for which I am grateful. Since I am referring to an unpublished version, I am unable to give page numbers for subsequent references, and shall indicate the chapter and section as appropriate.

by cinema.<sup>49</sup> The particularities of the Scottish reception of cinema are considered in a minutely documented chronicle of exhibition practices, mainly during the silent period. The perceived threat of cinema as an agent of cultural change and a site of tension between local and international forces is illuminated by chapters on topics such as Sunday shows, censorship, and sound in early film shows, which will be discussed at the relevant points in the present work. Drawing extensively on primary sources, in particular company registration records, Griffiths combines this social history approach with a more quantitative analysis of business trends in the exhibition sector, which will be discussed in Chapter 4. The present work adds to this section of economic history by examining the trajectories of distribution companies, which tended to fade into insignificance after the late 1910s. Examining the relationship between exhibition and distribution companies suggests different timelines of development and decline, which correspond to an increasingly metropolitan concentration of ownership across the film trade.

There are only a few countries that can claim to have had a viable production sector, but most have tried, so many histories of national cinema tackle the question of failure. In the first four volumes of her *History of British Film*, Rachael Low traces a process of consolidation, by the end of which the product of American majors occupied most of the screen time across Britain, and American firms held large stakes in exhibition and distribution. In her analysis, this process was complete by the end of the silent period.<sup>50</sup> Whatever little British production there was by then was centred on London, where the distributors operated out of

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<sup>49</sup> Griffiths, *The Cinema and Cinemagoing in Scotland*, 'Introduction'.

<sup>50</sup> Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film 1918-1929*, vol. 4 (London: Allen & Unwin, 1971), p. 71.

Wardour Street. From a Scottish perspective, this means a double subordination – to the United States for film product, and to London for the film trade. This process of centralisation can only be defined in relation to a period of decentralised activity, a moment of possibility when the future of cinema in Britain, or in general, was not yet defined. Low seemed to consider the period of 1906 to 1914 as such a moment, ‘a period of experiment from which crystallized the eventual structure of the trade’.<sup>51</sup> While the present work does not contest the broader narrative of events constructed by Low through her acute, sceptical reading of the trade press, it dwells on that moment of indeterminacy rather than on its known outcome.

This thesis, then, seeks to document the diversity and geographical spread of cinematic practices in Scotland at their most bewildering. In a sense, this serves to furnish detail and evidence for Low’s sparse account, as she did not mine her sources in any deliberate way to reveal peripheral developments. This relative lack of attention to non-metropolitan activity is compounded by the fact that she casually used ‘England’ and ‘Britain’ as interchangeable terms. In several areas, such as venue licensing and Sunday opening, Low’s account is heavily London-centric. Her discussion about the social aspirations of early exhibitors, for instance, is informed by her description of the London ‘penny gaff’ sector (the cheap show that was the local analogue to the nickelodeon); however, for reasons that will be explored later, penny gaffs seem to have been much rarer in Scotland.<sup>52</sup> Most importantly, by

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<sup>51</sup> Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film 1906-1914*, vol. 2 (London: Allen & Unwin, 1949), p. 13.

<sup>52</sup> Adrienne Clare Scullion, “‘The Cinematograph Still Reigns Supreme at the Skating Palace’: The First Decades of Film in Scotland”, in *Moving Performance: British Stage and Screen, 1890s-1920s*, ed. by Linda Fitzsimmons and Sarah Street (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 2000), pp. 80-100; Griffiths, *The Cinema and Cinemagoing in Scotland*, Chapter 1, Part II. Compare with the abundant evidence

foregrounding and exploring the heterogeneity that existed at some point, and the concrete actions through which it was reined in, this thesis hopes to challenge Low's haughty condemnation of the 'dead ends' of cinema, those practices that did not seem to move towards the manifest destiny of classical cinema as identified from hindsight. In this context, documenting local variation is not an end in itself. Instead, this thesis seeks to engage with broader discussions that have emerged within the discipline of cinema history, by adding to the growing number of local studies that are starting to compose the patchwork picture of the birth of cinema as an institution across the globe.

### **1.3. The local: Some role models**

The small-town experiences of cinema, and of modernity, have become increasingly interesting for film historians, as they demand new questions and approaches.<sup>53</sup> In his introduction to a recent volume under the rubric of the 'new cinema history', Richard Maltby celebrates the methodologies, borrowed from social and cultural historians, which are drawing film scholars closer to 'the production of a social geography of cinema'.<sup>54</sup> This empirical approach has resulted in a considerable growth in studies of exhibition, expanding and complicating current ideas about the contexts in which audiences encountered moving pictures at different moments and

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found for London penny gaffs by Jon Burrows, 'Penny Pleasures: Film Exhibition in London during the Nickelodeon era, 1906-1914', *Film History* 16.1 (2004), 60-91.

<sup>53</sup> Daniel Biltereyst, Richard Maltby, and Philippe Meers, 'Cinema, Audiences and Modernity: An Introduction', in *Cinema, Audiences and Modernity*, ed. by Biltereyst, Maltby, and Meers, pp. 1-16 (p. 7).

<sup>54</sup> Richard Maltby, 'New Cinema Histories', in *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies*, ed. by Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst, and Philippe Meers (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 3-40 (p. 28).

places.<sup>55</sup> This diversity poses a serious challenge to unified theories of spectatorship, and to teleological accounts of the progression of the film form towards classicism. Occurring within the context of industrial capitalism, institutionalisation was an overdetermined process.<sup>56</sup> The extent to which moving pictures mobilised a particularly modern sensibility or a way to work through the anxieties of urban life, and the cinema a class-specific social space, needs to be considered in the context of social and economic conjunctures that varied hugely from site to site. Understanding how this process played out in particular markets contributes to ‘a multiple and more dynamic definition of modernity’, one that recognises its sites of contention and its ambiguities.<sup>57</sup>

When refracted through diverse practices and non-metropolitan contexts, modernity needs to be thought of as negotiated or mediated. Even in the Scottish cities, according to Trevor Griffiths, ‘[a]n abiding sense of locality, more often associated with pre-industrial, pre-modern societies, continued to flourish in outwardly modern, urban settings.’<sup>58</sup> In this context, the idea of the film show as an instantiation of modern forms of perception and sociability needs to be questioned. Indeed, the debate over what has been called the ‘modernity thesis’ has been substantial in recent years. Sustained attacks on the notion that modern urban

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<sup>55</sup> Besides the aforementioned work by Waller and Gregory, other pioneering studies in this field are Kathryn H. Fuller, ‘“You Can Have the Strand in Your Own Town”: The Marginalization of Small Town Film Exhibition in the Silent Film Era’, *Film History* 6.2 (1994), 166-177; John Fullerton, ‘Intimate Theatres and Imaginary Scenes: Film Exhibition in Sweden Before 1920’, *Film History* 5.4 (1993), 457-471.

<sup>56</sup> David Levy, ‘What Imports Might Not Be Able to Tell Us About the Emergence of the Last-Minute Rescue Narrative in the American Cinema’, in *Networks of Entertainment*, ed. by Kessler and Verhoeff (Eastleigh: John Libbey, 2007), pp. 16-20 (p. 18).

<sup>57</sup> Biltereyst, Maltby, and Meers, ‘Cinema, Audiences and Modernity: An Introduction’, p. 7.

<sup>58</sup> Griffiths, *Cinema and Cinemagoing in Scotland*, ‘Introduction’.



lifestyles might have brought about changes in the sensory experience of city dwellers have led to a much more nuanced view of the relationship between cinema and the urban environment.<sup>59</sup> These challenges to grander narratives compel researchers to document and study the fine-grained histories of the emergence of cinema in different settings. While alternative hypotheses can be relevant to an understanding of the cinema show as an aesthetic or discursive experience, the present work offers an empirical approach to the emergence of cinema as a form of commercial leisure in Scotland.

Local studies show that cinema, and the experience of it, is always caught up in a complex field of forces that operate on different scales. Seeking to understand how the transformation of cinema into a mass practice was ‘achieved locally and integrated into the particularities of various cities’, Paul Moore’s study of moviegoing in Toronto shows how exhibition in the transitional era connected to locally relevant discourses of citizenship and civic values, while also being defined by changing trends in the North American and regional entertainment markets.<sup>60</sup> Moore’s exemplary monograph shows how the specificity of each encounter between text and spectator responded to material conditions as well as ideological expectations. This negotiation played out during the event itself – the film show –

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<sup>59</sup> On this debate, see in particular Charlie Keil, “‘To Here From Modernity’: Style, Historiography, and Transitional Cinema’, in *American Cinema’s Transitional Era*, ed. by Keil and Stamp, pp. 51-66 ; Ben Singer, ‘The Ambimodernity of Early Cinema: Problems and Paradoxes in the Film-And-Modernity Discourse’, in *Film 1900: Technology, Perception, Culture*, ed. by Annemone Ligensa and Klaus Kreimeier (New Barnet: John Libbey, 2009), pp. 37-51; Robert C. Allen, ‘Relocating American Film History: The ‘Problem’ of the Empirical’, *Cultural Studies* 20.1 (2006), 48-88 (p. 66).

<sup>60</sup> Paul S. Moore, *Now Playing: Early Moviegoing and the Regulation of Fun* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), p. 10.

but also in the process leading to it, as Richard Brown argued in an article about Manchester film exchanges:

Unlike the architectural design and the programming of cinemas, [...] film distribution always maintained its regional specificity as its structure represented a unique response to local logistical problems.<sup>61</sup>

This attention to the pragmatics of film supply as a moment where more abstract forces become concrete is evident in the recent work of Richard Abel and Gregory Waller. Abel has contributed to the discussion about the transition to feature programming by asking how the general trade models described by Staiger and Quinn worked at a regional and local level, by looking at cinema listings in New England newspapers. Through this prism, Abel shows how the new feature trading practices were destabilizing the closed-market model, by allowing exhibitors to assemble more eclectic programmes that helped their search for respectability.<sup>62</sup> Similar issues are also raised by Waller's study of the 'Trade News' column in *Moving Picture World*, an unusually intense engagement with the trade press as a source that highlights its preoccupation with the materiality of the film business, namely the everyday realities of storage and shipping.<sup>63</sup> These concerns became even more pressing in wartime, as Ivo Blom showed in regards to the disruption of the Dutch cinema trade due to the blocking of the Belgian railways.

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<sup>61</sup> Richard Brown, 'The Missing Link: Film Renters in Manchester, 1910-1920', *Film Studies*.10 (2007), pp. 58-63 (p. 58).

<sup>62</sup> Richard Abel, 'The "Backbone" of the Business: Scanning Signs of US Film Distribution in the Newspapers, 1911-1914', in *Networks of Entertainment*, ed. by Kessler and Verhoeff, pp. 85-93.

<sup>63</sup> Gregory A Waller, 'Mapping the Moving Picture World: Distribution in the United States circa 1915', in *Networks of Entertainment*, ed. by Kessler and Verhoeff (Eastleigh: John Libbey, 2007), pp. 94-102.

Drawing on Corinna Müller's work on Germany, which unfortunately has not yet been published in translation, Blom identified some of the characteristics of the European film trade during the 'take-off' phase of globalization: a developed transport infrastructure, with the main cities as hubs where film traders cluster around the railway stations and printers, constituting an efficient business sector through the use of modern communication technologies.<sup>64</sup>

The establishment of distribution as a specific economic activity, with film renters and agents operating in local and regional film markets, is a turning point in the formation of an infrastructure for institutional cinema. A tension can be identified, in most accounts, between the activities of local film renting businesses, often with roots in exhibition, and those of branch offices of national or international corporations which were mostly connected with production. Through an analysis of programming patterns in the Lyon region, for instance, Renaud Chaplain found that the establishment of branch offices for national distribution companies around 1912 resulted in a loss of business for local exhibitors who had been acting as renters, and entrenched a more regular but also more hierarchical circulation of single prints, where cinemas located in urban popular districts were strongly disadvantaged.<sup>65</sup> The role of Pathé in the distribution of local films, and then feature production, in Sweden has been studied by Marina Dahlquist.<sup>66</sup> A number of specific discussions of the activities of Pathé in several markets are contained in the proceedings from the 1996 Domitor conference, which was

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<sup>64</sup> Blom, 'Infrastructure, Open System and the Take-Off Phase', p. 138.

<sup>65</sup> Renaud Chaplain, 'La distribution dans la région Lyonnaise: entre spécificités locales et stratégies nationales (1908-1914)', in *Networks of Entertainment*, ed. by Kessler and Verhoeff, pp. 41-46.

<sup>66</sup> Marina Dahlquist, 'Global versus Local: The Case of Pathé', *Film History* 17.1 (2005), 29-38.

devoted to this pioneering French company which had a very strong presence in Scotland too.<sup>67</sup> Turning to independent local distributors, Pierre Véronneau highlights the shrewd ways in which some Canadian renters adapted and mediated the shifting structures of the American trade, while Luis Alonso García blames the professional incompetence and malpractice of the early Spanish traders for undermining national production.<sup>68</sup> Somewhere in between, the individual stories of early film renters like Jean Desmet in the Netherlands and Jens Christian Gundersen in Norway, already mentioned, paint a picture of petit-bourgeois entrepreneurs thriving modestly with limited capital and considerable worry.<sup>69</sup>

A conclusion of several specific case studies is that the domination of distribution by American studios was a significant obstacle for the development of national film industries and indigenous representations. This seems to be the case, for instance, in Québec, where francophone identity lacked representation because of the dependence on agents of American producers, whose Canadian views were informed by a touristic aesthetic aimed at the Anglophone market.<sup>70</sup> A general pattern seems to be an explosion of renters coincident with the boom in exhibition venues, followed by a contraction when the dominance of the majors is established from the late teens and into the 1920s. This corresponds with the trends described by Rachael Low, and confirms that the 1910s are a period of particular interest

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<sup>67</sup> Michel Marie and Laurent Le Forestier (eds), *La firme Pathé Frères 1896-1914*. (Paris : AFRHC, 2004).

<sup>68</sup> Luis Alonso García, 'Araignées et mouches: la formation du "systeme cinéma" et les débuts de la distribution cinématographique en Espagne, 1906-1921', in *Networks of Entertainment*, ed. by Kessler and Verhoeff, pp. 68-76.

<sup>69</sup> Blom, *Jean Desmet and the Early Dutch Film Trade*; Iversen, 'The case of Jens Christian Gundersen', pp. 131-136.

<sup>70</sup> Pierre Véronneau, 'De l'indépendance à l'absorption: le cas québécois', in *Networks of Entertainment*, ed. by Kessler and Verhoeff, pp. 57-67.

because there was a space for local activity, and because it seemed like a national production could be established. This possibility all but vanished with the consolidation of institutional cinema and the conquest of Scottish screens by American feature films, which was complete by the end of the war.

#### **1.4. Conclusion**

Over the past two decades, cinema history has gone through a process of disciplinary and methodological decentring, motivated by a new interest in the heterogeneity of experiences and practices connected with moving pictures. The desire to study concrete practices of cinemagoing as a way to interrogate the social functions of cinema has resulted in research projects that start from the particular but ask broader questions of structure and interrelationship, all the while maintaining ‘a humble, open and flexible theoretical stance’.<sup>71</sup> The study of distribution has emerged only recently as a productive field in which the interface between the local and the global, the particular and the general can be interrogated empirically.

As this chapter has argued, this centrifugal, grounded historiography offers opportunities to consider processes such as commoditisation, centralisation and alienation from a critical, evidence-led perspective. Having established the main terms of discussion and the transversal axes of this analysis, the following chapter introduces the methodological approach developed in this thesis as a response to this challenge.

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<sup>71</sup> Allen, ‘Reimagining the History of the Experience of Cinema’, pp. 55-56.

## Chapter 2

### Film distribution as a spatial phenomenon: Methods and approaches

The previous chapter introduced some of the theoretical and historiographical questions raised in this thesis, and presented some examples of engagements with distribution and institutionalisation from a local or regional perspective. Besides their subject matter, most of the works mentioned before share an empirical approach and, in their preoccupation with exhibition venues and locality, an interest in ‘the spatiality of the experience of cinema’.<sup>1</sup> This theoretical perspective not only defines new terms and questions for cinema history, but it can also produce concrete research practices. This chapter will introduce the research methods used in this project, and explain how they are connected to the issues outlined above.

One of the objectives of this work is to test the following methodological hypothesis: that a spatially-aware approach, supported by GIS (Geographic Information Systems) technology, can be relevant and useful for this kind of project. In order to trace back the reasoning behind this proposal, this chapter will start by arguing that distribution is essentially a spatial phenomenon, and therefore it can be studied using methods that are gaining traction in other areas of cinema historiography. Examples of previous experiences suggest that making location the

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<sup>1</sup> Robert C. Allen, ‘Getting to *Going to the Show*’, *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 8.3 (2010), 264-276 (p. 268).

pivot point for data collection and analysis encourages the discovery of new archival sources and helps contextualise known ones. With the expansion of what can be considered pertinent evidence comes the need to find ways to systematise and make sense of lower-level data. This chapter provides an introduction to the sources used, and explains how the data contained in them were integrated. More technical details can be found in the Appendix.

## **2.1. Studying cinema spatially and regionally**

The signs of a ‘spatial turn’ in film studies were spotted by *Screen* editors back in 1999, with the publication of a dialogue between Karen Lury and geographer Doreen Massey, where they started to signal the potential and promise that lay on the intersection between geography and film and television studies.<sup>2</sup> Since then, space and place have become central categories in textual analysis, suggesting new connections and foregrounding alternative bodies of work (such as amateur and artist’s film) that had been underappreciated. In audience and reception studies, and in historiography, this enhanced awareness of spatial factors has opened new methodological routes. When cinema-going is thought of as an event taking place somewhere and enmeshed in the fabric of everyday life in that place, it becomes clear how entangled it is within the web of spatial practices that constitute social activity. While an Italian immigrant in a Manhattan nickelodeon, an Edinburgh lady in a variety theatre, and a Lanarkshire miner in a fairground booth might have watched the same footage, their experience of motion pictures and the role of cinema in their lives could hardly be more different. The experiences themselves

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<sup>2</sup> Doreen Massey and Karen Lury, ‘Making Connections’, *Screen* 40.3 (1999), 229-238.

are forever lost, but mapping these cinema-events and trying to place them in context can tease out some insights into what constituted their difference.

The first reason to explore cinema history through a spatial optic is, then, because ‘the experience of cinema does not exist outside the experience of space’, as Robert Allen has written.<sup>3</sup> This is demonstrated by the multiple studies of early exhibition and its venues, some of which were mentioned in the first chapter. An approach that only deals with the individual and unique characteristics of the local (as the least ambitious of exhibition histories are prone to do) serves to challenge metropolitan assumptions, but it is insufficient. By including peripheral agents, practices and places, local studies prove that space is ‘the sphere of possibility of the existence of multiplicity’: distance and environment create the conditions in which difference can exist.<sup>4</sup> This heterogeneity of practices in space can only be understood in the context of a network of spatial relationships.

To study distribution is to study one such set of relationships as material practices, in a geographical context that includes distances, topography, and transport routes. Distribution is a spatial phenomenon, because the particularities of film as a commodity-type are characterised by its behaviour in space. The simple fact that identical films can be exhibited in many places at the same time, that is, their technical reproducibility, makes them a special kind of good.<sup>5</sup> When Gerben Bakker argued that ‘motion pictures industrialised spectator entertainment by automating it, standardising its quality and transforming it into a tradeable product’,

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<sup>3</sup> Robert C. Allen, ‘The Place of Space in Film Historiography’, *Tijdschrift voor Mediageschiedenis* 2 (2006), pp. 15-27 (p. 16).

<sup>4</sup> Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005), p. 183.

<sup>5</sup> Chanan, *The Dream That Kicks*, p. 27.



he highlighted the transportability of film as one of its defining industrial characteristics.<sup>6</sup> This potential ubiquity was also an essential component of the appeal for early audiences; as Paul Moore remarks, ‘part of the experience of joining a movie audience for a specific theater at a particular time was joining a mass audience for all movies everywhere.’<sup>7</sup> The relationship between the film-object (as text and as commodity) and its multiple uses as part of a practice plays out in a way that is highly responsive to a geographical and relational approach that recognises local variation in the context of a web of connecting forces.

These two principles – difference and interrelationship – form the basis of the research method proposed in this thesis. The relational approach formulated by Harald Bathelt and Johannes Glückler in their work on economic geography can serve as a precedent. In the context of a critique of previous approaches to economic geography, which they see as neo-positivistic, the authors advocate instead looking at economic relations through a ‘geographical lens’: ‘we use space as a basis for asking particular questions about economic phenomena but space is not our primary object of knowledge.’<sup>8</sup> This research project occupies a similar position: spatial methodologies are used, and a geographical awareness informs the conceptual horizon of the project, but the physical or ideological configuration of space is not the object of enquiry.

One of the methodological consequences of this spatial approach is the use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) tools. A GIS is a software package that

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<sup>6</sup> Bakker, *Entertainment Industrialised*, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Moore, *Now Playing*, p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Harald Bathelt and Johannes Glückler, ‘Toward a Relational Economic Geography’, *Journal of Economic Geography*.3 (2003), 117-144 (p. 124).

combines digital mapping and database management, by linking rows in tables of ‘attribute data’ (all sorts of information about a feature) to its geographical location. A ‘GIS approach’ involves handling spatial and attribute data in order to look for patterns.<sup>9</sup> It can be thought of as a spatial strategy for data analysis, one that can support fact-based historical interpretation. As any methodology, it has limitations and ideological biases. In particular, the fantasy of objectivity and rigour projected by the software can be dangerous when dealing with historical processes rather than strictly quantifiable ones. As Ian Gregory and Paul Ell show, ‘GIS originated in disciplines that use quantitative and scientific approaches in a data-rich environment,’ whilst most historians have to use mainly qualitative and incomplete data.<sup>10</sup> The following sections will consider the methodological implications of the two components of the GIS – the maps and the database – as implemented in this project.

In a pragmatic sense, working with GIS embodies the notion of relational space that sees space as the dimension where historical trajectories are ‘thrown together’ by happenstance, in the words of Doreen Massey.<sup>11</sup> As both historians and geographers have noticed, however, new tools generate great enthusiasm, and they can blunt the historian’s critical responses.<sup>12</sup> The fact that GIS were not created with historical research in mind means that the historian has to consider carefully the extent to which these tools can be useful. It is crucial to avoid being seduced either

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<sup>9</sup> Ian N Gregory and Paul S Ell, *Historical GIS: Technologies, Methodologies and Scholarship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 3-5.

<sup>10</sup> Gregory and Ell, *Historical GIS*, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Massey, *For Space*, p. 151.

<sup>12</sup> Anne K. Knowles, ‘Introduction’, *Social Science History* 24.3 (2000), 451-470 (p. 452).

by GIS's appearance of hard science, or by fancy 'Nintendo cartography'; instead, mapping can be understood as a more fluid process that maintains a dialogue with more discursive forms of knowing, as Jeff Klenotic has recently argued.<sup>13</sup>

## 2.2. The GIS approach: Mapping

Despite the intimidating name, for most effects a Geographical Information System is simply a database that can be visualized as a map, or a map where each feature connects to a series of attributes. In that sense, they combine the suspicions aroused both by maps and by databases as technologies of power that have been at the service of surveillance, colonialism, and the reification of social experience.<sup>14</sup> In some quarters, the rise of GIS technologies has been seen as a return to the most naïve and reactionary forms and ideologies of geography. The high cost of acquiring GIS software, training and data means that, besides being open to the same critique as mapping in general, in most cases digital cartography remains a tool of the privileged and powerful. It has emerged as an instrument of technocracy and social control, while critical geographers looked elsewhere for alternative ways to represent space. However, to refuse to use a method because it has been aligned with a hegemonic world view is to renounce the possibility of appropriating it for other ends. The same reductive processes that make geo-databases so suspect also create tools for communication and collaboration. The formal restrictions imposed by Euclidean geo-coding (where place is a point with coordinates, not a notion or a memory) provide a carrier signal; if our maps then speak the hegemonic language,

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<sup>13</sup> Gregory and Ell, *Historical GIS*, p. 118; Jeffrey Klenotic, 'Putting Cinema History on the Map: Using GIS to Explore the Spatiality of Cinema', in *Explorations in New Cinema History*, ed. by Maltby, Biltereyst, and Meers, pp. 58-84 (pp. 59-61).

<sup>14</sup> Massey, *For Space*, p. 106.

this at least makes them widely readable. In historical research, after all, cartography is one of several tools, not an end in itself.

In a geo-database model, the map is only one of the interfaces through which the user can view, edit, and analyse the underlying data tables. It is not, however, a decorative addition; working with and through maps has an impact on the kinds of operations and hypotheses one is drawn to try. In the first place, it facilitates the approaches suggested by spatially-aware theory and historiography, asking questions about centre-periphery relationships, trade networks, and demographics, for instance. These questions pre-date GIS methods, and there are other ways of seeking answers, but the actual, practical work with digital maps has four characteristics that make it particularly suitable: it gives the same importance to each point, it handles changes of scale, it is iterative, and it provides a point of connection to other materials.

If the ‘new cinema history’ is concerned with decentring the historian’s perspective, and engaging with the diversity of cinematic practices outside the metropolis, the ‘flatness’ of digital maps, where each item can be represented by an identical dot, becomes an asset. By making all places look the same (a dot on a map) GIS can encourage the researcher to look at them again and to see all of them rather than the ones known to be ‘important’. In this sense, it foregrounds the multiplicity made possible by spatial separation, according to Massey. Interesting findings can emerge at the local level, or an intriguing pattern be revealed on a broader view. These spheres of discovery can then be kept in tension through a dialectics of zooming – going from the general pattern to the particular case with more detailed archival stories, and vice versa. Those archival gems that are so rewarding for the

researcher's imagination can be seen in context, so that it becomes easier to tell whether this was a typical or exceptional case. This is standard historiographical practice, but it becomes a concrete procedure on a digital map. The ease with which the data can be sorted and visualised in different ways encourages an experimental approach: many modest hypotheses can be tested instantly, and the questions can be refined in a feedback loop that keeps the research questions open. Finally, the use of location data can facilitate the use of other sources and categories of analysis relating to the social and geographical context, using the growing amount of data currently available in those areas.

This research project, for instance, would have been impossible without the availability of Ordnance Survey data, through the Edina Digimap service. The 1:50,000 Gazetteer was used as the basic tool to locate towns on the map, and for finer placement of some cinemas (in the four main cities) historical maps were used.<sup>15</sup> Census data tables were obtained from the Historical Data Service and connected to a boundary map representing the Scottish parishes as they existed in 1890, while burgh population was connected to gazetteer points.<sup>16</sup> In those cases where boundary changes seemed to present a problem, where longer population series were useful, or where historical descriptions of economic activity were informative, the *Great Britain Historical GIS* portal, developed at the University of

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<sup>15</sup> *EDiNA Digimap Collections*, <<http://edina.ac.uk/digimap/>> [viewed Feb 25<sup>th</sup> 2012]

<sup>16</sup> Data table 'Parish level statistics arranged by family and sex for Scotland taken from the 1911 census', data input by the Centre for Data Digitisation and Analysis at the Queen's University of Belfast, downloaded from the Contemporary and Historical Census Collections (CHCC) at the History Data Service <<http://hds.essex.ac.uk/history/data/chcc.asp>> [accessed 20 October 2009]. The boundary map, a SHP file of Scottish Civil Parishes 1890 (digitised from Black's Atlas), was downloaded from UKBORDERS <<http://edina.ac.uk/ukborders/>> [accessed 20 October 2009].

Portsmouth, proved invaluable.<sup>17</sup> A very useful website and a 1912 geo-referenced map provided by the National Library of Scotland allowed me to dispense with the need to map railway routes, a very considerable task that has already been undertaken, in a more comprehensive way, by a Cambridge team.<sup>18</sup>

The ability to access and incorporate material generated by other research projects, and to make my own data available to others, is a strong motivation for the use of geo-databases. Thousands of internet users interact daily with ‘mash-up’ maps, in which layers of user-generated content can be plotted over basic map layouts. The popularity of digital cartography has fostered an environment in which a project like this one becomes achievable within the limits of a PhD, by adopting similar methods but with properly referenced and consistent sources and a more critical stance. Without access to already-digitised maps and demographics the task would be too onerous, and without the popularization of digital mapping, the skills required to foray into cartography would be forbidding for a non-specialist. Furthermore, the growth of open-source mapping software is removing some of the costs associated with geo-database development. Work for this thesis was initiated on the ArcGIS platform, a major software package for which the University pays a hefty license fee. Along the way, however, other possibilities became available, and the project was finalised using mostly an open-source package, Quantum GIS,

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<sup>17</sup> *Great Britain Historical GIS* <<http://www.gbhgis.org/>> [accessed 25 February 2012]. *A vision of Britain through time* <<http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/>> [accessed 2 July 2012].

<sup>18</sup> *A History of Britain's Railways* is a website maintained by Ewan Crawford which provides interactive diagrams of all Scottish rail lines with their dates of opening and closure. Although the data cannot be downloaded, it is an excellent reference resource. <<http://www.railbrit.co.uk/>> [accessed 25 February 2012]. The Department of Geography at the University of Cambridge has produced GIS maps of the development of railways as part of the ESRC-funded project on *The Occupational Structure of Nineteenth-Century Britain* (<http://www.geog.cam.ac.uk/research/projects/occupations/britain19c/>), [accessed 25 February 2012].

which provided better connectivity to the project database and had no licensing costs.<sup>19</sup> This software allowed me to integrate Ordnance Survey data, scanned map images, census data tables, and my own database using geographical coordinates as the principal independent variable, and also allowed me to export parts of the dataset as printed maps or online interactive mash-ups.

For all their practical advantages, it is necessary to be critical of this friction-free incorporation of certain ideologies of space into everyday life, and even more in academic research. The accretion of layers that constitutes GIS representation can be subject to Doreen Massey's critique of the postcolonial metaphor of the map as palimpsest, which she rejects for its political implications:

[T]his is to imagine the space being mapped – which is a space as one simultaneity – as the product of superimposed horizontal structures rather than full contemporaneous coexistence and becoming.<sup>20</sup>

Massey is here drawing attention to issues of change and continuity that inform some of the questions of this thesis. The past is part of the present through its persistence in space. The previous uses of the sites of cinema exhibition, for instance, continue to be relevant to the reception of moving pictures and to their social standing. As long as the simplifications they perform are kept in mind, I argue that maps provide a useful counterpoint to narrative history by drawing attention to the continuity of these localised differences. Primary sources, more

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<sup>19</sup> Quantum GIS is a project supported by the Open Source Geospatial Foundation. <http://www.qgis.org/>, <http://www.osgeo.org/> [accessed 25 February 2012]

<sup>20</sup> Massey, *For Space*, p. 110.

often than not, refer to moments of change: when a building license was given, when companies were created, when a cinema opened. Maps can complement these sources with insights on what did not change or changed more slowly, highlighting the asynchrony of historical processes.

On the other hand, the practical and ideological problems of the representation of time in cartography (both digital and analogue) are known to historical geographers. The static nature of most maps means that they can only represent a slice of ‘frozen’ time, collapsing into false simultaneity a series of processes and activities. A case in point is Robert Allen’s response to an article in which Ben Singer challenged Allen’s description of Manhattan nickelodeons as less exclusively working-class than previously thought. In the response, Allen argued that ‘mapping [the nickelodeons] upon a street map of Manhattan’, as Singer had done, ‘[does not] enable us to know whether there were qualitative differences between theatres in different or the same neighborhoods’, as they are all ‘reduced to identical dots on a map’. A more worrying ‘flattening’ occurs because Singer condenses the data from 24 months into a single map, and thus ‘the icons representing theatre addresses are *spatially* represented as copresent, whereas in fact many of them were *temporally* sequential’.<sup>21</sup>

My own attempt to negotiate these limitations resulted in a research design that reflects the changing temporal patterns of the phenomena. The data concerning itinerant exhibition constituted a longer time series. Evidence from newspapers and archival sources about the activities of travelling exhibitors was registered with a place and date, and the resulting maps tend to show the diachronic reach of these

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<sup>21</sup> Robert C. Allen, ‘Manhattan Myopia; Or, Oh! Iowa!’, *Cinema Journal* 35.3 (1996), 75-103 (p. 77).



activities. On the other hand, the analysis of programming patterns in fixed-site cinemas was structured around two time-slices: data were gathered for one single day in two different years, so that the synchronic representation of the map reflects the nature of the evidence. By fixing the time variable, it was possible to gather a broader range of data from a greater number of places.

Some degree of simplification is inevitable when dealing with complex historical processes in a way that aims to be systematic. While a printed map is often a static bird's eye view that is radically distanced from lived experience, digital mapping technologies can offer ways to include more qualitative dimensions, and to minimize the costs of entering and altering information so that mapping can become a more open-ended process. This relies on their existence as a dataset of unlimited richness, which is not restricted by the bi-dimensional conventions of a map. Furthermore, the connection between maps and databases can be an answer to the question of how to handle both multiplicity and interrelationship.

### **2.3. The GIS approach: Databases**

As mentioned before, a GIS is a front-end for a relational database where data are connected by location. As Ian Gregory and Richard Healey point out, '[a]lthough mapping is one of the key abilities of GIS, it is perhaps better regarded as a database technology.'<sup>22</sup> The use of databases (whether geo-referenced or not) in film studies and cinema history is growing, although not yet widespread, and the existing examples showcase the potential of a properly constructed data structure. There are many obvious advantages of using even the simplest of databases, such as

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<sup>22</sup> Ian N. Gregory and Richard G. Healey, 'Historical GIS: Structuring, Mapping and Analysing Geographies of the Past', *Progress in Human Geography* 31.5 (2007), 638-653 (p. 638).

the instantaneous retrieval of information and the ability to sort, filter, select, and perform some operations on the data. Although the formalisation required for most existing database models raises historiographical issues regarding the completeness and reliability of sources, it also broadens the scope of data capture and instigates collaboration.<sup>23</sup> The higher investment required in systematic data collection is balanced by a longer lifespan, where data can be used beyond the limits of individual research projects.

The most developed scholarly example of a cinema-related database, looking at exhibition rather than production, is the University of Amsterdam's *Cinema Context*, which logged more than a hundred thousand pre-1960 programmes from newspapers, as well as almost thirty thousand censorship files, to create a searchable and downloadable relational database, so that one thing (e.g. a cinema name) leads to the other (e.g. a programme with film titles in it, or a manager).<sup>24</sup> *Cinema Context* is a large project that has involved a team of people over a long time, and which relied initially on a group of relatively stable sources such as official censorship files and trade directories. The great care that has gone into compiling it has produced a dataset that is clean enough to use it within quantitative approaches, including network analysis and indirect measuring of film popularity.<sup>25</sup> In Australia, Deb Verhoeven and her students have been developing

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<sup>23</sup> Louis Pelletier and Pierre Véronneau, 'Databases for Early Cinema Research', in *Digital Tools in Media Studies*, ed. by Michael Ross, Manfred Grauer, and Bernd Freisleben (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2009), pp. 17-26 (p. 25).

<sup>24</sup> *Cinema Context* <<http://www.cinemacontext.nl/>> [viewed 25 February 2012]

<sup>25</sup> Karel Dibbets, 'Cinema Context and the Genes of Film History', *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 8.3 (2011), 331-342; Clara Pafort-Overduin, 'Distribution and Exhibition in the Netherlands, 1934-1936', in *Explorations in New Cinema History*, ed. by Maltby, Biltereyst, and Meers, pp. 125-139.

very promising applications of statistical techniques to work with data from the *Cinema Audiences in Australia Research Project* (CAARP), a database that combines data gathered by researchers in four universities as part of separate projects on rural cinema-going, distribution in the 1930s, and diasporic cinema circuits. Searching the database pulls up data gathered by any of the projects, in a consistent format that includes all the relevant references. The venues listed have also been geo-referenced with latitude/longitude data, so that importing them into any GIS becomes very straightforward.<sup>26</sup> Using these data, Verhoeven has pioneered interdisciplinary collaborations in papers that propose, for example, the use of Markov chain analysis to study distribution, and invent new forms of visualising information in a synoptic and insightful way.<sup>27</sup>

Showing how the methodology can be adapted to different research questions and social contexts, the *Enlightened City* project at the Universities of Ghent and Antwerp has built a database of film exhibition within a broader remit that also foregrounds oral history.<sup>28</sup> Although this dataset is not available online, it has supported interesting contributions to Flemish social history, by examining the position of cinema venues as spaces of distinction and interaction within a

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<sup>26</sup> Cinema Audiences in Australia Research Project search portal, <<http://caarp.flinders.edu.au/home>> [viewed 3 March 2010]

<sup>27</sup> Alwyn Davidson, Colin Arrowsmith, and Deb Verhoeven, 'A Method for the Visual Representation of Historic Multivariate Point Data', in *Advances in Cartography and GIScience. Volume 2*, ed. by Anne Ruas (Berlin: Springer, 2011), pp. 163-178.

<sup>28</sup> *The 'Enlightened' City: Screen culture between ideology, economics and experience. A study on the social role of film exhibition and film consumption in Flanders (1895-2004) in interaction with modernity and urbanization.* Fund for Scientific Research - Flanders, 2005-2007. University of Antwerp & Ghent University.  
<[http://www.ua.ac.be/main.aspx?c=\\*CWONZ&n=39392&ct=40094&e=90562](http://www.ua.ac.be/main.aspx?c=*CWONZ&n=39392&ct=40094&e=90562)> [viewed Feb 25<sup>th</sup> 2012]

‘pillarised’ society.<sup>29</sup> In Germany, the *Siegen Database of Itinerant Cinemas* and the *German Early Cinema Database* have been brought together under the same portal, although they are not searchable simultaneously.<sup>30</sup> The successful integration of data from these sources in Annemone Ligensa’s work on perception and modernity, for instance, shows that the kind of data analysis made possible by a structured collection has a role to play in theoretical and historiographical discussions and not only in quantitative or industrial accounts.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the research project under which the Siegen database was designed and implemented was concerned with the ‘industrialisation of perception’, and it has contributed significantly to recent discussions about cinema and modernity.<sup>32</sup>

The previous examples illustrate the potential of relational databases as an analytical tool that allows researchers to systematise large collections and make quantitative observations. Another use of geo-database technology is as a point of access for qualitative material such as photos, videos, and text, which are seen in

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<sup>29</sup> Daniel Biltereyst, Philippe Meers, and Lies Van de Vijver, ‘Social Class, Experiences of Distinction and Cinema in Postwar Ghent’, in *Explorations in New Cinema History*, ed. by Maltby, Biltereyst, and Meers, pp. 101-124. Philippe Meers, Daniel Biltereyst, and Lies Van de Vijver, ‘Lived Experiences of the “Enlightened City” (1925-1975): A Large Scale Oral History Project on Cinema-going in Flanders (Belgium)’, *Illuminace: casopis pro teorii, historii a estetiku filmu* = *Illuminace: the journal of film theory, history and aesthetics* 20.1 (2008), 208-214.

<sup>30</sup> *German Early Cinema Database* <<http://www.earlycinema.uni-koeln.de/>> [viewed Feb 25<sup>th</sup> 2012]. For a very informative account of the making of the Siegen database, see Michael Ross, Roger Sennert, and Jens Wagner, ‘Putting Itinerant Cinemas on the Map’, in *Digital Tools in Media Studies*, ed. by Ross, Grauer, and Freisleben, pp. 83-92.

<sup>31</sup> Annemone Ligensa, ‘Urban Legend: Early Cinema, Modernization and Urbanization in Germany, 1895-1914’, in *Cinema, Audiences and Modernity*, ed. by Biltereyst, Maltby, and Meers, pp. 117-129. Martin Loiperdinger, *KINtop Schriften 10. Travelling Cinema in Europe* (Frankfurt: Stroemfeld; Roter Stern, 2008). Joseph Garncarz, ‘Perceptual Environments for Films: The Development of Cinema in Germany, 1895-1914’, in *Film 1900: Technology, Perception, Culture*, ed. by Annemone Ligensa and Klaus Kreimeier (New Barnet: John Libbey, 2009), pp. 141-150.

<sup>32</sup> University of Siegen, ‘Industrialisierung der Wahrnehmung’ (Industrialisation of Perception) research project, <http://www.fk615.uni-siegen.de/de/teilprojekt.php?projekt=A5> [viewed 25<sup>th</sup> February 2012]

immediate proximity to a spatial setting and other contextual markers in what Jeff Klenotic has called ‘grounded visualization’.<sup>33</sup> An excellent example of this approach is Robert Allen’s *Going to the Show* project about moviegoing in North Carolina, which plots different types of archival data onto very detailed fire insurance town maps.<sup>34</sup> Placing the sites of cinema exhibition in their urban context has allowed Allen to document the role of racial divisions as ‘the most important factor in the experience of moviegoing for all North Carolinians between 1896 and the desegregation of white theatres in the early 1960s’.<sup>35</sup> Followed by further research on the ‘experience of downtown’ in small towns across the state, *Going to the Show* has already provided striking insights into social history. Thought of as a ‘historiographic experiment’, *Going to the Show* is an interactive digital library hosted by the State Library of North Carolina, and designed in close collaboration with librarians and archivists. Connected to a larger project, *Documenting the American South*, the collection and website attempt to illuminate historical documents in a way that brings them to a larger audience. A similar ethos is behind the *City in Film* project at the University of Liverpool.<sup>36</sup> As part of the events that marked Liverpool’s period as European Capital of Culture in 2008, the project geo-referenced a trove of professional and amateur moving images to construct a vision of the city across time.<sup>37</sup> Although the map interface is not as yet part of the online

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<sup>33</sup> Klenotic, ‘Putting Cinema History on the Map’, p. 66.

<sup>34</sup> *Going to the Show: Mapping Moviegoing in North Carolina*, <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/gtts/index.html>> [accessed 25<sup>th</sup> February 2012]

<sup>35</sup> Robert C. Allen, ‘Getting to *Going to the Show*’, p. 270.

<sup>36</sup> *Mapping the City in Film*, <<http://www.liv.ac.uk/lsa/cityinfilm/catalogue.html>> [accessed 25<sup>th</sup> February 2012]

<sup>37</sup> Julia Hallam and Les Roberts, ‘Mapping, Memory and the City: Archives, Databases and Film Historiography’, *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 14.3 (2011), 355-372.

access to the database, the Liverpool project is an example of a productive collaboration between urban studies, film studies and cartographic methods.

My project, as the result of an individual PhD, is considerably smaller, but it aims to maintain data standards with a view to future expansion and interconnection with comparable projects. The core database was built on the PostgreSQL platform, an open-source object-relational database system, using the PGAdmin interface.<sup>38</sup> This database format was chosen because it provided the best integration with Quantum GIS, using the PostGIS plugin.<sup>39</sup> This allows me to have direct access to the database via a map interface as well as the table and query views. Furthermore, by using a low-level open-source package (rather than more cumbersome proprietary formats such as MSAccess) it can be ensured that the data will be compatible across platforms and over time.

The future prospects for collaborative work and sharing of datasets depend on maintaining common standards for the formatting of data and the creation of metadata. If the data are organized with a view towards connectivity, the project becomes scalable: The work of a single researcher can be integrated into a group project, and the limited frame of analysis can be transformed into a point in a broader triangulation. Data integration becomes a practical answer to the question of what to do with all the local studies mentioned in the previous chapter. Several scholars have recognised the potential of using location data in order to integrate disparate datasets, to weave together what is frequently called the Semantic Web or,

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<sup>38</sup> PGAdmin, <<http://www.pgadmin.org/>> [accessed 25<sup>th</sup> February 2012]

<sup>39</sup> PostGIS, <<http://postgis.refractory.net/>> [accessed 25<sup>th</sup> February 2012]

on a more limited scale, a data grid.<sup>40</sup> Although that prospect is too remote at the moment, some attempts have been made by film scholars in the last couple of years to agree on a core set of data that could be collected locally and then used for comparative or integrated analysis.<sup>41</sup>

A functioning database tends to be a highly abstract representation of the real-world entities with which the data are connected. What is more important about structured databases is that they are able to capture some of the relationships between those entities. The way the database is structured is crucial to the way these connections will work, and it carries plenty of often untheorised assumptions. In my case, at the hub of everything is the cinema venue. Understood broadly as any site where film exhibition has been documented as taking place *regularly* before 1918, the six hundred rows of data represent the end-points and nodes of film circulation, and thus give a concrete spatial dimension to the phenomenon of distribution. Having approximate location information for the venues it then becomes relatively easy to work with other kinds of data by using a gazetteer, so that everything can be connected back to a point on the map. Linking to a venue gazetteer, there are a number of other tables, containing different aspects of the two programming snapshots as well as census data and information about the venues. More precise

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<sup>40</sup> Trevor M. Harris, L. Jesse Rouse, and Susan Bergeron, 'The Geospatial Semantic Web, Pareto GIS, and the Humanities' in *The Spatial Humanities: GIS and the Future of Humanities Scholarship*, ed. by David J. Bodenhamer, John Corrigan, and Trevor M. Harris (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), pp. 124-142. Paul S Ell, 'GIS, e-Science, and the Humanities Grid', in *The Spatial Humanities*, pp. 143-166.

<sup>41</sup> Elise Moore, a graduate student at the University of North Carolina who worked as project coordinator of *Going to the Show*, recently wrote a Master's dissertation that sought to establish the basis for a common semantics that can facilitate merging and comparing data, after conducting a study among researchers that used database tools. Elise D. Moore, 'Towards a Common Schema in Distributed Humanities Research' (unpublished master's thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2010).

definitions of these tables and the fields they contain is given in the Appendix.

What I want to highlight is that having this relational structure allowed me to tackle the challenge of reconstructing the emergence of distribution patterns without having, as far as I am aware, any kind of systematic and complete source that could tell me who was renting films to what theatres. Studying programmes worked as a tangential approach to understand distribution.

## **2.4. Sources and the ‘problem of the empirical’**

In an article about the film supply to a cinema in New South Wales in the 1950s, Ross Thorne noted ‘the frustrating lack of detailed records that deal with the mechanism of how films (or indeed any product) were dispersed’.<sup>42</sup> In the absence of comprehensive sources, it would be possible to question the value of a database approach. After all, the quantitative analyses that motivate the use of databases in other disciplines would be pointless and misleading with patchy data. This is a valid reservation, and the weight of the programming database as a quantitative source is always problematized throughout the thesis. However, I argue that relational databases are actually a good way to address the dearth of specific sources, because they allow us to cast a wider net and still be able to make sense of disparate findings. If cinema is understood as an experience grounded in the complex web of social relationships, a spatially-oriented approach can exploit the methodological potential of these connections.

Widening the field of vision of cinema history is not a rhetorical proposition: it has practical consequences. If the object at the centre of enquiry is the event,

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<sup>42</sup> Ross Thorne, ‘Rethinking Distribution: Developing the Parameters for a Micro-Analysis of the Movement of Motion Pictures’, *Studies in Australasian Cinema* 1.3 (2007), 275-298 (p. 328).



rather than the film, the researcher is confronted with two issues: firstly, past events ‘are no longer there and can only be “recalled” on the basis of (leftover) contextual information’.<sup>43</sup> Scholars then have the responsibility to make sure that the historical importance of collections of paraphernalia, cinema theatre ledgers, accounts books, company archives and the like is recognised, so that these documents can be found, preserved and investigated. One way to work towards this is by contextualizing the surviving artefacts, including films. In Scotland, several indexation and digitisation projects have made large collections available online, either freely or through educational access providers.<sup>44</sup> A well-constructed relational database opens the possibility for integration and collaboration that add value to these public resources.

The second issue the cinema historian must confront is what Allen has called ‘the problem of the empirical’: ‘what place does anything outside of the film ‘itself’ and its analysis by the film scholar have in film studies?’<sup>45</sup> As Rick Altman has pointed out, ‘instead of purifying film studies, we [now] do our best to find ways of integrating one cultural phenomenon after another into the discipline’,

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<sup>43</sup> Harry van Vliet, Karel Dibbets, and Henk Grass, ‘Culture in Context’, in *Digital Tools in Media Studies*, ed. by Ross, Grauer, and Freisleben, pp. 27-42 (p. 28).

<sup>44</sup> The most relevant example, because it integrates multimedia content according to geographic criteria and uses a map interface, is *Scotland’s Places*, a partnership between the National Archives of Scotland and the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, which displays town and building plans, photographs, and millions of scanned pages of government records of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Royal Commission is also responsible for Scran, an educational website that hosts over 360,000 images from more than 300 organisations such as museums, galleries and archives. <[www.scotlandspplaces.gov.uk](http://www.scotlandspplaces.gov.uk)> [accessed 10 February 2010]. The National Library of Scotland has a growing, thematically organised digital archive at <[digital.nls.uk](http://digital.nls.uk)> [viewed 10 February 2010]. The Scottish Screen Archive has also completed large digitisation initiatives <<http://ssa.nls.uk>> [accessed 2 July 2012].

<sup>45</sup> Allen, ‘Relocating American Film History’, p. 49.

through what he calls a ‘centrifugal’ academic practice.<sup>46</sup> This is in turn connected with the idea of a ‘total history’ of cinema as proposed by Barbara Klinger in the context of reception studies. As she argues, ‘total history’ as conceived by the Annales school is driven by a pursuit of comprehensiveness that, at the same time, acknowledges its impossibility: it is ‘a scholarly aim rather than an absolutely achievable reality’.<sup>47</sup>

Detractors of the idea of total history hold against it the accusation of naïve positivism: the illusion that knowledge and understanding of the past is a matter of gathering enough primary evidence. That is one of the suspicions often held by humanities scholars about research tools that originated in the hard sciences, and Geographic Information Systems are an example. Considering the growing amount of information available online, it is necessary to keep in mind Dorling and Fairbairn’s warnings against

the message, inherent in much writing about GIS, that  
if we only had more data we could draw a truer  
picture and that, eventually, with enough data, all will  
be revealed. This way of thinking last held sway at  
the turn of the century [from the nineteenth to the  
twentieth] when it was thought that, with complete  
information, key moral and political problems could

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<sup>46</sup> Rick Altman, ‘Whither Film Studies (In a Post-Film Studies World)?’, *Cinema Journal* 49.1 (2009), 131-135 (p. 134).

<sup>47</sup> Barbara Klinger, ‘Film History Terminable and Interminable: Recovering the Past in Reception Studies’, *Screen* 38.2 (1997), 107-128 (p. 109).

be solved through the search for an optimum solution.<sup>48</sup>

According to Klinger, however, working with the prospect of ‘total history’ always on the horizon without ever quite reaching it is useful for film studies, because it broadens the scope of enquiry. In other words, it leads the researcher out of the trade press and the specialised archives, and plunges her into the sea of documentary detritus of the twentieth century. In a research area where the ‘problem of the empirical’ is its scarcity, being able to work with scraps of evidence from all sorts of different provenances becomes crucial. Managing whatever data can be found in a relational manner is a way to increase their evidentiary value. A cinema advert in a local newspaper does not provide much information, but when contrasted with a hundred others (whether diachronically or synchronically) it becomes possible to draw inferences about distribution practices. This would not be possible if the locations were considered separately.

If the database is considered as a work in progress and an iterative process, then its incompleteness becomes an asset. The relational structure permits the progressive building of layer upon layer of data from different sources. This is particularly useful when dealing with fragmentary sources of varying reliability. Although more specific discussions about the sources used will appear at relevant points, an example can illustrate this point. Data for the two programming snapshots were gathered in the first instance from more than forty local newspapers, covering sixty-two towns and cities across Scotland. The basic information about venue

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<sup>48</sup> Daniel Dorling and David Fairbairn, *Mapping: Ways of Representing the World* (Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman, 1997), p. 125.

characteristics and film titles on the programme was then enriched with existing records on the Scottish Cinemas Database, secondary sources (such as the local exhibition histories mentioned in the previous chapter), evidence from historical maps, and archival material such as the licensing records of Glasgow Corporation. The film titles were first investigated using different online databases: IMDB, the BFI Film and TV Database, and the AFI catalogue.<sup>49</sup> Further information on each film, particularly its release date, marketing model and distributor if known, was obtained from the trade journal, *The Bioscope*. While none of these sources is systematic or comprehensive enough to be entirely reliable, the triangulation between them gives the best possible chance of finding accurate data. This is a data collection process that starts from the very local level of the newspaper advert, as fits the non-metropolitan perspective that this thesis adopts, but that also draws on more general resources to shed light on those local phenomena.

## **2.5. Conclusion: The strategic advantages of researching location**

Building a geo-referenced database can be a labour-intensive task involving a steep technological learning curve. Capturing information manually from primary and secondary sources, integrating digitized material, and making sure that the data model is logical and conforms to standards can be costly, both in terms of money and labour. But any historical research project involves a data-collection moment, and building a digital database out of it does not add substantially to its costs. Since it allows other people to use the data and encourages collaboration, creating some form of digital output is

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<sup>49</sup> Internet Movie Database <<http://www.imdb.com/>>; BFI Film & TV Database <<http://www.bfi.org.uk/filmtvinfo/ftvdb/>>, AFI Catalog of Feature Films <<http://www.afi.com/members/catalog/>> [all accessed 25 February 2012].

a more efficient use of resources.<sup>50</sup> However, in order to incorporate the advantages of GIS into humanities research, it is necessary to dismantle some of its positivist impulses, in particular the need for comprehensiveness that underlies quantitative analysis.

Given the limitations imposed by the types of sources used in this project, my use of GIS tools as a data management method has worked as a way of knitting together disparate pieces of information, using location as a connecting element. As a tool for data analysis, geo-referenced relational databases have supported an iterative method – a process of experiment and discovery, geared towards exploration rather than confirmation. New fields and relations have been established as the hypotheses are revised, incorporating different classification schemes and producing visualisations that can in turn trigger new questions. The constant revision of data schemes is not common practice in most top-down research designs, and the structure must certainly be fixed down at some point before the dataset is shared, but I think that approaching small-scale GIS projects with some flexibility is one way to subvert the ominous, bureaucratic undertones of the technology.

