

The Missing Link: Film Renters in Manchester, 1910–1920

• Richard Brown

Film renting, and its associated distribution, is a neglected and under-researched aspect of film history. At a regional level it has been completely ignored. Yet film rental is the vital 'missing link' in the supply chain. It is a key part of the marketing structure which enabled film exhibition to achieve extraordinary growth, especially between 1910 and 1920, and to develop into a mature mass medium. The development of film distribution has perhaps a greater claim than the development of film exhibition to be considered at local level. Unlike the architectural design and the programming of cinemas, both of which tended to become increasingly homogeneous in this period, film distribution always maintained its regional specificity as its structure represented a unique response to local logistical problems.

During the earliest period of film exhibition the filmmaker sold his products directly to his customers. By 1900, larger companies such as British Gaumont, Warwick and Paul, were all advertising a viewing service for new films. Orders received from provincial exhibitors were processed from London using a catalogue system, and it was frequently stated in advertisements that no films would be sent out 'on approval'. If specially commissioned, most companies were willing to send a cameraman to the provinces to take films of 'local' interest; but again, processing and administration were centralised in London. Regional business was not however ignored. Robert Paul appointed authorised local agents to collect orders for his films, and by January 1902 he had begun to offer a national rental service. There is some evidence – although it is not conclusive – that by around 1905 both Pathe and British Gaumont were using

travelling salesmen to collect monies due, and to take new orders.

The phenomenal growth of fixed-site cinemas after 1910 inevitably meant that this highly centralised system was no longer either adequate or appropriate, and that an intermediary would have to be introduced. The logistical difficulties inherent in implementing an effective distribution system within a very short space of time should not be underestimated.¹ Moreover, the change in exhibition practice was radical and total. From showing the same film to different audiences, often at different locations, the film exhibitor now showed different films to the same audience at the same location.

There was, in addition, a social dimension to this change. Never again would the film audience, exhibitor and filmmaker be so closely linked. The adjustment involved the abandonment of a highly personalised transactional model characterised by bespoke service, low replacement rates and long periods of time, with a much more dynamic but impersonal method, more appropriate for high replacement rates and short periods of use. Both the sale, and increasingly the rental, of prints were henceforth linked to an effective system of large-scale physical distribution.

Principles of Film Distribution before 1920

The basic requirement of film distribution involved the transportation of time-sensitive material to multiple destinations, and the eventual return to its point of origin. Logistically, this represented an unusual and very complex 'circular' journey pattern, and it was therefore an

essential requirement that the distribution centre be situated as close as possible to the receiving cinemas, in order that the journey times could be minimised and that distribution costs could be kept to an economic level. These physical distribution considerations always precluded any possibility of national distribution from London, and explain why, between 1910 and 1914, all UK cities became established as distribution centres.

A number of other problems, most of them related to demand forecasting, had to be solved by early film distributors against a problematic background of rapidly increasing numbers of permanent site cinemas. The first difficulty that had to be faced was that the known 'continuous demand' model, required from the distributor by the cinema, did not correspond to the unknown 'erratic' demand for film consumption by cinema patrons. The introduction of two three-day programmes (significantly a pattern never encountered when exhibitors were peripatetic), combined with the introduction of graduated percentage levels of film hire, are both examples of distributor/renter marketing initiatives intended to mitigate the disparity of these two incompatible demand models.

A further problematic aspect of demand forecasting predicated by programming patterns was that related to film usage. The pattern of staggered exhibition – later codified by 'barring' clauses which first developed around 1912 – was a joint response to the belief that there was a direct correlation between choice and consumer demand levels. But providing such diversity naturally increased administrative and logistical complexity for the distributor. One response, at least partially successful, was the introduction of micro-systems of local 'crossovers' – a procedure 'fraught with worry and anxiety', according to one informed contemporary² – whereby adjacent cinemas participated in the distribution system by passing prints directly from one to another, for their own self-interested reasons. Thus the local 'hub' retained overall control of print movements, but effectively delegated the less important ones. The weakness of such a system lay in tracking procedures, and frequent complaints were made

about uncooperative cinemas and wrongly routed or 'lost' films.

