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W. B. Yeats, the Abbey Theatre, and the Cinema: 1909-1939

“We may have to close down and, Ezra Pound suggests, put in a cinematograph,” wrote W. B. Yeats to Lady Gregory in January 1915.¹ This letter contains one of the earliest references to the cinema in Yeats’s work but it comes at a moment of crisis for his beloved Abbey Theatre, which had opened its doors to the Irish public in 1904. The prospect of replacing the Abbey with a cinema would not have attracted Yeats, who conceived of his theatre in direct opposition to all “low” forms of entertainment, which undoubtedly included the growing film business. Indeed, in an earlier essay, Yeats had described the Irish Literary Theatre as a space for “the right people” to “escape the stupefying memory of the theatre of commerce,” in order to witness a “remote, spiritual and ideal” drama.² The exclusive tones of his phrasing clearly contrast with the democratising appeal of film, one of the twentieth century’s most successful exponents of mass culture. Yet writers like Ezra Pound, invoked in Yeats’s letter above, believed that the advocates of the cinema had unrealistic aspirations for their exuberant new medium. Writing for *The New Age* in 1918 under the pseudonym B. H. Dias, Pound took various film supporters to task:

We hear a good deal about the “art” of the cinema, but the cinema is not Art. Art with a large A consists in painting, sculpture, possibly architecture; beyond these there are activities, dancing, grimacing, etc. Art is a stasis.³

Quite how Pound’s statement, particularly its cryptic final sentence, aligned with Yeats’s feelings about art and its definitions is debatable. After all, Yeats declared in “Poetry and Tradition” (1907) that “the nobleness of art is in the mingling of contraries, [...]

overflowing turbulent energy and marmorean stillness.”⁴ Although Yeats offered few statements on the cinema, it is tempting to imagine that the flickering evolutions of silent film corresponded to his desire for art to possess an animated sense of the still. There has, however, been very little critical work on Yeats and the cinema, possibly given the relative paucity of allusions to film in his writing, and his commitment to the creation of an Irish theatrical movement at the Abbey.

This gap in Irish studies belies a complex history concerning Yeats’s Abbey Theatre and the cinema in Ireland. Using Yeats’s letters and the digitized Abbey Minute Books, along with so far unexplored archival materials, this article will trace the intersections between Yeats and the various film industries that gained a foothold in Ireland during the early decades of the twentieth century. As Ruth Barton importantly remarks, although Ireland lacked a serious indigenous film industry up until the 1990s, “it has always had a cinema culture.”⁵ In its early years, the cinema acted as a repository for a burgeoning technological imagination, associated with the power of mechanised industry, and even the more distant realms of spiritualism and magic. Following on from the magic lantern and Edison’s phonograph, it was identified as one of the many “casual miracles” that sprung up at the close of the nineteenth century.⁶ The early connections between Irish literary culture and film were marked by James Joyce’s involvement in the establishment of Dublin’s first cinema, the Volta, which opened at 45 Mary Street on 20 December 1909.⁷ This was, however, a transnational enterprise, spearheaded by the Irish expatriate Joyce and a group of Italian businessmen, whose involvement was secured by Joyce’s revelation that Dublin, a modern city of 500,000, was in need of a picture house.⁸

During this period, the cinema inspired many contradictory responses, appearing to some literary figures to be the worst example of what Yeats termed “ the leprosy of the

modern,” and to others, the means for a new form of poetic expressiveness.⁹ In 1898, Yeats engaged in a heated debate with the writer John Eglinton (real name William Magee) in the pages of the Dublin *Daily Express*, after Eglinton declared that “the epics of the present age are the steam-engine and the dynamo, its lyrics the cinematograph, phonograph etc.”¹⁰ Luke Gibbons asserts that this sentiment was “lost on Yeats for whom even the Neon lights of O’Connell street were signs of Armageddon,”¹¹ and his assessment summons the familiar figure of Yeats the Revivalist, fed only by “the past, the vernacular and the local.”¹² Certainly, Yeats was scornful of Eglinton’s preference for popular art and literature, and he responded with a vociferous defence of Irish oral culture and myths, nostalgically evoking a land where “every strange little stone or coppice has its legend, preserved in written or unwritten tradition.”¹³ However, this early dispute does not delineate Yeats’s attitude towards the cinema across his lifetime, or indeed, towards other new media; for instance, radio broadcasting, in which he demonstrated considerable interest. The radical changes wrought on Irish cultural politics during the first decades of the twentieth century also affected Yeats’s stance on cultural nationalism, as the censorious climate of the Irish Free State placed new stresses on creative liberty, and on the public’s engagement with art. Taking my lead from a recent strand of criticism in Irish studies that has sought to reframe Yeats’s relationship to technology and the cultures of modernity, I will complicate the notion that the cinema was “lost on” Yeats, and trace an alternative history that reveals his tentative interactions with the film industry, which arose largely from his position in the Irish senate and his role as Abbey Director.¹⁴

Where scholars have broached the subject of Yeats and cinema, the Abbey Theatre has been the crucial point of contact. As Kevin Rockett illustrates in the pioneering study *Cinema and Ireland* (1988), those who sought to create a national film industry in Ireland

in some cases modelled their hopes on the success of the Abbey.¹⁵ More recent work such as Denis Condon's *Early Irish Cinema 1895-1921* (2008) has also emphasised the "close intermedial links" that emerged between the theatre and the Irish cinema in its infancy.¹⁶ For example, in January 1922, an *Irish Times* article announced a promising future for Irish film production by drawing a comparison between the indigenous cinematic imagination and the work of the Abbey Theatre.

