

Politics and the Cinematograph in Revolutionary Ireland

The Boer War and the Funeral of Thomas Ashe

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- A. Would you use the cinematograph to foster a national spirit in Eirinn?
- B. Would you use it to forward the Irish-Ireland movement?
- C. Would you use it for political propaganda?

These questions were posed by ‘Oisín’ in a competition for the young readers of the column *Buidhean na hÉireann* (the Irish Brigade) in two issues of the newspaper *Sinn Féin* in late 1910 and early 1911.¹ An anonymous ‘friend of the Brigade’ had offered five shillings for the best essay answering these questions. Although the winning essay, if there was one, does not seem to have been printed in the newspaper, the competition is evidence that some radical nationalists were thinking about how moving-picture technology might be used for their political purposes. The questions, however, posed as they are in a children’s column, perhaps suggest an uneasiness with the seriousness of the issue, that while the cinematograph might be utilized to promote an Irish national spirit, advance the Irish-Ireland movement, and disseminate political propaganda, the new technology should not after all be put to such use. Such reluctance would not have been overly surprising, given the amount of Irish nationalist energy expended in reviving or inventing Gaelic cultural pursuits untainted by association with British domination and what may have been regarded as an undesirable foreign technology.

¹ *Sinn Féin*, 24 December 1910 and 7 January 1911.

Nevertheless, between 1896, the date of the first exhibition to an Irish audience of projected moving pictures, and the establishment of the Free State in 1921, nationalists and other political groups in Ireland did use film for political purposes. In 1914, for example, the Union Defence League equipped lecturers with three large vans with cinematographs and fold-out screens to tour Britain, with the aim of promoting the unionist cause by showing films of Edward Carson and the Ulster Volunteer Force.² Others with no obvious political affiliation used politics as the pretext for making films to ensure large audiences.

The concern here is the political uses of film and the filmic uses of politics in Ireland in relation to the Boer War and the funeral of Thomas Ashe. These two historical moments exemplify the interaction of politics and what would, by the end of this period, come to be called *cinema*. Specifically, in showing something of the circumstances in which the people of Dublin were at times the audience for and/or the subject of films of political events, I hope to illuminate the dialectical relationship between the production, exhibition, and reception of ‘topical’ films at the turn of the century and what had become commodified as ‘newsreel’ films by the time of the 1916 Rising.

In order to concentrate on the closeness of factual films to politics in early twentieth-century Ireland, those fiction films that were first made in significant numbers in 1910–20 have been omitted from this discussion: their political dimensions have been discussed

² ‘Pictures in Ireland. By “Paddy”’, *Bioscope*, 18 June 1914.

in other commentaries.³ Paradoxically, early ‘factual’ films have received little critical attention, yet those that survive have had a busy afterlife and are familiar to a wide audience through their use by makers of historical films and television programmes. While early Irish fiction films can only be seen at the film archives that house them or in rare archival screenings elsewhere, a large body of political non-fiction film is readily available on DVD, notably in the film documentaries *Mise Éire* (1959) and *Saoirse?* (1961), directed by George Morrison for the Irish-language cultural organization Gael-Linn, and in the first episode of the landmark television history *Seven Ages* (2000), directed by Séan Ó Mórdha for the Irish national broadcaster RTÉ. Through frequent use in television programmes that illustrate Ireland in the last years of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth, the relatively few factual film images from the late colonial period have become detached from the history of their own production, distribution, exhibition and reception.

This is problematic on a number of levels. Harvey O’Brien has argued that *Mise Éire* and *Saoirse?* offer ‘a depoliticized political history, built solely upon the construction of an image of the nation amenable to received nationalist mythology’.⁴ For O’Brien, Morrison created a powerful myth of the ‘birth of a nation’ that would long exert a retarding influence on the representation of Ireland in moving pictures. Despite this, his films were important because at the very least they preserved early film material long before the establishment of the Irish Film Archive in 1992; indeed, for decades, Morrison’s

³ In particular, see Kevin Rockett, Luke Gibbons and John Hill, *Cinema and Ireland* (London and Sydney, 1987), 7–32; and Ruth Barton, *Irish National Cinema* (London, 2004) 18–33.

