

**INSIDE THE CINEMA TRAIN:
Britain, Empire and Modernity in the Twentieth Century**
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On March 12, 1924, the first British cinema train was unveiled at King's Cross Station in London. The movie coach made tangible both the historic and aesthetic intersections between film and rail technologies. In the motion picture carriage, the train's rhythm on the track was inflected by the shutter gate's whir; twenty-four frames per second marked time's passing alongside the minutes in the railway timetable. Audiences in the cinema watched films inside a moving coach, which altered how film and rail technologies intervened in everyday life by marrying two ordinary spaces in one architectural site. Inside the space, which transformed movement and vision, spectators simultaneously travelled through both imagined and actual landscapes. A product of Britain's particular experience of modernity, the movie coach both was formed by, and contributed to, the nation's expanding networks of visual consumption. Patrons' views and movements from inside the train were commoditized twice over, as customers paid to be passengers and spectators in the same space.

In this article, I examine how, and why, the spaces and practices of the cinema and the train physically converged by contextualizing the site's emergence within the railway and moving images' shared history. My examination of the movie coach frames an investigation into broader cultural changes taking place in Britain in the early- to mid-twentieth century, because the film carriage not only registers alterations in industrial practices, but also was a space in which tradition and innovation converged. The cinema train was a site that offered customers a new way to experience the world, yet also was an architecture in which an imperialist rhetoric was expounded in the newsreels projected onscreen (for example, in the 1938 British Pathé film *New Berth for Bananas*).¹ Similar frictions were prevalent in British society, as the nation witnessed both social improvements in the aftermath of the First World

War, with suffrage expanding between 1918 and 1928, and also stasis, in that myths about British colonial supremacy were perpetuated in popular culture.ⁱ As such, the history of mobile screens and cinema trains enables us to interrogate the tensions between the nation's imperial, hierarchical antecedents and the more socially inclusive future that was conceived by the British government after the Second World War.

The article thus offers an archaeological inquiry of British media and their mobility that situates the cinema and the train in a narrative about empire, technology and modernity. I propose that developments in filmic rail technologies are indicative of material transformations to public space that occurred in the first half of the twentieth century, because the carriage-auditorium was both inclusive (admission, in theory, was open to all patrons regardless of class or gender) and exclusive (as the newsreels screened in the coaches defined a national identity restricted to particular groups). Hence the movie coach was a physical manifestation of the frictions between hierarchy and democracy, individualism and egalitarianism, which were evident in British culture throughout the era. Disparities between the space's projected inventiveness (evidenced in a 1935 British Pathé newsreel film that reported the film carriage's inception), and the actual images projected inside the auditorium (which were jingoistic in tone), allude to anxieties about the nation's changing international role.ⁱⁱ

The first part of the article explores the shared histories of entertainment media and vehicles to contextualize the coming of the film carriage. In the second section, I look inside the 1935 carriage-auditorium to examine its design and function. I ask: Who used this space, and why? What was the purpose of the movie coach? How does the cinema train help us think

ⁱ For example, in motion pictures produced by the Crown Film Unit. See Martin Stollery, "The Last Roll of the Dice: *Morning, Noon and Night*, Empire and the Historiography of the Crown Film Unit" in *Film and the End of Empire*, ed. Lee Grieveson and Colin McCabe (London: British Film Institute, 2011), 35-54.

ⁱⁱ The cinema carriage was recorded in *Cinema on Train* (British Pathé, UK, 1935).

about Britain's projection of modernity in the period? I use contemporary newspaper reports, an extant movie-coach newsreel program, and the films shown inside the train as archives of the nation's contemporary cultural preoccupations. I analyze the aspirations and anxieties that were represented onscreen to interrogate the cinema and the railway's connections both to empire and formations of national identity. Third, I explore the film carriage's post-war incarnations. I examine the technology's transformation from a component in the leisure economy to one in public service, and argue that as Britain's rail network was reconfigured as more publically oriented, the cinema train became redundant. Finally, I conclude by proposing that the cinema train contributed to leisure and information industries that—especially through mobile news media—are manifest in our everyday lives even now.

The Emergence of the Movie Coach

Early cinema's showmen and *actualités* fix film exhibition in a tradition of travel. The movie coach was innovative in that it married two distinct times and spaces to create a new, modern experience. But the technology emerged from a history of mobile cinema that depended upon site-specific screens. Fairground historian Vanessa Toulmin describes how early showmen transported their Bioscopes by train to make profits from provincial audiences.² The middle classes were encouraged to invest in portable cameras and projectors because there was money to be made in expanding the cinema's reach. In 1896, an advertisement appeared in a national newspaper for '[v]itascopes [...] [c]inematographs or [a]nimatographs' (all early types of film projector).³ The complete set—a vitascope, screen, stand, lamp and instructions—promised showmen a 'grand money earner'.⁴ Travel and moving images not only contributed to cinema's distribution, but also featured as a popular movie genre in the form of travelogues, and an early incarnation of the cinema train in the form of Hale's Tours.⁵ Founded in 1904 at the St Louis World Fair, the cinema's ticket booth was designed to

replicate the frontage of a train station, and inside, the auditorium functioned like a carriage.⁶

