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## CHAPTER 8

# Local films for local people: 'HAVE YOU BEEN CINEMATOGRAPHED?'

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In October 1936, the week before the BBC launched the first public television service to an audience living within twenty-five miles of its production centre in Alexandra Palace, London, Gerald Cock, the first Director of Television, published an article in a special television issue of the *Radio Times*, 'Looking Forward: A Personal Forecast of the Future of Television'. Arguing that television '*from its very nature*' was better adapted to the dissemination of information than to entertainment, he states his case:

I believe viewers would rather see an actual scene of a rush hour at Oxford Circus directly transmitted to them than the latest in film musicals costing £100,000 – though I do not expect to escape unscathed with such an opinion.<sup>1</sup>

Even as late as the 1930s, even with the evidence of cinema's movement from side shows and one-reel actualities to its classic period of feature-length narration and spectacle, early television, like early film, put its faith in the attractions of the local, the familiar and the everyday: a version of the local topical peculiar to the immediacy of television. This chapter considers the scope and nature of local topical film-making and its exhibition in Scotland. By 'local topical' we mean short non-fiction films made or commissioned for local exhibition, and which captured moments of everyday life, such as street scenes and factory exits, or specific local events and ceremonies. We argue that the local, the familiar and the everyday were not simply transitory attractions, peaking in the period of travelling shows and itinerant exhibition, but were central to the appeal of early cinema and had a greater importance in new technologies of the moving image than historians or existing narratives often allow. (Think, in passing, of the uses to which Facebook, YouTube and Instagram are put.)

The appeal of the local topical was not lost on the trade. A handbook published by *Kinematograph Weekly* circa 1912 opined: ‘There can be no two opinions as to the value of the local topical film as a means of filling your theatre.’<sup>2</sup> Or *Cinema Exhibitors Diary* writing as late as 1928:

Local topicals are still one of the best means of bucking up business and filling the local picture theatre. It is the biggest business booster the wideawake manager can employ to increase his profits.<sup>3</sup>

For understanding the history of exhibition and movie-going before and after the arrival of sound, the trade press offers evidence throughout the period that the local topical enjoyed a valued place in the bill of fare offered by exhibitors, was popular with audiences and was a key tool in building business. More than that, in many instances, particularly perhaps in small towns, the local topical gives some indication of the civic status of cinema, recording the key events of the town, its pageants, ceremonies and sports as well as the everyday lives of its people. The local topical engaged its audience both as paying customers and as members of a community: it was good for business, and, at the same time, the recognitions and familiarity it offered were one of the distinctive pleasures of cinema-going.

The local topical was a feature of the cinema programme from the earliest days of the travelling shows and fairground cinematograph booths. The recovery in the 1990s by Peter Worden of the eight hundred or so Mitchell and Kenyon films, their donation to and preservation by the British Film Institute, their contextualisation by the University of Sheffield’s National Fairground Archive, and their transmission as a three-part series, ‘The Lost World of Mitchell & Kenyon’, by the BBC, raised the profile of early local actuality films and prompted a reassessment of our understanding of the nature of early British film-making and exhibition.<sup>4</sup> Mitchell and Kenyon, however, did most of their business with travelling cinematograph operators, and ceased making films in 1913, just as cinema was moving into fixed locations and purpose-built cinemas. While the recovery of their work is critical for the history of early cinema in Britain, the significance of local topicals to exhibition was not confined to the early decade of the itinerant moving picture show. The topical and its inclusion in the cinema programme endured the sea-change in the nature of exhibition in the years leading up to the Great War as cinema came off the road and ‘settled down’ in fixed site shows, as the full-length feature film – the so-called ‘super-film’ – became the anchor for the programme, and as Hollywood features began to change the nature of distribution and exhibition and to encourage various forms of ‘block-booking’. Throughout this

period of change and consolidation, the local topicals remained a familiar and appealing element of the cinema programme. Critically, while cinema moved more and more towards a cinema of narrative absorption and spectacle, the topicals continued to exercise the attractions of recognition, familiarity and the everyday, offering the pleasures of a participant audience, actively engaging rather than passively consuming, and maintaining the diversity of experience that the early film programmes offered over the course of an evening. They constituted part of what it meant to have a 'good night at the pictures'.

