

The History of the British Film 1918–1929

Volume IV

Rachael Low

The History of British Film



THE HISTORY OF BRITISH
FILM

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THE HISTORY OF
THE BRITISH FILM
1918–1929

Rachael Low

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**THE HISTORY
OF THE
BRITISH FILM**

1918 – 1929

by
RACHAEL LOW

LONDON
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Artistic and Critical Theory in the Twenties

It was during the 1920s that people started treating the film seriously in Britain. The writer John St Loe Strachey was a founder member of the Film Society formed in London during the twenties and, as editor of the *Spectator*, was an early sponsor of serious articles about the cinema. He said at the Stoll Picture Theatre Club in 1924:

'One of the things which have attracted me to the cinema is the fact that it has enabled us to witness the birth of a new art—an opportunity that has not previously arisen for many generations. . . . Nobody is consciously developing the cinema; it is developing itself.'¹

There was much truth in this. The cinema illustrated the historical process of invention and discovery, whereby the problems posed at any existing stage of knowledge and achievement point the way to their own solution. Changes in technique were suggested by the exigencies of production, and new methods were indicated by the very problems that arose. There was a great difference between the ordinary film of 1919 and that of 1929. Even in England, where few outstanding film makers could survive during the twenties, film making was pushing its exponents forward. The primitive stages of a new art could indeed be examined by highly civilized contemporaries, not for the first time for many generations as Strachey had suggested, but for the first time in history. Eric Elliott, in his book *Anatomy of Motion Picture Art*, wrote:

' . . . it is the only new one mankind has ever known. The other arts evolved with Man himself, and were ready only when he was ready.'²

By the end of the decade the new mastery of technique, and the possibilities it revealed, had earned an entirely new respectability for the cinema. The Society of Cinema Veterans, formed in 1924, was open to people who had entered the industry before 1903 when the film had been new and disreputable. The formation of the Society was the trade's proud claim to have come of age. But it was much more important that a new generation of young people, born since the cinema and taking its existence for granted from childhood, were also coming of age and approaching it with open minds. During the twenties not only was it increasingly accepted by the middle classes but a growing, if small, number of upper middle class and university-educated people committed themselves to it

as film makers and as critics. The advance in the art of film making took place at the same time as a significant improvement in the social and cultural standing of the film.

In 1929 the sudden arrival in Britain of the commercial sound film from America checked this. Showmen and audiences had always wanted, and welcomed, any form of sound accompaniment. But to the new theorists, recorded sound seemed to destroy the very limitation which was thought to be the essential mainspring of film art. Undoubtedly the fluidity of expression which the silent film had recently achieved was impossible with the early sound apparatus. Many of the new enthusiasts were repelled by the clumsy and crude sound films which resulted. Indeed, had the sound film arrived five or ten years earlier the serious public attracted by the flowering of the silent film would not have existed. It was natural that for a while antagonism to the sound film seemed greatest among those who were most serious about the film. It is interesting in this connection that in replies to a contemporary questionnaire 50 per cent of the men and 30 per cent of the women were in favour of the talkies, but only 19 per cent of the section described as 'people of prominence'. The setback, however, was only for a short while. The new intellectuals of the cinema were not to be so easily discouraged.

The temporarily hostile reaction to sound was to be found in the work of a new group of serious writers on the cinema. Early struggles towards the formulation of aesthetic and critical standards can be traced to the work of this group, which represents an interesting effort to understand the nature of the new art while it was still in its primitive stages.

After the war there was an air of change and rebellion among the young, symbolized by the girls' short hair and skirts and what one of our local film stars described as 'the Jazz':

'I think the Jazz expresses the feelings of the public at the present time better than anything else. After four years of war weariness it is only natural that everyone wants relaxation—the one desire is to dance, and what better than the Jazz to express the exultant feeling now abroad?'

The film trade by this time had a great idea of its own importance. Big talk about its technical marvels, the speed of its growth and its tremendous influence was commonplace. *The Bioscope*, an influential trade paper, even referred to the cinema in 1919 as the Church's 'legitimate competitor in moulding the character of the nation'⁴ and a film executive wrote in 1926 that the cinema was the 'most potent single factor in modern life'.⁵ It was true that the social status of the film was considerably higher than it had been before the war. The Stoll Picture Theatre Club, for example, which had been formed about 1919, assembled for discussion many people with a more serious approach towards the film and its speakers included not only the film censor and ex-journalist T. P. O'Connor and the journalist Hannen Swaffer, but even well-known writers like Hilaire Belloc and G. K. Chesterton and the critic St John Ervine. The Film Society was formed in 1925 with a most distinguished list of founder

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members (see page 34). Royalty, as well as the progressive intelligentsia, accepted the film. Queen Mary and George V were circumspect, visiting the Marble Arch Pavilion in 1924 to see a worthy British film of the battle of Zeebrugge, but other members of the family were less formal. The Prince of Wales charmed the trade by unexpectedly dropping in to the London Pavilion to see *Covered Wagon*, for example, and agreeing to attend the first presentation of the British film *Reveille*. It was said that Prince George had seen *Foolish Wives* three times, and the Duke and Duchess of York took a party to an ordinary showing of *Beau Geste* at the Plaza in 1926. No less than nineteen members of the Royal family were said to have seen *Ben Hur* when it was on in London. A few years later *The Film in National Life* could say, in fact,

‘A fellow of an Oxford College no longer feels an embarrassed explanation to be necessary when he is recognized leaving a cinema.’⁶

These were signs of the times but there was still massive hostility from much of the social and intellectual establishment. An article in *The Bioscope* in 1919 gives point to some of this opposition:

‘Has the time not come for the public to recognize that pictures can be made to fulfil a nobler purpose than merely to afford an opportunity of witnessing absurdity carried to imbecile excess, salaciousness smugly masquerading as a problem play, flagrant and disgusting immorality veneered with a thin coating of pinchbeck virtue, dramas as vapid as newspaper feuilletons, and thrilling adventures which far transcend the comparatively feeble exploits of Spring Heeled Jack and other worthies?’⁷

The critic Ernest Betts, devoted though he was to the serious cinema, wrote in 1928:

‘. . . chiefly as a result of American films, a large part of the world, and especially the youthful world, now has a cabaret outlook, full of feeble passion, Woolworth glitter, and trumpery heroics. . . .

‘But there is a difference between entertaining a man by making him drink and entertaining a man by making him drunk. The American film has doped the world with rotten juices. By a strength of purpose which is staggering and its one superb virtue, it has flung at us, year by year, in unending deluge, its parcel of borrowed stories and flashy little moralities.’⁸

Criticism from outside the industry was even more damning. Augustus John wrote in *The Actor* in 1922 and was quoted in the *Bioscope*:

‘The film writers, never out of their shirt-sleeves, are day and night engaged in boiling down more and more novels, reducing them to the pap-like consistency considered acceptable to the edented jaws and tired stomachs of the crowd. All this devoted labour results in a perpetual out-pouring of reels intended to

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attract, comfort and subdue the humblest, the commonest, the most universal level of intelligence in the land.⁹

Gordon Craig, the great stage director, was quoted on the cinema in 1922:

'Smears all it touches. Enslaves the mind of the people. Rules the people as in ancient days a degenerate Church ruled them. Is the brat of yellow journalism.'¹⁰

General Booth of the Salvation Army spoke of films:

'... most disgusting and absolutely unfit for public exhibition.'¹¹

and the poet John Drinkwater stated the cinema

'... has no existence at all as an art'.¹²

The theatre critic James Agate, the theatrical producer Basil Dean and St John Ervine were all known to be critical, although Agate made an exception in the case of Chaplin's film *The Circus* and Dean was soon to engage in film production himself when the arrival of sound film led to something more like stage production. Many writers had a rather ambivalent attitude to films, contempt for film makers and audiences being mingled with appreciation of the fees paid by production companies. Edgar Wallace, many of whose books were filmed and who later became involved in film production himself, wrote in a pamphlet published privately after the war and reviewed in the *Bioscope*:

'The difference between the book, the play and the photo or cinema play lies in the educational equipment of the consumer.'¹³

Writers who ventured into the studios sometimes had reason to raise their eyebrows. Compton Mackenzie has written in his autobiography:

'Meanwhile, Ideal Films had been going ahead with turning *Sinister Street* into a film. I was taken to see some of the "rushes". To my consternation I was shown Lord Saxby in full regimentals of the Welsh Guards, bearskin and all, riding along a country lane to have tea with Mrs Fane.

'"But look," I protested to the two little Jewish brothers who were managing Ideal Films, "a Colonel in the Guards would not go to tea in the country dressed up like that. He must be in mufti."

'The two Rowsons smiled.

'"What you must try and understand, Mr Mackenzie, is that the cinema audience wants romance. We must give them romance. There's no romance in a suit of dittoes"¹⁴

Arnold Bennett, writing in the magazine *Close Up* later, was more sympathetic to the problems of film making. He criticized not so much the story-telling

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technique, which was in fact quite highly developed by 1927 when he wrote, but the deplorable stories themselves:

'All the new stories, contributed *ad hoc*, are conventional, grossly sentimental, clumsy, and fatally impaired by poverty of invention. The screen has laid hands on some of the greatest stories in the world, and has cheapened, soiled, ravaged, and poisoned them by the crudest fatuities.'¹⁵

Bennett was shortly to write an original scenario for the film *Piccadilly*. Meanwhile, suggesting that the producer should seek someone with the gift of creating character and contriving events in terms of the screen, this middle-aged master added:

'Useless for him to go to established and therefore middle-aged masters of literary narration. To all these distinguished artists the screen is still a novelty. The film medium does not come naturally to them because they were not familiar with it in their formative years.'¹⁶

George Bernard Shaw refused to have anything to do with the cinema until the sound film arrived, when he became sufficiently interested to grant a couple of filmed interviews. H. G. Wells was more tolerant, openly admiring the work of Chaplin and allowing several of his own novels to be filmed but resisting many requests to write especially for the cinema. One of his sons, however, worked in the industry during the twenties and Wells himself became a founder member of the Film Society, and, after the arrival of sound, published a book purporting to be the idea for a film script (see page 242).

Wells's son was one of the new type of educated young people entering the industry and changing it, to some extent, from within. Lord Asquith's son Anthony Asquith, Lord Swaythling's son Ivor Montagu, and Edward Craig's son Edward Carrick were others. At least a dozen new young members of the industry in the later twenties were from universities, a number of them from Cambridge. Several of them had been at Cambridge together in the early twenties. Grouped round Harry Bruce Woolfe of British Instructional Films, George Pearson of Welsh-Pearson and the editing firm of Ivor Montagu and Adrian Brunel, most were keen members of the Film Society and had more in common with the new school of critics and theoretical writers than with other members of the trade. These young people were rebels against both the cultural snobbery of their elders and the vulgarity and ignorance of much of the trade. The latter, which had always contained an element yearning for artistic respectability, both welcomed the new tone and at the same time resented it. Art, to the more naïve of the pioneers, had meant Shakespeare, beauty and a little moral uplift. Instead of these, however, the new young people had obscure theories about light, rhythm and montage and were talking and writing enthusiastically about films of dubious box-office value. Foreign films which were often sombre, even shocking, were held up for admiration. There must have been many showmen who agreed with the correspondent who wrote to *The Bioscope* about the brilliant and daring Russian film *Bed and Sofa*:

'It is pitifully futile that such an artist as Room should be expected to paint a beautiful picture with no materials save a palette knife—and mud.'¹⁷

At all events, writing about films became more and more important. There was, of course, a flourishing trade press (see page 37) and a fan press. But the national and daily press also took more and more notice of films. Important papers with regular film correspondents in 1919 were the *Daily News*, which later became the *News Chronicle*, with E. A. Baughan; the *Evening News* with W. G. Faulkner, who left and went into the film trade in November 1921 and was succeeded by Jympson Harmon; and the *Westminster Gazette*, with Macer Wright. Other papers began to include reviews and information, at first often as a side line to dramatic criticism. Iris Barry, previously critic on the *Spectator*, joined the *Daily Mail* in 1925. The *Daily Express*, *The Times*, and G. A. Atkinson on the *Daily Telegraph*, frequently gave news and criticism. Walter Mycroft wrote for the *Evening Standard* and the *Illustrated Sunday Herald*. Ivor Montagu, after writing for *The Observer*, where he followed Angus Macphail, joined *The Sunday Times* at the end of 1927 and was followed on *The Observer* by C. A. Lejeune in 1928. Both Macphail and Montagu had written for *Granta* when at Cambridge. Lejeune, having started as critic on the *Manchester Guardian* in 1922, wrote for a wide, educated and liberal public, and with Iris Barry was one of the first real film critics. Most of the weeklies were slower to take regular notice of the cinema, although the *Bystander* had a feature called 'Picture Plays as seen from the Stalls' in 1923. Such papers as the *English Review*, *Saturday Review*, *Fortnightly Review*, *London Mercury*, *Drawing and Design*, *Illustrated London News* and *New Statesman* noted the phenomenon from time to time with varying degrees of friendliness. Even *The Studio* reviewed several films of particular interest for their sets or design. There were also occasional broadcasts from 2LO, including some by G. A. Atkinson in 1923, and a series of six talks on *The Art of the Cinema* by Anthony Asquith in 1927.