The rise of permanent cinema spaces in Britain preceded a decline in both phantom rides and mobile theatres.⁷ The 1909 Cinematograph Act contributed to the diminishing numbers of mobile shows, as did the emergence of narrative film, a new cultural understanding of onscreen space (enhanced by cross-cuts and linear editing), and longer shows. Yet mobile cinemas regained popularity during the First World War. Jon Burrows contends that during the war, an estimated 700-800 cinemas closed down in Britain.⁸ Taxation, lack of raw materials and decreased manpower all likely contributed to the auditorium's shrinking numbers. The renewed interest in mobile theatres responded to this problem, as moving auditoriums offered a practical solution to the cinema industry's needs. In 1914, the government equipped the British army with a series of 'travelling cinemas' to show information and propaganda films to the public from the backs of trucks.⁹ By 1920, salespeople had realized the commercial benefits of the 'Motor Cinema' when the proprietors of a new company called for investment to tour films in mining districts where '[m]otion [p]icture [e]ntertainments [did] not exist'.¹⁰

In Russia, the government adapted the mobile cinema for the railway: with vast distances to cover between provincial audiences, the truck was not a viable option. Income was the determining factor in accessing movies in Britain; in Russia, geography was limiting. The agit-train (so-called because it showed 'agitational' films) was the first mobile movie theatre on rails.¹¹ The trains travelled throughout the Soviet countryside to disseminate news and propaganda to those who lived in villages. Tickets for the shows, which took place inside static carriages, totaled 300million in one year.¹² The agit-trains constituted advancements in both rail and film technologies, as the coaches housed not only projectors and screens for viewings, but also cameras and printing equipment. Nevertheless, by 1924, the radio offered a more efficient alternative to the agit-train because it dematerialized communication practices.

While in the UK the British Broadcasting Corporation began radio transmissions in 1922, the bodily experience of modernity continued to fascinate audiences, and the cinema carriage was born in Britain precisely as the agit-train died.

The LNER film carriage was designed to modernize, and thus advertise, the company's cutting edge services in a saturated rail-leisure industry. That the cinematic was experienced on the move made this model (and so Britain by proxy) more advanced than its Soviet counterpart. The cinema carriage was attached to the 'Flying Scotsman' locomotive, enabling the LNER to combine speed (the engine), electricity (the projector) and the moving image. The train and the cinema, which both were manifestations of modernity, already had transformed experiences of time and space in the nineteenth century. The film carriage was a novelty and offered an even newer form of mobility to the visiting passenger-spectator. Audiences in the movie coach both watched and moved through two different spaces, simultaneously travelling in the coach and beyond the screen. The railway and the cinema, each with their own well-established histories, set in motion a new way to experience the world through their architectural intersection.

The train in the 1920s was an integral mechanism in Britain's empire because innovation on the railway was central to the nation's global representation. British companies established rail networks across Asia (through India and Burma), and Africa (through Egypt, Uganda and South Africa) in the nineteenth century, and also financed railways in both North and South America. Trains extended trade routes from ports to production sites, facilitating the efficient transportation of great quantities of goods. In countries exploited by imperial rule, the train symbolized Britain's superiority. However, the railway also was configured as an inclusive space that helped people to rise above their social station. In March 1924, Mr. J H Thomas, Secretary of State for the Dominions, praised the British constitution as one 'that enabled an engine-cleaner of yesterday to be a Secretary-of-State today'.¹³ Thomas, who was

Britain's representative to the colonies (and a former engine-cleaner), thus alluded both to the nation's supremacy, and the more American ideal of personal improvement, in a speech that was fraught with tensions between tradition and social progression.

The railway's role in empire building was emphasized by the 1924 British Empire Exhibition (held at what came to be known as the Wembley Stadium), which included displays put together by Britain and fifty-six of the dominion nations. The event featured a 'Never Stop Railway' to move visitors between each exhibition space, a novelty that mimicked Britain's international rail network.¹⁴ The Exhibition also incorporated stands promoting Britain's business interests, and invited major railway companies, newspapers and manufacturers to demonstrate their technological prowess to visiting foreign dignitaries. Ostriches, RAF airplanes and the LNER's 'Flying Scotsman' (the engine attached to the cinema train and famed for its speed) jostled for space alongside one another. By the 1920s, France, Germany and the United States were surpassing Britain economically and technologically.¹⁵ Yet the movie coach's invention supported the on-going narrative of British supremacy and simultaneously helped further it. Two years later, the Empire Marketing Board (EMB), an initiative set up to encourage people to buy products from the colonies, also showcased mobile cinema's role in shaping Britain's economy. The EMB's film unit, headed by John Grierson, exhibited documentaries in schools to educate children about Britain's international position.¹⁶

By 1924, the recently consolidated 'Big Four' rail companies (LNER, London Scotland and Midland (LMS), Great Western (GWR), and Southern (SR)) faced increasing competition from the road, sea and air: motorcars, liners and airplanes offered faster, more exciting diversions. The train journey had to be set apart: while Britain's roads were not yet ready for mass motoring, advertisers were doing their best to encourage it. Rail networks also had to contend with one another in a fight for custom. As Britain's tourism industry grew, the

four railways had to find new ways to improve and promote their services. In an age when trains predominantly were used for leisure rather than commuting, tourism was imperative to the railway companies' economic survival. Thus the film carriage was an advertising ploy for the LNER, as well as a response to changing modes of transportation. The movie coach invited passengers to rethink the railway spaces they had grown accustomed to and showed there were still new ways to experience train travel.

