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“On the First Rung of the Ladder of Fame”

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**Title:**

**“On the First Rung of the Ladder of Fame”: Would-Be Cinema Stars in Silent-Era Britain**

**Abstract:**

The “movie-struck girl”, and the anxieties that this figure generated, have been well documented in relation to early Hollywood. This article explores concurrent trends in Britain during the 1910s and 1920s, examining the local publications and practices that emerged to cater to aspiring film actors, and showing how discussions of would-be cinema stars took part in national debates about women’s place in the labour market and the struggle to legitimize the domestic film industry. Particular attention is given to so-called “cinema schools”, which aroused considerable hostility within the British film trade and eventually provoked government intervention.

**Key words:**

acting, cinema schools, movie-struck girls, aspiration, social history, British cinema

**Main text:**

**Introduction**

## “On the First Rung of the Ladder of Fame”

In September 1915, Dorothy Leader, a 20-year-old housemaid at Belgrave Square in London, pleaded guilty in court to the theft of jewellery and clothing worth £150 from her former employer. Reporting on the case under the heading “The Cinema Lure”, *The Times* explained that Leader’s crime had been motivated by ambition. Among the incriminating items of evidence found at her lodgings were pictures of film stars, letters indicating that she had written to film companies applying for work and receipts for a course of lessons in cinema acting. These materials were enough to convince the police that Leader was “obsessed with the idea that she could become a cinema actress”, and had resorted to theft to fund her passion.<sup>1</sup> Leader’s was not the only case of its kind in Britain, although it may have been the earliest. In 1920, the same paper explained how a 17-year-old kitchenmaid called Angela Rea stood accused of stealing furs, dresses, and underwear valued at more than £500 from her former mistress, which she had also apparently taken in order to support her efforts to become “a great cinema star”. The incident was made more newsworthy on this occasion by the fact that Rea’s alleged victim was the famous stage and screen actress Marie Lohr.<sup>2</sup>

Even when they were not appearing in court, aspiring film stars like Leader and Rea occupied a prominent position in the popular imagination of the early twentieth century. Studies of cinema culture in the United States have shown how, during the 1910s and 1920s, the “movie-struck girl” emerged as a key figure in debates about the cinema and its influence. For critics of the new medium, the obsessive desire to appear onscreen expressed by, or attributed to, many female picture-theatre patrons was proof of the cinema’s pernicious influence on society at large. For cinema’s promoters, however, the “movie-struck girl” became what Shelley Stamp describes as “a popular, if cautionary, model of film enthusiasm”: the type of dedicated

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cinemagoer that, while seemingly irrational and potentially transgressive in her ambition, was nevertheless deemed crucial in forming a core audience for moving pictures.<sup>3</sup> By the end of the silent period, the ultimate destination for the “movie-struck girl” in the United States and internationally was undoubtedly Los Angeles. “Why do girls leave home?” asked the British travel writer and novelist Alice Williamson in 1927. “The youngest answer to this aged question is, ‘They leave home to go to Hollywood, of course!’”<sup>4</sup> Historians of the period have revealed how social reformers, civic authorities and studio executives responded to the migration of huge numbers of aspiring film actors to Hollywood from the mid-teens onwards, and how, in the process, the “extra girl” in pursuit of stardom came to embody “a particularly gendered version of the American dream”.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, as the cases of Leader and Rea indicate, the ambition to act in films, and the public anxiety that greeted this ambition, was not confined to the United States, and was in fact a notable feature of other national cinema cultures, including Britain’s.<sup>6</sup> As one British cartoonist joked in 1922, it could often seem that, “while one half the world is going *to* the films”, the other half was doing their best to get “*on* the films” (Fig 1).<sup>7</sup> This essay explores how the desire to appear onscreen was manifested and received in Britain during the 1910s and 1920s. It begins by surveying the wide range of texts and practices that emerged to cater to would-be cinema stars in the form of fan magazine advice columns, instructional guides to screen acting and film star competitions, before focusing in detail on the spread of “cinema schools”, which offered courses of lessons in film acting. While the industries catering to would-be stars in Britain clearly contributed to a broader and distinctly transnational film culture, with Hollywood at its centre, the British response to aspiring film actors was also shaped in important ways by local concerns. This essay suggests that what

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was at stake in early discussions of would-be film actors in Britain was both the precarious cultural and professional status of those working in the domestic film industry and, more pressingly, the uncertain place of women in post-First World War British society.

