

Film: A New Form of Propaganda and Entertainment

The years between 1916 and 1918 were a key period in the integration of cinema into Irish society. In the early 1910s, speculative capitalists from city to village level, taking advantage of the growing international trade in moving-picture entertainment, had produced a building boom in the construction of picture houses. These new entertainment venues appeared not only on the streetscape of cities and large towns, where theatres and other entertainment venues had always been located, but also in suburbs, small towns and villages, where professional entertainment had never before been offered on a regular basis. With that substantial infrastructure in place, the later-war and post-Rising years were particularly notable for the various struggles to use and control it. Before the war, governments, political parties, the churches and other dominant social institutions had mostly ignored cinema or had tried to suppress what they initially saw as a pernicious working-class fad. During the war, however, powerful interests began to recognize cinema's value. As the cinema boom grew on the back of increasing middle-class interest in the business opportunity and in film as a new form of entertainment, cinema was taken more seriously.

Some of the difficulties that the authorities may have had in taking cinema seriously are suggested by the fact that the first big film star was comedian Charlie Chaplin, who began his film career with the California-based Keystone Company in December 1913. It was not so much the fact that he was a comedian that made Chaplin difficult to assimilate for those in power but that his comedy so consistently took the perspective of the underclass – so iconically represented in his tramp persona – against those placed above him in the social hierarchy. Although Chaplin by no means either invented or had this field to himself, he had become popular so quickly that less than a year and a half after he had first appeared on Irish screens in June 1914, Irish cinema owners were holding competitions for the best Chaplin imitators. Cathal MacGarvey, well-known entertainer and manager of Dublin's Masterpiece Theatre, filmed the contestants of the Chaplin competition he held in September 1915 and had the audience choose the best screen performance.

This kind of activity in picture houses offers a sense of how cinema culture of the 1910s differed from later forms. Although this level of audience participation was rare, some kind of live performance inviting audience interaction almost always accompanied the programme of films offered. The most common live portion of the entertainment was musical accompaniment of the silent moving pictures either by a single pianist or violinist or by an orchestra of a size dependent on the prestige of the picture house. Featured musicians playing solos, singers or variety performers sometimes also appeared between films. The number of films that constituted a programme varied, but by the late 1910s, it most often included a long dramatic feature film with a star actor supported by a combination of shorter comedies, episodes of serial films, factual films, cartoons and newsreels.

Despite the anti-establishment potential of elements of the programme, the interests of picture-house owners and film producers were in regularizing their industry in line both with the regulations of local and national government and with the attitudes accepted by a large swathe of the middle class. As the 1910s progressed, picture houses became larger and more luxurious, employed uniformed attendants and offered more comfortable seating to higher-paying patrons. Filmmakers vied for the rights to adapt popular and high-brow literary works and lured star actors from the theatre with unprecedented salaries. Trade organizations

attempted to self-regulate to avoid imposed censorship. In Ireland, the Catholic church-based Irish Vigilance Association introduced a Catholic nationalist flavour to the censorship campaign by suggesting that the London-based British Board of Film Censors (founded in 1912) was not sufficiently attuned to the needs of Ireland's largely Catholic population.

Although the outbreak of war brought hardships of various kinds to the film industry, not least the interruption of international trade, it also offered opportunities for cinema to show its social utility. Films were shown at recruiting events in Ireland from 1915, and in April 1916, H. Higginson resigned managership of the newly reopened Clontarf Cinema in Dublin to lead a cinema recruiting campaign. He proposed to give two shows in each place the campaign reached, the first exhibiting army and navy films, and the second offering a regular drama and comedy programme whose proceeds would go to various war funds.

Nevertheless, the British government did not overcome its scepticism about the production of official war films until early 1916. At that point, urged on and aided by the industry-founded British Topical Committee for War Films (BTCWF), it began making propaganda films, among the most successful and best remembered of which is *The Battle of the Somme* (Britain: BTCWF, 1916). "[F]rom the moment of preparation, all through that deadly, but glorious, First of July, on to the crash of victory," the *Belfast News-Letter* commented of this feature-length factual film released to enormous success in September 1916, "the story is unfolded in all the strength and simplicity which such photography can give."

This sense of the communicative potential of cinema was echoed in the opening article in the inaugural January 1917 issue of *Irish Limelight*, Ireland's first cinema trade journal and fan magazine. "[N]o other medium can provide the man who has something to say with so receptive and so enormous an audience," it argued. In the 1910s, many Irish men and women had something to say, among them, nationalist, unionists, suffragists and labour activists. Although films had been made in Ireland since cinema's earliest days, they had largely been made by foreign companies visiting the country and generally reflected an outsider's perspective. Even when local speculators saw the opportunities represented by building picture houses and exhibiting films to local audiences, very few cultural producers attempted to make films. Those that did faced several challenges. Ireland had little filmmaking expertise; the increasingly dominant feature film was expensive to make and required the participation of at least one well-known actor; the most successful films were those that could appeal to an international audience rather than offering culturally specific content; and the system of distribution was increasingly controlled by powerful international companies.