Inside the LNER movie coach, the specially selected audience of twenty watched the 1923 costume drama *Ashes of Vengeance* on the down journey from London.¹⁷ On the up route from York, the mobile movie theatre premiered *Black Oxen* (1924).¹⁸ The audience comprised officials, the public, and journalists from national, local and trade presses. *The Manchester Guardian* lauded the 'experiment' as 'a first in the history of British railway enterprise'.¹⁹ An article in *The Illustrated London News* was accompanied by two drawings that showed the coach's interior. The first detailed the lantern room, and the second showed the spectators turned toward the screen – the only source of light in the artificially darkened space. A reporter at a local newspaper described an auditorium complete with 'armchairs [...] sensational posters advertising the film,' and a screen 'about half the size of a screen generally found in a small picture house.'²⁰

There were drawbacks to the railway cinema, for there was the 'oscillation inevitable in an end coach' that projectionists had to overcome.²¹ Also there was 'the difficulty of keeping the coach perfectly dark'.²² *The Horsham Times* noted that the auditorium was darkened using blinds and curtains, suggesting that the carriage used for the movie theatre was not structurally altered to remove the windows.²³ The experience of watching a silent film (one suspects without any musical accompaniment) while on a train was also likely to be a claustrophobic one that constantly reminded audiences of their rail-bound surroundings. For all the cinema's design flaws, one reporter remarked that '[h]itherto, railway travellers have

had to be content with the moving pictures provided by nature through the carriage window.’ However, with the movie coach’s advent, art was ‘to compete with nature.’²⁴ The comparison channeled the machine/agrarian dichotomy that characterized the early railway and was documented in J M Turner’s *Rain, Steam, Speed*.²⁵ The film carriage’s propensity to battle nature, and so destabilize established experiences of time and space, was a familiar trope, but one that ensured publicity in the daily press. While *The Railway Gazette* reminded its readers that ‘[f]rom a railway operating point of view many matters have to be carefully considered before [public] travelling cinemas become possible,’ overall the press lauded the enterprise as a forward march in progress.²⁶ In the film carriage’s wake, hybrid exhibition spaces were popularized across the British rail network as advertising, technology and the tourism industry became closer connected.

Although the cinema train did not yet become a permanent feature on the railway, the LNER was the frontrunner in providing pioneering services. Radio was introduced on LNER trains in 1930 and continued until 1935: headphones were hired for one shilling and connected passengers to ‘the latest news and a selection of gramophone records, hosted by the world’s first mobile DJ.’²⁷ On February 1, 1932, the ‘Baird process’ (referring to the 1925 invention of television) for transmitting images was successful inside a train.²⁸ The broadcast took place on an LNER train that, even as it ‘touched speeds up to seventy miles per hour,’ still enabled spectators to observe an image. Passengers could hire sterilized headphones ‘for a nominal fee’ to watch the broadcast.²⁹ The additions to the railway were short-lived, demonstrating the fleeting lifespan of the shock of the new. But the feats served to advertise the rail company through the accompanying articles in broadsheet newspapers.

In the same period, the LNER also introduced cocktail bars, hair salons and showers in their coaches.³⁰ The GWR modernized its services by setting up a joint venture with the Post Office in 1935. Messengers holding ‘an illuminated button bearing the words

“Telegrams Accepted” stood on platforms at Paddington Station so passengers could send messages before their trains departed.³¹ Electric light, rail travel and the promise of speed transformed an everyday task—sending a telegram—into something exciting. The LMS, meanwhile, offered a door-to-door removal service that travelled by both truck and train; mundane furniture removals were recast as ‘[m]odern [f]ashion’.³² The railway companies adopted everyday activities and reinvented them, always mixing the old with the new. Entertainment technologies then continued to transform public transport spaces throughout the 1920s and 1930s.ⁱⁱⁱ The effects of the Great Depression (on the working classes in particular) in 1929, and the devaluation of the gold standard in 1931, both contributed to a narrative about the nation’s economic decline. However, stories about innovation (for example, Britain’s liner *Queen Mary* featuring more cinema screens than the French *Normandie*) represented Britain in a more positive light.³³

The 1935 LNER-Pathé film carriage emerged from a history of mobile screens as an innovative technology that was particular to the nation’s modernity.^{iv} The movie coach boosted railway revenue, encouraged the leisure industry’s expansion, and demonstrated that Britain was creating pioneering entertainment spaces. Screens sprang up in trucks, planes and ships, while television altered how viewers both literally and figuratively received images. Rail companies modernized services by integrating media and communication devices (including television and radio) into mobile spaces. Moreover, the connection between the railways and cinema was reciprocal, with representations of trains permeating popular culture in the mid-1930s. For example, movies including *Cock o’ the North* (1935), *The Silent Passenger* (1935) and *The 39 Steps* (1935) all depicted the railway.³⁴ Film sets replicated

ⁱⁱⁱ Including airplanes, with the first in-flight movie purportedly screened as part of the Chicago ‘Pageant of Progress’ in 1921. The film shown is reputed to be a silent called *Howdy Chicago!* (USA, 1921).