### **How to Become a Cinema Star**

Women’s role in British silent cinema, both as consumers and producers, has attracted increasing scholarly attention in recent years.<sup>8</sup> However, there is still much to be learned about the reach and impact of the industries that targeted women especially (although not exclusively) as potential stars. The dream of earning a living as a film star in Britain took shape during a period in which, as the historian Matt Houlbrook argues, fantasy worlds of all sorts were being marketed to women readers, moviegoers and radio-listeners in Britain, and which in turn were contributing to new definitions of selfhood.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, this particular dream was also a product of the aesthetic and institutional transformations associated with cinema’s second decade, as film acting made the transition from a casual and largely unskilled occupation to become a distinct, and potentially lucrative, professional activity.<sup>10</sup> The emergence of popular film magazines and other platforms for fan discourse in the 1910s quickly helped to promulgate the notion that film acting, like the cinema itself, was not only novel and exciting, but was also accessible to everyone: “men and women, boys and girls of practically all ages and all types”.<sup>11</sup> In the drive to distinguish cinema from other kinds of entertainment, notably legitimate theatre, it was often claimed that the difference between the respective arts of the “speaking” and “silent” stages meant “the experienced actor is of little more use to the producer than a raw but talented amateur”.<sup>12</sup> Already before the First World War, there was no

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shortage of untutored but eager screen aspirants willing to put the validity of this claim to the test.

Advice columns catering to would-be film performers became a fixture of British fan magazines and popular volumes on cinema from the early 1910s.<sup>13</sup> Some writers poked fun at fans for believing “that it is the easiest thing in the world for an inexperienced amateur to become a star picture actor”, stressing the competitive nature of the film business and the element of physical risk involved in stunt work.<sup>14</sup> Others advised that there was “plenty of room for more ‘stars’ in filmland”, especially those that possessed “the necessary qualifications”: namely “mobile, expressive faces, and good, clear-cut features”.<sup>15</sup> Along with other aspects of film culture, advice on film acting quickly spread to mainstream magazines, especially those aimed at young women. Just as British fan periodicals began to resemble contemporary “penny weeklies” aimed at women by the mid-1910s,<sup>16</sup> numerous women’s magazines also took to hosting regular film content. These sections frequently became a forum for discussions of women’s aspirations to stardom. For instance, next to a review of recent film releases, a typical 1916 issue of the young women’s magazine *Our Girls* gave advice about the best way to find work as a cinema actress in response to a correspondent whose ambition, said the editor, was “shared, apparently, by a good many of my readers”.<sup>17</sup>

By this point in the 1910s, there were already a number of dedicated instructional guides to screen performance in circulation in Britain. These began as early as Leopold Wagner’s *Cinema Acting as a Profession* (1915), with more than twenty similar publications appearing by the end of the silent period.<sup>18</sup> British “how-to” manuals on film performance in the silent period combined systematic advice on film-acting technique with more general tips about the mechanics of the studio and

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the professional codes of conduct of the film industry.<sup>19</sup> In common with American guides, the exercises recommended for mastering screen technique frequently included learning to produce emotions on demand, a skill referred to variously as “registering” or, more grandly, “the art of facial expression” (see Fig. 2).<sup>20</sup> To this end, the acting coach Agnes Platt suggested that novices hold a handkerchief across their face while practicing expressions in the mirror “so that only the eyes are visible”, while Fred Dangerfield and Norman Howard supplied a list of forty or so “common expressions” for readers to practice “registering” at home.<sup>21</sup>

Women, especially, were targeted by film-acting guides, and were strongly encouraged to identify with, and emulate, existing female performers. There is remarkable overlap between the illustrations to “registering” provided in acting manuals and the promotional images produced by publicists engaged in marketing celebrity film actresses. Certainly, photomontages of the many “moods” or “faces” of stars like Mary Pickford, Alla Nazimova and Norma Talmadge would have provided fodder for would-be film performers learning the “art of facial expression” for themselves.<sup>22</sup> Film acting manuals further encouraged the slippage between dedicated cinema fans and would-be stars by framing film viewing as a form of research. Many guides followed the British actress Violet Hopson in advising aspirants to give themselves “a cheap course of ‘star study’” at a local cinema.<sup>23</sup> William Elliott told readers of his guide *How to Become a Film Actor* to “watch keenly the pictures in which actors of repute are taking part. Study their methods; note how they handle certain situations, and do not be afraid to use your critical faculty in coming to an estimation of their effectiveness”.<sup>24</sup> An anonymous guide from 1920 similarly advised trainee film actors on “combining business with pleasure” when visiting the cinema:

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Watch very carefully the movements and facial expressions of every artiste; take special interest in the star of the leading picture, memorize as much as you can of the story, and when you get home, put yourself in the part of the star and go through what you consider to be the most difficult part of the plot.<sup>25</sup>

Such advice suggests how the dream of becoming a cinema star could be woven into the everyday practices of film viewing. As Amelie Hastie has observed of other kinds of celebrity lifestyle guide, training exercises like these also offered readers a way to extend the pleasures they took from the cinema by performing and embodying a version of screen stardom at home.<sup>26</sup> Manuals authored by famous film actors promised even closer contact with the star lifestyle, often devoting space to the expensive outfits and trips to exotic locations that film work was said to entail. A pamphlet attributed to the actress José Collins included “a useful dress chart” designed to help keep track of costumes on the film set, which no doubt had the added function of allowing readers to indulge in fantasies of wearing a gown of “powder blue chameuse”, kid gloves, fox furs and pearls.<sup>27</sup>

Despite their collusion in fuelling the fantasy of film celebrity, instructional guides to film performance during the silent period tended to expound the importance of hard work, systematic study and “the school of bitter experience” as the best means of getting to “film-land”.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, however, other developments catering to would-be cinema stars offered British aspirants less arduous routes to the studio. In the summer of 1918, the fan magazine *Pictures and the Picturegoer* launched a national search to find a new British star. According to the terms of the competition, the “‘Pictures’ Girl” was to be well educated, British born, good looking, young (aged 15-25), and without any professional acting experience. The prize was a supporting



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role in a film made by the competition’s sponsor, the Broadwest Film Company.<sup>29</sup> The magazine *Picture News* had already run a “popularity contest” for readers a few years earlier.<sup>30</sup> Screen-acting talent competitions had also been arranged on a local scale, including a contest at the First International Cinematograph Exhibition in London’s Olympia in 1913, which had apparently attracted more than 3,000 applicants.<sup>31</sup> In the 1920s, the format was emulated by a raft of national and international sponsors, who promised screen tests, cameos or leading roles to the eventual winners.<sup>32</sup> The biggest of these contests, launched by the *Daily Sketch* newspaper in 1922, offered a prize that included a trip to America and a part opposite Norma Talmadge in the First National film *Within the Law*.<sup>33</sup>

According to the rhetoric of their promoters, schemes like the “‘Pictures’ Girl” contest were predicated on the need to unearth homegrown performers, who could compete with international stars like Mary Pickford.<sup>34</sup> But they also served to lend weight to the narratives of discovery and celebrity that had become a staple of fan-magazine fiction, novels like Clive Holland’s *The Cinema Star*, and star biographies, as well as showcasing the range of consumer pleasures that were becoming associated with the star lifestyle.<sup>35</sup> As part of a 1919 contest launched in connection with the Stoll Film Company, the *Sunday Express* arranged for the twenty-four finalists to celebrate reaching “the first rung on the ladder of fame” by going on a three-day “cinema joy tour” of London. Their tour included trips to West End theatres and music halls, meals in luxury restaurants, a cruise on the Thames, a motor-drive up Oxford Street and flights in a stunt airplane. The newspaper covered the finalists’ time in London in detail, printing photographs of the women preparing for their screen tests at the Stoll studios and scenes from their “joy tour” in the paper’s weekly round-up of news (Fig. 3).<sup>36</sup> For a handful of women, competitions like these may

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have provided a genuine opportunity to begin a career in the film industry. But, for the majority of newspaper and magazine readers, film star contests, like instructional acting guides, traded on the vicarious access they offered to celebrity and on the shape they gave to women’s aspirations.

