

Chapter 9

Letter Writing, Cinemagoing and Archive Ephemera

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During the silent era in Britain, a substantial print culture quickly developed around cinemagoing. Through a variety of intermedial¹ formats, including cinema story papers, novelizations and fan magazines, an extra-textual network of commercial ephemera came to surround the silent screen, explicitly targeting women as the dominant cinemagoing audience. Focusing on the period 1911-1918, this chapter considers holdings of silent era fan magazines as one aspect of a body of archival materials that foreground the interactive qualities of this female-targeted print culture. In doing so, the chapter specifically turns to the published fan letters that such magazines contained, considering how this correspondence can be used to explore an interactive female audience in early twentieth-century Britain.²

I look firstly at the history of the fan magazine and its status as an ephemeral object within the archive and how we encounter this as researchers. Secondly, I offer an exploration of examples of individual letters, suggesting our ability to gain insight into the construction and engagement of female fans as writers through the development of a participatory epistolary discourse within the magazine. Where access to original hand-written collections of fan writing is not always possible, I argue that the magazine retains an essential value in the archive as evidence of female audiences as self-reflexive cinemagoers. I move finally to consider how we might attempt to engage with examples of contributing fans as individuals who testify to the

¹ I draw here upon André Gaudreault's notion of intermediality as 'the mixing of mediums in cultural production' (2000: 12).

² Elements of this chapter have appeared in the author's article: Stead, L. 2011. 'So oft to the movies they've been': British fan writing and female film audiences in the silent era. *Transformative Works and Cultures* [Online], 6, n.p. Available at: <http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/224> [accessed 27 April 2012].

lived experience of early cinema culture and its position within everyday life for British women through a wider web of archive ephemera.

Amelie Hastie's notion of 'miscellany' as an archival methodology is particularly relevant to the exploration of these kinds of materials. Hastie discusses the ways in which women's histories are 'inevitably dispersed across ... various forms and spaces', which we recollect through 'miscellaneous objects ... [and] writings' (2006: 229-30). Whilst we cannot construct a concretely verifiable biographical subject from a fan letter as one such object of miscellany, we can nevertheless read productively around and through the intertextual network of miscellany and socio-historical context related to the gendered forms and spaces to which it connects. In exploring miscellaneous examples of women's writing found within archival centres, I argue that we can use such materials to suggest the 'intricate situations in which cinema exists historically' (Klinger 1997: 113), not simply as an industry, nor as a collection of texts, but as a lived practice shaped by a range of contexts for women.

British Fan Magazines in the Silent Era

Film fan magazines first entered the UK market in 1911, constituting part of a broader shift in British print journalism towards a mass female readership. Fan magazines shared format traits with girls' story papers, women's magazines and newspapers, which, during this period, were moving 'to include articles on everyday matters, popular leisure, and the domestic' (Wasson 2006: 158). Addressing an expanding audience of female cinemagoers, a range of fan publications developed from cheap film fiction papers to popular star-based periodicals like *Pictures and Picturegoer*, *Cinema Chat* and *Picture Show*.

Fan papers provided readers with information about current releases, studio gossip, and popular performers. These periodicals were a valuable tool for the film industry, enabling them to advertise new productions to a UK audience estimated at 20 million by 1916, attending some

5,000 purpose-built cinema venues and 5,400 regular film shows across the country (Hiley 1998: 97). Magazines further functioned as advertising platforms for a range of commercial products that used the publications to communicate with a shared body of female consumers, particularly promoting domestic goods, clothing and cosmetics. Fan magazines offer snapshots of specific moments and trends within early film culture, and suggest cinema's place within broader discourses shaping commercially constructed images of modern femininity. Gaylyn Studlar has explored how silent era American magazines illuminate the ways in which 'women were positioned as viewers/readers/consumers' (1991: 246) and were addressed as 'active insiders' and 'appreciative fans' (1997: 109). Anne Morey suggests the value of fan magazines as 'reservoirs of information about how viewers might have used films' (2002: 334), whilst Marsha Orgeron has looked at how they offer 'more personal sources of knowledge about how viewers interacted with the motion picture industry' (2009: 4), particularly where they provided a platform for this interaction in the inclusion of letters pages.

Examining the growth of fan writing practices requires working with the archival copy in bulk and over time. My intention is to consider how the attitudes, opinions and subject matter that fan letters present relate to the shape of one particular British periodical, *Pictures and Picturegoer*.