^{iv} So far, I have been unable to find any evidence of mobile cinema trains in the USA, Germany or France (which then were Britain’s main industrial rivals) in the period, which suggests the technology was at that point unique to Britain.

actual locomotives, real trains were used for location shoots, and cinema atriums became stations.^v Newsreel theatres became popular at major transport sites, including London Victoria and Waterloo.³⁵ Yet while the movie coach borrowed from the practices of the past, travelling in the movie coach was a new experience for the passenger-spectator.

Inside the Cinema Train

On June 3, 1935, during Britain's holiday season, the LNER and British Pathé unveiled the cinema coach. The cinema was attached to the 10.10am down train to Leeds, and the 3.15pm up train to London.³⁶ Throughout May, the national press publicized the train's impending launch. The 1924 film coach (the 'experiment' that spawned the 1935 model) was forgotten in both newspaper reports and the public imagination. The newsreel theatre, like other everyday spaces (including the hair salon and bar), was made anew by LNER. *The Railway Gazette* announced that 'LNER is cooperating with Pathé Pictures Limited and Pathé Equipment Limited in providing a cinematograph van, fully equipped for exhibiting sound films'.³⁷ The joint venture between the rail and film companies introduced the public to a 'new' concept that was established by old firms. Customers were familiar with both the LNER and British Pathé, two recognizable brands that assured quality in their respective fields. The cinema train offered passengers a novelty without risk, a strategy that proved successful for both parties.

The cinema train guaranteed British Pathé a regular audience. The LNER likely used statistics about daily passenger returns on long-distance routes to select a profitable service on which to run the new coach. Inside the train, the promise of an hour's entertainment was a sure way to lure in customers. Jeffrey Richards contends that '[c]inema-going was indisputably the most popular form of entertainment in Britain in the 1930s.'³⁸ As rail

^v An article in *Kinematograph Weekly* reported the atrium of the Shepherd's Bush Pavilion was turned into a tube station to promote *Bulldog Jack* (1935). See *Kinematograph Weekly*, "Kinema Vestibule as Tube Station," September 26, 1935, p.47.

companies were looking to increase revenue from the leisure industry, film screenings made economic sense. Richard's figures attest that ticket sales at movie theatres in Britain were 917million in 1936.³⁹ The attendances were in a country with a total population under 47million in 1935.⁴⁰ Hence innovations in cinema technologies were vital to the growing entertainment industry.

The movie coach was also predicated on an existing alliance between newsreel companies and the railways. Travellers were used to the presence of film theatres at major train stations, where the news was available to people on screen, as well as on paper. 'Cinemas at train stations have for some time been an accomplished fact,' wrote *The Manchester Guardian*. 'Now they have invaded the trains themselves'.⁴¹ The Secretary of State for the Dominions, J H Thomas (whose presence signified the perceived importance of the new technology in projecting Britain's progress to the empire), attended the coach's inauguration. At the ceremony, former railway worker Thomas congratulated the LNER for 'another great improvement in railway travelling'.⁴² His speech posited Britain as a leader in entertainment and travel technologies on a global stage, his position within government guaranteeing him an international audience.

Thomas's speech was filmed by British Pathé and included in a newsreel bulletin. Records do not indicate when the clip was screened, nor do we know if the item was shown on the movie coach's own program. The short film, however, is the only surviving footage in the public domain of the LNER-Pathé carriage – no other images, films or illustrations endure. The clip shows us the coach's exterior, on which wooden panels replaced windows and a program board was placed to the right of the door [Figure 1]. 'LNER-Pathé Cinema' was painted above the entrance. By including the item in newsreel sequences, British Pathé had an efficient means through which to advertise their new venture. However, it is newspaper publicity that now provides us with details about the carriage's interior. The daily

press extolled the cinema train's virtues as a signifier of modernity and Britain's continuing innovation; mobile screens made the railway relevant in an age increasingly dominated by other, newer media and transport technologies.

The LNER-Pathé organizers invited journalists on the cinema train's trial run between London and Peterborough in May 1935. The film carriage was a converted passenger coach and brake van.⁴³ *Kinematograph Weekly* identified the carriage as a 'converted Pullman,' a name that denoted luxury to passengers.⁴⁴ The irony that both British Pathé, a company with French antecedents, and Pullman, an American business, were instrumental in a British invention appears to have gone unnoticed (or was ignored). In the cinema, 'two thirds of the space [was] equipped as an auditorium, and the remaining third utilised as the projecting room' [sic].⁴⁵ Newsreels were screened using a Pathé-Natan 17.5 millimeter rear projector.⁴⁶ The coach's layout differed from that in the 1924 film coach, which used a forward-facing projector (located at the rear), and a screen (positioned at the front).⁴⁷ Passengers sat in the middle, where '[b]etween the box and the screen there was sufficient room to seat about twenty people comfortably.'⁴⁸ The design changes wrought in the 1935 cinema train expanded the seating area to accommodate forty-four people.⁴⁹ The walls were covered in silver paneling and the space replicated a traditional movie theatre with raked, 'tip-up' seats that sloped down toward the screen.⁵⁰ The two key problems faced by the designers for the 1924 coach—darkness and picture oscillation—were overcome by 1935. But new difficulties arose.