We must start by being Irish in our point of view, and when our work is finished it must be of such a character that there will be no doubt in anyone's mind that the result attained is all the time Irish. This does not necessarily preconceive narrowness of treatment; it merely means that the only picture worth making is an Irish picture. Perhaps eventually a distinctive school of Irish film production will be evolved somewhat on the lines of the native dramatic movement, so that just as the Abbey Theatre play has a peculiar charm of its own, an Irish film will make a distinctive appeal wherever it may be shown.¹⁷

Although the first efforts to develop an Irish film industry had met with little success by 1922, the cinema itself had become a hugely important part of life in the nation's cities, particularly in Dublin, the home of the Abbey, where picture palaces provided even the poorest urban dwellers with "one their few affordable moments of luxury."¹⁸ Yet the above passage taps into a nationalist urgency surrounding the growth of the cinema, compounded by the dominance of the American and British film industries in the Irish market, which reignited familiar colonial anxieties and fears of cultural dilution. Such concerns are deeply embedded in the cultural discourses that defined Yeats's tenure at the Abbey, drawing the

stage and the screen into an evolving dialogue against the complex political backdrop of the Irish Free State.

An Irish Cinema?

During the Abbey's formative years,¹⁹ the cinema in Ireland became established as a primary source of entertainment. It is important to note, however, that the vast majority of the films shown at the Volta and other cinemas that sprung up during this period were mostly produced in America, with a smaller number coming from Britain.²⁰ The nascent Irish film industry was scattered and inconsistent, and produced very few works. Film therefore occupied a fraught position in the cultural imagination as nationalist anxieties about Irish authenticity collided with foreign depictions of the country on screen, many of which reproduced clichés and stereotypes long peddled about the Irish people. The rise of the cinema, as Jeannine Woods points out, occurred at a moment of imperialist decline and anti-colonial nationalisms, meaning “film was ideally placed to foster and cement the national and imperial consciousnesses hitherto engendered by print capitalism.”²¹

Indeed, the first major outfit to produce films in Ireland was Kalem, an American company led by the director Sidney Olcott, most famous perhaps for his controversial adaptation of *Ben Hur* (1907). Olcott directed the first American-made film produced outside the US, *The Lad from Old Ireland* (1910), filmed in Killarney, Co. Kerry.²² Reproducing conventional tropes associated with Irish rural life, this film nostalgically tracks the return of the Irish protagonist to his homeland, leaving behind the capitalist dream of America to rescue his childhood sweetheart from financial ruin. In some ways, this narrative taps into Irish ambitions for a national cinema that might draw on the model

of Hollywood, replacing American productions with something home-grown: a transatlantic emulation figured as an emigrant's return.

Observing these cross-cultural dialogues, Barton has argued that “Irish film and television have conventionally attempted to write back to two centres – Britain and Hollywood.”²³ This process of “writing back” can be traced through films made in Ireland and produced by Irish companies, but it is also a feature of films concerning Ireland made primarily under the auspices of American production companies. Drawing on its director's own Irish heritage, Olcott's *Lad from Old Ireland* follows its protagonist from Ireland to America, making the transition from native to immigrant only to complete the narrative with an idealized homecoming. Other films of the period map similar transnational pathways, including *Rory O'More* (Kalem, 1911) and *Ireland a Nation* (MacNamara Feature Film Co., 1914). Both films dramatise the historic Irish diaspora to America as a move towards what Christopher Morash terms “the promised republic, the screen upon which many of those who remained in Ireland projected their dreams.”²⁴ Yet the imagined return—or at least the “writing back”—to Ireland complicates this particular cinematic trope. The hero of *Ireland a Nation*, Robert Emmet, who was executed for his part in the Irish rebellion of 1803, speaks from his historical juncture to the fervent political climate of 1914 when he declares: “Until my country takes her place among the nations of the earth, then and not till then let my epitaph be written.” This denial of an inscription conversely “writes back” to Ireland, using the American-made film as a vehicle through which the Irish pockets of the “promised republic” speak to Irish audiences in their distant homeland.

The steady ascent of the cinema coincided with a particularly volatile point in Irish political history. In April 1916, the Easter Rising gave Yeats's fears of “tyranny and

violence” a new and troubling shape, and he seemed to feel a sense of personal responsibility, ruminating on events to John Quinn from the relative security of London: “A world seems to have been swept away. I keep going over the past in my mind & wonder if I could have done anything to turn these young men in some other direction.”²⁵ During the crisis, Yeats fretted in letters about possible damage to the Abbey, predicting that events would “leave Ireland different for a long time & affect our work a good deal.”²⁶ Repercussions were certainly felt by the Film Company of Ireland (FCOI), which had been set up just one month before the Rising and marked the first real attempt to establish an indigenous film industry. All of the films the company made in that first month were destroyed during the unrest, but this was followed by a burst of productivity. Eight of the short films made by the FCOI in 1916 were directed by J. M. Kerrigan, a leading Abbey Theatre actor who later went on to have a career in Hollywood.²⁷ His screen debut came in the first of these films, *O’Neil of the Glen*, which premiered at Dublin’s Bohemian Picture Theatre and was celebrated in the press, along with Kerrigan’s other films, for “preserving a genuinely Irish atmosphere and that inherent charm which is to be found in Irish life.”²⁸

The nationalist rhetoric surrounding the FCOI echoed the sentimentalism of Olcott’s *Lad from Old Ireland*, reinstating in Ireland’s supposedly modern present a romantic vision of the country’s past. An *Irish Times* article of June 1916 predicted:

No doubt many sons and daughters of Erin who have left her borders will welcome the opportunity the films will provide of gaining a glimpse of typical scenes in the old country. [...] There was a wholesome desire to reproduce the atmosphere of the country, and the motive was not purely mercenary. A vast field of folk literature was yet to be utilised.²⁹

The writer of this article makes certain claims about the morality of such filmmaking, aligning traditional images of Ireland with “wholesome” impulses and therefore colluding in the subtle ethical assumptions that supported the much more rigorous moral policing of the film industry in later years. Condon suggests that invocations of “an immemorial Gaelic past” were often deployed “for the fashioning of a distinctly Irish polity for the future.”³⁰ It is therefore interesting to note that this writer reaches out to those who have left Ireland, thereby aligning these new Irish films with particular anxieties surrounding the figure of the emigrant and the colonised homeland. In very real terms, the cinema in Ireland was bound up in the controversies and sense of national purpose engendered by the Easter Rising. Like the Abbey Theatre, the fledgling Irish film industry, manned from its inception by Abbey members, was the locus for various nationalist ambitions and forms of propaganda.³¹

Censoring Stage and Screen

Unfortunately, the Film Company of Ireland wound up production in 1920, and its cultural impact was so limited that, by 1933, an *Irish Times* writer could treat it as a little-known historical treasure: “In all that has been written about the proposed companies for the production of films in Ireland, there has not been the slightest reference to the fact that nearly twenty years ago an Irish film company, which had its offices in Grafton Street, produced quite a number of films in several parts of Ireland.”³² The author concludes that this company “does not seem to have been a success, but the next ‘talkie’ company may have a clearer field.”³³ Despite the fact that domestic filmmaking failed to really take off

in Ireland, foreign films, particularly from Hollywood, continued to flood into the cinemas. During the 1920s, one problem facing the Irish Free State government in this respect was how to control the nature of the material reaching Irish audiences.