Definitions are important, and the boundaries of the local topical sometimes need to be flexible. By the first decade of the twentieth century, the 'topical' was the term given to an actuality film which came to be embedded in the film programme as an early form of newsreel. Exhibitors could be supplied with two topicals or newsreels or 'animated gazettes' per week to match the change of programmes, with each gazette comprising around five items per issue each running for approximately one minute. Originally produced by film-makers such as James Williamson or Will Barker, their production was consolidated by the British offices of Pathé and Gaumont as Gaumont Graphics or Pathé Gazettes, joined in 1911 by the British company Topical Budget.<sup>5</sup> Typically, they featured major sporting events, national celebrations and appearances of the Royal Family, and they had particular prominence during periods of war or conflict: the Boer War of 1899–1902; the Balkan crisis of 1908–9 (some of which was filmed by one of very few women cinematographers, Jessica Borthwick),<sup>6</sup> or the First World War. The gazette was imagined as a way of not simply recording an event but bringing it before you in moving images, and making it real: emotionally, and, in wartime, often fictitiously. As early as 1899, the *Campbeltown Courier* reported the response of the audience to a screening of a topical of the Boer War by Robert Calder's concert and cinematograph company:

The cinematograph has not yet lost its attraction of novelty, and when it keeps pace with the times its success is assured. . . . The photo of Paul Kruger was greeted with hoots and howls of indignation, but the portrait of Mr Chamberlain elicited shouts of approbation.<sup>7</sup>

If the topicals or gazettes or animated graphics were an opportunity to reproduce the national newspaper in moving images, music and whatever commentary the exhibitor chose to offer, the local topical was a little more like what we now think of as the local newspaper. (The analogy is not precise as local newspapers in the early decades of the twentieth century were a major source of national news.) While in the first decade or so these

short elements made up the bulk of the programme, even after the arrival of the full-length feature film the ‘shorts’ – scenic, interest, newsreel and local topicals – continued as key supporting elements of a full programme. The subject matter of the local topical would typically be an event taking place in the vicinity of the picture house itself, or on the streets and in the public spaces in the catchment area of the cinema, spaces occupied by the cinema’s regular patrons. Stephen Bottomore makes an important distinction:

We need to be quite careful about a definition, because several kinds of film may be called ‘local’ for different reasons. For my purposes here, local doesn’t just mean a film which is made about a local area. I define a film as ‘local’ only if there is a considerable overlap between the people appearing in the film and those who watch it or are intended to watch it.<sup>8</sup>

This allows him also to make a distinction between ‘municipal advertising’ films (*Blackpool: The Wonderland by the Waves* (1912)) which were made locally but were intended for an audience outside the area, and local topicals, made for local cinema-goers (*Lochgelly at Work and Play* (1922)). Interestingly, it also allows Tom Gunning to make a distinction between Lumière’s *Sortie de l’Usine* of 1895, a film of the workers leaving their factory, commonly seen as the progenitor of many later ‘factory gate’ films, and similar ‘factory gate’ films made by Mitchell and Kenyon and others. Lumière’s film was intended for the upper-middle-class audience that attended the early screenings of the Cinématographe in Lyon or Paris whereas Mitchell and Kenyon’s films were filmed to attract the factory-workers to the cinema.<sup>9</sup> They were ‘local’ in the sense that there was a substantial overlap between the people in the film and the people in the audience. As well as ‘factory gate’ films, local topical films feature civic celebrations, galas, parades, festivals, sports competitions: a range of community activities in which potential cinema patrons would be participants or spectators. The key element of the content is an activity that attracts the local people – ‘Local Films for Local People’, the advertising tagline for Mitchell and Kenyon – out in public view so that they can be captured on camera.

Unlike the gazettes which were fragmentary items, a local topical was usually around one reel in length: about 1,000 feet of 35mm film, or fourteen minutes on screen. (Seven to ten minutes is the standard length of the topicals held in the National Library of Scotland Moving Image Archive.) These local topicals could be shot by a professional cameraman engaged for the day, sometimes in Scotland engaged from the Glasgow office of Gaumont; or they could be made ‘in house’ by the manager, projectionist

or other member of the cinema's staff. The camera operator would be clear that the editorial goal was to include generous shots of faces in the crowd in order to maximise the intended audience – members of the public who were there that day, saw the cameraman at work and would shortly afterwards be enticed into the picture house with the prospect of seeing themselves on the big screen – recognising not just oneself but friends, family, workmates and neighbours. The classic trope of the local topical is the panning shot, the camera slowly passing across faces in a crowd, along rows of football spectators in the stands, or capturing the mass of workers streaming out of the factory gates. The camera operators or their assistants often encouraged people to wave to the camera, highlighting the immediacy of the moment. 'Come and See Yourselves As Others See You' was the hook to pull in the customers. On special occasions, using the available technology of the day, the interval between the filming of the activity on the street and the showing of the film in the cinema could be as little as three or four hours. This afternoon's parade could be seen in the cinema that evening. As television would later recognise, part of the attraction in this 'cinema of attractions' was indeed the immediacy of the relay. This immediacy may have limited the shelf-life of the exposed film – the event had lost much of its impact a week later – but it increased the urgency of seeing it now.