One challenge was to prevent external noise in 'a train travelling at speeds up to eighty-five miles an hour' from 'muffling the sounds of the films.'⁵¹ W J Gell, the carriage's designer, acknowledged that the seating and ventilation required attention, although he claimed these issues did not detract from passengers' overall experiences.⁵² Furthermore, a reporter from *The Manchester Guardian* did not bemoan sitting with his back to the engine on

the outward journey.⁵³ Rather, he noted that '[f]ar stranger did it seem to be standing, because the apparatus was playing "God Save the King," while the train hurtled along at seventy miles an hour'.⁵⁴ Passengers experienced problems when cinematic and rail spaces collided: noise leaked in, while heat was not released sufficiently, so design within the auditorium was out of place inside the train. Despite these criticisms, the cinema train again received favorable reviews. The LNER found success with their Pathé coach for two probable reasons. First, the newsreel program offered a varied show. Each item was short in duration so the passenger-spectators' attention was not lost. Second, the 1935 incarnation of the film carriage featured sound films. The technological advancement in cinematic apparatus helped interpolate the audience in a theatrical experience. The movie coach was no longer silent except for the noise of the train: instead, the auditorium was filled with diegetic sounds that accompanied what happened on the screen.

The décor in the film carriage was congruent with the opulence on display in contemporary 'picture palaces'. For example, at the Odeon's grand opening in Bolton, spectators were greeted by liveried officers, bagpipe music, 'gold paint [...and] a bit of luxury'.⁵⁵ The theatre in the train was designed to match, if not exceed, the level of comfort in traditional cinema auditoriums. British Pathé constructed the furniture in-house, the company having expanded its furnishings division in the mid-1930s, when Pathé chairs were installed in 'public institutions, concert halls, and borough councils,' as well as movie theatres.⁵⁶ The company's design experience suggests the cinema coach was furnished to at least the same standard as other public spaces supplied by Pathé. The LNER, too, was known for the comforts incorporated in train services. Engineering drawings for a 1937 LNER restaurant car illustrate bottle-holders, service-bells, and coat-hooks arranged to complement the diner's experience. Double-glazing, swivel chairs and plump footstools also awaited customers, who sat between wooden partitions for added privacy.⁵⁷ *The Railway Gazette* described the dining

coach, asserting that ‘every point affecting the traveller’s comfort has been studied both for ease in dining and relaxation.’⁵⁸ In keeping with the LNER’s reputation, a 1938 film program advertised ‘a comfortable and luxurious cinema attached to this train’ [Figure 2].⁵⁹

The cinema space was distinct from the rest of the train not only in function but also in design. That the movie theatre and the train already shared characteristics helped in this endeavor. Both operated in similar ways: they were democratizing spaces in that travel (whether physical or vicarious) was opened up to the masses. Anyone was a potential customer and able to purchase a rail or movie ticket. Both locations also offered a variety of seats at different prices. As such, the film carriage was perhaps the most inclusive rail and cinema space because the movie coach eliminated tiered-price seating, offering an economic incentive to attract as many customers as possible. Any passenger from any class could pay for entry at the same cost. A ticket was one shilling, a price maintained into the late 1930s.⁶⁰ The entry fee was inflated from the national average for ordinary cinemas, which in 1937 was ten pence (a shilling was equivalent to twelve pence).⁶¹ While the price remained close to constant for both static and mobile screenings, the above-average entry fee for the film carriage (for a newsreel program with no main feature) probably attracted a middle-class audience on a good wage with money to spare for entertainment. The movie coach, therefore, remained a hierarchal space that privileged customers with disposable incomes, despite the non-class specific seating arrangement.

Inside the auditorium, newsreels ran for an hour and followed a routine pattern consisting of ‘news, interest and short films’.⁶² Attendants were available to sell tickets and announce the upcoming program.⁶³ A typical audience in the newsreel coach comprised businessmen, who found the screenings a ‘useful antidote to business cares and worries’ on regular trips, alongside small children, Salvation Army officers, and holidaymakers.⁶⁴ Businessmen—regular, if not everyday, commuters—‘never fail[ed]’ to attend the shows on

their journeys, pointing to both the cinema train's enduring appeal and repeat patronage, which transformed the experience from the novel to the everyday. On November 23, 1935, the cinema train celebrated its 1000th screening: in just five months, the movie coach had travelled 63,000 miles and received a total audience of over 16,000 people.⁶⁵ So popular was the service that in 1936, the LNER installed two further newsreel carriages on new routes between London, Leeds and Edinburgh.⁶⁶ In 1936, Pathé announced in *Kinematograph Weekly* that the coming of the cinema train was 'an event in screen history'.⁶⁷

