Pulpits, Coal Pits and Fleapits: A Social History of the Cinema in Wales, 1918-1951

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Summary

This thesis is a social history of the cinema in Wales. It examines the position of the cinema, as an institution, in Welsh society in the period when film-going was at its peak. It argues that from the 1920s to the 1950s the cinema performed a broader social function that went beyond the mere screening of films, and that this function was far more heterogeneous than previous historians have suggested.

The first section of the thesis examines the structure of the cinema industry in Wales, and the nature of the buildings themselves. The severity of the inter-war depression meant that major cinema companies were seldom interested in investing in Wales, and very few modern 'super cinemas' were actually built there. The vast majority of picture houses were small, relatively old and locally owned. It was to these 'fleapits', not the 'dream palaces' of popular repute that the majority of cinema audiences flocked each week.

The second section explores the reasons behind the appeal of cinema-going, and also examines the nature of the entertainment that audiences went to see. The central argument here is that it was not just the main feature film that attracted people to the cinema. The cinema provided an opportunity to escape, for a few hours, from the realities of everyday life. Whole programmes of entertainment were therefore consumed as a matter of routine, irrespective of the individual pictures being shown.

The final section deals with the responses to this form of mass entertainment in Wales. Opinions expressed by film critics, journalists, councillors and clergymen in Wales were similar to those heard in other parts of Britain. The campaign to prevent Sunday opening of cinemas, however, was a national, Welsh, issue. The intensity with which this issue was debated revealed the extent to which cinema had become an important social institution in Wales.

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Introduction: Pulpits, Coal Pits and Fleapits

The Cinema in Wales: A Social History

This thesis is a social history of the *cinema* in Wales, not a history of Welsh *film*.[1] The terms 'film' and 'cinema' are often used interchangeably, but in this thesis a distinction is drawn between them. The *cinema*, as it is understood here, was a social institution that for much of the early and mid-twentieth century formed an important part of local community life. It performed a variety of social functions that went beyond just the exhibition of *films*. The cinema served an economic purpose as an employer of both skilled and unskilled labour. The buildings themselves were social centres where courting couples or groups of friends could arrange to meet. The pattern of cinema-going, which was dominated by regular working-class attendance at local cinemas, confirms the cinema's essentially social appeal. Even the entertainment provided in the cinemas themselves went beyond just feature films, to include short films, animation, newsreels and even live variety. A measure of the cinema's significance as a social institution is provided by the responses it provoked: from critics, journalists, politicians, religious authorities, moral campaigners and social reformers.

This thesis examines the social function performed by the cinema in communities throughout Wales in the period of its mass-appeal (which lasted from around the end of World War One to the early 1950s). Cinema attendance figures did fluctuate over this period (they rose significantly during World War Two, and reached a peak in the mid-1940s) but the social and cultural significance of the cinema did not change significantly from the 1920s through to the early-1950s. In terms of the ownership and management of circuits, the number of cinemas and their design, the nature of the cinema's appeal, the entertainment they provided, and the response the medium solicited from Welsh society at large, there was relatively little change throughout this period. The introduction of talking pictures at the end of the 1920s may have heralded a new era in *film* making (as well as consigning many musicians to the dole queue), but this technical innovation did little to alter the *cinema's* status as a social institution. The construction of luxurious new super-cinemas in the 1920s and

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[1] The history of Welsh film has already been rigorously and comprehensively compiled: see David Berry, *Wales and Cinema: The First Hundred Years* (Cardiff, 1994).

1930s, though designed to attract a new middle-class audience to the pictures, did not change the fact that the medium's mass-appeal was based on the frequent and habitual attendance of working-class audiences. The modern super-cinemas did not account for the movies' popularity: the cinema's mass appeal was established by the end of World War One - before the so-called 'age of the dream palace'. Indeed, many of those features designed to make cinema-going more attractive to the middle-classes in the inter-war years in fact served to strengthen the cinema's appeal for working-class audiences. That 'the pictures' were so popular in Wales, where there was so little cinema-building between the wars, is highly significant.

As well as arguing that the cinema's social function changed very little in the period covered here, this thesis also contends that the medium's mass appeal was much more indicative of social/cultural deprivation than it was of affluence and prosperity. In debates as to whether the British economy was healthy or hungry in the 1930s, booming cinema attendance (associated with the image of a glittering dream palace) is sometimes cited as evidence of increasing affluence.[2] Yet the essence of the cinema's appeal lay not in the prosperity being created by new industries in the south of England or the midlands, but in working-class communities in the (mostly hungry) industrial heartlands of northern England, Scotland and south Wales. Furthermore, the decade in which cinema attendance in Britain peaked was not the 1930s but the 1940s. It was during the years of wartime hardship and the 'age of austerity' which followed that the cinema's social function was most needed. It was with the lifting of rationing and the return of prosperity in the 1950s and 1960s that the cinema's appeal went into decline: the *habit* of visiting the local cinema was lost, and audiences became increasingly middle-class in composition and selective in their choice of films

The social aspect of the cinema has been recognised by historians and analysed perceptively before.[3] The purpose of this study is to examine it with particular reference to Welsh society. In doing this it is essential to take due account of the

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[2] In drawing attention to a 1930s Britain 'of new industries, prosperous suburbs, and a rising standard of living', John Stevenson argued that 'full weight' needed to be given to the image of England in the 1930s painted by J. B. Priestley, which included 'giant cinemas' and 'factory girls looking like actresses'. See John Stevenson, 'Myth and Reality: Britain in the 1930s', in Alan Sked and Chris Cook (eds.), *Crisis and Controversy: Essays in Honour of A. J. P. Taylor* (Basingstoke, 1976), p. 91.

[3] Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain, 1930-1939* (London, 1984); David Docherty, David Morrison and Michael Tracy, *The Last Picture Show? Britain's Changing Film Audiences* (London, 1987); Peter Stead, *Film and the Working Class: The Feature Film in British and American Society* (London and New York, 1989).

valuable work already done on cinema and society in Britain as a whole. In many respects what happened in Wales mirrored patterns evident elsewhere (while this may not be surprising it is, perhaps, still worth saying). In other ways, however, the Welsh experience, if not unique, was sufficiently different from that of Britain as a whole to warrant closer inspection. For example, the major cinema circuits such as ABC, Gaumont and Odeon failed properly to establish themselves in Wales; the age, size and design of most cinema buildings in Wales was far removed from the image of the dream palace commonly associated with film-going in this period; and debates over Sunday opening of cinemas in Wales were a great deal more animated than in most parts of Britain. By focusing on Wales, (where the vast majority of cinemas were either independent or part of small, locally controlled circuits) it is possible to examine in more detail the role the cinema played within local communities: the influence of individual cinema managers or proprietors; the significance of individual picture houses; and the actual attitudes and opinions of cinema-goers themselves.

Yet this is not just a local study. It also attempts to say something about the condition of Welsh society at this time. Here the distinction between Welsh *cinema* and Welsh *film* becomes crucial. Any serious analysis of Welsh society in this period based on the way in which it was represented on screen must contend with the dual problems that: a) there were not *that* many films made with Wales as a setting in this period; and b) most of those that do exist were made in London or Hollywood - they are useful insofar as they reflect how Welsh society was perceived from outside, but they tell us less about how this society actually behaved.[4] A *social* history of the cinema in Wales, however, tackles the question from a different angle. It does not ask how Welsh people, cultures and institutions were presented on screen, but rather, how did the Welsh themselves consume the new medium; how did the institutions associated with the cinema itself operate within Welsh society; how did the guardians of Welsh culture respond to this new form of mass entertainment? In attempting to answer these questions it is important to recognise not just the differences which existed between Wales and Britain as a whole, but also the divisions and complexities evident with Welsh society itself.

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[4] I myself have attempted such an analysis, Peter Miskell, 'Imagining the Nation: The Changing Face of Wales in the Cinema, 1935-1955', Unpublished MA Thesis (Aberystwyth, 1996).

Pulpits, Coal Pits and Fleapits

The pulpit, the coal pit and the fleapit are three important symbols which reflect different, but nonetheless connected aspects of modern Welsh society. Indeed, they reflect in part Professor Alfred Zimmern's celebrated opinion that: 'There is not one Wales; there are three Wales.' In 1921 Zimmern distinguished between 'Welsh Wales'; 'industrial, or, as I sometimes think of it, American Wales'; and 'upper-class or English Wales'.[5] The distinction made here is a slightly more complex one. The society of the pulpits can be said to represent 'Welsh Wales'; the coal pits were central to a society best described as 'British Wales'; the fleapits, however, provide support for the notion, first proposed by Zimmern, of an 'American Wales'.

The society symbolised by the pulpit was that of chapel-going, non-conformist, Liberal Wales. It is described as 'Welsh Wales' here partly because Welsh was the language most commonly spoken, but also because its leaders were confident and proud of their distinctly *Welsh* identity. Men such as David Lloyd George and Tom Ellis were convinced that politically Wales belonged in, and was an important part of, the British Empire. The cultural distinctiveness of Wales, however, was something that they felt needed to be properly recognised and more confidently expressed. The single most lasting political accomplishment of Liberal Wales was Disestablishment of the Church; another of its legislative achievements was the 1881 Welsh Sunday Closing Act ('the first distinctively Welsh act of parliament'[6]). As well as providing 'the Principality' with a much more significant voice in Westminster, the 'Welshness' of Liberal Wales was also expressed in the national institutions which it established: the National Library of Wales, the National Museum and the University of Wales being the most prominent. The location of these institutions was also significant: the small west Wales town of Aberystwyth shared the spoils with Cardiff. It was not the large towns of the industrial south that were the heartland of this 'Welsh Wales', but the more rural areas of mid, west and north Wales. These were the areas where the sermons preached from pulpits were most influential, where Sabbath observance was most strict, and where Welsh was most commonly spoken as a first language.

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[5] Alfred E. Zimmern, *My Impressions of Wales* (London, 1921), p. 29.
[6] Kenneth O. Morgan, *Rebirth of a Nation: Wales, 1880-1980* (Oxford, 1981), p. 36.

If the pulpits represent 'Welsh Wales' (an essentially Liberal-voting, non-industrial, Welsh-speaking society led by a new self-confident and politically influential middle-class), the coal pits symbolised a 'British Wales' centred on an industrial economy, largely (though not exclusively) English-speaking, and peopled by a large (and growing) working-class who overwhelmingly supported the Labour Party. Important similarities did exist between these two societies: non-conformist religion was a common element in both, as was the value attached to respectability in appearance and personal advancement through self-education. The 'national' educational and cultural institutions established by Liberal Wales may not have attracted many south Walian miners or steel workers, but well-stocked libraries were one of the key features of the many south Wales miners' institutes built in the early twentieth century. For all the similarities between the societies of the pulpit and the coal pit, however, a key difference was that of national identity. Many of the political efforts of Liberal Wales were aimed at strengthening or creating national institutions that gave expression to a distinct Welsh culture and identity. The politics of Labour Wales, on the other hand, was firmly associated with British socialism in which the identity of class outweighed that of nation. Aneurin Bevan, for instance, was just as fervent in his opposition to the idea of Home Rule as Lloyd George had been in support.

Self-education, class struggle and political activism were important aspects of the society of the coal pit. Not all inhabitants of industrial south Wales, however, fitted neatly into the category labelled here as 'British Wales'. Passions for politics, learning, music and rugby football may have been real enough, but they were not all-pervasive. There was another Wales to be found in the valleys and coastal towns of the south, and in the smaller communities of mid and north Wales too. This consisted of people who may have shared some characteristics of the societies outlined above, but who did not identify strongly with them. A culture and society with which they could identify, however, was that presented to them on cinema screens in Hollywood films. This society, labelled by Zimmern as 'American Wales', provides the focus of study here. Of course, it did not exist in a vacuum: it overlapped with, and was shaped and influenced by, other social and cultural forces both within Wales and Britain as a whole. The societies of the pulpit and the coal pit, therefore, do have a place in this study - particularly in the final section where responses to the cinema within Welsh

society are examined. The society of the fleapit, however, is deserving of serious consideration in itself: this thesis is an attempt to provide just that.

That the people of Wales were so attracted to the American popular culture which the cinema provided should be no surprise. David Smith, for one, has argued persuasively that early twentieth century Wales, in many respects, was more Americanised than Anglicised:

> The only other nation with the same range of evangelical Protestant revivalism in the nineteenth century is the United States and, forgetting the scale of things, there is a remarkable resemblance between two rural nations in 1800 who spawn fierce denouncers of cities, convince themselves of the manifest destiny of their country safe in the hands of rural tradition and end up by 1900 well on the path to an overwhelmingly urban future. Revivalism is a frontier sport and the Welsh one spread from the geographical divide between rural and industrial Wales.[7]

The juxtaposition of 'Welsh' and 'British' Wales (of the pulpit and the coal pit) provided social and geographical similarities between it and the United States. The way in which Welsh society took to the movies suggests that in terms of popular culture the two countries also had much in common. Wales was by no means unusual in this respect. Hollywood films were hugely successful in many parts of the world. The important point, however, is that in Wales, as elsewhere, the appeal of the movies was a genuinely popular one. Concerns were occasionally raised by the moral and cultural guardians of 'Welsh' or 'British' Wales about the influence of the cinema, but their qualms were not shared by the majority of film-goers or by the public at large. For the hundreds of thousands of men and women across Wales who flocked to the cinemas each week escapism took priority over education; the pictures meant more than party politics; movie stars provided more likely role models than Methodist ministers. The cinema, therefore, was more than simply popular entertainment for Welsh audiences: it was an important part of Welsh society.

Chapter one examines the development, structure and operation of the cinema industry in Wales. The failure of the major cinema circuits to really establish themselves in Wales reflected the fact that this was the region of Britain most severely affected by the inter-war depression. Only in the large centres of Cardiff and Newport,

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[7] David Smith, 'Wales Through the Looking Glass' in David Smith (ed.), *A People and a Proletariat: Essays in the History of Wales, 1780-1980* (London, 1980), pp. 224-5.

along with those towns which managed to escape the worst of the economic hardship (such as Llanelli in the west, Colwyn Bay and Llandudno in the north and Chepstow in the east) did the major circuits erect new cinemas. With so many Welsh cinemas either being independent or part of small, locally-run circuits, they were better able to adapt themselves to serve the needs of their local communities. A number of local cinema proprietors endeared themselves to patrons by organising free prize draws in which food hampers or clothes parcels were given away. The cinemas also, of course, served an important function as an employer of both skilled and unskilled labour. Very little has been written about cinemas from the point of view of those who worked in them. In this chapter the nature of the work, the number of people employed, and their struggle to improve their own circumstances are examined. The benevolence demonstrated by certain cinema proprietors toward their paying customers was, we shall see, seldom extended to those in their employ. Attempts on the part of cinema workers to form trade unions were, furthermore, strongly resisted by the trade in south Wales.

While chapter one establishes the social and economic context in which the cinema industry operated, chapter two examines how this influenced the conditions in which cinema entertainment was actually provided. The absence of major cinema chains from most parts of Wales meant that the majority of Welsh cinema-goers consumed their weekly diet of films in small venues built before 1914, many of which were old public halls, churches or skating rinks that had been converted to cinema use. The fleapits, in other words, greatly outnumbered the opulent super-cinemas. 'The age of the dream palace', therefore, is a phrase ill-suited to the history of the cinema in Wales in this period. This examination of the provision of cinema buildings, however, also reveals that differences between various parts of Wales were almost as pronounced as those between Wales and the more prosperous regions of Britain. The nature of cinema provision was shaped largely by the geographical and economic conditions prevailing in a particular area. Yet the remarkable number of cinemas that were able to survive, often in the most desperate economic conditions, was testament to the medium's remarkable appeal.

The nature of this appeal is examined in chapter three. It is stressed that the cinema's enormous popularity cannot be understood purely in terms of the films themselves. More than this, the cinema's appeal was also largely unaffected by

attempts to make picture-going a more respectable activity for the middle-classes. The huge audiences consisted mainly of working-class men and women who attended the pictures on a weekly or twice-weekly basis as a matter of routine. The cinema offered its patrons a warm and familiar environment in which they could escape, temporarily, from the grim realities of everyday existence. The pace, vitality and humour of the best American films - and the glamour of its leading stars - did help to make the cinema a highly attractive means of escapism, but cheapness and convenience were arguably more important factors explaining its mass appeal. Cinema entertainment was no better in the period covered here than in the decades of audience decline. It did, however, serve a much needed purpose which was not available at equivalent cost or convenience anywhere else. Individual films and newly erected super-cinemas made little difference to the cinema's popularity. Attendances boomed in the war years (when super-cinemas were more likely to be bombed than built) because the need for escape became all the more acute; they declined in the post-war age of affluence as standards of living rose and alternative leisure activities became available.

The argument developed in chapter three is that it was the cinema's essentially working-class appeal that accounted for its remarkable popularity, and that this appeal was based on more than just the films themselves. Chapter four advances these points further by considering the actual nature of the entertainment audiences received once inside the picture halls: much of which was based on traditional working-class amusements that predated the invention of the cinema. It is noted, for instance, that many of the leading stars of the period, from Charlie Chaplin and Stan Laurel to Gracie Fields and George Formby, emerged from a background as travelling entertainers or music-hall performers. Moreover, the structure of the programmes, containing second features, newsreels, shorts, cartoons and also occasionally live performances, broadly resembled variety entertainment. The records of one south Wales cinema company, not previously examined by historians,[8] show that both exhibitors and audiences took cinema entertainment to mean the programmes as a whole, not just the main feature. Cinemas were venues whose mass-appeal was based on social and economic factors beyond just the films being screened. Once inside 'the

[8] The author was informed by the archivist who catalogued the collection that it had been the first time these boxes had been seriously studied.

pleasure dome', however, audiences expected to be treated to a whole evening's (or afternoon's) entertainment: exhibitors were only too eager to oblige. In providing this entertainment exhibitors needed to be mindful of local sensibilities. It could not be assumed that the most successful films would be equally popular everywhere. The occasional refusal of south Wales audiences to accept a picture that did good business elsewhere provides further evidence that the cinema's popularity was dependent on its genuine appeal for working-class audiences: it was not a medium that could easily impose attitudes or opinions on audiences.

The first four chapters explore the role that the cinema played in Welsh society: the way that cinema institutions actually operated; the reasons for their mass-appeal; and the nature of the entertainment itself. The final two chapters consider the responses to all of this by those in positions of cultural, religious and political authority. What did the societies of the pulpit and the coal pit make of the fleapits?

Chapter five begins with an investigation of film reportage in the national (British) press - which was widely read in Wales - in order to demonstrate how different types of film reviews reflected contrasting attitudes to the medium itself. Film reviews in the Welsh press were, for the most part, genuine attempts to reflect popular opinion. It is striking that most film reporters in Wales concerned themselves with whole programmes of entertainment in local cinemas, not just individual films. In order to detect the responses of other sections of Welsh society it is necessary to look beyond the reviews of the cinema entertainment itself to the letter pages, feature articles and editorials in papers such as the *Western Mail*. 'National' concerns, so important a feature of the Wales of the pulpits, were evident in calls for a Welsh Film Council and the frequent demands that more be done to promote film-making in Wales itself. The opinion that the cinema was a medium that could potentially make the culture and identity of Wales more relevant and accessible to a new and expanding audience was regularly expressed in the Welsh press. Despite the best efforts of a few committed individuals, however, this potential was not realised in the period covered here. Similarly, the establishment of cinemas in many miners' institutes did not enable the society of the coal pit to exploit the cinema's appeal for its own purposes. This society (which did not find its voice represented in the politically Conservative south Wales newspapers) did establish a number of miners' cinemas which screened films dealing with subjects such as the Spanish Civil War and revolutionary Russia. This

may suggest that the medium was being used to serve the political and cultural interests of Labour Wales. However, the screening of 'political' films was the exception rather than the rule, and miners' cinemas, like those elsewhere, had to rely on popular Hollywood entertainment in order to attract regular custom. The societies of both the pulpit and the coal pit hoped to use the cinema to promote their own social and cultural identity. Ultimately, however, attempts to do so proved futile. This was because the cinema's popularity was not based on the inherent appeal of the medium itself. The fleapits thrived because they performed a social function and presented a form of entertainment that satisfied a genuine public demand.

The attempts of those in positions of authority within Welsh society to regulate and control this form of entertainment provide the focus of chapter six. Once again, we see it is not the films themselves that local authorities sought to control, (the British Board of Film Censors decisions were widely, if not universally, accepted in this period), but the environment in which they were screened. The lighting and seating arrangements within the halls themselves, the posters advertising the latest attractions and the question of childrens' admittance to evening cinema performances were matters that local authorities did take seriously. In these respects councillors in Wales acted in much the same spirit as their counterparts in the rest of Britain. Debates over Sunday opening of cinemas, however, provide the clearest evidence of attempts to protect 'traditional' Welsh society (both pulpit and coal pit) from the increasingly commercial and secular values of 'American Wales'. Sunday opening of cinemas was prohibited in most parts of Wales for the entire period covered here. This was not because of a genuinely popular belief in Sabbath observance, but because religious and political leaders deemed the 'Welsh Sunday' to be a tradition worth keeping alive. The 'invention' of this tradition was one of the legacies of Liberal Wales. That the leaders of the emerging Labour Wales were prepared to maintain it is testament to the continuity between the societies of pulpit and coal pit (particularly in the matter of religious observance). As debates over Sunday opening wore on, however, attention was focused less on religion and more on national identity. The eventual introduction of Sunday opening across Wales in the 1950s coincided with the emergence of a new generation of political leaders in south Wales who were more secular in outlook and who were more attuned to the traditions of the British Labour party and to the wishes of the 'Americanised' Welsh public, than to a Welsh national

identity. This was also a period when those most concerned with the preservation of Welsh culture and identity began to adopt more pro-active means of achieving their objectives. As the political will to keep cinemas shut on Sundays weakened, popular opinion was able to assert itself.

This thesis examines how and why Welsh society took to the pictures with such remarkable enthusiasm. It argues that the fleapit really did become just as important a feature of Welsh life as the pulpit and the coal pit. As with pulpits and coal pits, of course, there was nothing inherently *Welsh* about fleapits. The fact that so many of these cinemas were locally owned and managed, however, meant that they had a particularly close relationship with their local communities. In adapting to the needs of such communities, moreover, it was not the traditional values of Liberal or Labour Wales that were promoted but those of 'American Wales'. Attempts to regulate and control the medium, and indeed to use it to promote the older values and traditions of Welsh society, only served to underline the social and cultural importance that the cinema had established for itself.

Chapter One: The Cinema Industry

Cinema was unquestionably the most popular form of mass-audience entertainment in Wales between the end of World War One and the mid-1950s. Admissions, which reached their peak in 1946, were still well in excess of one million per week in 1951, which easily outstripped those at rugby or football matches.[1] Furthermore, cinema patrons, unlike those of pubs or sporting events, included both males and females from a range of age groups and social classes. Yet the institutions which were responsible for providing this entertainment, both in Wales and Britain as a whole, have received uneven attention from historians. Existing studies of the cinema industry in Britain have been primarily concerned with the production, distribution and exhibition of *British* films. Such an approach certainly has its merits, and a number of studies produced within such a framework have proved extremely valuable[2], but it also has its limitations. Any examination of the cinema industry in Wales, where film-making was, at best, haphazard, requires an alternative methodology. Rather than attempting to demonstrate how an indigenous film industry endeavoured to provide screen entertainment for home audiences, this chapter seeks to examine the institutions which brought the popular Hollywood films to Welsh cinema-goers. It deals, in effect, with the history of the *cinema* industry in Wales, not the history of Welsh film production. One section will deal with the structure of the industry, examining both the nature of the circuits in Wales and the management of individual halls. A further section is devoted to the type of employment generated by the cinemas, and looks at the industry from the perspective of those working in it. Finally, the role of trade unions in the cinema industry in Wales will be considered. Before embarking on an examination of the cinema industry in Wales, however, the structure and operation of the industry in Britain will be considered.

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[1] From April 1950 to March 1951, the total cinema admissions in Wales have been measured at 72,137,000. See H.E. Browning and A.A. Sorrell, 'Cinema and Cinema Going in Great Britain', in the *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, Vol. 117, Part II (1954), p. 140. By contrast many Welsh rugby clubs were threatened with closure due to falling attendances in the inter-war period. See Gareth Williams, *1905 And All That* (Llandysul, 1991), pp. 175-200.

[2] For example, Ernest Betts, *The Film Business: A History of the British Cinema, 1896-1972* (London, 1973); Margaret Dickinson and Sarah Street, *Cinema and State: The Film Industry and the British Government 1927-1984* (London, 1985); Sarah Street, *British National Cinema* (London and New York, 1997); Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film*, Vol. I-VII (London, 1948-85).

The Structure and Operation of the Cinema Industry in Britain

The British *film* industry in the period covered by this thesis was the subject of a number of contemporary studies[3] and has since been subjected to detailed historical research.[4] Much is now known about the processes of production, distribution and exhibition of British films in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. Much less attention, however, has been devoted to what might be called the British *cinema* industry. Examinations of the *film* industry in Britain have almost inevitably been written from the perspective of British film-makers - or at least those with an interest in promoting British films.[5] This thesis, which is less concerned with films than the social environment in which they were screened, considers the cinema industry from the point of view of audiences, exhibitors and their employees.

In most studies of the British film industry, if exhibitors are considered at all it is in the context of their role as outlets for British-made films. Attention, therefore, has been focused almost exclusively on the major cinema chains of Gaumont, ABC, and from the mid-1930s, Odeon.[6] These circuits were undoubtedly highly influential within the British *film* industry. As the Plant Report into the British film industry pointed out: 'a booking with one of the three main circuits is indispensable if the producer of a British film is to have any prospect of recouping his production cost.'[7] By 1951 the three major circuits controlled a fifth of all British cinemas, and a third of all seats - a considerable proportion of the industry in the hands of just three companies. To concentrate exclusively on the major circuits, however, is to neglect the remaining 80% of cinemas, containing two thirds of all seats - an oversight

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[3] Davidson Boughey, *The Film Industry* (London, 1921); Michael Balcon, 'The Film Industry' in Hugh Schonfield (ed.), *The Book of British Industries* (London, 1933); F. D. Klingender and Stuart Legg, *Money Behind the Screen: A Report prepared on Behalf of the Film Council* (London, 1937); Board of Trade, *Tendencies to Monopoly in the Cinematograph Film Industry* (The Palache Report), (London, 1944); PEP Report, *The British Film Industry* (London, 1952);

[4] Low, *The History of the British Film*; Betts, *The Film Business*; Geoffrey Macnab, *J. Arthur Rank and the British Film Industry* (London and New York, 1993); Michael Chanan, 'The Emergence of an Industry', in James Curran and Vincent Porter (eds.), *British Cinema History* (London, 1983), pp. 39-58.

[5] Attempts by the British Government to intervene in the film industry have been scrutinised in some depth. See Dickinson and Street, *Cinema and State*; Julian Petley, 'Cinema and State' in Charles Barr (ed.), *All Our Yesterdays: Ninety Years of British Cinema* (London, 1986), pp. 31-46.

[6] See Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film, 1918-1929* (London, 1971); Allen Eyles, *ABC: The First Name in Entertainment* (Burgess Hill, 1993); Allen Eyles, *Gaumont British Cinemas* (Burgess Hill, 1996); Rosemary Clegg, *Odeon* (Birmingham, 1985).

[7] Quotation taken from PEP, *British Film Industry*, p. 151.

commonly made. The attitude of many historians to the smaller exhibitor is exemplified by Ernest Betts:

> As for the independent showman with one or more theatres, he is at the far end of the queue and must bide his time until the crumbs fall from the rich man's table. He has in fact no independence but must console himself by digesting the various reports on the tendencies to monopoly in the film industry.[8]

While this approach may be appropriate in the context of debates about the *film* industry, it cannot be adopted here. The purpose of this thesis is to explore the role of the cinema as a social institution and there is no escaping the fact that the great majority of these institutions did not belong to the three major chains. Any survey of the *cinema* industry, or indeed of the social significance of the cinema more generally, would be distorted by over-concentration on the role of major circuits.

How, then, did cinema-going develop in Britain and what form did the structure of the cinema industry take in the period covered here? The period between the cinematograph's invention and the end of World War One witnessed two discernible routes of development as far as the provision of cinema entertainment was concerned. The first of these involved films being shown as part of a general programme of entertainment in variety theatres or music halls. There has been some dispute over just how popular the early films were with variety or vaudeville audiences,[9] but they did well enough to survive, and in many cases they became an integral part of the programme. One Edinburgh showman recalled using them to maintain continuity throughout the show:

> A whistle was blown and a large linen graph sheet was pulled across the proscenium and pegged down, while a five or six minute Felix the Cat or a single reel Chaplin short was screened. Meanwhile the stage was being prepared behind for acts - a conjuror, monocyclist or equilibrist. The screen pulled off - on with the act - and at its conclusion another whistle ...[10]

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[8] Betts, *The Film Business*, p. 79.
[9] This is touched on in Robert C. Allen, 'From Exhibition to Reception: Reflections on the Audience in Film History', in Annette Kuhn and Jackie Stacey (eds.), *Screen Histories: A Screen Reader* (Oxford, 1998), p. 14.
[10] J. K. S. Poole, quoted in Janet McBain, *Pictures Past: Recollections of Scottish Cinemas and Cinema-Going* (Edinburgh, 1985), p. 14.

It was not long before films were the main attraction at variety theatres, and these halls began to devote themselves entirely to the screening of films as early as 1908.[11] Many of the buildings used as cinemas in Wales in our period were in fact old theatres or music halls (see below).

A second line of development in cinema architecture begins with the medium's humble fairground origins. In the earliest days of the cinematograph people lined up outside the showman's booth to catch a glimpse of the miracle of living pictures. As the cinema's enormous popularity became apparent, the showmen sought to cash in by screening their films in larger (though no more salubrious) 'penny gaffs'.[12] It was not until at least a decade after the cinema's arrival that its popularity was recognised by the trade as much more than a passing fad, and showmen began to plan for the longer term. Rather than packing the public into 'penny gaffs', they began to invest in purpose-built cinemas that claimed to offer comfort and refinement, as well as a full programme of films.

Purpose-built cinemas appeared at about the same time as variety theatres started to devote themselves entirely to the screening of films. Those halls which were designed specifically as cinemas, however, were seldom noted for their architectural quality or distinctiveness.[13] According to Dennis Sharp, 'The Grosvenor, All Saints, built in 1912, is a perfect surviving example of the pre-war picture house, with cream and green faience tiled elevations on two streets, a small copper dome over the corner entrance and an interior that is more like an Edwardian music hall than a cinema.'[14] These early cinemas lacked a discernible identity but, thanks partly to the Cinematograph Act of 1909, they were an improvement on what had gone before. The Act's provisions dealt with safety regulations, particularly in the event of fire, but as Rachael Low has pointed out, 'More and more effort was spent in impressing the audience with comfort and elegance, and proving the pictures worthy of better-class audiences'. This was even reflected in the names of the cinemas, with Gem, Palace, Pictorium, Jewel and Imperial being popular choices, although as Low suggests, 'Such

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[11] The earliest example seems to have been the Balham Empire, which became a cinema in 1907. See Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film, 1906-1914* (London, 1948), pp. 15-16.
[12] Penny gaffs were usually converted shops or houses in which films were screened in the evenings.
[13] Nicholas Hiley points out that 'Most of the new venues were built by local speculators eager to cash in on the cinema boom and were no more than small halls with very limited catchment areas'. See Hiley, 'The British Cinema Auditorium', in Karel Dibbets and Bert Hogenkamp, (eds.), *Film and the First World War* (Amsterdam, 1995), p. 160.

inept efforts to be dignified may have made a more favourable impression on the working-class public than on the classes for whom they were intended.'[15] The quality, and safety, of cinema buildings had clearly come a long way by 1914, yet developments seem to have been restricted by continuing doubts as to how long the popularity of moving pictures would last. One commentator in 1913 was adamant that 'The limitations of this form of entertainment, already eked out in the larger palaces with music-hall varieties, will soon appear, and the interest even of the threepenny public be exhausted.' It was not until after the First World War that such doubts finally evaporated, and 'the long rectangular hall with a minimum of pre-auditorium space was replaced by the larger cinema that seated audiences in thousands instead of hundreds and which copied American ideas on size, planning and decoration.'[16]

The building of the new, larger and more decorative 'super-cinemas' was undertaken largely (though not exclusively) by the major cinema companies. The boom in cinema building in the 1920s and 1930s in many parts of Britain, however, did not alter the fact that many cinema-goers continued to consume their regular diet of films in old converted music-halls or pre-1914 purpose-built picture halls. In 1951 well over half of all British cinemas (60.6%) were either independent or part of small circuits containing between two and ten halls. Only 25% of cinemas were part of large circuits of over fifty halls.[17] Furthermore, the large circuits were far more prominent in the more prosperous regions of the south and the midlands than in the north, in Scotland or in Wales. In London and the south east over half of all cinemas belonged to large chains (51.7%), yet in the east and west Ridings the equivalent figure was only 13.3%. In Scotland and northern England as a whole, the proportion of cinemas in circuits of over fifty halls was 19.7%: in southern England and the Midlands 33.9% of cinemas belonged to large chains.[18]

The growth of the major circuits, and with them the glittering 'dream palaces' was, of course, an important development in the cinema's social history: but this did not *create* the cinema industry's importance. The cinema existed as a significant economic and social institution well before the major players became involved. One

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[14] Dennis Sharp, *The Picture Palace, and Other Buildings for the Movies* (London, 1969), p.59.
[15] Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film, 1906-1914* (London, 1948), pp. 16, 17.
[16] Sharp, *Picture Palace*, p. 66. The erroneous forecast was made by one John Palmer.
[17] Browning and Sorrell, 'Cinemas and Cinema-Going', pp. 142-3.
[18] *Ibid.*, p. 142. Wales is excluded from the figures quoted here.

indication of the cinema's economic importance prior to 1918 is provided by the fact that the Government saw fit to impose an Entertainment Tax on the industry during World War One. The tax, initially intended to be a temporary wartime measure, was of such fiscal value to the Treasury that it remained an important source of income throughout the period covered here.[19]

The cinemas outside the major chains formed the bedrock on which the industry was based. They were of particular importance in those areas of Britain (Scotland, northern England and Wales) where cinema-going was most frequent. These were the local cinemas which seldom screened the latest new releases but which provided popular entertainment at an affordable price in warm and familiar surroundings. They were mostly second- or third-run halls, which meant they were unable to screen a film until its first run had been completed in one of the more prestigious halls. Their cheapness and convenience attracted a core working-class audience base who visited as a matter of routine on a weekly or twice-weekly basis. It was the *habitual* nature of cinema attendance which accounts for the remarkable audience figures recorded throughout our period.[20] This habit was strongest in northern Britain and in Wales, where the great majority of cinemas were locally owned and managed. It was the small, local halls which were at the heart of the *cinema* industry in Britain as a whole, though their importance was particularly noticeable in Wales. An examination of the industry here, therefore, must focus on the way in which the locally owned cinemas and circuits managed to serve the needs of their surrounding communities.

The Structure and Operation of the Industry in Wales

Circuits

In order to appraise the position of cinema within Welsh society it is first necessary to examine the structure of the industry within Wales. It has already been noted that the major circuits contained only a minority of the cinemas within Britain

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[19] During the economic crisis of 1931-2 exhibitors saw their percentage of gross receipts paid out in tax increase from 11% to 16.5%. Further increases were introduced during Word War Two. See Stephen Jones, *The British Labour Movement and Film, 1918-1939* (London and New York, 1987), pp. 91-93; Dickinson and Street, *Cinema and State*.

[20] The reasons for the cinema's mass-appeal are examined in much greater detail in chapter three.

as a whole. In Wales this situation was even more pronounced. In 1951 only 6% of cinemas in Wales were in circuits of over fifty halls. The proportion of cinema seats in these circuits was 11.7% in Wales, compared to 37.8% nationally.[21] Oscar Deutsch was responsible for opening approximately three hundred new Odeon cinemas in Britain in the 1930s: only six were in Wales.[22] Gaumont and ABC managed to avoid cinema building in Wales almost altogether.[23]

While the apparently relentless growth of the major circuits continued through the inter-war years in many parts of Britain, the social, economic and geographical environment in Wales was not conducive to their development. The period in which the major circuits established themselves was one of particular hardship for many Welsh communities. It would have been an unnecessary risk for these circuits to open cinemas in areas with high unemployment and a declining population. It was not just economic factors, however, which made Wales unattractive to the major circuits. Unlike the industrial areas of the north of England or central Scotland (also crippled by the depression), Wales contained few major urban centres. In both the south Wales valleys and most of rural Wales, the majority of the population lived in small communities of less than 8,000 inhabitants. These communities also tended to have a strong local identity, largely because they were so isolated from one another.[24] Unlike in, say, Cardiff where a new cinema for Rumney might attract attention from across the city; it was extremely difficult for a cinema in a place such as Cymmer, or for that matter Dolgellau, to appeal to people in surrounding areas - which would have had their own small cinemas anyway.

A combination of economic instability and limitations of geography clearly deterred major circuits from investing in Wales. This is illustrated by looking at the towns where they *did* invest. Odeons were constructed in the north Wales towns of Colwyn Bay, Llandudno and Wrexham.[25] In the south, the major circuits built

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[21] Browning and Sorrell, 'Cinemas and Cinema-Going', p. 142.
[22] See Rosemary Clegg (ed.), *Odeon* (Birmingham, 1985).
[23] Gaumont did build the Gaumont Theatre in Chepstow in 1938, but apart from this the only cinemas which these companies operated in Wales were those which had been acquired when taking over smaller circuits such as PCT. See Eyles, *Gaumont*; Eyles, *ABC*.
[24] Dai Smith, for instance, stresses 'the differences between valleys which are as separated by language, routes of development and geography as they were united by occupation, popular culture and shared experience.' Dai Smith, *Aneurin Bevan and the World of South Wales* (Cardiff, 1993), p. 92.
[25] Odeon cinemas, which usually seated between 1400-1800 people, were generally smaller than the two- or three-thousand seat Gaumonts and ABCs. This, perhaps, explains why Odeon built more cinemas in Wales than the other two major circuits.

cinemas in the larger towns of Cardiff and Newport, as well as the relatively prosperous Llanelli and Chepstow.[26] In none of these towns, however, was more than one cinema built by a major chain. Yet while conditions were not well suited to cinema *building* in Wales, there was nothing to stop the major circuits simply taking over existing halls. These companies usually preferred to design their own buildings than acquire existing ones, but in Wales they frequently made exceptions. One of Cardiff's oldest cinemas, the Imperial, was bought by Oscar Deutsch in 1936; the Maxime in Sketty and Port Talbot's Majestic were also converted into Odeons during World War Two. Similarly, Gaumont gained control of the Coliseum in Newport and the Hippodrome in Cardiff in 1927, the latter city's Empire went the same way in 1931. Associated British Cinemas, meanwhile, acquired the Queen's and the Olympia cinemas in Cardiff in 1927 and 1936 respectively (both kept their original names). ABC also gained control of Newport's Olympia in 1929 and Merthyr's Castle in 1932. These were mostly first run halls - the first to screen the latest new releases. By no means all such cinemas, however, were controlled by the major chains at this time. The Park Hall in Cardiff, and Swansea's Plaza remained outside circuits altogether.

The great multitude of Wales's less prestigious cinemas were of no interest to major circuits. Indeed, it was not unknown for smaller cinemas taken over by these companies to revert back to independent control. Gaumont, for example, acquired both the Palace in Treharris and the Picture House in Monmouth when they took over Provincial Cinematograph Theatres (PCT) in 1927. Whereas Gaumont chose to renovate and re-open the Monmouth's Picture House, they quickly got rid of the Valleys' cinema, which was taken over and re-opened by an independent company in 1930. Swansea's Albert Hall and Carlton cinemas also became part of the ABC circuit in 1937 but were taken back by the local South Wales Cinemas two years later.

Of the Welsh cinemas which were in circuits at this time, (44.6% in 1951), the vast majority were in small chains of less than 15 cinemas. These were often locally run, in many cases as a family business. A browse through the *Kinematograph Year Books* of the inter-war period reveals the limited geographical area to which most of these circuits were confined, in some cases to a single town.[27] As with the major

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[26] Odeons had also been planned for the south Wales towns of Swansea and Port Talbot. Building work was abandoned, however, with the outbreak of war.

[27] Neither Abertillery Theatres Ltd. nor Ebbw Vale Theatres Ltd. operated cinemas outside of their respective towns.

companies, the development of cinema chains within Wales owed as much to the economy and geography of the Principality, as it did to the state of the British film industry. Given the lack of any major transport links between north and south Wales it comes as little surprise that the largest of these circuits, (those with between ten and fifteen cinemas which might be described as regional, rather than local, in character), tended to expand along a west-east axis rather than a north-south one.[28] Thus the Wrexham-based Cambria and Borders circuit, as its name suggests, ran cinemas in places such as Market Drayton and Ellesmere as well as Colwyn Bay and Llanidloes. There were no circuits, Odeon excepted, which operated cinemas in both north and south Wales.

The total number of Welsh-based circuits altered very little in the inter-war period; the figure was usually around ten according to the *Kine Year Book*. What did change, however, was the area in which the majority of circuits were to be found. Companies based in the south Wales valleys such as Amman Alpha, Rowland Williams and Welsh Hills, were listed in the 1920s but all had disappeared by 1935. Interestingly, this did not mean that the cinemas themselves had closed. Many of the halls run by these chains, like the Picturedrome in Tonypandy and the New Theatre in Maesteg, continued independently into the 1950s. The new circuits which emerged in this period were usually based in areas without such severe economic problems. Cardiff and Hereford[29] both housed newly formed cinema companies in the 1930s. It is also noticeable by the end of the 1930s that more south Wales circuits were beginning to set up headquarters in Cardiff. The 1922 *Kine Year Book* mentions only one circuit based in Cardiff: by 1939 there were five.

There is some evidence that Welsh circuits were getting bigger in the inter-war years, but they were starting from a very small base and there is nothing spectacular in their rate of growth.[30] The only Welsh circuit containing more than ten cinemas in the 1920s, Cambria and Borders, vanished from the trade directories as quickly as it had appeared. The W.E. Willis circuit, which first appeared in 1936 with fourteen cinemas, had added just one to this total a decade later. The only Welsh

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[28] A discussion of contemporary debates concerning transportation between north and south Wales can be found in Prys Gryffudd, 'Remaking Wales: Nation-Building and the Geographical Imagination, 1925-1950', *Political Geography*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (1995), pp. 219-239.

[29] Although based in Hereford, all six of the cinemas operated by Plaza Cinemas were in mid-Wales.

circuit which appears to have maintained steady growth throughout the period was the Splott Cinema Company. Formed in 1913 in order to build the Splott cinema in Cardiff, the company continued to construct cinemas and purchase others throughout Cardiff in the 1920s and 1930s. By 1939 the company owned thirteen halls in Cardiff and Penarth. One episode in the company's history, however, suggests that this development of steady growth was not as smooth as might first appear.

In 1925 the Splott Cinema Company won a court action against its own managing director, one William J. C. Thomas. Mr. Thomas had apparently led his fellow directors (who were also his cousins) and his bank to believe that he was negotiating the purchase of the Canton Cinema from Mr. Samuel Instone on behalf of the company. After the deal had been struck, however, he claimed to have bought the property for himself with the intention of setting up his own company. After a protracted court case the Canton cinema did eventually become part of the Splott circuit, but it is noticeable that from this date on the company built its own cinemas rather than purchasing existing ones. This case may not have been typical of the difficulties incurred by cinema companies in this period, but it serves to demonstrate that in small businesses personal differences, as well as the general economic outlook, could affect the prospects for expansion.[31] The Splott Cinema Company clearly had ambitious plans, but not all Welsh circuits were so intent on expansion. Companies such as South Wales Cinemas (with four halls), Castle and Central (with three), and Will Stone (five), seemed content with small circuits and made little effort to add to them. Perhaps more significantly, they were able to survive throughout the period without being absorbed into a larger concern.

It is interesting that within Wales the largest circuit did not develop until cinema audiences had gone into decline. The early post-war years saw a continuation of the trends of the 1930s. In north Wales the Paramount company (a Welshpool-based circuit run by Mr. Guy Baxter) continued to grow, with twenty halls by 1950. It was joined by Deeside Entertainments, which was running twelve cinemas in 1955. In the south the larger circuits of Splott and W.E. Willis continued to operate in the early post-war years alongside the likes of South Wales Cinemas and new circuits such as

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[30] According to the information in the *Kine Year Books*, the average size of Welsh circuits increased from 3.9 in 1922, to 5.2 in 1936.

[31] Reports of the court case appear in the *Western Mail*, 20-26 March, 1925.

Bridgend Cinemas. As audiences began to fall away in the 1950s these circuits clearly encountered increasing problems. Rather than entering a prolonged period of terminal decline, however, it seems that many south Wales companies sold their cinemas to a single chain. By 1963 there were only two south Wales circuits listed in the *Kine Year Book*: Bridgend Cinemas, with six halls; and Jackson Withers, with thirty five. The smaller circuits had been able to continue operating for as long as the cinema business was profitable, only selling up when it became difficult to make a living.

It is an indication of the relative strength of the Welsh economy in the 1960s that a company like Jackson Withers was able to invest so heavily in the cinema industry, even when it was in decline. Had Welsh businesses shown such confidence in the 1920s and 1930s, it is possible that the structure of the cinema industry in Wales could have been quite different. Whatever the circumstances shaping its development, the cinema industry in Wales during this period remained closely rooted in local communities. Of the cinemas that were in circuits most were in small, locally-based chains. The overall majority of cinemas in Wales, however, were not part of a circuit at all. These were the independently managed, so-called singleton cinemas.

Singleton Cinemas

According to an extensive statistical survey of the cinema industry in the early 1950s, 55.4% of all Welsh halls were classed as singleton cinemas: meaning that they were not part of a circuit.[32] As well as being much smaller than many of the cinemas attached to large chains, these small independent halls were also managed in a quite distinct way. In many singleton cinemas, for instance, the proprietor and the manager were the same person. His (and most cinema managers were men) primary responsibility was, obviously, to ensure that the cinema operated at a profit. Even in cinema's heyday, however, this was not something small independent exhibitors could take for granted. For one thing non-circuit cinemas were in a very weak position when it came to booking films. They were mostly second or third run halls, unable to screen major releases until after the premier cinemas. Furthermore, while cinemas in major circuits had to pay approximately 25% of their box-office receipts to film distributors, independent halls were often required to contribute as much as 40%. Browning and Sorrell's survey of the British film industry showed not only that Wales had the

highest proportion of singleton cinemas in 1951, but also that the distributor's share of box office takings was higher in Wales than in any other part of Britain.[33] On top of this, the Entertainment Tax, introduced as a temporary wartime measure in 1916, continued to plague the industry throughout the period under examination. The levy was originally aimed at cinema-goers rather than the industry itself, yet it was not easy for cinemas to pass the tax-burden onto consumers. A 1949 Board of Trade report pointed out that:

> the exhibitor was actually a penny better off when pricing a seat at 1*s* rather than 1*s* 3*d*, since the duty increased in one step at that point from 3.5 to 7.5*d*.[34]

The option of raising admission prices not only exposed exhibitors to higher rates of Entertainment Tax, it is also questionable whether the working-class audiences, on whom many cinemas relied, would have been able to afford, or accept, higher prices. One attempt to increase prices at Cardiff's Park Hall for the screening of *Gone With the Wind* certainly met with a hostile response. As manager Joe Whatley recalled:

> We even had people picketing outside with notices telling the public to boycott the film because of the prices.[35]

The Park Hall, as a large city centre hall, at least had the advantage of a large auditorium which if filled to capacity could bring in a large revenue. For the smallest cinemas with under five hundred seats, however, there was less opportunity to take advantage of particularly popular films.

The independent cinema manager, while presiding over the home of the most popular form of mass entertainment, faced many restraints and could not be assured of making a profit, even when attendances were booming. In the face of all the difficulties confronting them, small independent exhibitors were able to survive by providing programmes of entertainment which were, as far as possible, tailored to the

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[32] Browning and Sorrell, 'Cinema and Cinema-Going in Great Britain', p. 142.
[33] Browning and Sorrell, 'Cinema and Cinema-Going', pp. 138-140.
[34] Board of Trade, quoted in Macnab, *J. Arthur Rank*, p. 192.
[35] *South Wales Echo*, 15 May 1971, p. 6.

demands of the local cinema-going public,[36] but also by dint of some fairly robust marketing.

Cinemas and the local community

Cinemas managers were usually very public figures in the local community. According to Stephen Ridgewell, 'the prominent public role of the manager ... was of no small significance in this process of binding the cinema to its locality.'[37] One way in which this might occur was through advertising. In the days before Hollywood companies allocated large marketing budgets for their films it was up to the local manager to attract attention to the picture being shown in his or her cinema. One cinema-goer from the south Wales valleys recalled how 'A religious epic was advertised the week before its screening by the appearance on the stage at the cinema concerned of massed chapel choirs of the area. They sang suitably sacred anthems, then a discreet announcement was made about the film and its content.'[38] At the Park Hall in Cardiff advertising was not confined to the auditorium. According to Merle Jones, writing in 1971, manager Joe Whatley:

> was a great believer in publicity stunts and for years the Park staged elaborate campaigns to get people to queue for its films. Efforts ranged from simple uniform displays accompanying military pictures to the parading through Cardiff of a stuffed Bengal tiger in a cage to advertise a film involving a one-man big game hunt, *Harry Black*. Ken Wardle, who now manages the Globe at Albany Road, even walked a wheelbarrow full of tools to promote *The Secret Garden*.[39]

Cinema proprietors were also able to use the popularity of their halls to the immediate benefit of local communities. This can be clearly seen in the case of the miners' cinemas, which were owned and run by local workmen. In numerous communities, such as Ton Pentre, Ynisher, Ynysybwl, Mardy and Pontcymmer, the Workmens' Institute was home to the only cinema throughout the inter-war period. Historians of the south Wales coalfield have attached considerable importance to these institutes in the creation of an active and distinct working-class culture. Hywel

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[36] The actual programmes of entertainment provided by Welsh cinemas is examined in greater detail in chapter four.
[37] Stephen Ridgewell, 'South Wales and the Cinema in the 1930s', *Welsh History Review*, Vol. 17 (1995), p. 600.
[38] *South Wales Echo*, 18 May 1971, p. 5.
[39] *South Wales Echo*, 15 May 1971, p. 6.

Francis and David Smith, for example, argue that the 'tradition of independent working-class education in South Wales ... was strengthened by the magnificent workmen's institute and welfare hall libraries in every village and town throughout the coalfield.'[40] Furthermore, Bert Hogenkamp has pointed out that 'Film exhibition guaranteed the survival of the halls and institutes, which otherwise would have had difficulties making ends meet due to high unemployment among miners.'[41] In the Tredegar Institute, for example, the rent paid by the Spanish Aid Committee for the hire of the cinema in 1937-8 'was refunded as a matter of routine without discussion. The cinema committee here even managed to persuade British Lion 'to supply a film free of charge for the Spanish Aid Committee.' What is more, the cinemas 'opened the Institutes, those bastions of typically male activities, to women, to children (special children's matinees) and to the unemployed.'[42]

It was not only the independently run halls which adapted themselves to the broader concerns of the local communities. The owners of small circuits in many cases played an active role in the running of the cinemas, and frequently displayed an acute awareness of their role within the local community. According to one of his employees, Will Stone, who owned a small chain of valleys cinemas, 'organised a sort of free lottery based on seat numbers. Many a poor family got prizes of new shoes or parcels of food from that little scheme, just by going to the cinema.'[43] It was also cinema owner W.E. Willis who promoted the young Tommy Farr in his first fight, on the stage of the Empire, Tonypandy.[44]

Local social and economic conditions clearly influenced the structure of the cinema industry in Wales as well as affecting the way in which those cinemas were managed. Yet the development of such a popular form of mass entertainment must itself have made some impression on the local economy within Wales. Whatever economic impact the cinema had in Wales, however, was limited almost exclusively to the exhibition sector.

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[40] Hywel Francis and David Smith, *The Fed: A History of the South Wales Mines in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1980), p. 447.
[41] Bert Hogenkamp, *Deadly Parallels: Film and the Left in Britain, 1929-39* (London, 1986), p. 143.
[42] Bert Hogenkamp, 'Miners' Cinemas in South Wales in the 1920s and 1930s', *Llafur* Vol. 4, No. 2 (1985), pp. 71-2, 66.
[43] *South Wales Echo*, 17 May 1971, p. 5.
[44] *South Wales Echo*, 14 May 1971, p. 5.

Employment in the Cinema Industry in Wales

Precise figures for the number of people employed in the cinema industry in Wales are not easy to obtain. According to the 1921 census, there were 1,834 people in south Wales employed in theatres, music-halls and picture palaces. The number working in film production and film studios was a mere twenty-eight. By 1931, the number employed in theatres, music halls and picture palaces had increased to 2,422 in south Wales, the figure for Wales as a whole was 3,011.[45] The total employed in film producing and film studios at this time was ninety-four. The 1951 census provides slightly more precise information. The total number of people in Wales working in theatres, music halls and cinemas stood at 4,988. Of this number, 3,577 (or 71.7%) were working in cinemas. In England and Wales as a whole, the equivalent proportion was 56.5%. These figures clearly demonstrate that within Wales, as far as employment is concerned, the exhibition side of the industry was far more significant than film production or distribution. Further, if the 1951 figures are anything to go by, it appears that within Wales the cinemas employed a much greater proportion of those in the entertainment industry than was the case in Britain as a whole.

The three-and-a-half thousand jobs available in the cinema industry in Wales by 1951 made it a significant feature of the economy. It was only a minor employer when compared to the heavy industries or agriculture, but in the inter-war years it was one of the few areas where new jobs were being created. This is not to say that unemployment was not a worry for cinema workers. The late 1920s saw hundreds of musicians thrown out of work as the technique of presenting sound films was perfected.[46] The 1931 census shows that in parts of Wales unemployment among those employed in theatres, music halls and picture palaces was very high indeed, reaching 45.1% in the Rhondda. The figure for Wales as a whole was 25.7%. It is unknown what proportion of these were recently unemployed musicians, indeed, it is far from clear exactly how many were cinema workers. It is apparent, however, that unemployment in the cinema industry was not as widespread as in the Welsh economy as a whole, and that the absolute number of jobs available in this industry was

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[45] The actual increase in the numbers employed in cinemas is probably higher than these figures suggest since many theatres and music halls were either forced to close or convert into cinemas in this period.
[46] According to the census there were 375 musicians employed in Welsh theatres, music halls and cinemas in 1921. It is likely that there were considerably more by the time the talkies arrived.

increasing throughout the period, despite the drop in the number of musicians. A further consideration to be taken into account is that the cinema offered employment opportunities for women. In some parts of Wales female cinema workers actually outnumbered male. It is important when considering this point, and the significance of cinema employment generally, to examine the types of jobs that were on offer.

The most senior member of any cinema staff was the manager. Some non-circuit cinemas were managed by the proprietor, but for the most part managers were salaried employees of a cinema company. As well as advertising (see above) their primary responsibility was to oversee the day-to-day running of the hall: to ensure that the building and its facilities were in good working order; to see that the accounts were properly kept; and to deal with any queries from the public. Managers of independent halls also had to book the films, though most circuits had a separate booking manager.