In Scotland, as elsewhere in Britain, audiences in the major cities and in small towns were exposed from the earliest days of the cinematograph to local topicals through the travelling showmen, touring companies and concert parties of the 1890s and 1900s. Scottish showmen, exhibitors and renters, operating substantial circuits across Scotland and the North of England, and local entrepreneurs with a more geographically circumscribed audience were quick to adopt the practice of including local films in their programmes, making them themselves, commissioning them, hiring them or purchasing them.

One of the pioneers was William Walker, a bookseller and optical lanternist in Aberdeen, whose company toured Scotland, often featuring in his concert party the famous Aberdeenshire dance master, composer and fiddle player Scott Skinner. Walker's company became Walker's Royal Cinematograph Company after screening his programme to Queen Victoria in October 1898. His programme included local films for local people throughout the North-east of Scotland, and he travelled as far south as Bo'ness by 1904. The significance of Walker is not simply as a pioneer but as a recruiting agent and training ground. Paul Robello and Joe Gray, employed by Walker to photograph and process his local films, and present the shows, were to become leading cinematographers

(or ‘cinematographists’) in the field of topical production after Walker’s company ceased trading in 1911. Similarly the ubiquitous Robert Calder formed his own touring party in 1896, and, like William Walker, developed a local circuit in and around Aberdeen before expanding to other localities. By 1900, the *Campbeltown Courier*, advertising Calder’s Grand Cinematograph and Pictorial Concert Party, was asking

HAVE YOU BEEN CINEMATOGRAPHED?

See the Local Pictures: *MacGregor’s Gathering*, *Clyde Trip*,

*Arrival at Campbeltown Pier*.

With Concert Party.<sup>10</sup>

This was followed by an editorial comment the following week: ‘A feature of the concert is the cinematograph exhibition, the films being all up-to-date and well chosen, and including a number of local views which should prove a great attraction.’<sup>11</sup> So, like Walker, Calder was engaging the local audience with the familiar tagline, ‘Have You Been Cinematographed?’, to bring them into his travelling shows.

It is striking that the once prominent concert parties and cinematograph companies began to fade from the programmes of major venues between 1911 and 1913: Walker, Calder, Lizars, Dr Ormonde, ‘the Great Hypnotic Clairvoyant Rosicrucian Psychognomancy’ and his family concert party, Lely’s Limited Gigantic Cinematograph Carnival and Pictorial Festival, all of them with their roots in the fairground, had gone out of business by 1913 or 1914 as purpose-built cinemas began to dominate the market. Companies, some of which had offered local topicals as an attraction in their programmes, retired from the road, and other companies, like Mitchell and Kenyon, which had supplied topicals, ceased to make films after 1913.

Travelling exhibitors, however, were not the only ones making and showing topicals. Local entrepreneurs, often with the technical skills of optics or photography and some with experience in lantern shows, offered topicals within their regional territories, showing them as part of their own programmes or providing a service for other showpeople. Peter Feathers in Dundee had been an optician and photographic dealer before moving to cinematography in 1896 with a programme of his own films offered in a small circuit around Dundee, locally based rather than part of an itinerant showmanship. He established himself as one of the city’s most successful exhibitors and continued to include local topicals in his programmes into the 1910s and 1920s. In 1901 he advertises Feathers’ Animated Panorama show in direct competition to William Walker’s ‘World-Famous Cinematograph’. Within the same

newspaper column Walker's advert offers 'cinematograms by the mile', including local actualities of Harris Academy scholars exiting the school, while Feathers gives top billing to his 'Extensive series of magnificent animated pictures illustrating Life In Dundee' with an impressive list of ten subjects including the 'phantom ride', *Tayport to Dundee in Front of an Engine*.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, David Gaylor and his son W.P. Gaylor ran an optician's in Hawick, before making lantern shows and bioscope entertainments around the Borders towns, showing in church halls and schools. By 1899 they had established the Borders Kinematograph Company to make films of local interest for their catchment area, billing them as 'Borders Newsreels' and focusing particularly on local events or sports. There is a regular annual programme of the various Borders Ridings, a continuing tradition of Border towns like Hawick and Selkirk. Twenty-three of these Borders Newsreels are held in the National Library of Scotland (NLS) Moving Image Archive.