A few books on the cinema were also published, including manuals of film production, books of criticism and a handful of more ambitious theoretical works.

The handbooks or how-it-is-done type of books were designed more to interest and amuse the public than to instruct those entering the industry, although there were virtually no teaching books and they may have been used as such. The days when an amateur could read one of these books and feel equipped to start his own production company were over. But although not really for professional use these little books give an insight into the practices and attitudes of ordinary commercial production at the time. Particularly helpful are *The Film Industry* written by Davidson Boughey in 1921 and *Kinematograph Studio Technique* by L. C. MacBean in 1922, both of which are frequently mentioned in the later chapter on film production techniques. Of greater interest at this point are books by two screen writers, *The Modern Photoplay and its Construction* by Colden Lore in 1923 and *Writing for the Screen* by Arrar Jackson in 1929, both of whom, as writers, were concerned with the planning of the film as a whole. Of greater interest, also, is the 1928 publication *Through a Yellow*

Glass by Oswell Blakeston, a critic and associate editor of *Close Up* and later co-producer of an experimental film.

Most of the books of criticism were works of hearty condescension. Their tone was interested but lighthearted, at equal pains to claim the cinema as an art and to avoid being thought stuffy or serious. Iris Barry's bright and chatty *Let's Go to the Pictures*, in 1926, for example, took a realistic stand:

'It seems to me that the best way to help progress is not by condemning cinematography off-hand, but by seeing for oneself what the cinema's function and its virtues are, and then by patronizing those films which most nearly reach one's ideal. If enough people support the better type of pictures, and stoutly demand more and still finer ones, they will get them.'¹⁸

Despite the obvious concern to avoid a highbrow appearance the best of these writers, if they were faithful to a sufficiently high standard, could perform a very useful task of popularization. But not all were as careful as Iris Barry. The American Gilbert Seldes, in *The Seven Lively Arts* in 1924, permitted himself to be timidly outrageous by approving things already widely accepted such as the genius of Chaplin, whom for some reason he preferred to call by his French title 'Charlot'. When he ventured into something more theoretical his ignorance of the processes of production and of developments in France, Germany or Russia led him to some rather strange conclusions: that in comedy the 'secret of pace [is] in the projector', that film is 'movement governed by light' and that the 'serious moving picture' was 'a bogus art'. *This Film Business* by Rudolf Messel in 1928 and *Films: Facts and Forecasts* by L'Estrange Fawcett in 1927 were in a similar vein of general enthusiasm. Fawcett's book, in particular, was an example of a type of criticism that seems to be peculiar to films, genuinely appreciative of the better films but at the same time over-reasonable about the commercial justifications for the worst.

Running with the hare and hunting with the hounds, this type of writer hesitated to offend his public by saying that rubbish was rubbish, yet would not yield place to the highbrow in his clamorous admiration of more *avant-garde* films. The aggressively positive pose of 'I'm as intellectual as anybody, personally, of course, but let's keep our feet on the ground', the ready forgiveness of pot-boilers and the ability to see a mysterious artistic discipline in the need to please all of the people all of the time showed more enthusiasm than discrimination. One such critic was even able to describe *Potemkin* and *Hindle Wakes*, a meretricious British popular success, as 'equally absorbing'.

Selection is as much part of the process of art appreciation as it is of artistic expression itself, and those who displayed such a jolly willingness to compromise were not likely to push the artistic advancement of the film very far. But a more discriminating attitude was beginning to appear even then. Ernest Betts, a contributor to *Close Up* who had been a film critic from 1922, produced a book called *Heraclitus, or the Future of Films* in 1928 which said firmly:

'... for art does not, and cannot, appeal to everybody, whatever people may say about the Old Vic, and B.B.C. concerts and native dances in South Africa.'¹⁹

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The possibility that different types of films and film makers might find greater freedom if the mass audience split into groups with varying tastes was already being recognized in the appearance of the film society and repertory cinema movements. And an essential part of these movements was the growth of a more advanced level of writing about films.

Thus Betts' flippant, breezy and discursive little book claims boldly on its first page

'... this is to be, at least in part, an aesthetic or "highbrow" study concerning films which are works of art'.²⁰

Most of the serious writers of this type were connected with *Close Up*. This was a monthly magazine printed in Switzerland as an international venture by Pool from July 1927 until 1933. Its historical importance is very great despite its small circulation. It was edited by Kenneth Macpherson. One associate editor was Blakeston, who also contributed criticism to the *Architectural Review* and collaborated on an experimental film, *Light Rhythms*, with the American photographer Francis Bruguière. The group of writers which grew up addressed the magazine, and a few books, to each other and a small circle of film initiates. The other assistant editor was Winifred Ellerman, under the professional name of Bryher, whose book on the film problems of Soviet Russia was also published by Pool in 1929. Another frequent contributor was Robert Herring, whose work also appeared in the *London Mercury* and *Drawing and Design*, and who produced a book of stills called *Films of the Year 1927-28*, which was published by *The Studio*. Ernest Betts, Jean Prévost and Ivor Montagu appeared in its pages, and also works by the writers Gertrude Stein and Dorothy M. Richardson. Eric Elliott, another *Close Up* writer, produced an ambitious theoretical book called *Anatomy of Motion Picture Art* published by Pool in 1928.

Close Up rarely had a good word to say for a British picture, but enabled its readers to keep in touch with the far more important developments taking place in films abroad, especially in Germany, France and Russia. It was particularly important as a source of information concerning films in Russia, as widespread opposition to the new political régime kept Russian films out of the British cinemas. Its characteristic literary style was affected, fashionable writing in an elliptical, casual manner. Sentences sometimes lacked verbs, capitals were used for emphasis, 'one' did this and 'one' did that, typographical errors and split infinitives were cheerfully disregarded. The text was peppered with such remarks as 'What rot', 'Oh, its a mess' and even '*quien sabe?*' or '*va bene*'. But the pretentious and precious tone of much of the writing can readily be forgiven for the passionate commitment to all that was best in the film. The style has dated, and years later it is easy to see the pitfalls into which theory led. But the magazine undertook an important job which it did without compromise, that of building up a nucleus of cineastes devoted to the development of the art of the film. Some of these were film makers who brought a new seriousness to their work within the commercial framework, some were soon to be making films outside

this framework in the documentary movement, and some were critics or merely spectators who were stimulated to seek, and support, better films.

There were a few other writers, equally earnest, who were not associated primarily with *Close Up*. Betts' *Heracitus, or the Future of Films*, published in 1928, was one of a series with titles by some serious and even distinguished writers. *Parnassus to Let*, by Eric Walter White, was published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf at the Hogarth Press in 1928. It was strongly criticized by *Close Up*, which found it ignorant and obscure, referring to it as

'a little essay on (I suppose) rhythm and the cinema.'²¹

Meanwhile young Paul Rotha was at work on his monumental book *The Film Till Now*, which appeared in 1930, a critical account of the cinema which was to introduce several generations of serious cinema goers to the subject, and to prove one of the greatest single factors in the growth of a new attitude.

Outside the mainstream of critical writing were three books which had little practical effect but which were significant of a growing desire to understand the real nature of the film medium. One was a new edition, published here in 1922, of an American book of 1916 called *The Art of the Moving Picture* by the popular poet Vachel Lindsay. The second was *The Mind and the Film* by Gerard Fort Buckle, published in 1926. And the third was the Pool publication in 1928 by Eric Elliott, *Anatomy of Moving Picture Art*.

The book by Vachel Lindsay, which probably had nothing like the influence he claimed for it, was an extraordinary attempt to establish the artistic credentials of the film by categorizing it in terms of the other arts. His main theme was an elaborate systematization of films into six classes, as Photoplays of Action, Intimate Photoplays, and Motion Pictures of Fairy Splendour, Crowd Splendour, Patriotic Splendour and Religious Splendour. The Action Photoplay was defined as Sculpture-in-Motion, with references to moving bronze, wood and stone; the Intimate Photoplay was likened to Painting-in-Motion; the Motion Picture of Fairy Splendour was Furniture, Trappings and Inventions in Motion; the Motion Picture of Crowd Splendour was Architecture-in-Motion with special reference to landscape; so was the Motion Picture of Patriotic Splendour, with special reference to mural paintings, and the Motion Picture of Religious Splendour with special reference to architecture. The four categories of Splendour Photoplays had two characteristics. Firstly they were out-of-doors, a definition which included large sets; and secondly they were concerned with the meaningful movements of inanimate things. The picture of Action, Intimacy and Splendour were further identified with the colours red, blue and yellow.

Steeped in the other arts and a Museum background which stressed the visual and plastic arts of painting, sculpture and architecture, Lindsay called on producers to seek inspiration only in these arts. He was fascinated with the power that films could exercise over the senses, and ignored their intellectual content almost entirely. In this he was like many of the more esoteric critics coming after him, who overlooked the simple truth that however great the appeal to the emotions or senses, if a film offers nothing to the mind it will in the end

be boring. He regarded films as pageants, even as tableaux. As a result he felt that they should be short, as 'a one-hour programme is long enough for anyone', and an individual film should not exceed twenty minutes. He saw the cinema as a place where people conversed as they watched the images on the screen. Believing this, he could regard a trite film like Trimble's short *Battle Hymn of the Republic* as a greater achievement than Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, and some of his other preferences were equally unusual. Lindsay, in fact, had no interest in film technique as later understood and made no contribution to its understanding. He was a popular poet, and his style was free-swinging, roistering and uproarious. The book is a panegyric, full of froth and self-display but bursting with praise and enthusiasm for film, and is a brave attempt to inspire others with his own joyful faith in it. It did show occasional insight. He referred, for example, to the 'noble managerial mood' which could make 'an artistic photoplay . . . the product of the creative force of one soul', and foresaw the emergence of individual style among directors. But on the whole, despite the rhetoric, his highly personal vision of the film could be of little real service to the cause of artistic development.