Although Lady Gregory had early on expressed her wish to create a theatre with a “freedom to experiment which is not found in the theatres of England,” she and her colleagues at the Abbey were bound in part by their reliance on government subsidies.³⁴ As Lauren Arrington has convincingly shown, the typical portrayal of Yeats as a champion of creative liberty masks the climate of careful selection and self-censoring that dominated at the Abbey, where “financial incentive [...] outweighed aesthetic principle.”³⁵ For instance, Yeats outright rejected or delayed the production on certain plays at moments that coincided with the possibility of further funding: these works included his own *The Herne’s Egg* (1936) and Denis Johnston’s *The Old Lady Says No!* (1929). Indeed, Johnston’s play was so named as a result of Lady Gregory’s refusal to have it staged—its title scribbled by Yeats onto the script returned to its author. The Abbey Board treated plays that might offend Catholic sensibilities or ignite political feuds with caution. It is, however, important to point out the relative freedom the Abbey enjoyed when compared to the film industry.

There was a prevailing assumption in Irish political circles that theatregoers were culturally superior to their counterparts in the picture houses. To repeat Lady Gregory’s words: the Abbey’s was an audience “*trained* to listen by its passion for oratory.”³⁶ Such careful phrasing sheds a light on the widespread assertion that spectators in the theatre were intellectually equipped to handle the representations that faced them on stage; by contrast, the cinema was viewed as an indiscriminate form of entertainment, designed to appeal to the masses with its bewitching modern spectacle. According to William Magennis, a professor at Trinity College Dublin and enthusiastic cinemagoer, “our people have not been

trained in these things.”³⁷ The very newness of the cinema posed a threat, not only to its “untrained” and eager spectators, but also perhaps to those equally inexperienced officials attempting to decipher and regulate its hidden meanings and subversive potential. Correspondingly, the theatre was seen as a “higher” form of art that coveted a socially superior following, whereas the cinema, according to the writer Lynn Doyle, was “in the main, bad art, and was controlled by persons whose aims [...] were not artistic, and because it was in its infancy, was still trying to copy the theatre.”³⁸

In the cinema, the Irish government recognised the workings of a very powerful cultural tool: a “highly sophisticated entertainment offered [...] to the unsophisticated masses.”³⁹ However, films were not initially scrutinised under a nationwide, uniform censorship, and local censors worked on a voluntary basis. One of the early pieces of legislation put before the Cumann na nGaedheal government was the 1923 Censorship of Films Bill. After passing easily through the debate in the Dáil, the Bill reached the Senate, where the future Abbey Director Ernest Blythe introduced it. Also present at the debate on 7 June 1923 was Yeats himself, following his appointment to the Senate the previous year; a position Roy Foster describes as one that “suited him best, political but detached from parties.”⁴⁰ Significantly, Yeats was one of the very few senators to speak against the censorship of films, using his political platform to shape his public image as a defender of artistic freedom.

We see only the evil effect, greatly exaggerated in the papers, of these rather inferior forms of art which we are now discussing, but we have no means of reducing to statistics their other effects. I think you can leave the arts, superior or inferior, to the general conscience of mankind.⁴¹

Yeats describes the cinema as a weaker art form, but an art form nonetheless, perhaps using this debate as an opportunity to allude to his own “superior” artistic interests at the Abbey, where he no doubt hoped to retain the creative control he enjoyed, even if it meant self-censoring with the spectre of state disapproval in mind.

In spite of Yeats’s intervention, described by Rockett as “characteristically lofty,” the Bill passed, establishing the role of an Official Censor, whose remit was far-reaching, and a nine-person unpaid Censorship of Films Appeal Board.⁴² Yeats served on this first Appeal Board between February and December 1924, although it was not a role he found particularly fruitful. In a letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell, he bluntly stated his frustration with the decisions of his fellow censors:

Yesterday I sat on the Film Appeal Board & my fellow censors refused a film because a pair of lovers who had lived together without wedlock go through great suffering & are finally married. The board would only allow the film if the marriage was taken out as that was to admit that sin could end happily. The lovers must be punished. This makes me wish that circular which I send had contained more of its leading article especially that sentence charging Bishops with atheism.⁴³

This letter demonstrates Yeats’s anger at the uncompromising Catholic morality of the Board, which very much reflected the standard set by the first Film Censor James Montgomery, who knew little about film but took the Ten Commandments as his code.⁴⁴ Although Montgomery accepted that the theatre might attract “a sophisticated adult audience,” he felt that cinemagoers required his paternalistic interventions.⁴⁵ The narrative

of the film Yeats describes in his letter raises a number of the themes that the Censor found most disturbing, such as adultery, female sexuality, and the destabilising of the marriage union.⁴⁶ Films examined by the Appeal Board during this period included one that bears a striking comparison to the content of Yeats's letter: D. W. Griffith's *The White Rose* (1924), a melodrama starring Ivor Novello and Mae Marsh. The plot of *The White Rose* concerns a novice clergyman, Beaugarde (Novello), and his affair with the socially inferior Bessie (Marsh), who becomes pregnant out of wedlock as a result of their affair. On the brink of marrying the more "suitable" Marie (Carol Dempster), Beaugarde renounces his religious ambitions and marries Bessie. For Montgomery, who rejected the film in July 1924, Griffith's work was no more than "a story of seduction wrapped in unhealthy sentimental twaddle," which celebrated a vulgar affair at the expense of religious faith.⁴⁷