Around 1910 and 1913, with the proliferation of purpose-built cinemas throughout Scotland, in major cities and in small- to medium-sized towns, topical were made or commissioned by cinema managers, engaging with the everyday life or the annual ceremonies associated with their own community. The topical continued to be commercially attractive: people still liked to see themselves as others saw them, and it continued to be good for business. At the same time, there is a growing sense that the local topical becomes part of the communal life of the town or the 'urban village', cementing cinema into its civic identity. The cinema manager who makes the films or commissions them begins to develop a municipal profile, not just as an entrepreneur but as a prominent community figure who now has a civic standing.

This developing civic profile could be enhanced by personal appearance on screen. James Gillespie, manager of the Palace in Rothesay, can be seen in shot in each of the surviving topicals he commissioned in the 1910s and 1920s. In *Lady Lauder in Rothesay* (1922) his daughter Jenny is foregrounded holding the bridle of a seaside donkey bearing a placard, 'Everybody goes to the Palace but me!'

In a sense, this is the 'classic' period of the local topicals: *Coronation Parade, Broxburn* (1910), *Laying the Foundation Stone at Kirkintilloch Parish Church* (1913), *Great Western Road* (1915 and 1922), *Lochgelly at Work and Play* (1923). Titles like these circumscribe the local topical: like items in the local newspaper, they may have little or no interest outside their own community, but at the same time they affirm the local identity of that community.

Many of the films that are held in the NLS Moving Image Archive are associated with individual cinema managers. Louis Dickson, for example, the proprietor and manager of the Hippodrome in Bo'ness, filmed a number of local topicals in the town, including, most famously, the annual Bo'ness Children's Fair Festival and the parade of the Festival Queen. Tommy Timmons, the proprietor of the Cinema de Luxe in Lochgelly, made a number of local topicals in the 1920s including *Lochgelly Old Age Pensioners' Drive to Crook O' Devon* (1928). In his civic role, Timmons was a member of the organising committee for the outing, and he was still making local topicals in the 1950s.<sup>13</sup>

In Glasgow, James Hart, employed as projectionist at the Hillhead Picture Salon (opened in 1913), became a topical cameraman. In Glasgow's fashionable West End in September 1915, he filmed the Sunday morning promenade along Great Western Road from the back of a moving car. *The Entertainer* reported on 2 October 1915 that the film had been completely successfully, albeit with 'the usual trouble of youngsters wanting to be in the picture all the time'.<sup>14</sup> And indeed, the dignity of the sober Sunday parade is undermined by boys, who clearly know something about cinematography, running ahead of the camera to stay in frame, seeing and being seen. In 1921 Hart moved to the neighbouring Grosvenor Cinema, newly opened, where he continued with his topical production, returning again to Great Western Road in 1922 to film the parade again. Becoming one of the most prolific topical film-makers in the trade, his locals were presented under the title Grosvenor Topical News. In 1928 Hart was promoted to management, and cited for his meritorious services, as 'in addition to his duties in the operating chamber, [he] has been the cameraman responsible for the taking of local topicals, which form practically a weekly attraction at the popular Hillhead house'.<sup>15</sup>

In Aberdeen Joe Gray similarly enjoyed local celebrity as a topical filmmaker. Having been one of Walker's Cinematograph staff cameramen until the firm's demise in 1911, he went to work as projectionist for J.J. Bennell, who had taken the lease of the Coliseum in Aberdeen (opened in 1910 by William Walker) for his B.B. Pictures. Continuing as projectionist, Gray also shot topicals for Bennell. By 1914 he had moved to Green's newly built La Scala Photo Playhouse on Union Street as projectionist but he continued to make topicals dealing with wartime events in the city. In the 1920s he moved around various halls in the city continuing with his filming activity, and became staff cameraman for Green's Scottish Moving Picture News.

On the Clyde coast, Harry Kemp had taken over a cinema in Saltcoats for which he produced a number of topicals. Harry was the son of George

'President' Kemp, who had been a travelling showman since 1882 and a pioneer of fairground bioscope exhibition with his majestic 'Dreamland' booth, where he showed topicals commissioned from Mitchell and Kenyon. Harry Kemp brought this showmanship flair to the La Scala in Saltcoats. Married to Susan Green, Kemp commissioned topicals from Green's Film Service. These include a local campaigning animation film, *Vote for Harry Kemp* (1922), to support his candidacy for the Saltcoats Burgh Council.

