

'Only the screen was silent . . .': Memories of children's cinema-going in London before the First World War

• Luke McKernan

All those people who, like me, were born in the early years of this century have grown up with the cinema, reached their prime with the cinema and are now declining with the cinema.

Ben Moakes¹

Ben Moakes, whose life rose and fell with the cinema, was born in 1904 and remembered clearly when cinema first arrived in Peckham. He had a choice of three close to his home – two in Walworth Road, and The Gem Picture Palace in Carter Street. There had been cinemas in the Walworth Road since at least February 1908, when the Electric Theatre opened at no. 341, and nine opened in that street alone over the period 1908–1914, even if not all were in operation at the same time. The Gem opened in 1911. By the end of that year there were fourteen cinemas in his borough of Southwark, around 270 across Greater London, and over 400 venues of all kinds that were showing motion pictures.² Before 1906 no such dedicated venues for the exhibition of film had existed in London. Five years later, over 200,000 people were attending a film show in the city every day.³ Many of them were children.

Ben belonged to a generation that was the first to experience a commercial entertainment that, unlike almost any before it, actively welcomed the young. The cinema was located and priced within most children's means, and it offered not only a programme that appealed but the attraction of the venue itself, the special rituals associated with its attendance, and the camaraderie of an audience largely made up of their own. The cinema was not directed solely at children, but in its first years aimed at a general working class audience in search of affordable

and readily-available entertainment. Nevertheless, children formed a substantial part of the first cinema audiences. Precise figures were not calculated at the time, and are impossible to deduce now, but it is likely that up to fifty per cent of cinema audiences were made up of children and adolescents, at least for the period to 1910.⁴ Even when special Saturday programmes began, which separated children from adult audiences, the numbers of the young attending film shows of all kinds were considerable. Nor was this some accident of policy on the part of the cinema trade. Ticket prices of a penny or even less were aimed particularly at society's poorest members with only pocket money to spend, and it was on the habit of regular attendance (encouraged in particular by weekly serials) that was inculcated in the young audience that the original cinema business in Britain was so successfully built.

What is valuable for the social history of cinema is that this was also the generation whose experiences of cinema-going at this time can be traced. No one thought to interview the British cinema audiences of the pre-First World War period at the time, but there is a rich vein of personal testimony available which has been hitherto overlooked by cinema historians.⁵ This testimony can be found recorded in memoirs (both published and unpublished records deposited in local archives) and oral history recordings, notably the 444 extensive interviews conducted in the 1970s by Paul Thompson and his team, as part of a study of the Edwardian era which resulted in his book *The Edwardians: The Remaking of British Society*.⁶ Inevitably, given the gap in time between the experience of pre-First

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World War cinema-going and the production of memoirs or interviews, most of this personal testimony documents the child's experience of cinema. The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate the richness of the testimony available, constructed around the various stages of the act of going to the cinema, where the experience and the enjoyment of the social space that the cinema provided was at least as important as the entertainment projected on the screen. Ben Moakes recalled not only the cinemas that he favoured, but the cost of getting in, the cinema's ticketing strategies, ruses for getting round these, the seating, lighting, the film stars he followed and the lessons he drew from watching the films. The testimony is taken from those who attended the cinema in London before the First World War. As London was the centre of the emerging British film and cinema business, such evidence of audience behaviour provides a good basis for an analysis of how cinema first came to have the great social impact that it had upon twentieth-century lives.⁷

Going to the cinema

1. *Obtaining the money*

The first task for the child was getting the money to go to the cinema. Ben Moakes and his elder brother were given a penny each week for the cinema. Cinema prices generally ranged from 3d to 6d, with some of the grand central London venues moving to a shilling or more in time. But children were so much the bedrock of the cinema audience that it was imperative to price the product within their range. Seats were therefore available at a penny (occasionally less for children), either at standard cinema shows or at the new Saturday matinees. Typical was the Electric Theatre in Islington, which opened in January 1910 with tickets at 3d for adults, 2d for children, children's penny matinees at 12.00 on Saturdays, for a show lasting an hour and a half, showing eight films.⁸

Children's pocket money varied according to parental circumstances and ideas on child-rearing. A penny or two pence appears to have been the going rate. 'I got a penny a week and

was passing rich on it – I know people of my age whose weekly pocket money at that time was a farthing', recalled C. R. Rolph.⁹ Some children received no pocket money as such, instead being given money according to need or perceived virtue. Usually it had to be earned, as R. J. Meads pointed out:

We all had to do jobs and the pocket money had to be earned – 2 pence paid on Saturday, 1 penny for pictures, 1 penny for sweets. A penny bought a lot in those days, we would spend 1/4p at a time on such things as sherbet dabs, liquorice laces, calorbonas and gob stoppers. We were always trying to earn extra pocket money which we would save up to spend on the outings which came our way.¹⁰

Blackmail, particularly to see a favourite serial, was a useful parental ploy, as Josef Morrell remembered.¹¹

However low were the family's finances, most parents tried to afford one penny for each of their children to visit the local cinema on Saturday mornings. I think there was method in this sacrificial attitude, and mothers could be forgiven for an innocent piece of blackmail. What better reason for withholding the entrance money, if certain jobs weren't accomplished, before being allowed to see the latest episode of the exciting thriller that had been eagerly discussed since last week's instalment. Also, most mothers thought that to be rid of her offspring for two or three hours was no bad thing, and at least they knew where their children were.

The weekly penny to go to the cinema became common. Willy Goldman was given his picture money on a Saturday, and a ha'penny or a penny for the rest of the week: 'anything extra was a windfall – or stolen'.¹² Children could also earn more than their allotted amount. Jam-jars could be sold to greengrocers, and old newspapers to butchers and fishmongers. There was an active trade between children in second-hand magazines, cigarette cards, and even the loaning out of precious toys such as bicycles or scooters. Theft was another option, and cases of children stealing to obtain money for going to the cinema exercised the authorities.

There was much that a child could do with a penny, to compete with the attractions of the cinema. C. R. Rolph remembered the 'agonizing hour of ecstasy' to be spent in the Marks and Spencer's Penny Bazaar, with a penny in your hand:

. . . nothing cost more than a penny, and a high proportion of the counter-space was allotted to toys, dolls, pencils, crayons, drawing and painting books, and sweets. The variety of little tin model vehicles available at a penny seems to be now, as I recall it, simply astounding.¹³

The cinema, therefore, had to represent best value to a child, who would spend half if not all of their weekly money on its attractions. However children attending the Saturday matinees gained not only entertainment, but the camaraderie of their friends, excitement, the glamour of the surroundings, and freedom from parental control. With a penny, they bought into a time and space of their own.

2. *Choosing the cinema*

Having obtained the money, the child then had to choose where to go. Both the venue and the programme on offer were important considerations. The venue had to be nearby. Although some children visited the cinema as part of a London shopping trip, having travelled in with their families for the day, the majority chose from cinemas within walking distance. By 1911, there were between two and three cinemas per square mile within inner London. Ben Moakes had a choice of three in Peckham, Josef Morrell had two in his part of Fulham; Arthur Newton in South Hackney had a pick of five.¹⁴ A crucial part of the cinema's appeal was its availability, positioned on public thoroughfares, within easy reach of almost anyone.

The choice of cinema was led less by comfort than the programme on offer. Willy Goldman describes the intense deliberations that preceded the child's visit to the cinema (his memoirs blend memories of cinema before the First World War with post-1914, as the reference here to the 'big film' indicates):

We went there straight after dinner. It was cheaper at that time of day, and also fitted in with our parents' plans of not having us out later. We were very discriminate in our choice of cinemas. A programme had to be of a certain quality to get our support. We didn't, like adults, go merely for the sake of seeing pictures. They had to be good pictures. [. . .] We made it our business to get all that information during the week. There were two elements – one negative, one positive – that we demanded in a programme: the first was 'not too much love' in the big film, the second was 'a serial' among the supporting items. With an exceptionally good serial we were prepared to compromise on the rest. The serial was the big moment in the show. If you missed an 'episode' one week you felt it to be one of the major tragedies of mankind. In the intervening days between two 'episodes' we argued heatedly among ourselves on the likelihood of the heroine, whom we had last seen trapped in a cave of slowly-rising water, drowning – or being rescued in the nick of time by the hero. It worried us a great deal.¹⁵