Buckle's book, which was written between 1921 and 1926, was a very different matter. It was a laboured attempt to isolate film technique, as an art, from the technological aspect of film making. Buckle felt that the best way to do this was to approach the subject from the psychological angle, and the bulk of the book was what he called a treatise on the psychological factors in the film, largely irrelevant psychological and even physiological material. Buckle himself wrote the scripts of several rather unsuccessful silent films, but although more knowledgeable than Lindsay about how films were made he seems to have lacked the poet's vision and enthusiasm, while sharing his propensity for making categories and misleading analogies, and for laying down laws. Although the title of the book refers to the mind, and although he stated on Page One that the 'primary duty of a film is to tell a story' he, like Lindsay, over-emphasized the visual nature of the film. The most important part of the book was the treatment of what he called Photographic Aids to the Mind. Here he discussed the techniques of cinematography almost as though the brain was capable of receiving visual stimuli, but not of thinking. He began with a misstatement of the theory of persistence of vision, in which he implied that the retinal impression was retained not for a fixed period, but until it was superseded by the next one. He then elaborated on this as if a retinal impression was the only consequence of the image. Again and again it was assumed that the spectator's mind would be doing what the film image was doing: if the picture faded the mind would experience 'complete loss of the thought movement', slow motion cinematography would cause slow thought, overuse of leisurely fading would even produce a 'state of coma'. In fact, of course, what the mind would be doing was to observe that fading or slow movement was being presented before it, and interpreting its significance. It was as a corollary to Buckle's mechanistic view that despite his good intentions he undervalued the very aspect of film in which he claimed to be most interested, the part played by the mind. What both he and Lindsay ignored was that besides being visual, the film occupied time. Because of this it

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was necessary to provide the mind with something to think about at the risk, quite simply, of being a bore. Leisurely fading produces not a coma, but a spectator who is thinking about something else. But their complete lack of interest in film content, and therefore in film structure, made it unlikely that either of them would discover the truth. Buckle's short and inadequate treatment of structure, in fact, simply came to the rather perfunctory conclusion that what he called balance and continuity should be determined on the floor of the studio. This was too much for J. D. Williams, the film producer who wrote his preface. Williams, a practical man, groped his way through the fog of pseudo-scientific argument and emerged to state politely but firmly that in fact the structure of the film should 'be determined before the studio floor is reached'.²²

The terminology of film technique was still fluid at the time that Buckle tackled the subject, and the written works of Pudovkin and Eisenstein had not yet elucidated it for others. Buckle did realize that film technique was more than the technical information contained in the manuals. But his attempt to work the fundamentals out for himself came to some disappointingly obvious conclusions. It was rather an anticlimax to be told that a good film story was a good story which did not lose by being translated into a film.

Eric Elliott, who seems to have been unfamiliar with the work of the Russians, came much nearer to a modern understanding of film technique than Lindsay or Buckle in his *Anatomy of Motion Picture Art* in 1928. Showing the same tendency to codify and name with quaint terms, he was a far more sympathetic and perceptive observer. He was somewhat hampered by his basic assumption that

'Dramaturgy, Histrionism and Pictorial Craft are the established foundations of screen technique.'²³

Worried by the debate as to whether photography was an art, he had already come to the conclusion that there was art in the arrangement of the material, and only the means of reproducing it were mechanical. Fortunately he did not pursue this, but discovered that

'... the cinema's peculiar values in *continuity* are independent of any refinement in the single scenes.'²⁴

Anticipating the Russian use of the term 'plastic material', he decided

'... *action, acting and pictures* became more or less elementary values, parts of photoplay construction, materials for a superior ensemble.

'Usually, the changing of scenes is intended to elucidate the plot of drama; but beyond that is the finer purpose of arranging scenes not for mere incident's sake, but to interpret, compare and reflect the transitive expressions latent in those scenes.'²⁵

Accordingly Elliott devoted an important chapter to what he decided to call the principles of continuity:

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‘There may be thousands of scenes in the complete photoplay. They, in turn, become factors in a larger scheme of composition. To avoid confusion with the still-picture term we do not speak of this larger scheme as composition. Technically it is termed CONTINUITY.’²⁶

At this point the prevailing habit of naming and classifying ran riot, and he distinguished various types of episodes besides those for purely narrative purposes. There might be episodes of incurrence, intensive or passive, objective or subjective; or they might be episodes of recurrence or concurrence, either of which might be cumulative.

‘By these arrangements we are able to obtain unlimited effects by COMPARISON.’²⁷

Comparison comprised contrasts, similes and reflections, and could be of five orders: remote, successive, incurrent, parenthetic or appended. As a result of this Elliott finally concluded that film most nearly resembled music, and described its design as

‘ENSEMBLE—the concinnity of detail to detail, scene to scene, motif to motif—a symphony of images, weaving in Time, Space and Motion, and pictures by Light.’²⁸

It is clear that the decade from the end of the war until 1929 was a time of enquiry about the cinema’s artistic significance. But as yet there was no accepted approach among those convinced that it was an art, and the only thing they had in common was a determination to establish its claim to serious attention. It was for this reason that all of them sought to establish in what way, exactly, the film was a creative art different to others.

It was not even easy to decide who the artist was. During the twenties specialization of function inside the studio separated the work of producer, director, the writer or writers of various types, lighting cameraman, designer, actor and editor. And while each became a skill with some creative scope of its own, final responsibility for the artistic conception of the film as a whole was not always as clear as it might be. The creative importance of the director was more or less accepted, but it could not escape notice that the actual influence exercised by the director in any particular production set-up could vary according to the temperament and talents of the actual people involved. It was the fact that film production was a group activity which made many sceptical of whether it could possibly be an art at all. Possibly it was ignorance of film-making procedures which made the multiplicity of skills so confusing to outsiders in their efforts to locate creative responsibility. One director warned them:

‘Be quite sure of your ground—technically. Don’t blame the lighting when the print is poor; the acting when the situation is false; the director when the script is at fault. And when you are bored with a film, don’t *always* think you have put a finger on the trouble by suggesting “judicious cutting”.’²⁹

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Perhaps it is not the critic's job to discuss the contribution of different people in such detail, but to assess the work as a whole. But with no clear idea of which function was responsible for the film as a film, only the most superficial criticism was possible. Hence the desire to place artistic responsibility, also, involved an attempt to define the qualities which made the film a medium of expression on its own. If it was more than a mere conglomeration of the skills of the actor, the writer, the set designer and the cameraman, what was it? Why was the film maker anything more than a stage producer working under extra limitations to make a silent photographed record of his work?

This idea, that a film was a photographed record of other forms of art, had indeed been the earliest way of looking at it. The desire to claim artistic status for the film had arisen before this elementary view had been superseded. Above all, art was identified at first simply with photographic beauty, and this unsophisticated view lingered into the twenties in the Victorian sentimentality of some early British producers. A first step towards a deeper understanding was taken by those who felt that the film, visual and largely wordless as it was, must tell its story in visible activity and that the art of film making lay in devising stories which could be told purely in visual terms. This was taken to mean in terms of action, and the results of this over-simplification were all too obvious in many British films of the twenties. No time was wasted, in this school of film making, on the establishment of mood or setting, on characterization, or on the subtlety of personal relations.

'The Film Play is pre-eminently the vehicle for stories rich in incidents and action.'³⁰

Fawcett wrote that the director

'... must translate every phase and scene into action, and no matter what sort of action it is, the treatment must be lively in order to appeal to the modern audience.'³¹

He even referred to a film being

'... representative of modern life—its movement, rapid change of scene, speed, sharpness of detail, plain straight-forward expression.'³²

But the busy little films which sped through their complicated plots managed to be strangely dull. The more thoughtful, while accepting that the film could only convey what had been externalized in visible objects and actions, realized that this need not imply ceaseless activity. Incidental but 'telling' incidents, symbolic shots, and in fact the whole technique of the expressive 'little touch' which gathered strength in the early twenties was a more subtle and leisurely development of the original idea of externalization. It is significant that films employing this technique were among the first to elicit favourable comment from more serious observers. Stage business, in the actor's sense of the term,

could be adapted to film narrative and be more expressive than Fawcett's 'rapid change of scene, speed, sharpness of detail. . . .' But it was still accepted that, since the camera could show only external things, the power of the film itself to suggest abstract ideas was very limited.

At the other extreme to those who tussled with the idea of overt action were those *avant-garde* critics who all but ignored the story in favour of light, movement and rhythm, visual patterns moving in two-dimensional space and in time.

'Light speaks, is pliant, is malleable. Light is our friend and god. Let us be worthy of it. Do not let us defame light, use and waste brilliant possibilities, elaborate material, making light a slave and a commonplace mountebank.'³³

'Think what you have. First of all pure form, every single attribute of photographic art, miracles to work in tones and tone depths, light, geometry, design, sculpture . . . pure abstraction all of it. Then this not static but with all the resources of movement, change, rhythm, space, completely fluid to the will of the artist. Then miracles to work again with trick photography, infinite possibilities of suggestion, contrast, merging, dissociation; whole realms of fantasy, states of mind, of emotion, psychic things, to symbolize not in the limit of one special moment of time, but in all the ebb and flow of their course, their beginning and their end. Not only have you mastery over the outward manifestation, but over the inner and inmost working too.'³⁴

Some pinned their hopes on light, some on movement. But all were preoccupied with the use of visual and temporal composition for a direct aesthetic assault on the senses. In this they were as exclusively concerned with visual values as their opposite numbers who thought only of visible action. And whilst the simpler view ignored the aesthetic appeal to the emotions, the more highbrow critics tended to underestimate the importance of a narrative thread or subject to engage the mind.

Strangely enough the highbrow critics of the twenties were merely restating in a more sophisticated way the eccentric position taken by Vachel Lindsay, with his purely sensual aesthetic of the visual and plastic arts in motion. Betts stressed movement. He wrote:

'Heraclitus it was who first perceived that all life consisted of, and tended towards, change and change is the first principle of all cinematography. . . . The film is unique among the visual arts in postulating a perpetual fluidity or becoming as the basis of the conception.'³⁵

An Essay on the Cinema in Herring's book of stills in 1928 maintained that, although a story was used to set the flow of images in motion, the essence of the matter was not the story but the design and rhythm, representing the visual and the time or motion elements. The experimental work of Francis Bruguière was cited for having

'perhaps carried it further than anyone else; by means of triple-exposure and parti-coloured make-up, he has obtained a form capable of expressing simultaneously the most evanescent shades of feeling, the most conflicting currents of thought.'³⁶

And Eric Walter White in *Parnassus to Let*, seeking to free cinema from the drama and painting from which he believed it had sprung, treated it as a form of poetry, and asked if

'the basis of cinematic metre is caesural and not accentual? that rhythm is built up by motion and emotion deployed from shot to shot?'³⁷

White's questions suggest a new interest in the way that shots of different duration related to each other, and produced different reactions in the spectator. But from the interesting instances of rhythm, which he went on to describe, it is clear that he was considering only the effects of rhythm, properly understood, as a periodical or regular metrical flow. In a way, contemporary use of the word rhythm in this connection was as unfortunate and misleading as the word montage which became so popular at this time. Just as montage became identified with the montage sequence, and emphasized quick impressionistic cutting rather than the creative importance of the whole edited structure, so the word rhythm drew attention to the emotional impact of regular and particularly of accelerating passages. This obscured the fact that it was the duration of all shots and their relationship to each other, whether it involved regular patterns or not, that were to be considered.

Most of these writers, despite their sincerity and occasional insight, were one-sided in their approach, and the critical theory of the time was full of unresolved questions. The answers, for those who cared to hear, finally came with the publication in 1929 of a number of essays and lectures by the great Russian director Pudovkin, under the title *Pudovkin on Film Technique*. As their translator Ivor Montagu wrote, the analysis of principle had so far been the work

'of aestheticists, who have approached the problem of filmic expression from the perceptual, not from the creative, standpoint.'³⁸

But the ideas of the film makers Kuleshov and Dziga Vertov, developed in Soviet films and above all in the work of Pudovkin and Eisenstein during the middle twenties, had gradually begun to circulate among British film intellectuals despite the barriers put up by political prejudice. They were first expressed coherently in these fragments by Pudovkin.

Three short passages explain the core of these views:

'Kuleshov maintained that the material in film-work consists of pieces of film, and that the composition method is their joining together in a particular, creatively discovered order. He maintained that film-art does not begin when the artists act and the various scenes are shot—this is only the preparation of the

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material. Film-art begins from the moment when the director begins to combine and join together the various pieces of film. By joining them in various combinations, in different orders, he obtains differing results.'

'But the combination of various pieces in one or another order is not sufficient. It is necessary to be able to control and manipulate the length of these pieces, because the combination of pieces of varying length is effective in the same way as the combination of sounds of various length in music, by creating the rhythm of the film and by means of their varying effect on the audience. Quick, short pieces rouse excitement, while long pieces have a soothing effect. . . .

