

Unequal Pleasures: Electric Theatres (1908) Ltd. and the early film exhibition business in London

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Time and money are unequal pleasures. Industrialism is biased toward producing goods rather than leisure.

Gary Cross, *Time and Money* (1993)¹

This talk was first conceived of in a Starbucks just off Oxford Street, while taking a break from a busy day and contemplating the nature of public and private time. For the record, I had a *venti* cappuccino with carrot cake on the side. But let me take you back to the London of a hundred years ago.

In 1903 the writer Walter Besant surveyed the state of theatrical entertainment for London's working class districts. In this era just before the rise of the cinema, 'the working man's theatre' as it came to be known, Besant saw a cultural desert: huge and populous areas of the city with little or no local theatrical entertainment to sustain them:

As regards the working man's theatrical tastes, they lean, so far as they go, to the melodrama; but as a matter of fact there are great masses of working people who never go to the theatre at all. If you think of it, there are so few theatres accessible that they cannot go often. For instance, there are for the accommodation of the West-end and the visitors to London some thirty theatres, and these are nearly always kept running; but for the densely populous districts of Islington, Somers Town, Pentonville, and Clerkenwell, combined, there are only two; for Hoxton and Haggerston, there is only one; for the vast region of Marylebone and Paddington, only one; for Whitechapel, 'and her daughters,' two; for Shoreditch and Bethnal Green, one, for Southwark and Blackfriars, one; for the towns of Hampstead, Highgate, Camden Town, Kentish Town, Stratford, Bow, Bromley, Bermondsey, Camberwell, Kensington, or Deptford, not one. And yet each of these places, taken separately, is a good large town. Stratford, for instance, has 60,000 inhabitants, and Deptford 80,000. Only half a dozen theatres for three millions of people!²

¹ Gary Cross, *Time and Money: The Making of Consumer Culture* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. vii.

² Walter Besant, *As We Are and As We May Be* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1903), p. 277.

Besant is referring in the main to theatres offering predominantly theatrical entertainments, as opposed to the music halls, of which there were about as many venues again. However, this still left millions of Londoners, predominantly working-class, with little or no easy access to the dominant form of live public entertainment of the day.

Besant neglects to mention a form of theatrical entertainment which had been common but which had gone rapidly into decline. The 'penny gaff' was a term to describe the cheap Victorian theatre which flourished in London's East End (and in other cities across Britain) between 1830 and 1900. These penny theatres were generally located in vacant shops or warehouses, and could house anything from a few dozen to an audience of 400 or more. There were probably 100 in London at anyone time during the Victoria era. They offered a mixed programme of melodrama, cut-down Shakespeare, variety acts, dances and songs. Their audiences were primarily the young, wage-earning children between the ages of eight and twenty, of both sexes. The programmes lasted around an hour, and there could be five or six performances in an evening. Entrance was a penny, or twopence for a box where these existed. They were not licensed to stage drama, and were widely considered to be immoral or degrading in themselves, and focal points for juvenile crime.³

There were considerable similarities between the penny gaffs and the converted shop-show cinemas that succeeded them. They were created out of the same kinds of properties, they attracted the same predominantly young audience, and in London they were located in the same kinds of district: the gaffs were particularly to be found in the Commercial Road and Whitechapel Road, but also in Tottenham Court Road, Shoreditch, and south of the river in Lambeth, Blackfriars and Southwark, all favoured locations for the first cinemas. Each put on a programme of varied material of about an hour's length, to audiences in the low hundreds. These programmes were repeated several times a day, and were dependent on a floating audience which came not so much for the 'event' offered by any one offering in the programme, but for the programme itself and for the overall experience of the show. What took place in the auditorium was as much a

³ The Victorian penny theatre has been strangely neglected by social historians of the period. Two useful accounts are Paul Sheridan, *Penny Theatres of Victorian London* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1981) and John Springhall, *Youth, Popular Culture and Moral Panics: Penny Gaffs to Gangsta-Rap, 1830-1996* (Houndmills/London: Macmillan Press, 1998).

part of the paid-for experience as what took place on the stage or screen. They charged similar prices, positioning themselves to attract a young audience not able to purchase any other kind of entertainment, and each acquired the negative associations of the product priced at a penny (the late Victorian era was also that of the cheap comics for children, or 'penny dreadfuls'). Each were usually unlicensed (though some might have music or music and dancing licences), which in the penny theatres' case meant that they were not permitted to stage spoken drama (a privilege reserved for the licensed West End theatres). This proved difficult to police, making their dumb show dramas akin to the products of the silent cinema. Each attracted the attention of moralists, local authorities and the police, and each were looked upon as depraved in what they exhibited and those audiences that they attracted. In each case, the fire hazards that they undoubtedly presented were understood, semi-consciously, as a metaphor for the social disorder that they were seen to represent.⁴

The penny gaffs had mostly disappeared by 1900, the victims not of the largely ineffectual efforts by the authorities to close them down, but rather of the rise in real wages in the 1880s to 1890s which encouraged the young with some money in their pocket to turn to the music halls. Tastes in any case had changed, and the gaffs did not fit in with the new forms of mass entertainment that were beginning to become available. Thus Besant's comments, made in 1903, come at precisely a time when a young, working-class audience with a little more money in its hands, a little more time on its hands, and newly-aware of its leisure opportunities made the time ripe for an appropriate, accessible form of entertainment. And so, in answer to the demands of the market, emerged the cinema. The first cinemas in London started to appear in 1906.⁵ They seemed like a throwback to the penny gaff era, but while the penny theatres had existed for decades, the cinema shop shows lasted for little more than five years, indication enough of the driving force of the new mass media in the twentieth-century and the ways in which they accommodated, indeed subsisted upon, change.⁶

The Continuous Show

⁴ Springhall, *Youth, Popular Culture and Moral Panics*, pp. 16-37.