The ease with which one can revise and check hypotheses, and try different angles by querying and visualizing the data over and over, is one of the main advantages of a GIS approach. Adhering too strongly to a pre-determined set of attributes or data structures would undermine this flexibility and would pre-empt the kind of discoveries we can make. Thinking of the on-going process of discovery, however, also means that we cannot be content when we have formatted and printed

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<sup>50</sup> Michael Ross, Manfred Grauer, and Bernd Freisleben, 'Introduction', in *Digital Tools in Media Studies*, pp. 7-16 (p. 9).

a map with a neat wind rose in the corner. Sharing the data to allow other researchers to repeat experiments or test their own hypotheses becomes both possible and desirable. This collaborative dimension creates a field where local studies become much more relevant as part of a comparative framework, and where film history can contribute to broader questions as well as benefit from interdisciplinary approaches. While there is a need for agreed data standards in order to realise this potential, individual research projects need to retain their distinctiveness so that they can continue to be built ‘from the bottom up’, as Jeff Klenotic puts it.<sup>51</sup>

Working with GIS does not need to be part of a megalomaniac project, and small-scale, modest projects can still benefit from incorporating location-based methods. This is a point also taken up by critical geographers like Jeremy Crampton, who has written about the developing tensions between two approaches to the use of digital mapping. On the one hand, GIS experts are trying to secure their position by entrenching ‘technical disciplinarity’, focusing on the technical aspects of GIS and controlling entrance to the field through professional certification. On the other hand, Crampton sees a growing field of critical practice alongside the exponential growth of amateur, collaborative, and open-source online mapping.<sup>52</sup> A mapping practice that does justice to the critical tradition of film studies needs to retain the open-endedness and ‘indiscipline’ of amateur mapping. This is not to say that working with professional cartographers is not a good idea – rather that it should be done on our own terms and with a focus on process rather than product.

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<sup>51</sup> Klenotic, ‘Putting Cinema History on the Map’, p. 79.

<sup>52</sup> Jeremy W. Crampton, *Mapping: A Critical Introduction to Cartography and GIS* (Chichester: Blackwell, 2010), p. 5.

Just as the field of film studies was transformed by a greater interest on historically specific audiences rather than theoretically identical spectators, the recent interest in mapping needs to be kept both grounded and connected. 'For there to be multiplicity there must be space', said Doreen Massey to Karen Lury.<sup>53</sup> In order to shed light on the endless multiplicity of the historical experiences of moving pictures we need to be able to situate them – but adding two coordinate columns to a massive data table does not do the trick. Mapping is not a substitute for analysis and imagination. Furthermore, the limits of inference from incomplete sources for quantitative data, and the role of maps and databases as technologies of power that have long served reactionary interests, demand a critical and reflective stance. Geo-databases and digital mapping are only some amongst many tools. Their practical application in the chapters that follow is an experimental way to consider whether their rewards outweigh their costs and risks.

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<sup>53</sup> Massey and Lury, 'Making Connections', p. 232.

## **PART II**

### **A GEOGRAPHY OF THE EARLY FILM TRADE IN SCOTLAND**



## Chapter 3

### Film trade in Scotland before permanent cinemas

Before the opening of the first permanent cinemas after 1906, public presentation of moving pictures in the UK did not take place in a dedicated space, but in a variety of impermanent locations. The spaces and practices of very early film exhibition signalled the inclusion of the new medium into existing ‘cultural series’, such as the fairground and the music hall.<sup>1</sup> Because it was subject to other institutional constraints and paradigms, the radical potential of film – residing in its mechanical reproduction and transportability – was not fully realised. Crucially for the present analysis, the fact that film was embedded within other practices means that the circulation of film prints was latched on to the itinerancy patterns of said forms of entertainment. Understanding how the various forms of early exhibition played out in the Scottish context, and how they related to different methods of film supply, provides a necessary starting point from which to unravel the changes of the regional film trade networks in the following years.

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of ‘cultural series’, already mentioned in passing in Chapter 1 but taking greater significance in this section, was introduced into film studies by André Gaudreault, who defines it as a subsystem or form of signification within a cultural paradigm. Gaudreault uses this concept to elaborate on his influential ideas about the fundamental intermediality of early film practices, which is an essential part of his definition of ‘kine-attractography’ as a polar opposite to institutional cinema. The apparent restriction of intermediality to pre-institutional practice is problematic, however, as Burrows shows through his study of the continued ‘cross-cultural co-dependence’ of silent British cinema. Gaudreault, *Film and Attraction*, pp. 63-64. See also Jon Burrows, *Legitimate Cinema: Theatre Stars in Silent British Films, 1908-1918*, Exeter Studies in Film History (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2003), p. 14.

This chapter will concentrate on the strands of early exhibition described by the head of Gaumont, A.C. Bromhead, in a 1933 lecture that has become a reference point for many more recent studies.<sup>2</sup> Recalling the main groups involved in the film trade before permanent cinemas, Bromhead spoke of three categories: the fairground travelling showmen, the town hall showmen, and the music hall exhibitors. Within each of these groups there were significant differences, such as the varying skill levels identified by Deac Rossell in relation to the marketing of equipment to experienced and novice entrepreneurs.<sup>3</sup> The cultural meanings associated with the spaces of early film shows were transferred, at least to some extent, to the reception of the new medium, shaping public expectations and discourse about it in very different ways. As mentioned before, there is a growing body of research on the fascinating interface between Victorian visual culture and early film. The characteristics of the film trade in its first decade, however, have remained underexplored.

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<sup>2</sup> A. C. Bromhead, 'Reminiscences of the British Film Trade', *Proceedings of the British Kinematograph Society* 21 (1933). This lecture, cited by Rachael Low in her first volume, contains several tropes that have been incorporated more or less critically in subsequent historiography. A recent revision of Bromhead's categories in the context of Edwardian exhibition is in Vanessa Toulmin, 'Cuckoo in the Nest: Edwardian Itinerant Exhibition Practices and the Transition to Cinema in the United Kingdom from 1901 to 1906', *The Moving Image* 10.1 (2010), 51-79.

<sup>3</sup> Rossell used the analytical frame developed by Wiebe Bijker for a social constructivist approach to the history of technology, to look at the relationships between equipment manufacturers and public entertainers as part of the process of definition of a new medium. Considering the different projection technologies produced in the early period, Rossell breaks down the category of 'town hall showmen' into experienced and novice practitioners. He also separates the music-hall showmen who had steady contracts from those who had to travel around seeking short-term engagements. He finally argues that a sector of the equipment market was targeted at novice outsiders attracted by the 'get-rich-quick' hype. Deac Rossell, 'A Slippery Job: Travelling Exhibitors in Early Cinema', in *Visual Delights: Essays on the Popular and Projected Image in the 19th Century*, ed. by Simon Popple and Vanessa Toulmin (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 2000), pp. 50-60.

This chapter will show how film fitted into the patterns of travel and trade used by fairground, public-hall and music-hall showpeople.<sup>4</sup> It will argue that these patterns of itinerant exhibition were necessarily connected to different forms of film supply. As so much additional input was required in order to make a saleable product (the show) out of it, the exceptional nature of film as commodity was not yet evident. Therefore, film was traded as a regular commodity: sold outright, with all rights transferring to the buyer who could then exploit or re-sell it as he or she pleased. The co-existence of several forms of exhibition and trade produced a complex scenario in which the separation of roles that is distinctive of institutional cinema did not apply. As Vanessa Toulmin has shown, there was a ‘profound interrelationship’ between producers such as Mitchell and Kenyon, and all kinds of exhibitors around Britain:

Initially built on the itineraries of the fairground  
 bioscopes, this web of contacts spread to include the  
 burgeoning practices of the stand-alone/town hall  
 showman. Independent film exhibitors such as  
 Vernon’s grew out of these networks establishing  
 their own circuits as a result and variety proprietors  
 such as [Thomas] Barrasford had access to Mitchell

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<sup>4</sup> A version of some parts of this chapter has been published as: María A. Vélez-Serna, ‘Mapping Film Exhibition in Scotland before Permanent Cinemas’, *Post Script* 30.3 (2011), pp. 25-37.

and Kenyon's expertise as a direct result of the wide dissemination of their products.<sup>5</sup>

As this quotation suggests, the *network* structure of the fairground trade was connected to the *circuit* structure of film exhibitors working the variety stage, but also to the independent nodes of stand-alone shows. The spatial patterns evoked in this description are as distinctive of pre-institutional exhibition as the showmanship practices that have attracted more attention. The relatively decentralised structure of the early film trade supported the diversity of exhibition contexts in which Scottish audiences first experienced moving pictures.

### 3.1. Fairground exhibition

Although the importance of fairground exhibition in Britain between 1897 and 1914 was recognised by Rachael Low, its historical role had often been dismissed as a dead end before the pioneering work by Vanessa Toulmin at the University of Sheffield and the National Fairground Archive. In a 1994 article, Toulmin argued that 'the moving picture industry was shaped in its initial years by the traveling showmen'.<sup>6</sup> Following this hypothesis, this section will look at the pattern of fairground traveling in Scotland and the social relationships that it fostered, arguing that these forms of mobility can be understood as part of the informal distribution channels of early film.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Vanessa Toulmin, "'We Take Them and Make Them': Michell and Kenyon and the Travelling Exhibition Showmen', in *The Lost World of Mitchell & Kenyon*, ed. by Vanessa Toulmin, Simon Popple, and Patrick Russell (London: BFI, 2004), pp. 59-68 (p. 65).

<sup>6</sup> Vanessa Toulmin, 'Telling the Tale. The Story of the Fairground Bioscope Shows and the Showmen who Operated them', *Film History* 6.2 (1994), 219-237 (p. 236).

<sup>7</sup> For a fascinating and helpful introduction to the complex social world of Scottish travelling showpeople, meticulously mapped and observed, see Mitch Miller's 'dialectograms' of the

Fairground entertainers were in a good position to take up the new attraction of the cinematograph, due to their previous experience translating a range of Victorian visual technologies from the sphere of scientific curiosity to that of popular entertainment. The portable theatres used for ghost shows, a melodramatic genre with special effects produced with magic lanterns, smoke and mirrors, were soon adapted for film projection.<sup>8</sup> Around 1905, competition was already fierce, and it was not uncommon to find six or more bioscope shows at the same fair, using showland traditions such as ornate fronts, mechanical organs and variety parades to attract punters. Several of the first Scottish showmen to start bioscope shows, such as George Biddall, Henry Codona, and John McIndoe, had had ghost shows and were skilled in the use of optical technology, as well as the sensationalist patter, sound effects, and other melodramatic devices that distinguished one show from the other.<sup>9</sup> Even more importantly, most of them came from fairground families and were well acquainted with the business. Establishing a viable pattern for travelling was key to success in the fairgrounds; an established route was a very valuable achievement that took years to build.

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Backcauseway yard in Parkhead, and of the 'circuits' of blood ties between showground families. Although these drawings reflect the current situation, they give an insight into the practical logic behind travelling arrangements. See Miller, Mitch. 'Drawing a Dialectogram: Backcauseway' (blog post dated 23 March 2010 at <<http://dialectogram.wordpress.com/>> [accessed 11 September 2010]

<sup>8</sup> Ghost shows used technologies based on Pepper's Ghost, an attraction which had appeared from 1862 at the Royal Polytechnic in London as part of a series of optical illusions, but was taken up by fairground showmen in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Jeremy Brooker, 'The Polytechnic Ghost', *Early Popular Visual Culture* 5.2 (2007), pp. 189-206. Also see 'The Ghost on the Fairground', National Fairground Archive <[http://www.nfa.dept.shef.ac.uk/history/miscellaneous\\_articles/article15.html](http://www.nfa.dept.shef.ac.uk/history/miscellaneous_articles/article15.html)> [accessed 2 July 2012]

<sup>9</sup> Brief biographical information for many Scottish fairground families is provided by Kevin Scrivens and Stephen Smith, *The Travelling Cinematograph Show* (Tweeddale: New Era, 1999).

Scottish fairground families formed a distinct community, although they had strong links with the North of England and with Ireland, and they travelled on broadly stable but flexible routes. The sequence of fairs that a particular family would visit each year was in part determined by tradition and contacts, in part by commercial reasons, and in part by the viability of transport, which was always a challenge. Up to 1905, most bioscope shows could be packed into two or three horse-drawn wagons, but as the fronts grew more ornate and they incorporated mechanical organs and electrical generators, this became more difficult.<sup>10</sup> In some cases, the wagons were adapted to travel on the railways; although the rates were high, the secretary of the Showmen and Van-Dwellers' Association reckoned in 1896 that more than four thousand vans travelled weekly on the British railways.<sup>11</sup> The turn-of-the-century boom of steam-powered rides, of which more will be said below, popularised off-track traction engines for fairground transport. However, traction engines still travelled on roads, not railways, and were prone to accidents. Although they could pull heavier loads, the engines were not much faster than the horses, so the geographical constraints for touring did not disappear. The goal was still to find an optimal string of fairs, maximising the potential paying audiences while minimising the costs of transport and the off days.

Many considerations entered into this planning process. By the end of the nineteenth century, most small rural fairs were on the wane, due to the extension of

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<sup>10</sup> Toulmin, 'Telling the Tale', p. 226.

<sup>11</sup> 'Showmen and Van-Dwellers', *The Era*, 1 February 1896 [consulted at *19<sup>th</sup> Century British Library Newspapers* <<http://find.galegroup.com/bncn/>> (4 November 2010)]

permanent commerce through railways and cattle markets.<sup>12</sup> Very few of these local fairs seem to have been relevant to the configuration of the late Victorian entertainment fair circuit. There were, however, a handful of fairs that thrived as regional hubs and became crucial fixtures in the showpeople's calendar. These included the Races at Paisley and Ayr and the famous Kirkcaldy Links Market, as well as several Common Ridings in the Borders. The industrial holidays in the main towns and seaside resorts were increasingly important. Those dates, established through tradition, were outside the showpeople's control and underpinned a travelling pattern that could often be inconvenient or inefficient.

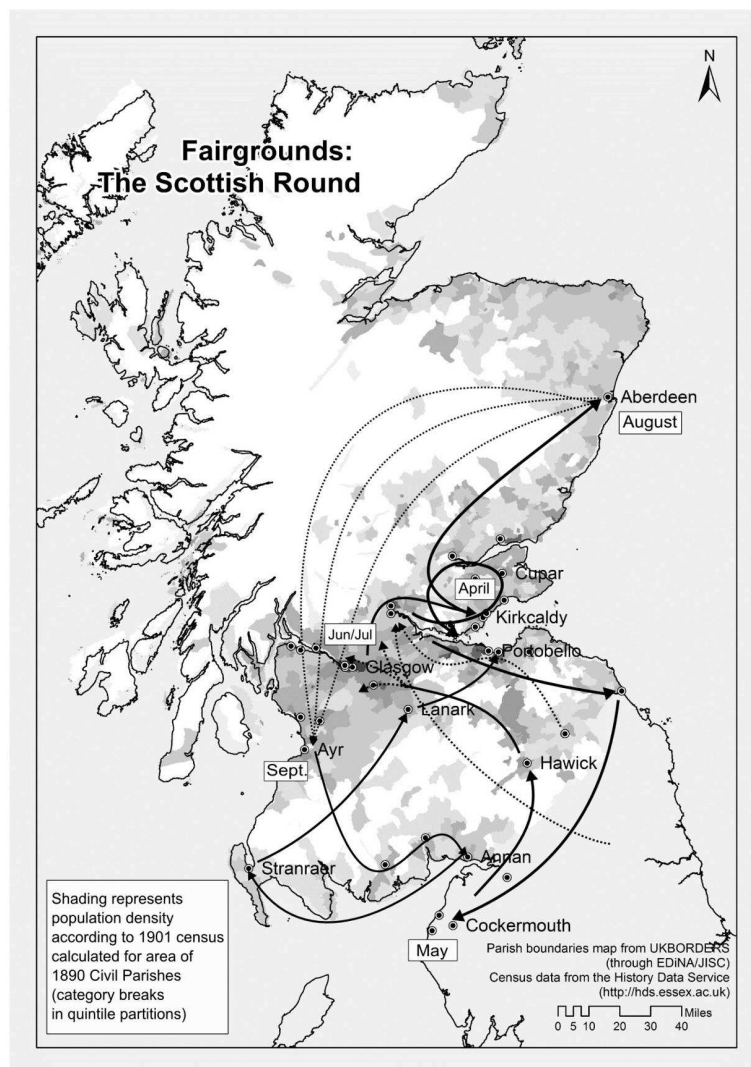
The basic template was the 'Scottish Round' of fairgrounds, which, as described to *The Era* by an anonymous showman, ran from March to December.<sup>13</sup> **[Figure 1]** Starting from their winter quarters, showpeople could visit several towns before arriving at Kirkcaldy, to the North of Edinburgh across the Firth of Forth, in the second week of April. A tour of Fife followed, and then two weeks on 'private business', which meant renting ground privately for a couple of attractions, or attending events like temperance fêtes and local bazaars. Towards the end of May some shows returned to England for the Cumbrian fairs at Cockermouth, Carlisle, and Maryport, before converging at the Scottish town of Hawick, close to the border, in time for the Common Riding. July was when most of the main city holidays took place, so there were fairs at Greenock, Glasgow, Dundee, and Stirling, and then at Aberdeen and Perth in August. After about a month on private grounds,

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<sup>12</sup> Sir James David Marwick, *List of Markets and Fairs Now and Formerly Held in Scotland* ([London]: 1890).

<sup>13</sup> 'The Showman World', *The Era*, 25 March 1899 [consulted at *19<sup>th</sup> Century British Library Newspapers* <<http://find.galegroup.com/bncn/>> (2 September 2010)]

October brought several fixtures in the Lowlands and Ayrshire. The season ended with a string of dates to the west and south of Glasgow, reaching Irvine or Kilmarnock in Ayrshire on the first week of December, after which the showmen started preparing for the Christmas and New Year fairs.<sup>14</sup>



**Figure 1: The Scottish fairground round**

<sup>14</sup> The Christmas carnival at Edinburgh Waverley Market, controlled by E.H. Moss, had been organised since around 1878. By 1902, the *Showman's Year Book* listed Christmas carnivals at Aberdeen, Dunfermline, Dundee, Edinburgh, Forfar, Fraserburgh, Galashiels, Glasgow, Govan, Greenock, Kelso, Kilmarnock, Kirkcaldy, Leith, Motherwell, Paisley, Renfrew, and Stirling.



Around this template, there was ample room for the individual showman's judgment, balancing ease of travel with their knowledge of places and audiences, the conditions of the ground lease, and the kind of opposition they were likely to encounter. Many showmen owned several rides and shows, so part of the expertise consisted in knowing which towns appreciated the switchback rather than the ghost show and vice-versa. Each attraction had its own route, and the owners delegated the management to other family members or employees. An established route was a very valuable achievement that took years to build. In 1914, when George Green decided to quit the fairgrounds and concentrate on permanent cinemas and distribution, he offered all his machinery for sale; but his advertisement emphasised the chance 'to buy a Route':

This is the chance of a lifetime, Machines and Shows  
with Grounds to put them on. For instance, one  
Roundabout has a wonderfully good route on Market  
Grounds and Fairs. One machine has only two weeks  
in the season when it is not on grounds controlled by  
me. One Machine only two weeks' private business in  
the season, etc., etc.<sup>15</sup>

Due to the high capital investment required to buy the equipment, owners of bioscope shows tended to be relatively wealthy showmen who often owned inheritable rights to occupy plots in several fairgrounds and had a number of shows on the road at any time. A glimpse of the mix of social contacts, personal experience, business methods, and calendar customs that influenced travelling

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<sup>15</sup> Advert, *The World's Fair*, 4 July 1914, p. 7.

showmen can be found in a small but fascinating group of letters kept at the Scottish Screen Archive. In these handwritten papers, dated from 1899 to 1906, Peter Swallow, who managed bioscope shows for George Green, reports on his progress and suggests business opportunities:

Dear George I hear that Jimmy Wilmot is going to  
Girvan, if he is it would put up your show. Old  
Lawrence says Jimmy Wilmot is going & has got the  
ground. I looked up the books & I find the show is the  
best going we had there [...] Jimmy is nearly sure to  
go to Maybole the week before Girvan. Girvan is on  
the first Monday in April & you can usually open the  
Friday & Saturday before it[. If] you want Maybole  
you write to the lessee at the Old Quarry Show  
Ground Maybole.<sup>16</sup>

This insider's knowledge was shared and updated within the business and family bonds of the traveling community, making the yearly round of fairs a very flexible network rather than a strict schedule or circuit. This network was one of the main structures underlying the circulation of early film in Scotland, but the influence of these patterns on later forms of distribution is harder to prove. The very specific conditions that shaped fairground routes did not necessarily transfer to later practices, which depended on railway transport rather than free-running traction engines and were organised in a more deliberate way. However, when fairground

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<sup>16</sup> Manuscript letter, Peter Swallow to George Green, dated at Kilmarnock, 3 March 1905. Glasgow, Scottish Screen Archive, 5/8/28.

exhibitors moved into the permanent cinema business, they tended to do so following their previous experience and contacts. The strong connections retained by the emerging Scottish cinema trade with Yorkshire, Lancashire and Sunderland exemplify the geographic continuities inherited from fairground practice.

As the description from the *Showman's Yearbook* suggests, the Scottish round in fact included several dates in the North of England, where most of the families that travelled these routes originally had their winter base.<sup>17</sup> The main touring routes in Scotland must be seen in the context of the Northern English fairground runs, in an area roughly stretching from Manchester to Perth. This might explain why no mention is made of the several important horse and feeing fairs that fell to the north of the central belt, such as Aikey Fair in Aberdeenshire in late July. While the routes of the grandest shows overlapped with some of the Midlands circuits, which in turn might include London dates, many showpeople did not travel so far, relying mostly on local circuits not represented here. The fairground trade can then be seen as a nation-wide network at variable scales, often held together by family ties, but with internal regional dynamics. This spatial ordering provided the conditions of possibility for the circulation of films in an open-market, direct-sale scenario.

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<sup>17</sup> Some branches of these fairground dynasties from the North of England ended up settling in Scotland. George 'President' Kemp opened cinemas in Irvine and Saltcoats; Preston-born George Green had settled in the East End of Glasgow by 1896; and the Biddalls, who wintered at Gateshead, opened a permanent picture show in Annan in 1912. See Frances Brown, *Fairground Strollers and Showfolk* (Ronda: Taunton, 2001), p. 86.

### 3.1.1. Buying film

The first film producers were apparatus manufacturers primarily; films were sold almost as an accessory to the machine, which, as Deac Rossell points out, was itself little more than an accessory to the magic lantern.<sup>18</sup> This was particularly true in the early days before standardisation, when there were incompatibilities between different brands of projectors and films. The manufacturers' plan was usually to sell the complete apparatus, comprising the cinematograph mechanism, the illuminant, accessories and a set of films. Further films could be purchased later as they were released, at varying prices according to topicality and quality. George Green, for instance, bought a machine from RW Paul in London for use in the circus building at the Carnival at the end of 1896.<sup>19</sup> George Biddall, after seeing Green's show (now a proper fairground bioscope) at the Ayr Races in 1897, ordered a machine from Haydon and Urry, a popular brand with fairground exhibitors.<sup>20</sup> They were both showing films of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee in the summer and autumn of that year, for quite a few months. The novelty of the medium itself, and the frequent change of audience, meant that the same stock could be an asset for a relatively long time, and it was therefore sensible for exhibitors to own films. It was, however, a substantial investment.

In 1897 each 'view', of around 50 ft, cost between £2 10s and £4; that is, more than the weekly salary of a variety performer. This price would have been out

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<sup>18</sup> Deac Rossell, *Living Pictures: The Origins of the Movies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> This anecdote is told in a letter kept at the Scottish Screen Archive, and quoted by Vanessa Toulmin in 'Telling the Tale', p. 221.

<sup>20</sup> Brown, *Fairground Strollers and Showfolk*, p. 66; Denis Gifford, 'Frank Harvey Haydon and George Urry', in *Who's who of Victorian Cinema*, available online at <<http://www.victorian-cinema.net/haydon.htm>> [accessed 6 September 2010]

of reach for all but the most prosperous of showmen. The situation was radically altered during the Boer war (1899-1902), when a glut of unwanted war films, and bold moves by the Warwick company, led to a drop of over fifty per cent in the price of new films, as Richard Brown has explained.<sup>21</sup> By then, having a local film made by Mitchell and Kenyon cost ten pence per foot plus the operator's fee and expenses, which worked out at about the 1897 rates.<sup>22</sup> At this time, both Walturdaw and Paul offered the possibility of renting films instead of buying them, but, with reduced sale prices, fairground exhibitors still preferred to buy outright.

London was a hub for the global film trade since 1896. Lumière productions were marketed in the UK by the Fuerst Brothers and Philipp Wolff, and for some time, the illusionist-turned-exhibitor David Devant travelled every weekend from London to Paris to bring Méliès films.<sup>23</sup> Edison films were sold by Maguire & Baucus, and Pathé titles could be obtained directly in Paris, at their London offices, or through agents such as Cecil Wray.<sup>24</sup> However, since the fairgrounds represented such a substantial part of the British film trade in the first ten years, manufacturers were prepared to make an extra effort to get their business. According to a well-known remark from A. C. Bromhead, companies like Gaumont sent 'a

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<sup>21</sup> Richard Brown, 'War on the Home Front: The Anglo-Boer War and the Growth of Rental in Britain. An Economic Perspective', *Film History* 16.1 (2004), 28-36 (p. 35).

<sup>22</sup> Timothy Neal, Vanessa Toulmin, and Rebecca Vick, 'Mitchell and Kenyon: A Successful, Pioneering, and "Travelled" Partnership of Production', in *The Lost World of Mitchell and Kenyon*, ed. by Toulmin, Russell, and Popple, pp. 6-11 (p. 6).

<sup>23</sup> John Barnes, *The Rise of the Cinema in Great Britain*, vol. 2 (London: Bishopsgate Press, 1983), pp. 120-1.

<sup>24</sup> The importance and dynamism of provincial agents in a thriving regional market is highlighted in Richard Brown, 'The Kinetoscope in Yorkshire: Exploitation and Innovation', in *Visual Delights: Essays on the Popular and Projected Image in the 19th Century*, ed. by Simon Popple and Vanessa Toulmin (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 2000), pp. 105-115.

representative with a bag full of films which the showman would be allowed to try out on the screen before his audience.’<sup>25</sup>

In some aspects, the early trade in films was very similar to that of other fairground necessities. The fairground business had a number of other ancillary trades, including the design and construction of steam rides and traction engines; the making of tilts and painted fronts; poster printing; and the wholesale of small prizes, gingerbread and coconuts. A look at the *Showman's Year Book* for 1902 shows that relatively few of the advertisers were based in London. The greatest concentration of fairground-related traders was in Lancashire in the North-West of England (although this may in part reflect the fact that *The Showman* was published in Oldham), while heavy machinery came mostly from the East of England. The bigger fairs, such as Nottingham Goose Fair, Ayr Races, and Kirkcaldy Links Market, were important junctions for all these trades. The roundabout engineers, Savage's, showcased their new models at King's Lynn, an important charter fair in the East of England, where the Van Dweller's Association also held an annual meeting.<sup>26</sup> The Scottish showmen had a charity concert and meeting at Paisley near Glasgow during the races.<sup>27</sup> It was at these kinds of congregations when a large part of the film trade, first- and second-hand, was conducted.

Films could also be ordered from a catalogue.<sup>28</sup> The promises of film suppliers were the same as those of other wholesalers of fairground paraphernalia:

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<sup>25</sup> Bromhead, 'Reminiscences of the British Film Trade,' p. 4.

<sup>26</sup> 'The Showman World', *The Era*, 13 February 1897 [consulted at *19<sup>th</sup> Century British Library Newspapers* <<http://find.galegroup.com/bncn/>> (4 November 2010)]

<sup>27</sup> 'Travellers' meeting and concert at Paisley', *The World's Fair*, 23 August 1906.

<sup>28</sup> For an interesting analysis of the changing rhetoric of early film catalogues, see Ian Christie, 'Comparing Catalogues', in *Networks of Entertainment*, ed. by Kessler and Verhoeff, pp. 209-217.

variety and novelty of their stock, immediate availability, and prompt dispatch via railway or parcel post. But in reality sales by catalogue reflected a market where both the supply and the demand for films were irregular, and where films were seen as durable goods that showmen should stock.<sup>29</sup> In a 1902 advert, Williamson's Kinematograph Film Works, from Hove on the south coast of England, not only offered films that had been released in 1900, but even suggested that films could be repaired, which shows how valuable they were for exhibitors that owned them and worked them for years:

No showman who values his reputation can afford to be without a copy of *The Attack on a China Mission Station*. This film has been before the public over a year, and is still a Trump Card [...]

We are always willing to replace damaged parts of our long subjects at 8d. per foot.<sup>30</sup>

The same advert, however, urged showmen to send their addresses so they could be notified at once of 'any new subject likely to interest you'. The double purpose of the advert is a good example of the balance between dependability and novelty that exhibitors strived for in their purchases and programmes. Audiences appreciated the repetition of some favourite films, but needed to be attracted by new items. The promise of instant notifications shows an effort to deal with the uncertainty of the market. An essential part of the institutionalisation process was to

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<sup>29</sup> Richard Brown and Barry Anthony, *A Victorian Film Enterprise: The History of the British Mutoscope and Biograph Company* (Trowbridge: Flick Books, 1997), p. 21.

<sup>30</sup> Advert, *The Showman*, 3 January 1902, p. 3.

improve the flow of information through planned release dates announced in the trade press, allowing exhibitors to plan their expenditure. A step in that direction was Gaumont's monthly 'Elge' list of films, a reliable system of catalogue updates that probably helped make this one of the most successful firms in the trade.

In comparison with the other fairground trades, the film trade was more centralised. Although there were several producers making films in the provinces, small firms tended to sell their product to London-based dealers like Philipp Wolff, Gaumont, and the Warwick Trading Company. However, the ability to request titles from a catalogue and have them sent 'on approval' through the parcel post meant that geographical distance was relatively unimportant, as long as the exhibitor was deemed trustworthy. Highly capitalised, established exhibitors in Scotland had immediate access to the films published in London, and indeed often boasted of being able to exhibit a particular topical film on the same day of release.

This sale model made it impossible for producers to predict sales and invest accordingly, and for exhibitors to budget for the purchase of particularly good films which could be released at any time. The extensive second-hand market created by the direct sale of films became a problem for producers, as it impaired demand for their new output.<sup>31</sup> For most exhibitors, however, it had several advantages, as the complete ownership of the films put them in control of an important part of the means of production of the show. As an asset, films could be a form of investment, so showpeople with available capital accumulated more films than they needed; for instance, when Joseph Wingate had to sell all his equipment after a devastating fire

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<sup>31</sup> Jon Burrows, 'When Britain tried to join Europe', *Early Popular Visual Culture* 4.1 (2006), pp. 1-19 (p. 7).



near Stirling, he offered 60,000 ft of film.<sup>32</sup> The December 1900 and January 1901 issues of *The Showman* have classified ads from sellers in several provincial towns in England, while in Scotland the Border Kinematograph Company was selling used films out of their public-hall exhibition venture at Hawick. As noted before, Hawick was a crucial node in the fairground calendar, being one of the points of convergence between the Northern English and Scottish rounds. Thus, the second-hand film trade exploited potential network connections and linked fairground and public hall exhibitors. The next section will argue that the increasing regularization of the fairgrounds reduced the flexibility of the network pattern of movement and trade. The new conditions favoured the growth of better-capitalized showpeople and required different forms of film supply.

### **3.1.2. The transformation of the fairground**

Around the turn of the twentieth century, the fairground business was in the throes of a substantial transformation, both in its management practices and in its physical shape. As Vanessa Toulmin points out, ‘the technological changes that transformed the landscape of the Victorian fair also had consequences for the organizational aspect of the business’.<sup>33</sup> Traditionally, the ground where the rides and sideshows were pitched was controlled directly by local councils, who collected a levy. Showmen scrambled to get into the grounds as soon as they were open in order to secure a good location. But in the later decades of the nineteenth century, local authorities had started transferring responsibility over the grounds to a single

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<sup>32</sup> Scrivens and Smith, *The Travelling Cinematograph Show*, pp. 160-1.

<sup>33</sup> Vanessa Toulmin, *Pleasurelands* (Hastings: National Fairground Archive / The Projection Box, 2003), p. 62.

private lessee, who would then collect rents and determine pitches for all the attractions. Since these were assigned in advance, it became more important to have a pre-arranged plan. The need for pre-determined spatial arrangements in the grounds also reflected a change of emphasis brought about by the development of steam-powered rides. The swings and roundabouts moved from the sidelines to the centre of the fairground, and, being expensive machines, their owners could not risk getting an unsuitable location or too much opposition when they arrived at the fair.<sup>34</sup> But the spatial reordering of the fairgrounds, and the proliferation of private business and holiday carnivals, also reflect a change in their social context.

Throughout the nineteenth century, as Trevor Griffiths has shown, the leisure aspect of fairs had surpassed their functional value as an opportunity for the hiring of farm hands and the trading of goods.<sup>35</sup> Leisure time and disposable income were on the increase amongst industrial populations, creating new opportunities for the so-called 'amusement caterers', who were no longer obliged to stick to the traditional calendar of fairs. The permanent or semi-permanent carnival sites that opened around the turn of the century in Glasgow's Vinegarhill and Portobello links in Edinburgh were devoted exclusively to amusement.<sup>36</sup> The expansion of private

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<sup>34</sup> Toulmin, *Pleasurelands*, pp. 9-10. Johnnie Swallow, *Round-a-Bout Scotland* (Largs: 1989), p. 52.

<sup>35</sup> Trevor Griffiths, 'Work, Leisure and Time in the Nineteenth Century', in *A History of Everyday Life in Scotland, 1800 to 1900*, ed. by Trevor Griffiths and Graeme Morton (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 170-195 (p. 181). Bakker, *Entertainment Industrialised*, pp. 72-85.

<sup>36</sup> George Green's Old Barracks Carnival in Glasgow was contiguous to the Vinegarhill fields where several fairground families had long had their winter quarters. During the summer of 1897, a penny would grant admission to the grounds including an outdoor circus, several bands, and variety entertainment on the main stage, besides rides and sideshows owned by other showmen who leased their space from Green at so much per foot (*The Glasgow Weekly Programme* No. 28, 26 July 1897). In 1906, the ground had been divided, with a free-admission top section and a lower gated section. Lease charges were three shillings per foot on the top ground and 7s 6d on the bottom ground. *The World's Fair*, 23 June 1906; 'The Showman World', *The Era*, 25 March 1899 [consulted at 19<sup>th</sup> Century British Library Newspapers <<http://find.galegroup.com/bncn/>> (2 September 2010)]

grounds encouraged some showpeople to develop a more managerial side, without giving up touring. One of the most important in Scotland was John Wilmot, who was a highly respected figure in the trade and managed the indoor Christmas carnival at Edinburgh Waverley market for the music-hall magnate, H.E. Moss, as well as running a series of other fairs.<sup>37</sup>

Bridging the gap between theatrical seasons, the semi-permanent carnivals responded to a steadier demand for entertainment, one that would eventually marginalise the fairground as an exhibition site. In the shift towards regularisation, the fairground business model had a limited role, because, as Vanessa Toulmin has argued, fairground shows ‘did not create the everyday audience that would be required’.<sup>38</sup> In a non-teleological view of the emergence of cinema, the importance of fairground exhibition should not be measured by its direct influence on the institutional model. Instead, as Toulmin suggests in the article cited above, its importance may reside in the fairground’s connection with a more popular audience which was excluded from other sites of entertainment. This strict class division of early exhibition is difficult to maintain, in particular for non-metropolitan contexts. However, it becomes a central factor to understand the shift towards regularisation. As Griffiths argues, new forms of production and employment emphasized clock-driven regularity at work, but were also connected to ‘a deliberate project of cultural and political reform’ which sought to transform the use of time outside working

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<sup>37</sup> John Wilmot, part of a large fairground family and linked by marriage to another (he married Martha McIndoe), had several steam-powered roundabouts, and was said to have pioneered the use of electricity for mechanical rides. He died in 1911. Swallow, *Round-a-bout Scotland*, p. 54; McNeill, Carol. *Kirkcaldy Links Market*. (Fife: Fife Council, Community Services, 2004), p.71.

<sup>38</sup> Vanessa Toulmin, “‘Within the Reach of All’: Travelling Cinematograph Shows in British Fairgrounds 1896-1914’, in *KINtop Schriften 10. Travelling Cinema in Europe*, ed. by Martin Loiperdinger, pp. 18-33 (p. 31).

hours too.<sup>39</sup> The punters at the fairground, likely to take a day off work in the middle of the week for a local holiday, did not fit in this picture. The rebalancing of cinema towards permanent venues and steady forms of supply was thus an overdetermined process, which dovetailed with broader social preoccupations such as the notion of ‘rational’ entertainment and the rise of the temperance movement. This was expressed most clearly in the other main strand of early exhibition which I will consider, namely public hall shows.

### 3.2. Public hall shows

When I travelled with Mr William Walker’s Company, the country towns did not have the convenient and commodious halls they boast now-a-days, and many a time and oft we had to fit up a tent (begged, borrowed, or stolen!) or commandeer a barn in which to give our “show”. Even on occasions we improvised a stage in a fish shed, in which the fishermen and women would stand for two hours and more without a murmur.<sup>40</sup>

As the celebrated fiddle player James Scott Skinner recalled, speaking about the late nineteenth century before moving pictures, there was a history of winter entertainments taking place in any enclosed space of sufficient capacity. During the second half of that century many Scottish towns built new halls with the specific

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<sup>39</sup> Griffiths, ‘Work, Leisure and Time in the Nineteenth Century’, in *A History of Everyday Life in Scotland, 1800 to 1900*, Griffiths and Morton, pp. 170-195 (171).

<sup>40</sup> James Scott Skinner, *My Life and Adventures* (Aberdeen: City of Aberdeen, Arts and Recreation Division in association with Wallace Music, 1994), p. 53.

purpose of serving as meeting places. The origin of these buildings varied; some were private investments, some belonged to the Parish or Burgh council, and others were erected by a temperance or friendly society such as the Good Templars, as a source of income as well as a meeting place. In rural areas, the halls were governed by committee instead of managed by a single entrepreneur or lessee. This collective control is an important difference between public halls and music halls, making the former closer to the kind of small-town American opera houses described by Robert Allen, rather than to more commercial venues such as the Melodeon Hall in Lexington, Kentucky, described by Greg Waller.<sup>41</sup> The Scottish examples I will refer to show that, while these halls aimed to be sustainable and to yield some profit, the committees tended to foster a strong community-service ethos. The types of activities that took place in them depended to a great extent on the criteria of the governing board; some were wary of purely recreational events such as dances, whereas others were more liberal or profit-oriented. When travelling film exhibitors approached the managers of these venues in order to organise a show, they had to negotiate such local attitudes and expectations.

The minute books and plans of many of these halls are kept in local and regional archives all over Scotland. One example will serve to illustrate the context in which the first traveling cinema shows were received in smaller towns. The accounts of the Uphall Public Hall are kept at the West Lothian Archives, on the outskirts of Livingston, halfway between Glasgow and Edinburgh. The village of Uphall was not very far from this location, and it was at the heart of the shale

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<sup>41</sup> Allen, 'Relocating American Film History', pp. 68-69. Gregory A. Waller, 'Introducing the "Marvellous Invention" to the Provinces: Film Exhibition in Lexington, Kentucky, 1896-1897', *Film History* 3.3 (1989), pp. 223-234.

mining district which supplied the paraffin oil industry. Following the establishment of Young's paraffin works, the population tripled in the twenty years to 1891, reaching 922.<sup>42</sup> This industrial workforce was, as so often, the target for a series of organizations, most of them aligned with a self-improving ethos (although there was also a football club). The hall, a stone building dating from 1875, had been built primarily to house the Sunday school, but it was used for all other social functions, from weddings to political meetings. In 1902, the Workmen's Union had monthly meetings; the Rechabites and the Shepherds had temperance concerts; there were bazaars, flower shows, and weekly dances during the summer.

This diversity of uses, together with the governance by committee, helped to protect public halls from moral suspicion, and hence created a reception context for cinema that was arguably far removed from metropolitan concerns over the immorality of popular entertainment. The constitution of the Dunrossness Temperance Hall in Shetland, for instance, stipulated that 'in no case shall the Hall be available for purposes of a disreputable nature, nor shall the Hall be available for propagating sectarianism'; this gave grounds for their rejection of a Salvation Army meeting in 1908.<sup>43</sup> For a showman, falling out of favour with the hall committees could mean being shut out of the public hall circuit altogether, as well as losing private contracts. Although the character of the programmes varied greatly, and objections were sometimes raised, in general the prudence exercised by Scottish exhibitors in their choice of subject allowed their cinematograph shows to reach

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<sup>42</sup> Francis H. Groome, 'Uphall', *Ordnance Gazetteer of Scotland: A survey of Scottish topography, statistical, biographical and historical*, (Edinburgh: Mackenzie, 1896) . Facsimile copy at <http://www.gazetteerofscotland.org.uk/> [accessed 17 September 2010]

<sup>43</sup> *The Story of the Dunrossness Central Public Hall, 1905-1960* (Dunrossness: Committee of the Dunrossness Central Public Hall, 2002), pp. 14, 19.

conservative rural areas without the controversy that surrounded cinema in some urban contexts. By staking so much on their reputations, exhibitors in this guise served as mediators, assuaging potential anxieties about the new medium, as Joe Kember has argued.<sup>44</sup> The spaces where their shows took place played an important part in legitimising moving picture entertainment.

Paul Maloney has argued that the popular concerts organized by religious, improving, and municipal societies in Glasgow's halls broadened the audience for variety entertainment in the city by setting it in 'a secure, publicly regulated environment' with 'the unmistakable imprimatur of respectability'.<sup>45</sup> This contrasted with the more disreputable associations evoked by music halls. The village hall was an inclusive space, at least symbolically, since tickets were not cheap (usually starting from six pence - around half a day's wages for a rural labourer). The permanence of these stark stone buildings contributed to the sense of seamless continuity from legitimised pre-cinematic practices, through travelling film shows, to the transformation of the hall into a picture palace.

In contrast to the decentralised interactions made possible by the fairground network, Scottish public hall showmen worked out of regional centres, and they seem to have had relatively little contact with each other. While the fairground round operated as a flexible network, with personal contacts acting on top of traditional constraints, itinerant exhibition in hired venues showed a more sparse, disconnected operation on smaller scales. Public hall exhibition worked within three

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<sup>44</sup> Joe Kember, *Marketing Modernity* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2009), pp. 44-83.

<sup>45</sup> Maloney, *Scotland and the Music Hall*, pp. 7, 192.

patterns of travelling with corresponding business models, which could however be implemented at different times by the same company. These were:

- a. *The lantern lecturer model.* Single engagements – either at showman’s financial risk or for a set fee. Operator, machines and films went back to company headquarters immediately. The show could be a complete programme including musical acts, a stand-alone film programme, or an addition to a bill outside the showman’s control.
- b. *The concert party model.* A company was assembled temporarily to tour in a region for a few months, with live performers and films. The owner of the cinema equipment could be the manager of the company, or the cinematograph could have been hired as a variety turn.
- c. *Longer runs in large urban halls* hired by the exhibitor. This was typical of larger, nation-wide organizations, adopting what Richard Brown has called the ‘hunter-gatherer’ model – staying in one place for as long as it was profitable.<sup>46</sup>

Based on existing cultural series, these patterns of itinerancy were able to adjust to an irregular film supply by exploiting each title intensively. The first two types of show did this by visiting many different places, and the latter by using large auditoria and a broad, cross-class appeal. These diverging strategies imposed their own demands on emerging distribution practices. The tensions between urban

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<sup>46</sup> Richard Brown, ‘New Century Pictures: Regional Enterprise in Early British Film Exhibition’, in *The Lost World of Michell and Kenyon*, ed. by Toulmin, Russell, and Popple, pp. 69-82 (pp. 70-71).



and peripheral locations, and between cinema as an everyday form of commercial leisure or as a distinct event, played out as business decisions in the years leading up to the widespread establishment of permanent cinemas in Scotland.

### **3.2.1. Lantern lecturing**

Shows based on the combination of projected images and live elocution had a very long history, but by the late nineteenth century several institutionalised practices had evolved around those two basic elements. They were highly diversified in content and showmanship, but also in their economic operation. There was a large non-commercial sector connected with the Temperance movement and self-improvement societies.<sup>47</sup> The magic lantern also appealed to wealthy amateurs, magicians, and journalists, amongst other groups.<sup>48</sup>

I will focus on the commercial sector, and in particular on two types of exhibition in public halls: on-demand presentations and stand-alone shows organised by the cinematograph owner. On-demand lantern shows were often offered by opticians, photographers, and apparatus dealers such as J. Lizars or Fraser and Elrick, who did not depend on a regular revenue stream from exhibition. They advertised their lantern services in the newspapers and directories, alongside their other trades, and waited to be hired by a wide range of clients, from wealthy

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<sup>47</sup> Elspeth King, *Scotland Sober and Free* (Glasgow: Glasgow Museums and Art Galleries, 1979), pp. 28-29. See also Alan Burton, "'To Gain the Whole World and Lose our Soul': Visual Spectacle and the Politics of Working-Class Consumption before 1914', in *Visual Delights*, ed. by Popple and Toulmin, pp. 25-37.

<sup>48</sup> Deac Rossell, 'Double Think: The Cinema and Magic Lantern Culture', in *Celebrating 1895: the Centenary of Cinema*, ed. by John Fullerton (Sydney: John Libbey, 1998), pp. 27-36 (p. 29).

individuals to Sunday schools and friendly societies.<sup>49</sup> They charged a flat rate and did not intervene in hiring the venue or engaging supplementary entertainments. These were therefore low-risk ventures with irregular schedules. The same firms often offered lanterns and slides for hire at so much per night; their whole operation was based in the notion of a one-off event. Longer engagements and repeat visits were not altogether uncommon, but it is still the case that the equipment was not installed permanently. Lanternists travelled to the place of their engagement and back immediately, their expenses often paid by the hirers.

Perhaps the most celebrated of early Scottish exhibitors was a bookseller-turned-lanternist from Aberdeen, William Walker. By the time he acquired a Wrench cinematograph projector, in September 1896, he claimed to have ten thousand lantern slides which he offered on hire to professionals and amateurs at sixpence per dozen per night. He also had several skilled lanternists who could provide a complete show on request, for private parties, parish concerts, and school events.<sup>50</sup> The tone and appeal of these lantern shows is clear in his 1893 advertising copy, addressing

[m]anagers of mutual improvement societies, of  
charitable and benevolent institutions, of soirees,  
school treats, or the like, who wish to provide an

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<sup>49</sup> The 1900 Post Office directory for Glasgow listed seven magic lantern specialists, of which at least three (W. W. Scott, W. A. C. Smith and John Trotter) could also provide cinematograph entertainments. Edinburgh-based cinematograph operators announcing before 1905 included Craig Lumsden, Fraser and Elrick, James Buncle, Macgregor Henderson and T. J. West (of whom more below). Glasgow, Mitchell Library, Glasgow City Archives.

<sup>50</sup> Thomson, *Silver Screen in the Silver City*, p. 7.

evening entertainment at once cheap, interesting and  
instructive or amusing[.]<sup>51</sup>

This mix of entertainment and instruction, already present in lantern shows, was crucial to ensure the acceptance of moving pictures in the controlled spaces of rural public halls. While the films themselves might be the same being shown in the fairgrounds, the reception context created around them was completely different, and it may explain why moving pictures did not encounter too much opposition even in rather conservative Scottish communities. Walker's shows usually included his own local films, privileging the attractions of recognition over those of shock and novelty. Furthermore, these events were presided over by some respected local gentleman, often the minister but also sometimes the school headmaster, bank manager or postmaster, and included local amateur performers. This example from New Pitsligo, a town of under 2,000 people, is representative of the mix of local talent, lantern views, lecturing, phonograph, local and national films that comprised these shows. **[Figure 2]**

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<sup>51</sup> 'Messrs Walker & Company's Christmas display', *Aberdeen Weekly Journal*, 14 December 1893 [consulted at *19<sup>th</sup> Century British Library Newspapers* <<http://find.galegroup.com/bncn/>> (19 August 2010)]

FRASER, AND SMITH.  
**THE CINEMATOGRAPH AND PHONOGRAPH.**  
 Messrs. Walker & Co., Bridge Street, Aberdeen, gave two exhibitions of the cinematograph and phonograph on Wednesday afternoon and evening in the Public Hall, under the auspices of the Public Library Committee. Dr Traill presided, and spoke of the benefits derived from the library, and hence the reason of getting up this entertainment for providing funds for new books. The hall was crowded. The cinematograph exhibition was greatly enjoyed, especially the views of the Diamond Jubilee celebration and Lord Provost Mearns's garden party. Mr Beveridge, as lecturer, gave a very interesting description of Nansen's "Farthest North," which was illustrated by some splendid photographs and charts. The phonograph, being new to this quarter, was greatly appreciated. This remarkable instrument repeating the chairman's opening remarks. Songs were contributed by Miss Blake and Mr Brown; while Miss I. Sinclair (pianoforte) and J. B. Sinclair (violin) played appropriate selections during the evening.

Figure 2: Review of Walker & Co's exhibition in New Pitsligo

Source: *Aberdeen Weekly Journal*, 22 December 1897

19<sup>th</sup> Century British Library Newspapers <<http://find.galegroup.com/bncn/>> [accessed 19 August 2010]

Working, as in the above show, 'under the auspices of the Public Library Committee', William Walker's career as a bookseller was not wholly unconnected to his involvement with moving pictures. In fact, selling books and giving lantern entertainments were economic activities that could feed into each other. As the advertisement that ran on the *Aberdeen Journal* shows, there was a market for wholesome but popular shows that could be used to raise funds. One of the more common civic drives of the time was the endowment of free libraries, which were being built with money gifted by Andrew Carnegie, the Scots-born millionaire founder of the Carnegie Steel Company in Pittsburgh. Carnegie insisted that his libraries should be places for improvement, not entertainment; in places like

Dunrossness, the implicit tension between the two models led to protracted discussions over the distribution and partitioning of the floor area.<sup>52</sup> If the project for a town's library met Carnegie's strict standards, he would send the money to start building, but the committee had to finance their own book acquisitions. As a bookseller, then, Walker was in for a double gain when he offered fund-raising shows. Its educational overtones meant that library committees might look to 'Walker & Company's Unique Cinematograph Exhibition' as an appropriate means to raise funds, which could then be invested in books - bought from Walker, of course. **[Figure 3]** Walker and Co.'s reputation was cemented by its Royal approval, as in 1898 they had been called to Balmoral to project films of the Braemar gathering for Queen Victoria, having provided lantern entertainments to the monarchical visitors in previous years.<sup>53</sup> In this market, such a seal of respectability was an important asset.

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<sup>52</sup> *The Story of the Dunrossness Central Public Hall, 1905-1960*, p. 7; see also Leslie Nobbs, *Corstorphine Public Hall Movement, 1889* (Edinburgh: Leslie Nobbs, 2002), pp. 8-9.

<sup>53</sup> In the holiday season Walker & Co were frequently called to give private shows at country estates for the workers and tenants, within a tradition of paternalistic benevolence from the landowners. For instance, at Durriss House, between Aberdeen and Banchory, Walker's Cinematograph was part of a programme of entertainments lasting ten hours, which also included singing, sketches, a lottery, gifts for the children and dancing for the adults. 'Gala day at Durriss House', *Aberdeen Journal*, 23 December 1896 [consulted at *19<sup>th</sup> Century British Library Newspapers* <<http://find.galegroup.com/bncn/>> (29 June 2012)]

**FREE LIBRARIES.**  
**HOW TO RAISE AND AUGMENT THEM.**

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COMMITTEES AND MANAGERS WILL FIND  
**WALKER & COMPANY'S UNIQUE**  
**CINEMATOGRAPH EXHIBITION**  
 The best Money-Raising Entertainment in existence.  
 Royal Pictures, Aberdeen and Local Scenes, London and  
 Aberdeen Diamond Jubilee Celebrations, Greco-Turkish  
 War, London Fire Brigade, Gordon Highlanders, Foot-  
 ball Match, &c., &c.

**NEW ELECTRO-DRAMA LECTURETTES — "WITH**  
**NANSEN IN POLAR SEAS."**  
 This is a unique Lecturette, and contains many  
 specially painted pictures. The interest in this fascinat-  
 ing subject is intensified by recent events; also,  
**THE RECORD REIGN OF HER MAJESTY QUEEN VICTORIA.**

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Library Books for private and public, at lowest prices  
 —many at half-price. Second-Hand Books in great  
 abundance. Boxes of Books sent on approbation.

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**WALKER & COMPANY**  
 BOOKSELLERS AND LANTERN OPTICIANS  
 (Under Royal Patronage),  
 19 BRIDGE STREET, ABERDEEN.

Figure 3: Advert for Walker & Co's cinematograph exhibition service

Source: *Aberdeen Weekly Journal*, 23 September 1897

19<sup>th</sup> Century British Library Newspapers <<http://find.galegroup.com/bncn/>>

[accessed 19 August 2010]

In this kind of low-risk arrangement, the exhibitor did not need to arrange hall bookings or bill-posting, and would not sustain any losses if the event turned out to be a failure; however, he was not paid more than the flat rate either if it was successful. Walker & Co combined these on-request appearances with their own shows, for which they engaged musicians and elocutionists. These shows were run as single engagements in small towns, but increasingly as longer stays in Aberdeen, Dundee and other larger settlements, sliding into the third mode of itinerant exhibition. The relatively low rents charged by provincial public halls and the network of contacts established within previous trades such as Walker's book

business allowed the cinematograph to reach even surprisingly small villages and remote locations.

### 3.2.2. Concert parties

A more risky venture, but one also firmly set within existing patterns, saw the integration of the cinematograph into touring concert parties. Concert parties had long been an important part in the life of rural communities. A typical show included vocal and instrumental music, artistic dancing, and one or two humorists. In addition, before cinematography, lantern slides were used at the start of the show.<sup>54</sup> Consistent with magic lantern practice as discussed by Deac Rossell, moving pictures were easily added to the concert format. The importance of the cinematograph within the show surpassed that of lantern slides, and thus owners of film equipment like Walker and his main competitor, Robert Calder, started organising their own tours.<sup>55</sup> Other managers of concert parties who were not film exhibitors themselves had to hire a machine and operator at a flat rate through the usual channels to find entertainers, i.e. classified ads or variety agents. Tours lasted from three to thirteen weeks approximately, and the venues tended to be small rural halls such as the Uphall site mentioned above.