Magazines in the Archive

The Bill Douglas Centre (BDC) at the University of Exeter contains a wealth of archival material related to film culture from its pre-history to the present day, and includes numerous copies of *Pictures and Picturegoer* across its 49 year run from 1911 to 1960. Published by Odhams and described by Peter Noble as a 'fairly innocuous fan magazine' in its early years, the paper nevertheless came to constitute 'Britain's leading popular film journal' and boast a 'very wide circulation' (1947-48: 149) by the Second World War. Copies of the magazine are

held on microfiche within institutions like Southampton's Hartley Library and the British Library, allowing us to co-ordinate missing pieces from different collections and construct a near complete run of the publication in its earliest years. Significantly at Exeter, however, the materials are accessible in their original paper format within an archive that exclusively houses cinema and popular culture ephemera.

Entering this kind of archive involves embarking on an investigation that takes the researcher beyond a fixed notion of a singular 'text' to be researched or discovered in film historiography, and into the material culture that both surrounds and constitutes cinema history. The BDC holds materials that range from toys, posters and playbills to ticket stubs and technology. As the centre's curator Phil Wickham explains, the archive contains a history of film culture positioned in 'the nexus between text and context' where ephemera 'can make meaning and create evidence' (2010: 316). The fan magazine is one part of a wider definition of what the BDC's principle donor Peter Jewell describes as 'paper ephemera' (2008: 149), located at the boundaries of both the literary and moving image archive. Wickham asserts that such material is essentially 'designed for the moment, not as a lasting monument to its own importance'. By turning an analytic eye to ephemera, we therefore 'challenge its reasons for being because we are suggesting that it has more value than may have originally been intended' (2010: 317). In the time of its original production, the fan magazine simultaneously constituted a collectable item and a disposable, cheaply purchased distraction for different consumers. Some fan letters speak of how readers built collections of back copies, others of how they deconstructed the paper for those elements they wanted to retain. One contributor states in 1918 that they 'make it a rule to cut [poems] ... out and save them' (1918e: 281), another in 1925 that they 'cut out the illustrations ... and paste them into albums' (1925: 82), a practice evidenced in the many fan scrapbooks held at the BDC.

When we encounter the magazine in the archive, the precious/disposable dichotomy is enticing for the ways it suggests the vitality of early film culture and the rapid turnover of its extra-textual dimensions that kept the cinema experience alive beyond the theatre space. The appeal of engaging with magazines in the archive resides with the sense that in picking them up and absorbing their advertising and gossipy views on current stars, and reading women's letters that speak of going 'to Picture shows to be amused' (1918d: 234) and buying the paper 'every week for nearly two years' (1918b: 518), we are aligned with a silent era fan, recreating their own act of engaged consumption.

Helena Michie and Robyn Warhol have turned to Elaine Freedgood's (2006) concept of strong metonymy in addressing this issue of a central fantasy of the archive as transportation. Strong metonymy involves the movement from objects to their histories in the activation of 'a metonymic chain by which those looking at, holding, or researching them can feel asymptotically closer to the historical reality from which the objects derive' (Michie and Warhol 2010: 416). Archival study can engage an imaginary transportation to a past we can experience through encountering the ephemera of that past, whereby the 'physicality of the items allows a very immediate connection to the original moment and how it was lived' (Wickham 2010: 328).

Archived fan magazines offer a strong catalyst for this metonymic chain, particularly where the inclusion of fan letters suggest both sides of an historical relationship between the producers and gendered consumers of popular culture. The complexities of this relationship are particularly apparent where the fan magazine allows us to explore its varied and often contradictory constructions of female representation in the teens. Penny Tinkler has argued that the editors of girls magazines the early twentieth century faced the 'problem of inheriting older notions of femininity, and therefore had to engage in ... an act of reconciliation' (1995: 6) between modern and traditional roles. Archive copies show how fan magazines attempted to

achieve a similar negotiation by allowing space for women's self-expression whilst affirming more conservative gender values. Advertising for home goods, cosmetics, and baby products constructed consumerist narratives of female choice and agency in relation to overarching frameworks of domesticity and marital duty. Written features foregrounded independence and self-expression, with articles penned by female stars featuring titles such as 'Why I Like To Work' (1918f: 843), whilst the editorial content conversely reinforced the domestic focus of the advertising by emphasizing familial responsibility in the private lives of these stars in 'home life' interviews and features.