⁵ Jon Burrows, 'Penny Pleasures: Film exhibition in London during the Nickelodeon era, 1906-1914', *Film History* vol. 16 no. 1 (2004), pp. 60-91.

⁶ So far as can be determined, no entrepreneur of the London penny theatres moved into the early cinema business. The last instance of one in operation appears to be 1904. Sheridan, *Penny Theatres of Victorian London*, p. 99.

Cinema was defined by its accessibility. Cinemas were so numerous in pre-First World War London that it was difficult to miss them. They were positioned on public thoroughfares, generally among retail areas that were 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.

The cinema was always there. One could drop in at any time; it was never far for one to travel to a cinema. It was cheap enough that for all but the most indigent it became a 'loose change' choice rather than one determined by strict budgeting. One did not have to dress up, or to arrive at a particular time, or in any way to behave in an exceptional manner in going to the cinema. It was completely egalitarian. The degree to which the cinema fitted in with people's own sense of time, as distinct from the managers of 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. One exhibitor reported:

They 'drop in' without fuss – without talking over the matter with the formality that a visit to an ordinary theatre appears to demand. They can see the whole show in an hour, though they may stay and see it twice or ten times for the same money if they please. The result of this free-and-easy access is that the theatres are full most of the evening.⁷

The continuous show meant a programme of, on average, an hour and a quarter, comprising a number of one-reelers. 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

⁷ 'London Picture Palaces – Their Large Profits and Quick Returns – Money Pouring In – Little Places of Entertainment that Make £100 Weekly', *The Evening News*, 16 November 1909, p. 1.

with the continuous performance', with the report stating that the 'importance [of the continuous show] in the pattern of cinema-going cannot be overrated'.⁸

The pioneering and influential Electric Theatres (1908) Ltd, which created London's first true cinema circuit, based its whole policy on the continuous show located within London's populous districts.⁹ In 1910, at least fifty per cent 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 than dozen people being in some London cinemas, despite being placed in established amusement eras.¹⁰ These were extreme examples, caused as much by a phase of greedy speculation in cinema building caused a glut of cinemas in excess of demand around 1911-1912.¹¹ 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 they needed to have one house cleared before another filled up. As cinemas became larger, and as programmes grew longer, the economic model shifted to a more theatrically-oriented policy, with fixed programme time two or three times in an evening. But the continuous show never fell away entirely, and remained a feature of cinema exhibition for decades to come.

The necessary comparison is with shopping, and it is better to look for commercial models for the popular uptake of cinema among retailing rather than the established entertainment modes of theatre or music hall (even though the continuous show policy was probably adopted from the model established by some American variety theatres). It has become a commonplace of American studies into early film that cinemas should be looked upon as a form of chain store. 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 costs low by simple

⁸ 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* (London, 1952), p. 19.

⁹ 'Topics of the Week', *The Bioscope*, 28 January 1909, p. 4.

¹⁰ 'Topics of the Week', *The Bioscope*, 28 January 1909, p. 4.

¹¹ Nicholay Hiley "'Nothing More than a 'Craze'": Cinema Building in Britain from 1909 to 1914', in Andrew Higson (ed.), *Young and Innocent? The Cinema in Britain 1896-1930* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002), pp. 121-124.

economies of scale, operating fixed costs across all outlets, and maintaining a uniformity of product and presentation.¹²

The same retail 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. The working-class housewife was worth courting. Lipton's, W.H. Smith's, Menzies, Boots, Freeman Hardy and Willis all flourished on this understanding, adopting marketing ideas from the United States, and offering uniformity, reliability, ubiquity and affordability. They stayed open to late to match working-class shopping patterns, and they encouraged customers to enter stores without the pressure on them to buy.¹³ 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.¹⁴

So much of this clearly rings true for the cinema business, with circuits such as 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.

Running a cinema – costs and profits

It cost very little to set up a bad cinema show. One would-be shop show exhibitor asking the *Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly* for advice in 1909, calculated that he had a business with forty pounds saved, fifteen pounds to be spent on a second-hand projector, fifteen shillings a week hire for a shop with a week's notice on either side, and charging clients a penny a head.¹⁵

¹² Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (London: British Film Institute, 1992), pp. 34-36.

¹³ W. Hamish Fraser, *The Coming of the Mass Market, 1850-1914* (London/Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1981), pp. 111.

¹⁴ Fraser, *The Coming of the Mass Market*, p. 133.

¹⁵ 'Starting a Penny Kinematograph Show', *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 11 March 1909, p. 1223.