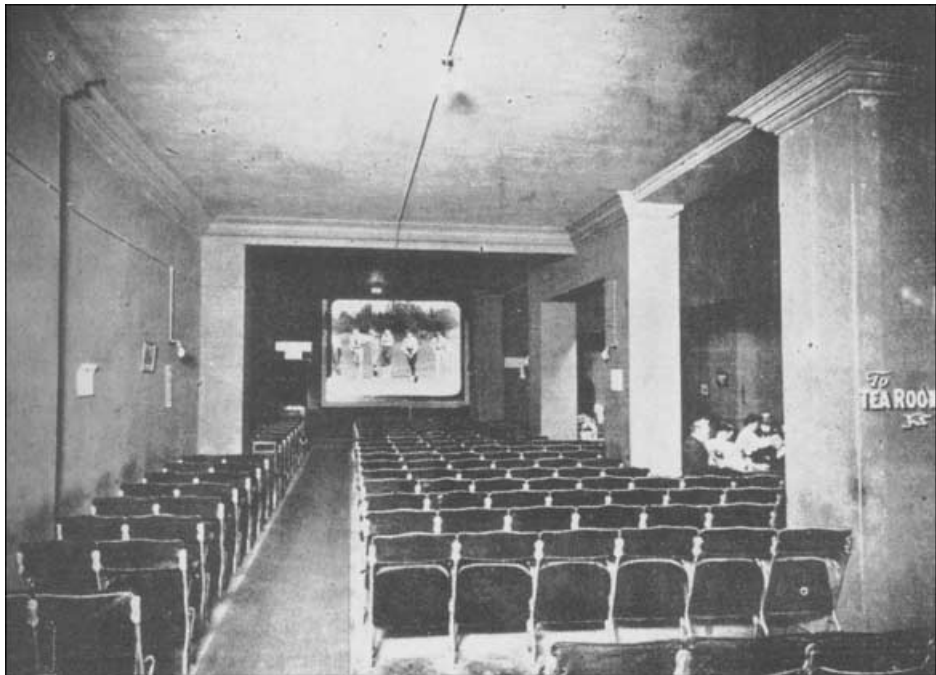
Serials, or multi-episode films, began to be hugely popular after 1912, with the American productions *The Adventures of Kathlyn* (1913), *The Perils of Pauline* (1914) and *The Exploits of Elaine* (1915). With their cliff-hanging strategies playing on hopes and fears for the hero or heroine, they were both a product of, and an inevitable encouragement to the habit of regular cinema-going.

Not every child could choose where to go and what to see. Maud Baines recalled: 'Oh we did sometimes go to cinemas if they – if the programme was suitable, you see, if father went to see what they were like first of all.'¹⁶ On the evidence of the memoirs and interviews, Maud's cautious father was in a minority. The greater sense is of a world freed of adult jurisdiction. If there was parental concern over the content of films (a common enough theme in social comment of the time), for most of these witnesses it had been forgotten.

3. *The exterior*

The cinema was really the only colourful thing in our world. North London was so drab and ugly, everyone

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- The Circle in the Square (originally the Bioscopic Tea Rooms) in 1913. This was the first cinema in Leicester Square, opened June 1909.

wore such dark clothes in those days. It all seemed black and grey to me. I felt starved for colour.¹⁷

Louise Blundell's recollections put the appearance of cinema into context. The electric theatre promised by its very name something dynamic, bright and exciting.¹⁸ In the first years of cinema the brightness was more metaphorical than physical. Converted shops, town halls or Salvation Army halls offered little glamour on the outside, and it was only when the purpose-built cinemas with names like Gem, Bijou or Picture Palace appeared around 1910 that displays of electric lights, posters and exotic architecture came to denote the luxuries that lay within.

Cinema became equated with the promise of electricity, within a general brightening of the urban experience. Alfred Gotts' memories demonstrate the impressions of the emergence of a light-filled world, and of the cinema's place within it:

Oh everything was lit up – any shops opened you see, then when I was, say round about fourteen, they started letting you in picture palaces, you could go in some for a penny, some for a ha'penny. There was one round – Silverland they call it – you could go and see the pictures for a ha'penny.¹⁹

Louise Blundell, so starved for colour, was impressed by the exoticism come to her Willesden streets:

I was now eleven and something wonderful happened. The cinema came! Two were opened in Archway Road, the Electric Palace and the Highgate Empire. Opposite the Archway Tavern was the Electric Palace. It had an eastern look about it and had an arch with rows of electric lights and when they were switched on it looked like an Arabian palace in the fairy tale books that I read.²⁰

The cinema positioned itself as a place of fantasy amid metropolitan conformity. Next door to the rows of houses in identical style, the familiar

shops and civic buildings, the cinema stood out as a place of glamour. Just as out of the darkness of its interior bright entertainment appeared on the screen, so the venue itself shone out among its surroundings.

4. *The foyer*

Having entered the cinema, the child clutching its penny was confronted by the foyer, the necessary prelude to the treasures within, a nave before the altar. Hymie Fagan queued up along with the rest of his peers:

I used to arrive almost before anyone else, queuing up impatiently at the box-office, and as the crowd of children grew, so did the yells demanding that it opened, which at last it did, dead on two o'clock.²¹

Precision over times and the cost of things is a notable feature among the memoirs. The rituals of attendance were of prime importance, and lingered in the memory. Evelyn Jones remembered the petty indignities of her cinema on Highgate Hill:

It was very small compared with the cinemas we get now and in those days there used to be queues of people. You'd go inside and they'd have a rope, or a piece of string or something, stuck across the bottom and you had to all stand behind before you got your seat. We used to hate that. There wasn't much else to attract people – just concerts and cinema, so a lot of people used to go and you often had to wait a long time before you got a seat.²²

Louise Blundell likewise remembered the time they had to wait before being admitted:

An hour before the first performance crowds of children came, with their twopence-halfpennies clutched tightly in their hands. Nell and I danced and played around the entrance hall until an attendant dressed in a smart uniform opened the doors for the cashier to take our money at the kiosk.²³

Children were generally treated with greater deference in the cinema than in any other sphere of life. A uniformed commissioner would oversee their entrance and, along with the elaborate decorations that came to characterise foyers, all denoted a special effort having been

made for the humblest in society. As a 1912 guide to cinema management pointed out, 'A dingy lobby betokens in the minds of many a poor entertainment. How often the mistake is made that all the public expect for outside appearance is a blaze of light.' Here would be found advertising displays, tiled or carpeted flooring, and plaster casting on the walls and ceilings, done out in white paint and gold leaf.²⁴ As cinemas grew, both in number and in size, so the foyer became of increasing importance as a means to control crowds, particularly with the continuous show policy adopted by many London cinemas before 1914, where a waiting audience needed to be contained before it could replace that heading for the exits.

5. *Purchasing a ticket*

In June 1909, it was reported that a single cashier at the Recreations Theatre (a cinema) in Edgware Road had, in a timed two minutes, given change and tickets to 227 patrons.²⁵ The cinema business was all about the numbers that could be processed through the box office on a daily basis. Cinemas at this period on average held around 600, and might have anything up to eight shows per day, on a continuous show policy. As films started to get longer around 1912–13, and cinemas became more commodious, things moved towards a more theatrically-oriented policy of two or three shows per day for an audience of 1,000 or more.

With the emphasis on getting as many through the doors quickly as possible, the selling of tickets had to be a highly efficient operation. Ticket-machines were available, but were nevertheless dependent on the steady hand that manned the box office. As *How to Run a Picture Theatre* coldly advised:

It is best to put a woman in charge of the box office, partly because women are apt to be more reliable, and in part because they ask less money. . . . One who is not too old to be attractive, and one who is steady enough to refuse the numerous opportunities for flirtation will become an asset.²⁶

Josef Morell, however, remembered a simpler system, whereby

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The doors were opened and we filed in dropping our pennies into a box on the table, under the eagle eyes of two large gentlemen whose principal job was to see that no one disappeared through the curtains before their hot little hands had released their pennies.²⁷

For children, the ticket procedures were especially memorable because they were bound up with strategies for their control. The continuous show policy originally allowed for audience members to stay on for as long as they liked for the purchase of one ticket. Children were all too keen to take advantage of this, and as the number of shows per day lessened, measures to ensure that a ticket was for one show only came into play. Ben Moakes recalled how tickets would be torn in half and later required for examination:

The procedure was to buy a penny ticket each at the paybox outside; then, on entering, half the ticket would be taken by an usher, the other half being retained. The seating consisted of rows of wooden forms. After two or three short films had been shown, the lights were switched on and the remaining half tickets were collected from us. The children who had arrived earlier and seen their full pennyworth would have to leave. At the end of the next part of the programme once more the lights went on and we, having no ticket, would go out. But my brother and I liked to have sweets to suck, so we spent a halfpenny on toffee before getting to the cinema, then bought one penny ticket and one halfpenny ticket. This meant that one of us, it was always me, had to leave after the first half was seen. So we planned a fiddle. I would lay full length under the form when the collector came, hidden by the legs of the other children. They also spread themselves along to cover the space I had occupied. As soon as the lights went out I climbed back on the form. But after a while they got wise to us. A man came in with a broom that had a long bamboo handle. 'Hold up your feet', he shouted, then plunged the broom under the forms to detect anybody lying there. Eventually Mum gave us an extra halfpenny for our sweets.²⁸

