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Selfe, M. (2012) Circles, columns and screenings: mapping the institutional, discursive, physical and gendered spaces of film criticism in 1940s London. *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 9 (4). pp. 588-611. ISSN 1743-4521

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/58341>

Deposited on: 5 October 2012

Circles, Columns and Screenings: Mapping the Institutional, Discursive, Physical and Gendered Spaces of Film Criticism in 1940s London

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Abstract:

This article revisits the period considered within ‘The Quality Film Adventure: British Critics and the Cinema 1942–1948’ (Ellis 1996), mapping the professional cultures, working contexts and industry relationships that underpinned the aesthetic judgements and collective directions which John Ellis observed within certain film critics’ published writings. Drawing on the records of the Critics’ Circle, Dilys Powell’s papers and *Kinematograph Weekly*, it explores the evolution of increasingly organised professional cultures of film criticism and film publicity, arguing that the material conditions imposed by war caused tensions between them to escalate. In the context of two major challenges to critical integrity and practice—the evidence given by British producer R. J. Minney to the 1949 Royal Commission on the Press and an ongoing libel case between a BBC critic and MGM—the spaces of hospitality and film promotion became highly contested sites. This article focuses on the ways in which these spaces were characterised, used and policed. It finds that the value and purpose of press screenings were hotly disputed, and observes the way that the advancement of women within one sector (film criticism) but not the other (film publicity) created particular difficulties, as key female critics avoided the more compromised masculine spaces of publicity, making them harder for publicists to reach and fuelling trade resentment. More broadly, the article asserts the need to consider film critics as geographically and culturally located audiences who experience films as ‘professional’ viewers within extended and embodied cultures of habitual professional practice and physical space.

Keywords: Criticism; professionalism; publicity; space; gender; press screenings; audiences; Critics’ Circle; MGM; Dilys Powell; Royal Commission on the Press (1949).

Journal of British Cinema and Television 9.4 (2012): 588–611

DOI: 10.3366/jbctv.2012.0107

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www.eupjournals.com/jbctv

Introduction

When scholars engage with film criticism, we are usually seeking evidence of something else. Our true object may be the roots of academic practice or echoes of a lost film text but perhaps most often and most problematically, we seek traces of contemporary reception. Responsible scholars who draw on reviews for this purpose are careful to frame them as specific, partial discourses which cannot represent wider reactions to the film. However, while we repeatedly highlight the gap between critical acclaim and box-office success, we lack the means to explain it fully. Collectively, these caveats work to position film criticism as an apologetic and inadequate substitute for the elusive 'real' audience.

Three decades of 'new film history' have taught us to approach cinema differently. While not every study seeks to map industrial practice, political contexts or audience cultures, the understanding that films and their cultural reception are 'shaped by a combination of historical processes ... and individual agency' has become pervasive (Chapman, Glancy and Harper 2007: 6). Criticism, like film, is a cultural form produced and received in material conditions, and in order to contextualise the reviews that so many of us draw upon, an equivalent methodological transformation is required. As is routinely done for films, we need to investigate how economic pressures, working practices, statute and precedent, official and unofficial censorship, and the interests of a variety of groups and organisations can be seen to shape the content, style, address, aesthetics, uses and interpretations of film criticism at specific historical moments.

Clearly one research project cannot tackle all these aspects, but in order to illustrate what such an approach can add to the existing picture, this article will revisit the period covered by John Ellis' classic study, 'The Quality Film Adventure: British Critics and the Cinema 1942–1948' (1996: 66–93), reframing it in terms of film critics' professional structures, routines and practices. As the aim is to attend to the discourses circulating about (rather than through) film criticism, this study reaches beyond the critics' published views to explore traces of disputes and routine practice drawn from a range of archival sources. These include the privately published newsletter of the Critics' Circle, the *Critics' Circular* (henceforth *CC*), the papers of *Sunday Times* critic Dilys Powell, and the materials relating to the 1949 Royal Commission on the Press.¹ It will also consider the practical impact of war on the perceived value of the critic's column inch and examine the pejorative way in which 'lay' press critics (those writing for the public rather than the trade itself) were represented within

the leading UK trade organ, *Kinematograph Weekly* (henceforth—as it referred to itself – *KINE*), throughout the 1940s. This evidence expands the discussion beyond elite tastes to consider conflicts of professional interest and the uncertain status of film critics in relation to both the film trade and the wider field of arts criticism.

In contrast, Ellis' analysis of the values and language of British film criticism in the 1940s focuses on published writings from the quality press and uses a sample underpinned by a traditional 'national cinema' research agenda. He argues that in 1948, following a few years of selective support for British films, British critics became collectively disillusioned with the possibilities of their own national cinema. Where the writing of the mid 1940s had been marked by the belief that, through their advocacy of the 'quality film', the critics could lead a sea change in public taste and thus help to raise the standard of British feature productions, by the late 1940s a shortage of suitable films, and the public's failure to embrace those that existed, meant that this optimism for mass cultural uplift was on the wane. Instead, Ellis observes the critics' growing acceptance of the cultural stratification of cinema spaces, cinema products, and—by implication—cinema audiences (*ibid.*: 89–90). He concludes that from the critics' 1940s 'attempt to create a "quality film" for the mass audience emerges the defence of the "art cinema" of the 1950s' (*ibid.*: 90).

Ellis is keenly aware of a range of contextual factors, but his combination of a film-centred research structure and a discourse analysis approach nonetheless positions the critics' observable disillusionment with British films as the main driver of their 'retreat into the specialised arena' (*ibid.*: 90). Although I do not wish to contest that such a shift took place, my approach highlights a range of cultural and professional conditions that I argue were more significant in shaping the direction of British critical practice. The start of the period of discursive coherence and attempted elevation that Ellis identifies maps closely onto the beginning of an era when film critics finally achieved greater acceptance and more effective collective organisation within the Critics' Circle. Similarly, while, as Ellis observes, 1948 was a crisis year for the British film industry, 1947 and 1948 also saw simmering resentments between critics and trade come to a head over two incidents: the libel case brought against MGM by E. Arnot Robertson (the legal and aesthetic implications of which I explore in greater detail in Selfe (2011)), and the evidence presented to the Royal Commission on the Press by Gainsborough Pictures producer R. J. Minney. In each incident, members of the trade were motivated by resentment at the critics' harsh, pedagogically-driven treatment of

popular cinema, and this resulted in public attacks on critics' personal conduct and professional competence.