In the giddy years of 1908-1910, the film trade press and company prospectuses were full of the extraordinary profits to be made out of cinemas at seemingly very little outlay. One new journal, *The Rinking World & Picture Theatre News*, was chiefly concerned with the attraction of the new industry as an investment. In a survey of the new phenomenon of picture palaces, *The Evening News* reported that two cinemas in London each were bringing in a weekly profit of £150, while a smaller cinema 'holding but a fifth of the number of people than can get into an ordinary dramatic theatre' brought in a 'steady' profit of nearly £100 a week.¹⁶

The realities of running a cinema were, inevitably, rather different, and depended very much on location and on whether the cinema was part of a chain or not. The initial start-up cost of a theatre varied according to size, fittings and location. In 1913 it was estimated that to set up a first-class theatre might cost anything from £10,000 to £20,000 (of which it was thought there were 500 in the country), second-class halls £7,000 to £10,000 (numbering 800-1,000), and the remainder anywhere between £500 to £5,000.¹⁷ In December 1910, at a time when concerns were beginning to be raised over the economic realities behind the cinema boom, *The World's Fair* produced an assessment of the running costs for the typical independent exhibitor:

Table 1: Running costs for an individual London cinema in 1910

<i>Expenses</i>	<i>Weekly payments</i>
Film service (two changes weekly)	£12 0s
Singing pictures (with hire of synchroniser)	£2 10s
Rental	£3 5s
Rates	£0 12s
Electricity	£5 0s
Staffing	£12 0s
Printing	£2 0s
Billposting	£1 0s
Advertising	£1 10s
Sundry costs	£4 0s
Total	£43 17s

Source: 'Cinematograph Trouble is Looming Darkly Ahead', *The World's Fair*, 17 December 1910, p. 12. The costs assume £4,000 having been paid for a freehold hall, and a staff of at least eight. Electricity could be from £3 to £5.

It required a great many threepences and sixpences, to say nothing of those cinemas subsisting on pennies and twopences, to cover such expenses and make

¹⁶ 'London Picture Palaces', p. 1.

¹⁷ 'Picture Theatre Companies – Excessive Competition a Danger', *The Times* 20 February 1913, p. 16.

a profit. *The World's Fair* calculated that, with a good location and a well-chosen programme, and working fourteen hours a day with 'a mountain of anxiety', a good proprietor might hope for a £10 or £20 a week profit.¹⁸ Assuming an average entrance fee of threepence, that would mean 4,800 tickets sold a week for a return of £60. For a theatre seating 800 (the average figure in 1910) with a continuous show policy of, say, eight programmes per day, this might seem easily achieved, but it was a feature of the continuous shows that the cinemas were seldom full. It has been estimated that attendance might fall to as low as 12.5% of capacity, which would mean the 800-seater cinema running eight shows a day might sell exactly 4,800 tickets over a six-day period. Cinemas that ran two programmes per evening only planned for fuller houses. The same 800-seater, if it could count on 80% capacity, might expect to sell 7,680 tickets, meaning a weekly take of £96. It was calculations such as these which put paid to the ubiquity of the continuous show, though it was such a part of people's understanding and acceptance of the cinema that it continued to be upheld quite widely.

Cinema circuits

All the advantages were with cinemas that were part of a circuit. All the expected economies of scale gave them the advantage. For example, hire prices were calculated by foot, not by usage, so there was obvious economy to be made in the selection of films. As someone from the Provincial Palaces circuit explained in 1909:

The film is generally 400 feet long, and the theatre shows 4,000 feet in its complete show. The cost would be just £100 a week for films to a single theatre. But on the multiple system we can send round the copies at less than £10 for the 4,000 feet and give new subjects every week.¹⁹

There were a number of well-established cinema circuits in London by 1914. Particularly prominent, with sixteen cinemas in Greater London by 1910, was Electric Theatres (1908) Ltd. This company was in the vanguard of cinema creation in Britain, and helped fix the name 'electric theatre' as a generic term for cinema and the continuous show as the dominant form of exhibition. It was established towards the end of 1907 with £10,000 capital, becoming a public company on 16 September 1908 with capital of £50,000. It was founded by

¹⁸ 'Cinematograph Trouble is Looming Darkly Ahead', *The World's Fair*, 17 December 1910, p. 12.

¹⁹ 'London Picture Palaces', p. 1.

Joseph Jay Bamberger, a New York City stockbroker who had financed nickelodeon construction in that city through the Electric Theatre Company, before noticing on a London business trip that there were no such theatres in a city of eight millions, whereas the far less populous New York City had, so he claimed, 629 (the real figure was probably around 400). The clear intention of the company was 'to open and operate cinematograph theatres in populous districts'. It instituted a policy of continuous programmes throughout the afternoon and evening, changed twice-weekly, at a uniformly low cost of 3d for adults and 2d for children (later raised to 6d and 3d).²⁰

The name 'electric theatre' was brought over from the States by Bamberger. There is no instance of it in London until the first cinemas were established by the company in January 1908. 'Electric Theatre' made these venues the harbingers of light. It allied them with Edison, the light bulb and with American dynamism. It was electricity as understood in a very general sense, since the power used to generate the projector lamp was often an arc light. Electricity featured prominently on the cinema's frontage, with rows of electric bulbs to associate their product with brightness, though inside things could be plainer.

