

‘Offensive and Riotous Behaviour’? Performing the Role of an Audience in Irish Cinema of the mid-1910s

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In September 1915, Frederick Arthur Sparling, proprietor of the Bohemian Picture Theatre, Dublin, prosecuted William Larkin on a charge of offensive and riotous behaviour for protesting in the auditorium during a screening of *A Modern Magdalen* (US: Life Photo Film, 1915). The protest was part of an ongoing campaign by the Catholic church-based vigilance committees – led by the Dublin Vigilance Committee (DVC) – against certain kinds of imported popular culture, initially targeting newspapers, magazines and books and moving on by 1915 to theatrical shows and films.¹ Larkin played a leading role in the confrontational elements of the campaign, gaining notoriety among theatre and cinema owners as he successfully drew press attention to the DVC’s activities.

Newspaper accounts of this case stand out in early Irish cinema history as providing the most extensive evidence of audience behaviour, but they also pose methodological questions. These include what the most appropriate way is to discuss Larkin’s protest, which was not “normal” behaviour but a kind of spectacular performance – honed and rehearsed – whose rhetorical intent was to suggest that he spoke for a silent majority too timid to voice their own interpretation of unacceptable images. Accounts of this case suggest that Larkin and the DVC rejected the attentive passivity apparently demanded of cinema audiences by such factors as the feature film’s growing dominance on the cinema programme in order to provide a space for performances of a Catholic Irishness they thought inadequately – or sometimes insultingly – portrayed on screen. However, despite tacit – and even explicitly – judicial approval of previous protests, this case did not end altogether successfully for Larkin. Courtroom

appearances by cinema employees and audience members not affiliated with the DVC offer rare glimpses of ordinary cinemagoers' responses not only to images on the screen but also to the behaviour of organizations who claimed to speak for them.

The few surviving archival traces of William Larkin give little indication of why he became involved with a conservative Catholic movement in an Ireland in which the name Larkin was synonymous with labour protest. The surname Larkin is likely – particularly in the wake of the 2013 centenary commemoration of labour struggles at the time of Dublin Lockout of 1913 – to alert readers familiar with Irish history to the very different forms of protests organized by Jim Larkin – apparently no relation – militant labour leader and founder of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union. William Larkin – 33 in 1915 – came from a working-class family – his father had been a wine porter – and he lived with his elderly parents and his twin brother Francis – who frequently joined William's protests – in Sherrard Avenue, a residential street of small houses north of the city centre.² Although his place of work is unclear, he was a clerk, and this shift in class status may have prompted his involvement with a church organization. Certainly, his willingness to breach the bounds of respectable behaviour made him valuable to more securely middle-class and ecclesiastical members of the DVC, for whom such behaviour would have been unacceptable.

Given their shared interest in an active audience, it seems less incongruous that the *Irish Times*, one of Ireland's main daily newspapers, should draw comparisons between the DVC and Futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. Writing in May 1913, the *Times*'s editorial writer commented that the manifesto the paper had recently received from the DVC

reminds us of the proclamations which, from time to time, reach this office from Signor Marinetti, the leader of that amiable band of anarchists, the Futurists. We hasten to say that the resemblance is one of manner, not of matter. The literary artist who drafted the

Committee's address has the same seriousness of purpose, the same passionate utterance, the same "intoxication in the exuberance of his own verbosity".³ The reasons the *Irish Times* drew these comparisons are worth exploring, but such a comparison is likely to remind early cinema scholars of the most famous essay in the field, Tom Gunning's "The Cinema of Attractions" and of Wanda Strauven's recent re-examination of it in relation to Marinetti's discussion of variety theatre and cinema.⁴ Gunning observes that Marinetti's 1913 manifesto on "The Variety Theatre" not only praised its aesthetics of astonishment and stimulation, but particularly its creation of a new spectator who contrasts with the 'static,' 'stupid voyeur' of traditional theatre. The spectator at the variety theatre feels directly addressed by the spectacle and joins in, singing along, heckling the comedians".⁵ As a result of this constantly changing stimulation, the variety spectator could not become enthralled by the entertainment. The variety spectator became the model for the spectator of Futurist theatre, whom Marinetti promised to foster by introducing agitation into the auditorium by various means.⁶ Ironically, it was precisely in the mid-1910s, when Marinetti was co-authoring "The Futurist Cinema" (1916), that the "trickality" of early cinema he valued was giving way to the theatricality and narrativity of Italian and world cinema.⁷