A far less visible, but equally important member of the cinema staff was the projectionist. In the earliest days of the cinematograph operators were highly skilled technicians whose role included more than simply operating the machinery. As the cinema industry developed, and new technologies became available, however, individual expertise became less important:

> Many a proprietor saved money on new machinery by relying on his operator's skills as a *bricoleur*, a technical wizard of home-made improvements (even, according to projectionists' folklore, as late as the introduction of sound). But these skills lost much of their importance when music halls, and then proper cinemas, installed permanent equipment. Basically all that was needed was for someone to turn the handle. This was still a skilled job, since it needed quite a lot of expertise to turn the handle smoothly, and keep the flicker on the screen down to a minimum. But the old school of operators chided the new school for being *mere* handle turners.[47]

The development of electrical projection equipment, although frequently problematic in its early days, eventually reduced the need even for 'handle turners'.[48] Cinema projectionists, in the period under consideration here, clearly did not require the same skills as their predecessors. This is not to say that they were unskilled. Extensive knowledge of the machines they operated was required in order that any

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[47] Michael Chanan, *Labour Power in the British Film Industry* (London, 1976), p. 14.

[48] In many parts of Wales, where electricity simply was not available for much of the inter-war period, older methods were preserved. Problems with electrical equipment, in areas where it could be used, meant that the skills of the 'handle turner' were often required in the 1920s.

difficulties could be resolved without interrupting the film. Audiences, from the 1920s onwards, were increasingly intolerant of stoppages in the programme of entertainment. As one former projectionist remembers of working in the First World War:

> It was a fairly difficult job in those days, but films were so new that the audience didn't seem to mind if anything went wrong. For instance there was no shouting or slow handclapping when the screen blacked out while reels were changed.[49]

The development of new projection equipment may have reduced the skill levels of operators in the 1920s, but the coming of talkies required projectionists to develop new skills.[50] Throughout the period, however, their job remained a fairy high pressure one. A loss of concentration on the projectionist's part had implications not just for the smooth running of the film, but also for the safety of the audience. The highly flammable properties of film stock were well known, and fire regulations were strictly enforced by local authorities (see chapter six). One could not expect to become a projectionist, therefore, without first having served an apprenticeship as an assistant. Whereas the role of the cinema manager was to get enough people through the door of the cinema to make it financially viable, the projectionist bore much of the responsibility for the smooth, and safe, running of the entertainment on offer inside. It is worth noting, perhaps, that as well as the films themselves, the lighting, music and any sound effects within the cinema were controlled from the projection room. While such duties would have been taken for granted by audiences, it was also possible for the projectionist to make a much more direct impression. Mac Smith, who worked as a projectionist for fifty years, recalls that for the screening of *All Quiet on the Western Front* (the original silent version) he 'got some cordite bombs which could be detonated electronically at suitable moments.' This was apparently not an isolated incident:

> Another memory is of the film *San Francisco*, which was a bit of a turkey until it got to the Park Hall and I started messing around with the sound effects. In the end I had so much sound turned on that the balcony was visibly shaking. I even fed the sound

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[49] Dick Lewis, who worked at Tonypandy's Empire, quoted in *South Wales Echo*, 17 May 1971, p. 5.
[50] See Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film 1929-1939: Film Making in 1930s Britain* (London, 1985), p. 17.

> through the under floor plenum system and frightened everyone to death. It did the trick too. After a couple of days the queues were stretching around the block.[51]

By no means were all of Mac Smith's innovations as successful as this: he admitted that after the incident with the cordite bombs 'I nearly lost my job and the audience were terrified'. While these examples, from one of Cardiff's largest cinemas, may overstate the level of influence which most projectionists exerted over the audience, they clearly did play a role in shaping the atmosphere in which films were viewed. As these incidents suggest, the job of cinema projectionist was not without its interesting moments, but it also involved a multitude of less memorable duties, and very long hours. As Mr Smith himself stressed: 'there was no romance in it. It was hard, hard work.'[52]

Another group of workers who played an important role in creating an appropriate atmosphere within the halls were musicians. Prior to the coming of sound a small orchestra was employed by many of the larger cinemas, while in the smaller halls a single pianist often provided the appropriate musical background. To perform suitably dramatic music for each film screened demanded a particular talent. The films themselves usually changed twice a week, leaving the musicians with little or no time to rehearse. A certain amount of improvisation was usually demanded - the wife of one cinema pianist in the 1920s recalls that her husband:

> would read the synopsis when each film arrived and once he had the idea he could fit in the right accompaniment for any situation ... I doubt if he ever played the same tune twice. And of course, the fact that he never used sheet music meant that he could watch the film as he played.[53]

With two or three screenings a day, the musicians, like all cinema employees, worked long and anti-social hours. The working day of the above pianist apparently lasted from 1pm until midnight, and occasionally it would be even longer. As his wife regretfully remembers:

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[51] *South Wales Echo*, 15 May 1971, p. 6.
[52] *South Wales Echo*, 15 May 1971, p. 6.
[53] The pianist, Adolphus Davies, worked in Cardiff's Globe cinema, see the *South Wales Echo*, 19 May 1971, p. 13.

> By the time he'd come home and looked at the papers and had something to eat it was about three in the morning ... so he stayed in bed late. It was a lonely life for me.[54]

On the positive side this particular pianist was able to earn as much as £8 in a busy week, which was more than many managers took home (see p.136). Another cinema musician, a drummer who worked at Will Stone's Empire in Tonypandy, remembers that 'It was hard work but enjoyable and the musical standard was remarkable'. He also went on to praise Mr. Stone himself:

> All of us got a week's paid holiday a year - quite something in those days[55] - and an evening off once a month. Mr. Stone even paid for our substitutes on those evenings.[56]

It is doubtful that all cinema workers would have seen their employers in such positive a light, and not even the benevolent Will Stone could avoid making his musicians redundant after the coming of talkies.[57] The sound film eliminated the need for live music in the cinema, at least during performances.

There was still employment for a few musicians in some of the largest and most prestigious halls. In the café at Cardiff's Capitol Theatre, for example, 'Falkman's Syncopated Five entertained customers daily' in the 1930s.[58] There was also a need for gifted organists, capable of mastering the huge and increasingly elaborate Wurlitzer or Hammond organs. At the opening of Swansea's Plaza cinema, it was pointed out that the organist, Frank Matthew, was classically trained, having 'played all the principal cathedral organs during his travels both in England and France.'[59] In Wales only a small proportion of cinemas actually contained such instruments, but their appeal extended well beyond the auditorium. The organist at the Plaza for much of the 1930s was Tom Jenkins, but his reputation extended far beyond Swansea thanks to his regular broadcasts for the BBC Empire programme. The broadcasts went out live from the cinema and apparently won Mr. Jenkins admirers in

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[54] *Ibid*, p. 13.
[55] Holidays with pay were enjoyed by relatively few workers in this period, see Stephen G. Jones, 'Trade Union Policy Between the Wars: The Case of Holidays with Pay in Britain', *International Review of Social History*, Vol. 31 (1986), pp. 40-67.
[56] *South Wales Echo*, 17 May 1971, p. 5.
[57] He did actually promise his musicians that they could stay on to play incidental music. Unfortunately, however, the sound equipment installed in all of Will Stone's cinemas failed on the first night, forcing them to close. See the *South Wales Echo*, 17 May 1971, p. 5.
[58] See *South Wales Echo*, 23 February 1976, p. 9.
[59] *South Wales Evening Post*, 16 February 1931.

many parts of the globe.[60] Organists such as these were clearly well respected figures in their own right, and it is perhaps significant that Mr. Jenkins was manager at the Plaza as well as organist.

The majority of jobs on offer in cinemas, however, were low-skill, low-pay positions which promised little by way of career opportunities. The most prominent such position was that of commissionaire, a feature of many cinemas of the period. Dressed in their immaculate uniforms, these important looking officials were intended to provide a form of customer service, as well as providing the cinema with an air of respectability. Much of their job, however, involved ensuring that the audience had paid for their seats and that they behaved in a civilised manner, both inside and out of the auditorium. However prominent a figure at the cinema entrance, the commissionaire was, in effect, an unskilled worker. As a result he did not receive a generous reward for his labour. The general secretary of the National Association of Theatrical and Kine Employees made the point bluntly in 1934:

> Arrayed like brigadiers while on duty, yet unable to feed like the officer's charger when off duty - that is the position of many commissionaires outside cinemas today.[61]

The position of commissionaire, however, was far from being the most lowly in the cinema business. In the largest super-cinemas he[62] was supported by a small army of page boys and usherettes, also smartly dressed, and even less well paid. Smaller cinemas also employed usherettes, but not in such large numbers. The tasks carried out by these employees were a far cry from the glamour and romance which their places of work had come to symbolise. A cinema usherette was expected to do far more than simply show people to their seats. As a former employee of Ely's Regent cinema remembered:

> I was 15 at the time in 1943 when I started as an usherette and cleaner. There were eight of us in all and our day started at 7.30am when we scrubbed eight rows of seats on each side for two hours with other duties. Then we went home for dinner and prepared for the matinee and evening performances, when we were the usherettes.[63]

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[60] See the *Radio Times*, 22 November 1935.
[61] Tom O'Brien, quoted in *The Daily Herald*, 2 July 1934, p. 3.
[62] The author has encountered no examples of any female commissionaires.
[63] This is the reminiscence of Connie Derrick, quoted in the *South Wales Echo*, 23 February 1996, p.

The extent of the cleaning duties varied, no doubt, from cinema to cinema, but they were often taken extremely seriously by the management. An employee of Will Stone's recalled that:

> His wife was fanatically concerned about cleanliness. She paid the cinema cleaning women the best wages in the Rhondda. But woe betide them if they skimped on the job. After they had cleaned the cinema Mrs Stone used to come in wearing a pair of white gloves. She would run her fingers over any surfaces such as seat backs or mouldings that caught the dust and if the gloves came away marked someone was in trouble.[64]

After spending their mornings scrubbing, polishing and clearing litter, the page boys and usherettes were expected to present an immaculate appearance when the cinemas opened to the public. A page boy at Cardiff's Capitol Theatre who worked 12 hour days, six days a week for 10s a week, spent his mornings polishing the building's many brass railings, then at 1.30pm:

> The whole 21 of us on the staff had to parade in a straight line each day, and woe betide us if there was as much as a speck of dirt on our shirt fronts or uniforms.[65]

Once the cinemas had opened, these employees performed various duties such as handing out programmes, tearing tickets, guarding cloakrooms, selling ice-cream and directing people to their seats. They were also expected to offer whatever advice or assistance was required by the patrons. The page boys at the Capitol were also ordered not to accept tips, but instead to reply 'Capitol service, sir'. Given the wages they were paid, however, it would not be a surprise if staff occasionally failed to adhere to this regulation.

The pay of cinema workers was notoriously low. Under the heading 'Scandalous Cinema Conditions', *The Daily Herald* in 1934 reported that in larger circuits girls were working between 50 and 60 hours a week for 25s, while in other halls the hours were from 55 to 70 with wages in the range of 12/6 to 18s. Men, it claimed, were marginally better off, earning between 40s and 55s for similar hours in larger halls, and from 30s to 40s in other houses.[66] In Wales, where the vast majority of cinemas were not run by large circuits, low wages were commonplace. The

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[64] So remembers Reg Bennett, quoted in the *South Wales Echo*, 17 May 1971, p. 5.
[65] The recollection is that of John Martin, quoted in the *South Wales Echo*, 23 February 1976, p. 9.
[66] *The Daily Herald*, 2 July 1934, p. 3.

manager of one Porth cinema was clearly aware that his main cleaner (who earned 14/6 a week) was 'worth more than she receives'.[67] The working conditions of these employees is seldom referred to by cinema historians. Yet as John Clarke and Chas Critcher have astutely observed, the service and leisure industries were becoming 'the new sweated trades'.

> The cinema usherette, working unsocial hours for low wages, suffering from boredom and sore feet, was a symptomatic figure - the invisible support of the glittering world of the 'dream palace'.[68]

Trade unionists had regularly complained about the pay and conditions of cinema workers and the lot of the 'girls who are employed in the cinemas' even pricked the conscience of a Conservative MP who, exaggerating slightly, felt that they amounted to 'slave conditions'.[69]

The type of work which the cinemas offered must be taken into account when assessing the gender breakdown of those who were employed there. It is noticeable that when complaints about the working conditions of cinema employees were voiced, it was the plight of the 'girls' which attracted the most attention. It should be pointed out, however, that the cinema industry was one of the few sectors of the economy which offered employment opportunities for Welsh women. The inter-war years saw an exodus of young women leaving Wales to work as domestic servants in more prosperous areas such as London, the midlands and the south east of England. A job at the local cinema was no more arduous than the lot of a domestic servant, and it at least enabled the women employed there to remain close to their families. By 1951, 60% of those working in Welsh cinemas were women.

The range of job opportunities provided by cinemas was far more limited for women than for men. The more senior positions of manager and chief projectionist were dominated by men. The 1921 census shows that of 260 managers of theatres, music halls and picture palaces, only nineteen (7%) were female. Similarly, of those classed as 'stage hands, cinema and limelight operators', there were 193 males to just eighteen females. Women did make up 30% of musicians, but the category which they

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[67] Robinson to Andrews, 2 October 1920, GRO, D/D A/B 18/5/74.
[68] John Clarke and Chas Critcher, *The Devil Makes Work: Leisure in Capitalist Britain* (Basingstoke, 1985), p. 77.

dominated was that of 'money takers, programme sellers, attendants'. Here, females outnumbered males by 404 to 63; almost half the women employed in the entertainment industry worked in this sector. The 1931 census does not give as detailed a breakdown of those employed in theatres, music halls and picture palaces, it does, however, show that of the 1,393 women working in this area only twenty-seven (2%) held positions which were described as managerial. The number of men employed in such positions was 355 (22%).

Whereas men who entered the cinema industry, even at the lowest level, might have opportunities for promotion, the female employees tended to remain in the same low paid jobs until they stopped work. Equality of opportunity, at this time, was a principle held by few, and practised by even fewer. The period covered by this thesis saw little sustained feminist activity. Women in this period were more noted for supporting a 'cult of domesticity'.[70] Marriage bars remained in operation for women teachers and civil servants until the 1940s, while a range of influential sources, from leading psychiatrists to popular magazines, argued in no uncertain terms that a mother's rightful place was at home with her children. The view which 'saw the mother-child relationship as the key to the healthy development of the child' was frequently expressed. 'Women's work outside the home therefore stood condemned as likely to produce juvenile delinquents.'[71] While the number of women in employment did increase in inter-war Britain, they remained in a small minority. In Wales, it should be added, the rates of female employment were considerably lower than in England.[72] It was not until the 1960s that rates of female employment in Wales caught up with, and went on to overtake, the national average. Working Welsh women in the inter-war years were 'breadwinners of the last resort'.[73] The general pattern of female employment at this time was for young women to work to help support themselves and their families until they married and had children. The Second World War did little to alter this. Both Penny Summerfield and Harold Smith have stressed continuity

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[69] The MP in question was Major Henry Procter, quoted in Stephen G. Jones, *The British Labour Movement and Film, 1918-1939* (London and New York, 1987), p. 66.
[70] See Martin Pugh, 'Domesticity and the Decline of Feminism, 1930-1950', in Harold Smith (ed.), *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* (Amherst, 1990), pp. 144-163.
[71] Jane Lewis, *Women in Britain Since 1945: Women, Family, Work and the State in the Post-War Years* (Oxford, 1992), p. 18.
[72] Economic activity rates for women in Wales were 23% in 1921 and 21.5% in 1931. The corresponding figures for England and Wales as a whole were 32.3% and 34.2% respectively.

rather than change in womens' attitude to work in the 1940s.[74] To the majority of women, either side of the war, it seems that marriage and domesticity were considered more liberating than the workplace. It is in this light that the position of women workers in cinemas must be seen. The cinema did not provide career opportunities for females, it offered young women the chance to earn some extra money by carrying out mundane, and at times arduous tasks.

It was the largest super-cinemas, which prided themselves on comfort, service and cleanliness, that employed the highest proportion of female staff. The size of the buildings, and the number of patrons they attracted, meant that a fairly large team of cleaners and usherettes were required for their smooth running. The smaller houses, on the other hand, while still employing a manager, projectionist (plus assistant) and perhaps a commissionaire might only require one or two female staff. It is noticeable that in the south Wales valleys and much of rural Wales, where the vast majority of cinemas were small, the proportion of women employed in the industry was considerably less than in the larger south Wales towns. In the urban district of Rhondda and the counties of Cardigan and Anglesey, in 1931, the proportion of females working in theatres, music halls and picture palaces were 36%, 29% and 41% respectively. The corresponding figures for Cardiff, Swansea and Newport were 48%, 55% and 51%.[75]

Trade Unions and the Cinema Industry in Wales

For those uniformed commissionaires, page boys and usherettes, whose long hours and low pay placed them among the most exploited groups of workers in the country, opportunities for advancement were extremely limited. It is significant, therefore, that the cinema industry was seldom affected by industrial relations problems. There is little evidence of any antagonism between the staff and management of most cinemas. Indeed, some cinema workers from this period have

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[73] Gwyn A. Williams, 'Women Workers in Wales, 1968-82', *Welsh History Review*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (1983), p. 531.

[74] Penny Summerfield, *Women Workers in the Second World War: Production and Patriarchy in Conflict*, (London, 1984); Harold L. Smith, 'The Effect of the War on the Status of Women', in Harold L. Smith, (ed.), *War and Social Change: British Society in the Second World War* (Manchester, 1986), pp. 209-229.

[75] The figures are taken from the 1931 Census, *Industry Tables*, pp. 446-458.

fond recollections of how they were treated: the drummer at Will Stone's Empire cinema described his boss as 'a marvellous employer and a philanthropist'.[76] This can be partly explained by the fact that cinemas were modern institutions that provided employment, for mainly unskilled workers, at a time of severe economic depression. Furthermore, most cinema workers did not have traditions to maintain: they were not an historically skilled group of workers, whose control over working practices had been steadily eroded by new technologies or increasingly intrusive management techniques. Where such arguments could be applied - as in the case of projectionists or musicians - some evidence of industrial militancy can be detected. The union which represented the vast majority of cinema workers in this period, however, the National Association of Theatrical and Kine Employees (NATKE), sought, wherever possible, to avoid confrontation with employers.

NATE, (the 'K' was added in 1936), did have a history of militant action. It had been closely involved in the Music Hall strike of 1906,[77] and considered itself to be at the forefront of the 'new union' movement, whereby workers were organised, irrespective of their skill levels, into 'industrial', as opposed to 'craft' unions. The right to represent all workers in the cinema industry was jealously defended by the NATE leadership throughout this period: they seemed even more willing to fight for this than for improving the conditions of their members. Any traces of militancy had certainly disappeared by the 1920s. Their main priorities in this decade were to broaden the membership, to gain national recognition by the Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association (CEA), and to avoid direct confrontation with employers.[78] Not surprisingly, then, NATE held few fears for cinema exhibitors in Wales. Even the miners' cinemas of the south Wales valleys, run by the workmen of various collieries dotted across the coalfield, had little inclination to even permit union organisation. Certain institutes, such as Cwmllynfell, did sign agreements with the union, 'but the overall picture was so disappointing that in 1939 NATKE general secretary Tom O'Brien took the unusual step of arranging a meeting with Oliver Harris, general secretary of the South Wales Miners' Federation, hoping "that the influence of the

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[76] Reg Bennett, quoted in the *South Wales Echo*, 17 May 1971, p. 5.
[77] NATE had represented the backstage workers in the Music Halls: the performers were led by the Variety Artistes' Association, and the musicians by the Musicians' Union. See Michael Chanan, *Labour Power in the British Film Industry* (London, 1976), p. 13.
[78] Chanan, *Labour Power*, pp. 13-22.

Federation would be helpful in securing any improvements necessary.'"[79] (Those in charge of the miners' institutes, such bastions of working-class culture and collective spirit, were apparently far less enamoured with the concept of industrial democracy when they found themselves in the position of employer.) Many other cinema managers felt equally uncomfortable at the prospect of having to deal with unions. The cautious and conciliatory approach taken by NATE must, therefore, have been quite a relief to them.

Even though it was accepted by the TUC that NATE was the official union for cinema employees, some of those who worked in the industry were members of different unions. NATE objected strongly to what they saw as the intrusion of rival unions onto their territory, however, workers belonging to these other unions usually received much stronger representation. In Swansea, due to peculiar local circumstances, a number of cinema workers belonged to the Dock, Wharf and General Workers Union.[80] This union had threatened strike action against Swansea exhibitors in 1920,[81] and there was a marked contrast in the attitude of local cinema managers in their dealings with the Dockers' Union compared with NATE. Referring to a meeting of local exhibitors with the Dockers' Union representative, the manager of Swansea's Castle cinema, A. R. Gambold, reported that:

> The secretary is one of these bullying, blustering sort of men who tries to force his views down your throat, does a lot of thumping on the table and makes all sorts of terrible threats ... I have taken no part in the wrangle as to what we shall pay cinema employees, this has been left to Mr. Dix and Mr. Gwynn mostly, and whatever the result will be we shall agree to no doubt.[82]

Given the forceful approach taken by the Dockers' Union representative, it is understandable that Arthur Andrews, who controlled the Castle and Central circuit, suggested to Gambold that 'it might have been better if we had recognised the NATE when they approached us some time ago.' The response was revealing:

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[79] Hogenkamp, 'Miners' Cinemas', p. 69.
[80] This was almost certainly because Swansea's Elysium cinema was built in 1913 as the main hall of the Dock, Wharf and Riverside General Workers Union. Those who worked at the Elysium would, therefore, have been members of the Dockers' Union, and it seems likely that some of them must have retained their membership after moving to other cinemas. See Brian Hornsey, 'The Elysium Cinema, Swansea', *Mercia Bioscope*, No. 53 (1994); also City of Swansea Archives, File FAC. 180.
[81] *Kinematograph Weekly*, 2 December 1920, p. 101.

> It slipped my memory for the moment, but as a matter of fact, we did recognise them and met a deputation and spent the whole afternoon with them, but could do nothing but decide to ignore them as they would not give way on any point.[83]

The fact that Gambold had not only been able to ignore NATE, but forget that he had even met with them at all, suggests that while the union would not modify their demands they had no intention of forcing them upon anybody. The Dockers' Union, in contrast, were willing to be both forceful and flexible in their negotiations.[84]

It was not only in Swansea that groups of cinema workers were able to find representation outside NATE. In the 1920s the Musicians' Union, whose members were both highly skilled and in considerable demand, used some innovative methods to defend their interests. When five Rhondda cinemas applied to the local Urban Council to have their licences renewed in 1920, 'The Musicians' Union (MU) objected to the renewal on the ground that clause 12 of the licence was not being complied with by the proprietors. The clause reads "that the kinema management should engage only Trade Unionists and to pay them only the recognised Trade Union Rates."'[85] I have been unable to discover whether this strategy was effective, but it at least demonstrates that the MU was active in the south Wales cinema industry in the 1920s. Further evidence for this comes from Swansea, where A. R. Gambold (still manager of the Castle in 1927) was becoming exasperated at the MU's insistence that musicians should be paid extra for performances that were broadcast on the BBC.[86] As cinemas across Wales were wired for sound from 1928 onwards, however, hundreds of musicians were thrown out of work, and the role of the MU, in the cinema industry at least, became likewise redundant.

The other skilled group of workers able to find representation outside NATE were projectionists. They had, in fact, been the first group of cinema employees to organise - forming the National Association of Cinematograph Operators (NACO) as early as 1896. NACO was affiliated to NATE, and by the 1920s it had been established by the TUC that NATE was the official union for cinema operators. A

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[82] Gambold to Andrews, 2 March 1920, GRO, D/D A/B 18/14/9.
[83] Gambold to Andrews, 24 January 1920, GRO, D/D A/B 18/14/5.
[84] The approach of the Dockers Union seems to have been effective. Their initial demands were not met, but a counter offer was accepted. Gambold informed Andrews that the new agreement 'will affect us to the extent of about £5 or £6 increase.' GRO D/D A/B 18/14/10-13ii.
[85] *Kinematograph Weekly*, 16 December 1920, p. 101.
[86] Gambold had no objection to musicians receiving extra payments, but contended 'that the MU should obtain payment from the BBC'. GRO, D/D A/B 18/15/132-133.

number of projectionists had traditionally belonged to the Electricians' Union (ETU), however, and this period witnessed an ongoing dispute between NATE and the ETU regarding the representation of projectionists.[87] The ETU were, strictly speaking, not supposed to entice cinema projectionists away from NATE, but the ETU's willingness to trade on the skill levels of its members to force the hand of employers attracted many cinema operators. In 1920, for instance, the ETU used the threat of strike action against exhibitors in Cardiff, Newport and the Rhondda Valley.[88] It was the ETU that organised the cinema operators' strike of 1938 - the most militant action taken by any group of cinema workers in this period. The strike did not effect south Wales, however, which suggests that the ETU had lost whatever foothold it once had in this area by the end of the 1930s.

Action such as the 1938 projectionists strike was never contemplated by the NATKE leadership. Indeed, to Michael Chanan 'It was all too clear that while the ETU was striking against the employers, the NATKE leadership was only interested in seeing their rivals' backs broken.'[89] NATKE, however, had considerably strengthened their position in south Wales as a result of a membership drive in 1936-7.[90] As well as increasing their membership, NATKE was also successful in securing the recognition of the south Wales branch of the CEA. It was in their fight for recognition by employees that NATKE took their most forceful stance. They wrote to all members of the CEA in south Wales, stressing that they represented the majority of cinema employees (with 100% membership in some areas), and threatened to use strike action against those exhibitors who failed to recognise the union.[91] This threat was apparently effective: all but a handful of south Wales exhibitors agreed to recognise NATKE without much objection; the few that did hold out, among them the 'benevolent' Will Stone, eventually gave in under further pressure from both the NATKE leadership and local activists.[92]

Once NATKE had established itself in south Wales, the local membership were quick to demonstrate their willingness to confront their employers directly. In the

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[87] Chanan, *Labour Power*, pp. 13-22.
[88] *Kinematograph Weekly*, 16 September 1920, p. 120.
[89] Chanan, *Labour Power*, p. 51.
[90] *Kinematograph Weekly*, 19 November, 1936, p. 37.
[91] Copies of the letters sent by NATKE to Arthur Andrews of Castle and Central cinemas in November 1936 are held at: GRO, D/D A/B 20/5/2-4.
[92] *Western Mail*, 19 July 1937, p. 5; 24 July 1937, p. 10; 20 August 1937, p. 8.

Rhondda, the local membership threatened the CEA with strike action in April 1938;[93] and in west Wales NATKE members fought (a successful) battle against a company called Union cinemas.[94] In neither case did stoppages actually occur (the leadership much preferred conciliation to direct action), but on both occasions the cinema workers were able to secure improvements in their pay and conditions.

Cinema workers in Wales quite clearly were prepared to join trade unions in order to secure improvements in their pay and conditions. Militant action, however, was never carried out and seldom even threatened. This can partly be attributed to the conservative stance adopted by NATKE, but it also makes sense given the nature of the cinema industry in Wales. The very size of the vast majority of cinemas meant it was inevitable that the cinema manager, and maybe the proprietor, would know each of their employees personally. Such personal relations must have made the threat of industrial action much less likely. Further, the proprietors of the smallest independent cinemas were in a far from powerful position themselves, being as dependent on major production and distribution companies as their employees were on them. They were also in competition with much larger and newer halls, sometimes part of a circuit, which had far greater financial resources behind them. Were it not for the commitment and co-operation of management and staff, it is uncertain whether such cinemas could have survived for as long as they did.

The gender composition of the cinema workforce may also have played a role in limiting the influence of trade unions within the cinema industry. The various institutions of the Labour Movement have traditionally been male dominated in both membership and outlook. While willing to accept female members, most trade unions were, at this time, reluctant to campaign on their behalf for rights such as equal pay for equal work. With the traditional instruments of working-class protest somewhat less than welcoming to women workers, the cinema employees with the strongest claim to an improvement in pay and conditions were in the weakest position to go about making such demands. Yet while the unions could have done more in support of female cinema workers, it is less than clear whether the usherettes and cleaners were themselves committed to the idea of collective protest. Alternative forms of employment for young females in this period were often less appealing than the

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[93] *Western Mail*, 19 April 1938, p. 14; 21 April 1938, p. 14.
[94] *Western Mail*, 30 July 1937, p. 6; 13 August 1937, p. 7.

cinema. Domestic service, for instance, would usually have involved longer hours, less freedom and little, if any, extra pay. For many young women in inter-war Wales, a job at the local picture house would not only have provided much needed cash, but also enabled them to remain at home - a possibility most would have been loath to jeopardise. As well as having its advantages for many Welsh women, a job at the local cinema, like most forms of female employment, was usually regarded as a short term measure. If the long term plans of the majority of female cinema workers involved getting married and bringing up children, then immediate concerns about pay and conditions in their current job take on rather less significance. The growth of the cinema industry in this period clearly was not entirely detrimental to the position of female workers in Wales, but neither did it offer an improvement in employment opportunities for women. Rather, it served to reinforce existing patterns of female employment.

Conclusions

The cinema industry did not comprise a fixed or coherent set of institutions which developed in a uniform manner throughout Britain. Indeed the *cinema* industry, in contrast to the *film* industry, was shaped more by regional or local social and economic conditions than it was by the decisions of industry moguls in Hollywood or Wardour Street. It was the economic depression, combined with the relatively small size and isolated locations of the communities in which a large part of the Welsh population lived that hindered the spread of the major circuits into Wales. However, the absence of major cinema companies from so many Welsh towns meant that the ownership and control of the industry in Wales remained, to a much larger extent than in Britain as a whole, in local hands. The social function that the cinema performed in local communities was, therefore, more pronounced in Wales than in many other parts of Britain.

This examination of smaller circuits and independent halls has attempted to draw attention to the strong local character which cinemas expressed - even though they showed films with an international appeal. This local identity was further reinforced by those who worked in the industry. Managers may have had relatively little influence over the entertainment they were able to screen, but the popularity of

the films lay in the fact that they offered audiences an escape from the realities of their local environment. The significance of the manager, and his staff, was that they could help create an environment in which audiences could feel comfortable, if not exactly 'at home'. If we regard cinemas 'as a kind of community centre or "club"'[95], rather than purely as an arena for viewing films, then their ability to reflect local conditions becomes more apparent. Whether it was by organising lottery schemes for patrons, providing live entertainment to accompany the films, or simply by force of their personality - cinema managers were able to provide even the smallest of cinemas with a distinctive character. Similarly, the atmosphere in which films were viewed was influenced, in the 1920s particularly, by projectionists and musicians working at the cinemas.

Yet the considerable efforts of cinema staff in creating a viewing environment which was safe, comfortable and reflective of a local flavour, were seldom adequately rewarded come pay day. The cinema may have been the first form of mass entertainment to which both men and women had equal access, but when it came to employing people to provide this entertainment, there was little sign of equality. All cinema employees may have had to work similarly long and unsocial hours, but while the more senior, and well-paid positions were dominated by men, female usherettes and cleaners were expected to carry out the most mundane, and at times arduous tasks, for scandalously low rates of pay. Some improvements in working conditions were won by trade unions representing cinema employees in this period. The cautious leadership of the main cinema workers' union, however, allied to the precarious economic environment in Wales, meant that this was not a period of tense industrial relations. The low pay and difficult conditions faced by cinema workers in this period were a feature of the Welsh economy as a whole, not just the cinema industry.

The cinema business in Wales was characterised by the prominence of independent halls and small, locally owned chains. The limited influence of the major circuits, however, did not only mean that the structure and ownership of the industry in Wales took on a much more local flavour. It also meant that the buildings themselves, to which Welsh audiences flocked for their regular diet of entertainment, were usually far removed from the image of the 'dream palace' commonly associated with cinema-going in this period.

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[95] Ridgewell, 'South Wales and the Cinema', p. 599.

Chapter Two: 'The Age of the Dream Palace'?

One of the most astounding events of modern times has been the development of motion picture theatres, beginning as penny gaffs, sporting the doubtful patronage of the gaping credulous and looked upon as something on a level with Barnum's sideshows, the whiskered lady and the fasting gentleman, then progressing through the various stages of the vacant shop, the abandoned skating rink, and the temporary booth, to the not less doubtful level architecturally of the imitation Earl's Court, or the much worse buildings of the wilfully ignorant and rapacious speculator - a period of development when to be even remotely connected with the cinema trade was a stigma sufficient to deter the boldest adventurer - to the highest level of good buildings specially erected by good architects, well equipped, a level which was considered final by the word of yesterday, which is even now as thoroughly out of date as things a hundred years old would be in another range of development. Even opera houses are puny and pitifully defective compared with the magnificent *theatres*, not *gaffs* of the moving (literally) picture world of tomorrow.[1]

Robert Atkinson, in the passage quoted above, makes a direct link between the esteem in which the film industry was held and the design of cinema buildings. Plush, spacious and comfortable 'super-cinemas' designed by leading architects, for instance, reflect the social respectability of the movies among middle as well as working class audiences in this period. Many of the cinemas constructed in the inter-war period were indeed impressive buildings with imposing frontages and interiors that offered the latest word in taste and comfort. They have attracted the attention of both architectural and cinema historians.[2] Such 'dream palaces', however, were by no means the only buildings used as cinemas at this time. In the following pages the range of cinema buildings found in Wales in this period will be examined - because here, to a greater extent than in most other parts of Britain, and contrary to the impression given in much of the literature, newly built cinemas were in fact in a minority.

It is essential to remember that the cinema - though acclaimed by some as a totally new and 'modern' art form - did, in fact, emerge out of a long tradition of working-class culture and popular amusements. Some of the earliest film shows took place in fairgrounds, and the earliest permanent homes for moving pictures were not purpose-built cinemas but 'penny gaffs' and music halls. Many of the buildings used as cinemas throughout the period covered here were, in fact, old variety halls or

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[1] Robert Atkinson, 'The design of the picture theatre', in the *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, XXXVIII, third series (June, 1921), pp. 441-455: 441.

[2] David Atwell, *Cathedrals of the Movies: A History of British Cinemas and their Audiences* (London, 1980); Denis Sharp, *The Picture Palace, and Other Buildings for the Movies* (London, 1969); Allen Eyles, *ABC: The First Name in Entertainment* (Burgess Hill, 1993); Allen Eyles, *Gaumont British Cinemas* (Burgess Hill, 1996); Rosemary Clegg, *Odeon* (Birmingham, 1985).

skating rinks.[3] One of the clearest indications that the cinema had achieved a widespread social respectability came, not when purpose-built picture theatres were first erected (most of the earliest cinemas appealed almost exclusively to the working-class[4]), but when some of the larger theatres began turning themselves into cinemas. It is interesting, therefore, that one of Cardiff's leading cinemas, the Capitol, described itself as a 'theatre' even though it was designed and built as a venue for showing films.

The chapter will begin by tracing the history of cinema architecture in Britain generally, examining the influences which lay behind some of the most important developments in inter-war cinema design. (Because of the war, and the labour and materials shortages in the years that followed, there was very little cinema building in the 1940s). Some of these national trends were evident in Wales, but only among the minority of halls actually built in the inter-war period. The intention here is to assess the importance of local and regional factors in determining the type of buildings in which films were viewed. It is not only argued, therefore, that cinema buildings in Wales were mostly very different from the 'super-cinemas' being constructed across Britain at this time. The variations in the nature of cinema provision within Wales are also highlighted. Cinema buildings reflected the social and economic environment in which they stood. A visit to 'the pictures', therefore, could be a very different cultural experience depending on what type of hall, and in what part of Wales, one went.

An important part of the social/cultural experience of picture-going was, furthermore, shaped by the interior design of the cinemas themselves. Social divisions were clearly reflected in the distinction between the circle (or balcony) which contained the most expensive seats, and the stalls – where the working-class audience was expected to sit (or even stand).[5] The gender composition of the audience may also have played a part in influencing the environment in which cinema entertainment was consumed. While I have found no specific evidence to confirm the importance of gender considerations in influencing cinema architecture, it is striking that so much emphasis was placed on comfort, elegance and refinement in the interior design of

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[3] Skating was one of the popular fads of the early twentieth century and disused rinks were regularly converted into cinemas. In Tredegar, for example, one of the cinemas used throughout this period was called the Rink and Pavilion.

[4] See Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film, 1906-1914* (London, 1948), p. 17.

[5] The significance of the social divisions within cinemas is discussed in chapter three.

cinemas - which were extremely popular with women - when such considerations had no place in the bastions of male dominated popular culture such as football terraces or the public house.

Cinema Buildings in Britain and in Wales

Britain

The key issues in the development of cinema provision in Britain prior to World War One were briefly discussed in the previous chapter. By the beginning of the period covered here the cinema was established as an important medium of popular entertainment with a long-term future. Showmen were no longer so anxious to cram as many people as possible into fairground booths, 'penny gaffs' or disused skating rinks in order to maximise their profits while the popularity of the medium lasted. As the cinema's appeal came to be regarded as permanent, exhibitors were more concerned with attracting both a better class of patron, and crucially, a *regular* audience. A greater emphasis came to be placed on providing audiences with what they wanted: warmth, comfort and refinement.

These developments were most pronounced in the USA, where the sheer scale and grandeur of many cinemas was quite startling. The Fox cinema in San Francisco, for instance, cost $5,000,000 to build and seated 5,000. Even bigger, and more costly, was New York's Roxy with a capacity of 6,000. Nothing on this scale was ever constructed in the U.K.[6] although the basic concepts which underpinned the work of leading American architects such as Thomas Lamb and C. Howard Crane were incorporated into British cinema design in the 1920s. New buildings became ever larger, and much more attention was given to making the interiors not just comfortable, but sumptuous. Exteriors also became more flamboyant, with facades in the Egyptian, Chinese or Assyrian styles particularly popular. In the U.S. John Eberson was taking some of the trends already evident in 1920s cinema design a stage further. More than simply being grand and spacious, his 'atmospheric' halls encouraged the audience to believe that they were actually in some distant exotic setting. The concept was clearly outlined by Eberson himself in 1927:

We visualise and dream a magnificent amphitheatre under a glorious moonlit sky in an Italian garden, in a Persian Court, in a Spanish patio, or in a mystic Egyptian temple-yard, all canopied by a soft moonlit sky.
We credit the deep azure blue of the Mediterranean sky with a therapeutic value, soothing the nerves and calming perturbing thoughts.
The very nature of the pastel colouring executed in hundreds of desired shades and colours, lends itself so well to the imagination of the average person, and as we linger and look about, our fancy is free to conjure endless tales of romance.[7]

Eberson's influence was limited to interior design, and externally many of the buildings still resembled theatres. The influence of the theatre was, in fact, clearly evident in most 1920s cinema architecture. This may owe something to American influence where the terms 'cinema' and 'theatre' were indeed synonymous. It should also be added that some of the leading British cinema architects of the twenties, such as Frank T. Verity, had started their careers by designing theatres, which must surely have provided the obvious starting point when it came to planning a cinema.

In a sense the 'atmospherics' were merely adapting some of the features of theatre design specifically for the movies. David Atwell makes the point that theatres were an obvious choice of building to convert to cinema use 'with their ready made "fantasy" atmospherics and sense of occasion.' He implies that for most people a visit to the cinema was a special event, an opportunity to escape from reality to a new, imagined world, and that cinemas should help to foster the audience's imagination. Indeed, he goes on to argue that it was the 'public clamour for even bigger and better picture palaces that resulted in many of the larger and more elaborate theatres being turned over to permanent cinema use in order to realise their most profitable potential.'[8] The public demand for more ornate and elaborate cinemas has been connected to the nature of the entertainment provided therein. Ross McKibbin observes that:

> the so-called 'atmosphere' cinemas, [were] appropriate for the decade's 'atmospheric' films: vamps, sheiks, Latin lovers, romantic adventurers in faraway places. The 'super-cinemas' of the 1930s, in their turn, reflected the greater matter-of-factness of 1930s movies: as the vamps and Latin lovers departed the cinema, so did the architectural ebullience.[9]

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[6] The largest cinema to be built in Britain at this time was Green's Playhouse in Glasgow, seating 4,400.
[7] J. Eberson, quoted in Atwell, *Cathedrals of the Movies: A History of British Cinemas and their Audiences* (London, 1980), pp. 76-77.
[8] Atwell, *Cathedrals of the Movies*, pp. 46-47.
[9] Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951* (Oxford, 1998), p. 423.

Whether 1930s films were really any more 'matter-of-fact' than those of the preceding decade is open to debate. However, the similarity between the criticism levelled at 1920s cinema architecture by highbrow British critics and that directed at the films themselves is striking[10]:

> Came the "atmospherics" as Mr. H.G. Wells would say. The phrase is well suited to the nature of this nauseating stick-jaw candy, so fulsomely flavoured with the syrupy romanticism of popular novels and the "see Naples and die" herd nostalgia which speeds Cook's conducted tours on their weary ways...[11]

This condemnation reflects more than simply dissatisfaction with the state of existing cinema design. It shows that there was a growing intellectual interest in, and therefore criticism of, the cinema generally. When Shand referred to H.G. Wells, he did so knowing that the writer was also a leading figure in the London-based Film Society. Through bodies such as the Film Society, and journals such as *Close-Up* and *Cinema Quarterly*, the cinema came to be viewed in certain intellectual quarters not just as the amusement of the masses, but as the century's newest art form. Shand himself was certainly no enemy of the cinema itself, claiming that it was only 'the soured and aged [who] declare that the spread of the cinema going habit is responsible for the decay of home life.' He felt that shortcomings of cinema design were caused largely by the fact that the buildings were not being designed by qualified architects: 'In more cases than not the wrong men are being entrusted with the job of building and decorating our cinemas.'[12] Greater intellectual and professional involvement in cinema design, then, was felt to be essential if the latest architectural principles were to be applied to the homes of the newest art form.

By the 1930s this was beginning to happen, with cinema buildings being treated seriously in periodicals such as *Architectural Design and Construction* and the *Architects Journal*. It was the growing professional and intellectual interest being taken in cinema design, not the changing nature of the films themselves, that led to the extension of (matter-of-fact) modernist principles to the design of cinema buildings in

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[10] The attitudes expressed by British film critics in this period are dealt with in chapter five.
[11] Shand, *Modern Theatres*, p. 19.
[12] Shand, *Modern Theatres*, pp. 9, 20.

the 1930s. The case for a new approach to cinema design was made forcefully by P. Morton Shand at the beginning of the decade:

> The cinema ought to be one of those types of building *most characteristic of our age*, if only because our age is identified both with the invention of the cinematograph and the phenomenal expansion of the film industry. Unfortunately, however, in England its design still wearily rings out the changes of already obsolescent theatre models. With the possible exception of Non-conformist chapels, no class of edifice represents quite such a degraded general level of design. But what was true of yesterday need not be true of tomorrow.[13] (Emphasis added).

To Shand, the theatre provided an entirely inappropriate model on which to base cinema architecture. As he explained:

> The cinema, whether taciturn or chattersome, fills a need in our lives which no preceding age has ever felt. This the theatre can never hope to answer ... There is something formal and ceremonial about going to the theatre. It is an occasion, an event. It implies more careful attire, if not evening dress. We do not say casually "Let's go to the theatre?" as we say "Let's go to the pictures?"

According to this view, a visit to the cinema was not a special event that needed to be invested with a sense of occasion. Rather, the cinema was 'primarily a sort of public lounge'[14] which needed no elaborate decoration. Rachael Low points out that admission prices and the running times of films reflected the fact that programmes were 'aimed at an unselective, low-income audience going regularly several times a week.'[15] Robert Cromie, a respected designer of modern cinemas in the 1930s, was thus able to assert that 'In architecture it is not necessary to play to the gallery. A good film would make money in a byre, and no architectural quality exists which would make people pay to see bad ones.' He continued: 'It is said that the public knows what it likes - the demand creates the supply - but in this as in any other commercial matter the supplier can and usually does create a demand for something a little better.'[16]

In many parts of Britain in the 1930s audiences were provided with 'something a little better' in the form of modern super-cinemas. The 'atmospherics', which were confined almost exclusively to London, had a limited impact on British cinema design

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[13] P. Morton Shand, *Modern Theatres and Cinemas* (London, 1930), p. 16.
[14] Shand, *Modern Theatres*, p. 9.
[15] Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film, 1918-1929* (London, 1971), p. 47.
[16] Robert Cromie, 'What I really think of present day cinemas', in *Architectural Design and Construction*, Vol. VIII, No. 3 (March, 1938), pp. 88-89.

with only a handful of examples ever built. Out, also, went the facades in Egyptian or Oriental styles. Exteriors, while often imposing, now tended to be far less ornate, which enabled the purpose of the buildings to be more clearly advertised. The name of the cinema and the titles of the films being shown were usually prominent, and the walls of the cinemas could be plastered with posters advertising forthcoming attractions.

The cinemas of the 1930s are, perhaps, best typified by the Odeons of Oscar Deutsch. The company had a policy of building new cinemas rather than simply taking over the running of existing premises, and these soon developed a distinctive house style. The buildings were moderate in size by the standards of the 1930s (usually seating around 1400-1800) and they were more noted for their practicality and simplicity than any architectural over-elaboration. As David Atwell put it: 'They were above all a complete break away from the traditional school inspired in America by Thomas Lamb and in Britain by Frank Verity, and from the atmospherics which grew out of John Eberson. The Modern Movement theatres and cinemas of Scandinavia and Europe, but more especially Germany, were the source of influence.'[17] All this had been the intention of Mr. Deutsch himself who expressed his thinking in the architectural press:

> With regard to design, it was always my ambition to have buildings which were individual and striking, but which were always objects of architectural beauty. The very flattering remarks in the architectural press from time to time lead me to think this ambition has been realised. We endeavour to make our buildings express the fact that they are specially erected as the homes of the latest, most progressive entertainment in the world today, and I think the entertainment with the greatest future.[18]

Acclaim for these, and other, cinemas was by no means universal in the 1930s. Robert Cromie, for instance, appeared to be concerned that cinema design was more reflective of European ideas than of British traditions. He felt that there was 'no reason why cinemas should not present, in mien and form, something of the comfortable elegance and repose of our best domestic work. It is strange that an

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[17] Atwell, *Cathedrals of the Movies*, p. 159.
[18] Oscar Deutsch, in a Foreword to a Special Cinema Supplement of, *Architectural Design and Construction*, Vol. VII, No. 5 (March, 1937), p. 183.

industry which includes so many people of artistic perception has not seen to this.'[19]

J.R. Leathart, another professional architect, was even more critical in 1935:

> Some few years ago an observant but irresponsible traveller returned from the Continent with the tale of a new simplicity in cinema design which he fatuously labelled "modern" and which has since provided some of our cinema architects with yet another opportunity of second-hand self expression.

Leathart did, at least, concede that there were a few buildings which 'bear the impress of an intelligent interpretation of elegant simplicity'.[20] Dennis Sharp, however, in his 1969 history of cinema architecture in Britain, agreed with John Betjeman's assessment in the same year that 'the truly modern kinema has yet to be built in England.'[21]

Other commentators have taken a different view. Audrey Field, for instance, points out that while many British cinemas tended to be rather conservative in nature, which 'was a source of dissatisfaction to many sophisticated people ... it is very doubtful whether the movie going millions wanted innovation. More probably they wanted something rich rather than strange ... If, as was soon all too sadly clear, we could not make a world fit for heroes to live in, a substitute Valhalla for an occasional festive afternoon or evening out was better than nothing, especially if, besides seeing a picture, you could dance and feast in the same marble halls.'[22]

David Atwell concurs, pointing out that audiences 'were hardly likely to be impressed or moved if the influence of Le Corbusier were to find its way into the cinema auditorium.'[23] To the extent that cinemas were in touch with popular taste, then, they clearly were reflective of their times - throughout their development, not just in the 1930s. What distinguished the buildings of this decade was the fact that they developed a distinctive style of their own. An article in a supplement to Kine Weekly in 1934 summed up the development succinctly:

> Today the kinema architect does not attempt to outdo all the other buildings in the street merely by excess of architectural detail. He is content to make his facade

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[19] Cromie, 'What I really think of present day cinemas', p. 89.
[20] J.R. Leathart, 'Cinema facade: the task of the modern cinema architect', in *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 4, No. 13 (1935), p. 12.
[21] Sharp, *Picture Palace*, p. 176.
[22] Audrey Field, *Picture Palace: A Social History of the Cinema* (London, 1974), p. 79.
[23] Atwell, *Cathedrals of the Movies*, p. 75.

> effective by means of distinction. That is to say, he allows it frankly to express his own particular line of business, and rather than cause the kinema to masquerade as something else, he may often emphasise or exaggerate those characteristics which a kinema possesses and other buildings do not.[24]

What emerges is that cinema design, like film itself, is socially constructed. Developments in British cinema architecture were certainly influenced a wide range of factors. The size and the number of buildings erected is clearly determined largely by the popularity of cinema-going itself. On top of this social and economic factors must be taken into account: cinema building ground to a halt in the war years and immediately afterwards because of a lack of labour and resources. Cinema design could also be influenced by technical innovations: before the widespread introduction of reinforced concrete in the 1920s, for example, it simply was not possible for architects to design a two-tier auditorium seating 3,000 spectators, each with an uninhibited view of the screen. Parliamentary legislation was another area which might have a bearing on cinema design: the safety regulations in the 1909 Cinematograph Act introduced considerable alterations to early cinema buildings. Changes in cinema design were hardly imposed upon a reluctant trade, however. Showmen, and later cinema companies, were eager to build halls that would both house and appeal to as broad a range of the cinema-going public as possible. Yet it was not only commercial interests which could influence cinema design, but also contemporary intellectual opinion. In the early years of its development the cinema had been unable to attract the interest of academics or professional architects. By the 1930s this was no longer the case and the influence of another social group had to be taken into account. The challenge now was to design buildings which were both architecturally interesting and popular with the general public. It was only after the cinema had established itself both as an art form and as the most popular medium of public entertainment, however, that the design of its buildings was taken so seriously.

Wales

In Wales, social and economic conditions contrasted strikingly with those in many other parts of Britain, and developments in inter-war cinema architecture had a very limited impact. In his study of British cinema design, David Atwell does draw

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[24] Quoted in Field, *Picture Palace*, p. 108.

attention to a couple of Swansea's pre-1914 buildings as being architecturally interesting,[25] but no study of cinema building in the UK has acknowledged any important innovations coming from Wales in the inter-war period. This is, in part at least, explained by the reluctance of the major cinema companies to invest in Wales in this period.[26] Moreover, the conditions which deterred the likes of Gaumont and ABC from building new halls in Wales (economic depression, instability and population decline) would also have influenced local speculators. The provision of cinema buildings in Wales by the end of the 1930s, therefore, was quite different to that in the more prosperous areas of Britain.

In his statistical survey of the British cinema industry in 1934, Simon Rowson pointed out that Wales and the west country 'can be accurately described as the special home of the small cinema'. His figures, presented in the table below, certainly point to a significant difference between the size of most Welsh cinemas compared with the national average.

Table 2.1: The Size of Cinemas in Britain and Wales, 1934[27]

Size of Cinema	**South Wales**		**North Wales**		**Britain**	
	Cinemas	Seats	Cinemas	Seats	Cinemas	Seats
Under 1000 seats	85%	72%	87%	74%	62%	52%
1000-1500 seats	11%	17%	10%	19%	27%	25%
Over 1500 seats	4%	11%	3%	7%	11%	23%

On this evidence Wales appears to have been virtually starved of large, modern picture halls in the period which one prominent historian of British cinema has termed 'the age of the dream palace'.[28]

This is not to say that modern super-cinemas were not built at all in Wales in this period. However, visits to halls such as the Plaza in Swansea (built in 1932) were very rare for the great majority of Welsh cinema-goers. An examination of the cinema

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[25] He mentions the Carlton and Castle cinemas, see Atwell, *Cathedrals of the Movies*, p. 29.
[26] See chapter one.
[27] The table is compiled from figures take from, Simon Rowson, 'A Statistical Survey of the Cinema Industry in Great Britain in 1934', in the *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, Vol. XCIX (1936), pp. 79, 81.
[28] Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace* (London, 1984).

buildings in Wales in this period, therefore, must focus as much on halls built before 1914 and converted theatres as on the newly constructed 'dream palaces'. The inter-war depression alone does not explain why Welsh cinemas were so small: in Wales the proportion of large, modern cinemas was much smaller than in other economically deprived areas of the UK. Scotland, indeed, boasted some of the largest and most impressive cinemas in the whole of Britain, and the proportion of halls with over 1500 seats there was in fact above the national average. [29] What needs to be taken into account is the *contrast* between the remarkable economic growth in Wales in the decades leading up to World War One, (the period when so many small cinemas were being built), and the ensuing collapse. As Philip Jenkins puts it 'From 1870 to 1914, the Welsh economy had grown at a dizzying rate; from the 1920s, the image is almost of a film suddenly thrown into reverse, as the country entered a period less of slump than of deindustrialisation.'[30] Peter Stead has claimed that in the early years of the twentieth century, 'as far as the commercial exhibition of films was concerned, Cardiff and Swansea were as advanced as any other towns outside the major centres of London, Paris and New York.'[31] Part of the reason, it seems, why relatively few large cinemas were being built between the wars was that the generous provision of halls from the pre-1918 era was sufficient to satisfy the demand of a declining population.

This contrast between rapid growth and startling decline, however, does not apply to the whole of Wales. The towns along the south Wales coastal strip, the south Wales valleys, and the communities of mid and north Wales were areas with a quite different provision of cinemas, and the remainder of this chapter will examine the nature and extent of these differences. For the purpose of clarity the different types of cinema hall that existed across Wales have been divided into three categories.

First, there was the small minority of newly-built cinemas. These looked very much like others in the rest of the UK, often with striking facades and interiors which claimed to provide 'the last word in luxury'. They ranged in size from little more than 500 seats right up to 3000. It was widely felt that the building of new 'super-cinemas' in Britain was an attempt to lure a new, more affluent and 'respectable' audience to

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[29] The figure was 13% in Scotland compared to 11% nationally. See Rowson, 'A Statistical Survey of the Cinema Industry', p. 79.
[30] Philip Jenkins, *A History of Modern Wales, 1536-1990* (London, 1992), p. 366.
[31] Peter Stead, 'Wales and film', in Herbert and Jones, (eds.), *Wales Between the Wars*, pp. 161-185: 161.

the cinema Attracting a middle-class audience, however, was probably not central to guaranteeing commercial success for Welsh cinema managers (even though the most expensive seats could cost up to four times that of the cheapest). More important was that the features designed to appeal to the middle-class were extremely popular with people from lower social groups.[32] This explains why Swansea was able to support a modern 3,000 seat super-cinema like the Plaza.

A second strand of inter-war cinema development took the form of improvements to existing facilities rather than the building of new ones. A number of large theatres and music-halls were converted into cinemas, and many of those older buildings already used as cinemas at the beginning of our period underwent substantial renovations in the 1930s. In terms of their interior decoration, these cinemas often resembled the newly-constructed dream palaces. Their exteriors, however, reflected no signs of modernist influence and looked much as they had done when first built - in many cases before the cinematograph's invention.

