# Falling Desperately in Love with the Image on Screen: “The Flictoflicker Girl” (1913) and Cinematic Structures of Fascination

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In August 1913, the Irish radical labor journal the *Irish Worker* was the somewhat unlikely place of publication for a short story entitled “The Flictoflicker Girl.”[[1]](#endnote-1) This story suggests that the male protagonist has become hopelessly infatuated with the screened image of the eponymous Flictoflicker Girl, the lead actress with a fictional film company. As such, the story ranks among the earliest fictional representations of the kind of fascination with the picture personality that was becoming a key part of the emergent institutional cinema’s economic strategy. The story’s appearance in the *Irish Worker* is unlikely not least because, as a journal whose primary task was to articulate workers’ views against those of hostile employers who controlled much of the press, the *Worker* largely used more direct forms of address than short stories. Although rhetorically ambiguous, “The Flictoflicker Girl” offers a critique from a far-left perspective of fiction cinema’s creation of a fascinated spectator rather than an active audience that places it in a radical lineage that includes the 1920s avant-garde and post-1968 apparatus theory. Analysis of “The Flictoflicker Girl” and its contexts shows that radical critique of the fascinated spectator was already occurring in the early 1910s.

“Charlie Payne was a quiet young man,” the story begins, before immediately qualifying that statement: “if he had any vices at all, which is distinctly doubtful, they were never unruly or noisy.” His youth is also qualified: he was not old or even middle aged, but “in that hazy period when men cease to be regarded as eligible and have not yet secured the comfort and dignity of being described as old bachelors.” Such other personal details as his profession are not mentioned; instead, the story moves on to the details of his leisure. “Charlie never went to theatres, and music halls were places he detested, yet he had a distinct liking for picture palaces. He loved moving pictures, particularly Westerns ones, and those produced by the ‘Flickoflicker’ [here spelled differently from the rest of the story] Company he simply adored.” Charlie’s loyalty to the Flictoflicker brand is based on unconscious erotic attraction: “The whole truth of the matter, though Charlie himself did not suspect it, lay in the fact that he had fallen desperately in love with Daphne Wildrew, the ‘Flictoflicker’ Company’s leading lady.” His attraction to Daphne manifests itself through a leap of the heart every time Daphne appears on screen, a physiological reaction that Charlie cannot explain to himself.

With these few contextual details established, the story then focuses on the events of the evening when Charlie –“lying luxuriously back in his sixpenny velvet tip up”—sees a film in which Daphne gets married and is then abused by her husband. Charlie is first consumed by jealousy and then so overcome by a range of emotions that he has to leave the picture house before the film is over:

<EXT>[O]ut of his seat he blindly stumbled and went into the streets. Arrived there he decided to go home. He would take an earlier tram and depart for his suburban residence. To be in the city where such an uncalled for display of wanton brutality was being exhibited periodically from 2 till 10.30 filled him with an intense hatred of his fellow men.<\>

Running for the already departing tram, he is flabbergasted to find that the woman who pulls him aboard the otherwise empty carriage is Daphne Wildrew who is “over for local scenes.” However, far from being the fulfilment of his dreams, this encounter is even more traumatic than his experience in front of the screen because Daphne takes his declaration of love as a joke, perhaps as a result of a deliberate strategy by the star in dealing with amorous fans or perhaps because of miscommunication resulting from Daphne’s American vernacular. “‘Don’t, don’t,’ cried Daphne, ‘you’ll tickle me to death.’ Charlie expostulated his earnest denial of doing anything so unbecoming.” Despite his protestations, the communication difficulties are not overcome, and a defeated Charlie “gazed broken heartedly out of the window” as Daphne is met at her stop with a kiss by, of all people, the dastard from the film.