Crucially, where analysis of published writing tends to present film criticism as disembodied expressions of opinion, connected primarily as a community of ideas, this article will apply the concerns of historical audience studies to film critics. The critics' 'quality film adventure' took place within an atmosphere of escalating antagonism with the trade, fuelled by gossip, casual insults, formal complaints and the threat of legal action. Throughout this period, film critics and publicity staff continued to collide within the shared working spaces of film criticism: the screening room, the press reception and the studio visit. Consequently, I consider the critics operating within 1940s London as a geographically and culturally located audience, who experienced films as 'professional' viewers within extended and embodied cultures of habitual professional practice and physical space. In addition to offering alternative explanations for the periodisation proposed by Ellis, this approach begins to open up a series of new questions regarding the contested purpose and status of press screenings, the key role played by publicity staff, and the gendered experience of the spaces of professional film review culture.

Film critics in the Circle

In the 1940s, the Critics' Circle became a significant body for British film critics: a source of strength and prestige but also of conflict. When the Circle was founded in 1913, it was the preserve of theatre and music critics, and was concerned both with advancing the art and ethics of criticism and with defending the professional interests of critics in relation to their employers and the various entertainment trades they covered. By the 1920s, a number of existing Circle members covered films on a regular basis within the general press ('Letters', *KINE*, 3 January 1946: 12), but critics were only formally accepted into the Circle on the merits of their film reviewing from 1925 onwards (*CC*, May 1937: 2). Over the next two years a film sub-committee was established (*CC*, January 1927: 3), but cinema was still regarded with disdain by many who wrote about the more established arts. Even in 1942, when Jympson Harman took office as the first dedicated film critic to be elected President of the Circle (always a one-year position), he noted that it was not so many years since a Circle colleague had publicly accused film critics of being 'dirty-nosed little office boys.' (*CC*, June 1942: 1).

Early concerns seemed to stem from the comparatively fluid structure of film as at once an industry, an art and an intellectual field. In the 1920s and 1930s, many of the film-specific critics were considered to have conflicts of interest, because they also engaged in work within the film trade as scenario writers, advisors, titlers and, most problematically, press agents. This resulted in a 1928 prohibition against critics writing about any film in which they had been otherwise involved (*CC*, October 1928: 3). The terms of membership later noted that press agents (whether for theatre, music or film) were ineligible, and specified that existing Circle members who engaged in publicity work would have their membership suspended for the duration of any such engagement.

In combination with the stipulation that critics would be eligible for consideration only if they had been 'regularly and substantially' employed in such a capacity for at least two years immediately prior to being proposed for membership,² these rules began to establish the parameters of professional practice. Specifically, they encouraged film critics to position themselves as specialist journalists rather than as occasional critical writers who were primarily members of the film trade or practitioners of more experimental forms of film. This marked a move away from the hybrid identities that had been central to the development of much early film writing but, as the next section will demonstrate, the boundaries between film criticism and industry interests remained problematic.

Another source of tension was the way in which a rapid influx of film critics in the late 1930s began to alter the character and purpose of the Circle. By 1939, the considerable voting power of the 'young and active' film critics had reversed their earlier under-representation, forcing some older members off the Committee (*CC*, June 1942: 1). The Circle responded by restructuring the organisation into more equal, proportionally represented Sections, thus ending the implicit privilege that theatre critics had previously enjoyed (*CC*, June 1941: 3–4). Significantly, the new influx of film critics was more than just natural expansion. In 1935, the film sub-committee had announced the intention to pursue full Circle membership among UK-based film critics (*CC*, June 1935: 3). By 1937, there were 22 members; by 1941, with 62 film critics on board, the newly formed Film Section reported that 100 per cent membership had been attained across the eligible critics of the London dailies, the important weeklies, the film magazines and the larger provincial papers (*CC*, June 1941: 6).

This strategy was driven by the desire to create a stronger claim to represent the interests of film critics, thus putting the Film Section

in a more effective position for collective bargaining with the film trade over the organisation of press screenings. However, it also had significant repercussions for the Circle itself. Historically, the Circle had operated as an exclusive professional body, extending membership to the most respected writers in each field. The Film Section's approach contributed to a climate in which membership was regarded as a right rather than an honour, and any writer on a relevant arts topic, with the prerequisite two years experience, could 'almost demand to be made a member' (Dilys Powell, quoted in *CC*, June 1942: 15).

At the 1942 AGM, the *Telegraph's* drama critic, W. A. Darlington, drew attention to the essential incompatibility of the Circle's two functions. On one level, it was 'a kind of Academy', thus necessarily exclusive, while on another level, its aim to serve as 'a kind of trade union' was inherently inclusive. His argument for the need to strengthen the 'artistic side' of the Circle's operation was seconded by Dilys Powell, who opined that the current situation offered the worst of both worlds: 'We are in the position of a trade union which has not the right to strike, and has not the prestige on a truly critical level that an academy would have' (*ibid.*: 15).

Concern about the prestige of the Circle also needs to be understood as part of a wider anxiety over the status of criticism. By 1941, wartime paper restrictions had seen newspapers shrink in size just as the volume of news had grown. This seriously squeezed the space afforded to all critics and the situation caused Circle President A. E. Wilson to note a decline in the standards of critical writing. He observed a tendency towards 'cheap "wise cracking"' and gossip, which led him to fear for the 'professional dignity' and 'individual reputations' of critics. Wilson concluded by stating his belief in an intelligent audience, hungry for 'sane, sincere and reasonable criticism of plays, films and music', and asserted the need to 'restore the dignity and importance of the critic's function' (*CC*, June 1941: 1). However, owing to the expectations of their peers, film critics faced the toughest challenge in this project, as their topic was already more tainted by association with populist gossip writing and 'wise cracking' than were other critical fields.