'To be able to find the requisite order of shots or pieces, and the rhythms necessary for their combination—that is the chief task of the director's art.'³⁹

Pudovkin emphasized the fact that film production was a group activity, and was able to fit the director's creative function into this. He was the

'commander-in-chief. He gives battle to the indifference of the spectator; . . . in order to attain a unified creation, a complete film, the director must lead constant through all the numerous stages of the work a unifying, organizing line created by him.'⁴⁰

At last a group of practising film makers, whose creative imagination was accompanied by an intellectual grasp of the subject, had been able to state the nature of the medium and stake an articulate claim for it as a form of artistic expression. The actor, the designer and the lighting-cameraman had gradually taken over different aspects of the creative illusion of reality, and superficially the director seemed to have little function except to unite them. But according to the Russian view their share was simply the preparation of the visible, or plastic, material. In a famous example it was demonstrated how a neutral shot of an actor's face could seem to express different feelings according to the content of the shots which came before and after it. The primitive view of the film maker as an illusionist, using the tricks of cinematography to give the appearance of reality to things that had never actually happened, had been transformed. The film maker's power of illusion lay in creative editing. The vision of reality was that selected by whoever decided the structure of the film. It was true that the camera could show only behaviour and visible objects, as others had realized, but the film itself as an edited structure could suggest ideas and abstractions with great freedom. The art of the film maker lay in the creative power of constructive editing, controlling both content and form, which used the order and the pace in which the plastic material was presented both to convey the idea, and to act directly on the emotions of the viewer. When Pudovkin had stated in 1927 that editing was the foundation of film art he had brought into harmony the visual and temporal patterns, on the one hand, which had so greatly occupied the aestheticists, and the externalization into acts and objects on the other, which had seemed the only problem to the popular theorists.

Did any of these writers, other than Pudovkin, have any real influence? If the function of aesthetics and the critic is to assist in the cultivation of taste, to

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help others to discriminate between good and bad and to enjoy the best, their task was just beginning. There were mistakes and confusions, as there were bound to be in an entirely new field. There were writers who felt that if they gave something a name they had explained it, and that they could establish the true function or 'duty' of an art as though it were a game to be played according to agreed rules. At their worst, there was the critic's besetting sin of turning an observation of successful practice into an imperative, transforming the fact that something is usually done into a rule that it must be done. Even Iris Barry, in a burst of zeal, wrote:

'I ask then: critics arise, invent terms, lay down canons, derive from your categories. . . .'⁴¹

An easy trick of the mind turns a canon from a statement into a command, forgetting that it is the nature of the creative imagination to ignore commands. But what all these writers except perhaps Buckle had, above all, was the ability to communicate their enthusiasm. Sometimes, looking at the films for which they made such great claims, this enthusiasm seems almost inexplicable. It must have taken a great deal of faith to see the possibilities of greatness in the primitives of the new art. Such faith certainly had an effect, if only a marginal one, in creating a larger public for it. But it was for the artist, rather than the critic, to discover the real nature of the film and to turn it into a medium of expression for the creative imagination. For the development of film technique we must turn to the film industry, with all its faults.

Exhibition and the Public

(I) RELATIONS WITH THE PUBLIC

The film industry was anxious to please everybody. 'Give them Joy', advised the *Bioscope* in 1922:

'There are certain things in film entertainment that can always be relied upon to please, such as romance presented with sincerity. It may be far-fetched, but it must not be sloppy. Baby scenes always get over. Even the lowest mental types always enjoy peeps into "furrin' parts" if they are not prolonged. All stories must end happily. There's no need to bother about logical or artistic endings. People don't go to cinemas to study logic or art. They want to be cheered up. Therefore, see you get humour into your programme. Broad humour, not coarse or vulgar, is safest, because it appeals to the majority, but vary this line with occasional light humour.

'And don't neglect the tragic. Folks like to know that other people get into trouble as well as themselves. Women especially love a good cry. But the end must strike a happy note.'¹

But many in the business took a cynical view of their public and would have agreed with an American screenwriter who said

'... production generally is crippled by the mentality of greater America'.²

A British renter advised in 1927

'... appeal to the primitive emotions rather than to the reasoning faculties'.³

and one of the scenario editors wrote brutally

'... roughly sixty per cent are women; and even if a woman is devoid of teeth, has a carcass which rattles like a box of dominoes as she walks, and wears elastic-sided boots and red flannel, she is still enough of a woman to simper at an emotional close-up, even if she simpers in secret.'⁴

There is little serious information on tastes, and it must be assumed that the showmen were right and the films actually booked were those the majority wanted, although every now and then someone would raise the alarm that the cinema was dying because the films were so bad. In 1924 the *Daily News* held a

Favourite British Film Stars poll which put Betty Balfour and Alma Taylor at the top, followed by Gladys Cooper, Violet Hopson, Matheson Lang, Fay Compton, Chrissie White, Stewart Rome, Owen Nares and Ivor Novello.⁶ But English players were of small importance compared with the Hollywood stars, and Betty Balfour and Ivor Novello, the only British players to be included in most popularity polls not confined to British actors (e.g. in Birmingham in 1924 and in the *Daily Mirror* in 1927), were described by the critic Iris Barry as our only two stars.⁸ A poll with 10,500 entries held in 1925 to discover which types of film were popular showed society drama at the top, followed by comedy drama, Western drama, comedy, costume drama and war drama. Interest films were low on the list.⁷ There was some excuse for this as the latter, even *The Epic of Everest* in 1924, were usually unskilfully made and dull. The short, well-made *Secrets of Nature* films were a popular exception. In 1927 and 1929 Sydney Bernstein, more intelligent than other exhibitors, delved deeper into audience preferences with two questionnaires. The second of these was to be issued to 250,000 cinemagoers. Results, however, were broadly similar to those of the earlier polls. The first showed among other things that whereas men and boys preferred adventure, followed by comedy and then society drama, women and girls put it the other way and preferred society drama and then comedy and adventure. With both, costume and war drama and melodrama were less popular. On the other hand 80 to 90 per cent liked the news reels. As before Betty Balfour and Ivor Novello, this time joined by Matheson Lang, were the only British stars. By the time of the second questionnaire in 1929 most of the stars in favour were different, yet Betty Balfour, although now appearing in a different type of part, was still high on the list.⁸

It was realized that all audiences were not the same, yet the mainstream of the commercial cinema depended more and more on finding the lowest common denominator. Books were published to appeal to circles of almost limitless variety, the theatre catered to many different tastes, and the feeling grew that the exhibition structure for films was not sufficiently elastic. Even *The Bioscope* as early as 1919 suggested that different cinemas might specialize in different types of film.⁹ In 1920 Adrian Brunel was associated with an early attempt to form a Cinemagoers' League to make articulate the demands of a new and more discriminating public. The foundation of the magazine *Close Up* in mid-1927 to encourage the showing of more progressive films was very important. As the editorial pointed out:

'... there is a minority of several million people to whom these films are tiresome, a minority that loves the film, but has too much perception, too much intelligence to swallow the often dismal and paltry stories and acting set up week by week before it on the screen. This minority has got to have films it can enjoy, films with psychology, soundness, intelligence . . . how much more charming and easy if we—the minority—could just walk into a theatre, one particular theatre, haphazardly as the majority wanders into its many theatres, knowing we would see films which, even if we did not always like, would be stimulating to mind and perception.'¹⁰

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In London a few cinemas began to show some of the more advanced imported films. The Holborn Cinema, Marble Arch Pavilion and New Gallery did so, and later the Academy Cinema. The Davis family embarked on a regular policy of showing unusual films at the Shaftesbury Avenue Pavilion Cinema at the same time as the formation of *Close Up*. This ran successfully as a repertory or specialist cinema for two years, showing among other films *Waxworks*, *Warning Shadows*, *Jeanne Ney*, *The Nibelungs*, *Vaudeville*, *The Student of Prague*, *The Street*, *Gosta Berling*, *Tartuffe*, *Cinderella*, *Berlin* and *The Last Laugh*. Stuart Davis wrote:

‘The repertory audience is composed, I find, roughly of three different classes: the *intelligenza*, the intellectual amateur who likes to follow new art movements, and the ordinary, average middle-class business man who doesn’t go to the cinema as a rule because he does not like the fare provided for “the masses”.’¹¹

Much of the trade was in favour of such specialization at the time, feeling that the prestige of these films was good for the cinema as a whole, but there was little scope for them outside London.

The other way of showing films of minority interest was in film societies. The earliest of these seem to have been formed for amateur production rather than exhibition, and it is significant that they were formed at Oxford and Cambridge by the generation of undergraduates which in a few years was to bring a more cultivated approach into commercial production.* The Film Society itself, whose importance can hardly be over-estimated, was formed in London in 1925. It was founded by Ivor Montagu and Hugh Miller and run by the film critic Iris Barry. It numbered amongst its celebrated founder members Lord Ashfield, Anthony Asquith, the film critic G. A. Atkinson, Lord David Cecil, Edith Craig, Roger Fry, J. B. S. Haldane, Julian Huxley, Augustus John, E. McKnight Kauffer, J. M. Keynes, the film writer Angus Macphail, George Bernard Shaw, John St Loe Strachey, Lord Swaythling, Dame Ellen Terry, Ben Webster and H. G. Wells. The Council included Iris Barry, Sidney Bernstein, Frank Dobson, Hugh Miller, Ivor Montagu, Walter Mycroft, and Adrian Brunel. The Society intended to show films not otherwise available in the belief that there was a large serious minority audience which, with critics and film makers, would like to keep abreast of new developments in film making. Jibes from the ignorant that the Society studied freaks and failures died away as the industry found that it did not compete with the ordinary cinemas, but supplemented them. A few films, amongst them *Berlin*, *Tartuffe*, *Waxworks* and Reiniger’s *Cinderella*, were shown at cinemas after their Film Society reception, and the film trade’s persistent interest in artistic respectability was even flattered a little by its existence. The first Scottish Film Society began in Glasgow at the end of the decade, and soon there were others, although the movement was hampered at first by the

* The Cambridge Kinema Club was formed in 1923 by Peter Le Neve Foster, who wrote and directed the half-reel *The Witch’s Fiddle* in 1924, and later the 800-foot *The Wizard of Alderley Edge* for Manchester Film Society in 1927; an Oxford group was also planning production in 1924.

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fact that licensing regulations and their offshoot, censorship, were applicable to film society shows as well as to cinemas. All the same, a serious public for the silent film was growing during its last few years, and the influence of the London Film Society in this was very great.

The trade's pleasure in having a small arty fringe, as long as it was harmless, was part of its ambivalence at this time. Fearful of competition from any source, even from radio after 1923 or from greyhound racing after about 1927, and usually scornful of anything regarded as highbrow, many in the industry nevertheless seem to have regretted that the marvels and success of the cinema had not yet obtained much artistic and social prestige. Early encouragement for the idea of an Academy or Institute was part of a hunt for dignity. As early as 1920 the views of Thomas Ince in America on the need for a serious Academy were reprinted here with approval.¹³ In 1922 the Faculty of Arts was formed as part of a larger movement 'to develop the arts and crafts of the country as a national asset' and included a plan for diplomas and medals for British films of outstanding merit, and this received considerable support from the trade. It formed the Kinema Art Group, later called the Faculty of Cinema Art, which was registered in January 1927. In a way it was the trade's approach to the same problem as that faced by the Film Society, 'to provide a central organization giving facilities for the study of cinema art', and aimed at co-operation, the exchange of information, training and what was later called Film Appreciation as well as the foundation of a film museum.*

Gradually there were other signs of academic recognition and encouragement. The Royal Photographic Society inaugurated a Kinematograph Group at the Royal Society of Arts in 1923. Abroad an organization called The Friends of the Cinema was offering an annual medal for 'advance of cinematographic art'¹³ and the American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences had been formed. An International Congress of Motion Picture Arts was held in New York in 1923. French trade bodies organized an international Congress of Cinematography in October 1923, which was attended by a British contingent drawn mainly from the Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association and which discussed such practical matters as taxes, educational films, insurance premiums, authors' rights and technical and electrical questions.

Outside the trade a British Empire Film Institute was set up in 1926, its director J. Aubrey Rees, with an inaugural dinner under the chairmanship of Lord Asquith. Its motive was patriotic rather than artistic, its aim to 'promote and develop public interest in British films throughout the world . . .', but it would also

' . . . act as a Bureau of Information with regard to British and other Films, British Film Producers and Users, Educational Institutions, Churches, Schools

* In 1919 the official war films were kept in the Imperial War Museum. The preservation of films presented technical problems, and in 1924 the post of Government Cinematograph Adviser was created and the films put in his care at His Majesty's Stationery Office. The idea of preserving other types of film for posterity received little support.