The company began with cinemas in Shepherd's Bush and Walworth Road (which appear to have been pre-existing businesses taken over by the company). Business from the outset was brisk. Of the first two cinemas in the circuit, the Shepherd's Bush Electric Theatre enjoyed a rise in receipts of £26 in January 1908 to £52 by September of that year, while that in Walworth Road rose from £44 in February 1908 to £85 in September. Weekly expenses in September were £26 and £28 respectively, leaving a net profit of £80 on those two venues alone. Shares rose in those nine months from ten shillings to fifteen shillings and sixpence.²¹ Three more cinemas had been added three more by the end of 1908, including the Theatre de Luxe in the Strand (adapted out of a Hale's Tours

²⁰ 'Electric Theatres (1908) Ltd.', *The Bioscope*, 21 January 1909, p. 23; 'The Origin of Electric Theatres', *The Bioscope*, 18 February 1909, p. 21; prospectus for Electric Theatres (1908) Ltd, in Colin Harding and Simon Popple (eds.), *In the Kingdom of Shadows: A Companion to Early Cinema* (London/Madison & Teaneck: Cygnus Arts/Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996), pp. 220-221. Bamberger's figure of 629 theatres is probably an exaggeration. An article in *Harper's Weekly* in August 1907 calculated that there were 500 moving picture houses in New York City, whereas *Reviews of Reviews* in September 1910 calculated that there were an estimated 450 such theatres in New York. Garth Jowett, *Film: The Democratic Art* (Boston/Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1976) pp. 45-46. A social survey in 1911 indicated that the number was 400. Michael M. Davis, *The Exploitation of Pleasure: A Study of Commercial Recreations in New York City* (New York: Department of Child Hygiene of the Russell Sage Foundation, 1911), p. 33. However, the London *Evening News* reported a figure of 600 cinemas in New York by the end of 1909. 'London Picture Palaces', *The Evening News*, 16 November 1909, p. 1.

²¹ *The Bioscope*, 23 October 1908, p. 4.

derivative, the Tivoli Tourist Station, operated unsuccessfully by Lighting Travels), which became a generic name for Electric Theatres (1908)'s classier theatres, with marginally higher prices (originally 6d) to match.²²

Table 2: Electric Theatres (1908) Ltd's cinemas in Greater London 1908-1914

<i>Cinema</i>	<i>Address</i>	<i>Opened</i>	<i>Seating</i>
Electric Theatre	164 Uxbridge Road, Shepherd's Bush	1908, Jan	415
Electric Theatre	341 Walworth Road	1908, Feb	720 (800)
Electric Theatre (St Mary's Hall)	133 High Street, Deptford	1908, Sep 24	400
Electric Theatre	255 Hammersmith	1908	355
Theatre de Luxe	65 The Strand	1908, Dec	200
Electric Theatre	75 Upper Street, Islington	1909, Feb 6	300 (600)
Electric Theatre	344 North End Road, Fulham	1909, Feb	180
Electric Theatre (King's Hall)	85 Commercial Road	1909, c. Feb	225
Electric Theatre	Junction Road, Tufnell Park, Holloway	1909, c. Feb	250
Electric Theatre (Lower Stanley Hall)	Islington	1909, Jun	350
Theatre de Luxe	211 High Street, Camden Town	1909	600
Theatre de Luxe	12 Acre Lane, Brixton	1909	945
Cinema House	225 Oxford Street	1910, Jul 14	630
Theatre de Luxe	75 Balham High Road	1910	766 (800)
Electric Theatre	108 North End, Croydon	1910	650
Electric Theatre/Theatre de Luxe	West Ealing	1910	400

Source: 'The London Project' database (<http://london.indigofour.co.uk>). Variant seating capacity figures given in parentheses. The Electric Theatres in Shepherd's Bush and Walworth Road, and the Theatre de Luxe in The Strand, were all pre-existing film venues taken over by the company.

Electric Theatres (1908) Ltd, in common with most of the London cinema circuits, did not restrict itself to the capital. By 1914, it managed three cinemas in Birmingham, and one each in Southend, Gloucester, Brighton, Norwich and Plymouth. It had established a subsidiary company, Provincial Electric Theatres, by the end of 1908, and the following year expanded overseas by initiating the establishment of permanent cinemas in South Africa through Natal Electric Theatres Ltd.²³

²² Allen Eyles and Keith Skone, *London's West End Cinemas* (Sutton: Keytone Publications, 1991), p. 14.

²³ *The Bioscope Annual and Trades Directory 1915* (London: Ganes, 1915), p. 376; 'Electric Theatres (1908)', *The World's Fair*, 5 February 1910, p. 12. One of the original directors of Electric Theatres (1908) Ltd was variety theatre impresario, Frederick Mouillot, who ran a South African theatre chain. The first Electric Theatre opened in South Africa in Durban on 29 July 1909. The company had at least five cinemas in South Africa, including a Theatre de Luxe in Cape Town, and a cinema in Durban for 'Coloured People Only' (primarily Indians). Short-term policies including the importing of films worn out through use on the English circuit led to the company's demise by 1911. Thelma Gutsche, *The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures in South Africa 1895-1940* (Cape Town: Howard Timmins, 1972), pp. 95-97.

The original capital was £50,000, later raised to £100,000, though by 1913 only £80,000 had been issued. The company did extremely well early on, paying out 40% dividends on its first year of operation. It planned for a huge expansion, including the purchase of the London Cinematograph Company (producers and distributors), the British and colonial distribution rights (excluding Canada) to Lumiere films (whose non-flammable stock was seen by the company as a means to bypass what it called the 'grandmotherly nonsense' of the Cinematograph Act, which applied only to nitrate film), and a controlling interest in their rivals Biograph Theatres. This ambitious bid for vertical integration required £400,000 capital, and was rejected by the shareholders. Dividends fell to 10% in the company's second and third years, 5% in the fourth, and nil thereafter to 1918. As the *Kinematograph Year Book* noted, the company was 'handicapped by the fact that most of its theatres were unambitious structures, which may have to be re-modelled, altered, and in some instances rebuilt or closed'. Electric Theatres (1908) Ltd paid the price for being a trail-blazer. Its theatres were mostly if not all converted properties which offered little opportunity for expansion, and eventually it struggled to keep up with audience expectations of grander venues.²⁴

Other circuits soon followed. A company similar to Electric Theatres (1908) Ltd, enjoying high profits in its earlier years, but then becoming caught out by the need to redevelop properties to match increasing expectations of cinemas as venues, was Biograph Theatres Ltd. This was formed in October 1908, with £50,000 capital. Two of its original three directors were theatrical managers, George Washington Stuart and Frederick George Pappa, demonstrating that there were those who saw cinema exhibition as being a logical extension to the theatre business. The company had nine London cinemas by the end of 1910.

