

THE 5TH HIPPODROME FESTIVAL OF SILENT CINEMA

Where movies and music come alive!

WEDNESDAY 18TH MARCH - SUNDAY 22ND MARCH 2015

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Sunday 22nd March | 16:30

The Film Explainer presents...

Dr Jekyll & Mr Hyde

Accompanied live by Andy Cannon (storyteller),
Wendy Weatherby (cello) and Frank McLaughlin (pipes/guitar)

'Silent' cinema was never truly silent. Those putting on shows were always wary of plunging audiences into darkness and complete quiet and so gaps between films and the progress of the films themselves would be punctuated by a combination of music, sound effects, and the human voice, all of which worked to bring immediacy and realism to what was on the screen.

The film 'explainer', 'lecturer', 'elocutionist', 'raconteur'- the precise title varied according to personal preference and the needs of the performance- was a key figure in the presentation of early film. Their role drew on long-established practice in the presentation of visual entertainments. The magic lantern show, through which stories were told through a succession of still images, relied on a commentator to guide its audience through the subject and to add drama and colour to the occasion. Such events combined education and entertainment in a manner long familiar to audiences: Temperance Societies gathered support through entertainments at which reformed drunkards proved their sobriety by reciting poetry to rapt audiences. In 1910 and 1911, Edinburgh cinema-goers were treated to exhibitions covering the lives of the recently deceased Edward VII and the newly crowned George V. In this case, the lecturer was the Irish peer, William Geoffrey Bouchard de Montmorency, Sixth Viscount Mountmorres, whose performance drew praise from *The Scotsman* as "He possess[es] the gift of vivid description, and his running commentary on every depicted item... is not only happily phrased, but always interesting and instructive".

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Here, the tone would be suitably reserved and reverential, but the varied nature of early film shows would often test the explainer's ability to move seamlessly from one subject to another. Imagine the challenge posed by consecutive items on the programme of the Operetta House, Edinburgh, in March 1901: the funeral procession of Queen Victoria, followed by the Scottish Cup semi-final at Tynecastle between Heart of Midlothian and Hibernian.

Skilled presenters acquired celebrity status. The 'raconteur' Thomas J. West enlightened audiences across the central belt and the east of Scotland with descriptions of scenes from across the Empire as well as the 'sensational and fantastic' picture 'A Trip to the Sun'. In Aberdeen, the 'elocutionist' Dove Paterson moved from dramatic recitation to film presentation, offering "dramatic, picturesque, and illuminative comments...on the pictures as they pass". He went further however in securing the skills of a female elocutionist, Marie Pascoe, later to become Mrs Paterson. This husband and wife team "spoke to" the pictures, adding dialogue sprinkled with references to local and topical events. The trade paper *The Bioscope* was hard put "to say which attracts the crowds, the elocutionary efforts of Mr and Mrs Paterson, or the pictures".

For others, the answer was clear and the Patersons provided a model taken up by other Aberdeen exhibitors, most notably Bert and Nellie Gates at the city's Star Picture Palace, where the vogue for speaking to pictures endured until 1926. By that point, the ability of directors and cameramen to construct stories that could be understood without vocal commentary, and the growing sophistication of audiences increasingly used to the visual presentation of narratives, had largely removed the need for the explainer. Indeed, six years earlier, at which point cinemas in the west of Aberdeen were in the process of abandoning the use of elocutionists, the local correspondent of *The Scottish Kinema Record* had observed, "I must say that the audience that requires dialogue to a picture nowadays seems to me to be lacking in intelligence".

If their time was seen to have gone in all but the east end of Aberdeen, the explainers had played a crucial part in creating an audience for cinema, relating the new recreation to more established entertainment forms and, until cinema developed its own "language", making film intelligible to as wide an audience as possible. Their role in cementing cinema in the affections of the public deserves to be celebrated.

By Dr Trevor Griffiths, University of Edinburgh



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