The *Irish Times*'s comparison of the DVC and the Futurists was made before the publication of "The Variety Theatre" in September 1913, and while the item made light of the DVC, its intentions went beyond humour to express the irritation of at least certain elements of the press with the movement. Nor was the comparison too obscure for contemporary readers. The *Times* had kept its readers informed about Futurism in a series of editorial items and short articles on the movement since 1909, many of them in response to the manifestos that Marinetti sent to it.⁸ However, the phrase "amiable anarchist" was an oxymoron at the time, and the general opinion of anarchy as dangerous and destructive was epitomized by the

sensational press reports and films of the Sidney Street Siege of London-based Latvian anarchists in January 1911. Although Marinetti's anarchism might be rendered amiable by his geographical remoteness and colourful iconoclasm operating wholly in the cultural realm, the same could not be said about the DVC by a Dublin-based newspaper.

The DVC was part of a Catholic Church-based movement that began in the West-coast city of Limerick in early October 1911. Its founding by a priest attached to the Archconfraternity of the Holy Family was widely covered in the press, particularly during an initial campaign against the delivery to the city's newsagents of English Sunday newspapers, which contained the details of divorce trials that the vigilance committee thought inappropriate for Catholics whose church opposed divorce.⁹ As the movement spread – and it did so like wildfire – its aims were initially expressed principally as a campaign against “evil” literature of this kind. Committees were quickly formed elsewhere in the country. The DVC was founded on the initiative of members of the Catholic Young Men's Society in early November 1911 and by the end of the month had 18 constituent parochial committees.¹⁰ What the committees deemed evil, however, remained vague and shifting, and their campaigns caused irritation in the press, particular such titles as the *Times* whose readership was largely Protestant and opposed to nationalism. Such irritation increased from 1913 on, as vigilance tactics became more confrontational. The DVC began picketing newsagents in early 1913 with the expressed aim of informing people attempting to buy certain newspapers of the unsuitability of their content but in fact – as was established later in court – physically obstructing and intimidating people. In the most widely publicized case, the Larkin brothers were arrested for obstruction outside a newsagent and fined £1 each.¹¹

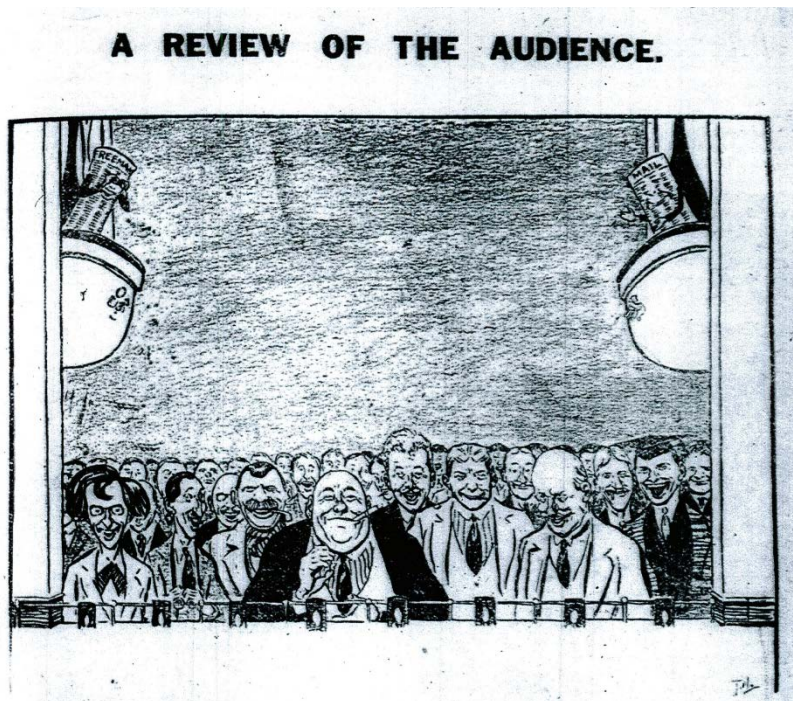


Figure 1: “A Review of the Audience,” *Leader* (17 July 1915): 541.