One company that planned to visit Uphall was Alexander Mathieson's in 1903, as part of a three-week tour of Linlithgowshire and Lanarkshire. This is the best documented example of this type of arrangement in Scotland, due to a Court of Session case brought by Mathieson against J. F. Calverto, a variety agent in

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<sup>54</sup> 'It was the custom to open the show with a short pictorial entertainment, consisting of a few 'still' lantern slides, generally of an educative character' Skinner, *My Life and Adventures*, pp. 53-54.

<sup>55</sup> Calder toured in Aberdeenshire, but also as far afield as Kirkwall, Lerwick, Scalloway and Stromness. Skinner, *My Life and Adventures*, p. 58.

Glasgow who had provided a cinematograph apparatus that did not work.<sup>56</sup> The correspondence submitted for the legal process, which has already been studied by Paul Maloney and Trevor Griffiths, shows the long and complex preparation involved, with Mathieson contacting hall managers for terms and dates, and then local printers and billposters in each town.<sup>57</sup> Before the start of the tour a considerable sum had already been paid out for a rent deposit and advertising – almost sixty-four pounds, according to the damages requested in Court. Mathieson had also engaged an award-winning dancer, Jeannie Hendry, as well as a contralto singer, a highland dancer and a humourist, whose wages and travel expenses needed to be paid.

The risk that the manager of a concert party incurred was thus considerable. For ambitious exhibitors, however, these tours were a good opportunity to identify receptive audiences and make contact with the managers of the halls. With time, longer-term relationships could be built, such as when concert parties were stationed at seaside resorts for the season.<sup>58</sup> But with their limited stock of films, touring companies depended on a constant change of audience. Their business model was built on the assumption that people did not go to a film show on a regular basis. Presented mainly to a rural audience that had few other opportunities to see films, the programme did not need to be absolutely up-to-date. Concert parties operated mostly outside the fairground season, and did not face the same

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<sup>56</sup> Alexander Mathieson, letter books, production in process against JF Calverto. Edinburgh, National Archives of Scotland, CS96/1482.

<sup>57</sup> Maloney, *Scotland and the Music Hall*, pp. 107-8, Griffiths, *The Cinema and Cinemagoing in Scotland*, Chapter 2.

<sup>58</sup> Frank Bruce, *Scottish Showbusiness: Music Hall, Variety and Pantomime* (Edinburgh: NMS Publishing Ltd, 2000), pp. 51-59.



competitive pressures.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, they constituted a way to extract even more revenue from films that had been exhibited to urban audiences, and thus enabled exhibitors to slowly build up their stock through catalogue sales, second-hand dealers or local production.

The availability of appropriate venues, the penetration of the railway network, and the discourses of respectability inherited from previous cultural forms, created the conditions for the success of touring film shows within a particular centre-periphery dynamic in Scotland. They constitute a parallel history that ran alongside fairground exhibition, but that addressed the audience differently, with a discourse that was closer to that of rational recreation than to the carnivalesque aesthetic, and that was key to the acceptance of the modern medium in small-town contexts. As Åsa Jernudd has written about the Swedish case, film screenings in church halls, temperance lodges and clubs created the 'spaces of a provincial modernity' that embraced cooperation between commercial entertainment and the civic society.<sup>60</sup> Like the fairgrounds, however, the itinerancy of these shows, dictated by the need to amortise the expenditure on films by finding new publics, made them inadequate for the task of building a regular mass audience. Just as the establishment of permanent carnival sites reflected a change in the patterns of the fairground trade to cater for expanding urban populations, there was also an increasingly static strand in public hall shows. During the first few years of the twentieth century, a different exhibition practice emerged in the cities: twice-nightly shows, around two hours long and featuring moving pictures as the main attraction,

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<sup>59</sup> Brown and Anthony, *A Victorian Film Enterprise*, p. 21.

<sup>60</sup> Åsa Jernudd, 'Spaces of Early Film Exhibition in Sweden 1897-1911', in *Cinema, Audiences and Modernity*, ed. by Biltereyst, Maltby, and Meers, pp. 19-34 (pp. 30,25).

in large, well-appointed public halls with relatively high entrance prices, and staying put for weeks or even months. Although the exhibitors taking on these longer leases were the same people who toured the small towns, their slowed-down itinerancy brought a whole new set of conditions and challenges that can be seen to co-evolve with new forms of film supply and production.

### **3.2.3. Stand-alone exhibition in urban halls**

The role of public hall exhibitors in the years leading up to the emergence of the cinema as a specialised space, as well as an institution, is only starting to receive the attention it seems to merit. As Jon Burrows argues, recognising the influence of Edwardian public hall exhibition demands a substantial revision of established narratives in early cinema history, in terms of the timing and characteristics of the ‘second birth’ of cinema, but also of the relationships between provincial and metropolitan practices.<sup>61</sup> In part because of its aspirational middle-class appeal, founded on discourses of uplift and instruction, public hall shows have been seen as a dead end. Richard Brown has described them as

an advanced form of early cinema which was  
incapable of further development, and whose basic  
economies were antipathic to later investors and  
unsuitable for incorporation into the pattern of the  
‘industrialisation’ of film exhibition considered as a  
marketing process.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Jon Burrows, ‘West is Best!; or, what we can learn from Bournemouth’, *Early Popular Visual Culture* 8.4 (2010), 351-362 (pp. 351-2).

<sup>62</sup> Brown, ‘New Century Pictures’, p. 69.

While public hall exhibition was not entirely compatible with the notion of cinema as mass commercial entertainment, it represented an opposing vector that was equally important in shaping the emerging institutions. Instead of the gaudy fronts and exuberant merriment of the fairground, the sites where longer-term, stand-alone public hall shows flourished were emblematic spaces of civic improvement. In Glasgow, for instance, the St Andrew's Hall, which hosted the first film seasons by Pringle's and the New Century Co., was an impressive building towards the West End of the city centre, with a classical façade and room for 4,500 people.<sup>63</sup> Built privately, it had been bought by the Glasgow Corporation in 1890, and had become the cornerstone of the municipal entertainment calendar after the establishment of the Saturday evening concerts, which featured prestigious musicians and artists while keeping the very low prices of one and three pence for admission.<sup>64</sup> In the same way in which small-town public hall exhibitors obtained legitimacy by occupying community-controlled, multi-functional spaces, the stand-alone urban shows associated themselves with the values of temperance and civic culture that the buildings represented. The best class of public hall shows embodied an ideal of distinction that predated the supposed gentrification of cinema (see Chapter 7, section 4) by at least a decade, and that was coded as social respectability rather than affluence. Such symbolic associations were maintained through practices of programming and showmanship that functioned as a counterpoint to the more overt commercialism of other parts of the industry, with

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<sup>63</sup> 'St Andrew's Halls at Charing Cross, c 1920', *The Glasgow Story* <http://www.theglasgowstory.com/image.php?inum=TGSD00269> [accessed 4 July 2012]

<sup>64</sup> The story of the acquisition of the Hall by the Corporation, and of the origins of the Saturday evening concerts, has been written about by the Corporation's halls curator at the time: Walter Freer, *My Life and Memories* (Glasgow: Civic Press Limited, 1929), p. 89.

various consequences. Burrows suggests, for instance, that the resistance to ‘cheap’ shows and the prevalence of feature-led programming practices by stand-alone public hall exhibitors can be seen to prefigure exclusive renting in the 1910s.<sup>65</sup>

Interestingly, the case study from which Burrows draws these conclusions, T. J. West’s show in Bournemouth, has its roots north of the border. During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, Thomas James West had been a lantern lecturer touring in Scotland.<sup>66</sup> In the winter holiday season of 1897-8 he was engaged by the Edinburgh-based Modern Marvel Company as a lecturer for their shows, which included moving pictures.<sup>67</sup> Burrows follows West’s trajectory from the autumn season of 1902, when he first ran a four-week-long show at the YMCA hall in Bournemouth. This show became a very prestigious feature in the relatively wealthy town, and West went on to establish hugely successful ventures in Australia and New Zealand. The whole enterprise, however, had started with Modern Marvel’s holiday show at the Queen Street Hall in Edinburgh’s New Town. After the Hogmanay season, West advertised his availability for private cinematograph entertainments. The holiday show stayed for longer each year, and in early 1900, after more than five weeks at the Queen Street Hall, West had to find other local venues in order to exploit his new, very popular Boer war films. After a few more weeks at the Freemasons’ Hall, West presented his show as a variety turn at the Pavilion theatre.<sup>68</sup> When he returned to Queen Street at the end of the year,

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<sup>65</sup> Burrows, ‘West is Best!’, p. 359.

<sup>66</sup> ‘West’s Pictures: Look on this Picture, and on That: or, how I Lost my Whiskers’, *The Bioscope*, 12 December 1912, pp.815-7.

<sup>67</sup> Burrows, ‘West is Best!’, p. 353.

<sup>68</sup> ‘Amusements’, *The Scotsman* 24 April 1900, p.5. At *ProQuest Historical Newspapers* <<http://search.proquest.com/hnpscotsman>> [accessed 17 March 2012]

his show was no longer unique: Walker and Co. had brought their 'cinematograph and electro drama' to a venue just around the corner on George Street, and the Operetta House had A. D. Thomas's show.

At least as far as can be inferred from their advertising, the differences between the shows were not substantial, with all of them showing films from the war in South Africa accompanied by musical and pantomime numbers.<sup>69</sup> How then did West regain the upper hand? Queen Victoria's funeral came conveniently just towards the end of the season, which he then extended through February while his competitors had closed. This flexibility with lease dates, made possible by the extensive provision of suitable venues in Scottish towns, was a great asset for independent public hall exhibitors. At some points, West ran a parallel show in other parts of the city, showing the same films. Thus, a multiple-venue strategy started to emerge, with the films circulating while the show stayed put. By 1902, this was already the case for some larger English companies, such as New Century and Pringle's, which ran several shows simultaneously, including one in either Glasgow or Edinburgh. Indeed, West would go on to control exhibition venues in different continents; however, the 1902 season illustrates a rather more humble approach. Just like other locally-based exhibitors such as Walker in Aberdeen and Peter Feathers in Dundee, T.J. West took the Modern Marvel show on a two-month tour of central and south-east Scotland. The tour took in towns of very different sizes, staying for two or three nights in the larger ones such as Falkirk and

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<sup>69</sup> Classified ads, *The Scotsman*, 31 December 1900, p.1. At *ProQuest Historical Newspapers* <<http://search.proquest.com/hnpscotsman>> [accessed 4 July 2012]

Dalkeith.<sup>70</sup> If the populations of the sixteen towns visited, according to the 1901 census, are added up and divided over the number of shows, the average potential audience for each night was around 5000 people – which was roughly the minimum town size for the establishment of fixed-site cinemas a few years later.<sup>71</sup> All the locations visited were served by the railways, although several were on small branches that have since disappeared. However, the order in which they were visited did not follow a sequential route, suggesting that West might go back to Edinburgh between shows. **[Figure 4]**

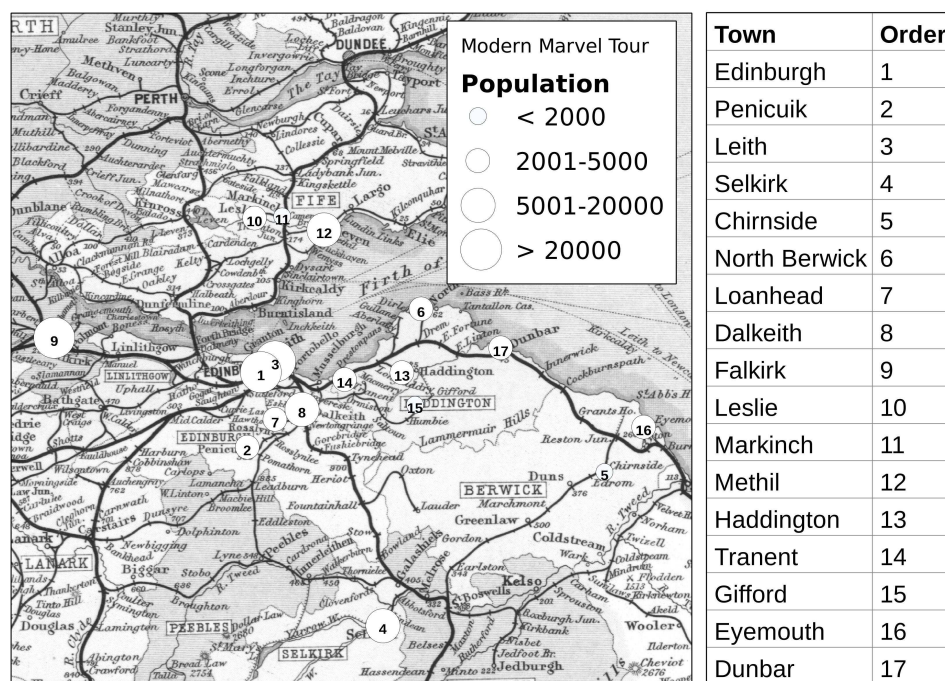
The success ultimately achieved by T. J. West, and the similar strategies attempted by other showmen, show that some form of circulation was indispensable for public hall exhibitors. Fixed exhibition sites demanded more frequent changes of programme, and given the cost of buying films outright this could only pay if the films could be circulated. The way in which this was achieved showed significant differences between two types of company – the larger national firms that could afford to run several shows at the same time, and the smaller regional companies that were better at touring. An interesting relationship was thus established between the prestigious shows in large urban venues, and the touring parties that visited market towns and villages. By providing a secondary outlet for the stock that exhibitors had to buy outright, small-town exhibition allowed urban shows to have more frequent programme changes, and thus to start building a regular audience for

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<sup>70</sup> Programme for show at Town Hall, Falkirk, 5-8 April 1902, Falkirk, Falkirk Council Archives, ref. A510.030.

<sup>71</sup> Although the Bournemouth show was established by the end of 1902, the Modern Marvel continued to appear in Edinburgh during the holidays, under the management of experienced Scottish exhibitors, Thomas Haddow and Mackenzie Henderson. ‘West’s Pictures: Look on this picture, and on that: or, how I lost my whiskers’, *The Bioscope*, 12 December 1912, pp.815-7.

moving pictures. (A similar co-dependence will be observed in the renting market as described in the following chapters.)



**Figure 4: Locations visited during the Spring 1902 tour of the Modern Marvel Company.**

**Note:** Numbers next to the dots represent the sequence in which the tour proceeded.

**Source:** *The Scotsman At ProQuest Historical Newspapers*  
<http://search.proquest.com/hnpscotsman> [accessed 4 March 2012]

**Background map:** John G. Bartholomew (ed.), *Railway and Route map with Counties*, The Edinburgh Geographical Institute, 1912. © National Library of Scotland.

This pattern of gradual re-investment in films is evident in the published reviews of Walker's shows, which show little change during each season but a substantial recasting twice a year, around local films made by Walker and his cameraman, Paul Robello. Factual films still constituted the bulk of the programme for Walker's 1904 Holiday Carnival, held at the Music Hall in Aberdeen, according

to a printed brochure kept at the Scottish Screen Archive.<sup>72</sup> The programme included prestigious variety acts, such as Mathieson's dancer, Jeannie Hendry, as support for a long session of films by Gaumont, Warwick, Paul, and Méliès, as well as Walker's own productions of royal and military events. The brochure also promises that 'any new pictures of interest which may be published during the Carnival' would be added, while a selection of these will be shown during each performance. The variation of the programme using a mix of new and older stock suggests an attempt to encourage repeated attendance, while operating with an irregular and costly film supply. At about two hours, stand-alone programmes in turn-of-the-century public halls were much longer than the usual twenty-to-thirty-minute shows in fairground booths or bioscope turns in variety entertainment. Putting together a programme this long was, therefore, much more expensive.

One of the ways in which public hall exhibitors could freshen up their programmes was through the production or commissioning of local films. Lanternists, opticians and scientific instrument makers, like Walker and Peter Feathers of Dundee, had the necessary technical skills to make their own records of local events. This gave them a competitive edge, and made them less dependent on London-based manufacturers and agents, although they often had to send the negatives away for processing and printing. Since a commercial production sector did not develop in Scotland during these years, local topicals are a particularly important part of the national early film collections. This has been recognised by

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<sup>72</sup> 'Programme of Walker & Company's Royal Cinematograph Holiday Carnival in the Music Hall, Aberdeen, 30<sup>th</sup> Dec 1904-7<sup>th</sup> Jan 1905', Glasgow, Scottish Screen Archive Robello Collection, SSA5/2/7.



archivists and researchers at the Scottish Screen Archive, where around 400 examples of this genre are preserved.<sup>73</sup>

Some of these are part of the Mitchell and Kenyon collection, a group of about 800 films produced by the Blackburn firm, mostly on commission for travelling exhibitors around Britain.<sup>74</sup> The issues raised by this corpus, discovered and made accessible during the past decade, are transforming our understanding of early cinema practice, both in terms of production and of exhibition and showmanship. The remarkable work done on the Mitchell and Kenyon collection by researchers at the National Fairground Archive and the University of Sheffield shows that stand-alone public hall exhibitors were responsible for the commissioning of most of the films in the collection, with a peak of activity in 1901 and 1902. Fairground exhibitors constitute the second largest group, but their activity peaked in 1900.<sup>75</sup> Janet McBain has written about the use of Mitchell and Kenyon films by two Scottish fairground families, the Greens and the Kemps, both of which continued to produce or commission and exhibit local topical films after establishing permanent cinemas.<sup>76</sup>

Mitchell and Kenyon's films for Green's fairground bioscopes were mostly taken in the North of England and focus on parades, fairs and factory gate scenes – the kind of subjects where large crowds could be filmed and then lured into the booths to see themselves. However, with the rise of public hall exhibition there was

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<sup>73</sup> McBain, 'Mitchell and Kenyon's Legacy in Scotland', in *The Lost World of Mitchell & Kenyon*, Toulmin, Popple, and Russell, p. 120.

<sup>74</sup> Vanessa Toulmin, Patrick Russell, and Timothy Neal, 'The Mitchell and Kenyon Collection: Rewriting Film History', *The Moving Image* (2003), 1-18 (p. 12).

<sup>75</sup> Toulmin, 'Cuckoo in the Nest', pp. 69-70.

<sup>76</sup> McBain, 'Mitchell and Kenyon's Legacy in Scotland', pp. 113-121.

a significant change of emphasis, away from the specific thrill of self-recognition and towards more objective attractions such as sports events and tram rides. The pleasure in recognising one's own surroundings, or seeing municipal worthies, was still predicated on the experience of locality, but it deployed a different mode of address from that of factory gate films. By focusing on externally-defined, extraordinary events, these new films reaffirmed a hierarchy of experience where the everyday (e.g. the end of a regular work shift) was less worthy of representation than the leisure pursuits of the middle classes, transformed into visual spectacle. This repackaging and alienation of the local film, although only incipient during these years, must be seen in the context of the attempts by exhibitors to attract a relatively diverse, but also regular, audience to their large venues.

The interdependence between urban public hall exhibition and touring introduced further considerations that affected the production of local films. From the point of view of distribution, local films seem to have little importance, since they were not marketed. As Stephen Bottomore has argued, they 'offer a certain challenge to the conventional economic models of the film industry', because they do not depend on a mass, national or international audience.<sup>77</sup> The narrow circulation of local films, and the blurring of boundaries between producer, distributor and exhibitor that they imply, make them a prime example of a non-institutional practice. The regional patterns of exhibition of local films reveal the small-scale spatial hierarchies that governed assumptions about the kinds of films that would attract peripheral audiences. Walker's show, for instance, gave

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<sup>77</sup> Stephen Bottomore, 'From the Factory Gate to the "Home Talent" Drama: An International Overview of Local Films in the Silent Era', in *The Lost World of Mitchell and Kenyon*, ed. by Toulmin, Russell, and Popple, pp. 33-48 (p. 43).

prominence to royal visits to Balmoral and parades of Highland regiments, which had the double attraction of imperial spectacle and potential sightings of local recruits and locations. T. J. West's Modern Marvel show, in its 1902 season, had a very different strategy: it included films made in different locations near some of the towns included in the spring tour, which had apparently been made towards the end of the Edinburgh run. Thus, films of a lifeboat launch in Dunbar, and of ice skating in Loch Leven, Fife, combined some general attraction value for Edinburgh audiences with the appeal of the local for those familiar with the locations. The complementary nature of urban and small-town exhibition, and the expected patterns of circulation, was then a determinant factor for the subject matter of the films made or commissioned by this particular company.

Discussing the absence of factory gate films in the programmes of Bradford-based New Century Pictures, Richard Brown has argued that this corresponded with the company's attempt to attract a middle-class audience.<sup>78</sup> At six pence at its lowest, admission to public hall shows was initially much more expensive than either the fairground or the music hall. The local films used by public hall exhibitors from 1902 on sought a middle ground of general interest, instead of exploiting the specifically popular appeal of films depicting working-class crowds. Repeated patronage became a central part of the business model, and to this effect prices were eventually dropped in an effort to attract the very young. To this extent, as Vanessa Toulmin argues, public hall exhibitors 'provided the model for the

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<sup>78</sup>Richard Brown, 'New Century Pictures', p. 71.

purpose-built cinema', inventing the film-only (or at least film-with-support) show as a distinct form of entertainment.<sup>79</sup>

More pertinently for the present discussion, the long-term stays in urban halls exerted pressure on the economic model that had sustained travelling exhibition up to that point, namely the outright sale of film to showmen. The need for more frequent programme changes or circulation of films gave advantage to those showmen who controlled several projection units, appearing simultaneously in different places, as they could move the films between them. The simultaneous control of multiple venues emerged as an efficient strategy for large, UK-wide companies with enough capital to implement these economies of scale. Scottish exhibitors like Walker, Feathers, and West, on the other hand, rarely had more than one show going at any one time, so their business model depended on a small-town touring circuit to cover the costs of film purchases. These two patterns – circulation between metropolitan centres, and inter-dependence between regional centres and peripheries – would find echoes in later configurations of the Scottish trade.

### **3.3. Music halls**

The role played by film exhibition in music halls during the years before permanent cinemas is an area of substantial disagreement between historians. As Robert Allen has argued, the modular format of American vaudeville (similar but not identical to British music hall) made it a particularly suitable context for the incorporation of the new medium of moving pictures into an existing entertainment practice.<sup>80</sup> It

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<sup>79</sup> Toulmin, 'Cuckoo in the Nest', p. 71.

<sup>80</sup> Robert C Allen, *Vaudeville and Film, 1895-1915: a Study in Media Interaction* (New York: Arno, 1980), p. 65.

provided the infrastructure for the first outings of the cinematograph as a showman's tool rather than a scientific curiosity in the cities. On the other hand, that structure was as rigid as it was commercially successful, constraining exhibition practice so that, as Vanessa Toulmin argues, '[m]usic hall showings in the early 1900s in particular did not advance either the entertainment context or the film program itself.'<sup>81</sup> The 'bioscope turn' as a discrete segment of a music hall programme did not change much before the War. However, the extent of the influence of music-hall practice on early exhibition in Scotland cannot be discounted.

One reason to pay attention to Scottish music hall is its relationship with cine-variety, a mode of film exhibition that was more prominent north of the border and which will be discussed further in the following chapters. Paul Maloney has identified cine-variety as a survival of 'unreconstructed' popular music-hall in Scotland, after its other expressions had been co-opted or gentrified.<sup>82</sup> While some of the showmanship styles and the acts that appeared in popular music hall transferred to cine-variety, I would argue that this was an entirely new format. The patterns of its presence in Scotland after the establishment of permanent cinemas will be discussed in chapters 4 and 6. This section will focus instead on the itinerant nature of bioscope turns in the early years, and in the divisions in the marketplace that can be seen to prefigure similar splits in fixed-site exhibition later.

The presentation of moving pictures in many (perhaps most) music halls in Scotland was organised as a 'complete service', so that in effect each bioscope turn

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<sup>81</sup> Toulmin, 'Cuckoo in the Nest', p. 57.

<sup>82</sup> Maloney, *Scotland and the Music Hall*, pp. 16-7.

acted as an independent travelling exhibitor, going to music halls in different cities with a projector and a stock of films; it was thus akin to the ‘small-time vaudeville’ practice described by Robert Allen in the United States.<sup>83</sup> Since the exhibitor got paid a flat rate and did not have to manage or advertise the show, this was a low-risk approach; Allen has called this approach ‘pre-industrial’ as it did not require the division of labour within the cinema business.<sup>84</sup> It was initially preferred by international, highly capitalised companies that did not have much experience in the entertainment business, such as Lumière, who had used this strategy in 1896, and the Biograph company.<sup>85</sup> Richard Brown and Barry Anthony have provided a thorough examination of Biograph’s activities in Britain, which explores in great detail the business model of this high-end, large-gauge form of exhibition. Having entered into an agreement with the Moss, Stoll and Thornton circuit of music halls in April 1897, the Biograph company made their first appearance outside of London at the Edinburgh Empire Theatre that May.<sup>86</sup>

The Biograph company based their success on the perceived higher visual quality of their larger scope, and ‘a professional and premium “image” far removed from the standards connected with most native peripatetic showmen of the time’.<sup>87</sup> Charging as much as £200 per week, the Biograph only appeared at big halls with higher admission prices, hence its contract with the Moss circuit. With twenty halls

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<sup>83</sup> Allen, *Vaudeville and Film*, pp. 111-3.

<sup>84</sup> Robert C Allen, ‘Vitascope/Cinématographe: Initial Patterns of American Film Industrial Practice’, in *Film Before Griffith*, ed. by John L Fell (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 144-152 (p. 152).

<sup>85</sup> Richard Brown, ‘Marketing the Cinématographe in Britain’, in *Cinema: the Beginnings and the Future*, ed. by Christopher Williams (London: University of Westminster Press, 1996), pp. 63-71.

<sup>86</sup> Brown and Anthony, *A Victorian Film Enterprise*, p. 44.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

in 1900 and thirty-six in 1906, Moss' Empires was a UK-wide operation that epitomised the commercialisation and concentration of music-hall ownership that had taken place in the late nineteenth century.<sup>88</sup> Founded by H.E. Moss, the son of a Greenock theatre manager, Moss' first ventures were in Edinburgh, Leith, and Glasgow.<sup>89</sup> The circuit expanded southwards as far as Birmingham, and then joined its bookings with the Stoll and Thornton circuits. The Victorian reinvention of the music hall as a more controlled and structured form of entertainment (relative to the earlier 'free-and-easy' shows in the back rooms of pubs) depended on higher capital investment and encouraged a concentration of ownership into a few syndicates. While the main music halls in Glasgow and Edinburgh belonged to the Moss circuit, Dundee and Aberdeen were enclaves of the Livermore Brothers, who controlled a circuit reaching as far as Bristol and Plymouth.<sup>90</sup> These kinds of organisations owed their success to the ability to co-ordinate the circulation of music-hall turns both on a national and local scale. They were able to impose longer contracts and exclusivity clauses on star performers, thus capitalising the publicity generated by London West End openings. On a local level, the circuits often had more than one venue in the same town, and the turns could appear at both during the same night, without commanding a double salary.

The circuits' 'national organising infrastructure', as Adrienne Scullion has argued, 'was at the root of the success of the theatre magnates of the music-hall era.'<sup>91</sup> It introduced modern business methods to the provision of live entertainment,

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<sup>88</sup> Bakker, *Entertainment Industrialised*, p. 35.

<sup>89</sup> Bruce, *Scottish Showbusiness*, p. 22.

<sup>90</sup> Maloney, *Scotland and the Music Hall*, p. 70.

<sup>91</sup> Scullion, "'The Cinematograph Still Reigns Supreme at the Skating Palace'", p. 82.

making it ‘highly organised, formalised, nationally integrated and standardised.’<sup>92</sup> It constituted, in effect, an industrialised distribution system for music-hall turns, but one that rewarded oligopolistic tendencies. Independent halls found it very hard to compete with the lavish buildings erected with joint-stock capital, and to book the most popular acts.<sup>93</sup> This consequence of concentration resonates with the debates around film booking in the following decade, when the influence of cinema circuits curtailed access to film supply for independent exhibitors. In a vicious circle, independent showpeople had no option but to programme lesser fare, which continued to drag down their reputation in a highly competitive environment.

As long as there were struggling independent music halls, there were small-time exhibitors, the ‘standard gauge men’ of Bromhead’s reminiscences, who showed films for an average fee of three pounds a week, and sometimes as little as thirty shillings – with a corresponding impact on the technical quality of the show and the freshness of the pictures.<sup>94</sup> Unable to get the long-term contracts and circuit engagements that seemed the holy grail of the theatrical profession, these bioscope operators offered their services through variety agents or classified ads just like any other music-hall act. Each act or their agent negotiated their terms with each music-hall manager. It is hardly possible to find out how these piecemeal negotiations proceeded, since they were conducted informally and in person. Even the precise equipment being used by the majority of music halls that listed a bioscope turn is often not identifiable from newspaper ads.

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<sup>92</sup> Bakker, *Entertainment Industrialised*, p. 14.

<sup>93</sup> Chanan, *The Dream That Kicks*, pp. 158-60.

<sup>94</sup> Bromhead, ‘Reminiscences of the British Film Trade’, p. 9.



The example of the Glasgow Tivoli shows that managers had access to a large pool of suppliers that criss-crossed the country on the railway system.<sup>95</sup> The Tivoli manager, Thomas Colquhoun, remembered that in 1899 he had engaged ‘a man called Del Montel [presumably one of the Monte brothers, who worked for Haydon & Urry] to bring his film of a Spanish bull fight to the Tivoli.’ Later that year, he ‘secured the rights for Glasgow from Mark Raymond, the London agent’ for a brand new Boer war film. Here things get complicated: Raymond was probably Matt, not Mark, and was acting in representation of the Warwick Film Company, who had made the film. However, the advertisement on the *Glasgow Herald* states this film will be shown by the Edison-Thomas Cinematograph.<sup>96</sup> Given that the week before the Edison-Thomas was at Sunderland with a different set of pictures (and the war had barely started yet), this case suggests that new titles could be secured if topicality was important. The confusing nature of the advertising and the arrangements it describes also suggest that the practices of independent music hall exhibitors were more complex and incoherent than those of the main circuits, the fairgrounds, or even the town hall showmen.

In part this complexity is due to the fact that there were more layers of intermediation between the film and the show, since music-hall managers did not, on the whole, buy films outright. Both the large circuits and most independent exhibitors functioned within a model that did not consider films as standalone

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<sup>95</sup> I am indebted to Paul Maloney for mentioning this reference and providing me with his notes, as the original document is unavailable for conservation reasons. ‘My Memories of Glasgow Music Halls’ by T. J. Colquhoun’, in *Thomson’s Weekly News* (The Weekly News), Saturday 9 June 1928, p. 20. Transcribed by Paul Maloney in an email to me dated 23 August 2010.

<sup>96</sup> *Glasgow Herald*, 16 October 1899, [consulted at *19<sup>th</sup> Century British Library Newspapers* <<http://find.galegroup.com/bncn/>> (9 September 2010)] The Edison-Thomas Cinematograph was the trade name of showman Arthur Duncan Thomas.

commodities, paying a flat rate to the bioscope turn as performance. This was only possible, however, because the providers of that service were able to buy films themselves, and offer their packaged show through the market infrastructure of the music hall business, using its agents, professional associations, and travelling routes. While absorbing the cost of renewing the programme, the owners of bioscope turns had the advantage of avoiding financial risk and the trouble of organising a programme and running a venue. This arrangement was not very lucrative for either side, and some music hall managers started dispensing with these services to acquire their own cinematograph equipment and become the first clients of film renters. A good example of this in Scotland is the Britannia Panopticon, still standing to this day on Glasgow's Trongate. Arthur Hubner, who has been credited with giving the first film show in the city, was managing the Britannia in 1897. Hubner had his own cinematograph apparatus, which he used at the Britannia, but also in other Glasgow venues and in neighbouring towns. On Sundays, he went over to the Wellington Palace to screen films such as *The life of Christ* (version unidentifiable) at Martinengo's sacred concerts.<sup>97</sup> His successor as manager of the Britannia Panopticon was A. E. Pickard, a larger-than-life character who ran the venue with great success as a popular cine-variety show, and went on to build a circuit of cinemas.<sup>98</sup> When the Panopticon was registered as a limited company in 1910, one of the shareholders was 'Prince' Bendon, the first Scottish film renter and usual supplier of Pickard's halls.<sup>99</sup> Pickard's case, however, was rather unique. The

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<sup>97</sup> *The Glasgow Programme*, 18 October 1897.

<sup>98</sup> Judith Bowers, *Stan Laurel and Other Stars of the Panopticon* (Edinburgh: Birlinn Limited, 2007), pp. 109-129.

<sup>99</sup> 'Limited companies', *The Bioscope*, 30 June 1910

significance of his early association with a film renter is beguiling, but many other factors – including his outrageous personality and sense of showmanship – may have contributed to his success.

The music hall format offered limited opportunities for the development of cinema as a separate cultural practice, in part because it did not deal with films as standalone commodities. It might seem, therefore, that music hall exhibition was a dead end. However, the organisational structures of the music hall circuits set a precedent for the development of commercial fixed-site exhibition on a large scale. The ‘complete service’ model in music-hall exhibition showed a tendency towards regularity that took on other expressions later on, for instance in the establishment of film services. It also set the template for the division of the market between high-capital halls in national or regional circuits, and small-time independent venues.

### **3.4. Conclusion**

The direct sale of films to exhibitors enabled the new medium to be integrated into diverse showmanship practices, and thus circulated in different ways. Since some of the functions of distribution, including transport and programming, were assumed by the exhibitor rather than the manufacturer or a middleman, the distribution patterns cannot be separated from the movement of the travelling exhibitors, which is in turn closely related to earlier models of entertainment. In the case of fairground travellers, strong connections with the North of England were maintained, constituting the basis for the reciprocal relationships between film rental agencies that were established in the years before World War I. Public hall exhibitors were able to use their reputable tradition to legitimise moving pictures and expand their

market, while the advanced commercial structures of the late-Victorian music hall supported a low-risk form of exhibition.

These synergies between existing cultural series and the emerging practices of early film exhibition had a geographical dimension that is just as significant as the better-known continuities in showmanship styles. This chapter has covered a period when film distribution did not exist as a separate practice, but instead the circulation of films was tied to the itinerancy of exhibitors. Their different patterns of movement were, in turn, adaptations of previous models to the changing marketplace – both catering for the more structured leisure habits of urban populations, and finding ways to recoup the high costs of film purchase. In Scotland, the circuits and networks of film distribution before the establishment of fixed-site cinemas repurposed existing structures, utilising informal links and a great deal of accumulated personal skills to adapt to economic and technological innovation. Although the commercial practices were to undergo momentous transformations in the transition to fixed-site exhibition, as the next chapter discusses, the main structuring tensions of the later trade were already present in itinerant shows. The emergence of regional hubs and of centre/periphery dynamics is visible at this scale, and the programming shows the need to balance predictability and innovation. The longer stays of those public hall shows that were not quite permanent yet represent a watershed moment in the tension between regularity and uniqueness in exhibition practice.

The next step in redefining that balance of forces required the decoupling of film circulation and travelling exhibition, as the next chapter will discuss. The emerging film rental sector eventually supplanted the distribution function of the

fairground routes, creating the chain of supply that sustained permanent cinemas. Since many fairground bioscope owners became cinema proprietors and even film renters, some of their personal connections and touring arrangements were imported into the new trade, so that something of the fairground remained in the spatial patterns and personal relationships that configured cinema culture in the decades to come. However, the delivery of films to fixed locations was a fundamentally different operation. If each stop in a travelling calendar could be considered as a node in a circuit or network, the longer stays necessarily disrupted the whole structure. As the trade grasped the particular characteristics of the film commodity, namely its mechanical reproducibility and portability, the drive to build a predictable mass market around it intensified. That movement is the overarching plotline of the following chapter, which sees new forms of trade emerging to supply a new abundance of film-hungry exhibition sites.

## Chapter 4

### The transformation of exhibition and distribution in Scotland, c. 1907-1915

As long as touring exhibition was the mode of operation, it continued to be – no matter how obscure – a part of traditional show business. Movies became a distinct industry when a fixed-location movie show became the dominant choice.<sup>1</sup>

The patterns and causes of the transition from sporadic to permanent film exhibition, and of the proliferation of dedicated cinema buildings all over Britain between 1907 and 1914, are at the centre of interesting polemics in film historiography. The ‘cinema boom’ phenomenon has been interpreted, on the one hand, as the inexorable triumph of a democratic art, and on the other, as a product of speculative finance in a capitalist bull market. The scale and speed of the expansion process is therefore at the heart of our understanding of the social position of the cinema in the early decades of the twentieth century, and therefore of its relationship to questions of ideology and class. These are complex issues that cannot be answered by the blunt force of evidence alone. As Robert Allen argued so vehemently in his debate with Ben Singer over Manhattan nickelodeons, while new and more precise data

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<sup>1</sup> Calvin Pryluck, ‘The Itinerant Movie Show and the Development of the Film Industry’, in *Hollywood in the Neighborhood*, ed. by Kathryn Fuller-Seeley (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 2008), pp. 37-52 (p. 49).

can provide important correctives to received narratives, evidence does not ‘explain itself’.<sup>2</sup> Changing the frame of enquiry or shifting its focus – from the urban to the rural, for instance – is just as important to generate new knowledge.

The disparate nature of primary sources for this subject and period means that basic factual matters, such as the total number of permanent cinemas in the UK throughout these years, are not settled. Just before the outbreak of war, Frank W. Ogden Smith estimated that Britain had seven thousand film theatres, with a combined capital of around thirteen million pounds.<sup>3</sup> However, only about half as many venues are listed in the 1915 edition of the *Bioscope Annual*, including four hundred in Scotland. This number can be taken as a reference point, but there are reasons to believe that it is not comprehensive, as it leaves out smaller shows whose owners did not have contact with the trade press.

For the earlier years of this period the figures are even less reliable. In his article about London ‘penny gaffs’, Jon Burrows has shown how the licensing and trade figures underestimate or deliberately play down the number of these humble shop-front venues in the capital, leading to the historiographical myth of Britain somehow having skipped the nickelodeon phase.<sup>4</sup> As Burrows himself wrote, however, the prevalence of penny cinemas in late-1900s London cannot be taken as an indicator of broader trends in the rest of the country.<sup>5</sup> Besides, as the previous chapter argued (also following Burrows), the nickelodeon or shop-front show was not the only precedent to fixed-site cinemas. Outside the main cities, the emphasis

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<sup>2</sup> Allen, ‘Manhattan Myopia’, p. 76.

<sup>3</sup> Frank W. Ogden Smith, ‘Picture Theatre Finance’, *The Bioscope*, 4 June 1914, pp. 1008-09.

<sup>4</sup> Burrows, ‘Penny Pleasures’, p. 63.

<sup>5</sup> Burrows, ‘West is Best!’, p. 52.

on the archetypal ‘proletarian’ show, with its associations with the sensory environment of urban modernity, becomes problematic.<sup>6</sup> The expansion of permanent film exhibition in Scotland must be understood in the context of a very uneven geographical distribution of the population, which was concentrated along the central belt (on the axis connecting Glasgow and Edinburgh), the West coast south of the river Clyde, and the East coast from Fife to Inverness. In 1911, Scotland had four cities with a population over 100,000, which correspond to the US Census office’s category of ‘metropolitan’, and over 56 per cent of the population lived in towns of more than 10,000.<sup>7</sup> If that is taken as a yardstick for urbanisation, Scotland lagged considerably behind England, but was ahead of the United States, where more than half the population was considered rural. What is particularly interesting about Scottish urbanisation, however, is the abundance of small towns of between two and ten thousand, which accounted for 21 per cent of the population, a much higher figure than in England. [Table 1] Although forms of industrialization reached deep into the Scottish countryside, these small towns were not the hyper-stimulating metropolises often imagined as the experiential backdrop for the rocketing popularity of cinema.

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<sup>6</sup> Allen, ‘Manhattan Myopia’, p. 96, and by the same author, ‘Decentering Historical Audience Studies: A Modest Proposal’, in *Hollywood in the Neighborhood*, ed. by Fuller-Seeley, pp. 20-33 (pp. 21-22).

<sup>7</sup> All demographic data in this chapter, unless stated otherwise, refer to the 1911 census, available in digital formats from the *Contemporary and Historical Census Collections* section of the History Data Service <<http://chcc.essex.ac.uk/chcc/>> and from the website *A vision of Britain through time* <<http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/>> [both accessed 27 April 2011]



**Table 1: Demographic comparison between US, England and Scotland**

United States, 1910		England, 1911		Scotland, 1911
Total population	91,972,266	Total population	36,075,269	4,759,445
Cities over 100,000	20,302,138 (22%) (50 cities)	Cities over 100,000	13,696,609 (38%) (44 cities)	1,304,925 (27,4%) (4 cities)
Large towns (pop. 25,000-100,000)	8,241,678 (9%)	Principal Town Districts (pop. 30,000-100,000)	6,425,670 (17,8%)	757,667 (15,9%)
Towns (pop. 2,500-25,000)	14,079,587 (15,3%)	Large Town Districts (pop. 10,000-30,000)	5,011,114 (13,9%)	638,891 (13,4%)
		Small Town Districts (pop. 2,000-10,000)	2,898,611 (8%)	999,884 (21%)
		Under 2,000	136,966 (0,4%)	
Rural Districts	49,348,883 (53,6%)	Rural Districts	7,906,299 (21,9%)	947,939 (19,9%)
		Insular Rural Districts		110,139 (2,3%)

**Sources:** J. Patten MacDougall and James C. Dunlop, *Preliminary Report on the twelfth Census of Scotland* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1911) at <<http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/>> [accessed 27 April 2011]; *Thirteenth Census of the United States taken in the year 1910, Volume 1: Population* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913) , at <<http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/decennial/1910.html>> [accessed 5 July 2012]

The expansion of permanent exhibition to small towns was a parallel process to the multiplication of venues within the cities, and equally important. The wholesale transformation of the film trade during these years can only be understood if both facets are taken into account. As this chapter will show, the interdependence between different types of exhibition, featured in the conclusions from the previous chapter, took a new form with the emergence of fixed-site cinemas. The need to optimise the circulation of film prints in order to exploit the particularities of film as a commodity encouraged certain forms of organisation. The cautious and organic nature of the transition in Scotland shows interesting variations from standard historical accounts, and resulted in a very diverse range of exhibition and distribution practices.

#### **4.1. Quantifying the cinema boom in Scotland**

The first stage of expansion did not look much like a ‘boom’. In a rather more sedate manner, public hall exhibitors had been extending the length of their seasons, as described in Chapter 3. The winter season of 1907 did not draw to a close in the next summer, and several companies remained open through the year for the first time. The Operetta House in Edinburgh had already been showing films as a main attraction for nine months a year since 1901, first by the Thomas Edison Animated Photo Co and then by Joe Ellis’s ‘National Pioneer Animated Pictures Co.’, according to advertisements in *The Scotsman*. In Aberdeen, Dove Paterson had had a show in the Gaiety Theatre since October 1906. In Glasgow, the Britannia Panopticon music hall, Moss’s Empire theatre, and Bostock’s Zoo-Hippodrome were amongst the variety venues that included films in their regular programmes,

while long picture seasons had run at Green's carnival site and the St Andrew's Hall in previous years.

The gradual pace of the transition to permanent exhibition suggests that it was an organic process, driven by cautious and experienced exhibitors that only committed to full-time film shows once they were certain that public demand would support them. This situation is at a remove from the high-risk, 'get-rich-quick' image that emerged later in relation to cinema investment. In an influential article, Nicholas Hiley's analysis of company registrations in the UK between 1909 and 1914 arrived at the conclusion that the building of cinemas during those years was fuelled by speculative capital rather than by increased demand.<sup>8</sup> Hiley painted a picture of empty auditoria and falling dividends for the hundreds of limited liability companies established in connection with purpose-built cinema venues, and in doing so it challenged the notion of cinema as a popular art, avidly embraced by the British public.

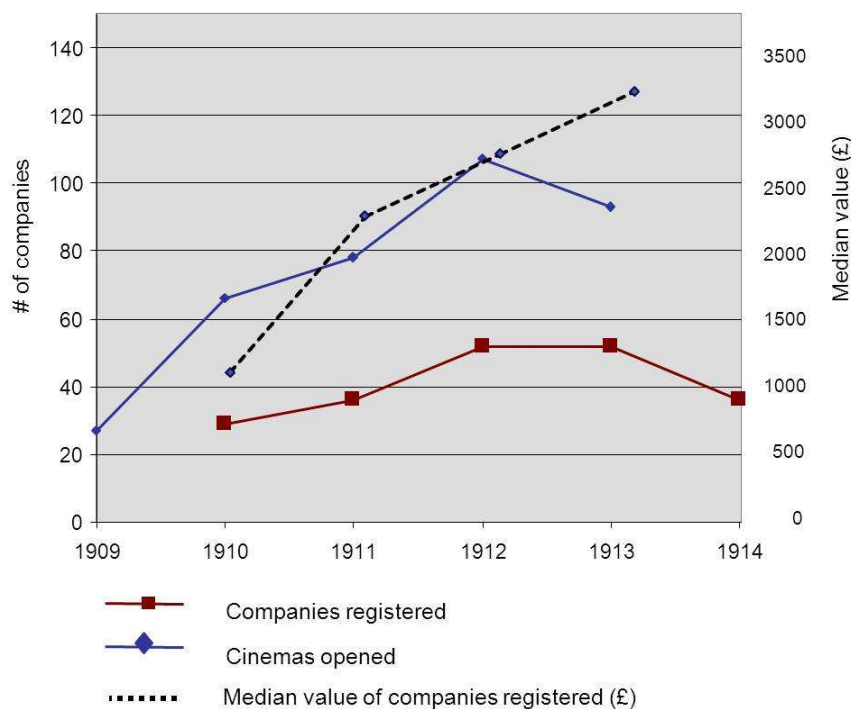
This narrative has been contested recently by Jon Burrows and Richard Brown, who argue that the over-capitalised, risky ventures described by Hiley were exceptional. Instead, they show that the cinema boom was driven by 'small-time businesspersons' who were relatively risk-averse and responsible.<sup>9</sup> Board of Trade records show a large number of small private companies or unincorporated partnerships which conducted the bulk of the trade, especially outside major cities. This description seems to fit the Scottish situation better, according to the annual

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<sup>8</sup> Nicholas Hiley, '“Nothing More than a “Craze””: Cinema Building in Britain from 1909 to 1914', in *Young and Innocent? The Cinema in Britain, 1896-1930*, ed. by Andrew Higson (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002), pp. 111-127 (p. 124).

<sup>9</sup> Jon Burrows and Richard Brown, 'Financing the Edwardian Cinema Boom, 1909-1914', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 30.1 (2010), 1-20 (p. 17).

company registration figures published from *The Scotsman*. In Scotland, the number of joint-stock companies registered during a year with the purpose of either building or ‘carrying on’ a permanent film show peaked in 1913 at 52. Although the data are patchy, the median capital of these private companies was three thousand pounds, which was roughly the cost of erecting a purpose-built cinema. [Figure 5]



**Figure 5: Joint-stock companies and new cinemas in Scotland, 1909-1914**

**Source:** Yearly trade reports on *The Scotsman* at *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*  
<http://search.proquest.com/hnpscotsman> [accessed 25 March 2011]

Trevor Griffiths has conducted a more systematic analysis of Board of Trade records comprising forty-six cinema companies established in Scotland from 1909 to 1914 that offers a different perspective. His analysis of the shareholder lists reveals that most investors and board members were not previously connected with

the entertainment business. The lists were, according to Griffiths, ‘dominated by a professional and commercial middle class attuned to the emergence of new investment opportunities’.<sup>10</sup> In a boom-and-bust economy, with a depressed housing market, investment in cinema ventures was generally a sound option. The willingness of middle-class women to invest in local picture houses, also identified by Griffiths, reflects the social acceptability of cinema in Scottish towns, cemented by a history of optical entertainments within an educational context. Furthermore, the piecemeal nature of the move to purpose-built venues is evidence of a cautious approach which at first tried to minimize sunk costs by adapting existing venues, drawing on the proved success of temporary exhibition in the same spaces.

#### **4.1.1. The gradual transition to permanent venues**

Registering a company can be seen as a result of the stabilisation of an existing situation at least as often as it was a speculative move. Many of the companies were constituted to lease or take over existing venues such as skating rinks and public halls, most often places where a show was already being run. In fact, the largest of the early Scottish companies, the B. B. Pictures Ltd., registered in 1910, produced a brochure with photographs of the halls it controlled and stating:

It will be seen that the policy of the management has been to secure the use of existing halls – test them, if successful, retain them, if not, abandon them.

This policy is intended to continue, as it is believed to be more prudent than to erect buildings, which, if

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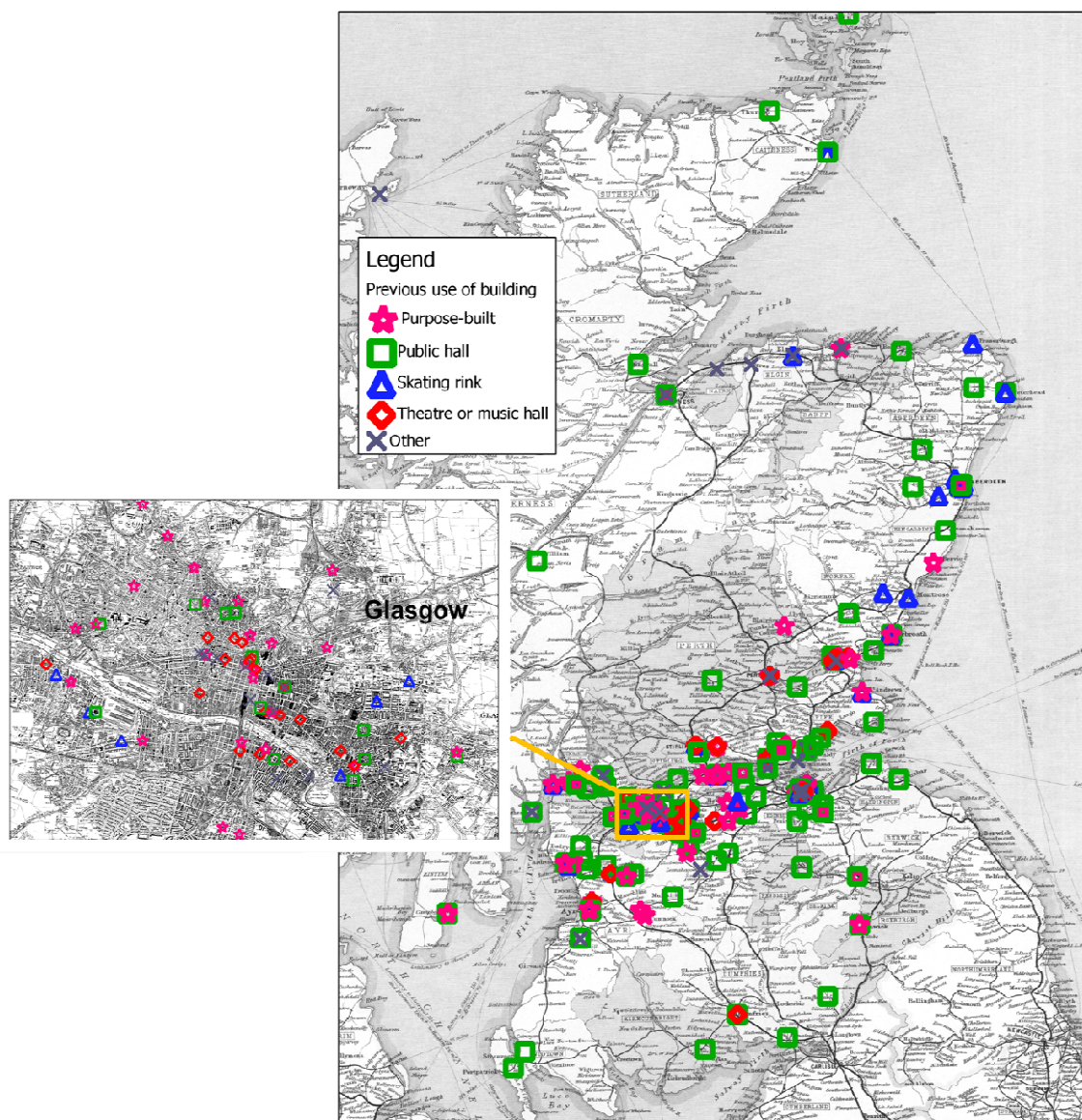
<sup>10</sup> Griffiths, *The Cinema and Cinemagoing in Scotland*, Chapter 1, Section III.

unsuccessful, might become a permanent loss of revenue.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast with the situation in other parts of Britain, in Scotland purpose-built cinemas were only a fraction of exhibition venues before the war. It was unusual for the first cinema in a medium-sized town to be purpose-built. The infrastructure left behind by a half-century of Temperance movements and by the schism and reforming of the Scottish Presbyterian churches provided the first home for moving pictures. In addition to this, the decline in popular interest in roller skating also left a scattering of large, adaptable buildings already associated with commercialised leisure. Companies needed a much smaller capital to install some lights on the façade of the local hall, pavilion or skating rink and re-name it an Electric Theatre. Therefore, focusing on the construction of purpose-built cinemas, as Hiley does, is not an adequate approach to this period in the Scottish case.

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<sup>11</sup> 'The Story of the B.B. Pictures', printed pamphlet. Glasgow, Scottish Screen Archive, SSA5/7/135. With thanks to Dr Peter Walsh for providing me with a scanned copy.



**Figure 6: Previous uses of cinemas open up to 1914**

**Sources:** Scottish Cinemas Database < <http://www.scottishcinemas.org.uk/>>, trade press.

**Background map (general):** John G. Bartholomew (ed.), *Railway and Route map with Counties*, The Edinburgh Geographical Institute, 1912. © National Library of Scotland.