Picking up a late 1918 copy of *Pictures and Picturegoer*, for example, we see the magazine constructing its female reader within its historical moment in specific, often contradictory ways in a period in which 'leisure and consumption assumed greater prominence in the organization of everyday life' (Rojek 1995: 57). This prominence is evidenced in the magazine's foregrounding of an interrelation between leisure, work and commercial products targeting female readers. The front cover courts its readers with an exotic image of the 'vamp' actress Theda Bara in full costume as Cleopatra beside an advertisement for 'MARY PICKFORD'S LIFE STORY' depicted in 'A DAINY BOOKLET Containing Many Pictures of the World's Sweetheart' (1918g: cover). Inside the magazine, glamorous representations give way to advertising for domestic products such as Glitto powder, showing a delighted housewife holding a sparkling kettle, and Robinson's Barley, whose tagline emphasises 'The importance of Motherhood' (1918g: 410). Other advertisements conversely pitch their products using an image of women's war work outside the domestic space. An Oatine Face Cream advertisement on the back page depicts a busy lady typist with the caption 'Punctual at the opening time she is found at the office or shop, doing men's work' (1918g: 431); earlier in the issue a "'PICTURES" Weekly NEWS' (1918g: 426) insert above the letters section (Figure 9.1) features

stills from Pathé's *Animated Gazette* newsreel including a shot of female munitions workers in the Midlands.

A central interview feature seems to reconcile the varied representations of war-time British women by presenting a 'chat' with the female film company manager Mrs Smalley. The interview praises her competence as a 'modern businesswoman' with the assurance that 'she is essentially feminine', affirmed with the inclusion of a large portrait of the pretty manageress. Yet the interview also allows space for her own assertion that she is a competent, permanent female worker when she insists in quotation that 'I was fighting my way as a woman in a job usually held by a man, when only a few long-headed people dreamed of the catastrophe that was going to overwhelm us!' (1918g: 422).

Such excerpts are representative of the negotiations that the magazine foregrounded across the war and immediate post-war period, where women's work ethic as film performers and industry figures is balanced out against the 'essentially feminine' in appeals to more traditional views of female beauty and/or domesticity. As Shelley Stamp has shown, focusing particularly upon stunting female stars in silent serial series, these kinds of representations 'served a substantial function in reconciling conventional spheres of femininity, like marriage and motherhood, with much more updated incarnation of womanly strength and autonomy' (2000: 149). A major international star could thus be described as 'happiest when she can change her gorgeous movie-gowns for workaday clothes and devote her energies to home-life' (1921: 16), and a shrewd businesswoman like United Artists co-founder Mary Pickford could be affirmed as 'always sweet and ladylike' (1918a: 282).

As we encounter these efforts towards negotiation and reconciliation whilst we read in the archive, fan letters allow us to simultaneously see traces of the original readers who received these representations. In the letters page of the October 26–November 2 1918 issue, for example (figure 9.1), stars are discussed by contributors like 'Cathleen and Mary

(London)', who write in praise of Anglo-American actress Olga Petrova for 'being the most delightful *woman* on the cinema', reflecting the way the magazine solicited responses around female stars through its dominant focus upon their on- and off-screen lives. Other letter topics, however, suggest that female contributors enjoy a more actively critical voice. 'Peggy (Birkenhead)' reacts to a previous contributor and their unfavourable view of British productions, arguing that 'In my opinion the Best British films are equal in every way to the best American films', whilst 'Daphne (Blackpool)' complains of how the recent growth in cinema orchestras fails to add anything 'to the enjoyment of watching the pictures' (1918g: 426).

