



Vélez-Serna, M. A. (2014) Showmanship skills and the changing role of the exhibitor in 1910s Scotland. In: Askari, K., Curtis, S., Gray, F., Pelletier, L., Williams, T. and Yumibe, J. (eds.) *Performing New Media, 1890-1915*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN, pp. 104-114. ISBN 9780861967148

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Deposited on: 10 September 2014

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Showmanship Skills and the Changing Role of the Exhibitor in 1910s Scotland

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At the core of many of the transformations that make the 1910s so interesting is a struggle over the definition of commodity relations: who owned films, who controlled their exhibition contexts, and how this peculiar good should be traded. This effort to grapple with the complex materiality of cinema was in part about the emergence of large business interests in the international film industry, but it was also intensely localised. This paper will use a sample of cinema adverts from Scottish newspapers to analyse how they both reflect and perform a shift in the role of the exhibitor on a local level.¹ I will argue that, while the transition to renting and towards longer narrative films shifted the balance of power away from local exhibitors and their traditional showmanship skills in favour of the manufacturing sector, this process rewarded new managerial and advertising skills, thus redefining showmanship rather than making it redundant. Although this shift entailed the loss of the means of production, it also tended to recast the exhibitor's labour along the lines of the professional middle class, and was framed by a discourse of legitimisation.

Property relations in early exhibition

The reshaping of the film trade between the American nickelodeon boom and the end of the First World War can be understood as a redefinition of the commodity nature of film, or rather, as a change in the role of film as a commodity within the broader phenomenon of cinema. To throw this transformation into relief, it is useful to return to Charles Musser's formulation of the three practices that constitute cinema's mode of production, where exhibition is defined as one.² In the first stage, the film print is produced as a material object (bearing intellectual content) with a use value and exchange value – a

commodity, but not an ordinary one. This object is then used in the production of a show, in such a way that the film is neither depleted nor removed from the market. Access to the show is then sold to the public. In a more technical way, Gerben Bakker has discussed films as an *intermediate good* – an input for the production of something else. So while films were indeed traded as a commodity, the audience was paying for the ‘spectator-hour’ – the economic unit that was produced using the films amongst other things.³ For simplicity, throughout this article I will refer to this as *the show*: the localised event of exhibition and reception embracing both live and filmed entertainment. Showmanship, for the purposes of this paper, can be thought of as the additional labour and skill required to transform films into spectator-hours.

As Musser puts it, over the first few years of the nickelodeon boom, ‘the reel of film became the basic industry commodity’, and the development of more self-contained forms of narrative entailed a relative loss of editorial control by exhibitors, as compared to the highly performative role they had within itinerant practices.⁴ The first Scottish exhibitors, with their diverse backstories of fairground, lantern lecturing, and music hall entertainment, certainly had plenty of performative showmanship skills.⁵ Between 1909 and 1913, the boom years for cinema opening in Scotland, the new kind of cinema entrepreneur that came into the exhibition business was, in contrast, a skilled manager and programmer rather than a performer. Furthermore, he or she tended to no longer own the apparatus or the venue (as fairground exhibitors had), and the films were also rented rather than bought outright. These films were in turn increasingly standardised and self-sufficient, transferring the weight of textual production to the manufacturers and diminishing the value added by showmanship.⁶ In other industries, this loss of control over the means of production and devaluation of artisan skills brought about by more standardised processes is a hallmark of proletarianisation. This is not, however, how this change was perceived by a film trade engaged in a process of expansion. Furthermore, the shift of attention from ‘show’ to ‘film’ was neither sudden nor uniform. The Scottish programme samples provide a suitable illustration of the tensions around mixed programming and the role of live performance in cinemas.

