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## ‘Temples to the Art of Cinematography’: The Cinema on the Dublin Streetscape, 1910–1920

### Picture Houses and the Second Birth of Cinema

Few that recall the days before ‘Electric Theatres’ became the vogue will need reminding that the earlier home of the ‘movies’ was almost invariably an old store or shop that happened to be vacant. Some enterprising individual would rent it, sweep out the dirt, fill up – or partially fill up – the floor space with ordinary wooden chairs, place a screen at one end of the fit-up and a projecting machine at the other and his ‘theatre’ was complete. Hardly more than a decade ago this primitive environment was so common that it was allowed to pass without adverse comment, yet the picture theatre of to-day is a palace by comparison, and, appropriately enough, is often called by that name. The last word in scientific construction and luxurious appointment still, however, remains to be said, but unless we are greatly mistaken, Dublin’s new super cinema – which is to occupy the site of the old ‘Freeman’s Journal’ office in Prince’s Street – will mark an immense advance on anything hitherto achieved. [...] ‘La Scala,’ as it is to be called, has been planned as a colossal temple to the art of cinematography.<sup>1</sup>

So comments an anonymous columnist in Ireland’s first cinema magazine, the *Irish Limelight*, in April 1918, recalling, as the article’s title puts it, ‘The side show of yesterday’. Despite the title, the writer is interested in the primitive ‘fit-ups’ of the late 1900s or early 1910s chiefly for the colourful contrast they present to the existing ‘electric theatres’ and ‘picture palaces’ of the mid- to late-1910s and the coming ‘super cinemas’ of the 1920s. Nevertheless, the article offers a vivid glimpse of the early development of the cinema in Dublin and how it was viewed by an interested observer

1 ‘The side show of yesterday’, *Irish Limelight* 2, no. 4 (April 1918), p. 4.

of these ongoing developments. When it opened on 20 August 1920, La Scala would confirm the writer's prediction that it was the pinnacle to that point in Ireland of both cinema construction and the experience of going to the pictures. It also epitomized the way in which watching films would in the 1920s become integral to the full evening's entertainment at large venues also offering restaurants, cafes, bars, ballrooms and live stage shows. Several of the premises providing such entertainment in the 1920s would occupy landmark sites in the centre of the city and they could do so because of the destruction of buildings during the 1916 Rising. The redeveloped site of the Hotel Metropole in Sackville/O'Connell Street<sup>2</sup> adjacent to both La Scala and the General Post Office (GPO) retained the name Metropole when it reopened in February 1922, but it was no longer a hotel; it was an entertainment complex at which patrons could eat, drink and dance in an evening whose core activity was attending a film show at the 1,000-seat cinema. Cinemas, or film-led entertainment complexes of this kind, would fill other large gaps in the streetscape as the new medium came to occupy prime sites in the city, making literally concrete the cinema's growing dominance in Ireland's media landscape. Most symbolically significant in this development was La Scala's construction on the sites of two Irish publishing giants, *The Freeman's Journal* newspaper and the Alex Thom publishing house.

Rather than newspapers or book publishing, however, the medium that cinema was more fully displacing or subsuming was popular theatre. Both *The Freeman's Journal* and Alex Thom would continue as going concerns in other premises, but the ill-fated Coliseum Theatre, a 3,000-seat music hall located behind the GPO had only been offering a variety programme including some film for just over a year when it was destroyed

2 Although Dublin Corporation had been prevented in the 1880s by residents and traders from changing the name of Sackville Street to honour Catholic nationalist hero Daniel O'Connell, most nationalists referred to it as O'Connell Street. Except when quoting contemporary sources, I will refer to it as O'Connell Street but to the Provincial Cinematograph Theatres' picture house in that street as the Sackville.

in the fighting of 1916.<sup>3</sup> Its proprietors, Premier Palace Theatres, did not rebuild the Coliseum, but the construction of the 3,200-seat La Scala offering film-based shows on a site next to it is indicative of contemporary trends in entertainment that were by no means unique to Dublin. In the late 1910s and 1920s in cities all over the developed world, large and luxuriously appointed buildings were erected for the theatrical presentation of moving pictures to popular audiences. In Dublin as elsewhere, the concentration of these new cinema buildings in landmark city-centre premises after 1920 was just one way in which cinema constituted a challenge to existing entertainment providers. The cinema was also a more pervasive medium than the theatre, encouraging the opening of entertainment venues in parts of the city where they had never existed before, and so providing professionally-made entertainment in the suburbs as well as in the city centre.

What happened by 1920, then, was that a new medium – the cinema – had fully emerged in Dublin in a way that was apparent on the streets in the shape of a building – the cinema. Indeed, it is worth making a terminological distinction between these two uses of the word 'cinema' to distinguish between what was in the 1910s most often called the 'picture house' – the individual building where people went specifically to watch films – and the cinema – the cultural institution of which the picture houses were but the exhibition spaces. Cinema would eventually become the generic for both the building – although apart from picture house such other terms as cinematograph theatre, picture theatre and electric theatre were also common before cinema became the stable generic term – and institution, which is constituted of such industrial and cultural practices as filmmaking, the distribution or renting of film, the exhibition practices that evolved internationally and regionally, cinema-going as a regular practice, regulation in the form of building codes and of censorship, and various forms of writing and speaking about the cinema. The beginning of cinema's emergence as an institution is generally said to have occurred around 1910, when it experienced a second birth fifteen years after a first

3 Denis Condon, *Early Irish Cinema, 1895–1921* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2008), pp. 93–94.

birth had delivered such devices as the moving-picture camera and projector.<sup>4</sup> Although citizens going about their business in the streets of Dublin were likely unaware of the momentous cultural shift that the arrival of institutional cinema represented, they could not have failed to notice the spread of picture houses all over the city.