And so it ends. It is a *short* story, running to just under 1,100 words. It is also a slight story, with just three sketchily delineated characters: Charlie, Daphne and Frank, her lover and co-star. However, it is significant in Irish literature as one of the very few early examples of cinema-going as a literary device that can be discussed in relation to the life of the city. But it is of more than local interest, even if the full significance of its singular use of cinematic fascination can only be appreciated when it has been contextualized. It is among the first works of fiction internationally to feature obsession with a picture personality, a phenomenon that—not surprisingly—begins with the public promotion of film stars by name after 1910.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Ken Wlaschin and Stephen Bottomore’s bibliography of fictional representations of cinema, “Moving Picture Fictions of the Silent Era, 1895-1928,” features just two examples of infatuation with a picture personality before the appearance of “The Flictoflicker Girl” in August 1913.[[3]](#endnote-3) Although very useful for comparative purposes, Wlaschin and Bottomore do not survey Ireland and therefore do not mention “The Flictoflicker Girl.” Nevertheless, Irish fiction writers appear to have been no less attracted to the cinematograph-as-literary-device than the authors that Wlaschin and Bottomore discuss. In 1913 alone, “The Flictoflicker Girl” was joined by another Irish short story, “Pat Callaghan’s Christmas Discovery,” in which the eponymous journalist is brought close to ruin by his obsessive love for a picture-house pianist.[[4]](#endnote-4) However, there are no other known Irish stories that feature obsessive love for a film star. A comparison of the stories identified by Wlaschin and Bottomore with “The Flictoflicker Girl” reveals that they are similar principally in the fact that they feature heterosexual attraction to a screen star. Like the female protagonist of 1911’s “Romantic Lucy” and the male protagonist of 1912’s “The Photo Star,” Charlie has an unhealthy obsession with the moving image.[[5]](#endnote-5) Unlike him, however, by the end of their stories, “Romantic Lucy” has resumed her romantic relationship with a tangible person, and the man in “The Photo Star” may—although this is less clear—have overcome his obsession with Flossie Florede. Charlie’s unreliability remains a constant in “The Flictoflicker Girl”; he is an obsessive loner, not someone who has developed a difficulty in existing relationships. Meeting Daphne does not resolve his difficulty because his repeatedly emphasized innocence, which entails a lack of self-consciousness and a degree of emotional repression, blocks him from seeing any problem. Taking these three stories together, it is noteworthy that by the early 1910s, the notion of obsession with a star was a common enough cinematic discourse for it also to have become something of a literary trope.

These stories offer early examples during the cinema’s transitional period of the star actor as part of the structures of fascination particular to the medium in London, Chicago and Dublin, where the publishers of these stories were based. In addition to this, recent scholarship on early stars by the early 1910s—particularly Martin Loiperdinger and Uli Jung’s collection and subsequent database on Asta Nielsen and Marina Dahlquist’s volume on Pearl White—has offered nuanced and theoretically informed historical accounts that show regional variation in the adoption of the picture personality.[[6]](#endnote-6) Such work demonstrates the value of attending to the specific contexts in which the star system has manifested itself. Nevertheless, returning to such a phrase as cinema’s structures of fascination—which derives from the apparatus theory of Jean-Louis Baudry, Christian Metz and Laura Mulvey—permits a glimpse of a genealogy of radical critique coming from activist sources as well as academic ones.[[7]](#endnote-7) Mulvey uses this precise phrase when she argues that “the cinema has structures of fascination strong enough to allow temporary loss of ego while also reinforcing it.”[[8]](#endnote-8) Identifying with the attractive and engaging personalities or “ego ideals” offered by the star system, the spectator becomes lost to the world as s/he normally experiences it. Naturally, “The Flictoflicker Girl” does not use psychoanalytical theory to examine Charlie’s erotic attraction to the image, but it does offer a clear instance of the strength of cinema’s structures of fascination, located in the transition era. Despite his cinematic connoisseurship, Charlie seems to expect that Daphne will address him directly with an erotic display in the manner of the cinema of attractions; he appears unable to deal with the fact that she is playing a character in a narrative film and rushes from the picture house, like a transitional-era Uncle Josh.

As such, the historical record does demand attention to some notion of cinematic fascination, offering as it does such surprising examples of fascinated spectators in fiction of the early 1910s, and also including in the case of “Romantic Lucy” a good example of female desire, however ultimately contained. Indeed, John Burrows has offered a nuanced analysis of “Romantic Lucy,” in which he sees her working-class status and gender as manifestations of author Alphonse Courlander’s disquiet with Edwardian mass culture. “The Flictoflicker Girl,” by contrast, presents a middle-class male spectator, thereby shifting the focus to Charlie Payne’s disposition—a term that will be discussed below—in relation to the cinematic apparatus, lying back in his velvet tip-up willing an erotic encounter with the image of the female star, without which he will be disappointed by his cinematic experience.[[9]](#endnote-9) The vivid detail of the seating and its cost it not incidental to the story’s concerns; economics and erotics are thoroughly imbricated. It is also significant that the story insists that film production and distribution companies achieve economic success through eliciting brand loyalty to such companies as Flictoflicker by tapping into unconscious—certainly in Charlie’s case—erotic processes.