By 1944, a new mood, one reflecting Darlington and Powell's arguments about the prestige of the Circle, could be detected in its working practices. President P. L. Mannock (a critic with over twenty years' experience, who covered both theatre and film) stressed a shift from the focus on 'mere numerical strength', and noted that the 'keenest scrutiny' was now being brought to bear on new membership proposals (*CC*, June 1944: 1).³ Closer attention to criticism of the arts, rather than just gossip coverage, was perhaps at the root of the way

that *Tatler and Bystander* journalist Jean Lorimer had her application for inclusion as a film critic repeatedly referred for specimen work (CC, June 1944: 2, 3 and 6). By 1948, there was also a complaint of 'aloofness' in the handling of applications from trade press writers such as Harold Myers.⁴

However, not all critics faced the stricter application of Circle protocols. In 1946, the two-year rule had been waived for the novelist turned BBC film critic, E. Arnot Robertson. This was a decision that would have repercussions for the Circle, as within a matter of months Robertson was embroiled in an ill-advised libel action against MGM after the film company had written to her employer, barring her from screenings and questioning her competence. Although the Circle's usual concern about libel was that its members would find themselves on the receiving end of actions, the case nonetheless became a rallying point for critical freedom. Robertson won damages in 1947, but in July 1948, the appeal court reversed the decision.

Publicly, the Circle was solid in its support for Robertson, leading the fundraising campaign that enabled her to fight on to an ultimately unsuccessful final judgement from the House of Lords in 1950. Internally, however, it caused great division. As soon as the appeal judgement was known, a core group within the Film Section hastily announced the Robertson Fund in the Circle's name in *The Times* (27 July 1948), but internal documents reveal that the Circle's continued backing owed more to saving face than true consensus.⁵

The incident would reveal a mass of tensions between proper Circle procedure, section autonomy, and the speed and accountability of executive committees.⁶ It also highlighted the degree to which the Circle was simply not equipped to function as a union, and emphasised differences of principle between individual members within the Film Section. This was more complex than a simple divide between the trade and quality press critics; at one point the *Observer's* C. A. Lejeune determined to resign if the Circle continued to back the Robertson fund and the *Sunday Times's* Dilys Powell was poised to do exactly the same if they did not do so.⁷ In September 1948, Richard Winnington, film critic of the *News Chronicle* and one of the key instigators of the Robertson Fund, argued that the *Evening Standard's* new film critic, Milton Shulman, should also be granted early Circle membership. This time, despite Shulman's 'quality' approach, the two-year restriction was not waived (CC, May 1949: 2). The stricter application of the rules for all types of critic undoubtedly reflected the problems caused by the Robertson case, and even Film Section members sympathetic to Winnington's objectives saw the need to avoid aggravating the main Circle Committee.⁸

The Circle formalised film critics' interactions with the industry, providing many practical benefits but also reinforcing the distinction between one side and the other. Consequently, as a variety of clashes with the film trade led the Circle to take public positions throughout the late 1940s and 1950s, the presence of members who wrote primarily for the trade press became increasingly problematic because they were perceived to have divided loyalties. Leaks to the trade about Circle discussions were probably the motivation for the stern instructions that began to appear atop the *Critics' Circular* and other documents from 1941 onwards: 'Strictly private. For circulation to Members only'. Public criticism of Circle members and matters would ultimately result in the decision to expel *KINE* reviewer Josh Billings from the Circle in 1957.⁹

Crucially, the film critics' move to strengthen their collective bargaining position caused external as well as internal reactions. In January 1944, the Film Industry Publicity Circle (FIPC) was launched, with MGM publicity director Mervyn McPherson in the chair. By 1949, with McPherson now president, the FIPC announced that it had gained full recognition from the other trade bodies and boasted a membership including almost every senior executive in the business (*KINE*, 13 January 1949: 23). McPherson was a veteran publicist, credited by the older film critics both for his key role in successfully marketing the cinema to the respectable 'stalls' audience and for organising some of the most memorable all-night industry parties during the decadent 1920s and early 1930s. In his austere inaugural FIPC announcement, he set the new tone, stressing that the FIPC would be more business-focused than the publicity men's organisation that had preceded it. As *KINE*'s editorial put it, the 'mild Bacchanalian orgies of the old "Bumpers"' club were now 'taboo' (*KINE*, 27 January 1944: 4). The FIPC's stated aims reflected its new priorities, and in addition to addressing practical issues, the first aim also responded defensively to the critics' increasingly coherent 'quality'-driven aesthetic agenda. These aims were:

1. to counteract hostile propaganda;
2. to cultivate cordial relations with the Critics' Circle and the press;
3. to promote greater cohesion between and unity of purpose between the three main branches of the industry, and to achieve overall publicity campaigns; and
4. to incorporate the Central Clearing House [the body previously responsible for avoiding press show clashes] (*ibid.*).

Hostilities and hospitalities

The 'lay' critics' renewed cultural ambition was not the only reason why they faced increased opposition from the trade during the 1940s. The practical constraints of war disrupted regular publicity practices in ways that exacerbated the usual resentments. The space available for press advertising was greatly reduced and paper restrictions (which began to relax only in the late 1940s) also limited the opportunities for local film promotion. Thus, while the war saw newspaper editors accord less importance to critics, for the film industry, the same circumstances caused the value of the film criticism published in the national press to rise.

However, the critics' 'high-brow' priorities meant that precious column inches were devoted to those titles that approached the ideal of the 'quality film', regardless of their box-office appeal. Conversely, major entertainment releases were frequently dismissed with both brevity and cutting wit. This led to trade complaints that the 'lay' critics were neglecting their duties: they practised 'witticism not criticism',¹⁰ merely using the popular films as an excuse to showcase their personalities and talents as clever writers, whilst offering the film-goer insufficient information with which to make a decision about whether to see the very films which they were most likely to enjoy (Selfe 2011).

In the 1950s, the film companies would resume their 1930s tactics, and respond to persistent bad notices with press advertising boycotts (Betts: 79–84), but in the 1940s paper restrictions meant the advertising pound was worth relatively little (see Lejeune in *Royal Commission on the Press*, Cmd. 7512: 8–9). Consequently, some of the American film companies attempted to impose their influence in the only way left to them, issuing a series of press show bans against the film critics who angered them most. Dilys Powell was excluded by MGM between April 1941 and February 1942;¹¹ Columbia briefly barred the BBC and *Sunday Chronicle* critic, Matthew Norgate, in July 1944;¹² MGM's notorious ban on E. Arnot Robertson began in September 1946; and, before that case reached court, 20th Century Fox barred Paul Holt in January 1947.