Beginning in earnest in 1910, a boom in the construction of new picture houses in Dublin and the adapting of existing buildings as dedicated film venues had a significant impact on the building trade, on the nature of popular entertainment, and on patterns of sociability in the city. The arrival of picture houses created on many of the city's streets a new 'place of public resort' in the form of an entertainment venue that was often accessible to a popular audience with even the minimum of disposable income. Some picture house proprietors, however, targeted a more lucrative middle-class audience, and this became increasingly the norm during the 1910s, with the construction of ever-larger auditoria offering increasingly lavish comforts, large orchestras and long 'feature' films tailored to the perceived tastes of the middle class. Nevertheless, even at their initial appearance at the start of the decade, these buildings frequently presented an attractively decorated facade and lobby intended to draw patrons into the auditorium within, and unlike the theatres, the picture houses frequently operated both day and night, seven days a week. The building industry was interested in the construction of these picture houses not only because they offered outlets for the crafts of their members, but also because as a matter of course they required the use of new buildings materials such as structural steel and reinforced concrete in order to comply with the 1909 Cinematograph Act's stipulation that 'cinematograph theatres' be protected against fire. The industry initially saw the pre-World War I boom in picture house construction as a 'craze' similar to the recent boom in the construction of roller-skating rinks, and during the war, the picture house construction suffered not only from a general decline in construction

4 André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion, 'A medium is always born twice ...', *Early Popular Visual Culture* 3, no. 1 (2005), p. 13. Delegates at The Second Birth of Cinema: A Centenary Conference, Newcastle University, 1–2 July 2011, largely agreed that 1911 marked the second birth of cinema.

because of the scarcity of material but also from the destruction along with the Hotel Metropole and the Coliseum Theatre of some city-centre picture houses in the fighting of 1916. As the epigraph shows, these were merely setbacks before the continuation of picture house building after the war on an even more ambitious scale, when La Scala became the 'last word in scientific construction', a discourse in concrete and steel that had begun a decade earlier. Once these buildings were constructed, most of Dublin's citizens encountered them as members of audiences but for some, they were places of business and employment both for speculators and owners and for the managers and workers in various roles who operated them. As an increasingly visible part of the city's social fabric, picture houses not only attracted national and local governmental regulation but also became the locus of protests by such groups as the Dublin Vigilance Committee intent on policing what audiences could see in an Ireland moving towards some form of self-government.

The second birth of cinema – its institutional emergence – occurred in Dublin when the practice of visiting a picture house began to be an established habit for a mass audience. By 1910, middle-class audiences had shown that they would patronize the Irish Animated Picture Company's long-established seasons of pictures at the Rotunda; large working-class audiences had shown they would support the daily picture-based shows at the People's Popular Picture Palace, which operated at the former Queen's Theatre between March 1908 and January 1909; and a small number of other important early film venues had appeared, the best known of which is the Cinematograph Volta, which was opened in Mary Street on 20 December 1909 by author James Joyce and his business partners from Trieste.<sup>5</sup> What changed during the 1910s was that it became common for people of all classes regularly to visit a picture house, and this provided the basis for the cinema as serious business. As such, the People's Popular Picture House and the Volta do not yet constitute the second birth of cinema, which likely occurred when the few Irish exhibitors faced competition from British

5 Luke McKernan, 'James Joyce's cinema', *Film and Film Culture* 3 (2004), pp. 7–20; Kevin Rockett, "Something rich and strange": James Joyce, Beatrice Cenci and the Volta', *Film and Film Culture* 3 (2004), pp. 21–34; Condon, pp. 218–219.

firms determined to exploit the lucrative opportunities they perceived in Dublin because they were already exploiting similar opportunities in cities in Britain. The second birth of cinema in Dublin, therefore, likely occurred as Irish exhibitors responded to the arrival in 1910 of the British company Provincial Cinematograph Theatres, which opened the Sackville Picture House, acquired the Volta by buying out Joyce and his partners, and began work on a luxury picture house on Grafton Street, the city's most fashionable thoroughfare. Ordinary Dubliners were mostly unaware of the struggles between rival firms; they were enjoying a new entertainment provided in such novel public spaces as the Sackville Picture House.