Table 3: Biograph Theatres Ltd

<i>Name</i>	<i>Address</i>	<i>Opened</i>	<i>Seating</i>
Parkhurst Theatre	401 Holloway Road	By March 1909	560 (900)
Biograph Theatre	133 Rye Lane, Peckham	By March 1909	450 (500)
Biograph Theatre	236 High Road, Kilburn	By 1910	600

²⁴ H.B. Montgomery, 'Kinematograph Finance in 1913', in *The Kinematograph Year Book Diary and Directory: 1914* (London: London: The Kinematograph & Lantern Weekly Limited, [1914]), pp. 17-21; 'Electric Theatres (1908)', *The World's Fair*, 5 February 1910, p. 12; 'The Cinematograph Act', *The Rinking World & Picture Theatre News*, 8 January 1910, p. 12; Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film 1906-1914* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1949), p. 20; TNA BT 31/32003 file 99537, 'Electric Theatres (1908) Ltd.'; *The Kinematograph Year Book Programme Diary and Directory 1919* (London: Kinematograph Publications, 1919), p. 129.

Biograph Theatre	121 High Street, Peckham	By 1910	318 (400)
Biograph Theatre	181 High Street, Stoke Newington	By 1910	339
Biograph Theatre	27 St John's Road, Clapham Junction	By 1910	450
Wandsworth Picture Palace	Central Hall, East Hill	By 1910	350 (660)
Electric Theatre	47-48 Wilton Road, Victoria	By 1910	480 (560)
National Hall	High Street, Hornsey	By 1910	500

Source: 'London Project' database. Variant seating capacity figures given in parentheses.

Electric Palaces Ltd was registered as a limited company in January 1909, with nominal capital of just £6,000. Its original directors were Horace Sedger and Edward Laurillard: as with Biograph Theatres both were theatrical managers (Sedger had been manager of the Lyric Theatre; Laurillard would later team up with George Grossmith to manage the Gaiety Theatre). However, in June 1909 nominal capital was increased to £50,000, and in March 1910 to £75,000. New directors showed not only the great appeal of the cinema boom to investors, but the interest being shown in the phenomenon by the upper classes. They included Lord Templetown and Lord Rosmead, the latter's name prominent on a share prospectus in April 1910. This characterised the entertainments as follows:

Popular prices

Constant and ever-varying change of programme and subjects displayed

Freedom from offence or vulgarity

Continuous performances

The company maintained a policy of investing in London theatres only ('the accumulation of Halls at distances beyond the sphere of practical influence can only tend to weaken control and to reduce average profits'), and made a particular point of stating that its halls were always lighted during performances. Daylight projection, where the screen was placed in a black-lined recess, enabling (in theory) the rest of the cinema to be fully lit, was given serious consideration at this time, in response to widespread concern over potential improprieties that being in darkness might encourage. It was a bold claim for the company to say that all its cinemas would exhibit in this fashion, for the idea was neither effective nor popular, and it is unlikely that Electric Palaces could have persisted with it for long. The company was never able to expand in the way that it had promised to investors, and it brought them little return. It had effectively ceased operations as a company by 1921, though it was not formally wound up until 1937.²⁵

²⁵ TNA BT 31/32008/100942, Electric Palaces Limited; Low, *The History of the British Film 1906-1914*, pp. 14-15. One cinema from the Electric Palaces chain is still in operation in 2006, the Notting Hill Gate.

Table 4: Electric Palaces Ltd

<i>Name</i>	<i>Address</i>	<i>Opened</i>	<i>Seating</i>
Electric Palace	532 Oxford Street (Marble Arch)	1908, Nov 9	654 (800)
Electric Palace	13 Rockhall Terrace, Hendon	1909, Jan	Not known
Electric Palace	100 High Street, Lewisham	By March 1909	630
Electric Palace	12 Atlantic Road, Brixton	1909, Aug 11	450 (500)
Electric Palace	210 High Street, Lewisham	1909, Dec 21	700
Electric Palace	87 High Street, Notting Hill Gate	By 1909	450 (800)
Electric Palace	48 High Street, Thornton Heath	1910, Mar 23	700
Electric Palace	194 High Street, Clapham	By 1910	859 (920)
Electric Palace	30-36 High Street, Stoke Newington	By 1910	600 (800)
Electric Palace	137-141 King Street, Hammersmith	By 1910	670
Electric Palace	17 Highgate Hill	1912, Dec	760 (900)

Source: 'London Project' database. Variant seating capacity figures given in parentheses. The company took possession of the Oxford Street venue on 30 January 1909. The Hendon venue was originally an independent cinema known as the Little Palace.