**Glasgow inset:** Ordnance Survey County Series 1:10560, 1910. © Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group Limited (2012). All rights reserved. Supplied by Edina Digimap <http://digimap.edina.ac.uk/>

In Scotland, the first wave of expansion of fixed-site exhibition, from 1909 to 1912, was characterized by the permanent lease of premises already used for entertainment, in particular skating rinks and public halls. Between one quarter and one third of the permanent exhibition venues operating by 1912 were existing halls, with an average capacity over 800 seats. Only around one in every six venues was purpose-built, although substantial alterations might have been carried out. Purpose-built venues tended to be slightly larger than halls, but converted skating rinks surpassed both with average capacity over 1,000 seats. Theatres, variety theatres and music halls, which could switch back and forth between different types of entertainment following popular demand, were substantially larger, but fewer in number.

Although the year with the most new cinema openings before the war was 1912, the building boom only peaked in the following year, when more than forty purpose-built cinemas opened in Scotland. This was the tail end of the 1910-2 construction peak identified by Nicolas Hiley for the whole of Britain.<sup>12</sup> The new cinemas of 1913 included very few hall or skating rink conversions, but the average capacity did not increase significantly. This suggests that the decision to build new auditoria was a response to the saturation of existing spaces, rather than a move to a different exhibition model or a purely speculative trend. This again contrasts with Hiley's description, pointing towards significant differences in the expansion of fixed-site cinemas in Scotland and the rest of Britain. Hiley argues that a shift from early smaller venues towards middle-sized and larger auditoria before the mid-1920s 'changed the whole style and context of cinema-going', sidelining the local,

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<sup>12</sup> Hiley, "Nothing More Than a "Craze"", pp. 119-21.



working-class audience that had sustained the first wave of expansion. However, the data for Scotland in 1914 portrays a state of affairs that seems closer to that of 1925 according to Hiley, with a predominance of middle-sized venues and relatively few small ones. [Table 2]

**Table 2. Cinema capacity in 1914**

Distribution of British cinemas by size in 1914, from Hiley		Scottish data for 1914/1915
Seating capacity	Percentage of venues (Britain)	Percentage of venues (Scotland)
1-500	28%	17.4%
501-800	35%	38.4%
801-1000	16%	21.6%
1001-2000	18%	21.6%
2000+	3%	1.1%

**Sources:** Nicholas Hiley, "Let's Go to the Pictures": The British Cinema Audience in the 1920s and 1930s', *Journal of Popular British Cinema*.2 (1999), pp. 39-53 (p. 41).; *Bioscope Annual* 1915.

There might be a number of alternative explanations for the discrepancy. It is possible, for instance, that the Scottish data do not reveal a number of smaller venues. This issue comes back to the question about the existence of a 'nickelodeon-like' sector in Scotland. With only two or three possible examples in Edinburgh and Leith, and a short-lived shop conversion on Glasgow's Argyle Street (the Vaudeville, which only opened in 1914), there is no evidence that there was a nickelodeon sector in Scotland. Of the five film-only shows operating in Glasgow in 1908, three were in public halls and two in music halls.<sup>13</sup> One of the reasons why

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<sup>13</sup> 'Round the Provinces', *The Bioscope*, 2 October 1908.

expansion in Scotland took place in larger venues may be the absence of the 'large clearing houses dealing in many hundreds of used films' that served the London trade.<sup>14</sup> The cost of bringing film up from London meant that a small penny show would struggle to cover its costs; even if cheap films were used, a larger audience or a higher entrance price was needed.

Further evidence of the kind of venue that characterized the expansion phase in Scotland is provided by the resistance to the 1909 Cinematograph Films act, which imposed a number of regulations regarding fire hazards. In London, as Burrows has shown, the Act affected a large number of 'penny-gaff' venues, which in some cases had to close but quite often found an incentive for stabilisation. The Act provided a route towards recognition for the shop-front shows that had been operating in a precarious legal situation during the previous years.<sup>15</sup> In Scotland, on the other hand, the Act caused concern mostly for itinerant exhibitors and showmen using existing halls. This reaction suggests that, by late 1909, fixed-site exhibition was still uncommon in Scotland, and the travelling sector was the main force in the trade.

Showmen had hoped that the Act would clarify the rules for their trade and would eliminate uncertainty, but that was not the case. Besides the general rules set out, there was an unspecific clause giving powers to the Scottish Secretary to create further regulations, and local authorities were free to impose their own restrictions and to interpret the Act according to their interests. For instance, for a while it seemed that the Scottish magistrates wanted to extend the regulations to all shows,

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<sup>14</sup> Jon Burrows, 'Penny Pleasures II: Indecency, Anarchy and Junk Film in London's 'Nickelodeons', 1906-1914', *Film History* 16.2 (2004), 172-197 (p. 178).

<sup>15</sup> Burrows, 'Penny Pleasures', p. 84.

ignoring the exception granted in the Act for places where films were shown up to six times a year. According to Edinburgh exhibitors, forcing even temporary venues to comply with the Act by putting up a metal enclosure for the projector, clearing emergency exits, and so on, would be prohibitive and would lead to the cancellation of about 500 local shows given every year.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, the Glasgow magistrates held talks with exhibitors to produce what *The Bioscope* considered to be sensible licensing rules, and Dove Paterson boasted of his good relationships with the Aberdeen constables.<sup>17</sup>

Hiley, following a line of argument frequently represented in the trade press, concludes that the conditions demanded by local authorities under the 1909 Act favoured wealthy companies that could build cinemas to the new specifications, while forcing small-time shows to close.<sup>18</sup> While there certainly was a trend for better-capitalised exhibition ventures, the main effect of the 1909 Act in Scotland was not so much to encourage higher investment, but to discourage itinerant exhibition. Most of the cases brought before the courts for contraventions to the Act referred to the use of unlicensed premises for one-night-only shows, or for failing to give the required notice to local authorities. In Aberdeenshire, Walter Mayne, a small-time showman who ran a traveling bioscope on his own, was fined twice in 1910 for occupying unlicensed halls; George Melvin, who ran the Arbroath Theatre,

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<sup>16</sup> 'Wake up, Scotland! Drastic Action by the Authorities: 500 Edinburgh Entertainments Spoiled', *The Bioscope*, 17 February 1910, pp. 39-41.

<sup>17</sup> 'Bravo, Glasgow', *The Bioscope* 21 April 1910, pp. 4-5. 'Cinematograph Defence League: Conferences at Glasgow and Newcastle', *The Bioscope*, 11 August 1910, pp. 5-9.

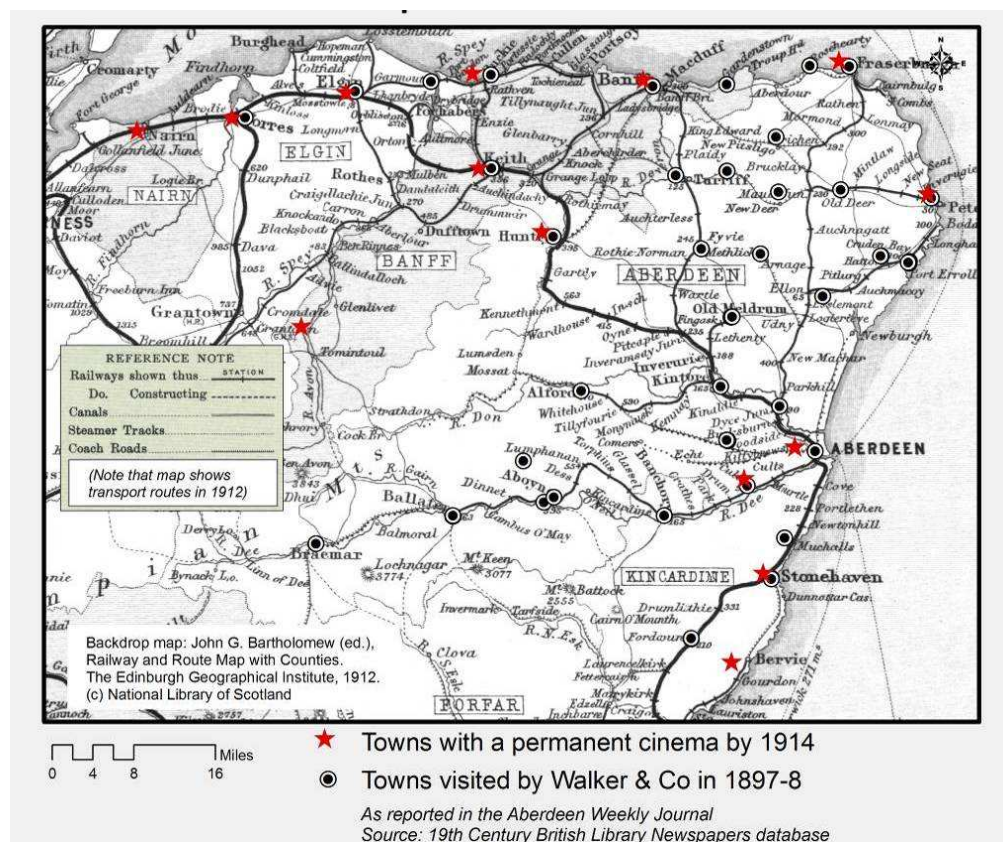
<sup>18</sup> Hiley, "Nothing More Than a "Craze""', p. 120.

was fined for an unlicensed show in Stonehaven Town Hall.<sup>19</sup> Making sure that all the locations for a tour were licensed, and giving the necessary notice to each local council, was too much of a burden given the slim margins of itinerant exhibition. It is likely that some showpeople continued to tour under the radar, but in any case the most profitable locations often already had a fixed-site cinema, and were not very profitable any longer. Those exhibitors that continued to visit small towns for short engagements were usually operating out of a permanent base, instead of attempting longer tours.

The case of Aberdeenshire can serve to illustrate the consequences of this process of stabilisation and centralisation on the provision of film shows to peripheral areas. By the end of 1910 there were at least five full-time cinemas in Aberdeen and one in Elgin, but a revision of the 'District News' column of the *Aberdeen Journal*, where local events were reported, shows that by 1910 the number of cinematograph entertainments given outside the city had plummeted from its 1890s levels. By 1914 there was a cinema in every burgh with a population over 3,500, but even this expansion did not reach many of the places where film shows had been given before. **Figure 7** compares the places visited by William Walker in 1897-8 with the provision of cinemas fifteen years later.

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<sup>19</sup> 'Contravention of the Act at Aberdeen', *The Bioscope*, 10 March 1910, p. 43. 'Away up North', *The Bioscope*, 6 October 1910, p. 21; *The Bioscope*, 9 March 1911, p. 53.



**Figure 7: Public hall shows and permanent cinemas in Aberdeenshire**

**Background map:** John G. Bartholomew (ed.), *Railway and Route map with Counties*, The Edinburgh Geographical Institute, 1912. © National Library of Scotland.

It is interesting that, in Scotland, the changes in the exhibition sector connected with both the cinema boom and the 1909 Act were not defined in terms of the ticket price (as a crusade against penny gaffs) or the size of the venues. These two aspects remained relatively stable, since the halls, skating rinks and theatres where the first film shows had taken place already had an average capacity of over 800 and charged a minimum of two or three pence for admission, with a range of ticket categories to accommodate a broader audience. It can be said that, except for a few specific examples in industrial districts such as the East End of Glasgow, the

expansion of cinema in Scotland cannot be described as an exclusively working-class phenomenon, and so it took a form that differed significantly from the nickelodeon model. The transformation brought about by the cinema boom did not necessarily imply a change in the trade's perception of the audience; indeed, the transition was characterised by the stabilisation of existing practices more than by their sudden demise.

With the 1909 Act, exhibition in halls did not plummet; it became permanent, so that halls changed their name to 'Picturedrome' or 'Electric Theatre'. The demise of travelling exhibition was undeniable, but the Act was only the final nail. Transformations in all sectors of the industry had cast a new role for exhibitors, one that was more clearly delineated and less multi-tasking. As Brown has explained:

The adjustment [to fixed-site cinemas] involved the abandonment of a highly personalised transactional model characterised by bespoke service, low replacement rates and long periods of time, with a much more dynamic but impersonal method, more appropriate for high replacement rates and short periods of use.<sup>20</sup>

At the core of this reconfiguration was a change in the ownership of films, with the abandonment of direct transactions between producers and exhibitors and the emergence of film renting. The 'low replacement rates' of the pre-boom era reflected the fact that exhibitors had invested significant amounts to buy the films

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<sup>20</sup> Brown, 'The Missing Link', p. 58.

directly from producers, and could not afford to replace them until they had extracted an equivalent value from a long tail of shows. Under the rental system, the ownership of film prints passed to the renter, and thus the weekly price paid by the exhibitor was lowered. Although this fundamental transformation will be explored in more detail in another Chapter 6, it is important to note here that the relative low cost of hiring films had the double effect of making extended rural tours unnecessary, and enabling many more exhibitors to set up shop.

After 1912, fierce competition in urban areas went hand in hand with the abandonment of rural touring. In 1911, when William Walker opened the Coliseum cinema in Aberdeen, he already faced opposition, and by 1914 there were no fewer than twenty cinemas in the city.<sup>21</sup> By that time, Glasgow had eighty-five licensed venues, of which about fifty were full-time cinemas.<sup>22</sup> About one-third of the permanent cinemas functioning in Scotland before 1914 were in one of the four largest cities. The pressures of competition between urban exhibitors set the conditions in which many of the future developments of the film trade took shape. Although the wide network of small-town cinemas was the ballast that stabilised the industry, the interests of those exhibitors were increasingly marginalised.

## **4.2. Exhibition practices in the single-reel era**

The rise of the specialized film venue and of fixed-site exhibition can be seen as a process of standardisation, whereby the film industry created a reliable network of

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<sup>21</sup> Low, *History of British Film*, vol. 2, p. 51..

<sup>22</sup> Office of Public Works, 'List of premises licensed under the Cinematograph Act, 1909, and the Accommodation therein' (12 July 1913). Glasgow, Mitchell Library, Glasgow City Archives, D-OPW 61/5. This number was up from fifty-seven venues licensed in 1911 according to C. A. Oakley, *Fifty Years at the Pictures* ([Glasgow]: Scottish Film Council/BFI, 1946), p. 7.

outlets with regular supply needs, met through a more streamlined distribution system. However, the transformation of exhibition practices in Scotland between 1907 and 1914 was far from being so unidirectional. Heterogeneity persisted, and in some cases thrived in the new market conditions. The following analysis is based on a sample of 106 cinemas that advertised in local newspapers in January 1913. They represent only about one in every four cinemas functioning in Scotland by that time, but they are distributed over almost fifty locations in a manner consistent with the general urban : rural ratio. Their advertisements were collected from more than forty microfilmed newspaper titles held at the National Library of Scotland and the Mitchell Library in Glasgow. This snapshot is intended to capture the characteristics of the venues as they were being used at the time (admission prices, live entertainment, opening hours, owners and managers), and the titles of the films being shown on Thursday, 9 January 1913. Besides the motivation for this method given in Chapter 2, more details about the data collection are given in the Technical Appendix.

Newspaper adverts present many problems as a source. Firstly, only a fraction of the cinemas used newspaper advertising; the rest preferred billboards, posters and handbills. For instance, one of the earliest and most important cinemas in Glasgow, the B. B. Pictures' Wellington Palace, has left almost no trace in the press; the company relied on the distribution of thousands of half-price admission invitations. Secondly, the existence and survival of local newspapers have their own determinants. While Irvine in Ayr (pop. 32,986) was served by at least three weekly papers, the National Library has very few titles for Aberdeenshire and the Highlands. I am confident, however, that the sample is representative enough to



substantiate a modest quantitative description of the exhibition landscape on that date. The resulting dataset is rich, versatile, and can always incorporate new information as it turns up.<sup>23</sup> The data present a picture of great complexity and diversity; no two adverts are identical. What they do have in common is the fact that the titles of individual films are only one element in an advertising rhetoric that encompasses a range of other appeals. The adverts often say more about the venue and the surrounding attractions than they do about the films being shown. While this makes them problematic for a study of distribution, it serves as a reminder that cinema was not always, first and foremost, about the film text. The physical comforts of the venue, the variety acts interspersed with the films, the musical accompaniment, or the lecturer's patter were all important components of the experience.

#### **4.2.1. Selling the show**

The 1913 snapshot reveals the extent to which cinema had become assimilated in local routine across Scotland. A sense of the everydayness of the film show emanates from most of the adverts in the sample. Especially in medium-sized and small towns, they seem to address an audience that is already familiar with what they are offering. Continuity with previous practices was evident in the operation times of these venues. About three quarters of the cinemas ran one or two shows a

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<sup>23</sup> The dataset is included as an OpenOffice Base database on the accompanying CD-ROM. The scanned newspaper adverts are also included, and they are linked to the map visualisations included as .kml files (which can be viewed using Google Earth and most GIS software), and on the **scotlandcinemaps.html** file, which can be opened in most standard web browsers with an internet connection. See the Technical Appendix for details.

night, at fixed times (usually 7:00 and 9:00). Only a minority ran a continuous show. As discussed above, this was very different position from that of nickelodeons, and was possible because from early on Scottish cinemas operated in large venues. The average capacity found in the sample exceeds a thousand seats. Therefore, the high-turnover, small-capacity, short-show model that characterised nickelodeons and penny gaffs did not operate in Scotland. Similarly, the notion of the dingy shed with sawdust on the floor was not the norm, as the comfort of the venue was a paramount attraction. Many of the halls may have been humble indeed, but exhibitors did their best to hide it with Jeyes fluid and potted palms, because the venue was not an unimportant component of a fleeting experience, but a key factor in drawing people to the show.

There is only one example in the snapshot of a cinema charging one penny for admission; the most common pricing strategy divided the auditorium in three or four categories ranging from two to six pence or one shilling. Children were often admitted for half the price, and there were *matinée* performances aimed at them. This appeal to the younger audience paid off, as Scottish children became notoriously enthusiastic cinemagoers; besides, the *matinée* audience was relied upon as a vehicle for publicity.<sup>24</sup> As Fife exhibitor, Tom Gilbert, explained to his renters, spoiling the early show meant spoiling the whole evening and possibly the week, as the children would take their disappointment back home to the parents, who would then talk about it at work the next day.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Griffiths, *The Cinema and Cinemagoing in Scotland*, Chapter 2, III.

<sup>25</sup> Letter (wet copy), Tom Gilbert to Bios Films, Crossgates, 2 December 1918. Edinburgh, National Archives of Scotland, NAS SC36/79/18, p. 370.

Programmes were about two hours long, following the same structure as those of the first town hall exhibitors. Both in the large cities and in smaller towns, about a third of the venues in the sample had a mix of live and filmed entertainment. This further determined the need to keep the twice-nightly hours, because performers charged for two shows a night plus one or two matinees in the week. The balance between live acts and films varied, and a difference should be made between those venues defined primarily as music halls that included a ‘bioscope turn’ (which have been discussed in the previous chapter), and those defined as picture houses that included a few simple live turns – the ‘cine-variety’ model mentioned before. The distinction is relevant because the supply model for both types of show was different, with music halls usually adhering to the ‘complete service’ provision described before.

In the 1913 sample, cine-variety shows were advertised in thirty towns, from Alloa to Wick. (A map of the prevalence of cine-variety according to the 1915 *Bioscope Annual* can be found in Chapter 6). A multitude of comedians, comic singers, balladists, dancers, minstrels and illusionists were mentioned, and the Victoria in Grangemouth even had ‘Pongorila, the man-monkey’.<sup>26</sup> Films more often than not appear on an equal footing to other acts – rarely topping the bill, but not as ‘chasers’ either. This reflected a high point in the integration of films as part of a modular entertainment format, where each week offered a new permutation of a familiar experience. The balance between the ordinary and the extraordinary was tilted towards the constitution of a regular audience, to the extent that five of the

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<sup>26</sup> *Grangemouth Advertiser*, 4 January 1913

adverts indicate only ‘times and prices as usual’, assuming the audience would know what they were.

Whether the advertisement included film titles or the names of variety acts, emphasis was on the permanent characteristics of the venue. In towns with a population under 20,000, there was likely to be only one cinema by this time, and the patrons’ last experience of moving pictures could have been in a fairground, so the goal was still to convince the patrons of the technical qualities of the show: ‘rock steady and flickerless’ (Darvel), ‘clear as crystal, steady as the bass’ (Leven).<sup>27</sup> The comfort of the hall was another selling point, and as a manager in Cupar put it, ‘you get Two Solid Hour’s Amusement and Instruction, and you can smoke your pipe or cigarette’.<sup>28</sup> Within the same ticket price range, some cinemas would represent themselves as popular and comfortable, while others preferred to be ‘high-class’ and luxurious. Only a few city cinemas advertised orchestral accompaniment, although the Edinburgh Olympia had a full choir to transport their screening of a biblical film to a more sublime realm. At least two examples can be found of the practice of ‘talking to the pictures’, which has been studied by Trevor Griffiths.<sup>29</sup> This was not simply lecturing in the magic-lantern tradition, as it was more an exercise in elocution and contained some dramatisation. In Dumfries, Nicol Pentland was performing a ‘picture play’ about Robert Burns, while in Aberdeen, the Gaiety owner Dove Paterson and his wife had been performing along with their pictures since 1906.

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<sup>27</sup> *Irvine Valley News*, 10 January 1913; *Mail from Leven, Wemyss and Fife*, 8 January 1913

<sup>28</sup> *Fife Herald*, 8 January 1913

<sup>29</sup> Trevor Griffiths, ‘The Enduring Appeal of the Elocutionist: Scotland, Sound and Silent Cinema’, in *The sounds of early cinema in Britain*, ed. by Julie Brown and Annette Davison. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming [2012]).

The role of the manager as a ‘cultural intermediary’, constructing the appeal of moving pictures for a local audience, was enabled by the flexibility of the modular format and the availability of older practices with which audiences were familiar.<sup>30</sup> Audience interaction was encouraged in events such as ‘go-as-you-please’ amateur music contests, which appear in the sample week at the Bo’ness Electric Theatre, Aberdeen Savoy, and Glasgow’s Govan Hall. Local photographs and football scores were also included in the show by enterprising exhibitors, as were occasional local topical, although none appear in the sample. Musical accompaniment is also highlighted in the advertisement, ranging from piano to full orchestra. There were thus many options for a manager who wanted to have an edge over the opposition, and the selection of films was only one of the variables.

#### 4.2.2. Programming

The timing of the snapshot in January 1913 captures the situation of Scottish exhibition in a key moment: the heyday of the single-reel programme. Although a few longer films had been released, mainly by Italian and Danish companies, and there had even been a three-reel Scottish feature (*Rob Roy*, United Films, 1911), the thousand-foot reel was the standard unit of the trade. With a screen time of around sixteen minutes each, single-reelers were ‘the backbone of the business’, and they depended on an idea of film as a commutable, substitutable product.<sup>31</sup> Rooted in previous traditions of popular entertainment, the modularity of the single-reeler gave great flexibility to exhibitors, who could enhance the appeal of their film programmes by mixing in variety acts (inherently suitable for this format), singing

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<sup>30</sup> van Oort, ‘“Christ” is Coming to the Elite Cinema’, pp. 52-3.

<sup>31</sup> Abel, ‘The “Backbone” of the Business’, p. 170.

pictures, and other ancillary attractions as described above. However, as film production grew, and the rental system developed, the differentiation of cinemas was increasingly a question of programming. Selecting the films for every change of programme was the point of interaction between exhibitor and distributor, and therefore the crucible of the tensions that shaped the industry.

If 'feature' is understood in its original sense, that is, as the headlining item in a bill, the typical feature film shown in Scotland in January 1913 was a single-reeler. A programme rarely included more than three single-reelers, plus two or three thousand feet's worth of shorter films, including factual titles. There are more than twenty films of three reels or more in the sample, hinting towards a coming transformation, but at this point they still constituted the exception. There were, on the other hand, several cinemas that did not advertise the titles of the films on show. This absence can be explained as a result of the cost of advertising space, especially for city dailies such as the *Glasgow Evening News*, but it could denote a relative indifference to the precise contents of a show that had become a habit; it could also be the case that the exhibitor did not know in advance what the distributor was going to send.

At the beginning of 1911, *The Bioscope* started including in their lists the films released on the previous, current and following week. Their argument to do so was that

there are in vogue so many different methods of  
selecting programs, and whereas one man wants to  
know what films were released last week, his next-  
door neighbour desires to know precisely what films

are being released during the current week. Then there is the man who has a “say” in the selection of his program; his principal requirement is a list of subjects which will be released next week.<sup>32</sup>

This describes a tiered market where some exhibitors could cherry-pick their films, whilst others had to rely on a cheaper supply. It also takes for granted the need for a weekly change of pictures. By 1913, the standard practice was to change the programme twice a week, on Monday and Thursday. This had become the norm throughout Britain, and it marks a significant difference with the United States and with some London penny gaffs, where the programme was changed daily. The lower frequency of programme changes in Scotland reflects the larger size of exhibition venues. The few cinemas that changed their films more often tended to be either smaller in size, or located in more isolated places such as Crieff and Lerwick, which suggests that, instead of getting a new batch of films every day, they received a larger shipment once a week and then scheduled them as they saw fit.

The fact that almost half of the adverts collected for the 1913 snapshot omit to mention film titles, while the write-ups that some newspapers included (usually on Tuesdays) were similarly hit-and-miss, means that a systematic analysis of programming can only be carried out to a limited extent. For the 106 cinemas considered, then, the current state of the database lists 182 film titles. An attempt was then made to match these titles to their release data based on listings on *The*

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<sup>32</sup> "Film Releases," *The Bioscope*, 5 January 1911, p. 3.

*Bioscope*. It has not been always possible to identify the films, since there might be several versions under the same title, or the advert might not give the exact title used in the listings. The following analysis of release patterns is, therefore, only exploratory, but it starts to outline hypotheses that can be tested in a larger-scale data collection.

#### 4.2.3. Film release dates and the tiered runs system

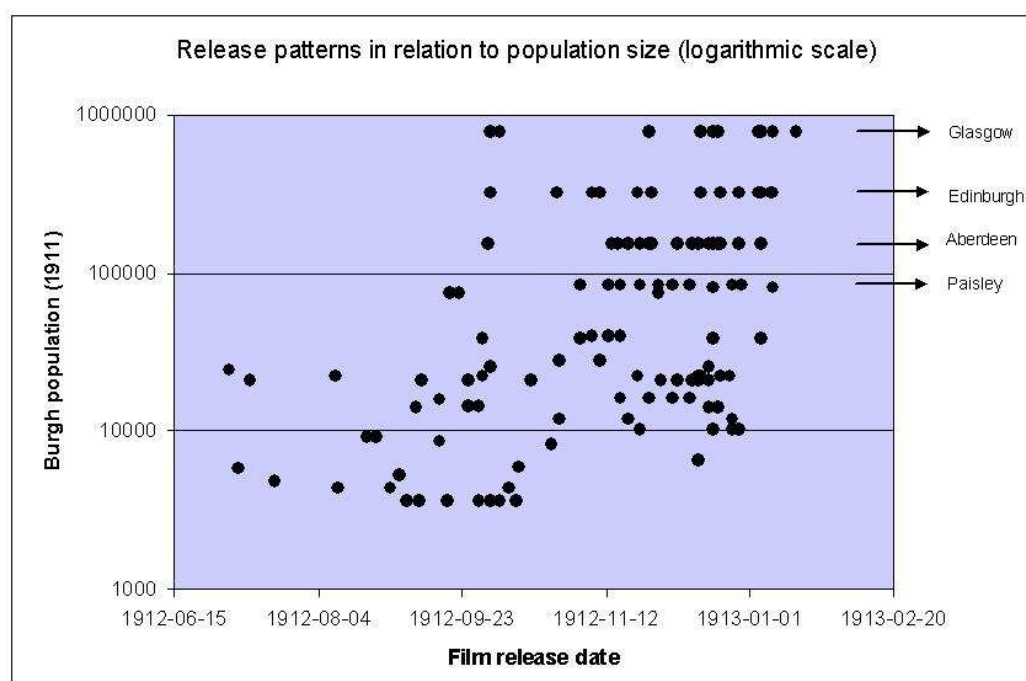
One of the most reviled consequences of the cinema boom was that films became an extremely time-sensitive good with a short shelf-life. As producers invested more in advertising, the public became better informed, and as the proliferation of picture theatres offered them more choice, they wanted to see only the latest films.

Exhibitors thought that if they did not have the latest film, and the opposition did, they would lose business. The ‘fallacy of first runs’, as *The Bioscope* put it in 1910, was the reigning factor in the stratification of exhibition following the runs system. It traduced geographic and socio-economic distance into a time lag.

Plotting the release dates of the sample films, as given on trade journal listings, against the populations of the burghs where the same films were being exhibited, illustrates the nature of this lag. **Figure 8** shows one dot for each film, with its release date on the  $x$  axis and the population of the burgh where it was being shown on the  $y$  axis. Population is plotted on a logarithmic scale in order to emphasize the difference between small and medium towns, while the films shown in the four largest cities in the sample form the rows towards the top half of the graph. Although there is considerable spread, an elbow-shaped pattern is visible: the oldest films (towards the left-hand extreme of the graph) are mostly being shown in towns of under 25,000 inhabitants. In the towns with a population of under ten



thousand, not a film is mentioned that is not at least two and a half months old by January 1913. On the contrary, in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, and some of the satellite burghs (Hamilton, Paisley), only the oldest films date from October. Of the forty-four urban cinemas in the sample, at least a dozen included brand-new releases in their programmes, although none seems to offer an all-new bill. This is consistent with the practices described by Burrows regarding cheap London cinemas, many of which obtained their programmes as a mixed package of very old and not so old films, from renters who in turn bought their stock in the second-hand market.<sup>33</sup>



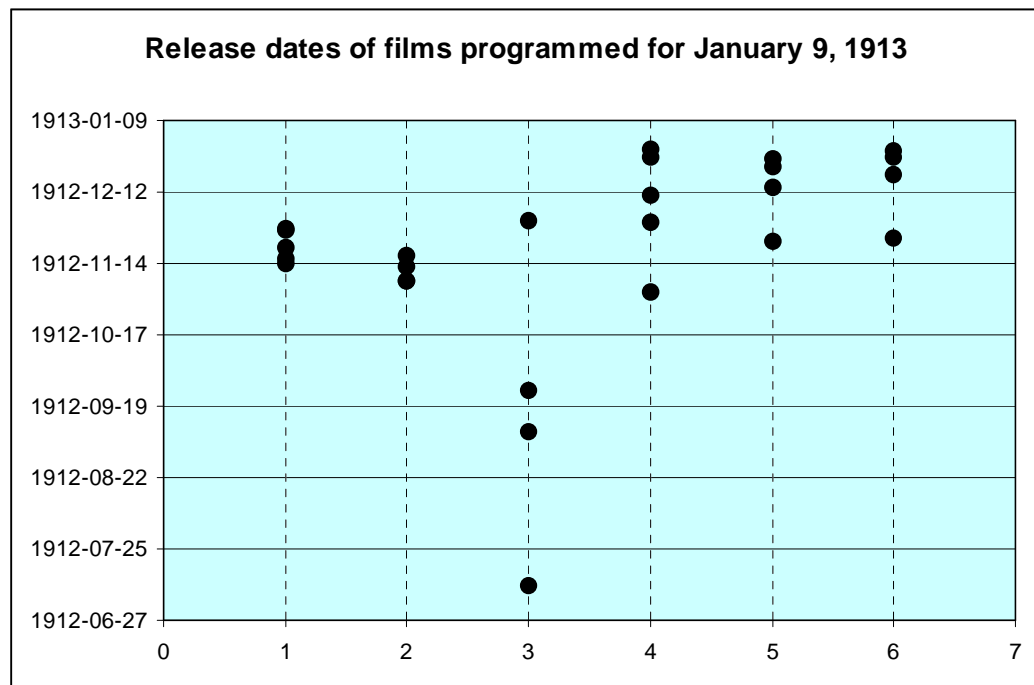
**Figure 8: Release patterns for the 1913 snapshot**

On closer inspection, the clustering of release dates for the different films within an individual programme presents interesting patterns. While some venues

<sup>33</sup> Burrows, 'Penny Pleasures II', p. 179.

were showing films that were released within a short time of each other, there are cinemas that display a greater spread. The different clustering patterns point to alternative programming strategies, and are likely to be linked to different modes of film supply. **[Figure 9]** compares the programmes of a sample of six cinemas, exemplifying three programming patterns.

On the left side there are highly clustered programmes comprising films released over a period of about a month. This pattern would be consistent with the hire of a 'film service' from a major distributor, a practice that will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6. More widely-spread release dates, and in particular the pattern seen on the right-hand side of the graph, seem to be more common. In this pattern, there is a small cluster of relatively recent films, and a few older outliers. Since the cinemas' advertising tends to highlight the newer films, it can be assumed that there could be several other older films. This pattern of 'star films' and 'filler' allowed exhibitors to pay more for a small part of the show (the feature) while getting the rest cheaply, perhaps even from different distributors, at a fixed price per thousand feet.



**Cinemas:**

- 1 – Queen's Cinema, Aberdeen
- 2 – New Picture and Variety Theatre, Craigneuk
- 3 – Craigs Electric Theatre, Stirling
- 4 – Rink, Paisley
- 5 – Music Hall, Inverness
- 6 – Picturedrome, Irvine

**Figure 9: Release patterns in 1913 snapshot, detail**

It must be pointed out that the sample is very likely to be biased towards newer and longer films, because others would not necessarily be mentioned in the adverts. The same caveat holds for the ranking of manufacturers. The only brand that was consistently mentioned was Vitagraph, which attests to the success of their efforts to create brand recognition through 'quality' films, and to produce a varied

output that could be used to programme a complete show with only Vitagraph films.<sup>34</sup> The brands with the most films amongst those identifiable from the sample are Vitagraph and Pathé, followed by Lubin, Edison and Selig. Besides Pathé, the most popular European makes were Gaumont and Ambrosio, and amongst the British producers Cricks and Martin appears with five titles. The sample does not contain any local topicals or other specially-commissioned films, although these continued to be produced for a handful of cinemas. The adverts are, in themselves, evidence of the increasing importance afforded to particular items in the programme – that is, of the origins of feature programming.

**CRAIGNEUK**  
**NEW PICTURE AND**  
**VARIETY THEATRE**  
CRAIGNEUK ST., CRAIGNEUK.  
MONDAY, JANUARY 6TH, 1913,  
and during the week.

**7. TWICE NIGHTLY. 9.**  
**MONDAY, FRIDAY & SATURDAY**

One House Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday at 7.30 p.m. | Doors Open at 7.  
**GREAT SUCCESS OF OPENING PROGRAMME.**  
Everyone Delighted.  
Our Motto:—Quality—Not Quantity.  
Special Engagement of  
**THE REANOS**  
In their refined Vocal and Instrumental T's Bits.  
**CHARLIE KEMBLE**  
Comedian and Patroller.  
Two of the Best.  
**GALLAGHER & WEST**  
Singers, Talkers, and Dancers. But what Dancers! Don't miss their great Burlesque Wrestling Match.  
**ANOTHER GREAT PICTURE PROGRAMME.**  
Blind Love. The Smuggler. Too Many Kids. The Winning of Latonia Derby—in two parts.  
**Popular Prices—9d, 6d & 3d.**  
Children's Matinees every Saturday at 2.30 p.m.  
**NOTE.**—Two Performances Monday, Friday and Saturday at 7 and 9 p.m. One Performance Tuesday, Wednesday & Thursday at 7.30 p.m.

**ELECTRIC THEATRE,**  
CRAIGS, STIRLING.

• **CONTINUOUS SHOW—7 till 10.30.**  
**SPECIAL PICTURES—**  
"QUEEN BESS" (enacted by Madame Sarah Bernhardt and her Powerful Company).  
"SMILER AT THE PICNIC."  
"A LIFE FOR A KISS."  
"QUEEN OF THE KITCHEN."  
**SINGING PICTURE ALL WEEK.**  
—  
**SPECIAL PRICES—2d, 4d, 6d, and 9d.**  
**MATINEES:**  
**WEDNESDAY at 3.30; SATURDAY at 3.**

Sources: *Wishaw Herald* (1913.01.03), *Stirling Observer* (1913.01.07)

Figure 10: Adverts for some of the venues in previous figure

<sup>34</sup> William Urrichio and Roberta E. Pearson, *Reframing Culture: The Case of the Vitagraph Quality Films* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 30, 25.

#### 4.2.4. The division of the market

At the higher end of the market, the imperative was to book first-run films from recognized brands. This restricted the pool of possible selections for any given programme to the thirty or so films released every week. The rapid depreciation of films after the first few weeks meant that renters were unwilling to buy more prints than strictly necessary. As renter, James Williamson, explained in *The Bioscope*,

as the demand increases for new or exclusive films,  
the demand decreases for older films at a cheaper rate.  
The renter is, therefore, in the position of having to  
earn the cost of the film in a shorter period, and not  
only increase the rates for first and early runs, but to  
limit his purchases as well. The exhibitor, therefore,  
has some difficulty in getting first run programmes.<sup>35</sup>

A contemporary example can be given by looking at the archival documents left behind by two Glasgow cinemas: the Cinema House and the Paragon. Open in December 1911, the Cinema House was an expensive, purpose-built cinema whose board of directors was made up of printers and stationers rather than showmen. They wanted to run the cinema on the highest standard, showing good new films, and so they hired a local renter, the B. B. Pictures Ltd., to supply them with 5,000

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<sup>35</sup> James Williamson, 'A Review of Present Conditions of the Cinematograph Industry', *The Bioscope*, 12 December 1912, p. 805.

feet of first-run pictures, plus a newsreel, for twenty pounds a week.<sup>36</sup> At this time, this was relatively good value for a first-run programme, which could cost thirty pounds or more. The renter could offer this price because he was showing the same films at his main hall, the Wellington Palace, which was located just across the River Clyde in the Gorbals. A boy had to run to and fro taking the films between the two venues, which annoyed the directors of the Cinema House, but the price was a strong argument to continue this practice. The only way in which they could have a first-run programme was by submitting to the conditions offered by the renter.

On the other hand, the Paragon cinema in Calton, to the east of Glasgow city centre, had been a music hall – the New Eastern Alhambra, managed by Arthur Hubner of the Britannia Panopticon.<sup>37</sup> It was then occupied by the B. B. Pictures before it was leased to Richard Singleton in 1913. Although it seems that no trace remains of it, it was a rather large hall seating 1,200 people. The accounts book, kept at the Scottish Screen Archive, shows that the average weekly expenses for the year before the start of the First World War added up to around twenty-five pounds, of which the price paid to the B. B. Pictures for film hire oscillated between two and eight pounds.<sup>38</sup> George Singleton remembered their films were about three months old, and they paid roughly 7s 6d per reel for three nights.<sup>39</sup> The accounts book shows that the films hired for the Paragon were shared with the other cinema ran by

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<sup>36</sup> An incomplete series of minute books for the Cinema Picture House Ltd exists. Glasgow, Scottish Screen Archive, SSA5/22.

<sup>37</sup> Adrienne Scullion, 'Geggies, Empires, Cinemas: The Scottish Experience of Early Film', *Picture House* 21, pp. 13-19 (p. 16).

<sup>38</sup> Accounts donated by George Singleton to the Scottish Screen Archive, SSA5/26.

<sup>39</sup> Andrew Young, 'Family pictures', in *From Limelight to Satellite*, ed. by Eddie Dick (London: Scottish Film Council and British Film Institute, 1990), pp. 83-90 (p. 85).

RV Singleton, the Premier Pictures in Burnbank. There was a considerable budget for posters and handbills. Singleton was a printer by trade, as were many of the early investors in the Scottish cinema boom. The Paragon, consequently, did not advertise in the local press, and therefore finding out what exactly was being screened proves impossible. However, the range of prices paid for film rentals shows that a cinema lower down the pecking line could have more options for programming than a city-centre palace committed to first-run fare.

### **4.3. Circuits**

Splitting the film hire costs between two or more venues, as both the Paragon and the Cinema House did, was a key part in the business model of many exhibitors. The ‘change-over’ (as this practice was called) often happened without the renter’s knowledge, and was deemed illegitimate in the trade. It can, however, be seen as a new appearance of a well-known principle: maximising the exploitation of a print by taking it to a different location and audience. This form of localised micro-distribution allowed cinemas in the different tiers to limit their expenses and turn a profit. There were clear advantages for exhibitors who controlled more than one venue. The fact that a film can be screened many times in an evening was thus an encouragement for the concentration of ownership.

The traditional account of the development of the trade in Britain highlights the importance of large horizontally-integrated exhibition companies (i.e. cinema circuits), following the model of the music-hall circuit. In this narrative, a few English companies established during the early years of the cinema boom became the financial bedrock of the British film trade, and gave rise to various attempts at

vertical integration.<sup>40</sup> Some of those UK-wide circuits had Scottish venues: Provincial Cinematograph Theatres Ltd (PCT) had Picture Houses in Edinburgh's Princes Street and in Glasgow on Sauchiehall Street. These were large, well-appointed city-centre venues with first-run programmes that charged a minimum admission price of six pence. In contrast, Pringle's Picture Palaces, a company established in the North of England by Ralph Pringle, a travelling exhibitor, located its Glasgow and Edinburgh venues in working-class areas on the edges of the city centre. Converted from music halls and skating rinks, these venues charged two pence for admission and showed films that were a couple of weeks old. These two chains had been amongst the pioneers of fixed-site exhibition in Scotland: Open in 1907, Pringle's Queen Theatre was one of the first permanent cinemas in Glasgow, and PCT's Picture House offered continuous shows and new standards of luxury on the high street from 1910. However, their presence in Scotland remained limited, never reaching beyond the main cities; the Scottish venues were the periphery of their circuit, and their film booking arrangements were coordinated centrally.

Burrows and Brown's article on the financial aspects of the cinema boom challenged the preponderance of the big circuits in the expansion of permanent exhibition, pointing out that, after a brief flourishing of highly-capitalised company formation in 1908-9, the trade was dominated by smaller, private companies.<sup>41</sup> The Scottish exhibition trade did not undergo such a dramatic spike in investment, as the largest circuits tended to expand only gradually and on the back of already-thriving concerns. By the start of the war, there were five Scottish companies that controlled

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<sup>40</sup> Low, *The History of the British Film 1906-1914*, pp. 20-22.

<sup>41</sup> Burrows and Brown 'Financing the Edwardian Cinema Boom', p. 14.



six or more venues: B. B. Pictures, Green's, G. U. Scott, R. C. Buchanan, and Bostock's. Between them, they controlled more than fifty cinemas, mostly on the central belt. In contrast, at least twice as many venues were owned by a company controlling only one cinema, while almost half of the venues were coupled or part of a small local circuit.

Coupled venues, splitting hire costs and shuttling reels back and forth during the screenings, can be considered as the most basic case of horizontal integration in exhibition. There were several such cases around Scotland, such as Aberdeen Picture Palaces, a relatively small company that will make an appearance in later chapters, or the aforementioned R. V. Singleton. Such modest arrangements depended on close geographical proximity, not only for change-overs but also because they often shared a manager. The exhibition trade north of the border was thus dominated by local companies from an early point. While the stories of the two largest circuits, B. B. Pictures and Green's, will be discussed in Chapter 5 in the context of their emergence as film renters, it is worth considering here other smaller cases. Lack of programme information, unfortunately, precludes a closer examination of more rural circuits not centred upon a first-run metropolitan venue. There are some interesting examples, such as the Elite Entertainments Syndicate in Aberdeenshire (Huntly, Nairn, Keith and Buckie) and T. J. Scott's East Lothian circuit (Peebles, Dunbar, North Berwick, Linlithgow, and Haddington). Comprising mostly smaller public halls, these peripheral syndicates are an undocumented part of the landscape of the early Scottish trade. Meanwhile, the cases of the better-known urban circuits point to the diverse character of circuits, showing that the parallel

tracks and tensions that defined early exhibition were also expressed in their discourses and programming practice.

A fruitful comparison can be made, for instance, between the R. C. Buchanan and E. H. Bostock circuits. R.C. Buchanan was an actor and theatre owner who took over music halls and theatres in Edinburgh, Dundee, Motherwell and Coatbridge. Initially hiring from a Glasgow renter (Bendon), programmes at Buchanan's Edinburgh venues included prestigious first-run films, both at the central Princes cinema and at the more suburban 'comfortable family house', the Coliseum in Fountainbridge. E. H. Bostock was a very successful menagerie and circus showman from Buckinghamshire, who had started showing film as part of the variety entertainment at the Hamilton Hippodrome.<sup>42</sup> By 1914, he controlled at least eight venues, mostly in old music halls or circuses, all within ten miles of Glasgow. At the Paisley Rink, the programme in January 1913 included second- and third-run pictures, supplied by Butcher's Film Service, an important London distribution company that handled a wide range of American and Continental brands.<sup>43</sup>

Contracting with a large London renter could be convenient for both parties: The circuit could get films that local renters were not offering, and the renter got to do trade in Scotland without establishing a branch to organise circuits. Having a larger number of venues increased the exhibitors' bargaining power in negotiating hire prices with the renters, and allowed them to present fairly new films even in suburban, low-priced venues. Furthermore, as the following chapter will show, after

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<sup>42</sup> 'E.H. Bostock', in *Who's who in Glasgow in 1909*, Glasgow Digital Library <http://gdl.cdlr.strath.ac.uk/eyrwho/eyrwho0331.htm> viewed 2 April 2012.

<sup>43</sup> 'Items of Interest', *The Bioscope*, 26 October 1911, p. 209.

a circuit reached a certain number of venues (about eight) it started to make more sense to own the films again. Even though the larger circuits comprised a relatively small proportion of the Scottish cinemas, the demand they created was particularly important given the relative scarcity of first-run prints. The 1913 sample shows very little overlapping of city-centre programmes, which suggests that renters sent only one or very few prints to Scotland. In the cases in which the snapshot shows two prints of a new release, they were never playing in the same city. In the four cases, furthermore, one of the prints was being shown at a cinema belonging to a circuit. By buying their own first-run films, circuit cinemas increased the availability of second- and third-run films further down the line.

#### **4.4. Conclusion**

This chapter has charted the development of fixed-site exhibition across Scotland, and the emergence of programming and supply practices in this context. It has shown that the process tended to be cautious rather than speculative, driven by the gradual expansion of exhibition concerns with roots in earlier forms of entertainment. These differences in background, strategy and available capital were amplified by the competitive conditions of the urban market, which became rapidly crowded but also fragmented. Bostock's and Buchanan's cases above illustrate how local distribution practices and the competition over first-run films encouraged some degree of concentration of ownership, but also enabled the circulation of relatively new films to suburban, working-class and peripheral venues. It soon became apparent that circuit owners that wanted to extract more revenue from films they had acquired for their own cinemas could rent them out simultaneously. Once

the link between exhibition and distribution was established, the dominance of the companies that were able to capitalise on it was secure.

The heterogeneity that had persisted in exhibition practices was enabled and mirrored by a diverse regional distribution sector, which also emerged organically and was deeply imbricated with exhibition circuits. The following chapter will start by introducing the two main stories of temporary success in this field, B. B. Pictures and Green's, and will go on to describe the business practices and company histories of the main figures in the distribution sector up to 1915.

## Chapter 5

### Rise of the middlemen: Scottish renters in the open-market years

Scotland [...] has many distinctive claims to what we might term “special treatment”. Many, indeed the majority, of the Trade houses are of purely native origin, for it requires a Scot to fully understand the Scottish folk and their requirements.<sup>1</sup>

In his study of London’s ‘flicker alley’ (Cecil Court, where many film-related businesses had offices from the late 1900s), Simon Brown argues that a shift took place in 1907 from the prevalence in the area of ‘cinematograph supply stores’ that stocked films and hardware for sale, towards ‘three new business areas, which were foreign film sales, the supply of equipment and furnishings for cinemas, and film rental.’<sup>2</sup> It is only a few years into this second wave of the film trade that Scottish companies came into the picture. As discussed in Chapter 3, film supply for itinerant exhibition was mostly in the hands of equipment dealers, and Scottish exhibitors obtained new films on visits to London and the North of England, from each other on the fairground circuits, from travelling representatives, or through catalogues.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Our Scottish section’, *The Bioscope*, 29 April 1915, p. 379.

<sup>2</sup> Simon Brown, ‘Flicker Alley: Cecil Court and the Emergence of the British Film Industry’, *Film Studies*.10 (2007), pp. 21-33 (p. 26).

Aside from second-hand dealing and topical work, the Scottish film trade was a client of London-based companies, which were in turn often agents for Continental European production companies. While such balance of trade was never overturned, during the cinema boom and the war years the Scottish film business developed at a remarkable rate. A group of local companies managed to capture some of the profits from the expanding market and to support the demands of Scottish exhibitors, while wrestling with the changing conditions of the British and global film trade. This chapter traces the early years of the most important of these local renters, from 1908 to around 1915. It starts with a comparison between the two largest regional distributors, B. B. Pictures and Green's, to show how their business model was founded on an exhibition circuit, and how the companies' background in different forms of showmanship translated to the new trade conditions. Smaller independent renters are discussed next, highlighting their reliance on open-market trading and their role in supplying exhibitors across a range of venue types and practices. Finally, the presence of branches of English or international companies in Scotland is addressed briefly, considering the extent of their autonomy and their relationships to the Scottish trade. These studies of the working practices of open-market renters are mostly descriptive, but they set the stage for a further discussion of the consequences of supply modes for local programming and exhibition in the following chapter. For factual details and trade press references about the companies mentioned in this chapter, please open the interactive timeline included in the CD-ROM (**[timeline.html](#)**) using a web browser with an internet connection.

### 5.1. Renter-exhibitors

As the previous chapter explained, during the boom years, investors soon realised that the joint ownership of multiple cinema venues could result in economies of scale and a greater bargaining power. Besides its role in the concentration of real estate property and capital investment, a circuit is a distribution structure. It allows exhibitors to spread the cost of film hire or film purchase. In Scotland, the two largest local renters of this period came from the ranks of exhibitors rather than equipment dealers or film producers as had been the case in London and, to some extent, in the United States.<sup>3</sup> This was unavoidable due to the client relationship noted above, which concentrated investment and skills in the exhibition sector. This bias resulted in the Scottish trade being more aligned with the interests of exhibitors than with those of producers. Whether this alliance meant that Scottish renters were more responsive to audience demands is debatable, but the two partially integrated renters-exhibitors, B. B. Pictures and Green's, both enjoyed spectacular popular success into the 1920s and beyond.

This success was not a product of speculation and luck, but of cautious, gradual investment and expansion based on the solid foundation provided by an established circuit. When the B. B. Pictures started renting out films regularly in 1910, the company controlled eight large cinema venues, all converted from various other uses. Two years later, Green's Film Service was established at the headquarters of a circuit of comparable size that was just starting to invest in purpose-built cinemas. Both companies were directed by experienced showmen who were also financially cautious and savvy. The comparison between them is

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<sup>3</sup> Max Alvarez, 'The Origins of the Film Exchange', *Film History*, 17 (2005) pp. 431-65 (p. 433).

particularly interesting, however, because it refers to the parallel discourses and contexts of early exhibition which were described in Chapter 3. While B. B. Pictures had its roots in public hall shows and the temperance movement, the Greens were a fairground family.

Considered side by side, the cases of Green's Film Service and the B. B. Pictures seem to encapsulate the forces and processes that shaped the development of local companies before the war. These companies dominated the exhibition sector, and their prominent branding means they figure highly in oral history accounts of cinemagoing, especially in Glasgow. Much less known is their role as distributors, but as shown above, film renting was an essential part of the business model that allowed their cinema circuit to thrive. The extent to which their business methods converged can be seen to illustrate the multiplicity of forces that crystallised around the institutionalisation of cinema.

#### **5.1.1. J.J. Bennell and the B. B. Pictures, Ltd.**

It is not clear how James Joseph Bennell came to be involved in the film business, but by the time of his death in 1922 he was hailed by many as the 'father' of the Scottish film trade. This was not only due to seniority, but also to the importance of the companies he directed, and to his central role in different trade defence organizations. His contemporaries remembered him as a kind, charitable man, and his interventions in the rowdy business of the Renters' Association certainly paint him as a measured and diplomatic professional.<sup>4</sup> Bennell had a background in Temperance lecturing in the North of England, which goes some way to explain his

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<sup>4</sup> H. Victor Davies, 'The late J.J. Bennell', *The Scottish Kinema Record*, 23 December 1922, pp. 2-3.



conservative style, so removed from the flamboyance and exaggeration of other early showmen.

Bennell claimed to have started touring with a hired bioscope in 1897 with modest success, before he associated with the Bradford-based company, New Century Pictures, to tour in Scotland and the North of England. Working for that company, he visited Glasgow twice a year for public-hall engagements that grew steadily longer, until in 1907 he decided to rent the Wellington Palace, in the South side of Glasgow, from the Good Templars. Bennell later confessed that he had ‘a limited faith in pictures’:

I had pinned my faith to the working classes and the  
twice nightly house, and I did not dream that the  
palatial picture house, as we know it to-day, drawing  
its tens of thousands of well-to-do patrons, would  
ever become a reality.<sup>5</sup>

This outlook meant that for the initial expansion of his circuit, Bennell did not invest in the building of new venues, but instead took leases on large halls in working-class areas in Glasgow, Dundee, and other towns in the central belt of Scotland. (Interestingly, the two venues first leased in Edinburgh were not successful). This low-cost strategy was a condition for the rapid expansion of the B. B. circuit (the initials stood for ‘Bright and Beautiful’), which by 1910 controlled fourteen halls, eight of which were permanent. The other condition was that Bennell had a satisfactory supply of films for hire, which he obtained from Jury’s in London. As he remembered in a very useful contribution to *The Bioscope*, it was

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<sup>5</sup> J. J. Bennell, ‘The Cult of the Cinema’, *The Bioscope*, 20 September 1917, pp. xxii-xxv.

impracticable for Scottish exhibitors to choose films themselves, as they could only be watched in advance at the manufacturers' offices. He therefore left the selection of the programme to his renter; although he recalled having tried Gaumont's service after being approached by the Glasgow manager of that firm, he preferred Jury's.<sup>6</sup> Even as early as 1907-8, there were noticeable differences between the existing renters, and J.J. Bennell emphasized the importance of a good selection.