Not far from Saltcoats, Fred Randall Burnette had invested in a number of cinemas around the Clyde Coast, including the Theatre de Luxe in Rothesay (opened in 1912) and the Picture House in Campbeltown (opened in 1913). Burnette had toured in the United States before opening the Argyle Electric Theatre in 1910, one of the first purpose-built cinemas in Glasgow. At Campbeltown, he was responsible for some of the most fascinating local films kept at the National Library's Moving Image Archive. On 18 July 1914, he advertised in the *Campbeltown Courier*: 'Campbeltown Invaded, by F.R. Burnette, Managing Director, and his Staff and Cine Operator, to take a picture at the Pierhead of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders.' Inauspiciously, the arrival of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders for a training camp preceded by days the outbreak of the First World War, and the march past of cheerful soldiers, filmed by an operator from Gaumont, now seems rather poignant.

From the record, it is a characteristic of the known local topicals that they seem to congregate around small towns – Lochgelly, Saltcoats, Hawick or Bo'ness. The difficulty is that the record is constituted to quite a large extent by what is held in the NLS Moving Image Archive, or what can be gleaned from the catalogues of Mitchell & Kenyon. Unlike feature films, or even to some extent scenics and interest films, local topicals were not given trade shows and therefore did not appear in the trade press, and, by and large, they were not advertised, and only occasionally were they mentioned in editorial page comment in the local press. It is reasonable to assume that the archive or the record is by no means complete, that what remains is the result of the happenstance of what has been preserved or recorded, and that the appeal of the topicals extended well beyond the handful of towns where clusters of films can now be identified. We know, for instance, that J.D. Ratter, a well-known and still collected photographer in Shetland at the turn of the century, showed a programme of films of a 'kirnin' (butter churning) and birdlife on Noss at the North Star Cinema in Lerwick in 1916, but no record remains other than a passing mention on the editorial page of the *Shetland News*.<sup>16</sup> So we can assume that there were many more local topicals than those of which

we now have a record. What is interesting, however, is that, even allowing for the incompleteness of the record, the local topicals seem to offer an insight into the ways in which cinematography was integrated into its communities. In a period when cinema in the UK and in Scotland was moving towards the global, and the feature film set in the Highlands was likely to be filmed in Los Angeles or Devon, the local topical preserves this foothold of attraction for the local and the everyday.

The trade press was actively providing the local exhibitor with information and advice on the practice and costs of making local topicals. The exhibitor, the trade papers suggest, had a choice in how he acquired his film and could either commission a specialist producer or purchase the film-making apparatus to shoot the film in-house. In 1912, *How to Run a Picture Theatre* estimated the cost of a topical as anything up to £10 to £15 according to length and value of the subject: 'on average 5d a foot if your own man takes it' or 6d a foot if you were to commission a production company.<sup>17</sup> The Williamson Kinematograph Company offered an operator and camera for hire at 12s 6d a day. With negative and print costing 2d per foot each, a 100 ft topical shot in one day would cost £1 13s 4d.<sup>18</sup>

The manufacturing sector was similarly responding to the needs of the exhibitor. In *The Bioscope* in 1913 two companies are advertising for sale a camera for topical use – equipment specifically aimed at the exhibitor or his camera operator. The Williamson Company offered 'a camera which costs the same as two weeks' *Gazette* and which will provide *Your Own Weekly Local Gazette*', at a cost of £10 10s.<sup>19</sup> Jury's Kine Supplies were marketing a complete photographic outfit that comprised a camera which could be converted into a film printer, along with accessories that allowed processing and developing of the film negative in situ. Jury's camera and lens was priced from £7 to £13 whilst the complete camera/printer/developing package ranged from £14 to £20.<sup>20</sup> The presumption both in adverts and in the trade manuals is that the cinema's projectionist is the person best qualified to become the camera operator: It was claimed that anyone who has operated a projector and taken a photograph with an ordinary camera can also operate a kinematograph camera: 'Every operator a film producer. . . . Your Operator Can use it', claimed Williamson.<sup>21</sup>

The trade and its specialist press were also engaging management readership with articles on marketing and promoting local topicals and noting in their regional news sections examples of imaginative and proactive publicity stunts and successes. The inclusion of a topical, with its exclusivity, could give an individual exhibitor an edge over their rival, something special and unique to that cinema's programme of fare, particularly in towns where several cinemas could be in keen competition for patrons.

Unlike the national gazettes these reels were not shared across several cinemas in the one town. Exclusivity was a key component and could be flagged up in the advertising through posters, fly aways and local press adverts: 'Specially taken for this theatre'.

The publicising of the topical fell into the pool of showmanship skills and attributes that were recognised by the cinema trade as a valued element of the profession, as seen in *Kinematograph Weekly's* awarding of Certificates of Showmanship to individuals who had shown a flair for the task.