KINE broadly took the trade's side, and its regular criticism of 'lay' critics was usually concentrated in two locations: The Stroller's 'Long Shots' editorial and the satirical 'Close Ups' column, which was penned under the name Screencomber and appeared on the page directly opposite. In the latter, the editorial's principled objections to the aesthetics and indeed the quality of 'quality' criticism routinely

degenerated into collective character assassination. Screencomber cast the 'lay' critics as less than professional in attitude and behaviour: a self-serving band of upper-class dilettantes, whose snobbery and greedy appetites threatened the wellbeing of the industry. They were given thuggish nicknames – 'Basher' [Ernest] Betts, 'Mauler' [P. L.] Mannoock, 'Knocker' [Matthew] Norgate and 'Slasher' [Dilys] Powell – and charged, in the context of wartime rationing, of being motivated largely by a love of caviar and champagne (*KINE*, 7 December 1944: 5). Notably, it was not only their collective taste that was depicted as aggressive and destructive, but also their increasingly organised form:

Around the West End archaeologists have discovered numerous strange markings know as Critics' Circles, the origin of which are lost in the mists of antiquity. These are clearly defined circles, worn into the carpets of the West End kinemas and hotels, and the theory is that at some stage a Critics' Altar had been set up in the centre of the Circle. The Altar was invariably piled high with choice wines and foods, and round this the milling critics would worship, trampling a well defined circle into the pile of the carpet. (*KINE*, 14 December 1944: 5)

The column continued by detailing a primitive sport of the ancient critics' tribe, called 'Biting the Hand that Fed You', in which a press agent would be instructed to advance holding 'a glass of champagne in one hand and a caviare sandwich in the other', only to be savaged by a critic, who, if he could remove a finger or hand as he grabbed the gift with his teeth, would be awarded points by the crowd.

These demands for caviare should be read as partly metaphorical, attacking not only the class origins of many critics but also the kind of 'quality' film product for which they clamoured. A running gag about 'Professor Monja Danischewsky, of the Ealing synthetic caviare laboratories' strongly highlights this aspect (*KINE*, 7 December 1944: 5). Prior to the evolution of the distinctive comedy style for which the studio is now famous, Ealing had been instrumental in developing the documentary-influenced British feature aesthetic that the critics admired. Thus, Screencomber's narrative about Ealing Publicity Director Danischewsky's ability to charm the 'quality' critics with different kinds of 'fake caviare' made, for instance, of herring juice (*KINE*, 31 January 1946: 8) not only wrought humour from a wartime culture of culinary substitution, it also portrayed the critics as gullible and implicitly questioned the 'quality' of those films being made out of rougher, lower-cost ingredients.

Some of Ealing's success with the critics may also have resulted from the informal ways in which 'Danny' Danischewsky went about the business of selling the studio image. Although now better remembered as a producer—a role that began with *Whisky Galore!* (1949)—Danischewsky had started out as a literary journalist, before moving into film publicity in the 1930s. As his autobiography details, his continued 'infatuation with journalism' meant that he enjoyed a very good relationship with the press:

I could not wait until after the day's work was finished in the studios to make my way to the busy pub life of Fleet Street, there to share with my journalist friends the day's 'shop'. I don't think I was even conscious of being on the job when I told them the latest anecdote about Balcon and other Ealing personalities, and was pleasantly surprised to find these featured in the papers. (1960: 128)

The picture he paints of Fleet Street drinking dens is highly territorial, with a journalist's ritual pub designated by newspaper allegiance rather than journalistic specialism: 'You would rarely see a *Daily Express* man drinking in the *Daily Mail* reserve' (ibid.: 129).

Danischewsky delighted in doing the rounds of the social spaces of journalism, and acknowledged the degree to which late nights and a generous approach to buying drinks on expenses became a vital part of his job. However, as Screencomber's reference to the 'kinemas and hotels of the West End' suggests, Fleet Street haunts were not the main spaces of film industry hospitality. There were the post-screening buffets and drinks in the cinema pressroom, the studio luncheons, and the grander spaces of evening premieres and receptions. The critics often regarded these working social occasions with deep ambivalence. Thus Screencomber's multiple references to caviare, champagne and cigars should also be understood more literally, in relation to the industry's growing anxiety about the limited effectiveness and possible inappropriateness of its traditional screening and hospitality practices during what was a period of continuing austerity. From the critics' perspective, however, the Screencomber column was not the most problematic place in which their purported appetites and territorial West End tendencies were called into question.

R. J. Minney was an ex-newspaper editor turned producer of some of the most widely panned British films of the 1940s: the Gainsborough melodramas *Madonna of the Seven Moons* (1944) and *The Wicked Lady* (1945). And he bore a grudge. In November 1947, when his previous career earned him an invitation to give evidence before the Royal Commission on the Press, he used the opportunity to paint a very

unflattering picture of film criticism. Where Screencomber's hyperbole dramatised the futility of film companies' efforts to woo the critics, Minney suggested quite the opposite: that film critics *were* being swayed by the lavish hospitality of the big American companies. He claimed that for a picture costing £500,000, film companies would allocate £3,000–£5,000 'to get the press well disposed', and that for journalists on £25–£30 per week, the studios' methods created serious temptations (Cmd. 7369: 2).

Minney's perception of a critical bias towards wealthy American film companies was certainly not shared by the companies themselves, as illustrated by the press show bans. However, despite the fact that Minney acknowledged that his accusations were based on second-hand information, his combined experience in the film and newspaper trades lent credibility to the charges. The response from the Critics' Circle Film Section was understandably robust,¹³ and during 1948, four prominent members refuted his claims in their evidence to the Commission: P. L. Mannock, film and dramatic critic of the *Daily Herald* and ex-editor of *Picturegoer* (Cmd. 7500: 22–5); Richard Winnington, *News Chronicle*; C. A. Lejeune, *Observer*; and Stephen Watts, *Sunday Express* (all Cmd. 7512: 1–17).

Minney's accusations fell into two categories. The first related to ways in which unnamed, individual critics might be surreptitiously put onto film company payrolls: (1) through lucrative token work in script advising, and scenario and treatment writing; (2) through overpayment for walk-on parts; and, most implausibly, (3) through receipt of generous cheques for general services to the film industry (Cmd. 7369: 1–2). Of these, the potentially most serious and damaging suggestion was that critics were being persuaded to write material that the studios had no intention of producing, and then kept dangling for a decision, purely as a means of obtaining softer reviews of the current releases. However, most critics did not engage in screenwriting activities (Mannock's estimate was 'not one in ten' (Cmd. 7500: 22)) and, of those who did, several, including Mannock, could demonstrate that at least some of their projects had come to fruition (*ibid.*: 22–3). Therefore, while it was impossible completely to refute, this charge, at worst, painted a small number of critics as self-deluding victims, dreaming of screen credits whilst blithely unaware that they were being paid from the publicity budget.