The Catholic and nationalist sections of the press were generally supportive of the increasing militancy of the DVC’s campaign. Although not representative of the mainstream nationalist press, the cultural nationalist journal *The Leader* – whose editor and chief polemicist, D. P. Moran, advocated an “Irish Ireland” that should be “de-Anglicized” to become fully Catholic and Gaelic in its language and culture – is of particular interest because it expressed its support not only in words but also in some of the few images of popular audiences of the period. Beginning its first issue in September 1900 with a review of a show at Dublin’s Lyric Music Hall, the *Leader* had condemned Irish variety theatres not merely because they were “regular night-schools for Anglicisation” but because the type of entertainment that they brought to Ireland was a degenerate form of what was available in London and as a result was especially morally pernicious.¹² The reason that Dublin had become a dumping ground for such a low form, Moran contended, was that the Irish press praised what it should actually condemn. He excoriated unionist newspapers – principally the *Times* and *Dublin Evening Mail* – but reserved particular vitriol for the Catholic nationalist press – the *Freeman’s*

Journal and its *Evening Telegraph*, and the *Irish Independent* and its *Evening Herald*. In a cartoon that appeared in the *Leader* in July 1915, the *Dublin Evening Mail* and the *Freeman's Journal* are seen watching from the privileged vantage point of theatrical boxes a music hall production they have advertised and recommended (Figure 1). However, Moran's real target was the Irish popular audience, which the *Leader* – in very similar terms to Marinetti's condemnation of the bourgeois theatrical audience – repeatedly chastised for being too passive and in need of rousing, but here condemned for the groups among them who craved and supported degenerate music hall shows. A scathing description of the audience in verse below the cartoon described the “dirty degenerates” into whose faces readers looked.¹³

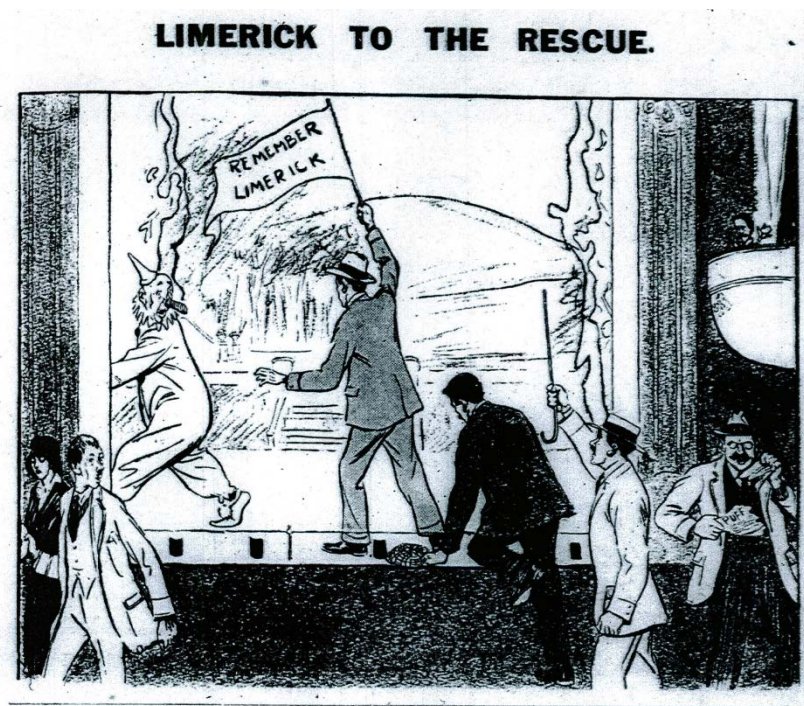


Figure 2: "Limerick to the Rescue," *Leader* (25 September 1915): 153.