The fact that such a system of film distribution worked at all before 1920, and the widespread use of road transport, was undoubtedly due to a mature railway communication system, at that time far more comprehensive than it is today. Market demand on its own was immaterial – it had to be translated into logistical support – and the symbiotic relationship with the railway was vital to success. Irrespective of the availability of capital to build more and more cinemas, or the increasing volume of films available to service them, the two required an existing national distributive network to bring them together. Especially relevant for a product like film, with absolute time constraints for delivery, were railway timetables, printed in advance and often maintained for months or even years without alteration.³

Manchester Film Renters

Manchester has a long history as a trading centre. Evidence of a Roman fort and a Norman castle indicate its early strategic location; and by the late medieval period, the town had established its importance for the linen and woollen cloth trade. Settlements also developed at the base of surrounding hills, and so in addition to its own organic growth – especially during the Industrial Revolution – Manchester became the natural trading centre for six satellite towns, none more than ten miles distant.⁴ This geographical feature, unique among British provincial cities, offered convenient access to a very large total market for any business using Manchester as a distribution centre.

The first film renters – or 'hirers' – to be listed in *Slater's Manchester Directory* for 1912 were the 'American Bioscope Company' and the 'Manchester Film Service'. Thereafter growth was rapid (Table 1).

If these figures are compared with equivalent totals for other cities, they clearly demonstrate Manchester's pre-eminence as a provincial renting centre, accounting for nearly 25% of the total (Table 2).

- Film Renters in Manchester, 1910–1920



- Vitagraph's Manchester office.

Major companies such as British Gaumont, Pathé and Ruffells had opened Manchester offices by 1913, and they were followed by Éclair in 1915, J. D. Walker's World Films in 1916. Essanay, Fox and Western Import in 1917, Thanhauser in 1918 and Famous Players Lasky and Vitagraph in 1920.⁶ But representation by the larger companies was never comprehensive, and it is interesting to note that American companies were slower than European ones to open provincial offices. Indeed as late as 1916, Hardwicke and Smith were still acting as agents for Lancashire, Cheshire and North Wales for such companies as Selig Polyscope, Famous

Players Lasky, Charles Urban and Walker's World Films – which controlled the British distribution of Chaplin's Mutual films.

Two 'clusters' soon formed, where the majority of renters in Manchester congregated. Most of the larger and more important companies separated themselves at the outset from the smaller and less important local firms. By the end of 1914 most smaller companies were grouped in the maze of narrow streets surrounding Victoria Station, which was the headquarters of

Table 1: Film renters, Agents and Distributors in Manchester, 1912–1920

1912	2	1915	37	1918	53
1913	8	1916	43	1919	57
1914	26	1917	55	1920	59

Source: Slater's Manchester Commercial Directory, 1912–1920.⁵

Table 2: Film Renters in UK Provincial Cities

	1917	1919
Glasgow	28	35
Cardiff	21	23
Newcastle	28	24
Liverpool	18	25
Leeds	26	26
Birmingham	35	29
Manchester	55	57
UK totals	211	219

Source: *Kinematograph Year Book* 1917 and 1919

the Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway. By contrast, no renters seem to have had offices near London Road (now Piccadilly) Station, which was the terminus of the London and Birmingham Railway. The second cluster of companies formed in Deansgate, near Parsonage Gardens, which was a more prestigious district, near to the heart of the commercial, legal and high-class shopping area of the city. Here were to be found Pathé, Gaumont, Fox and Vitagraph, together with, by 1920, a further ten independents.

It was not just areas, but individual streets that were favoured. Of eight renters listed in the 1913 directory, five had addresses in the same street. In 1916, 17 renting companies were established in just two streets. In a number of cases there was multiple occupation of the same premises, although this factor may of course be evidence of multiple ownership of different companies.