It seems ironic that this relatively innocuous melodrama was banned in Ireland, given that Griffith's far more controversial films had been shown with great success in the decade before the Censorship of Films Act. *The Birth of a Nation* (1915)—banned during the same period in France for its offensive racial stereotyping—was screened in Ireland to large audiences, and was described as a "remarkable picture [...] intensely interesting from beginning to end, and realistic beyond anything of the kind ever brought under the notice of the public."⁴⁸ It is also hard to imagine that Griffith's follow-up, *Intolerance* (1916), would have passed under Montgomery's rule, given its potentially anti-Catholic insinuations. Yet when it showed at the Bohemian Picture Theatre in 1918, it was heralded as a "masterpiece."⁴⁹

Naturally, the climate of rigorous censorship presided over by Montgomery stemmed from anxieties about the cinema's potential to influence the behaviour of its

audience members. Even prior to the 1923 Censorship Act, there was evidence of public fears about the power of film. News reports described picture palaces as fiendish influences, attributing petty thefts to the portrayal of immorality on the silent screen.⁵⁰ More comically, in 1936 the *Irish Times* offered an unsettling report from the Fruit and Vegetables Tribunal in Dublin, where it was declared that “the reasons for the fall in the demand for apples during recent years was a distaste for cooking on the part of the modern girl, caused by the lure of the cinema and the dance hall. Canned fruit was supplanting cooking apples.”⁵¹ Clearly, it was not merely the content of individual films but the cinema as an institution that was viewed, in some quarters, as a threat to the hegemony of Irish society. Although censorship at the Abbey and in the film industry operated very differently, the subtle parallels between the two were underlined by the fact that Richard Hayes, appointed as a member of the Abbey Board in 1934, was chosen to replace Montgomery as Film Censor in 1940, drawing Irish theatre and cinema into even closer political proximity.

Yeats, Robinson, and the Film Industry

During the censorious 1920s, the overwhelming majority of films screened in Ireland, as in the UK, were produced by Hollywood. Neither country possessed the infrastructure or technological capabilities to support a substantial domestic industry.⁵² In 1927, the British government attempted to remedy the issue by passing the Cinematograph Films Act. This legislation was largely created to reinvigorate the flagging British film industry through the introduction of quotas for distributors and exhibitors, with the latter obligated to make sure that 5% of its films screened were British, with an increase each year until it reached

20% in 1936.⁵³ As Stuart Hanson has pointed out, this law was also an important piece of rhetoric, imbued with nationalist and protectionist ideas designed to curb the cultural dominance of America.⁵⁴ Across the border, the Irish Censor James Montgomery admitted that, in his mind, the real danger posed by the cinema was “not the Anglicisation of Ireland, but the Los Angelesation of Ireland.”⁵⁵

At the same time as this legislation was passing into law in the UK, Yeats was becoming involved in some rather intriguing projects. On 14 May 1927, he chaired a meeting of a “Provisional Committee” to advise an outfit called British Authors Productions on Irish films, and led another meeting of the same kind on 9 June 1927.⁵⁶ Yeats’s letters from the period offer valuable contexts for these meetings. On 17 May 1927, Yeats wrote to his wife, George, with the following description: “Present film project is— W.B.Y. Chairman of advisory body & so with ex-officio post on technical committee. Technical committee — Lennox, Arthur Shields (to be in London Film Studio for six weeks), Montgomery [*sic*].”⁵⁷ A second letter to Lady Gregory on 11 June announced that “[Lennox] is also to see the film people.”⁵⁸ Although these meetings have been largely passed over by scholars, they pertain to an extraordinary scheme designed to involve Ireland’s leading literary figures in the work of a new film unit called British Authors Productions, which was affiliated with the larger film company British Incorporated Pictures. Yeats, Lennox Robinson, and others, were invited to advise the company on particular aspects of filmmaking that dealt with Irish subjects. The Cinematograph Films Act had ignited enthusiasm for British cinema, and British Incorporated Pictures was established in March 1927 with a one million pound start-up capital in the hope that it would become the cornerstone of filmmaking in the UK.⁵⁹

British Incorporated Pictures began life with lofty ambitions, and the intention to

“found a British Hollywood.”⁶⁰ It was led by Ralph J. Pugh, who acquired grounds at Wembley (35 acres) and planned to convert the Palace of Engineering into the world’s biggest film studio. According to Pugh, the new grounds would permit “thirty film ‘shooting’ spaces in simultaneous use.”⁶¹ The Wembley studios were characterised as a great potential rival to the American film industry. These plans were met with real excitement in the press, with the *Guardian* speculating that “the Wembley lake, on which the trippers used to make the tour of the Empire, will be the setting of many a terrible event on the water.”⁶² Such comments implicitly connected the modern (domestic) cinema to a glorified imperial past, reflecting in part the way that the Film Company of Ireland was used to deliver nationalist myths, albeit in that case with anti-colonial subtexts.

The involvement of the Abbey directors is therefore highly charged in political terms. It is of real historical significance that those overseeing Ireland’s national theatre, an institution apparently dedicated to the preservation of authentic Irish literary culture, should become associated with this resolutely British organisation. However, materials in the Thomas Bodkin collection of the Trinity College Dublin archives shed a light on the particular nature of the work Yeats and his colleagues were to undertake, along with the personal controversies and factions that emerged amongst the members of the Board. A letter from Ralph Pugh to Bodkin, who agreed to join the Provisional Committee, reveals Pugh’s confidence that “Ireland is destined to play a very large and important part in the development of film production.”⁶³ Minutes from the meetings of the General Committee suggest that Yeats, Robinson and others were brought on board in an advisory capacity, with the additional prospect of being involved in film projects made under the auspices of “British Authors.”⁶⁴ Yeats’s role on the committee, which also included Walter Starkie, Josephine McNeill, and the Gaelic writer “An Seabac”, was to advise the British company

on “matters relating to all films dealing with Irish life and character”: subject, authors, players and production.⁶⁵ Furthermore, a sub-committee was set up (referenced in Yeats’s letter) in order to shape the film material itself, helping authors to prepare Irish scenarios and assisting British Authors in the securing of actors resident in Ireland (most likely, of course, to be actors engaged at the Abbey).⁶⁶ From the content of Yeats’s letter, it seems that this sub-committee would consist of Robinson, Arthur Shields, who was a prominent Abbey actor and film star, and finally the Film Censor, James Montgomery.