In another cartoon published just over two months later, the *Leader* provided the reverse angle on this image (Figure 2). It was reversed not only in viewing the stage from the auditorium but also in offering a complete change in the representation of the popular audience. Unlike the first cartoon, which depicted a “typical” degenerate audience, this image and its accompanying verse portrayed and praised the actual members of the audience of

Limerick's Rink Palace, who on 7 September 1915, chased the artistes performing the variety revue *Everything in the Gardens* from the stage.¹⁴ The Rink Palace was part of the circuit operated by Ireland's best known film exhibitor, James T. Jameson, who ran occasional weeks of pure variety revue but mostly offered programmes of pictures accompanied by one variety act. With over ten-years' experience of Irish show business, Jameson should have known his audience well enough to avoid such a confrontation, but it appears that he fell afoul of what the *Limerick Leader* termed "Vigilance Revived".¹⁵ Indeed, while the image and verse in Moran's paper distinguished the "raiders" from other members of the audience who did not take part in the protest, the *Limerick Leader* was more explicit in identifying these raiders as "Arch-Confraternity men [who] formed themselves into an informal Vigilance Committee, stormed the Rink and requested the audience to leave quietly".¹⁶

The timing of the raid on the Rink Palace suggests that the protesters were answering the call made by the leaders of the vigilance movement to intensify their campaign against variety theatres and cinemas. Addressing the movement's annual mass meeting at Dublin's Mansion House on 5 September 1915, two days before the Limerick incident, the national movement's defacto head Father Paul announced a shift in the committees' focus from literature to films. "Pestilent literature is bad enough", he argued, "but its dreadful havoc is outdistanced by the pernicious effects of the filthy picture screen".¹⁷ Justifying this on the basis that the cinemas were most popular with impressionable youths, Paul urged a plan of action on his hearers: "We appeal to you not to frequent any amusement Hall that will not maintain a high standard of morality, and should anything improper appear on the stage or picture screen urge upon you to mark your disapproval by a strong protest, and we feel that in relying upon your co-operation we shall not be disappointed".¹⁸

While his words were being greeted with loud applause by those in the Mansion House, the 20,000 who could not get in were being addressed outside by William Larkin, whom the *Irish Catholic* described in its report of the events as “the hero of so many prosecutions for making vigorous public protests that drew on him the attention of the law” .¹⁹ Larkin also spoke to his hearers about strong protest, which he said they could perform with relative impunity because “in consequence of cases brought against him it had been laid down by the magistrates that everyone present at a theatre, music hall, or cinema show had a legal right to manifest publicly in due measure by hissing or other protest, their disapprobation of any performance they considered objectionable” .²⁰

Perhaps in his turn taking inspiration from the raid on the Rink Palace, Larkin would just a week later again test the laxity of Dublin magistrates. When he and Francis had been arrested for what appears to have been their first theatre protest at the Gaiety Theatre during a live-theatre production of the French farce *Who's the Lady?* in March 1914, the magistrate had dismissed the case and praised them for performing a public service.²¹ This set the pattern for the cinema protests that followed and made cinema owners reluctant to take a case. In some cases William alone and in others both Larkin brothers would also face a magistrate for protests at the Phibsboro Picture House in June 1914 during the film *In the Shadow of a Throne* (*I Tronens Skygge*; Denmark: Kinografen, 1914) and at the Pillar Picture House in February 1917 for interrupting a screenings of *The Soul of New York* (US: Fox, 1916).²² As well as these incidents, there were several others at which they were not arrested and the papers merely reported a disturbance, notably another protest at the Bohemian in July 1915 during a screening of *Neptune's Daughter* (US: Universal, 1914).²³ Even in the cases where they were arrested and appeared in court, however, they merely received nominal fines, suggesting tacit approval by the magistrates concerned.