Typical of many topicals postwar is the inclusion of a shot of the exterior of the sponsoring cinema itself, sometimes with the manager as the host in the entrance, identifying the film strongly with the place of its exhibition and reinforcing the film's exclusivity to that place. The camera's gaze could fall on the cinema itself, and its role in civic life. Films of the queue for the children's Saturday matinee, for the first talkie or for the appearance of a film star at the hall made the cinema patron a screen protagonist. On occasion reels would be brought out for reshowing decades later. The 1925 topical of Annan's Riding of the Marches shot by Gaumont for Victor Biddall's cinema at Gracie's Banking was followed on the same reel by an earlier film of the Riding prefaced with a new intertitle 'We shall now take you back to 20<sup>th</sup> September 1913 to compare the event of 12 years ago'.<sup>22</sup>

At the same time, some of the major cinema circuit owners and entrepreneurs were engaged in producing topical films for their own use or for commission. Gaumont, the international production and distribution company, had opened an office in Glasgow in 1912, and it brought the expertise of their camera operators to the production and supply of local topicals, often supplying managers in small towns who did not have access to equipment or expertise. With Jack Harris, their resident news cameraman, and with their own film laboratory facilities available for the production of actualities, Gaumont became major producers of sponsored and topical films for local clients.

J.J. Bennell, who had started as a Temperance lecturer in the North of England, owned one of the major circuits in Scotland with cinemas in Glasgow, Dundee, Aberdeen, Airdrie, Perth and Greenock. B.B. Pictures (B.B. is variously Bright and Beautiful, Bennell's Brilliants or the initials of J.J.'s wife), established in 1907, was one of the early companies in Scotland to realise that Bennell could offset the cost of hiring films by becoming a film renter, and B.B. Film Services was set up to rent films and to produce them for local use with a film production department created in 1911. As well as renting, B.B. Film Services claimed that 'The

BB budget of Scottish news is the only cinematograph journal published in Scotland'.<sup>23</sup>

The most concerted effort to produce a Scottish newsreel came from the Green family, an established family of travelling showpeople. Originally from Lancashire, George Green had commissioned Mitchell and Kenyon topicals for his fairground bioscopes.<sup>24</sup> This was the start of a prosperous circuit of cinemas. George's sons, Fred and Bert, established Green's Film Service in 1912 to rent films and produce local topicals for local managers. Its distribution business had offices in Glasgow, London and Newcastle, from which it rented films to hundreds of clients in Scotland and the North of England, and it had a mechanical department selling projectors and a music department renting sheet music. Green's was producing local topicals in the West of Scotland from around 1910, branching out to other cities as it extended its circuit. By 1917, it aimed to consolidate the production side of the business by producing not just local films for a local audience, thus fragmenting the market, but to produce Scottish topicals for a Scottish audience, creating a national market for their topical films. Scottish Moving Picture News, as it was called, would be available for purchase or hire to exhibitors across Scotland: *The Scottish Grand National* (1919), for instance, or *Julian, the Tank Bank* (1918), a topical of a tank filmed in Edinburgh, Dundee and Aberdeen whose purpose was to raise money for the war effort. In 1919 the Scottish Moving Picture News briefly became the British Moving Picture News, indicating a desire to broaden the market even further, but indicating also a commercial drift of Green's Film Service away from the local topical to the national news gazette. If definitions are indeed important, there is a boundary, however flexible, between the local topical – 'local films for local people' – and newsreels or gazettes – items of news or national interest wherever you happen to be.

If major distributors like Green's or J.J. Bennell had ambitions for a programme of national topicals, there is also limited evidence that local topical film-makers may occasionally have had ambitions to cross the boundary from topicals to drama. On 8 August 1912, 'Scotty' in the 'Away Up North' column in *The Bioscope* reports on leaflets distributed by Bert Foulger, the Manager of B.B. Film Services, including a leaflet which

gives particulars regarding four new exclusive films which have been issued by the same Service, and these include *Tam O'Shanter's Ride* and *Land of Burns* – the former to be first featured at the Ayr Picture Palace on August 5th, and the latter to be shown at the same house a week later. This is quite a new line for the B.B. Service – the producing, photographing, and printing of their own special films – and I am sure that Mr. Foulger, with his accustomed business ability, will make this scheme a great success.<sup>25</sup>

In 1912, the *Ayr Post* reported on a forthcoming programme that would include *The Last of the Mohicans* and a variety act of vocalists and dancers:

For next week the management have shown commendable enterprise in securing a film for the week of the scenes depicting Tam O' Shanter and his famous ride past the haunted kirk of Alloway. Some time ago the scenes were enacted here, and Ayr people wondered at the time what the picture would look like when completed. Their curiosity will be satisfied if they go to see the film some night next week.<sup>26</sup>

Subsequent issues reported that 'the audience has shown its appreciation in no half-hearted manner, and the fact that the film has been taken locally added to the enjoyment'.<sup>27</sup> Little is known about either *Tam O'Shanter* or *Land of Burns*, but it is worth recording that a company, B.B. Film Services, and a manager, Bert Foulger, who are associated with film rental and the production of topicals had used their experience to stray into the territory of a kind of local drama. There is no evidence that the films were ever shown anywhere other than the Ayr Picture Palace, and like the topicals, their appeal seems to have been to local interest and local exhibition.

A number of threads can be distinguished in this: the appeal of the local in a touring 'cinema of attractions' in which the 'attraction' was precisely the local; the development of an interest in local actualities as managers recognised the appeal of local interest to the communities in which they lived; the beginnings of an overlap between local topicals and newsreels; and the difficulty of 'graduating', if that is how it was seen, from local topicals to feature films. The boundaries between the threads are permeable, but what persists is the appeal to audiences and exhibitors of the local topical. Throughout the period, before and after the emergence of purpose-built cinemas, before and after the rise of the feature film, and, indeed, before and after the arrival of sound, it seems clear that there was a continuing interest in the local and the everyday. While this may have moved from the attraction of novelty – seeing yourself moving on the screen – to the appeal of local interest – seeing the everyday life of the community recorded – local topicals continued to exercise an appeal.

What is the significance of local topicals for the history of cinema, and what is the particular significance for a history of Scottish cinema? Routine and amateur as they may be, these films of the everyday now seem a great deal more 'modern' than many fictions of the period and most fictions of Scotland. What is striking in scanning the trade press in Britain and America is that, while the cinema industry is modern, a great proportion of its early films appeal to a society that is still imagined as premodern.

Characters, themes and places recur that belong to an earlier age – the village, the forest, gypsies, smugglers, fisher-folk, lighthouse keepers, the squire – and place twentieth-century cinema somewhere in an imagined nineteenth century. Feature films set in Scotland seem particularly rooted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: in a longing for the mythology of the Highland wilderness or in a nostalgia for the small pre-industrial town.

Walter Benjamin speaks frequently of the ‘dream’ of the nineteenth century in which we slumber. Of his massive unfinished work, *The Arcades Project*, he says that it ‘deals with awakening from the nineteenth century’.<sup>28</sup> In Scotland, in the history of its early films and film-making, the local topical seems to awaken from the nineteenth and, indeed, the eighteenth centuries. The topicals record the accidental detail of everyday life that the modernity of early cinema seemed to promise but never quite deliver. In Francesco Casetti’s terms, they, rather than the feature films, seem to offer the possibility of ‘the popularization of modernity and the modernization of popularity’,<sup>29</sup> wakening up from the dream of the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries with everyday films that are both geographically and historically located in the here and in the now. Without idealising the primitive, by accident *and* by design they give a licence to their subjects to look back at the camera, sometimes because they cannot prevent small boys from chasing the camera, but sometimes also because they want to capture as many faces as they can to deliver on the promise of seeing yourself as others see you. This gives an immediacy and an intimacy to the figures on the screen which resists the objectifying and interrogative gaze of the documentary camera. People return the look of the camera. The Lochgelly old age pensioners who look back at the camera have not yet learned to be objects of this new visual apparatus and deal with it with a dignified but distant interest. The soldiers on their way to a war from which many will not come back memorialise a historic moment without being aware of its history or its tragedy. The look of these people, and the small boys who continually intrude on their space, gives them a sense of presence and materiality, a kind of ‘matter-of-factness’ – which is increasingly difficult to recognise on the various screens we now use.

In his autobiographical essay ‘Autobiography of a historian’, written in 1949, the liberal/Whig historian G.M. Trevelyan describes the ‘poetry of history’ thus:

The dead were and are not. Their place knows them no more and is ours today . . .  
The poetry of history lies in the quasi-miraculous fact that once, on this earth, once,  
on this familiar spot of ground, walked other men and women, as actual as we are

today, thinking their own thoughts, swayed by their own passions, but now all gone, one generation vanishing into another, gone as utterly as we ourselves shall shortly be gone, like ghosts at cockcrow.<sup>30</sup>

This suggests, somewhat poetically, the legacy of the local topicals. It is conventional, but somewhat dry and prosaic, to say that they are important social and historical records. They are that, of course, but the popular appeal and fascination which the local topicals still seem to offer to audiences who are seeing them now for the first time is not just as records of social customs, local events or workplace rituals. It is partly that the films make few if any gestures towards posterity; they are recorded for this audience, here and now, and will be shown hours or days after the event. Some of their historical appeal is that they are, precisely, transitory and



**Figure 8.1** People leaving church in a still from local topical 'Great Western Road 1922', Glasgow. National Library of Scotland's Moving Image Archive.