Among the documents in the Bodkin collection relating to this particular scheme are a number of letters between Bodkin, Josephine McNeill and Lennox Robinson. McNeill, who had a successful career as a diplomat, was wary of what she called the “clique” on the General Committee – referring no doubt to the Abbey Theatre contingent.⁶⁷ On 16 May 1927, McNeill wrote a letter to Robinson in which she opined that the General Committee should receive formal applications from individuals desiring to become members of the Sub-Committee, presumably to prevent the positions going automatically to the Abbey figures initially proposed: Robinson, Arthur Shields and Dorothy Travers-Smith.⁶⁸ She also wrote to Thomas Bodkin around the same time, describing how Yeats had called on her to discuss the proposal and had “mouthed a good deal,” which she follows up with some cutting remarks:

However, I came to the conclusion that as far as I can see at the moment — much of his mouthings do not amount to any more than an expression of his infatuation with himself as the guardian of the “l’art pour l’art” idea in Ireland. He allows himself some disciples, among whom he hoped to count you and the rest of us he regards as people occupied with vulgar ideas of habitual prestige and political

expediency! As the sole mouthpiece — as he does us the honour to believe — of the l’art pour l’art notion, he has to talk specially loud to drown the voices of the vulgar mob.⁶⁹

This letter, whilst scornful of Yeats’s aesthetic ideals, does suggest that Yeats was heavily invested in the British Authors project, at least to the extent that it would move him to “mouth” about the value of art in Ireland and his role in ensuring the authentic portrayal of the nation on screen. Certainly, McNeill emphasises the importance of retaining Yeats as a “highly influential but not wholly dominant member of the committee,” and expresses her relief that she can “count on [Bodkin] to keep things right.”⁷⁰ Even during this early stage of negotiations, it is clear that the Abbey members, and Yeats in particular, were asserting their centrality to the British Authors project, and to the development of Anglo-Irish film production.

This could have been the beginning of a momentous collaboration between a globally successful British film production company and the Abbey Theatre, with Yeats and Lennox Robinson at the forefront of shaping representations of Ireland on screen, having done the same on stage. However, as McNeill fretted in a note to Robinson, British Authors was a “completely untried company” with no proven capacity in successful film production.⁷¹ Her anxiety about the feasibility of the proposal was, in this case, justified. The plans to build the studios at Wembley never came to fruition, after Pugh and his investor failed to secure the funds. In May 1928, the grounds were sold on.⁷² British Incorporated Pictures, despite its highly promising origins, was ultimately a short-lived venture.

This was not, however, the end of the Abbey’s relationship with the cinema. In

August 1930, a film by the Irish amateur director J. N. G. Davidson, a student at the University of Cambridge, was screened at the Peacock Theatre. The Peacock had been opened in 1927 as the Abbey's experimental wing, located in a small studio upstairs in the Abbey buildings. It mostly staged performances by the Dublin Drama League, who brought avant-garde European drama to Dublin audiences for the first time. The work of the League was effectively replaced by the Gate Theatre Studio (later the Gate Theatre) in October 1928, when the latter staged its first production at the Peacock. One of the most imaginative productions at the Peacock during this period was Denis Johnston's *The Old Lady Says No!*, which was aesthetically indebted to the formal qualities of the cinema.⁷³ Indeed, Johnston believed that the cinema had offered theatre directors an unprecedented opportunity to escape the pressures of realism and to experiment with form and narrative. Certainly, the Peacock, also home to Ninette de Valois's Abbey School of Ballet, was a space conducive to the mingling of art forms, promoting modern ideas about theatre and performance.

On 25 August 1930, Davidson's *By Accident* was screened at the Peacock alongside three other Irish films: a documentary by Mary Manning called *Bank Holiday*, and two shorts, *Pathetic Gazette* and *Screening in the Rain*.⁷⁴ Davidson's film is an introspective study of melancholy, detailing the unfortunate death of its young male protagonist, who finds his life limited by his own "temperamental morbidity" and ultimately kills himself "by accident."⁷⁵ With assistance from P. J. Carolan, an actor and stage manager at the Abbey, Davidson had shot the interiors for *By Accident* in the Abbey Theatre itself.⁷⁶ This single film is a significant example of Ireland's national theatre and its filmmakers working in concert. Not only were the Abbey buildings home to the exhibition of new cinema, but they were, in this case, the very site of its conception.

There was a great deal of enthusiasm surrounding this screening in 1930, not least from Lennox Robinson, who introduced the films at the Peacock. In his remarks, he recognised a moment of transition for Irish drama, calling on young theatre directors to turn their creative attention to the art of the cinema in order to rescue it from the hands of capitalists. Although *By Accident* was an amateur piece of filmmaking, it represented, for Robinson, a step in the right direction for the Irish cinema.

There had been Irish pictures made before but this was different. This picture contained more feeling in any ten feet than there was in any hundred feet of pictures across the street. [Robinson] looked on the production not as a great achievement, but as the beginning of an intelligent making of Irish pictures by intelligent Irishmen. He hoped that that night was the beginning of a real Irish art of the cinema.⁷⁷

Robinson's speech marked the first attempt to form the Irish Film Society, which ultimately came together in 1936. The Peacock screenings signify an important historical moment for the Abbey and its relationship with the cinema. Throughout the first decades of the twentieth century, there were a number of attempts to create an appetite for Irish filmmaking, and at each stage, members of the Abbey—its actors, directors, founders—were complicit, even instrumental, in such efforts.