Live performance and cine-variety

The contrast between the 1913 and 1918 situation as represented in the two samples of cinema adverts shows how the exhibitor’s labour became increasingly obscured as the live elements of the show were marginalised. A first instance of this process involves the decline of the mixed show combining live variety and

films. In the United States, as Bakker notes, ‘small-time vaudeville’ was on the way out by 1910, having been ‘automated away’ by moving pictures.⁷ This was not the case in Scotland where, according to Paul Maloney, the working-class culture of live entertainment survived in industrial districts in the form of cine-variety (a programme format akin to the ‘small-time vaudeville’ described by Robert C Allen, incorporating a few simple variety turns in alternation with single- or double-reel films).⁸ In 1913, a mixed programme was offered in forty-four per cent of the adverts in the Scottish sample. Two years later the *Bioscope Annual* still described thirty-six per cent of the 399 Scottish cinemas in its list as presenting ‘pictures and varieties’. As Figure 1 shows, the geographical pattern of this mode of exhibition was uneven, with a higher concentration in Glasgow, Dundee, Ayr, and the mining towns of North Lanarkshire and Linlithgowshire (in other words, in the densely populated, industrial central belt of Scotland, between Glasgow and Edinburgh). The proportion of mixed programming in the 1918 sample had dropped to twenty-six per cent – which was nonetheless still a significant presence.

The links between cine-variety and earlier forms of working-class entertainment help explain the disdain expressed by some sectors of the trade. Even when the live element involved something as respectable as the engagement of vocalists by several Glasgow cinemas, exhibitors lamented it ‘as it is but a step from this to a full variety programme’.⁹ A separate performing tradition existed, however, as practised by lecturers and elocutionists. There are only three instances of ‘speaking to pictures’ in the newspaper sample for 1913. At the Bannockburn Picture House, a Mr. J. Newby would recite Tennyson’s poem before ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’ was shown, and describe the film.¹⁰ Meanwhile, in Aberdeen, Dove Paterson was presenting his trademark act at the Gaiety and the Music Hall. The history and peculiarities of Aberdeen elocution have been discussed by Trevor Griffiths in a recent article, which also traces the influence of local regulations, economic pressures and taste cultures on the vocal and musical accompaniment of silent cinema in Scottish venues.¹¹

The local nuances of these intermedial presentation contexts played an important role in popularising film with Scottish audiences. The desire to define film as a self-sufficient form of entertainment, however, was a common topic amongst contributors to the trade press, and it demanded a new style of management. The generation of city cinema managers that took up the job during the cinema building boom privileged a rhetoric of efficiency and standardisation, through which a stable patronage could be secured amongst the desirable classes. They frowned upon the old forms of showmanship that some

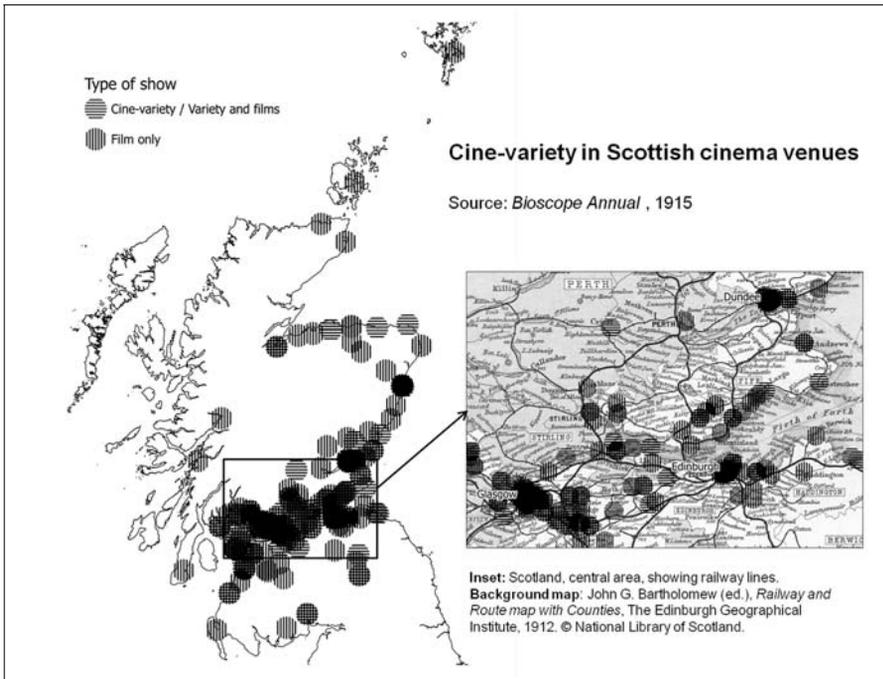


Figure 1: Main type of show given at permanent exhibition venues in Scotland, as listed in the 1915 *Bioscope Annual*. Venues only used occasionally, as well as those that do not include this information, have been excluded, for a total of 366 listings.