LNER's partnership with British Pathé anticipated a change in viewing habits that now accounts for the cinema train's longevity. Newsreels typically were shown prior to features in traditional cinemas, so audiences were accustomed to consuming visual news. However, British film producer Jeffrey Bernerd lamented the fact the news was 'often regarded as a fill-up' in a 1936 article for *Kinematograph Weekly*.⁶⁸ Yet he anticipated that the newsreel would become 'a decided "feature"'.⁶⁹ Indeed, the 1937 Bernstein report (an extensive audience survey) found that cinemagoers wanted more newsreels.⁷⁰ Film's role in facilitating communication was by this time recognized by the state, religious groups and political parties.^{vi} While newsreels were not as popular as feature films, or perhaps as immediate as the daily press, the short documentaries enabled people to witness events previously confined to print. The mobile film theatre introduced an alternate news source for rail passengers while they were on the move, and the consumption of information was surely as crucial to the coach's success as entertainment and travel.

The newsreel companies in the 1930s promoted their products in print and yet distanced themselves from the obvious political stance taken by the newspapers. On the one hand, the *Daily Mail* was conservative, or right wing, in its approach. On the other hand, *The*

^{vi} For example, the Salvation Army used magic lantern slides and films to spread their teaching to the public. See Simon Popple and Joe Kember, *Marketing Modernity: Victorian Popular Shows and Early Cinema* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2009), 50. Also the government adopted cinema as a medium to disseminate propaganda in the First World War.

Manchester Guardian, with its working-class roots, was biased to the left. The newsreel purported to be more objective, which harked back to *The Illustrated London News*'s regular wartime feature, 'The Camera as Correspondent'.⁷¹ The implication was that the camera was a neutral observer, not prone to the same bias as the subjective human. British Movietone posited the same argument in 1935, when Gerald F Sanger, the company's editor, announced that propaganda was 'banned' from the company's output.⁷² He stressed that 'British Movietone News never has and never will abuse its influence as a news publishing medium to distort the significance of events or to give them propagandist flavour' [sic].⁷³ Newsreel producers insisted that filmic representations of events were more accurate, and thus more authentic, than print. Furthermore, the filmmakers suggested that the newsreel was imbued with an immediacy that rivaled the newspaper: images recorded on any given day might be edited and distributed within hours. The cinema train lent the news even greater urgency; with bulletins available to watch on the journey to, or from, work. That newsreel theatres invaded both stations and trains demonstrated a growing appetite for onscreen news.

While the newsreel gained popularity throughout the 1930s, evidence to support Sanger's assertions was not forthcoming. And the newsreels, for all the producers' representations to the contrary, were as biased politically as any report in print. That the state did not intervene in onscreen news censorship for seven days after a clip's initial screening bolstered the suggestion that the newsreel provided unbiased reporting.⁷⁴ However, newsreel producers had both personal and political agendas that likely influenced the companies' films. In the interwar period, the newsreel production units were dominated by leaders who were connected to political groups: the Topical Budget distribution controller, the head of Gaumont British, the director of Pathé, and indeed Gerald Sanger at British Movietone News, all were affiliated with the Conservative Party.⁷⁵ That British Pathé's newsreels inside the cinema train supported a conservative ideology, and devoted programming to stories about the empire,

industry and Britain's modernity, was congruent with the newsreel producers' political persuasions.

The flyer dated May 16, 1938, is the most recent extant evidence of the LNER-Pathé film carriage. The leaflet is the only publically archived LNER-Pathé program. The document lists all thirty-seven films 'compiled exclusively for this train by Pathé Gazette'.⁷⁶ The selection commenced screening on a Monday in mid-May, indicating a weekly, or bi-weekly, program rotation. The date on the surviving program is not imbued with any particular significance (the cinema train was still three weeks from its anniversary) and the 'special' newsreel selection refers to the unique location, so the chosen films probably represent a typical screening.

An analysis of the films reveals a program that now archives the contradictions between tradition, empire and hierarchy, and innovation, modernity and inclusivity. The opening item was *Their Majesties Tour in Lanarkshire* (all films on the program were produced in 1938), in which the royal couple was filmed on a visit to Scotland.⁷⁷ In the sequence, the King (George V) and Queen (Mary) watch the production of steel plates in a factory. Molten metal spills from vast furnaces and machines continuously whirl. The Queen then 'works the lever that starts one of the machines,' cutting steel 'like scissors cutting paper,' demonstrating the manufacturing processes that make Britain prosper. The visit keeps Scotland 'proud and happy' – happy, one supposes, to boost its international reputation as a producer of raw materials, as well as the country's tourism industry through association with the royal family.

