

Diverting Time: London's Cinemas and Their Audiences, 1906–1914

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Between 1906 and 1914, there were over 1,000 venues exhibiting film in London. They attracted a vast new, largely working class, audience, drawn to an entertainment which was cheap, conveniently located, placed no social obligations on those wishing to attend, and which was open at a time that suited them. This essay examines the rapid growth of the first cinemas in London and the impact that they had on audiences, particularly in terms of the value they offered, not simply economically but in terms of time spent.

Introduction

Over the years 1906 to 1914, and particularly around 1909 to 1910, a remarkable transformation occurred across the face of London. These were the years in which cinema came to the city. Cinemas appeared with startling suddenness, and in profusion. They effected a highly visible change along many of the capital's prominent thoroughfares, and drew in a vast new, largely working class, audience. Cinema was a powerful democratising force in an era of significant social change, brought about by new technologies and a perception of a time for leisure. This essay outlines the nature of film exhibition in London 1906–1914, and determines what it was that was distinctive, indeed different about cinema among the products of its time.¹

At 105–107 Charing Cross Road, on the right-hand side of the road looking south, one will find the Montagu Pyke bar. It is unlikely that many of the habitués know the source of its extraordinary name. Ninety-five years ago, the Montagu Pyke was the Cambridge Circus Cinematograph Theatre, one of a new kind of public entertainment venue, one which opened its doors to everyone, at a time that suited them, in a location most likely to attract the common crowd, with a product that appealed to all. The Cambridge Circus Cinematograph Theatre seated 690 and opened on 26 August 1911. It was the sixteenth and last of what was popularly known as the Pyke circuit, a group of metropolitan cinemas owned by Montagu A. Pyke.

Pyke (figure 1) was a larger-than-life figure, formerly a commercial traveller, gold miner and bankrupted stock market gambler who was inspired by the success of some of the first cinema exhibitions in London to make a quick fortune. Initially Pyke's cinemas were simple shop conversions, but his policy soon turned to larger venues in prestige locations. Each building was given the generic title of Cinematograph Theatre. Each cinema was also a limited company in itself (a common feature of cinema capitalisation at this time), but he established an umbrella company Amalgamated



Fig. 1. 'Cinematographs': Vanity Fair portrait of Montagu Pyke, London's most notable and notorious early cinema entrepreneur, by Ape Jnr (17 May 1911). Author's collection.

Cinematograph Theatres Ltd in 1910, with £150,000 capital. Pyke became a notable figure about town, the first person from the previously lowly cinema industry to be honoured by a *Vanity Fair* cartoon, and by 1911 he was paying himself a £10,000 per year salary.²

Pyke was a charlatan and a crook, one whose dubious methods of raising capital were rapidly exposed, and who in 1915 was bankrupted once again, as well as being put on trial for manslaughter when an employee died in a nitrate film fire in the basement of the Cambridge Circus Cinematograph Theatre itself.³ However, Pyke had his philosophical side. In a 1910 pamphlet, entitled *Focussing the Universe*, he set out an eloquent justification for the cinema:

The Cinematograph provides innocent amusement, evokes wholesome laughter, tends to take people out of themselves, if only for a moment, and to forget those wearisome worries which frequently appal so many people faced with the continual struggle for existence. It forms in fact — I like the word — a diversion. It is in some respects what old Izaak Walton claimed angling to be: An employment for idle time which is then not idly spent, a rest to the mind, a cheerer of the spirits, a diverter of sadness, a calmer of unquiet thoughts, a moderator of passions, a procurer of contentedness.⁴

He emphasises the necessity for relaxation in a pressured, often grim age, identifying escape as freedom from regulated time. He sees the picture theatre as being, in the finest sense of the word, a 'diversion.' For Pyke, the cinema diverts and thereby conquers time and space, not only in what it portrays on the screen, but in the very experience it offers in presenting what it has to show. This integration of social and aesthetic experience lay at the heart of cinema's achievement; that is, its deep cultural acceptance, quite as much as the commercial success that accompanied it.

The territory and the evidence

The cinema appeared overnight. Certainly it seemed that way to observers passing through London streets before the First World War. For years, wrote theatre critic W.R. Titterton, 'the cinema had been an addendum to the music-hall programme. Then somebody conceived the great idea of having a theatre altogether to the moving picture. The next morning you could hardly move for picture palaces.' Down Oxford Street, Tottenham Court Road, Euston Road, and Edgware Road, along Islington's Upper Street, Hackney's Mare Street, Southwark's Walworth Road and Stepney's Commercial Road, popping up along the public thoroughfares in every corner of the city, cinemas were suddenly everywhere.

They were not at first the luxurious and commodious purpose-built venues that cinemas were to become. Behind the spurious glamour of ornate frontages, converted shops and rudimentary halls offered plain entertainment. Titterton sighed as he saw 'Brand-new stucco and gold in the broad streets, tottering dwelling-houses in the back alleys, slapped over with newness and disembowelled, old drill halls, chapels, public-houses, assembly rooms, anything with a roof cover and space for a curtain and a crowd, hung out its sign and hung up its magic screen.'⁵ Hasty creations they may have been, most often a simple re-imagining of an old building to a new purpose, but they were highly visible, and ubiquitous. Here was a significant addition to the modes of visual communication that made the city rich in the forms in which it interacted with its inhabitants. To the demanding presence of posters, advertisements, illustrated newspapers, and shops that invited you to see before you bought (if you chose to buy at all), there now came the cinema with its potential to turn any whitened wall into an active space for motion pictures.

As Titterton observed, the showing of films to the general public was nothing new, but before 1906, film exhibition had no home of its own. London had first experienced film, in a peepshow format, in October 1894, with the Edison Kinetoscope; and since January 1896 in the form that became most acceptable to its consumers, projected on a

screen.⁶ In this form, films were exhibited as part of music-hall programmes, as occasional attractions in town halls, missions, etc., or they travelled with the fairgrounds. It was not so much that the films themselves were, for the most part, very short — a minute or so in length — because it was not the individual film that attracted audiences but rather the idea of the medium itself and the constructed programme. In the first ten years of projected film in Britain, audiences went to see the Biograph, or the Cinematograph, or the Bioscope. They saw its depiction of events, locations, personalities or dramatic turns within a specific format; another half-hour's turn within the encompassing variety programme. Film exhibition was, until 1906, predominantly a part of other exhibition strategies, other histories. It was peripatetic and ancillary. It did not, in sociological terms, have a readily identifiable audience of its own.