Another strategy was the use of coloured tickets. Willy Goldman demonstrated the same sort of determination in seeing the programme as Ben Moakes:

It was a very eventful afternoon at the cinema. There was as much drama off the screen as on, due to sporadic conflicts that broke out in various parts of the hall when a porter tried to eject children who were attempting to see the show through a second time. The management had invented a system of coloured tickets to keep a check-up on this kind of thing. Maybe this was necessary in view of the habit prevalent among children of seeing a show through twice. But the complications it brought! Children were not to be ejected easily after waiting a whole week to get inside the cinema.²⁹

6. *Entering the cinema*

To enter the inner sanctum of the cinema was to be divested of the strictures of the outside world (exemplified by the box office procedures) and to be admitted into a time and space of your own. Louise Blundell recorded the moment of release:

We pushed and shoved and at last with tickets held tightly in our hands we rushed in – past the gilt mirrors and glossy photographs of famous stars, down the aisles to find the best seats and to wait for the magic to begin. We stared in wonderment at the ceiling which was covered in paintings of angels and cherubs with garlands of flowers and lovely ladies disporting themselves all over the ceiling. At last the pianist arrived to play as the film was shown . . . We were carried along on a wave of music and emotion.³⁰

7. *Seating*

The first cinemas in London were shop conversions, and offered only the most rudimentary comfort. For example, there was 12 High Street, Whitechapel, visited in March 1909 by the Metropolitan Police. The frontage presented a central ticket booth with entrance doors each side. The price of admission was two pence for adults, a penny for children. The doors led directly into the 'cinema'. This was a plain room, forty-five deep by twenty-five feet wide, with no raking. The projector was housed in a fireproof box inside the entrance, just behind the ticket booth. A white sheet hung down at the far end of the room. The best seats were placed nearest to the screen, tip-up wooden seats, with the rest being ordinary chairs in rows. Seating filled up two-thirds of the room; the remainder was for

standing room only. There was a single five-foot gangway to the side of the seats, with an exit door that opened outwards halfway down the room. There were three adult attendants, who took it in turns to operate the projector as well. Musical accompaniment was supplied by an electrical piano, which played continuously. The cinema housed around 280, and at the time of inspection around 250 'English and Jewish people' were present, of whom around 100 were children.³¹

A similar venue was recalled by Henry Elder as the place where he first saw motion pictures:

Well, the first cinema that ever I went to was the corner of Lime Street and Caledonian Road which is a shop now, and it was no bigger than a shop and it was – a recognised thing for me to be tipped out of there because they used to issue you with a ticket and when you'd seen the programme they come round and collect this coloured ticket when you'd seen the programme. Well, I used to dive underneath the seat to see it – see it again.³²

Even when the shops started to be replaced by the Bijous and Gems of the 1910–11 period, they seldom had raking. This resulted in a dilemma for the cinemas, which was how to price the seats. Many cinemas followed established theatrical practice and assumed that the best seats were nearest the front, consequently pricing these higher. The public soon got wise to this, and for a time enjoyed the best seats at the cheapest prices, until the cinema owners realised their error.³³

Humbler cinemas, in the shop-conversion and mission hall period, offered plain wooden seats or even forms for their predominantly juvenile audiences. Hannah Myers recalled seeing films in a fairground sideshow behind Mile End station:

They used to call it the flea pit. Used to be a ha'penny. But when he had it built it was a penny. You used to go in, and you used to get a card. And if you had a lucky number on it, – you either won boots or a sack of coal or some articles of clothing – what this man used to buy for prizes. And it used to be chock-block full. And used to sit on forms. And although it was chock-block full they'd still say, come on, shift up there, shift up there, we were all huddled together and when we used to get these serial pictures you know – and the hair raising

stuff that they used to do – we'd all cringe and cringe, and the people at the back used to say, 'look behind, look behind, he's behind the door, he's behind' – of course it used to be silent pictures. Look behind the door. And then it used to come up, continuation next week. And we'd say – aaaah.³⁴

Soon seating began to improve as luxury became part of the attraction of the cinema, and the dominant keyword in the cinema lexicon became 'plush'. Verne Morgan recalled seating, time-scheduling, warmth and different corners of the auditorium, all bound up with the sense of palatial pleasure:

The Palais de Luxe was indeed a palace as far as we were concerned. We sat in plush tip-up seats and there were two programmes a night. Further, you could walk in any old time and leave when you felt like it. Which meant, of course, that you could, if you so desired, be in at the start and watch the programme twice through (which many of us did and suffered a tanning for getting home late). It was warm and cosy, and there was a small upper circle for those who didn't wish to mix!³⁵

Seats were designed for adults rather than children, who revelled in the space they offered, kicked the backs of the seat in front of them at moments of excitement, and in some cinemas were placed two to a seat so that more could be crammed inside. Getting to one's seat was, of course, never an orderly business but rather the subject of intense competition. Josef Morrell described the anarchy of a world in which children for once were in charge:

Once inside we scrambled to a seat, often resulting in skirmishes reminiscent of the action we were about to see in the films. There were another two attendants inside supervising the seating arrangements, but as I remember, they quickly lost heart when they saw the unruly and unorthodox manner the children chose their seats.³⁶

Then, miraculously, all would be settled, the curtains would part, and the show could begin.

8. *The screen*

Children were attentive to the mechanics of the entertainment put before them, while equally able to lose themselves in what was projected

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- 'Cinema as a place of fantasy amid metropolitan conformity': a contemporary cartoon from c. 1912.

on the screen. The first film shows offered a rudimentary white sheet, which could be less than stable. Henry Elder remembered where he first experienced the pictures:

It used to have a little sheet up, I suppose no bigger than six foot square and a bloke'd come round every now and again and squirt water on it and then you'd have cowboys and Indians – and a bloke with a drum making the bullets. And sometimes the screen used to fall down. Yes, that's the first place that ever I remember seeing the pictures.³⁷

In such humble venues, the proprietors would even stoop to the strategy of having a centrally-placed sheet with those children seated behind charged half price for seeing the entertainment back-to-front, a phenomenon witnessed by Arthur Newton and Jack Brenner:

The Museum Cinema in Cambridge Heath Road. Morley Hall – one penny to see and if you sat behind the screen and saw the picture backwards, one halfpenny.³⁸

Now I went to a cinema once – and we children, they put us at the back of the screen, so the words were

double dutch, because we couldn't understand them. All you could see was just the pictures . . .³⁹

Verne Morgan was keen to see how things were done at his Bromley cinema, both the mechanics of projection and the nature of the screen itself:

The operating box was a temporary affair, and was perched up at the rear of the gallery. I used to get a seat as close to it as possible so that I could see how it was all done. The lighting was effected by a stick of black carbon, about the size of a piece of chalk, which lit up the small box with a brilliant blueish-white light and had a blinding effect if you looked right at it. Occasionally it would burn low and the operator would push it up a bit; this would be reflected by the density of light on the screen. The screen itself was also of a temporary nature, it was in fact little more than a large white sheet weighted at the bottom to keep it taut. Any movement close to it would cause it to wobble, and the picture would go a little peculiar. We were not critical of such minor details. The very fact that the picture moved was enough to satisfy us . . .⁴⁰

Alfreda Holmes records a less scientific but intriguing memory of the relationship between the audience and the action on the screen, suggesting that the action was somehow being performed on the screen, and that these were presences whose actions might be affected by their cries:

Whenever the cowboys looked like – you know, we used to shout out. We were quite convinced that – it was because they could hear us through the screen, that that's why they moved quickly you see, and – and of course the cowboys always won. I mean the Indian spears, you know, never – never sort of hit them properly.⁴¹

Interaction with, or through, the screen was not only mental but vocal. The cinema was a place where it was natural to call out, to be as one with the action.