The second item, *New Berth for Bananas*, takes the audience on a tour around a new merchant ship bound for the West Indies. The camera, panning and tilting upward, mimics the machine that rotates and lifts the imported bananas, as if to proclaim the film's own imperial credentials. Toward the sequence's end, the footage speeds up to signify the rapidity with

which the naval technology works. The newsreader's overt racism ('[w]hen we say West Indies we mean fruit, and particularly bananas – you know, the little yellow-skinned fellows') established Britain's imagined superiority and set the nation apart from a colony it relied upon for produce. As in the first film, the second one posited Britain on a world stage and referred to the country's industrial growth, while also alluding to imperial supremacy. In *New Berth for Bananas*, mass production was represented onscreen as benefitting the whole nation. But while Britain reaped the rewards of international trade, the film failed to acknowledge the exploitation on which the transaction was predicated.

Within the thirty-seven news items on the program, some thirty-six per cent featured new technologies. Other prevalent themes included transport (twenty-four per cent), industry (twenty-one per cent), and social changes (eighteen per cent). Three films explored Hitler's activities in Europe. For example, both *Hitler in Italy* and *Italians Goose-Step for Hitler* treated the leader with humorous contempt.⁷⁸ In the latter feature, the Italian army marches through Rome on display for their guest. Hitler's imposition in the ancient city is signified through the juxtaposition of mounted guns rolling past ancient monuments, including the Coliseum. 'If he [the marching soldier] don't do it right, chop his head off!' the newsreader exclaims, neutralizing external threats to British power with comedy.

That three films featured Hitler, and five concerned Italy, alluded to on-going political anxieties about the potential for war in Europe. Thus the newsreel was not providing objective information, but rather news with a marked agenda, which also inflected *French Liner Ablaze at Le Havre*.⁷⁹ Aerial shots taken from a plane above a gutted ship grant the clip journalistic authority over both the landscape, and the developing story. From a bird's-eye perspective, the British literally were looking down on France. The newsreader then referred to the 'hoodoo of fire' that had contemporaneously engulfed other French ships, implying that France's naval hopes were cursed. As the country was dealt 'another staggering blow,'

Britain's own military, passenger and merchant ships (as evidenced in *New Berth for Bananas*) remained unharmed, and also unrivalled.

Even the items on the program that focused on innovation were committed to a nationalistic cause. In *Ninety-Four Years Old Mrs. Anne Budd Takes Her First Flight*, producers represented Britain as having both a traditional past (the ninety-four year old woman) and also the desire to adopt new technologies (through flight).⁸⁰ The film carriage had emerged from modernity's facilitation of media, speed and machines, and these were themes that dominated the program's stories about Britain. For example, *New Defence Balloons* and *Demonstration of Kay Autogyro at Southampton* showcased new technologies.⁸¹ The helicopter that featured onscreen had a top speed of one hundred miles per hour, and gave 'the sort of demonstration that proves the future is in the air'.⁸² If the autogyro was the future, then Britain was designing and manufacturing it.

The program's final section was given over to travelogues and entertainment items. Whereas the earlier films had a technological emphasis that vicariously referred to the cinema train's own part in Britain's modernity, the travelogues more obviously were designed to sell the railway experience. Both *Troy Town* and *Novelties* were moving image guidebooks that respectively transported the audience to Cornwall and York.⁸³ Architecture, wildlife and history were all addressed in these brief cinematic tours. Spectators figuratively visited the locations on the train as they watched the films, and might actually travel to the destinations by railway. The cinema train was not only used to promote tourism through innovation, but also through the films screened inside the space. Any passengers enticed into the LNER-Pathé carriages as holidaymakers soon found themselves invited to part with their money on the railway for a third time – having already paid to use the train and the railway cinema.

The end of the May 1938 program also marks the end of the cinema train's life in print, for (to my knowledge) the program is not followed by any further newspaper articles or

company documentation. Both the LNER and British Pathé went their separate ways and no record of the film carriages survives in public archives. Like other LNER projects, including the cocktail bars and hair salons, the cinema train probably was discontinued in 1939 at the war's outbreak. The bodily experience of watching and moving while simultaneously in a cinema and a train was a manifestation of modernity and indicative of contemporary British preoccupations with technology. The mobile newsreel theatres also altered the ways people connected with the world: inside film carriages passengers might leave aside their newspapers to watch, rather than read, current affairs. But, as the country went back to war, the government's reliance on the railways to move troops and supplies put an end to onboard leisure pursuits such as the cinema train.

A Reversal in Fortune

Two rail companies continued to use movie coaches throughout the Second World War. One was built in a converted London and South West Rail (LSWR) passenger coach.^{vii} The other was launched in 1940. Designed by SR, the latter film carriage had a more utilitarian function than its LNER predecessors. The brown exterior was made from riveted metal sheets, while the interior featured plain white walls, exposed electric bulbs and cloth-covered benches [Figure 3].⁸⁴ A portable projector screened moving images from the aisle beside the seats.⁸⁵ While the movie coach was still a propaganda machine, the space was no longer used to promote British modernity, tourism and leisure. Instead, the railway film theatre was operated as a communication device that helped train staffs cope with the national emergency. The SR cinema carriage travelled the country showing training films to railway workers, sharing more in common with the Russian agit-train than the LNER-Pathé models. Like the agit-train, the SR cinema train gave static performances; mobile screenings were impossible in an

^{vii} The LSWR Company had ceased to exist in 1923, when the network was incorporated into the GWR. It is thus likely that the surviving company used the coach in the 1940s.

auditorium with a portable projector, due to oscillation. The movie coach, changed from a recreational space into an entirely educational one, was part of a shift that saw the railways enter public service in Britain.