The audience, however, was beginning to seek out films for their own sake. In May 1905, a London schoolboy wrote, as part of a school exercise, what he had done the previous Saturday. His account indicates how the cinematograph was starting to be sought out among the young with a few earned pence in their pocket and free time in which to determine how that money might most profitably be spent.

Saturday last, I woke at seven o'clock, cleaned my boots, had a good wash, then had my breakfast, wished my mother and father good bye for the day. At eight o'clock I started to go to work at Cardwardine and Co., on one of their vans, delivering flour around Bermondsey. At three p.m. we had our dinner, and at four o'clock started on our journey. At eight p.m. I had finished my work, I called at the Leysian Mission and saw Cinematograph [sic] scenes. I returned home at ten p.m. I had a wash, had my supper and thanked God for keeping me safe through the day and then went to sleep.⁷

Here is the cinema-going habit, before cinemas properly existed to satisfy it. The East End missions were a significant source of cinematographic entertainment, a number of pastors having discovered that motion pictures were becoming a far greater draw than the magic lantern with which they had previously tried to lure in the young. Energetic figures such as the Reverends John Higgitt (of the Lycett Mission, Mile End Road), Peter Thompson (Central Hall Mission, Commercial Road), F.W. Chudleigh (St George's Wesleyan Chapel, Cable Street), and Alfred Tildsley at the Poplar and Bromley Tabernacle played a not insignificant part in popularising film among London's working-class young who were permitted few other such entertainments. Tildsley, for example, put on weekly film shows of fifteen minutes up to 1906, increasing these to an hour by 1908, and such was their popularity that he put on two shows, the first at 5.30 for children and a second for adults at 7.30.⁸

Another significant driver towards cinema exhibition, impelled by the desires and expectations of a working-class audience, was the fairgrounds. Fairground bioscope shows, with the largest of them able to accommodate up to 1,000 people (with seating for 400 or more), were demonstrating the viability of dedicated film exhibition venues. Fairgrounds laid the groundwork not only for the physical appearance of cinemas but for their core working class audience. E.V. Lucas noted in 1906 that it was the story-led programming of the film shows that was attracting this audience; that, and the welcome darkness:

A fairly satisfactory proof that the cinematograph has conquered is to be found in its popularity, not only in the ordinary music-hall, but among less enlightened audiences

even than those which one finds there. At Barnet Fair, this year, I noticed that many of the old shows had given place to animated pictures . . . [T]he invented story, comic, tragic, pathetic, was the staple; there were no royal processions, no conferments of the freedom of cities, no military manoeuvres. Instead of taking the place of the illustrated paper, as the cinematograph did almost exclusively, and still does at the more pretentious halls, it was taking the place of the theatre. And for two very good reasons it was making the real theatrical booths look very foolish — one being that the pictured stories were bright and engrossing, involving the use of only one sense and never straining that (whereas a stage play in a booth one often fails to hear and sometimes to see at all); and the other that the body of the booth was in darkness, a favourable condition for those who attend fairs in couples.⁹

Lucas detects how the presentation of the animated picture was moving in space and form to that which best suited its potential mass audience. The cinema impulse came out of those social spaces where the working-class chose to gather. They were adopting those products that best pleased them, in the form and in the milieu that were expressions of their own culture.

In 1906, the first London cinemas began to appear. They could well have been an expression of popular will, but they were also a reflection of the growing commercial success of the nickelodeon in America, and American models determined much of what was to follow. Numerous candidates for London's 'first' cinema have been made over the years. If one identifies a cinema as being a fixed venue dedicated to regular motion picture entertainment, then the first in London was almost certainly the Daily Bioscope, located at 27–28 Bishopsgate Street Without, which opened to the public on 23 May 1906. The Daily Bioscope operated as a subsidiary of the Gaumont company, and showed primarily news material to a maximum audience of 130, 20–30 minute shows only, run continuously between midday and 9 p.m. Its target audience was city clerks seeking cheap, quick entertainment during their lunch hours.¹⁰ Other London cinemas opening in 1906 included Pleasure Land at 26 Station Road, Brixton, the Original American Bioscope at 8 High Street, Aldgate, and Hale's Tours at 165 Oxford Street.¹¹

The numbers of cinemas grew in 1907. The London County Council (LCC), which maintained a licensing system for public entertainment venues, looked on anxiously at this new type which did not fall naturally into any of its three categories: music, music and dancing, or stage. It counted 167 unlicensed places in London by mid-1907 which were giving cinematograph shows, though only 12 were cinemas as we would recognise them (mostly converted shops), the remainder being mostly halls run by the Salvation Army, churches or missions.¹² (There were other venues showing films, such as music halls, which of course were licensed.) The LCC's overt concern was fire; three people had recently lost their lives, and many had been injured, following a film fire and the ensuing panic at Newmarket in September 1907.¹³ Its underlying concern was the audience itself: young, mixed, working-class, disruptive, prey to manipulation, and certainly not safe to be left alone in the dark.