⁴ Harvey O’Brien, *The Real Ireland: The Evolution of Ireland in Documentary Film* (Manchester, 2004), 120.

documentaries were ruefully described as Ireland's only film archive.⁵ It is important to note, however, as indeed IFA curator Sunniva O'Flynn has observed, the selective nature of Morrison's act of preservation, by which he extracted the political items contained in Ireland's first newsreel series, *Irish Events*, to create his documentaries, while neglecting other items of a non-political nature seen by their first audiences.⁶

O'Flynn's insight — that political items filmed by an Irish newsreel company were first presented to their audiences as part of a series of short scenes of local interest — begins the process of re-imagining the context for these films. Whereas much about moving-picture entertainments changed in the sixteen years between the exhibitions of Boer War films and the *Irish Events* special *The Funeral of Thos. Ashe* in 1917, their essential 'variety' nature remained constant. Variety covered a wide range of entertainments — from live acts that accompanied the film, itself regarded as an 'act', in the music halls and variety theatres in the early 1900s, to the filmic variety provided by cinema programmes in the late 1910s. For O'Flynn, the typical combination of a one-minute political film along with four other one-minute films of sporting or cultural interest is likely to have lessened the impact of the political material on the audience. Besides, the audience of a late 1910s cinema programme would usually have seen this newsreel material as an accompaniment to a featured dramatic film, one or more short comedies, and perhaps a travelogue or other non-fiction 'interest' film of five to ten minutes in length. This can be seen in the programme at the Bohemian Picture House in Dublin's north-city suburb of

⁵ Martin McLoone, *Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema* (London, 2000), 17.

⁶ Sunniva O'Flynn, 'Irish Newsreels: An Expression of National Identity?', in Roger Smither and Wolfgang Klaue, eds., *Newsreels in Film Archives: A Study Based on the FIAF Newsreels Symposium* (Trowbridge, 1996), 57 and 59.

Phibsboro for the first part of the week in which *The Funeral of Thos. Ashe* formed the *Irish Events* contribution:

On Monday next a splendid picture by the Fox Company is announced, 'The Island of Desire', featuring George Walsh, a thrilling tale of the South Seas; a two-part Keystone comedy, 'Teddy at the Thottle', will afford plenty of fun. The Gaumont Graphic and Irish Events, with a cartoon, will complete a really first-class picture programme.⁷

Although this helps to enhance our awareness of the historical importance of topicals, these films did provide the occasion for some remarkable political displays.

Not only did the Irish political scene undergo enormous changes between 1900 and 1917 but so too did moving pictures. Even use of the term 'cinema' to designate a venue dedicated to the exhibition of moving pictures did not become common until after 1912, and was not universal even then, many establishments preferring to call themselves picture houses. Part of what Rick Altman has called the 'identity crisis' of projected moving pictures, they emerged as a form of entertainment independent of the established media from which they had liberally borrowed, then underwent internal 'jurisdictional conflicts', and finally reached 'overdetermined solutions' to tease out these problems.⁸ It would be anachronistic to call these moving pictures 'cinema' or even 'early cinema'; contemporary sources demonstrate how film shows were understood at specific moments.

⁷ *Dublin Evening Mail* [hereafter, *DEM*], 29 September 1917.

⁸ Rick Altman, *Silent Film Sound* (New York and Chichester, 2004), 18–23.

Emphasis here is on the encounter between historical audiences and films, rather than on extended textual analysis of the films themselves. The aim is to challenge entrenched myths about early film entertainments. For example, it is widely believed that James Joyce established Ireland's first cinema, the Cinematograph Volta, in Dublin's Mary Street in December 1909. However, there was fixed-venue, dedicated picture entertainment in Ireland before the Volta. Between March 1908 and January 1909, for example, the Colonial Picture Combine's People's Popular Picture Palace was located at the Queen's Royal Theatre in Dublin's Brunswick (now Pearse) Street, when the venue's theatrical patent and lease had temporarily lapsed. Differing significantly from the Volta and attracting a substantially proletarian audience, this picture palace opened with a programme headed by *The Story of the Kelly Gang*, a sensational melodrama about the notorious Australian outlaw.⁹ Of Irish extraction, Ned Kelly proved a popular subject and the film created a stir in an audience used to the Queen's staple stage melodramas about the deeds of Irish nationalist heroes. But an even earlier encounter between Dublin audiences and films had occurred eight years before.

The Boer War

It was the visit of Queen Victoria to Dublin in April 1900 that produced the first substantial encounter between politics and the cinematograph in Ireland. Continuity exists between street protests organized against Victoria's jubilee in June 1897, pro-Boer

⁹ *The Story of the Kelly Gang*, Australia: Gibson and Tait, 1906; dir. Charles Tait.