### **Women workers and the cinema**

The emergence of a culture of aspiration around film acting as a profession, and around the figure of the film star in particular, prompted a range of responses from commentators within and beyond the British film industry. While some writers acknowledged that the interest in film acting was widespread among different social groups, the bulk of commentary about would-be film actors focused on female aspirants, so that by 1920 the British actress Peggy Hyland could confidently label women “the screen-struck sex”.<sup>37</sup> In the years immediately after the First World War, discussions of women’s common and seemingly irrational desire to act in films in Britain took on more urgent implications. Some sources noted a surge in the number of women approaching film studios for work, and linked this trend to changes in the British labour market.<sup>38</sup> Specifically, the rise of would-be cinema stars was implicated in the awkward transition from a wartime economy, in which large numbers of women had entered professions usually reserved for men, to a peacetime economy, in which women workers were expected, and in some cases required by law, to relinquish jobs in munitions industries or other “men’s trades” and return either to domestic life or to more conventional roles in domestic service.<sup>39</sup> As national unemployment levels rose in the early 1920s, young working women were widely blamed for taking jobs away from men and their dependents, as well as being

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perceived as a bar to the restoration of the “normal”, if largely imaginary, pre-war order.<sup>40</sup>

Would-be film actresses, like other women jobseekers, were on the receiving end of the ambivalent social attitudes current at this time. Some writers conceded that film work might offer hope to those women without a trade and unaccustomed to manual labour, whose husbands had been killed in the war. A trade journalist in 1922 reported sympathetically on the case of one woman seeking desperately for “middle-aged” screen parts. Women like her, the writer commented, “are handicapped by having had no previous training, and are now called upon to cope with a situation they have never dreamt would arise”, leaving them with the belief that cinema acting might be their only chance of earning a living.<sup>41</sup> In contrast, many commentators interpreted the desire to act in films as one more expression of women’s refusal, for better or worse, to participate in the rebuilding of traditional social relations. Depictions of “screen-struck” women in British journalism and literature show how potent this idea remained throughout the 1920s. Bernard Rolt’s novel *Cinderella of the Cinema* focuses on the workings of a fictional film star contest arranged by a national newspaper in connection with an American production firm (much like the 1922 contest promoted by the *Daily Sketch*). As news of the competition spreads, it is said to cause “enormous excitement in the brains of shop-girls, typists, chorus ladies and the like”, resulting in “severe attacks of film fever”, which make women “ruinously dissatisfied with their present spheres in life”. It is telling both of the novel’s conservative tone and that of much contemporary discussion of would-be film actresses, that the heroine and eventual winner of the contest declines the offer of a film contract in order to devote herself to the task of being “famous at home” for her husband.<sup>42</sup>

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More progressive, or opportunistic, commentators likewise connected the interest in film work with ideas of economic independence and a shift in women’s expectations. When John Galsworthy decided to give the overbearing patriarch of his play *A Family Man* two rebellious daughters, he made one of them a woman who refuses to marry the man she is living with and the other a would-be film actor intent on leaving the strictures of her middle-class home to join “the movie people”.<sup>43</sup> At the other end of the social scale, Lillian Bamburg, in her 1929 instructional guide to film acting, observed that “young women who would have drifted happily into service a generation ago, now look for a better occupation – something that gives a little freedom and happiness in place of the old drudgery”. For these women, said Bamburg, acting for the films, even as a “screen super”, represented an attractive alternative to domesticity or domestic labour.<sup>44</sup>

The anxieties stoked by the number of women apparently seeking work as film actresses in the post-war years can be seen especially clearly in the discussions surrounding so-called “cinema schools” that began in the 1910s and reached a peak in the 1920s. The public response to cinema schools shows how attitudes towards would-be film stars were caught up in more far-reaching debates about the physical and moral safety of women in the city. The deep hostility of the British trade press and, latterly, the fan press towards cinema schools, and the eagerness with which they welcomed government intervention, also suggests how concerned the domestic film industry was during this period to nurture its cultural and professional respectability.