The LCC approached the Home Office with a view to having a law passed making it illegal to put on a cinematograph exhibition in a venue not licensed for the purpose. Meanwhile, the number of film venues grew. By 1909, the number was 195, and by the end of 1910, the year in which the Cinematograph Act was first instituted, 375. By 1914,

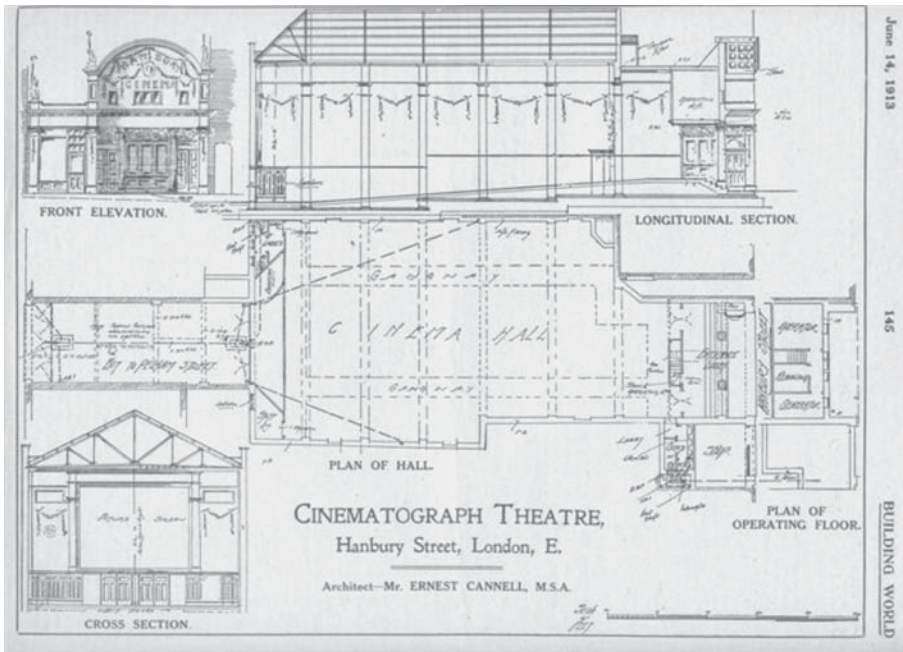


Fig. 2. Architect's designs for a cinema in Hanbury Street (from *Building World*, 14 June 1913). Author's collection.

there were 474 venues in Greater London showing films (the qualification over terminology is necessary, as will be made clear), 413 of them within the County of London (figure 2). It was not an even curve of adoption over the period 1906–1914, however, as an investor-led boom led to an excess of cinema construction, and many businesses went under. Hence, there were over 1,000 identifiable film venues in Greater London over the period 1906–1914, though probably no more than 475 at any one time. Nationally, the number of film venues rose from 2,450 in 1910 to 3,800 by 1914.¹⁴

Few statistics were made of the rise of cinemas in London before the First World War, but much data can be derived from individual cinema records in film trade year books and the records of the LCC. In the tables and calculations that follow, I have tried where possible to note the differences between figures for inner London (that is, the 28 boroughs of the County of London administered by the LCC, plus the City) and Greater London; and between those buildings whose prime purpose was as cinemas, and 'film venues', which includes buildings of a broader purpose that nevertheless showed film on a reasonably regular basis.

Table 1 covers the period following the introduction of the Cinematograph Act, when cinemas began to proliferate in London. Before then, there are occasional snapshot calculations, such as the 1907 survey referred to above, but what we know is greatly outweighed by what we do not. In crude terms, we can call the 1906–1909 period that of the shop shows, when unlicensed converted shops on short leases frequently came and went before the LCC could note their existence; and the period 1910–1914

TABLE 1
Types of Greater London film venue, 1910–1914

	1910	1911	1912	1913	1914
Arcades	3				
Arenas	2	3	4	3	3
Baths		1	1	3	1
Cinemas	261	289	322	350	383
Exhibitions	3	2	2	2	
Fairs	2	2	2	2	2
Halls	25	13	12	8	16
Missions	2	9	9	8	3
Music Halls	33	40	23	25	28
Polytechnics	3	2	2	1	1
Restaurants	1		1	1	1
Theatres	37	42	34	36	34
Uncertain	3	3	2	3	2
Total	375	406	414	442	474

Source: London Project database, <http://londonfilm.bbk.ac.uk>. Chiefly based on data from film trade year books and LCC records. Figures for 1906–1909 are too incomplete for reliable analysis.

that of the purpose-built cinema, as the film-going habit became ingrained, and commercial success was determined by offering comfort, luxury and audience empowerment. Of course, the real picture was never so simple, as many of the so-called shop shows had early pretensions to cinema-style luxury, while cheap unlicensed venues continued to linger on even after the introduction of the Cinematograph Act in 1910 that was supposed to bring about their demise.¹⁵

We can next match the data on cinemas to census returns. Table 2 shows the number of cinemas in each inner London borough for the peak period of 1911, from which one can obtain the figure of an approximate 2.8 cinemas per square mile. The boroughs showing the greatest density of cinemas are those with a predominantly working class population, such as Stepney (4.35 per mile) and Southwark (7.92); though noticeable too are some areas away from the centre attracting a lower-middle class population benefiting from improved transportation links, such as Islington (5.38). Here is cinema's ubiquity: along major thoroughfares and shopping areas, within walking distance for anyone, cinemas were omnipresent, ever available, unavoidable.

From the number of cinemas and their geographical extent, we need next to determine the seating capacity. Figures are not available for every single cinema, and there is much inconsistency among those that do exist, so I have worked from an average capacity for venues in each year, and then used this to estimate total seating capacity.

The figures in Table 3 are averages. The smallest cinemas might seat a hundred or less. On the other end of the scale, in 1913–1914 the first of the super-cinemas started to emerge, places such as the Kilburn Grange and the Rink Cinema in Finsbury Park, which seated 2,000 to 3,000. Of course, those theatres and music halls that included film could offer comparable seating capacity, and some music halls such as Gatti's Palace of Varieties converted into cinemas. However, seating capacity did not necessarily equal

TABLE 2
Cinemas in London boroughs in 1911

	Persons	Cinemas	Cinemas per sq. mile	Inhabitants per cinema
City of London	19,657	1	0.94	19,657
Battersea	167,743	10	2.96	16,774
Bermondsey	125,903	4	1.76	31,475
Bethnal Green	128,183	4	3.37	32,045
Camberwell	261,328	18	2.57	14,518
Chelsea	66,385	7	6.79	9,483
Deptford	109,496	7	2.86	15,642
Finsbury	87,923	2	2.19	40,147
Fullham	153,254	7	2.63	21,893
Greenwich	95,968	3	0.49	31,989
Hackney	222,533	14	2.63	15,895
Hammersmith	121,521	6	1.67	20,253
Hampstead	85,495	8	2.26	10,686
Holborn	49,357	1	1.58	49,357
Islington	327,403	26	5.38	12,592
Kensington	172,317	4	1.11	43,079
Lambeth	298,058	24	3.76	12,419
Lewisham	160,834	13	1.18	12,371
Paddington	142,551	6	2.83	23,758
Poplar	162,442	5	1.37	32,488
St Marylebone	118,160	9	3.91	13,128
St Pancras	218,387	14	3.32	15,599
Shoreditch	111,390	4	3.89	27,847
Southwark	191,907	14	7.92	13,707
Stepney	279,804	12	4.35	23,317
Stoke Newington	50,659	3	2.22	16,886
Wandsworth	311,360	27	1.89	11,531
Westminster	160,261	21	5.37	7,631
Woolwich	121,376	4	0.30	30,344
Averages			2.80	16,323

Source: *London Statistics 1911–1912* and London Project database.