Other cinema chains operating as limited companies included Cinema Palaces Ltd, with seven cinemas in London by the end of 1912; Entertainment Properties Ltd with three; London and Provincial Electric Theatres Ltd, with five; New Bioscope Trading Co. Ltd with four; Standard Electric Theatres with five (including a venue within the Earl's Court exhibition buildings); and Walturdaw Co. Ltd, the film distributors and manufacturers, with five.²⁶

Most notorious among the London cinema circuits was Amalgamated Cinematograph Theatres Ltd, managed by Montagu A. Pyke. Pyke was a larger-than-life figure, formerly a commercial traveller, gold miner and bankrupted stock market gambler who was inspired by the success of Hale's Tours in Oxford Street to make a quick fortune in this new business which had such an obvious appeal for the general public. Obtaining a £100 loan from a City business friend, Pyke formed Recreations Ltd in 1908, with nominal capital of £10,000, but no assets of his own. He identified a property in Edgware Road:

... firstly because it is a very thickly populated neighbourhood, and secondly, it appeared to me from the class of people one sees daily on the streets that they would make an appreciative audience if you gave them good value and the prices were right.²⁷

²⁶ London and Provincial Electric Theatres Ltd was an unfortunate victim of the Trading with the Enemy Amendment Act, a number of its directorate being German. It was forced to be wound up early in the war. *The Kinematograph Year Book Programme Diary and Directory 1919* (London: Kinematograph Publications, 1919), p. 129.

²⁷ Montagu A. Pyke, 'When I was the Cinema King', *Picture House: The Magazine of the Cinema Theatre Association*, no. 10 (1987), p. 3. This is a chapter from an unpublished autobiography written in the 1930s and held by Pyke's grandson.

Pyke found two shop properties at 164-166 Edgware Road, and recalled that they were next door to Funland, a shop show which operated for a short period in 1908/09 and undoubtedly played its part in influencing the choice of location, as a proven film-going attraction. He raised money by exploiting society connections and spinning tales of vertiginous profits, including £1,000 from Lady Battersea, sister of Lord Rothschild. Pyke placed his first cinema in a populous neighbourhood with good passing trade, and offered a continuous show between twelve noon and midnight, with prices at 3d, 6d and a shilling. Programmes lasted between an hour and an hour and fifteen minutes. Takings, he recalled, were £400 a week, against outgoings of just £80, and Pyke embarked on a rapid programme of expansion, with investors queuing up to join him.²⁸

Initially Pyke's cinemas were 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 Cinematograph Theatres Ltd in 1910, with £150,000 capital, by which point he was managing five cinemas.²⁹ At its peak, the 'Pyke Circuit' included fourteen cinemas in central London.

Table 5: The Pyke Circuit

<i>Cinema</i>	<i>Address</i>	<i>Opened</i>	<i>Seating</i>	<i>Company</i>
Recreations Theatre	164/166 Edgware Road	1909, Mar 19	500	Recreations Ltd/Amalgamated Cinematograph Theatres Ltd (ACT)
Finsbury Park Cinematograph Theatre (CT)	367-369 Seven Sisters Road	1909, Oct 1	620	Finsbury Park Cinematograph Theatre Ltd/ACT
Walham Green CT	583 Fulham Road	1909, Dec 29	436 (500)	ACT
Ealing CT	22 Ealing Broadway	1910, Jan 5	385 (500)	Ealing Cinematograph Theatre Ltd
Pyke House CT	19, 21 & 23 Oxford Street	1910, Feb 17	350 (400)	ACT
Shepherds Bush CT	57/57A Shepherds Bush Green	1910, Mar 3	800 (1000)	Shepherds Bush Cinematograph Theatre Ltd/ACT

²⁸ Pyke, 'When I was the Cinema King', pp. 3-4; TNA MEPO 2/9172 file 590446/5, 'Bioscope & Cinematograph Shows', 11 March 1909; Ernest Betts, 'When Films Came to Wardour Street', *The Times*, 20 September 1967, p. 6; '10 Minutes Chat with Celebrities – No. 1: Mr. Montagu Alexander Pyke', *The Rinking World & Picture Theatre News*, 4 December 1909, p. 19.

²⁹ Montgomery, 'Kinematograph Finance in 1913'; TNA BT 31/19514 file 110118, 'Amalgamated Cinematograph Theatres'.

Piccadilly Circus CT	43-44 Great Windmill Street	1910, Mar 5	300 (400)	Piccadilly Circus Cinematograph Theatre Ltd
Hammersmith CT	84-88 King Street	1910	490	Hammersmith Cinematograph Theatre Ltd/ACT
Clapham Junction CT	St John's Hill	1910, Jul 27	800	Clapham Junction Cinematograph Theatre Ltd
Elephant and Castle CT	47/51 Walworth Road	1910, Nov 5	800	Elephant and Castle Cinematograph Theatre Ltd
Croydon CT	62 & 64 North End	1910, Dec21	800	ACT
Peckham CT	166 Rye Lane	1911, Feb	770	Peckham Cinematograph Theatre Ltd
Brixton CT	101 & 103 Brixton Hill	1911, Mar 10	963	Brixton Cinematograph Theatre Ltd
Holloway CT	71/83 Seven Sisters Road	1911, Mar 29	730 (900)	Holloway Cinematograph Theatre Ltd
Balham CT	172 High Road	1911	1000	ACT
Cambridge Circus CT	105/107 Charing Cross Road	1911, Aug 26	533 (750)	Cambridge Circus Cinematograph Theatre Ltd

Source: 'The London Project' database, Board of Trade company records, and data compiled by Allen Eyles for the article 'When I was the Cinema King' (*Picture House* no. 10, 1987). Variant seating capacity figures are given in parentheses.