The second type of accusation had less explicit connection to bribery, but it tainted all of the critics and, because of the austerity of the national situation, it was potentially just as damaging. Minney asserted that hospitality had become a 'racket', initially driven by the overblown

generosity of the American companies but now fuelled equally by the excessive expectations of the critics (Cmd. 7369: 3–4). All four of the Critics' Circle witnesses challenged this. They argued that Wardour Street's generosity had never been desired, and was bestowed upon them all equally, regardless of the notices they gave; they also directly contradicted Minney's vague assertion that gift-giving had escalated (Cmd. 7512: 1–17). Not only was the lavish pre-war Christmas box (which might have contained a whole case of whisky or champagne) now a thing of the past, but following a few years of more moderate tokens, a combination of a shortage of luxury goods and a growing sensitivity to suggestions of improper practice had caused the gift-giving to dwindle to almost nothing over the preceding two Christmases (Cmd. 7500: 23–4).

In the course of his evidence, Minney recounted the second-hand claims of unnamed 'publicity men' who complained that it was now impossible to persuade a critic to come out to a film studio unless they and their wife or girlfriend were driven there by car, given lunch and even taken to a show, dinner and a dance hall (Cmd. 7369: 4). While Minney framed this as a social jolly and yet another example of the decadent demands of the critics, the counter-evidence provided by Winnington, Lejeune and Watts reveals that something quite different was at stake here. At heart, this was a territorial battle to define both the proper content of film criticism and the key spaces in which it should be practised.

The critics argued that standards of criticism had never been higher, and dismissed out of hand the suggestion of visits to dance halls. But in claiming that British critics 'maintained an honesty that you do not find in any other country', Winnington stressed that there were essentially two kinds of film coverage: aesthetic reviews and gossip writing (Cmd. 7512: 4). As Lejeune observed, many editors expected one journalist to serve both functions, and the studios were the spaces where, under the control of the film companies, film critics could meet with stars and directors to gather the general film news and gossip (*ibid.*: 7–8). Lejeune noted that these meetings could be fitted into the busy schedules of press screenings and newspaper deadlines only if cars were organised to take the critics to and from the far-flung studio locations in time for the lunchtime break in filming.¹⁴ She asserted the practical benefits of improved cooperation between the FIPC and the Critics' Circle, claiming that rather than engaging in 'bribery and corruption', 'both film critics and film publicity men take a higher view of their duties today than they have ever done' (*ibid.*: 8).

Like Winnington, Lejeune and Watts both had the luxury of a purely aesthetic brief, but they staunchly defended the personal integrity of their gossip-writing colleagues, laying the blame for the unfortunate overlap between film coverage and publicity interests firmly with the low cultural ambitions of the newspaper editors (Lejeune, *Cmd.* 7512: 9–10; Watts, *Cmd.* 7512: 16–17). Nonetheless, defining themselves as the kind of serious film writers that Critics' Circle membership ideally embodied also meant avoiding such frivolous spaces and focusing on the film itself. Thus Watts (who by this point had succeeded Dilys Powell as the Chairman of the Critics' Circle Film Section) asserted: 'I have long maintained in public and in private that I require only one facility from film companies—to see their film at a time suitable for me to review it punctually for my paper' (*ibid.*: 13).

The desire to avoid the spaces associated with gossip and promotion may have been particularly strong among some of the female film critics who, in 1945, made up a third of the sector (Bell 2011).¹⁵ But despite the relatively high representation of women within the field, the default critic in Minney's attacks and Danischewsky's recollections is always male, and the social spaces, consumption habits and relationships outlined are predominantly masculine. This reflects the male-dominated nature of the publicity business—in 1949, Margaret Marshall was the only woman among the sixteen executives of the FIPC (*KINE*, 13 January 1949: 23)—but failure to understand the concerns of female critics may have undermined the effectiveness of the trade's press relations.

As Melanie Bell (2010) has argued, female 'quality' critics were careful to distance themselves from the gendered cliché of the romantic, overly emotional female film-goer, instead cultivating an unsentimental professionalism within their columns. Accounts of the two most powerful female critics, Lejeune and Powell, depict them as similarly cautious in the way in which they negotiated the spaces of film criticism, studiously avoiding potentially compromising social encounters. In particular, the drinking culture associated with film publicity may have been more problematic for female critics, as despite certain shifts in attitude during the war, this was an era when the public consumption of alcohol was not considered entirely respectable for women. As Graham Greene noted in 1936, the film trade's refreshments culture transgressed even the acceptable boundaries of male alcohol consumption: 'It is assumed that the film critic is invariably thirsty and alcoholic at even the oddest of hours. Nowhere else, except on the West Coast of Africa, have I been expected to start drinking by 10.30 in the morning, when the taste of the morning

marmalade is still on the tongue' (1936: 64). By late 1945, a new caricature had emerged in *KINE* to explain why the critics might not be making the most of the return of the well stocked bar and the buffet of 'pre-war dimension' (*KINE*, 13 September 1945: 5). Rather than presenting the critics as moderate in their appetites, Screencomber suggested that they had 'grown soft through years of pampering' and were being beaten to the spoils by 'The Free Eaters, an elite corps of Society leaders' who, in their copious leisure time, attended premieres and even disguised themselves as film critics in order to gain access to the free bars. These 'fearless and unscrupulous' non-professionals were led by a ruthless female glutton, the 'intrepid Senior Muncher, Lady Swallow of Guzzling-on-the-Nod' (*KINE*, 27 September 1945: 5).