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and other organizations and persons interested in or concerned with Cinematography.¹⁴

The trade was sceptical:

‘. . . Laudable objects, to be sure, but—I can’t find among the sponsors the name of anyone, however familiar to the public, who is known to have made a special study of the film business, except that of Sir John Ferguson.’¹⁵

and *Close Up* was frankly scornful:

‘Equally moving is the announcement of the British Empire Film Institute (slogan: More British Films on British Screens) that “all over the world films from other countries are shown whose tone is, at least, not beneficial to the interests of the British Empire”. Among its aims, these bright jewels: to rouse a patriotic feeling sufficient to prevent the scandal of British Films being actually excluded from the great majority of film houses here and elsewhere . . . to confer Awards of Merit for films of Imperial value, to *break down prejudice*, to attract better brains to the industry.

‘Now what more could anybody ask? With this sort of feeling if we cannot produce the most exquisite and subtle masterpieces there must be something radically wrong with us.’¹⁶

Nevertheless the Institute did not give up, but began acquiring the nucleus of a film archive with Ponting’s polar films and, having started a book library, planned a film library as well.

In 1926 the French National Committee of Intellectual Co-operation organized yet another Congress, this time under the patronage of the League of Nations. The Faculty of Arts, Authors’ Society and British Empire Film Institute sent representatives, and the Film Society sent Ivor Montagu, Adrian Brunel, Iris Barry, Walter Mycroft and Angus Macphail. The C.E.A. sent only three representatives but, although the *Bioscope* sneered at the Congress’s ‘pious resolutions’, the three trade representatives found the Congress interesting and advised the C.E.A. to take the one next year at Berlin more seriously. In 1928 the League of Nations recognized an International Institute of Educational Cinematography set up at Rome.¹⁷

None of this, however, did anything to meet the far more important need for organized training in film production. *Close Up* had pleaded for a Cinema University in 1927.¹⁸ And in 1929 the American J. D. Williams, known for his grandiose schemes both sides of the Atlantic, proposed the formation of an Academy with a teaching staff. He hoped this could be self-supporting through the distribution of its experimental films, and even more optimistically that it could be attached to Oxford or Cambridge University:

‘. . . something more than the Parliament of British Cinema, that it might be the British National Research Laboratory of Cinema Art . . . the incubating ground

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of Youth, as the meeting place for Experience, as the testing place for theory'.¹⁹

The renter G. W. Pearson suggested that each production company should contribute £1,000 a year towards its expenses. There was premature enthusiasm from some who were dazzled by hopes of academic glory, a cautious preference for apprenticeship schemes from others, and guarded meanness from those who would have to foot the bill. The Chairman of the Federation of British Industries Film Group emphasized the huge capital that would be needed and the pitfalls of an educational system dependent on selling its products, and like many other grand schemes it sank without trace.

While part of the trade pursued respectability like a will o' the wisp, showmanship and publicity made contact with the public in a more practical way. The trade was well served with trade papers.* These were augmented in the early part of the decade, when publicity was for brand names rather than for individual films, by elaborate house organs sent periodically by film publishers not only to the press and exhibitors but also for sale on the bookstalls.† They contained the photographs, news and gossip later described as press hand-outs, and the desire to exploit the press for free and apparently spontaneous publicity was undisguised:

' . . . publicity that is not paid for, by which I mean, of course, news paragraphs. . . .'²⁰

One leading article suggesting a weekly radio chat about films appears to be based on the assumption that similar 'inspired paragraphs' were the basis of dramatic and music criticism.²¹ Like studio handouts, posters stopped advertising film brands and began to advertise individual films in the early twenties. With elaborate illustrated Trade Show synopses and front-of-the-house displays the stills photographer became an important technician in the studio. E. Gordon Craig's firm Winads provided simple trailers from the mid-twenties and National Screen Service was registered in May 1928 to provide a rather more elaborate type of trailer. The joint managing directors were W. Brenner from the parent company in New York and Paul Kimberley, previously with Hepworth's. With these changes also came stunts, personal appearances and tie-ups with commercial products and local shops as well as occasional trouble over 'tasteless' posters, which contrived to suggest that some films were more daring than they actually were. One notorious publicity stunt caused an outcry in 1925. When the European Motion Picture Company imported *The Phantom of the Opera* from America they somehow managed to have it escorted from Southampton docks by a contingent of soldiers. So great was the public's anger at this that the

* There were three main weeklies: *Kinematograph Weekly* was edited by Frank Tilley and *The Cinema* by Sam Harris: *The Bioscope* was founded, edited and owned by John Cabourne, with his review editor J. H. Beaumont, and followed an independent policy with growing difficulty. Cabourne died in January 1929.

† House organs included the *Idealletter*, *Jury Box*, *Pathé News*, *Hepworth Picture Play Magazine*, *British Actors Film Company Brochure*, Phillips' *The Flashlight* and Stoll's *Editorial News*.

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Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association banned the film amongst its members and European was persuaded to substitute another film for those who had booked it. The ban remained in force until Carl Laemmle himself induced the C.E.A. to lift it in November 1928, the violence of the reaction a reminder that the search for publicity could over-reach itself.

Meanwhile the showmen were complacently abrogating some of the functions of the film maker, in preparing

'the minds of the audience to receive in the appropriate mood the story that is to be unfolded'²²

by means of 'American presentation methods', or elaborate staged prologues and accompaniments. In the first instances, admittedly, they were the work of the film maker himself.

'For the first time in this country there will be shown to the British public a film which is presented in a specially designed artistic setting. . . . *Broken Blossoms* will form the only feature, and will be presented three times daily. The entire theatre will be decorated in the Chinese manner, and the Chinese attendants will form a feature in the auditorium. The screening of the film will be preceded by a Prologue in which the two leading characters will appear in one of the scenes from the film, and after the lowering of the curtain the film will be presented, followed by an enacted epilogue. Every care will be taken to present *Broken Blossoms* in the same manner as presented by Mr David Wark Griffith at its original presentation in New York.'²³

'Suspended from the proscenium were cages of singing birds which were heard at tense moments in the action.

'In the prologue were employed nine actors who mimed a scene laid in a Buddhist temple which was disclosed as the curtain rose to three notes of a gong. Perfume floated out to the auditorium from censers swung by Chinese incense bearers. After the preliminary action, a Chinese singer chanted a litany, standing in an amber spot light, and, with another note of the gong, the curtain fell to be followed immediately by the screening.'²⁴

There were a large number of such prologues in the super cinemas from 1921 until about 1925. A 'barefoot ballet' by the Margaret Morris dancers prefaced Hepworth's *Pipes of Pan* at the Alhambra Trade Show, and with his *Comin' thro' the Rye* in the same year a prologue called *A Picture of 1860*, and described as a 'tabloid version of the story played in pantomime behind a gauze curtain by the leading artists',²⁵ ran at a number of theatres. There were other forms of build-up, ranging from Paul Whiteman and his band appearing with Lupino Lane's *A Friendly Husband* in 1923 to Elgar himself conducting the prologue to Samuelson's deplorable film *Land of Hope and Glory* at an Armistice Day show in 1927. Many exhibitors were extremely proud of their work and began to feel that they contributed to the artistic success of the film. After 1926 some

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showmen also interspersed their programmes with variety turns. But voices began to be raised against this, especially when not only the super cinema but ordinary ones also were involved, and even more when elaborate staging was suspected of disguising an inferior film. Castleton Knight went a little far in his arrangements for opening the London Palladium as a cine-variety house in 1928:

‘The stage curtains parted, Reg. Foort, the well-known cinema organist, lulled the house to silence with the opening bars of “The Lost Chord”, and then a spotlight traced De Groot standing before a transparent background, on which was seen “the golden gates”.

‘His music! Then the gates opened as the one hundred performers took up the harmony, which swelled into a terrific crescendo, as dazzling light fell upon a crystal fountain playing in the background. Then the fountain disappeared as “The Lost Chord” gave place to “The Blue Heaven”, and suddenly the symphony died, it was gradually merged into syncopation, and an elevator rose at the back of the De Groot party, bearing Teddy Brown and his band, furiously working out the same melody according to more popular and more modern conceptions of musical entertainment.

‘But greatest of all was the rendering by De Groot and players of Tschai-kowsky’s “1812”, with organ accompaniment, and with a tableau of choristers dressed as Russian peasants singing the refrain. It beggars description, though when four trumpeters appeared in the stage-side boxes I felt it was rather too much. . . .’²⁶

(2) THE EXHIBITION COMPANIES

The increasing elaboration and respectability of the picture show was accompanied by the evolution of a highly capitalized modern industry. Lord Burnham said at a Cinematograph Exhibitors’ dinner in 1920:

‘The High Financiers of the world are flocking into the Cinema industry. Formerly it was difficult, I believe, to raise even a small capital for a cinema enterprise. Today, if you ask for a million you get half a million oversubscribed.’²⁷

According to F. W. Ogden Smith some £15 million was invested in exhibition by 1914. By 1927 the President of the Board of Trade, replying to a Parliamentary question, put it between £30 and £50 million, and in 1929 an anonymous estimate put it as high as £70 million.²⁸ Certainly greater capital had been available for exhibition long before the quota legislation became probable, and big business had appeared early in this sector of the industry. At first, single cinemas run by local exhibitors had obtained their small capital from local businessmen in private companies or perhaps from local renters, but gradually as bigger cinemas became profitable backing was available from banks and insurance companies, and the 1927–28 edition of the *Blue Book*²⁹ listed fifty-

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three public limited liability companies connected with cinema exhibition, with an authorized capital of over £11 million.

The financial structure of exhibition during the twenties had changed in two important ways. The dependence on private capital tended to be replaced by the growth of public companies, and the enormous number of small firms were rationalized at first by horizontal combination into circuits, and finally by vertical combination of the largest circuits with renting and production interests. Similar integration was taking place in many sectors of British industry at the time. Sir Alfred Mond spoke of this in the *Daily Mail* towards the end of the period:

'There is apparent in Britain at the present time a distinct tendency towards large scale amalgamations. . . . These are necessary to enable it to deal on terms of equality with similar organizations being formed on the Continent, and already formed in America. . . . The combinations of industry taking place are being literally forced upon us, and, although many people may not like them, they will have to come if Britain is to maintain its place in the commercial and industrial future of the world.'³⁰

The inducement to form circuits lay in their organizational and booking advantages. The better runs and barring terms (see page 76) secured by groups of cinemas made competition difficult for the remaining independents, and as renters could and did refuse to deal with co-operative groups of cinemas many small exhibitors were compelled either to form proper circuits or sell out to existing ones. This trend accelerated as the decade wore on, and meanwhile the specialized nature of the industry encouraged vertical combination. Especially as the quota prospects brought capital into renting and production firms did they seek control of an assured exhibition outlet. Such integration was slow here in comparison with that in America, where large circuits linked to producer-renters already existed by 1920. But large impersonal combines did not please the older showmen in Britain. Sir Walter Gibbons, the theatrical impresario, complained on resigning from General Theatres Corporation in 1928 that

'I am now definitely finished with the theatrical and film business unless any specially tempting offer in the future causes me to reconsider my decision. The new régime thinks that theatres can be managed by boards of directors consulting on every point and by banks, but the great days of the theatre were the days of big personal figures whose decision was absolute.'³¹

The growth of circuits can be illustrated by companies listed in *Kine Year Book* from the war to the early thirties. The following account was compiled from the *Kine* directories for 1918, 1921, 1927, and 1931. During the war, in 1917, there were 90 circuits in Britain with 429 cinemas. 27 per cent of these circuit halls, or 114, were in a mere 8 large circuits of 10 or more each; the average size of these was 14 cinemas against the average of 4 in the rest of the circuits. The largest circuit was Albany Ward's, with its head office in Weymouth

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and with 28 cinemas in the south-west. The only circuits based in London were Biocolour Picture Theatres and the Central Hall Circuit of Wandsworth, most of the others being local circuits in the provinces.