9. *Noise and behaviour*

The noise inside the cinema could be considerable. Cinemagoing was a social event, where people met friends, commented on the films, munched peanuts, sang along with favourite melodies, chastised children, and laughed and cried with the action on the screen. The projector rattled and the piano crashed loudly. People read out the titles, a regular source of irritation for some commentators. Harry Blacker, from an East End Jewish family, recalled the hubbub, with a distinctive service provided by some of the children:

A perpetual buzz of conversation mingled with the crackle of peanut shells that littered the floor like snow in winter. Every step in any direction crunched . . . Nearby, children were reading the titles out loud for the benefit of their foreign parents. Some even translated the words directly into Yiddish. Babies cried, kids were slapped, and an endless procession to the 'ladies and gents' was greeted by outraged cries of 'Siddown'. Only the screen was silent.⁴²

Between 1881 and 1914, some 120,000 to 150,000 East European and Russian Jews moved to Britain, sixty to seventy per cent of these to London. They settled in the East End boroughs of Bethnal Green, Hackney and Stepney, where the

Whitechapel district became predominantly Jewish in character.⁴³ These boroughs were also those with a high number of cinemas: in 1911, Bethnal Green had four, Hackney fourteen and Stepney twelve, or 4.35 per square mile.⁴⁴ London did not have quite the ethnic diversity which so characterised the nickelodeons of New York at this period, but that there was mixing of audiences is indicated by the evidence of non-Jews such as Ben Thomas, also witness to the translation phenomenon:

I remember people reading aloud in the days of the silent films. In them days a lot of people, especially the elderly, couldn't read owing to little schooling or bad eyesight. So while you would be looking at the picture being shown, as soon as the captions or wording came on someone would read it aloud to the person they were with. It might be a man reading to his wife, or vice versa, or a couple of women, or some woman would have one of her kids read to her. So there was always a good deal of mumbling going on and if the cinema wasn't too packed, you kept away from them. Jews done a lot of this reading aloud, for there were a lot of Russian, Polish and German Jews in the East End who couldn't read or speak English.⁴⁵

The noise, however, was general. Willy Goldman noticed the different qualities of noise, as the audience both treated the cinema as a social gathering and interacted with the entertainment on the screen:

People were definitely out to get an afternoon's entertainment – in the most diabolical sense of the word. In the half-hour preceding the show they turned the place into a circus. They stood up and shouted jests to each other. Some sought out relatives and friends and when they had caught sight of them screeched across: 'Hey, Becky! . . . Here's a seat I've saved for you – come on over!'

With the commencement of the programme the noise does not so much quieten down as change its character. It takes on a more collective form . . . There are also the 'gossips' everywhere. These are usually housewives, for Monday is 'forgetfulness day', for them as well as for the unemployed. They love discussing the film during its progress. Mostly it is a drama that sets them off – they try predicting the various situations

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before they arrive. They do it with a great sense of triumph. They consider themselves very clever, like people who work out a crossword puzzle.⁴⁶

Audiences responded with open emotion to what they saw on the screen. The cinema was a place where one could laugh or cry without reserve. James Malone was questioned about the behaviour of his mother (who enjoyed few other entertainments) in the cinema:

Q: Did she ever go out to enjoy herself?

A: She used to go to the cinema with my father. By the way she behaved and other women too in a cinema – they used to live with it, they used to talk to the actors. She used to say to 'em, 'look behind you, and – 'he never done it'. . . . I remember my mother coming out of the cinema with my father and I was very – very young and I remember what she said to him she said, Jim – she should never have married that man, he'll never be any good to her. Now that's what I call – living with a picture.

Q: How often would they go to the pictures?

A: Oh once or twice a week. People used to really cry at the cinema them days, when the lights went up you look around – see 'em all tears down their eyes you see. Used to snivel.⁴⁷

Living with the picture was common for children too. Fermin Rocker was out of the ordinary in being the son of prominent anarchists, and his particular take on the generally popular 'Cowboys and Indians' was unusual, even if his engagement with what was happening on the screen was not. He was a great admirer of North American Indians, and was appalled at the tales of deceit and treachery played upon the by the white man in stories told to him by his father:

My partiality for the redskin was to have some unhappy consequences when I received my first exposure to the cinema. The Westerns, which featured rather prominently in the repertory of those days, invariably had the Indians getting the worst of it in their encounters with the white man, a headlong rout of the redskins being the usual outcome. I found it quite impossible to look on calmly while my friends were being massacred on the screen. Not being nearly so stoical as my Indian idols, I would raise a tremendous

commotion and have to be taken out of the theatre to prevent things from getting completely out of hand.⁴⁸

The cinema as social space meant more than simply conversation. Ben Thomas remembered women in the Ben Hur cinema in Stepney doing their vegetable peeling, a habit that continued into the late 1920s:

The 'Old Road' was a very cheap market, so what some women used to do was to do their bit of shopping just before 2 o'clock, then queue up at Ben Hur's which opened at 2 o'clock. While watching the films the women would peel their spuds or when the film changing was on, for the lights would go up then. So the cleaners, besides nut shells and orange peelings to clear up, had potato peelings as well, some women peeled carrots, swedes and parsnips as well.⁴⁹

The cinema's working class audience brought a lively sociability to it, treating the space as their own, to be inhabited by their normative modes of behaviour. The children championed cinema as a place for near-riotous celebration. Only the screen was silent.

10. Comfort

Not everyone enjoyed the experience of going to the cinema. For Eileen Baillie, 'Cinemas were few, smelly "flea-pits" with flickering films that made your eyes ache.'⁵⁰ Her attitude may have been shaped by her suburban milieu, brought into London on pleasurable days out with her vicar father, where the cinema contrasted badly with the theatre and music hall. Nevertheless, going to the cinema was a mixed blessing. Cinemas were often muggy and smoke-filled, too few having proper ventilation. 'The heat was terrific . . . No air-conditioning disturbed the fug of cigarette smoke and perspiring humanity', Harry Blacker recalled.⁵¹ Cinemas were commonly viewed as unhygienic (hence the term 'flea pit'), with little difference made in the perception of a lack of cleanliness between the cinema and those who patronised it. A common practice was to spray the audiences with perfumed disinfectant, which seems to have aroused surprisingly little protest. *How to Run a Picture Theatre* recommended that the cinema should be disinfected not only after

each performance, but while the films were being shown as well, necessary for 'warding off disease' and 'keeping the atmosphere pure and sweetly scented'.⁵² Blacker remembered that the spray smarted if it got in the eyes, and V. S. Pritchett made the experience seem almost sensuous, bound up with all the other sensations of cinema-going.

London was dangerous. We had a girl to help my mother for a few weeks and her mind, like the mind of the one at Ealing, was brimming with crime. She took me to the Camberwell Bioscope to see a film of murder and explosions called *The Anarchist's Son*, in which men with rifles in their hands crawled up a hill and shot at each other. When the shed in which one of them was living, blew up, the film turned silent, soft blood red and the lady pianist in front of the screen struck up a dramatic chord. In the Bioscope men walked about squirting the audience with a delicious scent like hair lotion that prickled our heads.⁵³

11. Music

Binding together the various sensory pleasures that made up the first cinema experiences was music. It played only a small part in most working-class children's lives. As Eileen Baillie noted, 'It must be almost impossible for the modern child to realize how starved we were of music'.⁵⁴ The cinema, by contrast, was filled with music, generally provided by a pianist, who might have one or two fellow musicians in larger venues, but who usually soldiered on alone for the children's shows. Walter Southgate noticed and was sympathetic:

There again the appropriate noises and tempo had to be supplied by a versatile pianist. This fellow sat in the wings playing the same tunes and making the same noises twice nightly, seven days a week.⁵⁵

The person playing the piano would toil with seemingly no thanks for hours, and might be pelted with orange peel for their pains. The novelist Ursula Bloom was a pianist at a pre-First World War cinema in Harpenden as a teenager. She remembered playing on matinee days from two thirty until five, and then six until ten-thirty, with just two-and a-half minutes' rest every half

hour.⁵⁶ But the children were aware of them, and many of the memoirs identify the person responsible for directing the audience's emotions:

. . . we would all cheer when the pictures finally started for the screen was a long time flickering and shaking and tearing itself in two with brief glimpses of the previous week's serial before it settled down, and whenever it broke down during the performance, which was often, we would all boo loudly. A lady played the piano, sad music, frightening music, and happy music according to how the film was progressing and what was taking place.⁵⁷

Cinemas could be filled by other kinds of music, as sing-a-longs to music slides were common, though these seem to have been kept for adult shows, since no children's memoirs mention them. Josef Morrell is, as usual, eloquent and observant on the subject of music accompaniment:

There was silence until the film got underway, then the piano gave the clues of the story. The pianist thumped the keys *fortissimo* when the hero was hurrying to rescue the heroine from all sorts of terrible fates, and we gave him every encouragement by raising our voices to a deafening pitch. It was when the leading lady's baby was desperately ill, that the pianist gave her best. Soul stirring melodies were played in unbelievable silence, and the boys had to be on their guard not to be caught crying with the girls. Of course justice was seen to be done, and had we been able to reach him, we would have assisted the hero to throw the villain off the cliff. The end came with most of us standing on our seats cheering the epic drawing to a close.⁵⁸

The music provided the cue to emotion, propelling the story forward and holding adult and child audiences alike in its grip.