During the war, the government assumed control over Britain's private railway companies. In 1947, the government passed the Transport Act, which nationalized the railways and dissolved the once private train companies (due in part to the infrastructure's role in serving the nation's mining industry) with effect from 1948. Also in 1948, the government transformed the leisure industries, establishing the British Tourist and Holidays Board to attract foreign tourists through a coherent, national marketing campaign. Economic competition, the rail companies' incentive for improving services, disappeared. With it went the technological advancements that distinguished the 1920s and the hybrid functionality that sped up life in the 1930s. While the cinema train by no means was redundant (the technology was used in Britain until 1989), the movie coach's significance as a leisure space was depleted on a rail network that valued efficiency over entertainment.

During the post-war period, the SR movie carriage continued to distribute educational films for British Rail (BR), and two further coaches were added to the rolling stock. The first was a converted LMS coach, the second, built in 1955, was an old GWR dining saloon.⁸⁶ But the new railway auditoriums remained static during screenings and BR hired out both coaches for events (such as corporate functions, or railway advertising), rather than regular passenger services. Throughout the 1950s and 60s, critics voiced concerns about the movie coaches' viability. In 1958, a British Rail manager complained that the cinema carriage was a drain on resources. He declared that public interest was so small 'tickets were distributed to all and sundry in order to get some sort of audience.'⁸⁷

Nevertheless, a third new film carriage, built by British Rail in 1978, was designed once again to project moving images while the train was in motion.⁸⁸ The network's decision

to create an additional, mobile cinema on the railway was perhaps in response to the normalization of inflight movies on airplanes.^{viii} Even in 1978, reintroducing a cinema train onto Britain's railways was likely to attract publicity, and thus customers, for the rail network; indeed, Princess Margaret was one of the movie coach's first passengers.⁸⁹

However, the venture was not successful, and by 1989, all the film carriages were retired from service. Where the LNER-Pathé carriage had garnered large crowds, the British Rail movie coach failed to entice demand. Now, aside from the LNER-Pathé program, there is no physical evidence of the early movie coaches left, and all but one of the later coaches are destroyed. What promised to be 'an event in screen history' was all but forgotten by film scholars and historians.⁹⁰

Conclusion: The Cinema Train's Afterlife

Britain had posed a Janus figure in the interwar period, for, like the passenger-spectator, the nation inhabited two worlds – one defined by tradition and past glories, the other insistent on progress and technology. The movie train, one example of the architecture of Britain's particular modernity, was destined to become old even as it was made new. However, the film carriage spawned other mobile entertainment technologies that continue to resonate in our lives today. Giuliana Bruno argues that the media we consume influence our perceptions of everyday places.⁹¹ The cinema train altered railway architecture with moving images and encouraged viewers to travel through motion pictures. Now, the portable media devices we carry in our bags enable us to visit those same un-mappable spaces that the movie coach presented to us. Cinema trains could not halt Britain's decline in a changing political

^{viii} British Overseas Airways Corporation (now known as British Airways) began screening films during flights in 1971. See *Kinematograph Weekly*, "BOACS Jumbo Jets to Show Films," March 13, 1971, p.4.

landscape. But the mobile screen lives on, and the convergence between the moving image and the railway continues to impact on our everyday lives.

The cinema, posits Philip Rosen, offers ‘models for other, subsequent media with which it has become intertwined’.⁹² The ‘subsequent media’ Rosen refers to are televisions and digital devices, and the film carriage pre-empted a spatial convergence of the cinema and the railway that continues into our digital age. Moving images now adorn train station walls where once there were posters. Screens announce departures and arrivals at platforms. Smart phones and tablet computers give us access to mobile motion pictures while we travel – albeit as individuals, rather than an individualized crowd. But our digital devices emerge from an established fascination with mobile media, not the forgotten history of the cinema train. I argue the film carriage’s legacy lies instead in the ways we consume information.

The 1935 LNER-Pathé cinema train made visual news consumption exciting. The film carriage presented the news as a feature in its own right in an unusual setting. And the movie coach also made pictorial news mobile. The setting of the news in motion enabled newsreel companies (and later television, Internet and other visual news broadcasters) to contest the easily distributed, individually printed, newspaper. Benedict Anderson suggests that the newspaper, ‘one of the earlier-mass-produced commodities,’ becomes useless the morning after its printing. This, he argues ‘prefigure[d] the inbuilt obsolescence of modern durables.’⁹³ The cinema train inevitably was as ineffective as a daily newspaper. However, the architectural convergence of the railway and the cinema shaped the cultural practices that we continue to perform in our everyday lives, as the movie coach actualized the possibilities for mobile news media consumed by audiences of individuals. The rolling, twenty-four hour news broadcasts that we watch on portable screens have emerged from a history of mobile, visual news reports that began when LNER-Pathé built a cinema in a rail carriage.

Endnotes

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