Finally there were the smaller cinemas built between c. 1910-1915. While a number of these were forced to close as a result of competition from larger and more modern rivals in the 1920s and 1930s many, perhaps the majority, survived at least until World War Two with virtually no alterations. Such venues, which charged less for admission than larger and more modern alternatives, appealed particularly to the lowest paid, young and unemployed. They also benefited from the loyalty of the local community who would have been unwilling to spend extra time and money travelling to more distant picture shows.

These different types of cinema embody variations not only in social and economic conditions, but also in the attitudes and requirements of different groups of cinema-goers. For many people visits to the pictures were frequent and habitual: the cinema, in effect, performed a social function which was later to be provided by television. For such purposes the local 'fleapit', which was both cheap and informal, was ideally suited. For middle-class audiences, however, and for those who wanted their visits to the cinema to be separate from a weekly routine (courting couples, perhaps, or children enjoying a birthday treat) the larger, more glamorous halls were

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[32] This was a point made by, among others, Rachael Low. See above, p. 45.

more suitable.[33] Yet these halls could only exist where social and economic circumstances permitted. In the south Wales valleys, where the contrast between pre-1914 prosperity and inter-war depression was most dramatic, the old 'fleapit' halls continued to make up the bulk of cinema provision. In many parts of mid and north Wales, where permanent cinema provision had been very limited before World War One, modern cinemas were constructed - but on nothing like the grand scale seen in the major towns and cities in Britain. In the larger towns of south Wales, however, the biggest and most impressive cinemas tended to be the converted theatres and music halls, not the modern 'super-cinemas'. The precise nature of the cinema buildings available to Welsh audiences, therefore, is best examined by dealing separately with different parts of Wales.

The South Wales Coastal Strip

A useful gauge of the kinds of building being used as cinemas in the larger south Wales towns in this period can be provided by examining the situation in Cardiff. The city was an extremely important port in the early part of the twentieth century, from where much of the produce of the south Wales coalfield was shipped across the globe. As coal production soared, so more work was created in the city. At the turn of the century there had even been suggestions that its economy would eventually outstrip that of London.[34] The rate of its population growth was certainly impressive. Between 1891 and 1901 the population increased from 128,915 to 164,333, by 1921 it was well over 200,000.[35]

As might be expected, the city was well catered for in terms of cinemas, with eighteen at the end of World War One. This number changed remarkably little during the inter-war period. It did rise to twenty-one during the 1920s but had dropped to nineteen by the end of the 1930s.[36] Cardiff's virtually unchanging number of cinemas in the inter-war years was apparently out of line with the pattern in Britain as a whole

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[33] The appeal of the cinema for different social groups, and the social function it performed is dealt with more fully in chapter three.

[34] The prediction was made in a special edition of the *Daily Mail*, 31 December, 1900, quoted in Ian Christie, *The Last Machine: Early Cinema an the Birth of the Modern World* (London, 1994), p. 9.

[35] These figures, and all subsequent population totals, are take from census reports.

[36] These figures, and a great deal more information on Cardiff's cinemas, have been gleaned from Brian Hornsey, *Ninety Years of Cinema in Cardiff* (Stamford, 1997); also the *Kinematograph Year Books*.

which, according to the *Kine Year Book* in 1921, needed another 2000 cinemas to satisfy public demand. Birmingham, for example, had fifty-seven cinemas in World War One, and its population was far greater than three times that of Cardiff's. However, these figures increased to seventy-four in 1928, one hundred in 1935 and one hundred and nine in 1939.[37] In comparison to this, Cardiff's total of three newly built cinemas in the 1920s and three in the 1930s appears virtually negligible.[38] To some extent this reflects the rapidity of cinema's growth in Cardiff up to 1918. Of the eighteen picture houses operating in this year eleven had been purpose-built as cinemas. Furthermore, a number of the buildings which had been converted to cinema use by 1918 were fairly large, prestigious halls. The Empire, Grand, Andrew's Hall, Park Hall and Philharmonic, which had been built in the late nineteenth century as theatres, were all being used, in part at least, for film exhibition. This, again, bears testament to the popularity of the cinema in Cardiff by the beginning of our period, but it also meant that as well as having a lot of cinemas, the city was well provided for in terms of seating capacity. A number of these older buildings had 2000 seats or more, and all had over 1000, they were certainly much larger than the purpose built cinemas in the city at this time.

This is not to say, however, that the nature of Cardiff's cinemas remained unchanged throughout the inter-war period. Admittedly, only six new cinemas opened in these decades which, when combined with a handful of closures, meant that the total number of venues remained fairly constant. Further, many of the buildings used as cinemas in the 1920s and 30s were based on Edwardian, or even Victorian designs. But while cinema buildings themselves tended not to be new, they were frequently subject to renovation. Of the twenty cinemas open in Cardiff at the end of 1939, nine had received some kind of renovation since 1918. This usually involved the building having to close for several weeks as the interior was redecorated, and occasionally some alterations were made to the facade. When we add to this number the cinemas newly constructed since 1920, we find that three quarters of Cardiff's cinemas in 1939 had either been built or renovated in the inter-war period. When measured in terms of

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[37] Richards, 'Cinema and cinema-going', p. 35.
[38] Of those that were built in the 1930s one opened in the last week of 1939 and can thus cannot have benefited inter-war audiences.

available seating, 86% of Cardiff's cinema capacity had been either built or renovated in the inter-war era.[39]

Two points emerge from all of this. First, that Cardiff's cinemas did change considerably during the 1920s and 1930s, such that the experience of visiting many of them in 1939 was quite different to what it would have been twenty years previously. This comment in the *South Wales Echo* in 1935 was typical of the way in which cinema openings, or re-openings, were reported in the local press:

> When the Olympia Cinema, Queen Street, Cardiff, re-opens tomorrow afternoon, after being closed since May for complete rebuilding, patrons of the hall with the most interesting history in Cardiff will not recognise the palace of entertainment which will be revealed to them ... The Olympia of old was an admirable hall, but the proprietors, S. Andrews and Sons Ltd., felt that it was not all that the modern cinema-goer demanded. He had learned to expect comfort with the showing of the super-film, and the company felt that if the Olympia was to maintain its proper place in the scheme of entertainment in the city it had to be the most luxurious and best equipped cinema that money could provide. Orders were given immediately for drawing up of plans, and the task fell to Mr. Howard Williams ARIBA, of Pembroke Terrace, Cardiff, who planned a theatre which incorporated the finest features of British and American practice.[40]

Second, the majority of new developments took the form of alterations to existing buildings, rather than to the construction of completely new ones. Even the Odeon circuit, which had a policy of erecting new buildings, rather than renovating old ones, made an exception in Cardiff's case. The building, on the site of the former New Imperial on Queen Street, had an extremely narrow front and looked nothing like the majority of other cinemas from this famous chain.[41] It seems then, that for all the growth in cinema's popularity and the corresponding expansion in Cardiff's picture houses, the city's architecture was far from transformed in the inter-war years. Many of the city centre halls were able to keep up with the latest trends in *interior* design, but they continued to look much as they always had done from the outside.

For the most part the alterations made to Cardiff's cinemas in the 20's and 30's were incorporated into the city's existing facilities. Continuity with the past and preservation of local traditions was probably as important a feature of Cardiff's inter-war cinema development as was the imposition of a continental, modern style of

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[39] The information regarding seating capacity comes from the *Kinematograph Year Book*, (1939), pp. 668-669; see also Hornsey, *Ninety Years of Cinema in Cardiff.*
[40] *South Wales Echo*, 11 November, 1935, p. 8.

architecture. It is interesting that even the press report on the opening of the Olympia drew attention to the building's place in the city's 'history'; it is stressed that the architect, while being professionally qualified, was a local man; and his influences were not German or Scandinavian, but from Britain and America. While the journalist claimed that patrons would not recognise the new auditorium, given the improvements in decoration, comfort and facilities, the name, structure and location of the building remained unchanged. Here, then, we see developments in British and American practice indeed being 'incorporated' into the existing facilities – facilities which happened to pre-date the age of cinema itself. The press report greeting the re-opening of the Park Hall makes the point even more clearly:

> One of Cardiff's first cinema theatres, the Park Hall, has always had a character and atmosphere all its own. There was that elusive quality about it that gave a *homely warmth* sometimes missing from the more imposing "Picture Palaces". Those who attended the re-opening last night were probably relieved, as I was, to find that not even the housebreakers, the builders and the decorators, or the glitter of modernity, has robbed it of its old character.[42] (Emphasis added.)

It seems clear that modernity was demanded *inside* the halls in terms of space, comfort, and practicalities like sightlines, sound quality and ventilation systems - even in the old Park Hall. Indeed, it is a common feature of local press reports of cinema openings across Wales that such practical facilities are described in immense detail. But it is equally clear that audiences also cherished the familiarity, 'homely warmth' and 'old character' of their favourite cinemas. Of all Cardiff's main city centre cinemas, interestingly, only the Capitol was built in the inter-war period, opening in 1921.

All the new cinemas built in Cardiff after this were in the suburbs; it is here rather than in the city centre that modern cinema architecture established itself. Avoiding any similarities with theatre design, these buildings had fairly plain, yet striking, exteriors which could loudly advertise both the name of the cinema and the films being screened. The most notable examples were the Monico in Rhiwbina, the County in Rumney, the Regent in Ely, the Plaza in Gabalfa and the Tivoli in Llandaff. It was in these areas, outside the city-centre, where the cinema made its greatest

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[41] Incidentally, it also happens to be the only Odeon opened in Wales in the 1930s which is still running under this name.

architectural impact - insofar as a recognised new style of design, conceived of elsewhere, was introduced into the local townscape.[43] These newly constructed suburban halls, however, were not exactly worthy of description as dream palaces. For one thing they were much smaller than the city centre halls. Their average capacity was a moderate 1140 seats, and the smallest of them – Llandaff's Tivoli - held only 600. The fact that these halls were built in outlying residential areas, rather than the city centre, suggests that they were designed to meet a demand, not for prestigious showpiece cinemas, but for more modest, local buildings whose chief attractions would be cheapness and convenience.

The admission prices charged by the different kinds of cinema is discussed in the next chapter, but it is important to note that in this respect modern suburban cinemas were, in fact, closer to those of the local fleapit than to the larger city centre halls. The difference in price between the suburban and city centre halls may not have been spectacular, but it was certainly significant for those on the lowest incomes and youngsters, who formed the bulk of the regular, cinema-going audience.[44] Indeed, the saving probably amounted to more than just a few pennies since the bus fare would have added further to the cost of a visit to a city centre cinema for many people. The opening of the Regent in Ely, it was claimed by the local press, would 'enable the population of about 15,000 to "go to the pictures" at the price they formerly paid to travel to the city by bus or tram.'[45]

It was not just the cost of visiting the modern suburban cinemas which set them apart from the larger city centre halls. The nature of the entertainment they provided was also slightly different. The likes of the Capitol and the Park Hall were first-run cinemas - that is to say they were the first in the area to screen new releases. The suburban cinemas were second- or third-run halls, they were therefore unable to screen the major releases until weeks, or even months, after main city centre venues. Furthermore, a number of the largest and most prestigious halls, such as the Capitol, supplemented their programmes of films in this period with live variety entertainment

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[42] *South Wales Echo*, 8 September, 1936, p. 10.
[43] This information comes from a combination of press reports in the *Western Mail* and *South Wales Echo*, and also from Hornsey, *Ninety Years of Cinema in Cardiff*.
[44] The social makeup of the cinema audience is discussed in more detail in chapter three.
[45] *South Wales Echo*, 20 October, 1928, p. 2.

on stage. The modern halls, in keeping with their size and their admission prices, offered a more modest programme of entertainment.[46]

Cardiff's modern suburban cinemas were in no way in competition with the larger (and older) city-centre halls. Rather, they offered substantial improvements for the existing, once or twice-weekly cinema-going public. The new halls were certainly eager to distance themselves from the 'fleapits'. Advertisements in the local press stressed that their interior design offered the 'last word in luxury', and it was also pointed out that car parking space was available - a clear indication that more affluent patrons would be welcomed. Yet it was an essentially local, working-class public for which these halls catered. It is significant that whereas the large city centre halls provided those able to pay the most with superior balcony seats, in the suburban cinemas more effort was made to provide comfortable and spacious conditions *throughout* the hall.

> Care has been taken to make the seating arrangements as comfortable as possible, with ample leg room and it is a fact that no matter where one sits, cheap or dearer sections of the hall, the seats are equally comfortable. The sound system installed is absolutely the latest and best, and conveys the dialogue to any part of the hall with equal clarity and range.[47]

As well as appealing to an essentially local, working-class public, these cinemas were also built by a local firm - the Splott Cinema Company. This was a company that had pursued a policy of building new cinemas rather than buying existing ones ever since running into difficulties over the purchase of the Canton cinema in 1925.[48] Their activities brought about an improvement in the cinema facilities available to many people. They simply did not have the resources, however, to construct cinemas to rival city centre venues such as the Capitol or the Park Hall, much less the 'dream palaces' constructed by Gaumont and ABC.

Just as significant as the *type* of building constructed by the Splott Cinema Company, arguably, was their location. None of the cinemas built by this company in the inter-war years was in an area that already had a picture house.[49] The social function performed by these modern suburban halls actually had much in common

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[46] The nature of the entertainment offered by different cinemas is considered more fully in chapter four.
[47] *South Wales Echo*, 17 April, 1937, p. 8.
[48] See chapter one.
[49] The Tivoli was only built after Llandaff's existing cinema had been destroyed by fire.

with the third type of cinema considered here: the ageing 'fleapits'. The intention of the Splott Cinema Company was clearly to meet a demand for more local cinemas, not to compete directly with existing ones. What this meant was that quite a number of Cardiff's small, pre-war cinemas such as the Central, Coliseum, Globe and Coronet faced little new competition in the period covered here. These halls offered little by way of glamour or even comfort, but they were an established and a popular feature of the local community. Their familiarity, convenience and cheapness appealed to a working-class public for whom visits to the cinema were habitual, rather than a special event. For the whole of the period covered by this thesis the older 'fleapit' cinemas formed an important part of Cardiff's cinema provision.

The situation in Wales's second largest town, Swansea, was broadly similar. The relative diversity of Swansea's economic base meant that the town's economy was less badly hit by the depression than many other parts of Wales. Unemployment in the town did reach 24.1% in the town in 1931, but this was well below the figures reached in some of the worst blackspots. Neither Cardiff nor Swansea suffered from the kind of population exodus which afflicted the valleys in the inter-war years and their relative economic security was reflected in the state of their cinemas.

As with Cardiff, Swansea had plenty of cinemas by the end of World War One. There seem to have been around seventeen separate venues, of which approximately half were purpose-built as cinemas.[50] Also like Cardiff, the absolute number of cinemas altered very little in the inter-war years - rising to nineteen by 1939. Again, however, there were significant developments in this period. Six new cinemas were built and a number of others were altered significantly. The tendency toward using existing theatres for film exhibition was also evident in Swansea where both the Albert Hall and Grand were converted into cinemas. In Swansea, however, such halls were not necessarily the most prestigious town centre venues. The town's premier cinema was undoubtedly the Plaza, built in 1931, while a theatre like the Theatre Royal, rather than simply having a face-lift in the 1930s, was totally demolished and rebuilt - opening in 1932 as the Rialto.

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[50] See Brian Hornsey, *Ninety Years of Cinema in Swansea: An Essay Celebrating the Cinemas* (Stamford, 1994); also *South Wales Evening Post*, 8 November 1976, p. 8, and 22 December 1976, p. 4.

With regard to the town centre cinemas, at least, it seems that new buildings and styles of architecture were developed to a much greater extent than in Cardiff, although some older traditions did remain. Moreover, no clear distinction appears to exist between town centre and suburban developments: throughout we find a blend of old and new buildings. The Castle (1911) and Carlton (1913), as well as the Albert Hall and Grand were able to compete with the likes of the Plaza and the Rialto in the town centre. Further out, the Maxime in Sketty and Tower in Townhill were products of the late 1930s, the Tivoli and Regent were built in Mumbles in the mid-to-late 1920s, while residents of the Uplands and Morriston had local cinemas since before 1914.

Where new cinemas were built they tended to follow trends evident elsewhere in the U.K. It was claimed in the local press, for instance, that 'Those who were present at the opening of the [Maxime] cinema on Saturday must have been impressed with the modern developments in cinema practice which are embodied in the building'. Increasingly imposing and distinctive exteriors were developed, providing an identity quite separate from traditional theatres. In the Maxime's case 'an imposing facade' was 'carried out in coloured glass, illuminated with neon lighting.'[51] The interiors became ever more decorative and comfortable; each new building claiming to offer 'the last word in luxury'. They were also bigger than their pre-war counterparts with an average of 1634 seats as compared with 773 in those earlier purpose built cinemas.[52] Converted theatres also tended to be fairly large, usually between 1000 and 2000 seats. Much the biggest of Swansea's cinemas, however, was the Plaza: with over 3000 seats this was, in fact, the largest picture house in Wales. The Plaza was built by a local firm and, though impressive in many respects, it was not a typical example of 1930s British cinema design. Serious consideration was clearly given to the interior design in terms of lighting, seating arrangements, acoustics and decoration. One press report claimed that 'internally one can almost describe it as artistically perfect'. Both interior and external decorations, however, were said to have been 'in the Renaissance style with Celtic motifs'. This is clearly some way from an austere, modernist design, and it is interesting that a Welsh flavour should have been added. Yet the sheer scale, as well as look, of the building made a

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[51] *South Wales Evening Post*, 5 December 1938, p. 6.
[52] These averages are based on the seating capacities given in the *Kinematograph Year Book* (1939).

considerable impression on the local townscape. As it was claimed in the press, 'From the exterior the cinema presents an imposing appearance, facing on what is destined to become the town's main thoroughfare.'[53]

As well as attempting to combine modern architectural principles with a Welsh theme, the Plaza was also a good example of a theatre which made its appeal as all-inclusive as possible. This was reflected in the pricing policy, which was similar to that seen in Cardiff's modern cinemas. In most of Swansea's cinemas admission charges ranged between 6d and 1/6 by the late 1930s. Visiting the cinema was thus within the range of all sections of society, although the more affluent could spend an extra shilling and sit in the balcony. In the Plaza and the Albert Hall the price range was slightly wider, going up to 2s; these halls were the ones which probably appealed most to the middle-class audiences. It was not even necessary to be a film fan to be able to enjoy the facilities on offer here. Both contained large cafes, and the Plaza advertised itself in the South Wales Evening Post as 'Swansea's popular rendezvous' rather than just a place of entertainment.

At the other end of the market, the Scala, Uplands and Landore cinemas, which fell into the third ('fleapit') category, charged prices of between 4d and 1/4. The difference is not great, but it does seem that these halls were catering largely for those with the least to spend on entertainment. These so-called 'bug houses' were almost inevitably survivors from pre-war days. They were not necessarily the oldest buildings used for showing films. They were, however, early examples of purpose built cinemas erected to meet a working-class demand for moving pictures, the longevity of which could not be predicted. In south Wales a considerable proportion of these were able to survive, with minimum alterations, into and beyond the inter-war period, competing alongside the modern super-cinemas and offering an alternative experience for film-goers.

Much of what has been seen in Cardiff and Swansea, applies equally to other towns along the south Wales coastal strip. Newport's tally of cinemas rose from eight in 1918 to ten in 1940. Of these ten, just two were built in the inter-war period, and two had been converted to cinema use during these years, leaving six survivors from before 1918. The four new cinemas had an average capacity of 1271 seats and were able to provide the latest standards of comfort, convenience and decoration. Of the

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[53] *Western Mail*, 14, February, 1931, p. 5.

older halls only two, the Gem and the Plaza, conformed to the 'fleapit' stereotype, with much smaller capacities and cheaper prices. The other existing cinemas adapted very well to modern developments. The Olympia was taken over by ABC, and the Colisium by Gaumont British, both undergoing improvements in the 1920s. The other two pre-war halls were not purpose built cinemas but large buildings converted from other uses, and thus more adaptable for the demands of inter-war audiences. Newport's cinemas were thus able to keep abreast of the latest developments without radically altering the architecture of the town.[54]

A similar picture emerges in Port Talbot where the small pre-war cinemas such as the Electric Palace and Picturedrome were able to co-exist in the inter-war years alongside new constructions such as the 1500-seat Majestic, and the Regent, as well as converted theatres like the Grand and New Empire. The same was true of Llanelli where the large newly built cinemas, namely the Odeon (1450 seats) and the Regal (1778), were joined by the Hippodrome, a converted theatre of 1000 seats. Alongside these halls, however, were the likes of the Llanelli Cinema and the Palace, both survivors from the pre-war era.[55]

These south Wales towns were hardly in a position to support the kind of explosion in cinema building witnessed elsewhere in Britain. The difficult economic circumstances no doubt deterred the major cinema companies from investing here, and the fact that many of these towns were already well served in terms of cinema provision by 1918 meant that there were limited opportunities for local firms to exploit. By the end of the inter-war period, however, we can see that there were three types of cinema in the larger south Wales towns, (the newly built halls, the converted theatres and the ageing fleapits), each of which had a significant role to play.

The south Wales valleys

In the valleys, too, there was evidence of all of the above types of cinema, although here the overwhelming majority fell into the third category. Indeed, it was the valleys, far more than the coastal belt, which were responsible for the preponderance of small cinemas in south Wales noted by Simon Rowson. It has been

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[54] Brian Hornsey, *Ninety Years of Cinema in Newport* (Stamford, 1994).
[55] *Kinematograph Year Books* (1914 -).

suggested above that boom-bust economic cycle in Wales in the first half of the century partly explains the number, size, and age of her cinemas. Nowhere was this economic decline more acutely felt than in the valleys of south Wales. In the century leading up to World War One this area had developed from a quiet, largely rural backwater to one of the most important industrial regions in Britain. Between 1901 and 1921 the population of Glamorgan had increased by 45.6%; the population of Rhondda by 69.1%. By 1923 there were 252,617 miners working in the south Wales coalfield and the area was producing over a million tonnes of coal a week.[56] The economic collapse of the following decades, however, was every bit as spectacular as this meteoric growth. With unemployment levels reaching fifty or sixty percent in many areas there seemed little alternative, especially for young people, but to get out. Young women fled into domestic service in London, the Home Counties and the Midlands, while schoolboys embarked upon what Gwyn A. Williams described as the 'examination obstacle race.'[57] By 1951 the population of Rhondda was back below its 1901 level; the population of Merthyr fell from 80,116 in 1921 to 61,142 in 1951; in Aberdare the figures were 55,007 and 40,932. Given that the younger generation were the most regular cinema goers, and that those who remained in these areas generally had less to spend on entertainment, it must have seemed inevitable that cinema, like much else, would be a victim of the depression - and in a sense it was.

The explosion in cinema building in inter-war Britain simply did not happen in the south Wales valleys. It is perhaps ironic, though hardly surprising, that this most vibrant and radical working-class culture, once described as 'The most active and thriving community in Great Britain or the world',[58] failed to witness any significant improvement in its provision of cinemas - homes to the most popular medium of public entertainment. On the other hand, the cinema industry existing in this area was able to cope with the economic conditions remarkably well; far better, it seems, than most other businesses, or forms of popular culture.[59] One of the most striking features

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[56] Figures taken from Hywel Francis and David Smith, *The Fed: A History of the South Wales Mines in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1980), p. 508.
[57] Williams, *When Was Wales?*, p. 246.
[58] The phrase comes from the *Western Mail*, 1 January 1901, and has been cited by various historians since. See, for example, Chris Williams, *Democratic Rhondda: Politics and Society 1885-1951* (Cardiff, 1996), pp. 12-28.
[59] Other forms of working-class culture in south Wales, notably rugby football and choral singing, were dealt a severe blow by the inter-war depression. See Gareth Williams, 'From Grand Slam to Great Slump: Economy, Society and Rugby Football in Wales During the Depression', *Welsh History Review*,

of the valleys cinemas was not just that they tended to be old and relatively small, but that so many actually survived throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The writer Jack Jones, visiting one Valleys town in 1938, was astounded that 'Today, in this most distressed Borough in Britain, there are half a dozen cinemas, with a seating capacity of six thousand, with a mid-week change of programme. The largest does three shows daily.'[60] Evidence from trade directories of the period tells us this must have been an exaggeration. However, they also show that at a time when the population and economy of most valleys' communities was being crippled, the cinemas were able to survive.

For the inhabitants of most valleys' communities picture-going did not involve a visit to modern super-cinemas, but to the local fleapit, or perhaps a Workman's institute. Where cinema building did take place in this region between the wars it tended to be in larger towns such as Merthyr and Aberdare. Here, although on a much smaller scale than developments in more prosperous towns and cities in south Wales, the general pattern was much the same. Merthyr, for example had four cinemas at the end of World War One, and the same number twenty years later. Of the four cinemas open in 1939, two were survivors from the pre-1914 era: the Palace (897 seats) and the Temperance Hall (600). The remaining two were the Castle Super Cinema (1600 seats), built in 1929, and the Theatre Royal (1217), converted to cinema use in the early 1920s. The two which had closed were the Penydaren Cinema and the Electric Theatre. Despite its declining population, then, Merthyr's cinema provision actually increased in terms of seating capacity between the wars. As with other south Wales towns there was a mix of new and old cinema buildings, and in the design of the Castle cinema itself there was a combination of American and local influences. The interior seems to have been designed along the lines of an 'atmospheric' - with the setting medieval Wales rather than a Mediterranean resort:

> The walls are beautifully decorated by mural paintings of singular beauty and charm. Large landscape panels, designed by Mr. J. Jones, a local artist ... show stately castles in medieval settings, and across the ceiling is colour-washed a brilliant sky, illuminated from two light-ray domes.[61]

Vol. 9 (June 1983), pp. 338-357; Gareth Williams, *Valleys of Song: Music and Society in Wales, 1840-1914* (Cardiff, 1998).

[60] Jones, 'Social effects', p. 19.

[61] *Merthyr Express*, 16 February 1929, p. 10.

In terms of comfort and decoration, then, the most up-to-date practices in cinema design were adopted here. Yet the cinema was very much a local institution. The Castle was originally locally owned and run (by Merthyr Cinemas Ltd.), and its local identity was confirmed by its name - it stood on the site of the old Castle hotel on Castle street.

In Aberdare a broadly similar picture emerges with the Rex the only cinema to be built between the wars, although this did not open until 1939.[62] Many valleys towns witnessed no such developments in the 1920s and 1930s. In places such as Mountain Ash and Tredegar no new cinemas were built in this period at all. Similarly, the numerous small mining communities scattered across the Valleys, saw very little change in their cinema provision in the inter-war years. Not only were very few new cinemas ever built, there was seldom any attempt to refurbish or redecorate existing ones. In terms of interior design, therefore, as well as external appearance, valleys cinemas had undergone little change in this period. Much of this, of course, was due to social and economic conditions caused by the depression. For the major cinema circuits, it would surely have been a far greater risk to invest in the south Wales valleys than most other parts of the country. Authors of social surveys dealing with life in distressed areas were attracted to towns like Brynmawr;[63] Oscar Deutsch was not. This is understandable. While the super-cinemas were felt to be offering the entertainment of the future, it was far from clear for how long such communities would continue to exist. Where new cinemas were built, such as the Castle at Merthyr, the investors were usually a local firm. The depression, however, had meant that there was less money in the local economy to be invested. When the Mayor opened the Castle cinema he said that he 'looked upon the venture as a magnificent gesture of faith in Merthyr's future. To build so fine and so costly a hall today needed great courage.'[64] Such courage, not to mention resources, must have been a scarce commodity at this time. Nevertheless, a great many existing cinemas were able to survive, and new ones tended to do quite well. Merthyr's Castle cinema was even taken over by ABC in November 1932.

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[62] *Aberdare Leader*, 8 April 1939, p. 5.
[63] Hilda Jennings, Brynmawr: *A Study of a Distressed Area* (London, 1934).
[64] *Merthyr Express*, 16 February 1929, p. 10.

It was not only the economic depression that caused so few modern 'super-cinemas' to be built in the valleys. Another factor which ought to be taken into account is the social geography of the area. The vast majority of cinemas were located in small communities with a population of between four to eight thousand. These communities also tended to have a strong local identity, largely because they were so isolated from one another. Dai Smith, for instance, writes of 'the differences between valleys which are as separated by language, routes of development, and geography as they were united by occupation, popular culture, and shared experience.'[65] The cinemas built in these communities were local institutions, they did not (and could not) serve a wider regional audience. Even if the inhabitants of some of the smaller communities had wanted to visit cinemas in larger towns like Maesteg or Merthyr, they would have faced transport difficulties. Geographical, as well economic limitations made the south Wales coalfield a risky area in which to build large, modern cinemas.

This, however, only served to strengthen the local identity of the picture halls which did exist in these areas. The cinema had become firmly incorporated into the culture and traditions of the south Wales coalfield. This was reflected in the buildings themselves, which were frequently housed in Miners' Institutes and run by the local workmen, not large circuits based in London.[66] It was the Valleys, more than the coastal strip, that were responsible for high proportion of small cinemas found in south Wales in the 1930s. While there were some similarities between the two parts of the region, the differences in cinema provision must be accounted for in terms of geographical and cultural forces, as well as economic ones.

Mid and north Wales

As with the south, it would be misleading to generalise too freely about cinema building in north Wales. According to Rowson's study in 1934, north Wales had an even greater proportion of small cinemas than the south. This is not to say, however, that cinema development here followed a similar pattern to that set in the valleys. Social and economic conditions, for one thing, were rather different. In much

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[65] Dai Smith, *Aneurin Bevan and the World of South Wales* (Cardiff, 1993), p. 92.
[66] See chapter one.

of rural Wales the population was declining between the wars, but this was nothing new. Population had been steadily falling since around 1850 in these areas, providing much of the labour in newly-industrialised regions. There was not such a stark contrast between economic hardships here in the inter-war period and the prosperity of previous decades, as was the case in the industrialised south. In north Wales towns the depression was certainly felt, (the proportion out of work in the Wrexham area, for instance, reached almost 40% in 1931), but the high rates of unemployment were not as widespread as in the south. The county of Flintshire actually witnessed considerable industrial development in these years, its population increasing by about 10,000 between 1921 and 1938.[67] Further, the social structure of the towns tended to be quite different. While Wrexham had a certain amount in common with Cardiff and Swansea in terms of the proportion of the population belonging to social groups D and E, the resorts of Colwyn Bay and Llandudno contained not only more people in work but a far higher proportion in professional positions. It is in the towns of the north, in fact, that some of the most frantic cinema building took place in inter-war Wales. The differences between towns in the north and the south, however, are no more striking than the variations between north Wales towns themselves.

Wrexham, a relatively large industrial town in the north east of Wales, is the most important place to start. Its population grew from 23,295 in 1921 to 30,967 in 1951, and by the end of the 1950s it was officially the largest town in north Wales. Although smaller than some of the industrialised towns in the south, its social structure was broadly similar to theirs. 17% of workers in Wrexham were in professional or intermediate positions, (compared with 15% in Swansea and 17.5% in Cardiff); 30.2% were either unskilled or partly skilled (the corresponding figures for Cardiff and Swansea were 34.2% and 28% respectively).[68] Similarities are also evident in terms of cinema development.

In 1918 Wrexham had four cinemas, (or at least four venues at which pictures were shown), by 1939 the number was five. As with the towns in the south, however, it was the nature, rather than the number, of cinemas which altered in the inter-war years. All four of the 1918 cinemas survived into the 1950s, three of them largely

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[67] See Dennis Thomas, 'Economic decline', in Herbert and Jones, eds., *Wales Between the Wars*, pp. 13-51.

[68] These figures are taken from the census returns of 1951, the corresponding figures were unfortunately not published in the inter-war years.

unchanged. The Glynn, which had been erected as a temporary cinema in 1910, underwent some alterations in 1919, and did remarkably well to survive until 1960. The Hippodrome, which had been the Public Hall, lasted until 1959; the Empire, originally a music hall, was used for film from 1911 to 1956. The other venue open in 1918 was the Majestic. Originally built in 1910 as a skating rink, it was known in its early days as a cinema before World War One as the Rink and Pavilion. The name changed in 1922 and in the 1930s it underwent major renovations, giving the 1770-seat auditorium a modern, art deco, design.[69] The inter-war modernisation of Wrexham's cinemas was completed in March 1937 with the 1246 seat Odeon. Built on a site recently cleared of poor quality housing, the new cinema was indeed a welcome addition 'in a district which needed a first class entertainment hall'. During the opening ceremony, architect Harry Weedon was congratulated on designing and building a theatre which could not be improved upon anywhere.'[70]

By the end of the 1930s Wrexham's two premier picture houses could claim to reflect the latest practices in cinema design, and although there were three others which could not, the combined seating capacity of the Majestic and Odeon outnumbered that of the other venues. Thus, as with many other towns in south Wales, Wrexham supported a balance of cinema venues, some modern, others with a longer history in the local landscape.

A similar balance is to be found in other north Wales towns. In Bangor, for instance, there were three cinemas running in 1939, the 1500-seat Plaza super cinema (opened in 1934), the New City Picture House (seating 900 and erected in 1919), and the County Theatre (originally a chapel, but used for film shows since around 1918). Bangor's oldest picture house, known variously as the Picturedrome, the Electric Pavillion and the Cosy, never installed sound equipment and had closed by 1931. The situation in Caernarfon, also with three cinemas by World War Two, was broadly similar. The 1178-seat Majestic, built in 1934, was a relatively large, modern building, equipped with a cafe which claimed to be 'worthy of the finest traditions of the cinematograph world'.[71] The Guildhall was a much smaller and older building:

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[69] See Brian Hornsey, *Ninety Years of Cinema in Wrexham* (Stamford, 1990); also Brian Hornsey *Cinemas of North Wales* (Stamford, 1996), pp. 91-97.
[70] *Wrexham Leader*, 19 March 1937, p. 7; see also commemorative section, celebrating the cinemas twenty first anniversary in the *Wrexham Leader*, 7 March 1958, pp. 8-10.
[71] *Caernarfon and Denbigh Herald*, 3 August 1934, p. 2.

seating 500, it was converted to full time cinema use in the 1920s. The Empire, which also seated 500, was a purpose built cinema dating from 1915.[72] What we see, then, is a variety of types of cinema, some reflective of the recent developments in British cinema design, others part of a local architectural tradition dating from a period before the cinema had begun to develop its own distinctive style.

While such a balance is evident in most Welsh towns, Rhyl provides an exceptional case. This popular north Wales seaside resort had five cinemas by 1939: of these, four had been built since 1920 and the other had received a new interior in 1933. The town's unusually generous provision of modern cinemas was acknowledged by the chairman of the local council on opening the Plaza in 1931. 'It was', he claimed, 'a great thing in such depressing times that there were men in Rhyl who had such confidence in the future that they could embark upon such an ambitious enterprise.'[73] Such confidence, and ambition, was not in such abundance in most parts of north Wales, although it does seem that in some of the more affluent areas the number of cinema venues, if not new buildings, increased considerably during the inter-war period. In Llandudno the number of cinemas leapt from two to five between the wars: one of the new venues was a 1930s super cinema; one was opened in 1920 (although probably planned before World War One); the other, the old Princess Theatre, was converted to cinema use in the 1920s. In Colwyn Bay too a rapid growth of cinema venues occurred after 1918. Three new cinemas, the Arcadia, the Princess and the Supreme, were built between 1920-1923. To these were added the Odeon in April 1936.[74]

In parts of north Wales, then, it appears that the early 1920s saw as much, if not more, cinema construction than the years leading up to the First World War. The small size of so many of the communities in north and mid Wales, combined with their lack of prosperity, meant that it was not until the 1920s (by which time cinemas were firmly established as the most popular sites of public entertainment) that they came to be built throughout this region. Many communities here had continued to rely on travelling cinemas for access to the silver screen up until the 1920s. The result was that the picture houses in north Wales towns had a more modern feel to them than

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[72] Hornsey, *Cinemas of North Wales*, pp. 8-14, 23-25.
[73] *Liverpool Post and Mercury*, 30 June 1931, p. 1.
[74] Hornsey, *Cinemas of North Wales*, pp. 78-88; 49-61; 33-35.

those in the rest of Wales. In a sample of six north Wales towns, 52% of cinemas open in 1939 had been built since 1918; the corresponding figure in a similar sample of south Wales towns was 32%.[75] This may help to explain why Dafydd Roberts, in his study of the slate quarrying communities of north west Wales, found that it was only 'from the early twenties on' that 'the cinema became an intrinsic part of social life within every town and larger village in the quarrying areas'.[76]

Across Wales, films continued to be shown even into the 1950s in buildings which had been constructed before the cinematograph was invented. Architecturally, many cinemas were incorporated into a town's existing facilities as others imposed a new modernist style on the high street. Further, it was local conditions which determined the extent to which this process of modernisation could actually take place. Social and economic circumstances clearly came into play in this respect, but so did specific indigenous factors. The work of firms such as Rhyl Entertainments Ltd. In the north Wales town, and the Splott Cinema Co. around Cardiff and Penarth, meant that cinema-goers in these localities were particularly well served in terms of modern cinemas.

Another way in which local conditions influenced cinema design was in terms of the relatively small size of north Wales towns. The modern cinemas erected here in the 1930s tended to be smaller than those elsewhere in the U.K. The seating capacity was usually between 1000-1500, seldom any more, and there were certainly no cinemas to compare with the Plaza in Swansea or the Capitol in Cardiff in terms of sheer size. It was outside the main towns that the really small modern cinemas were to be found. A large proportion of the population of north Wales lived in fairly small towns or villages of 8000 or less inhabitants, which could not support large cinemas. It was the lack of major urban centres, rather than a lack of recent cinema building, which provides the best explanation as to why north Wales picture houses were, on average, smaller than those in the rest of Britain. It is significant that the only other comparable English region was the south west. New cinemas were, it seems, being erected in small north Wales towns, to a much greater extent than was evident in the south Wales valleys. In very few communities did there appear to be no change at all

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[75] The towns included in the sample are: from north Wales, Bangor, Caernarfon, Llandudno, Colwyn Bay, Rhyl and Wrexham; from south Wales, Newport, Cardiff, Port Talbot, Swansea and Llanelli.
[76] Dafydd Roberts, 'The slate quarrying communities of Caernarfonshire and Merioneth, 1911-1939', PhD Thesis (Aberystwyth, 1982), p. 477.

in the provision of cinemas between the wars. Further, it seems that the new cinemas here bore many of the hallmarks of modern design. Captain Pritchard, who was responsible for the construction of buildings like the Majestic in Caernarfon, also opened cinemas in Pwllheli, Porthmadog and Blaenau Ffestiniog. Sidney Colwyn Foulkes, a north Wales architect, who had designed cinemas such as the Plaza and the interior of the Queens Theatre in Rhyl, was also responsible for the Plazas at Queensferry and Flint. Other new cinemas were built in the 1930s in Conwy, Llanrwst, Penmaenmawr, Broughton and Bagillt. With names such as the Luxor, Regent and Palace these cinemas had many of the comforts of the modern super cinema, but an average seating capacity of only around 625.[77]

Again, however, it is questionable whether these halls should be categorised as 'dream palaces'. Many of the cinemas built in mid and north Wales in the inter-war years had more in common with the modern halls erected by the Splott Cinema Co. in Cardiff than with, say, the Odeons of Oscar Deutsch. As well as being small, these cinemas were usually built by local firms, and they tended to be situated in areas where there was no other cinema. In other words, they provided the local public with a cheap and convenient means of going to the pictures; they did not seek to provide a more glamorous alternative to existing halls.

Conclusion

The three categories of cinema discussed in this chapter - the newly constructed cinemas, the converted theatres and music halls, and the pre-war 'fleapits' - could be found across Wales (and indeed Britain) throughout this period. One of the most notable features of cinema architecture in *Wales*, however, was the scarcity of newly constructed 'dream palaces'. Most medium-sized Welsh towns could boast at least one cinema with around 2,000 seats that offered the latest pictures in surroundings which were comfortable, if not luxurious. The dream palaces *were* to be found in Wales but, for the most part, they were not newly built cinemas. There was a smattering of Odeons across Wales, and the odd cinema like Swansea's Plaza, which combined imposing exteriors with plush decoration inside. It was much more common, however, for the most prestigious cinemas to be converted theatres or

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[77] Hornsey, *Cinemas of North Wales*.

variety halls. Such buildings were able to keep abreast of the latest developments in interior design - without significantly altering their exterior appearance. The Lyric in Carmarthen was typical of many old theatres converted to cinema use in the 1920s and 30s. Patrons were promised 'a place of entertainment second to none in west Wales' with 'comfort and convenience far beyond one's usual expectations' and the decoration 'designed entirely on modern lines'. It was also pointed, however, that 'The dignified facade in King Street has not been disturbed.'[78]

Most modern cinemas built in Wales in this period were not found in the high streets of major towns, but in outlying districts, suburbs and small towns. Though influenced by modern developments in cinema architecture, these halls were usually fairly small (often under 1000 seats). Most of these cinemas were well designed with care having been taken to provide the latest interior designs. Their purpose, however, was not to target custom from existing halls, or to attract a more up-market clientele. These halls were built in areas where no cinemas previously existed, and they served to facilitate the development of cinema-going as a habitual, and locally based experience.

The success of local cinemas in attracting a regular audience (almost irrespective of the programme of entertainment on offer) is most clearly evident in the survival of so many 'fleapits'. Many such cinemas, built before World War One and offering little by way of comfort or refinement, were able to survive because they were cheap and they had a regular local customer base. Their presence was most evident in the south Wales valleys, but the inhabitants of most Welsh towns would have been able to identify at least one local fleapit. The existence of small 'fleapit' cinemas was by no means unique to Wales. Indeed, Jeffrey Richards' work on *The Age of the Dream Palace*, acknowledges that such halls could be found across Britain. In Wales, however, a combination of the economic depression, the small size of so many towns, and their geographic isolation, meant that the 'fleapits' tended to survive for much longer than in many other parts of Britain.

The balance of the cinema provision within different parts of Wales certainly reflected differences in geographical, social and economic conditions. The co-existence of different types of cinema building, however, also suggests that a visit to the pictures could attract a range of people for differing reasons. It is the makeup of

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[78] *Carmarthen Journal*, 3 April 1936, p. 1.

the cinema audience, therefore, and the nature of the cinema's appeal which will be dealt with in the next chapter.

Chapter Three: The Cinema's Appeal

The film audience is Everybody; the fact we know from experience, and the reason has just been made clear. At one end of the scale is Tommy who cadges threepence from a harassed mother glad to be rid of him for the Saturday morning matinee; at the other end is the Duke of Blankshire who pays ten guineas for his seat at a London charity premiere. In between lie the mothers and fathers, the youths and lasses of every walk and station of life. In the main, however, the cinema audience is a young audience, and (because the prices are cheap) predominantly a working-class audience. Furthermore, as has been intimated, the cinema flourishes most successfully in the industrial areas.[1]

Both to contemporary observers and subsequent historians the cinema has been regarded as a hugely important and influential form of popular culture. It was not just that attendances were spectacularly high. The figure of 31.4 million tickets sold per week in the peak year of 1946 is, of course, impressive by any standards, and confirmed the position of the British as the world's most regular cinema-goers.[2] It should not be forgotten, however, that other forms of media such as radio and the press had the potential to reach a similarly wide public. It is in comparison with other forms of entertainment which required a 'massed' audience, such as spectator sports and the music-hall that cinema really stands out. Mass spectator sport and music-hall rapidly established themselves as largely working-class (and in the case of sport especially) male pastimes. The theatre, although more welcoming towards women, was never entirely able to shake off its identification with the middle-classes. Numerous examples can, and have, been cited of working-class groups forming their own theatre societies and little theatres, but the stage was never able to rival the mass popular appeal of the screen in this period.[3] In 1950, for example, cinema attendances numbered 1396 millions while the combined figure for theatre, music-hall and football matches was 168 millions.[4] The cinemas, clearly, were the principal

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[1] Ernest Lindgren, *The Cinema* (London, c.1944), p. 11.
[2] UNESCO calculated that annual cinema attendances in Great Britain stood at 28 per head of population in 1950. The next highest figure was achieved by the United States with 23, no other country got above 19. See H.E. Browning and A.A. Sorrell, 'Cinemas and Cinema Going in Great Britain', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, Vol. 117, Part II (1954), p. 136.
[3] Stephen Ridgewell, 'South Wales and the Cinema in the 1930s: The Functioning and Reception of a Mass Cultural Form', M.Phil (Swansea, 1993), pp. 67-92.
[4] Philip Corrigan, 'Film Entertainment as Ideology and Pleasure: A Preliminary Approach to a History of Audiences', in James Curran and Vincent Porter (eds.), *British Cinema History* (London, 1983), p. 24. Corrigan actually puts the number of cinema attendances in 1950 at 1611m, but I have used the figure given by Browning and Sorrell.

establishments in which people would gather to be entertained *en masse*. One historian has in fact described the buildings as the 'cathedrals of the movies'.[5]

Cinema-going was a hugely popular activity *throughout* the period covered by this thesis, though as table 1 shows, attendances reached their peak during the years of World War Two and its aftermath.

Table 3.1: Cinema Attendance in Britain, 1934-1951[6]

Calendar Year	Admissions (Millions)
1934	903
1935	907
1936	917
1937	946
1938	987
1939	990
1940	1,027
1941	1,309
1942	1,494
1943	1,541
1944	1,575
1945	1,585
1946	1,635
1947	1,462
1948	1,514
1949	1,430
1950	1,396
1951	1,365

1934 is the earliest year for which reliable statistics exist, but judging by the number of cinemas already in existence by then,[7] the level of public debate the medium was attracting[8] and the popularity of stars of the silent screen, such as Rudolph Valentino, the cinema's position was firmly established by the 1920s.

The reason for the cinema's enormous popularity lay not just in the films themselves, but in the close fit between the nature of the entertainment on offer and the needs of the society it served. The cinema's social function, in other words, lay at the heart of its mass-appeal – a point which has been observed both by contemporaries

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[5] David Atwell, *Cathedrals of the Movies: A History of British Cinemas and Their Audiences* (London, 1980).
[6] Browning and Sorrell, 'Cinemas and Cinema-Going in Great Britain', p. 134.
[7] There were 4,305 cinemas in Great Britain in 1934. See Simon Rowson, 'A Statistical Survey of the Cinema Industry in Great Britain in 1934', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, Vol. XCIX (1936), p. 76.
[8] The nature of the public debates surrounding the cinema are discussed in chapters five and six.

and historians.[9] Attendances boomed in the war years not because of the quality of individual films, but because the need for audiences to escape (at little cost) from the realities of everyday existence was far more acutely felt. The relief, albeit temporary, that the cinema offered those who lived through the inter-war depression, the Second World War and the years of austerity that followed seems to have been addictive. For many, cinema-going was a habit[10] – an essential part of the weekly routine. The opportunity for escape, therefore, was not a special event but an integral, and necessary, part of many peoples' lifestyles.

It must be stressed at this point that although cinema attendance was considerably higher during World War Two than it had been in the 1930s, the fundamental nature of its appeal had not changed. The cinema continued to provide escapism, it was just that in the war years people had all the more reason for wanting to escape. As James Chapman has observed, 'the wartime increase in cinema attendances was due not to more people going to the cinema than before, but to the same people going more often.'[11] In Wales (and other parts of Britain crippled by the inter-war depression), it was no longer mass-unemployment and poverty that people needed to forget, but long working hours, rationing, and in some cases, bombing raids. *Economic* conditions may have changed significantly from the 1930s to the 1940s, but the *social* circumstances conducive to high cinema attendance remained, and indeed intensified in the war years. (This makes the Government's decision to close all cinemas at the outbreak of war seem all the more remarkable, but it also helps to explain why that decision was so swiftly reversed).[12]

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first begins by examining the social breakdown of the British cinema audience in terms of class, age and gender, and comparing this to cinema-going patterns in Wales. The second section explores

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[9] See, for example, Iris Barry, *Lets Go To The Pictures* (London, 1926); Lindgren, *The Cinema*; Roger Manvell, *A Seat at the Cinema* (London, 1951); Paul Swann, *The Hollywood Feature Film in Postwar Britain* (London, 1987); David Docherty, David Morrison and Michael Tracey, *The Last Picture Show? Britain's Changing Film Audiences* (London, 1987); Graeme Turner, *Film as Social Practice* (London, 1993 edition).

[10] One of the most prominent historians of modern Britain described the cinema as 'the essential social habit of the age'. A. J. P. Taylor, *English History, 1914-1945* (Oxford, 1965), p. 313.

[11] James Chapman, 'British Cinema and 'The People's War', in Nick Hayes and Jeff Hill (eds.), *Millions Like Us: British Culture in the Second World War* (Liverpool, 1999), p. 41.

[12] For more on the closure of cinemas at the outbreak of war, see Chapman, 'British Cinema and the People's War'; Jeffrey Richards and Anthony Aldgate, *Britain Can Take It: The British Cinema in the Second World War* (Oxford, 1986).

the attraction of various types of cinema within Wales. It is argued that the social function performed by the cinema varied between different kinds of hall, and that distinctions between different sections of the same cinema were also important. The third section deals with the appeal of the cinema more generally. It looks at the popularity of films themselves; at the importance of cinema-going as a social/cultural activity; and at the position of the cinema within Welsh society at this time. The cinema's immense popularity, as well as the opposition it provoked, reflect the fact that it was a form of amusement more relevant to the society based on coal pits, than to that dominated by the pulpit.

The Cinema Audience in Britain and in Wales

The cinema's appeal in Britain, though wide, was by no means universal. The authors of one study of British cinema audiences have described the notion 'that once upon a time everyone went to the cinema' as 'the myth of the universal audience'[13] and argue cogently that it was not so. In fact there has always been a significant section of the population who were not cinema-goers.[14] The remarkable levels of cinema attendance in the 1920s, 1930s and, in particular, the 1940s were caused not so much by more *people* going to the pictures, but by the fact that they went more *frequently*. What, then, was the composition of the cinema-going public in the period under consideration here?

It will perhaps be most useful to begin by identifying those groups who were *least* likely to be found at the pictures in the decades of the medium's mass-appeal. The most noticeable such group was the older generation, namely those aged over 65. A study conducted for the Wartime Social Survey in 1943 found that 69% of those 65 and over never went to the cinema while only 5% were regular attenders (these figures are presented in tabular form on p. 84). The comparison with those aged 14-17 is striking. Among this younger age group almost 80% went to the cinema at least once a week (43% actually attended twice a week or more), while only 2% claimed not to go

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[13] Docherty, Morrison and Tracey, *The Last Picture Show?*, p. 15.

[14] A survey carried out in the summer of 1943 put the number who did not go to the cinema at 30%. It should be noted, however, that the summer months are traditionally a period of low cinema attendance. 'The Cinema Audience. An Inquiry made by the Wartime Social Survey for the Ministry of Information

at all. It seems certain that adolescents and young adults (those who had always known the cinema) were the most avid films fans in this period, although in all age groups up to 45 a clear majority (over 70%) were at least occasional cinema-goers. For the generation that had literally grown up with the cinema, whether in fairground booths or the earliest purpose designed buildings, the habit of movie going also persisted. Clearly, as this generation grew older and faced up to parental responsibilities their visits to the cinema became much less frequent, but they did not stop altogether. For those who had reached adulthood by the time the first film shows were beginning to attract public attention, cinema going seems not to have held such lasting appeal. It was also from among this older generation that many of the criticisms frequently aimed at the cinema were being articulated. P. Morton Shand, for instance, claimed that it was only the 'soured and aged' who 'declare that the spread of the picture-going habit is responsible for the decay of home life.'[15]

As well as being a pastime more popular with younger audiences than old, cinema-going was also, in the main, an urban phenomenon. This is not to say that people in rural areas did not go to the pictures - many clearly did, often to travelling cinemas. It is also probable that attendances would have been higher in these areas if there had been a greater choice of picture houses and a more regular supply of films.[16] However, of the twelve categories of employment defined in the 1943 survey, among only two was the proportion of those who did not attend the cinema over 50%: the 'retired and unoccupied' (63%), and 'agriculture' (58%). The essentially urban nature of the cinema-going habit is confirmed in a regional analysis. Whereas the highest proportion of regular movie-goers, and the lowest percentage of non-attenders, were to be found in London, the North and North West, cinema-going was least common in areas such as the South West and East Anglia.[17] As we shall see, explanations of cinema's popularity have frequently referred to its role as a provider of entertainment (or escapism) for industrial workers trapped in an increasingly monotonous daily, or weekly, routine. So pervasive was this belief that virtually all of the local social

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by Louis Moss and Katherine Box', an appendix to J.P. Mayer, *British Cinemas and their Audiences: Sociological Studies* (London, 1948), p. 253.

[15] P. Morton Shand, *Modern Theatres and Cinemas* (London, 1930), p. 9.

[16] A survey carried out in 1934 clearly showed that East Anglia, the West of England and North Wales had fewer cinemas than more industrialised areas, and that they were smaller in size. Simon Rowson, 'A Statistical Survey of the Cinema Industry in Great Britain in 1934', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, XCIX (1936), pp. 67-119.

surveys conducted in this period which concerned themselves with the cinema were of urban areas.[18] Furthermore, since the cinema arrived later in rural districts[19], there would have been a higher proportion of the population in these areas who had not grown up with the silver screen, and for whom the cinema-going habit was only slowly established.

Apart from the elderly, and those in rural areas, few other groups could be identified as unlikely to attend the cinema. It could certainly be argued that those belonging to the middle and upper-middle classes tended not to go to the cinema regularly, but this is not to say they did not go at all. According to the Wartime Social Survey it was the lower social groups, whether identified by income or education, which contained the highest proportion of both regular cinema-goers *and* of those who never went. The middle classes, it seems, while avoiding the regular screen fare presented in cinemas on a weekly or twice-weekly basis, were less inclined to shun film-going altogether.[20] For this social group the cinema was just one of a range of leisure pursuits that might take up an evening. Other options, such as a visit to the theatre or a meal at a restaurant, would seldom have been undertaken by those lower down the social scale. (Alternative working-class leisure activities, such as the pub, dog track or football match were essentially male preserves). Further, the prospect of spending the evening at home would have been considerably more appealing for those who lived in warm, spacious and comfortable houses than for working-class families who lived in rather less lavish accommodation.

Among the working-class the amount of money available for leisure activities, and also the range of options, were more limited. Whether cinema-going was a habit (as it was for many young people) or an occasional evening out (as for married couples with young children) it would seldom have been one of a wide range of possible options. One of the more cogent suggestions which has been put forward to

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[17] 'The Cinema Audience', pp. 258, 261.
[18] For example, D.C. Jones, *The Social Survey of Merseyside* (Liverpool, 1934); H. Llewellyn Smith *et al.* (eds.), *New Survey of London Life and Labour* (1934); B Seebohm Rowntree, *Poverty and Progress* (1941); the Carnegie Trust studies of youth unemployment in Glasgow, Liverpool and Cardiff (1941).
[19] In a study of slate quarrying communities in north west Wales it has been argued that it was from 'the early twenties on' that cinema-going became firmly established in the area, and that 'magic lantern shows had been fairly common in the years before 1914'. Dafydd Roberts, 'The Slate Quarrying Communities of Caernarfonshire and Merioneth, 1911-1913', PhD Thesis (Aberystwyth, 1982), p. 477.
[20] 32% of those in the lower economic group never went to the cinema compared with 27% in the higher. More strikingly, 33% of those not educated above elementary level claimed never to go to the cinema compared with just 18% of university graduates. See 'The Cinema Audience', pp. 257-8.

explain the level of the cinema's popularity, especially among the working-class, is that the buildings themselves acted as a form of community centre. This argument, which is considered in more detail below, posits that when going to the cinema one would be in familiar surroundings with people one knew. It was the sense of community as much as the films themselves, therefore, which attracted regular cinema-goers. With this being so, for those working-class people who were not usually film-fans, and therefore not part of the 'cinema-going community', occasional visits to the cinema would have been a less appealing prospect. Non-cinema-goers, it would seem, found a sense of community and belonging in the pub, and were happy to ignore the movies altogether.