Abbey Actors go to Hollywood

Despite repeated attempts to build on the early promise of Irish cinematic endeavours, from the Film Company of Ireland to Yeats and Robinson's agreement with British Authors,

there was little by way of an indigenous film industry by 1930. A lack of awareness regarding the recent history of Irish cinema allowed Douglas Fairbanks to remark, during a 1933 visit to the Abbey: “If you ever start an Irish film industry [...] you will certainly have good material to work with.”⁷⁸ Of course, there had already been ventures of this kind, but they had been short-lived, and hardly successful enough to reach the attention of a major Hollywood star. Fairbanks’s comments, however, reflected a widespread feeling that, if there were to be an Irish cinema industry, the Abbey would be its natural source. Travelling to Ireland to make a documentary in 1936, the director Richard de Rochemont declared that “the film possibilities in Ireland were virtually unlimited,” adding that all that the nation needed was a good film laboratory.⁷⁹ Echoing the sentiments of Fairbanks, he concluded by praising the Irish dramatic tradition, and Yeats’s Abbey in particular.

The Abbey Theatre company was known all over the world. Irish actors and dramatists were also world-famous. The question of dramatic acting should present no difficulty to the development of the Irish film industry.⁸⁰

Whilst comments like this did not precipitate the emergence of an indigenous cinema tradition at the Abbey, they did mirror a growing trend of Abbey performers turning to film acting during this period. The Abbey Minute Books reveal that the lure of the screen was creating issues for the Directors, who found that their actors were increasingly preoccupied with impressing casting agents, or taking a period of time away from the theatre to concentrate on film projects.

On 14 February 1936, whilst preparing a production of O’Casey’s *The Plough and the Stars*, the Abbey Directors discussed an unsettling case of an actor attempting to

canvass for a particular role.⁸¹ Shelah Richards, a regular member of the Abbey contingent and the wife of the playwright Denis Johnston, had asked to play the part of Nora Clitheroe. It was a role she had already performed on numerous occasions at the Abbey, although it appears that in this case it had initially been meant for Eileen Crowe. F. R. Higgins, a dramatist on the Board, complained that Richards performed for the Abbey only through self-interest, demonstrated by the fact that she had appealed for this role because she knew that a casting director from a film company was likely to be in the audience. Evidently, she hoped to use her stage work as a means of securing employment in the film industry. Those present at the meeting agreed to restore the part to Crowe as a matter of principle, and declared that such canvassing from actors would not be tolerated in the future.⁸²

This case is merely illustrative of a wider shift in relations between the Abbey Theatre and the film industry. Not only were actors eager to participate in screen projects, but film companies were also interested in securing the Abbey's cooperation for adaptations of Irish plays. In the same year, an agent from R. K. O. Film Cooperation negotiated with the theatre to obtain the services of a number of actors for a film version of *The Plough and the Stars*, to be made in Hollywood. Minutes from a meeting of 28 February 1936 reveal that R. K. O. was "anxious to get these players chiefly as a means of using the name of the Abbey Theatre in their publicity."⁸³ Richard de Rochemont was correct when he asserted that the strength of the Abbey was internationally recognised. There was a good deal of excitement surrounding this adaptation, but the Abbey Directors were not pleased when they discovered that Denis O'Dea was trying to get a part in the film through his agent, without informing the Board first.⁸⁴ Although these forays into cinema were valuable to the Abbey in publicity terms, they also took the theatre's best actors away from Dublin.

As others have documented, many Abbey actors began to establish their film careers during this period.⁸⁵ Sara Allgood secured roles in Alfred Hitchcock's *Blackmail* (1929) and *Juno and the Paycock* (1930), and later moved to Hollywood permanently to try to capitalise on the success of the Abbey's American tours.⁸⁶ Cyril Cusack, Barry Fitzgerald, and Arthur Shields also turned increasingly to the cinema, playing small parts in major films including *Bringing up Baby* (1937), and taking on more significant roles in *The Plough and the Stars* (1936), and later *The Quiet Man* (1952). In order to anticipate further demand for its actors from Hollywood, the Abbey Board decided to take control of the terms under which its company could do film work. As many of its actors were requesting time away to shoot screen projects, the Abbey decided in May 1936 to revise its players' contracts. The new contracts stipulated that the Abbey had the right to act as the agent for all of its actors, and to arrange the terms under which its actors could take up such work.⁸⁷ This meant that the management could keep a rein on the number of actors away at any given time, ensuring that the theatre would still be able to run consistently with the majority of its cast. The change to the contracts also resulted in the Abbey having a closer relationship with representatives from the film industry, as it now held the power to negotiate the release of its actors to film companies, rather than leaving this in the hands of individual agents. Ultimately, the events surrounding *The Plough and the Stars* drew the Abbey into a more direct engagement with Hollywood.

Upon its release, *The Plough and the Stars*, directed by John Ford, seemed to cement the Abbey's new relationship with international cinema. Arthur Shields was commended for his work as assistant director, and one reviewer noted that "although made entirely in Hollywood, the true Dublin scene and atmosphere are captured."⁸⁸ Another "first view" from the *Irish Times* correspondent confirmed the superiority of the Abbey

players—among them Eileen Crowe, Barry Fitzgerald, F. J. McCormick, and J. M. Kerrigan, former director with the Film Company of Ireland. The writer acknowledged that the American leads were “fine [...] but the Abbey actors steal the picture.”⁸⁹ And it was not just the Irish press that registered enthusiasm for the work of the Abbey actors. The *Guardian* suggested that John Ford was creating a “tradition of Irish pictures” in American cinema, since he had already adapted Liam O’Flaherty’s *The Informer* (1935), commenting that it was “a pleasure to hear [the] voices [of the Abbey actors], to experience not only the music of the words but the understanding of them which these players feel.”⁹⁰ *The Plough and the Stars*, one of the most successful plays in the Abbey’s repertoire, marks an important transnational collaboration between the Irish theatre and Hollywood, demonstrating how the Abbey, under the direction of Yeats, Robinson, and others, prepared its actors for the demands of the cinema.