Open Market and 'Exclusive' Films

Although independent Manchester renters greatly outnumbered the major companies, most of the independents would have been handling 'open market' lower priced films, whereas by 1917 most of the main companies were renting 'exclusives'.⁷ Therefore, although the total footage throughput of the independents must have exceeded that of the larger companies, value levels and profitability would have been poorer. But while open market films were declining in popularity during this period, it was still a considerable business, and in terms of titles far exceeded the Exclusives total (Table 3).

Deprived of the best films, several independent Manchester renters stressed their local connections – implied by the name of their company – and offered low prices instead. Both the 'Northern Feature Film Agency' and

the 'Manchester Film Producing Company' claimed that they were 'the oldest established renting firm in Manchester' (although neither were), while a company optimistically named 'Exclusives' promised territorial rights for the North of England.⁸ The Northern Feature Film Company, which seems to have traded in junk film, claimed to have an improbable six million feet of film 'always in stock' and was understandably keen to move some of this with an offer of special bargain prices.⁹

There can be little doubt that the fundamental problem of the independent renting sector in Manchester before 1920 was that of gross overcrowding. The willingness of companies to switch from rental to outright sale, and from open market to exclusives (if these could be obtained), in addition to becoming involved in small-scale film production, suggests a desperate struggle for survival. The mortality rate was indeed rather grim. Of the eight companies listed in the 1913 directory, and therefore in existence at the end of 1912, only two were still listed in the 1920 directory – a failure rate of 75%. In 1914, a total of 26 renters/distributors was listed, but of these companies only six had survived to 1920 – a 77% failure rate – and this was actually a worse figure than for the previous year since two of the six survivors were branches of the large national companies Pathé and British Gaumont. There may have been some consolidation or takeovers that might mitigate the figures, but overall the life expectancy of an independent renter appears to have been very poor.

There were several reasons for this situation. Profit margins were notoriously poor for those who traded in open market films, and this situation must have been even worse in Manchester where the local market was clearly oversupplied.¹⁰ If a small distributor was unable to gain volume business to offset his low margins, he was immediately vulnerable. Cash-flow and managerial competence were additional hazards, especially for the sole agent – the 10% man – right at the bottom of the market. As early as 1911, a contemporary criticised the fatal combination on the part of small renters of

Table 3: Comparative UK Film Releases

	<i>Open Market</i>	<i>Exclusive</i>
1914	6,648	Approx 400
1915	4,790	Approx 650
1916	2,324	Approx 823

Source: *Kinematograph Year Book*, 1917, p. 20

- Film Renters in Manchester, 1910–1920

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- Trade advertisements from the *Kinematograph Year Book* for 1917.

simultaneously cutting prices and offering long credit, a tactic 'used to snatch business from competitors'.¹¹ When combined with the 'careless and lackadaisical methods of account keeping on the part of main renting houses', the writer concluded rather unsympathetically that 'much of the loss is richly deserved'.

That many of the Manchester renters were small-scale entrepreneurs with more hope than substance, can be demonstrated by analysing the composition of the total, distinguishing those companies that were incorporated from those with the word 'agency' in their title. The decrease of agents after the war is notable (Table 4).

Yet despite incompetence, the war and horrendous levels of failure, there was no shortage of entrants into the volatile Manchester renters market, willing to take the place of those that had failed. Indeed, as both the local trade

Table 4: Proportion of Incorporated and 'Agency' Companies to Total

	Total	Ltd. Cos.	% of total	Agency	% of total
1913	8	4	50	2	25
1914	26	11	42	5	19
1915	37	14	38	10	27
1916	43	19	44	11	25
1917	55	23	42	12	22
1918	53	22	41	11	21
1919	57	24	42	13	23
1920	59	26	44	8	13