[Insert figure 9.1 here – portrait]

Figure 9.1 'Bouquets and Brickbats': the letters page, *Pictures and Picturegoer*, October 26–November 2 1918

It is in these moments where contributors like 'Daphne' reference particular cinemagoing experiences that the letters suggest the presence of the individual fan more acutely, and prompt us to extend the investigation across the ephemeral archive. What cinemas might this correspondent have visited as a Blackpool woman, for example, where the noise of an orchestra would trouble her? What more we can ask of a letter like this as evidence of the persona or experiences of the writer? In beginning to address these questions for evidence of a readership, the archive collection allows us to look back across the history of *Pictures and Picturegoer* to examine how these more individualised voices, which were initially heavily displaced, began to emerge. By November 1911, a month into its print run, *Pictures* started to feature an 'Answers to Correspondents' section. The original questions penned by the letter writers were not displayed in print at this stage; instead, the editor offered short responses that evoked the original query. By 1912, correspondent names and locations began to be included, and the editorial captions imply a significant volume of letters, informing readers that answers

'have been held over' (1912: 16). In August 1912, *Pictures* was enlarged to 32 pages; *Answers* was renamed 'Our Postbag' and expanded to an entire page, displaying a mix of gendered and anonymous contributors. By mid-1913, more contributors began to be labelled with 'Miss' preceding their initials, and from around ten letters printed in 1911/1912, the page now featured nearly 40. The paper then became *Pictures and Picturegoer*, and by 1914 the letters page was re-titled 'Replies', encouraging female correspondents by including an illustration of a girl's headshot above a heap of letters.

A significant format shift in 1917 meant that the page, now titled 'Bouquets & Brickbats', printed the text of readers' letters for the first time, removing the framing device of the editors' response whilst drastically reducing the number of entries. Lengthy letters were now titled by the editor and presented in quotation marks. The more personal nature of this format allowed for letters like those of 'Daphne' and 'Peggy' to be printed in the voice of the contributor, revealing their manner of addressing the magazine and suggesting the presence of the readers behind the letters. The 22–29 December 1917 letters page serves as a good example. The page features eight letters, covering topics from the controlling influence of film directors to continuity errors, with one letter accompanied by a printed photograph its composers – a group of female charity singers called 'The Dutch Follies'. The tone of the prose varies, from aggrieved – 'I WAS much annoyed and puzzled'; to celebratory – 'I HAVE just seen the Hepworth film *Merely Mrs. Stubbs*, I was very delighted with it'; to chatty, instigating communication with other readers – 'I HAVE been interested lately in the correspondence concerning Wallace Reid ... I would like to endorse the opinion passed upon his style of dress by "Darby and Joan"' (1917: 691). All the contributors offer their locations along with their initials – three from Manchester, and the remainder from New Barking, Brixton, Wandsworth, Taunton, and Hampstead – mapping a collection of contributors across the country from big city to small town.

Authenticity and Editorial Influence

While we can draw broader observations about the gendered and regional make up of readers in this way,³ we may question the extent to which the published letter provides evidence of ‘real’ individual readers. Where we look to analyse tone, fan correspondence that cannot be directly traced to hand-written originals at a basic level denies access to material signifiers exploited by letter writers to ‘manifest [sic] their personality and needs’ (Kataoka 1997: 105), such as the selection of paper and ink. The magazine copy further offers a record of publication and therefore what was selected and potentially edited, rather than what a cinemagoer more directly said, thought or penned. Readers themselves came to vocalise their awareness of these processes – one writer complains that *Picturegoer* should give more space ‘to print readers’ letters in full, instead of only bits of them’ (1922: 66). Since the magazine had strong financial ties to the film industry, editors may also have been inclined to invent letters focusing upon particular stars or recent releases.

Attentive to these issues, critics utilising fan letters have tended to eschew the printed copy. As part of an initial process of finding ways to access female audiences from the 1940s, Jackie Stacey drew upon the collection of handwritten and typed letters from the year 1940 sent to the *Picturegoer* publishing offices held at Sussex’s Mass Observation Archive. Marsha Orgeron also turned to available original copies, citing the problem of establishing published letters as authentic ‘reflections of the magazines’ readership’ (2009: 20). The existence of these isolated original collections, however, does suggest that editors would not have needed to invent letters once the correspondence pages were established features, as letters were clearly sent to publishers on both sides of the Atlantic. The wealth of fan-created ephemera in archives

³ Kathryn Fuller’s work on *Motion Picture Story Magazine*, for example, assesses through a similar process that early published letter writers ‘hailed from both small towns and big cities, [and] were nearly as likely to be male as female’ (1996: 138).

like the BDC – such as scrapbooks, clipping collections and fan writing in film postcards – supports the sense that there was a body of active and participatory cinema fans in the early period, where collections of original letters are not always accessible. And although the printed letter is subject to editing, Stacey makes the point that whilst ‘some material is less defined by the institutional boundaries of the film industry ... all audience ‘data’ has its textual formations, produced within particular historical and cultural discourses’ (1994: 56). Those available handwritten copies are themselves shaped by such discourses and by the generic conventions of writing for publication, and are further subject to additional imperatives of editing and selection as archival collections, and thus do not represent a purely unmediated source of self-representation.