After Yeats, and Ardmore

Following on from this period of Hollywood success, the Abbey and its actors looked in a position to become more involved in domestic film production. On 28 April 1938, Ernest Blythe reported back to the Board about a meeting he had attended with representatives from the Ministry of Industry and Commerce, who had raised the possibility of making films in Ireland under the control of the Abbey.⁹¹ The government was keen to build a studio in Dublin, to ensure that both interior and exterior scenes could be shot on Irish soil. It was proposed at the meeting that the films would come under British quota regulations in order to guarantee a certain circulation.⁹² At the time, the Minister for Industry and Commerce was Seán Lemass, whose enthusiasm for an indigenous film industry continued

into the 1940s and 1950s, despite the repeated setbacks that characterised attempts to set the wheels in motion.⁹³ In this case, the excitement surrounding these plans for the Abbey did not result in serious financial investment, which meant that once again, hopes turned quickly into disappointment. As Rockett observes, Ireland was very much a peripheral territory for film production and distribution; or, a “branch plant of a branch plant,” in terms of its relationship to Britain and the primary market of America.⁹⁴

In his lifetime, Yeats did not see the growth of a prominent Irish film industry, but he and his colleagues at the Abbey undoubtedly fomented a culture of theatrical innovation and collaboration, which ultimately paved the way for later cinematic endeavours. At almost every stage in the early history of cinema in Ireland, the Abbey was involved in writing, acting, and production, from J. M. Kerrigan’s short silent films in 1916, to the planned partnership between Yeats and British Authors that failed to gather steam, to the celebration of Abbey actors in Hollywood films of the 1930s and 1940s. In the 1950s, discussions between the Abbey’s chairman, Ernest Blythe, and the film producer Emmet Dalton sowed the seeds for Ireland’s first permanent film studio: Ardmore. This studio emerged from Dalton’s desire to adapt Irish plays for the screen, creating “an Irish film industry powered by the Abbey Theatre.”⁹⁵ In reality, however, Ardmore operated not as a production company but as “a piece of industrial equipment which, it was hoped, would attract film producers to use it and thus create local employment.”⁹⁶ It hired very few Irish film technicians, and did not manage to generate a lively culture of film production as had been initially proposed. In 1963, the Industrial Credit Company placed it in receivership.⁹⁷

What emerges from this history of Yeats’s Abbey Theatre and cinema in Ireland is a narrative of tantalising potential turned repeatedly to financial failure. There were certainly hopes that the Abbey could provide a new Irish film industry with a model for

success and cultural prestige. Indeed, even after Ardmore had fallen well short of expectations, there were suggestions that Ireland's theatre could spur on fresh cinematic talent, despite the Abbey itself suffering from Yeats's death in 1939 and the policies of his successor, Ernest Blythe.

Now with the Abbey ready to rise from its ashes with its present artistic rating sadly lowered, there may be a possibility of renewing the theatrical life of the country round a national theatre and a national film industry.⁹⁸

Such comments confirm the powerful status that Yeats's Abbey held in Ireland's cultural life. Although Yeats is not traditionally associated with the cinema, his role in proposed film projects and the success of Abbey players in Hollywood is surprisingly far-reaching. The failure of the British Authors endeavour is of particular historical interest: had it succeeded, it would have constituted a significant partnership between Ireland's foremost theatre and the largest film company in the world. Yet these persistent efforts by members of the Abbey to make connections with the world of cinema, whether in domestic production or foreign adaptation, demonstrate a so far underestimated willingness to modernise and diversify the theatre's ambitions. Numerous Abbey actors, including J. M. Kerrigan, Arthur Shields, and Barry Fitzgerald, went to Hollywood during and after the 1930s, and although they often played minor roles alongside major stars, their work cemented the name of the Abbey Theatre in the transatlantic cinematic discourse. Ruminating on the fact that many of her colleagues had remained in the US after travelling there for film work, the Abbey actor Siobhan McKenna described her arrival in Los Angeles and her subsequent desire to go back to Ireland, completing the emigrant's return

foregrounded in the nostalgia of early Irish cinema: “Years later I went to Hollywood to make a television film. It was neither city nor country and the smog was terrible. I thought: ‘My God, where did I get my wisdom?’”⁹⁹

¹ WBY to Lady Gregory, 23 January [1915], *CL IntelLex* 2588.

² Yeats, “The Theatre,” in *The Major Works*, 366.

³ Dias, “Art Notes,” 352.

⁴ Yeats, “Poetry and Tradition,” in *Essays and Introductions*, 255.

⁵ Barton, *Irish National Cinema*, 11.

⁶ Morash, *A History of the Media*, 106.

⁷ For the background on the opening of the Volta see Rockett, *Cinema and Ireland*, 5-6.

⁸ Ellmann, *James Joyce*, 300-301.

⁹ Yeats uses the phrase “leprosy of the modern” in “The Poetry of Sir Samuel Ferguson,” in *Uncollected Prose I*, 104.

¹⁰ Eglinton, *Literary Ideals in Ireland*, 43.

¹¹ Gibbons, *Transformations*, 165.

¹² Gibbons, “Projecting the Nation,” 208.

¹³ Yeats, “Nora Hopper,” in *Uncollected Prose II*, 127.

¹⁴ Emilie Morin, for example, has built on the work of Yeats scholars such as Ronald Schuchard to show the significance of the radio to the growth of Yeats’s “imaginative horizons.” See “W. B. Yeats and Broadcasting.”

¹⁵ Rockett, *Cinema and Ireland*, 104.

¹⁶ Condon, *Early Irish Cinema*, 80.

¹⁷ “Cinema Notes,” *The Irish Times*, 28 January 1922.

¹⁸ Barton, *Irish National Cinema*, 38.

¹⁹ For a comprehensive account of the Abbey’s foundation and history, see Welch, *Form and Pressure*.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

²¹ Woods, *Visions of Empire*, 22.

²² *Ibid.*, 7-8.

²³ Barton, *Irish National Cinema*, 8.

²⁴ Morash, *A History of the Media*, 154.

²⁵ Yeats made his reference to “the unworthy instruments of tyranny and violence” whilst speaking about the 1907 *Playboy* riots. See “Opening Speech,” in *Uncollected Prose II*, 351; WBY to John Quinn, 23 May [1916], *CL InteLex* 2960.

²⁶ WBY to Lady Gregory, 27 April [1916], *CL InteLex* 2934.

²⁷ Rockett, *Cinema and Ireland*, 17.

²⁸ “The Film Company of Ireland,” *The Irish Times*, 18 August 1916, 2.

²⁹ “Irish Film Production,” *The Irish Times*, 20 June 1916, 6.

³⁰ Condon, *Early Irish Cinema*, 16.