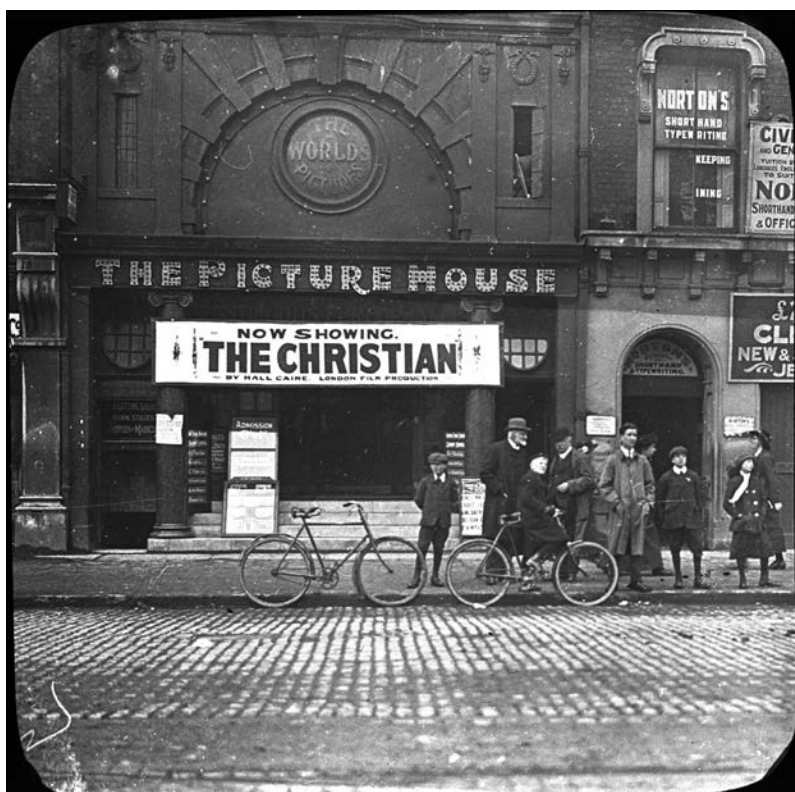


Figure 1 The oldest known photograph of the Sackville Picture House, 51 Lower Sackville/O'Connell Street.

The image of the Sackville that features in Figure 1 is one of the oldest surviving photographs of a Dublin picture house from the 1910s. It offers a good deal of information about the facade of the building around the middle of the decade as well as presenting such other fascinating incidental details as the ways in which the management used the exterior of the premises to address potential patrons and the dress and demeanour of a group of passersby. The photograph comes with the estimated date of 1915, based on the release date of *The Christian*, the film advertised so prominently on the banner strung across the picture house's entrance. Produced by the London Film Company, this film was an adaptation of the hit novel and play of the same name by Hall Caine, whose son Derwent Hall Caine starred on screen. Although it is a useful image for considering Dublin's early picture houses, further contextual details are required to establish what it reveals about the Sackville Picture House in 1910 and perhaps to illuminate the reasons that the photographer composed the image to include a group of people who are mostly unaware of the camera because they are intently watching an event unfolding well to frame right.

Research on the exhibition of *The Christian* in Dublin indicates that rather than in 1915, this photograph was taken in April 1916 and shows how the experience and geography of Dublin picture-going changed during the 1910s. *The Christian* was first shown by Provincial Cinematograph Theatres in the company's most prestigious Dublin venue, the Grafton Picture House, from 13 to 18 March 1916. This six-day engagement was twice the usual period for which a film was exhibited, and the run occurred during the week that included St Patrick's Day, which many Dubliners celebrated by attending entertainments. To ensure audiences that were as large as possible for an appropriately religious-themed film during the festival of Ireland's patron saint, the company placed more illustrated advertisements than it usually did in newspapers (Figure 2). The company's choice of the Grafton rather than the Sackville for the first showing of this important film is indicative of the Grafton's precedence. The Sackville had been hailed as a prestige venue when it opened in 1910, but the arrival of the luxuriously appointed and better-located Grafton on 17 April 1911 eclipsed the more modest comforts of the Sackville. By 1916, the Grafton had long received most of the illustrated newspaper advertisements that distinguished Provincial's publicity strategy from that of other Dublin



exhibitors. *The Christian* followed the release pattern whereby films that had had a successful first run at the Grafton reappeared shortly afterwards for a second run at the Sackville.



Figure 2 Provincial Cinematograph Theatres' publicity was distinguished by such striking illustrated advertisements as those for *The Christian's* run at the Grafton in March 1916 and for an episode of the popular serial *The Exploits of Elaine* at the Sackville in 1915.

*The Christian* was held over for showing at the Sackville for the second major religious festival in early 1916, Easter. Although it did not benefit from a campaign of illustrated advertisements similar to the one that had accompanied the run at the Grafton, it did receive a substantial preview in the *Evening Telegraph's* 'Music and the drama' column on the Saturday before its scheduled opening at 1pm on Easter Monday 1916. Given that



this was almost exactly the time that insurgents occupied buildings around the city – including the nearby GPO – at the start of the Easter Rising, it is unlikely that *The Christian* ever entertained audiences at the Sackville. It is not surprising, then, that the people in the photograph appear unaware of the photographer when the spectacle of the Rising likely commands their attention. Therefore, the facts that this photograph was taken during Easter week 1916 and that the Sackville was no longer the first-run venue it had been should be taken into account in assessing this photograph as a source evidence of how the building looked to contemporary observers when it first appeared on the streetscape in 1910.