Pyke's business methods were highly dubious, and soon exposed. A committee of investigation formed in 1912 uncovered numerous business irregularities, including dividends being paid out that had not been earned.³⁰ Pyke was the most notorious exploiter of investors' eagerness to profit from the cinema craze. His strategy was based on the assumption that the boom would be short-lived, tempting avaricious investors with quick-term profits from a pyramid of flotations. He certainly profited handsomely himself. From a salary of £25 a week in 1908 he had risen in 1911 to paying himself £10,000 a year. As the cinema business only established itself all the more, and competition from larger and more competently managed rivals grew, Pyke's business necessarily collapsed. He had only two cinemas in operation by the end of 1913 (Piccadilly Circus and Cambridge Circus), and was made bankrupt in 1915, the same year in which he was accused of manslaughter following the death of an employee in a nitrate film fire at the Cambridge Circus venue.³¹ Pyke's ambitions to expand into the provinces were

³⁰ Montgomery, 'Kinematograph Finance in 1913'.

³¹ "'Cinematographs' (Montagu Pyke)", *Vanity Fair*, 17 May 1911; 'Cinema Theatre Fire', *The Times*, 31 July 1915, p. 8; 'Cinema Manslaughter Charge', *The Times*, 8 September 1915, p. 3. Pyke was

never realised. Amalgamated itself was reconstituted as a company in December 1916 and continued to manage five theatres (Edgware Road, Finsbury Park, Oxford Street, Walham Green and Shepherd's Bush) to the end of the war.³²

The cinema theatre business in London witnessed some grotesque over-speculation in its earliest years, of which the Pyke circuit was merely the most notorious. By 1909 the number of venues in Greater London showing films was 195, and by the end of 1910, the year in which the Cinematograph Act was first instituted, 375. By 1914 there were 474 venues in Greater London showing films. But there were over 1,000 identifiable film venues in Greater London over 1906-1914, though no more than 475 at any one time. Cinemas were coming and going with alarming suddenness.³³

In such a vertiginous market, those companies pursuing a more conservative approach than that demonstrated by Pyke succeeded – at least as far as 1914. The distribution of all profits among the shareholders, the lack of forward planning or making allowances for future liabilities, were all ruinous for a business which was clearly going to be a long-term one. By 1913 it was calculated that the cinema industry (meaning cinema theatres) across the country represented capital around £11,000,000, and it was considered a matter of some regret in the film industry that there was no 'Kinematograph Market' on the London Stock Exchange, although there had been a premature attempt to create one a few years before.³⁴

Not all of the London cinema circuits were public limited companies. The individual cinemas of Israel Davis' Electric Pavilions circuit were each incorporated as individual companies, but his Electric Pavilions company itself did not go public. He managed seven cinemas in London, among them the Marble Arch

initially found guilty of manslaughter, but the verdict was overturned. The Cambridge Circus Cinematograph Theatre site is now a fashionable bar, named the Montagu Pyke.

³² *The Kinematograph Year Book Programme Diary and Directory 1918* (London: Kinematograph Publications, 1919), p. 128.

³³ Figures calculated from cinema listings given in the *Bioscope Annuals* (1910 onwards), the *Kinematograph Year Book* (1914 onwards), the *Stage Guide and Directory* (1912), records of licensed cinemas taken from the records of the London County Council, and records of unlicensed cinemas taken from LCC papers, Metropolitan Police records and other sources. The figures are necessarily approximate. The data is published in the London Project database, <http://london.indigofour.co.uk> (temporary address).

³⁴ 'Picture Theatre Company Registrations, 1908-1914', *The Kinematograph Year Book Diary and Directory 1916* (London: Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly, 1916), p. 28; Montgomery, 'Kinematograph Finance in 1913', p. 20.

Pavilion and the Edgware Road Electric Pavilion, which had over 1,000 seats. Gale and Company was the private concern managed by A.J. Gale, one of the few shop-show merchants to make the move into the fully-fledged cinema business. His shop-shows were located primarily in the East End, and the largest of them for which there are figures available seated 350. New Skating Palace and Bioscope Theatres showed most clearly by its name the important link for a number of entrepreneurs between roller skating (the last great public entertainment craze) and cinema. It controlled five cinemas in South London. Architect and cinema owner James Watt was responsible for ten, mostly in the Lewisham and Wandsworth areas, bearing the name Central Hall Picture Palace.

There were many small-scale entrepreneurs managing one or two cinemas only. Some of the stand-out names are Lewis Klein (operator of Happy Land in Commercial Road), E.M. Barker (three cinemas including the 1,450-seater Old Kent Road Picture Palace), G. and J. Fabbro Sr (managers of Electroscopes Ltd which ran two Wandsworth cinemas), Philip Michael Beck (four cinemas in Shoreditch and Islington), George Edwards (Edwards' Imperial Bioscope), H.B. Hermann (People's Picture Parlours) and Frank W. Ogden Smith (Standard Electric Theatres).³⁵

Time, leisure and tea-shops

Montagu Pyke, entrepreneur behind Amalgamated Cinematograph Theatres, was a charlatan and dangerous crook, but his ideas for the business were intriguing, and he was more eloquent than most when discussing what the cinema could do and where it might go. He drew parallels between the emerging picture theatre business and that 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.³⁶

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

³⁵ The most prominent cinema theatre company in Britain at this time was Provincial Cinematograph Theatres Ltd, which was formed in 1909 and which by 1913 had capital of £400,000. At this time, it had no cinemas in London.

