

## The Volta Myth

“In England there is a growing demand for cinematograph entertainments,” announced Dublin’s *Evening Mail* in February 1908. “Every important town has its permanent ‘picture show,’ and the Colonial Picture Combine see no reason why Ireland should not be adequately represented in this respect.” The occasion of this statement was the opening of what was soon being advertised as the People’s Popular Picture Palace at the former Queen’s Theatre in Dublin’s Brunswick Street (now Pearse Street). This venue was probably Dublin’s and Ireland’s first dedicated cinema, opening almost two years before Ireland’s best-known early cinema, James Joyce’s Volta opened its doors on December 20, 1909.

It is curious how persistent the myth of the Volta has been in both popular and academic accounts of Irish cinema. The link between Ireland’s most celebrated 20<sup>th</sup>-century writer and the most powerful medium of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is such a good story that the misconception that the Volta was the first cinema in Dublin – and in some accounts, in Ireland – has circulated virtually unchallenged since it appeared in Richard Ellmann’s 1959 Joyce biography. The Volta was undoubtedly an important early cinema, and the Joyce connection has provided the focus for some fine research. The significance of the Volta has, however, been inflated to the extent that it has come essentially to represent Ireland’s first cinemas, and thereby to distort our view of early cinemas and the audiences who attended them.

To begin to redress the balance, I would like to offer a glimpse of the film entertainment that the People’s Popular Picture Palace at the Queen’s offered and the kind of people who frequented it. It should be noted that the Queen’s wasn’t the only pre-Volta dedicated film venue. Hale’s Tours, a fairground attraction that exclusively exhibited films that had been shot from moving trains inside converted train carriages rigged to simulate the motion of a train, operated from a former theatre premises just off Dublin’s Grafton Street from June 3, 1907. And in his 1985 history of Belfast cinemas, *Fading Lights, Silver Screens*, Michael Open identified two Belfast venues specializing in films that opened more than a year before the Volta: the St. George’s Hall, which opened on August 17, 1908; and the Star Picture Palace, which opened on September 14 of the same year.

For the ten months between March 2, 1908, and January 9, 1909, during a period in which its theatrical patent had lapsed, it was the Queen’s that was probably Ireland’s first dedicated cinema. Visiting it on its opening night, diarist, architect, and habitual theatergoer Joseph Holloway

found the entrances to the cheaper parts of the house thronged with small boys eager to gain admittance – The Story of the Kelly Gang evidently was the attraction to these youthful minds who are so full of the horrors of the “penny dreadful,” & who longed to see some of them realised before their eyes in “living pictures.” The excitement in the street outside was fully maintained inside (I got standing room on the upper circle for 6d). The house was thronged in every part, & a series of pictures depicting the humours and excitement of a man’s first row on the river. This was followed by “The Sorrows of a Clown” & “Her Rival’s Necklace” – two dramatic shows. Mr. Alan Wright sang “The Boy on the Raft,” to a series of pictures & then a three minute interval occurred, & the lights put up. Smoking was freely indulged in & the whole house was agog with excitement. The

event of the programme – “The Story of the Kelly Gang” was then announced amid “sensation,” as they say in a murder trial, & the story was dramatically & excitingly unfolding itself amid noisy approval as I left a little after eight o’clock.

Even if the middle-class Holloway distances himself from the excitement of the spectacle, he offers a vivid eyewitness account of the event and particularly, the kinds of social interaction that could occur in early cinemas. Because a film performance in a cinema during the silent period combined recorded visuals with the live sound produced by musicians and, sometimes, a lecturer or cicerone who explained, or invented, the narrative, considerable local variations in the experience of a particular film were possible. At the Queen’s, the film show was punctuated by vocal acts singing to magic lantern slides and by an interval that allowed spectators to socialize, smoke, and drink nonalcoholic beverages, the last because of restriction on the building’s lease. The programme worked to build anticipation for the feature, in this case *The Story of the Kelly Gang* (Australia, 1906; directed by Charles Tait), often considered the first long dramatic film.

Holloway suggests that spectators at the Queen’s opening became an audience in response to a film from a genre that they follow in other media: in popular literature and in the sensational melodramas that had previously been (and would be again from September 1909) staged at the Queen’s. The story of the fate of an outlaw of Irish extraction in Australia would doubtless have appealed to an audience used to the stage melodramas treating the deeds of such Irish nationalist heroes as Wolfe Tone and Robert Emmet that had been a staple of the Queen’s. In *The Story of the Kelly Gang*, the Irish rebel has gone global.

The Colonial Picture Combine’s shrewd combination of entertainments shows that the management intended to retain the audience that had come to melodramas at the Queen’s and that were curious about film shows. If the kind of “Irish” material provided for the opening night could not be sustained, the management offered a steady supply of U.S. and British films popular with audiences, in contrast to the Volta which provide predominantly Italian and French films. Many times larger than the Volta’s converted shop-front that could hold in excess of 400, the Queen’s demonstrated the viability of a dedicated cinema of well over a thousand seats in Dublin in 1908.

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THE QUEEN'S THEATRE, DUBLIN.

SOLE PROPRIETOR,

F. W. MARRIOTT WATSON.