exhibitors had inherited from the fairground. In a particularly ungracious article published when the transformation was irreversible, W.A. Williamson wrote that ‘the old showman does not understand the cinematograph trade, a trade requiring not showmanship but sympathy’.¹² This ‘sympathy’ suggests a relationship with the audience that is somewhat different from the outsider appeal of fairground performers. It will be noted that, as early as 1911, the author of the *Handbook of Kinematography*, Colin Bennett, did not mention any performing abilities as desirable for the picture house manager. His or her ‘showmanship’ was to be expressed in ‘the comfort, cleanliness and beauty of his [sic] hall’, in ‘judicious advertising’, and in ‘catering for the continual education and amusement of regular and chance patrons’.¹³

Such advice is indicative of the aspirational tone that permeated the trade press, in which the professionalisation of cinema management was a constant topic. Although the companies registered to control cinema venues in Scotland tended to be small and local, their legal configuration as limited liability companies signalled a shift towards more corporate business models. The redefinition of the exhibitor’s job mainly in terms of house-management and programming

reflected his or her increasingly subordinate and accountable position in the new pattern of venue ownership. Within these confines, however, the cinema manager had the task of addressing and bringing in a growing audience. This is where newspaper advertising proves to be a rich, if complicated source. Because they are enmeshed in the same web of transformations as the phenomena they refer to, advertisements must be understood as having a performative function: they are acts of showmanship, part of the labour to produce the show. Analysis of a systematic collection of adverts provides a way to observe how the function of cinema was negotiated and constructed in response to local contexts and through the changing nature of the exhibitor's role.

Creating the habit

After the building boom, once it became clear that cinema was not a passing fad, the challenge was to convert the audience that had first come in for the technical novelty and the attractions, into a regular patronage that would provide a solid foundation for further investment. There were potentially several ways of achieving this. Michael Hammond has observed that, up to the beginning of the war, the advertising rhetoric used by Southampton cinemas emphasised 'the social utility of the space as part of the cinema-going experience', so that working-class, peripheral venues were presented as 'warm and cosy', while city-centre cinemas provided facilities such as tea rooms and ran a continuous show to enhance the sense of convenience and respite for urban strollers.¹⁴ The same emphasis can be seen in the Scottish context.

While more than thirty per cent of the 1913 Scottish adverts surveyed omit the mention of specific films, most of them include show times and prices of admission. Furthermore, there are numerous references to the permanent characteristics of the venue, rather than the specific show. Thus, for instance, the Scenic, in the South side of Glasgow, claimed to have 'comfortable seats and every convenience'; Slora's Electric Theatre in Cowdenbeath (perhaps unwisely) advertised the fact that the auditorium was disinfected with Jeyes fluid; and the Whitburn Picture Theatre promised 'Beautiful Pictures! Appreciative Audience!'.¹⁵ A few city-centre venues that opened through the afternoon offered free tea, and the resident orchestras were mentioned in ten cases. Finally, the music-hall background of many managers came in handy when it came to judging local talent competitions; at the Airdrie Hippodrome, for instance, an aspiring artist could win a week's engagement for 'not less than 30s'. On another day of the week, the theatre would be the starting point for a marathon race. This direct appeal to the local audience points to an active engagement that

sought to foster repeated custom, which is why the mention of the week's films is sometimes cursory, giving only titles and sometimes genres. Not much else was needed to convey the appeal of a mixed programme of short films, or a cine-variety bill.

Putting together such a programme was arguably the most trade-specific skill a manager had to master during the transitional era. This task involved negotiating with distributors, viewing and selecting films, and arranging the transport. While in the United States some of these functions had been outsourced to the film exchanges who put together a film package delivered to each cinema daily, in the United Kingdom the attachment to free-market renting meant that exhibitors resisted some forms of programme standardisation. This resistance to relinquish control over the show can be found well into the 1920s in the debates around block-booking, but it was already present from the introduction of single-reel features and packaged 'service' programmes before the War. The growing length of films and the development of more restrictive rental practices (such as exclusive and territorial rights) focused opposition from the trade, at least discursively. In practice, however, feature programming had taken over by 1918.