12. Food

Cinema audiences ate, almost continuously. The commonest foodstuffs available were chocolates, peanuts and oranges. Children had half their pocket money spent on the show and the other half dedicated to the accompanying foodstuffs. Harry Blacker recalled he and his sister exchanging 'our spending money for massive

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• The Palladium, Mile End Road c. 1913.

bags of peanuts, still warm from their on-the-spot roasting', while Josef Morrell recognised that, 'it must have been a daunting task each week to clear the floor of sweet bags, orange peel and apple cores, thrown down by anything up to three hundred children'.⁵⁹

However, as the cinema sought to attract a gentler sort of clientele, other kinds of eating and drinking were introduced. Cinemas were often located on commercial thoroughfares, targeted at a passing trade often out for an afternoon's shopping, and cinemas started to offer tea and biscuits with afternoon shows, in the hope of attracting women shoppers. No less than children, women found the cinema a socially acceptable, affordable and welcoming form of entertainment, in sharp contrast to the stigma of the male-oriented pub. Many such cinemas were located in central London, such as the Bioscopic Tea Rooms in Leicester Square, but Arthur Newton remembered his Hackney cinema, the 'Empress by St Thomas's Square, Mare Street,

where its patrons were given tea and biscuits in the afternoon'.⁶⁰ Lily Broomhill from the same borough enjoyed similar intimations of gentility in Kingsland Road:

We used to go to a picture palace in Kingsland Road for a penny, and we'd get a cup of tea given to us. It was right near Dalston, on the Ridley Road side, of Kingsland Road, near Forest Road – a very tiny place.⁶¹

Orange peel and apple cores discarded on the floor were indicative of the happy disorder that characterised the first cinema shows; tea and biscuits of the need to attract an audience with more spending power, encouraging them into regular attendance, pushing up ticket prices.

13. *The dark*

There were many things about this new phenomenon of cinema that worried the authorities. They were worried about the fire hazard that the small, unlicensed venues before 1910 represented, with the inflammable nitrate

film stock running through the projectors, the narrow gangways and poor exits. Nitrate film fires were rare; the fear of ensuing panic was the real danger, and those who did die or were injured in the few fires that occurred usually were caught in the crush as people tried to get out.⁶² The authorities worried about the content of the films, their supposed horrific or debauched content, and how they might lure the young into crime or depravity. Stories of children who had learned to steal from having seen 'how to do it' on the screen were legion. Canon H. D. Rawnsley, one of the most outspoken critics of the cinema, expressed such fears in these lurid terms:

Those of us who know what a large proportion of the spectators are children between four and fourteen, and that before these children's greedy eyes with heartless discrimination horrors unimaginable are in many of the halls presented night after night, are the reverse of happy. Terrifying massacres, horrible catastrophes, motor-car smashes, public hangings, lynchings, badger-baiting, bull fights, prize fights, pictures of hell fire and the tortures of the damned, &c., are passed before them, and become such realities that they cannot sleep at night and have been known to implore the policeman to guard them on their way home from 'the horrid man with the beard'.⁶³

The authorities and social commentators equally feared the crowd, the threatening, disreputable mass, always seeming to offer the possibility of disorder, until the growing good order people started to display in cinemas once they became comfier and classier then led commentators to bemoan those same audiences' passivity in the face of the seductive screen.⁶⁴

But the core fear of the cinema expressed by authorities was the fact that it placed people in the dark. There would be unchecked mixing of the sexes, the unseen mass might fall prey to base temptations, and the young might fall prey to predatory elders. The combined fears of fire, darkness and impropriety are usefully combined in the Metropolitan Police report on cinemas in Whitechapel in March 1909:

In all these places of entertainment the audience is mixed together irrespective of age or sex. A series of five

or six sets of pictures are shown in quick succession lasting from 30 to 45 minutes. During that time the room is in darkness. The rays from the lantern slightly illuminate the benches near the curtain, but at the opposite end where some of the spectators stand up in order to get a better view, it would be quite easy for acts of misconduct or indecency to take place without fear of detection. In several cases the only means of exit is by one door, and the gangways are so narrow and inadequate that if an alarm of fire was raised it would be impossible for the younger members of the audience to escape in the rush that would ensue, and there might be loss of life.⁶⁵

It is a noticeable feature of the memoir evidence that the darkness is seldom mentioned. Many comment on the brightness of the screen entertainment, by implication in contrast to the darkness in which they had been placed, but the view of the audience was very different from that of those commenting upon them. There are references to what some might be expected to get up to if they were not especially engrossed in what was on the screen. Hymie Fagan recalled:

Real picture lovers, but poor like me, went into the gallery. Others, who simply wanted to snog in the dark, went into the stalls. Looking down into it, it seemed that nearly all the seats were empty, as indeed they were, for the snoggers preferred the walls round the stalls.⁶⁶

C. R. Rolph recalled the cinema management's preference for keeping children visible when a film was not being screened:

The films were all very short, and no doubt very old – they broke down many times in each performance. And at each breakdown a stout lady who always sat on a cushioned stool near the Exit . . . tugged at a little chain hanging from the gas-lamp near the door and, it seemed to our startled eyes, flooded the room with a dazzling light. Mr Herbert told us that the management had not learned to leave a company of children in the dark with nothing to engage their attention. An audience of grown-ups were allowed to wait in the dark, I believe, during breakdowns. But they probably knew how to pass the time.⁶⁷

Such was the fear of the dark that some 'daylight' cinemas were introduced, where

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the screen was placed in a black-lined recess, enabling (in theory) the rest of the cinema to be fully lit. One London cinema circuit, Electric Palaces Ltd., announced in April 1910 that all of its cinemas would be daylight ones, though it soon had to backtrack from such an impractical suggestion.⁶⁸

Overt fear of the dangers of fire combined with closet fears of the uncontrolled mass in the dark led to a licensing scheme for cinemas, spearheaded by the London County Council. Previously the LCC had attempted to oversee venues showing films by recourse to its existing licence schemes for music, music and dancing or stage, but many venues (film not being live and, strictly speaking, silent) either ignored such strictures or in some cases got round them by not having music at all.⁶⁹ The Cinematograph Act introduced in January 1910 had the immediate effect of spurring on a huge rise in cinema construction across London and the rest of the country. Legitimation brought about quietude. Of the audience at the Euston Picture Palace, it was reported in January 1910 that 'though they were first inclined to be restless and over demonstrative, no more attentive audience can now, thanks to a liberal programme and excellent management, be anywhere met with.'⁷⁰ Cinema gradually 'civilised' its inhabitants. Josef Morell noted the change in the difference between child and adult audiences, and the expectation of good order:

Of course the quiet and peaceful atmosphere of the hall although nearly full, was in sharp contrast to the morning's performance. For instance, with everyone orderly, there was no need for attendants to be waiting to throw out anyone misbehaving, and was therefore an early glimpse into the future and what was expected of me when I grew up.⁷¹

As Norbert Elias observes, cinema transformed 'an active, often aggressive expression of pleasure, into the passive, more ordered pleasure of spectating (i.e. a mere pleasure of the eye)'.⁷² But that was for the adults. For the children, a delirious anarchy reigned, and would continue to do so – anyone can vouch for who experienced a children's Saturday matinee, up to their demise in

the 1970s. Despite its best efforts, cinema did not contain them – it was their space for expression and release.

14. *The films*

Why did children, and people generally, first go to the cinema? The too obvious answer is, to see the films. The memoir evidence alone demonstrates the appeal held in the memory of the films and first film stars that they saw, but they also indicate the multiple and interconnected pleasures that made up the cinema-going experience. Films did not exist in isolation, and for the audience it was the combined experience of entertainment, sociability, warmth, glamour, a relative lack of social obligation and the excellent value for money in terms of time spent that made cinema the huge *social* success that it was.