It should also be noted that as the mass-popularity of the cinema began to wane from the mid-1950s onwards, the social makeup of the cinema audience became much more evenly spread. As a much wider range of leisure pursuits presented themselves to the (young) working-class, such as rock and roll, expresso coffee bars and television, so the proportion of working-class *regular* attenders dropped, becoming comparable with those from other social groups. By the 1970s a transformation had occurred, with those in the AB social groups showing a higher propensity to attend the cinema than those in the DE categories.[21]

The presence of women in cinema audiences during the first half of this century has frequently been commented upon, both by contemporaries and historians. As Roger Manvell put it, 'The old fairground showman who put a notice outside his little travelling cinema saying that his films were "refined and pleasing to ladies" obviously had the right idea: soon the ladies were eating and drinking dainty teas when they met their friends at the picture palace.'[22] In a much more recent study of cinema-going Stephen Ridgewell has argued that 'it was working-class women, housewives and young single girls who formed the backbone of the cinema audience.'[23] This, it has further been suggested, was reflected in the nature of the British films being made. The films most popular with British audiences during and immediately after the Second World War, for example, were costume dramas such as *Madonna of the Seven Moons* (1944) and *The Wicked Lady* (1946), which are often

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[21] Corrigan, 'Film Entertainment as Ideology and Pleasure', p. 34.
[22] Manvell, *A Seat*, p. 22.
[23] Ridgewell, 'South Wales and the Cinema in the 1930s', p. 97.

described as 'womens' pictures'.[24] By the 1950s, interestingly, this trend had apparently been reversed as war and adventure films such as *The Dam Busters* (1955) and *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) became ever more prominent.

The availability of this form of mass entertainment for a female audience is certainly one of the more significant features of cinema's development. It seems that women, who had fewer leisure opportunities than men in this period, formed the majority in most cinema audiences. There has been a tendency, however, for the popularity of the cinema with females to be over-emphasised. According to one social survey carried out in the 1930s 'It is estimated that 70 per cent. of the weekly audience consists of girls and women. Men tend to go only when they have nothing better to do, or when they have a girl friend to take out. Girls, on the other hand, go by themselves, or with other girls, or with their men friends.'[25] In their broad survey of modern Britain, similarly, historians S. Glynn and A. Booth casually assert that cinema attendance was 'mainly female'.[26] Such sweeping claims, though not completely without foundation, do require a certain amount of qualification.

There are relatively few studies which have attempted to break down the cinema audience along gender lines. The evidence from the Wartime Social Survey suggests that while among women there is a higher proportion of regular cinema-goers, slightly more men were occasional attenders. For both men and women the proportion who never attended the cinema were in a distinct minority. This evidence (presented in more detail in the table below) suggests that similar numbers of men and women were cinema-goers, but that women usually went more regularly.

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[24] See, for example, Sue Aspinall, 'Women, Realism and Reality in British Films 1943-53', in Porter and Curran (eds.) *British Cinema History* (London, 1983), pp. 272-293; Sue Harper, *Picturing the Past: The Rise and Fall of the British Costume Film* (London, 1994); Pam Cook, *Fashioning the Nation: Costume and Identity in British Cinema* (London, 1996).

[25] H.L. Smith (ed.), *The New Survey of London Life and Labour*, Vol. 9, *Life and Leisure* (London, 1935), p. 46. Ridgewell, 'South Wales and the Cinema in the 1930s', p. 97, argues that 'The cinema was equally popular among the women of industrial South Wales'.

[26] S. Glynn and A. Booth, *Modern Britain: An Economic and Social History* (London, 1995), p. 29.

Table 3.2: 'How often do you go to the cinema at this time of year?'[27]

	Age:	14-17	18-40	41-45	46-65	Over 65
		%	%	%	%	%
Once a week or more	Men	76	38	24	15	5
	Women	81	45	28	19	5
Less than once a week	Men	21	43	48	40	26
	Women	15	36	43	42	25
Not at all	Men	2	19	27	43	69
	Women	2	18	28	38	70
Sample	Men	151	841	378	897	193
	Women	153	1,527	336	795	261

This certainly seems to be the case with adults (of all age groups) but the situation is apparently somewhat different with younger children - who were also regular cinema-goers.[28] Docherty, Morrison and Tracey have claimed that children demonstrated a 'quite extraordinary level of engagement and involvement' with the cinema. The clearest reflection of this was to be found in the cinema clubs (which were particularly popular in the 1940s), and which 'tied the cinema to every aspect of a child's life.'[29] These clubs, however, appear to have been significantly more popular with boys than girls. One study of children's leisure activities found that in the age group 11-14, only 25.9% of girls were members of a cinema club, compared with 38.5% of boys.[30] Part of the reason for this may have been that the clubs screened films which appealed particularly to boys, such as westerns and adventure pictures, as opposed to romance.[31] Yet it was not necessarily just the cinema clubs which were more popular with boys than with girls. The same study, in contrast to the Wartime Social Survey, found 'that 78.3 per cent. of the boys and 74.1 per cent. of the girls of fourteen years

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[27] The table comes from 'The Cinema Audience', p. 255. The 'time of year' was during the summer months, traditionally a quiet period for cinema attendance. There is no evidence, however, that the social or gender composition of the audience was significantly different at this time.

[28] Rowntree suggested that 'Fully half the people who attend cinemas are children and young people, and *of the adults* about 75 per cent. are women' (emphasis added), B. Seebohm Rowntree, *Poverty and Progress: A Second Social Survey of York*, (London, 1941), p. 413. Similarly, in Merseyside it was found that '*Of the married*, women go more than their husbands' (emphasis added), D. Caradog Jones (ed.), *The Social Survey of Merseyside: Vol. III* (Liverpool and London, 1934), p. 281.

[29] Docherty, Morrison and Tracey, *The Last Picture Show?*, pp. 18-19.

[30] Mary Stewart, *The Leisure Activities of Schoolchildren* (London, c.1947).

[31] Conversely, it may have been precisely because boys formed the bulk of cinema club membership that these films were the ones most regularly shown.

and over went to the cinema once or more a week.'[32] Among younger children, it seems that boys were more likely to be cinema enthusiasts than girls. It was in later childhood and adolescence that girls' cinema attendance began to outstrip that of boys. When children are taken into account, and there is no reason why they should not be, estimates of female cinema domination ought to be revised.

Cinema-going, for adults and children alike, was very largely a social activity, often involving families and couples. The fact that cinemas were the first public places of entertainment to which women had equal access must have made females more conspicuous to contemporary observers - particularly since single young women were the most regular attenders. The overall gender balance of cinema audiences does seem to have been weighted in favour of females, but it is unclear whether they formed as much as 70% of the total audience. There is no reliable evidence for the gender distribution of cinema audiences in Wales, but there are grounds for believing that the image of the typical female cinema-goer in Britain is less suitably applied to Wales. All of the evidence considered so far has suggested that young, working-class women were the most regular cinema-attenders. This is borne out by the distribution of cinema-goers into occupational groups by the WSS. The two groups which contained the highest proportion of regular cinema-devotees were 'clerical/secretarial' and 'light manufacturing inc. munitions workers'. These were groups containing a high proportion of young female labour. Housewives contained a far lower proportion of frequent cinema-goers. Yet it is commonly accepted that in Wales the levels of female employment were considerably below the national average throughout this period.[33]

A multitude of young Welsh women had no option but to leave home in order to find work between the wars, often in the Midlands or the south east of England. The popular image of Welsh women in this period was that of devoted mother and scrupulous housewife - the 'Welsh Mam' in fact. This was precisely the opposite image of womanhood to the young working women, with no commitments to house and home, money to spend and time to enjoy themselves. It was such women as these, with makeup and hairstyles modelled on those of the stars: the 'factory girls looking

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[32] *Ibid.*, p. 9.

[33] Economic activity rates for women in Wales were 23% in 1921 and 21.5% in 1931. The corresponding figures for England and Wales as a whole were 32.3% and 34.2% respectively.

like actresses' to borrow Priestley's phrase[34], who were most associated with cinema-going in this period.

This is not to say, of course, that cinema was not popular with Welsh women, it clearly was - a point which ought to force us to see beyond the myth of the 'Welsh Mam'. The difference between the popular stereotype and the lived experience of Welsh women is hinted at in the recollection of one regular cinema-goer from Pen-y-graig:

> Mind, my parents didn't allow any make-up, not before the age of eighteen: it was strictly forbidden. So you would put it on after leaving the house and then wipe it all off before you got back home again.[35]

It still needs to be recognised, however, that the opportunities for, and experience of women in Wales in this period was in many respects quite different from that of women in the more affluent areas of the country. There simply could not have been so many 'factory girls looking like actresses' in Wales: there were not as many factories. It may be unwise to assume that young working women would have formed as large a proportion of the total cinema audience in Wales as in the rest of the country. What does seem apparent, is that while certain groups were more regular attenders, the broad appeal of the cinema, especially for those in urban areas, was remarkably wide, cutting across divisions of class, gender, and for the most part, age.

The appeal of the buildings themselves

Having established the diversity of the social and economic backgrounds from which the cinema audience was drawn, it is important to explore what attracted them. It should be stressed from the outset that they were not all attracted for the same reason, nor were different groups drawn to the same cinema. Cinemas should certainly not be regarded as institutions within which social distinctions were forgotten. People from diverse backgrounds generally did not sit alongside one another enjoying a common leisure interest. Before going on to examine the appeal of the cinema in this period, particularly in Wales, it is first necessary to outline some of the differences in

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[34] J.B. Priestley, *English Journey* (London, 1934), p. 401.

appeal between different types of cinema, and within cinemas themselves.[36] In the previous chapter a distinction was drawn between different types of cinemas in terms of their architectural qualities. Similar distinctions can be made between the various types of halls in terms of the audience they were most likely to attract.

Differences between the halls

The most prestigious cinemas - the large first-run halls - such as Cardiff's Capitol and the Plaza in Swansea were the ones which most consciously sought to attract a better class of patron. One of the ways in which they did this was to offer a range of facilities other than just the films themselves. These were places where one could go to eat (or at least have afternoon tea); where live musical (and sometimes variety) entertainment was provided; and where a host of page boys and usherettes attended to the customer's every need. The interior design of most first run halls, both in terms of comfort and cleanliness, and the notable feature of the balcony - out of the ordinary price range of the working-class - were clearly supposed to appeal to the more affluent sections of the community. Indeed, the prices of admission charged by these large, town centre halls also helped to set them apart from the smaller fleapits or suburban halls. Cinemas such as the Odeon, Park Hall and Capitol in Cardiff charged between 9d and 2s for admission by the end of the 1930s. This is hardly extortionate, and the majority of seats were of the cheaper variety. Yet at two and a half times the price of the cheapest, the most expensive balcony seats were beyond the means of the working-class cinema-goer, at least on a regular basis. Cinemas such as these made little effort to appeal to the poorest sections of the community. The cheapest seats at Cardiff's Capitol were more than double the price of those at the City's Central cinema.[37] This is not to say that the more prestigious halls were inaccessible to working-class cinema-goers altogether. Certainly, it would have been beyond the means of the average teenager to pay 1/6 (or even 1s) to go to the cinema twice a week or more, but as somewhere to go for a date, or a special occasion, such cinemas were ideal.

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[35] Mildred Evans (b. 1920), quoted in Jeffrey Grenfell-Hill (ed.), *Growing Up In Wales: Collected Memories of Childhood in Wales, 1895-1939* (Llandysul, 1996), pp. 169-170.
[36] A more detailed examination of the design of these buildings is undertaken in chapter two.
[37] The cheapest seats in the Central were 4d compared with 9d in the Capitol in the late 1930s, these prices are taken from the *Kinematograph Year Book* (1939).

The largest, and most well-known of these halls were in the biggest towns or cities, but most of the smaller Welsh towns would also have had a 'leading cinema'. The Odeons in Wrexham, Colwyn Bay and Llanelli, the Majestic in Port Talbot (later to become an Odeon), and the Castle in Merthyr are a few examples. As shown in the previous chapter, however, in some parts of Wales such prestige halls simply did not exist. One cinema-goer from Treorchy, for example, remembers that:

> It was a great treat to go to Cardiff to the Pictures and see the Organist rise out of the floor before the screen playing the cinema organ. We did not have this luxury in the Rhondda, although one of the cinemas in Aberdare had such an organ and all the local girls fell for the handsome organist.[38]

Another cinema enthusiast, from Anglesey, has recalled occasions when she would take the Saturday train to Bangor to visit the Plaza cinema.[39] Such outings were clearly regarded as being very different from a visit to the local fleapit.

This brings us to the type of cinema buildings placed in the third category in the last chapter. In popular reminiscences of the cinema, and cinema-going, terms like 'fleapit' and 'bug-house' recur over and over again. They are as much a part of cinema's history in this period as the 'dream palace'. Such buildings were almost inevitably survivors from pre-war days. They were not necessarily the oldest buildings used for showing films. They were, however, early examples of purpose built cinemas erected to meet a working-class demand for moving pictures, the longevity of which could not have been predicted. In south Wales particularly, a considerable proportion of these were able to survive, with minimal alterations, into and beyond the inter-war period. They did so by providing a very different service from the larger, more prestigious halls.

The minor luxuries which cinema audiences had come to expect in the newly-built or refurbished halls were not to be found in the pre-war buildings. The terms 'fleapit' and 'bug house' - often used as terms of endearment - did not originate by accident. One Swansea cinema-goer recalled a particularly notorious hall: 'The Rialto was bad. The fleas used to live in the upholstery ... on the odd occasion when you got

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[38] Mrs Cora Edwards, letter to the author, 11 February 1997.
[39] Mrs Judy Godfrey Brown, letter to the author, 13 February 1997.

home you found you "had company"'.[40] In Holyhead, the Cybi cinema was apparently known to locals as the 'sit and scratch'.[41] Regular patrons of such cinemas were even known to turn a hall's reputation to their advantage. 'My father had a good technique for getting a seat in those crowded days when you couldn't get in', recalled one gentleman, 'he and his brother would start scratching themselves; in ten minutes they'd have seats.'[42]

Dating from a period when cinema-going was an almost exclusively working-class leisure pursuit, these cinemas made little attempt to broaden their appeal. Those people who would willingly pay 1/6 or 2s to watch a film in a satisfactorily clean and comfortable environment were not accommodated. The fleapits catered for the other end of the market. By charging just a few pence for the cheapest seats, these cinemas cost significantly less to attend than the more prestigious halls. They were also second or third-run halls, which meant that they did not show the latest new releases.

The appeal of these cinemas can be explained largely by the fact that they cost so little to enter. For those on very low incomes, or the unemployed, the local fleapit would have been the only cinema cheap enough to visit regularly. It comes as little surprise that Wales, which was one of the most depressed regions of Britain throughout the inter-war period, should have a high proportion of such cinemas. It was in the south Wales valleys however, the worst affected area within Wales, that their presence was most noticeable. As Stephen Ridgewell has remarked, 'In apparently sharp contrast to the large, modern constructions which were to become a symbol of the "new" Britain emerging at this time, the great majority of valleys cinemas were small (under 1000 seats) and old (built before 1914) - the proverbial "fleapits" in fact.'[43] Whereas many valleys towns saw virtually nothing in the way of modern cinema provision between the wars, in the majority of Welsh towns elsewhere the old halls had to compete with a number of new rivals. Had the popularity of the cinema been determined entirely by peoples' desire to see the latest big release, such halls would not have survived. Yet survive they did, often by screening second or third run pictures the identity of which the audience might not have known until taking their

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[40] Quoted in Stephen Ridgewell, 'South Wales and the Cinema in the 1930s', *Welsh History Review*, Vol. 17 (1995), p. 597.
[41] Mrs Judy Godfrey Brown, *op cit.*
[42] Professor Graham Owens, letter to the author, 22 February 1997.
[43] Ridgewell, 'South Wales', p. 594.

seats. Visits to these cinemas were not special events. It is also unlikely that the individual films on offer would have been the main attraction. These were local cinemas that provided an evening's entertainment, at little cost, for a public who went to the picture house more as a matter of routine than out of any desire to see a particular film. In its early days the cinema had been an almost exclusively working-class leisure activity. The existence of the fleapit halls throughout the inter-war years ensured that those from deprived backgrounds were able to continue going to the pictures, even in times of real hardship. The fact that so many survived into the 1950s demonstrates their importance to local communities.

The prestigious first-run halls and the ageing fleapits represent, in terms of cinema provision, extremes of splendour and squalor. During the inter-war years, however, a number of halls were constructed that fell somewhere between these extremes: the halls placed in the second category in chapter two. These modern 'super-cinemas', usually situated in suburban areas or small towns, were far more impressively designed and decorated than the older fleapits, but they served a broadly similar function. Their significance lay in the fact that they improved the conditions in which films were seen by many working-class audiences, and not that they attracted a new, more sophisticated public. Their admission prices of between 6d and 1/3 by the end of the 1930s were more comparable with the local fleapit than the main first-run halls. The modern suburban cinemas, such as those run by the Splott circuit in Cardiff were second-run halls; their twice-weekly programmes of old, or low budget films, however, could hardly be considered as entertainment designed to appeal to the middle-classes. In terms of design and marketing these 'super-cinemas' may have appeared to be buildings which could appeal to the more respectable film-goer. Beneath the cosmetics, however, such details as the price of admission and the selection of films offered, mark them out as essentially working-class institutions.

The difference between the Splott cinemas and their city centre rivals is clearly demonstrated in their respective advertisements in the local press. Adverts for the first run halls were more eye-catching, usually featuring a picture of the leading star(s) in the main feature - which generally stayed for a whole week. An advert for five Splott cinemas, by contrast, would take up approximately one third as much space as one for, say, the Capitol. Within this limited space would be the names of all the films showing in each cinema - a considerable number given that they all screened double

features and had a twice weekly change of programme. Whereas the Capitol, and other first run halls made a real effort to market themselves - usually around the films and stars they featured - adverts for the Splott circuit, like those of the Olympia, Globe, Coliseum and Central cinemas, merely provided information. It is unlikely that many people would have been attracted to these cinemas on the strength of the adverts alone. For those living locally who were regulars at these cinemas, however, these adverts provided useful information.

Differences within the halls

The distinctions which existed between different types of cinema seating warrant closer attention in themselves. Inequalities in terms of comfort, viewing and sound distribution were a feature of many cinemas throughout this period. Indeed, social distinctions were just as likely to be marked by where one sat in a particular cinema, as by the type of cinema one attended. In smaller towns particularly, where the choice of cinemas was more limited, there was a greater likelihood that a range of social groups would be gathered under one roof. This did not mean, however, that they enjoyed a shared experience.

In the majority of cinemas in Wales, where the modern super-cinemas were less common than in much of Britain, there was a discernible difference in terms of comfort and convenience between the cheap seats and the more expensive ones within individual halls. In most cinemas the cheap seats were situated at the front of the hall, and those who sat in them to looked up at the screen from an awkward angle. For those unfortunate enough to be seated at the sides of the auditorium the problems must have been even worse. In some of the older cinemas (usually those that were converted theatres) there were also restricted viewing seats available. In a number of these older theatres the cheapest seats were not to be found in the front stalls, but in 'the gods'. The Coliseum in Aberystwyth, built in 1906, is one such example. Its layout was recalled by a former patron:

> There were the stalls, and an upper and lower circle. The upper circle, affectionately known as 'The Gods' didn't have any seats, just a bench which ran around the horseshoe shape of the circle, and if you sat up there, for the princely sum of one shilling you got a nasty crick in your neck from trying to see the whole of the screen.[44]

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[44] Mrs Beryl Ellis, her recollections are held at the Museum of Welsh Life (MWL), file no. 3682/4.

As this account implies, the discomfort incurred by sitting in such seats was not only a result of straining to see the screen, but also of the nature of the seating itself. Long wooden benches were a feature of many cinemas throughout this period. As well as being uncomfortable to sit on, these benches had the added disadvantage (or benefit for unscrupulous managers) of being able to accommodate a high density of people. Gwyn Thomas, in typical style, has described the extreme overcrowding that could, and almost certainly did at times ensue.

> There was also a strange but profitable system of 'stacking' members of the audience. At the back of the cinema were a few rows of benches. Unsuspecting people would be shown to a seat at one end of the bench and room would be made either by pushing the person at the other end off his seat or by squashing up the row until it bulged visibly in the middle.[45]

For many people, clearly, visits to the cinema were not an opportunity to experience luxuries that could not have been enjoyed at home. There were those, however, who were determined to sit in the more comfortable seats, whether they could afford it or not. In Treorchy, apparently, 'It was common for boys to pay a penny for the seats at the front of the Pavilion cinema and then crawl further back to the tuppennies when the lights were lowered.'[46]

For those wishing to avoid such obvious discomfort and inconvenience by more legitimate means the rear of the stalls would usually contain moderately priced seats (not benches) which were more comfortable and afforded a better view. The difference in price between these seats and the cheapest ones, although perhaps only two or three pence, was clearly significant for many people, particularly if they were regular cinema-goers. The best view of all, and the most comfortable seating, was to be found in the balcony - with the front balcony seats the most expensive of all. The difference in the price of seats from one section of the cinema to another, however, cannot wholly be explained by their relative level of comfort or convenience. Even in the suburban halls of the Splott circuit - which prided themselves on providing good

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[45] Gwyn Thomas, quoted in *South Wales Echo*, 18 May 1971.

[46] Mrs Cora Edwards, letter to the author, 11 February 1997. Gwyn Thomas has recalled similar activity in local cinema: 'Downstairs a lot of the audience seemed to have something akin to a lemming instinct. Given half a chance they'd get down on the floor and crawl away under the seats, emerging through a forest of legs in a completely different section of the cinema', see *South Wales Echo*, 18 May 1971.

seats *throughout* the hall - the most expensive seats were almost three times the price of the cheapest.

The reason why some people were willing to pay up to three or four times more for their seat was not just a matter of sight-lines or comfort, but also of social status. The only reason people would have chosen to sit in the cheapest seats of all, particularly in older cinemas, was because they could not afford to sit elsewhere. These seats were therefore filled almost exclusively by people from the lowest socio-economic groups. This, in itself, would have deterred some others from wanting to sit there in order to save money. When visiting the cinema with family or friends on a weekday evening, there may have been no second thought before opting to sit in the cheap seats. When going on a date with a partner, however, (and cinemas were usually the most popular venues for courting couples in Wales, as elsewhere), the situation would probably be very different. A young man hoping to impress a new girlfriend would certainly be reluctant to take her to the cheapest seats. The infamous double seats for courting couples, of course, were situated toward the rear of most halls.

Even in cinemas where the cheapest seats were not that uncomfortable there could still be some form of stigma attached to them. One regular patron of Pwllheli's Palladium cinema, ('which was considered quite classy as there was a café in the building'), has recalled that 'the price then was either one shilling or one and three pence. We never liked to sit in the shilling seats as that was lowering the tone.'[47] A similar sentiment was expressed by a Porth man who recalled being taken his father,

> to the Central, a better and higher form of theatre. It cost 2d. and we usually sat upstairs in the first row of the balcony. The show fare was as much up-to-date as possible and we were quite interested in the more sophisticated products of Hollywood . . . It was quite nice to go into a comfortable, good smelling building, without the crowds of noisy street urchins. Also, the manager had a daughter in my class in school and I was quite attracted by her.[48]

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[47] Mrs. Brenda Roberts, letter to the author, 12 February, 1997. According to Brian Hornsey, the Palladium was an 800 seat cinema opened in 1935, he claims that in the later 1940s prices ranged from 9d up to 3/-, which suggests that the difference between the 1s and 1/3 seats was probably only very marginal. See Hornsey, *Cinemas of North Wales*, p. 73.

[48] John Prior (b. 1914), quoted in Grenfell-Hill, *Growing Up*, p. 133. It seems more likely that the balcony seats would have cost 2s rather than 2d.

The new friends he could now associate with in the more expensive sections of the hall was clearly as important a consideration for this youngster as the social group he was leaving behind.

The most obvious and visible sign of the social division within cinemas was the existence of the balcony. A middle-class couple with a comfortable income would probably never consider sitting in the front stalls, just as a working-class family with much less money could seldom afford to 'go upstairs'. It is clear, therefore, that these two groups were physically separated, and they formed quite distinct audiences, albeit of the same film and in the same cinema. J.B. Priestley's assertion in 1934 that cinemas, along with the wireless and other 'very modern things' were 'absolutely democratic, making no distinctions whatever between their patrons' must clearly be called into question.[49] The very expression 'cheap seats' itself conjures up images of the sort of people who might sit in them.

To the manager of Porth's Central cinema the social and cultural distinction between the balcony patrons and those who sat in the rest of the auditorium was at times all too evident. The visit of a touring opera company to neighbouring Tonypandy, for instance, provided a significant counter-attraction - but only for a certain section of the audience:

> I am afraid that our circle patrons have absented us this week. The reason is, I think, the visit of the Carl Rosa Co. to 'Pandy. Opera has a distinct appeal here and as it is changed every evening it looks as though we will be very badly 'let down'. It was quite an unnatural thing to see the circle almost empty on a Monday evening while the other part was full.[50]

It was not just between different sections of the hall that prices varied, but also from one showing to another. Saturday matinee programmes were almost inevitably cheaper than evening ones, and usually attracted a very different (younger) audience. The atmosphere within a cinema could change significantly from afternoon to evening. The commissionaire and usherettes patrolled the aisles vigilantly in the evenings, while youngsters were able to voice their excitement more freely earlier in the day. A former Treorchy cinema-goer made the point succinctly: 'On the whole, the

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[49] Priestley, *English Journey*, p. 402.
[50] G. Robinson to A. Andrews, 23 November 1920, Glamorgan Record Office (GRO), D/D A/B 18/5/86.

behaviour in the evening performances was quite good, it was at the penny rush which all the kids attended on a Saturday morning that we could make our feelings felt.'[51] As well as being quieter, some cinemas were also much cleaner during evening performances - as one lady has recalled:

> The picture-house in Tonypandy wasn't very grand. For the matinee you would go to your seat to the crunch, crunch of shells: monkey-nuts - peanuts - eaten, with the shells thrown down on the floor. Every Saturday afternoon children would be admitted without their parents, but not in the evening when it was more sedate. You had to be with your parents in the evening, so the place was quieter - they had cleaned up the nut shells too - so it wasn't crunch, crunch, as you moved your feet.[52]

The distinctions between matinee and evening performances, between different types of cinema, and the varieties of seating provision within the halls themselves all point to the diverse function performed by the cinema for different people. A broad range of social groups were drawn to the cinema, and they were entertained in contrasting environments – even within the same building. It remains now to consider the forces which attracted them.

The Films and their Stars

Ostensibly, at least, people went to the cinema in order to watch films. As Roger Manvell put it, 'Though they both depend on each other for their main welfare, the film could, in the end, exist without the cinema, but nobody supposes that the cinema could exist without the film.'[53] In fact, as will be seen, it is an oversimplification to attribute the enormous appeal of the cinema *entirely* to the films being shown. But certainly the cinema's popularity grew alongside technical and artistic developments in the field of film-making.

The cinema has been described as the last invention of a machine age and as the first art form of the twentieth century.[54] The importance of technology in its creation and development is signified by the fact that it was the mechanical device of the cinematograph that gave its name to the industry which developed in the wake of

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[51] Mrs. Cora Edwards, letter to the author, 11 February 1997.
[52] Mildred Evans (b.1920), quoted in Grenfell-Hill, *Growing Up*, p. 169.
[53] Roger Manvell, *A Seat at the Cinema* (London, 1951), p. 13.
[54] Ian Christie, *The Last Machine: Early Cinema and the Birth of the Modern World* (London, 1994).

its invention. A device to project moving images, however, had not been developed with feature films in mind. Early pioneers such as Janssen, Muybridge and Marey, were much more interested in astronomy or animal locomotion, than in story-telling or entertainment.[55] Once perfected, the greatest potentialities of the new invention were felt to be its ability to record important events for posterity, and its role as an aid to education. The early uses to which the cinematograph was put certainly bear little resemblance to the production of modern feature films - with which it has now almost become synonymous. The earliest films, lasting little more than a minute, featured such events as a train pulling out of a station. It was the sheer novelty value of seeing pictures move which first attracted audiences to the showman's booth. What prevented this novelty from wearing off were developments in film-making. Not only did films become longer, but they evolved beyond a mere recording of events and developed a narrative structure. Perhaps the most important development in this respect was the use of editing, which arguably did more than anything else to establish the film as an art form. It both opened up new possibilities for film-makers, and provided them with a much more powerful means of expressing their ideas. The point has made by, among others, the great Russian director Vsevolod Pudovkin:

> Editing is the language of the film director. Just as in living speech, so, one may say, in editing: there is a word - the piece of exposed film, the image; a phrase - the combination of these pieces. Only by his editing methods can one judge a director's individuality.[56]

The work of directors such as D.W. Griffith in America and Sergi Eisenstein in the Soviet Union is widely felt to have extended the possibilities of the film to a new level. The importance of such developments was not simply that they helped to attract larger audiences (although the films of Griffith and Eisenstein were remarkably popular within their own countries), but that they also attracted a new type of audience. Prior to the period covered by this thesis, the cinema had generally been regarded by educated minds as the latest form of idle amusement for the masses: a fad which would soon pass. By the end of the 1920s it was quite clear to a body of 'highbrow' critics that cinema was much more than this: it was the first genuine art

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[55] See Michael Chanan, *The Dream That Kicks: The Prehistory and Early Years of Cinema in Britain* (London, 1996 edition), p. 8.
[56] V.I. Pudovkin, quoted in Roger Manvell, *Film* (Harmondsworth, 1946 edition), p. 45.

form of the twentieth century. The Film Society had been formed in London in 1925, counting among its members such notables as H.G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw and Ivor Montagu;[57] serious publications dealing with the cinema and its history began to emerge;[58] this was also the period in which serious film criticism began to flourish.[59] Thanks largely to developments in film-making, cinema's place in mainstream society was established. As Roger Manvell confidently asserted in 1951: 'To this day the social status of our cinemas varies widely with the districts in which they operate, but the social respectability of the cinema as a whole is as assured in this country as that of the popular press.'[60]

While developments in film *technique*, (new editing styles, principles of documentary film-making) were providing the medium with artistic credibility among highbrow critics; new *technical* developments (sound films, colour stock) were helping to boost further its popular appeal. Those films which were able to make best use of new technologies, such as *The Jazz Singer* (1927) with sound, and *Gone With the Wind* (1939) with colour, were enormously popular. While technological developments played a significant role in determining the popularity of individual *films*, they only go part of the way towards explaining the appeal of the *cinema*.

The figures for cinema attendance in Britain in this period (table 3.1) show that audiences reached their peak in the war years and just after. This had little if anything to do with the technical or artistic quality of the films, but reflected a greater demand in wartime for the sort of escapist entertainment the cinema had traditionally provided. Throughout our period a large proportion of most cinema audiences were made up of people who attended as a matter of routine, and who were prepared to watch whatever films were provided for them. The cinema was the attraction, not the films themselves. The majority of cinemas, therefore, were local ones which catered for a relatively unselective audience of regular attenders. Had the films themselves been central to the cinema's popularity, then those halls which were not first run cinemas, and which did not have access to the latest new releases, would have struggled to survive. Yet the first run halls, which went to some length to advertise

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[57] See Jen Samson, 'The Film Society, 1925-1939', in Charles Barr (ed.) *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema* (London, 1986), pp. 306-313.
[58] For example, Terry Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights: A History of the Motion Picture* (London, 1926).
[59] See chapter five.

their films, were in a distinct minority - especially in Wales. The success of the local halls, which charged very low prices for old or less well known films that changed twice, or sometimes even three times a week, suggests that the quality of the film alone is insufficient to explain the cinema's appeal. Indeed, the existence of over forty news cinemas in Britain by 1950 is evidence that that cinemas could, in fact, survive without feature films.[61]

I do not wish to suggest that films were entirely irrelevant to the cinema's appeal. If the entertainment provided on cinema screens had not been popular then the medium itself would not have achieved such mass-appeal. One of the reasons that films *were* so popular with audiences was the presence of stars. In most recollections of cinema-going the names of actors and actresses recur much more frequently than those of the films. It was the stars with whom audiences felt they could identify, not just the characters they played or the situations in which they found themselves on screen. This comes across not just from oral testimony, it becomes plainly apparent when browsing through any of the movie magazines which were sold in their thousands throughout this period.

As Richard Dyer has pointed out 'Stars represent typical ways of behaving, feeling and thinking in contemporary society, ways that have been socially, culturally, historically constructed.'[62] They have a particularly important role to play in industrial, capitalist society by highlighting the individual in a world of 'mass' production and consumption. The phenomena of national and international entertainment stars, moreover, advanced greatly with the arrival of cinema. (Theatre and music-hall favourites had an appeal which was geographically limited to a much greater extent). The stars were clearly more than just actors or actresses, they were cultural icons. This certainly helps to explain why the cinema has been such a popular medium of entertainment, but it does not explain why it was *particularly* popular from the 1920s to the early 1950s. More significant in this respect is that for the generations who grew up in this period, the cinema was virtually the sole provider of stars. This was not so in the later 1950s and 1960s when popular music stars such as Bill Haley,

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[60] Manvell, *A Seat*, p. 22.
[61] The news cinemas, usually situated near stations or meeting places, showed a continuous programme of newsreel films. They proved popular until the widespread arrival of television. PEP, *The British Film Industry*, p. 199.
[62] Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (Basingstoke, 1986), p. 17.

Buddy Holly and, of course, Elvis Presley,[63] came to rival the older generation of screen idols, which included Humphrey Bogart, James Stewart, Norma Shearer, Ingrid Bergman, and specifically for British audiences, James Mason, Stewart Granger and Margaret Lockwood.

The argument that social and economic conditions underpinned cinema's mass-appeal is, indeed, strengthened when the period of its decline is taken into account. A PEP report in 1952, which highlighted the drop in attendance that had occurred since 1946,[64] made a pertinent observation:

> No one can seriously contend that the entertainment value of films changed so suddenly as to be entirely responsible for so considerable a decrease. It seems probable that the re-opening of other forms of popular entertainment, and the beginning of a return to peacetime living conditions, reduced the extraordinary dependence on the cinema as a form of recreation which was an undoubted feature of the war years.[65]

Far from mass-producing films of a diminishing technical or artistic standard which the public were no longer prepared to pay to see, the Hollywood studios tackled the problem of declining audiences in the 1950s by producing ever more colourful and expensive films, and by developing new technical innovations. This was the period of the classic Technicolor Hollywood musical. Films such as *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) and *White Christmas* (1954) are fondly remembered now as if they dated from the 'golden age' of the Hollywood studios: in fact they were part of an unsuccessful attempt to reverse the decline in cinema attendance, by emphasising the advantages of the big screen over television.[66] Other aspects of that attempt included the development of Cinemascope, Widescreen and 3-D films - all of which date from the 1950s. The ability of the major studios to produce high quality, popular entertainment clearly bore little relation to the broader appeal of the cinema as a whole. If this mass-appeal is to be properly understood, it is necessary to look beyond the films themselves.

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[63] Elvis did, of course, star in a number of successful films, however, it could easily be argued that the movies needed Elvis more than he needed them.
[64] The decline in cinema attendance between 1946 and the early 1950s, though real, was only gradual. The figures only began to nose-dive in the late 1950s and 1960s, partly, but by no means entirely, because of competition from television.
[65] PEP, *The British Film Industry*, p. 188.
[66] It is interesting that a number of films from the 1950s and 1960s featured scenes in which television was portrayed in a less than flattering light. See Charles Barr, 'Broadcasting and Cinema 2: Screens Within Screens', in Barr (ed.) *All Our Yesterdays*, pp. 206-224.

The Appeal of Pictures that Move

The remarkable popularity of the cinema had less to do with films than with moving images. Films are only one specific type of moving image: they are cultural artefacts which relatively few people feel the need to see on a weekly or twice weekly basis. Moving pictures, on the other hand, have an appeal which seems to be much more deep seated. The desire to watch moving pictures had existed long before the cinema was invented. Attempts to project images that move can be traced back to the seventeenth century with the development of the magic lantern. Throughout the nineteenth century numerous innovators strove to design machines that could more convincingly create an illusion of living pictures. The Phenakistoscope (1820s), the Zoetrope (1860s) and the Kinetoscope (1890s) were among the many devices developed for this purpose.[67] The goal of perfecting the recording and presentation of moving images was regarded by those involved as a scientific endeavour, not an artistic or commercial opportunity. Yet the public attention given to the many precursors of the cinema, and the huge audiences that flocked to early Kinetoscope and Cinematograph shows, suggest that the demand for moving pictures was highly developed before the 1890s. Michael Chanan argues that the cinema's astonishing growth in the first two decades of the twentieth century must be explained in terms of unsatisfied demand:

> The *sense* of unsatisfied demand lay in the baffling fact that, like the primary, basic material needs of human existence - for food, clothing, a dwelling and warmth - the demand for the cinema seemed to anticipate the particular means of satisfying it. This is an undeniable fact of social history.[68]

As well as pre-dating the invention of the cinematograph, the desire to see moving pictures showed no signs of abating when the cinema's appeal went into decline. The latter half of the twentieth century saw the development of a plethora of new techniques and (virtual) technologies which were intended to make the images presented on television screen or computer monitors appear more *real* than ever. The

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[67] A concise account of the development of these, and other machines pre-dating the Cinematograph, can be found in David Parkinson, *History of Film* (London and New York, 1995), pp. 7-22.

extent to which moving pictures became a feature of everyday life in twentieth century society, suggests that the cinema's role as a provider of moving images was much more important than the actual films themselves in explaining its popularity. According to this line of argument the remarkable *mass-appeal* of the medium up to the 1950s was due to the fact that the cinema was the only provider of moving pictures in the period.

This thesis examines the function performed by the cinema in Welsh society and seeks to emphasise the importance the social aspect of the cinema's appeal. The screen entertainment was, of course, what people went to the cinema to see, but it was the manner in which moving pictures were consumed that is of greater interest here. Why was it that cinemas were, for so long, the only places where moving images could be seen?

One reason, frequently commented upon by contemporaries and occasionally mentioned by historians, was that the cinema heightened the psychological effect of watching motion pictures. The darkened surroundings, huge screen and (often) comfortable seats were considered to have enhanced both the influence and the appeal of the cinema. Within this viewing environment the experience of watching a film was considered to be almost like a day-dream. Iris Barry argued it was this dream-like quality which made the cinema so much more popular than the theatre:

> The stage of the cinema is in the minds of the spectators. There is no such sense of separation as the theatre-goers experience. To go to the pictures is to purchase a dream. To go to the theatre is to buy an experience, and between experience and dream there is a vast difference ... we come out of the pictures soothed and drugged like sleepers wakened having half forgotten our own existence, hardly knowing our names.[69]

The association of the pictures with day-dreaming was quickly established in the film-goers vocabulary. The increasingly grand and luxurious halls were commonly referred to as 'dream palaces', and the American anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker coined the phrase 'dream factory' to describe the Hollywood studios.[70]

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[68] Michael Chanan, 'The Emergence of an Industry', in James Curran and Vincent Porter (eds.), *British Cinema History* (London, 1983), p. 45.
[69] Iris Barry, *Let's Go to the Pictures* (London, 1926), p. 31.
[70] Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain 1930-1939* (London, 1984); Hortense Powdermaker, *Hollywood the Dream Factory* (London, 1951).

The dream-like quality of cinema entertainment helps to explain not only its popularity, but also some of the opposition it aroused. There was certainly concern in some quarters that people were going to the pictures just to see moving images rather than to enjoy the artistic quality of films. Roger Manvell, in the passage below, expresses a sentiment which was frequently voiced by highbrow critics of the period:

> A person in control of his film-going will, if the queuing system at his cinema allows it, go in to view the picture he wants to see, and then leave the cinema unless the rest of the programme promises to be of sufficient interest to warrant his staying on. Merely to sit through any film for the sake of watching images passing over the screen is a habit which is more universal than we may imagine. The mental outlook it indicates is certainly rather a dull one. ... There should be special cinemas for the dull-eyed with a blank screen where they may be taught not to watch but to sleep.[71]

It was not just the lack of serious criticism being applied to *films* which was of concern, but the psychological effect which moving pictures could have on individuals, particularly children when they were in the cinema. One contributor to the *Penguin Film Review* felt that:

> The conditions of mass film showing bear a strong resemblance to those utilised when putting a subject under hypnosis. The warmth, the comfortable seats, the darkness and the fixation of moving objects upon a lighted screen: add to these the feeling of communication with other members of the audience and you have all the features which increase suggestibility, diminish logical thought and criticism, and enable opinions, sentiments and attitudes in the film to be accepted more easily by the audience.[72]

The thought that children could be easily influenced by the cinema was of particular concern. Writing of the serials, which were one of the highlights of the Saturday morning children's cinema clubs in the 1940s, the sociologist J.P. Mayer wrote:

> they are pernicious in their psychological effects, leaving the children at a high pitch of expectation for the next week's show, poisoning their day-dreams and, by an utterly artificial unreality, influencing their play.[73]

Mayer went on to suggest that the cinema clubs should be closed, and that young children should only be allowed to watch films made especially for their age group.

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[71] Manvell, *A Seat at the Cinema*, p. 60. This sort of criticism, it should be noted, was not confined to cinema audiences. Of equal concern were so-called 'tap-listeners' to the wireless.
[72] Gertrude Keir, 'Psychology and the Film', in *The Penguin Film Review*, 9, (1949), p. 68.

The psychological effect of the cinema has remained a subject for debate throughout this century, and is closely linked to the issue of censorship.[74]

Since the 1950s, the argument that the cinema's appeal can be explained in terms of the deeply felt need that it satisfies has been proposed less often. This, no doubt, is because the argument does very little to explain the decline of the cinema audience. The large screen, darkened surroundings and comfortable seats may have heightened the psychological impact of the movies, but this did not account for their fundamental appeal. It is interesting that historians of the early years of the cinema, such as Michael Chanan, are generally willing to accept that the cinema satisfied an important human (psychological) need, those who have studied the period of declining audiences do not. Docherty *et al* clearly state that 'In the 1940s habitual cinema-going was a social experience rather than the product or expression of a deep-seated psychological or cultural need.'[75] For the period covered here the cinema was the sole provider of a form of publicly consumed entertainment (in the form of motion pictures) which was popular, affordable and accessible to all. In this sense it did satisfy a 'deep-seated' need, which was both social and cultural. When other forms of entertainment became available which served a similar function, however, the cinema's role changed and its social significance declined.

In its heyday, people were attracted to the cinema no more because of the psychological effect of its dark environment and comfy seats than they were by individual films. As it was noted in the previous chapter, the local cinemas which catered for the most regular film-goers were seldom noted for their comfort. What people wanted was a cheap and convenient form of recreation which enabled them to forget about their problems and concerns. In this sense the cinema performed a similar function to the radio. As one woman from south Wales explained to Jack Jones in 1938: 'If it wasn't for the wireless, and a penn'orth of pictures once in a while, it's off our heads us women would have gone long ago.'[76] A visit to the cinema, therefore, was not usually a special event, but part of a regular routine. Local cinemas, by

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[73] J.P. Mayer, *Sociology of Film: Studies and Documents* (London, c.1946), p. 53.
[74] See chapter six.
[75] Docherty, Morrison and Tracey, *The Last Picture Show?*, p. 22.
[76] Jack Jones, 'Social Effects of the Coming of Broadcasting', manuscript in NLW, No. 146 (1938), p. 13.

providing a warm and familiar environment in which an evening's entertainment could be enjoyed, catered perfectly for this demand.

The Cinema-Going Experience

In 1930, P. Morton Shand wrote that:

> The cinema is a sort of public lounge ... one can drop in and out at will ... One can enjoy a little nap as easily as the luxury of a good laugh or a good cry. In wet weather it is an easy escape from the rain; in winter a means of keeping warm ... The cinema is a pastime and a distraction, an excuse for not doing something else or sitting listlessly at home.[77]

Similarly, Iris Barry claimed that 'you can walk into a picture-palace as easily as into your own kitchen ... the place becomes a sort of informal club.'[78] It was the cinema's informality, in contrast to, say, the theatre, which was often commented on by middle-class observers. For the likes of Mr. Shand it was most convenient to be able 'to drop into any old cinema, on any old pretext, at any old time and in any old clothes.'[79] For the poorest sections of the community the cinema's informality (and cheapness) was its most important feature.

The cinema's informality was certainly one of the most important reasons for its mass-appeal in Wales. A survey of young people in South Wales, published in 1941, sought to ascertain 'In what lies the special appeal of the cinema?' One of the responses received was that 'Because of the darkness, it is possible to go to the cinema after "slipping on your coat"'. Cinema was not only cheap, it was available to those who avoid other activities on the grounds that 'I haven't got the clothes to go in.'[80] This point was made explicitly by one gentleman recalling his youth in Abertillery, where even the local dance could be prohibitively expensive:

> The posh one was the Hospital Dance when it came round, at two shillings a ticket - but we didn't have the right clothes for it anyway. We would go to the pictures and see stars like Rudolph Valentino and Ronald Colman.[81]

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[77] Shand, *Modern Theatres and Cinemas*, pp. 9-10.
[78] Barry, *Let's Go*, p. 3.
[79] Shand, *Modern Theatres and Cinemas*, p.9.
[80] A.J. Lush, *The Young Adult in South Wales* (Cardiff, 1941), p. 80.

The fact that cinema entertainment could be enjoyed at such little expense and without formality was clearly a significant feature of its appeal. It also meant that the cinemas themselves could act as a focal point for a community. One historian of the cinema in south Wales has argued that the picture hall operated 'as a kind of community centre or "club"'. 'Old and uncomfortable as they may have been, for relatively little cost the valley cinemas provided warmth, hours of entertainment, and above all a sense of common interest and togetherness.'[82]

The very fact that second run cinemas could not offer the latest screen entertainment only added to their local identity. Such halls seldom showed films which attracted visitors from outside their immediate area. Rather, they catered for a regular, working-class audience who were more interested in going to the local cinema than in seeing the latest Hollywood release. The popularity of serials among south Wales cinema audiences (which is discussed in chapter four) is possibly the clearest indication that people did return week after week to *their* cinema. As Nicholas Hiley argues: 'for many working-class patrons the cinema was not so much a place for watching films as a comfortable venue in which they were greeted warmly by the proprietor and enjoyed the novel experience of being in a public space which they could both dominate and control.'[83]

Cheapness, convenience and informality were key to the mass-appeal of the cinema, but it must also be acknowledged that certain halls provided audiences with an experience that was considered quite extraordinary. The attraction of cinema for those wishing to mark a special occasion was acknowledged by the head of one leading chain of modern halls in 1937.

> As a social institution, the local cinema represents to a section of the population the peak of glamour. Warmth and colour are to be had there; there are comfort, richness, variety. The cinema is so often the poor mans sole contact with luxury, the only place where he is made to feel a sense of self-importance. ... Not only the film programme, but the deep carpets, the bright lights, the attention 'fit for king', are the weekly delights of the majority of picture-goers.[84]

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[81] Herbert James (b. 1909), quoted in Grenfell-Hill, *Growing Up*, pp. 97-98.
[82] Ridgewell, 'South Wales and the Cinema', p. 95.
[83] Nicholas Hiley, 'The British Cinema Auditorium', in Karel Dibbets and Bert Hogenkamp (eds.), *Film and the First World War* (Amsterdam, 1995), p. 160.
[84] Sidney L. Bernstein, 'Walk Up! Walk Up! - Please', in Charles Davy (ed.), *Footnotes to the Film* (London, 1937), p. 230.

Roger Manvell made the same point in the 1940s:

> there is more to cinema-going than seeing films. There is going out at night, the sense of fun and excitement. Wise to this, the builders of cinemas have designed the majority [sic.] of them like palaces, picture palaces, with many advantages over the live theatres and music-halls, especially cheapness and accessibility.[85]

There were occasions when a visit to the cinema could be a special event, but these did not constitute the majority of attendances. In Wales, where glittering dream palaces were relatively few and far between, there is even less reason to suppose that the cinema's appeal lay in the fact that it provided a something out of the ordinary. The distinction between the cinema 'habit', and cinema-going as a special event is as important as, and closely related to, the distinctions between the cinemas themselves. The cinemas which were a 'sort of public lounge' or 'community centre' to which millions flocked twice a week (or more) were local second run halls, their main attractions being price, familiarity and for the most part, relative comfort. The large, first-run town centre halls were the favoured venues of the middle-class and those seeking a venue for a more special social occasion. It was here that people had the opportunity to dress up, although as one female cinema-goer put it, she dressed 'for the boyfriend, not for the cinema.'[86] These differences in the nature of cinemas and cinema-going also tie in closely with the broader patterns detectable in British society during this period. Indeed, it is essential that any examination of the cinema's appeal takes into account the wider social context in which it operated.

The Wider Social Context

The social and economic background against which cinema-going occurred in many parts of Wales in this period was one of severe economic hardship. The scarcity of luxurious 'dream palaces' meant that for most Welsh audiences a visit to the cinema was not an extraordinary (or escapist) social/cultural *experience*. Cinema programmes were certainly escapist *entertainment*, but they were provided cheaply and in a convenient and familiar environment. The effectiveness with which the cinema acted as a means of escape is only part of the explanation for its mass-appeal,

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[85] Manvell, *A Survey of the Cinema*, p. 3.

however. Equally important was that the need to escape was so acutely felt. It was in the areas of greatest economic hardship that cinemas themselves were most numerous and where cinema-going was most frequent. This can be clearly illustrated by looking at the situation in Britain as a whole.

This is not the place to attempt a detailed analysis of social and economic conditions in Britain from the 1920s to the early 1950s. One of the salient points that would emerge from any such analysis, however, is the distinction between the relative prosperity enjoyed by many in the midlands and the south east, and the severe hardship endured by large sections of the population in the north, in Scotland and in Wales. As the Coles observed in 1937:

> It will be seen that if a line be drawn across the country between the Midlands and the North, every division to the south of this line has less than the average percentage of unemployed, and every division to the north of it more than the average. Scotland is worse than Northern England, and Wales again is a great deal worse than Scotland.[87]

The variations in the levels of prosperity from one part of the country to another reflected the fact that within Britain there were a number of quite different economies in operation. J. B. Priestley, one of the most prominent commentators of this period, famously wrote in 1934 of 'three Englands'. The first of these he called 'old England', by which he meant the rural or agricultural areas. This image of England as a 'green and pleasant land' was one frequently painted by travel writers, politicians and advertisements at this time, although it bore little or no relevance to the lives of the majority of British people.[88] Less than ten per cent of Britons worked in agriculture, and as noted above they contained a high proportion of non-cinema-goers.

The second England of which Priestley wrote, nineteenth century industrial England, has much greater relevance to the history of the cinema. This was the England:

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[86] Mrs. Eirona Richards, interviewed by Beth Thomas, MWL tape 7583.
[87] G. D. H. Cole and M. I. Cole, *The Condition of Britain* (London, 1937), pp. 222-223.
[88] There has been much discussion of the role of the countryside in shaping British culture and identity, see, for example, A. Potts, 'Constable Country Between the Wars', in R. Samuel (ed.), *Patriotism - The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity, Vol. 3: National Fictions* (London and New York, 1989), pp. 160-186; Malcolm Chase, 'This is no Claptrap: This is Our Heritage', in Christopher Shaw and Malcolm Chase (eds.), *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia* (Manchester and New York, 1989), pp. 128-146; A. Howkins, 'The Discovery of Rural England', in R. Colls and P. Dodds (eds.), *Englishness: Politics And Culture 1880-1920* (Beckenham, 1986), pp. 62-88; Angus Calder, *The Myth*

of coal, iron, steel, cotton, wool, railways; of thousands of rows of little houses all alike, sham Gothic churches, square-faced chapels, Town Halls, Mechanics' Institutes, mills, foundries, warehouses, refined watering-places, Pier Pavillions, Family and Commercial Hotels, Literary and Philosophical Societies, back-to-back houses, detached villas with monkey-trees, Grill Rooms, doss-houses, Unionist or Liberal Clubs, cindery waste ground, mill chimneys, slums, fried-fish shops, public houses with red blinds, bethels in corrugated iron, good class drapers' and confectioners' shops, a cynically devastated countryside, sooty dismal little towns, and still sootier grim fortress-like cities.[89]

This was the Britain that was hardest hit by the inter-war depression as its staple industries (of 'coal, iron, steel, cotton') went into steep decline. The part of Britain which enjoyed the greatest prosperity in these years was Priestley's 'third England':

> This is the England of arterial and bypass roads, of filling stations and factories that look like exhibition buildings, of giant cinemas and dance-halls and cafes, bungalows with tiny garages, cocktail bars, Woolworths, motor-coaches, wirelesses, hiking, factory girls looking like actresses, greyhound racing and dirt tracks, swimming pools, and everything given away for cigarette coupons.[90]

Priestley himself, in this passage and elsewhere, cites the cinema as an example of the new thriving, consumerist and democratic 1930s. As well as *looking* very different from the bleak industrial districts and their 'dark satanic mills', this new England had a distinct, Americanised culture:

> You need money in this England, but you do not need much money. It is a large-scale, mass-production job, with cut prices. You could almost accept Woolworths as its symbol. Its cheapness is both its strength and its weakness. It is its strength because being cheap it is accessible; it nearly achieves the famous equality of opportunity.[91]

Priestley was writing in 1934; four years earlier P. Morton Shand had made an almost identical point:

> The theatre has its traditions, and on the whole they are formal ones. The cinema, an essentially democratic institution for all its brave show of royal splendour, has as yet as

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of the Blitz (London, 1991), pp. 180-208; Martin Weiner, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit 1850-1980* (Cambridge, 1981).

[89] Priestley, *English Journey*, p. 398.

[90] Priestley, *English Journey*, p. 401.

[91] *Ibid.* p. 402.

> good as none. It is at one with the socially go-as-you please age we live in: a symptom and a symbol of it.[92]

The claims by contemporaries that the growth of the cinema was symptomatic of a broader social and cultural shift has not been seriously questioned. The glittering new dream palaces of the 1930s are generally accepted as being reflective of a new, healthy and thriving economy. Yet only a minority of British cinemas could be described as dream palaces, and it was in the areas where economic prosperity was least in evidence that movie-going was most popular.

The statistical survey of the cinema conducted by Simon Rowson in the 1930s points clearly to the fact that it was Scotland, Wales and the north of England which had the highest proportion of cinemas per head of population at this time.