The skills required to market a programme of short films are different from those required for a long film, and the rhetorical strategies used in the advertising reflect this. While 1913 adverts contain more information about the venue and exhibition practice, 1918 publicity yields more film titles, but it can be more laconic in terms of presentation strategies. This elision of showmanship from advertisement does not necessarily signify its disappearance from actual practice. It is however apparent that the personal appeal and direct address that, as Joe Kember's work has showed, helped tame the unsettling modernity of the moving image, were receding from view. As Kember has also suggested, a different form of personalisation was taking hold, connected to the emergence of the star system and new ways of marketing the film product.¹⁶ Understanding and managing audience expectations for particular films became much more important, and a new style of advertising reflected this changing relationship.

Luring the transient audience

The 1913 sample, taken at the height of the Scottish cinema boom, reflects a trade that is becoming embedded in everyday life. 'Usual times – usual prices' is a phrase often seen in the collection, but most of the venues list specific show times and prices. This is much less prevalent in 1918, when a third of the adverts do not list times, partly because half of the venues are running a continuous

show. Although this mode of operation is mostly associated with high-street venues, many suburban and small-town cinemas had stopped advertising two shows a night (or even one), and instead offered a continuous show throughout the evening, with only enough time to run the films twice. The informality of the continuous show no doubt contributed to the embedding of cinemagoing into everyday routines for many Scots, and not only the deprived inhabitants of inner-city slums who might go to the cinema just to escape their overcrowded tenement rooms and to sit in the warmth for a couple of hours in the winter.¹⁷ In a tendentious but interesting editorial, the Scottish trade journal, *The Entertainer*, tried to explain ‘the rise of the picturehouse’ with arguments that seem to contradict some standard assumptions about early audiences:

In the aristocratic quarters the audience is interested, and it is a kind of club rather than a place of entertainment, while in the industrial neighbourhoods the people who enter the picturehouses do so to learn the ways of the world, to see how others live, how others die.¹⁸

This is a curious inversion of the more established idea of bourgeois spectatorship as more attentive to the film text, and popular cinemagoing as a social rather than intellectual activity. In its optimism about the self-improving aims of working-class spectators, it might be filed together with earlier discourses of uplift or regarded as wishful thinking on the part of the trade. However, the mention of high-class cinemas as ‘a kind of club’ is in line with developments in exhibition that were taking place around the time the article was published. As Michael Quinn has pointed out, the trade’s idea of the ‘transient audience’ did not define it as lower-class.¹⁹ Many of the new, luxurious cinemas that had appeared on the central commercial streets of the main Scottish towns had entrance prices starting at six pence – three times as much as most neighbourhood halls. Their appeal to a more affluent audience was founded on convenience and atmosphere; the addition of tea-rooms, smoking rooms and foyers to many of the larger picture houses further created club-like social spaces which were only loosely connected to film viewing. Exhibitors imagined that these spaces would attract the businessman with some time to spare between appointments, or the respectable lady who needed a break from her shopping. The preferred strategy to cater for these desirable customers was the continuous show, and it was from this quarter that opposition to the feature-length film often came.

As Ben Singer has found for the American context, ‘the feature craze was not a tidal-wave phenomenon that instantly wiped out the short film’ or the variety programme.²⁰ Feature programming, furthermore, did not become dominant

at the same time everywhere, and its patterns of expansion are surprising in the Scottish case. The twice-a-night show was initially thought better suited to longer films than the continuous city-centre programme, and thus a consistent programming policy based on longer films (rather than the occasional 'big' exclusive) was adopted by peripheral cinemas before central ones. By 1918, however, all of the cinemas in the Glasgow city centre represented in the sample were showing a feature programme, even though the shows were continuous. The apparent contradiction between feature films and the continuous show was resolved through the reformulation of the concept of the transient audience, which required city-centre cinemas to reinvent their address to the individual, discriminating customer rather than the curious passerby. The assumption of mobility (transience) as a characteristic of city-centre audiences was reinterpreted as meaning that spectators could be drawn in to particular films, enticed by the advertising columns that lay out the urban environment as a seductive menu for the middle class.²¹ Their choice was increasingly a choice of film, and the manager's role was to sell each title. The new style of advertising reflected this shift, and the emergence of the star system was deeply intertwined with it. One of the most radical changes observable in the sample of adverts has to do with the prominence of star performers in the promotional rhetoric for particular films. While in 1913 only 3.5 percent of the adverts mentioned an actor, the proportion is over sixty percent in 1918. The manufacturer's brand and the length of the film were also used widely in advertisements: while fewer than one in ten of the 1913 adverts contain information on either manufacturer or length of the film, over thirty-eight percent of the 1918 sample mentions a brand, and forty-four percent the length.