demonstrations that began in August 1899, and opposition to the visit of Edward VII in July 1903.¹⁰ Of particular interest here, however, are the public demonstrations by the Irish Transvaal Committee, an organization led by James Connolly, Maud Gonne, Arthur Griffith, and John O’Leary, and supported by such figures as W. B. Yeats, Michael Davitt, and William Rooney. The last of the great pro-Boer demonstrations was held on 17 December 1899, on the eve of the arrival in Dublin of Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain.¹¹ When the Transvaal Committee’s efforts against army recruitment in early 1900 seemed to be having an effect, a two-week royal visit, to begin on 3 April 1900, was announced in an attempt to champion the British cause.¹² Dublin Corporation’s decision on 14 March to deliver a loyal address to the queen led to angry scenes in the council chamber, with separatist nationalists singing ‘God Save Ireland’ from the gallery,¹³ and on St. Patrick’s Day the inauguration procession of Lord Mayor T. D. Pile was attacked in the streets.¹⁴ A planned peaceful protest against the Victoria’s visit, organized by Yeats for 4 April, was suppressed by the police.¹⁵

These demonstrations occurred in immediate response to, or even in advance of, events. However, it was to be some time before such resistance manifested itself in response to moving images of the queen’s visit, or of the Boer War for that matter, because the speed with which a film production company could screen images of the war in British and Irish venues depended upon how quickly a camera operator could be shipped to and from

¹⁰ P. J. Mathews, *Revival: The Abbey Theatre, Sinn Féin, the Gaelic League and the Co-Operative Movement* (Cork, 2003), 17–18, 66–91, 122–24.

¹¹ Mathews, *Revival*, 72.

¹² Editorial ‘The Royal Visit’, *Evening Telegraph* [hereafter, *ET*], 8 March 1900.

¹³ ‘Corporation and the Queen: The Lord Mayor Proposes an Address: Scenes in the Council Chamber: “God save Ireland” Sung from the Gallery’, *ET*, 14 March 1900.

¹⁴ ‘The Lord Mayor’s Procession: A Hostile Reception’, *ET*, 17 March 1900.

¹⁵ Mathews, *Revival*, 89.

‘the seat of war’. By contrast, the telegraph, while unable to transmit pictures, could deliver information rapidly between the parts of the Empire suitably connected. War films may have been screened at Dublin’s Lyric in the week following the outbreak of hostilities between the Boers and the British, but the images were of the Spanish-American War, which had been under way for nearly a year and a half. When the advertisement for this act claimed that ‘All Important News from the Seat of War arriving during the Performance will be Announced Nightly on the Cineograph’, however, the war referred to was the conflict in South Africa, which was dominating the news. As Simon Pople has observed:

The war itself straddled the end of the old and the beginning of the new century, and marked the end of a tradition dominated by the manual transcription of information and impressions. New media based on the technologies of the camera and the telegraph altered not only the speed with which the war could be covered but also the nature of the representation.¹⁶

When moving-picture representations of the conflict eventually arrived in Irish theatres and other venues, they encountered patterns of reception that had largely been established by other entertainments. From early in the war, Dublin theatre audiences voiced their displeasure at jingoistic displays by British stage performers. In January 1900, the *Irish Playgoer*’s ‘Odds and Ends’ column advised that ‘all reference to the war and soldiers should be omitted from our entertainments for the present, seeing the divided state of our

¹⁶ Simon Pople, “‘But the Khaki-Covered Camera is the *Latest* Thing’”: The Boer War Cinema and Visual Culture in Britain’, in Andrew Higson, ed., *Young and Innocent? The Cinema in Britain 1896–1930* (Exeter, 2002), 13–14.

people on the matter'.¹⁷ In February, a writer in the same journal described the Gaiety audience as 'over sensitive': 'Our Wilkie Bard was singing a capital medley song, and the very mention of one line of "The Soldiers of the Queen" created an uproar.'¹⁸ At the same theatre, more substantial disruption greeted the opening of the new musical comedy *San Toy*, which included such jingoistic songs as 'Private Tommy Atkins' from the 1893 musical comedy *The Gaiety Girl*:

the indefensible introduction of war glorification and jingoistic bunkum of that sort completely marred the ordinary playgoer's enjoyment on the opening night, as each reference to such caused a disturbance, which, at times, developed into quite a pandemonium of discordant sounds that completely obliterated what was taking place on the stage. This introduction of contentious matter into musical plays ought to be discontinued, especially in Dublin, where so much diversity of opinion on such-like affairs is, at present, or in fact, always to be found.¹⁹

It was not just the Gaiety's predominantly middle-class audience that reacted in this way. When comic singer Harriet Vernon appeared at the low-priced Lyric variety theatre on 15 May 1900 dressed as an English officer, 'though she looked exceptionally well in the uniform, a very large number of the people who were present objected, and showed that they did so in the usual way'. Despite establishing that the uniform was the problem, 'Vernon came out in the same dress and sang what a majority of the audience considered

¹⁷ *Irish Playgoer*, 1, 9 (1900), 4.