While apparatus theory has been criticized for its inability to focus on the historical specificities of such situations, Frank Kessler has returned to Baudry to offer ways of reorientating his work historically.[[10]](#endnote-10) Kessler observes that some of the problems of doing this in English-language scholarship have been created by translators who render both “appareil de base” and “dispositif” in Baudry’s essays as “apparatus,” despite the fact that Baudry distinguishes between them. Kessler demonstrates the advantages of distinguishing “appareil de base” as the global term for the basic cinematographic apparatus from “dispositif” as the disposition of the instance of projection. For Kessler, many *dispositifs* are possible, not only those established by dominant modes of engagement with the image at a given period. It is not sufficient to say, for instance, that one or more *dispositifs* are associated with early cinema and that these are replaced by a different *dispositif* or *dispositifs* in the cinema of narrative integration. Kessler contends that an “historical investigation of historical and present *dispositifs* would thus have to take into account the different viewing situations, institutional framings, the modes of address they imply, as well as the technological basis on which they rest.”[[11]](#endnote-11) Such an historical investigation provides a basis for considering what the *dispositif* of the fascinated spectator presented by the “The Flictoflicker Girl” tells us about cinema at the moment of its composition in Dublin in 1913. The story is particularly intriguing as a unique source of information about the reception of cinema in Ireland at this early point in its institutional development.

If thinking about the *dispositif* here means thinking about the relationships between text, viewer, and viewing situation, including aspects of technology and institutional framing, the first of these that should be addressed in relation to “The Flictoflicker Girl” is the institutional framing of what is after all a written fiction and not a film or an account of audience reception. Andrew Patrick Wilson who wrote the story under the pseudonym “Mac,” is probably best remembered for his significant contributions to Scottish theatre and film, including co-founding the Scottish National Players and directing a series of film adaptations of four popular golf-related Bertie Wooster novels in 1924.[[12]](#endnote-12) In the early 1910, however, Wilson was in Dublin to which he moved in 1911 and became heavily involved in theatre and radical labor politics. A playwright, founding member of Irish Workers’ Dramatic Group, and later manager of Dublin’s famous Abbey Theatre, Wilson also subedited and frequently contributed to the syndicalist weekly the *Irish Worker*.

At the *Irish Worker*, Wilson worked under the editorship of Jim Larkin, an inspired orator who is a hero of the Irish labor movement and one of the most revered figures of Irish history among many ordinary Irish people.[[13]](#endnote-13) The reason for such reverence is that he organized not the skilled artisans but the unskilled, poorest workers—the carters, dockers, and general laborers—in a city with the worst slum conditions in Western Europe.[[14]](#endnote-14) Larkin is particularly remembered for his leadership of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union and its strategy of sympathetic strikes, which in 1913 led to the largest labor dispute in Irish history, the Dublin Lockout of 1913-14. As this name suggests, what began as a strike of transport workers became a lock-out of workers by the Dublin Employers Federation, led by industrialist William Martin Murphy. The struggle between Larkin and Murphy was also an uneven media war, fought by Larkin primarily with the *Irish Worker* and by Murphy with the national newspapers he owned, the *Irish Independent, Sunday Independent,* *Evening Herald*, and *Irish Catholic*.[[15]](#endnote-15) Despite donations for strike pay from America and particular from the British labor movement, which also sent food shipments, the workers had returned to work on the employers’ terms by February 1914.