Although the turn towards promotion of the individual film is visible in most of the cases in the collection, the Glasgow Picture House can be cited as a particularly striking example. The 1913 advert starts by listing opening times and prices, and goes on to mention 'The Palm Court Smoke Room, Wedgewood Lounge and Palm Court Balcony. The Finest Tea Rooms in Glasgow'. There is no mention of titles for the films being shown on that day, but rather of two 'special' films – longer European exclusives – that will be shown during the following two weeks. This then captures a moment of transformation, when features were not yet a regular part of the programme; instead, they disrupted routine, because longer films were not produced or marketed in a systematic way.²² Five years later, in contrast, this cinema advertises using a large block print depicting the protagonists in a film titled *His Golden Hour*. The copy praises the performance of French actress Suzanne Grandais, inviting the

audience to enjoy ‘a wonderful piece of work’, an ‘artistic triumph’ inscribed within theatrical discourse through the use of the term ‘in Five Acts’ (rather than the more prosaic ‘5-reel’).²³ This rhetoric is a sharp departure from the continued use of adjectives such as ‘thrilling’ and ‘strong’ that were more common in adverts for popular venues, but it is also very different from the previous idea of a more casual and briefer engagement with the film. The shift in emphasis from practice to product, mediated by the rise of the star system and feature programming, contributed to a transference of power back to manufacturers. The process through which the film industry reined in the diversity and localism of early cinema exhibition, while still relying on skilled individuals to market the films to audiences, is illustrative of the contradictory field of forces in which cinema exists: between local and global, reality and fantasy, and, in the words of Robert Allen, ‘poised between the ordinary and the extraordinary’.²⁴ The dual nature of cinema as a live event that depends on mechanically reproduced inputs redefined showmanship, but still needed it to mediate between films and viewers.

Conclusion

This paper started as an attempt to map the transformation of the showman’s role in Scotland during the transitional era, using newspaper advertising as evidence. However, it became evident during the research process that advertising is a very opaque source, because it does not simply record or reflect historical phenomena but contributed to shape it. Insofar as advertising on the local press was locally organised, it was one of the exhibitor’s roles and was indicative of the changes in that profession. The foregrounding of film titles, brands and stars over a more direct and personal address is a consequence of the shift in the balance of forces between the show-product to the film-product, or, in other words, between film as text and cinema as practice. This is not, however, a tension that was resolved one way or the other, but one that structured a matrix of diverse practices that continues to be remade in every encounter between films and audiences.

Acknowledgements: This paper is based on my doctoral research on early film distribution in Scotland, funded by an Overseas Research Award/College of Arts scholarship and under the supervision of Prof. John Caughie. My current research is part of the AHRC-funded project, ‘Early Cinema in Scotland, 1896–1927’, also led by Prof. Caughie, for whose support and guidance I am grateful. I would also like to thank Dr. Joshua Yumibe for his comments.