¹⁸ *Irish Playgoer*, 1, 14 (1900), 12.

¹⁹ 'San Toy: Lively Scenes at the Gaiety — Singers Turn the Theatre into a Bear-Garden by Singing "Jingo" Songs', *Irish Playgoer*, 2, 10 (1900), 11.

a Jingo song, with the result that during the time she was on the stage hissing was very noticeable'.²⁰ The *Irish Playgoer* columnist Conn comments:

I, for one, sincerely wish the war was over, in order that amusement-seekers in Dublin may again be allowed to enjoy themselves in peace ... I fear our local managers are greatly to blame for the state of affairs that exists at present, in not compelling all companies to 'blue pencil' every Jingo allusion while here ... if this were done, I, for one, would go with a merrier heart to the theatre, knowing that I could then sit out a play without uproar and hideous noises.²¹

The same sensitivities were not apparent in Belfast, where for several weeks in late January and early February the Alhambra featured war sketches such as *Briton or Boer* and *The Union Jack*.

What appear to be the first Boer War films in Ireland were exhibited at the Lyric in March 1900 by Scott's metascope, 'the most up-to-date appliance for showing living pictures'.²² As well as views of the battles of Spion Kop, Modder River, and Nicholson Nek, mentioned in the advertisement, the show featured general films of South Africa — 'among many others, Cape street, Port Elizabeth' — and further war-related footage, including: 'the Roslin Castle, conveying consignments of troops for the war; the "Fighting Fifth" digging trenches at Estcourt; a Skirmish with the artillery outside Ladysmith; the Lancers at the Modder River; Bridging the Tugela, and Watering the

²⁰ *Irish Daily Independent*, 14 May 1900.

²¹ 'Odds and Ends', *Irish Playgoer*, 2, 13 (1900), 2.

²² *ET*, 10 March 1900.

Artillery and Transport Mules; the Ambulance at Work, etc'.²³ These films do not seem to have caused anti-British demonstrations or displays of loyalty in the Lyric.

A delay in the arrival of pictures, however, could as likely have increased as reduced the resistance to them, but their mode of presentation was crucial to the audience's reception of them. When the films were presented in a neutral way — without any pro-British display by the lecturer, or the choice of jingoistic music, or the patriotic wording of titles — they could be accepted as information rather than resisted as propaganda. Reviewing the first week of 'WAR PICTURES. The Very Latest, including "Relief of Kimberly", Troops in Action, Most Thrilling Scenes' and the first showing of 'HER MAJESTY THE QUEEN's Gorgeous Entry into Dublin' at the Empire Theatre of Varieties, the unionist *Dublin Evening Mail* briefly comments that they 'were greatly appreciated' and 'received with unstinted applause'.²⁴ A newspaper with this ideological outlook might be expected to emphasize demonstrations of loyalty and downplay shows of protest. In its review of the shows at the Empire during the second week of the run of these films, however, the same paper demonstrates that the music-hall audience could divide on political lines. On the evening of 16 April, protest broke out before the potentially explosive film material had been shown:

Mays and Hunter, banjoists, played several charming selections, and for a moment or two the gallery threatened to become disorderly, in consequence of representations of different schools of politics, calling — some for 'Killarney' and

²³ *ET*, 10 March 1900.

²⁴ *DEM*, 10 and 14 April 1900.

other for 'Rule Britannia'. Eventually the banjoists played 'Killarney', and were cheered again and again.²⁵

In this context, and given that the loyal element in the audience had previously been prompted to sustained applause in response to footage of the queen's visit, it seems remarkable that the pictures were not more contentious.

The nationalist *Evening Telegraph's* strong pro-Boer stance reflected the broad nationalist position, which drew a clear analogy between the British threat to the self-determination of the Boers and that of the Irish, understood either as Home Rule or as independence. The paper gave prominence to illustrated articles on the Transvaal Irish Brigade, which fought with the Boers.²⁶ However, it could not ignore the fact that much larger numbers of Irish recruits fought in the British army against the Boers, and it is on such an issue that the accusations against the British establishment's manipulation of the news take an interesting turn. The *Telegraph's* report 'A Sensational Story: Dublin Fusilier's Letter from the Front: The Boers and the Border Regiment' displays the Dublin Fusiliers as patriotic Irish men in their readiness to tell the true story of British losses covered up by the military hierarchy.²⁷

The delay in the delivery of genuine films of the war in South Africa, and the subsequent difficulty of filming a guerrilla campaign, encouraged certain film producers to shoot

²⁵ 'The Empire Palace', *DEM*, 17 April 1900.