Table 3.3: Cinemas and Seats in Cinemas Per Head of Population in 1934[93]

	Population (1931)	Cinemas		Population per...	
	Total Population (thousands)	**No. of Houses.**	**No. of Seats (thous.)**	**Per House (thous.)**	**Per Seat.**
London	6,363	401	462	15.9	14
Home Counties	4,166	343	295	12.1	14
Eastern Counties	3,173	227	171	13.9	19
West of England	4,047	369	268	10.9	15
Midlands	6,133	585	501	10.5	12
Yorkshire	5,014	534	475	9.4	11
Lancashire	6,187	699	684	8.8	9
North of England	2,571	304	262	8.5	10
North Wales	532	62	42	8.6	13
South Wales	2,061	259	201	8.0	10
Scotland	4,843	522	511	9.3	9
Total	45,090	4,305	3,872	10.5	12

In south Wales there was a cinema for every eight thousand people, in London the proportion was one for every sixteen thousand. In every region of England from the midlands southwards the proportion of cinemas per head of population was lower than in each region of the north, Scotland or Wales. The more prosperous areas of the country did have a relatively high proportion of large cinemas, so the figures for cinema seats per head does not show such a wide disparity between north and south. The general pattern still remains, however, with regions in the north, Scotland and

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[92] Shand, *Modern Theatres and Cinemas*, p. 10.
[93] Rowson, 'A Statistical Survey of the Cinema Industry in Great Britain in 1934', p. 84.

Wales containing proportionately more cinema seats than those in the south or midlands.

Rowson's findings in the 1930s were mirrored almost exactly by those of Browning and Sorrell in the early 1950s. They were able to demonstrate not only that people in Scotland, Wales and northern England were more generously provided with cinema seats than those in the south, but also that they were more regular attenders.

Table 3.4: Cinema Attendance By Region in 1951[94]

	Population Per Seat	Admissions Per Person
South Western	17.0	19
Southern	15.3	20
London and South Eastern	13.6	26
Eastern	16.7	17
Midland	12.8	26
North Midland	12.2	25
Scotland	8.6	36
Northern	9.5	37
East and West Ridings	10.1	34
North Western	9.5	36
Wales	10.1	28
Total	11.6	28

The reasons for the cinema's mass-appeal, on this evidence, should be attributed not to the quality of the escapist experience provided by either the films themselves or the cinemas in which they were screened, but rather to the need for people to escape from austere social and economic circumstances. Not only did people living in the areas worst affected by the inter-war depression have much reason to want to forget about everyday realities, the cinema was virtually the only place where they could do so.

The importance of these factors in determining the levels of cinema-going is reflected not just in the figures showing *where* attendance was highest, but also *when*. As table 3.1 (on p.77) clearly illustrates, cinema attendance in Britain reached its peak not in the 1930s but in the 1940s. It was during the war, and the post-war years of austerity that the cinema's appeal was strongest – an age of shortages and rationing, and a time when other leisure activities were not available.

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[94] Browning and Sorrell, 'Cinemas and Cinema-Going in Great Britain', pp. 138-140.

The Government's decision to close all cinemas at the outbreak of war was reversed within two weeks, and these institutions quickly proved themselves to be essential places of recreation for weary war workers. It was, perhaps, the only form of public consumption the Government were not able to ration during the war years (although they did extract considerable revenues from the cinema industry through the Entertainment Tax). When the Government did directly intervene in the cinema industry in 1947 by imposing a 75% duty on all imported films, it ended in ignominious failure. U.S. film companies boycotted the British market, and the Government was forced to abolish the tax. The intention of the Labour government had been to ease the balance of payments crisis by preventing too much money flowing from the British economy to Hollywood. Imports had to be restricted and the British public were asked to choose between 'Bogart and bacon'.[95] They opted for the former.

The difficult social and economic conditions experienced in those areas worst affected by the inter-war depression, and the hardship faced by the country as a whole in the war years and just after, provided the circumstances in which cinema-going really flourished. For those with most reason for wanting to escape their daily surroundings, and with little opportunity for doing so, the cinema was not a luxury but a necessity. In a number of respects the pattern of cinema attendance closely resembled that of an addictive substance.

Conclusion: Cinema as an Addiction?

In their book on culture in inter-war Britain, Peter Miles and Malcolm Smith argued that 'The cinema generation - those who lived through the 1930s and 1940s - had a unique experience of mass entertainment, the context of which is permanently lost to those who have come after.'[96] The context which has been lost is the social and economic one against which mass cinema-going took place. With increasing affluence and a wider range of leisure activities becoming available in the later 1950s and 1960s the cinema lost its mass appeal. There were other places for young people to go, and

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[95] See Geoffrey Macnab, *J. Arthur Rank and the British Film Industry* (London and New York, 1993), pp. 162-187.

[96] Peter Miles and Malcolm Smith, *Cinema, Literature and Society: Elite and Mass Culture in Interwar Britain* (London, 1987), p. 163.

new stars for them to follow. As Docherty *et al* point out, 'the symbolism of teenagers ripping up cinema seats when Bill Haley played *Rock Around the Clock* was pregnant with meaning.'[97] As far as cinema attendance was concerned the most fundamental change was that regular (weekly or twice-weekly) cinema-going became less and less common. It was the *habit* of going to the movies which had created such high attendance figures, most notably in the 1940s. In an age of austerity, which in Wales included the 1920s and 1930s as well as the 1940s, the hundreds of (mostly small) second-run halls, which were cheap, easily accessible and had a twice-weekly change of programme, played an important social and cultural role. They catered for a public for whom cinema-going was not just regular, it was arguably addictive.

A.J.P. Taylor claimed that 'The cinema was the essential social habit of the age'.[98] The *habitual* nature of cinema attendance also observed by Ivor Montagu:

> Rather than individual films, the cinema sold a *habit* - a place to go out to ... To 'go to the local', meant in the language not only a visit to the pub but, equally, a visit to the cinema.[99]

The cinema may not have been addictive in a strictly physical sense, but there is a case for suggesting that it was 'addictive' in a broader social and economic sense.

In the difficult economic circumstances brought about by the inter-war depression, and even more so with the level of deprivation experienced during World War Two and in the 'age of austerity' immediately afterward, the cinema was 'addictive' because it provided the most effective (and for many the only) means of temporary escape. That so many people were prepared to watch films in cinemas which were notorious for their poor standards of comfort, cleanliness and hygiene reinforces the point. What the cinema provided was not a luxury, but a form of entertainment which was widely regarded as a necessity. The most regular cinema-goers of these years could rightly be regarded as 'film-addicts', just as their children and grandchildren have been called 'tele-addicts'.

The attention the cinema received from the government, particularly in World War Two, also has much in common with the regulation of other addictive substances.

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[97] Docherty, Morrison and Tracey, *The Last Picture Show?*, p. 26. Bill Haley played to a packed Capitol Theatre in Cardiff in the mid-1950s.
[98] A.J.P. Taylor, *English History 1914-1945* (Oxford, 1965), p. 313.
[99] Ivor Montagu, *Film World: A Guide to the Cinema* (Harmondsworth, 1964), p. 221.

It was, for example, an obvious fiscal target for the government, who realised that a small increase in admission prices would make little difference to overall attendances. The cinema, in effect, was treated much like alcohol and tobacco: it was impossible for the government to cut off or strictly ration the supply of these goods, but taxing their consumption was a useful means of raising revenue. Furthermore, the habitual nature of cinema attendance enhanced its importance as a tool of wartime propaganda. Individual films could not be expected to significantly alter or reinforce public sentiment. Propaganda is most effective when a simple message is continually repeated. Planting such messages in films was a sure way of getting them through to a large section of the public on a regular basis.

In peacetime conditions the addictive nature of the cinema's appeal was seldom recognised as having the potential to serve any useful purpose. There were certainly those who had come to believe that the cinema's compulsive (or addictive) appeal was damaging. Roger Manvell's complaint that the *habit* of visiting the cinema just for the sake of seeing images flicker across a screen was 'more universal than we may imagine' has already been noted, as have J. P. Mayer's criticisms of childrens' habitual attendance at cinema clubs. These highbrow critics clearly felt that many people were not 'in control' of their film-going - that they were to all intents and purposes 'addicted'. The view that the cinema's appeal was both addictive and damaging was made more explicitly in a letter the *Western Mail* in 1939. The contributor argued that:

> a State-aided cinema in every town, showing a certain proportion of intelligent films each week, might succeed in re-educating that section of the population which has already imbibed too deeply of the weekly drug.[100]

The view that the cinema was an addictive form of recreation was one which seemed to carry some credence in the period of its mass-appeal. The addiction does not seem to have been a physical or even necessarily a psychological one: audiences 'kicked the habit' quite easily in the late 1950s and 1960s as social and economic conditions changed and alternative leisure pursuits became available. For audiences in the period covered here, and in Wales more than in many other parts of Britain, cinema-going was more than an occasional night out. It was an essential form of

recreation, relaxation and escape. The remarkable, and in some cases addictive, appeal that the cinema held must be attributed to a combination of difficult social circumstances (which were greatly exacerbated during World War Two), a lack of affordable alternative leisure activities, and the powerful attraction of motion pictures as a medium of public entertainment. These factors help us to understand why cinema-going so easily became a habit, which in turn explains why so many local cinemas were able to survive, and take on the social function of community centres or clubs. The precise nature of the entertainment to which audiences were treated when they visited these halls will be examined next.

[100] *Western Mail*, 4 January 1937, p. 9.

Chapter Four: Cinema Entertainment

In examining the type of entertainment provided by the cinema, critics and historians have often tended to focus exclusively on feature films. It is one of the objects of this thesis to draw a distinction between the feature film, on the one hand, and the broader social institution of cinema on the other. In this chapter it will be argued that during the cinema's heyday there was a great deal more to programmes of entertainment than just the main feature. Emerging out of a long tradition of popular working-class amusements, cinema programmes continued to offer a broad range of entertainment throughout the period under consideration here. It was not just traditional forms of working-class culture, however, that shaped the structure and content of cinema entertainment. In the more up-market halls exhibitors went to some lengths to include items which would attract a more discriminating audience, for whom Hollywood films alone held little appeal. A combination of the decline in regular working-class cinema attendance, and the increasing acceptance among the educated middle-class that the output of British and American studios constituted a genuine 'cultural' artefact, eventually led to 'film' and 'cinema' becoming virtually synonymous terms. During the period when cinema was the predominant form of mass public entertainment, however, it was far more flexible and diverse in the range of attractions it was able to provide. These, often neglected, features of the cinema programme will be examined here.

This chapter will focus on cinema entertainment in Wales, though it should be stressed that the programmes of entertainment enjoyed by Welsh audiences were essentially no different to those provided in other parts of Britain. This is not to say that cinema programmes were the same wherever one chose to go to the pictures in this period. The nature of the entertainment provided in cinemas varied from one type of hall to another. In Wales, where there were so few large super-cinemas, the sort of entertainment these halls provided was rarely experienced by most cinema-goers. Any differences in the provision of cinema entertainment between Wales and other parts of Britain were a reflection of differences in the provision of cinemas. It was social and economic conditions, more than any significant regional cultural variations, that determined the programmes of entertainment Welsh audiences went to see.

The fundamental difference between the entertainment provided in small, local halls, and that offered in the larger, more prestigious cinemas was that the former category of hall relied almost entirely on just films themselves, while the latter made more extensive use of live musical and staged entertainment. The reason for this difference was partly audience preference and partly economic necessity. It would have been financially impossible for most Welsh halls to provide live entertainment or to keep on an orchestra after the coming of sound films. However, it also seems that the regular patrons of most local halls were not particularly interested in such distractions. The 'cinema addicts' of the 1930s and 1940s needed to get their regular 'fix' of pictures at the local hall, and no more. It was only in the larger halls, which were visited as a special treat, that large orchestras, mighty organs and ancillary turns were really in demand.

Throughout this chapter the attempt is made to analyse cinema entertainment from the perspectives both of those who consumed and provided it. The reminiscences of those who actually went to the cinema in Wales in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s provide valuable evidence of what audiences really wanted to see when they went to the pictures. The surviving records of one south Wales cinema company offer an authentic insight into the issues at the forefront of exhibitors' considerations.

The chapter is divided into four sections. The first examines the cinema's emergence as an important form of mass-entertainment in the early twentieth century. It is argued that the attention the medium came to receive from intellectuals, who regarded the motion picture as a new art form, helped to create an environment where critics and historians alike concentrate their attention on the feature film alone. The cinema's historical roots as an agency of working-class popular entertainment, however, were evident throughout the period covered here. By looking beyond the 'main feature', it is suggested, a closer link can be detected between the cinema and older forms of popular culture. The second section seeks to examine the actual makeup of the cinema programmes. No part of the supporting programme was regarded as being as important an attraction as the main feature, yet audiences and cinema management both treated the short films, serials and newsreels as an integral part of the evenings entertainment. Indeed, many cinema managers were keen to promote their establishments not just as homes of Hollywood pictures, but as

'pleasure domes'[1] where, as well as watching films patrons could meet friends, take refreshments and even sometimes dance. When the BBC first began transmitting radio programmes in the early 1920s some enterprising managers even attempted (unsuccessfully) to incorporate these into their evening's entertainment. The third section focuses particularly on the role played by live entertainment in cinemas, especially in the 1930s. The provision of live musical or staged performances was an important means by which the leading cinemas sought to distinguish themselves from their rivals. The reluctance of the middle-classes to accept the cinema as a serious cultural form was clearly evident in their attitude to American films, and this provides the focus for the final section. Whereas working-class audiences immediately appreciated the pace and vitality of American films, it took much longer for the output of Hollywood studios to be taken seriously by 'respectable' middle-class opinion. Once mainstream American pictures had established themselves as legitimate cultural products, however, the role of live entertainment in cinemas was rendered superfluous.

High art or popular culture?

One of the developments which helped to promote the universal appeal of the cinema - which made it acceptable to the educated middle-class - and gave it an air of permanence, was the acceptance by intellectuals that cinematography could be considered an art form. Rather than viewing the cinema as a passing fad, as many had before World War One, critics now began to observe its unique qualities and sought to educate the masses as to its true potential. Furthermore, attempts were made to trace the history of the moving image, in which the contribution of individual pioneers were documented and celebrated. In one of the earliest and most substantial such histories Terry Ramsaye claimed that 'Critics and forecasters, academic, professional and commercial, are continually committing themselves to error, and to the swift exposures of those errors, because of their failure to see the screen as one of the strands in the yarn of life, with an infinity behind and ahead.'[2] He went on to provide

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[1] This phrase was coined by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and later taken up by Graham Greene. See John Russell Taylor (ed.), *The Pleasure Dome* (London, 1972).
[2] Terry Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights: A History of the Motion Picture* (London, 1926), p. xxxviii.

a detailed account of the development of the cinematograph, taking into account the work of men such as Marey, Muybridge, Friese-Greene, Paul, Edison and the Lumiere brothers.

It is important to note that it was not until the 1920s that film was recognised as an important cultural medium. Indeed, Rene Clair claimed the between the years 1922-1935:

> I was present at the *creation* of a language, an art form, an industry, or, rather, of something not covered completely by any of the above terms, and whose complex nature has given rise to much ambiguity.[3] (emphasis added).

In the process of investing the cinema with a new cultural respectability in the 1920s, however, its intellectual supporters overlooked, or chose to ignore, the social environment out of which the cinema had grown. The approach taken by Ramsaye, that the cinematograph was a highly important piece of apparatus with a clearly defined function that man had been striving to perfect throughout the nineteenth century, was echoed by critics such as Andre Bazin decades later. To Bazin, the concept of the cinema had existed 'fully armed in men's minds' long before it was technically perfected:

> If cinema in its cradle lacked all the attributes of the cinema to come, it was with reluctance and because its fairy guardians were unable to provide them however much they would have liked to.[4]

It was not until long after the cinema's mass appeal had been eroded, and the medium's intellectual (and indeed academic) credibility was firmly established, that the critical consensus established in the 1920s was broken.

In the early 1980s Michael Chanan took a proverbial hatchet to Bazin's musings, pointing out that the prominent figures in the pre-history of the cinema such as Janssen, Muybridge and Marey, 'weren't trying to invent cinematography: they were involved in a search for quite different discoveries, in the fields of astronomy or the investigation of animal locomotion; they used rapid series photography as an

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[3] Rene Clair, *Reflections on the Cinema* (London, 1953), p. 7. The dates are significant. Clair recalls being present at the 'creation' of an art form fully quarter of a century after the cinematograph was invented.

[4] Andre Bazin, *What is Cinema?* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1967), p. 21.

instrument or tool of scientific research.'[5] In order to understand the way in which the cinema developed, either as an art form or as a medium of mass entertainment, it is necessary to examine its broader social, economic and cultural context.

At the same time that Chanan attacked Bazin's interpretation of cinema history, a new generation of (academic) British film historians began to look beyond the pictures which had received critical acclaim to those which had actually been most popular with audiences. Their endeavours have yielded some fascinating work, yet the focus on what audiences actually went to see, rather than what critics wanted them to, has not resulted in a serious attempt to look beyond feature films themselves, to study *programmes* of entertainment as a whole. In this thesis a distinction is drawn not between populist and artistic films, but between films as a whole on the one hand, and cinema as the social institution in which they were seen on the other. When viewed in this broader context, 'cinema', although a technological invention of the late nineteenth century, can be said to have a history which stretches back considerably further than 1895.

Far from being hailed as a new medium for creative expression, cinema, in its early years, was shunned by the respectable classes. Even those 'Bohemians and other refugees from the middle-class' who had delighted in the music hall saw little merit in the cinema. 'They thought of the movies as a mechanical novelty, a meaningless and trivial craze which might be allowed to provide a moment's distraction at a music hall or vaudeville show but which normally belonged to the amusement arcade or fairground.'[6] This was precisely the point. Despite later attempts to suggest that the invention of cinema marked the birth of a new art form, contemporaries recognised that its roots lay in working-class culture which, as E. P. Thompson memorably pointed out, had 'its more robust and rowdy features.' In urging more work to be carried out on this subject Thompson caught the attention of a number of film historians:

> we must also remember the 'underground' of the ballad-singer and the fair-ground which handed on traditions to the nineteenth century (to the music-hall, or Dickens' circus folk, or Hardy's pedlars and showmen); for in these ways the 'inarticulate'

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[5] Michael Chanan, *The Dream That Kicks: The Prehistory and Early Years of Cinema in Britain* (London and New York, 1996 edition), p. 10.

[6] Peter Stead, *Film and the Working Class: The Feature Film in British and American Society* (London and New York, 1989), pp. 6, 13.

> conserved certain values - a spontaneity and capacity for enjoyment and mutual loyalties - despite the inhibiting pressures of magistrates, mill-owners, and Methodists.[7]

It was out of this 'underground' tradition, through fairground showmen and music hall proprietors, that moving pictures found their way to the public. Only later did businessmen, Governments, censors, and the likes of J. Arthur Rank (mill-owner and Methodist), seek to regulate and commercialise this form of entertainment, to rid it of its more 'rowdy element' and appeal to a middle-class audience. Indeed, as Rachel Low and Roger Manvell have argued, 'It is to the fairground showmen that cinema owes its ultimate success ... It was they who bridged the gap between the music hall days and the later, more respectable picture palaces, and they disappeared only with the First World War - long after the coming of the regular cinema.'[8] A further indication of the cinema's origins has been provided by Michael Chanan, who explains that:

> Around 1905 some of the cinematograph operators thought of joining the Variety Artistes. This is not as strange as it sounds, since many of them were originally theatrical illusionists and magicians who had adopted the cinematograph because it extended their range of trick devices; or else they belonged to the tradition of magic lantern lecturers. At any rate, many of them thought of themselves as performers of some kind.[9]

Though the initial popular appeal of the cinema was part of a long tradition of working-class amusement, its commercial value was quickly recognised. The Cinematograph Act of 1909 (much like the Suitability Act of 1878)[10] was ostensibly intended to improve safety within cinemas but rapidly became exploited by local authorities to influence the content of the filmed entertainment itself. But if the authorities were anxious to regulate this new form of entertainment, the industry itself was equally keen to broaden its appeal. As Rachael Low puts it, 'The showman, not satisfied with a penny-gaff public, sought a more dignified position in society'.[11]

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[7] E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963), pp. 63-4.
[8] Rachael Low and Roger Manvell, *The History of the British Film: Vol. 1, 1896-1906* (London, 1948), p. 37.
[9] Michael Chanan, *Labour Power in the British Film Industry* (London, 1976), p. 13.
[10] This Act related to music halls and variety theatres. See Jeffrey Richards, 'The Cinema and Cinema-Going in Birmingham in the 1930s', in John K. Walton and James Walvin (eds.), *Leisure in Britain, 1780-1939* (Manchester, 1983), pp. 32-52.
[11] Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film: Vol. 2, 1906-1914* (London, 1948), p. 11.

Jeffrey Richards has pointed to a similarity between music hall and cinema in this respect:

> Moralists had consistently attacked the music halls for their association with drunkenness, sexuality and rowdiness. But reform came at the behest of music hall proprietors and theatrical entrepreneurs, anxious to broaden their appeal and make yet more money up-market ... In the process they created a bastard form of music hall called 'variety' to which the working class continued to flock, though now joined by middle- and upper-class audiences. The same pattern developed in the cinema industry, where the control of film content and improvement of cinema facilities were instigated by the commercial interests themselves.[12]

Although accepting that a similar process of commercialisation took place in each case, Peter Stead has argued that whereas music hall and vaudeville were forms of entertainment that were transitional 'between the genuine folk culture of an earlier age and the mass commercialisation of the twentieth century', the 'movies had broken through to a vast new public and everything was on a different scale.' For the showmen, therefore, 'To attract bigger audiences was not just a bonus, it was part of the whole logic of the industry.'[13] It was commercial opportunism which led showmen to take their picture shows out of fairgrounds, penny-gaffs and music halls into more permanent accommodation. In a passage already alluded to in chapter two, Rachael Low has described how this process worked:

> More and more effort was spent in impressing the audience with comfort and elegance, and proving the pictures worthy of better-class audiences. Red plush and marble, ferns in brass pots and plenty of electric light were guaranteed to give that "air of cosy refinement" which was wistfully sought by a trade anxious to disclaim its low birth ... In the matter of names, too, was reflected the search for class - Olympia, Bijou, Empire, Jewel, Gem and Mirror were favourites, and endless variants such as Electroscope, Picturedrome, Pallasino and even Palaceadium. Such inept efforts to be dignified may have made a more favourable impression on the working-class public than on the classes for whom they were intended.[14]

The earliest attempts on the part of showmen to broaden the cinema's appeal, then, consisted largely of changes to the environment in which the pictures were viewed. Those who sat in the plush seats of the earliest purpose-built cinemas saw programmes made up of short, one or two reel pictures: feature length films were

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[12] Richards, 'The Cinema and Cinema-Going in Birmingham', p. 38.
[13] Stead, *Film and the Working Class*, pp. 5, 6, 13.
[14] Low, *Vol. 2*, pp. 16-17.

virtually unheard of before World War One. 'Only gradually did the commercial preoccupation with the projector and the venue shift to a greater interest in the films themselves and then very much the same kind of people who had struggled to control the machines and theatres began to make and distribute the films.'[15]

It was argued in chapter two that commercialisation, in terms of the building of new super-cinemas, did not extend to all parts of Wales. Similarly, the entertainment provided in most cinemas in Wales, for much of this period, was not as far removed from some of the more traditional forms of working-class amusement as we are sometimes led to believe. The audiences who flocked to cinemas on such a massive scale were not suddenly cut off from older forms of entertainment. The kinds of attractions which provided the main competition for local cinemas indicate the type of cultural environment audiences were coming from.

The letters written by managers from one small circuit of Welsh cinemas indicate what sort of competition many picture houses faced. G. W. Robinson, who ran the Central Cinema in Porth wrote the following to his employer in June 1920:

> I am afraid that this week will prove one of the worst in the year for us. We have the annual fair here, which I had previously been warned would play havoc with our business, I did not believe that this could possibly interfere with trade until I paid a personal visit. I really think the whole population of Porth remain there from afternoon till 11pm.[16]

A. R. Gambold, manager of Swansea's Castle Cinema in the 1920s, expressed similar concerns:

> I hope I am wrong, but I am rather afraid somehow that we shall experience a slump during the summer months. Swansea, as you know, has great outdoor attractions during the season and this summer Campbell's will be running a regular service of pleasure boats, they have secured a good site for embarking etc. almost within a stone's throw of the bottom of Wind Street and judging by the preparations, they evidently mean doing the thing well.[17]

Such counter-attractions were unable to rival the cinema's appeal on a national level, or for a prolonged period. Indeed, the existence of alternative forms of popular culture could on occasions benefit the local cinema industry:

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[15] Stead, *Film and the Working Class*, p. 11.
[16] G Robinson to A Andrews, 22 June 1920, GRO (Glamorgan Record Office) D/D A/B 18/5/48.

> The large influx of Saturday trippers to Cardiff and other parts of South Wales to witness football games is a big advantage to the kinemas, which do a huge week-end business. This was particularly the case during last Saturday's International encounter at Swansea, for in the evening the picture palaces were literally crowded.[18]

This is not the place to attempt to measure the precise effect of alternative forms of leisure on patterns of cinema attendance. What clearly needs to be emphasised, however, is that the movie-going public was not suddenly cut off from older forms of popular culture. Neither, it must be said, was the cinema itself. Emerging out of a long tradition of popular amusement, the entertainment provided for cinema audiences owed much to customs already well established by previous generations. This can be seen both in the nature of the films themselves and in structure of the programmes as a whole.

Cinema Programmes

The influence of existing forms of popular culture on feature films has been explored by a number of film historians. We know, for instance, that some of the most celebrated exponents of Hollywood film comedy, such as Charlie Chaplin and Stan Laurel, learned their trade in travelling variety troupes. Music hall traditions remained alive in British cinema in the 1930s and 1940s in the work of, among others, George Formby, Gracie Fields and Will Hay. Victorian melodrama was also evident in the films of Tod Slaughter and much of the output of Gainsborough Studios in the 1940s.[19] Of the cultural significance of cinema *programmes*, however, as opposed to individual films, much less is known.

That part of the cinema programme which came before the main feature is easily (and often) overlooked. The items contained therein, (such one or two reel comedies, serials and newsreels), were of much shorter duration than the main film, they tended not to contain popular stars, and much less effort went into marketing

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[17] A Gambold to A Andrews, 23 April 1920, GRO, D/D A/B 18/14/17.
[18] *Kinematograph Weekly*, 22 January 1920, p. 151.
[19] See Andy Medhurst, 'Music Hall and British Cinema', in Charles Barr, (ed.), *All Our Yesterdays: Ninety Years of British Cinema* (London, 1986), pp. 168-188; Jeffrey Richards, 'Tod Slaughter and the Cinema of Excess', in Jeffrey Richards, (ed.), *The Unknown 1930s: An Alternative History of the British Cinema, 1929-1939* (London, 1998), pp. 139-159.

them. This element of the cinema programme did not provide the central attraction for cinema-goers (this was provided by the main feature), but it was, nonetheless, an established feature of the cinema-going experience, and both managers and audiences treated it as such. A. R. Gambold, for instance, was at pains to explain to his employer that:

> our patrons seem to expect all the items in our usual programme even when we are showing an extra long picture, I believe I mentioned this to you when we had "The Only Way", some of the patrons appeared to be disappointed that there was no second feature.[20]

In some cinemas programmes were run continuously, so one could arrive at any point and remain in the auditorium until the programme had come full circle. In this way the main feature would not necessarily conclude an evening's (or afternoon's) entertainment. In other cinemas, usually the smaller working-class halls, where programmes were run separately it is significant that the time of the main film's screening was seldom advertised. There was simply a choice between attending the 'first house' or 'second house'. A visit to the cinema, then, entailed much more than the viewing of a feature film. In his reminiscences of cinema-going in the 1950s Peter Stead referred to his time spent 'in the cinemas of the Llynfi Valley where relations in Maesteg, Nantyfyllon and Caerau were always encouraging us to join them at what they called "a show".'[21] While patrons had come to expect two or three hours of cinema entertainment, not just a single film, managers were concerned to ensure programmes were suitably balanced and appealing. Geo. Robinson certainly took the shorter films into account when considering how best to attract the Porth public to his cinema:

> May I suggest that programmes be balanced thus. Where we have a two reel *serial* booked, the second big feature should be a comedy drama the remaining comedy element being supplied by a one reel comedy. The other half of the week we could perhaps have a two reel comedy with two dramas as I know one cannot always obtain a good Comedy Drama in four or five reels. In any case I reckon it is bad business to book two one reel comedies on the same programme they are not appreciated by the audience. A comedy must be good to be well received, and I am sure the majority would dispense with some willing provided the main pictures were good. Then again

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[20] A Gambold to A Andrews, 15 April 1926, GRO, D/D A/B 18/15/98.
[21] Peter Stead, 'By the Light of the Silvery Moon', *Planet*, 116 (April/May 1996), p. 37.

> we must consider the younger patrons, who delight in a good comedy.[22] (original punctuation maintained).

Gambold was equally sceptical of the appeal of one reel comedies for his patrons in Swansea:

> With regard to Sybil Thorndike single reel dramas I do not see how we can do with these unless we could have single reel comedies to go with them, and of course this would mean cutting out the two reel comedy, I am not in favour of this unless we can be certain of getting good one reel comedies.[23]

In terms of the way in which programmes of entertainment were structured, providing an assortment of shorter features as well a main film, there is clearly an element of continuity between the cinema and older traditions of music hall and variety. It is the content of these supporting programmes to which attention will now be turned.

Much the longest of the supporting items on cinema bills were second features or B movies. These were usually low budget American pictures of about an hour's duration. The types of films shown as supporting features, fell into a number of different categories. Hugh Louden, in recalling his movie-going experiences of the thirties and forties describes them variously as 'the western', 'the murder mystery', 'the actioneer featuring working guys in tough situations', 'college romps' and 'domestic comedies'.[24] Although lacking the sort of meticulous production values that would characterise a studio's premier releases, these films could at times express a crude authenticity which appealed to working-class audiences. Peter Stead, recalling his early cinema-going days, claimed that 'It was those B movies, which we rarely comprehended as we had always joined the story during a lengthy flashback, that fascinated us most and left us in no doubt that we lived in an unsophisticated town that was behind the times.'[25] Similarly, Louden asserted that 'In my early days I enjoyed the B movies almost as much as those with grander pretensions.'[26]

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[22] G Robinson to A Andrews, 6 June 1920, GRO, D/D A/B 18/5/44.
[23] A Gambold to A Andrews, 3 January 1923, GRO, D/D A/B 18/15/14.
[24] Hugh Louden, *My Hollywood: A Nostalgic Look at Films of the Thirties and Forties* (Upton-upon-Severn), p. 49.
[25] Stead, 'By the Light', p. 41.
[26] Louden, *My Hollywood*, p. 48.

Although these films seldom featured established stars, they often contained characters who were familiar and formats that followed a tried and tested formula. Fictional personalities who proved popular with cinema audiences were regularly used to form the basis of a whole series of low budget films. While it would be easy to criticise such movies for their unimaginative direction or repetitive storylines, they undoubtedly held a strong appeal - particularly for younger audiences. As Louden remembers it: 'Fans liked the regular feel of Charlie Chan, Mr Moto, the Cisco Kid, Sherlock Holmes, Blondie, Michael Shayne, Boston Blackie, the Jones Family, the Saint, the Falcon, Hopalong Cassidy and Mr Wong.' This comes as little surprise. From the regular catchphrases of music hall comedians, to the enduring popularity of television soap operas, familiarity and repetition have been key features of British popular entertainment for well over a hundred years. As was argued in chapter one, the movie-going experience itself was habitual for a large proportion of working-class patrons, and it was in the halls which they most frequently attended that such films were most appreciated. Indeed, it was often only these halls that were prepared to screen them: 'Many B films never found their way into the bigger and better cinemas, inferior product being given a showing only in the meanest of halls.'[27] Even the films that larger cinemas would probably have shunned, however, were regarded as an important feature in lesser halls. This was illustrated rather well in a letter written by the head of a small chain of picture houses in South Wales to his local MP regarding the proposals for the 1938 Films Act.

> It is proposed that British films, to count for Quota, should cost a minimum of £15,000: one result of this will be that the import of foreign films will be restricted, as it is obvious that it will not pay to import a foreign film *of moderate earning power*, under these conditions. This will have a serious effect, (1) On industrial districts especially, where films of the Western type are popular, and (2) On cinemas owned by small independent proprietors, as the circuits will have preference for the smaller number of films available. In our case we shall be penalised both ways, and the outlook for an adequate supply of films is very black, if these proposals become law in the form now proposed.[28] (Emphasis added).

It was not only formulaic B movies which could be described as films of 'moderate earning power'. Serials fell into the same category and their appeal was likewise limited to an almost exclusively working-class audience. The manager of

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[27] Hugh Louden, *My Hollywood*, p. 49.

Porth's Central Cinema provides a striking example of how attitudes to serials differed markedly between different social groups. In the early 1920s he felt his cinema was attracting the highest class patrons in the town, even suggesting that 'We are in a position to work on different prices to other Porth halls because we have a balcony';[29] this consideration influenced his attitude to serials:

> I am not at all particular about starting them again, and am of the opinion that they are badly overdone. There are four different ones showing in Porth at present, and we have been congratulated upon the absence of such from our programme, by many circle patrons. Of course, this may not represent the views of the cheapest seats, but taking all things into consideration I feel sure we have reached a stage when we may dispense with this item altogether.[30]

To a large extent the appeal of serials depended less on the quality of their plots or production as on the cinema-going habits of their audience. To follow a serial from beginning to end one needed to attend the same cinema for perhaps twelve consecutive weeks, regardless of the main feature in the programme. Those who were at all selective about the films they chose to see were simply not prepared to do this. For such patrons, viewing a single episode of an ongoing serial each time they went to the cinema would probably have been more irritating than entertaining. For those who did follow the serials throughout, however, each episode was eagerly awaited. The recollections of South Wales cinema-goers would suggest not only that serials were a popular feature in this area, but also that their leading characters achieved star-like status in certain communities. One name which seems to have cropped up more often than any other in relation to serials is that of Pearl White.[31] According to a Tonypandy projectionist from the time 'Pearl White was idolised ... There was even a popular song about her which the audience used to sing before she appeared on the screen. It was called *Pearl, Pearl, you're a wonderful girl.*'[32]

The environment in which serials were most widely appreciated, free from the derision of circle patrons, was in the children's matinee or 'penny rush'. The likes of

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[28] Andrews to Temple Morris MP, c. 1937, GRO, D/D A/B 43/1/58.
[29] Robinson to Andrews, 29 July 1920, GRO, D/D A/B 18/5/57ii.
[30] Robinson to Andrews, 26 November 1920, GRO, D/D A/B 18/5/87.
[31] Pearl White appears in the recollections of the following: Herbert James in Jeffrey Grenfell-Hill (ed.), *Growing Up in Wales: Collected Memories of Childhood in Wales, 1895-1939* (Llandysul, 1996), p. 94; Florence David, quoted in the *South Wales Echo*, 14 February 1985, p. 13; letters to the author by Mr T H Jones, 24 February 1997, and Robert Parry, 18 February 1997.
[32] Dick Lewis, quoted in the *South Wales Echo*, 17 May 1971, p. 5.

Roy Rogers, the Lone Ranger and Zorro held huge appeal for younger audiences, and it was in the form of serials that their adventures were most often followed. As Hugh Louden remembers:

> The penny rush was nothing without the serial ... we relished each episode avidly and after twelve episodes felt a real rapport with the characters. The heroes and the villains - mostly played by actors who never appeared in a major film - were well known to young audiences. It was film watching on a different level.[33]

Similar experiences have been recalled by a Caernarfon cinema-goer:

> The Guildhall was our mecca on a Saturday afternoon. This was our picture 'ouse and for two pence were a variety of films for an hour and a half: cowboys and Indians, comics, drama and a serial. Pearl White was my idol, plus Charlie Chaplin.[34]

These children's performances only made up a small proportion of total cinema programmes, but their role was an important one. Not only were children a highly significant part the cinema audience, but it was in the Saturday matinees that their cinema-going habit was often forged. The appeal of particular serials may have worn thin with the passing of years, but the routine of attending the pictures at least once a week took much longer to die out.

Not all cinema programmes would have contained a serial in the 1920s or 1930s, but there would almost inevitably have been at least one short film in addition to the two longer features on the bill. The form that these short films took varied from week to week and depended upon the nature of the main attractions (as noted above). Short dramas and comedies (in either one or two reels) were frequently booked and, despite occasional complaints about single reel comedies, generally seem to have been well received. These short entertainment films, along with topicals (pictures of actual events) were survivors from the earliest days of the cinema. Short actuality films, such as those of a train leaving a station, and later single reel chase dramas or slapstick comedies had been regular fare at penny gaffs and showmen's booths. Such films had certainly become less prominent by the 1920s, but the 'genre' had not died out completely. It is even possible to find evidence of managers making their own films for local audiences in the inter-war period, much as the early pioneers had decades

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[33] Louden, *My Hollywood*, pp. 18-19.

before. George Townsend, who managed the Central in Porth from the late 1920s until the 1940s, felt that such films still held a strong appeal for audiences in the 1930s:

> This late afternoon and evening I took pictures of a local Gala. I can assure you quite definitely that providing I have had some success in taking these pictures ... the interest taken by the local people was very keen and we can rest assured, that when we advertise the showing, the response will be good.[35]

Similar initiative was shown by J. Leo Rippen, manager of Cardiff's Pavilion: when providing two free tickets for a flying demonstration in conjunction with the film *The Dawn Patrol*, he took the opportunity to film the event, and show it to audiences the following week.[36]

It is possible to trace the proportion of short films in the programmes of the Central Cinema in Porth from surviving cash books. A typical programme of entertainment from 1919 consisted of perhaps one five reel film, one two reeler and three or four single reelers. By the mid to late 1920s, however, this was no longer the case. By this time it was usual to screen two of the longer five or six reel films, with only one or two shorter films making up the rest of the programme - a pattern which continued until after the Second World War. This development was not to the satisfaction of some of the more traditional showmen. According to a 1925 edition of *Kine Weekly*, Thomas Orminston, then President of the CEA, claimed that in his experience:

> patrons demanded variety in the kinema programme, and he deplored that the market in short features was not so large as it was in the earlier days, when the industry owed its present development to this class of picture.[37]

Short films were clearly not the central attraction for cinema patrons, though they remained an important feature of the programme. If in some respects they were a remnant from an earlier age of cinema history, in others they provided opportunities for innovative film-makers to develop new ideas and stretch the boundaries of the cinematic medium. Animated films provide an example of how this process could

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[34] William Norman Thomas, whose reminiscences are held at Caernarfon Archives, XM/T/353.
[35] Townsend to Andrews, 5 August 1937, GRO, D/D A/B 42/3/2.
[36] *Kinematograph Weekly*, 30 April 1931, p. 65.

take place. Cartoons had proved equally popular with audiences and critics throughout the 1920s. In 1925, for instance, Harold Tilney felt confident enough to book a series of *Felix the Cat* for his cinemas in Cardiff and Newport lasting a whole year. He was apparently one of thirty exhibitors who had made such a booking in the space of a week.[38] In his monumental *The Film Till Now* Paul Rotha quoted a film magnate as saying 'You spend a million dollars on a super-spectacle and they sit through it just to see Mickey Mouse.' Indeed it was the work of Disney which seemed to attract the broadest range of admirers. When Laura and Alec went to the cinema in the film *Brief Encounter* (1945), Donald Duck was the only feature which they really seemed to appreciate. They were not alone: Paul Rotha (writing in 1929) claimed that 'To many writers at the moment, the Disney cartoons are the most witty and satisfying productions of modern cinema.'[39]

Disney, it should be stressed, was one of the only film-makers in this period to appeal equally to critical and popular opinion. For the most part critics were dismissive of the sort of pictures which the majority of cinema-goers watched on a weekly basis. Indeed, the practice of sitting through an entire cinema programme was something which those who prided themselves on possessing a critical faculty often derided. Yet this is what most of the cinema audience frequently did.

The one aspect of the cinema programme other than the feature film which has been rigorously examined by historians is the newsreel. This item was usually featured between the two main films, so only those arriving very late in the programme would miss it. As with other short items on the bill, newsreels were not the main attraction for most cinema audiences; however, they were much more than simply a means of filling out the programme. By examining the content and appeal of the newsreel, one can detect trends which permeate through the cinema more generally.

As far as the content of the newsreels is concerned, it should first be pointed out that:

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[37] *Kinematograph Weekly*, 16 April 1925, p. 57.
[38] *Kinematograph Weekly*, 20 August 1925, p. 109.
[39] Paul Rotha, *The Film Till Now: A Survey of World Cinema* (London, 1949 edition), pp. 516, 119.

> Newsreels are not an extraneous branch of cinematographic work, grafted on to the essential business of film production. On the contrary, the cinema itself developed out of the presentation of topical events.[40]

Short actuality films had been the staple diet of the earliest cinema audiences. In Wales pioneers such as Arthur Cheetham had filmed local events to attract audiences to his fairground shows around the turn of the century.[41] The demand for moving pictures soon led to the development of companies in the USA, Britain and France, eager to sell films of current events to growing audiences. The first newsreel companies were established in the first decade of the twentieth century, but the likes of Pathe and Gaumont had never been in the business of attempting to present an objective view of current events: they sought to provide entertainment, and they had little other choice.

> As in all small leisure-business, whether pubs, fairs or 'pics', the first rule was that you must please the regulars, for on them depended the business. Therefore, working-men and their wives, from adolescence to about middle-age, were better placed to get the kind of product which they actually wanted in the local cinema than anywhere else. For once it was they who paid the pipers and were seen to be paying them too.[42]

In its earliest form the very novelty of the moving image meant that the actual events depicted did not need to be 'newsworthy' in order to attract an audience. (Shots of a train departing from a station, or people going about their everyday business attracted immense interest). This did not last long, however, and soon the showmen were competing to screen actuality footage of all sorts of weird and wonderful events. Sir Arthur Elton's evaluation in 1955 of early newsreels is revealing:

> For at least the first thirty years the content of the newsreels was determined mainly by the passing fads and fancies of the time ... Of scenes of one-legged men pushing turnips with their noses from Paris to Rome there is much; of boat races, crowned heads, bathing belles, railway smashes, the glossier phases of war, fashion parades, fires, murders and dance marathons more ... Taking a parallel from written sources, it is as if the historian of the early twentieth century had litttle more to guide him than the

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[40] Peter Baechlin and Maurice Muller-Strauss, quoted in Anthony Aldgate, *Cinema and History: British Newsreels and the Spanish Civil War* (London, 1979), p. 17.
[41] Cheetham's work, which consisted entirely of actuality films, is discussed in David Berry, *Wales and Cinema: The First Hundred Years* (Cardiff, 1994), pp. 35-42.
[42] Nicholas Pronay, 'British Newsreels in the 1930s: 1. Audience and Producers', *History*, Vol. 56, No. 188 (1971), pp. 415-6.

Daily Mirror, *Old Moore's Almanac*, *Tit-Bits* and a run of Nelson's Sevenpenny Novels.[43]

It was precisely this sort of popular journalism and working-class culture out of which the early newsreels grew: as did the cinema itself. As Terry Ramsaye remarked in 1934, 'The newsreel is not a purveyor of news and is never likely to become one ... Whether they know it or not, the newsreels, as they call them, are just in the show business.'[44] In pinpointing one of the essential characteristics of the newsreels, Elton and Ramsaye also rejected the idea that such films could be of any interest to historians. As Anthony Aldgate has pointed out, 'the dismissal of newsreel content was virtually universal among film critics and commentators.' Newsreel items simply made no effort to portray the world behind a veneer of gritty realism, as had Grierson's documentarists (however falsely or 'creatively').[45]

When newsreels did attempt to concern themselves with the serious issues of the day they could find themselves under attack from audiences, which was potentially far more damaging than critical derision. The reporting of the 1931 general election (in a manner entirely sympathetic to the newly elected National Government) evidently proved too much for many South Wales cinema patrons. After numerous complaints from cinema managers that audiences had 'got up and booed', the South Wales branch of the CEA protested to the newsreel companies about the propaganda content of their films. Replies were apparently drawn from Fox, Gaumont and Pathe 'in which it was pointed out that it was not the practice to include speeches of a controversial nature, and that the items were only included in consequence of the importance of the recent General Election.' This was not enough for the South Wales CEA who passed a further resolution 'expressing the opinion that items of controversial politics should be rigidly excluded from the news as being detrimental to the exhibitor's business, and further calling on the General Council to press this matter home.'[46] Similarly, Anthony Aldgate has argued that 'from the onset of war the newsreels suffered a sharp decline in credibility, perhaps because they were now for the most part reporting events which the audiences were enduring for themselves

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[43] Sir Arthur Elton, quoted in Aldgate, *Cinema and History*, p. 8.
[44] Terry Ramsaye, quoted in Aldgate, *Cinema and History*, p. 64.
[45] The tenuous claims of British documentarists to be developing a more realist approach to film-making in the 1930s is critically examined in Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real: The Documentary Film Revisited* (London, 1995).

under stress. The newsreel audiences were therefore able to evaluate their own response in comparison with the portrayal of events as depicted in the cinema.'[47]

Audiences were clearly highly sensitive to being served what they recognised as propaganda. For the most part newsreel companies concentrated on safe events which were easily filmed, had popular appeal and generated little controversy. Football matches, ship launchings and royal visits are typical examples of the sort of items regularly featured. Newsreels were not subject to the scrutiny of the British Board of Film Censors, yet the companies' policy of avoiding contentious issues was absolutely in keeping with that of the BBFC. Jeffrey Richards describes the aims of British film censorship in the 1930s as being 'The maintenance on the one hand of moral standards, and, on the other, the avoidance of all political, religious and indeed social controversy.'[48] In summarising the influence of newsreels in the 1930s Nicholas Pronay suggests that:

> In real and practical terms the Newsreels served well their regulars who wanted to hang on to what they believed were the basic decencies of their situation: a belief in the good intentions of their rulers, the belief that things would get better without violence in Britain, and that they should bravely meet their present plight with a laugh. In all they felt, and the Newsreels helped them to feel it, that they must avoid despair.[49]

(If one substituted the name Gracie Fields for the word Newsreels in this passage it would surely lose none of its validity.)

More general similarities can also be drawn between the newsreels and the cinema. There seems to be an extremely close correlation between the history of the newsreel and the position of cinema within society. The newsreel companies developed, along with the distribution and exhibition sides of the industry, in the years prior to World War One. It was between the 1920s and the 1950s, however, that they reached their widest audience. As cinema attendance went into decline in the late 1950s and 1960s, so the newsreels became less significant, eventually dying out altogether. It would be easy to blame this entirely on television, and indeed, in many ways the new medium did provide a more suitable home for the sort of material once

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[46] *Kinematograph Weekly*, 12 November 1931, p. 48; and 10 December 1931, p. 40.
[47] Aldgate, *Cinema and History*, p. 62.
[48] Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain, 1930-1939* (London, 1984), p. 106.

covered by newsreels. However, this was largely because the nature of cinema-going, and the social environment which underpinned it, had themselves changed. When television first arrived there was a good deal of scepticism as to whether it would ever be able to 'screen such events as the Derby, the FA Cup Final, the Boat Race, a Test Match, or even such events as a Royal Wedding, a Coronation etc.,':

> Advanced as television is, remember its limitations. The Emitron camera, a marvellous piece of work, can pick up such events and pass them through a transmitter, but always keep in mind that these pictures are being reproduced on a small screen no more than a foot square. Reduce the Wembley Stadium to this size and imagine how large the individual players would appear. More important still, imagine the size of the ball. It would be so small as to make it almost impossible for a televiewer to watch its progress.[50]

Such a failure to appreciate the future possibilities of television is entirely understandable in the context of South Wales in 1936. Television, at that time was a novelty available only to a very limited audience in the London area; its technical quality was poor; and while cinemas remained such popular social institutions and centres of entertainment it seemed to serve little obvious purpose. As long as people attended the cinema once a week or more newsreels had a useful role to play within the evening's entertainment. With the opening up of new leisure activities and the development of a vibrant youth culture during the so-called 'age of affluence' this regular pattern of attendance was broken. It made little sense for topical news items to feature in cinema programmes when they did not have a regular audience - especially since so many people could by this time 'see' the news on television.

It would be stretching the point to claim that cinema achieved the appeal it did *because* the programmes of entertainment were so varied. However, as long as the cinema maintained its position as the dominant form of public mass entertainment, it made every effort to provide as broad a mixture of entertainment as possible. This did not only mean that older traditions of popular culture survived in cinema programmes; managers also sought to incorporate new forms of entertainment into the bill.

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[49] Nicholas Pronay, 'British Newsreels in the 1930s: 2. Their Policies and Impact', *History*, Vol. 57, No. 189, p. 67.
[50] Albert Shaw, in the *South Wales Echo*, 3 September 1936, p. 6.

In 1923 the management of Swansea's Castle cinema decided to launch an experiment as to the feasibility of incorporating radio broadcasts into their programmes. The manager reported that:

> From what I can gather, the wireless has drawn a few patrons over and above what we should have had in the usual way, but I did not expect to do much during the experimental stages, what I had in mind was that in the event of anything special being transmitted at any time we could make a feature of it.[51]

These experiments were abandoned when it became apparent that even if a 'state of perfection necessary to include Wireless as part of the programme' was achieved, there was 'a clause in the license which stipulates that the set must not be used during broadcasting hours.'[52] It was licensing regulations, not a lack of ambition on the management's part, which prevented this innovation from reaching fruition. No such regulatory difficulties, however, stood in the way of live entertainment being performed in picture houses.

Live Entertainment

The live element of cinema entertainment was an essential feature of just about all programmes in the 1920s, prior to the coming of sound films. Even the smallest fleapit would at least have employed a pianist to provide some musical accompaniment to the images on the screen. In some of the larger halls a small orchestra was considered necessary to provide a suitable atmosphere and their influence on a film's reception was certainly recognised by managers. (The now familiar) Geo. Robinson at Porth held his musicians at least partly responsible for the success of *Madame X* in 1921:

> Never in my experience have I known a picture with such universal appeal as "Madame X". To see hundreds of people leaving a hall some openly crying, and the majority of men and women dabbing their eyes, (in the case of the ladies) very red ones at that, is a most remarkable sight. I have had showers of personal congratulations and thanks for having screened such a picture, *and with such beautiful music*. Curiously enough I had most of the trade show music myself and *I must give every credit to the orchestra for*

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[51] Gambold to Andrews, 8 March 1923, GRO, D/D A/B 18/15/21.
[52] Gambold to Andrews, 2 May 1923, GRO, D/D A/B 18/15/27.

> *the way they performed it, as a bad setting would have spoiled the effect.*[53] (emphasis added).

The musicians' importance to 1920s cinema exhibition was also reflected in their pay, as the table below demonstrates.

Table 4.1: Staff earning £160 per annum or more in Swansea's Castle Cinema, 1926.[54]

Surname	First Name(s)	Occupation	Weekly Wage		
			£	s	d
Gambold	AR	Manager	6	-	-
Millard	Wm. James	Asst. Manager	3	10	-
Illingworth	William	Operator	3	10	-
Hawkins	Edward	Relief Operator	3	5	-
Arnold	John Wm.	Orchestra Leader	5	-	-
Williams	Arthur	Organist	4	10	-
Selly	John Sydney	Violinist	4	-	-
Williams	Edgar David	Cellist	3	10	-
Payne	Katherine	Pianist	4	5	-

The least well paid of the musicians was still earning the same amount as the assistant manager and the chief operator. The only person who actually earned more than any of the musicians was the manager himself. It should also, perhaps, be noted that the pay of musicians reflected not so much the grateful appreciation of employers, as the determined efforts on the part of the Musicians' Union to exploit their members' strong bargaining position (see chapter one).

Attempts to provide an effective accompaniment to silent films often went beyond just instrumental support. For a film such as *The Volga Boatman* it was considered necessary for a choir to provide the necessary vocal support. When this film was shown at the Castle in Swansea in 1927, for example, it was accompanied by the Gwent Glee Singers.[55] Though relatively unusual for managers to book choirs in order to enhance a film's appeal, they were encouraged by sections of the trade press to be innovative in terms of providing audiences with 'special effects'.

> The finest film may be greatly enhanced if accompanied by the right and appropriate sound; the poorest film may also be saved from failure by the same means ... The aim

[53] Robinson to Andrews, 26 April 1921, D/D A/B 18/6/25.
[54] 26 April 1926, GRO, D/D A/B 18/15/105.
[55] Gambold to Andrews, 26 January 1927, GRO, D/D A/B 18/15/124.