Up to this point, Bennell probably had never bought films outright, or only to a very limited extent, because he had started by hiring a complete outfit, and then, at New Century, had become part of a circuit of public-hall shows that shared their film library. But in early 1908, by his own account, he was offered for purchase a few films that he had not received from Jury's,

and this was the beginning of the B.B. Film Service. I used those films at shows I organized at [the Glasgow districts of] Govan, Kinning Park, Springburn, Kingston, Langside, Dixon, and Pollokshaws Public Halls, and then obtained something more by hiring them on to other exhibitors, such as Bob Stewart, Thomas Haddon, and others, who were running occasional shows.<sup>7</sup>

He repeated the experiment a few times, although most of the programme still came from Jury's. Perhaps Bennell did not have access to enough capital to

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<sup>6</sup> J. J. Bennell, 'The B.B. Film Service From Start to Finish', *The Bioscope*, 20 September 1917, pp. xvi-xvii.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

switch to outright buying at that moment, because he then entered into a peculiar arrangement with his renter: he would hire 10,000 ft of first-run film every week, and keep it for ten weeks. In this way, Bennell controlled a changing stock of 100,000 ft of film, enough for at least fifteen programmes. Without actually buying any film, Bennell was able to start building a clientele as a distributor over the two years that he kept this arrangement.

The cost of first-run hire at this point was around two pounds per 1000 ft. It is difficult to estimate how much Bennell was paying Jury's, because we do not know precisely how this price diminished over time, but based on price tables from another company it is possible to arrive at an approximation. Over ten weeks, 1000 ft of film might accrue rental fees of around ten pounds.<sup>8</sup> Since he was keeping ten times that amount, it is reasonable to think that Bennell was paying at least a hundred pounds a week. Buying 10,000 ft directly from the manufacturers, on the other hand, would cost £166 at the top rate of four pence a foot, but when trade discounts are considered, it is possible that the price did not differ that much from what Jury's was getting. This must have been the case, since in 1909 Bennell realised 'that [he] was paying [Jury] more than the films cost him', and decided to end the agreement amicably and start buying for himself.<sup>9</sup> Bennell's belated conversion to buying is consistent with the cautious attitude he had adopted regarding cinema venues: he would not sink capital into material assets such as films or bricks and mortar until he was certain that it would pay. His arrangement

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<sup>8</sup> This is based on the rental prices cited in an advertisement for the Royal Film Agency, *The Bioscope*, 2 November 1911, p.370.

<sup>9</sup> Bennell, 'The B.B. Film Service From Start to Finish', pp. xvi-xvii.

with Jury's allowed him to see the development of the market and build a client base gradually.

The experience with Jury's also demonstrated that if films were needed for long enough, as for a circuit of cinemas, then it made sense to buy, even though the manufacturers' price was around eight times as much as the rental fee. This fact was the foundation of the success of renter-exhibitors. Buying enough films to put together a two-hour/6000 ft programme, at the standard manufacturers' rate, would cost around ninety-six pounds (minus trade discounts), while the same amount could be hired, depending on age and condition, at between six and twelve pounds.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, if an exhibitor had eight venues to supply and could rotate the films amongst them, the cost of buying would be equal to that of renting a good-quality programme for each hall, and after the run the films would continue to produce revenue when leased to other exhibitors.

The challenge for Bennell in his new role as a renter was to obtain a selection of films that was as attractive as he had been getting from Jury's. This meant travelling to the London showrooms, and this he did, every other Monday, watching film after film over four long days and returning to Glasgow on Thursday.<sup>11</sup> This work was, again, only justified by the economies of scale: independent exhibitors programming for one single hall could not possibly preview the films they would show, plus the manufacturers would not be inclined to carry on private screenings for such small business. While London exhibitors, even small-time ones, could arrange to attend at least some trade previews, only a few of the

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<sup>10</sup> 'Questions worth answering', *The Bioscope*, 18 September 1908, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Bennell, 'The B.B. Film Service From Start to Finish', pp. xvi-xvii.

Scottish cinema owners were able to select first-hand the films they would put on their screens. The B. B. Pictures, on the contrary, opened in 1911 an office in London to manage acquisitions, under the direction of Bennell's son, Ritson.<sup>12</sup> He started work after some months of practical training, which consisted in observing the audiences at the company's halls and those of their clients in Newcastle, Manchester and Birmingham, to get an idea of 'the class of films the public most appreciated'.<sup>13</sup>

With the full transition to buying and renting, Bennell's business overcame its initial timidity and it was floated in 1910 as the B.B. Pictures Ltd. The prospectus for the flotation, issued in October that year, transcribed a letter from T. J. West (previously mentioned as the manager of the Modern Marvel Company), who had been called in to value the assets and thought the film library was worth £7629 1s 9d. He also celebrated the finding that Bennell had 'over 100 customers on your Hire List'.<sup>14</sup> The B. B. Pictures' rental side was indeed so successful that, in the first half of 1910, it had made a net profit of £2820, which was even greater than the pre-tax profit of the eight exhibition venues for the same period. The company attracted investors of all kinds, from the coalminer-turned-founder of the Labour party, James Keir Hardie MP, to several fellow exhibitors and an array of cabinetmakers, printers, and typists.

Months later, the company had opened a branch office in Manchester,

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<sup>12</sup> *The Bioscope*, 16 March 1911

<sup>13</sup> Bennell, 'The B.B. Film Service From Start to Finish', pp. xvi-xvii.

<sup>14</sup> B.B. Pictures Board of Trade files, Edinburgh, National Archives of Scotland, BT 7670.

to secure some late bookings, which really were the only profitable ones – all the earlier income being absorbed to pay for the films.<sup>15</sup>

A dependent relationship had been created between the circuit of cinemas and the renting business. Box office from the cinemas covered the costs of the film prints, but the profit was made in renting them. A clientele that, according to one source, included the Free Trade Hall in Manchester, and places in Wolverhampton, Sutton Coldfield, and South Wales, was unwittingly helping subsidise the first-run films enjoyed by Glasgow audiences.<sup>16</sup> However, the economies of scale also worked to keep prices relatively low for exhibitors, and secured the acquisition for Scotland of first-run prints. By 1911, the B. B. Pictures were offering a film service (a regular mixed programme) at prices from ten shillings to five pounds per 1000 ft.<sup>17</sup> The company's profits for that year reached £4738.<sup>18</sup> Besides, the exhibition side continued to thrive, and the B. B. Pictures became one of the first recognised 'brands' in Scottish film culture. It had managed to create a brand image combining working-class appeal and respectability, encapsulating the ideals of 'rational entertainment'. It had done so by maintaining visible links with temperance movements and educational efforts scheduled on Sunday evenings, and by engaging very successfully with the juvenile audience. Saturday matinees at the Wellington Palace could attract as many as 3000 children, paying only a penny each, which was

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<sup>15</sup> Bennell, 'The B.B. Film Service From Start to Finish', pp. xvi-xvii.

<sup>16</sup> Jack Kissell, 'Cinema in the By-ways', *Educational Film Bulletin*.33 (1946), pp. 22-31 (p. 26).

<sup>17</sup> 'Away up North', *The Bioscope*, 9 March 1911, p.41

<sup>18</sup> 'Away up North', *The Bioscope*, 30 November 1911, p.657

half the adult price.<sup>19</sup> J. J. Bennell's public persona was crucial to the company's image. He presided over the matinees personally by leading the children in a singalong, but also had lasting connections with the Glasgow Corporation – which hired his show as a turn in the Saturday evening concerts at the City Halls – and with other civic institutions which depended on his services for fundraising events.

The B. B. Pictures' position of power in the Scottish trade was entrenched further by their central role in both the Scottish branch of the Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association (CEA) and the national and regional Renters' Associations. The membership of renter-exhibitors in these organisations was controversial because it could lead to a conflict of interests, but Bennell's activism and connections were so effective for the Scottish trade that other members rarely questioned his views. In the years before the war, Bennell's main campaign was around licensing issues. Following a fire at Gaumont's film depot which destroyed their whole stock, the Glasgow authorities had inspected other renters' premises. The B. B. Pictures worked out of the Wellington Palace itself, and the firemaster considered it very dangerous to keep so much cellulose nitrate (about two million feet of film) next door to a hall seating 2000 people.<sup>20</sup>

The fact that the Wellington Palace could be said to be storing two million feet of film gives an idea of how much the B. B. Pictures had invested in film stock. By the end of 1912, they were certainly the largest renting concern north of the border. When the national body of the Incorporated Association of Film Renters

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<sup>19</sup> 'The Story of the B.B. Pictures' [1910]; Terry Staples, *All Pals Together: The Story of Children's Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), p. 6.

<sup>20</sup> 'Cinematograph Film Stores: Important report to the Glasgow Corporation', *The Bioscope*, 19 September 1912.

created a Buyers' Section, probably intended as an exclusive pressure group to look after the interests of the largest firms, Ritson Bennell (J.J.'s son) was elected to the executive.<sup>21</sup> The Buyers' Section included only those members of the Association that bought at least 40,000 feet of new film per month; the B. B. Pictures claimed to be buying that amount every *week*.<sup>22</sup> As discussed in the previous chapter in relation to the Glasgow Cinema House and the Paragon cinema, they were able to supply the complete programme needed by clients in the opposite ends of the pricing scale, and they were able to do so locally. For a renter-exhibitor like B. B. it was possible *both* to run a first-run programme in their own halls *and* to hire it out, at first-run prices, on the same days: the films were carried back and forth between the halls, as happened between the Cinema House and the Wellington Palace. This way to optimise the use of each first-run print became increasingly necessary with the expansion of exhibition and the subsequent pressure of competition, which led to a sharper pricing curve: the earning potential of each print dropped more dramatically after the first week, because so many exhibitors wanted a first run and there were too many prints of older films choking the market.<sup>23</sup>

Without ever really being intent on complete vertical integration, the B. B. Pictures had a stab at production. The production department was put under the direction of Frank Storm Mottershaw, son of Frank W., the pioneer filmmaker who had made the legendary 1903 thriller, *Daring Daylight Robbery*, for the Sheffield

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<sup>21</sup> *The Bioscope*, 23 January 1913, p. 243.

<sup>22</sup> 'The B.B. Film Hiring Service', advertisement, *The Bioscope*, 8 June 1911, p.466

<sup>23</sup> Ritson Bennell, 'The Film Industry Settles Down', *Educational Film Bulletin* 33 (1946), pp. 34-39 (p. 36).



Photo Co.<sup>24</sup> A topical film of the funeral of a famous illusionist, Sigmund Neuberger ('the Great Lafayette') has also been attributed to the company, with Albert Bryant behind the camera.<sup>25</sup> The following year, cameraman Denver Yates filmed an amateur drama production of *Tam O'Shanter* and a scenic film, *Land of Burns*, shown at B. B.'s Ayr cinema.<sup>26</sup> It is not known if these films were successful, but in any case the production activities of the company did not develop any further.

As the cinema boom peaked, business conditions became increasingly hostile for the B. B. Pictures. Their business practices, as described above, depended on an open-market model where films could be purchased outright and made to pay over long stretches of time. It also depended on having privileged access to the manufacturers in London, mediating between them and individual Scottish cinema managers. These two conditions were eroded throughout the war years by the growth of exclusive dealing and the development of vertical integration, especially of American firms. Although these changes will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 7, the crucial point is that many manufacturers stopped selling films to independent renters, so their supply chain collapsed. The impact on the B. B. Pictures was severe and sudden: their company report for 1914 registered a loss of trading amounting to £7337, which led to the resignation of two directors. The *Kine Weekly* speculated that the company was very close to failing.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Thanks to Peter Walsh, who has done extensive research on early cinema in Yorkshire and provided me with the basic information about the two Mottershaws.

<sup>25</sup> 'Full record for 'FUNERAL OF THE GREAT LAFAYETTE, EDINBURGH'', Scottish Screen Archive online catalogue, reference number 1620. <http://ssa.nls.uk/film.cfm?fid=1620> [viewed 4 Oct 2011].

<sup>26</sup> Kissell, 'Cinema in the By-ways', p. 27; 'Away up North', *The Bioscope*, 8 Aug 1912, p. 413.

<sup>27</sup> 'The B.B. Pictures, Ltd.', *Kinematograph Weekly*, 7 January 1915, p. 40. From Sydney Carter's scrapbook, West Yorkshire Archives 46D/84.

In fact, the company held on, and tried to get into the business of exclusive renting, by acquiring the rights for relatively minor productions and for some serials. They probably tried to keep their old film stock in circulation, offering 'cheap subjects to suit the smallest hall'.<sup>28</sup> Tom Gilbert, the manager of the Crossgates Picturedrome (whose correspondence is discussed more extensively in other chapters), maintained his custom until the end, as many other small-town independent show owners must have done. But in September 1917 J. J. Bennell retired from renting and sold all his stock and list of customers to a new company, Argosy Films. The exhibition side of the B. B. Pictures continued to operate and indeed to thrive; although J. J. Bennell died in 1922, the company was only dissolved in 1971.

### **5.1.2. Green's Film Service**

The early history of George Green's involvement in the film business has been recounted in Chapter 3, where his quick rise as a fairground proprietor and bioscope exhibitor was charted. Having acquired his first fixed venue, the Whitevale Theatre in the East of Glasgow (close to the Carnival ground), in 1902, Green's circuit grew steadily until its heyday in the late 1920s, when it controlled twenty-four cinemas in Scotland.<sup>29</sup> The expansion had only really started in 1911. Just as Bennell stuck to leased halls as he waited to see if cinema was a passing fad, Green continued travelling the fairgrounds and exhibiting in his magnificently decorated bioscope booths until 1914. Only when he was assured, through his experience at the Carnival, that there was a permanent, sustainable market for pictures did he start

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<sup>28</sup> Advert, *The Bioscope*, 1 April 1915, p. 18.

<sup>29</sup> Janet McBain, 'Green's of Glasgow: 'We Want "U" In'', *Film Studies* 10 (2007), pp. 54-57 (p. 56).

investing in bricks and mortar. And there was no timidity in his plans: Green set out to erect huge purpose-built cinemas, initially with the expertise of John Fairweather, an architect who had done work for Carnival structures such as a switchback railway.

Like Bennell, George Green opened most of his cinemas – called Picturedromes – in working-class areas, and offered low admission prices. He used to buy a large amount of films for his fairground operation, but by 1911 he was renting them from others, including Jury's and the Bendon Trading Company (which will be discussed in the next section). Then,

demands for his increasing number of halls, and the fact that other showmen solicited his help in picking their programmes, brought him face to face with the necessity of becoming his own renter.<sup>30</sup>

Green's Film Service was launched in February 1912, when George Green controlled eight cinemas. This mirrors the case of the B. B. Pictures, and confirms that eight was the minimum number of venues for which it made more sense to buy films outright.

Starting, as it did, in the midst of the cinema boom, Green's Film Service expanded rapidly, soon outgrowing its initial premises in the Whitevale's winding room. One of George Green's sons, John Cyril, was in charge of the hiring department until his death of pneumonia in June 1914. It was at this point, on the eve of war, that George Green decided to get out of the fairground business

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<sup>30</sup> 'Scottish renter's rapid rise', *The Bioscope* I, 29 April 1915, p. 459.

altogether, so that his other sons could ‘stay at home to assist with my other business’. This frankly worded advertisement occupied a full page in *The World’s Fair* of 4 July 1914, and in it George Green declared that all his fairground equipment, ground leases and routes were for sale. This was a good moment to leave the fairground trade, as it was to be severely curtailed by wartime restrictions (especially on fuel for the engines, which were in some cases requisitioned by the military); but in hindsight it cannot have been a good moment to make a sale. In any case, the expansion of Green’s circuit and renting activities continued, so that in May 1915 the Film Service, now under the direction of Fred Green, moved to more central premises. At this point, *The Bioscope* claimed that the firm had ‘over a hundred customers having complete programmes’, and three motor cars to deliver the films to them.<sup>31</sup> It is tempting to think that the proceeds from the sale of the fairground engines were invested in the motor cars. Such a swap would crystallise a change in film transport methods that became manifest during the railway strike of 1919, when distributors, in a rare display of trade unity (and unapologetic strike-breaking), pooled resources to move their films by road.<sup>32</sup>

George Green died on 17 November 1915. At that moment, the assets he left were valued at £38,393, almost two-fifths of which corresponded to the cinemas he owned, their fittings and stock. Most of the remainder corresponded to ‘household property’ in Bolton and Preston, and real estate in England.<sup>33</sup> After his death, business was carried on by Fred and Bert Green, but the first years of war proved

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<sup>31</sup> ‘Scottish renter’s rapid rise’, *The Bioscope* I, 29 April 1915, p. 459.

<sup>32</sup> Prince Bendon, ‘A message from the founder’, *Cinema Club (Glasgow) 1919-1940*, booklet at Glasgow Museums collections, PP 1975 197.9, pp.2-3.

<sup>33</sup> ‘George Green deceased. Balance sheet as at 17<sup>th</sup> November 1915’. Typescript, n.d., Scottish Screen Archive, 5/8/35.

difficult, with the company registering losses in 1916 and 1917. Their trading account for the year ending on 31 March 1918 showed that the company was on the mend, and provides a good illustration of the economics of renting at that conjuncture.<sup>34</sup>

An important caveat regarding the following data, drawn from documents prepared by the accountants of Green's trustees before the new incorporation of George Green Ltd in 1918, is that it is not clear whether the 'Purchases' line includes other things apart from films. My hypothesis is that films must at least be the main component of that item, because many other expenses (from carbons to stamps) are itemised separately. With that in mind, the accounts show that the 'purchases' for the fiscal year 1917 amounted to £24,847 (that is, if my hypothesis is right, the amount of film bought by Green's). The total drawings from the Film Service were £30,675. Of this sum, the supply of film to the company's own houses was valued at £6298. This must be taken to be the cost of supplying a year's worth of films to thirteen cinemas. The circuit had drawn almost five times that much in box office takings, and it showed very good margins even after wages and other expenses are considered. In contrast, when the cost of supply to their own houses is deducted from the drawings of the Film Service, the latter turns out to be about five hundred pounds in the red. This shows that at this point the renting side of the operation depended on exhibition to stay in profit. This imbalance increased during the following year, when income from the Film Service dropped by 18 per cent.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> 'George Greens Trustees. Greens Film Service. Picture Houses and Carnival. Trading and Profit and loss account for year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March, 1918.' Typescript, n.d., Scottish Screen Archive, 5/8/35.

<sup>35</sup> 'Copy of draft. George Green Ltd. 182 Trongate, Glasgow. Trading and profit and loss account for year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March, 1919.' Typescript, n.d., Scottish Screen Archive, 5/8/35.

The bulk of Green's trade was in open market programmes, even as the industry trends turned away from them. Through an office in London, staffed by Green's trusted colleague Mr Dearden, they bought up to four prints of the most popular titles. Green's advertising continued to appeal to regular customers through the provision of open-market films on different price bands. As late as 1917, the company claimed to have bought 1,250,000 feet of open market films over the previous year, and offered a twice-weekly change of two-reel features.<sup>36</sup> (The amount purchased may have included the whole stock of Hibbert's, an early Bradford renter bought out by Green's in October 1916).<sup>37</sup> Green's continued dealing in shorter films resulted from the fact that some of Green's cinemas still presented 'variety' programmes at a time when features were starting to dominate. Indeed, in the *Bioscope Annual* for 1915, Green's cinemas were listed as presenting live variety items alongside the films, although this practice seems to have been occasional and restricted to few of the venues.

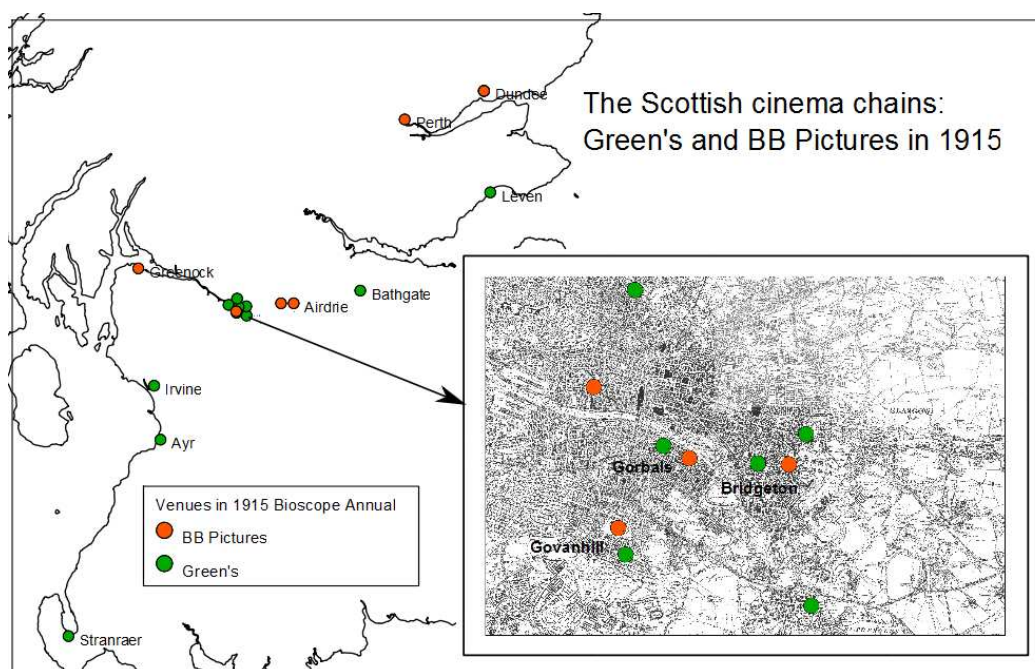
The same source allows for a comparison between Green's and Bennell's circuits at that point, with both companies listing twelve permanent venues each. As Figure 11 shows, both companies concentrated their activities in Glasgow, with Dundee as a secondary stronghold for the B. B. Pictures. Green's circuit reached into Stranraer, Ayr and Irvine on the west coast, and to Leven in Fife on the east. This pattern becomes understandable in the light of the fairground routes sketched in Chapter 3, which included all of those locations. The west-coast bias may also be

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<sup>36</sup> Advert, *The Bioscope* (Scottish section), 11 January 1917, p.181; Advert, *The Entertainer* Vol 4 No 177, 17 February 1917, p.8.

<sup>37</sup> 'Trade jottings', *The Entertainer* Vol 3 No 158, 7 October 1916, p.11; McBain, 'Mitchell and Kenyon's Legacy in Scotland', p. 115.

a result of the continued links of the Green family with Lancashire. They owned substantial real estate in the Northwest of England, including Farringdon Park on the outskirts of Preston. The two companies had halls in relative proximity in three working-class areas of Glasgow: Govanhill, Bridgeton and the Gorbals.



**Figure 11: Green's and B. B. Pictures' venues in 1915**

**Source:** *Bioscope Annual* (London: Gaines, 1915). **Glasgow map:** Ordnance

Survey County Series 1:10560, 1910. © Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group Limited (2012). All rights reserved. Supplied by Edina Digimap <http://digimap.edina.ac.uk/>

A look at the programmes offered by some of Green's cinemas on Thursday, 8 January 1913 (the first 'snapshot' date, already discussed in Chapter 4), can give an approximate idea about the circulation of films within Green's circuit (Table 3). The newest film was being shown at Govan. The second run was at Irvine, and then it might pass to other Glasgow cinemas before going to Leven and Rutherglen. This is only a very rough indication of a hierarchy, because bookings would be subject to

demand from other exhibitors, the number of prints acquired, and to formed ideas about what was suitable for different audiences. Programmes were unlikely to pass to the next venue intact; there was a constant process of re-arranging and substituting that could only be understood with a much broader collection of exhibition data. This is impracticable at the moment, but as more and more newspaper sources get digitized and become searchable, it will not be long before such endeavour is feasible.

**Table 3: Films in Green's venues on 8 January 1913**

<b>Town</b>	<b>Venue</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Release date</b>
Glasgow	Green's Govan Picturedrome	Forest ranger	1913-01-05
Irvine	Green's Picturedrome	Private Hector	1912-12-26
		Rube's mistake	1912-12-19
		The alibi	1912-12-18
		A child's devotion	1912-11-24
Leven	Green's Picturedrome	Nick Winter and the stolen favourite	1912-12-14
Rutherglen	Green's Pavilion	Sins of the fathers	1912-07-04

If it is hard enough to get a notion of how films moved within a circuit, it is much more difficult to examine the broader circulation of these prints through Green's Film Service, particularly in regards to open-market films. Who were the 'hundred customers'? Unless some new archives are unearthed, this question cannot be answered. What can be said is that Green's own circuit was itself hierarchical, and it accommodated films of different ages from release date onwards. Because Green's cinemas were located outside the city centre, they did not face the same intense competition as other venues, but were placed in direct rivalry with the B. B.



Pictures. Programming strategies are likely to have evolved in response, but these are impossible to explore in more depth because of the paucity of surviving B. B. handbills. It is worth noting, however, that these two companies' policies of exhibiting their new acquisitions in their own circuit first, together with their concentration on working-class districts, meant that it was possible to see the best and newest films very cheaply in some of Scotland's suburban and small-town halls.

Green's continued support of open-market, medium-length films was a dangerous business strategy. As discussed in the case of the B. B. Pictures, high demand for first-run pictures created a glut in the market so the rental price dropped rapidly. Green's boasted about the number of prints they had ordered, in particular for serials. This reflected the interesting position of serials during the transition to feature programming; serials could take the role of features, bringing into the programme a strong, well-publicised attraction without disrupting established practices. As Rudmer Canjels has argued, serials were a separate film form that co-existed with the feature, but that was in tension with it because serials retained greater flexibility and were more adaptable to the needs of exhibitors in different contexts.<sup>38</sup>

While maintaining this foothold on the open market, Green's were nonetheless moving with the times. In order to counter the drawbacks of open-market oversupply, early in the war years the company had become exclusive booking agents for Nordisk features, the first in a series of deals that allowed Green's to keep a stake in the exclusive market. Later on, they regularly acquired

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<sup>38</sup> Rudmer Canjels, *Distributing Silent Film Serials: Local Practices, Changing Forms, Cultural Transformation*, Routledge Advances in Film Studies (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), p. 23.

exclusive rights for the Red Feather and Bluebird features marketed by Phillips, and in 1917, Green's received £780 by commission as agents for Samson films, and were handling Phillips exclusives.<sup>39</sup> But these were relatively small fry. Two deals closed during 1917 attempted to strengthen the company's position in the changing market. At the beginning of the year, they became agents for Triangle, the pioneering Hollywood studio that employed Griffith, Sennett and Ince, as well as Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, and Roscoe Arbuckle.<sup>40</sup> Towards the end of the same year, they acquired the rights for the sought-after new Mutual films, also known as the 'million dollar Chaplins.'<sup>41</sup>

In the last year of the decade, Green's failed to make a profit, but the drawings from the Film Service were up and the cost of purchases down, helping to close the gap that had opened before. On the other hand, drawings from the picture houses had risen much more sharply, but wage increases had absorbed part of the revenue. [Table 4] The company was constituted as a trust to give financial security to the Green brothers and sisters who had inherited it, and it continued to thrive, although renting played an increasingly minor part of the business. A similar fate befell the production department, which produced a newsreel from 1917 to the early 1920s.

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<sup>39</sup> 'Trade jottings', *The Entertainer* Vol 4 No 175, 3 Feb 1917, p.10; 'George Greens Trustees. Greens Film Service. Picture Houses and Carnival. Trading and Profit and loss account for year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March, 1918.' Typescript, n.d., Scottish Screen Archive, 5/8/35.

<sup>40</sup> *The Bioscope*, 26 July 1917, p.348

<sup>41</sup> *The Bioscope*, 29 November 1917, p.97

**Table 4: George Green, Ltd. Extract from trading and profit and loss accounts.**

<b>Paid out</b>	<b>Year to 1 Apr 1918</b>	<b>Year to 1 Apr 1919</b>	<b>Year to 1 Apr 1920</b>
Purchases	24847	30975	26369
Carriage	731	1006	1266
Wages	16993	22026	31408
Producing	579	1645	2496
London films acct	2915	10589	2900
<b>Drawings</b>			
Film Service	24376	19904	21990
Picture Houses	31428	38049	52238
Gross Profit/Loss	-118	5580	-4228

**Source:** Summarised from accountants' reports, kept at the Scottish Screen Archive, 5/8/35.

All amounts are in pounds.

In 1927, Green's Playhouse opened in Glasgow as the largest cinema in Europe and proof of the strength of Scottish exhibition.<sup>42</sup> Given the vast differences in the growth rates for Green's Picture Houses and Green's Film Service already evident in earlier accounts, it is hardly surprising that by then the company had given up on distribution. The parallels with the B. B. Pictures are striking, as they show the retreat of even the largest local companies towards the 'retail' end of the film business as a rational strategy, dictated both by the rising popularity of cinema and by the changes in trade methods that prevented regional renters from owning

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<sup>42</sup> McBain, 'Green's of Glasgow', p. 56.

film prints for exploitation. For the B. B. Pictures and Green's, exhibition was so profitable that reinvestment was directed to building larger, grander cinemas rather than production facilities. The incipient bottom-up vertical integration that had been essayed was abandoned and the client relationship to Hollywood and London consolidated subsequently.

## 5.2. Independent renters

Although the B. B. Pictures and Green's Film Service were the largest of the early Scottish film renters, they were not the first. Such distinction lies with William John 'Prince' Bendon, a ventriloquist who had given some bioscope shows in the late 1890s, but had started dealing in films in 1900. Initially, he worked from his own home in Cathcart Road in Glasgow's South side, and acted as an agent for A.D. Thomas and for Jury's, which, as mentioned above, supplied J. J. Bennell's halls before the latter started buying directly.<sup>43</sup> In these early days, Bendon hired out complete bioscope equipment kits and dealt in projectors and accessories as well as films.<sup>44</sup> Through these activities, he built long-lasting ties with many of the Scottish cinema pioneers, including A.E. Pickard, George Green, and Harry Milne at Hengler's Circus, as well as Bennell.<sup>45</sup> Pickard, the flamboyant manager of the Britannia Panopticon on Glasgow's Trongate, seems to have been a close friend, and Bendon had shares in his company, as mentioned in the last chapter. Thus, although the Bendon Trading Company did not have an exhibition side, it did have privileged access to Pickard's growing cinema circuit in Glasgow and suburbs, and Bendon's exclusive films were frequently shown there.

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<sup>43</sup> 'Jury's Pictures (Scotland) Limited', *The Bioscope* 28 January 1915, p. 369

<sup>44</sup> 'Glasgow's Oldest Renting Firm', *The Bioscope*, 6 May 1915, p. 559-61.

<sup>45</sup> T. A. Blake, 'Prince Bendon', *Educational Film Bulletin*.33 (1946), pp. 31-32.

Bendon's background and his contacts in the live entertainment business meant that the company was more likely than others to supply films for music halls and theatres. In 1911, for instance, customers of the Bendon Trading Company included the Century Theatre in Motherwell, the Theatre Royal in Coatbridge, and the Alhambra and the Zoo in Glasgow.<sup>46</sup> Bendon supplied complete programmes for these and other venues, and became known mostly as providers of regular open-market fare. The company marketed mostly American brands. The MPPC brands, and especially Lubin and Vitagraph, were exploited extensively by the larger Scottish renters, and their films could be obtained from B. B., Green's, Bendon and Gaumont. These productions, sold to the British open market by import agents such as Markt & Co, formed the back-bone of Scottish exhibition: the 1913 programming snapshot, for instance, shows twelve identifiable Lubin films being shown from Aberdeen to Dumfries. The newer ones were at circuit venues, such as Green's Glasgow Picturedrome and R. C. Buchanan's Coliseum in Edinburgh. Because the renter-exhibitors, that is to say the large circuits, showed their own prints first run, independent renters were crucial for exhibitors that were trying to programme first or second-run films against competition from circuit venues.

While the clients of the B. B. Pictures and Green's saw an advantage in hiring from circuit-owners, because they could guarantee first-run films on reasonable rates, the combination of exhibition and distribution was contentious. Showmen working in the same locality as renter-exhibitors complained that their suppliers were at the same time competitors, and they would keep all the newest and best films to their own houses while only circulating lesser titles. Making a

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<sup>46</sup> 'Away up North', *The Bioscope*, 21 September 1911, p.615

virtue out of necessity, independence from exhibition interests was one of the main selling points for the smaller companies. United Films Ltd, a short-lived company established in December 1910 by ex-Bendon employee James Bowie, made a point of it in their advertisement: ‘we are not showmen but are the best servants of showmen’.<sup>47</sup>

The tension between independent renters and renter-exhibitors peaked around December 1915, in connection with the formation of the Scottish Renters’ Association and the question of exclusive and direct renting. These were contentious issues because some renters were more invested in the open market than others, and sided with the producers or the exhibitors depending on what suited them. Initially, those renters that specialised on supplying a ‘regular programme’, such as Bendon, were committed to the open market model and tried to keep a stock of single- and double-reel films. One of the stauncher opponents of the Renters’ Association was Jack Carlton Baker, a maverick renter and local sales agent for the *Kine Weekly*. Baker’s advertisements in *The Entertainer* declared: ‘I am not on the panel [the Renters’ Association]. I mind my own business and give best value for money’.<sup>48</sup> Around the same dates, Baker published a pamphlet entitled *The silent drama*, seemingly an invective against the Association, which I have been unable to trace.

Baker’s business worked on similar lines to Bendon’s. He supplied regular programmes, and in particular offered a cheap summer alternative, entreating exhibitors to ‘Say what you can AFFORD to pay for your Summer Programmes –

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<sup>47</sup> Advert, The United Films Ltd, *The Bioscope*, 15 December 1910, p.56

<sup>48</sup> ‘Trade Jottings’, *The Entertainer* Vol 3 No 123, 5 February 1916, p.9

JOIN THE SCOTTISH SHOWMEN'S SPECIALLY SELECTED SUMMER SERVICE'.<sup>49</sup> He also provided posters, tickets, publications, and some features. Baker's main selling point was lower prices, and therefore his marketing was not directed at first-run exhibitors. The argument was that newer films did not mean better films, and that it might be better for a show to get tried-and-tested films that had been selected with a certain kind of audience in mind:

Let the man down the road run releases and pay big  
prices. You pay the small price and get the "Best". It  
takes a little time to know the "Best" and THE  
RELEASE HOUSE CANNOT GET THEM ALL.

Do You Ever Think of This?

Every film has been viewed and is booked to you by  
the viewer. No matter what class of subject you ask  
for, you obtain it here to suit your patrons.

YOU CAN PAY DOUBLE AND FARE WORSE.<sup>50</sup>

Baker did indeed travel to London himself to view and buy films. However, his lack of capital meant that he turned increasingly towards working as a booking agent. The same advertisement quoted above showed that Baker had an agreement with the North Eastern Film Service, from Sunderland, to manage the Scottish bookings for some Motograph two-reelers and the early IMP feature, *Traffic in Souls*. Such ad-hoc collaborations were common, although they might not have involved

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<sup>49</sup> Advert, Jack C Baker, *The Entertainer*, Vol 1 No 27, 4 April 1914, p.10

<sup>50</sup> Advert, Jack C Baker, *The Entertainer*, Vol 2 No 58, 7 November 1914, p.8

anything more substantial than reciprocal representation, as when the newly-formed United Films boasted of having agents in Belfast, Newcastle, Leeds and Middlesbrough.<sup>51</sup> In Baker's case, he was the last in the sequence of sub-letting and sub-dividing territories that characterised the beginnings of exclusive renting, of which more will be said in Chapter 8.

### **5.2.1. Small-time Exclusives**

As early as 1911, the lower end of the exclusives market was appealing to renters with little capital, since it allowed them to start an operation without buying any films. Around the demise of United Films at the end of that year, one of its associates, a Paisley exhibitor called Arthur Vivian, registered Vivian Pictures Ltd with a capital of £2500, and the avowed intention to supply exclusives from Andrew's, Jury's, Kinematograph Trading Co, Monopol and Walturdaw.<sup>52</sup> As the supply of open market subjects started to dry out, independent renters sought refuge in niche or cheaper exclusives. Baker had been dealing in two- and three-reeler exclusives from relatively minor brands such as Powers, Continental, Band C, and Broncho, and he later assumed the representation for Fenning's Film Service and for Lucoque productions. He developed a portfolio of 'picturizations', comprising a few dozen feature films mostly based on plays or books, whose authors were mentioned in the publicity matter rather than the production company. This was understandable, given that most of these films are by little-known brands and featuring no stars; by 1916, they did not sound as an appealing proposition. These were the kind of 'exclusives' that other renters shunned because they relied on

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<sup>51</sup> 'Away up North', *The Bioscope*, 18 May 1911, p.305

<sup>52</sup> 'Away up North', *The Bioscope*, 23 November 1911, p.575



moral scandal for attention. For Baker, however, these ‘film plays’ allowed him to offer exclusive feature programming to exhibitors that could not afford it otherwise. Furthermore, he introduced (for Lucoque’s production of Rider Haggard’s *She*) the notion of ‘sharing terms’ or percentage hiring.<sup>53</sup> In order to motivate an exhibitor to book a film of dubious appeal, the renter offers not to take a flat rate but a set proportion of the box office. This is, broadly, the system that is still in use nowadays.

As late as 1917, the Bendon Trading Company could still boast of buying thirty new open-market subjects in a month.<sup>54</sup> However, William and Samuel Bendon, who were now running the business after their father’s retirement, had noticed the changing conditions and had already started to carve a new niche market that would allow them to stay in business. The company’s experience in handling films for legitimate theatres, and their personal connections in that field, led to a strong position handling ‘super’ features later in the decade. D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and Thomas Ince’s *Civilization* (1916) were amongst the big films handled by Bendon for Scotland and four northern English counties. Titles like these were first road-shown outside the regular cinema circuits and using different distribution patterns, and could benefit from being handled by a smaller company that could work more closely with exhibitors. Indeed, through the spatial hierarchies of sub-letting, the exploitation of such films was handled in a very localised way. The letters of Tom Gilbert, the Fife exhibitor that has been mentioned in previous chapters, show him organising bookings of *Civilization* in

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<sup>53</sup> Advert, Jack C Baker, *The Entertainer* Vol 3 No 129, 25 March 1916, p.8-9

<sup>54</sup> ‘Trade Notes and News’, *The Bioscope*, 1 February 1917, p.510

1918 for his own halls at Crossgates and Lumphanan, but also for other exhibitors in Dunfermline, Bannockburn, and Kinross, at distances from four to twenty-five miles approximately to the north and west.<sup>55</sup>

I will come back to the chaotic market of cheap exclusive renting in Chapter 8. This introduction, however, gives an indication of how trade conditions were changing around the start of the War, squeezing independent renters, and their clients, out of the open-market supply chain. The failure of the smaller companies (only Bendon survived) confirms the extent to which the rental trade was in thrall to exhibition circuits. Furthermore, at least part of the blame for the collapse of these companies can be attributed to their unsuccessful attempts at vertical integration towards production. Some of Scotland's earliest efforts in narrative filmmaking were the product of the budding ambitions of these firms, and their failure must be considered another factor in the imbalance of power between exhibition and production that became a feature of the regional film culture.

### 5.2.2. Independent renters as producers

The demise of United Films Ltd was accelerated by their only claim to fame: *Rob Roy*, a three-reel production shot during the summer of 1911 in the Clachan of Aberfoyle, Perthshire, and directed by Arthur Vivian. The production probably received some support from the English firm, Barker Motion Photography, which also undertook its distribution south of Leeds. The cameraman, Danver Yates, was a Barker employee who later went to work for the B. B. Pictures.<sup>56</sup> *Rob Roy* can be

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<sup>55</sup> Letters (wet copy). Tom Gilbert to: Fraser and Carmichael, Dunfermline (29 July 1918); Mrs Paine, Kinross (14 October 1918); James Stephenson, Bannockburn (15 October 1918). NAS SC36/79/18 pp. 314, 339, 341.

<sup>56</sup> Kissell, 'Cinema in the By-ways', p. 27.

considered the first Scottish feature, and it was longer than almost any other British film up to that point. It was shot entirely outdoors, and featured a well-known cast including John Clyde, who was already famous in stage productions of the same story.

In 1915, Jack Baker followed on Bowie's footsteps and started a production company, the Scottish Artistic Film Producing Company. Its first exercise involved the cameraman, G. E. Brown, filming down the river Clyde for the launch of a P&O liner, the Kashmir. The first planned release was 'The crests of Scottish regiments', in early 1915, but the first film actually screened, at the Hillhead Salon, was *Loch Lomond in early spring* (430 ft, tinted and toned, camera by G. E. Brown). Other films covered Lanark and the Clyde falls, Grantown-on-Spey, and Loch Awe. The films were released on the open market, and (in theory, at least) could be obtained from other renters.<sup>57</sup> Considering Baker's fractious relationships with his colleagues, it is hardly surprising that the production effort was short-lived.

Bendon had long had an interest in camera work and produced some local topicals and advertising films. He is credited with having established a studio in a disused tramway depot at Rouken Glen.<sup>58</sup> A film was shot here by the Ace Film Company in 1918, *A Cotter's Saturday Night* (after Burns' poem), starring a Yorkshire-born star of the music hall, Etty Thompson or 'Vonetta'.<sup>59</sup> This was followed by *The Harp King* in 1919, although the level of involvement Bendon had

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<sup>57</sup> 'Cinema Chit-Chat', *The Entertainer* Vol 2 No 70, 30 January 1915, p.5; 'Cinema Chit-Chat', *The Entertainer* Vol 2 No 73, 20 February 1915, p.7; Advert, Scottish Artistic Film Producing Co, *The Entertainer* Vol 2 No 83, 1 May 1915, p.6; 'Cinema chit-chat', *The Entertainer* Vol 3 No 108, 23 October 1915, p.5

<sup>58</sup> T. A. Blake, 'Prince Bendon', *Educational Film Bulletin* 33 (1946), pp. 31-32 (p. 32).

<sup>59</sup> Amy Dawes, 'The female of the species', *Early Popular Visual Culture* 5.2 (2007), pp. 127-150 (p. 146).

in these two projects is not clear. Ultimately, any illusions Bendon had of breaking into film production were left unrealised. He became the founder of the Glasgow Cinema Club and his sons continued to run the business until the late 1930s.<sup>60</sup>

It is hard to know how successful *Rob Roy* was, but by 1912 United Films Ltd seemed to be no more, and a new company, directed by one Hugh Bowie, had been established at the same address under the name of The Glasgow Films Ltd. This too had disappeared from the Post Office directory by 1916. Hugh Bowie was then running the Bo'ness Town Hall cinema, and James Bowie managed another hall at Bannockburn. Their trajectory followed a familiar track; the structure of the film industry made it extremely difficult for medium-sized local companies to succeed in production or distribution, while exhibition continued to provide more secure returns. But the lowly positions they found themselves in after very ambitious starts also illustrate the significance of the transformation of film trade over less than a generation.

After his stint as a feature-film director, Arthur Vivian spent some time as the appointed representative for the New Century Pictures, and then set up a new company, Scottish Film Hiring Co, which was more oriented towards equipment and cinema-building accessories.<sup>61</sup> However, in 1914 Vivian had gone to Coatbridge as manager of the Pavilion, and in 1916 he found himself unemployed. When the reporter for *The Entertainer* transmitted Vivian's request for a job 'that

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<sup>60</sup> Butler, Eamonn. 'Biography of 'BENDON, William John 'Prince''. Scottish Screen Archive website, <http://ssa.nls.uk/biography.cfm?bid=10002> [viewed 3 Oct 2011]

<sup>61</sup> 'Away up North', *The Bioscope*, 4 April 1912, p.45; *The Bioscope*, 5 September 1912

would give him a free hand', it was with scepticism: 'methods which would have carried one through yesterday cannot apply today'.<sup>62</sup>

### 5.3. Branch offices

When the Scottish Film Renters' Association was created in 1915, five of the seventeen funding members were not, strictly speaking, Scottish film renters. They were branches of companies with headquarters in different parts of England. Branch companies, and travelling agents for English companies, controlled a substantial part of the Scottish trade from its inception. A distinction in terms of working practice must be made between these agents and renters. Some companies such as Ruffell's appointed local representatives, or sent their own to Glasgow and Edinburgh every so often, in order to meet with exhibitors and make bookings.<sup>63</sup> But these agents simply relayed the orders back to headquarters. Often operating out of a hotel room, they did not have film stocks in Scotland and their autonomy was very limited; they acted simply as a sales force. The cases I will mention next, on the other hand, represent more established firms which opened a branch office, kept films in storage for use within the region, and were able to provide preview screenings. In these companies, the local managers had autonomy and were well-known figures in their own right.

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<sup>62</sup> 'Trade jottings', *The Entertainer*, Vol 3 No 141, 10 June 1916, p.13

<sup>63</sup> These travellers called in to cinema managers with synopses and brochures, often driving a hard sell and using the competition between neighbouring venues to persuade managers to book expensive first-runs or exclusives. The job of travelling agent had acquired such a reputation that the Leeds exhibitors, for instance, were trying to introduce a standard contract form so that deals agreed with travellers were honoured by the renters, since they had been known to scrap agreements if a better offer appeared later. "A Leeds conference: Renters and exhibitors meet in friendly discussion", *The Bioscope*, 22 February 1917, p791.

The first company to establish a branch in Scotland was Gaumont, which had offices at Glasgow's Trongate by September 1909 (and probably since 1908).<sup>64</sup> This was a British affiliate of the French manufacturer, with A.C. Bromhead installed as London director. They saw themselves as a clearing house and billed as 'The Scottish Film Bureau'. Through their marketing of equipment, in particular Chrono projectors, they came into contact with many of the pioneering exhibitors. However, as J.J. Bennell recalled, they could not always deliver on their promises: he had switched his supply from Jury's to Gaumont's for a short while, after the manager, Fred Gent offered

that I should see in advance in Gaumont's showroom  
at Glasgow practically all the films issued, and should  
have the choice of selecting my own programme.<sup>65</sup>

Bennell found that Gaumont were not in fact able to supply the range of films he expected, and went back to receiving a pre-selected programme from Jury's. Over time, Gaumont was able to expand its catalogue by striking distribution deals with smaller production companies. But if exhibitors were to be able to select their own programmes, this meant that the company had to keep a large stock of films. With at least seven branches throughout Britain, and its own factory for striking positive prints, Gaumont was in a unique position to do that. From 1911, the company offered a cheap film service, from ten shillings per 1000 ft, in which exhibitors could make a selection and were guaranteed to get all the films they had

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<sup>64</sup> In September 1909, the manager, Fred Gent, was reported to have presented the Shackleton films at Balmoral by Royal command ('Items of Interest', *The Bioscope*, 30 September 1909, p.9). However, J. J. Bennell's reminiscences suggest that the branch existed in 1908.

<sup>65</sup> J. J. Bennell, 'The B.B. Film Service From Start to Finish', *The Bioscope*, 20 September 1917, pp. xvi-xvii.

requested.<sup>66</sup> This was not possible for local renters that might only own a limited number of prints (usually just one), and had to do their best to replace the requested films that were unavailable for other suitable ones. This flexibility, low prices and continued support for shorter films made Gaumont a popular supplier with managers of smaller halls. As late as 1917, Gaumont was still releasing two programmes of comedy shorts by assorted American independent brands.<sup>67</sup>

It was on a change night – a Wednesday, when all the films on hire were returned to the renters’ offices to be checked overnight and dispatched to the next engagement in the morning – when a fire broke out in Gaumont’s film store in the heart of Glasgow, destroying the whole stock.<sup>68</sup> Despite this, and a previous burglary, Gaumont continued to thrive, moving to new premises in April 1915. The new place had, on the ground floor, a suite of offices for the manager, assistant manager, cashier, and ‘each of the programme clerks’, besides the enquiries desk, phones, typing pool and counting house. Programme clerks were the main actors in the actual process of distribution – selecting a varied group of films, keeping tabs on each cinema’s orders, and keeping up with the week’s releases. In the basement floor, there was a projection theatre, the film storage vaults, the poster store, facilities for examination and repair of the films (a work often entrusted to women), and the packing and dispatching rooms. These were all functions of distribution and

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<sup>66</sup> Advert, Supplement to *The Bioscope*, 24 August 1911, p.xiv-xv.

<sup>67</sup> Advert, Gaumont Film Hire Service, *The Bioscope*, 4 January 1917, p.22

<sup>68</sup> *The Bioscope*, 22 August 1912.

the planning of the office space can give some indication about the kind and level of employment that renters created.<sup>69</sup>

An important part of Gaumont's output was the newsreel, *Gaumont Graphic*, which had started in 1910. The Glasgow branch, which had developing and printing facilities, worked in the production of local news items and films of local events for particular exhibitors. In these two lines of work – newsreels and local topicals – Gaumont had a competitor, also of French origin: the almighty Pathé Frères. In many other respects, nonetheless, the two companies were very different. The main point of divergence was that while Gaumont was, in Britain, mainly a distribution company with only a tentative stake in fiction film production, Pathé was a manufacturer's agency. Despite its director's repeated attempts to rein in the British open market, up to 1913 Pathé films had been traded as regular releases. However, at the start of that year, Pathé announced they would stop selling to renters and do their own distribution instead. To this effect, they acquired the premises and staff of Fenning's Film Service in London and Leeds, and soon afterwards opened a Glasgow branch on Miller Street. A manager, John Jowett, was sent up from London, and Andrew Reid was hired as a traveller. A year later, the number of staff was said to reach twenty.<sup>70</sup>

Pathé did not distribute other companies' films, and had stricter policies on renting their own. By the time they switched to direct renting, their films already occupied a strange position: they stood apart from regular programmes. Pathé did not emphasise the offer of a complete programme, as Gaumont did, because their

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<sup>69</sup> 'Gaumont's New Premises', *The Entertainer* 2:81, 17 April 1915, p.5.

<sup>70</sup> 'Scottish Notes', *The Bioscope*, 9 April 1914, p.175



stock could not support it. On the contrary, they promoted more distinctive product lines such as travel and animal films, comedy series, coloured films and pantomime films, which monopolised Glasgow screens in the run-up to Hogmanay year after year. It was not for the branch office to second-guess what kinds of films would get a better reception in Scotland; their role was to try and market the output sent by the manufacturing interest. These subjects were priced from five shillings to £3 10s for 1000 ft, and four pounds for the same length in coloured film.<sup>71</sup>

The other major national company to establish a branch in Glasgow before the war was Jury's Pictures. As mentioned in several examples above, Jury's had a strong presence in Scotland from the earliest days. Its exclusives had been booked through other companies, including Vivian Films Ltd and Hibbert's. In 1915, a new company was constituted with the name of Jury's Pictures (Scotland) Ltd. Thomas Ormiston, an exhibitor who was in the midst of acquiring a circuit of cinemas around Lanarkshire, was named as co-director.<sup>72</sup> By the time the Glasgow company was established, Jury's was concentrating its business on exclusives. Exclusives trading, at its prestigious end, depended on preview screenings, and the premises designed for the company seemed to reflect this. After an awed commentary on the firm's glass-roofed equipment showroom, *The Bioscope* provided a description of the screening room and film store that merits quoting at length:

Rich carpeting covers the floor, comfortable tip-up  
chairs give the acme of comfort, walls are panelled in  
a warm tone of red, and the frieze and roof are

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<sup>71</sup> Advert, Supplement to *The Bioscope*, 15 May 1913, p.xxiii.

<sup>72</sup> 'New Companies', *The Bioscope*, 18 February 1915, p.633-4

decorated with choice designs in fibrous plaster work.

A convenient “rake” gives all visitors a clear view of the screen, which is enclosed in as natty a little proscenium as could well be imagined. [...] The dispatch department is also in the basement, and is provided with a separate entrance from the adjoining lane, so that operators and messengers calling for films can be served without going into the main offices. The film storerooms have been fitted out anticipatory of future legislation [...] Separate fireproof compartments, with fireproof doors and iron shelving, make a “blaze” almost impossible.<sup>73</sup>

The final piece of detail about the storerooms is not only interesting in connection with the continuing struggles between renters and the authorities over licensing and fire hazards, but also because it served to reassure potential clients that Jury’s kept a permanent stock in the premises. The transition to exclusive trading, and the subsequent proliferation of agents for English companies, meant that renters did not necessarily own the films they offered, or did not have prints in Scotland. This caused problems for exhibitors, not only in terms of possible delays and confusion, but also because exhibitors had to pay carriage from wherever the film started its journey. On the other hand, if they booked from what *The Bioscope* called ‘the regular houses’ (Green’s, Gaumont, B. B., Jury’s, Bendon, N.B., or Pathé), then the films would be sent only from the company’s storerooms in

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<sup>73</sup> ‘Jury’s Pictures (Scotland) Limited’, *The Bioscope*, 28 January 1915, p.369.

Glasgow or Edinburgh.<sup>74</sup> Some of those companies had stores in Dundee and Aberdeen too. Local exhibitors could even call in to the renters' offices themselves, therefore avoiding any carriage charges. As the case of Tom Gilbert shows, some exhibitors from out of town paid regular visits to Glasgow in order to be able to pick up the films themselves and avoid the costs and risks of railway delivery.<sup>75</sup>

Besides the distributors mentioned above, there were many short-lived attempts at regional distribution, usually started by exhibitors, and there were several smaller companies from the North of England that kept a presence in Scotland; an overview of the situation is provided in **Table 5**. The most important of these was Newcastle Film Supply, which was also the largest renting firm in Edinburgh. When the Edinburgh branch was established, it boasted of controlling 'all the bookings for nine theatres in Edinburgh and district'.<sup>76</sup> A representative in Glasgow was engaged at the end of 1915. By then, the company had acquired exclusive rights to handle Famous Players and Lasky features, and had therefore placed itself at the forefront of the definitive transition to feature programming. From this point on, the company became identified with these two brands, and acted as an agent rather than an independent renter. This is a pattern that can be observed in several other cases, but its discussion pertains to the section on direct renting in the final chapter.

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<sup>74</sup> 'The railway carriage problem', *The Bioscope*, 24 June 1915, p. 1307-9.

<sup>75</sup> Letter (wet copy), Tom Gilbert to Mr Taylor at the Carnoustie Pavilion, 7 June 1917. NAS SC36/79/18, p.78.

<sup>76</sup> 'Edinburgh jottings', *The Bioscope*, 27 November 1913, p.919.