Source: *Slater's Manchester Commercial Directory*, 1913–20

directory and *Kinematograph Year Book* demonstrate, the replacement rate exceeded the losses every year and the total numbers similarly rose year on year. The reason for this apparently irrational behaviour was that the prize also

increased in value during this period. From modest beginnings, the total of Manchester cinemas had already reached 111 by the end of 1914 – double the number listed for Glasgow and over three times more than the total for Liverpool.¹² In addition, as already noted, a Manchester based distributor had easy access to cinemas in the six surrounding towns. Throughout this period, not far short of 200 cinemas required a twice-weekly change of programme, which offered the attractive prospect for many of ‘easy money’ to be made.

Conclusion

This account has been concerned with issues of growth, structure and communication within a provincial context. Partly for reasons of length, but mainly with the intention of exploring a currently less fashionable area of film history, an analysis of film exhibition in Manchester was excluded. Although a decentralised system of film renting was the only effective method of delivering films to the point of their consumption after 1910, it is important that developments in Manchester and other provincial cities yet to be studied should be evaluated in a national context. For there is no contradiction in emphasising that it is integration rather than insularity that needs to be studied. Regionality (which of course also includes London) is a defining characteristic which can and should be regarded both as complementary within a national context, and unique within its own.¹³

Notes

- 1 On the origins of film rental in the UK, see Richard Brown, ‘War on the Home Front: The Anglo-Boer War and the growth of rental in Britain. An economic perspective’, *Film History*, vol. 16., no. 1, 2004, pp. 28–36.
- 2 Evidence of W. A. Northam to the Cinema Commission of Enquiry. See *The Cinema: Its Present*

Position and Future Possibilities, London: Williams and Norgate, 1917, pp. 194, 196.

- 3 The railway companies insisted the renters supply specially designed fireproof boxes, ‘... very expensive at ordinary times, while at present [1916, with wartime priorities in force] they are practically unobtainable’ (Northam, op. cit., p. 194). Northam estimated that there were about 24,000 of these containers, each transporting two or three films, in circulation on the railway system at any one time. A somewhat similar figure, of between 16,000 and 20,000 boxes, was suggested by F. W. Ogden-Smith at the end of 1914. Ogden-Smith calculated that the gross revenue to the railway companies was £45,000 annually (‘Mr Ogden-Smith on the Industry’, *Kinematograph Year Book*, 1915, p. 59). Although these are unverifiable estimates, they do provide a graphic indication of both the scale of film distribution at this time and the reliance of the film trade on the railway system for its survival.
- 4 Stockport, Ashton, Bolton, Bury, Rochdale and Oldham.
- 5 It should be noted that the *Kinematograph Year Book* offers comparable but slightly higher figures from 1915–1920. However, the Manchester directory lists renters that do not appear in the *KYB* listings and vice versa.
- 6 All of these listed in successive editions of *Slater’s Commercial Directory*.
- 7 For an informed contemporary explanation of the two systems, see Northam, op. cit., pp. 192–93.
- 8 Advertisement, *Kinematograph Year Book*, 1917, p. 84.
- 9 Advertisement, *Kinematograph Year Book*, 1917, p. 85.
- 10 Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film*, vol. 3, pp. 42–43.
- 11 Colin N. Bennett, *The Handbook of Kinematography*, *Kinematograph Weekly*, 1911, p. 246.
- 12 Low analysed provincial cinema numbers and seating capacity, from information in the *Kinematograph Year Book* for 1915. Low, *History of the British Film*, vol. 2, pp. 50–51.
- 13 The national relationship of renters with exhibitors and filmmakers before 1920 was complex and frequently fractious: for an overview of the situation, see Low, vol. 2, pp. 74–84. For a more recent perspective on trade relations at this period, see Jon Burrows, ‘When Britain tried to join Europe. The significance of the 1909 Paris Congress for the British Film Industry’, *Early Popular Visual Culture*, vol. 4, no. 1, April 2006.