Cinema played a lesser part in this media war. Neither the union nor the prominent employers were owners of cinemas, and so there are no such union-sponsored films of the Lockout as Steven Ross describes in his book *Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America*.[[16]](#endnote-16) An Irish fiction film production company had been active in 1912, but by 1913, indigenous producers were offering only actualities and advertising films, and the few fiction films shot in the country were made by Gene Gauntier and Sidney Olcott in their post-Kalem guise of the Gene Gauntier Feature Players or GGs.[[17]](#endnote-17) Although Larkin was involved in shooting one factual film said to be for fund-raising purposes, labor leaders did not see cinema as a regular medium of agitation, nor as an accessible way of disseminating their ideas.[[18]](#endnote-18) They did, of course, use popular media to agitate, educate and organize, but the popular agitational media of choice were first and foremost the press and to a lesser extent theatre. Nevertheless, the references to cinema in the *Irish Worker* indicate that labor activists were thinking about the new visual medium. Most of these references suggest that they thought about cinema in fairly straightforward ways. It was a source of income in the guise of the advertisements for the Irish Cinema in Dublin’s Capel Street, the only entertainment advertisements that appeared in the paper on a regular basis. It was the occasion of a parody of prominent opponents of radical labor—including William Martin Murphy and picture-house owners who were also members of Dublin Corporation who were lampooned with many references to Hell and Satan for having attended a special screening of *Dante's Inferno* in February 1913.[[19]](#endnote-19) And it was a new type of workplace where the more equitable worker-employer relations being demanded elsewhere also had to be fought for, as they would be when Dublin’s Theatre de Luxe was picketed in late September 1913 following a worker’s dismissal for union activity.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Nevertheless, the timing of the publication of “The Flictoflicker Girl” is highly suggestive of cinema’s relevance to the labor movement. The story appeared in the *Irish Worker* of 23 August 1913. This is the issue that would have been in circulation for Dublin’s largest festival of the summer, Horse Show Week. The Dublin Horse Show itself was a prestige event, but the influx of wealthy revelers to the city meant that special and additional entertainments were mounted, and newspapers printed special editions that contained more feature articles that usual, fiction and so on. The *Irish Worker*’s 23 August edition was also a Horse Show special, even if it did not explicitly state this. Rather than the usual articles excoriating the employers, the first page was dominated by cultural items. “The Flictoflicker Girl” appeared here alongside a review also written by Wilson of George Edwardes’ *Gipsy Love*, a musical comedy playing at the upmarket Gaiety Theatre, and an article analyzing the use of the term “respectability” in Irish society as a way of denigrating trade unionists.[[21]](#endnote-21) Unlike “The Flictoflicker Girl,” the intention of these nonfiction articles to draw out the immediate political implications of popular culture and language for Dublin workers is clear.

These journalistic interventions were not the only surprises Larkin had planned for Horse Show Week. On 26 August—three days after the publication of “The Flictoflicker Girl”—he called a strike of the workers at the Dublin United Tramway Company. This was designed to hit Murphy, who was chairman of the company, at the busiest time of the year. But Murphy and other employers faced down Larkin, dismissing workers who would not sign a pledge to boycott the union. Larkin was arrested for inciting riot but quickly released and then arrested again when he addressed a proscribed meeting in Dublin city centre that was baton charged by the police. Violent clashes with the police in the early days of the strike left two workers dead, perhaps the “uncalled for displays of wonted brutality” the story mentions. Many workers on low wages and living in miserable conditions followed Larkin’s call to strike or were locked out by their employers for refusing to sign the pledge to ignore the union. They became further impoverished on meagre strike pay and food parcels in the six months of strike that followed.

On the eve of such events, Larkin believed it was timely to address cultural matters and engage in cultural critique. The “Flictoflicker Girl” addresses its readers—working-class trade unionists—as more sophisticated picture-house patrons than the naïve Charlie Payne, whose flight from the city-centre picture house to the suburbs marks him out as middle class and whose foolish fascination with the screen is not excused by youth. For such workers, the *dispositif* described creates further distance from Charlie as he settles back into his luxurious seat. However, like Charlie, readers are assumed to share his “distinct liking for picture palaces,” at least to the extent that they must have a good knowledge of what goes on there to understand the story. Perhaps his connoisseurship, his love of Westerns produced by the Flictoflicker Company, is laughable, yet it was doubtless more so for readers who knew that branding by production companies was well established and that films were already highly codified into genres—of which the Western was the most popular; a reviewer of a show at one Dublin picture house commented in September 1913 that “no picture programme nowadays is considered complete if it does not include a cowboy film.”[[22]](#endnote-22)

Similarly, Charlie’s infatuation with the Flictoflicker Girl would have been topical for readers familiar with the crazes for the Biograph Girl and the Vitagraph Girl, actresses who had only relatively recently become famous under their own names, Florence Lawrence and Florence Turner, respectively. Indeed, a month after “The Flictoflicker Girl” was published, the Rotunda Pictures broke “new ground as far as Dublin picture houses are concerned” by beginning to show the city’s first film serial, Edison’s 12-part *What Happened to Mary*, starring Mary Fuller.[[23]](#endnote-23) The *Dublin Evening Mail* reviewer commented that “all who have seen the opening scenes of Mary’s adventures will be eager to know more about this fascinating actress.”[[24]](#endnote-24) Daphne Wildrew is not the target of the story’s critique; she is like the serial queens: an active and engaging figure, capable of pulling Charlie aboard the train and nimbly dodging his professions of love. Therefore, it is the *dispositif* of the fascinated spectator that is the target of the critique in “The Flictoflicker Girl.” Charlie’s affordance of the expensive seats and flight to the suburbs is a flight from the world of workers, who lived, worked and fought in the city in late 1913 and early 1914.