Newspaper accounts in 1910 indicate how Provincial Cinematograph Theatres wished the public in Dublin to see their new picture house. The Dublin Cinematograph Theatre – which would soon be renamed the Picture House, 51 Lower Sackville Street – opened to the public for the first time on Saturday, 9 April 1910. The building had been designed by Provincial's resident architect, J. R. Naylor and would be managed by Walter Huish.<sup>6</sup> To ensure favourable press coverage of the opening, R. T. Jupp, managing director of Provincial Cinematograph Theatres and the newly formed Dublin Cinematograph Company, held an inauguration dinner on the preceding Thursday evening and a reception for the press at the picture house on Friday. Addressing the main employees of the Dublin Company, a group of prominent citizens and representatives of the press at dinner in the Hotel Metropole in O'Connell Street, Jupp stressed the proven profitability of the company's methods of film exhibition, implicitly distinguishing the company from other exhibitors in the city.<sup>7</sup> Although the company offered film programmes that were high class and suitable to be viewed by women and children, they differed, he implied, from the high class and respectable shows then being offered by the IAPC at the Rotunda in running continuously and thereby offering patrons the flexibility of dropping in at any time during between the hours of 2 and 10.30pm. That continuous

6 'Dublin cinematograph theatre: inauguration dinner', *Evening Telegraph*, 8 April 1910, p. 2.

7 'Dublin cinematograph theatre'.

performances were the most profitable form of exhibition, he explained, was demonstrated by the 50 per cent return on their investment that shareholders in the publicly listed London company received.<sup>8</sup> Although Jupp clearly felt that continuous performances required explanation for patrons more familiar with theatrical shows beginning at advertised times, the writer of the *Irish Times*' 'Fashionable Intelligence' column who had attended the press reception at the picture house on 8 April duly extolled the merits of the system. This writer described the Sackville as a 'great addition to the entertainments of the city', particularly for the 'ladies shopping' that were the column's main readership because 'it can be entered at any time, and a complete performance witnessed'. Continuous performances of a programme of the one-reel (fifteen-minute) films of the time were particularly suited to such passing custom, with the further attraction for patrons of the Sackville that afternoon tea was provided free of charge (Figure 3).<sup>9</sup> Although audiences did enjoy the flexibility that continuous performances provided, this system would prove more difficult to reconcile with the long feature films that were just beginning to be produced.

Reporters described the building as being 'extremely comfortable, [...] beautifully upholstered and decorated, and lighted in the most up-to-date fashion'. A particular feature of the customizing of the premises for showing films was the raking of the floor, 'giving an equally good view of the pictures from all parts of the building'.<sup>10</sup> As much as the decoration and upholstery, however, journalists who were given a tour of the building stressed its safety. 'A glance at the operating room', commented a writer in the *Irish Times* 'which is entirely separate from the public portion of the building, was sufficient to show not only that the most up-to-date machines are employed, but that the safety provisions more than comply with the most stringent regulations of the recent [Cinematograph] Act'.<sup>11</sup>

8 'Dublin cinematograph theatre'. Jupp was also preparing potential investors for the share prospectus that would appear in the newspapers in early May, see 'Provincial Cinematograph Theatres, Limited', *The Irish Times*, 9 May 1910, p. 5.

9 'Fashionable Intelligence', *The Irish Times*, 9 April 1910, p. 8.

10 'Dublin cinematograph theatre', *Irish Independent*, 9 April 1910, p. 6.

11 'Dublin cinematograph theatre', *The Irish Times*, 9 April 1910, p. 8.

The emphasis on public safety as well as respectability was underlined by the fact that the opening ceremony was performed – 'in the presence of a large number of influential citizens' – by chief sanitary officer Sir Charles Cameron, who opined prophetically given the imminent picture-house boom that 'the larger the number of places of amusement in a city the greater the success of each individual establishment'.<sup>12</sup>

The writings of one regular picture goer in 1910 allow us to get beyond the managed media events the company had arranged for the opening. Dublin architect Joseph Holloway's unpublished diary – running to some 25 million words – is usually seen as a source of information on the theatrical productions he attended on an almost obsessive basis between the 1890s and 1940s. During the summer of 1910, when many of the theatres he favoured were closed, Holloway switched his allegiance for a time to the Sackville, and his entries offer compelling evidence not just of the opening of a new entertainment venue but of what might properly be seen as the second birth of cinema: the habitual visiting of the picture house. An entry for the evening of Thursday, 21 July 1910 reveals that

Mother, Eileen & I went down to the Picture Theatre after tea & thought the programme good – a few American dramatic pictures were very effective. The place was crowded as usual. Pictures are rapidly taking the place of the plays with the ordinary amusement seeker.<sup>13</sup>

Although brief, this entry records that Holloway accompanied his eighty-year-old mother, Anne, and twenty-two-year-old niece, Eileen O'Malley, across the city from their home in Northumberland Road to the Sackville. Anne Holloway appears to have been making her debut, but Joseph Holloway had attended this picture house on four previous occasions since it opened in April, bringing Eileen with him for his first visit on 18 June. As such, this latest visit was remarkable for little other than that it was the first time that all three members of the family – each representing

12 'Dublin cinematograph theatre', *Irish Independent*, 9 April 1910, p. 6.

13 National Library of Ireland (NLI), Manuscript 1810, *Joseph Holloway Diaries*, 21 July 1910, pp. 76–77.

a different generation – attended this picture house together. But it is precisely its ordinariness that makes this event interesting because it indicates the practice of cinema-going becoming a habit. Joseph and Eileen had been sufficiently entertained by their previous visits to recommend it to Anne, and she would enjoy the experience enough to repeat it on several return visits that year.