Circuits in 1917

Albany Ward Circuit (Weymouth)	28
Biocolour Picture Theatres (London)	10
Broadhead's Theatres (Manchester)	17
Central Hall Circuit (Wandsworth)	12
Eastern Counties Electric Theatres (Norwich)	10
Glasgow Corporation Public Halls (Glasgow)	13
George Green Circuit (Glasgow)	12
Thomas Thompson (Middlesbrough)	12

By the immediate post-war period, in 1920, both the number of circuits and the number of cinemas in them had increased considerably to 157 circuits and 787 cinemas. About the same percentage of the circuits as before had the same percentage of the cinemas, that is to say 27 per cent of the circuit halls or 213 cinemas were in 12 large circuits of 10 or more halls; their average size was bigger than that of the larger circuits before. The average size of the many smaller circuits continued to be 4 cinemas. Again most of the circuits were regional, but two of the biggest were national in scale with headquarters in London. These were Provincial Cinematograph Theatres with 33 and Biocolour with 25.

Circuits in 1920

Award Circuit (Bristol)	26
Biocolour Picture Theatres (London)	25
Broadhead Theatres (Manchester)	17
Green's Film Service (Glasgow)	12
Haigh & Son (Liverpool)	14
A. B. King Circuit (Glasgow)	18
Levy Circuit (Birmingham)	14
New Century Pictures (Leeds)	13
Thomas Ormiston (Motherwell)	11
P.C.T. (London)	33
Scottish Cinema & Variety Theatres (Glasgow)	20
J. F. Wood's Circuit (Liverpool)	10

By 1926 the figures show some consolidation. The number of circuits had temporarily fallen from 157 to 139, and the number of circuit halls they comprised had gone up proportionally less from 787 to 856. The percentage of the circuits which could be considered large, with 10 halls or more, had gone up to 11 per cent; the percentage of circuit halls in these larger groups had also gone up, to 33 per cent. The average size of the mass of circuits was still small, with 5 halls, and the average size of the larger circuits was still not very big at 15 halls; but it is significant that one much larger circuit, excluded from this average,

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had appeared. This was Provincial Cinematograph Theatres, which had grown from 33 cinemas in the previous list to 75. There were still only three circuits with headquarters in London, P.C.T., Biocolour and Savoy Cinemas, all the others still being regional.

Circuits in 1926

Bradford Cinemas (J. F. Wood) (Liverpool)	14
Biocolour Picture Theatres (London)	17
Broadhead's Theatres (Manchester)	16
E. C. Clayton (Sheffield)	13
Eagle Picturedromes (Wigan)	11
J. F. Emery's Circuit (Manchester)	14
George Green (Glasgow)	13
E. Haigh (Liverpool)	11
A. B. King (Glasgow)	18
A. G. Matthews (Glasgow)	10
New Century Pictures (Lceds)	19
Thomas Ormiston (Motherwell)	22
P.C.T. (London)	75
Savoy Cinemas (London)	10
Scottish Cinema & Variety Theatres (Glasgow)	24

The position in 1930, although strictly speaking out of our period, shows clearly how this trend developed under the influence of the sound film and quota legislation. The number of circuits had gone up again, back to 167, but this represented not consolidation as before but a much greater inclusion of previously independent halls. The larger circuits of 10 halls or more now numbered 23 or 14 per cent, and they had as much as 52 per cent of the circuit halls, which was a big increase on the previous 33 per cent. Not only had combination into circuits taken a big step forward, but it showed a trend to bigger circuits. Whereas the average size of the small circuits was more or less unchanged at 5, and the average size of the larger circuits other than the outstanding ones still 15, there were now two giants. These were first A.B.C. with 118 halls and secondly G.B.P.C.-P.C.T. with 296. Together with the appearance of the huge circuit had come nation-wide organization from London, where renting and exhibition could most easily be merged, and as many as ten other circuits besides the two giants had their headquarters in London.

Circuits in 1930

A.B.C. (London)	118
Sidney Bacon's Pictures (London)	31
Cambria & Border Cinemas (Wrexham)	12
Cinema House (London)	10
E.C. Clayton (Sheffield)	12
County Cinemas (London)	13
Eagle Picturedromes (Wigan)	11
J. F. Emery's Circuit (Manchester)	15
Federated Estates (London)	12
G.B.P.C. (London)	200

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A. B. King (Glasgow)	25
H. D. Moorehouse Circuit (Manchester)	38
Thomas Ormiston (Motherwell)	11
P.C.T. (London)	96
Regent Enterprises (Liverpool)	10
Shipman & King (London)	10
George Singleton (Glasgow)	13
Standard Cinema Properties (Birmingham)	14
Thompson's Enterprises (Middlesbrough)	15
J. F. Tidswell (Leeds)	12
Union Cinema Company (London)	13
United Picture Theatres (G.B.P.C.) (London)	17

Details of the remarkable growth of the two large circuits shows how the process took place. Associated British Cinemas was the creation of John Maxwell. He had entered exhibition in 1912 and later moved into renting, and by 1923 was chairman of the new firm of Wardour Films together with Arthur Dent and J. A. Thorpe. This successful firm took its first abortive flutter in production with Maurice Elvey in 1926 under the name of M.E. Productions. Early in 1927 a huge new public company, British International Pictures, was floated to acquire and enlarge the recent British National producing set-up with its studio at Elstree. Maxwell, Dent and Thorpe were on the Board, and distribution was to be effected through Wardour. A big public issue was made in November 1927, and Sir Clement Kinloch-Cooke and J. D. Bright joined the Board. In December Maxwell took part in arranging a merger between First National and Pathé, and had reached a position of considerable power in renting and production. The quota legislation had been passed and British production now had some security of market. Plans to ensure a regular distribution circuit were in the air. At the end of January 1928 A.B.C. was registered quietly as a private company with a capital of £50,000, with J. E. Pearce as managing director, controlled by B.I.P. and having an entirely new circuit of 29 cinemas scattered over the country. In November 1928 Associated British Cinemas was registered as a public company with a capital of £1 million. B.I.P. had a controlling interest and Maxwell was Chairman, with Pearce as managing director and Kinloch-Cooke and Bright on the new Board. The object of the new company was to acquire other circuits besides the original 29 halls, including Scottish Cinema and Variety Theatres, which had 24 in 1927-28. A.B.C. was further expanded in January 1929 to a capital of £2 million. By this year it had 88 cinemas, and was ready to grow considerably during the next few years.

The organization of G.B.P.C. was an even bigger operation. The firm of Gaumont's in Britain had been started in 1898 by the brothers A. C. and R. C. Bromhead, to distribute the films made in France by the firm of Léon Gaumont. They also started production at a studio at Shepherd's Bush, but renting was the more important part of the business. In December 1922, after some eighteen months of negotiation, the Bromheads bought out the French interests in the agency and it became an entirely British firm, continuing production at Shepherd's Bush for several years.

Like others, Gaumont's moved into exhibition in 1927 when the coming of the quota was leading to reorganization in the industry. Gaumont-British Picture Corporation was registered as a public company in March 1927 with a capital of £2,500,000 and the backing of the Ostrer brothers, Maurice and Isidore, whose city firm had already taken an interest in the film industry. It was essentially an amalgamation formed to control the Bromheads' firm of Gaumont: Ideal, a renter and producer formed in 1920 and run by the Rowson brothers and Edward Russell: W. & F. Film Service, a renting firm formed in 1919 by C. M. Woolf and handling mostly American productions including the popular films of Harold Lloyd: and the Bicolour circuit of E. E. Lyons. The new firm was to acquire immediately 21 cinemas, including the 15 Bicolour halls which had already been bought by the Ostrers as well as four in London said to be worth £550,000 and owned by the Davis family, who had been in the exhibition industry since 1908.

Bicolour, which was the basis of the G.B.P.C. circuit, had been one of the earliest of the big circuits. It was a private company run by E. E. Lyons and had been sold to a syndicate which included the Ostrers in November 1926. The next step was the formation of Denman Picture Houses out of several other circuits of similar size. D.P.H. was registered as a public company in March 1928 with a capital of £1 million and links with G.B.P.C., with the Bromheads on the Board. It already included New Century Pictures of Leeds, a pre-war company run by Sidney Carter which in 1927 had 19 cinemas, and National Electric Theatres with 9. By April 1928 D.P.H. had 96 cinemas and the Board included not only the Bromheads, H. A. Micklem, C. M. Woolf and Simon Rowson representing G.B.P.C., but also a number of exhibitors like Thomas Ormiston, the Hyams, A. J. Gale, E. E. Lyons, Thomas Thompson and Sidney Carter whose small circuits had been absorbed. Before long it had over 100 halls and a capital of £4 million.

The next action was to take over General Theatres Corporation, an unexpected but happy acquisition. Sir Walter Gibbons, as managing director of this company which had an authorized capital of £2 million, had embarked on a policy of buying both theatres and cinemas early in 1928. His Board was distinguished, but not representative of the film trade, and perhaps because of its inexperience in films there was a very poor response to its public issue of shares. Gibbons had indignantly resigned in the spring of 1928. The company was taken over and reorganized by G.B.P.C. Only George Black of the original Board remained, and he was joined by the Bromheads and Stephen Gordon in August.

The foundation of Gaumont-British in size, if not in time, was Provincial Cinematograph Theatres. This was one of the earliest public companies in the business, founded before the war and expanded to its capital of £1 million in early 1919 with an issue which was heavily oversubscribed. 1919 was a big year for P.C.T. and at the end of it Lord Beaverbrook bought a £400,000 share in the company. He also acquired a large holding in Pathé, and at the same time in February 1920 bought £300,000 of the £500,000 associated company of Associated Provincial Picture Houses, of which F. A. Adams of P.C.T. was the managing director. P.C.T. also acquired the circuit of Albany Ward in the West

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Country, although this remained more or less separate and temporarily regained its independence in 1923. P.C.T. made another big issue in March 1920, bringing it up to £3 million, and this was once more oversubscribed. Lord Ashfield joined as Chairman of the Board with Beaverbrook and Adams, and the company had direct control of 33 cinemas. Further reorganization followed in 1923 and Will Evans became managing director. During the next few years more halls were gradually acquired. In 1926 there were 79, 37 of them under direct control, 11 in A.P.P.H., 19 under Albany Ward and 8 others; in 1928 there were 93, 44 direct, 15 in A.P.P.H., 27 under Ward and 12 others; and in 1930 there were 97, 49 direct, 16 in A.P.P.H., 26 under Ward and 17 others.

In February 1928 the Standard Film Company was registered as a holding company for P.C.T. and First National-Pathé. It was a private company, with a capital of £300,000 and with Beaverbrook and his associates Ashfield, Jury, A. P. Holt and Will Evans on the Board. It took over control of P.C.T. and there was another successful issue of capital.

Later in 1928 a bombshell exploded with a battle between G.B.P.C. and A.B.C. for the control of P.C.T. The upshot of this was that Beaverbrook and Ashfield withdrew from much of their interest in the film trade, control of First National-Pathé was sold to Maxwell, and P.C.T. fell to G.B.P.C. In February 1929 the latter expanded once more, its capital going up to £3,750,000 and, with control of P.C.T., it now had 287 cinemas. These included the Tivoli as its London showplace, acquired by P.C.T. from Metro-Goldwyn when the latter's new cinema, the Empire, was ready in 1928. Meanwhile Gaumont-British had stepped into production, acquiring a big holding in Michael Balcon's important new production outfit Gainsborough in April 1928. Woolf and Maurice Ostrer were on the board of the latter company. At this stage the G.B.P.C. Board included the Bromheads and the Ostrers, but in August 1929 both the Bromheads resigned and the field was left open for the Ostrer brothers, C. M. Woolf and Will Evans to continue expansion of the large new combine.

As the shape of a modern industry emerged, so did a degree of self-awareness and the beginnings of political activity. The Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association, although its membership still did not cover all exhibitors, had grown from 1,600 members in 1919 to 2,882 in 1928.³² W. Gavazzi King was its outspoken and energetic General Secretary until he retired at 70 in 1926, when he was replaced by his Assistant Secretary since April 1921, W. R. Fuller. The officials, Presidents and Councils of the C.E.A, gave active leadership in many of the acrimonious controversies affecting exhibitors during this period of change, over issues such as the model contract, barring and tied houses; block, blind and advance booking and the quota; co-operative booking; pre-release runs; percentage booking; entertainment tax; and labour troubles. (See Chapter III). But there was considerable divergence of interest between the circuits and the independents, especially in the late twenties, and some suspicion of the centralized London leadership. Both regional and other breakaway movements appeared occasionally,* but on the whole there was apathy among the majority of small

* E.g. The Manchester breakaway in 1922 and the proposed Sussex Small Exhibitors' Protection Society in 1927.