TABLE 3
Seating capacity for Greater London film venues, 1909–1914

	1909	1910	1911	1912	1913	1914
Average capacity for all film venues	507	793	855	751	770	833
Average cinema capacity	377	491	525	540	570	633
No. of film venues	195	375	406	414	442	474
No. of cinemas	159	261	289	322	350	383
Est. total seats for all film venues	98,865	297,375	347,130	310,914	340,340	394,842
Est. total seats for all cinemas	59,943	128,151	151,725	173,880	199,500	242,439

Source: London Project database.

audience capacity, since many smaller cinemas allowed for people standing, and some fitted in two children to a seat.¹⁶

Calculating daily or weekly cinema attendance for this period is fraught with difficulty. There was no simple curve of adoption, and the few figures produced by the industry at the time vary wildly. In 1917, the Cinema Exhibitors' Association, using 'carefully tabulated returns', estimated that the average attendance across the country per cinema per day was a conservative 750.¹⁷

Using this 750 figure as a basis, Table 4 demonstrates data for cinemas only, not film venues. There were far more than 3,750 people per day witnessing films in London in 1906, but these were seen across a wide range of venues, often offering other entertainments, and it is not possible to deduce any meaningful figures for total film attendance for the period 1906–1909. What the table does demonstrate, however, is the rapid growth in popularity of the dedicated film venue, or cinema, with a quarter of a million people attending one each day in Inner London by 1914.

To judge the impact of cinema, one need only compare it with its most obvious rival attractions, theatres and music halls.

The figure of 94 cinemas with a seating capacity of 55,149 (in 1911) given in Table 5 is limited to venues licensed by the LCC only. The real figure was at least 265, or 383 film venues of all kinds. This meant a combined seating capacity of not 55,000, but nearer 155,000 (to count only the 265 converted and purpose-built cinemas). This more than doubled the number of seats of the theatres and music halls combined, and the figure should be multiplied that much further to accommodate at least two, and in at least half of all cases, several programmes a day. Of course, the cinemas were never full

TABLE 4
Daily London cinema attendance, 1906–1914

	1906	1907	1908	1909	1910	1911	1912	1913	1914
Inner London	3,000	4,500	27,000	84,000	150,000	198,750	228,750	242,250	249,000
All London	3,750	5,250	30,000	119,250	195,750	216,750	241,500	262,500	287,250

Source: London Project database.

TABLE 5
Number and seating accommodation of licensed theatres, music halls and cinemas in the county of London

	1891		1901		1911	
	Number	Seats	Number	Seats	Number	Seats
Theatre	49	65,550	59	(66,368)	54	67,187
Music hall	42	50,000	42	(61,835)	50	73,670
Cinema	—	—	—	—	94	55,149
Total	91	115,550	101	(128,200)	198	196,006

Source: *The New Survey of London Life & Labour: Volume I—Forty Years of Change* (1930). Seating figures for 1901 are lacking and have been estimated by averaging the 1891 and 1911 figures.

all the time, and the actual audience as opposed to the potential one is a far more difficult figure to determine, but nevertheless, by 1911 there was in London potentially a total daily cinema seating capacity of perhaps half a million. It was the difference between that maximum figure which the phenomenon of continuous shows seemed to promise, and the actuality of cinema attendance that was to lure so many unwise investors in these giddy years.

The poor man's theatre

Who were these people who went to the cinema in London for the first time, and what drove them to go there (figure 3)? We want to see them divided up by age, class and gender, but no one conducted sociological surveys to mark this new phenomenon, and while deductive reasoning from fragmentary sources can yield some indications as to audience composition, we are in the field of assumptions rather than pure science. The audience was heterogeneous in terms of age and gender, because most reports indicate that this was so. Children (including adolescents) predominated, however, certainly in the first few years, probably to the extent of forming half of the audience. The cinema was commonly referred to as 'the poor man's theatre', and there is every indication that the audience was predominantly working class.¹⁸ The location of the shop shows and earliest cinemas in the working-class districts of Stepney, Southwark, Lambeth and



Fig. 3. A rare image of an audience inside a pre-First World War London cinema, at the Palladium, Mile End Road, c.1913. Courtesy of the Cinema Museum, London.

Bermondsey gives a clear enough indication of the roots of the medium, though its rapid expansion into the upper working-class and lower middle-class boroughs away from the centre, such as Hackney, Islington and Hammersmith, indicate that the process of ‘bourgeoisification’ was soon under way. Cinemas began to be opened by local dignitaries, they stressed luxury and class in their fittings (and in the films that they showed), and those in the West End designed themselves specifically to attract a more prosperous audience, coming into town for the shopping and being lured into the cinema by the promise of free tea and biscuits with their late afternoon film. The first true cinema in Leicester Square was the Bioscopic Tea Rooms (figure 4), catering for precisely this passing audience with time and money on its hands.¹⁹ Such targeted audience strategies are a warning not to expect uniformity across all types of film shows: audiences varied in age, gender and class according to time and place. Yet cinema was, fundamentally, the poor man’s theatre, and that coloured its social acceptance and determined its prices; but the poor man did not have it to himself for long.

Of the categories by which we might want to divide up the audience, the one that seems most interesting here is that of age, for one of the things that made cinema such a unique phenomenon was its huge popularity among a hitherto neglected portion of society when it came to the provision of leisure opportunities; that is, children.