Holloway records his enjoyment of the entertainment on 21 July, commenting on the effectiveness of the ‘American dramatic pictures’. Holloway did not name any of the films, and the Sackville was no longer advertising regularly in the press. Doubtless, the films presented would have resembled those on the Sackville’s opening programme, during the week of 9 April, when it had shown seven films: *The cowboy and the squaw: a story of the West*, *Winter sports in the Vosges Mountains*, *Ideal army life*, *A strange friendship: Persian kitten and parrot*, *His last burglary*, *Recent eruption of Mount Etna* and *The dancing tabloid*, the last described by the *Evening Telegraph*’s reviewer as ‘a highly diverting picture’.<sup>14</sup> The practice of mixing short fictional subjects with short factual subjects, without any one film appearing as the highlight or ‘feature’ of the programme – as *The Christian* would be in 1916 – was standard for this period. Occasionally, an item on the programme would reward special advertising, but this did not mean that it was a feature film in the sense that it would be later used. On the week following the visit with his family, for example, Joseph Holloway returned to the Sackville to see and hear *The Byeways of Byron* (Figure 3). Consisting of filmed scenes accompanied by a lecture delivered live by the film’s maker J. W. Gilbert Smith, *The Byeways of Byron* was certainly the featured item on the programme and one that justified special advertising. Unlike *The Christian*, however, it was the elements of the live lecture format emphasizing the literary connotations of Byron’s name that justified the special appeal to middle-class audiences.

14 ‘The cinematograph theatre’, *Evening Telegraph*, 12 April 1910, p. 2.

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| <p><b>ROUND ROOM, ROTUNDA.</b><br/>ALWAYS FRESH, BRIGHT, AND AMUSING.<br/><b>TO-DAY AT 4. 10-NIGHT AT 8.</b><br/>Popular Prices. Booking at Casser's.</p> <p><b>PERFECTION NEW LIVING PICTURES.</b></p> <p>GRAND ORCHESTRAL BAND OF THE ROYAL SCOTS FUSILIERS<br/>MUSICAL REPERTOIRE COMPANY, ETC.<br/>THIS SATURDAY, AFTERSOON ONLY will be presented, an original, artistic, and interesting programme.</p> <p><b>THE GREAT PASSION PLAY,</b><br/>so much spoken of recently, in addition to<br/><b>MOUNT ETNA ERUPTION.</b><br/>Extraordinary Scenes of Devastation by Lava.<br/>AND THIS WEEK'S NEW PROGRAMME.</p> <p><b>THE DUBLIN AMATEUR ORCHESTRAL SOCIETY.</b><br/>Conductor: Mr. J. P. LASCHEZ, R.I.A.M.</p> <p>Patron: Lord Pratham<br/>Patrons: The Bishops of Meath, Clogher, and Down<br/>President: Sir Charles Casser, C.B.</p> <p><b>SEASON, 1910.</b></p> <p><b>FIRST CONCERT, WEDNESDAY NEXT, APRIL 13, ANTIENT CONCERT ROOMS.</b></p> <p>In addition to the Orchestral Items—Vocalist: Mr. J. C. DUFFY. Solo Pianoforte: MISS ADRIE LORD, R.I.A.M. Reserved and Numbered Seats, 5s.; Balcony, 2s.; Admission, 1s. Booking at Pigott's and Clarke's.</p> <p><b>DUBLIN CINEMATOGRAPH THEATRE.</b><br/>51 LOWER SACKVILLE STREET,<br/>WILL BE OPEN TO-DAY FROM 2.0 TILL 10.30 p.m.<br/>ADMISSION, 6d. and 1s. 5009</p> | <p><b>"VOLTA" ELECTRIC THEATRE,</b><br/>45 MARY STREET,<br/><b>BOXING,</b><br/><b>FREDDIE WELSH</b><br/>(Light-Weight Champion of England.)<br/>VERSUS<br/><b>JACK DANIELS.</b></p> <p>This interesting fight will be shown for ONE WEEK only, commencing MONDAY NEXT, JULY 25th. A first exhibition of scientific Boxing, every round shown from start to finish, including the famous knock-out in the seventh round.</p> <p><b>CONTINUOUS PERFORMANCE FROM 2 P.M. TO 10.30 P.M. DAILY</b><br/>Admission, 3d. and 6d.</p> <p><b>KINGSTOWN PAVILION</b><br/>DAILY AT 3.30 and 8.<br/>EXCLUSIVE ENGAGEMENT OF<br/><b>THE WILL O' THE WISPS.</b><br/>THE LATEST IN FAIRFIELD ENTERTAINERS.<br/>EUROPE, NIGHTLY—CHANGED MONDAYS AND THURSDAYS.<br/>Admission, 6d. Front, 5009. 1s. Combined Trains 80d. Rail Tickets.<br/>FRED WELSH—BIRDSONG OPERA SINGERS.</p> <p><b>THE SACKVILLE PICTURE HOUSE,</b><br/>51 LOWER SACKVILLE STREET.<br/>MR. GILBERT SMITH<br/>WILL LECTURE ON<br/><b>THE BYWAYS OF BYRON</b><br/>EACH DAY AT 3.45 and 9 O'CLOCK.<br/><b>CONTINUOUS PERFORMANCE FROM 2 TO 10.30 DAILY.</b><br/>Admission, 6d and 1s. including Afternoon Tea between 3 and 7. 5009</p> |
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Figure 3 Amusements columns advertising picture houses in 1910. On the left, the IAPC's New Living Pictures season was well under way at the Rotunda on the opening night of the Dublin Cinematograph Theatre, soon to be renamed the Sackville Picture House (*Evening Telegraph*, 9 April 1910, p. 1). On the right, the class composition of the audiences at the Volta and the Sackville are reflected in the different programmes offered (*Dublin Evening Mail*, 23 July 1910, p. 2).