### **Schools for the screen-struck**

Cinema schools were commercial establishments that offered courses of training in film acting and, in some cases, in projection and camera operating. However, it was

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those schools that specialized in acting tuition that prompted the most commentary and controversy. They first appeared in Britain before the First World War, and during the 1920s there were dozens of cinema schools in operation across the country. Many of these were clustered in and around London, but there were also schools in Manchester, Hull, Birmingham, Glasgow, Liverpool, Southsea, Southampton and Plymouth.<sup>45</sup> Some were attached to existing or defunct studios, and others, like the long-running Victoria Cinema College near London’s Oxford Street, boasted their own studio facilities, and occasionally produced their own films (Figs 4 and 5). There were also cinema schools that grew out of existing stage schools, as in the case of Stedman’s Academy of Dance, which had begun to offer lessons in film acting by 1914.<sup>46</sup> Several schools claimed ties with established production companies, and even advertised the services of well-known members of the industry as tutors.<sup>47</sup> To be sure, trade journalists and filmmakers often expressed the need for greater screen-actor training during the 1910s, and some film workers may well have moonlighted as screen-acting coaches. Having already offered training at the Samuelson Film Company studio in the mid-1910s, alongside the director George Pearson, the actor and filmmaker Fred Paul made plans to recruit students for a proposed Academy of Cinematographic Art on the premises of the London Film Company in 1919, although his plans do not seem to have come to fruition.<sup>48</sup>

From the start, though, cinema schools attracted suspicion from members of the film business. As early as 1912, an article in the *Film Censor* warned of misleading advertisements and shady practices connected to one “school for picture acting”, and further complaints were made in the trade papers in the years that followed.<sup>49</sup> By the 1920s, cinema schools had become the target of widespread derision. When the industry journal the *Motion Picture Studio* was founded in 1921, “bogus schools”

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made an early appearance on the editor’s list of things that did most damage to “the credit of the film industry”.<sup>49</sup> Court cases involving cinema schools aroused considerable interest in the popular press, especially when they provided details of the far-fetched scenes that pupils were asked to act out.<sup>50</sup> Fictional stories involving cinema schools proliferated. Adolphus Raymond’s behind-the-scenes novel *Film-Struck* dedicated a whole chapter to unveiling the workings of a cinema school in London, where the protagonist spends several weeks attending lessons, only to be told by the manager that her qualification is useless, “as the producers are prejudiced against cinema schools” and will not employ anyone who admits to having been to one.<sup>51</sup> This sentiment was largely confirmed by the statements of British producers and casting directors, many of whom went on record to say, like Bernard Bromhead of Gaumont, that they believed cinema school training to be “detrimental and not helpful to the success of the artist”.<sup>52</sup>

Even cinema school graduates who went on to forge careers in film acting viewed their training with mistrust. In her memoirs, the British film actress Dorothy Boucher, better known by her screen name, Chili Bouchier, described her time in the mid-1920s at a school near London’s Oxford Street (probably the Victoria Cinema College on Rathbone Place). The school, she recalled, was run by a teacher in boots and riding breeches (“the typical garb of the silent film director”), who made students perform in front of “a dummy camera made of wood and cardboard”. “We played love scenes, murder scenes and horror scenes”, Bouchier explained. “I thoroughly enjoyed myself although it was beginning to dawn upon me that this was a phoney setup.”<sup>53</sup>

In 1919, stories of bogus cinema schools reached the committee of the London County Council (LCC)’s Public Control Department. The Department had been

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established by the LCC in the 1890s to deal with an eclectic range of public safety issues. Over the years, their remit expanded to include petroleum and explosives licensing, vehicle registration, weights and measures inspection and the control of diseases in animals.<sup>54</sup> The Department’s interest in cinema schools stemmed largely from their existing remit for overseeing employment agencies. Since 1905, the Department had kept a register of agencies handling domestic servants and theatrical employees in London, initiating a broader licensing scheme in 1910.<sup>55</sup> According to information passed on by the police, the Department had reason to suspect that many cinema schools were also operating as employment agencies for their students, despite not holding the relevant LCC licence.<sup>56</sup> However, as a letter drafted to the LCC executive made clear, the Department’s underlying concern was that cinema schools were effectively preying on young women. The committee wrote:

The majority of the students are girls with little or no experience of the career they seek to enter. [...] Pitiful cases have been instanced of girls who have been attracted to London from the provinces by the specious and glowing advertisements, and who, having fruitlessly spent their savings in undergoing training and in hotel expenses, found themselves stranded, with no hope of redress.