From memoirs and oral history recordings, we can gain vivid insight into the experience of cinema-going for the young in London before the First World War. Thus

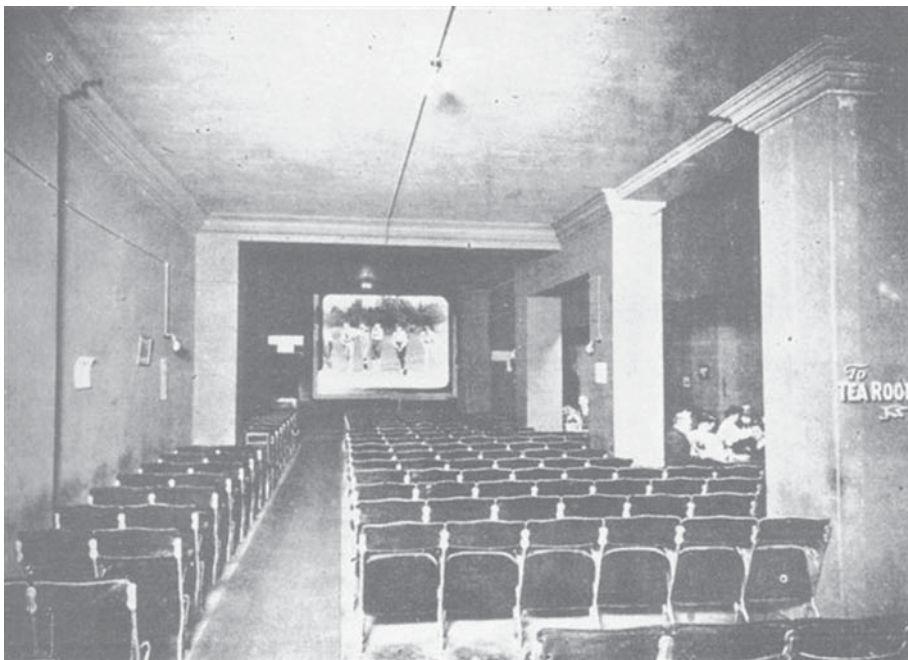


Fig. 4. The interior of the Circle in the Square (previously the Bioscopic Tea Rooms), Leicester Square, in 1913, with a sign on the right pointing to the tea rooms. Author’s collection.

we learn from C.R. Rolph that every time there was a breakdown in the films (which was common), the cinema would be flooded with light, because the ‘management had not learned to leave a company of children in the dark with nothing to engage their attention.’ V.S. Pritchett, whose family lived off Coldharbour Lane, recalled how ‘In the Bioscope, men walked about squirting the audience with a delicious scent like hair lotion that prickled our heads’, reminding us of the smells of the early cinema, its unhygienic reputation, and the compliance of audiences in letting themselves be treated in this way. Harry Blacker recalled the heat, the fug of cigarette smoke, the peanut shells littering the floor, and the continual noise, including children translating the titles into Yiddish for their illiterate parents. ‘Only the screen was silent’, he says. Ben Thomas wrote of the women at his Limehouse cinema peeling potatoes, the peel mingling with the nut shells and orange peel that littered the floor. Almost everyone remembered the agonies of waiting each week for the next episode of a Pearl White serial, and then the agonies of actually watching such perils.²⁰ Dolly Scannell gives a marvellous vignette of how her sister became totally bound up in the action of the screen:

Marjorie was the most terrible person to accompany to the pictures . . . We all left the world mentally, but she left it physically as well in a sense. When the heroine was tied to the railway line, and tried to fight her captors, Marjorie would fight in her seat. When the poor mother was pleading with the wicked landlord for her starving children, Marjorie was on her knees pleading too. Her screams of terror when the heroine was about to be tortured seemed louder to me than the frightening music being played by the lady pianist and I would thump Marjorie to bring her back to the world. All in vain, she never felt or heard me . . .²¹

All such memoirs stress, indirectly or directly, the convivial, sociable, often boisterous nature of the early cinema. We learn about the comforts of the cinema and the solidarity of the audience. The term ‘we’ for children collectively, rather than ‘I’, is common. Again and again they mention how much it cost, how they obtained the money, and the dilemmas they faced in having to balance pocket money with the demands of the cinema, the toy shop and the sweet shop. Until 1910, most cinema tickets cost a penny; some only a halfpenny. Prices rose to a usual threepence and sixpence, but when an Entertainment Tax was levied on cinemas midway through the First World War and seat prices went up, audiences figures went down dramatically.²² Cinemas undeniably situated themselves not only geographically but economically within reach of that bedrock, working class audience.

The economics of the penny is important. A penny is what a child often had to spend for the week, and when we consider that perhaps half of the audience were children (as some admittedly patchy figures indicate), then pocket money becomes not just something of anecdotal interest but an important determinant in how the cinema existed. We need to be considering the relative values of the Electric Theatre and the penny bazaar, Pearl White and toffee apples.

But the most interesting portion of the audience to consider is that which, in theory, could not afford to go to the cinema. It was on its determination to adopt the new form of entertainment that the success of cinema could be said to have been built.

Between 1909 and 1913, the Fabian Women’s Group recorded the daily household budgets of thirty Lambeth families. These were not the poorest of the district, but

‘respectable persons’ where the men were in full work ‘at a more or less top wage, young, with families still increasing’, earning between eighteen and thirty shillings a week. The Group found that the men generally kept 1s 6d to 2s a week for themselves (to pay for clothes, travel fares, tobacco and drink), and gave the remainder as allowance to their wives, who had then to pay the rent, burial insurance, coal and light, cleaning materials, clothing and food (to name the major categories) on ‘round about a pound a week.’²³

Maud Pember Reeves’ book, *Round About a Pound a Week*, records the findings of the survey. It identifies a class that on paper could not afford such a luxury as the cinema; yet they *did* find the money, and it was on their support that the cinema in London flourished in the first place. This was a class that represented perhaps a third of the adult male workforce, as Table 6 demonstrates.