²⁶ See, for example, 'The Transvaal Irish Brigade' and 'Transvaal Irish Brigade: Four of Its Sturdy Members', *ET*, 28 October 1899 and 9 December 1899.

²⁷ *ET*, 27 January 1900.

staged war scenes. In March 1900 the *Optical Magic Lantern Journal* lamented that ‘A correspondent asks us how he is to know real from sham war films, seeing that several subjects are made at home from life models.’²⁸ These staged war films, the longest running series of which were produced by the Mitchell and Kenyon Company between 1900 and 1902,²⁹ ‘draw on the standard Boer narratives, in which the patriotic behaviour of the Tommy is contrasted with the devious and unchivalrous conduct of the Boer’.³⁰ Staged films were joined in late 1900 by patriotic trick films, such as R. W. Paul’s *Kruger’s Dream of Empire*, directed by Walter R. Booth, which includes an animated dream and the disappearance of live-action figures.³¹

The first film exhibition at which protests are recorded was the Modern Marvel Syndicate’s film and variety show at the Rotunda between 8 and 20 April 1901. The company was run by T. J. West, ‘a gentleman long and favourably known in theatrical and amusement matters in Dublin, his association with our city extending over twenty-five years, during which time he has been very successful in his endeavours to meet the public taste’.³² When protests were made against parts of the show, the reviews were careful to exonerate him. As well as managing the show, he delivered ‘a descriptive and interesting lecture at each display’. Far from offering a damning verdict, the two substantial reviews in the *Telegraph* might be said to be generous in their attentiveness but equivocal in their praise. Their overall assessment, nevertheless, was that the ‘whole

²⁸ ‘Sham War Cinematograph Films’, *Optical Magic Lantern Journal and Photographic Enlarger*, 11, 30 (1900), 30.

²⁹ Robin Whalley and Peter Worden, ‘Forgotten Firm: A Short Chronological Account of Mitchell and Kenyon, Cinematographers’, *Film History*, 10, 1 (1998), 37–38.

³⁰ Pople, ‘The Boer War Cinema’, 20.

³¹ Pople, ‘The Boer War Cinema’, 20–21.

³² *ET*, 13 April 1901. All quotations in this paragraph are from this review and an earlier, longer review titled ‘The Modern Marvel Syndicate, Limited: An Interesting Show’, *ET*, 9 April 1901.

show certainly makes an amusing, interesting, and wonderful entertainment'. The variety acts, consisting of singers and jugglers, were 'a pleasing adjunct to the photographic portion'. The main attraction featured the drama *Joan of Arc*,³³ which was judged to be 'both entertaining to the old and instructive to the young, and last night the display was received with loud and long well-merited applause'. But some of the accompanying topical films elicited conflicting responses from the audience:

Some did not meet with the approval of a large section of the audience. They objected to representations of her late Majesty Queen Victoria, and scenes representing 'Our gallant soldiers, who have been fighting for the last eighteen months'. Some of those present cheered and clapped, and the remainder booed and hissed, but probably both parties were satisfied, notwithstanding the Khaki flavour of that portion of the entertainment, for, as a show, it was good, and this, the manager said, was all he wanted the audience to admit.

By the end of the week, the *Telegraph* was describing the show with no mention of audience disapproval. It seems likely that West altered the programme to make it more acceptable to the divided loyalties of Irish audiences.

Two South African-themed entertainments played seasons in Dublin to coincide with the lucrative Horse Show week in late August 1901. *Savage South Africa*, playing at the grounds on Jones's Road, was advertised as 'NOT A CIRCUS BUT REAL LIFE. NOT PICTURES

³³ *Joan of Arc*, France: Star, 1899; dir. Georges Méliès.

BUT REALITY'.³⁴ Its demonstrations of trick-riding and pageantry based on the Zulu wars attracted more than usual attention because of the outbreak of the Boer War, and new acts were added accordingly,³⁵ including a

realistic scene descriptive of Major Allan Wilson's last stand on the banks of the Shingani River, and the piece de resistance was afforded in the concluding spectacle dealing with the battle of Elandslaagte, in which the rattle of Maxim guns and the roll of heavier ordnance played a leading part.³⁶

As the different newspaper reviews described it, audiences could read this variation on the Wild West show as either pro-Boer or pro-British, or as apolitical spectacle.