In conclusion: with the 1913 short story “The Flictoflicker Girl,” the Irish labor journal *Irish Worker* was among the first to critique cinema’s emerging structures of fascination from a radical perspective. The story specifically targets the star system’s commodification of heterosexual desire through the gaze, but in its description of the *dispositif*, it is careful to distinguish the foolish bourgeois male protagonist from the working-class readers of the journal who are also assumed to have knowledge and an interest in cinema. As such, it suggests that it is possible to critique cinema, while also enjoying it. This is, then, an early example of such critique, shaped by its own institutional contexts, but it forms part of a critical genealogy of activists, thinkers and filmmakers who have repeatedly returned to the ways in which cinema has distracted spectators from the world around them.

1. Mac, “The Flictoflicker Girl,” *Irish Worker* (23 August 1913): 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Richard deCordova, *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ken Wlaschin and Stephen Bottomore, “Moving Picture Fiction of the Silent Era, 1895-1928: An Annotated Bibliography,” *Film History* 20:2 (2008): 217-260. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Madge Barlow, “Pat Callaghan’s Christmas Discovery,” *Killarney Echo and South Kerry Chronicle* (27 December 1913): 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Alphonse Courlander, “Romantic Lucy,” *London Opinion Summer Annual* (c. May 1911): 93-95, and Epes W. Sargent, “The Photo Star,” *Green Book Album* (September 1912): 451-456. “Romantic Lucy” is reprinted – along with seven other short stories featuring the cinematograph – in Andrew Shail, ed., *Reading the Cinematograph* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2010), 155-158. Like the other stories in the collection, “Romantic Lucy” is analyzed in an accompanying essay, John Burrows, “‘She Had So Many Appearances’: Alphonse Courlander and the Birth of the ‘Moving Picture Girl’” (Shail 159-168). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Martin Loiperdinger and Uli Jung, eds., *Importing Asta Nielsen: The International Film Star in the Making, 1910-1914* (New Barnet, Herts.: John Libbey, 2013), “Importing Asta Nielsen Database,” Martin Loiperdinger and Uli Jung, Deutsches Filminstitut, last updated June 1, 2015, http://importing-asta-nielsen.deutsches-filminstitut.de/, and Marina Dahlquist, ed., *Exporting Perilous Pauline: Pearl White and the Serial Film Craze* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. The most influential work in English are Jean-Louis Baudry, “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus,” *Film Quarterly* 28.2 (Winter 1974-75): 39-47, Christian Metz, “The Imaginary Signifier,” *Screen* 16.2 (Summer 1975): 7-13, and Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16.3 (Autumn 1975): 6-18. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure,” 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Burrows, “‘She Had So Many Appearances.’” [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Frank Kessler, “The ,Cinema of Attractions as *Dispositif*,” in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven(Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), 57-70. See also his “La cinématographie comme dispositif (du) spectaculaire,” *CiNéMAS* 14.1 (Autumn 2003): 21-34, and “Programming and Performing Early Cinema Today: Strategies and *Dispositifs*,” in *Early Cinema Today: The Art of Programming and Live Performance*, ed. Martin Loiperdinger (New Barnet, Herts.: John Libbey, 2011), 137-146. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Kessler, “Cinema of Attractions,” 61-62. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Steven Daedalus Burch, Andrew P. *Wilson and the Early Irish and Scottish National Theatres*, 1911-1950 (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Francis Devine, ed., *A Capital in Conflict: Dublin City and the 1913 Lockout* (Dublin: Dublin City Council, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Jacinta Prunty, *Dublin Slums, 1800-1925: A Study in Urban Geography* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1998). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Donal Nevin, ed., *James Larkin: Lion of the Fold* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1998). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Steven Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Denis Condon, *Early Irish Cinema, 1895-1921* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2008): 98-107, 153-159 and 236-238. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. “Cinema Machines at Work at Liberty Hall: An Unrehearsed Picture,” *Evening Telegraph* (25 October 1913): 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. “Farrell’s Inferno,” *Irish Worker* (15 February 1913): 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. “Picketing a Picture Palace,” *Evening Telegraph* (7 October 1913): 5, “Distributing Leaflets Outside Picture Theatre: Two Men Fined,” *Dublin Evening Mail* (14 October 1913): 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Euchan, “The Love of Romance,” and Shellback, “The Value of Respectability,” *Irish Worker* 23 Aug. 1913: 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. “Rotunda Pictures,” *Dublin Evening Mail* (9 September 1913): 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. “Rotunda Pictures,” *Dublin Evening Mail* (23 September 1913): 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. “Rotunda Pictures,” *Dublin Evening Mail* (27 September 1913): 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)