³¹ Lance Pettitt applies political theory to his analysis of an Irish national cinema in *Screening Ireland*, 28-30. On the one hand, he suggests that the “imagined” relations that bond individuals together within a nation are strengthened by the “collective screen fiction” of a national cinema. On the other hand, the cinema can operate to subvert nationalist ideologies, problematising the hegemony of the state with “more liberal, diverse and inclusive identities.”

³² “Irishman’s Diary,” *The Irish Times*, 23 March 1933, 4.

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- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre*, 20.
- ³⁵ Arrington, *Half Pence*, 7. See also “I Sing what was Lost.”
- ³⁶ Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre*, 20 (my emphasis).
- ³⁷ Magennis quoted in Rockett, *Irish Film Censorship*, 66 (my emphasis).
- ³⁸ “Plan to Save the Drama,” *The Irish Times*, 21 September 1936, 8.
- ³⁹ Montgomery quoted in Rockett, “Protecting the Family,” 287.
- ⁴⁰ Foster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life*, II, 228.
- ⁴¹ Yeats, *Senate Speeches*, 52.
- ⁴² Rockett, *Irish Film Censorship*, 68.
- ⁴³ WBY to Lady Ottoline Morrell, 25 July [1924], *CL InteLex* 4597.
- ⁴⁴ Rockett, “Protecting the Family,” 285. Original citation is Thomas P. Gallagher, in Devane, *Irish Cinema Handbook*, 93.
- ⁴⁵ Montgomery, quoted in Rockett, “Protecting the Family,” 287.
- ⁴⁶ Rockett, *Irish Film Censorship*.
- ⁴⁷ “The White Rose,” Irish Film Censor’s Records, Irish Film & TV Research Online, accessed June 28, 2016, <https://www.tcd.ie/irishfilm/censor/show.php?fid=22>.
- ⁴⁸ “The Birth of a Nation,” *The Irish Times*, 20 September 1916, 3.
- ⁴⁹ “Article 5—No Title,” *The Irish Times*, 1 October 1918, 3.
- ⁵⁰ “Education by Pictures,” *The Irish Times*, 23 August 1913, 6.
- ⁵¹ “The Lure of the Cinema,” *The Irish Times*, 28 March 1936, 5.
- ⁵² Hanson, *From Silent Screen to Multi-Screen*, 45.
- ⁵³ Wood, *British Films, 1927-1939*, 8.
- ⁵⁴ Hanson, *From Silent Screen to Multi-Screen*, 45-46.

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- ⁵⁵ Montgomery, quoted in Rockett, *Irish Film Censorship*, 19.
- ⁵⁶ Kelly, *Yeats Chronology*, 254; 255.
- ⁵⁷ WBY to George Yeats, 17 May [1927], *CL InteLex* 4997.
- ⁵⁸ WBY to Lady Gregory, 11 June [1927], *CL InteLex* 5007.
- ⁵⁹ Wood, *British Films*, 5.
- ⁶⁰ “British Films: A New Producing Organisation,” *The Guardian*, 16 March 1927, 14.
- ⁶¹ “World’s Largest Film Studio: British Venture at Wembley,” *The Guardian*, 16 June 1927, 20.
- ⁶² “Our London Correspondence: Wembley,” *The Guardian*, 16 June 1927, 10.
- ⁶³ I am very grateful to John Kelly for pointing me in the direction of these materials in the Thomas Bodkin Collection at Trinity College Dublin. TCD MS 6963/174.
- ⁶⁴ TCD MS 6963/180; 188
- ⁶⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid.
- ⁶⁷ TCD MS 6963/181.
- ⁶⁸ TCD MS 6963/182.
- ⁶⁹ TCD MS 6963/186.
- ⁷⁰ Ibid.
- ⁷¹ TCD MS 6963/184.
- ⁷² Wood, *British Films*, 9-10.
- ⁷³ Sisson, “A Note on What Happened,” 141.
- ⁷⁴ Details of the Peacock screening can be found in Trinity College Dublin’s digital Film Index. See the record for “By Accident,” Irish Film & TV Research Online, accessed June 28, 2016, <https://www.tcd.ie/irishfilm/showfilm.php?fid=56625>.

⁷⁵ “Irish Amateur Films: A New Venture in Dublin,” *The Irish Times*, 26 August 1930, 6.

⁷⁶ “By Accident,” Irish Film & TV Research Online.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Fairbanks, quoted in “British Films Praised: Views of Douglas Fairbanks,” *The Irish Times*, 7 November 1933, 4.

⁷⁹ “Filmmaking in Ireland: Need of a Good Laboratory,” *The Irish Times*, 28 September 1936, 2.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ “Meeting of 14 February 1936,” *Abbey Theatre Minute Book, 1936-1937*.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ “Meeting of 28 February 1936,” *Abbey Theatre Minute Book, 1936-1937*, 25.

⁸⁴ “Meeting of 15 May, 1936,” *Abbey Theatre Minute Book, 1936-1937*, 65.

⁸⁵ Caughie and Rockett note that a number of Abbey players combined their stage work with film roles, although they were mainly given small parts. See *The Companion*, 12-13.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 19.

⁸⁷ New contracts are outlined in “Meeting of 22 May 1936,” *Abbey Theatre Minute Book, 1936-1937*, 68.

⁸⁸ “New Irish Film,” *The Irish Times*, 12 December 1936, 6.

⁸⁹ “The Plough and the Stars,” *The Irish Times*, 6 February 1937, 10.

⁹⁰ “‘The Plough and the Stars’ Filmed,” *The Guardian*, 6 February 1937, 12.

⁹¹ “Meeting of 29 April 1938,” *Abbey Theatre Minute Book, 1937-1939*, 84.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Rockett, *Cinema and Ireland*, 96.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 95.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 104.

⁹⁶ Marcus, "The Irrelevance of Ardmore Studios," *The Irish Times*, 28 March 1967, 8.

⁹⁷ Rockett, *Cinema and Ireland*, 101.

⁹⁸ "An Aisle for the Abbey," *The Irish Times*, 19 June 1965, 9.

⁹⁹ McKenna, "I Modelled Joan on my Mother," in *Interviews and Recollections*, 210.

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