The fact that the Larkin brothers protested repeatedly at cinemas located out of the city centre – particularly in Phibsboro, at the northern edge of the city – indicates how the advent of cinema changed not only where people went for entertainment but also where protests could take place. Between 1911 and 1915, Dublin city (population: 304,802) experienced a boom in cinema construction. Many of the twenty-seven cinema licences that Dublin Corporation issued per year by 1915 were for venues located within the business core of the city, which was the customary location of theatres and other kinds of professional entertainment. However, cinemas were also located in residential areas, where professional entertainment had never been available on a regular basis before. Phibsboro’s entertainment provision was radically altered when just a few weeks apart at the end of May and beginning of June 1914, two substantial cinemas, the Phibsboro Picture House and the Bohemian Picture Theatre, opened. Located about 15 minutes walk from Sherrard Avenue, these were William Larkin’s closest cinemas, offering him a choice of local venues at which to protest.

At about 10 o’clock on the evening of Tuesday, 14 September 1915, he shouted repeatedly during *A Modern Magdalen* at the Bohemian, causing a large number of people to leave the cinema. Daisy Sandes, a 16-year-old girl sitting near him, testified in court that she earlier heard him hissing during the film’s so-called “madcap scene,” in which the female protagonist Katinka danced on a table in a nightclub – before he shouted: “This is a picture that our ‘Freeman’s Journal’ would not object to” – a reference to Ireland’s largest daily newspaper’s positive review – and “It is damned near time that we called for an Irish Board of Censors” .²⁴ His shouts caused some girls in the audience to scream, and a general panic ensued, with many people rushing to leave the cinema. The manager, Ernest Mathewson, ordered Larkin to leave, escorting him to the door. However, Larkin then held what owner

Frederick Arthur Sparling – who was also there that night – described as a kind of public meeting.²⁵ Larkin stood at the top of the steps leading from the street up to the box office and addressed the departing patrons on the need for film censorship. At this point, Sparling had Larkin arrested on the grounds that he had disturbed the peace. After appearances in court on 15 and 22 September the charges against him were dismissed to applause from Larkin's DVC supporters in court because disturbing the peace was not an indictable offense in an Irish theatre or cinema.²⁶ Determined to put a stop to Larkin's protests, Sparling prosecuted him again, this time for offensive and riotous behaviour.

Up to this point, Larkin's performance had had its intended effect. He had made his protest, had been arrested – thereby receiving the additional publicity that came with the court case – and the charges had been dismissed. However, the second prosecution was unprecedented and gave rise to some consequences Larkin had not foreseen. At this second trial, Larkin argued that his protest was legitimate because in the mad-cap scene, Katinka danced topless, a detail the prosecution and most of the witnesses disputed. The case was adjourned for a week while the magistrate viewed the film, and he concluded that it was not indecent or objectionable, imposing a fine and costs on Larkin. More interestingly, in order to prove the charge that Larkin had caused a panic, Sparling called cinema staff and audience members to testify, and Larkin's lawyers called the DVC members who had been present as defence witnesses. As a result, this is the only instance in which the views – or even the names – of ordinary members of an Irish audience were recorded. The court provided a forum for these ordinary audience members to confront the coercive behaviour of the DVC.

Like Larkin, however, these people have left very few archival traces beyond their names, addresses and professions. In all, fifteen people testified in court, including Larkin, Sparling

and Mathewson. The DVC members, for the defence, were Richard Jones, chairman of the Richmond Asylum; Mrs. A Murphy of Capel Street; P.J. Walsh, a Phibsboro accountant; Philip Lavery, a justice of the peace from Armagh; and Peter Tierney, a china and glass merchant of Bolton Street. The cinema staff who testified were the operators William Jones and Scallan; advertising agent Robert Moss; and cashier Rachel Smith. Three “unaffiliated” witnesses also spoke for the prosecution: Mrs. Evans of Grangegorman, civil servant Charles Millen and Daisy Sandes. They said similar things, perhaps best put by the youngest of them, Daisy Sandes, who worked at a retouching studio and lived with her working-class family in an artisan dwelling about ten minutes walk from the Bohemian. “I was amazed,” she commented, when asked about Larkin’s behaviour. “I did not see why anyone should object”.²⁷ Sandes’ utter rejection of Larkin’s arguments refutes the DVC’s claim to speak for ordinary people too timid and accepting to speak for themselves. It seems also to mark a point at which she and other young working-class men and women were increasingly choosing a form of entertainment at which agitation in the auditorium was to be kept to a minimum.