Notes

1. The main dataset consists of two collections of cinema adverts taken manually from over a hundred local newspapers around Scotland for two particular dates: the second Thursday of January in 1913 and in 1918. With a total of 129 and 143 programmes collected for 1913 and 1918 respectively, these samples represent about a third of the exhibition venues that were active in Scotland for those dates. These collections constitute an attempt to build a source that is systematic enough to allow for some degree of quantitative exploration, in the spirit of larger projects such as Cinema Context (<http://cinemacontext.nl/>), the German Early Cinema Database (<http://www.earlycinema.uni-koeln.de/>) and the CAARP database (<http://caarp.flinders.edu.au/>), but on a more modest scale. The information was transcribed into a PostgreSQL relational database and analysed using the open-source geographical information software Quantum GIS (www.qgis.org/). Please contact the researcher for access to the dataset. (All websites viewed on 5 April 2013).
2. Charles Musser, “The Nickelodeon Era Begins: Establishing the Framework for Hollywood’s Mode of Representation”, *Framework* no. 22/23 (1983): 4.
3. Gerben Bakker, *Entertainment Industrialised: the Emergence of the International Film Industry, 1890–1940* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 320.
4. Musser, “The Nickelodeon Era Begins”, 4; Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company*, 158. [e-book <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft3q2nb2gw/> accessed 23 December 2011].
5. See María A. Vélez-Serna, “Mapping film exhibition in Scotland before permanent cinemas”, *Post Script* 30, no. 3 (2011); Adrienne Scullion, “Geggies, Empires, Cinemas: The Scottish Experience of Early Film”, *Picture House* no. 21 (1996): 13–19; and Trevor Griffiths, *The Cinema and Cinemagoing in Scotland, 1896–c. 1950* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).
6. As Pierre Chemartin and André Gaudreault have argued, the loss of ownership of the film print also meant that exhibitors were not free to cut up and re-assemble the views. With this withdrawal of their editing role, they became excluded from production, so that the *exhibiteur* of early cinema becomes the *exploitant de sale* in institutional cinema, Chemartin and Gaudreault, “Les signes de l’éditeur pour l’assemblage des vues dans les catalogues de distribution”, in Frank Kessler and Nanna Verhoeff (eds), *Networks of Entertainment* (Eastleigh: John Libbey, 2007), 195.
7. Bakker, *Entertainment Industrialised*, 143–147.
8. Paul Maloney, *Scotland and the music hall 1850–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 16–17; Robert C. Allen, *Vaudeville and Film, 1895–1915: A Study in Media Interaction* (New York: Arno, 1980), 111–113.
9. “Scottish News and Notes”, *Bioscope*, 15 October 1914, 245.
10. Advert, *Stirling Sentinel*, 7 January 1918.
11. Trevor Griffiths, “Sounding Scottish: Sound Practices and Silent Cinema in Scotland”, in Julie Brown and Annette Davison (eds), *The Sounds of the Silents in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 72–91.
12. “The Passing of the Old Showman”, *Bioscope*, 26 August 1917, 360–361.
13. Colin N. Bennett, *The Handbook of Kinematography* (London: Kinematograph Weekly, 1911): 250.
14. Michael Hammond, *The Big Show: British Cinema Culture in the Great War, 1914–1918* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006), 16–21.
15. Adverts: *Evening Times* (Glasgow), 9 January 1913; *Cowdenbeath Mail*, 11 January 1913; *West Lothian Courier*, 3 January 1913.
16. Joe Kember, *Marketing modernity* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2009), 5, 44–83.

17. Nicholas Hiley, “‘At the picture palace’: The British cinema audience, 1895–1920”, in John Fullerton (ed.), *Celebrating 1895: The Centenary of cinema* (Sydney: John Libbey, 1998), 100.
18. “The rise of the Picturehouse”, *The Entertainer* (Glasgow), 13 June 1914, 1.
19. Michael Quinn, “Distribution, the Transient Audience, and the Transition to the Feature Film”, *Cinema Journal* 40, no. 2 (2001): 42.
20. Ben Singer, “Feature Films, Variety Programs, and the Crisis of the Small Exhibitor”, in Charlie Keil and Shelly Stamp (eds), *American Cinema’s Transitional Era: Audiences, Institutions, Practices* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 79.
21. Paul S. Moore, *Now playing: Early Moviegoing and the Regulation of Fun* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), 161.
22. Michael J Quinn, “Paramount and early feature distribution: 1914–1921”, *Film History* 11, no. 1 (1999): 99.
23. Regarding the role of a discursive association with legitimate theatre in the expansion of the cinema audience in the late 1910s, see Jon Burrows, *Legitimate cinema: Theatre stars in silent British films, 1908–1918*, Exeter Studies in Film History (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2003), 185.
24. Robert C Allen, “Reimagining the history of the experience of cinema in a post-moviegoing age”, in Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst, and Philippe Meers (eds), *Explorations in new cinema history: Approaches and case studies* (Chichester: Blackwell, 2011), 51–52.