In light of such caricatures of unprofessional over-indulgence, it is perhaps unsurprising that female critics were careful to maintain a respectable public image. In 1948 Jane Stockwood profiled a selection of her fellow film and theatre critics for *Harper's Bazaar*. In addition to pointing up the contrasts between Richard Winnington and Caroline Lejeune's writing styles, Stockwood characterised their preferred working environments, painting Winnington as a fiercely intellectual man of the world, completely in his element in Fleet Street, as opposed to Lejeune, portrayed as a sharp but shy provincial lady, coming into town only to attend screenings before returning to a wholesome mixture of work and sober, ladylike pastimes – perhaps not unlike those pursued by *Harper's Bazaar's* target readers:

She does not like parties or smarties. But if she is bearded by one of the unwary, she can be as devastating in speech as she is in print. The moment she can get away from the cinema, she hurries back to her big comfortable house in one of the outer suburbs where, between articles, she gardens, plays airs from light opera on the piano and reads detective novels. (1948: 74)¹⁶

Although *KINE's* abstract critic always remained male, the specific examples used in the publication's news reporting and its Screencomber jibes illustrate the ways in which the industry feared both the considerable power and comparative unreachability of female critics. It is thus notable that while Screencomber's Lady Swallow – the over-indulging and unwanted female presence at film premieres – was not a critic, in the column's depiction of the vicious 'tribe' of critics purposefully descending upon the screening, it is one of the influential 'Sunday ladies' who was positioned at the head of the gathering:

It is said that as the rising sun tips the sombre tower of the Odeon on Midsummer's Morning a solemn procession led by Caroline [Lejeune], High Priestess of Highbrow, gathers around the Critics' Circle, and there, amid strange rites, a human sacrifice in the form of a Virgin Press Agent is offered up to the gods Clair, Lubitsch and Welles. (*KINE*, 14 December 1944: 5)

However, perhaps the epitome of the unreachable female reviewer was the other 'Sunday lady', Dilys Powell. Her exceptional talent as a critic and writer, coupled with a meticulous approach to professional ethics, resulted in Powell being universally, if sometimes grudgingly, respected. Even Minney considered her integrity to be beyond inducements (Cmd. 7369: 3.), and Dirk Bogarde's warm introduction to her collected criticism noted her aversion to the spaces of publicity in the very first paragraph:

She never attends those hideous after-film lunches . . . where she could be at risk from obsequious producers or over anxious directors or, worse than either the publicity rep. hell bent on getting a good review no matter what. He never would from Dilys, she'd simply not be there. (1989: 7)

In her own words, Powell regarded the pressroom as 'a trap'.¹⁷ This attitude did not escape the attention of the trade, as *KINE* noted when she became the first woman Chair of the Critics' Circle Film Section in 1946:

Her election is perhaps surprising, for she mixes practically not at all with the Industry, and it will now be interesting to see how she makes out as the critics' spokesman at those gatherings which, in the past, she has so scrupulously avoided. (*KINE*, 4 April 1946: 35).

Press screenings: the problem of viewing professionally

As the earlier sections of this article have demonstrated, the press show was the only publicity event both valued and used by all critics. The timing clashes that had been a source of irritation for all during the 1930s had been ironed out by cooperation between the Critics' Circle and the FIPC, and screenings had settled into a regular pattern of six weekly sessions running over four days: Monday afternoons, Tuesday and Wednesday mornings and afternoons, and Thursday mornings.¹⁸ However, these could never be comfortable shared working environments. Week in and week out, whatever brutal reviews, press show bans, trade press commentary and loose

gossip had occurred since the previous occasion, the critics and the various publicity personnel would meet once again. And in between the necessary politeness of the meet-and-greet and the ambivalent prospect of lunch or drinks in the pressroom, the lights would dim and the critics would watch a new film. Consequently, as a viewing context, the press screening was uniquely loaded.

As the negative reviews continued to pile up, there was a growing suspicion among the industry that the peculiar atmosphere of these daytime viewing events was an integral part of the problem. Allowing critics to watch with fellow professional viewers in an exclusive space separate from 'real' audiences generated a fear that their responses could never be anything other than judgemental and cynical. This collective sense of industry resentment was captured in an issue of MGM's weekly *KINE* advertorial, 'The Lion's Roar', which was published in the week that news of the Robertson ban hit the national press:

My few remarks last week about the critics have brought in much comment and one delightful story, which I am assured is absolutely true. One of the brightest of the critical young people was watching the press show of an exceedingly important British film. When the film was about quarter way through she turned to her particular pal, and said in those well-bred but penetrating tones of the b.y.ps.: 'Oh, goody, goody, it's bad!' (*KINE*, 3 October 1946: 20).

In addition to suggesting the potential pleasures of writing a bad review and illustrating the trade's own tendency to gossip, particularly about female critics, this attack also tells us something about the nature of the critics as an audience. In their published work, 'quality' critics were the biggest advocates of 'good' audience behaviour: giving full and silent attention to the screen in a way that reverently privileged the film text over the social dimensions of cinema-going (Selfe 2007: 76–80). However, talking was not the only way in which the critics failed to embody the ideal of the arthouse audience.

In the case of the film critics who drew the greatest trade wrath, a common trait was that they not only criticised the individual films but they also recounted their experiences of being professional viewers. For BBC critics Robertson and Norgate, this anecdotal quality was an important part of the process of presenting themselves as personable broadcasters and building a rapport with the listeners (Selfe 2011: 379). However, for the industry, accounts of press screenings and the publicity machine exposed the wrong kind of behind-the-scenes film activity, magnifying the irritation caused by the 'quality' critics'

reluctance to report on stage-managed studio visits. Most notably, after Robertson had been stung in court by MGM's accusations that she was out of touch, hated romance and indulged in witty self-promotion (Selfe 2011), she modified her broadcast approach. Indeed, in 1949 she pointedly positioned her viewing of *The Golden Madonna* (1949) within a 'real' audience and recounted the overheard responses of the 'ordinary' women around her in order to legitimise her professional assertion of realist values.¹⁹

Most problematically for the trade, in bad weeks the critics were inclined to present film-going as a depressing chore, with films that outstayed their welcome bearing the brunt of their annoyance. The lengthy running time of *The Green Years* (1946) had been one of Robertson's objections in the review that had sparked the legal battle with MGM, and half of Dilys Powell's review of *Gone With the Wind* (1939) was devoted to constructing a narrative about how the hardy 'expedition party' of brave critics had prepared themselves to face its three hour and 40 minute duration. In conclusion, Powell suggested that a 'survivor' had eventually emerged exhausted and, 'slipping into a coma', had declared the experience 'tougher than pole squatting' (1989: 20). Although the references to gruelling endurance sports were somewhat extreme (and helped to provoke Powell's 1941 press show ban), she nonetheless captured the way in which screen-fatigued critics approached the trend for large-scale blockbusters.