> of the theatre manager should be gradually to acquire such a collection of instruments that no demand upon it - from the raising of a ship's anchor to a cork pop - need remain unsatisfied.[56]

Fletcher Clayton, writing in *Kine Weekly*, made a similar point, though rather more cautiously:

> The exhibitor, with his instinct for showmanship, should always seek 'stunts' likely to attract and delight his patrons. This does not mean that he must engage freaks, or indulge in eccentricities; but that, knowing what pictures he is showing each week, he should try and devise some special 'effects.' The pictures are, of course, *the* attraction; 'effects' are only intended to heighten their impressiveness.[57]

The use of such effects, though especially widespread in smaller halls, had its critics. Gilbert Stevens, writing in the same edition of *Kine Weekly*, argued that in those halls employing an orchestra of a dozen or more instruments there was no need for crude effects. 'Why', he questioned, 'should the ear be offended by the noise of stones rattling on a drum as a crude imitation of the sound of waves beating upon the shore when so much music interpretive of the noises of the sea has been written? ... Let us have good music, not good music spoiled by crude imitations.'[58] Most cinema managers, particularly in Wales, had nowhere near twelve instrumentalists in their employment, however, these comments do suggest that a good orchestra was able to influence not just the reception of films, but also the reputation of cinemas. In recommending price increases for admission to the *circle* of Porth's Central Cinema, the manager stressed that 'the little over and above the other halls we well deserve, considering the comfort, cleanliness and service generally given, not to mention the orchestra which stands alone here'. Nevertheless, he still maintained that 'I should like if possible to improve our music if we carry out these changes.'[59]

Clearly, the role of live entertainment in cinema programmes was developed to its greatest extent in the 1930s in the larger first run halls which sought to attract a middle-class patronage. This took the form not only of bigger and better orchestras, but also live variety stage acts. There was nothing new in the notion of showing films and live variety entertainment on the same bill. Music halls, along with fairground

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[56] Low Warren (ed.), *The Cinematograph Exhibitors' Diary: 1928* (London, 1928), p. 69.
[57] Fletcher Clayton, in a supplement to *Kinematograph Weekly*, 5 February 1920, p. xiii.
[58] Gilbert Stevens, *ibid.*, p. xv.
[59] Robinson to Andrews, 29 July 1920, GRO, D/D A/B 18/5/57ii-iii.

booths, had been important outlets for the screening of early cinematograph pictures. But whereas earlier music hall proprietors had sought to exploit the craze for moving images in order to boost their audiences, by the 1920s cinemas were using live acts to win over the custom of music hall and variety patrons. *Kine Weekly* even offered advice to managers as to how best to achieve this:

> Undoubtedly the introduction of variety acts has brought into the picture houses any number of entirely new patrons who have developed, and are still developing, a taste from pictures as apart from their original preference for variety. This educational work would certainly be much more effectively carried on if the 'alternating' form of programme ... was adopted. For where the variety part of the entertainment is a self-contained section, the chances are that these new patrons who have been music-hall 'fans' hitherto will time their visit to coincide with the appearance of the variety acts. The 'alternating' programme would prevent this. In order to see the variety acts this new audience would be obliged to see the pictures as well, and in due course be numbered among the picture 'fans'.[60]

It was the desire for respectability, as well as profitability, which encouraged cinema proprietors to appeal to this market. By the 1920s variety was well established and had won a certain level of respectability. In the early twentieth century variety halls had included films in their programmes to attract audiences. By the 1930s the tables had turned and cinemas began using variety turns to broaden their appeal. The introduction of variety acts into cinema programmes, therefore, was part of a more general phase in cinema's development which also witnessed improvements to the design, comfort and cleanliness of the buildings themselves. The halls which provided variety entertainment were usually those which also boasted 'the last word in luxury'. In Cardiff, for example, the Capitol and the Olympia, both first run halls, featured variety acts regularly in this period. The latter advertised itself as providing 'Always the Latest and Best Pictures & High Class Variety Turns'.[61]

As for smaller towns, the Grand Pavilion in Llandrindod Wells is a good example of the sort of hall which provided live entertainment. The proprietor described the hall as the 'Llandrindod Wells Super Cinema and Rendezvous', pointed out that 'in addition to cinema performances, stage plays are held' and boasted that 'the free car park is usually lined with vehicles.'[62] Evidence of variety entertainment

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[60] *Kinematograph Weekly*, 26 March 1925, p. 72.
[61] GRO, D/D A/B 19/6/10.
[62] Reg Pickard to A Andrews, 25 January 1937, GRO, D/D A/B 20/3/16i.

in cinema programmes is also to be found in some of the more prosperous North and West Wales tourist resorts. The Coliseum in Aberystwyth, for instance, featured acts ranging from the Aberystwyth Madrigal Singers (1932) to 'Musical Dawsons (Real Live Educated Birds)' (1933) as part of their programmes.[63] The Rialto in Colwyn Bay even employed its own variety troupe, known as The Rialto Sparks.[64] In the south Wales Valleys, however, cinemas could seldom afford to provide live, as well as screened entertainment. The attempt to introduce variety at the Central in Porth in 1923 apparently 'did not pay off'.[65] The contrast between the sort of entertainment provided in Valleys cinemas, as opposed to those in more prosperous areas was vividly described by Gwyn Thomas. Having experienced the 'great novelty' of seeing a dancer at a London cinema, he went on to explain that:

> Back home, ancillary turns at the cinema were rare. One cinema in Cardiff, a Babylonian palace visited specifically as a treat, had an organist who rose from the basement to a height of about ten feet above the heads of the front row, riding his organ and playing as he rose. In the valley we would sometimes have reciters, failed actors who contributed to the theme of the film being shown. ... But girls wearing only an ounce of beads and moving their bodies in ways that breathed soft bordello notes with every ripple, we never got as far as that, and even when we had a film about Salome the reciter stayed fully clothed.[66]

Even in the age of silent films, then, there was a discernible difference in the sort of entertainment being provided in different classes of hall. After the coming of sound films around 1928-30 this distinction became increasingly obvious. As far as the smaller halls were concerned, not only was it no longer necessary to employ musicians, few could now actually afford to. After investing heavily in sound apparatus, proprietors, particularly of small cinemas, were in no position to keep on non-essential staff. Even if the contribution of musicians or variety performers was known to improve overall takings, the film renter would still take a percentage of the whole income, making it very difficult for exhibitors to break even. In Wales, where small independent cinemas were so prominent, musicians were in a particularly difficult position, partly because the small capacity of most halls meant there was

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[63] This information comes from the cinema's surviving records, held at Ceredigion Museum.
[64] Ruthin Public Record Office, DD/DM/204/1.
[65] GRO, D/D A/B 19/6/93.
[66] Gwyn Thomas, *A Few Selected Exits* (Bridgend, 1985), p. 66.

relatively little scope for improving takings, but also because it was here that the renters' share of total income was highest.[67]

While the majority of small exhibitors dispensed with the live element within their programmes in the 1930s, in the more prestigious larger cinemas it was being expanded. Looking ahead to the year 1931, *Kine Weekly* pointed out that although 'When 1930 came in, the musicians' only note was one of extreme pessimism', before the year was out 'Super kinemas were rapidly reaching completion ... and it was noted by musicians that nearly every one which opened started with an orchestra and a modern unit organ, in addition to artistic ballet and variety stage presentations.' This article, stressing that in the large circuit halls 'the size of the orchestras will be very much greater than in the days of the silent film', went on to suggest that 'Musicians can safely regard the worst phase of kinema history as passing away and normal conditions of kinema employment returning.'[68]

Perhaps the clearest symbol of the growing importance of live entertainment in the largest and most prestigious halls was the cinema organ. Names such as Wurlitzer, Hammond and Christie had been around in the 1920s, yet it was not until *after* the coming of sound, when they were no longer a practical necessity, that they took on their greatest significance. Rather than doing anything to enhance the actual exhibition of films, they came to be regarded as a symbol of the class and prestige of a particular hall, and as such they were in great demand. According to *Kine Weekly* the John Compton Organ Co. had installed cinema organs at the rate of one a week in 1930, 'an achievement which is without parallel in the history of British organ construction.' The following year it was pointed out that 'one of the principal British organ builders has already extended their works, and another is doing so at the present time.'[69] It was the newly built or renovated super cinemas that were creating this demand, the sort of buildings that were in a distinct minority in Wales. Yet most Welsh cinema-goers, like those elsewhere in Britain, would at some point have had occasion to visit a 'Babylonian palace', even if it was only as a special treat. As such the image of the organist rising up from under the stage became as established a cinema cliché as the later striking of J. Arthur Rank's gong. As well as creating a striking visual effect the

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[67] HE Browning and AA Sorrell, 'Cinemas and Cinema-Going in Great Britain', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, Vol. 117, II (1954), pp. 138-140.
[68] *Kinematograph Weekly*, 1 January 1931, p. 41.
[69] *Kinematograph Weekly* (supplement), 8 January 1931, p. 53; and 1 January 1931, p. 41.

organs did, of course, provide an important musical attraction - and not only for cinema audiences. In Swansea's Plaza cinema, for instance, Tom Jenkins (who was also the manager) conducted regular Sunday evening organ recitals, which were frequently broadcast by the BBC. Such national publicity added, no doubt, to the cinema's local reputation, and the organists themselves were in great demand. In Powell and Pressburger's 1944 film *A Canterbury Tale*, the character Peter Gibbs, a classically trained organist who had aspirations of playing in the finest Cathedrals, actually worked instead in the 'Cathedrals of the Movies',[70] receiving the handsome sum of thirty pounds per week.

If the organs were symbols of splendour and prestige, the orchestras were intended to provide additional entertainment for the higher class of patron that these cinemas were aiming to attract. At Swansea's Plaza, for instance, the management introduced 'a series of weekly, Thursday afternoon, tea-dances, on the floor at the top of the building.'[71] In the café of Cardiff's Capitol 'Falkman's Syncopated Five entertained customers daily.'[72] Not only musicians, though, provided live entertainment in such cinemas. Variety acts were maintained, and in some cases became more prominent, in the talkie era. Judging by advertisements in the local press, variety certainly seemed to be a more significant feature of the Capitol's programme in the 1930s than it had been a decade earlier. On occasions it even took priority over the films themselves - as in April 1938, when a ninety minute stage show called *The Show's The Thing* took top billing for one week.[73]

The increasing prominence of live entertainment within the programmes of the leading cinemas was matched, in the 1930s, by the conversion of some of the remaining theatres and variety halls into picture palaces. Swansea's Grand Theatre, for instance, faced direct competition after the opening of the Plaza in 1931. As Stephen Ridgewell observed, 'This high-class family cinema was able to attract many of the Grand's traditional patrons who might otherwise have overlooked the less "respectable" cinemas of the town.' As a means of retaining its audience between

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[70] David Atwell, *Cathedrals of the Movies: A History of British Cinemas and Their Audiences* (London, 1980).
[71] *Kinematograph Weekly*, 26 November 1931, p. 52.
[72] *South Wales Echo*, 23 February 1976, p. 9.
[73] *South Wales Echo*, 4 April 1938, p.

1934 and 1947 the Grand took to showing films.[74] Similarly, Cardiff's New Theatre installed talkie equipment in 1931.[75] This was not in response to any direct threat posed by a particular cinema, but it did come at a time when the leading halls were extending their efforts to attract middle-class patrons. Outside the major Welsh towns similar developments were occurring. Aberystwyth's Coliseum, for example, was a variety theatre which converted to a cinema in February 1932.[76] In their competition to attract a particular class of audience, many leading picture houses and more traditional theatres had become virtually indistinguishable during the 1930s.

Thus, the distinction between the most prestigious cinemas and the smaller working-class halls increasingly lay not just in the type of patrons they attracted or the quality of their interior decoration, but their quite different programmes of entertainment. To some extent this is explained by the economics of the cinema industry, (as noted above, the smaller halls simply could not afford to employ large orchestras or variety artists). The fact that both types of hall were able to attract such a large and reliable patronage, however, would also suggest that their audiences had genuinely differing demands and expectations. A *Kine Weekly* feature headed 'Variety in the Kinema' made the point succinctly:

> A working-class audience prefers quite a different sort of programme to that acceptable to a more "West-Endy" audience, just as their tastes in pictures differ.[77]

This in itself is no great surprise. It was in order to attract a higher class of patronage that many 'West-Endy' halls introduced variety in the first place. But whereas other innovations intended to appeal to middle-class audiences proved equally popular with those lower down the social scale, such as improved seating and interior decoration, the lure of variety entertainment was less appealing to working-class audiences. The failure of variety at Porth's Central Cinema has already been noted, but even a first run hall such as the Olympia in Cardiff, when faced with

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[74] Stephen Ridgewell, 'South Wales and the Cinema in the 1930s: The Functioning and Reception of a Mass Cultural Form', M.Phil. thesis (Swansea, 1994), p. 74; Brian Hornsey, *Ninety Years of Cinema in Swansea* (Stamford, 1994), p. 16.
[75] *Kinematograph Weekly*, 30 July 1931, p. 50; Brian Hornsey, *Ninety Years of Cinema in Cardiff* (Stamford, 1994), p. 16.
[76] Michael Freeman, *The Coliseum: The History of a Cinema and Theatre in Pictures* (Aberystwyth, 1994).
[77] *Kinematograph Weekly*, 15 January 1925, p. 74.

competition from the likes of the Capitol and the New Theatre, was forced to drop live entertainment from its programmes in 1932. This decision did provoke a small number of complaints from disappointed patrons who had greatly enjoyed not just the variety turns but also 'the musical items given by Mr Wheeler's Olympians'. One 'annoyed' gentleman took the step of informing the management that he and his family would now go elsewhere 'as your show has gone down 100% & this is not only my opinion.'[78] More interesting than this complaint, however, was the reply it received, which is quoted in full below:

> We thank you for your letter, and are pleased that you have given us an opportunity of replying to your criticism. For our part, we tried hard to retain the Orchestra and, as you are aware, we recently introduced extra Musicians, to form a Jazz band, which seemed to be what modern taste called for. Unfortunately, the public did not support us, and we think we can say, without any exaggeration, that our receipts at the Pay-Box did not seem to improve at all, as a result of the extra Band. It has been a great disappointment to us, but we feel we have not had the support we should have had in our effort to keep an Orchestra, and we cannot afford to bear all this extra expense, without support. It is something like the public's attitude to British films: they say they want British films, but when we show one, as a rule, we do bad business.
>
> There are probably a small proportion of people, like yourself, who are prepared to support British entertainment, but it would appear that the vast majority of the public prefer the American variety: it is a matter for regret.[79]

As well as demonstrating the lack of interest shown by the majority of cinema-goers in such live entertainment, the comparison drawn with public's attitude to the films themselves (also touched on in the *Kine Weekly* article) is an extremely interesting one. What evidence there is certainly suggests that the groups least inclined to favour variety turns within cinema programmes were precisely those with whom American films were most popular.

British or American Films?

There was no survey on attitudes to British and American films carried out in Wales in this period. However, some indication of the relative popularity of such films in a predominantly working-class industrial district is provided by a Mass-Observation questionnaire issued in Bolton in March 1938. A clear majority of

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[78] D Griffiths to A Andrews, GRO, D/D A/B 20/2/39ii; the only other written complaint contained in this file is that of J Edwards to A Andrews, GRO, D/D A/B 20/2/42.

respondents (63%) said they preferred American films, only 18% preferred British, with the remainder holding no preference. Further, the questionnaire was issued at three cinemas in the town, and it was in the Palladium, described as 'a down-market cinema, frankly a "fleapit"' where the Hollywood product was most popular. Here, 75% of respondents preferred American films, compared to just 11% who would rather have seen British ones. In Wales, where so many cinemas were of a 'down-market' type, the pattern must surely have been the same, there is certainly no evidence to suggest otherwise.[80]

There are, it would seem, sound reasons for arguing that it was precisely *because* of their liking for American films that working-class audiences were so ambivalent toward live entertainment within cinema programmes. Certainly, in the first decade of the twentieth century, when feature films had yet to develop fully, it was common for films to be shown as part of a wider programme of popular entertainment, whether in fairgrounds, music-halls or purpose built cinemas. By 1914, however, 'the marquee picture palaces of the fairgrounds were fast disappearing' and the 'use of film as a music-hall turn persisted only to a small extent.' This was also the period when the long five-reel 'features' first arrived. Although they had their critics, these films, which were almost all American, 'were in reality very popular with the public'. By 1916 'The average programme consisted of one long feature, one slightly shorter exclusive and perhaps one short film.' The popularity of these pictures, combined with the longer overall duration of programmes, meant that it was no longer necessary to include variety within cinemas. The fact that cinemas were now providing 'greatly improved films and comforts at the same admission prices as before', only made this form of entertainment more attractive to the working-classes. The fact that the majority of films were American was certainly no deterrent.[81]

The middle-classes, meanwhile, were rather less favourably disposed to the output of Hollywood studios. During the inter-war period there was a growing intellectual interest in the 'cinema' yet it was most likely to be films by Soviet directors which most interested members of the Film Society. The general critical

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[79] A Andrews to D Griffiths, GRO, D/D A/B 20/2/39i.
[80] Jeffrey Richards and Dorothy Sheridan (eds.), *Mass-Observation at the Movies* (London, 1986), pp. 34, 32.
[81] Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film, 1914-1918* (London, 1948), pp. 14, 18, 27, 28.

attitude to Hollywood was neatly summed up by Paul Rotha when, writing in 1929, he somewhat reluctantly turned his attention to the American film:

> By sheer ubiquity, American movies compel attention. Although they are, together with their British and German counterparts, the lowest form of public entertainment, their very number prevents them being ignored.[82]

It was the populist, sentimental nature of these films, rather than just their country of origin, which critics objected to. As Peter Stead has pointed out:

> It is not difficult to detect pronounced anti-Americanism in much of what many British intellectuals had to say about Hollywood in the 1930s, but at least the fervour that went into denouncing American sentimentality and 'the accents of the Bowery' was moderated by the realisation that British films were of even less cultural significance.[83]

Indeed, the frustration expressed by critics at the lack of artistic endeavour to be found in most popular American films was compounded by the fact that most British studios, in attempting to copy the Hollywood formula, were producing films that were even worse.

Without wishing to confuse the terms 'intellectual' and 'middle-class', it does seem reasonable to assume that middle-class audiences were those most likely to be influenced by such critical opinions. Indeed, this was the audience for which such writing was surely intended. As such it comes as little surprise that the middle-class were less easily attracted to the movies than those lower down the social scale. The average picture house (as opposed to the Sunday night cinema society) was yet to prove itself as a serious cultural institution. The introduction of live entertainment was an attempt to remedy this. Many of the variety turns were far from intellectually stimulating, but they did at least offer a form of amusement with which middle-class audiences were familiar. There were also calls for the music played in cinemas to be of the highest standard. One contributor to *Kine Weekly* arguing in 1920 that 'even if the majority of picture-goers do not understand Elgar or Delius, yet they appreciate good music, and through constant hearing of it would become educated up to a high musical standard.'[84] The working-class had been introduced to motion pictures as part

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[82] Rotha, *The Film Till Now*, p. 126.
[83] Stead, *Film and the Working Class*, p. 102.
[84] *Kinematograph Weekly* (supplement), 5 February 1920, p. xv.

of a broader framework of existing popular amusements in the first decade of the century. In much the same way, certain exhibitors sought to present films in the twenties and thirties within programmes of entertainment with which more 'respectable' patrons could feel comfortable.

It is also noticeable that once mainstream feature films (British and American) had established a degree of critical approval, live variety entertainment ceased to be a significant feature of cinema programmes. From the mid- to late-1930s writers such as J. B. Priestley and Elizabeth Bowen had come to accept that for all their faults, there was much to be commended in American films. Priestly even went as far as to state in 1936 that Hollywood had provided him 'with at least 9/10ths of the good entertainment' he had enjoyed in cinemas.[85] The pace and vitality of the social-realist films coming out of America from the mid-1930s, such as *Mr Deeds Goes to Town* (1936) and *Dead End* (1937) were rapidly winning Hollywood new admirers. At about this same time a number of British films (albeit in some cases made by American film companies in the UK) were gaining both critical and popular acclaim. With *The Citadel* (King Vidor, 1938), *South Riding* (Victor Saville, 1938) and *The Stars Look Down* (Carol Reed, 1939) British films were at least beginning to shake off their poor reputation. It is interesting that in the Mass-Observation questionnaire issued in 1938 a number of the respondents, most notably in the more up-market halls, suggested that although they still considered American films superior, British ones were fast improving. Others said that they felt the best British films were equal to the best American ones.

It was during the Second World War and its immediate aftermath that British films can really be said to have come of age. The work of directors such as Carol Reed, David Lean and Noel Coward, along with the output of Powell and Pressburger - to say nothing of Ealing Studios - had sparked a mood of unprecedented confidence among British film critics in their home industry. Concluding her 1947 survey of recent British films Dilys Powell, film critic for the *Sunday Times*, neatly captured this spirit of optimism:

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[85] J B Priestley, quoted in Stead, *Film and the Working Class*, p. 101.

The serious British film has thus found an audience as well as a subject. If it presents its newly-found standards of conception of technique, it will find not merely a national, but an international audience.[86]

By the time Powell was writing, variety entertainment had largely disappeared from all but the most up-market halls. One explanation for this is that the war, and the 'age of austerity' which followed, had rendered such ancillary amusements superfluous - labour shortages prevented cinema managers from employing large numbers of musicians and live entertainers. The live aspects of cinema entertainment did not return in the 1950s, however, despite the fact that middle-class attendance held up remarkably well in the post-war period. Indeed this social group came to represent an increasingly important section of the cinema audience from the 1950s onwards. With mainstream British and American films established as 'legitimate' cultural products by World War Two, cinema programmes no longer needed to offer alternative attractions in order to ensure their social/cultural respectability.

This is not to suggest that the significance of live element within cinema programmes should be played down. Insofar as it was part of a process by which the cinema sought to enhance its respectability and broaden its appeal, live stage entertainment played an important role in the cinema's history. It reflected the flexibility and diversity of the entertainment provided by the cinema in a period when picture houses were the principal venues of massed public entertainment. As well as appealing to middle-class audiences, the orchestras, stage shows and organ recitals in the leading cinemas also provided the patrons of rather less salubrious halls with an ideal venue for a special night out.

Nor should it be assumed that the eventual emergence of the feature film as the predominant form of cinema entertainment was inevitable. Live entertainment had played an important role in largely up-market halls in the inter-war years, and within virtually all cinemas short films, cartoons, newsreels, and in the early-1920s serials, had been an essential part of the entertainment on offer. In the less fashionable halls especially, patrons came to view them as an important feature of their evening's entertainment. It was not until the decline in regular working-class cinema attendance in the 1950s and 1960s, and the simultaneous spread of television, that such features were lost from cinemas.

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[86] Dilys Powell, *Films Since 1939* (London, 1947), p. 40.

In seeking to explain why it was that feature films did come to be regarded as being virtually synonymous with the cinema itself, the role of the critics must be taken into account. It is to their influence that attention will next be turned.

Chapter Five: Critics and Critical Responses

Throughout this thesis it is argued that the term 'cinema' should not be regarded as being synonymous with 'film', much less with a relatively narrow range of critically acclaimed films. That the history of the cinema has so often been regarded as being the history of film is in no small measure due to the influence of film critics. Critics played a crucial role in establishing the cultural and intellectual respectability of the cinema in the 1920s and 1930s. In doing so, however, they created something of a consensus by which certain films were elevated to the status of art, while others were dismissed as trivial escapist nonsense. In recent decades historians have begun to look beyond these 'consensus' films and it has come to be widely accepted that the British 'cinema' of the 1930s and 1940s constituted much more than just those films deemed critically important at the time.

The argument pursued here, however, is not just that we should look beyond the critical consensus in order to better understand the true nature of the British cinema, rather, that we should consider more than just the films themselves. The cinema is regarded here as a social institution, not just a medium for showing films. Previous chapters have examined the way in which social and economic conditions in Wales shaped the historical development of the cinema there. The final two chapters focus on the way in which the cinema was publicly received. As such the intention here is not to examine what certain critics had to say about individual films, but what they wrote about the cinema as a whole - as an institution. There will be little attempt to highlight the shortcomings of particular pieces of critical analysis. Attention is devoted instead to the social and cultural context within which film critics wrote, and to finding out exactly who these critics were. The main reason, it is argued, that the British cinema was for so long thought of in terms of a narrow range of 'consensus' films was not because historians paid too much attention to the writings of film critics, but because they focused on too narrow a range of critical opinion. In this chapter, therefore, a clear distinction is drawn between *critics*, who tended to write for an educated, middle-class readership, and *reporters*, who pitched their journalism more at the level of the ordinary film-goer. By analysing the writing of film *reporters* in the local press within Wales it is possible to detect a quite different view of the cinema than that expressed in the London-based papers and journals.

This chapter will devote roughly equal amounts of space to the critical response to the cinema in Britain as a whole, and to Wales in particular. Part of the reason for this is because the national, London-based papers were widely read in Wales. The Welsh local or regional papers tended to be read in addition to, not instead of, the national press. It is also necessary to write at some length about the social/cultural context from which British film criticism emerged because relatively little attempt has been made to do this before. The contrast between the approach taken by film journalists in London and Wales did not necessarily reflect national differences. The writing of film columnists in the local or regional press, however, does provide a quite different insight into the way the cinema was regarded to that which we get from the national press. It is from the local papers that the cinema's position as a social institution, rather than just a place for screening films, comes across most clearly.

The chapter is divided into four sections. In the first it is argued that conflicting attitudes to the cinema held by different sections of the English middle-class reflected deep-seated social and cultural divisions within that social group. The second section focuses more specifically on what was written about the medium by contemporary newspaper critics and reporters in Britain as a whole at this time. It seeks to identify and explore the distinction between 'critic' and 'reporter'. In the third section attention is turned to Wales where the political and cultural mores of a relatively recently established middle-class were plainly evident in critical debates surrounding the cinema. It also attempts to say something about attitudes to the non-commercial cinema in Wales. It is demonstrated that there was a demand in Wales for films other than the regular output of Hollywood studios. A number of film societies and workmen's institutes screened non-commercial films in this period. The most popular attractions, however, were invariably those regarded as having a theme which held particular cultural or political interest for a local audience. The final section examines the output of film reporters in Wales. Writing specifically for a *local* audience, they tended to take a rather different approach to London-based critics, focusing the attractions offered by individual cinemas, rather than the appeal of particular films.

Cinema and the Middle-Classes in Britain

The emergence of film criticism in Britain was by no means synonymous with the development of the cinema. For roughly the first twenty-five years of its existence the cinema was viewed with contempt by those who aspired to any kind of social or intellectual respectability. No national newspapers had a regular film critic, and there were no specialist journals devoted to serious analysis of films. An impression of the way in which educated middle-class opinion viewed the cinema is provided by C. A. Lejeune. Lejeune, whose film reviews for the *Observer* were to make her one of the most popular and respected critics of her generation, looked back in 1934 on her early cinema-going experiences:

> When I first went to the pictures, I remember how my friends and I used to hide behind the bill-boards outside the theatre, in case one of our relations came by and discovered us in the queue, or some other girl from school told tales about the way we spent our evenings. And even some time later, at college, I remember how we thought our Professor of English a very gay old dog, because he paid his sixpence regularly to see Nazimova and Pauline Frederick at the local picture house.[1]

At the time Lejeune was making these comments, the commercial products of the British and American film industries were still viewed with disdain by the more discerning critics. The medium itself, however, had managed to win some new and influential converts. But which sections of the middle-class had been won over, and what role did film critics have to play in their conversion?

In a famous and much quoted essay written during World War Two, George Orwell contrasted two 'important sub-sections of the middle-class', which he regarded as 'symbolic opposites'. 'One was the military and imperialist middle class, generally nicknamed the Blimps, and the other the left-wing intelligentsia.' The Blimps, the Empire builders and administrators, had even before 1914 begun to lose some of their vitality. Their brand of blind patriotism and anti-intellectualism, however, was never far below the surface of both popular and official opinion in inter-war Britain. The intelligentsia, on the other hand, although not without influence, had largely been excluded from positions of official authority:

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[1] C. A. Lejeune, '"Eyes and no Eyes": What to Look for in Films', in R. S. Lambert (ed.) *For Filmgoers Only: The Intelligent Filmgoers Guide to the Films* (London, 1934), pp. 82-3.

If you had the kind of brain that could understand the poems of T. S. Eliot or the theories of Karl Marx, the higher-ups would see to it that you were kept out of any important job. *The intellectuals could find a function for themselves only in the literary reviews and the left wing political parties.* (emphasis added).

To literary reviews can easily be added film criticism, for the qualities which characterised the English intelligentsia, as Orwell saw it, were precisely those which underpinned the more serious film reviews. He asserted, for instance, that 'the English intelligentsia are Europeanized. They take their cookery from Paris and their opinions from Moscow.' Film critics, similarly, were most enthusiastic about the work of directors such as Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Pabst and Clair. The contempt which Orwell claimed the intellectuals had for 'every English institution, from horse racing to suet puddings' also applied to British films. Further, the journals which Orwell cites as the principal organs of the intellectual left, the *New Statesman* and the *News Chronicle*, were precisely those in which such critics wrote.[2]

By the 1930s, the intellectual wing of the English middle-class dominated the writing of serious film criticism. Indeed, it could be said that they had a profound influence on the development of film in Britain more generally. How had this happened? The establishment of the Film Society in 1925 was certainly an important development. It was set up 'in order that works of interest in the study of cinematography, and not yet easily accessible, might be made available to its members'. The members themselves were drawn from a variety of fields, and included H. G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw, Julian Huxley, J. B. S. Haldane and John Maynard Keynes. As Jen Samson has observed: 'The new and controversial foreign films which the Film Society imported into Britain during the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s not only increased esteem for the medium among the intelligentsia, but also had an effect on the development of British film production.'[3] In the same year (1929) as Grierson's *Drifters* was first shown to the Film Society, he also set up a film unit at the Empire Marketing Board.

Within two years of the first Film Society meeting, the first journal devoted to serious film criticism had been launched. As Charles Barr has noted, '*Close-Up*

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[2] George Orwell, 'The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius. Part I: England Your England', in *The Penguin Essays of George Orwell* (Harmondsworth, 1994 edn.), pp. 154-156.
[3] Jen Samson, 'The Film Society, 1925-1939', in Charles Barr (ed.), *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema* (London, 1986), p. 306.

belongs to the early years of the Film Society movement, and the discovery by a generation of intellectuals of the cinema as an art form.'[4] In 1932 *Cinema Quarterly* first went into print, a journal with close associations to the documentary movement. This period also saw the launch of *Sight and Sound* and *World Film News*, as well as the introduction of film criticism in such journals as the *Spectator*, *News Chronicle*, *New Statesman*, *The Listener*, and on the BBC. A generation of British film critics emerged in the late 1920s and 1930s who regularly contributed to these journals, among them Roger Manvell, Paul Rotha, R. S. Lambert, Dilys Powell, C. A. Lejeune, Richard Winnington, William Whitebait, Graham Greene and Alistair Cooke. While Graham Greene and Alistair Cooke are much more well known for their work in other fields, they can legitimately be viewed as part of a generation of film critics who sought to highlight the artistic and educational properties of this new medium.

These critics, though important in lending the cinema a new artistic and intellectual respectability, were not alone in attempting to take films up-market. Among the more Blimpish elements of the middle-class were also to be found advocates of the new medium. For this group, it was the cinema's potential as a medium of national expression, rather than its artistic development, which was the primary concern. As a letter, published in *The Times* in 1932, argued:

> No close study of films and talkies is needed to convince one that the British point of view is neglected oversea[s]. There is little enough shown with 'home' as a setting; practically nothing of the Empire, that treasure-house of colour and drama. Sentimentally this is a pity: politically it is a tragedy, for in this case 'point of view' connotes standards, influence, trade. ... the remedy lies with the layman at home. If he encourages our own people to produce work which by sheer merit outsails that of the other man on every tack; if he insists on clean humour, on technical excellence, on plots which can be shown to children without hesitation and to the East without scruple he will get what he wants: that link will be forged. But if he goes on tolerating foreign extravagances which proclaim the white races to be nothing but degenerate half-wits, we shall pay the cost some day. And on that bill there will be no discount.[5]

The paper itself strongly endorsed such sentiments: 'The British Empire should know itself; and the world should know the British Empire.'[6] It was concerns such as these which had led to the establishment, in 1929, of the Commission on Educational and

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[4] Charles Barr, 'Introduction: Amnesia and Schizophrenia', in Charles Barr, (ed.), *All Our Yesterdays*, p. 5.
[5] The letter was written by one Thomas Wood, *The Times*, 5 March 1932, p. 13.
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 13.

Cultural Films. The Commission's 1932 report, *The Film in National Life*, devoted a chapter to 'The Cinema and the Empire' in which it was argued:

> The backward races within the Empire can gain more and suffer more from the film than the sophisticated European, because to them the power of the visual medium is intensified. The conception of white civilisation which they are receiving from third-rate melodrama is an international menace, yet the film is an agent of social education which could be as powerful for good as for harm.

The authors of the report concluded that a National Film Institute needed to be established, 'an important branch' of which 'should deal with Imperial and Colonial film affairs.'[7]

The concerns expressed in this report and in editorials in *The Times* were by no means new. Indeed, Blimpish-inspired initiatives to influence British film production predate the establishment of the more highbrow Film Society. The British National Film League was established in 1921, which aimed 'to encourage the production and exhibition of British-made films'. One of the ways it attempted to do this was by launching a campaign of British Film Weeks. The intention was to arrange as many bookings as possible for British films in a single week, which could then be shown in different areas on successive weeks. The first of the Film Weeks was scheduled for November 1923, and according to *Bioscope* among those present at the launch of the campaign were:

> leading members of the diplomatic corps, Colonial and Dominion representatives ... Members of Parliament, legal luminaries, civic dignitaries, the Army and Navy, and practically everyone who matters in the social scale.[8]

The campaign, which did not get underway until February 1924, did little to stimulate British film production. However, the interest clearly taken by the traditionally patriotic sections of the middle-class in raising the prestige of British films is worth noting. Their influence can also be detected in the 1927 Films Act, which sought to stimulate British film production (if not to encourage the development of a specific type of British film). As Julian Petley puts it, 'Compared to, for instance, France or the USSR there was at this time little interest in the art of the film, or in the cinema as

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[7] Commission on Educational and Cultural Films, *The Film in National Life* (London, 1932), pp. 126, 139.

what might be called a "cultural industry". More typical of the level of debate was Lord Newton's concern with the "industrial, commercial, educational and Imperial interests involved"'.[9]

The lack of interest shown in the artistic properties of the film infuriated highbrow critics. Indeed, the blind support shown to British pictures (regardless of their 'quality') by journalists and politicians led Paul Rotha to argue that the British film lay on a 'hollow foundation':

> it rests upon a structure of false prestige, supported by the flatulent flapdoodle of newspaper writers and by the indifferent goodwill of the British people ... Well-merited castigation would have laid bare, and therefore more easily remedied, the root of the evil. Instead, there have been British Film Weeks and National Film Campaigns which have nourished the cancer in the film industry. As it is, the British film is spoon-fed by deceptive praise and quota regulations, with the unhappy result that it has not yet discovered its nationality.[10]

What concerned Rotha and others was that British studios in the 1920s, had failed to develop their own distinctive style of film-making. The British Film Weeks, launched in November 1923 with the intention of promoting 'British films for British people', were an anathema to critics who did not necessarily regard a film made in Britain as a truly British film.[11] One of the films promoted as part of the Film Weeks campaign was Cecil Hepworth's *Comin' Thro' The Rye* (1923). Here is an example of a film which made every effort both to be distinctively British, and to appeal to a higher class of audience. As Andrew Higson has demonstrated, however, though widely praised in the national press, the film failed to match up to the artistic standards being set by the emerging generation of cinema critics, and has seldom featured in discussions on British cinema since.[12]

Hepworth claimed in his autobiography that 'It was always in the back of my mind from the very beginning that I was to make English pictures, with all the English

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[8] See Rachel Low, *The History of the British Film, 1918-1929* (London, 1971), pp. 89-90.
[9] Julian Petley, 'Cinema and State', in Barr (ed.), *All Our Yesterdays*, p. 32.
[10] Paul Rotha, *The Film Till Now: A Survey of World Cinema* (London, 1949 edition), p. 313. Also quoted in Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain* (Oxford, 1995), p. 36.
[11] In 1929 Leon Moussinac wrote that '*L'Angleterre n'a jamais produit un vrai film anglais*'. ('The English have never produced a truly English film'). In 1930 Paul Rotha described this remark as 'miserably true', and even in 1949 he argued 'that the dictum of the famous French critic is still even partly true.' Rotha, *The Film Till Now*, pp. 313, 544.

countryside for background and with English atmosphere and English idiom throughout.' His adaptation of Helen Mathers's 1875 novel was clearly an attempt to do just this. The film can be seen as part of the process of mythologising the English countryside, which reached new heights during the inter-war period. Higson regards it as a 'heritage film' and argues that it represents an early (i.e. pre-Film Society) attempt to appeal to more up-market audiences, and to utilise film for artistic purposes. The thoroughly traditional notion of Englishness represented in this literary adaptation, however, was totally at odds with the modernist principles upon which film was later to establish itself as an art form. Higson, recognising that historians of British cinema from Rachael Low to Roy Armes have tended to dismiss the film as 'retrogressive', draws attention to the mixed response it received at the time. Its emphasis on tradition, landscape and heritage, as opposed to more modern editing techniques and narrative structures was 'neither summarily dismissed nor unhesitatingly celebrated.' Further, the most positive reviews came from the fiercely patriotic *Bioscope* and *The Times*, suggesting, perhaps, that Hepworth's film had some success in appealing to the more Blimpish sections of the middle-class.

The lack of intellectual film criticism in 1923 makes it difficult to compare high- and middlebrow responses to *Comin' Thro' The Rye*. It can only be asserted that while the film did win a certain amount of acclaim from reporters at the time, it has been largely overlooked by critics ever since. Hepworth's film was clearly far removed from the product of Hollywood studios, and he might be viewed as attempting to take British films up-market by aiming at the more patriotic section of the middle class. By the early 1930s, however, it was the intelligentsia who (limited as they were to 'the literary reviews and left wing political parties') had come to determine what constituted an 'artistic' film. An illustration of the relative influence of these two sections of the middle-class over British cinema is provided by the only Government sponsored film unit. It is interesting that when established in 1929 the unit was located within the *Empire* Marketing Board. It was soon dominated, however, by the most *intellectually* acclaimed of British film-makers - the documentarists, led by John Grierson. Within a couple of years the unit had been re-housed at the GPO.

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[12] For a much more detailed discussion of *Comin' Thro' The Rye* see Higson, *Waving the Flag*, pp. 26-97.

Critics and Reporters in the National Press

While the more patriotic element within the English middle-class continued to exert influence over government film policy in this period, it was from the intelligentsia that the emerging generation of film critics were drawn. To focus too closely on the writings of the above critics, however, as many historians have, obscures the fact that much else was being written about the cinema in the national press in the 1920s and 1930s. The growing popularity of the cinema (as a form of entertainment rather than an art form) led many of the national daily papers to devote more attention to what might be termed 'screen gossip' in order to attract and interest readers. A distinction came to be drawn in the 1930s, therefore, between 'critics' and 'reporters'.

The critics were that body of writers, mentioned above, who usually wrote in weekly or monthly publications and who were most interested in the intellectual possibilities that the medium provided. Above all they wanted to see films which would make audiences *think*. It was recognised that such films would not be made unless there was a demand for them. The critics, therefore, saw their role as being essentially an educational one: to teach their readers to appreciate, and demand, intelligent films. As Dilys Powell, reflecting on her early days as film critic for the *Sunday Times* admitted: 'I suppose in a kind of impertinent way I did want to educate my readers. I probably thought I must persuade people to go and see this film which I liked very much, which moved me.'[13]

Reporters, on the other hand, were less interested in shifting popular middle-class taste than in reflecting it. Those who reviewed films in the national daily press often had little or no specialist knowledge of film-making or of the cinema industry. As Guy Morgan, film 'reporter' for the *Daily Express* explained, they were simply journalists who happened to be writing about films. As such 'the "lay" critic's first responsibility is to his editor, for a feature in his paper that people, not necessarily filmgoers, will read on its own merits.' He went on to argue that:

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[13] Christopher Cook (ed.), *The Dilys Powell Film Reader* (Manchester, 1991), pp. ix-x.

There is no difference between the film critic of a popular newspaper and a reasonably observant film fan except that the former has more regular opportunities for seeing films, wider standards of comparison and greater practice in summing up films quickly according to the journalistic requirements of his paper. For this reason "film reporter" is a fairer designation than "film critic". His approach is of necessity more informative than critical.'[14]

Graham Greene, film critic of the *Spectator*, had made the same distinction between critics and reporters two years earlier (in 1936). He placed himself firmly within the former category:

> One need not deny to either books or films of popular middle-class entertainment a useful social service, as long as it is recognised that social service has nothing to do with the art of the cinema or the art of fiction. What I object to is that it is the *critic's* business to assist films to fulfil a social function. The critic's business should be confined to the art.

The problem that Greene went on to identify was that, because only 'two or three films in the year can be treated with respect', the serious critic had a limited amount of material about which to write. The solution he proposed was for critics to be more 'satirical'. 'We need to be rude, rude even to our fellow reviewers ... Indeed, I am not sure whether our fellow critics are not more important subjects for our satire than the cinema itself, for they are doing as much as any Korda or Sam Goldwyn to maintain the popular middle-class Book Society *status quo*.'[15]

This distinction between critics and reporters was also alluded to by C. A. Lejeune in 1934. Indeed, she felt that 'it is one of the cinema's misfortunes that film criticism ... has been consistently bad both in this country and America, while film journalism ... has been consistently efficient.' Although a respected film critic herself, Lejeune also considered herself a film fan, and felt that there was a need for the gulf between critics and reporters to be bridged:

> What we need, and what we have not yet got in this country, is a catholic criticism, which will recognise the distinctive qualities of the best continental pictures, but give just as much care and attention to the mass products of England and America.[16]

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[14] Guy Morgan, 'Critic or Reporter?', in *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 7, No. 26 (1938), p. 54.
[15] Graham Greene, 'Is it Criticism?', in *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 5, No. 19 (1936), pp. 64-65.
[16] Lejeune, '"Eyes and no Eyes"', pp. 80, 85.

The obstacles in the way of bridging this gap and developing a more 'catholic' criticism, however, were formidable. If the comments of Graham Greene and Guy Morgan are anything to go by, then the critics and reporters were themselves not only aware of their differences, but saw themselves as performing quite separate roles. Indeed, these roles can be seen as polarised opposites, the salient features of which are outlined below:

Critic	Reporter
Artistic	Commercial
Europeanised	Patriotic
Intellectual	Populist
Experimental use of film	Adaptations from literature/theatre
Modernist aesthetics	Traditional settings (countryside/heritage)

In drawing up the above table I do not wish to suggest that all those who wrote film reviews in this period fitted neatly into one of the above categories. However, this table can be said to reflect two contrasting interpretations of what the cinema meant to film reviewers, and indeed to the wider society. It was a contrast Paul Rotha drew attention to in 1934 when he wrote of 'two different tendencies' within contemporary cinema:

> On the one side, there is the accepted standard of story-film, making use of orthodox ideas of acting and studio routine and still having much in common with the theatre; while on the other there is the increasing interest being taken in documentary cinema, which springs direct from the fundamental requirements of the medium and is principally concerned with an approach to modern existence. The two types are well contrasted in *The Private Life of Henry VIII* and *Kameradschaft*.[17]

A brief comparison of these two films will be instructive. To take the latter first, G. W. Pabst's *Kameradschaft* (1932) in many respects epitomises the sort of qualities most frequently praised by the highbrow film critics. Set on the Franco-German border, the film tells the story of a mining disaster in which trapped French workers are rescued by their German counterparts. The film demonstrates the artificial nature of national boundaries, and its implied message ('workers of the world unite') evidently appealed to those who could 'understand the theories of Karl Marx.'[18] It was

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[17] Paul Rotha, 'The Development of Cinema', in Lambert (ed.), *For Filmgoers Only*, pp. 33-4.
[18] See below, pp. 151-2.

not so much the film's political message that attracted critical acclaim, however, but its distinctive cinematic style, which applied documentary-like realism to a feature film.[19] The sort of lavish praise the film received at the time was clearly expressed by Francis Birrell in *The New Statesman*:

> It is not easy to convey to the reader the singular beauty of the photography, which is placed in this realistic and murky setting. Yet the photography has a rhythm of its own, which becomes more apparent with familiarity. There is nothing pretentious about it. You never feel that either the settings or the actors have been elaborately posed before the camera in order to get an 'artistic' shot. The whole thing is a 'movie'. If you held the film up at any given moment, I doubt that you would be much impressed by the beauty of the picture. For every moment is seen in relation to what goes before and after. The whole is dominated by a simple narrative photography, which avoids all the faults of the ordinary high-grade German film. I have never in my life seen anything less 'arty'.[20]

Similar sentiments were expressed in *The Spectator* and *Close-Up*, while Roger Manvell, re-assessing the picture for *Sight and Sound* in 1950, argued that the film survives 'as the work of an artist, and not as an effective example of contemporary propaganda.'[21] Highbrow critics were clearly impressed by the film's realism, and its innovative cinematic style and structure were clearly regarded as artistic (though not 'arty'). Its influence can be measured by the number of mining films which came in its wake.[22] It is possible, however, to detect a rather different emphasis in the reviews of the national 'lay' press. *The Times*, for instance, though approving of the film's realism in terms of photography, settings and acting, argued that 'it is more important that this admirable technique is put at the service of an emotional conflict, a story which is really fascinating.'[23] Even this organ of respectable middle-class opinion apparently felt that entertainment was as important as art in the making of feature films.

Sue Harper has described *The Private Life of Henry VIII* as 'a significant cultural innovation' but for rather different reasons. She points out that 'Korda had

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[19] The cast of *Kameradschaft*, as with documentary films, was not entirely made up of professional actors: many of the miners in the film were playing themselves.
[20] Francis Birrell, 'A Film as a Serious Subject', *The New Statesman and Nation*, 5 March 1932.
[21] Roger Manvell, in *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 19, No. 7 (November 1950), p. 299.
[22] These included *The Stars Look Down* (Carol Reed, 1938), *The Proud Valley* (Pen Tennyson, 1940) and *Blue Scar* (Jill Craigie, 1949). See Peter Stead, '"Kameradschaft" and After: The Miners and Film', *Llafur*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1988), pp. 37-44.

developed a film theory which eschewed realism', and that he believed the film's (female) target audience to be unreceptive to 'historical exactitude'. Korda's intention was clearly to appeal to popular taste, not to aim above it. As such he distanced himself from 'characterless' international pictures, arguing that 'the more typically national a film is ... the more general its appeal will be.'[24]

The Private Life of Henry VIII was a huge commercial success, not just in Britain, but also in Europe and America. The critical response to the film in Britain, unsurprisingly, was mixed. It would be an oversimplification to draw too clear a distinction between, on the one hand, highbrow contempt for the film, and on the other, patriotic delight that a British film had at last proved a match for the most successful Hollywood productions. The acting of Charles Laughton, in particular, won acclaim from the more intellectual critics, while there were those of a Blimpish persuasion who felt that the film presented the wrong image of Britain to overseas audiences. Lord Cottenham, writing in *The Daily Telegraph*, felt that the picture showed Henry to be a 'dissolute buffoon' and argued that 'those who love the empire contemplate with anger and disgust the world-wide distribution of a vulgar travesty of history such as this.'[25] Nonetheless, attitudes to this film were largely determined by one's position on the broader question of what exactly the cinema was meant to be. Those most concerned with the artistic properties of the medium had cause to view the film in a more critical light to those who regarded the cinema as a national entertainment industry.

It is significant that the views expressed by Lord Cottenham in *The Daily Telegraph* were not echoed by that paper's film reporters, who argued, 'Whether this is Merrie England is a matter on which dons may differ. It is certainly first rate cinema.'[26] Similarly, *The Times* reviewer felt that 'Neither comment [on situations] nor arrangement [of characters], would be altogether bearable in a book, but they are very amusing in a film'. What matter if 'it is an emotional and ignorant picture of the past' asked *The Evening News*, when 'the childish imaginings in dusty schoolrooms have been suddenly and warmly brought to life'? To the film reporters of the national

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[23] *The Times*, 7 March 1932, p. 10.
[24] Sue Harper, *Picturing the Past: The Rise and Fall of the British Costume Film* (London, 1994), p. 20.
[25] Lord Cottenham's comments are quoted in Harper, *Picturing the Past*, p. 16.
[26] See Harper, *Picturing the Past*, pp. 22-3.

press, it would appear, *Henry VIII*'s artistic deficiencies were more than compensated for by its sheer entertainment value.[27]

There is evidence to suggest that the more intellectual critics took a far less tolerant attitude to the film's shortcomings. For Alistair Cooke, writing in *Sight and Sound*, neither the film's nationality nor its popular appeal were enough to excuse its failure to match up to what a 'movie' should be:

> *Cavalcade* and *The Private Life of Henry VIII* have between them a lot to answer for. Either of them might have been spared so that we might also have been spared the pre-occupation with Epic which they have unwittingly provoked. ... if anybody wants to know what a movie is I should say it is a photographic representation thrown onto a screen, complete with dialogue and sound effects, of a life-like incident treated tragically, comically, whimsically or just left to look after itself. But as long as one generation goes on thinking its most lavish platitudes are its best works of art ... it will remain a critics duty to try and cure the conceit in his own time.[28]

Cooke, writing a year after *Henry VIII*'s release, was much more critical than many 'highbrow' reviewers had initially been. He was attacking the popular response to the picture as much as the film itself. To Cooke, and many critics like him, films such as *Kameradschaft* were true 'movies' while 'epics' like *Henry VIII* were merely commercial enterprises with no artistic merit. That the latter were so popular with audiences was a matter for regret, but also a situation which critics felt it their 'duty' to try and change.

Critical Responses to the Cinema in Wales

Patriotism and intellectualism were both in evidence in Wales in this period, though the polarised distinction which Orwell draws between Blimps and highbrows is of limited value when applied to the middle-class in Wales. This was a social group that emerged and developed a distinctive identity in the latter part of the nineteenth century. In an incisive essay on culture and identity in late modern Wales, Dai Smith identified a Welsh 'clerisy' which 'traced out the elements of higher Welsh culture.'[29]

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[27] *The Times*, 25 October 1933, p. 10.
[28] Alistair Cooke, 'Films of the Quarter', *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 3, No. 12 (Winter, 1934-5), p. 165.
[29] Dai Smith, *Aneurin Bevan and the World of South Wales* (Cardiff, 1993), p. 49. The essay from which these quotations are taken, 'Wales Through the Looking Glass', can also be found in David Smith, *A People and a Proletariat: Essays in the History of Wales, 1780-1980* (London, 1980), pp. 215-239.

The emergence of this distinctively Welsh middle class was a feature of the increasing sense of self-confidence so characteristic of Liberal Wales. It could count among its number the likes of T. E. Ellis and David Lloyd George: men with an acute awareness of their distinctive Welsh identity, but who took equal pride in Wales's central position within the British Empire. Thus Tom Ellis, in replying to a toast at the British Empire Club in 1892 to 'The Principality of Wales', asserted that 'The more Wales has the power of initiative and decision in her own affairs, the more closely will she be bound to the very texture of the imperial fabric.'

While it is possible to distinguish a middle class within Wales which was proudly patriotic and oozing in political and economic self-confidence, elsewhere Smith observes that this was also a class 'consumed with the guilt of an achievement that implicitly denied its origins'.[30] The new found prosperity and political centrality of Liberal Wales was rooted firmly in the astonishing industrialisation of south Wales. The huge influx of migrants into the steelworks, dockyards and coal mines of Glamorgan and Monmouthshire, which saw the combined population of those two counties rise from under 600,000 in 1871 to over 1.7 million half a century later (an increase of 187%)[31], provided the bedrock upon which Wales's contribution to the empire was built. Yet while almost two thirds of the Welsh population lived in one of these two counties by the end of the First World War[32], they had no place in the image of Wales which was being constructed by the beneficiaries of this social and economic transformation. Rather, the Welsh 'clerisy' preferred to place a mythologised *gwerin* at the heart of its cherished national identity.

The *gwerin* can be broadly described as a classless folk: inhabitants of small, isolated communities in Welsh speaking, rural Wales; yet highly cultured and 'enlightened' by a combination of self-education and non conformist religion. As Gwyn A. Williams noted: 'It was in the last decade before the War, when anything resembling a *gwerin* was fast disappearing from Welsh earth, that the *gwerin's* self-appointed voices filled the Welsh air.'[33] Those self-appointed voices were those of the Liberal Welsh 'clerisy' whose hallmark was cultural nationalism. Thus, as Gareth Elwyn Jones puts it, 'There was some substance in the *gwerin* myth, but it ignored, or

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[30] Smith, 'Wales Through the Looking Glass', p. 53.
[31] These figures are taken from John May, *Reference Wales* (Cardiff, 1994), pp. 18-19.
[32] The actual figure is 64% and it is taken from the year 1921, *ibid.*, p. 19.
[33] Gwyn A. Williams, *When Was Wales? A History of the Welsh* (Harmondsworth, 1985), p. 239.

was antipathetic towards, that most revolutionary element in Welsh history, industrialisation.'[34]

Attempts to locate the national genius of modern industrial powers within a 'timeless' rural heritage is by no means unique to Wales. Similar tendencies have existed in, among other places, the United States of America, Germany and England. In the very act of expressing their national identity and distinctiveness, therefore, the cultural 'establishment' within Wales were following a well established pattern. Something similar can be said of attitudes to the cinema commonly expressed by the Welsh middle class. The terms in which the commercial cinema was criticised within Wales, as we shall see, were broadly consistent with concerns being raised across Britain. Moreover, in perceiving the cinema in national terms, the Welsh 'clerisy' exposed their close proximity to the values and assumptions of the more patriotic sections of the English middle class, while also, paradoxically, demonstrating their profound sense of cultural identity.

The emergence of the cinema in the early twentieth century was a significant feature in the process of modernisation - indeed Americanisation - of Welsh society. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, there were serious objections raised as to the cultural threat this new form of popular amusement posed. Yet while much of the entertainment provided in the picture houses was subject to moral or intellectual condemnation, there was also an acknowledgement that the medium itself provided a valuable means by which traditional Welsh culture might be brought to a much wider audience. This was certainly a common theme in many of the serious articles concerned with the cinema in Welsh newspapers. B. Ifor Evans, a professor of English Literature at Southampton University, was one who made the point forcefully, recognising that 'the cinema is not merely an idle amusement, but an international power of no mean importance in the world of today.' Yet he went on to ask:

> what is being done in Wales? As a nation we are sometimes accused of not treating the arts, apart from music, with sufficient seriousness, and certainly as far as literature is concerned we are not known to the world at large. It is said that the ghost of a puritan conscience lurks amongst us that leads us to consider drama and the kindred arts as the wanton pastimes of the Evil One. ... [Yet] it is a fallacy to condemn any instrument because that instrument is at times abused. One might as well condemn music because one dislikes some piece of jazz played by some hack orchestra in a dance hall. ... In a

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[34] Gareth Elwyn Jones, *Modern Wales: A Concise History* (Cambridge, 1994 edition), p. 318.

superlative way the cinema is the medium through which a small nation can express itself to the world. Few foreigners will master our language, but through this silent language of the film we can tell the world much of our customs and our history.[35]

An editorial in the same edition of the *Western Mail* warmly endorsed such sentiments, adding that:

> In the development of the cinema we must avoid making the mistake that was made in the development of the drama - the mistake, we mean, of allowing these old prejudices to blind us to its tremendous possibilities as an art, as a vehicle of expressing contemporary life, and also as a means of communicating to the world our rich heritage of folk-lore, history and romance.[36]

An article published in the same paper the following year went as far as to suggest that the northern coastal resort of Colwyn Bay might become a 'Hollywood for Wales'. Mr. A. G. Hales argued that the attractive marine and mountain scenery, the atmosphere (which was suitable for photography), and the climate (which 'would enable the production work to proceed without a halt all year round') made Colwyn Bay 'an ideal place for a British Hollywood.'[37]

There is clearly a certain amount of overlap between the sentiments being expressed here, and those of the patriotic wing of the English middle class.[38] Middle-class commentators in Wales did not exhibit the sort of anti-intellectualism that Orwell detected among the Blimps, but there certainly was a strong emphasis on the importance of projecting a positive national image to the rest of the world. Further, the suggested themes are those of romantic legends, beautiful landscape and ancient heritage. In Wales, as elsewhere, middle class interest in the cinema was provoked at least as much by cultural nationalism and quasi-Blimpish patriotism, as it was by intellectual considerations.