The other South African-themed entertainment running in August 1901 was not so ambiguous in its address to its audience. One of Poole's myriorama companies, which had long-established links to Dublin, encountered difficulty because of the jingoism of its Boer war-based show of still and moving pictures. 'There are no less than seven of Messrs Poole's organisations all being exhibited to-night in various parts of the kingdom,' reports the *Evening Mail*, 'and so well is the business arranged, that no show is ever seen twice in the same town.'³⁷ The company that met with protests in Dublin was owned by Joseph Poole and managed by Fred Mayer. The *Evening Telegraph* offers a blunt assessment:

³⁴ Advertisements appear in the daily papers in the week of 29 July 1901.

³⁵ Pople, 'The Boer War Cinema', 23.

³⁶ "'Savage South Africa': Unique Entertainment at Jones' Road', *DEM*, 6 August 1901.

³⁷ 'The Stage and Gallery: Poole's Myriorama', *DEM*, 24 August 1901.

The entertainment is styled 'Our Empire', and the title is entirely expressive and descriptive. The principal portion consists of scenes in the Boer war, and while the pictures as pictures are good enough, the history portrayed ... by them will not be of much assistance to the young student. Of course the Myriorama was painted for a British audience who imagine that their aggression in the South African Republics has been an uninterrupted series of successes, and that the Yeomanry are the equal of Napoleon's Old Guard. Yesterday these pictures were not received with unmixed approval. But better than these unfortunate views was the photographic display in reference to the Pekin [*sic*] disturbances and scenes of general interest all over the world.³⁸

The *Telegraph* reiterated its claim of controversy in its Saturday 'Music and the Drama' column at the end of the first week of the season: 'Poole's Myriorama continues to draw large houses at the Round Room, Rotunda, and the pro-British representation of South African war scenes give rise to a little excitement nightly between the patrons of the show who hold opposite views on the subject of the war.'³⁹

Poole's case is illuminating because the war films were included with paintings and still photographs. In assessing the entertainment as a whole, the *Telegraph* reviewer admires them as aesthetic objects, while criticizing their use to advance the British cause. Dublin newspapers and journals pointed out the limitations of the new media technologies based

³⁸ 'Poole's Myriorama', *ET*, 6 August 1901.

³⁹ *ET*, 10 August 1901.

on the telegraph and the photograph. “[F]aked” snapshots of the war,’ observes the *Irish Playgoer*, ‘made with pictures of theatrical supers, who are made up as Boers or Englishmen as occasion demands are much more dramatic than the real ones, and find ready sale in Paris.’⁴⁰ While remarkable achievements in themselves, these media could be made to lie, whether inadvertently on occasion, to increase their entertainment value, or to suit the ideological position of the companies that produced them and screened them.

The Funeral of Thomas Ashe

In the sixteen years between the Boer War film protests and the funeral of Thomas Ashe, some significant uses of film for political purposes occurred. There were exhibitions of films covering republican commemorations at the grave of Wolfe Tone in Bodenstown, Co. Kildare, in 1913 and 1914. And some cinema-owners around the country, including the Horgan brothers of Youghal, County Cork, shot and screened films of local political groups. But the founding by Norman Whitten of his General Film Supply company after his arrival in Ireland in 1910 was of national importance. Whitten had worked in film since its earliest days, beginning his career with the British pioneer film-maker Cecil Hepworth. As the name of his company suggests, Whitten distributed films and supplied cinema and film-making equipment, but he also made many kinds of film, including: news films of events such as the funeral of Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa in 1915; local interest films; British army recruitment films; promotional films for such companies as

⁴⁰ ‘Odds and Ends’, *Irish Playgoer*, 2, 3 (1900), 2.

Court Laundry and Patterson matches. He also made a film of the 1913 Irish National Pilgrimage to Lourdes, as well as the early Irish animated film *Ten Days' Leave*, with newspaper cartoonist Frank Leah in 1917, and the 1920 drama *Aimsir Padraig/In the Days of St. Patrick*.

It was a film from the GFS's newsreel *Irish Events*, which ran from 1917 to 1920, that marked the spectacular public culmination of a protest in September 1917 against British government treatment of Sinn Féin prisoners in Mountjoy prison. The occasion of the protest was the death of Thomas Ashe, president of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, as a result of force-feeding while on hunger strike. In a series of demonstrations carefully stage-managed by republican leaders, Ashe's body became the emblem of a new public solidarity between the various insurgent nationalist groups that were already moving towards coalition under the Sinn Féin banner. The protest's highlight was Ashe's funeral at Glasnevin cemetery on Sunday, 30 September, the largest public demonstration since the Rising was put down in 1916, at which the Irish Volunteers marched openly under arms and fired three volleys of shots over the coffin, 'the only speech which it is proper to make above the grave of a dead Fenian'.⁴¹

The *Evening Herald* commended the exhibition on the evening of Ashe's funeral 'of films showing various ranges of the procession and scenes associated with it. The rifling part at the grave was included.'⁴² The widespread publicity of organized events after Ashe's death allowed GFS to plan a newsreel special for their *Irish Events* serial. In what

⁴¹ This accounts for most of Collins's laconic oration at the graveside, reported in the daily papers; see, for example, *Irish Times*, 1 October 1917.