How might we think about the printed extract in epistolary terms, therefore, when seeking to establish that published letters were potentially authored by real women, retaining an awareness of the textual formations which shape their responses and their publication? By reading the published letters in the archive, tracing the way women wrote about cinema, about themselves, about noisy theatres, good and bad films, and their own aspirations for the screen, we see a range of reasons, often linked to personal, local, and class-specific contexts, motivating writers to interact with the magazine.

Reading Fan Letters

Reading and interpreting the printed fan letter involves contextualising the scraps and snippets of information that the letters give us. This archival process in turn illuminates the letters as suggestive of modes of engaging with film culture, and how film fandom aligned with a sense of identity for female letter writers through the mention of home town or place of living, indication of age, or of occupation.

The ‘Daphne’ letter discussed earlier focuses on ‘the cinema orchestras one hears nowadays’ and gives her location as Blackpool. We can trace cinemas in Blackpool big enough to accommodate a cinema orchestra in late 1918, thereby suggesting venues that Daphne may have frequented where the music was ‘interfering with the picture’ (1918g: 426). The range of other paper sources in the BDC allow us to locate playbills and programmes for some of the larger Blackpool cinemas in the late teens, such as the grand Palace Picture Pavilion,⁴ which advertises screenings accompanied by ‘The Palace Picture Bijou Orchestra’ in January 1919.

The Bijou could be a candidate for the orchestra Daphne heard a few months earlier who inappropriately played ‘the Bing Boys ... during a comedy-drama’ and overlaid ‘the really pretty love-reconciliation-lived-happily-ever-afterwards scene with the music of “Another little drink won’t do us any ‘arm”’ (1918g: 426).⁵ Her compulsion to voice her dissatisfaction in the magazine testifies to her perception of herself as an active, critical contributor. At the same time, it suggests how wider developments in cinema exhibition impacted upon female audiences in regional contexts, where the industry were working to attract more affluent customers by constructing higher-standard permanent theatres that could accommodate full orchestras,⁶ moving away from the smaller, non-purpose built venues that tended to feature the ‘solo pianist’ (1918g: 426) that Daphne favours.

Other types of letters engage more explicitly with participatory topics promoted by the magazine, such as those responding to star-search competitions. Competitions were a significant part of early fan magazines, where editorial content prompted readers to envisage

⁴ The Pavilion began as a theatre in 1899 and became a grand entertainment complex, remodeling the cinema in 1903, able to seat 4000 by 1910 (Alhambra: n.p.).

⁵ The Bing Boys was a popular revue which played at the Alhambra Theatre in London from 1916 to 1918.

⁶ The development of the first cinema chains in the early teens, such as Provincial Cinematograph Theatres (PCT), established new cinemas ‘built to a high standard’ (Eyles 2003-11: n.p.); these developments were an initial step towards the rise of purpose built picture palaces and super cinemas when cinema construction resumed after the war.

themselves as potential stars and to foreground this potential by writing to the magazine. Competition letters are thus more heavily coded in the terms of fan interaction that the magazine encouraged, but they also suggest more particular contexts for the ways in which readers' aspirations for the cinema were formulated in relation to their background and experience.

The 31 August–7 September 1918 *Pictures and Picturegoer* includes an example of this type of letter, written by 'D.B. (Highbridge)', responding to a lengthy campaign to 'find the next Pictures Girl'. The competition encouraged 'any lady reader of PICTURES who aspires to become a screen player' (1918d: 222) to submit their portrait. Like many others whose letters were printed alongside competition updates in late 1918 as 'examples from the mass of correspondence received' (1918c: 168), this reader advertises the credentials of a potential winner:

I BEG to advise you that in my opinion you can find one in Highbridge—"It." The lady in question is in employment, but would act if worth while. I think it advisable for you to run down and judge for yourself. She is quite well educated—a good business girl—good figure—as strong as a lioness—resourceful—witty and just the face and eyes necessary—She can swim, ride and drive. (1918d: 235)