Rather than the details of particular short films, Holloway was more concerned by the way in which the picture houses appeared to be displacing the theatre. As a committed lover of the theatre, this was of some concern to him, and he had commented after a visit a few days previously to the Volta: 'Fancy I been driven to seek amusement at the "Volta," & then you may know to what a state Dublin has fallen as an artistic centre.'<sup>15</sup> It appears,

15 NLI Ms. 1810, *Holloway Diaries*, 16 July 1910, p. 50.

however, that it was the class composition of the audience rather than the nature of the entertainment that prompted him to bring his mother and niece to the Sackville instead of to the Volta. Both venues had a seating capacity of under 500 – the Volta with 420 seats and the Sackville with 270 – and therefore could not be socially stratified to the same time-honoured degree as the much larger theatres, a fact that many early picture houses advertised as making them more democratic or ‘popular’ entertainment venues. Nevertheless, although the Sackville attracted a different class of patron to the Volta, both venues retained a level of class division in their auditoria based on admission pricing, with the higher-paying patrons typically given a better view of the screen and a more comfortable seat. The Sackville charged an admission of 1 shilling (1s.) to the balcony or sixpence (6d.) for the stalls, and the Volta charged 6d. for the individual seats at the front or 3d. for the benches. However, it seems that the Volta was not well patronized by the middle classes at this point because Holloway notes of his visit there on 16 July that ‘[t]he 3d seats were well filled, but the sixpenny ones were mostly unoccupied.’<sup>16</sup> Located near Mary Street’s junction with Jervis Street, the Volta was close to some of Dublin’s worst slums, and as such, this was not one of the areas usually visited by middle-class families for an evening’s entertainment. By contrast, the Sackville was located in such a thoroughly respectable area of the city that it could be visited even by unaccompanied middle-class women who read the *Irish Times*’ ‘Fashionable Intelligence’ column.

Having the right location was vital in establishing the picture house as a habitual entertainment destination for the middle classes and in facilitating cinema’s second birth in Dublin. As the cinema became a true institution in the 1910s, however, it would fundamentally alter Dubliners’ perceptions of where they should go for amusement.



## Protests at the Bohemian Picture Theatre, 1915

Cinema fundamentally changed the geography of entertainment in Dublin. Their city-centre locations were vital to the business strategies pursued by the owners of such early picture houses as the Sackville, but the habit of going to the pictures developed during the 1910s so that the entertainment was available in practically all parts of the city. This would be remarkable enough if the suburban picture houses were small venues catering for a local audience, but many were larger than those being built in the city centre and therefore required an audience that would travel to them at a time before the widespread availability of personal transport. In early 1910, although several theatres and mixed-use venues showed films regularly, only the Volta and the Sackville, and possibly the Abercorn Hall on Harcourt Road and the Coliseum in Redmond's Hill acted as full-time picture houses.<sup>17</sup> By 1915, Dublin Corporation, which had become the issuing authority for licences to show films under the 1909 Cinematograph Act, was issuing almost thirty licences a year.<sup>18</sup> In his report for the final quarter of 1914, Walter Butler, the Corporation's inspector of theatres, listed twenty-five premises in the city seeking renewal of their licences for 1915, and two other premises that would soon receive a licence. These twenty-seven licensed premises – a number that remained remarkably stable for the rest of the decade – included the large city-centre theatres: the Theatre Royal in Hawkins Street, the Tivoli Theatre on Burgh Quay, the Empire Theatre of Varieties on Dame Street and the Queen's Theatre in Great Brunswick (now Pearse) Street. The Gaiety Theatre in South King Street had also applied for and received a temporary licence for showing films for a week in October 1914. All these theatres were located on the south side of the River Liffey – which bisects the city – with the Tivoli, Theatre Royal and Queen's clustered within a few streets of each other between Burgh Quay and Brunswick Street, and

17 'Dublin sessions', *The Irish Times*, 25 March 1910, p. 2. The latter two venues were granted cinematograph licenses in 1910, but no evidence has yet come to light on the kind of entertainment they provided at this time.

18 Dublin Corporation, *Committee Reports*, 1917, Vol. 2, Item 88, pp. 6–8.

the Gaiety and Empire a short walk away up Grafton Street and Dame Street respectively. These theatres, therefore, roughly defined the limits of the city's main commercial core on the south side of the river. The theatres very rarely showed films as their main entertainment in the 1910s but rather screened them as part of or as a supplement to a more extensive variety, dramatic or musical show. The only theatre that operated on a sustained basis on the north side of the Liffey was the Abbey, which was located in a building redesigned by Joseph Holloway on Abbey Street just a block from O'Connell Street, but the Abbey did not hold a licence to show films.