For those who saw the representation of Wales on screen as an important objective, film criticism was not necessarily regarded as a means of achieving it. Whereas film critics in the national press hoped that by writing intelligently about film they could create a demand for the kind of pictures they deemed to be of artistic merit,

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[35] The *Western Mail*, 16 October, 1926, p. 9.
[36] *Ibid.*, p. 6.
[37] *Western Mail*, 18 March, 1927, p. 7.

within Wales the total cinema going-public was simply too small to generate the sort of demand which might attract the interest of film companies in London or the U.S. It was not until the onset of war that British companies, for rather different reasons, made a conscious effort to include Welsh characters and settings into their films.[39]

If an image of Wales was to be projected onto cinema screens, the initiative needed to come from within Wales itself. It was the encouragement of indigenous film production, therefore, rather than a more enlightened criticism of what was being made elsewhere, which pre-occupied the more film-minded Welsh middle class. Early suggestions as to how this might be brought about were, at best, highly optimistic. Ifor Evans, for instance, having outlined a grand vision of what a Welsh film industry might be able to achieve, could only pose the question: 'Does there exist in Wales the man of wealth and initiative who will give Welsh art an opportunity?'[40] By the 1930s the debate had moved on. The publication of *The Film In National Life* in 1932, and the subsequent establishment of the British Film Institute, led those who hoped that the cinema would become a 'respectable' cultural force within Wales to call for a Welsh Film Council. In October 1936 a group of Welsh members of the BFI decided to form themselves into a body called the Film Institute Society of Wales. They gathered together representatives of religious organisations, local authorities, social services, public institutions and academic bodies at a meeting in Cardiff University to call for the formation of a Film Council of Wales. Also present was the general manager of the BFI, Oliver Bell, who expressed support for the idea of a central administrative organisation which could cater for the particular cultural and educational needs of Wales.[41] The idea was warmly endorsed in an article by Harold Dowling in the *Western Mail* the following week:

> Very little thought is needed to show that if this council can become a really effective working instrument Wales cannot but reap enormous benefit from its activities. The film, a method of education, culture and propaganda as yet in its infancy, will in the future become an increasingly potent influence in the life of the nation. Its possibilities

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[38] Ifor Evans, for example, expressed the view that 'when the history of the changed attitude of the Indians to the British comes to be studied I think it will be found that an important cause lies in the introduction of the cinema into India.' *Western Mail*, 4 August, 1925, p. 6.
[39] Peter Miskell, 'Imagining the Nation: The Changing Face of Wales in the Cinema, 1935-1955', unpublished MA thesis (Aberystwyth, 1996).
[40] *Western Mail*, 16 October, 1926, p. 9.
[41] *Western Mail*, 23 October, 1936, p. 7.

> as an instrument of enlightenment are only limited by the technique of its art, a technique which is approaching nearer to perfection every day.

The group of intellectual, religious and political authorities that were represented at this meeting were about as reflective of a bourgeois Welsh 'clerisy' as it was possible to be. It is interesting to note, therefore, that in discussing the makeup of a future Film Council of Wales, Dowling was quick to stress that, 'its activities must not be confined to Cardiff or even to South Wales ... It is only common sense to suggest that such bodies as the National Museum, the National Library, the Free Church Council, the YMCA and the universities should be strongly represented on the executive body if the council is to be truly representative of the nation.'[42]

Just as it was the landscape and traditions associated with the rural *gwerin* which were felt to provide the obvious background for screen depictions of Wales, it was the institutions established by the middle class of Liberal Wales which were seen as being 'truly representative of the nation.' There was evidently no place in such a national outlook for trades unions, miners' institutes, or any other institution which reflected the social and cultural experience of industrial south Wales. Yet how far does this view of Wales, and of the cinema's position within Welsh society, as expressed in the pages of the *Western Mail*, actually reflect the views of the Welsh middle-class? This question is not one that can be answered with any degree of certainty. However, evidence of alternative viewpoints can be detected in a debate among readers generated by one such article, and published in the paper's letter columns.

In 1938 D. P. Williams wrote a long article in the *Western Mail* entitled 'It is Time Wales Told Her Story on the Screen'. The gist of his argument was familiar enough. He began by suggesting that 'Wales must by this time be almost, if not quite, the last country in Europe which has not tried to use the film as a means of self-expression.' Yet he felt that 'Our country is a paradise of the film director and cameraman', in terms of both subjects and settings. Indeed, he claimed that 'there is enough potential drama in Wales to keep the studios of London and Hollywood working for a lifetime.' However, Williams was not content to rely upon British or American film companies to produce screen images of Wales. Rather, he hoped that a

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[42] *Western Mail*, 30 October, 1936, p. 8.

body of Welsh film-makers would emerge who could create authentic, if low-budget, pictures of their own country. 'The important thing', he stressed, 'is not to ape foreign methods, but to make films that really express Wales.' Thus, while he congratulated the Cardiff Amateur Cine Society in 1937 for making an apparently successful film at a tiny cost,[43] 'the Welshman in me was pained to see this effort wasted on a thriller about a Chinese cabinet that might equally well have been made in Leeds or Inverness or Norwich.'[44]

The initial response to this article was supportive. Expressing contempt for the mainstream feature films with the greatest popular appeal, a correspondent with the pen-name 'Anti-Box Office', complained that:

> The immense output of the commercial studios in the United States, Britain and France has made the term cinema synonymous with the machine-made products with which the public is almost exclusively familiar. Stripped of the 'production values' ... 99 per cent of these stock articles are built on the tattered formula of 'boy meets girl'.

This criticism, interestingly, is based on the modern, standardised methods by which commercial films were mass-produced, as well as on their actual content. Pointing to the success of such countries as Finland and Sweden in producing 'films of imperishable' quality on low budgets, this correspondent saw no reason why the same could not be achieved within Wales. Indeed, he argued that 'the cinema has such a great potential value for Wales that it should be seriously studied and adapted by some cultural organisation which would safeguard it from the abuse to which it is so easily open.'[45]

The views of 'Anti-Box Office' correspond closely to those expressed in various articles published in the *Western Mail* in the inter-war period. An alternative position, however, was taken by another correspondent, this time named 'Realist', who was apparently much closer in outlook to highbrow intellectual opinion. Equally dismissive of mainstream commercial films, 'Realist' argued that the root of the problem was one of demand rather than supply.

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[43] The film made by the Cardiff Amateur Film Society was *The Secret of the Chinese Cabinet*. It was not their first, the previous year they had produced a picture called *Nothing Ever Happens*, see the *Western Mail*, 13 and 16 December, 1937.
[44] The *Western Mail*, 21 December, 1938, p. 9.
[45] The *Western Mail*, 30 December, 1938, p. 9.

> If the people who live in Wales had the slightest desire to see films which have any cultural, educational or national value, or even films which offer some measure of intellectual entertainment, they could have voiced that desire long ago. ... I do not suggest that the Welsh are less appreciative of good entertainment than the English, but I do maintain that if the Welsh really wanted more intelligent films they could easily get them. They need not make the films themselves.

The important objective, according to this argument, was that Welsh people should be encouraged to appreciate high quality entertainment (whatever its country of origin), preferably through a state aided circuit of specialist cinemas. The medium's potential to provide a means of national self expression was a secondary consideration.

> What grounds has 'Anti-Box Office' for suggesting that Wales is in any way specially adapted for the task of raising cinematographic art from the depressing level to which it has sunk in Britain and America? ... Welsh history and Welsh scenery and institutions doubtless offer scope for good films, but so, for that matter, do the history, scenery, and institutions of England and most other countries.

'Realist' went on to defend the Cardiff Amateur Cine Society against the criticism it had received from D. P. Williams for failing to make films about Welsh life. S/he pointed out that only one member of the Society was actually Welsh, and that 'they make films for their own amusement and not with the idea of contributing to Welsh nationalist propaganda.'[46]

With two differing viewpoints so forcefully expressed, a debate was soon underway. 'Anti-Box Office' was quick to defend his/her position, and launched into a further attack on 'Realist's' suggestion that there should be a state aided cinema in every town. S/he argued that the cinema suffered from 'enough capitalistic [sic.], political, religious and moral suppressions without putting the millstone of State aid round the neck of a young movement that must have absolute freedom if it is to live at all.'[47] The Rector of St. Athan, Stanley Gibbon, joined the debate by expressing support for 'the end "Realist" has in view.' He was also opposed to the idea of state aid, however, and argued for the establishment of a network of voluntary film societies across south Wales which could screen cultural and intellectual films.[48] 'Realist', for his/her part, made a spirited defence of the argument for state support for

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[46] The *Western Mail*, 4 January, 1939, p. 9.
[47] The *Western Mail*, 6 January, 1939, p. 9.
[48] The *Western Mail*, 10 January, 1939, p. 9.

the film industry.[49] Other contributors to the debate included Reginald Coath, the secretary of the Cardiff Amateur Cine Society, who, pointing out that his society had 'at least produced something tangible', called for constructive advice or assistance rather than damning criticism from those who claimed to care about film making in Wales.[50] Mr. Oliver Bell, by now Director of the BFI, also added his opinion that a documentary film of Wales would be a welcome addition to the body of work already in existence, and that such a film would find a ready market in film societies and schools throughout Britain.[51]

In a second article on the subject of Wales and film, D. P. Williams reiterated his original position while taking account of some of the views which had been expressed since then. He pointed to the twin threats posed to the cinema by those for whom it was no more than escapist entertainment and those who regarded it purely in terms of its 'highbrow' intellectual content. Yet he suggested that they bore little relevance to Wales: 'Sex-appeal and high-browism are not, happily, among the more noticeable failings of Welsh people.' Williams appeared to be suggesting that cinema's popular and intellectual appeal could be married within a national context. He writes of an industry 'with traces of an art about it', and argues that 'story-documentaries ... would be popular throughout Wales.'[52]

The question of national identity lay at the heart of the debate. 'Realist', and others, regarded the Welsh cinema audiences as being no different to those elsewhere in Britain. Their concern was that such audiences should be encouraged and educated to appreciate better films, whatever their nationality. 'Realist's' suggestion of a state aided circuit of cinemas would not, presumably, have been limited to Wales. Many of those who expressed their opinions in the Welsh press, on the other hand, clearly did consider the Welsh audience to be a distinct entity, and that by making films of national interest other differences could be overcome.

The majority of the articles relating to the cinema that were published in the *Western Mail* adopted broadly the same position as that of 'Anti-Box Office'. The view expressed by 'Realist', on the other hand, that film should be treated as a serious

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[49] The *Western Mail*, 14 January, 1939, p. 11.
[50] The *Western Mail*, 9 January, 1939, p. 9.
[51] The *Western Mail*, 16 January, 1939, p. 9.
[52] The *Western Mail*, 4 April, 1939, p. 11.

cultural form rather than an opportunity for national expression, also had its adherents within Wales. It was this outlook which lay behind the establishment of film societies such as that at Colwyn Bay in 1942. Within two years this society, which met on Sunday evenings at the town's Arcadia Theatre, had 820 members and was making an annual profit of over £120. Its programmes usually provided a diverse range of pictures: 'There was clearly a strong demand for Continental films, especially French, but there were also requests for main films with English dialogue.' The society frequently screened films by French and Russian directors, and the programmes usually included at least one documentary, short or animated film. In addition a number of films of 'historical and technical interest' were shown, such as *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) and *The Invisible Thief* (1909).[53]

If the debate between 'Realist' and 'Anti-Box Office' reflected a gulf between two sincerely held points of view, it was not necessarily an unbridgeable one. Even those lacking much sense of cultural nationalism, and who regarded film as having great artistic and intellectual potential, usually had their own local or regional cultural preferences which set them apart from the highbrow London-based critics. A national, as well as an intellectual, outlook was certainly evident within the Cardiff Film Society, established shortly after the end of World War Two. As well as screening films of intellectual interest, it also sought to take the lead 'in establishing a Welsh group of film societies which, with financial support from the British Film Institute, would be able to help any body of interested people in Welsh towns and villages to establish a local film society.'[54] Here was a body concerned with film on both an artistic and a national level. It saw its role, perhaps, in similar terms to the way in which the Film Society operated between 1925-39, but with a Welsh, rather than British focus.

One of the founding members of this society, and for three years its chairman, was Idris Evans. There was certainly a good deal of overlap between his attitude to the cinema, and that of London-based critics, yet he maintained a concern for the Welsh national interest.

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[53] See programmes and second annual report of the New Film Society, Colwyn Bay, Denbighshire Record Office, DD/DM/962/18-19.
[54] The *Western Mail*, 5 November, 1951, p. 2.

> It is probably no exaggeration to say that during the past seven years in Wales 90% of pupils have left school without ever having had a single lesson in film appreciation and film criticism. It is hardly remarkable in the circumstances that our young people's taste in films is unrefined and that all many of them require of the commercial cinema is hackneyed stuff with little or no intellectual content. To put it bluntly: Welsh education authorities missed the film boat years ago and even in the intervening time have been rather pathetically paddling after it.

Evans, who had acted as Film Officer for Wales in the MoI during World War Two, had long championed the cause of a Film Council for Wales. He had been among those present at the meeting in Cardiff University in 1936 when calls for such a council were first voiced. In an article in the *Western Mail* several years later he outlined in some detail what he felt such a council could do. He saw its potential largely in educational terms, hoping that it would foster a Welsh film library, and forge closer links with schools and universities - both so that film was more widely used as an educational aid and that film-making techniques could be properly taught. He also suggested that such a council should 'collaborate with Welsh religious bodies in equipping church and chapel halls for the use of films to teach religious knowledge and social betterment.' It was not just a greater appreciation of the artistic and educational potential of the cinema which Evans wished to encourage, but also a more concerted effort to put Wales on the screen. He envisaged 'a film production unit of Welsh experts to make films about Wales, her history, culture, traditions and industries. Both Welsh and English copies of these films will be made.' Evans, rather like George Orwell and Humphrey Jennings in England, was able to combine intellect and patriotism. He wanted the Welsh to appreciate better films, but he also wanted Wales to be depicted on screen. Further, it was not a narrow view of Welshness which he sought to promote, but bilingual accounts which took in her industrial background as well as older rural traditions.[55]

Evans's patriotic leanings, which set him apart from the more cosmopolitan intellectual film critics, would almost certainly have been shared by many others from a Welsh middle class background. In effect, he was voicing a demand for non-commercial films for reasons which bore relevance to his own cultural outlook. It was not only middle class Welshmen who did this, however. Much the same thing took place in the working class communities of the south Wales coal field where, on the

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[55] The *Western Mail*, 28 March, 1940, p. 9.

surface at least, it appeared that some of the attitudes expressed by highbrow London critics had an appeal.

Bert Coombes, a self-educated and proudly respectable miner, whose writing is often quoted by historians of the south Wales coalfield, was as critical as anyone of mainstream Hollywood entertainment - especially if it found its way into the miners' institutes:

> My complaint about Glynneath is that the regular nightly film shows have driven all other interests away. Unless you want to see a picture it is better to keep away after early evening, for you will get neither room nor peace. I do not believe it was the ideal to compete with other cinemas when the welfare Halls were built. ... What the halls were for was to supply a permanent place where other types of culture should be nurtured, and I believe all that was intended was that they should be self-supporting.[56]

He was apparently not alone in holding such a view. When the Ystradgynlais Miners' Hall began operating in competition with local commercial cinemas it provoked a boycott by some of its own members who, like Coombes, felt that the whole purpose and ethos of the halls was being corrupted by 'cinemaisation'.[57] Thomas Jones was another who decried the fact that in the institutes of the 1930s 'cinema and billiards [were] going strong and education going weak.'[58]

It was not the showing of films in themselves which most concerned the more culturally minded miners, rather, the type of entertainment being screened and the commercial use to which it was being put. The occasional screening of the 'right sort' of film was considered to be entirely appropriate for the miners' halls. The range of cultural opportunities available at Resolven Welfare Hall, for instance, met with Bert Coombes's approval. Here, 'The large upstairs concert room is reserved for cultural occasions when visiting or local dramatic societies perform, or good class operas or musical comedies are given. Educational and documentary films are shown there.'[59] To Coombes, it would appear, only 'educational and documentary films' qualified as being 'cultural' and therefore worthwhile. Such films held no more popular an appeal for regular cinema-goers in the south Wales valleys than they did in any other part of

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[56] B. L. Coombes, *Miners Day* (Harmondsworth, c. 1945), p. 85.
[57] *South Wales Evening Post*, 6 July 1937, p. 7; 13 December 1937, p. 6.
[58] See Stephen Ridgewell, 'Pictures and Proletarians: South Wales Miners' Cinemas in the 1930s', *Llafur: Journal of Welsh Labour History*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (1997), p. 74.
[59] Coombes, *Miners Day*, p. 85.

Britain, yet, the mining communities of south Wales did provide a working class audience for certain films which could be termed 'alternative'.

Throughout this thesis it is argued that the cinema was able to serve local interests and did not simply impose a unified popular culture on a passive British public. In the case of south Wales there clearly was a demand for films of educational or cultural value, and their exhibition could be regarded as a legitimate extension of the existing role of the miners' institutes. The institutes neither avoided showing uncommercial films, nor did they attempt to follow any kind of critical consensus established by highbrow critics. It would probably be fair to say that the south Wales miners were more likely to appear in a Griersonian documentary than to pay to go and see one.[60] However, when films appeared on subjects in which the miners had a genuine interest, such as Spain, they were readily booked by the institutes. The Tredegar Workman's Hall, for example, screened both *They Shall Not Pass* and *Spanish Earth*, while the hall at Mardy was able to show the Progressive Film Institute's (PFI's) *Defence of Madrid* which was released on 16mm stock.[61] This demand for films dealing with the Spanish Civil War underlines Bert Hogenkamp's claim that films at the miners' cinemas fell not just into the categories of entertainment or education, but also of politics. Ivor Montagu, leader of the PFI in the 1930s, once claimed that the miners' cinemas 'were among our best customers'. What is more, a number of these halls were occasionally able to secure permission to screen films denied a certificate by the BBFC on the grounds of their politically 'controversial' content. Thus audiences in Cwmbach, Nantymoel and Mardy had the opportunity to see Pudovkin's *Mother* in the early 1930s.[62]

In 1934 a Rhondda Film Society was established 'with the object of privately exhibiting films not ordinarily available to the public. ... The programmes will include films of international repute and of educational, scientific and aesthetic interest.' A 'crowded audience of members' was told that *Battleship Potemkin* and

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[60] South Wales provided the setting for various documentary films in the 1930s such as *Today We Live* (Ralph Bond and Ruby Grierson, 1937); *Eastern Valley* (Donald Alexander, 1937); *Rhondda* (Donald Alexander, 1935). See Bert Hogenkamp, 'To-day We Live: The Making of a Documentary in a Welsh Mining Valley', *Llafur: The Journal of Welsh Labour History*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1988), pp. 45-52; David Berry, *Wales and Cinema: The First Hundred Years* (Cardiff, 1994), pp. 127-144.

[61] Ridgewell, 'Pictures and Proletarians', p. 79.

[62] Bert Hogenkamp, 'Miners' Cinemas in South Wales in the 1920s and 1930s', *Llafur: Journal of Welsh Labour History*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (1985), pp. 64, 67.

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari were among the films the society intended to screen.[63] I have been unable to determine how long, and how successfully, this society continued to function, but its very existence demonstrates that there was a demand in this part of south Wales for films of artistic as well as political significance. This point is supported by the fact that the Tredegar institute, after many years of discussion, also established a Film Society in 1944, to show 'Italian, French, Russian and non-commercial American films'. Indeed, such was this society's financial success that within a couple of years it 'was able to launch into cultural activities on an even greater scale than had been possible in the past.'[64]

Film Reporters in the Welsh Press

The success of film societies in different parts of Wales points to the fact that there was an audience here for non-commercial films. For the vast majority of the cinema-going population in Wales, however, the existence of film societies and the writings of the more highbrow critics were quite irrelevant. It was suggested at the beginning of this chapter that since films such as Gainsborough costume melodramas, so popular with audiences in the 1940s, are considered worthy of serious analysis, a similar logic must also be applied to different modes of film criticism. Thus, film *reporters*, who sought to appeal to public taste and not to educate it, should be given as much credence by historians as the more highbrow *critics*. Such an approach, I would argue, might be usefully applied to other historical studies of British cinema, but it is *essential* when studying the cinema in Wales. Film reviews in the Welsh press were almost entirely the work of reporters rather than critics. This is not to say that there was no demand within Wales for a more intellectual approach to film criticism, or for 'artistic' films. Such sentiments were voiced from time to time in letters pages and editorials (as discussed above), but not within the format of a weekly film column. If Welsh residents wished to learn of the latest developments in film technique in Europe or America, it was to the London-based press that they had to

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[63] *Western Mail*, 20 April 1934, p. 15.
[64] D. J. Davies, *Ninety Years of Endeavour: The Tredegar Workman's Hall, 1861-1951* (Cardiff, 1951), p. 88; Hogenkamp, 'Miners' Cinemas', p. 73.

turn. Welsh newspapers, which only had a local or regional distribution, made little attempt to appeal to such minority interests.

What, then, do these film reviews, which were aimed at the majority of cinema-goers within their regions, actually tell us? It is necessary here to draw a distinction between weekly titles, which generally had a small, local circulation, and the much larger dailies, which could be described as regional papers. Journalists writing for weekly titles such as the *Caernarfon and Denbighshire Herald*, the *Cambrian News* or the *Cardigan and Tivyside Advertiser* were not in a position to attend advance press screenings of the latest films. Unable to view films ahead of their readers, film reviewers in the local Welsh press were limited in what they could actually write. For the most part their notices provided little more than a brief factual description of the basic plot, and a list of the leading players. This information was probably gleaned from the standard reviews provided by the trade press. When local papers in Wales did want to draw attention to a film's critical acclaim, they often relied on quotations from reviews in the national press.[65] The local weekly newspapers in Wales had neither the resources nor the inclination to provide a thorough analysis of the week's films. Audiences in most parts of Wales would have learned all they needed to know about the best films months before they arrived at their local cinema. What they demanded of the local weekly paper was not so much criticism as information. Yet, while the textual content of the reviews in the local press are of limited interest to this historian, the format in which this information was presented is of rather greater significance.

It has been repeatedly argued within these pages that cinemas were important local centres of popular entertainment in their own right; they were visited by audiences on a regular basis as a matter of routine; and individual films were by no means the only factor which determined whether or not one went to the cinema. This comes across clearly in the way that film reviews were presented in Welsh local newspapers. They were not organised on a film by film basis, but rather on a cinema by cinema one. Each cinema was given a similar amount of exposure, and so preference could seldom be given to one individual film over another. Further, the reviews concerned themselves with the whole programmes of entertainment to be

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[65] See, for example, the reviews of *The Citadel* and *The Stars Look Down* in the *Cambrian News*, 28 July 1939, p. 9; 19 April 1940, p. 4.

provided at the said cinemas, not just the main features. Information, however brief, was therefore also provided about the second feature, and any short films or live entertainment. It seems unlikely that many people would have decided which cinema to attend on the basis of the reviews in the local press. Both the format and content of these reviews seemed to be geared towards those who wanted to check what was on at their local cinema, and not those who may have wished to discover which was likely to be the most interesting or appealing film.

The film reviews provided by the daily provincial newspapers within Wales were rather more detailed than those of the local press. Titles such as the *Western Mail* and the *South Wales Evening Post* made more of an effort to advise their readers as to the particular merits and weaknesses of individual films. The tone of the reviews, however, was very much in the style of the reporter rather than the critic. That this should have been so was entirely consistent with the developments in the Welsh press since the 1880s. The adoption of the principles of New Journalism in the late nineteenth century by daily titles, especially in south Wales, meant that these papers were becoming much more popular in terms of their presentation and appeal. In the case of the *Western Mail*, for instance, Joanne Cayford has shown that far from being able to impose its political views on a south Wales readership, the paper, along with its rival the *South Wales Daily News*, 'became increasingly consumer orientated. They catered for what they perceived to be popular taste, encouraging reader participation and reader purchase.'[66] In the 1890s this was most evident in the introduction of a *Ladies' Own* supplement, and a huge expansion in the coverage of sport. It is within the context of the increasing commercialisation and popular appeal of the daily Welsh press that the film reviews of the 1930s can be best understood. Yet the adoption of the principles of New Journalism by sections of the Welsh press did not simply mean that they aped the presentation techniques of the more popular national titles. As Aled Jones has argued, 'such Cardiff-based papers as the *Western Mail*, succeeded in constructing a new and crucially undifferentiated audience that was conceived of as being essentially *Welsh* in character.'[67] This can be illustrated by examining the

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[66] Joanne M. Cayford, 'The Western Mail 1869-1914: A Study in the Politics and Management of a Provincial Newspaper', Unpublished PhD Thesis (Aberystwyth, 1992), p. 212.
[67] Aled Jones, 'The New Journalism in Wales', in Joel H. Wiener (ed.), *Papers for the Millions: The New Journalism in Britain, 1850s to 1914* (Westport, 1988), p. 166.

writing of the film reporter for the *South Wales Echo*, Walter Grossey, or 'The Prompter' as he was known to his readers. The *Echo*, it should be noted, had employed Langford Reed as a regular film reporter since 1920 and was far ahead of most Welsh papers in its coverage of cinema news. To give a sense of the style in which Grossey wrote, as well as an analysis of his views, he is quoted at some length here.

'The Prompter's' entertainment notes appeared regularly in the *Echo* from 1927 until the 1940s. The majority of his column inches were taken up by cinema news, but he did not limit himself to film reviews; he also reported on theatre performances and any other entertainment which was deemed newsworthy. A play in the New Theatre or a film in the Capitol were treated on their own terms as equally valid cultural pursuits. Indeed, there were occasions when he found it necessary to defend himself against allegations that 'I invariably depreciate the stage to the advantage of the films.'[68]

When dealing with films, 'The Prompter' would discuss cinema programmes, not just the main feature. He demonstrated his awareness that cinema audiences often demanded as much as three hours entertainment for the price of admission, and expected the whole programme to be up to standard, by quoting the complaints of disgruntled cinema managers:

> One of these pictures alone ought to give them their money's worth ... Instead of that happy feeling of a shilling well spent I have known lots of my regular customers leave the theatre with the remark, 'Of course, the big picture was fine, but the second was simply terrible.'[69]

Under the heading of 'All about next week's shows', 'The Prompter's' cinema notes dealt with the supporting programmes offered by Cardiff's cinemas, as well as the main features. He was enthusiastic, for example, about the introduction of cine-variety at the Capitol in the 1930s, advising his readers to look out for acts like 'Herschel Hentere, the famous pianist; Terry's 24 Tots, a big music-hall act; and the popular Gershom Parkington Quintet, whom I last heard in a West End drawing room.'[70] Not

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[68] *South Wales Echo*, 19 March 1932, p. 5.
[69] *South Wales Echo*, 16 December 1933, p. 5.
[70] *South Wales Echo*, 5 March 1932, p. 5.

all live entertainment met with his approval, however, and he was known to express amazement 'at rounds of applause given acts after 25 minutes of what in the old days of variety would have been regarded as wearisome drivel.'[71]

Attention to the role of the manager was a recurring theme in 'The Prompter's' weekly column. When expanding on what he considered his role as a film critic to be, Grossey did not define his position against that of the film producer or advertising executive, but against that of the local manager.

> Well, I try to be critical and kind at the same time, but bless your heart, a Chicago gunman would get less abuse for a 'killing' than the *provincial critic* who fires one real shot at the stage or screen. 'Ah', they [the managers] say, 'what do you know about this game of providing a satisfying programme, week after week, of back stage difficulties, temperamental audiences, and so on?' To which I reply, 'what matters how much I know of sound-systems, tabs, back cloths, accoustics, the art of booking shows, and so on. That's your job. I merely report on the audience reactions to all these things; whether they say "It is" or "It isn't", whether I think their opinion is genuine and deserved; whether it is liable to reflect opinion of Cardiff folk generally.' (Emphasis added).

It is significant the 'The Prompter' refers to himself as a 'provincial critic'. Whereas critics in the national press sought to provide an appraisal of a film's worth to set against the hype generated by the publicity departments of major film studios, the role of the provincial critic was to provide an opinion which was clouded neither by the boasts of cinema managers, nor by the outpourings of the national press.

> Because a selective 'audience' in an intimate West End theatre raves over this or that play, giving enormous press publicity, it neither follows that the play is great, nor that provincial audiences are unintelligent because their sense of the artistic does not lead them to gushing flattery.[72]

This reluctance to follow the critical opinions expressed in London, was reflected in 'The Prompter's' attitude to British films. He was not at all concerned, for instance, that the majority of cinema programmes consisted of American films, or even that US companies had begun to take control of leading provincial cinemas, such as Cardiff's Capitol. To the contrary, he commended the fact that 'Every penny necessary for the maintenance and general equipment [of the Capitol] is spent locally.' Further, 'Paramount and other big corporations are making British pictures,

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[71] *South Wales Echo*, 19 March 1932, p. 5.

employing British artists in British studios.' His attitude to the films themselves was influenced by their level of popular appeal, not their nationality:

> Anyhow, the public does not care a rap whose film they pay to see, provided its good entertainment. All the 'bad' American films are getting 'the bird' when they deserve it, and so are the British productions that fail to reach the standard. ... Hang it all. The most successful stage musical comedies of recent years have been American. When we have glutted the market with something equal, if not better, then lets raise the cry, 'All British'.[73]

It was not necessarily the lack of artistic integrity in British films which concerned 'The Prompter', nor their failed attempts to imitate the methods of Hollywood studios. Rather, he pointed to broader cultural reasons why they failed to appeal to south Wales audiences:

> Let us be fair. Give the Americans their due. If the nasal accent grates upon British ears like a circular saw, how much do our Yankee friends suffer to hear a mixture of the Oxford-cum-Cockney language spoken on English films? If they give the artist and the film 'the bird' would you blame them? I would not. The audience at the Pavilion Cinema did 'bird' a British film one night this week. ... The amount of suburban chatter among the women must have got on the cinema patron's nerves, because when the traditional English 'silly ass' appeared he proved to be too great a burden. Having spent their money to be entertained, the folk in the pit began to guffaw and laugh in anything but a complimentary fashion, and I sympathised with them.[74]

When 'The Prompter' did offer words of praise for a British film, as in the case of *The Private Life of Henry VIII*, he did so by saying that 'I am going to offer an impression from one Provincial to another - in fact, to all of you who sometimes find that the over-boosted film can easily be a bauble.'[75] In attempting to pitch his film reviews at the level of popular taste, this film reporter clearly found it necessary to distance his views from those of the national press. I do not wish to suggest that Walter Grossey was typical of all those who wrote about films in the Welsh press. However, his approach does provide an interesting example of how Welsh-based newspapers could tailor the information and opinions within their film columns to the specific concerns of a local or regional readership.

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[72] *South Wales Echo*, 19 March 1932, p. 5.
[73] *South Wales Echo*, 30 April 1932, p. 5.
[74] *South Wales Echo*, 1 August 1936, p. 3.

Reliable evidence of the actual popularity of individual films in local areas is rather thin on the ground. The surviving records of at least one south Wales cinema, however, clearly underline the folly of assuming that audience responses mirrored those of the critics in the national press. *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1939), for instance, was a conspicuously unsuccessful film in Porth's Central cinema. Following, perhaps, the call of Graham Greene to 'give as whole-hearted a welcome as we can to this magnificently constructed engine-of-war',[76] it was one of the few films of the year to play for a full six days there. Yet the cinema's takings that week were barely half the amount netted in the week that *Swanee River* (1939) was shown.[77] The collected film criticism of Graham Greene does not contain a review of *Swanee River*, nor of any of the films which topped the box office takings at this cinema between 1935 and 1940.

Perhaps the clearest example of cinema-goers in this south Wales town apparently bucking the national trend is provided by the case of *The Young Mr. Pitt* (Carol Reed, 1942). Here was a film which, as Jeffrey Richards has shown, was 'extremely well received. With a few exceptions, the critics were unanimous in praising the film, Donat and Carol Reed.' Publications as diverse as the *News Chronicle*, *Sight and Sound, Kinematograph Weekly*, the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Mirror* awarded it a ringing endorsement. The British public, apparently, concurred: the film was one of the most successful of its year at the box office and featured among the top twenty British films of the war years in a *Daily Mail* readers poll in 1946. Reassessing the picture in the 1980s, Richards rated it 'among Britain's finest film works.'[78]

The response to the film back in Porth, however, could not have been more different. The manager of the Central Cinema, conscious of the hype which had been generated by this picture in both the trade and 'lay' press, had enough confidence in its potential appeal to agree to pay a higher booking fee than was usual. It proved to be a costly mistake, and led him to make the following complaint to the distributors:

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[75] *South Wales Echo*, 27 January 1934, p. 5.
[76] John Russell Taylor (ed.), *The Pleasure Dome: The Collected Film Criticism of Graham Greene, 1935-40* (London, 1972), p. 229.
[77] The actual amounts taken in the respective weeks were £130 and £259. Glamorgan Record Office (GRO hereafter), D/D A/B Box 41.
[78] Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Britain Can Take It: The British Cinema in the Second World War* (Edinburgh, 1994 edition), pp. 152, 155.

> We have just completed our run on the above film, and we would draw your attention to the returns which we have sent you. You will observe that this film has failed completely to match our usual standard of business with Twentieth Century Fox Films and in view of the high percentage we have contracted to pay you for this subject, we shall, without doubt, lose considerably on the booking.
> In view of this, I have been instructed by my Head Office, to ask that you meet us in some way, either by a substantial reduction in percentage, or by some concession on a future booking.[79]

I have been unable to find any record of a response to this request, but the very fact that it was made at all serves as a reminder of the diverse tastes of cinema audiences. It could be that south Wales audiences simply refused to accept the aristocratic, Tory Pitt as a national hero, and identified more closely with the radical Charles James Fox, who was made to look rather foolish in Reed's film. While the film draws obvious parallels between Pitt and Churchill, Jeffrey Richards suggests that Fox, too, had a contemporary equivalent in Aneurin Bevan.[80] If this point got through to cinema audiences, then it may explain why the film was received so poorly in this Rhondda community. The alleged willingness of Churchill to deploy armed forces against striking miners in Tonypandy in 1911 has never been forgotten, or forgiven, in this part of south Wales. Bevan, by contrast, had learned his politics in the Tredegar Workman's Institute and 'went to Westminster fully formed and informed by the society which had sent him there.'[81] His quickly acquired reputation for haranguing Tory politicians in the Commons made him far more of a heroic figure than Churchill for many in these communities.

Whatever the reason for the failure of this film to appeal to the cinema-going public of Porth, the failure itself would appear to explain why critics such as 'The Prompter' found it necessary to distance themselves from their colleagues in the national press. It was not that south Wales film critics were always successful in reflecting precisely which films were the most popular with their readers, but they did, at least, recognise that many of those readers had tastes and preferences not adequately addressed by London-based critics.

Conclusions

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[79] Townsend to Twentieth Century Fox, 3 April 1943, GRO, D/D A/B 42/3/4.
[80] Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, p. 149.

'Highbrow' film critics can certainly be said to have played an important role in providing the cinema with a measure of respectability in Britain in the 1920s. It was not only the intellectual section of the English middle class, however, who took an interest in the cinema at this time. By the end of the 1920s different bodies of opinion were emerging as to whether the cinema should be regarded as an institution devoted to promoting the national interest, or if it should treated as a truly global, cultural medium. Concerns about how the cinema could affect British national economic or cultural wellbeing lay behind the 1927 Films Act and the 1932 report on the *Film In National Life*. It was film critics, however, who promoted the belief that the cinema had come to represent the century's newest art form. Film *critics* may have given the cinema intellectual respectability, but they were not the only ones who wrote about film in the national press. If the highbrow *critics* wrote for an educated and discerning body of film-goers, *reporters* were far more widely read by the majority of cinema audiences. The reviews written by reporters may not always have correctly anticipated the popular response to individual films, but they did at least deal with film as a medium of mass-entertainment rather than as an art form.

In Wales, the differing responses to the cinema (as an art form, mass-entertainment or a national institution) were also expressed. The popular appeal of the cinema for the majority of audiences was best captured by those 'reporters' writing in the provincial daily papers. They sought to address the interests of local or regional audiences, and in doing so wrote about whole programmes of entertainment at local cinemas, not just the main films. When it came to reviewing films themselves, however, film reporters like Walter Grossey had no interest in promoting the national interest or in raising the level of public taste. He drew attention to the pictures he felt would be most popular among local audiences, which for the most part were products of Hollywood studios.

Mainstream Hollywood entertainment did much to satisfy the demands of 'American Wales', yet those of a more intellectual persuasion also took an interest in the artistic potential which cinema had to offer. Indeed, the demand for 'alternative' films showed up both the diversity and continuity inherent within society and culture in Wales. Calls for the cinema to be effectively utilised as a medium of national

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[81] Smith, *Aneurin Bevan*, p. 195.

expression within the Welsh press had their origins in the cultural nationalism of Liberal Wales. The audience which existed for non-commercial films in the valleys of south Wales, on the other hand, grew out of a working class culture that had emerged in industrialised areas. These two groups had quite different cultural aspirations, as embodied in the *gwerin* and *working class* myths. One was essentially rural, Welsh speaking and Liberal voting (closely associated with the pulpit); the other increasingly (though not exclusively) industrial in landscape, English in language and Labour in politics (often linked to the coal pits). While the differences between these cultures are clear enough, there were similarities also. Within both traditions non-conformist religion, education, self-improvement and social respectability were highly valued. Even codes of dress, as Dai Smith has observed, remained very much the same: 'The Welsh working class accepted that they were only to wear their working clothes at work or in private; on the street, in public, at ceremonial moments they would wear the clothes of the bourgeois.'[82] Gwyn A. Williams made the same point when he remarked that, 'The new Labour people were still children, even if bastard children, of imperial Wales.'[83] The common concern for social and moral respectability within these cultures led elements within both to reject mainstream Hollywood entertainment. Indeed, religious concerns were a prominent feature of many of the debates about cinema in Wales, and it is to these that attention will now be turned.

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[82] Dai Smith, *Aneurin Bevan and the World of South Wales* (Cardiff, 1993), p. 56.
[83] Gwyn A. Williams, *When Was Wales?* (Harmondsworth, 1985), p. 241.

Chapter Six: Censorship and Control

One of the clearest indicators of the social significance accorded to the cinema in Britain by the beginning of our period was the extent to which society sought to exert control over both the functioning and the influence of this form of entertainment. Perhaps the most widely known method of attempting this was film censorship, which in Britain began with the establishment of the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) in 1912.[1] However, the censorship of films is but one feature of a much wider process by which the cinema has been socially controlled and regulated. The regulations relating to the design of buildings, makeup of audiences and hours of opening were as important as actual censorship of films in terms of the cultural experience which the cinema was able to provide. These rules were drawn up and enforced, moreover, on a local rather than a national level. If anything they served to strengthen the established position of the cinema in the local community, and they were usually given the full backing of the trade.

The controls placed upon the cinema industry (relating to the content of films, the way they were advertised, issues of health and safety within the halls themselves) were essentially no different in Wales to any other part of Britain. In the following pages various examples will be cited of how local authorities in Wales sought to regulate the environment in which films were viewed. These examples do not set Wales apart, they illustrate how local authorities across Britain went about their task of *cinema* censorship. The important point is that control of the cinema as an institution, rather than just censorship of films, was taken seriously by local authorities.

The issue of Sunday opening of cinemas, however, was an area where clear differences did exist between Wales and most other parts of Britain. In almost the whole of Wales cinemas were prevented from opening on Sundays until the 1950s. In many parts of England, on the other hand, Sunday opening of cinemas had occurred

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[1] Some of the best accounts of British film censorship are to be found in Annette Kuhn, *Cinema, Censorship and Sexuality, 1909-1925* (London and New York, 1988); James C. Robertson, *The Hidden Cinema: British Film Censorship in Action, 1913-1975* (London and New York, 1989); James C. Robertson, *The British Board of Film Censors: Film Censorship in Britain, 1896-1950* (London, 1985); Guy Phelps, *Film Censorship* (London, 1975); Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain, 1930-1939* (London, 1934), pp. 89-152; Rachel Low, *The History of the*

throughout the period covered by this thesis. An examination of the debates over Sunday opening of cinemas in Wales from the early 1920s to the early 1950s points to deeper changes occurring in Welsh society at this time. Cinemas had remained shut on Sundays in Wales because calls for Sabbath observance had been supported by representatives from both the societies of the pulpit and the coal pit. This alliance of opinion meant that opposition to Sunday opening was increasingly presented as a national issue, rather than a moral or religious one. The eventual extension of Sunday opening into Wales (which came after the public themselves – the frequenters of the fleapits - had been allowed to vote) reflected the declining importance of religious observance in Welsh society as a whole.

The Process of Cinema Censorship

Cinema censorship in Britain was not conducted by a single, all-powerful body, but emerged out of a fairly complex series of social/political interactions. Early attempts to regulate the cinema had been based on the 1780 Disorderly Houses Act, but in 1909 a new Cinematograph Act was introduced which legislated specifically for picture houses. The Act was drafted with the intention of ensuring safety within the halls, but was soon being used to enforce the censorship of films themselves. Under the Act local authorities were given the final responsibility for drafting and enforcing regulations, but their measures could only be expected to succeed when they were widely supported. Therefore, the interests of various local pressure groups, the cinema-going public, the trade, the police, the national Governmet and the BBFC all needed to be taken into account. Where the interests of one or more of these groups were blatantly ignored enforcement of the regulations became extremely difficult. The controversial decision of Liverpool JPs in 1930 not to admit children to films with an 'A' certificate (even when accompanied by an adult) was enforced for less than two years.[2] The attempt by councillors in Beckenham to introduce their own system of film censorship was even shorter lived, lasting for barely six months.[3]

British Film, 1918-1929 (London, 1971), pp. 55-70; Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film, 1929-1939: Film Making in 1930s Britain* (London, 1985), pp. 54-72.

[2] The BBFC did not grant 'A' certificates to those films it considered unsuitable for children. The purpose of the classification was to alert parents to their responsibility of judging whether their children should see the film. The CEA, however, were consistently prevented from making this point to the local

Cinema censorship, in other words, was a process rather than a single act, and one which could be regarded as constructive as well as constraining. In this respect Foucault's conception of power can be usefully applied to the regulation of the cinema:

> If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression.[4]

Following Foucault, Annette Kuhn has argued that the development of cinema censorship should be regarded as an essential part of the process by which the cinema emerged as a 'public sphere'. Any form of censorship or regulation which impinges on individual liberties, she argues, is much more likely to be accepted if it is regarded as performing a wider, public role. Within little more than a decade of its invention, the cinema was coming to be regarded as a public institution on a number of levels. The cinema buildings themselves were public spaces, audiences were broad based enough to constitute a cinema-going public, and thus the cinema could be regarded as a potential threat to public safety or public morality. To Kuhn, censorship was not only a product of the cinema's increasingly public status, it was a productive force in shaping the cinema as a public sphere. Censorship, therefore, was much more than simply a negative or repressive force - something *done to* films. Rather, it was part of a much wider process by which both films themselves and the cinema more generally were shaped and developed.[5]

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magistrates - who refused to receive their deputation, and failed to read out their letter of protest in a meeting. It was not until the North-West branch of the CEA wrote personally to each city councillor that their voice was finally heard, and the ban was dropped. See Low, *Film Making in 1930s Britain*, pp. 59-60.

[3] In order to watch films banned by the local authority but passed by the BBFC inhabitants of Beckenham were prepared to travel to neighbouring districts. In one case weekly attendance at a Beckenham cinema dropped by 36% and local exhibitors, many of whom were threatened with closure, refused to pay their rates in protest. See Dorothy Knowles, *The Censor, The Drama and the Film, 1900-1934* (London, 1934), p. 181; also Low, *Film Making in 1930s Britain*, p. 59.

[4] Michel Foucault, 'Truth and Power', in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (Hemel Hempstead, 1980), p. 119.

[5] For a fuller discussion of how Foucault's notion of power can be applied to censorship, see Kuhn, *Cinema, Censorship and Sexuality*, pp. 4-8.

Far from being imposed on the cinema industry once the medium achieved a certain level of popularity, the process of censorship was productive in that it helped to shape the public experience of cinema-going in the decades of its greatest appeal. There is certainly no reason to suppose that controls were imposed upon a passive film trade whose freedom to conduct its own affairs was diminished accordingly. On the contrary, the 1909 Cinematograph Act was passed with the full backing of the trade. Initially welcomed as a 'picture showman's charter', it was hoped that the Act would invest the industry with a greater measure of social respectability. Even when it became clear that the powers granted to local authorities under the Act were more wide ranging than they had initially realised, it was the trade itself who set up a board of film censors. There were few groups with a greater interest than the exhibitors themselves in the establishment of the cinema as a respectable social/cultural institution. Representatives of the film industry were, therefore, very much a part of the overall process by which the cinema was regulated on both a local and national level.

Controls over the cinema were evidently not imposed on managers or audiences by a single, powerful institution. Regulations were only properly developed once the cinema had been established as a public institution, and they only proved effective in cases where it could be agreed that they were for public benefit. The process of censorship, therefore, was one which involved a number of institutions, organisations and pressure groups, each protective of their own interests. Struggles inevitably arose when these interests clashed. The story of cinema censorship, is the story of how these struggles were fought and resolved.

Regulation of the Cinema as a Public Space

The earliest attempts to regulate the cinema were centred not on the films themselves, but the physical environment in which they were presented. It was only when film shows were regularly taking place in buildings used primarily as cinemas (as opposed to music halls, penny gaffs or showmen's booths) that specific legislation relating to the cinema was deemed necessary. This legislation, ostensibly at least, was designed to protect public safety: not to regulate the entertainment on offer. Just because the Cinematograph Act was later used to sanction film censorship (as well as

a host of other controls and regulations) did not mean that the initial concerns over public safety had become any less important. Indeed, even after the passing of the 1909 Act, previously existing legislation (such as the Disorderly Houses Act and Public Health Act) continued to be used to regulate the cinema.

The public concerns expressed in this period about the physical conditions inside cinemas during performances can be divided into three categories: safety, health and morality.

Public Safety

Safety concerns centred largely on the threat of fire breaking out during a performance. By 1909 the fire hazard had, according to Annette Kuhn, 'become almost mythical', even though there had been no major cinema fires caused by inflammable stock in Britain by this date.[6] Safety concerns were at the forefront of parliamentary debates surrounding the Cinematograph Act, and the Act itself dealt predominantly with fire regulations. Thus, it became necessary for the projection room to be sealed, for films to be stored in fire-proof cases, and for the auditoriums to have sufficient provision of exits and fire extinguishers. It was relatively straight forward for local authorities to ensure that these provisions were in place before granting a cinema license.

A problem that was less easily dealt with, however, was that of over-crowding. Gwyn Thomas recalled, with characteristic humour, some of the practices employed by unscrupulous cinema managers/proprietors who sought to get as many paying customers into their halls as possible (see above, p. 93). To the licensing authorities, however, the matter was rather more serious. In March 1920 the concern was expressed at a meeting of the Swansea Watch Committee 'that in a number of kinemas the rule of keeping the gangways clear was not observed.'[7] A month earlier the Rhondda Urban District Council had discussed the same issue, having heard from the Porth Trades and Labour Council that the problem was becoming critical:

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[6] Kuhn, *Cinema, Censorship and Sexuality*, p. 16. There may have been no major cinema fires in Britain by this time, but public opinion could have been influenced by events overseas, most notably the disastrous fire at the Paris *Bazaar de Charitee* in 1897.

[7] *Kinematograph Weekly*, 11 March 1920, p. 123.

> Councillor Morgan Rees alleged that at certain halls chairs were placed in the aisles so as to 'get every penny piece'. He described the conditions as 'really deplorable', and said the overcrowding was so acute that in the case of an outbreak of fire many people might be trampled to death even if they escaped the fire. ... It was decided that the attention of the police should be called to the matter.[8]

The Superintendent of Glamorgan did conduct an inspection of Rhondda cinemas, but found no evidence of overcrowding.[9] This was not entirely surprising, given that local cinema managers would have known an inspection was imminent. Clearly, the enforcement of regulations intended to prevent overcrowding was fraught with difficulties. The fundamental problem, it seems, was the clash of interests between those at the back of cinema queues eager to get in and exhibitors anxious to relieve them of their money, on the one hand, and licensing authorities concerned about public safety on the other. That concerns about overcrowding appear to have diminished as the decade wore on cannot simply be attributed to a more effective enforcement of regulations on the part of the police. A more likely explanation is that with the cinema now firmly established as public institution, managers were increasingly concerned with protecting the long tern interests of their business, rather than making a quick profit while the opportunity existed.

Public Health

Nowhere were the exhibitors' aspirations to present a positive public image more evident than when it came to questions of hygiene and cleanliness. The reputation which many cinemas had acquired as 'fleapits' or 'bug houses' was not easily shaken off. Thus, when P. Morton Shand came to describe the cinema as 'a sort of public lounge', he claimed that 'Schoolboys, whose holidays are drawing to a close, know that prevalent epidemics can be caught there.'[10] Anecdotes relating to the unhygienic conditions within particular halls can be found in most towns and cities. One of the most well known is Leslie Halliwell's recollection of the Atlas cinema in Bolton in the 1930s: 'The local joke was that they loaned you a hammer with your ticket.'[11]

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[8] *Kinematograph Weekly*, 5 February 1920, p. 155.
[9] *Kinematograph Weekly*, 4 March 1920, p. 127.
[10] P. Morton Shand, *Modern Theatres and Cinemas* (London, 1930), p. 9.
[11] Leslie Halliwell, *Seats in All Parts: Half a Lifetime at the Movies* (London, 1985), p. 115.

If the fleapits are often remembered with an element of affection, however, their reputation was one which managers were anxious to shed. The trade press was full of advertisements in this period for disinfectants and deodorants which would enable managers 'to put forward the claim that his house is absolutely germ proof, and that patrons can visit it without the slightest fear of infection.'[12] As well as maintaining high standards of hygiene and cleanliness, those halls most concerned with presenting a positive public image made sure that they were *seen* to be doing so. Aberystwyth's Coliseum cinema, therefore, placed notices in the local press, not just to advertise forthcoming attractions, but also to stress that 'This hall is disinfected with Jeyes fluid.'[13]

Clearly, business concerns were uppermost in the minds of cinema managers, who wanted to create an environment that would attract as many patrons as possible. The role of the licensing authorities, however, was also something which needed to be taken into account. In February 1920, for instance, *Kine Weekly* warned that with another outbreak of influenza, even if less severe than previous epidemics,

> there is every possibility of more severe legislation, for the authorities have been attacked so heavily for previous laxity that they will no doubt the next time go to the other extreme. The fanatic opponents of the kinema will also take advantage of an epidemic to air their views and force the hands of the authorities, where possible, to the most stringent measures.[14]

The worst fears of the trade may not have been realised in 1920, however, the issue of health as well as safety was increasingly coming to concern local and national authorities. In October of that year the Home Office sent out a communication to surveyors complaining of the unsatisfactory sanitary conditions in some cinemas. Though the government could not force licensing authorities to improve the situation, this was a problem to which a number of local officials were already turning their attention. Addressing a meeting of the Welsh School of Social Service at Cardiff University, Mr. Lleufer Thomas, stipendiary magistrate for Pontypridd, referred to some cinemas as 'barracks', with no adequate system of ventilation. He went on:

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[12] The quotation comes from a feature advertising 'Ultrazone', in Low Warren (ed.), *The Cinematograph Exhibitors' Diary: 1928* (London, 1928), p. 70.
[13] *Cambrian News*, 3 January 1936, p.
[14] *Kinematograph Weekly* (supplement), 5 February 1920, p. xii. Influenza was, of course, a killer disease in the years immediately following World War One.

> The cinema had come to stay, and they should insist, *from the point of view of public health*, on the buildings being flooded with sunshine by means of sliding roofs.[15] (Emphasis added).

Sliding roofs were, alas, never to become a feature of cinema architecture in south Wales.[16] Concern about public health, however, continued to feature in debates about the cinema in this period. While cases of cinemas having licenses refused because of their failure to meet minimum sanitary requirements were rare (if they existed at all), it was quite common for licensing authorities to cite public health concerns as a reason for introducing new regulations. Again, Lleufer Thomas was to play a prominent role in this respect. His primary concern, unsurprisingly perhaps, was the physical health and development of children.

Mr. Thomas had asked Dr. J. D. Jenkins, Medical Officer of Health to the Rhondda Urban District Council, to report to the magistrates at the Licensing Sessions in Pontypridd what he considered to be the likely effect of cinema attendance on those aged under fourteen. The evidence was actually provided by the Assistant Medical Officer, Dr. Murphy, and it was damning. He raised four areas of concern. The first was that visits to the cinema in the evening prevented children getting their necessary ten hours sleep. Second, the flickering screen was apt to cause eye strain, especially after a long day.[17] Third, there was an 'increased risk of infection from germs at night, and in places which were overcrowded personal contact was much closer and resistance of disease was lowered.' Finally, children were especially 'liable to colds and bronchial trouble when they came out of the kinemas ... into the night air.' According to Dr. Murphy, 'There was no doubt that children who went to kinemas at night suffered mentally and physically, and at school the following day showed general lassitude.'[18] On hearing this testimony the local magistrates were left in little doubt that the best course of action would be to stop children from entering, or remaining in, cinemas after 8.30 p.m.

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[15] *Western Mail*, 10 May 1920, p. 7.
[16] Mr. Thomas's audacious suggestion could easily be dismissed as hopelessly optimistic, though it might also serve as a poignant reminder of the spirit of self-confidence that existed in south Wales prior to the inter-war depression.
[17] Concerns about the effect of the flickering screen were frequently voiced in this period, though little evidence was ever produced to prove that this was a real threat.
[18] *Kinematograph Weekly*, 18 March 1920, p. 136.

The exhibitors were loath to be seen not to share the general concerns, but they had no hesitation in expressing their opposition to the measures suggested. The manager of Porth's Central Cinema said of the magistrates' intention to oppose the admission of children to evening performances: 'personally I quite agree with them, unless the restrictions should be extended to children accompanied by adults'. The health risk posed by visiting the cinema was presumably the same for children whether accompanied by their parents or not, but this was clearly not Mr. Robinson's primary concern. He realised that the proposal 'would be a serious hit at the business', fearing that as much as 25% of trade could be lost. Rather than confronting the justices head on, however, Robinson sought to convince them that he was sensitive to their concerns, and that formal regulations were unnecessary:

> As a licensee I am not the least keen on fighting the authority who grant these. I agree with the views of the stipendiary and was bound to admit this in the box on Tuesday last. He says he would like the public to be educated on the point, I wish he would allow us to do so voluntarily, by means of slides and advertising gradually, not to make it an immediate condition upon acceptance of a license.[19]

The refusal of the magistrates to accept a voluntary agreement brought Rhondda exhibitors round to the point of view initially expressed by Will Stone on behalf of the CEA. Mr. Stone had tactfully refused to express his personal opinion as to whether evening cinema performances had any harmful effects on children, but stated that he was prepared to legally challenge the justices' decision. The solicitor to the CEA, Mr. Norman Hart, was therefore invited to south Wales to defend the exhibitors interests. He argued that under the Cinematograph Act of 1909 only conditions that were deemed reasonable could be imposed on the granting of a cinema license, and that the proposed measure was *ultra vires* and, therefore, illegal. Mr. Thomas, explaining the justices' decision, accepted that the Cinematograph Act did not give them the authority to impose such a condition, but pointed out that the *Public Health Act* did. To this, the CEA solicitor had no effective response, and the exhibitors were forced to accept the magistrates' decision.[20]

The authorities in the Rhondda were not alone in their attitude to public health. The following year the county medical officer for Carmarthenshire expressed

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[19] Robinson to Andrews, 12 March 1920, GRO, D/D A/B 18/5/23.
[20] *Kinematograph Weekly*, 8 April 1920, p. 123; *Western Mail*, 31 March 1920, p. 5.

concerns about the lack of sunlight ('that great disinfecting agent'), paucity of ventilation and stagnation of air within cinemas. Describing the buildings as potential 'hotbeds of disease', he went so far as to question the value of building isolation hospitals when children were allowed to attend crowded cinemas. Like the Pontypridd justices he felt that children under fourteen should be kept out of cinemas in the evenings, and he even suggested that those under five years of age should be prohibited entirely.[21]

It was not only the health of children that was at issue where cinema regulations were concerned. The question of sanitary conditions inside picture houses also entered the debate on Sunday opening.[22] In response to the much used argument that the closing of cinemas left people with nothing to do other than roam the streets, opponents of Sunday opening contrasted the virtues of a breath of fresh air with the risk of contamination (both physical and mental) posed by the cinema. 'Young couples' opined Lord Colum Crichton-Stuart in the *Western Mail*, 'are undoubtedly better off walking in the open than sitting holding each other's hands in a dark, stuffy cinema seeing the "close-ups" of the Hollywood stars, who demonstrate the latest ritual of love expression.'[23]

Cleanliness and godliness were, apparently, near neighbours, and moral concerns about conditions inside cinemas were never far from those relating to public health.