Reeves’ survey records the dilemma faced by those existing on apparently a subsistence level:

Indoors there are no amusements. There are no books and no games, nor any place to play the games should they exist. Wet holidays mean quarrelling and mischief, and a distracted mother. Every mother sighs when holidays begin. Boys and girls who earn money probably spend some of it on picture palaces; but the dependent children of parents in steady work at a low wage are not able to visit these fascinating places — much as they would like to.

Here is an economic class apparently denied the very pleasures that seemed best designed for it. But, as she records, families of this order did somehow find the money, denoting the point where a luxury turns into a necessity. She is analysing the women’s household budgets.

Two instances of ‘piktur show, 2d’ appeared in the budgets. One was that of a young, newly married couple. The visitor smilingly hoped that they had enjoyed themselves. ‘E treated me,’ said the young wife proudly. ‘Then why does it come in your budget?’ asked the visitor. The girl stared. ‘Oh, I *paid*,’ she explained; ‘he let me take ‘im.’ The other case was that of two middle-aged people, of about thirty, where there were four children. A sister-in-law minded the children, they took the baby with them, and earnestly enjoyed

TABLE 6

Numbers and earnings of men estimated to be in regular occupation in UK in 1911

Wage	Number of men	Percentage of total number
Under 15s	320,000	4%
15s to 20s	640,000	8%
20s to 25s	1,600,000	20%
25s to 30s	1,680,000	21%
30s to 35s	1,680,000	21%
35s to 40s	1,040,000	13%
40s to 45s	560,000	7%
Over 40s	480,000	6%
	8,000,000	

Source: Philip Snowden, *The Living Wage* (1912), p. 28.

the representation of a motor-car touring through the stars, and of the chase and capture of a murderer by a most intelligent boy, 'not bigger than Alfie.' Here again the wife paid.²⁴

Philip Snowden was another social commentator concerned with those living on or below the poverty line. In *The Living Wage* he recorded that the picture palace was but one among several new expenses to be detected in working class budgets which could not be accounted necessities on subsistence terms alone, but which were starting to be accounted necessities nonetheless. Snowden's tone is almost one of irritation at an unthinking class lapsing into temptation.

New expenses have come into the category of necessities. The development of tramways, the coming of the halfpenny newspaper, the cheap but better-class music hall and the picture palace, the cheap periodicals and books, the very municipal enterprise which was intended to provide free libraries, free parks, free concerts, has added to the expenditure of the working classes, who cannot take advantage of these boons without incurring some little expense in sundries. The features of our advancing civilisation are always before the eyes of the working classes, and they fall into habit of indulging in the cheaper ones. People cannot see tramways without wanting to ride sometimes; they cannot see newspapers without at least buying one occasionally; they cannot see others taking a holiday into the country or to the seaside without desiring to do the same.²⁵

What one could buy was, ultimately, less of a driver than what one expected one might buy. The rise in real wages up to the end of the nineteenth century had brought about a key change in public attitudes. That rise had been largely halted in the 1900s, but now people had an expectation of leisure, and of a time that should be theirs in which to enjoy it. If they did not always have the money or the free time to match such aspirations, this did not lessen their belief in the necessity of such hopes.²⁶ Cinema was the beneficiary, and, to some extent, the result of this shift in expectations.

What was missed by such worthies as Reeves and Snowden was that the household budgets that they analysed were more theoretical than actual. You found the money somewhere, if you wanted it. Families supplemented income with the wife's or children's earnings, they had recourse to pawn brokers and money lenders; frequently they simply lived their lives in debt. Moreover, a less politically-charged set of figures from the economist W.A. Mackenzie in 1921 suggests that even in the poorest sector of society, for a hypothetical family of five, by 1914 a man earning 20s 6d a week would spend 12s 7³/₄d of that on food, 3s 6d on rent, 1s on clothing, 1s 6d on fuel, etc., and 1s 10³/₄d on 'sundries.'²⁷ There was money enough for the cinema, if they wanted it (figure 5).

It is important to know what it was that they were buying with their pennies. It was not any one film title, or star name, or at least those were only part of the reason for going to the cinema, and they were not the driving forces which led to its original popularity. What they were buying into was space and time.

The continuous show

The cinema was defined by its accessibility. Cinemas were so numerous that it was difficult to miss them, certainly in inner London. They were positioned on public



Fig. 5. 'All this for 3d, 6d, and 1/-': H.M. Bateman's wry comment on the social empowerment of the cinema (originally published in *The Sketch*, 27 September 1911). Reproduced with kind permission of HMBateman Designs Limited.

thoroughfares, generally among retail areas accessible by public transport but frequently close enough to residential areas so that they could be readily reached on foot. Their cheapness removed the restrictions that other entertainments put on the poor and on children. Their proximity to shopping areas, their long opening hours and their position as an alternative to the public house made them acceptable as a place of entertainment for women. One did not have to dress up, or to arrive at a particular time, or to behave in an exceptional manner. The degree to which the cinema fitted in with people's own sense of time, as distinct from other entertainment options or other forms of social activity (or, of course, the workplace), lay at the core of its attraction. In this, the development of the continuous show was crucial.

Public sense of an ownership of the cinema, of the freedom to enjoy it under conditions seemingly entirely under their own control, was bound up with the understanding of a film programme which did not begin at any particular time, and where one could

drop in at any time. The continuous show meant a programme of, on average, an hour and a quarter, comprising a number of one-reelers (each lasting ten minutes or so). The audience member could enter at any time in the programme, and in many cinemas they could then stay for as long as they wanted. Forty years later, an exhibitor could still tell the Political & Economic Planning report on the British film industry that, ‘real life for the cinema came with the continuous performance’, with the report stating that the ‘importance [of the continuous show] in the pattern of cinema-going cannot be overrated.’²⁸

The pioneering and influential Electric Theatres (1908) Ltd, London’s first cinema circuit, based its whole policy on the continuous show located within populous districts (figure 6).²⁹ In 1910, at least 50 percent of the cinemas in the Greater London area operated with a continuous show policy. The real figure is likely to have been higher. Continuous shows did not mean full theatres throughout. There are reports of no more



Fig. 6. Advertisement for the Electric Theatre (1908) Ltd.’s Theatre de Luxe in the Strand, which opened in December 1908. Author’s collection.

than a dozen people being in some London cinemas, despite being placed in established amusement areas.³⁰ These were extreme examples, as much a consequence of greedy speculation in cinema building which caused a glut of cinemas in excess of demand around 1911–1912.³¹ In general, the continuous show policy assumed that cinemas would be less than full, in that they were serving a passing trade along retail thoroughfares, and needed to have one house cleared before another filled up. As cinemas became larger, and as films grew longer (the feature-length film of four or more reels becoming increasingly common by 1914), the economic model shifted to a more theatrically-orientated policy, with fixed programme time two or three times in an evening. But the continuous show never fell away entirely, and indeed became a feature of cinema exhibition for decades to come.