Nevertheless, the 1916-18 period is remarkable for the appearance of indigenous fictional and factual film companies who faced these challenges. When Irish-American diplomat James Mark Sullivan and Irish businessman Henry Fitzgibbon founded the Film Company of Ireland (FCOI) in March 1916, it was not the country's first fiction production company but it would become the most significant one of the 1910s. Sullivan and Fitzgibbon aimed to use Irish actors and writers to revise the misrepresentation of Ireland by foreign filmmakers. Despite the destruction during the Rising of its initial Dublin offices at 16 Henry Street, the company went on to make nine short dramas and comedies in 1916, all of them directed by Abbey Theatre actor J. M. Kerrigan and featuring actors from the Abbey and other theatres. None of these films survives, but FCOI's far more ambitious *Knocknagow* (Ireland: FCOI, 1918), an adaptation of Charles J. Kickham's novel, does still exist. Directed by Abbey actor

and manager Fred O'Donovan in the wake of Kerrigan's departure to America, this consciously conceived national epic was shot at Tipperary locations associated with Kickham and his novel in the summer of 1917 and released in Ireland in early 1918. FCOI's films were popular in Ireland, but its limited success abroad caused financial problems that meant that it made just one other feature film, *Willy Reilly and His Colleen Bawn* (Ireland: FCOI, 1920), before the company folded in 1920.

Although Norman Whitten's General Film Supply (GFS) had been making cinema advertisements and films of local events since its foundation in May 1913, it began to produce Irish Events – the first indigenous newsreel – in July 1917. Newsreels or topicals, which typically consisted of five one-minute stories of recent events, were provided by the British companies who produced the popular Pathé Gazette, Gaumont Graphic and Topical Budget, and all of these did occasionally cover Irish stories. English-born Whitten occasionally sold his films of newsworthy events to these companies, but in July 1917, he formalized GFS's local filmmaking into the weekly Irish Events, to which many Irish picture houses subscribed. Irish Events filmed many of the key political and social events of the period, including the funeral of Thomas Ashe, Sinn Féin's election victories, and the first Dáil. As well as providing the weekly newsreel in its five-minute format, GFS also offered a growing number of newsreel specials, generally focusing on one topic and running ten minutes. A 1918 advertisement of its specials featured *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," boasted the advertisement, "that topicals such as any of the above will attract a larger audience than a six-reel exclusive."

Newsreel companies including GFS made films in Dublin at the time of the Rising that appear to suggest it represented a setback for cinema. In *Easter Rising, Dublin 1916*, the camera spends some time examining the ruined façade of the iconic DBC restaurant on the east side of Lower Sackville/O'Connell Street before panning past the substantially destroyed building beside it and across the smoking ruins of the rest of the block to the corner of Lower Abbey Street. The building next to the DBC was the Grand Cinema, opened by hotelier William Kay in 1913 as the second of the four picture houses – along with the Sackville Picture House (1910), the Pillar Picture House (1914) and the Carlton Cinema (1915) – that would operate on Sackville/O'Connell Street in the 1910s. Kay did not rebuild the Grand but instead entered a joint management arrangement at the prestigious Rotunda Pictures with journalist and printer James T. Jameson, who since the early 1900s had made the Rotunda at the top of Sackville/O'Connell Street the base for the countrywide operations of his Irish Animated Picture Company.

Despite all other utopian plans and speculations, when Dublin actually emerged from the ruins of 1916, it did so as a cinema city. The DBC itself would be replaced by the Grand Central Cinema (1921), a picture house with approximately 1,000 seats – four-times as many as the Grand – and the Grand Central would almost back on to the equally large Corinthian Cinema (1921), which would replace three destroyed buildings on Eden Quay. Larger again were the 1,500-seat Metropole Cinema (1922) and 3,200-seat La Scala Theatre (1920) on ruined sites adjacent to the GPO. La Scala's siting on the former premises of the *Freeman's Journal* and publisher Alex Thom – as well as Jameson's change from print to cinema – are indicative of the wider shift in media that was underway.

Further Reading

Denis Condon, *Early Irish Cinema, 1895-1921* (Dublin, 2008).

Early Irish Cinema (blog), 2013-17.

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