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exhibitors, who were roused only by occasional outbursts of emotion. It proved difficult to mobilize them for effective action.

There seems to have been a vague idea that the size and importance of the exhibition industry entitled it to more respect, even power, than it had. A Report by Blake, Bromhead and Rowson for the newly formed Cinematograph Trade Council in June 1923 which discussed how to improve the trade's relations with the public even suggested that space in the papers should be bought for articles about films by 'public men', and that public relations paragraphs should be supplied to the press as news. The general attitude to Parliament, also, was somewhat naïve. Appeals were made to the so-called power of the screen as though it could be wielded in the interests of the film trade, and as though Parliament existed to represent organized interests as in a syndicalist system, rather than geographical constituencies under a party system. A. E. Newbould, President of the C.E.A., stood for Parliament for the West Division of Leyton as an Independent Liberal in November 1928, but many in the business seemed to feel that he was standing on behalf of the film industry. He was defeated by a Coalition Unionist, and *The Bioscope* consoled its readers with some artlessness:

'After all, Parliament only makes the laws, and it is the local bodies that are charged with carrying them out.'³³

Newbould's successful opponent, however, died and he sportingly entered the 'Parliamentary Handicap' again for the by-election of March 1919, which he won. He sat until 1922. The less sophisticated expected him not only to act as an authority on exhibition matters in the House of Commons but to be accountable to the industry for his actions, and there was some indignation when he voted for an amendment regretting the omission from the King's Speech of any intention to nationalize the coal industry.³⁴ Old-fashioned individualists for the most part, many small showmen were natural Tories and not only disapproved of nationalization but even failed to make use of the potential sympathy of the Labour Party for cheap popular entertainment. The most determined effort to influence Parliament in their own interest was the campaign to reduce Entertainments Tax (see page 48) but they were unable to mobilize a majority under a Conservative Government. When remission did take place in 1924 it was under a Labour administration. The first steps in political education were taken when *The Bioscope* remarked with surprise that

'It is not giving any secrets away to state that the Trade's partial success in connection with the last Tax Campaign was largely brought about by MPs who derived no financial benefit, or even desired it, for the assistance that they gave.'³⁵

(3) THE CINEMAS

The picture show, the object of all this activity, was established as part of the economic and social structure of the country by the end of the war in 1918.

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Early estimates of the number of cinemas vary because different people defined them variously as permanent cinemas with daily shows, as permanent cinemas even if shows were only on certain days of the week, or as all halls having occasional shows even if used for other things as well. A figure of only 3,500 has been quoted for 1915 as the number of those listed in *Kine Year Book* excluding public hall cinemas³⁶ (*The Factual Film* by the Arts Enquiry); but it is doubtful whether such an exclusion is valid for this period as public halls still played a considerable part in providing facilities for picture going. The figure of 4,000 to 4,500 given by a 1917 Report by the National Council of Public Morals would probably give a fairer picture. Boughey in 1921 spoke of 4,000 cinemas in the United Kingdom and, although his figures were not always reliable, this agrees with those listed in *Kine Year Book*, which still included even the once-weeklies, although by 1921 these were certainly declining in relative importance. Gradually the smaller and occasional shows died out and bigger cinemas replaced them, fewer in number but with more seats. The Federation of British Industries told the Moyne Committee in 1936 that there had been some 3,000 cinemas in the United Kingdom by 1926, and the *Bioscope British Film Number* of 1928 quoted 3,760. The Rowson pamphlet of 1934, which is usually taken as the first reliable body of statistics concerning the British film industry,³⁷ estimated that there were 4,305 cinemas open six days a week, intermittent shows having by then ceased to be part of the mainstream of exhibition, with a total of 3,872,000 seats. This estimate was said to be based on *Kine Year Book*, *The Cinema Buyers' Guide* and the records of the four big sound installation companies. This sounds more likely than the figure of 5,000 commercial cinemas in the United Kingdom given by *The Film in National Life* in 1932.

Simon Rowson said in 1927 that 14 million people, or 20 million attendances, yielded £30 to £35 million a year at the box office.³⁸ But these figures included many people who went twice a week or even more often, and in their desire to expand their sales, many exhibitors seemed to have regarded the whole population as a field for exploitation, their ideal being a state in which everyone went to the pictures at least twice a week.

In fact the percentage of people who went twice a week did seem to be increasing. According to the two questionnaires organized by Sidney Bernstein, in 1927 33½ per cent of the cinema-goers questioned went once a week and 47½ per cent twice, whereas by 1929 only 23½ per cent went once a week and as many as 60 per cent went twice.³⁹

Admission prices and the normal length of time each film ran at any particular cinema reflected this fact, with programmes aimed at an unselective, low-income audience going regularly several times a week. Cheap seats and several changes of programme a week were essential to this. The general pattern did not change very much during the period. At first a three-day run was most usual, shows beginning at 5.30 or 6 p.m., although many cinemas also had two or three matinées a week. According to Rowson, although the six-day run had made some headway by 1934, three-day runs were still more numerous; and although the key house with runs of two to four weeks or even more had appeared at the

top of the scale, the large number of small houses served a small local population where the twice-weekly patrons were still necessary to make a profit, and there were still cinemas with even more than two changes a week.*

The price structure also resisted change. The increase in cinemas with medium prices and a few high-priced key houses left the lower prices of 4d to 1s 6d more or less unchanged, despite proposals in 1920 for a 6d or 9d minimum. The highest prices in 1920 were 11s 6d at the Marble Arch Pavilion, 21s at the West End Cinema, Coventry Street, and 10s 6d at the Regent Street Poly, but some cinemas even continued to have seats for 2d. The larger super cinemas which began to occupy the best residential areas in London and the provinces had seats from 4d to 2s 4d or even 3s 6d, with the higher range of 1s 3d to 5s 9d or even 8s 6d confined to West End or show-case cinemas.

The low price level contributed to the mean standards of many cinemas, with badly paid labour, inferior presentation and a poor choice of films. But despite C.E.A. efforts to change this many small showmen who relied on their poorly-paid twice-weekly patrons refused to co-operate. When Entertainments Tax remission came in 1924 many cinemas even lowered their prices.

Entertainments Tax, which had been introduced as a wartime measure, was blamed for many of the cinema closures and must have contributed to the difficulties of the humble semi-amateur occasional shows. After the war there was a small remission of tax on the cheapest seats and by 1920 it stood thus:

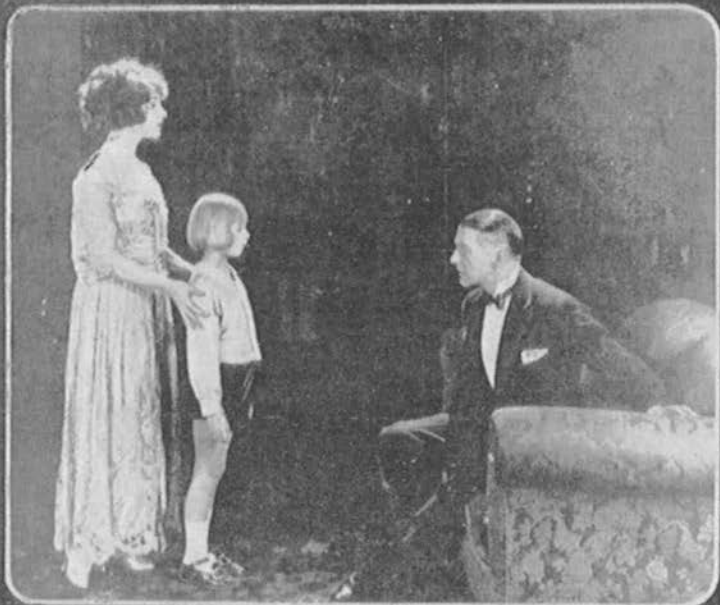
Seats under 2d	.	.	.	No tax
Seats 2d-2½d	.	.	.	½d tax
Seats 2½d-4d	.	.	.	1d tax
Seats 4d-7d	.	.	.	2d tax
and up to 2s tax on seats of 10s 6d to 15s.				

Exhibitor groups such as the C.E.A., Provincial Entertainments Proprietors' and Managers' Association, Entertainment Protection Associates, Theatrical Managers' Association and the Society of West End Managers campaigned throughout the twenties for abolition or at least remission of tax on both theatre and cinema tickets. A C.E.A. deputation led by A. E. Newbould, at that time a Member of Parliament, went to the Chancellor in May 1921; it accepted the fact that the tax was probably permanent but asked for some rearrangement. The Chancellor refused. Early in 1922 the C.E.A. and the renters decided to press for abolition in the cinema industry alone and formed a Cinema Tax

* Sunday opening was not a live issue during this period. Some local authorities allowed it and some did not, but there was little active demand for it by either trade or public. The Labour Party was generally in favour of it as it was entertainment for people who worked during the rest of the week, but some unions, which had found that despite regulations Sunday opening did in many cases lead to a seven-day working week, were opposed to it. Records of a couple of ballots in 1927 are of limited value as the voters were self-selected. But the *Manchester Evening News'* open ballot, so-called, gave 215,643 against Sunday opening and only 30,078 in favour, and a referendum in one Manchester ward of nearly 20,000 people, of whom about half voted, gave approximately 70 per cent against and 30 per cent for Sunday opening.



Victor McLaglen as Dick Turpin.



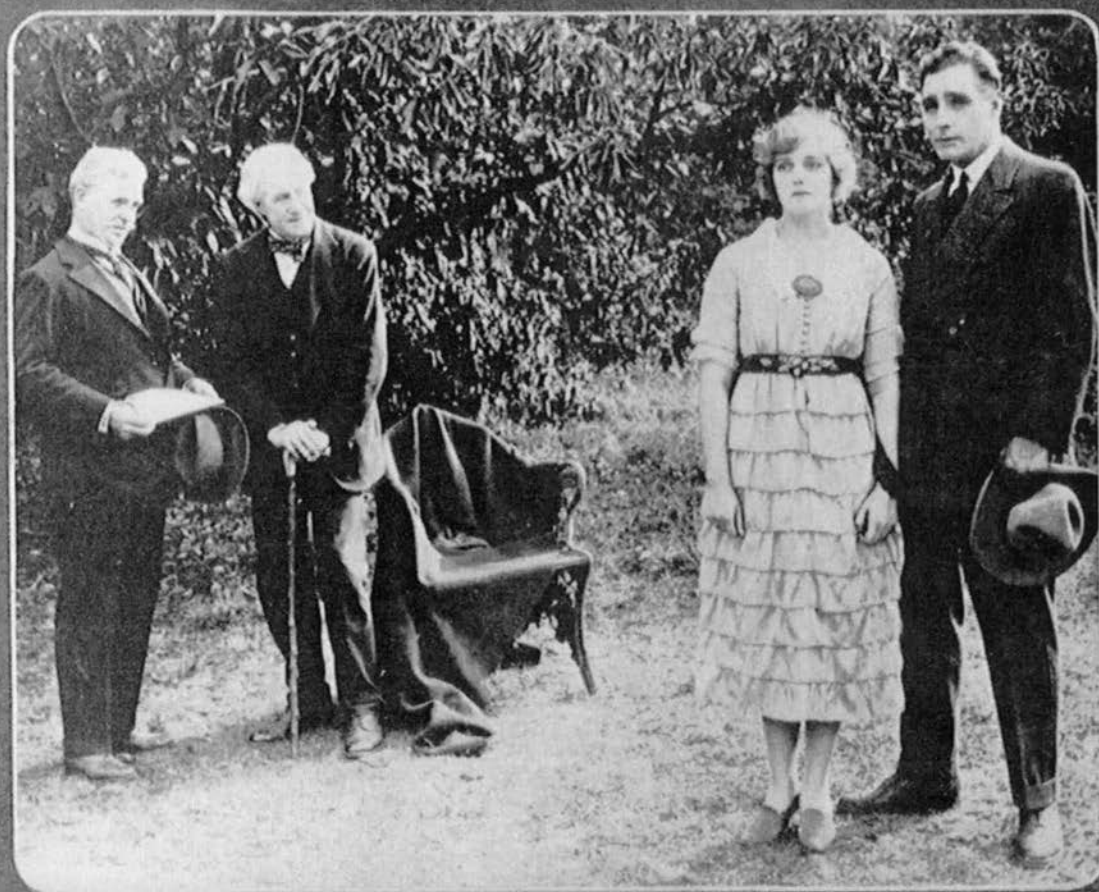
Top right: Betty Blythe in Wilcox's *Chu Chin Chow*, 1923.