Nevertheless, if people went to the cinema for a variety of social reasons, they would not have done so at all were it not for the films. The memory of the first film seen, however vague the circumstances, is frequently recalled. For many it provides a useful opening means by which to frame the history of their cinema-going. Ben Thomas remembered the simple emotions that were called upon at his first film show:

The first moving film I saw was of a man being chased, who kept falling over and tripping over things. I thought it very funny, and there were roars of laughter from the children. The other picture was a sad one with a woman holding a little girl's hand going through the snow.⁷³

Frank Scott, older than most of the memoirists and an adult when he first saw films (his recollection of being seven or eight at the time is incorrect), remembered the moving pictures as a circus sideshow:

Oh they had – equestrian riding, a couple of downs, a bit of acrobating and – perhaps a little sketch they'd put on. And they'd had – what they called penny gas [gaffs], little side shows, you know. Shadow pantomimes and fat ladies and the biggest rats – a coypu – I know what they are now but we didn't at the time. The bearded ladies – tattooed ladies, tattooed

man. A penny to go in and that was the first time I'd seen – moving pictures. Paid a penny to go in and I can remember that picture even now. I don't suppose I was about seven or eight. They were playing cards, it was a French picture. There's two blokes playing cards on the side of the kerb, van came by with the tailboard down. They started playing cards on the tailboard of this van, 'til it went round the corner, that was the finish of it . . . Then perhaps they'd put on a – a short comic one on, drunken sailors or something like that you know. Whn I went home and told – father and mother I'd seen moving pictures they wouldn't believe me. I said, well you go up and have a look.⁷⁴

The first film stars, invariably American, are frequently mentioned. Pearl White, star of the serials, is the name most commonly recalled, also William S. Hart, 'Broncho Billy' Anderson, Mary Pickford and John Bunny (Chaplin too, though he properly belongs to the period just after that covered by this essay), but there are also names now largely forgotten, such as Elmo Lincoln and Eddie Polo, remembered by Ben Moakes as being 'one of our early film heroes. He had fights in every picture, getting his shirt ripped each time'. Moakes also picked up on the way cinema was dictating modes of behaviour for heroes and villains:

In the many fights we saw on the screen, our heroes always fought fairly. When they had knocked down their antagonist, they stood back to allow him to get up. But the villains would frequently kick the man who was on the ground.⁷⁵

In general, types of film rather than specific stars (occasionally) or films (almost never) are recollected. Cinema is therefore home to a succession of expected visual and emotional experiences, built upon the reliability of genres.

15. *Leaving and returning*

And then it was time to leave the cinema.

It had come to an end, and we were left with feelings nearly as emotional as the film, realizing it would be a whole week before we knew for certain whether our favourite would be in time to save his sweetheart.

As we jostled our way out, the relief of the watching attendants can only be guessed. Then they made a

systematic check by turning up the seats and examining the toilets, in case someone had secreted themselves away in order to see the adult programme without paying.

Arguments took place on the way home, trying to guess what would happen the following week, and our parents were of little help; when relating the exciting finish to the serial and asking whether everything would turn out the way we wished, they smiled and irritatingly said we would just have to wait and see.⁷⁶

In leaving there had to be the promise of return. The serial, so dominant in the recollections of those who first enjoyed going to the cinema before the First World War, was the most blatant tool for encouraging regular, weekly attendance. Josef Morrell, C. R. Rolph and their contemporaries knew that they would be back next Saturday, caught between fear and anticipation:

Miss [Pearl] White held us by reason of the terrifying predicaments we always had to leave her in. As the curtain swished across at the end she was always crying for help from a seventh-floor window in a burning building, hanging by her beautifully manicured fingernails from the outside of a balloon basket, or bound and struggling gracefully in the path of an express train. Her films bore titles like *The Exploits of Elaine*, and it was only the need that she should survive for at least one more advertised Exploit that sent us home partly optimistic about the future.⁷⁷

Thus did the cinema become a home for the weekly playing out of hopes and fears.

Collective memory

The memoir, particularly the published memoir, is a work shaped for a readership, which balances its recollections according to an overall narrative, and may, for instance, give equal stress to cinema-going, attending music halls, reading, or sports events, which does not reflect accurately the memoirist's actual experience. Such memoirs may be edited, their raw text manipulated to suit easy reading, and of course they often come from literate people whose wish or whose ability to record their past life may indicate a relatively

privileged upbringing. The memoir also tends to be written by those in their later years, leading to an imbalance of evidence from those who were children in the Edwardian period. Inevitably, they are subject to the failings of memory, the desire to create a picture different to that which reality may have represented, and they are constricted by the limitations of the memoirist as a writer, particularly those memoirs not intended for publication.

But the advantages of the memoir far outweigh the problems, which are no greater in their way than other kinds of historical evidence. The memoir is the personal record *par excellence*, the conscious testimony of an individual in their voice alone (editorial assistance notwithstanding). The memoir privileges that which was important within that person's life, identifying those experiences which were formative, which have endured in the mind and which the memoirist recognises as needing commemoration. In this, they are very much documents of our modern age, which so treasures the individual and the private experience.

The problems with using oral history recordings are well known. Again, the subjectivity, selectivity, and the difficulties inherent in an interview method trying to elicit comment must all be taken into account, but again interviews are of no less value than any other form of evidence. As Paul Thompson argues, the social facts one finds in statistics, newspaper reports, private correspondence or published biographies do not represent absolute facts, but instead represent 'the *social perception* of facts . . . subject to social pressures from the context in which they are obtained.'⁷⁸ The testimony from an oral history recording is no less valid in gauging social meaning than any other document subject to its own process of mediation.

There are specific caveats that need to be addressed in using memoir evidence for this early period in cinema history. Despite the short time-frame, 1906–1914, there was considerable change in the metropolitan film-going experience, from the crudities of the first

shop conversions to the increasingly palatial super-cinemas that started to be introduced 1913–1914. Some of the memoirists note such changes in venue, but their memories nevertheless can range indiscriminately over the period and make general statements which may only apply to a particular situation. Memories of these first shows often blend with later war-time and post-war experiences. Retrospective knowledge is sometimes applied, as with Alfred Gotts, who tried to impress his interviewer with memories of people rushing out of a bioscope show at the sight of an oncoming train; more myth than reality.⁷⁹ Allowance must be made for the creative tricks that memory plays, while valuing the evidence provided by specific recollections and the overall documenting of the experience.

There are many memoirs of the Edwardian period that make no reference to the cinema. For some of these writers, the cinema clearly did not impinge on their lives. For others, it seems to have been deliberately excluded. The recreations of a golden Edwardian age by such skilful sentimentalists as W. Macqueen-Pope tend to exclude the upstart, mass-appeal, mechanised and Americanised cinema from their portraits of the era.⁸⁰ J. B. Priestley, in perhaps the best-known portrait of the Edwardian period, rejected of the alien medium:

The final act in most of these variety shows when all the glory of the programme had vanished, was a few minutes of jerky film, generally called 'Bioscope'. But we rarely stayed to discover what the Bioscope was offering us. Now that we have so many accounts of the early history of films, we know that men in various places were taking them very seriously indeed. But that was true of very few people. My friends and I waved them away. [. . .] And for that reason I shall spend no more time with them here, leaving them to flicker away, a final disregarded item in the great gaudy programmes of the music hall.⁸¹

But, despite his assertion, Priestley's jaundiced view is representative of very few. By the time of the First World War there were 20,000,000 cinema tickets being sold in Britain every week.⁸² This was socially significant not only in number

but in the kind that it represented. As F. R. Goodwin of the Cinema Exhibitors' Association pointed out:

The cheapness of this form of amusement has created what is really a new type of audience. Over half of the visitors to the picture theatres occupy seats to the value of threepence or less. In the main, the vast majority of picture house patrons were not in the habit of attending any other places of amusement. The picture house is emphatically the poor man's theatre, and it must always be remembered, is the only organisation which systematically provides amusement for children.⁸³

This new audience was empowered by an entertainment space which it could afford and command as its own, akin to what the music hall had been for a previous generation but with the added strengths of the huge increase in the numbers entertained, and the regularity and frequency of that entertainment. For their pennies and threepences they bought not simply into the films but into the cohesive experience of cinema. Of course all the rituals of cinema attendance that were introduced in this period can be seen as means of social control, seeking through discipline to create manageable habits which would in turn make the cinema a more attractive proposition for a monied audience. But that was not the audience's point of view. It was the cinema that served them, not the other way around.