Public Morals

The first section of a 1917 report by the Cinema Commission of Inquiry, which dealt with 'Moral and Social Aspects of the Cinema', considered the dangers posed by the cinema 'as a place of entertainment' before it raised the issue of the 'character of the films'.

> A distinction must be made between moral evils *incidental* to the picture house and those *consequential* on the kind of film shown. The charge has been brought against the picture house that the darkness encourages indecency, especially where there are boxes, though this is the case in very few houses; and that the promenade or the standing room

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[21] *Western Mail*, 23 April 1921, p. 6.
[22] The issue of Sunday opening is discussed more fully below, pp. 204-217.
[23] *Western Mail*, 13 June 1931, p. 11.

> at the back of the building, where such exists, affords opportunities for improper conduct.[24]

The report acknowledged that such charges could easily be exaggerated, but insisted that they were not without foundation. At worst, it was claimed that conditions inside cinemas afforded opportunities for 'solititation' [sic.] and 'the molestation of children',[25] though one London exhibitor argued that 'When investigation is made it is usually found that the alleged misconduct is nothing more than the privileged manifestation of affection between the sexes.' Whatever the seriousness of the allegations, it seems that concerns about indecent conduct within cinemas were enough to convince a number of Chief Constables to insist on increasing the amount of lighting inside cinemas during performances.[26] Licensing authorities in Wales, too, shared such concerns.

When Rhondda magistrates undertook to prohibit the attendance of children at cinema shows in 1920, they also introduced a clause into licenses stating that the auditorium was to be adequately lit during performances. This would appear to be a clear example of moral considerations influencing cinema regulation. It did not become an important *censorship* issue because exhibitors themselves made no attempt to challenge the ruling. When the manager of the Central cinema was informed that 'the justices hope to visit as many of the halls in the area as possible in order to see the type of poster etc. displayed in the lobbys [sic.], and also the lighting of the interiors during the performance', he maintained that 'they are welcome here any time.'[27] Mr Norman Hart, when expressing the opposition of Rhondda exhibitors to regulation dealing with children at the cinema, was careful to point out that they 'had no objection to the condition as to the lighting of the premises'.[28] There seemed to be a consensus among those involved in the cinema trade in the early part of this period that measures needed to be taken to limit the opportunities for indecent behaviour in cinemas.

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[24] Cinema Commission of Inquiry, *The Cinema: Its Present Position and Future Possibilities* (London, 1917), p. xxv.
[25] One of the correspondents who wrote to the author to describe their cinema-going experiences in this period had vivid memories of being harassed during a cinema performance. Like many others, no doubt, she said nothing about it to anyone at the time.
[26] The Chief Constables of Edinburgh, Dundee, Guildford, Hull and Margate had expressed such sentiments. See Cinema Commission of Inquiry, *The Cinema*, pp. xxiv-xxix.
[27] Robinson to Andrews, 5 February 1920, D/D A/B 18/5/14.
[28] *Kinematograph Weekly*, 8 April 1920, p. 123.

As well as increased provision of interior lighting, this also meant that cinema attendants were to have a more prominent role in overseeing the behaviour of cinema audiences. The actions of torch-wielding cinema staff were in many ways more intrusive a form of control over the cinema-going experience than any policy devised by local or central government. An example of what this meant for audiences in the Rhondda is provided by Gwyn Thomas:

> I remember that in one cinema there were a pair of funereal-looking ushers who roamed the aisles hissing, 'Put 'at light out. What're you up to? Shurrup', on the general principle that someone somewhere must be doing something which was covered by some part of the statement.[29]

Problems connected with safety, health and morality inside picture houses often required specific action to be taken on the part either of local authorities or central government, particularly in the early part of this period. These issues also informed wider debates as to the cinema's social respectability, and the regulations by which it was to be controlled. Such regulations, clearly, were concerned with more than just the censorship of films. However, attempts to control the entertainment provided by cinemas were a common feature of the period.

The Films and their Audiences

It was argued in chapter four that cinema entertainment in this period involved much more than just feature films. The supporting programme often included live musical entertainment, and sometimes even variety turns. Censorship of cinema programmes, however, was seldom concerned with anything other than the images on the flickering screen. The content of the films themselves was the most obvious area of concern and the BBFC, under the presidency of T. P. O'Connor, wasted little time in compiling a catalogue of taboo subjects.[30] By 1917 a set of rules had been established, known as 'O'Connor's 43', which tightly regulated the portrayal of, among other things, royalty, religious subjects, criminal behaviour, and any kind of immorality - ranging from bad language to prostitution. Additions and amendments

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[29] Gwyn Thomas, quoted in the *South Wales Echo,* 18 May 1971, p. 5.
[30] O'Connor took over as president following the death of G. A. Redford in November 1916. He continued in this position until his own death in November 1929 and was succeeded by Lord Tyrrell.

were made throughout the period, but the fundamental principle remained: that subjects likely to arouse controversy should be kept off the cinema screen.[31] Despite the best efforts of the BBFC to cut, ban or generally discourage the filming of sensitive topics, however, films continued to create controversy throughout our period. This was because the content of individual films was not the only factor that created censorship controversies. The BBFC report of 1930 outlined the problem concisely:

> One such film by itself may not be prohibitive, but the board cannot help feeling that a continuous succession of them is subversive, tending to invest a life of irregularity with a spurious glamour. There is evidence of quite definite disapproval of this type of film among the regular cinema-going public.[32]

The censors, clearly, found themselves in a difficult position. They were able to prevent the public exhibition of particularly objectionable scenes or images in individual films; but they had no control over the alleged long term effect of certain *types* of film that audiences so regularly went to see. The habitual routine of cinema-going, it would seem, posed as many problems for those involved in the censorship process as the actual films themselves. Certain films, felt to have slipped through the censors net, did occasionally arouse the ire of moralists, educationalists, critics and local authorities. Behind all this, however, lay deeper concerns about the influence of Hollywood films on British, and Welsh, society.

Areas of Concern

In a useful discussion of English criticism and American culture, Richard Maltby argues that censors and critics perform parallel functions. He points to a distinction between 'art' and 'entertainment', whereby it is only the former which is allowed to be 'socially disruptive', and argues that such 'cultural frontiers are policed by the institutions of censorship and criticism. Regimes of censorship ensure that entertainment conforms adequately to its socially prescribed role; regimes of criticism

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[31] Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace*, pp. 89-107.
[32] Quoted in the *Western Mail*, 18 March, 1930, p. 8.

define entertainment as trivial, and maintain the distinction.'[33] This observation helps to explain an anomaly raised by BBFC President Edward Shortt in 1933:

> I have never been able to understand why it is that with a certain section of highbrowed people nothing is really high art unless it is beastly.[34]

Shortt's job, and that of the board as a whole, was to ensure that such 'beastly things' were kept off the cinema screen. They were able to do this precisely because the vast majority of films were not considered to be 'high art' - an opinion that 'highbrowed' critics played an important part in fostering and maintaining.

The extent to which a body of critical opinion could be incorporated into the overall censorship process was evident in Wales, even though there was no journalistic outlet for highbrow film criticism. Film *reporters* in Wales, as was argued in the previous chapter, were mostly favourably inclined toward Hollywood's output and treated it at face value - as a highly popular form of entertainment. In Wales, criticism of Hollywood films came not from film reviewers, but from groups more closely associated with the censorship process, such as moralists, educationalists and local councillors. As well as bemoaning the negligible cultural value of such films, these critics were also anxious to highlight their potential social impact. One speaker at a meeting of the Swansea Citizen's Union in 1920, for example, complained that 'one of the causes of young girls going astray, was their inordinate love of excitement and pleasure - visiting picture halls and theatres at every opportunity':

> Many of the pictures shown in our town are of a very low standard, and create a love in these girls of aping a society of foolish standards of living and life. These artificial standards are fatal to the interests of the community.[35]

A Cardiff delegate at a conference of Christian workers in 1932 made the point more forcefully. Claiming that Hollywood films were 'a direct affront to the Christian Church' he warned that 'We must take great care to see that the foundations of society

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[33] Richard Maltby, '"D" for disgusting: American culture and English criticism', in Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and Steven Ricci (eds.), *Hollywood and Europe: Economics, Culture and National Identity 1945-95* (London, 1998), p. 106.
[34] Quoted in Richards, *Age of the Dream Palace*, p. 92.
[35] Mrs George Bowen, quoted in *Kinematograph Weekly*, 25 March 1920, p. 139.

in this country are not interfered with by these foreign eruptions of bestiality.'[36] A Lampeter vicar, similarly, harboured fears that the pictures were causing the Welsh people to 'lapse into paganism'. His concerns are worth quoting more fully since they incorporate many of the anxieties being expressed about what young Welsh audiences were watching in cinemas at this time:

> pictures in which battle, murder and sudden death are glorified, where what is known as 'sex appeal' is very much in evidence, and where marital infidelity is exhibited as a matter of course. Children who are brought up on this sort of filth cannot help developing a moral twist, for the spirit of emulation is strong in the young.[37]

Fears about juveniles emulating the criminal behaviour they see at the pictures are almost as old as the medium itself. In the period when cinema's popularity among youngsters was unmatched by any other form of entertainment, however, such concerns were voiced with particular frequency and urgency. One of the most vitriolic and sustained denouncements of much of Hollywood's output came from R. G. Burnett and E. D. Martell. Their account, (that concluded that too many films were 'concocted by depraved minds for depraved palates'), began with an anecdote of a young man who murdered his girlfriend on the way home from the cinema after having witnessed a similar incident on screen. This, according to the book's authors, was:

> no exaggeration, only the slightly disguised but otherwise authentic story of a recent occurrence. It is merely a degree more appalling than hundreds of stories that magistrates can tell of juvenile crime directly inspired by the films. No wonder a famous critic of the screen has described it as 'the greatest crime-producing agency of this generation'.[38]

Burnett and Martell were certainly two of the more zealous of Hollywood's accusers, but their opinions were shared by many in Wales. Dr. George Green, for instance, lecturer in education at the University of Wales in Aberystwyth, often addressed meetings in different parts of Wales where he would talk on subjects such as 'the truth

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[36] Mr G. Percy Thomas, quoted in the *Western Mail*, 3 May 1932, p. 14.
[37] Canon D. W. Thomas, quoted in the *Western Mail*, 8 May 1934, p. 11.
[38] R. G. Burnett and E. D. Martell, *The Devil's Camera: Menace of a Film-Ridden World* (London, 1932), pp. 123, 10.

about the film'.[39] For the Cardiff Head Teachers' Association the 'truth' was of no small concern. In a letter to the local authority they pointed to the harm done to children by the 'unavoidably vitiated atmosphere' of the halls and the loss of sleep caused by evening visits. 'Even more serious still', they insisted, was:

> the pernicious effect that many of the films have on the vivid imagination of children, perverting their moral sense, and, doubtless, often inciting them to actions of an undesirable, if not criminal, nature.[40]

At a head teachers' conference in London, moreover, concern was expressed that it was not only violent films which could induce impressionable young people to commit crime, but also those with an distinct sexual element:

> Many films had this sex appeal, and its effect on children was serious. It had been discovered that a child who was too early stimulated to sex might develop undesirable qualities and become anti-social. It brought about irritability, laziness, strained love relations, and any kind of crime from pilfering to violent assault.[41]

Objection to films on the basis of their overt 'sex appeal' was, in fact, much the most frequently voiced complaint against cinema entertainment in this period. It was widely recognised, however, that the problem ran deeper than the images on the screen themselves. Just as concerns were expressed about audiences who sided with criminals in films, even though they were brought to justice in the end, censorship authorities displayed a certain amount of anxiety about not just the depiction of sexual relations on screen, but how such scenes could be interpreted. The Bishop of Edinburgh, speaking at a conference in Cardiff in 1920, raised the point that:

> The kinema films, whilst not directly indecent, were suggestive, and, after all, it was a suggestion which was operative in this matter of immorality.[42]

Edward Shortt elaborated on the same point over a decade later. Complaining of 'the tendency on every conceivable occasion to drag in scenes of undressing, bathroom

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[39] For reports of such meetings in Llanelli and Swansea see the *Western Mail*, 23 November 1937, p. 11, and 4 May 1938, p. 6.
[40] *Western Mail*, 13 November 1920, p. 5.
[41] Miss Spender, quoted in the *Western Mail*, 11 June 1924, p. 9.
[42] Quoted in *Kinematograph Weekly*, 8 April 1920, p. 122. See also the *Western Mail*, 29 March 1920, p. 8.

scenes, and in the exhibition of feminine underclothing, which are quite unnecessary from the point of view of telling the story', the President of the BBFC concluded that:

> They are solely introduced for the purpose of giving the film what is termed in the trade a 'spicy flavour'. The cumulative effect of a repetition of such scenes as can be described as 'suggestive' is very harmful and properly evokes adverse criticism, although isolated instances may do no harm and call for no comment.[43]

The difficulties facing local licensing authorities who sought to clamp down on the exhibition of immoral or excessively violent pictures were neatly captured by a Swansea councillor, who was reported to have lamented that:

> a film at which he made strong protest was liked very much by other members of the committee when they went to view it. Action appeared to be difficult because they could not agree on what was indecent.[44]

At the same meeting, the city's Chief Constable apparently said 'he wished he had time for a local censorship, but did not think the Committee would agree with many of his decisions.' However strong the consensus of opinion that debased and immoral films posed a serious threat to the social fabric, there was little local councillors were able to do as far as individual films were concerned. (There were occasional cases of films being cut or banned by local authorities in Wales, such as when the Cardiff Chief Constable demanded cuts to an educational film, *The Mystery of Life*. Censorship of major Hollywood pictures, however, was not the most practical means of controlling the cinema's influence.)[45] This is not to say that they did nothing, rather, that in order to counter the dangers associated with Hollywood's cultural hegemony, attention was focused on areas other than the screen itself.

Methods of Control

While he regretted not being in a position to administer a local censorship of films, Swansea's most senior police officer did, at least, point to the fact that 'posters were now censored.'[46] As well as being a task that local authorities actually had the resources to conduct, this form of regulation was widely felt to serve an important

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[43] Quoted in the *Western Mail*, 17 February 1931, p. 7.
[44] Councillor Jenkins, quoted in *Kinematograph Weekly*, 3 September 1931, p. 47.
[45] See *Western Mail*, 21 January 1931, p. 7; 22 January 1931, p. 11.

social function. Critics such as Burnett and Martell argued that the cinema's influence was considerably enhanced by the way in which it was publicised, and that in this respect poster advertising was central:

> The posters are often worse than the films themselves ... [here the] sex-cum-crime mania flaunts itself. The much larger posters, usually printed in several gaudy colours, are exhibited either outside the cinemas themselves, or on huge roadside hoardings. ... The purpose of such posters is not so much to advertise details of the programme as to stimulate the curiosity of passers-by and so compel them to come in and see it ... More often they are blatantly lurid and intended to suggest that 'this film is hot stuff.'

As well as demanding a stricter censorship of posters, complaints were also levelled at the titles of films which, they felt, were 'deliberately concocted to deceive.'[47]

It was not just the films themselves but the way in which they were received that caused so much concern. The regulation of picture advertising, therefore, was deemed equally necessary as control of the content of films. This was an area where local authorities sought to exert an influence.

As early as 1920 Rhondda exhibitors were having their premises inspected by local justices who wanted 'to see the type of poster etc. displayed in the lobbies.'[48] At least one member of Swansea's Watch Committee was also alert to the problem, urging her colleagues that:

> Something might also be done with regard to hoardings, which were having a detrimental effect upon children. She happened to be living opposite a hoarding and they would be surprised to see the numbers of small children who stood before it and criticised the pictures they were shown on it.[49]

That the councillor should have been especially concerned about the effect of posters on children was entirely consistent with what was being written about the influence of cinema more generally in this period. With the interpretation placed upon films being as great a concern as pictures themselves it is unsurprising that impressionable young minds were considered most prone to corruption at the hands of the Hollywood studios.

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[46] The Chief Constable was quoted in *Kinematograph Weekly*, 3 September 1931, p. 47.
[47] Burnett and Martell, *The Devil's Camera*, pp. 78, 81.
[48] Robinson to Andrews, 5 February 1920, GRO D/D A/B 18/5/14.
[49] Mrs H. D. Williams, quoted in the *Western Mail*, 3 August 1929, p. 11.

Complaints that the cinema acted as a corrupting influence over the young were evident in Welsh newspapers during this period. In a *Western Mail* article of 1933, Ray Hopkins warned that 'In the average cinema the child to-day is shown for the most part a travesty of life, seen through the distorting lens of Hollywood.'[50] A decade and a half later the same paper ran a leader article stating that 'too often children are admitted to cinemas to see films which are obviously beyond the capacity of their impressionable minds to assimilate in a healthy manner.'[51] These concerns were reflected in the attempts of local authorities to impose stricter controls on when children were allowed to attend cinemas, and what sorts of films they were allowed to see.

Moves by councillors in Pontypridd, Swansea and elsewhere to prevent children from visiting cinemas in the evening have already been discussed. As well as the public health justification for doing this, however, it was also argued that the viewing of pictures in the evening was more likely to cause nightmares and/or loss of sleep. This was a point made by Dr. George Green who, recognising that the cinema could be a force for good as well as evil, reasoned that: 'On the whole, it seemed advisable that children's performances should be given in the afternoon rather than in the evening, as that had a less disturbing effect on sleep.'[52] Likewise, a delegate at a head teachers' conference in 1924, complained that 'children went to the films and were then afraid of the dark, and spent their nights in dreams of horror.'[53]

Regulation of posters and the prohibition of children from cinemas after a certain hour were measures designed, in part at least, to control the influence that films could have on younger audiences. The policy of banning minors from cinemas showing 'A' certified films, even when accompanied by parents or guardians, was a much more direct form of censorship, and this, too, had its supporters in Wales.[54] It was a delegate from Cardiff who, at the conference of the National Federation of Christian Workers in 1932, proposed that an appeal be made to the Home Office to introduce legislation preventing even accompanied children from watching 'A' classified films. As he saw it:

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[50] *Western Mail*, 14 November 1933, p. 13.
[51] *Western Mail*, 13 May 1947, p. 2.
[52] *Western Mail*, 23 November 1937, p. 11.
[53] *Western Mail*, 11 June 1924, p. 9.

> The trouble lies in the fact that you never know what seed has been planted in the minds of those young people by films marked 'A'. The result may not now be apparent, but God knows it will be revealed later on in life.[55]

Neither the Home Office nor the BBFC approved of this idea, but this did not stop local authorities from pursuing precisely such a policy. It had been adopted most famously by Liverpool JPs in October 1930, who felt that parents were 'not always the best judges of what a child should see.'[56] Burnett and Martell described this decision as 'an outstanding victory for decency',[57] and a number of other local authorities followed Liverpool's example. Demands that children be kept away from pictures deemed suitable for adult audiences, however, were made before the 1930s. In 1920 Lleufer Thomas, a key figure in the decision to ban children from evening cinema performances in the Rhondda, spoke of the need for more exhibitions of films for children only.[58] By 1929, at least one member of Swansea's watch committee felt 'there was no doubt that films were being shown that children should not see.'[59] Within a year Swansea councillors had decided to ban all children under the age of sixteen from cinemas where 'A' films were being shown: some nine months before the Liverpool JPs did so.

The measures introduced by local authorities to keep children away from cinemas at certain times, or during particular sorts of performances, were by no means set in stone. Under pressure from both exhibitors and audiences most of these decisions were eventually reversed. By taking such action in the first place, however, local licensing authorities demonstrated that they were serious about their role in the censorship process. They may have been unable to do much to control the content of individual films, but they did what they could to limit the cinema's potential as a harmful influence.

Sunday Opening of Cinemas in Wales

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[54] The failed attempts of Liverpool and Beckenham Councils to ban minors from 'A' certified films is discussed on p. 186.
[55] *Western Mail*, 3 May 1932, p. 14.
[56] Rachel Low, *The History of the British Film 1929-1939: Film Making in 1930s Britain* (London, 1985), p. 59.
[57] Burnett and Martell, *The Devil's Camera*, p. 51.
[58] *Western Mail*, 10 May 1920, p. 7.
[59] *Western Mail*, 3 August 1929, p. 11.

Throughout this chapter it has been argued that censorship decisions were influenced by more than the content of films: the process was a complex one in which the relevant authorities considered a wide range of questions. It is also necessary, however, to look beyond the mechanics of the decision making process, and consider the background against which it took place. Writing in the 1930s, for example, Richard Ford was aware that the increasing concern about the effect of the cinema on children 'was a small part of a social movement of considerable magnitude':

> It was coincident with the development of new theories and techniques in State Education, with the revolution against Victorian methods of attacking juvinile delinquency, and with the growing realisation that in view of the prospect of a stationary or declining population during the 1940s, the child of to-day will become an extremely important citizen of tomorrow.[60]

Though seldom raised explicitly in contemporary debates, deep seated social or cultural trends such as these lay behind the censorship process at all times. The importance of such factors became much more evident when debates centred not on the nature of cinema entertainment or the atmosphere within the halls, but the time at which it took place. Not only were the opening hours of cinemas strictly controlled, but films which would ordinarily have raised few concerns provoked a hostile reception when screened at sensitive times. The issue of Sunday opening provides the clearest example of this.

In Wales, for deep-seated social/cultural reasons, the issue of Sunday opening was much more sensitive than in most other parts of Britain. Evidence of the actual extent to which Wales (and Scotland) were out of step with England in terms of Sunday cinema attendance is provided by the statistical survey of cinema attendance conducted by Browning and Sorrell in the early 1950s. In 1951, they calculated that in the north of England the proportion of cinema visits that occurred on a Sunday was 10.1%, in the south the proportion was slightly higher, at 12.2%. However:

> The experience in Scotland and Wales is in marked contrast to England. In Scotland only about one in twelve cinema were open on Sunday in 1951 (compared with two out of three in the country as a whole) and under 1% of all admissions were on Sunday; in

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[60] Richard Ford, *Children in the Cinema* (London, 1939), pp. 1-2.

Wales the corresponding proportions were one in ten and 2%. This is perhaps some indication of the strength of nonconformist traditions in these countries.[61]

Opponents of Sunday opening of cinemas in Wales often took exception to the nature of the films themselves, on the grounds that they were wholly inappropriate for exhibition on the Sabbath. Cinemas were, in fact, allowed to open on Sundays for most of our period, but only for 'sacred concerts' at which no films were shown nor profits made. When attention was turned to the idea of allowing film shows on Sundays, therefore, film censorship took on added significance. When the Cardiff Watch Committee met to discuss the possibility of opening cinemas on Sundays in order to raise funds to relieve distress, it was implicitly accepted that a stricter standard of censorship than that already existing would need to be enforced on Sundays.[62] The Lord Mayor expressed the view that cinemas 'were opened for concerts now, and if they could get some kind of censorship of the pictures that would be shown he saw no reason why the people should not be in cinemas rather than walking around on the streets.'[63] Similarly, Mrs Rhoda Parker 'did not see any objection as long as pictures of the right sort were shown and if the cinemas were opened after church hours.'[64] Even for those in favour of Sunday opening, it seems, the moral standards to which films had to live up from Monday to Saturday were insufficient to warrant the granting of Sunday licences. When films were found which were suitable for exhibition on the Sabbath, however, it was known for attitudes to become more relaxed. Both the Watch Committee and the local Chief Constable were willing, for instance, to allow Swansea YMCA to screen religious films on Sunday evenings in 1931.[65]

The broader developments within Welsh society and culture which underpinned debates about Sunday opening will be dealt with more fully below. Before doing so, however, it should be noted that Sunday opening did not provide the only example of objections being levelled against films on the grounds of when they were screened rather than what they portrayed. Four Pontypridd cinemas found that the renewal of their licenses had been placed in jeopardy in 1931 because they had

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[61] Browning and Sorrell, 'Cinema and Cinema-Going in Great Britain', p. 147.
[62] This attitude to cinema performances on Sundays is similar to that of the Reithian Sunday on the BBC.
[63] *Western Mail*, 29 January 1921, p. 8.
[64] *Ibid.*, p. 8.

'shown films at Christmas other than those permitted by the magistrates.'[66] More significantly, perhaps, in 1926 a Swansea cinema was forced to change its programme on Armistice Day because of the public outcry surrounding the film *The Unknown Soldier*. The tradition of the unknown soldier was by no means unique to Britain, but it nonetheless embodied powerful national sentiments. The notion that an *American* film company should be able to profit by releasing a film on the subject, and at such a sensitive time, was clearly too much for some of the more patriotic members of the public. Neither the BBFC President, T. P. O'Connor, nor the Home Secretary, who was forced to defend the film in the House of Commons, could find anything objectionable in the film's content. The author of one letter to the *South Wales Daily Post*, however, insisted that 'the offence to British sentiment cannot be over-emphasised':

> It is revolting to think that an American film company should hoax the British public into patronising a film of this type, by causing a title so endeared to all British hearts ... The Unknown Soldier is revered throughout the Empire. I feel sure that the Welsh people, as members of this vast Empire, will feel the insult to British sentiment and pride.[67]

Mr W. Gambold, who managed the Castle Cinema, unperturbed by such sentiments, assured the proprietor that 'the whole matter will probably be forgotten by Monday.' He nonetheless considered it necessary to withdraw the picture on Armistice Day itself - though not for the rest of the week when it played to packed houses.[68] The tone of the criticism directed at this film, along with its popularity with audiences, suggest that the controversy was an expression of much deeper concerns about the spread of American culture throughout British society. Such anxieties were never far from the surface in debates about the cinema in this period. They were pushed to the fore in this instance because Hollywood had been seen to have penetrated one of Britain's most important national traditions.

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[65] *Kinematograph Weekly*, 8 January 1931, p. 80.
[66] *Kinematograph Weekly*, 12 February 1931, p. 40.
[67] *South Wales Daily Post*, 10 November 1926, p. 9. See also GRO D/D A/B 18/15/114ii.
[68] Far from being apologetic about screening the film in the first place, the only regret Mr Gambold expressed to his superiors was that he had to withdraw the picture on a Thursday (traditionally a popular night): 'I wish that Armistice Day had been earlier in the week, say Tuesday, I believe we should have done big business for the remainder of the week, as it is we have only Friday and Saturday.' Gambold to Andrews, 12 November 1926, GRO D/D A/B 18/15/114i.

Many of the objections which were aimed at the cinema generally, were provided with added intensity whenever it was suggested that picture halls should be opened on Sundays. It was in debates over Sunday opening where accusations that the cinema was a threat to public morals, or an agent of Americanisation, were most forcefully made. An examination of the factors which lay behind the controversy over Sunday opening, therefore, may help to explain the rationale behind attempts to control of regulate the cinema in Wales.

The question of Sunday opening came to prominence every ten years or so throughout the period under examination here. In 1921 a request by Earl Haig that cinemas should be opened on a single Sunday (April 3) to raise money for his Officers' Association fund, led to the issue of Sunday cinemas being discussed by local licensing authorities across Wales. Though there was a general acceptance that something should be done to assist the cause, the suggestion that cinemas be opened on a Sunday, albeit as a one off gesture, was felt to be the thin end of the wedge, and most Welsh licensing authorities rejected the idea. The same year saw a number of requests for cinemas to be (temporarily) opened on Sundays to support various local charitable causes - such as the purchase of a war memorial in Pontypridd, and the relief of distress caused by unemployment in Cardiff.[69]

Much the most prolonged debate on the issue of Sunday opening (in Britain as a whole, not just Wales) came in the early 1930s. Until this time it had been widely assumed that any local licensing authority could grant cinema licenses on Sundays - on the proviso that all profits went to charity. However, an unexpected legal decision in 1930, based on the Sunday Observance Act of 1780, ruled such actions illegal. This led in turn to demands for new legislation to replace what was seen as an outdated Act. A Sunday Opening Bill came before Parliament in 1931, therefore, in which it was proposed that local authorities should be allowed to grant licences for the showing of films on Sundays provided a public demand for this could be demonstrated. There was some dispute as to what exactly constituted 'public demand', but in effect the Bill simply attempted to re-establish, on a secure legal footing, the situation that had existed before 1930. Scotland and Northern Ireland were excluded from the Bill on the grounds that the 1780 Act had not applied in these territories in the first place. There were a committed group of Welsh MPs who also

argued that Wales should be excluded from the legislation. Before the Bill could pass into law, however, the country was plunged into economic and political crisis and the legislation was postponed.

The whole matter was debated once again in 1932 and this time a Bill was passed (in which Wales was included) that permitted local authorities to grant Sunday cinema licenses. The only authorities automatically entitled to do this, however, were those where Sunday film shows had regularly taken place before 1930. Those authorities, including all Welsh ones, which had previously refused to grant Sunday licenses needed to submit a draft order to the Secretary of State before permission for them to do so could be granted. Furthermore, in all boroughs and Urban Districts a draft order could not be submitted until a poll of local residents had been taken and a majority approval of Sunday opening demonstrated. Despite these stringent conditions the great majority of Welsh MPs still voted against the Bill - for reasons which will be discussed below.[70]

With the onset of World War Two the question of Sunday opening was again raised. The 1932 Act was amended, making it easier for local authorities to issue Sunday cinema licenses, and there were demands that, in certain parts of Wales at least, restrictions on the Sunday opening of cinemas should be relaxed. It was (unsuccessfully) argued, for instance, that troops stationed in Welsh towns should have the opportunity to visit picture houses on Sunday evenings

For the most part, Sabbatarians had been able to rebuff attempts to introduce Sunday opening into Wales, most of which had been generated by developments elsewhere in Britain. In 1950, however, after a fiercely fought referendum campaign, the people of Swansea voted in favour of the Sunday opening of cinemas. Thereafter it was only a matter of time before other parts of Wales followed suit.[71] In retrospect it seems that opponents of Sunday opening were engaged in a battle they were always doomed to lose. Eventually, forces of commercialisation and secularisation rendered the foundations of Welsh Sabbatarianism obsolete.

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[69] *Western Mail*, 29 January 1921, p. 8, and 8 February 1921, p. 9.

[70] This brief summary of the Sunday cinema legislation is based on the ongoing, and extensive, coverage the Sunday opening question in the *Western Mail* throughout the passage of the 1931 and 1932 Bills.

[71] Two years after the Swansea referendum, the people of Cardiff voted overwhelmingly in support of Sunday cinemas.

It is interesting to note in this respect, however, the way in which the arguments marshalled against Sunday cinema in Wales gradually shifted in emphasis over the period covered here. Increasingly the issue came to treated as a national, rather than a religious one. The main areas of debate can be broadly divided into four areas.

The argument most frequently advanced by supporters of Sunday opening was that by allowing cinemas to open, people would have something to do on Sunday evenings other than roaming the streets. The prospect of young people spending their Sunday evenings in the local picture hall, so the argument ran, was a good deal less harmful than having them out on the streets. One Wrexham councillor made the point directly when debating the issue in 1942. He appealed to his colleagues that:

> they must admit that Wrexham on a Sunday night was a disgrace. The streets were thronged. It was worse than any other night. A number of young men from the district were being packed home by the police.[72]

Similarly, when the renewal of a seven day dramatic license for a Bargoed cinema was discussed, one councillor argued that 'young people are better off in cinemas than running about the roads and rambling over the mountains. It is better for the morals of the people.'[73] Sabbatarians, on the other hand, flatly rejected the notion that the opening of cinemas on Sunday could achieve any advance in public morality. They tended to regard the cinema as a dubious moral influence as it was, to extend licenses to permit Sunday opening was, for them, unGodly as well as unnecessary. The Rev. F. W. Cole of Penarth made the point succinctly:

> I maintain that it is far better for them [young people] to take a walk along the cliffs, with the fresh wind of God on their faces, than in a cinema, where the winds blow from Hollywood.[74]

A second argument employed by proponents of Sunday cinemas was that it would serve a valuable social purpose by raising money for local charitable causes. It was solely as an aid to such causes that Sunday opening had first been seriously proposed in parts of Wales in the early 1920s. These proposals were turned down by

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[72] *Wrexham Advertiser and Star*, 11 December 1942, p. 1.
[73] *South Wales Echo*, 7 March 1928, p. 9.

most local councils, however, on the grounds that they represented the 'thin end of the wedge'. Defenders of the 'traditional' Welsh Sunday were, no doubt rightly, suspicious of the claims that all profits would go to charity. They realised that once the principle of Sunday opening had been established the desire to help local charities would soon diminish, and cinemas would be run on the same basis for seven days a week. Lord Colum Crichton-Stuart, for one, was not fooled by the re-assurance that the Bill before Parliament in 1931 would prevent exhibitors from pocketing the profits from Sunday opening:

> Many cinema proprietors are against the Bill, but, of course, there is money in it. There are the receipts from advertisements and the publicity they will get for the week's fresh films. But is anyone so simple as to doubt that in the course of a short time there will also be a substantial share in the receipts, if not the whole, to bank on Monday morning?[75]

When the Sunday Opening Bill came before Parliament once more in 1932, Major Goronwy Owen led the Welsh opposition to the proposals, by arguing that:

> The trouble and danger of this Bill is that it gives the sanction of law for the first time to inroads upon the Christian Sunday, and *it would open the way to a further secularisation and commercialisation of the one day of rest.*[76]

Such concerns were a key feature of the opposition to Sunday opening.

Against this, a third (libertarian) argument that people had as much right to visit the cinema on a Sunday evening as they had to go to church cut little ice with Sabbitarians, and indeed it was a point seldom advanced. Demands for increased personal liberty could easily be interpreted by the more religiously minded as simply putting more temptation in peoples' way. Further, by raising the issue of personal choice, supporters of Sunday opening left themselves open to the counter-argument that cinema workers would be required, against their will, to work on Sundays.

The fourth, and increasingly prevalent, area of debate surrounding the issue was the question of nationality. Just as protesters at a demonstration in Cardiff against the 1881 Sunday Closing Act had demanded 'British rights for British working

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[74] *Western Mail*, 5 July 1932, p. 10.
[75] *Western Mail*, 13 June 1931, p. 11.
[76] *Western Mail*, 14 April 1932, p. 7.

men',[77] there were those half a century later who similarly felt that the rights enjoyed by many people in parts of England should also be extended to Wales. On learning, in 1921, that Sunday opening was permitted by the LCC, one Cardiff councillor complained that he failed 'to see why London should be favoured or disfavoured - according to the point of view - more than Cardiff.'[78] Such a view, when stated at all however, remained a minority one within most Welsh councils. The alternative position was expressed by, among others, Lord Crichton-Stuart. Arguing that capital cities, by their very cosmopolitan nature, tended to be more lax about Sunday observance than outlying areas, he went on to suggest that:

> London is unique in attempting to force its failings, not only upon its own provinces, but upon another country - Wales - as well.[79]

The twin assumptions implicit in this argument - first, that Wales was a distinct national entity in itself; and second, that it was opposed, *as a nation*, to Sunday opening - became increasingly important as the debate wore on, of which more later.

Key to the success that Welsh Sabbatarians were able to achieve in delaying the spread of Sunday opening into Wales, however, was not the strength of their arguments, but the amount of influence they could exert in Welsh society. Who was it, then, who had reason to support the Sabbatarian case?

According to Stephen Ridgewell, 'the churches and chapels' played 'an absolutely central role in moulding and organising this hostile opinion.'[80] Despite declining church attendance religious authorities, and non-conformist denominations in particular, continued to wield considerable influence throughout this period. This was only partly the result of individual ministers berating congregations from their pulpits. More important was the role played by bodies such as the Free Church Council and the Lord's Day Observance Society both in holding demonstrations and, crucially, sending deputations to lobby licensing authorities. In both 1921 and 1940 such deputations played an important role in convincing Cardiff councillors not to permit Sunday opening.

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[77] W. R. Lambert, 'The Welsh Sunday Closing Act, 1881', *Welsh History Review*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (1972), p. 184.
[78] *Western Mail*, 29 January 1921, p. 8.
[79] *Western Mail*, 13 June 1931, p. 11.

It is unlikely that the arguments advanced by various religious bodies would have proved very effective, however, had local politicians not been sympathetic to their position in the first place. Much is made of the fact that the 1920s witnessed something of a watershed in Welsh politics, with the nineteenth century Liberal hegemony eventually coming to an end, being replaced by that of a Labour Party more in tune with the needs of an industrial working-class. Non-conformist religion had been intimately bound up with the identity of Liberal Wales, as reflected by its political achievements from the Welsh Sunday Closing Act of 1881 to disestablishment of the Church in 1919. If the debates over Sunday cinemas tell us anything, it is that the decline of the Liberal Party, and of chapel attendance, did not bring to an end the influence of non-conformity in Welsh political society.

Ridgewell describes the controversy over Sunday cinemas in Wales as 'the "tip of an iceberg", the visible extremity of something far deeper':

> Since the turn of the century the 'traditionalists' had been struggling to hold on to their idea of a distinctly Welsh culture against the threatening advance of an urbanised, commercialised and anglicised counter-culture ... The cinema, and especially the Sunday cinema, came to crystallise this clash of cultures.[81]

He observes that the six Welsh MPs who voted in favour of the Sunday Opening Bill in 1932 all represented south Wales constituencies, and that the remaining Liberal strongholds in north and west Wales remained staunchly opposed. It is important to recognise, however, that support for any opposing 'counter-culture' to the traditions of Liberal Wales was not likely to be found in the Labour Party. The transformation of Welsh politics in this period was more evolutionary than revolutionary: continuity was just as discernible as change. Ridgewell is aware of these continuities but still 'can't help feeling that had the Labour Party in Wales, particularly in south Wales, pressed the case for Sunday cinemas, their arrival would have been a good deal hastened.'[82] No doubt, but the crucial point is surely that the Labour Party in Wales saw no reason to press the case for Sunday opening. Indeed, the secular and commercial forces which informed the logic of Sunday opening were as much of anathema to Welsh Labour

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[80] Stephen J. Ridgewell, 'South Wales and the Cinema in the 1930s: The Functioning and Reception of a Mass Cultural Form', M.Phil. thesis, University of Wales, Swansea (1993), pp. 50-1.
[81] Ridgewell, 'South Wales and the Cinema', p. 59.
[82] *Ibid.* pp. 60-1.

men as they had been to their Liberal predecessors. As Peter Stead has remarked, the Labour Party in south Wales was led after 1918, 'by men whose careers had consisted not of sectional activities but of service to the community as a whole.' It is significant, therefore, that 'most of them were active in nonconformist chapels.'[83] A closer look at the south Wales MPs who voted for the 1932 Sunday Opening Bill is revealing in this respect. All six represented south Wales constituencies, but it is surely significant that three of them were Conservatives.[84] Reginald Clarry, who had won a by-election in Newport in 1922 on the back of his opposition to the Liberal Government's extension of the 1881 Sunday Closing Act to Monmouthshire, was one such supporter of the Bill. Clarry had 'gained the support of local licensed victuallers'[85] in his 1922 election campaign, and the concern that he, and other Conservatives, had for the interests of local traders (whether publicans or cinema managers) accounted for just as much of the support for the Sunday Opening Bill in Wales as did any sympathy on the Labour benches for the rights of working-class men and women. The sort of arguments that were most likely to persuade Labour supporters were almost invariably employed by opponents of Sunday opening. It was repeatedly stressed, for instance, that cinema workers needed a day of rest on the Sabbath, yet the fact that it was illegal for any cinema employee to work for seven consecutive days was largely overlooked.

In contrast to the breadth of support on which Sabbatarians could rely, supporters of Sunday opening had few representatives in positions of authority. Even cinema exhibitors in Wales were reluctant to be seen pushing the case for Sunday opening too forcefully. When the Sunday Opening Bill was being debated in 1931 the south Wales branch of the CEA argued that Wales should not be exempted from the legislation, but in doing so stressed that 'If there is no general demand in an area for Sunday opening, the kinemas will remain shut.'[86] The view of the trade was that Sunday opening should only come about if the public demanded it, but they did very little to influence public opinion themselves.

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[83] Peter Stead, 'Working-Class Leadership in South Wales, 1900-1920', *Welsh History Review*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (1973), pp. 350-1.
[84] The six were: W. G. Cove (Lab., Aberavon); Reginald Clarry (Con., Newport); Capt. D'Arcy Hall (Con., Brecon and Radnor); David Grenfell (Lab., Gower); Morgan Jones (Lab., Caerphilly); and Capt. Arthur Evans (Con., Cardiff South).
[85] Kenneth O. Morgan, *Rebirth of a Nation: Wales 1880-1980* (Oxford, 1981), p. 191.
[86] H. Victor Davies, quoted in *Kinematograph Weekly*, 30 April 1931, p. 25.

The length of time it took for Sunday opening to be established in Wales suggests that the 'traditional' values espoused by Liberal Wales continued to hold considerable moral authority until the second half of the twentieth century. As the debates wore on, however, opponents of Sunday opening appealed less to deep seated religious sentiments than to national ones.

National consciousness had been as much a feature of Liberal Wales as had non-conformist zeal. The establishment of institutions such as the University of Wales, the National Library and the National Museum had been important achievements, and a powerful sense of national sentiment had also underpinned arguments in favour of the Welsh Sunday Closing Act of 1881, disestablishment of the Church and, of course, Home Rule. The society and culture that emerged out of the industrialised areas of (mainly south) Wales, however, had no place in the outlook of this generation of Welsh nationalists. Abhorrence at the industrialisation of south Wales was even more pronounced among the more radical Welsh nationalists, who had sought a political outlet of their own after the post-1918 decline of the Liberal Party.[87] Saunders Lewis's poem, *The Deluge*, effectively captures their sense of disenchantment: the opening stanza reads as follows:

> The tramway climbs from Merthyr to Dowlais,
> Slime of a snail on a heap of slag;
> Here once was Wales, and now
> Derelict cinemas and rain on the barren tips;
> The pawnbrokers have closed their doors, the pegging clerks
> Are the gentry of this waste;
> All flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth.[88]

If cinemas were regarded as unwelcome and alien institutions by the defenders of 'national' Welsh culture, Sunday opening was an even more direct affront to their sense of national identity. In opposing the Sunday opening Bill of 1932 Major Goronwy Owen MP (Lib. Caernarvon) claimed to:

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[87] The political background and objectives of Plaid Cymru's founders were quite distinct from those of traditional Welsh Liberalism. Lewis did not speak for the society of the pulpit, but his disdain for the culture and society of industrial south Wales widely held.

[88] Saunders Lewis, 'The Deluge 1939', in Alan R. Jones and Gwyn Thomas (eds.), *Presenting Saunders Lewis* (Cardiff, 1983), p. 177.

> know the views of the great number of the Welsh nation with regard to the Bill and with what repugnance and abhorrence they viewed any legislation which tended to detract from the holiness of Sunday.

Making direct reference to the 1881 Sunday Closing Act, he argued that 'The position of Sunday in Wales was quite different from England.'[89] The 1881 Act was important in this respect because it had been the 'first distinctively Welsh Act of Parliament' that applied 'a distinct legislative principle for Wales, as distinct from England.'[90] This was a precedent that those of a nationalist persuasion were enthusiastic to see extended.

The national element to debates over Sunday opening in the early 1930s was highlighted by the fact that all but four Welsh MPs voted against the Bill in 1931 (a figure which increased to six the following year.) This also explains why Goronwy Owen and his supporters were less concerned to see the Bill defeated as to ensure that Wales was excluded from it altogether. The apparent contradiction in their arguments - that, on the one hand, there was no demand in Wales for Sunday opening, and on the other, that local option should not be granted to Welsh constituencies - were seized on by defenders of the legislation. When another Welsh MP, Mr. Llewelyn-Jones (Lib. Flintshire), put the case for Welsh exclusion in Standing Committee, the Home Office Under Secretary, Oliver Stanley, replied that:

> The hon. Member must have very little confidence in the desire of Welshmen to preserve their Sunday if he really believes that this provision is going to be a temptation to them.[91]

For many Welsh Liberals, however, local option was opposed precisely because the issue was felt to be a national, rather than a local one.

Concerns about the protection of Welsh identity were also evident when Sunday opening was debated during World War Two. The Pontypridd councillor who announced in 1940 that he opposed Sunday cinemas on the grounds that 'it is a step in the direction of eliminating all that is best in the life of the Welsh nation',[92] was expressing what had become the standard argument against Sunday opening. The Rev.

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[89] *Western Mail*, 14 April 1932, p. 7.
[90] Morgan, *Rebirth of a Nation*, p. 36.
[91] *Western Mail*, 17 June 1932, p. 13.
[92] *Western Mail*, 8 January 1940, p. 6.

Dr Rees Griffiths, similarly, appealed to Cardiff councillors that 'Wales is what it is because it has had this institution for centuries.'[93]

The increasing frequency with which the national card was being played in Sunday opening debates, however, was more indicative of the decline in popular religious sentiment than any increasing nationalist fervour. Shortly after Cardiff councillors had voted against Sunday cinemas in 1940, the Rev. William Yorwerth published an article in which he argued that:

> The tragic and undeniable fact is this, that the decline in Sabbath observance is not so much due to indifference of the masses as to the increasing apathy of those in normal membership with the churches, to whom Sabbath observance has no personal and vital meaning. ... The revolt of modern youth from organised religion is due not to a growing materialism but to the failure of the churches to square up to new conditions.[94]

The arguments being advanced by those opposed to Sunday opening clearly had no relevance to those of a younger generation who had grown up in a very different society. Appeals to the national heritage of Liberal Wales, with its emphasis on Sabbath observance, may have influenced those in positions of authority in the inter-war years, but by the 1950s a new generation of political leaders was emerging, to whom such considerations were quite unimportant. The authors of a survey titled *Social Change in South-West Wales*, note that 'During the discussions about Sunday cinemas in Swansea in 1950 a substantial number of Labour councillors were in favour of them opening.' They argued that such councillors were part of a 'newer generation of active trade union Socialists ... [who] are gradually ousting the more old-fashioned Socialists whose activities and opinions alike show their chapel background.'[95]

The length of time it took for Sunday opening to become established in Wales is testament that the values of Victorian Wales survived into the mid-twentieth century. The eventual arrival of Sunday cinemas, however, was a clear signal that such values would have little role to play in the shaping of post-war Wales. The traditional Welsh Sunday was being, as it were, 'uninvented', and the issues that most concerned post-war Welsh nationalists much more secular and overtly political.

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[93] *Western Mail*, 6 February 1940, p. 7.
[94] *Western Mail*, 27 March 1940, p. 9.
[95] T. Brennan, E. W. Cooney and H. Pollins, *Social Change in South-West Wales* (London, 1954), pp. 156-7.

There was little by way of any active censorship of films in Wales, partly because local authorities simply did not have the resources to carry it out, but also because they did not need to. The standards upheld by the BBFC in this period were usually quite acceptable to authorities in Wales as well as the rest of Britain. Cinema managers did not need to be overly concerned with the films they showed in order to avoid licensing difficulties, but they did need to take account of how the pictures were locally marketed and received. The environment in which films were seen, the makeup of the audience who saw them and the times at which they were screened were matters to which licensing authorities paid close attention. The intention was to ensure that the institution of the cinema conformed to standards of respectability which were acceptable to leaders of Welsh society. These standards evolved as Welsh society itself changed and new leaders emerged. In the period covered by this study, the vast majority of Welsh cinemas were either independently managed or part of a small, locally run chain. Control over the way that films were exhibited and received, therefore, lay almost entirely in local hands. For the most part, cinema managers and local councillors in Wales acted much like their counterparts in the rest of Britain. Their autonomy, however, did enable them to express local, and in the case of Sunday opening, national differences.

Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to deal with issues that are relevant to both the social history of Wales and to the history of cinema in Britain as a whole. Historians of popular culture in Wales have demonstrated how the development of such activities as rugby football and choral singing have been shaped by social and economic conditions.[1] It has been argued here that the cinema should be regarded in a similar light. The sheer number of cinemas that existed across Wales, and the regularity with which people attended them, suggest that the cinema was indeed a central institution of popular culture within Wales in this period. The way this institution operated, in terms of the structure of the industry and the nature of the buildings themselves, was clearly influenced by the economic climate in Wales from the 1920s to the 1940s. Social conditions above all affected the extent of the cinema's appeal in Wales, and indeed the nature of the entertainment it provided. The inter-war depression in Wales gave people every reason to want to escape from the reality of their every day lives, it also ensured that the relatively small pre-war cinemas provided virtually the only affordable such means of escape for many people. The entertainment provided was not as spectacular as that found at the more grandiose 'dream palaces', but it was consumed as a matter of routine by a public whose appetite for 'the pictures' seemed insatiable. These local halls quickly became important centers where a beleaguered population could momentarily relax and enjoy themselves. During World War Two the economy in Wales was much healthier, but long working hours, peculiarly stressful social conditions, and a lack of alternative leisure opportunities meant that the cinema's appeal was further enhanced. The continuation of shortages and rationing in the 'age of austerity' immediately after the war meant that the cinema's enormous popularity lasted until well into the 1950s. It was *social* conditions, rather than purely *economic* ones, that lay behind the cinema's mass-appeal.

The cinema's appeal was no stronger in Wales than in many other parts of Britain, and cinema-going (unlike rugby football) was not regarded as a defining national characteristic. The cinema did little to forge any sense of distinctive Welsh identity. But it

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[1] David Smith and Gareth Williams, *Fields of Praise: The Official History of the Welsh Rugby Union, 1881-1981* (Cardiff, 1980); Gareth Williams, *Valleys of Song: Music and Society in Wales, 1840-1914* (Cardiff, 1998).

was an institution that stood at the heart of the social life of towns and villages across Wales. Its significance was arguably much greater than that of sporting events or musical performances, partly because cinema shows were attended so frequently but also because they were popular with women as well as men. No other form of entertainment was as affordable and accessible. This meant that the cinema came to perform a social function that went beyond just the screening of films. An indication of this wider social function is provided those who recall going to the pictures during this period. One former patron of Ebley's Olympic cinema (which was the one picture hall in Cwmavon) remembered it thus:

> When we were children, Ebley's was the first place we were allowed to go on our own. Then came those tentative meetings between groups of girls and groups of boys, followed by the actual courting. This resulted in marriage and the next generation of children, who were of course, allowed to go to Ebley's on their own.[2]

The cinema's appeal in Wales rested on the same factors that underpinned the medium's popularity in other parts of Britain (and indeed the world). That the cinema's appeal was so strong in Wales is interesting precisely because it points to similarities, rather than differences, between Wales and other parts of Britain. The images of the pulpit and the coal pit have been closely associated with Welsh identity for much of the twentieth century. Similarly, the cultural pursuits most often associated with the Welsh are those which grew out of the societies of pulpit and coal pit – namely choral singing and rugby football. Yet the fleapits (which could be found across Britain) were just as significant a feature of Welsh communities, and in the period under examination here cinema attendance in Wales dwarfed that at rugby and football matches.

The extent of the cinema's appeal throughout Wales, and the way in which different elements within Welsh society responded to its mass appeal, points not just to similarities between Wales and the rest of Britain, but to similarities between different elements within Welsh society itself. The societies of pulpit, coal pit and fleapit, though identifiable, were far from self-contained. Not only did large numbers of people who lived in communities believed to be dominated by the pulpit or coal pit eagerly flock to

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[2] The quotation is attributed only to Edna. See Edward Ebley, 'Memories of Times Past: The History of a Travelling Theatre', *Michaelstone Super Avon Parish Magazine* (January 2000), p. 12.

the fleapits. Attempts to control or regulate the cinema also revealed how much the leaders of Liberal and Labour Wales had in common.

This thesis is as much a history of the cinema as it is a social history of Wales. By examining the popularity of the cinema in Wales, therefore, it is possible to inform wider debates about the development of the cinema in Britain as a whole. In particular, it enables us to challenge the notion that film-going in Britain boomed in the 1930s because major cinema companies developed huge chains of luxury super cinemas. In Wales, where the economic depression was especially severe, the vast majority of cinemas were either independently run, or part of small, locally owned chains. Further, these halls were usually fairly small (with less than a thousand seats) and relatively old (built prior to 1914). In Wales at least, this was not the 'age of the dream palace', and for the great majority of film-goers here the fleapit was a more familiar venue than the modern super-cinema.

The preponderance of fleapits was particularly noticeable in Wales, but this fact is relevant to the rest of Britain also. The situation in Wales fits into a broader pattern whereby those areas worst affected by the inter-war depression witnessed the least new cinema development, but also, interestingly, the highest rates of cinema attendance. During periods of social or economic hardship, (notably the inter-war depression, and even more so in World War Two), the cinema was a much needed form of recreation and escape. The larger super-cinemas may have helped to make cinema-going more attractive to a middle-class audience in parts of Britain in the 1930s, but it was the regular patronage of small, local halls by working-class cinema 'addicts' that accounted for the cinema's remarkable popularity from the 1920s to the 1950s. In Wales, Scotland and the north of England, where the fleapits were most numerous, the cinema's appeal was also strongest.

The appeal of the cinema was clearly determined by the social and economic environment in which people lived, and the range of alternative leisure pursuits available to them. The role of individual films themselves was of rather less significance. Certain films did, of course, achieve remarkable success (they continued to so when audiences went into decline) but it was not individual films that attracted so many people to their

local cinemas each week. Most people went along for an *evening's* entertainment, often without regard for the main feature that happened to be showing. More important than the individual films, was that they were screened in a friendly and familiar environment where patrons could feel at home. The entertainment on offer at most local cinemas was not usually as spectacular or as memorable as that in the larger dream palaces, but it was much the cheapest and most convenient way of taking one's mind away from the real world.

The reasons why people went to the cinema, the type of films they saw, and the environment in which they saw them were not very different in Wales compared to other areas of high cinema attendance in the north of England and Scotland. In other words, the society of the fleapit existed in more than one part of Britain. In Wales, however, the cinema was also influenced by the societies of the pulpit and coal pit. On the one hand, there were attempts by miners' institutes and local churches to use films to advance their own cause. There were even calls for a Welsh film council that would promote the heritage, traditions and culture of Wales on screen. On the other hand, there were attempts by leaders of Welsh society to regulate and control when and where cinema entertainment could be consumed. The clearest example of this was the opposition to Sunday opening of cinemas in Wales. The 'Welsh Sunday' was a tradition that had been 'invented' in the nineteenth century, but which was firmly established by the period covered here. It was a response to the increasingly secular and commercial way in which the country was being run, developments which were anathema to the leaders of the societies of the pulpit and coal pit. The opening of cinemas on Sundays was perceived as being a direct assault by secular and commercial forces on 'traditional' Welsh society. Opposition to Sunday opening therefore became a national issue. The eventual spread of Sunday cinema opening into Wales can be regarded as part of a process whereby the fleapit established itself alongside the pulpit and coal pit in Welsh society. The irony here is that such recognition was achieved when cinema audiences in Wales (as elsewhere) were going into decline.

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