The necessary comparison is with shopping, and it is better to look for models for the popular uptake of cinema among retailing rather than the established entertainment modes of theatre or music hall (though the continuous show policy was probably adopted from a model established by some American variety theatres). Douglas Gomery has demonstrated how the leading American cinema exhibitors before the First World War sought to adopt the practices of the ‘ongoing chain store revolution’, chains being able to keep their expenses low by simple economies of scale, operating fixed costs across all outlets, and maintaining a uniformity of product and presentation.³² The same revolution was taking place in Britain. Retailers in the late Victorian era had begun to realise that cheapness and quality need not be separated, that a more prosperous working class was having an effect on supply and demand. Lipton’s, W.H. Smith’s, Menzies, Boots, Freeman Hardy and Willis all flourished on this understanding, adopting American marketing ideas, and offering uniformity, reliability, ubiquity and affordability. They stayed open until late to match working-class shopping patterns, and they encouraged customers to enter stores without the pressure on them to buy.³³ As Hamish Fraser says of the American-inspired Selfridge’s, in *The Coming of the Mass Market*:

[The] policy was to attract customers into the shop and let them browse through the various departments. He wanted them ‘to enjoy the warmth and light, the colours and styles, the feel of fine fabrics.’ There was no pressure to purchase: or rather, the pressure to purchase was through the eye, not through the ear.³⁴

This rings true for the cinema business, with pre-First World War London circuits such as those run by Electric Theatres (1908) Ltd, Electric Palaces Ltd, Biograph Theatres Ltd and Amalgamated Cinematograph Theatres Ltd, in its pricing policies, positioning, target audience, and, of course, most profoundly in that appeal to the eye.

There is another interesting analogy. Montagu Pyke was acute in his understanding of the audience and the position of the cinema in modern life. He drew parallels between the emerging picture theatre business and that of Joseph Lyons in the catering trade:

Everyone recognises that the Lyons Company, with its excellent and cheap catering, its sumptuous restaurants, its admirable organisation, has worked a revolution in the catering business of this country. I believe that it is within the province of the picture theatre proprietor, given proper organisation, to revolutionise the entertainment world.³⁵

Pyke saw cinemas as providing the same combination of service, quality and affordable, democratising luxury as a Lyons Corner House — and with the same degree of professional organisation (and, of course, handsome profits) that underpinned it. He was not alone in such comparisons — the prospectus for Electric Theatres (1908) Ltd likewise drew investors' attention to the complementary success of tea shops and 'cheaper catering establishments.'³⁶ Lyons' restaurants offered that escape from the ceaseless flow of the daily round which Pyke identified as a key function of the cinema. The cinema diverted people away from the pressures of the modern age, for a time which was theirs.

Diverted time

Crucial to the understanding of the development of the cinema in London is the idea of time. Although it is important to be aware of demographics, class aspirations, gender roles, age, competing attractions and particularly audience spending power, these can all be overridden by the audience's sense of personal time.

Nicholas Hiley observes, in a riposte to conventional early film historians, that the basic commodity that audiences were interested in was not any one film but the programme, and that what they wished to buy was 'not access to an individual film, but time in the auditorium.'³⁷ This may be a simplification (people were very soon drawn to films from a particular company or featuring a favourite performer), but it does pinpoint the importance of the cinema as social space, and encourages us to look beyond the films alone for what audiences found to be of value in going to the Electric Theatres, Picture Palaces, Gems and Bijoux of London before the First World War.

Cinemas provided conviviality, warmth, music and entertainment, at a price that put it in the reach of all. They were readily accessible, and put no social constraints on those wishing to attend. The phenomenon of the continuous show, combined with the heterogeneous programme of one-reelers promising an ever-changing roster of comedies, dramas, travelogues, industrials and newsreels, offered not only escape through the films' subject matter but through the very act of attendance.

The metropolitan crowd of the early twentieth century was being offered something quite new: a time of its own. Time, as industrialisation had taught, was a commodity, and when, with the gradual drop in working hours, people gained a little more time for themselves — or had the expectations of a time they could call their own — so they sought out best value for that time.³⁸ The cinema, which took you out of yourself not only in what it showed but in how it showed it, a medium built entirely around the needs and life patterns of a working class, urban audience, became as popular as it did because it was, literally, a good way in which to spend your time. 'Amusement, relaxation of some kind is necessary for men and women, and it is especially necessary in these strenuous days when nearly all work is at high pressure.'³⁹ So argued Montagu Pyke, recognising that cinema's social and aesthetic functions were as one, the basis of its huge success in the decades to come. It is perhaps not inappropriate that the Montagu Pyke in today's Charing Cross Road should still be a place for escape from the daily round into a time that is your own: a diversion, in every sense of the word.