**Figure 8.2** Territorial Army parade in a still from 'Arrival at Whitehart Hotel, Campbeltown' (1914). National Library of Scotland's Moving Image Archive.



**Figure 8.3** Still from 'Lochgelly Old Age Pensioners' Drive to Crook O'Devon' (c.1928), National Library of Scotland's Moving Image Archive.



**Figure 8.4** Still from 'Lochgelly Old Age Pensioners' Drive to Crook O'Devon' (c.1928), National Library of Scotland's Moving Image Archive.

ephemeral. We see them by chance – and through careful curation – rather than as documents of historical record. What seems most important is the disconcerting look of these people back at the camera. The documentary look at the object becomes reversible, and its objects become subjects.<sup>31</sup> The unselfconscious look back at the camera of these old age pensioners, the soldiers, the workers leaving the factory, the children on parade and the small boys being boisterous is both intimate and distant. It seems to individualise them within the mass, making them both present and absent, familiar and strange at the same time. The directness of their look at the camera – and therefore at us – gives them a material presence which is so much their appeal in the cinematographic memory.

### Notes

1. Gerald Cock, 'Looking Forward: A Personal Forecast of the Future of Television', *Radio Times* (Special Television Issue), 23 October 1936, p. 7.
2. Kinematograph Weekly, *How to Run a Picture Theatre: A Handbook for Proprietors, Managers, and Exhibitors*, 21.
3. *Cinematograph Exhibitors' Diary*, 71.
4. Toulmin, Russell and Neal, 'The Mitchell and Kenyon Collection'; Toulmin, Pople and Russell, *The Lost World of Mitchell & Kenyon*.
5. See McKernan, *Topical Budget*.
6. See McKernan, 'A Girl Cinematographer at the Balkan War'.
7. *Campbeltown Courier*, 21 October 1921. (Paul Kruger was President of the South African Republic; Joseph Chamberlain was British Secretary of State for the Colonies.)
8. Bottomore, 'From the Factory Gate to the "Home Talent" Drama: An International Overview of Local Films in the Silent Era', 33.
9. Tom Gunning, 'Pictures of Crowd Splendor: The Mitchell and Kenyon Factory Gate Films', 50–1.
10. *Campbeltown Courier*, 20 August 1900.
11. *Campbeltown Courier*, 1 September 1900.
12. *Evening Post* (Dundee), 20 September 1901.
13. See *St. Patrick's Church, Lochgelly* (1952–3), National Library of Scotland Moving Image Archive, ref. no. 0963.
14. *Entertainer*, 2 October 1915.
15. *Bioscope*, 15 August 1928, p. 43.
16. *Shetland News*, 6 April 1916.
17. Kinematograph Weekly, *How to Run a Picture Theatre*. According to the National Archive's 'Currency Converter', £10 0s 0d in 1910 would have the same spending worth of £570.60 in 2005. See <<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency/results.asp#mid>> (last accessed 29 January 2016).

18. Williamson House advertisement, *Kinematograph Year Book (1914)*, 48.
19. Williamson Company advertisement, *Bioscope*, 27 February 1913, pp. 622–3.
20. Jury's Kine Supplies advertisement, *Bioscope*, 27 February 1913, p. 618.
21. Williamson Company advertisement, *Bioscope*, 27 February 1913, pp. 622–3.
22. *Riding of the Marches in the Royal Burgh of Annan, September 12<sup>th</sup> 1925* (1925), National Library of Scotland Moving Image Archive, ref. no. 3738.
23. *Aberdeen Daily Journal*, 16 September 1911.
24. See McBain, 'Mitchell and Kenyon's Legacy in Scotland: – The Inspiration for a Forgotten Film-Making Genre'.
25. *Bioscope*, 8 August 1912, p. 413.
26. *Ayrshire Post*, 2 August 1912.
27. *Ayrshire Post*, 9 August 1912.
28. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 464.
29. Casetti, 'Filmic Experience', 58.
30. Trevelyan, 'Autobiography of an Historian', 13.
31. On 'reversibility', see Daney, 'La Remise en scène', 58–9.