Table 5: Scottish renters

Company name	Type	Address in Scotland	Dates*
Bendon Trading Co.	local	75 Jamaica Street / 26-28 Wilson Street, Glasgow	1900
Gaumont & Co	branch	142 Trongate / 77-79 Dunlop Street / 77-79 Mitchell Street, Glasgow	1909
Ruffell's	branch	80 Mitchell Street, Glasgow	1909
B. B. Pictures Ltd	local	81 Dunlop Street, Glasgow	1910
United Films Ltd	local	4 Howard Street, Glasgow	1911
Vivian Pictures Ltd	local	St George's Theatre, Paisley	1911
Green's Film Service	local	833-901 Gallowgate, Glasgow	1912
Glasgow Films Co	local	4 Howard Street, Glasgow	1912
Hibbert's Pictures, Ltd.	branch	8 Dixon Street / 34 Great Clyde Street, Glasgow	1912
Scottish Film Hiring Co	agent	88 Great Clyde Street	1912
Anglo-American Films, Limited	local	143 Princes Street / 5-11 West Register Street, Edinburgh	1913
JC Baker	local	95 Renfield Street, Glasgow	1913
The North British Film Service Ltd	branch	23-24 Prudential Chambers, St Andrew Square, Edinburgh	1913
Ideal Film Renting Co	branch	108 Renfield St, Glasgow	1913
Newcastle Film Supply Co	branch	12 Dixon Street, Glasgow / 28 North Bridge St, Edinburgh	1913
Pathé Freres Cinema Ltd	branch	80 Miller Street, Glasgow	1913
Central Film Agency	agent	95 Renfield Street, Glasgow	1913
Western Film Service	agent	124 St Vincent Street, Glasgow	1913
Edinburgh Film Hire Service	local		1914
Hart's Film Service	local	132 West Nile St, Glasgow	1914
Edinburgh Film Supply / Leon	local	Edinburgh and Dundee	1914
Alex Stewart / Star Exclusive Film Co	exclusives	411 Crown St, Glasgow / 73 Dunlop Street	1914
Percy Winocour / St Mungo Exclusive Film Co	exclusives	43 Garturk Street / 142A St Vincent Street, Glasgow	1914
London Scottish Exclusive Film Agency	agent		1914
N.B. Exclusives Ltd	exclusives	77-79 Dunlop Street, Glasgow	1915

S and B Exclusives	exclusives	Edinburgh	1915
West of Scotland Film Agency	exclusives	86 Neilston Road, Paisley	1915
Scottish Premier Exclusives	exclusives		1915
Jury's Pictures (Scotland)	branch	16 Dixon Street, Glasgow	1915
Thomas Fairlie & Co	agent	28 Stockwell Street, Glasgow	1915
Apex Films Ltd	local	65 Bath Street, Glasgow	1916
Bruce Film Service	local	132 West Nile Street, Glasgow	1916
David Mundell	local	95 Gloucester Street, Glasgow	1916
Square Film Co	local	57-58 George Square, Glasgow	1916
Lothian Film Service	local	Edinburgh	1915
Success Film Co	local	77 Dunlop St, Glasgow	1916
Classic Film Hiring Co	local		1916
Scottish Exclusive Control	exclusives	73 Dunlop Street	1916
Oak Film Ltd	exclusives	52 Howard Street, Glasgow	1916
Globe Films, Ltd	branch	77-79 Dunlop Street, Glasgow	1916
London Independent Film Trading Co	branch	65 Bath Street, Glasgow	1916
Fox Film Co	agent		1916
Argosy Film Co Ltd	local	81 Dunlop Street, Glasgow	1917
RC Buchanan	local	Palladium, Edinburgh	1917
Pringle's Film Service	branch	49 Jamaica Street, Glasgow	1917
Hagen and Double	agent	144 St Vincent St / 34 Great Clyde St, Glasgow	1917
Percy Humphrys	agent	68 Renfield Street, Glasgow	1917
FC Page Film Co	agent	5 Minto Avenue, Newlands, Glasgow	1917
Dunedin Film Agency	agent	8 North Bridge, Edinburgh	1917
Bolton's International Pictures	agent	68 Great Clyde Street, Glasgow	1918
Film Booking Offices	agent	34 Great Clyde Street, Glasgow	1918

\* Date given is that of the first mention in my records, which are the product of browsing *The Bioscope* and *The Entertainer* manually; they are given as an indication only.

#### 5.4. Conclusion: Sustaining diversity in a booming regional market

In 1914, the Scottish film trade was booming. Every Monday and Thursday morning, around two thousand reels of film had to be moved around Scotland on foot, on carts, on trams, motorbikes, ferries and trains for the change of programme. In Glasgow, Dunlop Street buzzed with activity, with exhibitors going from one renter's office to the next, and from luncheon to trade show at Cranston's. Pathé's premises, with their machinery showroom, private theatre seating three hundred, and 'waiting room elegantly panelled in oak for exhibitors', must have been teeming with managers sealing a bargain, spool boys wrapping up packages to be taken to St Enoch's railway station, and projectionists picking up their programme before starting their shift.<sup>77</sup> Business was made via letters, telegrams and phone calls, but also in chance encounters on Dunlop Street, mixed with gossip overheard on the short walk from Central Station, and passed on with the help of an agent's choice of whisky. The Scottish trade was small enough to depend a great deal on personal trust, but it was a fully-fledged sector with its own internal dynamics.

While five or six years earlier exhibitors like Bennell struggled to get a good supply of films locally, there were now around twenty companies competing with each other for the business of some three hundred cinemas. As *The Bioscope* noted,

Formerly many exhibitors had to book their specials from London. Now those who do so are in the minority, for they have found that they can do equally well if not better by placing their bookings with local firms. [...]

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<sup>77</sup> 'Glasgow Notes', *The Bioscope*, 26 June 1913, p.949.

[A]s far as film hire is concerned, Scotland is in as good a position as the rest of the Kingdom.<sup>78</sup>

It was possible to hire a complete service or individual exclusives, at a wide range of prices and from British, European or American brands. This chapter has showed how the various backgrounds and trajectories of Scottish exhibitors and renters had produced a tangle of diverse and interconnected practices. Each of them occupied a different position in relation to the structuring tensions between variety- and feature-centred programming models, shorter and longer films, open market and exclusive dealing, and, importantly, between the first-run urban market and the peripheral exhibition sites.

Open-market renters operating locally played a crucial role in sustaining the various tiers in an increasingly segregated market. However, the pressures created by intense competition amongst urban venues, exacerbated by the producers' branding strategies, were shifting power away from these local structures and towards more hegemonic practices that allowed producers to retain greater control over both textual meaning and commercial revenue. The following chapters trace the transformations in exhibition and distribution practice that characterised the rise of feature-length films, and consider how this production trend interacted with local factors to erode the open-market model.

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<sup>78</sup> 'Trade Notes', *The Bioscope*, 13 May 1915, p.673.

## **PART III**

### **PROGRAMMING AND THE STRUGGLE FOR CONTROL**



## Chapter 6

### From showmanship to management

The discussions of itinerant exhibition in Chapter 3, and single-reel programming practices in Chapter 4, highlighted the agency of exhibitors in fashioning a particular entertainment experience out of a supply of reproducible images. Early films were not standalone tradable products, since they were just an input that had to be integrated into highly skilled showmanship practices. The expansion of the market through the proliferation of outlets, and in particular the nickelodeon boom in the United States, required films to become less reliant on presentational strategies as not all the new exhibitors were as skilled as the previous generation. In the space of a few years, between 1908 and 1914, film exhibition in Scotland passed from being an occasional attraction provided by a handful of experienced entertainers and lecturers, to being a permanent feature of ordinary life in more than 150 towns. Chapter 5 showed how a regional distribution trade emerged alongside the expansion of fixed-site exhibition, providing different ways to ensure a steady and constantly rotating supply of films. These new forms of circulation broke the link between the film and the showman, since they made their movements independent. This chapter considers several aspects of this transformation as they played out in Scotland.

As Martin Sopocy and Charles Musser have written, with developments such as the use of intertitles films started to incorporate into the text some of the

functions that had been performed by the exhibitor, becoming ever more adept at fixing interpretation and establishing the framework for a mode of address defined by narrative integration.<sup>1</sup> Such important transformations in the film text and its construction of spectatorship were wound together with a crucial but gradual change in the commodity status of film. The first section of this chapter will argue that this shift revealed a tension between the product ‘film’, and the service ‘show’. The next section of the chapter thus considers how the profession of cinema management changed as the manager’s role in the production chain was curtailed. While the cinema of narrative integration made the job easier for nickelodeon owners, it also devalued some of the showmanship and presentation skills that Scottish exhibitors had in abundance, and restricted their liberty to interpret and contextualise the images. The new kind of cinema entrepreneur that came into the exhibition business during the cinema boom was a skilled manager and programmer rather than a showperson, and the professionalization of the role was in accordance with the corporate structures of a mass-produced commodity system. The appeal to the audience was also informed by an attempt at regularisation and legitimisation that is described next as a somewhat paradoxical courting of the transient audience. The practice of variety programming is finally discussed from a distribution perspective, describing how exhibitors outsourced programming decisions with the contracting of pre-packaged shows as a ‘film service’ in the pre-war years.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Sopocy, ‘The Role of the Intertitle in Film Exhibition’, in *Cinema: The Beginnings and the Future*, ed. by Christopher Williams (London: University of Westminster Press, 1996), pp. 123-134 (p. 123). Charles Musser, ‘The Nickelodeon Era Begins: Establishing the Framework for Hollywood’s Mode of Representation’, *Framework*.22/23 (1983), pp. 4-10 (pp. 9-10).

### 6.1. Film as commodity

Although it is not pertinent for this thesis to offer an extended discussion of film as a commodity type, some points need to be made in order to establish the terms for the more localized historical processes described below. The reshaping of the film trade between the American nickelodeon boom and the end of the War can be understood as a redefinition of the commodity nature of film, or rather, as a change in the role of film as commodity within the broader phenomenon of cinema. While this is a general discussion, such reinvention had material consequences for Scottish exhibitors and renters, some of which have been discussed before, mainly in the context of the transition to renting. Only when the special nature of film as a commodity was grasped – and contained – did film become fully an industrial product and a modern mass medium.

This transformation depended on important changes in the film text, as well as in the organization of the trade. As Musser puts it, over the first few years of the nickelodeon boom, ‘the reel of film became the basic industry commodity,’ displacing the ‘complete outfit’ model (machine, films and showperson travelling as a self-contained ‘turn’ or show) which was described in Chapter 3.<sup>2</sup> While the pioneer itinerant exhibitors had of course traded in films as commodities, it is only with the expansion of renting that films stop being predominantly an accessory to the projector and capitalise on their particularities as a commodity-type. In a useful article on this subject, John Sedgwick and Michael Pokorny outline six characteristics that distinguish film as a commodity-type from other forms of mass

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<sup>2</sup> Musser, ‘The Nickelodeon Era Begins’, p. 4.

art.<sup>3</sup> Besides reproducibility, one of the technologically-based characteristics is at the basis of Michael Chanan's own discussion of film as commodity – namely the fact that film is not 'spent' upon viewing, it remains in the market.<sup>4</sup> This is the crucial point that allowed film rental to develop, but which also kept the trade searching for ways to control availability.

However, discussing the commodity nature of the *film* does not exhaust the matter. In Sedgwick and Pokorny's formulation, each film 'has its status as a commodity confirmed, or otherwise, by audiences'.<sup>5</sup> This posits a linear relationship between the material transactions involving strips of celluloid, and the immaterial consumption of projected images. While this may be the case in the classical and current distribution systems, where box-office percentage contracts mean that there is a continuous transference of money from viewer to producer in relation to one particular commodity, it does not provide an appropriate model for early cinema. Before the 1920s, it makes more sense to view films, following Gerben Bakker, as an *intermediate good* - an input for the production of something else.<sup>6</sup> So while films were indeed traded as a commodity, the audience was paying for something else that was produced using the films amongst other things. Distinguishing between these two moments of production provides a better starting point for an understanding of the transformation that was taking place.

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<sup>3</sup> John Sedgwick and Michael Pokorny, 'The Characteristics of Film as a Commodity', in *An Economic History of Film*, ed. by John Sedgwick and Michael Pokorny (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 6-23 (p. 13).

<sup>4</sup> Chanan, *The Dream That Kicks*, p. 229.

<sup>5</sup> Sedgwick and Pokorny, 'The Characteristics of Film as a Commodity', p.11.

<sup>6</sup> Bakker, *Entertainment Industrialised*, p. 320.

In an early article, Charles Musser identified three separate practices (defined as production, exhibition and reception) as constituent of cinema's mode of production.<sup>7</sup> The film print is produced as a material object (bearing intellectual content) with a use value and exchange value – a commodity, but not an ordinary one, as has been shown before. This object is then used in the production of a show, in such a way that the film is neither depleted nor removed from the market. Access to the show is then sold to the public; Bakker formulates this more precisely by defining the 'spectator-hour' as the economic unit that exhibitors trade in.<sup>8</sup> This distinction serves to highlight that the product being exchanged is not the same at different stages of this economic chain. There are at least two distinct moments: the production (and marketing) of the commodity 'film', and the production (and marketing) of the service 'show' or the 'spectator-hour'. For Musser, a third moment would concern the social and cognitive production of a certain experience (for which the show is both an input and a context), but the present discussion will remain focused on the narrower economic processes mentioned before. What is produced through the three processes is then *cinema*, which can be a slippery term, and which must not be confused with *film*.

These theoretical precisions are necessary because the shifting importance and the ability to capture revenue at the different stages in the economic chain are of great consequence for the balance of power between branches of the trade, and therefore for the position of Scottish exhibitors and renters. One of the hallmarks of nickelodeon practice in the American context, according to Musser, was the relative

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<sup>7</sup> Musser, 'The Nickelodeon Era Begins', p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Bakker, *Entertainment Industrialised*, p. 320.

loss of editorial control by exhibitors as compared to the highly performative role they had had within itinerant practices.<sup>9</sup> The ‘redefinition’ of the medium as a narrative form in which Griffith and Ince were engaged responded to the need for regularisation that sought to capitalise on the nickelodeon boom.<sup>10</sup> The initial expansion, however, would not have been possible without an initial standardisation of the single-reel narrative film as the staple commodity, as early as 1904.<sup>11</sup> But this consolidation was a unique, fascinating conjuncture where distribution and exhibition practices, the economics of the film trade, its address to audiences and its textual modes were all transforming each other. Furthermore, as a historical process it played out differently according to context.

Noël Burch has argued, for instance, that American cinema moved faster towards the kind of narrative closure and subject-centring that he sees as the defining characteristics of the Institutional Mode of Representation, mainly because of the nature of class relations in American society. While the original populism and subsequent courting of the middle classes by American exhibitors has been revised extensively since the publication of Burch’s book, the differences he points out in relation to the British context are still relevant. By the time of the American nickelodeon boom, Burch argues, British cinema still operated mainly within a pre-institutional model, dominated by what he calls an ‘experience of *primitive externality*’, where the linearity of narrative was created outside the film text – either through intertextual association, or via a commentary or other presentational

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<sup>9</sup> Charles Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company*, p. 158. [e-book <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft3q2nb2gw/> accessed 23 December 2011]

<sup>10</sup> Tom Gunning, “‘Now You See It, Now You Don’t’: The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions’, *Velvet Light Trap*.32 (1993), pp. 3-12 (p. 4).

<sup>11</sup> Musser, ‘The Nickelodeon Era Begins’, p. 4.

aids.<sup>12</sup> According to Burch, this was a consequence of the class ideology that informed early British film culture, framed by the rational recreation and Temperance movements as middle-class efforts to control leisure time. However, as the descriptions of itinerant exhibition in previous chapters have suggested, this narrative constitutes only one of the vectors in the process of institutionalisation, in a counterpoint with the more overtly commercial and populist traditions of the fairground and the music-hall that were equally strong in Scotland. As the following sections will argue, the tensions around the standardisation of the programme and the role of the exhibitor can be seen to express class ideologies, but they are also very much a pragmatic business matter for peripheral or small-time exhibitors and renters.

The types of self-contained narrative films that were imported from the US from 1906 onwards were the product of an industrial context that differed significantly from the British one. As Bakker has argued, in the US cinema was more effective as a substitution of the lower end of the entertainment spectrum, whereas in Britain cheap, live entertainment was relatively abundant and the pressure to industrialise it further was not so strong. The incentives to eliminate the ‘human element’ of film presentation were weaker, while British and European audiences continued to value live entertainment more highly.<sup>13</sup> The mode of address of ‘narrative integration’, thus, represented not only a change in the way ‘closure’ was thought of and achieved, but was also a matter of commercial interest that transformed the relationship between exhibitors and audiences, and between films

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<sup>12</sup> Burch, *Life to Those Shadows*, p. 188.

<sup>13</sup> Bakker, *Entertainment Industrialised*, pp. 143-147.

and spectators. Thomas Elsaesser goes as far as suggesting that the shift towards more self-contained textual modes (continuity editing and the Institutional Mode of Representation) can be read, in the light of exhibition history, ‘as a way of detaching, unhooking filmic representation and the viewing situation from any form of material presence’.<sup>14</sup> Of course, part of the argument of this thesis is that the experience of cinema cannot in fact be detached from its materiality and situatedness. Nevertheless, the tension highlighted by Elsaesser – that between the IMR and ‘material presence’ – becomes very interesting in the context of a historical geography of cinema. While the production of the text and the control of its meanings was increasingly monopolised and centralised in the United States, the production of the *show* cannot be anything but local.

A distinction must be made here between the notions of film-as-performance, where live extra-textual elements are central to the spectator’s comprehension and enjoyment of the pictures, and film as *part* of a performance alongside other, separate live attractions. However, the transformations of the commodity form touched on both aspects. The growing elevation of the individual film over the extra-textual attractions of the show meant that exhibitors had fewer opportunities to add value to their stock-in-trade (spectator-hours), unless they were prepared to make significant investments on a par with the skyrocketing budgets of feature production. In a market such as the Scottish one, with rich performative traditions but relatively low capital, this could be a crisis point. On the other hand, it also created new profit opportunities for those in a position to exploit them. The degree of acceptance or resistance to the changes in the commodity status of films hinged

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<sup>14</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, ‘Introduction (Second part)’, in *Early Cinema Space-Frame-Narrative*, ed. by Elsaesser and Barker, pp. 153-173 (p. 167).



on particular exhibitors' ideas of their relationship with audiences, on their attachment to showmanship skills, and on their access to the new-fangled film markets. If the previous part of the thesis ended on a panorama of great diversity, the drive to standardise the industry found just such a varied response in Scotland as elsewhere.

## **6.2. The exhibitor's role**

With the development of increasingly self-sufficient forms of cinematic narration the role of the exhibitor shifted from internal meaning-making or story-telling and towards modular programming, arranging a satisfying group of packaged narratives.<sup>15</sup> The separation between the two moments of production became sharper. As exhibitors were increasingly disengaged from internal narrative functions, their role as mediators between the international film trade and the local audience's habits and expectations was reduced to the selection and advertising of titles. As the following chapters will show, even this had to be done within narrow constraints dictated by the hierarchised availability of the film product and the growing intervention of production companies in exhibition practice.

With the transference of creative agency away from exhibitors and to film actors and producers, the exhibitor went from being a performer to being a coordinator, on the model of a music-hall manager – selecting rather than creating. While this could be seen as a step up the occupational ladder, it was accompanied by the loss of ownership over the means of production, initiated by the shift from

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<sup>15</sup> Musser, 'The Nickelodeon Era Begins', p. 9. Thomas Elsaesser and Adam Barker, 'The continuity system: Griffith and beyond. Introduction', in *Early Cinema Space Frame Narrative*, ed. by Elsaesser and Barker, pp. 293-317 (p. 305).

outright sale to film rental, and exacerbated by the growing levels of investment that new cinema venues required.<sup>16</sup> As outlined in Chapter 4, many of the new venues were owned by incorporated companies and controlled by a board, which was usually constituted by businesspeople with no background in public entertainment. In his study of early exhibition in Toronto, Paul Moore also found that the new situation cleared the path for younger entrepreneurs who did not have the same status as ‘craftsmen’ or the same connections to local civic life as the pioneer exhibitors. While localising practices and personal reputation had been key to the exhibitors’ success in the early years,

those showmen who embraced the transnational character of movies defined how film showmanship differed from management of the amusements that came before it. Later still came another type of showman in control of corporate boardrooms, in a sense abdicating showmanship altogether in favour of rational management.<sup>17</sup>

Although, as argued in Chapter 4, the companies registered to control cinema venues in Scotland tended to be small and local, their legal configuration as limited liability companies signalled a shift towards more corporate business models, if only in the sense that it separated ownership from management. The

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<sup>16</sup> As Pierre Chemartin and André Gaudreault have argued, the loss of ownership of the film print also meant that exhibitors were not free to cut up and re-assemble the views. With this withdrawal of their editing role, they became excluded from production, so that the *exhibiteur* of early cinema becomes the *exploitant de sale* in institutional cinema. Chemartin and Gaudreault, ‘Les consignes de l’«éditeur» pour l’assemblage des vues’, p. 195.

<sup>17</sup> Moore, *Now Playing*, p. 79.

present account would differ from Moore's in the sense that if the cinema manager can be considered to take the place of the showperson, he or she rarely had but a subordinate place in the boardroom. Even if the manager was not voluntarily 'abdicating showmanship', these committees tried to steer the way in which the manager ran the day-to-day operation of the cinema, usually by restricting expenses in an attempt to protect their investment.<sup>18</sup> In these conditions, the manager's new responsibilities differed from those of the traditional showman. As the 1911 *Handbook of Kinematography* indicated,

[The manager] must be a capable organiser, a strict disciplinarian, able and willing to make himself [sic] popular with every section of his patrons, and above all, must judiciously economise so that the proprietor of the show, or its shareholders, can reap return for their invested capital.<sup>20</sup>

The inflow of external capital thus created work conditions that were markedly different from those of independent travelling showpeople. The generation of city cinema managers that took up the job during the cinema boom seemed more inclined towards a cult of efficiency and standardisation, through which a stable patronage could be secured amongst the desirable classes. They frowned upon the old forms of showmanship and the aesthetics of exaggeration that some exhibitors had inherited from the fairground. They (or, more often, their

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<sup>18</sup> Examples of these kinds of discussions can be found in the minute books of the Glasgow Picture House (Scottish Screen Archive, SSA/5/22), and those of the Aberdeen Picture Palaces and the Queen's Rooms, at the Cinema Museum, London.

<sup>20</sup> Colin N. Bennett, *The Handbook of Kinematography* (London: Kinematograph Weekly, 1911), p. 250.

employers) were in agreement with the producers about the need to see film as a self-sufficient form of entertainment, a view that was common amongst contributors to the trade press.

In a particularly ungracious article published when the transformation was irreversible, W.A. Williamson wrote that ‘the old showman does not understand the cinematograph trade, a trade requiring not showmanship but sympathy’.<sup>21</sup> This ‘sympathy’ suggests an identification with the audience that is very different from the extravagant, outsider appeal of fairground performers. It will be noted that, as early as 1911, the author of the *Handbook of Kinematography* cited above did not mention any performative abilities as desirable for the picture house manager. His or her ‘showmanship’ was to be expressed in ‘the comfort, cleanliness and beauty of his [sic] hall’, in ‘judicious advertising’, and in ‘catering for the continual education and amusement of regular and chance patrons’. The emphasis here is in understanding the local audience and integrating cinemagoing within everyday life, beginning with the opening ceremony which should serve to ‘[bind] the hall up with other social affairs’.<sup>22</sup>

Such advice is indicative of the aspirational tone that permeated the trade press, in which the professionalisation of cinema management was a constant topic. The redefinition of the exhibitor’s job mainly in terms of house-management and programming meant that originality was encouraged only within certain parameters – increasingly dictated by middle-class taste. Before assuming that this was a sudden betrayal of cinema’s popular vocation, it should be evident that the new

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<sup>21</sup> ‘The Passing of the Old Showman’, *The Bioscope*, 26 August 1917, pp.360-1

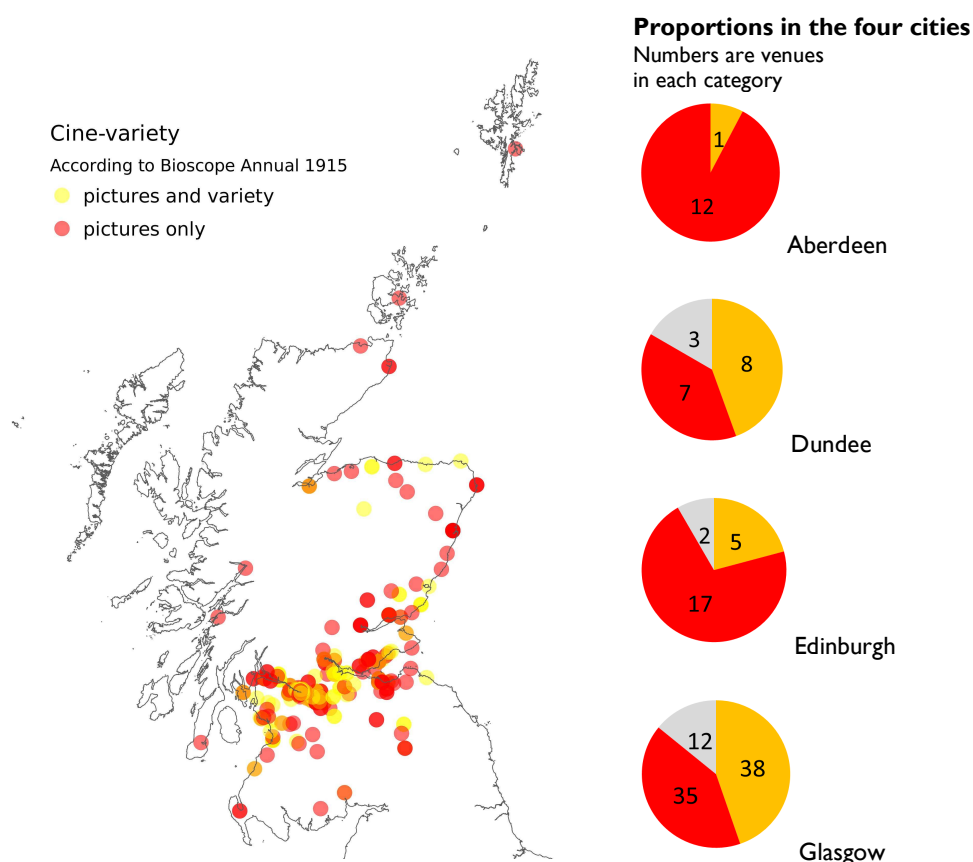
<sup>22</sup> Bennett, *The Handbook of Kinematography*, p. 250.

corporate structure of exhibition venues demanded a more cautious and accountable style of management, which utilised the increasing standardisation of both production and distribution to foster more predictable business results. That said, as Burch has argued, the ‘economic last instance’ is ‘hard to apply in a conjuncture as overdetermined as this one’.<sup>23</sup> The drive towards industrialisation was both a market imperative and an ideological position. However, its advance was also exaggerated by a trade discourse obsessed with legitimacy. On the ground, and in the provinces, the process was not as swift or as pervasive as the metropolitan press liked to imagine.

The place of live performance in film shows is a good indication of resistance to full industrialisation, as cine-variety was one of the established practices that had fallen foul of the new trends. At a time when this kind of practice had been almost completely abandoned in London, the 1915 *Bioscope Annual* described 142 (36 per cent) of the 399 Scottish cinemas as presenting ‘pictures and varieties’. The geographical pattern of this mode of exhibition was very uneven, and it can offer some hints on the reasons for its survival. Glasgow, Dundee, Ayr, and the mining towns of North Lanarkshire and Linlithgowshire had a much higher proportion of cine-variety shows before the war than Edinburgh and Aberdeen, suggesting a connection with earlier traditions and with the economic and demographic differences between the Scottish regions. **(Figure 12)**

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<sup>23</sup> Burch, *Life to Those Shadows*, p. 141 (Note 17).



**Figure 12: Cine-variety in Scotland**

**Sources:** Directory of 399 cinemas from Bioscope Annual 1915. Coast outline © Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group Limited (2012). All rights reserved. Supplied by Edina Digimap <http://digimap.edina.ac.uk/>

According to Gerben Bakker, the ‘lower end’ of the entertainment spectre was ‘automated away’ by moving pictures; in the United States, ‘small-time vaudeville’, which combined films and live acts, was on the way out by 1910.<sup>24</sup> This was not the case in Scotland where, according to Paul Maloney, the working-class culture of live entertainment survived in industrial districts in the form of cine-variety.<sup>25</sup> Such associations explain the dismay expressed by some sectors of the trade when variety turns made a creeping return during the third year of the war.

<sup>24</sup> Bakker, *Entertainment Industrialised*, pp. 143-147.

<sup>25</sup> Maloney, *Scotland and the Music Hall*, pp. 16-17.

Even when this involved something as respectable as the engagement of vocalists by several Glasgow cinemas, exhibitors lamented it ‘as it is but a step from this to a full variety programme’.<sup>26</sup> However, variety was being re-introduced as a competitive decision with which managers tried to stand out in a crowded marketplace.

The 1918 snapshot reveals a surprising increase of cine-variety in the Edinburgh and Aberdeen, contrasting with the general declining trend. The Operetta House in Edinburgh and the Coliseum in Aberdeen were amongst the central cinemas that started showing variety during the war. The spiralling cost of hiring recently-released features impelled managers to turn back to live turns as a competitive strategy, especially when neighbouring venues preceded them. For instance, in Aberdeen, the Casino and the Star, located back-to-back less than 300 yards from the Market Cross, were in direct opposition. When the Casino started programming cine-variety, Bert Gates, the manager at the Star, noticed the impact on his box office. Up to that point, Gates had doubled as an elocutionist. This performance practice, where one or two actors would stand behind the screen and create dialogue to match the action in the film, had become particularly common in Aberdeen after the pioneering influence of Dove Paterson and Marie Pascoe at the Gaiety.<sup>27</sup> In 1916, Gates told the board of directors at the Star that ‘it was his opinion that speaking to the pictures had now ceased to be effective’.<sup>28</sup> Variety turns were presented throughout the Fall and Winter of 1916, but did not work out,

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<sup>26</sup> ‘Scottish News and Notes’, *The Bioscope*, 15 October 1914, p.245.

<sup>27</sup> Griffiths, ‘The Enduring Appeal of the Elocutionist’ [n. p.].

<sup>28</sup> Minute book of the Aberdeen Picture Palaces Ltd: Minutes, 19 Sept 1916. London, Cinema Museum.

and on the following February variety was suspended and elocution re-instated.<sup>29</sup> It can be presumed that elocution did not survive for much longer after that, considering Gates's previous statement and the general decline in extra-textual narrative practices that accompanied the development of the Institutional Mode of Representation.

As the 'standard commodity' of the film trade expanded from the single-reel format of the nickelodeon period into multi-reel features, the pressure on exhibitor-led, variety-based practices increased. The exhibitors' showmanship skills brought them into conflict with producer-led strategies to claim a greater portion of the revenues and greater control over the conditions in which films were presented. The core of resistance concerned the format of the programme. It was a struggle to keep control of the second production process (the production of a show) after textual production had been relinquished.

### **6.3. Regular audiences and variety programming**

As Miriam Hansen has argued, the variety format that cinema shows inherited from the first exhibition contexts (vaudeville, fairgrounds, dime museums) determined the modes of early spectatorship.<sup>30</sup> The mode of address defined by Gunning as 'cinema of attractions', she argues, is 'predicated on diversity',

[b]ut the display of diversity also means that the viewer is solicited in a more direct manner – as a

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<sup>29</sup> Minute book of the Aberdeen Picture Palaces Ltd: Minutes, 14 Feb 1917.

<sup>30</sup> Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 19.



member of an anticipated social audience and a public,  
rather than an invisible, private consumer.<sup>31</sup>

After the cinema boom, once it became clear that cinema was not a passing fad, the challenge was to convert the audience that had first come in for the technical novelty and the attractions, into a regular audience that would provide a solid foundation for further investment. There were potentially several ways of achieving this. The variety mode reflected an attempt to position cinemagoing as an everyday leisure activity. Michael Hammond has observed that, up to the beginning of the war, the advertising rhetoric used by Southampton cinemas emphasised ‘the social utility of the space as part of the cinema-going experience’, so that working-class, peripheral venues were presented as ‘warm and cosy’, while city-centre cinemas provided facilities such as tea rooms and ran a continuous show to enhance the sense of convenience and respite for urban strollers.<sup>32</sup> The same emphasis can be seen in many of the adverts collected in the 1913 snapshot. **(Figure 13)**

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<sup>31</sup> Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, p. 34.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Hammond, *The Big Show: British Cinema Culture in the Great War, 1914-1918* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006), pp. 16-21.

**QUEEN'S CINEMA**  
120 UNION STREET.

Great Success of Aberdeen's Newest and Finest Picture Theatre.

*Beautifully Decorated.*  
*Luxuriously Upholstered.*

Open.....2.30 to 10.30.

ADMISSION—  
2.30 to 5.30, 6d.  
Evenings, 6 to 10.30, 3d. and 6d.

SEASONABLE ATTRACTIONS.  
Handsomely Appointed Tea and Smoke Rooms.

NOW OPEN.  
**DUMFRIES THEATRE**  
AND PICTURE HOUSE,  
HIGH STREET, DUMFRIES.  
*A Place of Entertainment of Unparalleled  
Luxury.*

**Finest ANIMATED PICTURES.**  
Popular Prices—3d, 6d, and 1s. Children  
Half-price when accompanied by parents.

8 p.m. One Performance. 8 p.m.  
MATINEES every WEDNESDAY and  
SATURDAY at 2.30 p.m.

7 p.m. Twice Nightly on Saturdays. 9 p.m.  
MAGNIFICENT MUSIC.  
LATE TRAIN every SATURDAY to Lochmaben,  
Lockerbie, etc., at 8.55 p.m.

**McANDREW'S**  
**Electric Theatre**  
TEMPLAR HALL, LANARK.

**[The People's House for Pictures.**  
7—Twice Nightly—9.

Splendid Programme for next week.  
Monday—"The Nature of the White Man's Burden."  
Wednesday—"A Lion Let Loose."  
Thursday—"Officer Murray."  
Friday—"The Lady of the Lake."

Note—Prices on all nights as formerly,  
2d, 4d and 6d.

**COLISEUM.**  
NULLI SECUNDUS.  
TWICE NIGHTLY. 9

A NEW YEAR RESOLUTION—

Keep a Vacant Night for the POPULAR COLISEUM, the most Commodious and Comfortable Family Picture House in Edinburgh. This Week's Galaxy of Star Pictures includes "THE CASTAWAY," "FOREST RANGER," "NINA'S EVENING PRAYER," and many others.

POPULAR PRICES—2d, 4d., and 6d.

Figure 13: Examples of cinema adverts in local newspapers for January 1913

Sources: clockwise from top left: *Bon Accord*, 9 January 1913; *Annandale Herald*, 9 January 1913; *Edinburgh Evening Dispatch*, 9 January 1913; *Lanark and Upperward Gazette*, 4 January 1913

Even when some titles are mentioned, the permanent characteristics of the venue – its luxurious upholstery or magnificent music – are highlighted over the specific films presented on a given week. As has been often suggested, in the most deprived areas such as Candleriggs or the Gorbals in Glasgow, people might go to the cinema just to escape their overcrowded tenement rooms and to sit in the

warmth for a couple of hours in the winter.<sup>33</sup> This does not mean, however, that the notion of habitual cinemagoing was associated only with the working classes. In a tendentious but interesting editorial, *The Entertainer* tried to explain ‘the rise of the picturehouse’ with arguments that seem to contradict standard assumptions about early audiences:

In the aristocratic quarters the audience is interested,  
and it is a kind of club rather than a place of  
entertainment, while in the industrial neighbourhoods  
the people who enter the picturehouses do so to learn  
the ways of the world, to see how others live, how  
others die.<sup>34</sup>

This is a curious inversion of the more established idea of bourgeois spectatorship as more attentive to the film text, and popular cinemagoing as a social rather than intellectual activity. In its optimism about the self-improving aims of working-class spectators, it might be regarded as wishful thinking. However, the mention of high-class cinemas as ‘a kind of club’ is in line with developments in exhibition that were taking place around the time the article was published. As Michael Quinn has pointed out, the trade’s idea of the ‘transient audience’ did not define it as lower-class.<sup>35</sup> Many of the new, luxurious cinemas that had appeared on the central commercial streets of the main Scottish towns had entrance prices

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<sup>33</sup> Nicholas Hiley, “‘At the picture palace’: The British cinema audience, 1895-1920’, in *Celebrating 1895*, ed. by Fullerton, pp. 96-103 (p. 100).

<sup>34</sup> ‘The rise of the Picturehouse’, *The Entertainer* (Glasgow), 13 June 1914, p.1.

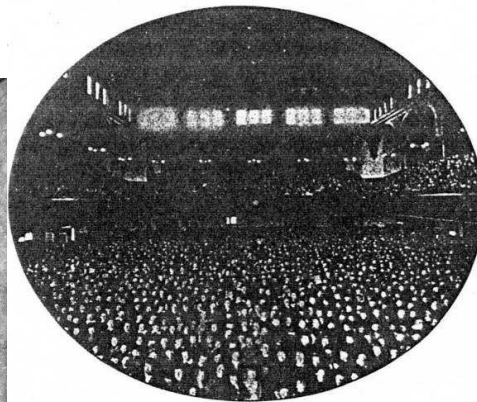
<sup>35</sup> Michael Quinn, ‘Distribution, the Transient Audience, and the Transition to the Feature Film’, p. 42.

starting at six pence – three times as much as most neighbourhood halls. Their appeal to a more affluent audience was founded on convenience and atmosphere; the addition of tea-rooms, smoking rooms and foyers to many of the larger picture houses further created club-like social spaces which were only loosely connected to film viewing. Exhibitors imagined that these spaces would attract the businessman with some time to spare between appointments, or the respectable lady who needed a break from her shopping.<sup>36</sup>

The preferred strategy to cater for these desirable customers was the continuous show, where people could come in and out at any point. Returning to Miriam Hansen's quote above, this is a view of the audience as a disaggregated set of individuals rather than a 'public'. The polar opposite of this is the children's matinees in neighbourhood cinemas, which started with mass sing-alongs and tried to foster a strong emotional attachment. Considering the subsequent identification of fragmented, discontinuous forms of entertainment as predominantly popular, it is important to notice that most of the opposition to the demise of variety programming came from the owners of continuous shows that catered for more affluent, transient audiences. As the next chapter will show, however, such resistance was short-lived as new ways of securing that patronage were discovered.

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<sup>36</sup> The appeal to middle-class women and children was crucial for the legitimization of cinema and the broadening of the audience, at least in the United States; this target might go some way towards explaining the privileging of certain genres and narrative forms in American film production, as Noël Burch has argued in *Life to Those Shadows*, pp. 122-3.



Saturday Afternoon at Wellington Palace.

3,000 children pay for admission every Saturday Afternoon. The constant change of, and variety in, the Pictures assists materially in the maintenance of their popularity.

**Figure 14: Building a transient/regular audience**

A 'high-class' cinema foyer and a popular children's matinée.

**Sources:** Left: Entrance Hall, the New Picture House, Edinburgh, photographed by Harry Bedford Lemere in 1914. Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland; B/64810. Licensor [www.scran.ac.uk](http://www.scran.ac.uk) [23 December 2011]. Right: Saturday Afternoon at Wellington Palace, Glasgow, ca1909, from 'The Story of the B. B. Pictures' [pamphlet].

#### 6.4. Renting variety programmes: The regular service model

The emphasis on the permanent characteristics of the venue and its social functions reflected a system where the individual titles were not the main preoccupation. This is hardly surprising considering that each programme was made up of seven or more items, arranged according to a conventional format which is well represented by the Darvel and Inverness examples below (**Figure 15**). Both shows have about the same number of dramatic and comic films, one scenic/interest film, and an acrobatic/pantomime title. The Central Hall, being a larger, urban, more expensive show, also included the Pathé Gazette and two 'singing pictures' (presumably

synchronised recordings). What was important for the exhibitors was to obtain the right balance of genres so that the programme appealed to the broadest possible audience, and to maintain a certain ‘tone’ that was acceptable for that audience.

**Darvel Burgh Prize Silver Band.**

**ELECTRIC PICTURES.**

Absolutely Rock Steady & Flickerless.

**Programme for Saturday**

(11th JAN., 1913).

FOOTBALL RESULTS.

(1) <b>HALF-BREED'S TREACHERY</b> -	Drama
(2) On the Banks of the Zemes -	Scenic
(3) <b>THE EMPEROR'S MESSENGER</b>	Drama
(4) Wife for a Day - - -	Comic
(5) <b>THE GIRL AT THE KEY</b> -	Drama
(6) <b>THE DIONNES</b> -	Acrobatic (Coloured)
(7) The Detective's Conscience -	Drama
(8) Brown moves to Town -	Comic
(9) Shocking his Flock - -	Comic

**6.30 AND 8.30.**

**ADMISSION** { Area 3d. Children 1d  
                  { Balcony 6d.    ..   3d

**Central Hall Picture House,**

**ACADEMY STREET.**

Telephone—Inverness 523.

**ON JANUARY 6th to 8th, 1913.**

CONTINUOUS PERFORMANCE EVERY AFTERNOON FROM 2.30 to 11.

<p>ANIMATED GAZETTE—News from Everywhere.</p> <p>LET'S MAKE A NIGHT OF IT TO-NIGHT—Singing Picture.</p> <p>I LIKE YOUR APRON AND YOUR BONNET—Singing Picture.</p> <p>FUNNIUS AT LUNA PARK—Comic.</p> <p>A WASTED SACRIFICE—Drama.</p> <p>JIM'S JOY DAY—Comic.</p>	<p>ALL'S FAIR IN LOVE—Comic.</p> <p>IN A DEN OF LIONS—Part I.—Drama.</p> <p>WHY JIM REFORMED—Drama.</p> <p>STENOGRAPHER WANTED—Comedy.</p> <p>IN A DEN OF LIONS—Part II.—Drama.</p> <p>A PAGE IN CANADIAN HISTORY—Interest.</p> <p>MR FATTY'S ADVENTURES—Comic.</p> <p>HARLEQUINADE LET LOOSE—Pantomime.</p>
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**PRICES OF ADMISSION—**

LOUNGE SEATS .....	Adults, 2s; Children, 6d.
BALCONY .....	Adults, 1s and 6d; Children Half-Price.
AREA .....	Adults, 6d and 3d; Children, 3d.

TEA AND BISCUITS SERVED FREE EVERY AFTERNOON.

**Figure 15: Variety programming in Darvel and Inverness**

**Sources:** *Irvine Valley News* 10 January 1913, *Inverness Football Times* 11 January 1913.

Renters offered ways for exhibitors to reduce the cost and difficulty associated with selecting enough short films individually to fill two hours. By contracting a ‘film service’ or complete programme, the exhibitor received from the renter a pre-packaged ensemble of films once or twice a week, ideally containing a good mix of films of different ages and types. As the cinema of narrative integration had transferred the task of meaning-making from the exhibitor to the producer, the outsourcing of programming decisions was another site of the struggle for control between sectors of the industry. In the United States, programme composition had

been centralised at the film exchanges, controlled either by the MPPC through ‘an interlocking directorate among manufacturers and distributors’, or by MP Sales.<sup>37</sup> This was a crucial element in the duopolistic control of the American industry.

In Britain, the use of film services was widespread but not as generalised as in the US. One reason for this was that a daily change of programme was the norm in American nickelodeons, and therefore selecting films individually was not worth the exhibitor’s time. In Britain the programme was changed only on Monday and Thursday (plus a special programme on Sunday in the few cases where shows were allowed), and there was more time for word-of-mouth about a particular film to spread, as well as a greater incentive to advertise titles. Still, selecting each of the films in a programme of seven or eight items was not considered necessary; early on, the notion of feature or ‘star’ film denoted headliners, and in some cases these could be selected separately.<sup>38</sup> In other cases, such as the one presented below, the headliner was simply the newest film of the bunch, which would subsequently descend to the undistinguished category of ‘support’.

**Table 6** lists the prices for different categories of programmes offered by the Birmingham-based Royal Film Agency in late 1911. A programme of five reels, of which the newest was in its fifth run, could be obtained for three pounds, although

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<sup>37</sup> Staiger, ‘Combination and Litigation’, p. 50.

<sup>38</sup> When Pathé started trading directly to exhibitors in 1913, they made much of the fact that each film could be booked individually, effectively making every film a feature (‘The Bioscope Parliament’, *The Bioscope*, 28 August 1913, p. 687-9). The French company offered this argument against trade rumours that accused them of trying to bind exhibitors to block-booking contracts. Although service hiring had some similarities with block-booking, in fact the two forms of business responded to differing models. As the next chapters will show, block booking tended to be an imposition from vertically-integrated renters (that is, studio agents), while service hiring in most cases was a non-compulsory option offered by open-market renters.

*The Bioscope* opined that a reasonably good programme cost at least twelve pounds, while first-run films went for twice as much.<sup>39</sup>

**Table 6: Service Prices, Royal Film Agency, November 1911**

Price for programme of 5000ft changed twice weekly	'Star Picture'		Support	
	Run	Length	Price category (per 1000ft)	Length
£3	5th	1 x 1000 ft	10s	4000 ft
£4	5th + 6th	2 x 1000 ft	15s	3000 ft
£5	3 <sup>rd</sup> + 4th	2 x 1000 ft	15s	3000 ft
£7	2 <sup>nd</sup> + 4 <sup>th</sup> + 4th	3 x 1000 ft	20s	2000 ft
£10	1 <sup>st</sup> + 3 <sup>rd</sup> + 3 <sup>rd</sup>	3 x 1000 ft	20s	2000 ft

**Source:** Advert in *The Bioscope*, 2 November 1911, p.370

One of the advantages of the service model, both for exhibitors and renters, is that each delivery combined subjects with different release dates, so that at least a part of the programme was newer. A renter would try to have as many customers in each service category, in order to keep the films accruing a profit throughout their shelf life. Having a good circuit of cinemas taking a full programme on the different price categories was the ideal situation for an open-market renter during the single-reel years. It allowed them to know how many prints to buy and to keep them in circulation for long enough by mixing them into different groupings. This was only possible while the open-market model allowed renters to buy their films at competitive prices from all manufacturers, and use them for as long as possible. The

<sup>39</sup> 'The question of price', *The Bioscope*, 7 April 1910, p.3.



modular format, with the reduced importance of each individual film, made the recycling of older titles as ‘filler’ in the programme an acceptable practice.

In order to take over successfully the work of programme composition from exhibitors, renters had to appropriate some elements of the rhetoric of showmanship. As discussed before, the manager’s connection with local audiences was an essential part of the job. The transference of this skill to renters gave some advantage to local companies, as exhibitors were more likely to trust the judgement of someone with a good knowledge of Scottish audiences. This is why, as mentioned in the previous chapter, J. J. Bennell’s son had to spend a few formative months sitting in the company’s cinemas and their clients’, to get a sense of what their patrons preferred; and also why local renting companies often hired experienced showpeople as programme managers. However, as much as they liked to claim so, in reality renters could not provide a bespoke service for each cinema, as they had to exploit the films they had acquired for the first run. The number of first-run customers was limited by the capital the renters could invest in new releases, and conversely, the selection of films was mainly influenced by the choices of first-run cinemas.<sup>40</sup> This means that the preferences of audiences in cheaper cinemas lower down the release hierarchy did not have a proportional influence on the market, and that the kind of films favoured by the grandest venues tended to trickle down and flood the exhibition scene.

This standing order or complete programme mode of film hire was an option available locally to Scottish exhibitors. The first company to offer this arrangement

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<sup>40</sup> Cinema Commission of Enquiry, *The Cinema: Its Present Position and Future Possibilities* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1917), p. 193.

locally was the Glasgow branch of Gaumont, which had programmes from ten shillings per 1000 ft. The Bendon Trading Company had started at around the same time, and by 1915 they were well known for delivering ‘ordinary programme films’.<sup>41</sup> In 1913, Green’s were hiring an assistant with experience in ‘selecting good well balanced programmes’ for their film service.<sup>42</sup> Jack Baker offered cheaper summer programmes, alongside his main line in dramatic exclusives. The short-lived Hart’s Film Service claimed to have the cheapest programmes in Glasgow in 1915.<sup>43</sup> The local representatives of Hibbert’s, Butcher’s, and New Century, amongst others, could also arrange circuits in Scotland, even if the stock was not kept in Glasgow.

The B. B. Pictures offered a film service that cost from ten shillings to five pounds per 1000 ft. The cases of the two B. B. customers discussed in Chapter 4 (the Glasgow Cinema House and the Paragon) serve to highlight how renters catered for a highly stratified market. First-run films were supplied to the Cinema House for four pounds per 1000 ft (a discounted price because they were crossed over from the Wellington Palace), while the Paragon often paid as little as two pounds for their whole programme. Because of the way film renting worked within an open-market system, a cinema like the Paragon could increase or decrease their film hire budget according to the circumstances. The accounts book for this cinema kept at the Scottish Screen Archive records film hire payments to the B. B. Pictures from £4 6s. 1d. for a week in September 1913, to just over one pound two months

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<sup>41</sup> ‘Scottish News and Notes’, *The Bioscope*, 11 March 1915, p.1043.

<sup>42</sup> Classified ads, *The Bioscope*, 8 May 1913, p.451.

<sup>43</sup> Hart’s Film Service advert, *The Entertainer*, Vol 2 No 68, 16 January 1915.

later.<sup>44</sup> For both these weeks, the book records two additional titles hired independently, at a price similar to or higher than that paid to B. B. The Paragon was a regular customer of the B. B. Pictures and received a supply of non-specific 'ordinary' films, but there was still considerable variability; it was not a fixed contract. The regular service was a baseline which was meant to be topped up with additional bookings.

The Cinema House did not have as many options when it came to choosing a programme, since they were restricted to the newly released films acquired by their renter, but they could add more expensive 'exclusive' pictures from other distributors. In February 1913, for instance, the directors of the cinema company agreed to pay forty pounds to book *Cleopatra* (Helen Gardner Players, 1912), the first six-reel film produced in the United States.<sup>45</sup> Other deals are registered around the same time with companies like Gaumont and Ideal, while maintaining the regular service from B. B. Pictures. These additional expenses became more risky after the start of the war, when the board tried to cut back the operating costs wherever possible in the face of falling dividends. With less flexibility than the Paragon, they asked the B. B. Pictures to provide a shorter programme (rather than an older one). Unfortunately, the second minute book has not been preserved, and so we cannot know how the wartime programmes were composed.

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<sup>44</sup> Paragon Accounts book, 1913-4, ms notebook. Glasgow, Scottish Screen Archive, SSA5/26/112.

<sup>45</sup> Minutes, 25 February 1913, Glasgow Picture House minute book. Glasgow, Scottish Screen Archive, SSA5/22/3. Dorin Gardner Schumacher, 'Gardner, Helen', in *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema*, ed. by Richard Abel (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 378..

## 6.5. Conclusion

The very flexibility of the modular format allowed the service model to adapt to the new practices that were undermining it, in particular the growing importance of exclusive and feature renting, which will be discussed in the following chapters. Instead of depending on a single renter for their entire programme, exhibitors started to deal with two or three companies each week, so that as the length of exclusives grew, the proportion of 'regular' programme films shrunk without quite disappearing. Exhibitors who were willing and able to make an effort still had considerable liberty to arrange their programmes. The remarkable adaptability of variety programming with open-market subjects demanded time and skill on the exhibitor's part, but it allowed him or her to experiment with different ways to both save money and attract audiences.

Film services flourished from around 1909 to before the war. Afterwards, the extended length of films, the availability of local trade screenings, and the increased importance of each individual title lead more exhibitors to take charge of their own selection and to book feature, support, and newsreels separately from different renters. This reconfiguration of the show around one main feature put providers of film services increasingly at a disadvantage, as the gap between the prices paid for features and for 'ordinary' films widened, and the availability of open-market subjects shrunk. The shift from a programming paradigm where diversity was key to one where a single film took up most of the time hinges on a change in the forms of imagining and addressing the audience. The hugely significant transformations of the film trade that crystallized around the transition to feature programming is the subject of the following chapter.

## Chapter 7

### Feature programming

The way films were made, traded and shown was in constant transformation before the end of the First World War. The growth of permanent and sometimes purpose-built places of exhibition was followed by a shift from a completely modular format built around a variety of short films, to a less flexible format structured around a long film. The rise of the feature-length film was linked with many other fundamental changes that configured what has come to be known as classical cinema or the Institutional Mode of Representation. The feature-length fiction film has proved to be an enduring cultural formation, leading to the emergence of teleological discourses in film historiography that saw it as the medium's destiny and perfection. However, the motivations and processes behind this multi-faceted transformation are still only partially understood.

The popularity of longer narratives must certainly have been a factor in the rise of feature films, but the exhibitors' long-lasting scepticism suggests that it was not fundamentally a demand-led process. Reading the British trade press, it can be difficult to see whose interests were served by the new dominant product. This is in part because the main episodes in the process were taking part thousands of miles away on the California coast. Gerben Bakker has described the transition to feature films as

a quality race in which films escalated their costs  
 sunk in film production and marketing [and which]  
 resulted in a handful of American companies  
 dominating the entertainment business.<sup>1</sup>

These industrial strategies were mainly engineered to profit from the American market. Their impact on British and Scottish film culture was therefore mediated by the different structures of distribution and exhibition that were already established here, as well as by the social context in which cinema functioned. While the previous chapter explored the emergence of the feature film as the institutional commodity-form, this chapter considers the transformations in the second moment of production (the production of spectator-hours) in a regional context. A discussion of some of the findings of the second programming snapshot leads into a broader engagement with historiographical issues regarding the class position of early cinema.