Bottom right: Henry Edwards and Chrissie White on the left, in John Forrest *Finds Himself*, 1920.

Top Left: Lily Elsie and Gerald Ames in Elvey's *Comradeship* in 1919.

Centre Left: A. V. Bramble shooting *Wuthering Heights* on location in 1920.

Bottom Left: Betty Compson and Clive Brook in Cutts' *Woman to Woman* in 1923.





Top Left: Owen Nares and Gladys Jennings in Kellino's *Young Lochinvar* in 1923.

Centre Left: Ivy Duke and Guy Newall in *Fox Farm* in 1922.

Bottom Left: George Robey as Widow Twankee in Sinclair Hill's *One Arabian Night*, 1923.

Abolition Committee, with an organizing committee which included F. E. Adams, F. R. Goodwin, A. J. Gale and Frank Hill. They lobbied MPs and obtained another hearing from the Chancellor, but again with no results. In April 1923 Baldwin's Budget, after yet another deputation, still gave no relief. MPs who had connections with the entertainment industry became active at the Committee stage of the Finance Bill, some pressing for abolition and some for an alternative scale of taxes suggested by Sir Walter de Frece, MP. Both were decisively beaten as the Government felt that the entertainment industry was simply sharing the general depression of the country and had no case for special treatment. The politically inexperienced trade was dismayed to find that many whom they had supposed to be their friends voted on party lines and failed to support them.

Hopes rose again as a change of government became imminent, since it was known that the Labour Party was sympathetic to the remission of tax. An Entertainments Tax Abolition League was formed and its deputation met the Labour Chancellor, Philip Snowden, in March 1923.

When Entertainments Tax remission finally came in 1924 it gave considerable relief to small exhibitors but was otherwise something of an anti-climax. Tax was removed from seats up to 6d in price and reduced on those up to 1s 3d as from June 2, 1924. The concessions were made on the understanding that they would be passed on to the public in the form of cheaper seats.

The Labour Government was soon replaced by another Conservative administration in which Winston Churchill as Chancellor soon received the usual deputations seeking more concessions. Every year the Budget aroused new hopes, only to disappoint them. When in 1926 a motion to reduce the scale of the tax was tabled in the House of Commons the Chancellor's reply was that this was inadvisable as it would cost the Revenue £1,350,000 a year. The tax seemed immovable. And when in 1929 the prospect of another change of government encouraged fresh approaches even Snowden no longer favoured immediate remission 'in view of the serious state into which the present Chancellor has got the national finances.'⁴⁰

There had been no new cinemas built during the war and large queues in 1918 and 1919 led many to believe that there was room for up to another two thousand cinemas in the United Kingdom. In fact, as general economic depression set in the queues disappeared and it was bigger and better cinemas, rather than more of them, that were needed. The cosy Bijou and Biograph closed, and were replaced by the grander Pavilions and Metropoles. At first the restrictions on luxury building presented difficulties, but capital was diverted into the conversion of stores, hotels, older cinemas, legitimate theatres and music halls. By the time restrictions eased and big new cinemas could be built the audiences were slackening. Meanwhile legitimate theatres were converted as skating rinks had been before the war, and the upstart entertainment was often accused of killing the theatre.

Many legitimate theatres and music halls were taken over as supers or pre-release theatres. The Capitol in New Oxford Street had made its intentions clear in 1919:

'As every film is to run so long as there is a public demand for its retention in the programme, the Capitol will introduce a new innovation in regard to the run that a film may enjoy.

'It will, in fact, be the premier motion picture theatre in every sense of the term, for films will have their initial screening there before they appear in the programme of other picture theatres.⁴¹

The renter discovered early that if in order to give publicity and good presentation for a special film he gave his own pre-release run, he could skim the profits and, by puffing the picture, could even put up its eventual price. It was suspected before long that this treatment was employed to build up unremarkable films, the renter's expenses on the pre-release run being made up later by inflated prices for the ordinary runs. *Broken Blossoms*, put on at the Alhambra early in 1920, had been seen by 96,782 people by April; *Fabiola* was seen by 20,000 at the Stoll in its first three days, and *Orphans of the Storm* by 63,000 at the Scala during its 1922 run; Harold Lloyd's *For Heaven's Sake* took £6,033 in its first seven days at the Plaza in 1926; *Ben Hur* took as much as £5,128 even in its forty-fourth week in London. The renters tactlessly announced the huge crowds drawn to these shows, and the large sum taken at the box office, in their trade publicity. There was much resentment, especially among showmen with large cinemas in parts of London other than the West End, who had been accustomed to securing genuine first runs. Matters were made worse by the renter's deliberate exploitation of the long delay there would be before the film was allowed to appear at any other theatre.

As building restrictions eased, conversions ceased and super cinemas were built. By 1928 a West End pre-release run was the normal practice and the *première*, also, was becoming a popular way of launching a film, having appeared first in the guise of an evening Trade Show. The old Empire theatre in London was taken over by Goldwyn in 1921, and the New Empire in Leicester Square was opened by Metro-Goldwyn in November 1928. In the meantime the Tivoli, Strand, had been opened by Metro-Goldwyn in September 1923 on the site of the old Tivoli theatre which they had bought in May 1919. The Tivoli was later acquired by Provincial Cinematograph Theatres and used by Gaumont-British. The Capitol, Haymarket, which had been planned in 1919, was finally opened by the Clavering brothers in February 1925. The New Gallery, which had been a P.C.T. theatre even before the war, had been rebuilt by July 1925. Famous-Lasky, a company which also had theatres in Manchester and Birmingham, opened the Plaza in February 1926 and the Carlton in March 1928. Universal had Rialtos in both London and Leeds. The Regal, Marble Arch, was opened in November 1928, and the Marble Arch Pavilion was opened by Gaumont-British by 1928.

When the pre-release run began to take place in the provinces as well as London it made a farce of expensive first runs and objections were raised in the C.E.A. Because it was associated with the big American renters the question became confused with patriotism but the real issue for other showmen was the same whether the pre-release cinema was American or British. Mention was

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made of the first American producer to buy a cinema in the provinces at Leeds, at a C.E.A. Branch Meeting in 1925. In October of that year Lt. Col. Levita unsuccessfully suggested that the L.C.C. should license only entirely British cinemas. And at a Birmingham meeting of the C.E.A. it was decided that:

‘. . . in view of the fact that the members of this Association welcome and are willing to show the films of all producers on a basis of merit, the General Council desires to place on record its considered opinion that there is grave danger to the interests of the exhibitors if cinema theatres be controlled by producers or renters, and therefore recommends that a committee be appointed to ascertain the interest of producers and/or renters in the exhibition side of the industry.’⁴²

Matters came to a head in 1926 when Famous-Lasky acquired the Futurist and Scala in Birmingham for seven years (see page 84). Birmingham exhibitors wished to boycott renters who competed with them in this way and the General Council decided to bring this to the notice of other branches. But Famous-Lasky put out a Manifesto dated February 10, 1927, claiming first that the Birmingham opposition came from people who did little business with them at the best of times, and second that they had only proposed to use one of the cinemas in question.⁴³ The boycott was impracticable and agreement was soon reached with J. C. Graham of Famous-Lasky. But provincial pre-release continued to be a matter of concern to exhibitors.

While the large pre-release theatre was the subject of controversy the ordinary cinema itself was becoming bigger and grander. According to *The Film in National Life* one thousand cinemas were built between 1924-25 and 1931-32, especially after 1926.⁴⁴ The few 2,000- and 3,000-seaters were mainly in London and a few other large cities. Most were of medium size. Rowson in 1934 said 71.4 per cent had 1,000 seats or less and the average size was 900. There were larger ones, however, and Bernstein’s new Cricklewood cinema in 1919 was to seat 3,800, the West End Capitol planned one with 4,000 seats, and the East Ham Premier 5,000.⁴⁵ Many had lounges and restaurants, and more care was given to seating, lighting and projection. Boughey claimed that projection was powered by electricity in all the better halls by 1921:

‘The old method of turning the mechanism by hand has long since given place to a power-driven projector in all places where electric current is available. The hand-drive is still used, however, as a standby in case of sudden breakdown.’⁴⁶

Much was made of the improved architecture, especially in the West End and the larger London cinemas like the Shepherd’s Bush Pavilion. The sculptor Frank Dobson and designer Komisarjevsky were said to be associated early in 1927 with Bernstein’s cinema building, and the *Kine Year Book* of 1929 refers proudly to the contemporary cinema’s ‘beauty of architecture’. Inside, there were impressive entrance halls and elaborate curtains and coloured lights. Apart from the façade, however, the outside of the buildings was usually, in fact, as

bleak as a warehouse, and the backs and sides of the new buildings disfigured many small towns. After 1928 atmospheric *décor* enlivened the inside. The American John Ebersson, described as the originator of atmospheric cinemas in America, was over here in December 1927. The 1927 *Kine Year Book* already spoke of Paramount's Plaza as an 'Italian Renaissance kinema' and Charing Cross Road Astoria as a 'fine Pompeian conception'. The Alexandra Cinema, Aldershot, reconstructed as the first atmospheric cinema in England in June 1928, showed on its walls a 'courtyard and garden in the Italian style with an Alpine background'. Another early atmospheric cinema was the Lido at Golders Green, with romantic Venetian *trompe-l'oeil* murals surrounding the audience.

The costs of film hire in these cinemas naturally differed widely according to the age of the film, that is to say whether it was its first run, second run and so on down the scale to the end of its circulation, and also according to the rank of cinema and the duration of the run. Very approximately 20 to 25 per cent of the expected box-office receipts seems to have been considered a fair profit for the renter, but the charge was made as a flat rate, descending with the age of the film and other considerations, not as a percentage of actual receipts. In 1920 £30 was spoken of as normal for a three-day run for a feature, but as a general figure this is misleading. In 1925 Associated-First National's booking prices for five classes of film for various runs was said to descend all the way from £300 for a first run to £3.⁴⁷ A big popular cinema in a good district could afford an early run and would pay at a rate very much higher than a small, old hall in a sparsely populated area, putting in films that had already gone the rounds of the better cinemas. A special case was Chaplin's two-reel *The Idle Class* offered in October 1921, just after the success of his film *The Kid* and his much publicized visit to England in September. Film Booking Offices offered it at £2,800 for a two months' booking, £2,000 for four weeks or £500 for a week. This offer exhibitors were urged by the C.E.A. to resist as outrageous, but the bigger cinemas must have felt that for such a film it was worth while. But this was exceptional. The issue was further complicated by the existence of block booking, in which the price of individual films fell if they were booked in company with a large number of others. A leader mentions a small exhibitor accustomed to paying £5 to £25 for his features in 1924 being offered a bargain of twelve for £50.⁴⁸ Few British producers had a large enough output to be able to offer blocks. (See Chapter III for booking practices.) British films, which had to cover their costs in this country, were also more expensive to book than those from America. An ordinary British picture at £200 a week in 1926 was said to compare with an American super at £70, and one exhibitor complained of being asked 150 per cent more for British films.⁴⁹

Sir Michael Balcon, addressing the British Kinematograph Society, later said that in 1920 a good film would have received about five hundred bookings and yield renters' receipts of £12,000. Assuming this to be in the region of a quarter of box office takings this would indicate a gross of some £48,000, an approximate estimate which seems fairly accurate. British films earned far less and a British film of 1920 like *Nothing Else Matters*, which had cost £7,000 to make, was considered to have done very well to have made £30,000 at home and