⁴² *Evening Herald* [hereafter, *EH*], 1 October 1917.

might be called a ‘prequel’, some of the material relating to Ashe’s lying-in-state at City Hall was shown at the Rotunda on the Saturday night preceding the funeral, with the complete film, including the procession through the city to the cemetery, due for general release on the following Monday. The final film was first exhibited, however, on the night of the funeral at the Bohemian.⁴³ Run by Frederick Sparling, the Bohemian was a 1,000-seat cinema located on the route of the funeral procession out of the city, between Mountjoy prison and Glasnevin cemetery.⁴⁴

Reporting on the filming of the funeral, the cinema journal *Irish Limelight* observed that people ‘took part in the procession, went home to have tea, and an hour later saw themselves on the screen. Some hustle on the part of the camera men!’⁴⁵ While by no means unprecedented for important events, the speed with which Whitten prepared the film for exhibition distinguished the GFS from its competitors; in this case, from Charles McEvoy, proprietor of the Masterpiece Picture House, who also filmed the funeral but was unable to show his film until the Monday evening.⁴⁶ The theatrical exhibition of *The Funeral of Thos. Ashe* is as important as the speed of its appearance. The *Limelight* report suggests that, having taken some refreshment, mourners reassembled at the Bohemian to reconstitute the political demonstration that the funeral represented. Here, they viewed the funeral distilled to its ten-minute highlights — twice the usual length of a newsreel — all taken from advantageous viewpoints. In a sense, the exhibition at the Bohemian represented the culmination of the political protest, of the concentration of the energies

⁴³ See advertisements in *DEM*, 29 September 1917.

⁴⁴ For details of the location, management, and seating capacities of most Irish cinemas of the period, see *Cinema Yearbook 1915* (London, 1915), 94ff.

⁴⁵ *Irish Limelight*, 1, 10 (1917), 8.

⁴⁶ *Irish Limelight*, 1, 10 (1917), 8.

and emotions that had been built up over several days. That night the spectators were freed from the limited perspective available to people in a crowd; they saw all the key events from a privileged vantage, an audience now seeing itself.

The screening of this film might seem to be a moment when the cinema assumed a key role in Irish political protest. However, little information is available on what happened in the Bohemian that night. What does survive suggests that the film would have fostered a participative form of spectatorship among the people who chose to attend its screening. 'Participative' here implies a more advanced form of interaction than took place with the Boer War films, this kind of spectatorship occurring between the subject, the producer, the exhibitor and the spectator(s) because both the subject and the spectator(s) and, at least in early cases, the producer and the exhibitor are often remarkably allied with one another. Such an alliance between producer/exhibitor and spectator/subject does not transcend the material conditions in which the films were produced and consumed. In fact, the earliest manifestations of this participative spectatorship, when it is particularly associated with the local-view film, seems to be associated with a form of primitive accumulation in which the moving image of previously unfilmed groups is expropriated for profit.

Other factors in the first exhibition of *The Funeral of Thos. Ashe* must have worked to dissipate this participative dynamic or to make it fleeting. Advertisements for the Sunday evening show at the Bohemian, for example, describe it as 'a special long and interesting programme', featuring 'a five-part exclusive comedy-drama entitled, "A Modern Taming

of the Shrew”’.⁴⁷ With the evening performance beginning at eight thirty and the funeral film screening at ten o’clock, the spectators would have experienced an hour and a half of other entertainments. There is no report that the cinema’s well-publicized orchestra played dirges or patriotic tunes, although this seems very likely and happened in on similar occasions. Earlier that year, when Whitten managed to get the *Irish Events* film *Release of the Sinn Féin Prisoners* screened just hours after their arrival in Dublin on 18 June,

Some of the ex-prisoners and their friends could not resist the temptation to see themselves ‘in the pictures’, and a contingent marched up to the Rotunda early in the afternoon. They cheerfully acceded to the genial manager’s request that they should leave their flags in the porch, and, when inside, gave every indication of enjoying not only ‘their own film’ but the rest of the programme.⁴⁸

The power of the cinema to enthrall its audiences is evident in this account, with heightened political feeling having been, at least momentarily, forgotten in the sense of enjoyment of the other entertainments on offer. Nevertheless, it also indicates a tension that undermines the apparently smooth identification being advanced between the cinema audience and the mourners on screen. This tension is present in the *Limelight*’s suggestion that it was not the continuation of the demonstration that brought mourners to the Bohemian but the narcissistic pleasure of seeing oneself on screen, of picking oneself

⁴⁷ *DEM*, 29 September 1917. *A Modern Taming of the Shrew*, United States: New York Motion Pictures, 1915; dir. Reginald Baker.