### **7.1. Long films, serials, and feature programming**

The most durable outcome of the processes that reshaped the film trade between 1913 and 1918 was the establishment of feature-length fiction films as the dominant form of cinema. As discussed in the previous chapter, the rise of the feature film was an element in a wholesale recasting of cinema as an industry and as a social activity. As a production trend and textual mode, the step from single-reel to multiple-reel dramas may not have been as significant as the emergence of the standardised single-reel narrative. Its imbrication with all other aspects of the film

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<sup>1</sup> Bakker, *Entertainment Industrialised*, p. xx.

trade, on the other hand, meant that the rise of the feature was necessarily accompanied by profound transformations in exhibition and distribution practices.

As Michael Quinn has written,

the transition from a program-based cinema to one based on the feature was one of the most significant in film history, on the order of the shift from attraction-based to narrative cinema.<sup>2</sup>

The debate over the threat posed by longer films to the established practices that had underpinned the cinema boom started with the consolidation of single-reel films as the staple of the market. During the spring and summer of 1911, *The Bioscope* often ran letters from showmen complaining about the increasing length and slackening pace of features. The editors of the journal held the view that ‘variety is the key-note of the success attained by the cinematograph show’, and that although there seemed to be some demand for films that would fill the whole programme, this trend would be detrimental to the trade as people would soon tire of it.<sup>3</sup> Opposition to longer films was stronger in Scotland and the North of England, where cine-variety shows were more common, since long films did not seem to fit easily within the modular format. Live entertainment was more common in the provinces, so the disregard of short subjects was perceived as a metropolitan bias. Contributing to the protracted debate in *The Bioscope*, C. L. Jamieson, an exhibitor from Newcastle, wrote a letter outlining his exhibition habits:

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Quinn, ‘Distribution, the Transient Audience, and the Transition to the Feature Film’, p. 36.

<sup>3</sup> ‘The Length of the Film: A Question of Policy’, *The Bioscope*, 7 September 1911, p. 471.

At present I show a programme consisting of about seven subjects (about 4000 ft), interspersed with two variety turns [...] twice nightly [...] Most of the Northern picture houses are run on the same lines. We do not want the lengthy film; we want more subjects of the 500 ft length.<sup>4</sup>

Although the forms of exhibition and distribution associated with the classical system had established complete dominance by the end of the decade, the shift was gradual and punctuated by many partial turns. The sway that the attractions model still held was evident in the fact that long films were first made to integrate within the variety paradigm: they were something special that would keep audiences on their toes, but they could not provide the regularity that was now sought by the industry. They were in the same category as other novelties such as synchronised-sound or Kinemacolor films, or special non-fiction subjects such as the Delhi Durbar and the polar expeditions. The main purpose of these films, from the exhibitors' perspective, was to enhance the visibility of the venue, perhaps by getting a mention in the press, as the *Kine Weekly* advised in 1911:

every now and then, say once a month, an exceptional film subject should be boomed as a special attraction. No matter who supplies the film service, or on what basis it is arranged, some presumably rather extraordinary film of the startling kind now so often announced in the KINEMATOGRAPH WEEKLY

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<sup>4</sup> *The Bioscope*, 28 September 1911, p. 667



should be made much of, and it should be presented with special music and effects, and featured as a star attraction. This is a fine paying advertising instrument, when carried out with proper preparations and announcement.<sup>5</sup>

Pantomime films shown over the holiday period, and films with religious content such as *From Manger to Cross* (Kalem, 1912) were given particular attention, as they had a role to play in the legitimization of the venue and the conquest of desirable audiences. In accordance with their special character, these films were distributed on different principles and were booked most commonly in addition to a regular service, as in the Glasgow Cinema House's booking of *Cleopatra* mentioned in the previous chapter. Indeed, the initial meaning of the 'feature' film was a film that could be booked individually and was not included in regular programmes. As such, it was priced outside the flat rate paid for regular programmes – usually over it, but undercutting it in some cases. The individual negotiations exhibitors had to enter to obtain feature films complicated the notion (developed around single-reel narrative products, as explained before) of a reel of film as a regular commodity, interchangeable with any other.

This was a blow to the regular-service distribution model, which aimed for dependability rather than uniqueness. In a regular variety programme, the diversity of the attractions minimised the risk and allowed even small-time exhibitors to

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<sup>5</sup> Bennett, *The Handbook of Kinematography*, p. 256.

include some fresher titles alongside older fare.<sup>6</sup> With the concentration on promoting a single, longer film, rather than the qualities of the venue or the show as a whole, exhibitors were placing their fate increasingly in the hands of their suppliers. While in a variety programme the risks of not enjoying a particular film were dispersed by the diversity of attractions, exhibitors knew that a dud feature was a memorable disappointment that would affect the box office and long-term reputation of the cinema.<sup>7</sup> Showing a five-reel feature meant making most of the programme depend on a single manufacturer, so that the competitive position that exhibitors had had before was compromised. It is not surprising, therefore, that Scottish exhibitors tended to adopt a cautious approach, programming features alongside serials and variety throughout the war years.

A Dunfermline cinema that published their whole programme provides a good illustration of this emerging practice (**Figure 16**) The first part of the week of 7 January 1918 featured the five-reel Triangle film *American Aristocracy* (1916), starring Douglas Fairbanks. The rest of the programme consisted of two British comedies, including *Pickles and Pozzie* (1917), a film shot by wounded soldiers; a cartoon, a travel film, and the Pathé Gazette. The change of pictures on Thursday brought the first episode of Pathé's serial *Patria* (1917), which was given more prominence on the advertising than the longer Lasky film *The Yellow Pawn* (1916). With continuous opening hours, and a pricing scale from four pence to one shilling

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<sup>6</sup> As early as 1911, prominent exhibitor and commentator Frank Ogden Smith (under the pseudonym 'Tuan Ketchel') complained, in an open letter to 'Mr. Film Maker's Agent': 'I look back upon the old times when I paid far less for hire, and always looked for one new film with each change, and at a figure that permitted running a small hall at a profit', while now he was forced to hire long, boring films at higher prices. 'An open letter', *The Bioscope*, 6 July 1911, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Singer, 'Feature Films, Variety Programs', p. 85.

after tax, this cinema seems to have been quite typical of the attempt to broaden the target audience through quietly aspirational programming. The inclusion of factual films retained a hint of the educational ethos, and Triangle films, as Rob King has argued, were pioneering in their attempt to 'appeal to the elitist tastes of America's middle class without sacrificing the existing audience of working- and lower-middle-class patrons'.<sup>8</sup> Although the Triangle corporation had collapsed in 1917, their releases, handled in Scotland by Green's (acting as agents rather than renters), remained amongst the most sought-after titles.

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# THE CINEMA,

EAST PORT.

## PROGRAMMES FOR NEXT WEEK.

Mon., Tues., Wed.	Thurs. Fri. Sat.
<p style="text-align: center;">DOUGLAS FAIRBANKS in a Smiling, Whirling Five Part Triangle Drama</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>American Aristocracy</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">W. W. Jacob's Comedy <b>The Persecution of Bob Pretty</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>MUTT &amp; JEFF CARTOON.</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Cliff Dwellers. In New Mexico. No. 2.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>PATHE GAZETTE.</b> The Very Latest News in Pictures.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">A Sparkling Military Comedy <b>Pickles and Pozzie.</b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">First Episode of the Serial Supreme <b>PATRIA.</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Featuring Mrs VERNON CASTLE, The World Famous Dancer. "A Serial that for sustained interest and breathless excitement surpasses anything of the kind that has ever been filmed."— <i>Era.</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Cleo Ridgely and Wallace Reid in A Famous Players' Novelty Production <b>THE YELLOW PAWN.</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>THE HISTORY OF THE GREAT WAR.</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>PATHE GAZETTE.</b> The Very Latest News in Pictures.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>A CLEVER DUMMY.</b> A Keystone "La Poupee" Comedy.</p>
<p>Continuous Daily, 3 till 10.30 p.m.      Saturdays, 3 till 11 p.m.</p> <p><b>PRICES</b>      -      -      -      -      1/-, 8d. and 4d.</p>	

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Figure 16: Programme for East Port Cinema, Dunfermline

Source: *Dunfermline Press and West of Fife Advertiser*, 5 January 1918.

<sup>8</sup> Rob King, "'Made for the Masses with an Appeal to the Classes': The Triangle Film Corporation and the Failure of Highbrow Film Culture', *Cinema Journal* 44.2 (2005), pp. 3-33 (p. 6).

To compose a programme like the above, the exhibitor had to enter into different arrangements. The Triangle film was hired directly through Green's, who might have also supplied the open-market comedies. The rest of the week had a Keystone comedy (which was distributed through Triangle's agents), a Famous Players-Lasky film (which could only be booked from JD Walker in London), and several Pathé titles. The cinema clearly had a contract with Pathé for the Gazette, a serial, and factual items. In this combination of long-term regular contracts and individually-selected features, the Dunfermline venue revealed a dual strategy that is prevalent throughout the 1918 sample. The alternation of features and serials that can be found in many Scottish venues is also a clear marker of the tension between standardisation and differentiation, as well as between the aim to satisfy regular patrons and attract new ones.

The average length amongst the films surveyed in 1918 was around 3000 ft, but the most common length was around 2000 ft, which was the standard for most serials. Almost half of the cinemas in the 1918 snapshot were advertising a serial, and some of them had programmes composed mostly of serials. Since the sample considers the films being shown on Thursday 10 January, it is likely that the number of cinemas showing serials was even higher as other venues ran serials during the first part of the week. Serials, as Rudmer Canjels has pointed out, were an autonomous form that existed alongside features, rather than a transitional stage leading to the longer film. Their importance relied not only in their experiments with seriality and narrative, but also in the distribution and exhibition practices they

implemented; serials 'stimulated consistency and regulation on the film market, something the feature could not yet provide'.<sup>9</sup>

As a crucial tool in the regularisation of attendance, serials were thought to work better in cinemas with a regular patronage, while exhibitors did not think they would succeed in those venues depending on a transient audience.<sup>10</sup> By extension, they were considered more suited for those halls running two shows a night than for those with continuous opening hours. In that respect, they shared the same position as long films, and indeed served as a feature even if they were only one or two reels long. The structure of the programme remained the same whether the feature was a long film or a serial; support consisted of a couple of interest or topical films and two or three short comics. The feature-length film and the serials had thus replaced the single-reel dramas of the previous years, while other genres continued to be produced in short formats.<sup>11</sup>

Towards the end of the war, the supply of shorter dramas had dried up to the point that it was difficult to put together a balanced programme of short films without relying on serial contracts. This was either impossible or undesirable for many smaller exhibitors, who continued to attempt to run variety programmes using the few single-reel films in circulation. By mid-1917, Tom Gilbert, the Crossgates Picturedrome manager, was writing to fellow exhibitors both near Dunfermline and in Ireland, to enquire about swapping their single- and double-reel dramas, since he had run his through. In a letter to one of his colleagues, he pleaded with him to

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<sup>9</sup> Canjels, *Distributing Silent Film Serials*, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> 'The Film Serial: A Remarkable Development', *The Bioscope*, 7 January 1915, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> On production trends during the transitional period, see Singer, 'Feature Films, Variety Programs', pp. 76-100.

return the titles in time, reminding him of the shortage of single-reel film.<sup>12</sup> This shortage reflected trends in American production, which followed their own market logic, but it also reflected the change in strategy for high-street venues in the main Scottish towns. Given that renters selected their purchases according to the demand of first-run venues, if the best halls on Sauchiehall Street or Princes Street were not showing short dramas, the local renters would not stock them.

If Tom Gilbert found that the metropolitan trends left him lacking a satisfactory supply of shorter films for his rural shows, other exhibitors had the opposite perception. In a letter to *The Bioscope* countering another showman's complaints about the length of films, John Darlison, the manager of the Lyceum in Dumfries, argued that it was only high street cinemas that wanted the return to variety programming because of their continuous show. On the contrary, he thought, 'the vast majority of suburban and provincial audiences go to the cinema for an evening's entertainment and are rightly unsatisfied by a "snippet" programme'.<sup>13</sup> In fact, by this time most city-centre cinemas had already completed their transition to feature programming and reinvented their appeal to transient audiences in the process. Provincial exhibitors' positions regarding this transition were not univocal or coherent, since they were the product of localised, particular experiences and views of the audience. The tension identified by the Newcastle showman quoted at the start of this section, between urban, suburban and provincial exhibition practices, appeared to have changed its orientation in less than a decade. The patterns behind

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<sup>12</sup> Letter (wet copy), Tom Gilbert to W. Webster, Halifax, Yorkshire, dated 22 October 1917 at Crossgates, Fife. NAS SC36/79/18, p. 185.

<sup>13</sup> 'Correspondence: What Exhibitors Want'. *The Bioscope*, 28 August 1917, p.828.

this shift can shed some light on the economic and ideological institutionalisation of cinema in Scotland.

## 7.2. A geography of the transition to feature programming

As Ben Singer has found for the American case, ‘the feature craze was not a tidal-wave phenomenon that instantly wiped out the short film’ or the variety programme.<sup>14</sup> Feature programming, furthermore, did not become dominant at the same time everywhere, and the evidence from Scottish venues gathered in the 1918 programme snapshot can shed light on the varying patterns of change.

The first thing to notice is that feature programming was undoubtedly dominant. Out of the 127 cinemas in the 1918 sample, less than a quarter were offering a programme of single- and double-reelers only. About half of those were cine-variety houses; most of the rest simply happened not to be showing long films on the sample day, but had them on other days of the same week. Five years earlier, only ten out of more than a hundred cinemas had been showing a three-reel film, and a higher proportion of the venues included live entertainment (forty-one per cent of the 1913 sample, compared to twenty-five per cent in 1918). A striking example of the transformation wrought to programming practices is provided by the Galashiels Pavilion, which went from advertising unnamed ‘pictures and variety’ to having a ‘Fox week’ (a branded feature-led programme), while still keeping ‘2 star turns’ (**Figure 17**).

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<sup>14</sup> Singer, ‘Feature Films, Variety Programs’, p. 79.

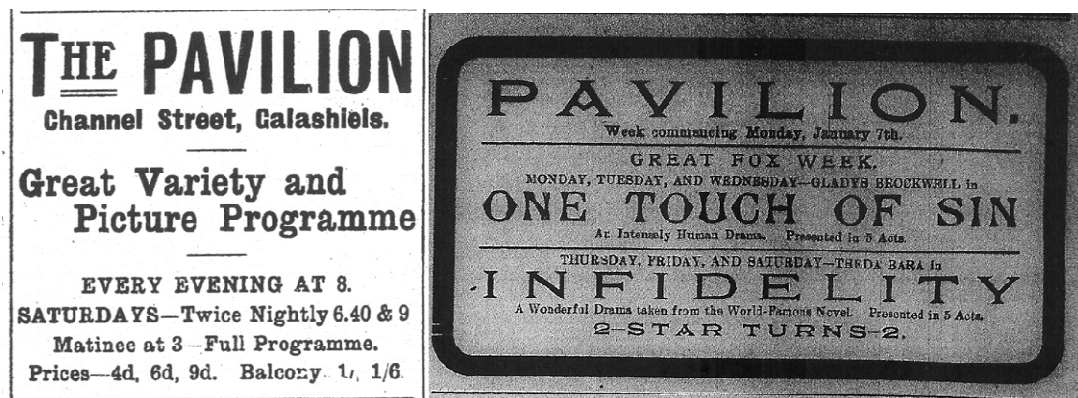


Figure 17: Galashiels Pavilion newspaper ads in 1913 and 1918

Source: Left: *Border Standard*, 11 January 1913. Right: *Border Standard*, 5 January 1918

Variety programming survived in cinemas like the Dingwall Picture House, which advertised simply their ‘usual varied pictures’, the Girvan Assembly House and the Johnstone Pavilion, which included live performances, or the Campbeltown Picture House, which advertised a ‘four-reel Italian masterpiece’ for half of the week, and a programme of shorter films for the other half. Since the sample covers only one week, it is likely to hide more widespread but sporadic programming of features. As they complained about the diminishing supply of shorter films, even the managers of cine-variety halls were programming five-reel features quite happily, with almost half of the live venues advertising films of four reels or more.

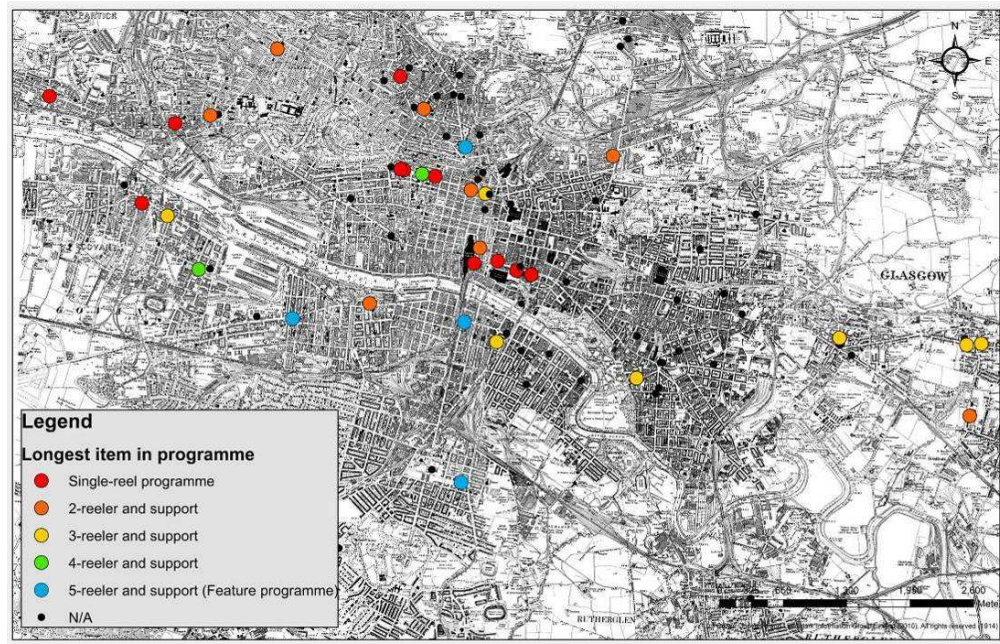
This persistence of variety turns even as supporting acts to a feature programme reveals a strong sense of continuity, and, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the geographical pattern of its survival is interesting. Indeed, the fact that it survives at all, even in war-time conditions when both labour and transport were scarce, is remarkable. Although ultimately it is not possible to draw general



conclusions since the sample is small and uncontrolled, cine-variety retained a stronger presence in the West Coast and in Fife. Most of the advertisements for this kind of show place some emphasis on the manager's name and personal responsibility for the show. As these were areas that had a tradition of travelling entertainment and were linked into the Northern English fairground circuit, it is possible that an existing base of skilled entertainers and managers facilitated the survival of those forms of programming that rewarded such skills. It can also be that there was curtailed access to feature hiring, because the distances from Glasgow and Edinburgh prevented managers from attending trade screenings. Distance was also a factor in other unorthodox programming practices. The Galston Picture House, the East Wemyss Empire, and the Breadalbane Cinema in Wick were amongst a handful of venues that advertised three changes of pictures every week, presenting a different programme on Saturday. The presence of this practice in relatively remote locations, which had been observed for the 1913 snapshot in Lerwick and Crieff, suggests that the anomaly might be due to transport difficulties preventing these cinemas from operating on the same schedule, probably opting to get a weekly shipment instead of two. The coexistence of such different practices shows that programming was still quite fluid at this conjuncture, and local factors had a decisive influence.

The adoption of feature-length films by suburban cinemas displays a very interesting pattern. Because of the perceived incompatibility between continuous shows and long films (given that people were expected to drop in and out), long films were first introduced in more peripheral cinemas, which worked two shows a night. A look at programmes in Glasgow in January 1916 shows an unstable

arrangement, with most city-centre picture houses running a continuous programme of newer short films, and longer films starting to dominate in the working-class districts to the East and South of the city, as **Figure 18** shows.



**Figure 18: Programme mode in Glasgow cinemas, January 1916**

**Source:** Background map: Ordnance Survey County Series 1:10560, 1910. © Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group Limited (2012). All rights reserved. Supplied by Edina Digimap <http://digimap.edina.ac.uk/> **Programmes:** *Glasgow Evening Times*, *Partick and Maryhill Press*, *Southern Press*, *The Entertainer*, *Eastern Argus*, *Clydesdale Catholic Herald*.

By 1918, however, all of the cinemas in Glasgow city centre represented in the sample were showing a feature programme, even though the shows were still continuous. Only six of the twenty-six cinemas sampled in the broader urban area were showing a programme of short films. These were all in working-class residential areas in the East End and south side of the city. This was a reversal of

the situation that could be observed only two years before, and showed that continuous shows and feature films had ceased to be perceived as a contradiction. Once the most prestigious city-centre venues modified their conception of the kind of trade they wanted to attract, the conditions were given for the feature-dominated era of the picture palace.

### **7.3. The new transient audience**

The shift from variety to feature programming as a dominant mode in first-run cinemas hinges on a change in the forms of imagining and addressing the audience. In the variety mode, the assumption was that spectators attended the cinema regularly, hopefully at least twice a week. As discussed in the previous chapter, in this model, aimed at catering for a mass audience, the permanent characteristics and ‘identity’ of the venue were at least as important as the films on offer. The exclusive-feature model, on the other hand, assumed that spectators would make a choice on the strength of the films advertised.<sup>15</sup> While feature programming was an attempt to combine regularisation and difference, the focus was on the uniqueness and appeal of the main feature. If the transition to features can be considered, after Gerben Bakker, as a quality race, it was not only between the studios but also between exhibitors.<sup>16</sup> Understanding and managing audience expectations for particular films became much more important, and a new style of advertising reflected this changing relationship.

Scottish managers proved particularly adept at the new advertising boom.

They are represented disproportionately on *The Bioscope*’s ‘Manager’s bureau’

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<sup>15</sup> Hammond, *The Big Show*, p. 47.

<sup>16</sup> Bakker, *Entertainment Industrialised*, p. xx.

section, where the editor distinguished and gave awards to the keenest managers.<sup>17</sup> During the war years, several Glasgow cinemas started printing publicity bulletins which were more substantial than the usual handbills, and included synopses of the films which functioned as a narrative aid.<sup>18</sup> For instance, the Gorbals Cross Picturedrome had one which included ‘an interesting serial story in Scotch, written by the Manager.’<sup>19</sup> Although I am only aware of a few loose examples of such publications that have been preserved, it seems that besides the programmes for the week or month, they also included adverts for local businesses and some copy which addressed the local audience. Such forms of promotional activity can be considered as an exercise of showmanship skills, and managers had substantial liberty to implement them.

While many of the adverts collected for the 1918 snapshot reflect the continuity of older forms of address, dependent on familiarity and habit-formation, the emergence of new advertising discourses is also evident. An example of the shift that occurred during the war years can be found in the comparison of the advertisements for the Glasgow Picture House in 1913 and 1918 (**Figure 19, Figure 20**). The 1913 advert starts by listing opening times and prices, and goes on to mention ‘The Palm Court Smoke Room, Wedgewood Lounge and Palm Court Balcony. The Finest Tea Rooms in Glasgow.’ There is no mention of titles for the films being shown on that day, but rather of two ‘special’ films that will be shown

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<sup>17</sup> ‘The manager’s bureau’, *The Bioscope*, 1 March 1917, p.942-3

<sup>18</sup> The Manchester trade journal *Pictures & Pleasures* saw the public’s general lack of interest in printed programmes as a problem, since people did not get to find out what was being shown, and thus the exhibitor’s efforts to secure a good selection of films were in vain. (‘Our advent’, *Pictures & Pleasures* 17 Nov 1913, p.1-2)

<sup>19</sup> ‘Cinema chit-chat’, *The Entertainer*, Vol 2 No 78, 27 March 1915, p.5

during the following two weeks. These are both European productions: *Les Misérables* (Pathé, 1912), and the 'Original German Version' of *The Merry Widow*.<sup>20</sup> This is at a moment when the popularity of the longer films that France, Italy, Germany and Denmark had been producing since 1911 was peaking, and American manufacturers were only starting to become interested in this trend.<sup>21</sup> This then captures a moment of transformation, when the feature was not yet a regular part of the programme, because longer films were not produced or marketed in a systematic way.<sup>22</sup> Instead, they disrupted routine; these two productions were advertised as separate from the flow of the continuous programme, with only one screening every evening. Following the analogy with legitimate theatre that feature films often tried to evoke, exhibitors believed that viewers would not want to come in halfway through a film, and so preferred to have a set time and booked seats. These interruptions of more formal traditions of theatre going into high-street cinemas could provide a distinctive experience, but they were ultimately viewed as a one-off 'specials' that did not displace the highly flexible variety format.

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<sup>20</sup> Mentioning the nationality of the film may have been a way to emphasise its closeness to the source material and thus to legitimate musical theatre. There were many single-reel film versions of this popular operetta and I have been unable to determine which one was shown in Glasgow; however, the version that was circulating in Europe at the time may have been Éclair's (*La veuve joyeuse*, 1913). Either the advertisement was misleading patrons by presenting a French film as German, or the cinema was showing an older German version (perhaps Deutsche Bioscop's 1909 production). Blom, *Jean Desmet and the Early Dutch Film Trade*, p. 201.

<sup>21</sup> Ben Brewster, 'Traffic in Souls: An Experiment in Feature-Length Narrative Construction', *Cinema Journal* 31.1 (1991), pp. 37-56 (p. 38). Abel, 'The "Backbone" of the Business', pp. 86-88.

<sup>22</sup> This is why the regularisation of feature production and distribution by Paramount, studied by Michael Quinn, was such a pivotal moment. Michael J. Quinn, 'Paramount and Early Feature Distribution: 1914-1921', *Film History* 11.1 (1999), pp. 98-113 (p. 99).



Figure 19: Ad for The Picture House, Glasgow

Source: *Evening Times*, 9 January 1913

Compare this to the advertisement for the same cinema, on the same newspaper, five years later (**Figure 20**) There is a large block print depicting the protagonists in a film titled *His Golden Hour*; distributors provided these printing blocks for local clients. Standing out in a white dress, the main figure is identified as Susan Grandaise (sic), although this refers to the French actor Suzanne Grandais, and the copy in the advert goes on to praise her performance. The text refers to characters from the play or novel in which the film is based, appealing to the spectator's previous knowledge of the story. The supporting films are only identified by genre (comedy and interest), pointing to the generic divide that developed within the trade, where feature production concentrated on dramas or comedy-dramas, while factual films and comedies were still produced and marketed as 'ordinary' films.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> The case of Charlie Chaplin is illustrative in this context: having made his fortune with single- and double-reel films, Chaplin immediately moved on to feature-length productions. Those longer films, as Michael Hammond explains, introduced more pathos and helped cement Chaplin's respectability across class divides. Hammond, *The Big Show*, pp. 206-214.



**Figure 20: Ad for The Picture House, 1918**

**Source:** *Evening Times*, 10 January 1918

In the second advert, the audience was invited to sit and enjoy ‘a wonderful piece of work’, an ‘artistic triumph’ inscribed within theatrical discourse through the use of the term ‘in Five Acts’ and the centrality given to Grandais’s performance. This rhetoric is a sharp departure from the continued use of adjectives such as ‘thrilling’ and ‘strong’ that were more common in adverts for popular

venues such as the Premier, in the working-class suburb of Shettleston.<sup>24</sup> (**Figure 21**)

The Premier, in common with some other similar venues, advertised a ‘continuous performance’, but since the hall only opened for three and a half hours in the evening, in practice this equalled to two full shows. The reference to ‘usual prices’ is a reminder of the local, regular audience that was reached through a local newspaper.



**Figure 21:** Ad for the Premier Picture Theatre, Shettleston

**Source:** *Eastern Argus*, 5 January 1918.

<sup>24</sup> From early on, industry commentators had been aware of the different aesthetic discourses required to attract more affluent audiences, suggesting, for instance, that ‘the gaudy, bloodthirsty posters issued by some of the Continental and American makers are to be avoided in the better-class neighbourhoods’. Bennett, *The Handbook of Kinematography*, p. 252.



Neighbourhood cinemas such as the Premier had long been assimilated within their audience's routine. Their opening hours reflected the temporal patterns of a working population rather than a leisured class. Except for the serial, the films on offer were between two and five years old, and the advert does not include any mention of brands, stars, or plot. The advert, therefore, would not say much to anyone trying to select something to watch, other than the titles are 'strong' and 'thrilling', that is, conforming to generic expectations. On the contrary, although most city-centre cinemas retained their continuous opening hours, their embrace of feature programming required them to reinvent their address to the individual, discriminating customer. The purpose was no longer to provide a resting place for people going about their daily business, but to get them to leave the house and make an evening of it. The businessman with an hour to spare and the shopping lady (an aspirational code that, in reality, translated closer to the clerk and the shop-girl) were no longer expected to come in for a half-hour, but to stay through the complete programme, until the point where they had arrived. Their investment was higher and the options available were plenty, so the publicity around the film had to be persuasive. The assumption of mobility (transience) as a characteristic of city-centre audiences was reinterpreted as meaning that spectators could be drawn in to particular films, instead of being regulars. This did not preclude them being regulars at their neighbourhood cinema, establishing a weekly routine that could lead them to visit different venues according to their perceived function and social character. The neighbourhood cinema could retain some of its community appeal, while up-to-dateness and choice were sought on the high street.

Such options were a prerogative of urban, relatively affluent and mobile spectators, and those venues that intended to cater for them had to be highly competitive. Since differentiation was increasingly restricted to the choice of film, this competition required the emergence of distribution practices that provided exclusivity. There were, however, many more venues that did not face the same competitive pressures, and which attempted to promote frequent attendance, such as the circuit of cinemas operated by Harry Dawson in the mining towns of Gorebridge, Loanhead and Penicuik, which offered a daily change of programme.<sup>25</sup> When a triple weekly change of pictures had been introduced in some provincial halls in 1913, the *Bioscope*'s Scottish correspondent opined that this innovation was 'a capital scheme for some of our smaller towns [...] where the triple change is thus all the more likely to induce continuous "custom"'.<sup>26</sup> The concentration of this practice in industrial and mining districts suggests that, more than the type of programme presented, it was the regularity of attendance that defined popular cinemagoing. The opposition between routine and choice, and between collective and individual experience, carries ideological connotations shaped by the class system. This apparent dichotomy, however, should not be understood as a polar opposition; rather, these are yet more vectors in the field of forces that keep reshaping the social phenomenon of cinema. In the emergence of feature programming, these class-based tensions have attracted considerable historiographical attention, as the next section discusses.

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<sup>25</sup> 'Items of interest', *The Bioscope*, 19 February 1914, p. 747.

<sup>26</sup> 'Away up North', *The Bioscope*, 1 May 1913, p.337.

#### 7.4. A bourgeois cinema?

According to Ben Singer, one of the reasons why variety and feature programming could coexist and share the market for a few years was because they were perceived as occupying separate niches and serving different purposes.<sup>27</sup> As he points out, feature exhibition in the United States took place in more luxurious and expensive venues, and the inter-textual reference to literary and dramatic works placed feature films in the context of middle-class culture. If this holds true, then the rise of feature programming would have profound consequences in terms of audience demographics. In his article in the *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema*, Nico de Klerk introduces a notion that has caused intense scholarly debate. The shift to feature programming was, he writes,

a reflection of developments in production, distribution, and exhibition practices: on the one hand, processes of rationalization, standardization, and increase in scale and, on the other, a process of “gentrification” in terms of ownership, film subjects, and target audiences.<sup>28</sup>

The first part of this argument has been discussed above. Although standardisation was a major force, the next chapter will show that it maintained a dialectic relationship with differentiation, so that these industrialising processes cannot be read as unidirectional. The second part of the argument, however, is much

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<sup>27</sup> Singer, ‘Feature Films, Variety Programs’, p. 84.

<sup>28</sup> Nico de Klerk, ‘program formats’, in *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema*, ed. by Richard Abel (London, New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 533-535 (p. 533).

more problematic. While the increasing transference of ownership of different entities in the cinema trade towards bourgeois and petit-bourgeois individuals can be verified throughout the cinema boom (some examples can be found in Chapter 4), the change of the class position of texts and audiences is much more difficult to ascertain. In the first place, it requires an assumption of a previous state in which the cinema was proletarian.

The Allen-Singer controversy over Manhattan nickelodeon audiences made evident some of the problems inherent in trying to nail down the class identity of early cinemagoers. Challenging previous assumptions, Allen had argued that, rather than attracting exclusively a working-class or immigrant audience, Manhattan exhibitors used 'small-time vaudeville' to entice more middle-class patrons.<sup>29</sup> In his 1995 article, Ben Singer used different sources to reveal previously undocumented nickelodeons, and contest the revisionist notion that the middle class had quickly appropriated early cinema.<sup>30</sup> Although this discussion has mostly taken a back seat with the growing interest in non-metropolitan practices, it provides a relevant context for the present argument. As discussed in Chapter 4, British exhibition practices are not directly comparable to nickelodeons. However, the debate surrounding nickelodeons is still relevant, insofar as it pertains to broader institutional and textual transformations.

The opposition between the proletarian and bourgeois versions of cinema is an important element in understanding the fracture between variety and feature

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<sup>29</sup> Robert C. Allen, 'Motion Picture Exhibition in Manhattan 1906-1912: Beyond the Nickelodeon', *Cinema Journal* 18.2 (1979), pp. 2-15.

<sup>30</sup> Ben Singer, 'Manhattan Nickelodeons: New Data on Audiences and Exhibitors', *Cinema Journal* 34.3 (1995), 5-35.

programming. On the one hand, the ever-shifting attractions of a variety programme have been interpreted as offering working-class audiences a way to process the modern perceptual environment and mechanised routines of urban industrial life.<sup>31</sup> On the other, longer films coincided with production trends, such as a greater reliance on actors and texts borrowed from the legitimate stage, at a time when the industry saw an opportunity to draw middle-class theatre audiences into the cinemas.<sup>32</sup> However, the Scottish case shows that variety programming held on in city-centre cinemas, while working-class venues had been showing longer films from an early date. The city-centre cinemas' attempt to broaden the audience to include some ranks of the middle class was initially based as much on extra-textual qualities such as convenience and tea-rooms as in the transformation of both product and programme. As discussed above, up to around 1915 the exhibitors' idea of the transient – and more affluent – audience saw the more casual form of engagement that was offered by the cinema as an advantage over the theatre in certain circumstances. The variety programme was, therefore, mobilised and defended by Scottish exhibitors in their attempts to attract a more middle-class audience before the beginning of the war.

Long films, on the other hand, were not identified necessarily as less attractive or accessible for working-class audiences. If anything, they could be

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<sup>31</sup> Although this somewhat romantic idea of early cinema as a 'proletarian public sphere' is hard to sustain against the evidence of cross-class interest, it can be useful as an ideal (inexistent) category that helps define the field of tensions; as Miriam Hansen wrote, early cinema 'would qualify as an instance of a proletarian public sphere' not because it was one, but because there was such a concentrated effort to prevent it being one, 'to rid the institution of its class-specific stigma'. Miriam Hansen, 'Early Silent Cinema: Whose Public Sphere?', *New German Critique*, 29 (1983), 147-184 (p. 157).

<sup>32</sup> Burrows, *Legitimate Cinema*, p. 185.

thought of as *too* attractive; many of the early features were rejected by more aspirational exhibitors as they tended to contain sensationalist or titillating topics. As Hammond argues, the notion of moral threat was intertwined with the fear of adverse physical effects from prolonged eyestrain.<sup>33</sup> The regularisation of American feature production and the studios' increasingly successful control of the discourse around it, through branding and the star system, turned the tables by making the 'transience' of the middle-class audience a matter of choice between heavily-advertised features rather than a casual use of a comfortable space. Privileging text over context, feature programming, imbricated as it was with narrative integration as a mode of address, tended to make the exhibitor's (and the distributor's) work invisible, and to foster in the individual spectator the illusion that he or she was choosing freely to consume a unique product, rather than take part in a collective event.

## 7.5. Conclusion

The transition from exhibition and distribution practices that valued the diversity and modularity of attractions, to ones where the attributes of a branded narrative film were foregrounded, is a key moment in the rebalancing of the ordinary and extraordinary dimensions of the cinema experience that defined institutionalisation. On the basis of the evidence gathered for the Scottish case, this chapter has shown that this process was shaped by a tension between regular and selective audiences, which played out in the spatial politics and discourses of the cinema trade. The hierarchies that divided a very competitive market were made acute by city-centre venues representing their audience as more affluent and mobile. This did not

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<sup>33</sup> Hammond, *The Big Show*, p. 217.

happen to the same extent in peripheral cinemas, which continued to be rooted in local community life, retaining some of the collective characteristics that Miriam Hansen identified in attractions-based practices.

Up to the First World War, independent small-town exhibitors in Scotland had had a great deal of control over their programming, and they mobilised their direct knowledge of their audiences to create shows that appealed to them on a regular basis. At least part of the explanation for the great popularity of cinemagoing in this nation must lay with them. However, the future of cinema was being decided in relation to the very competitive context of metropolitan exhibition, which demanded high brand recognition and investment in extra-textual promotional strategies. Regardless of the actual income level of the patrons, the embourgeoisement of the cinema experience during the transition to feature exhibition resides in its individualisation and in the foregrounding of film as commodity over the show as labour and event. The cinema was engulfed by the rising hegemony of urban consumer culture, rather than appropriated by one social class over another.

The industry's attempt to create an artificial diversity through marketing and monopolistic practices, while at the same time striving for greater standardisation and predictability, was at the core of the shift towards more classical or institutional models that started happening during the war years. While some of these processes have been discussed above from the point of view of exhibition, the following chapter will focus more explicitly on distribution, as it considers the convergence of feature programming with exclusive and direct rental methods.

## Chapter 8

### Feature distribution

According to an industry commentator, by 1917 the average cinema in Britain was receiving three boxes every half-week – one with the exclusive, one with the open-market short films, and one with the topical.<sup>1</sup> These items not only came from different companies, but arrived through different distribution models: the newsreels as a subscription directly from the manufacturer, the short films as a regular service from an open-market renter, and the feature as an exclusive rental from a specialised dealer. The tensions and debates that were dividing the industry played out in the composition of each show. As Chapter 6 showed, the exhibitors' opportunities to distinguish and add value to their product (the show) were becoming more restricted, while the pressures of competition in urban centres increased. This chapter will argue that, in this environment, the diminished role of showmanship and performance contributed to foster demand for what might be called standardised differentiation, in which branding and the star system are key. This was intertwined with the changes in the commodity nature of film that had started crystallising around multiple-reel works.

There were forces undermining the standard-price, open market model coming from different sectors. On the exhibition side, there was the desire to show a distinctive programme that nearby cinemas could not get. It was therefore a

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<sup>1</sup> Cinema Commission of Enquiry, *The Cinema: Its Present Position and Future Possibilities*, p. 197.



problem created by the density of cinemas in urban areas and the fiercely competitive market that ensued. On the production side, producers were engaged in an arms race, with production costs skyrocketing in an attempt to drive smaller competitors out of business and to cement brand recognition. And distributors were increasingly entering the exclusives market or acting as direct agents of manufacturers. The struggle for power between the three sectors of the industry resulted in a constant renegotiation of trade conditions and the overlapping of contrasting practices.

This chapter will start by considering some of the attempts of film manufacturers trading in Britain to extend their control over the film product and the revenue it helped generate. Restricting the availability of film prints to allow for higher prices was a long-term ambition that was resisted by some renters and exhibitors, particularly in the lower end of the market. This chapter will discuss two strategies that developed as an attempt to satisfy the demand for differentiation. Exclusive renting was a distribution-based practice that allowed exhibitors to put on unique programmes through the restricted circulation of prints. Branding and the star system were production-based and text-inscribed practices that developed as part of the studios' quality race, and dismantled the notion of films as interchangeable, homogeneous commodities. The concentration on individual films brought about by the transition to features gave more power to successful brands to drive definitive changes in the trade, namely direct renting and block booking.

Besides the particular challenges created by national conditions, the war years were difficult for most Scottish exhibitors. Rapid expansion gave way to a process of consolidation, whereby large companies became larger and the gap

between the lower and upper rungs of the market widened. The conditions that had allowed the development of independent and diverse exhibition and distribution sectors in Scotland were changing. Using archival sources, trade journals, and the 1918 programming snapshot that was introduced before, this chapter examines the local response to some of the multiple transformations associated with the rise of feature-length films.

### **8.1. Trade disputes**

The fundamental difference between the American and the British film trade, as previous chapters have suggested, was that in Britain, film prints were sold by manufacturers or their agents to any renter that wanted to buy them, with no licensing system or further control on the exploitation of the print such as existed in the US under the General Film/MP Sales duopoly up to 1912. Taking the American situation as a warning, renters were outraged every time that a proposal was put forward by manufacturers restricting in any way their freedom to hire or sell the films they had bought. Still, such proposals emerged year after year, just to be fought, defeated or accepted, and then hardly ever implemented.

As Jon Burrows has shown, the climactic point of the confrontation of manufacturers and renters was the Paris Convention of 1909, where the producers tried to impose a minimum price and a fixed shelf life for films sold to renters. The Convention collapsed, but it had long-lasting effects, because it led renters to forge closer bonds with American manufacturers and spearheaded their takeover of the British market.<sup>2</sup> If in that instance the exhibitors had been mostly on the side of the

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<sup>2</sup> Burrows, 'When Britain tried to join Europe', pp. 14-15.

renters, the tables were turned in the summer of 1910 after the outrage caused by the formation of the Cinematograph Renters' Association, and its subsequent agreement with the manufacturers.<sup>3</sup> Later on, a new agreement between manufacturers and renters, valid throughout 1912, restricted second-hand trade and was thus resented by smaller renters and exhibitors.<sup>4</sup> The perception amongst parts of the trade was that manufacturers wanted to create a monopoly to increase prices, while the competition between small renters, as well as the second-hand trade, was what kept rental prices in check and affordable for small-time and peripheral shows.<sup>5</sup>

These constant attempts to curtail the outright sale of films to renters proposed to replace it either with a licensing system where films had to be returned to manufacturers after a set period, or with direct renting (of which more below). This had the effect of removing older films from the market so that there was constant demand for new titles. Returning to Michael Chanan's characterisation of the particularities of film as a commodity, it is worth remembering that the fact that films are not 'spent' – removed from the market – upon use is a crucial part of their commercial nature. The manufacturers' controlling ambitions can therefore be seen as a struggle to tame the disconcerting characteristics of their industrialised product. The fascination with the techniques of mass entertainment was in tension with emerging discourses of distinction and exclusivity. However, the British trade's ideological commitment to the open market, as well as the trajectory of established renters, allowed the old practices to survive for longer than in many other countries,

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<sup>3</sup> 'Secret Conclaves' (editorial), *The Bioscope*, 8 September 1910, p.3

<sup>4</sup> Low, *The History of British Film*, pp. 78-79.

<sup>5</sup> Low, *The History of British Film*, p. 80.

even if they were increasingly marginalized due to the influence of feature programming.

The rise of longer films threatened the open-market model because of the shifts it brought to the commodity form of both film and show. These changes in film production, driven chiefly by the conditions of the trade in the United States, interacted with a local exhibition market that appeared to be reaching saturation and faced further pressure resulting from war conditions. The distribution models that were tried out during the war years were dynamic attempts to mediate between a fiercely competitive, yet precarious exhibition sector, and a limited number of larger, more powerful producing companies. This unstable situation created an opening for the model of exclusive renting, which experienced a similar boom pattern as exhibition, attracting small investors and opportunistic dealers.

## **8.2. Exclusive renting**

As early as 1913, the Cinema Exhibitors' Association had passed a resolution deploring the producers' concentration on long films over shorts, and particularly the fact that some agents were marketing all films as exclusives. The rise of the long film and the development of the exclusive renting model were parallel, but they are separate phenomena. Most 'exclusives' happened to be over 2000 ft. long, but that was not the reason they were exclusives. The confusion between the terms existed since their inception, but for the sake of clarity 'exclusive' will be understood in this section as a film (long or short) that was not sold by the production companies to as many renters as wanted to buy it; instead, a limited number of prints were struck, and renters paid for the right to handle that film in a territory for a period

(two years on average).<sup>6</sup> This was a version of the American system of states' rights, which saved renters the expense of buying many prints of a title that would have a very short shelf life. In Britain, it was also a logical result of the crowded exhibition scene in the main towns, which had resulted in the fixation with first-runs that was so costly to renters.<sup>7</sup>

In the open market model, production companies only received a one-off payment for the sale of each print. They had therefore an incentive to promote a form of saturation release where all first-run exhibitors wanted to show the newest films of certain brands, so that renters needed to buy more prints to satisfy demand. The first-run problem, discussed in Chapter 4, had been a topic of discussion for the industry since the start of the decade. However, the heightened awareness of the film commodity brought about by feature programming and branding exacerbated matters. Open-market renters had to buy enough prints to keep their first-run customers happy, but this was proving uneconomical, as the B. B. Pictures manager, Ritson Bennell, wrote:

certain brands of films, such as Vitagraph and  
American Bioscope, and, of course, Keystone after  
Chaplin got going, became so popular that every first-  
run exhibitor wanted these included in his programme  
and, to satisfy his customers, the film renter was  
obliged to buy eight or ten or more copies of these  
films, with the result that there were so many copies

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<sup>6</sup> Cinema Commission of Enquiry, *The Cinema: Its Present Position and Future Possibilities*, pp. 192-197.

<sup>7</sup> Dr. W. Fowler Pettie, 'The Question of Exclusives', *The Bioscope*, 14 August 1913, p. 486-7.

available for late releases that the film became a drug on the market before the renter had been able to recuperate his cost and his expenses. The result was the more popular a film became, the more money the renter lost on it.<sup>8</sup>

From the point of view of exhibitors, the problem of using open-market films as first-run features was that the opposition might get the same titles, when the feature was meant to be the differentiating element in a variety programme.<sup>9</sup> This was a problem in cities with several first-run cinemas operating in close proximity; furthermore, it was a problem mostly for those venues that depended on a non-regular audience. The strategies that emerged in response to this problem, therefore, catered mainly for high-street exhibitors who could also pay higher prices. In restricting the number of prints on the market, renters avoided oversupply in the late runs, but this meant that exhibitors lower down the distribution chain could not benefit from the cost reductions resulting from this market behaviour. Exclusives did not depreciate at the same rate as open-market features, and the price of the weekly programme increased accordingly.

By the beginning of the war, the oldest Glasgow-based distributors, B. B. Pictures, Bendon Film Trading Co, and Green's Film Service, were solidly established as the backbone of the Scottish trade. Their directors visited London very often or kept staff there, in order to attend the trade shows and place orders with the manufacturers. All these operations required considerable capital and an

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<sup>8</sup> Ritson Bennell, 'The Film Industry Settles Down', *Educational Film Bulletin* 33 (1946), pp. 34-39.

<sup>9</sup> 'The Results of Competition' (editorial), *The Bioscope*, 18 December 1913, p. 1176.

extended business network. Since exclusive renters, by contrast, did not have to buy the films, this became an inexpensive way to set up business. Exclusive renters mushroomed, with at least ten new companies set up in Scotland between late 1911 and early 1917. There were probably as many non-registered individuals marketing individual films on a commission (the ‘ten per cent merchants’ so despised by other renters).<sup>10</sup> These could be people like John H. Mills, a trumpet player who represented the London Film Agency for Edinburgh, or Walter Draper, of the merchant firm Thomas Fairlie & Sons, who handled bookings for Gerrard Exclusives.<sup>11</sup> Film renting was not their full-time occupation, and their experience was in commercial representation rather than showmanship. Most of these enterprises were short-lived, as their staff went to work for other, larger companies or returned to their habitual occupations. Some cinema-circuit owners, such as R. C. Buchanan and Ralph Pringle, also established exclusive dealerships even though they had not attempted to enter distribution before.

The North British Exclusive and Feature Film Co. was one of the more solid of Scottish exclusive renters – substantial enough to take over the premises vacated by Gaumont in 1915, and to poach travelling salesmen from Bendon and Pathé.<sup>12</sup> They handled films from British producers such as Neptune, Clarendon, and Bishop, Pessers & Co. Alex Stewart, who had worked as a traveller and representative for different companies, went on to establish two exclusive agencies – the Star Exclusive Co., and the Scottish Exclusive Co., with John Henderson, which handled

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<sup>10</sup> Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film 1914-1918* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1950), p. 42.

<sup>11</sup> ‘*The Bioscope*, 19 September 1914, p. 706; ‘Scottish News and Notes’, *The Bioscope*, 21 January 1915, p. 236.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Cinema chit-chat’, *The Entertainer*, 30 January 1915, p. 5.

films from Bolton Mutual, Kino Exclusives, International, Butcher's, and Hepworth.<sup>13</sup> A similar case was that of Percy Winocour, who established St Mungo Exclusives after several years working as an independent distributor. His company handled exclusives from Lucoque, a British brand with a small line in dramatic features.<sup>14</sup>

As the above examples suggest, independent Scottish firms represented mostly second-rate producers with a limited output, many of them British. Exclusive rights were first sold on a national (Great Britain) level, and then subdivided to facilitate exploitation. **(Figure 22)** Scottish exclusive renters, therefore, were usually sub-contracting from English companies, or operating on agency terms. B. B. Pictures, for instance, acquired the Scottish rights of two World-Film titles from the Clarion Film Agency, but they also represented a Newcastle-based company, Dominion Exclusives.<sup>15</sup> Jack Baker had an agreement with the North Eastern Film Service, based in Sunderland, to handle booking rights for Imp/Universal's *Traffic in Souls* (1913) and other American features.<sup>16</sup> He later obtained rights for several Paramount features after he took over the Scottish operations of Fenning's Film Service.<sup>17</sup> Some of the more desirable American brands were represented by Green's and Bendon's, but more commonly it was bigger companies with local branches that acquired rights for the most sought-after titles. For instance, Hibbert's, and then Newcastle Film Company, handled Famous

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<sup>13</sup> 'What of the New Year? Scottish Renters Fully Prepared', *The Bioscope*, 4 January 1917, p. 68.

<sup>14</sup> 'Scottish trade notes', *The Bioscope*, 15 February 1917, p. 745.

<sup>15</sup> 'Scottish News and Notes', *The Bioscope* 17 September 1914, p. 1049; 'BB Pictures Trade Show', *The Entertainer* 31 July 1915, p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> Advert, *The Entertainer*, 31 October 1914, p. 8.

<sup>17</sup> Advert, *The Entertainer*, 22 January 1916, p. 6.



Players-Lasky films for Scotland even though the British rights were held by JD Walker.<sup>18</sup> In any case, as the last section of this chapter will explain, the new policy of direct renting was curtailing the participation of local agents.



Figure 22: Territorial division for management of exclusive rights for Barker's film *Beneath the Mask* (1915)

Source: *The Bioscope*, 11 February 1915, p.553.

<sup>18</sup> 'Scottish News and Notes', *The Bioscope*, 3 December 1914, p. 1017; Advert, *The Bioscope*, 4 February 1915, p. 434.

Exhibitors, particularly in the North, were wary of the inflationary effect that the exclusives market was creating. The higher prices obtained through the restriction of supply, plus the several layers of middlemen that could come between them and a film all cut into the exhibitors' margins, which were already much diminished by the Entertainments Tax introduced in 1916. Besides, the new exclusive renters that kept appearing out of the woodwork were not necessarily trustworthy when it came to dispatching films on time and keeping tabs on the condition of the prints. Since exclusive dealers had little incentive to order new prints of films, what provincial exhibitors often received if they booked from London-based agents were those prints that had already been worked in the capital or in other districts for a long time.<sup>19</sup> An exhibitor could think he had struck a very good deal, only to find that the film as received was unusable.

Mistrust was rife between the two sectors. Although there were frequent calls for war-time co-operation, in fact the trade organisations maintained a long-running power struggle. In the summer of 1915, *The Bioscope* ran a series of editorial articles considering 'the position to-day' from the perspective of different sectors of the trade. The first of these blamed the film producers for creating a glut in the market through overproduction, and thus bringing about the exclusives market as an imperfect way of dealing with the subsequent depreciation.<sup>20</sup> The renters are then made partially responsible for the threat that hangs over their trade, since their 'laissez-faire and thoughtlessness' have made the argument for those

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<sup>19</sup> 'Newcastle Exhibitors' Discussion on the Exclusive', *The Bioscope*, 24 June 1915, p.1301.

<sup>20</sup> 'The Position To-Day: The Manufacturers' Attitude', *The Bioscope*, 13 May 1915, p. 603.

who would rather hire films directly.<sup>21</sup> Exhibitors were then pictured as mostly victims of all these changes, bearing the brunt of the price escalation. Although the apportioning of responsibility is unconvincing and the causes of change are poorly understood, with these editorials the trade paper managed to pinpoint some pertinent debates. The most crucial of the questions raised was on the survival of open-market renting in the face of a creeping movement towards direct renting (or vertical integration).<sup>22</sup>

In the times of *Cabiria* (Itala Film, 1914) or *Birth of a Nation*, when ‘big’ films were relatively uncommon, they could be traded on top of the existing system. *The Bioscope*, trying hard not to offend any of its advertisers, clung to the opinion that exclusives were worthwhile for exhibitors as a way to deal with competition, but that the open market was ‘the only real, safe and permanent method of conducting business’.<sup>23</sup> The problem was that exclusive dealing also undermined the basic principle that any foot of film was equal to any other, and that the price scale could be linked only to the time elapsed since its release. The promoters of exclusive renting could claim that it was a step towards free-market economics, because exclusives would only fetch their actual market value – instead of a fixed minimum amount – and that would spur producers to compete on quality. Longer films, conceived as large-scale spectacles, were more expensive to produce, and to promote. With the advance of brand and star awareness, producers realised that they could make a larger profit; the standard price did not match the full earning potential of sought-after features.

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<sup>21</sup> ‘The Position To-Day: What the Renters Have to Face’, *The Bioscope*, 20 May 1915, p. 707.

<sup>22</sup> ‘The Position To-Day: Conclusions’, *The Bioscope*, 3 June 1915, p. 915.

<sup>23</sup> ‘The Open Market’, *The Bioscope*, 5 May 1915, p.479.