The writer either speaks of herself in the third person, or on behalf of the potential 'pictures girl' – perhaps as a friend, sister or mother. Whilst a number of different writing figures are possible, they offer us a portrait of D.B. as a cinema fan which appears to enact a series of processes offsetting an idea of screen stardom against the experiences of the individual reader/fan/writer that link the archive to wider cultural contexts. D.B. is described as a 'lady' / 'girl' from the Somerset market town Highbridge, located near the larger sea-side resort of Burnham-on-Sea. Highbridge's first small cinema, the Picture House (later the Regent), opened in 1920 on Church Street, the main thoroughfare of the town, two years after the composition of the letter. Prior to its opening, films were shown in the Town Hall, known as

unofficially as the 'Electric Theatre'; the letter writer might have viewed films here for the relatively low price of 1d⁷ in 1918 (Buncombe et. al. 2004: 202).

The letter frames the girl's suitability to performing in relation to her skills as a working woman, echoing the language of *Picturegoer* features which praised the professional qualities of female stars and the business acumen of figures like the manageress Mrs Smalley. Placed within a regional perspective, the description of the girl as 'in employment' offers further insight. In a population of 2,479, Highbridge women outnumbered men by 103 individuals on census day 1921 (*Census* 1921: 2), two years after the end of the war and the publication of the letter. The reduction in the male population during the war drew women more widely into the nation's workforce, whilst decreasing immediate opportunities for courtship, marriage and motherhood. The number of women in employment in Britain rose by 234,000 between 1911 and 1921 (Stevenson 1990: 170); employment for the D.B. girl would thus have been a significant aspect of her identity as a war-time British woman, and is a prominent part of the letter's description of her qualities.

Because early fan periodicals targeted a working-class readership, sharing their original story-paper formats with working women's magazine like *Peg's Paper* and falling within a similar price bracket, it is likely that D.B. as part of its readership was herself a working but also a working-class woman. Given that she is able to boast of her competency as 'a good business girl', the letter suggests that the D.B. could also be single. The marriage bar for working women that had existed before the war was 'greatly intensified' (Briar 1997: 40) into the interwar period to the point of being 'almost universally applied' (Bruley 1999: 20). The competition rules further stated that entrants should be between 15 - 25 years of age; leading into the interwar period 'the usual pattern' was 'to work in the period between leaving school and getting married', meaning that 'the vast majority of women workers were young and

⁷ 3d was a common starting price for tickets in British picture houses in this period (Eyles 2003-11: n.p.).

single' (Glucksmann 1990: 36). Assuming she falls somewhere within the specified age boundaries, then, the D.B. letter figure could well be part of the surplus of unmarried young single female workers in continuous employment towards the end and immediate aftermath of WWI.

The letter's remark that the girl would take up acting 'if worth while' would thus hold serious resonance for a young woman in 1918 facing the potential pressures of lower wages and familial financial obligation where unmarried working girls were expected to send part of their wage packet to their families. Where might D.B. have found employment to meet these potential obligations? The 1921 census recorded that 67 per 1,000 women in Highbridge worked as 'Makers of Foods', and that the town also had the 'highest local rates' for female workers in 'Commerce and Finance other than clerks'⁸ in the Somerset county at 160 per 1,000 (1921: xxxiii-xxxiv). Work opportunities in the first category for the D.B. girl would have been available at sites such as the West of England Creamery and Highbridge Bacon Co. Ltd., a major factory established in the south of the town in 1890, whilst shop work could have been sought in the stores that lined Church Street.

Since the competition rules also explicitly emphasised entrants being 'well educated' (1918d: 222), the mention of education in the letter is unsurprising, but significant when framed in relation to a consideration of the class-base of fan magazine readers. Free compulsory education ran up to the age of 12 and 14 for girls at this time, but beyond this working-class women were 'the group least likely to receive higher education' (Stevenson 1990: 257). The letter's 'quite well educated' remark thus needs to be read in the context of a period where, as Judy Giles has shown, the assumption was that formal schooling only needed to prepare women for pre-marital "'filler" occupations' (1995: 4-5).

⁸ The census generally defines workers in this category as shopkeepers and shop assistants.