¹ For the importance of this case to the introduction of film censorship, see Kevin Rockett, *Irish Film Censorship: A Cultural Journey from Silent Cinema to Internet Pornography* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2004), 44-51.

² <http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/>

³ “The Vigilance Committee”, *Irish Times* (31 May 1913): 6.

⁴ Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde,” and Wanda Strauven, “From ‘Primitive Cinema’ to ‘Marvelous’”, in Strauven, ed., *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2006), 381-8 and 105-20.

⁵ Gunning, 385. Marinetti’s manifestos, including “The Variety Theatre” are available in Lawrence Rainey, Christine Foggi and Laura Witman, eds, *Futurism: An Anthology* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2009), 159-64.

⁶ Strauven, 115.

⁷ Strauven, 107-8.

⁸ [Editorial item], *Irish Times* (5 May 1909): 4; [Editorial item], *Irish Times* 24 August 1912): 6; “Revolution in Art”, *Irish Times* (24 November 1913): 6. The *Times* would continue to report on Marinetti: “Futurism”, *Irish Times* (3 December 1915): 4; “Futurism”, *Irish Times* (25 March 1916): 4.

⁹ See for example, “English Sunday Press”, *Irish Independent* (24 October 1911): 7; “English Sunday Newspapers”, *Nenagh Guardian* (28 October 1911): 3.

¹⁰ “Dublin to Take Action”, *Irish Independent* (2 November 1911): 7; “Obnoxious Literature: Suggested Action in Dublin”, *Irish Times* (2 November 1911): 7; “Dublin Vigilance Committee”, *Irish Times* (28 November 1911): 11.

¹¹ “Evil Literature Crusade: Dublin Obstruction Charge”, *Irish Independent* (4 February 1913): 5 “Dublin Vigilance Committee: Two Members Fined for Obstruction”, *Irish Times* (8 February 1913): 1

¹² *Leader* (1 September 1900): 2-4.

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- ¹³ “A Review of the Audience”, *Leader* (17 July 1915): 541
- ¹⁴ “Limerick to the Rescue”, *Leader* (25 September 1915): 158.
- ¹⁵ “Vigilance Revived: Rink Palace Stormed”, *Limerick Leader* (8 September 1915): 3.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ “Fighting a Plague: Vigilance Committee’s Crusade: Annual Procession and Meeting”, *Irish Catholic* (11 September 1915): 2.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ “‘Who’s the Lady?’ Scene in the Gaiety Theatre”, *Irish Times* (4 March 1914): 8.
- ²² “Row in Picture House: Ink Thrown at Picture”, *Evening Telegraph* (5 June 1914): 5; “City Cinema: Exciting Episode”, *Evening Telegraph* (22 February 1917): 1.
- ²³ “Annette Kellerman at the Bohemian”, *Freeman’s Journal* (10 July 1915): 7.
- ²⁴ All Dublin’s newspapers covered the case, including: “Scene in Dublin Picture Theatre: Question as to the Morality of the Film”, *Evening Herald* (11 October 1915): 5.
- ²⁵ “Scene in a City Cinema: ‘An Irish Board of Censors’”, *Dublin Evening Mail* (11 October 1915): 4.
- ²⁶ “Scene in a City Cinema: ‘Irish Censor Board Wanted’”, *Dublin Evening Mail* (22 September 1915): 5.
- ²⁷ “Scene in Dublin Picture Theatre: Question as to the Morality of the Film”, *Evening Herald* (11 October 1915): 5.