The fact that exclusives were negotiated individually led to very complicated arrangements, and meant that exhibitors had to deal with a much larger number of companies for their programme. While in 1913 a cinema like the Glasgow Picture House could get most of its films from one company, with some occasional additions, by 1916 the Star, in Aberdeen, was getting films from at least twenty-seven different companies, including all the main Scottish firms but also many with a London base.<sup>24</sup> Exclusives seem to have caught on strongly in Scotland, or at least the trade press claimed that much. 'It is only in one-hall towns they are not the popular item in the programme', wrote *The Bioscope's* reporter.<sup>25</sup> If it is true that exhibitors facing no local opposition did not plump for exclusives, the ascent of this form of renting must be understood as a consequence of the urban emphasis in the development patterns of the cinema boom. Exclusive renting was a response to city conditions, and its undermining of the open market was detrimental to small-town exhibition. On the other hand, a combination of new trade methods and the war conditions suspended the 'tyranny of first runs' and eroded the geographical hierarchy that gave small towns only old films.

In the 1918 sample of programmes, the number of newly released films on show is very low. The release dates of films that were being shown in January 1918 are widely spread over the past six months and even further. This marks a striking contrast with the 1913 pattern, where there was a very clear concentration on newer films (under two months from release) for the larger cities. While in 1918 city cinemas still get more of the new releases, the pattern seems much less predictable.

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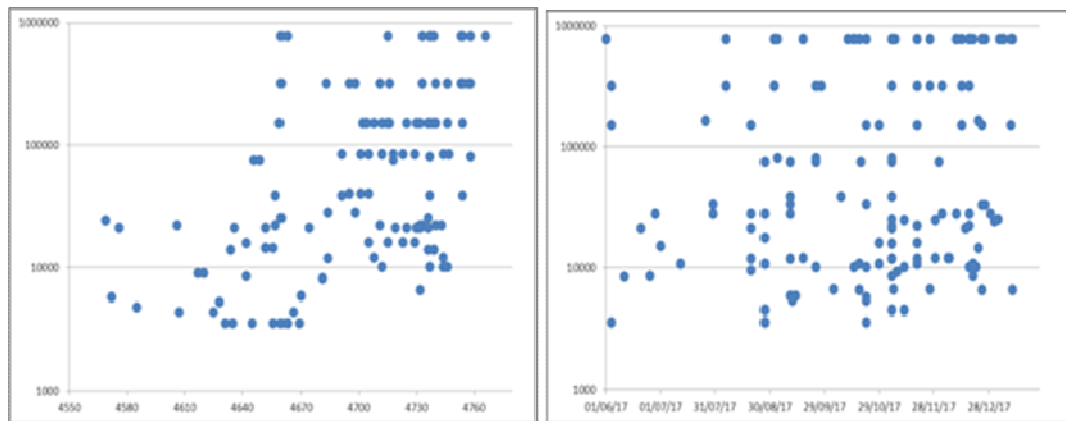
<sup>24</sup> Minute book of the Aberdeen Picture Palaces Ltd: Logs of cheques paid to film renters, April 1915 to September 1916.

<sup>25</sup> 'General Notes (Scottish section)', *The Bioscope*, 17 June 1915, p. 1193-5.

This can be observed when the release dates of the films on show are plotted against the population of the towns.

**Figure 23** compares the pattern found in the 1913 and 1918 snapshots. Each dot represents one film named in the newspaper cinema listings examined. The y axis represents burgh population in 1911 on a logarithmic scale, so that films shown in the larger cities (Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Paisley; Dundee is not present in the sample) form rows towards the top half of the graph area. The x axis is the date of UK release for the film, covering the six months before the snapshot date, as given in *The Bioscope* (sometimes the date is approximate, according to the first mention found). The first graph, presented before in Chapter 4, shows a boot-shaped pattern where newer films tend to cluster around larger populations, while there is a ‘tail’ of older films in smaller towns. This is consistent with the standard first-run model, where film rental depreciates rapidly so the higher value must be obtained in the larger urban halls.

The 1918 snapshot, on the right, looks strikingly different. Although there is still a slight concentration of newer films in the larger towns, there are also much older ones and the separation from small-town programming is not so stark. This change can be attributed to exclusive renting: the majority of the programmes sampled contained a long feature film traded outside the open market. The differentiation made possible by exclusive renting meant that exhibitors could book films that were not new but had not been shown in their district. The smaller number of prints available meant that each film took longer to make its way around the country, and depreciated more slowly.



**Figure 23: Comparison of 1913 and 1918 release date patterns**

Release dates of films in 1913 (left) and 1918 (right) programming snapshots, plotted against population of the towns where they were shown (y axis, exponential).

Although the 1918 snapshot shows the ascendance of exclusive renting, and its almost complete appropriation of the feature slot, it also shows that there was still a considerable amount of open-market film in circulation, mostly comedies and short dramas or westerns that filled out the rest of the programme. It was those long-established renters, like Green's and Bendon's, with a background in fairground and travelling exhibition, who continued to trade in open-market films for longer. Their sales pitch often blamed the new trading methods, rightly, for driving up the cost of film hire to exhibitors.<sup>26</sup> The renters were themselves in dire straits due to their lack of access to the most marketable brands. Ritson Bennell, who had been one of the most powerful figures amongst Glasgow renters, remembered how 'the supply of independent product died out and one after another

<sup>26</sup> In an 'open letter' advert, Green's declared: 'Are you aware that programmes in good class halls have more than doubled in cost? We have gone very carefully into the actual cost and find that first, last, and in the middle the cause is the advent of the five-reel feature. At one time £1 per reel per week was a fair price; now it is only a fair feature that you can get for three days at £1 per reel.' 'Open letter to Scottish exhibitors', *The Bioscope*, 9 August 1917, p.659

the independent renters who had been the backbone of the business were forced to shut up shop.<sup>27</sup> Regional renters were powerless to revert to the old trade methods, because of two other producer-led phenomena: the development of the star system, and the advance of vertical integration in the form of direct renting. They could, however, adapt to the new practices even if that compromised their independence, as Green's did when it started acting as the Scottish agency for Triangle films in 1917.

Exclusive renting on a one-by-one basis had developed as a way to handle exceptional features, when long films were not common. In order for producers to flourish by marketing features, they needed to negotiate the simultaneous demands for differentiation and standardisation that kept the trade in a permanent state of reinvention throughout the transitional era. The model that emerged during the second half of the 1910s was a more sophisticated way to exert monopolistic control by production companies. Instead of simply restricting the number of prints struck, they counteracted the reproducibility of film with the uniqueness of personal charisma, using the appeal of the movie star, promoted through inter-textual media discourse, to secure a competitive advantage.

### **8.3. Branding and the star system**

The patterns observed in the 1918 snapshot show a decreased emphasis on the newness of each film, as other forms of competitive differentiation emerged. As the adverts studied in the previous chapter showed, there is greater awareness of brand and star names, in particular in high-street urban cinemas. Branding was a way to

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<sup>27</sup> Ritson Bennell, 'The Film Industry Settles Down', *Educational Film Bulletin* 33 (1946), pp. 34-39 (p. 39).

create continuity and predictability while emphasising variation, both between and within brands. Chapter 6 showed how, in the transition to the institutional mode, the personality and agency of the exhibitor ceased to be the central point around which the identity and appeal of the show crystallised, and this role was appropriated by the feature film as it dominated programming.<sup>28</sup> By comparison with stable values such as comfort and personality, however, the quality of feature films was too unpredictable. Branding was a way to reassure a more selective audience by introducing a regularity of expectations into a system that required constant change.

In his studies of early distribution in the United States, Michael Quinn has identified the introduction by Paramount of a 'feature service' as a turning point in the regularisation of feature releases. In the US, where most exhibitors relied on a steady supply from one exchange, the random release patterns of the first features made them very difficult to market. With their approach to regular feature releases, Paramount 'mediated the paradox of prestige feature distribution', by combining the regularity of the film service model with the intensive use of differentiating elements, in particular 'prestige' productions and stars.<sup>29</sup> Stars, like literary properties, were one way to communicate a promise of quality to the spectator.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, as Joe Kember argues, they had an ideological role in acclimatising the public to the institutions of cinema. If cinema needed to assuage the alienating effect of mechanical reproduction through the projection of human qualities, and in

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<sup>28</sup> Kember, *Marketing Modernity*, p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> Quinn, 'Paramount and Early Feature Distribution', p. 101.

<sup>30</sup> Allen J. Scott, *On Hollywood: The Place, the Industry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 29.



early cinema these were those of the inventor and the showman, stars and directors took on that role later on:

Though the growth of increasingly distant, centralised institutions, such as those associated with film production, were part of the process wherein individuals were becoming increasingly divorced from the means and methods of production, this paradigmatically modern industry thrived because it successfully personalised certain aspects of its products.<sup>31</sup>

The tensions created by reproducibility emerge here again, in the text as well as in trade methods. Stars could be protected through contracts in a way that was not possible for genres, plots or even titles, so they were also a way for producers to restrict supply and cultivate exclusivity. Star contracts encouraged the long-term association of particular performers with a studio, and were therefore a crucial component in promoting brand awareness. As Bakker points out,

Branding was particularly important to film companies because they continuously launched new products with short life-spans and therefore needed to persuade large numbers of consumers to buy the product 'now'.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Kember, *Marketing Modernity*, p. 5.

<sup>32</sup> Bakker, *Entertainment Industrialised*, p. 277.

This was not only the situation for the American studios, but also for high-street urban exhibitors in Scotland and elsewhere. Manufacturers' agents exploited this hyper-competitive environment to entrench their power, by 'booming' individual films, stars and brands while restricting their availability, thus forcing exhibitors (and sometimes also regional renters) to compete not only for the audience but also for their film supply. This was made possible because the conditions of the American market, where producers had a guaranteed outlet for their films, allowed them to build and sustain an oligopoly through the escalation of budgets and production values.<sup>33</sup> The advance of vertical integration further concentrated power away from the regional, open-market renters and exhibitors, so that those surviving elements of independent showmanship and management skills were subsumed under more corporate strategies.

An example of this is the impact of branding strategies on the way that exhibitors handled publicity. From early on, the major production companies had devoted considerable efforts to the production of posters that could be hired along with the films, so the main Glasgow-based renters all had poster departments in their premises. However, as companies started to realise the importance of a consistent brand image, they started to push a wider range of advertising materials. This was most evident in the marketing of serials, since the investment in publicity would be effective for a longer time. For their serial, *Pearl of the Army* (1917), Pathé promised a 'gigantic parcel of free publicity' to all exhibitors who booked it.<sup>34</sup> For a previous serial, *The girl of lost island* (1916), Pathé had taken a full-page

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<sup>33</sup> Bakker, *Entertainment Industrialised*, p. xx. Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment*, p. 169.

<sup>34</sup> Pathé advert, *The Bioscope*, 9 August 1917, p.608-9

advert in *The Entertainer* to list all the newspapers where they had contracted front-page advertising.<sup>35</sup> This is the Glasgow branch of Pathé taking space on the local trade journal, to advertise their advertising. This suggests that – reasonably enough – exhibitors would be tempted to book a film that was being widely advertised at someone else's expense.

Serial nights and branded nights were two of the new strategies available to exhibitors to achieve the simultaneous goals of regularisation (of attendance) and differentiation (from the opposition). The growth and consolidation of studios allowed some of them to offer enough films to compose a full programme, which was then advertised as a special event. The printed organs of the production companies were awash with advice on how to organise and promote a brand night, and crowded with tear-out forms for exhibitors to order the various souvenirs and knick-knacks that the producers were flogging as a tie-in. In a nicely produced magazine that circulated from before the war, the Trans-Atlantic company (the European branch of Universal) encouraged exhibitors to organise an 'all-transatlantic night', offering to send them up to a thousand postcards, and to loan them a banner and the printing blocks to send to local papers.<sup>36</sup> They also promoted the 'T-A funfete', which was a branded comedy programme and included colour postcards to give to the audience. At this point, Trans-Atlantic was still renting on the open market, so that these events could be arranged through any of the Glasgow renters that handled this brand: Bendon, B. B. Pictures, Gaumont and Green's.

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<sup>35</sup> Pathé advert, *The Entertainer*, Vol 3 No 126, 26 February 1916, p.14.

<sup>36</sup> *The Trans-Atlantic Review*, 1915 copies preserved at the British Library Newspaper Collections.

‘Keystone nights’ were another promoted format that broke the paradigm of variety programming in order to highlight that particular brand of comedies whilst still operating in the open market.<sup>37</sup> The Keystone Chaplins, a group of thirty-five single-reel comedies produced in 1914, are interesting, because even though they were short films, they were significant and distinctive enough to be traded as features. Released in the open market at a moment when Chaplin’s popularity was on the rise, they were in great demand amongst Scottish exhibitors. Green’s bought four copies, the North British Exclusive and Feature Co got three, and the B. B. Pictures and Bendon Trading Co probably had a similar number. This allowed small-time renters such as Tom Gilbert (the aforementioned manager of the Crossgates Picturedrome near Dunfermline) to purchase some of these single-reelers which functioned as the centerpiece of his modest rental business. Chaplin films, albeit a couple of years old and presumably rather battered, were always in demand, at a standard hire rate of around a pound for half a week, although Gilbert never managed to charge that much.<sup>38</sup> He also had in stock a number of old single-reel films at the rock-bottom price of 2s. 6d. per subject per week, with which he was also trying to run a cheap film service along pre-war lines. Given the diminishing availability of open-market features, the Chaplin films were his main selling point.

Because access to features was very restricted for most renters, the vertically-integrated companies that controlled feature production, such as Trans-Atlantic, Vitagraph, and Pathé, had the upper hand when it came to offering a

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<sup>37</sup> The trade press claimed that Keystone nights were proving particularly popular in working-class districts of Glasgow. ‘Scottish News and Notes’, *The Bioscope*, 5 November 1914

<sup>38</sup> Letter (wet copy), Tom Gilbert to Thomas Convery, 12 October 1917. NAS SC36/79/18, p.171.

complete programme. As Gerben Bakker argues, one of the advantages of American companies was the ability of integrated producer-distributors to offer a complete programme to cinemas, thus dispensing with the middleman and capturing the whole rental price.<sup>39</sup> While with the open-market film services exhibitors had some degree of choice over the fare they received each week, the branded programmes were sold on the strength of their uniformity. Still, an exhibitor could choose to run an all-Vitagraph or all-Keystone week obtained through his or her usual renter, and then go back to the regular mixed programme. Pathé's programme scheme, touted as 'a boon to the small exhibitor', consisted of a five-reel feature, a single-reel comedy, a scenic picture and a serial.<sup>40</sup> This had not caused much of a stir before, as it was simply another option and something that managers could try from time to time. Insofar as they helped consolidate brand recognition, branded nights contributed to the erosion of the open market, since they increased the producers' power. The demise of the open-market was thus a process that started within it, and was exploited by all sectors of the trade in their pursuit of highly competitive business methods.

#### **8.4. Direct renting**

This trust scheme is, of course, of American birth, and, if exhibitors submit to it, it will only be a matter of time when the renter will be controlled by the manufacturer, and this will mean that we shall have to take what we are given, and all the veriest trash will

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<sup>39</sup> Bakker, *Entertainment Industrialised*, p. 248.

<sup>40</sup> Pathé advertisement, *The Bioscope*, 18 January 1917, p.234.

be dumped on us; high-class programmes will cease,  
 for manufacturers will curtail their prime cost of  
 productions by rehash, and reissues, and this will  
 mean death to the high-class cinematograph theatre.<sup>41</sup>

E.M. Barker's strongly worded misgivings about a mooted combine of renters and manufacturers due to start operating in early 1913 expressed a common attitude in the British trade. The disputes discussed at the start of this chapter had seen many stages since Charles Pathé threatened to take his films off the open market in 1908. As the production costs of long films grew, and the distribution branches of the reorganised, post-MPPC American companies stretched into the provinces, the practice of direct renting started gaining ground. The upheaval started in 1913, when Pathé warned that 'no renter, unless he is also an exhibitor or exploits exclusive films, can possibly hope to make money in these times, when the long film is so popular'.<sup>42</sup> Pathé not only predicted the demise of renters, but actively contributed to it by announcing they would stop selling films to other distributors and would hire their films directly to exhibitors instead.<sup>43</sup> The fact that they finally implemented the policy they had mooted five years before, and which they had already rolled out in most of Europe, reveals the weakening defences of British open-market trading.

Pathé proposed to deal directly with the exhibitors, bypassing the middlemen. The rumour spread that Pathé would take advantage of the strong brand

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<sup>41</sup> Barker, E.M. 'What of 1913?', *The Bioscope*, 12 December 1912, p. 825.

<sup>42</sup> 'Interview with Mr Chas. Pathé', *The Bioscope*, 2 January 1913 pp.39-41.

<sup>43</sup> 'The European combine: Draft of the proposed scheme', *The Bioscope*, 30 January 1913, p. 233-5.

recognition it had achieved to force exhibitors to get their full programme from the company, instead of choosing a mixed programme from renters.<sup>44</sup> Pathé claimed that was not their plan. However, the Renters' Association decided to implement a boycott by refusing to rent films to any exhibitor who was also hiring from Pathé, and then they signed an agreement with other manufacturers in order to introduce restrictions to film exploitation.<sup>45</sup> This was perceived by the exhibitors, who had not been consulted, as a combine that would strip them of their right to select their programmes, and they looked to make alliances with Pathé instead.<sup>46</sup> An agreement between the three sectors was reached, whereby films would be licensed for three years through a clearing house, and they should be brought in every year and re-leased for a small fee, after their condition had been checked.<sup>47</sup> The issue had nonetheless created a fracture amongst the trade, in particular between large and small-scale companies, and the agreement fell through.

1913 thus started as a year of crisis for renters, who realised they were being elbowed out of business. A year later, *The Bioscope* concluded that '1913 has been notable primarily for the problems which have arisen in connection with film hire'.<sup>48</sup> But although Pathé was an important player in the British market, it was

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<sup>44</sup> One of the established English renters, James Williamson, responded to Pathé's provocative remarks with an open letter in defence of the British model of trade: 'I know very little about the conditions under which films are dealt with on the Continent, but here in England the exhibitor has almost complete control of his programme. He is sufficiently alive to his own interests to know that those interests are better served by a firm of renters having an unrestricted choice and market that would be the case if his programme was subject to selection by a firm or group of firms of filmmakers.' ('An Open Letter to Mr. Chas. Pathe', *The Bioscope*, 9 January 1913, p.99.

<sup>45</sup> 'Meeting of the Renters' Association', *The Bioscope*, 20 February 1913, p. 591.

<sup>46</sup> 'A New Agreement: Exhibitors Hold a Protest Meeting', *The Bioscope*, 27 March 1913; 'Exhibitors against the new agreement', *The Bioscope*, 3 April 1913, p. 5.

<sup>47</sup> 'The Trade Unanimous', *The Bioscope*, 17 April 1913, p. 163.

<sup>48</sup> '1913, A Year of Progress [editorial]', *The Bioscope*, 1 January 1914, p. 3-5.

falling behind in the ascent of American feature producers. Contrary to what was feared, Pathé did not prevent exhibitors from choosing their programme from a variety of suppliers, and so the popular Pathé serials, as well as the Pathé Gazette, can be found as support in bills that featured exclusives of other brands. However, the suspicion about block booking and the general interference of manufacturers over programming extended to similar attempts by other companies over the following years.

Kristin Thompson identifies the summer of 1915 as a turning point in the distribution system, with Essanay's decision to stop selling films to renters.<sup>49</sup> Essanay was able to propose this bold deal due to their control of the most recent Chaplin films, by far the most valuable properties in any renter's portfolio – even in Tom Gilbert's humble stock, as shown above.<sup>50</sup> Essanay's move caused a great stir in the Glasgow trade, and almost led to a split from the Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association. After Glasgow exhibitors had decided to boycott Essanay, and the renters agreed not to supply to any cinema that showed the company's films, the general body of the CEA decided to accept Essanay's terms. A visit from Gavazzi King, the national president of the CEA, was necessary to calm down the tempers of raging Scottish showmen like A.E. Pickard, who felt betrayed by metropolitan

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<sup>49</sup> Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment*, p. 82.

<sup>50</sup> As Michael Hammond has shown in a fine-grained observation of Chaplin films in Southampton, during the war years the exhibition of new titles by the comedian, first under contract to Essanay and then with Mutual and First National, overlapped with the re-issues of older Keystone titles, which continued to be sold on the open market, thus creating an almost permanent presence. Michael Hammond, 'Mr. Elliot Books Chaplins Direct': Essanay's Exclusive's Strategy in Southampton 1915', in *Networks of Entertainment*, ed. by Frank Kessler and Nanna Verhoeff (Eastleigh: John Libbey, 2007), pp. 105-112.



decisions.<sup>51</sup> The CEA in Scotland was fractured between nationalist and loyalist interests – many members were unhappy with the way their issues were addressed in London, and campaigned for the formation of a separate union. They claimed the differences between the meaning and application of regulations such as the Cinematograph Act, as well as the vagaries of contract and tenancy laws, among other things, meant that representation from London would be ineffectual.<sup>52</sup> The Glasgow branch, when formed, had a somewhat more radical inclination; although the chairman was, as always, J. J. Bennell (unionist), the secretary was James Welsh, of the Alexandra Parade Cinema, who was a Labour councillor and trade union activist, and the vice-chairman was Matthew Waddell of the City Picture House, ‘a strong supporter of Home Rule for Scotland, with special antipathy to London control’.<sup>53</sup> This topical, tongue-in-cheek reference was aimed at the CEA rather than necessarily reflecting a broader political position, but it is worth noticing how the disputes around the Essanay boycott had unexpected resonances with such profound rifts in Scottish society.

Bennell’s position and influence was probably a crucial factor in the acceptance of direct renting. He even gave a speech at the inauguration of the Essanay agency established in Glasgow by Hagan and Double, who had acted as agents for different manufacturers before.<sup>54</sup> Soon afterwards, a local branch of the Film Booking Offices was established to manage direct bookings for Essanay and

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<sup>51</sup> ‘Cinema Chit-Chat’, *The Entertainer* 2:101, 4 September 1915, p.5; ‘‘Essanay’ Again’, *The Entertainer* 3:113, 27 November 1915, p.5; ‘Trade Jottings’, *The Entertainer* 3:123, 5 February 1916, p. 9.

<sup>52</sup> ‘Glasgow Exhibitors Demand Autonomy’, *The Bioscope*, 8 March 1917, p. 1077.

<sup>53</sup> ‘Association Launched in Glasgow’, *The Bioscope*, 28 August 1917, p. 893.

<sup>54</sup> ‘Essanay’s Official Opening of Premises in Glasgow’, *The Entertainer* 4:174, 27 January 1917, p. 11.

MP Sales.<sup>55</sup> This, following the establishment of a branch of Fox Films, marked a milestone in the transition to direct renting.

Although direct dealing was feared by renters because it made them irrelevant, in Scotland some of the established renters served as agents for those producers who had not yet opened a branch office. The Scottish Exclusives Control Ltd did the bookings for Bolton Mutual; the Square Film Co, for Nordisk; the Bendon Trading Co, for Selig; and Percy Humphrys, for Broadwest, to name but a few agencies.<sup>56</sup> The appointment of Green's as the agents for Triangle in Scotland and the four Northern English counties was crucial in making this company, born out of fairground exhibition, sustainable enough to thrive for another decade.<sup>57</sup> As for well-placed renters, direct renting could be a boon for prosperous exhibitors, as it allowed them to bypass the middleman. But for smaller shows it could be disastrous, as they did not have the clout to negotiate films on an individual basis, and could be easily coerced into accepting long contracts at prices they could not afford.

Block-booking was very contentious and indeed still is.<sup>58</sup> But, like the first-run system, it was a consequence of the exploitation by manufacturer-renters of the

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<sup>55</sup> 'Essanay and MP Sales', *The Entertainer* 4:180, 10 March 1917, p. 12.

<sup>56</sup> 'Notes on Advertisers in this Issue', *The Bioscope*, 20 September 1917, p.xxxvii.

<sup>57</sup> *The Bioscope*, 26 July 1917, p. 348.

<sup>58</sup> In an interesting discussion on block booking, F. Andrew Hanssen comes to the conclusion that, rather than a monopolistic strategy, it was a way to 'cheaply provide in quantity a product needed in quantity'. While the technical argument is better left to the economists, it can be said that regardless of the producers' intentions and their effects on the American market, the British and Scottish situations, with their existing distribution practices, meant that block booking was a significant and unwelcome attack on the exhibitor's autonomy. F. Andrew Hanssen, 'The Block Booking of Films Re-Examined', in *An Economic History of Film*, ed. by John Sedgwick and Michael Pokorny (Oxon: Routledge: 2005), pp. 121-150.

intense competition amongst urban exhibitors. As brand recognition started building up around 'stars', first-run cinemas had to scramble to get hold of a limited number of prints. On the strength of a few actors' celebrity (Charlie Chaplin, Billy West, Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks), exhibitors were prepared to book the film even before the trade show, simply to ensure they would be the first to screen it in their district. Films were being booked for months ahead, which benefitted renters, as they gained financial security, but was inconvenient for exhibitors because it reduced their flexibility. Maybe they suddenly managed to secure the hire of a particularly lucrative film; in that case they might need to drop a previous booking, and be liable for breach of contract. On the other hand, if the takings were down due to local factors, they might no longer be able to afford the big feature they had booked when business was looking up – but again it was not easy to wriggle out of it.

Midway through the war years, the directors of the Queen's Rooms cinema in Aberdeen found that the cost of film hire was not squaring up with the takings, greatly affected by the tax and intense competition. At the beginning of 1916, they appointed a new manager; however, the previous one had already entered into contracts with film suppliers, booking films up to August. As the minutes put it, understatedly, 'this was not considered very satisfactory'.<sup>59</sup> During that year the Cinema made a loss of over £200, so in November the directors decided to close it or sell it to the Pringle's chain.<sup>60</sup> However, by that time films had already been booked up to the end of April 1917. The directors thought they could use the change

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<sup>59</sup> Queen's Rooms Cinema Syndicate, Minutes, 12 January 1916. London, Cinema Museum.

<sup>60</sup> Queen's Rooms Cinema Syndicate, Minutes, 15 November 1916.

of management as an argument to cancel some of the contracts, but they found there was no way of doing this without upsetting the renters, which was something they wanted to avoid as they were running other cinemas.<sup>61</sup> They were forced to stick it out, and in the meantime they carried out an agreement with a new cinema in town to exchange films and divide the cost of hire in proportion to takings.

Although reduced box office was probably the main cause of financial trouble for the Queen's Rooms, it is clear from the minute book that their struggles to negotiate bookings and to manage contracts with renters were often an obstacle and meant that rental costs were frequently higher than the cinema could afford (even though, at an average of £16 9s for 1916, the weekly bill was still lower than it must have been three years earlier). The change of fortune for the Queen's Rooms reflects some of the changes in the film trade during these years, and the increasingly difficult position of independent cinemas with little bargaining power.

An example of the form that block-booking contracts often took can be found in the archives of another local company, the Aberdeen Picture Palaces Ltd. This company managed two middle-range cinemas, the Star and the Globe, and for the first half of 1917 the main suppliers of features for the company were Gaumont and Newcastle Film Supply. From the former company, the Star had booked twenty-three films at three pounds each, which was relatively cheap; they had also booked three more expensive features. From the Newcastle Film Supply, they were getting twenty films at five pounds each plus a free one. In total, the contracts already signed in November 1916 guaranteed two films of three to five reels each, at prices ranging from three to ten pounds each, for every week up to the following

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<sup>61</sup> Queen's Rooms Cinema Syndicate, Minutes, 22 November 1916

May.<sup>62</sup> Before this period, the main suppliers to the Star and the Globe had been Pathé and the B. B. Pictures; the fact that they are not mentioned among the feature contracts suggests that they supplied the rest of the programme and had different arrangements in place.

Exhibitors were rightly distrustful of block booking and of the power that it gave to distributors, in particular to those handling very attractive content. This was worsened by the lack of a transparent and uniform price policy. Distributors exploited competition between cinemas in the cities, but also the limited access to information and in-existent bargaining power of small-town cinemas, such as Tom Gilbert's Picturedrome. Amongst his endless troubles and disputes, he had a long-running argument with the Glasgow branch of Gaumont over a contract he entered into in early 1918. Trying to shift the blame for not being able to pay his balance to the company in time, he complained:

I have tried to show you that there would have been  
no balance standing had I not have entered into a  
contract for films at a higher price than the takings  
will stand owing to the fact that your traveller said  
they could not be booked under a certain figure but I  
am sorry to say I find that the same films have been  
booked to a show not a 100 miles from Glasgow at £1

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<sup>62</sup> Aberdeen Picture Palaces Ltd., Minutes, 16 November 1916

per subject cheaper & they did not take every film  
good or bad but selected about 6.<sup>63</sup>

Although Gilbert's account must be taken cautiously as he obviously had an interest in playing the victim, it is indicative of the situation for smaller exhibitors. It was the combination of the exclusives principle and block booking that most outraged exhibitors. *The Bioscope*'s plain-speaking Scottish editor described the situation thus:

A firm (not one particular firm) has a special brand of films, and the series handled is so uniformly good that many exhibitors sign a contract to take thirty, forty, or even fifty-two a year *as they come*. But one day one picture of the series turns out extra good, it is praised by the critics (...) Is this subject included in the thirty, forty, or fifty-two? Oh, dear, no! It is a special! And as a special it has a special price, which is usually a good fiver over the price paid for the other subjects.<sup>64</sup>

By this stage, however, it seems like independent exhibitors could only complain. They had very little power when all around them the larger circuits were dealing directly with the American companies to book first-run films. In part, their subjugated position was a result of a failure to organise and a passion for undercutting each other, which led Rachael Low to uncharacteristic rudeness

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<sup>63</sup> Letter (wet copy), Tom Gilbert to Mr Booth, Gaumont, Glasgow, 7 February 1918. NAS SC36/79/18, p234

<sup>64</sup> 'Trade news and notes', *The Bioscope* 5 July 1917, p. 93.

against ‘the low level of debate, stupid and vicious, which was to hamper every effort to organize the mass of ignorant small showmen’.<sup>65</sup> But above all, they simply did not have the money to play the new high-stakes film game. In the 1918 programmes in the sample, the number of films from companies that rented directly (Fox, Famous Players-Lasky, Triangle, Essanay, Gaumont, Pathé), from exclusive dealers, and from the open market (mostly Trans-Atlantic/Universal subjects) is roughly equivalent. But this does not mean that the power balance was even. There were many companies that claimed to defend the open market, but actually contributed to its marginalisation by releasing only their ‘lesser’ work onto it, while reserving the most attractive pictures. Vitagraph, for instance, released their first exclusive in the summer of 1914, but continued to put out two single-reelers and a serial on the open market every week in 1917.<sup>66</sup>

## 8.5. Conclusion

The deep imbalances of bargaining power and earning potential between different sectors of the trade were not accidental consequences of the audience’s increased sophistication and taste for features. A deliberate process of industrial consolidation was taking place, and the hour-long drama acted by glamorous Americans was an instrument in conquering the centrifugal impulses of early cinema. By the end of the war the crisis of the open-market feature was definitive: of the fourteen open-market releases announced for 7 January 1918, none was longer than two reels,

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<sup>65</sup> Low, *The History of the British Film 1914-1918*, p. 45.

<sup>66</sup> ‘The Vitagraph Company: Its Future Policy’, *The Bioscope*, 4 January 1917, p.5

while the exclusives list contained thirteen titles over four reels long.<sup>67</sup> This left independent regional renters in a critical situation, as Ritson Bennell described:

The open market had closed up on [them] and the new exclusive films were handled on a United Kingdom basis by the manufacturers or their Agents so that it became difficult for the local independent renter to find product.<sup>68</sup>

Medium-sized regional companies had facilitated the cinema boom by taking over the duties of film selection and programming from novice exhibitors, and they had been able to do so due to their ability to buy large stocks of open-market pictures that could be re-mixed into packages on a range of prices (see Chapter 5). Once it became imperative to have a long feature film in the programme, and once those features ceased to be sold to renters, their ability to put together an attractive full programme was severely impaired. The role of the regular film service was reduced to handling the supporting items in the programme. This was a significant loss of power for regional distributors, and Pathé's warning came to mind once again. Once manufacturers were able to control their releases completely, independent renters would be consigned to irrelevance, and the small exhibitors they served would have no option but to pledge allegiance to one of the big companies by signing a block-booking contract.

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<sup>67</sup> 'Summary of Exclusive Films Released on January 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>, 1918', *The Bioscope*, 6 December 1917, p.49.

<sup>68</sup> Ritson Bennell, 'The Film Industry Settles Down', *Educational Film Bulletin*.33 (1946), pp. 34-39 (p. 38).



In the words of Kristin Thompson, in the lapse of five years up to 1920, 'Britain went from being one of the most flexible, open markets in the world to one of the most rigid, closed ones.'<sup>69</sup> The power struggle that played out throughout the transitional years resolved itself in favour of the major American studios with their vertically integrated distribution practices. The Scottish trade, in particular the established open-market renters, offered some resistance to these changes and continued to supply a variety programme to those suburban and small-town exhibitors that wanted it, for as long as it was possible. However, the advance of feature programming, facilitated by new forms of audience appeal that attracted a disaggregated, selective audience to branded products, transformed the commodity status of films and motivated important shifts in the way they were traded. The unsettling possibilities of mechanical reproduction had been contained by the producers through a tight control of supply, and the panoply of imaginable uses of film beyond a commercial spectacle driven by illusionist narrative had been consigned to the side-lines if not quite scrapped. Paradoxically, it was in the context of such alternative takes on film culture that Scotland made its mark in later years with its contributions to documentary, educational, and avant-garde cinema, while the mainstream trade thrived almost exclusively as a retail market.

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<sup>69</sup> Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment*, p. 83.

## Conclusions

Between 2012 and 2013, most film distributors in the United States and Britain will stop dealing with celluloid prints, as the majority of cinemas are now equipped with digital projectors.<sup>1</sup> Digital conversion means the abandonment of the basic technology that gives the film medium its name: a strip of celluloid put in the way of a light beam. Whatever the aesthetic and economic consequences of this shift, it spells the disappearance of those stacks of film reels in their cans, covered in half-peeled labels and courier stamps, which used to wait in a corner of the foyer to be picked up and taken to their next engagement. The material practices of film supply are undergoing a fundamental transformation. Just as the discussion of early film has been energised by the reinvention of the short, attractions-based formats that now dominate online video, it is perhaps the right moment to look back at the emergence of distribution. As this thesis has tried to show, researching film distribution and distributors is not only interesting in its own right as institutional history, but it can also illuminate other discussions that continue to be relevant in the present context, such as commodity relations in cultural industries, and the interactions between local audiences and media products. As the technologies and contexts of the moving image continue to shift, it becomes more relevant to ask, with Robert Allen, what *was* cinema.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> According to figures cited by the Cinema Exhibitors' Association, in April 2012 about 72 per cent of British screens were equipped for digital projection, and the disappearance of 35mm was forecast for early 2013. Andreas Wiseman, 'UK Digital Cinema Rollout Likely Complete by Q1, 2013', *Screen Daily*, 20 April 2012 <http://www.screendaily.com/home/exhibition/uk-digital-cinema-rollout-likely-complete-by-q1-2013/5040664.article> [accessed 4 July 2012]

<sup>2</sup> Allen, 'Reimagining the History of the Experience of Cinema', p. 44.

## **Original contributions**

This thesis approached the subject of early film distribution from the ground up and on a regional scale. It is the first systematic investigation of the beginnings of the cinema trade in Scotland, and the first study of Scottish distributors. Its use of the local press and archives brings up new bodies of evidence, as well as new angles on better known sources, decentring traditional trade-journal-based accounts and revealing the heterogeneity of peripheral practices. This non-metropolitan optic was supported by an innovative methodology, using geo-databases and digital mapping to organise data collection and facilitate spatially-aware forms of analysis. The methodology was a practical correlate to the theoretical positions of new cinema history, which insist on the importance of the cinema venue as a socially significant space and draw attention to the material and geographical phenomenon of distribution.

The focus on the regional, as an ambit with particular internal dynamics that are not independent from global phenomena, differs from a national cinemas framework in that it emphasises interconnectedness as much as distinctiveness. In this relational approach, the particular history of Scottish distribution can be read as a case study on the local institutionalisation of cinema, or as a dialectical counterpoint to more generalising narratives about film and modernity. Although the findings from this research do not pose a fundamental contradiction to more canonical or metro-centric histories of cinema, the view from a Scottish perspective, and from peripheral sources, results in a very different narrative. From the vantage points reflected in this thesis, the different transformations that fall under the umbrella of institutionalisation were not seen necessarily as progress. More often

than not, the movements of the international film industry were problems in the supply system that local distributors and exhibitors had to negotiate, as part of a subordinate market.

### **Main findings**

The diversity and complexity of the emergent Scottish film trade is one of the findings of this thesis. A wide range of exhibition practices were supported by similarly diverse forms of distribution that built their own patterns of interdependence between urban and rural, first-run and scrap markets. These patterns were connected to changing models of ownership of film prints and to the status of film as a commodity vis-à-vis the film show as performance. The ownership of the film by exhibitors required a constant change of locale, but also granted showpeople control over the means of production of their programme, thus providing more opportunities to mediate between the films and local audiences. The transition to renting, on the other hand, centralised ownership to some extent, but also made possible the expansion of permanent exhibition. The discussion of this expansion in Chapter 4 showed that, in Scotland, the cinema boom was mostly an organic process rather than a speculative bubble. For a period of about ten years after 1907, this growing exhibition scene developed internal dynamics that supported a small group of local distribution companies. These companies sometimes functioned as a buffer between the national/international and the regional markets, and enabled forms of local circulation that were essential for the commercial viability of smaller exhibitors. Local distribution companies were in a better position to take over the mediating role of early exhibitors, thus supporting

the new class of cinema managers in the process of positioning cinemagoing as part of everyday life.

The next step in product control by the producers threatened the role of independent distributors through more restrictive forms of exclusive renting and longer feature films, using the strategies of artificial scarcity to rebalance the hard-earned ordinariness of cinema. This structural tension between the ordinary and the extraordinary constitutes the main transversal axis of this thesis, substantiating Allen's recent remarks which make this polarity the key to unravelling 'the eventfulness of cinema'.<sup>3</sup> Over the previous chapters, it was observed how this tension was present in the transition from itinerant exhibition to fixed-site cinemas, where the changes in film supply practices required also reflected a shift from more decentralised or networked forms of trade towards a hub-and-spokes model. The transition from variety to feature programming prompted a reformulation of the address to the audience which again shifted the ordinary/extraordinary balance, marketing the uniqueness of individual films as a consistent, repeatable cinema experience. Although an important degree of diversity persisted, by early 1918 the structures of exhibition and distribution in Scotland were aligned with those of institutional cinema, with American companies as the main players and local enterprises cornered into the retail end of the trade.

A final core finding of the thesis refers to the role of the spaces in which film exhibition took place in shaping the social experience of cinema. Moving pictures were initially presented in spaces that were already associated with existing cultural practices, from the fairground to the church hall and from the music hall to

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<sup>3</sup> Allen, 'Reimagining the History of the Experience of Cinema', p. 51.

the legitimate theatre. These connections also positioned cinema in relation to audience groups, which could be more or less segregated by class, gender, age, or religion. Choice (of venue, but increasingly of film) became a central promise of urban exhibition, allowing audiences to exercise distinction and aspiration through their cinemagoing practice. The distribution methods that responded to the overabundance of cinemas in Glasgow and Edinburgh were geared towards offering such opportunities for selective consumption. In small towns, on the other hand, the more socially inclusive and often multi-functional nature of exhibition venues provided a very different context for cinema, and exhibitors did not always benefit from the changes that served the urban market. By the end of the period of study, cinema had come to be understood as mass commercial entertainment, and the other possible roles that it had assumed during the early and transitional eras were marginalised.

### **Future work**

This thesis contributes to methodological discussions in early cinema historiography by testing a way to work with empirical evidence that can represent both heterogeneity and interrelation. Geographically-enabled databases are shown to be a productive tool, able to accommodate piecemeal, iterative data collection (that is, to work from the ground up), while opening up the possibilities of data sharing and cross-regional or trans-national comparisons. Due to the relatively modest scope of the sample, the project is also intended to serve as a pilot project and sanity check for the use of geo-database methods in larger data collections. If thus far early cinema research has been defined by a scarcity of sources, the massive digitisation initiatives that are currently underway will soon facilitate the

compilation of vast databases of, for instance, cinema adverts and programmes. The use of synchronic newspaper revision (snapshots) is proposed as one possible way to analyse and visualise such materials.

The experimental approach here demonstrated opens paths for further work on larger data collections. While the positivist fantasy of perfect factual history through comprehensive documentation must be kept in check, the explanatory powers of this thesis are limited by the scope of the samples and their variable reliability. The geo-database approach, and in particular the mapping component, has been shown in the previous chapters to be productive for storing and exploring the dataset. Maps encourage novel interactions with the material and help generate hypotheses through the observation of patterns. However, hypothesis confirmation is more problematic, due to the remaining tension between scrappy, ambiguous sources and precise data structures. In order to harness the quantitative potential of geo-database technologies, as well as its usefulness for qualitative observation, a larger data collection is necessary. The snapshot technique can also be complemented with diachronic studies of particular localities or films. Better ways of dealing with uncertainty and imprecision must also be embraced, attending to the work being done in digital humanities and historical GIS scholarship.

Further archive research could follow some of the leads uncovered by the sampling process and by the archive work already done. The role of cinema and of the cinema trade in relation to social movements, Temperance and civic organisations is a promising area of research for the Scottish case. On the basis of the structures and patterns of trade identified, it is possible to compare the circulation of Scottish films and thus investigate the obstacles that prevented film

production from flourishing to the same extent as exhibition and distribution.

Further comparative work with the English market is also a likely prospect, in particular considering the important projects that have been undertaken on early exhibition in several regions.

## **Coda**

A final argument that this thesis makes is that distribution is at the heart of what was new and revolutionary about early cinema, but it is also a key element in the containment of that potential. While the portability of film reels created the possibility of non-hierarchical, widespread circulation, the institutional distribution system as it emerged served to protect social and geographical hierarchies. It did so by maintaining the commodity status of film prints through centralisation of ownership and greater producer control over the textual coherence and material use of the films. Understanding the tension between the radical modernity of the film medium and the inertia of the structures on which it operates is a way to contribute to current debates, such as those around intellectual property in the digital environment. Before that, however, the local emergence of the institutions of cinema, repeated throughout the world, was a fascinating point of convergence of historical forces. In each of these local conjunctures, cinema was something slightly different, and yet part of a global phenomenon. As well as addressing a gap in our knowledge of early cinema in a small country, the particular study of early distribution offered here demonstrates at the same time the contingency and interconnectedness of history.



## Technical Appendix

This section sketches the technical details of the implementation of a Geographic Information System for this project, introduces the contents of the files on the accompanying CD-ROM, and explains how to access them.

### I. The PostGIS database

Part of the project consisted in building a relational database. This was intended both as a way to store, visualise and analyse the data collected from a range of sources, and as a pilot project that creates an infrastructure with potential for expansion. Furthermore, this database had to provide integration with the mapping software, and it should be built on open-source, multi-platform software to maximise compatibility, so that it can be shared or integrated with other projects in the future.

Considering these requirements, it was decided to use the PostgreSQL 9.0 database system for the creation and maintenance of the database.<sup>1</sup> Support for geographic objects on PostgreSQL is provided by an open-source plug-in, PostGIS, which formats spatial information so that it complies with the specifications given by the Open Geospatial Consortium, the international standards organisation for GIS.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> PostgreSQL code and documentation available from <<http://www.postgresql.org/>> [accessed 9 July 2012]

<sup>2</sup> PostGIS code and documentation available from <<http://postgis.refractory.net/>> [accessed 9 July 2012]

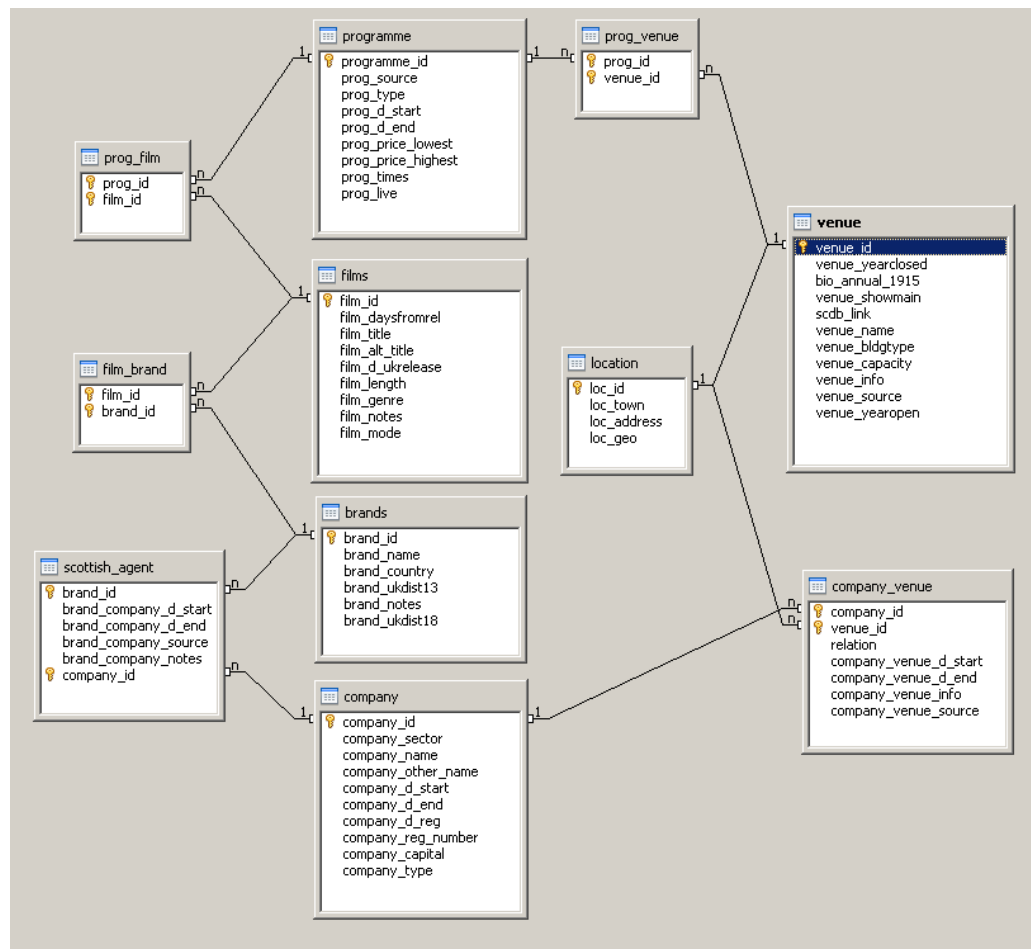
## 1.1. Design

The design of the database combines the specific interests of this project with the examples of previous cinema history databases. The goal was to arrive at a compatible data structure that responds to the interests of the broader scholarly community, while avoiding a design that was too prescriptive. In her Masters' thesis, Elise Moore surveyed cinema history researchers working with databases, and extracted a definition of the core categories and fields of interest. In the resulting schema, she defines five types of entity: Cinema/Traveling show, Company, Person, Programme, and Film.<sup>3</sup> Each of these entities has a number of attributes and they are connected through logical relationships. This schema is akin to the one used by *Cinema Context*, which has tables for Cinema, Programme, Company, and Film (plus several derived attributes and relations).<sup>4</sup> Figure 24 shows the table structure and relationships for the core project database.

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<sup>3</sup> Moore, 'Towards a Common Schema in Distributed Humanities Research,' p. 33.

<sup>4</sup> The schema used for *Cinema Context* can be found by downloading a sample database from the website, <<http://www.cinemacontext.nl/cgi/b/bib/bib-idx?c=cccfilm:sid=19b6bb3f68b4c91dbe9a921015c70001;tpl=doehetzelf-downloads.tpl;lang=en>> [accessed 9 July 2010]



**Figure 24: Relationship schema for database Scotland\_DB**

Working directly with the PostgreSQL database requires running an instance of a server, which might not be convenient for the reader. A copy of the PostgreSQL database was exported to the OpenOffice Base format (.odb) in order to provide a more accessible version. The file **Scotland\_DB.odb** should be opened using Apache OpenOffice Base, which can be downloaded freely from <http://www.openoffice.org/>

## 1.2. Contents

The database contains eleven data tables, of which one is the main gazetteer (**location**), five contain the bulk of the information, and five establish one-to-many relationships between the other tables. The main content tables are **venue**, **programme**, **films**, **brands**, and **company**. Each table contains a variable number of fields. The completeness and reliability of the information in these fields varies according to the sources consulted. It is, however, expected that the data structure can continue to receive inputs and corrections.

**Table 7: List of principal data tables in Scotland\_DB**

Table	Rows	Description
<b>venue</b>	600	Based on Excel spreadsheet supplied by Gordon Barr of the Scottish Cinemas Database, listing over a thousand cinema venues in Scotland. This was compared with trade journal, company registration, secondary and archival sources, amended and reformatted. The Unique ID of the venue matches the gazetteer number in <b>location</b> .
<b>location</b>	602	Provides geographical reference for <b>venue</b> . This table was created by connecting the town names to the 1:50,000 Ordnance Survey Gazetteer. In consequence, location is only accurate to that scale, except for Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee and Aberdeen, where an attempt has been made to establish the precise street address.
<b>programme</b>	236	Contains information transcribed from the advertisements collected for both 'snapshots', that is, cinema programmes for 9 January 1913 and 10 January 1918. Linked to <b>venue</b> and <b>films</b> .
<b>films</b>	386	Lists the distinct titles mentioned in the advertisements collected in the two snapshots. UK release dates have been obtained from manual search in <i>The Bioscope</i> for the six months previous to the date of the programmes. Linked to <b>programme</b> and <b>brands</b> .

<b>brands</b>	74	Lists the distinct manufacturers' brands identified from the two snapshots. When the make was not identified from the trade press, an effort was made to find a match on Cinema Context and imdb.com, but ambiguities persist due to repetition of film titles. Linked to <b>films</b> and <b>company</b> (through <b>scottish_agent</b> ).
<b>company</b>	275	Lists Scottish cinematograph sector companies of different types mentioned in the trade press, Board of Trade records, and <i>The Scotsman</i> financial reports. Consists mostly of companies constituted to own and manage a venue, but also includes the renters. Where it has been possible to identify a connection, these companies have been linked to the <b>venues</b> they controlled or to the <b>brands</b> they represented.

In order to present the data in more meaningful ways, eight sample Queries were coded. These queries select data from the tables, using the relational structure, responding to the most relevant themes for this thesis. New queries can also be formulated using the Design View, Wizard, or SQL tools of the Base software. The tables identified as 'gazetteer' contain a geometry column so they can be imported into the GIS software.

## 2. GIS implementation

For most stages of the project, the main form of visualisation and interaction with the database was by deploying the data tables as maps on the open-source GIS software Quantum GIS.<sup>5</sup> Using the PostGIS add-on, Quantum GIS was made to connect to the PostgreSQL database. By constructing queries including geometry columns it was possible to represent all the data spatially in an efficient and

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<sup>5</sup> Quantum GIS is supported by the Open Source Geospatial Foundation Project and can be downloaded freely from <<http://www.qgis.org/>> [accessed 9 July 2012]

dynamic way. It was then relatively easy to export the data in a number of formats, including the maps that illustrate the body of the thesis.

## 2.1. KML files

In order to make some of the data accessible in a simpler form, the following KML (Keyhole Markup Language) files were produced:

**Table 8: KML files included in CD-ROM**

<b>1913 Programmes.kml</b>	Point data for each of the cinema adverts collected for the 1913 snapshot, displaying name of venue, town, address, source, and linking to the image scan of the advertisement.
<b>1918 Programmes.kml</b>	Point data for each of the cinema adverts collected for the 1918 snapshot, displaying name of venue, town, address, source, and linking to the image scan of the advertisement.
<b>Venue_location.kml</b>	Plots the 600 venues in the database
<b>Venue_attributes.kml</b>	Plots the 600 venues with additional information
<b>Programme_attributes.kml</b>	Plots the information about the venues transcribed from the 236 programmes from both snapshots
<b>Films_gazetteer.kml</b>	Displays the films that were being shown at any given point for the 1913 and 1918 snapshots, with some attributes
<b>1911 census.kml</b>	Data table 'Parish level statistics arranged by family and sex for Scotland taken from the 1911 census', downloaded from the Contemporary and Historical Census Collections (CHCC) at the History Data Service ( <a href="http://hds.essex.ac.uk/history/data/chcc.asp">http://hds.essex.ac.uk/history/data/chcc.asp</a> ) on 20 October 2009; the data were input by the Centre for Data Digitisation and Analysis at the Queen's University of Belfast. The boundary map, originally a SHP file of

	<p>Scottish Civil Parishes 1890 (digitised from Black's Atlas), was downloaded from UKBORDERS (<a href="http://edina.ac.uk/ukborders/">http://edina.ac.uk/ukborders/</a>). Because of administrative changes, 1911 census data does not map exactly onto the parish boundaries; this map is provided for illustrative purposes only and under fair use terms. It should not be redistributed.</p>
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These files can be viewed using Google Earth or as a web page.

## 2.2. Google Earth instructions:

1. Download and install Google Earth from <http://earth.google.com>
2. Start Google Earth
3. From the top menu, go to File > Open >
4. Select the .kml file
5. Google Earth should zoom in to Scotland and display the markers. Clicking on markers will display a pop-up bubble with the attribute data.

## 2.3. Web page:

(Best viewed with Mozilla Firefox, available from [www.mozilla.org](http://www.mozilla.org))

To see a static version linking to the programme snapshot images, please open **scotlandcinemaps.html** from the CD-ROM on a computer connected to the Internet.

### 3. Contents of attached CD-ROM

<b>Scotland_DB.odt</b>	OpenOffice Base database
<b>KML files</b>	As listed above, to be viewed on Google Earth or GIS software
<b>scotlandcinemaps.html</b>	HTML file providing a visualisation of the kml files on a historical map from the National Library of Scotland (Internet connection required)
<b>timeline.html</b>	HTML file providing a clickable timeline representing distribution companies active in Scotland between 1908 and 1918 (Internet connection required)

The project data can be exported in a range of formats, including .shp (for GIS packages such as ArcGIS and Quantum GIS), .dbf or .xls (database table format), .csv (text format), or the original .sql server data. Please contact the author if any of these are required.



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