Perhaps inevitably, tensions within the 'dreadfully small' private screening room at MGM's flagship cinema, the Empire Leicester Square, became particularly intensified over the course of the film company's legal conflict with Robertson.²⁰ In addition to the critics' general resentment of press bans, Empire screenings brought together key personnel involved in the case. Publicity man Mervyn McPherson was the author of the original letter to the BBC and the person accused of repeating the slander to a journalist. Consequently, his testimony was central to the case. Dilys Powell's prior experience of an MGM press show ban caused her to become heavily involved in the case too, firstly as a witness for the prosecution in 1947 and then as a key advocate for Robertson's cause within the Critics' Circle.

Tensions increased further in November 1948 when Powell and the four fellow Circle members involved in coordinating the Robertson fund campaign were individually threatened with legal action by MGM. The film company had somehow obtained a copy of a fundraising letter that the five co-signatories had sent to Circle members, and it considered the letter's summary of the situation defamatory.²¹ This was MGM flexing its financial muscle. Fighting five

new and expensive legal actions was clearly impossible, so a retraction was duly issued.²² However, when Powell wrote to McPherson just a month later regarding an overheard slight from the screening room, her letter clearly echoed, and perhaps mocked, MGM's high-handed communication about misrepresentation. On hearing that McPherson had complained about her late arrival at the Tuesday afternoon press screening of *Polly Fulton* (1948), she wrote:

I am told you were overheard saying, as I came in: 'A fine time to arrive ... With her it's habitual.' The suggestion that I am habitually late for MGM press shows is false, and I feel sufficiently concerned to point this out to you ... I am sure that on consideration you will realise the seriousness of your remark.²³

Powell apologised for a delay caused by commitments to her paper and stressed that on occasions when she missed 'any appreciable part' of a film that she intended to write about, she made a point of going to a public screening and seeing at least that part of the film which she had missed. She informed McPherson that she had gone to see the rest of *Polly Fulton* at the Empire on the Thursday, attaching the evidence (the ticket stub) to her own file copy of her reply. McPherson responded, accepting her apology for the particular incident of lateness and apologised that his 'penetrating voice' had caused his distressing comment to be overheard. However, his response continued at length and went beyond the tit-for-tat threats of litigation in order to explore many facets of the discord between the FIPC and the Critics' Circle.²⁴

He revealed that, at the behest of an un-named industry body (but not the FIPC itself), press show organisers had been asked to keep a check on the arrival times of critics, and that Powell, although admittedly not usually *so* late, had been one of a number of critics found repeatedly wanting in this respect.²⁵ The issue of critics' lateness had been rumbling within the trade press for some time (*KINE*, 22 February 1945: 4), and McPherson detailed a number of negotiations on the matter that had taken place between the Critics' Circle and the FIPC in the preceding four years. However, his frank letter also highlights the degree to which lateness was a multi-layered source of tension, stressing the personal affront felt by press agents and explaining the extremely difficult position in which it placed them. Certain 'important' critics expected the films to start on time; meanwhile, other equally 'important' critics might be offended if starting times were not held for them. Late arrivals, therefore, forced the publicity staff diplomatically to negotiate the egos and

pecking orders of the critics. But perhaps most curiously, McPherson's arguments against late arrivals began to elaborate a theory of viewing pleasure.

While appreciating that Powell had taken the time to see the first portion of *Polly Fulton*, he disputed whether the way she had done so could possibly enable any kind of 'fair appraisal':

Let me hasten to explain myself. I am quite sure that you can write an entertaining, and indeed brilliant criticism of the film which you have seen, so to speak, upside down. But I cannot agree that it is possible for anyone, however brilliant, to enjoy a picture when they see the first part of it last and the last part of it first. And after all, when we arrange press shows for the convenience of the critics, we do hope—perhaps in our blind optimism—that they may enjoy the film we are showing. [...] By missing the beginning, it is very possible to lose the 'essential guts' of the whole story. That, incidentally, is why we spend quite a lot of money on advertising the starting times of each big picture, and in certain instances begging the public to see it from the beginning. [Emphasis in the original]

Here, McPherson appears to regard temporally disjointed viewing as almost Brechtian in its effect: creating an artificial critical distance which cuts off the possibility of pleasure and thus enables the critics' vicious wit to vent itself. Given both the prevalence of continuous admission and the critics' regular stance against it, it is perhaps surprising that, in this instance, it is the film company man that expresses a corporate desire to move from continuous admission to the fixed starting times of the hard ticket. However, as a representative of MGM, a studio that prided itself on producing prestige fare, McPherson challenges the critics' monopoly on audience education, presenting marketing as the best way to encourage responsible viewing practices.

In print, the 'quality' critics supported precisely this shift to fixed start times, but not as a means of increasing pleasure and emotional immersion. Rather, they saw it, along with active film selection and quiet attention, as an essential component of approaching the film text seriously and critically. That the critics did not always uphold these principles in their own film-going practice may have reflected the ways in which their regular viewing routines entirely contradicted their cinema-going ideals. Instead, they echoed the very social, habitual, indiscriminate, neighbourhood cinema-going practices that the 'quality film adventure' had aimed to cure. Week in and week out, the audience of critics attended the same cinemas at the same

times with the same crowd, watching whatever was on. In the light of this dissonance, it is perhaps unsurprising that they often framed the experience not as pleasure but as martyrdom. By contrast, when international cinema became available again at the end of the war, not only did it offer films more suited to the 'quality' critics' tastes, it also created a new and dynamic professional viewing environment: the international film festival. This had the potential to recast critics' collective viewing experiences as purposeful occasions for cultural reporting rather than a source of puerile sport.

Conclusion

In many respects, the late 1940s created the conditions for a perfect storm between the critics and the trade. On the one side, the desire for prestige and parity within the Critics' Circle had magnified the more widespread wartime ambitions for cultural uplift; on the other, paper rationing had created a situation in which bad notices were not simply something out of which the trade could advertise its way. While the critics' retreat from this collective fight clearly owed something to the failure to make any real cultural gains with the public, the nature and persistence of the trade's attacks should also be taken into account. The trade's response to the critics' arguments for aesthetic restraint was to accuse them of personal excess. These ranged from charges of bribery, through caricatures of gluttony and alcoholic excess, to the more intimate surveillance and policing of critics' behaviour within the screening space. Consequently, pursuit of the 'quality' agenda was not without risk to the personal reputations and professional integrity of the critics involved. Moreover, it soon became clear that the Circle was not sufficiently equipped financially or structurally to take on the trade in a union-like manner, and by 1948 pragmatic Circle politics also worked to temper support for 'quality' criticism's assault on mainstream taste.