Almost all the other venues seeking licences for 1915 were picture houses in which the film show accompanied by live music was the main form of entertainment. Several of the picture houses were located within the theatre ring described above, catering for the extensive passing trade in the city centre and for those who lived in or near the centre or travelled into it for their entertainment. The picture houses, however, also penetrated far into the city's residential areas. So, on or close to O'Connell Street could be found the Sackville and Grand Cinema on Lower O'Connell Street; the soon-to-open Pillar Picture House close to Nelson's Column at the midpoint of the street; and the Round Room of the Rotunda at the northern extremity of O'Connell Street, where it almost faced the Cosy Cinema in Parnell Street. The picture houses also pushed further east and west of O'Connell Street: the stroller toward the Volta on Mary Street would first encounter the World's Fair on Henry Street, and passing the Volta, see the Mary Street Picture House before continuing into Capel Street at the edge of the shopping district to visit the Irish Cinema. Walking east from Nelson's Column down North Earl Street and into Talbot Street, an amusement seeker would first see the Masterpiece Theatre and would almost have reached Amiens Street Station before coming upon the Electric Theatre. On the south side of the river, the stroller would not have far to go past the Queen's Theatre to come across the Brunswick Cinema, and both the Grafton Picture House and Dame Street Picture House also fell comfortably within the fashionable parts of the city. However, picture houses were also located at the very furthest points of the city covered by the Corporation's remit, and beyond, through the adjacent suburban townships of Pembroke and Rathmines and into south county Dublin as far as Blackrock and Kingstown. Many of these would have required

local audiences or spectators induced by advertised attractions to travel to suburban venues by tram or train. Two picture houses met the entertainment seeker on Lower Camden Street, the Camden Picture House and the Theatre de Luxe. Continuing up Camden Street towards the Grand Canal and the city limits, the pleasure seeker might discover the Picturedrome at the Abercorn Hall on Harcourt Road. If the picture-goer instead travelled out southwest from the city centre, he or she might encounter the People's Picture Palace in Thomas Street. Both east and west of the city on the north side, one could see pictures at the Town Hall, Clontarf, or when heading towards the Phoenix Park visit the Phoenix Picture Palace on Ellis's Quay. Heading north of O'Connell Street, one could drop in to see a picture at the Dorset Picture House on Granby Row on the way to catch a train at the Broadstone Station, as the Irish correspondent of the British cinema trade journal *Bioscope* suggested.<sup>19</sup> Or, before leaving the city by crossing the Royal Canal – perhaps to visit the Botanic Gardens or Prospect Cemetery in Glasnevin – one could choose to visit one of the rival pictures houses in Phibsboro, the Phibsboro Picture House or the Bohemian Picture Theatre.

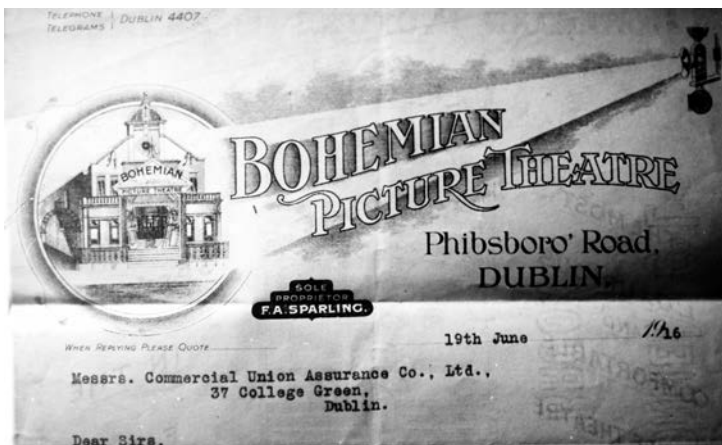


Figure 4 This elaborate letterhead incorporates an early film projector casting onto the paper the only known image of the Bohemian Picture Theatre in the 1910s.

19 'Pictures in Ireland: by "Paddy"', *Bioscope*, 14 March 1912, p. 753.

The remarkable change in the geography of entertainment in the city brought about by the pre-war boom in building these picture houses is epitomized by these last mentioned premises – the Phibsboro Picture House and the Bohemian Picture Theatre. When these picture houses opened within weeks of each other in mid-1914, they provided Phibsboro, on the northern edge of city, with its first purpose-built venues for professionally produced entertainment. As such, they were well placed to take advantage both of the increased population in this part the city and of the tram service that brought not only residents from the city but also those on excursions to the Phoenix Park and the Botanic Gardens.<sup>20</sup> The keen competition between them began in the building stage, when both were increased in size and provided with further decorative features, the *Irish Builder* commending the Phibsboro's added 'brickwork and terra cotta dressings, [which] will present a more handsome and bolder appearance than the original design.'<sup>21</sup> However, the Bohemian would be the larger of the two with approximately a thousand seats, and to design it, the twenty-four-year-old owner Frederick Arthur Sparling engaged Dublin's most prominent cinema architect, George L. O'Connor. Having already drawn the plans for the Mary Street Picture House and the Rathmines Picture Palace, O'Connor was said to be making 'a speciality of designing cinema theatres.'<sup>22</sup> His design for the Bohemian resembled that of the Rathmines Picture Palace in incorporating two shops on either side of the entrance, each only a single storey in order not to block the view of the theatre itself, whose front was 'finished in red brick and chiselled limestone dressings, gables and finials' (Figure 4).<sup>23</sup> Although set back from the street, the picture house announced itself with a canopy that extended between the shops, and patrons entered the auditorium by climbing a set of steps to the lobby.

20 Mary E. Daly, *Dublin, The Deposed Capital: A Social and Economic History 1860–1914* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1985), pp. 118–119.

21 'Building news', *Irish Builder*, 30 August 1913, p. 563.

22 'Another new cinema theatre for Dublin', *Irish Builder*, 31 January 1914, p. 72.