⁴⁸ ‘Sinn Féin Prisoners’ Homecoming: Story of the Filming of Recent Remarkable Street Scenes in Dublin’, *Irish Limelight*, 1, 7 (1917), 16–17. This incident is treated in more detail in Rockett, Gibbons and Hill, *Cinema and Ireland*, 34.

out of the crowd. This kind of pleasure was a particular feature of the earliest films, but early films also purposely employed the figuration of the crowd as an instance of identification.

In any event, it is unlikely that many individual mourners could have identified themselves among the throngs depicted in long shot by the funeral film. With the camera viewing events from among the spectators, it could, however, help re-create for its audience their participation in the funeral as a group by reproducing their optical perspective. Newspaper reports and photographs demonstrate that even such apparently god-like perspectives as the high-angle shots above the crowd reproduced the points of view of numerous mourners. ‘Over 200,000 spectators and sympathisers thronged the route,’ declares one evening newspaper, ‘roofs, windows, verandas — even lamp-posts, railings, walls, hoardings, trees, statues, and monuments — every possible point of vantage was utilised by eager sightseers.’⁴⁹ The *Freeman’s Journal* reported that ‘residents of many houses were charging for seats at their windows, and that the sites were appreciated by those taking advantage of them was testified by the numbers who witnessed the procession from these points’.⁵⁰ The caption to a photograph in the *Freeman* reads:

Sunday at the O’Connell Statue: The above picture gives a very good idea of the dimensions of the crowd which surged round and up the base of the O’Connell

⁴⁹ ‘30,000 Mourners: Incidents in Yesterday’s Mighty Funeral: Facts and Figures: 3 Miles of Marchers in Massed Formation’, *EH*, 1 October 1917.

⁵⁰ ‘Thomas Ashe: Funeral in Dublin Yesterday: Impressive Scenes: Enormous Crowds Throng the Streets’, *Freeman’s Journal*, 1 October 1917.

Statue on Sunday afternoon. For fully two hours before the cortege was due to pass men and boys by the score fought to obtain a good view by climbing amongst the figures which adorn the plinth, until all but the statue itself was obscured.⁵¹

This film and others like it address not only those who could claim this very direct form of spectatorial identification with the image, but also those who desired to witness the event. In the weeks following the funeral, apart from cinema-goers who were indifferent or hostile, it is likely that screenings of the film in Dublin and in the fifty cinemas around Ireland that subscribed to *Irish Events* would have brought together spectators who had taken part in the demonstrations as well as those who had been unable to attend.⁵² From this perspective, these films are essentially local newsreels targeted at spectators who could decode them. Therefore, it was not only the actual participants who would be able to place themselves in the crowd, but also those who could fill in this ‘back-story’, those who would have wanted to be in the crowd and who, as a result, became virtual participants. These films worked on the desire to see oneself as a participant, whether or not one actually had been present at the event, and provided a semi-public context in which to experience this mediated participation.

When exhibited as political propaganda in jingoistic shows, the Boer War films engendered protest among nationalist audience members and displays of loyalty among unionist members. On the other hand, such *Irish Events* specials as *The Funeral of Thos. Ashe* seem more directly to offer the possibility of fostering ‘a national spirit in Eirinn’.

⁵¹ *Freeman's Journal*, 2 October 1917.

⁵² *Irish Limelight*, 1, 12 (1917), cover.

These latter films could be used to imply identification between the spectator and popular protest. In the period between the 1916 Rising and the War of Independence, GFS seems to have ensured its audience by being more obviously favourable to the nationalist cause. A 1918 listing of *Irish Events* specials features: *Irish Sinn Fein Convention*; *Funeral of Thos. Ashe*; *Release of the Sinn Fein Prisoners*; *South Armagh Election*; *Consecration of the Bishop of Limerick*; *Funeral of the Late John Redmond, M.P.*; and *Waterford Election*. 'It has been proved,' boasts the advertisement, 'that topical such as any of the above will attract a larger audience than a six-reel exclusive.'⁵³ In the context of wider political events and especially when they took the place of the featured attractions at the top of the cinema programme, as *The Funeral of Thos. Ashe* did at the Bohemian Picture House on 30 September 1917, the political significance of these films becomes more fully visible.

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⁵³ *Irish Limelight*, 2, 4 (1918), 15.