The prevalent theory in early cinema studies is the 'cinema of attractions', defined as a period to 1906 where films exhibited moments of spectacle (vaudeville turns, tricks, sensations, colour, the exotic etc), to be replaced thereafter by an organisation of the filmic text around narrative, with character, motivation and suspense.⁸⁴ Something similar existed in the changing experience of going to see a film. Before 1906 film was an add-on attraction, a turn at the music hall, a part of fairground or circus entertainments, just so much 'Bioscope'. After 1906 the experience of viewing a film is bound up with the place in which it is shown. The film cannot be divorced from its surroundings, the rituals of its attendance, or the society of those paying to see it. And whereas in pure film-as-text

terms the period 1907–1913 is seen (in Tom Gunning's phrase) as 'the true *narrativization* of the cinema', maybe for an understanding of film-going as a social phenomenon we need to be thinking of the *socialization* of cinema occurring at the same time. By 'socialization' is meant that process by which people (and particularly children) become aware of those around them and learn of their interrelationships within society. The cinema then becomes a place for the identification of the social self. It is also a process of belonging, where the film experience changes from something at a remove to something owned. From the collective memoir record of those who were young when the cinema was young we find a rich memorious set of experiences whose interconnected features define their subject. To understand fully the early history of the cinema, we need to see it through its first young audience's eyes.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

- 1 Ben Moakes, 'Going to the Pictures', in *The Time of our Lives* (Peckham Publishing Project, 1983), p. 96.
- 2 Dates and figures taken from the London Project database, <http://londonfilm.bbk.ac.uk>, and originally derived from data for individual cinemas given in the *Bioscope Annual and Trades Directory* (1910–1915), *Kinematograph Year Book* (1914–1915) and other cinematograph and theatre trade publications, as well as records for licensed venues produced by the London County Council (London Metropolitan Archives). Films were shown not only in cinemas, but also in music halls, mission halls, amusement arcades and other public amusement places, hence the broader calculation for film venues of all kinds.
- 3 Luke McKernan, 'Diverting Time: London's Cinemas and Their Audiences, 1906–1914', *The London Journal*, vol. 32, no. 2, July 2007, p. 133.
- 4 No analysis of audience composition, by gender, age or class, was undertaken at this period. Metropolitan Police reports on attendance at shop shows in the Whitechapel district in March 1909 indicate that up to half the audience were children. 100 out of an

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audience of 280 at the Whitechapel Picture Theatre were children; fifty percent were children at an unnamed venue at 63 Whitechapel Road; 100 out of 150 at Happy Land in Commercial Road; 200 out of 300 were children at Solomon Templinski's show in Hanbury Street; over fifty percent of an audience of 200 at Philip Sasovsky's show in Brick Lane. The National Archives (TNA) MEPO 2/9172 file 590446/5, 'Bioscope & Cinematograph Shows', report from Arbour Square Station, H Division, 29 March 1909. There is too little information from sources such as newspaper reports following fire panics to be able to deduce such data in a way that has been done for music halls. See Dagmar Höher, 'The Composition of Music Hall Audiences, 1850–1900', in Peter Bailey (ed.), *Music Hall: The Business of Pleasure* (Milton Keynes: The Open University Press, 1986), pp. 73–92. It is reasonable to assume that after 1910 the number of children went up but the percentage they represented went down, as more adults were attracted to the cinema. But the only audience composition figures traceable for 1910–14 relate to the special case of children's matinees rather than the audience overall. For example, a survey of cinema matinees undertaken in Liverpool on a Saturday in November 1913 showed that there were 13,332 children between the ages of four and thirteen present at twenty-seven venues. Canon H. D. Rawnsley, *The Child and the Cinematograph Show and the Picture Post-Card Evil* (pamphlet, 1913).

- 5 There were a number of city-scale social investigations in America that incorporated film-going habits, with limited questioning of audience habits; for example, Michael M. Davis, *The Exploitation of Pleasure: A Study of Commercial Recreations in New York City* (New York: Department of Child Hygiene of the Russell Sage Foundation, 1911). An important 1912/13 sociological study of filmgoing in Mannheim, Germany employed audience questionnaires: Emilie Altenloh, *Zur Soziologie des Kino: Die Kino-Unternehmung und die sozialen Schichten ihrer Besucher* (Jena: Diederichs, 1914), trans. Kathleen Cross, 'A Sociology of the Cinema: the Audience', *Screen* vol. 43, no. 3, Autumn 2001, pp. 249–293. British cinema-goers were first given a voice in 1917 through a report commissioned by the National Council of Public Morals, published as *The Cinema: Its Present Position and Future Possibilities* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1917).
- 6 Paul Thompson, *The Edwardians: The Remaking of British Society* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975). Transcripts of the original interviews are now held in the National Social Policy and Social Change Archive, University of Essex. The interviews are carefully structured around the same core questions on their lives in the Edwardian era, including the entertainments that they and their parents enjoyed.

The interviews come from people across the whole of the country, not just London.

- 7 The research for this essay was conducted 2004–05 as part of the 'London Project' of the AHRB Centre for British Film and Television Studies, investigating the film business in London before the First World War. The London Project database is another of the outcomes from this work.
- 8 'Picture Theatre News', *The Rinking World and Picture Theatre News*, 22 January 1910, p. 17.
- 9 C. H. Rolph, *London Particulars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 64. Rolph was born in 1901, the son of a policeman. The family lived in Southwark, then Finsbury Park, then Fulham. C. R. Rolph is a pen name – his true name was Cecil Rolph Hewitt. He became a Chief Inspector with the City of London Police, and was Vice-President of the Howard League for Penal Reform.
- 10 R. J. Meads, *Growing-up With Southall From 1904* (Southall, 1979), p. 3.
- 11 Josef Morrell, *Tell Me Grandpa* (Easthill Brauton, Devon: Merlin Books, 1981), p. 99. Morrell was born in 1906, the son of a Fulham tailor.
- 12 Willy Goldman, *East End My Cradle* (London: Faber and Faber, 1940), p. 40. Goldman's memoirs cover his East End Jewish childhood before, during, and after the First World War.
- 13 Rolph, *London Particulars*, p. 103.
- 14 Arthur Newton, *Years of Change: Autobiography of a Hackney Shoemaker* (London: Hackney Workers' Educational Association/Centerprise Publications, 1974), p. 38. Newton was born in 1902, and lived in South Hackney. For calculations of the number of cinemas per individual London boroughs in 1911, see McKernan, 'Diverting Time', p. 132.
- 15 Goldman, *East End My Cradle*, pp. 35–36.
- 16 Interview with Maud Agnes Baines, ref. C707/13/1-2, *Family Life and Work Experience Before 1918*, National Social Policy and Social Change Archive, University of Essex (FLWE). She was born in Enfield in 1887.
- 17 Louise M. Blundell, *A North London Childhood 1910–1924* (Islington Libraries, 1985), p. 21. She was born in 1910, living in Willesden and Archway Road. Her recollections come from a slightly later period than the others cited in this essay.
- 18 Cinemas were often called 'electric' in the early years, following the example of Electric Theatres (1908) Ltd.
- 19 Interview with Alfred Gotts, ref. C707/366/1-8, FLWE. Gotts was born in Stepney in 1894, one of thirteen children, of whom nine survived infancy. His father was a City carman; his mother was a cigar maker. Silverland was located at 273 Commercial Road, Stepney.
- 20 Blundell, *A North London Childhood 1910–1924*, p. 21.
- 21 Hymie Fagan, *An Autobiography*, n.d. [typescript] (Brunel University Library, 2–261), p. 42. Brunel