By the late 1940s, the combination of the Critics' Circle and the FIPC had brought practical benefits of collective negotiation and more effective cooperation but they had also created sharper divisions between the two trades. An outsider's perception of these contradictory effects can be read through the somewhat incoherent evidence given by Minney to the Royal Commission on the Press. Moreover, Screencomber's comic characterisation of Danischewsky and the Critics' Circle's eventual expulsion of Billings illustrate the ways in which each side was inclined to police those who attempted to straddle both worlds. Both film critics and publicity agents were going

through processes of modernising and formalising their professional standards and practices, and for the critics this included the greater involvement of female critics in Film Section committee roles. In this context, Screencomber's 'caviare' refrain not only turned the daily frustrations of press agents into Grand Guignol, it can also be read as a playful lament for the good-old-bad-old-days of truly decadent 'boys' hospitality, effectively displacing the excesses of the 'Bumpers' club onto the 'ancient tribe' of film critics. Within this, the trade repeatedly chastised the critics for never venturing beyond the 'well-worn Circles' of the West End – literally or metaphorically. However, it is notable that the unreachable female critics attracted particular negative attention, and it seems likely that this created a self-stoking cycle whereby female critics, careful to protect their professional reputations, pointedly avoided those social spaces in which they might leave themselves open to further attacks. This, in turn, magnified the importance of the press screening as the key point of critic and trade contact, thus heightening the tense atmosphere of the viewing environment and cementing the critics' collective identity as a hostile audience.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by an RCUK fellowship and a Carnegie Universities Trust small grant. I am indebted to the expert assistance of the staff in the following organisations: the British Film Institute Library, the BBC Written Archive, the British Library Manuscripts Department, and the Jerwood Theatre Library. I also wish to thank David Archibald, Peter Cargin, Ivor Powell and William Russell for their helpful comments.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, Critics' Circle material is held within the Critics' Circle Archive, Maunder and Mitchison Collection, University of Bristol. Further Circle documents are held within the Elizabeth Dilys Powell Papers, British Library (hereafter DPP BL) Add.87691, and will be noted as such.
2. Report of the Committee to Enquire into the Constitution of the Circle, 26 March 1942 (DPP BL, Add. 87691).
3. This and the 1943 edition of *CC* are missing from the main Circle archive, but copies are held within DPP BL, Add. 87691.
4. Meeting of the Council of the Critics' Circle, 8 October 1948 (DPP BL, Add. 87691).
5. Extract from the Minutes of the Critics' Circle Executive Committee, 10 September 1948 (DPP BL, Add. 87691).
6. Film Section meeting, 28 July 1948 (DPP BL, Add. 87691).
7. Film Section meeting, 31 August 1948; extract from the Minutes of the Critics' Circle Executive Committee, 10 September 1948 (both DPP BL, Add. 87691). Lejeune resigned but rejoined shortly afterwards.

8. Stephen Watts to Dilys Powell, 14 October 1948; Powell to Watts, 16 October 1948 (both DPP BL, Add. 87691).
9. Various 1957 (DPP BL, Add. 87691).
10. McPherson to Powell, 2 April 1941 (DPP BL, Add. 87615.3).
11. McPherson to Powell, 2 April 1941 (DPP BL, Add. 87615.3).
12. A. J. Allighan to Barnes, 4 July 1944 (BBC Written Archive Centre, Caversham (hereafter BBC WAC), R51/173/3).
13. Critics' Circle Executive Committee meeting, 10 September 1948 (DPP BL, Add. 87691).
14. Although Lejeune was at the high-brow end of press criticism, her husband, E. R. Thompson, handled publicity for Alexander Korda, so she was more sympathetic in recounting these practices than was either Winnington or Watts.
15. Calculated from Critics' Circle membership records. Because of the Film Section's short-lived 100 per cent membership drive in the early 1940s (outlined earlier in this chapter), Bell's 1945 male/female Circle ratio is likely to be an unusually reliable reflection of industry proportions, within the limits of the Circle's published eligibility criteria.
16. Stockwood's piece echoes a much longer article on Lejeune in her working/home environment, which was published the previous year in the weekly pictorial, *Leader Magazine* (Wood 1947). On account of her marital connection to the publicity business, it is possible that Lejeune felt under particular pressure to stage-manage the respectability of her public persona.
17. Powell to Stephen Watts, 16 October 1948 (DPP BL, Add. 87691).
18. Trevor Blewitt to the BBC Director of Talks 'The Week's Films: Speakers in April/June', 2 March 1945 (BBC WAC, R51/173/4).
19. 'The Week's Films', 10 June 1949 (BBC WAC, Broadcast Scripts, filed under Robertson). Bell gives a fuller account of this interesting broadcast but does not attribute the inclusion of 'ordinary' voices to industry pressure (2010: 712).
20. The private MGM theatre struggled to accommodate all who needed to attend the Tuesday press shows: McPherson to Trevor Blewitt, 5 March 1945 (BBC WAC, R51/173/4). James Agate described it as 'cosy' (1946: 241).
21. Slaughter and May for MGM to Powell, 12 November 1948; draft of the offending letter, authored by Stephen Watts, for circulation in the names of A. V Cookman (Vice President of the Critics' Circle), Stephen Watts, Dilys Powell, Richard Winnington and Milton Deane, dated 24 October 1948 (both DPP BL, Add. 87615.3).
22. See two undated, annotated drafts, c. November 1948 (DPP BL, Add. 87615.3).
23. 14 December 1948 (DPP BL, Add. 87615.3).
24. 17 December 1948 (DPP BL, Add.87615.3).
25. Whilst a fierce defender of critical freedoms, Powell was also sensitive to legitimate industry criticism. In 1949 she began a new diary, in which she recorded very little: just whether she and the films (and one or two of the other important critics) were punctual (DPP BL, Add. 87649).

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