³⁶ '10 Minutes Chat with Celebrities – No. 1: Mr. Montagu Alexander Pyke', p. 19.

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 eating establishments'.³⁷ A report in *The Evening News* from 1909 on the apparent licence to print money that cinemas presented wrote of the American experience which was influencing the British: 'Americans say they are as gladly welcomed as tea shops, nearly as numerous, and "sure money-getters."' ³⁸

It is an intriguing comparison. Tea shops and coffee houses were certainly popular. The Aerated Bread Company had first offered tea to its bread customers in 1884, and by the 1890s the A.B.C. as a place to rest a while over a cup of tea was common. Pearce Refreshment Rooms (offering 'Pearce and Plenty') catered for London's poorer districts, while there were ninety-eight of the classier Lyons tea houses in London by 1910.³⁹ They were as ubiquitous as cinemas were so rapidly to become, and indeed many cinemas imitated them so far as to offer tea and biscuits, particularly to West End shoppers keen to take time out in a nearby cinema for an hour or two. The Bioscopic Tea Rooms, the first cinema proper to open in Leicester Square, was one such venue catering for both markets.⁴⁰

Lyons' restaurants offered an escape from the ceaseless flow of the daily round which Pyke identified as a key function of the cinema, in his 1910 pamphlet, *Focussing the Universe*. Here Pyke acclaims the catholicity of the cinema, its appeal across all classes and ages. It has 'annihilated space' (a strikingly modernist observation), bringing people closer together through a realisation of different cultures, enlarging people's imagination by degrees as a wider world was put before them. 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' ('I like the word').⁴¹ 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

³⁷ 'Particulars and Future Prospects of Electric Theatres (1908) Ltd', in Harding and Popple, *In the Kingdom of Shadows*, p. 221.

³⁸ 'London Picture Palaces', p. 1.

³⁹ Fraser, *The Coming of the Mass Market*, p. 213.

⁴⁰ Opened on 5 June 1909, later changing its name to the Circle in the Square. It is now an Angus Steak House.

⁴¹ Pyke, *Focussing the Universe*, p. 9. The text of the pamphlet is reproduced in *Picture House: The Magazine of the Cinema Theatre Association*, no. 10 (1987), pp. 6-7.

what it has to show. This integration of social and aesthetic experience lay at the heart of cinema's success; that is, its deep cultural acceptance, quite as much as the commercial success that accompanied it.

The commodity that Lyons tea houses and cinemas both offered was time. Although it is undoubtedly useful to see in the rapid emergence of cinema chains in London a parallel with the chain store revolution, that really only explains the mechanics of the business, not the deeper reason why the business succeeded. It still begs the question what it was that the first cinema audiences were buying into. The obvious answer would seem to be the cinema programme, or a type of film, or a particular title, or subsequently a star actor. But these do not represent best value. One has to consider what it was attracted an audience largely new to such easy entertainment, with a few pence in its pocket, some time of its own in which to spend that money, and looking for the greatest return on its sixpence. As Nick Hiley has argued, they were buying time in the auditorium.⁴²

There were many aspects of the cinema which made it a first-choice leisure time option for so many. It offered entertainment, conviviality and privacy. It provided warmth, variety, music, stimulus to the imagination. It was cheap, open to all, having no bar to the poor, to children or to women, there was no ceremony involved, it was convenient. It offered considerable value for minimal expenditure, both in the form of entertainment and in the length of time available in which to enjoy it. It suited people. Above all, it offered escape – escape in the contents on the screen, of course, but escape simply in the act of being there, an escape from regulated time.

Cinema offered, in Montagu Pyke's words, 'a diversion', a turning away from work-time, Taylorism, and the strictures of public time. Just as the tea-shop gave you more for your few pence than simply a cup of tea, so cinema gave you so much more than the film. This was the age when issues of public versus private time were being actively debated, with the decrees of World Standard Time being countered by the argument for the plurality of private times put forward by Bergson and Proust.⁴³ This alteration in consciousness combined productively with a new understanding of leisure time as a human need, and a gradual drop in

⁴² Hiley, Nicholas, "'At the Picture Palace": The British Cinema Audience, 1895-1920', in John Fullerton (ed.), *Celebrating 1895: The Centenary of Cinema* (Sydney: John Libbey, 1998), p. 197.

⁴³ Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880-1918* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 33-34.

working hours.⁴⁴ Having time of your own, and being able to make choices as to how to make best use of that time, is one way to pin down human aspirations in modern times. What Asa Briggs calls 'the greatest public audience ever collected' came together at the cinema not so much for the films as for the escape from mechanised life, the escape into personal time.⁴⁵ The cinema was therefore both a product of, and an antidote to, the conditions of modernity. That is something that is hard to write into a business prospectus, harder still to take into consideration when following a chain store model of business operation. But it is what drew the audiences in their millions to the lights of the electric theatres of London.

⁴⁴ Michael Argyle, *The Social Psychology of Leisure* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), pp. 22-27.

⁴⁵ Asa Briggs, *Mass Entertainment: The Origins of a Modern Industry* [The 29th Joseph Fisher Lecture in Commerce] (Adelaide: The Griffin Press, 1960), p. 18.