- University has a substantial collection of unpublished memoirs of working class life. Fagan was born in Stepney in 1903, into a Jewish working class family.
- 22 Sylvia Bond (ed.), *Yesteryears – School, Work and Leisure Remembered by Highgate Residents* (London: Sylvia Bond, 1979). The memories are of Miss Evelyn Jones, born 1903, who lived all her life in Milton Park. The cinema she refers to is probably the Electric Palace, 17 Highgate Hill.
 - 23 Blundell, *A North London Childhood 1910–1924*, p. 21.
 - 24 *How to Run a Picture Theatre: A Handbook for Proprietors, Managers and Exhibitors* (London: The Kinematograph Weekly, [c. 1912]), p. 12.
 - 25 *The Bioscope*, 3 June 1909, p. 5.
 - 26 *How to Run a Picture Theatre*, p. 29.
 - 27 Morrell, *Tell Me Grandpa*, pp. 99–100.
 - 28 Moakes, 'Going to the Pictures', p. 96.
 - 29 Goldman, *East End My Cradle*, p. 35.
 - 30 Blundell, *A North London Childhood 1910–1924*, p. 21.
 - 31 TNA MEPO 2/9172 file 590446/5, 'Bioscope & Cinematograph Shows', report from Arbour Square Station, H Division, 29 March 1909.
 - 32 Interview with Henry Elder, C707/71/1-2, *FLWE*. Elder was born in 1896 in Swindon Street off Gray's Inn Road, before the family moved to Cumberland Street, living for twenty-four years in an eight-room tenement house shared with other families. His father was musician, working in piano manufacturing as a finisher.
 - 33 'Picture Theatre Notes', *The Rinking World & Picture Theatre News*, 4 December 1909, p. 27.
 - 34 Interview with Mrs Hannah Myers, C707/401/1-2, *FLWE*. Myers was born in 1900 in London E3, the seventeenth child of eighteen (some of whom died in infancy) of a Jewish street trader selling fruit, who later opened his own shop.
 - 35 Verne Morgan, *Yesterday's Sunshine: Reminiscences of an Edwardian Childhood* (Folkestone: Bailey Brothers and Swinfen, 1974), pp. 125–126. The Morgan family lived in Hounslow and Bromley.
 - 36 Morrell, *Tell me Grandpa*, p. 100.
 - 37 Interview with Henry Elder, *op. cit.*
 - 38 Newton, *Years of Change*, p. 38. See also Leslie Wood, *The Romance of the Cinema* (London: William Heinemann, 1937), p. 71, where he records oil being sprayed on the sheet in a Hackney venue to ensure its transparency and those in front reading out the titles for the benefit of those placed behind.
 - 39 Interview with Jack Brenner, C707/391/1-2, *FLWE*. Born 1900 in Buckston Street E1, sixth of the seven children of a Jewish small master builder, originally from Lithuania. The family moved to Eric Street in 1905, then to Princes Street.
 - 40 Morgan, *Yesterday's Sunshine*, p. 123.
 - 41 Interview with Mrs Alfreda Elicia Holmes, C707/4002, *FLWE*. She was born in Kensington in 1902, eldest of five. Her father was a manager in the restaurant business; her mother was a lady's maid.
 - 42 Harry Blacker, *Just Like It Was: Memoirs of the Mittel East* (London: Vallentine, Mitchell, 1974), pp. 27–28. Blacker came from an East Jewish family, describing his 'Mittel East' as being Bethnal Green, Hackney, Shoreditch, Whitechapel and Stepney.
 - 43 Todd M. Endelman, *The Jews of Britain, 1656 to 2000* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 127–130.
 - 44 McKernan, 'Diverting Time', p. 132.
 - 45 Thomas, *Ben's Limehouse*, p. 43.
 - 46 Goldman, *East End My Cradle*, pp. 139–140.
 - 47 Interview with James Malone, C707/245/1-2, *FLWE*. Malone was born in Highgate in 1904, the eldest of four. His father was a carpenter and joiner, often out of work, and the family was extremely poor. They moved to Islington to cheaper housing, and several times thereafter, often following eviction. Malone wrestled as a middle-weight in the Olympic Games of 1928 and 1932.
 - 48 Fermin Rocker, *The East End Years: A Stepney Childhood* (London: Freedom Press, 1998), pp. 61–63. Rocker was born in the East End in 1907, the son of the German anarchist theorist Rudolf Rocker. His mother Milly Witkop-Rocker was a Jewish-Ukrainian anarchist-syndicalist. He had a heavily-politicised upbringing in Stepney, and went on to become a notable realist artist.
 - 49 Ben Thomas, *Ben's Limehouse: Recollections by Ben Thomas* (London: Ragged School Books, 1987), p. 43. Thomas was born in 1907, the youngest of a Limehouse lighterman's family of seven. The cinema is the Palacadium, 137 Whitehorse Street, which was run by 'Ben Hur', a local businessman.
 - 50 Eileen Baillie, *The Shabby Paradise: The Autobiography of a Decade* (London: Hutchinson, 1959), p. 173. She lived in Poplar.
 - 51 Blacker, *Just Like It Was*, pp. 27–28, 30.
 - 52 *How to Run a Picture Theatre*, p. 16. The manual recommended Pinozal, Ozone and Empire Essence as the most effective deodorisers.
 - 53 V. S. Pritchett, *A Cab at the Door: An Autobiography: Early Years* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1968), p. 72. Victor Pritchett, later a renowned writer, was born in Ipswich in 1900, spending his childhood in various London boroughs. His father was a travelling salesman. At the time of this anecdote the Pritchett family lived in a street off Coldharbour Lane. The cinema he is referring to is possibly Burgoyne's American Bioscope at 213 Rye Lane, Peckham.
 - 54 Baillie, *The Shabby Paradise*, pp. 186–187.
 - 55 Walter Southgate, *That's the Way it Was: A Working Class Autobiography 1890–1950* (Oxford: New Clarion Press, 1982), p. 79. He was born in Bethnal Green, one of seven children.
 - 56 Ursula Bloom, *Mistress of None* (London: Hutchinson, 1930), pp. 87, 89. This autobiography

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- has a particularly informative account of playing the piano in a pre-war cinema, which Bloom did for eighteen months before bidding 'Finis to aching hands and to fetid air, and the eternal darkness which gradually saps the colour from your cheeks. Finis to the smell of oranges and peppermint, and the raw homely corduroys of the twopennies' (p. 104).
- 57 Dorothy Scannell, *Mother Knew Best: An East End Childhood* (London: Macmillan, 1974), pp. 46–47. Dorothy Scannell was the daughter of a plumber and lived in Poplar.
- 58 Morrell, *Tell Me Grandpa*, p. 100.
- 59 Blacker, *Just Like It Was*, pp. 27–28; Morrell, *Tell Me Grandpa*, p. 99.
- 60 Newton, *Years of Change*, p. 38.
- 61 Lily Broomhill in 'Like it was Yesterday': *Childhood Memories* (London: Islington Libraries, 1989). She was born in Shoreditch in 1901.
- 62 The two most prominent cinema disasters of this period were in Newmarket in September 1907, when two women and a children burned to death and fifty were injured in the ensuing panic, and Barnsley in January 1908, when sixteen children were killed in a crush on a staircase, a tragedy due to overcrowding and not to any fire or fear of a fire.
- 63 'Cinematographs and the Child', *The Times*, 12 April 1913, p. 10.
- 64 On the concerns raised by authorities, see Audrey Field, *Picture Palace: A Social History of the Cinema* (London: Gentry Books, 1974), pp. 23–30; Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film, 1906–1914* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1949), pp. 58–69. On the changes in audience behaviour and comments on later passivity, in an American context, see Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750–1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 1–19.
- 65 TNA MEPO 2/9172 file 590446/5, 'Bioscope & Cinematograph Shows', 11 March 1909, report from Arbour Square station.
- 66 Fagan, *An Autobiography*, p. 19.
- 67 Rolph, *London Particulars*, p. 105.
- 68 TNA BT 31/32008/100942, Electric Palaces Limited.
- 69 Jon Burrows, 'Penny Pleasures: Film exhibition in London during the Nickelodeon era, 1906–1914', *Film History*, vol. 16 no. 1 (2004), p. 70.
- 70 'Picture Theatre Notes', *The Rinking World & Picture Theatre News*, 22 January 1910, p. 17.
- 71 Morrell, *Tell Me Grandpa*, p. 101.
- 72 Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1994), p. 170.
- 73 Thomas, *Ben's Limehouse*, p. 43.
- 74 Interview with Frank Henry Scott, C707/225/1-2, FLWE. Scott was born in Hoxton in 1884, and married in 1904.
- 75 Moakes, 'Going to the Pictures', p. 96.
- 76 Morrell, *Tell Me Grandpa*, p. 101.
- 77 Rolph, *London Particulars*, pp. 106–107.
- 78 Thompson, *The Edwardians*, p. 6.
- 79 'Yes, I saw a film in Whitechapel Road – then – only paid a penny to go in there – and – opposite Whitechapel chutch and as this bio – like the train came in, so all the people got up and ran out, they thought it was coming on top of 'em. See the train come along, ch-ch-ch-ch-ch – like, see and that was – they thought – thought the train was coming into this here – fairly – a big size – room where you was all sat in side by side. Yeh, all the people got up and run out they thought the train was coming in the room to 'em. Yeh, never seen such a thing before like that. Oh yes, they was – good old times'. Interview with Alfred Gotts, *op. cit.*
- 80 For example, W. Macqueen-Pope, *Twenty Shillings in the Pound* (London: Hutchinson, 1948). He merely notes that the music hall was the initial home of the cinema 'and so helped to dig its own grave' (p. 276).
- 81 J. B. Priestley, *The Edwardians* (London: William Heinemann, 1970), pp. 175–76. Priestley was born in 1894.
- 82 'Kinema Finance', *The Times*, 11 March 1914, p. 19.
- 83 *The Cinema: Its Present Position and Future Possibilities*, part II, pp. 5–6.
- 84 Tom Gunning, 'The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, its Spectator and the Avant-Garde', in Thomas Elsaesser (ed.), *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative* (London: British Film Institute, 1990), pp. 56–62.