23 'More cinema theatres for Dublin', *Irish Builder*, 16 August 1913, p. 536.

Inside, a wide stairs led to a spacious gallery, while an auditorium 104 feet by 38 feet was furnished with seats and carpets in shades of blue and topped by an elliptical ceiling finished in decorative fibrous plaster.<sup>24</sup>

In the latter half of the 1910s, Sparling and his manager Ernest Matthewson successfully matched the attractive and comfortable premises with elements of a show that consistently drew large numbers of higher-paying middle-class patrons to the Bohemian. Although films continued to be presented in programmes, a hierarchy of film attractions was developing at the top of which were multi-reel films whose titles were advertised at the front of picture houses, in newspapers and magazines, and on hoardings and handbills. These films increasingly featured star actors known to the audience, and they were sometimes adaptations of literary or musical works that were favoured for their instant recognisability and high-cultural connotations. Occasionally as the 1910s progressed, certain films gained a reputation as artistic works in their own right; in December 1917, for example, the Bohemian was the first Dublin picture house to show D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (USA: Epoch, 1915). As well as the right films, a first-class picture house in the mid-1910s had to provide appropriate musical accompaniment for the pictures and a suitable programme of music between films. At the Bohemian, music was provided by an orchestra under the direction of Percy Carver, and the management enhanced their musical offerings in 1916 by hiring cellist Clyde Twelvetrees – a well-respected Dublin concert musician – as the orchestra's resident soloist, and engaging such other musicians as the violinist Signor Simonetti from time to time (Figure 5).

24 'More cinema theatres for Dublin', and 'Bohemian Theatre', *The Irish Times*, 9 June 1914, p. 5.

**PICTURE PHIBSBORO' BOHEMIAN THEATRE, PHIBSBORO'**  
 (MONDAY NEXT), POSITIVELY FOR ONE WEEK ONLY,  
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 (The World-Renowned Violinist), (Ireland's Greatest 'Cellist).

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**YOUR TAX.**

Figure 5 The exhibition of *Carmen* (USA: Lasky, 1915) allowed the management of the Bohemian to provide a wide range of musical attractions in addition to the resident soloists Clyde Twelvetrees and Signor Simonetti. *Dublin Evening Mail*, 26 August 1916, p. 2.

Although the Bohemian's success offers an example of how cinema itself become an established institution in Ireland, events at the Bohemian also epitomized the opposition that cinema would face. While on occasions throughout the 1910s nationalist and unionist groups attempted to use the cinema to promote their causes, groups associated with the campaign to bring the cinema under the control of the Irish Catholic church were most active in confronting it as an institution with almost as many local branches as the church itself. In September 1915, the Bohemian became an important



site of protest for a group determined to make Dublin Corporation introduce film censorship.<sup>25</sup> The incident began on the evening of Tuesday, 14 September, when William Larkin loudly demanded film censorship during the screening of the feature *A Modern Magdalen* (USA: Life Photo Film, 1915). He alleged later that the protest was particularly justified by a scene of indecent dancing. His shouting caused a panic that cleared the auditorium, and on the steps of the building's vestibule, Larkin briefly addressed the departing patrons on the need for censorship before being arrested by a constable responding to a complaint by Sparling. During his subsequent court appearances, it became clear that Larkin was not acting alone, and that he had used the same tactic of interrupting screenings on several previous occasions to gain publicity for the Catholic Church-based Dublin Vigilance Committee's film censorship campaign. Indeed, Sparling testified that he had summoned the police because he had had direct experience of Larkin's previous vocal objections to films at the Sandford Picture House in the south-city suburb of Ranelagh and at the Bohemian during the run of *Neptune's Daughter* (USA: Universal, 1914), starring Australian swimmer Annette Kellerman.<sup>26</sup> The timing of the protest against *A Modern Magdalen*, however, was particularly important in maintaining publicity for the Vigilance Committee's embryonic film censorship campaign, which had for the first time received substantial attention at a rally in early September 1915 alongside the Committee's established campaigns against 'evil literature' and music halls.<sup>27</sup> However, events in court did not all go Larkin's way. Ordinary cinemagoers refuted his claim that the film was indecent, and on seeing the film, the judge agreed with them, fining Larkin. This set back but did not end Larkin's confrontational approach to the campaign for film censorship that other members of the Committee would successfully pursue by lobbying the Corporation.<sup>28</sup> Larkin continued

25 Kevin Rockett, *Irish Film Censorship: A Cultural Journey from Silent Cinema to Internet Pornography* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004), pp. 47–48.

26 'Panic in picture theatre: scene last night', *Evening Telegraph*, 15 September 1915, p. 6.

27 'Vigilance work: Dublin celebration: views of the bishops', *Irish Independent*, 6 September 1915, p. 6; Rockett, pp. 46–47.

28 Condon, pp. 228–229.

to use the public space of the cinema – and the courtroom – as a forum where Irish Catholicism needed to be performed in order to reassert the primacy of the church over the cinematographic temple.

During the 1910s, then, picture houses would become a pervasive presence on Dublin's streetscape, reflecting the increasing popularity of the entertainment they offered among an ever-larger proportion of the city's population. By the end of the decade, architecturally interesting picture houses would occupy not only important sites in the city centre but also prominent locations in the expanding suburbs, indicating cinema's growing dominance of the mediascape. These developments alerted groups concerned with controlling public morality to the need to carry on the ideological struggle in these spaces, too.