Where the D.B. letter makes the link between her business acumen and her education, therefore – ‘quite well educated—a good business girl’ – the implication is that her emphasis is upon her practical education as a working girl. This echoes the presentation of female stardom in *Pictures and Pictureogger* to which she aspires. Star interviews emphasised the fact that performing for the screen was a demanding, physical, full-time occupation. The preface to an interview with American actress Dorothy Philips questions the reader: ‘Perhaps you imagine that the word WORK has no place in Studio Directories? Let Dorothy Phillips undeceive you’ (1921: 16). Such warnings deflated the fantasy of screen stardom as a glamorous escape from working life, whilst simultaneously marketing precisely such a fantasy to female readers through screen-star competitions, again testifying to the frequently contradictory reconciliatory processes of magazine discourse at this time. The D.B. letter seems to navigate these contradictions by combining the aesthetic glamour of the role of the performer (‘just the right face and eyes’) with the emphasis upon her professional working character and physical capabilities (‘strong as a lioness’ / ‘can swim, ride and drive’). In doing so, the letter boasts a firm knowledge of what fan magazine discourse dictated as the qualities of successful female performers on the silent screen: simultaneously skilled professionals and glamorous aesthetic spectacles.

The D.B. letter thus engages in, and to an extent recreates, the processes of female representation enacted by the magazine, by writing directly about a topic to which the paper encouraged and trained its readers to respond. As it does so, however, the letter also suggests how such ideas might have been formed in relation to a range of local contexts and wider trends for cinemagoing women of a particular age and class in this period who, as Stamp asserts, ‘might be trying to reconfigure their own lives beyond the customary strictures of family life’ (2000: 149) through their interaction with star profiles and the emulation of the new models of womanhood that fan magazine discourse presented.

Reclaiming the Published Letter

What have we gathered about this one writer as she emerges from the archive? We might posit the following in summary: that the individual of which the letter speaks is a young, South West-based, working woman, somewhere between 15-25 years old, likely unmarried, possessed of a variety of skills and well-versed in the qualities of female cinema stardom, potentially gained from her experiences at her local 'Electric Theatre' and bolstered by her reading of and contribution to *Pictures and Picturegoer*. We also know that ultimately D.B. didn't prove to be the ideal Picture Girl that the magazine was looking for; the winner was announced in the early March 1919 as 'Alice (Lavender) Lee', a 19 year-old 'Yorkshire Girl' who nevertheless shared many of the qualities of which the D.B. letter boasted, presented as 'educated', and 'essentially a sports girl', who asserted her desire to 'work to *earn* the reputation of ... the British "PICTURES Girl"' (1919: 217).

Drawing fixed conclusions about the identity of a letter writer from this kind of ephemeral material is obviously not without its problems. Most immediately, we risk constructing a fantasy of the archival subject in trying to build a biographical snapshot around such traces. We may question how closely the woman described in the D.B. example really fitted the prescribed competition age range. She could be older, or too young, bending the rules to make herself fit. Alternatively, if the writer is not D.B. herself, it suggests another, more hidden persona – a friend, or her mother or sister perhaps, wishing to push or promote D.B. on her behalf. The persona the letter describes could have been partly fictionalised, in the distortions and wish-fulfilment of either the woman herself or those who promote her, before the letter actually reached the hands of the editor.

If these factors push the letter towards a semi-fiction, does this fiction itself still have resonance? I would argue that both are significant – the potentially more 'authentic' identity

and the potentially more imagined one – for the ways they demonstrate a wider perception of film culture and women’s interaction with it at this cultural moment. As the range of ephemera within archives like the BDC testifies, women did write fan letters, just as they created fan scrapbooks and collected cinema memorabilia, and many writers use the fan magazine as a creative platform and as a way of voicing and sharing their experiences, complaints, and observations alongside their fantasies and aspirations. Real experiences and representations fundamentally intermingle with fantasy in both the official content and the printed correspondence of the magazine. In the letters this mode of representation is simultaneously mediated through reference points (to work, to location, to education) that facilitate an interpretive framework for understanding how an epistolary persona could have been shaped by other factors not entirely bound by engagement with the interactive discourse of the magazine. Fan letters thus speak to the ways archival ephemera can enable us to co-ordinate a sense of a lived film history, illuminating both sides of an interactive and intermedial relationship between the producers of film culture and those who consumed it.

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1918e. *Pictures and Picturegoer*, September 14–21.

1918f. *Pictures and Picturegoer*, October 5–12.

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