NOTES

- ¹ This essay is one output of the 'London Project', a year-long study of the film business and film exhibition undertaken in 2004–5 at the AHRB Centre for British Film and Television Studies, Birkbeck, University of London. The database of London film businesses and film venues to 1914 created by the Project can be found at <http://londonfilm.bbk.ac.uk>.
- ² H.B. Montgomery, 'Kinematograph Finance in 1913', in *The Kinematograph Year Book Diary and Directory: 1914* (1914), 17–21; National Archives, BT 31/19514 file 110118, 'Amalgamated Cinematograph Theatres'; M.A. Pyke, 'When I was the Cinema King', *Picture House: The Magazine of the Cinema Theatre Association*, no. 10 (1987), 3–9.
- ³ 'Cinema Theatre Fire', *The Times*, 31 July 1915, 8; 'Cinema Manslaughter Charge', *The Times*, 8 Sept. 1915, p. 3. Pyke was initially found guilty of manslaughter, but the verdict was overturned.
- ⁴ M.A. Pyke, *Focussing the Universe* (1910), 7.
- ⁵ W.R. Titterton, *From Theatre to Music Hall* (1912), 67.
- ⁶ On Kinetoscopes and the earliest film business in London, see J. Barnes, *The Beginnings of the Cinema in England, 1894–1901 — Volume One: 1894–1896* (Exeter, 1998).
- ⁷ T.E. Harvey, *A London Boy's Saturday* (Bournville, 1906), 14.
- ⁸ D.R. Rapp, 'A Baptist Pioneer: The Exhibition of Film to London's East End Working Classes 1900–1918', *Baptist Quarterly*, 40 (2003), 6–10.
- ⁹ E.V. Lucas (1906), quoted in S. McKechnie, *Popular Entertainments Through the Ages* (1931), 191.
- ¹⁰ 'The Pioneer of Bioscope Shows', *The Bioscope*, 15 Apr. 1909, p. 9; H.E. White, *The Pageant of the Century* (1933), 147.
- ¹¹ J. Burrows, 'Penny Pleasures: Film Exhibition in London During the Nickelodeon Era, 1906–1914', *Film History*, 16, no. 1 (2004), 60–91.
- ¹² LCC/MIN 10,729, Minutes of the Theatres & Music Hall Committee, 15 Jan. 1908, item 7.
- ¹³ 'Panic at a Cinematograph Exhibition', *The Times*, 9 Sept. 1907, 12.
- ¹⁴ Figures derived from returns in the *Bioscope Annual and Trades Directory* (1910–1914), *Kinematograph Year Book Diary and Directory* (1915) and the London Project database.
- ¹⁵ Burrows, 'Penny Pleasures', 82–4.
- ¹⁶ On the afternoon of 28 Apr. 1917, a panic broke out at the Deptford Electric Palace when a child threw some flints into a ventilating fan and the loud noises frightened a number of the children who made up the majority of the audience. The cinema officially held 726, but owing to the practice of seating two children to a seat, there were in fact 1,007 in the cinema at the time of the panic. A cry of 'fire' exacerbated the chaos, and four children died in the crush. K. George, *Two Six Pennies Please: Lewisham's Early Cinemas* (1987), 24.
- ¹⁷ *The Cinema: Its Present Position and Future Possibilities*, Part II (1917), 2.
- ¹⁸ For example, F.R. Goodwin of the Cinema Exhibitors' Association uses the phrase in *The Cinema*, Part II, 6.
- ¹⁹ Opened 5 June 1909 at 28A Leicester Square; soon renamed Circle in the Square. The site is now occupied by an Angus Steak House.
- ²⁰ C.H. Rolph, *London Particulars* (Oxford, 1980), 105; V.S. Pritchett, *A Cab at the Door: An Autobiography: Early Years* (1968), 72; H. Blacker, *Just Like It Was: Memoirs of the Mittel East* (1974), 29–30; B. Thomas, *Ben's Limehouse: Recollections by Ben Thomas* (1987), 43.
- ²¹ D. Scannell, *Mother Knew Best: An East End Childhood* (1974), 47.
- ²² N. Hiley, 'The British Cinema Auditorium', in K. Dibbets and A. Hogenkamp (eds.), *Film and the First World War* (Amsterdam, 1995), 166–7.
- ²³ M.P. Reeves, *Round About a Pound a Week* (1913), 2–3, 9–11.
- ²⁴ Reeves, *Round About a Pound a Week*, 192–3.
- ²⁵ P. Snowden, *The Living Wage* (1912), 66.
- ²⁶ J. Walvin, *Leisure and Society 1830–1950* (1978), 63. Wray Vamplew makes a similar observation on sports spectating: 'However, many budget studies which show how much is left for recreation

- and other spending are deficient in that they are reluctant to accept that *all* spending is optional. Humans are perverse creatures, often finding greater satisfaction in activities other than meeting basic physiological needs. We will never know how many soccer fans nutritionally could not “afford” to be at the game.’ W. Vamplew, *Pay Up and Play the Game: Professional Sport in Britain 1875–1914* (Cambridge, 1988), 54.
- ²⁷ W.A. Mackenzie, ‘Changes in the Standard of Living in the U.K., 1860–1914’, *Economica*, no. 3 (1921), 227–30.
- ²⁸ P.E.P., *The British Film Industry: A Report on its History and Present Organisation, with Special Reference to the Economic Problems of British Feature Film Production* (1952), 19.
- ²⁹ ‘Topics of the Week’, *The Bioscope*, 28 Jan. 1909, 4.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*
- ³¹ N. Hiley “‘Nothing More than a ‘Craze’”: Cinema Building in Britain from 1909 to 1914’, in A. Higson (ed.), *Young and Innocent? The Cinema in Britain 1896–1930* (Exeter, 2002), 121–4.
- ³² D. Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (1992), 34–6.
- ³³ W.H. Fraser, *The Coming of the Mass Market, 1850–1914* (1981), 111.
- ³⁴ Fraser, *The Coming of the Mass Market*, 133.
- ³⁵ ‘10 Minutes’ Chat with Celebrities — No. 1: Mr. Montagu Alexander Pyke’, *The Rinking World & Picture Theatre News*, 4 Dec. 1909, 19.
- ³⁶ ‘Particulars and Future Prospects of Electric Theatres (1908) Ltd’, in C. Harding and S. Popple (eds.), *In the Kingdom of Shadows: A Companion to Early Cinema* (1996), 221.
- ³⁷ N. Hiley, “‘At the Picture Palace’: The British Cinema Audience, 1895–1920”, in J. Fullerton (ed.), *Celebrating 1895: The Centenary of Cinema* (Sydney, 1998), 97.
- ³⁸ See G. Cross, *A Quest for Time: The Reduction of Work in Britain and France, 1840–1940* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, 1989).
- ³⁹ Pyke, *Focussing the Universe*, 7.

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