Without proof that the bogus cinema schools were actually operating as recruitment agencies, the Department could do nothing to control their activities. But, proceeding on the grounds that “the present vogue of the stage, the revue and the cinema” was unlikely to diminish, the committee’s solution was that they be given official power over film and theatre training schools as soon as possible.<sup>57</sup>

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The Public Control Department’s concern over the “pitiful cases” of vulnerable “girls” attracted to cinema schools was no doubt partly informed by their longstanding belief that employment agencies and other establishments aimed mainly at women workers were easy covers for prostitution rings.<sup>58</sup> Several years before asking the LCC for special powers to deal with cinema schools, the Department had also made similar arguments for being allowed to deal with massage parlors in the West End, which police suspected of being used as “disorderly houses”, or brothels. This suggestion was taken so seriously that the Department was eventually granted the ability to inspect any premises in London that they suspected of being used for “immoral purposes”.<sup>59</sup> Given their track record, it is reasonable to assume that, in cinema schools, the Department saw another potential front for the sexual, as well as financial, exploitation of young women. The LCC concurred, and successfully petitioned Parliament for an extension of their licensing powers at the next session.<sup>60</sup>

The LCC’s fears about the scale of the fraudulent cinema school business and the danger it posed to women intent on seeking film work in London would seem to have been exaggerated. In the decade after they were granted licensing powers, the Public Control Department awarded annual licences to more than twenty cinema schools, with little objection from either LCC inspectors or police. However, the LCC was not alone in believing that young women’s enthusiasm for film work was leaving them vulnerable to sexual and moral corruption. Elsewhere, too, the image of young, “screen-struck” women coming to London to look for work in British studios activated older fears of the sexual dangers that awaited women in the “city of dreadful delight”; fears which, as Judith Walkowitz has argued, were themselves symptomatic of an uneasiness about the prospect of women’s social and economic mobility.<sup>61</sup> Young women’s incursion into the area around Wardour Street, the British film



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industry’s de facto headquarters, aroused particular discomfort. The cinema correspondent for the *Daily Express*, G.A. Atkinson, complained in the early 1920s of the “hundreds of screen-struck women and girls” making their rounds each day to the recruitment agencies, production offices and trade screening rooms of Soho and Shaftesbury Avenue in a practice known to job-seekers as “looping the loop”. For Atkinson, there was “a sinister side to this great drift of unemployed beauty”, in that women were in danger of being sexually exploited by unscrupulous producers, who, in the euphemistic parlance of “filmland”, promised career advancement only to girls who were willing to be “nice” to them.<sup>62</sup> The journalist Sydney Moseley made even stronger accusations of sexual exploitation in his 1920 dissection of “cinema stage morals”, claiming that, “as a channel of ruin for girls, the cinema-stage goes one better than either the music-hall or legitimate stage”.<sup>63</sup> Such fears were given further credibility in subsequent years, when news of the so-called “star scandals” in Hollywood began to make front-page news in British papers. Following Roscoe Arbuckle’s arrest in 1921 for the alleged murder of Virginia Rappe, the *News of the World* reported sympathetically on the response of US reform campaigners, who, the paper said, saw Rappe’s death as one more instance of “the misery, disgrace, and death that follow the breakdown of customs which once protected women”.<sup>64</sup>

Within the film industry, the response to cinema schools was less ostensibly concerned with regulating young women’s sexuality, and more anxious about the negative effect that such media stories were having on business. The publicity generated by sham cinema schools was seen as particularly damaging to the status of professional film actors, who were themselves becoming increasingly unionized during this period, and to British studios struggling to convince the public to support domestic film production. When news of the LCC’s new powers to licence cinema

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schools was announced in 1920, the *Kinematograph Weekly* welcomed it as a “serious blow [...] at the spurious training schools with which the Trade has been afflicted”, and hoped that schools would now be forced to keep their promises to find pupils employment or else close their doors.<sup>65</sup> In the same year, the theatrical trade union the Variety Artistes’ Federation (VAF) made more proactive efforts to defend the cinema from the “affliction” of cinema schools. Writing for *The Times*, a VAF representative, Anthony Charles Keith, argued that cinema schools were “one of the greatest blemishes upon the film trade”, accusing them of damaging the reputation of the industry and promoting unrealistic expectations among film fans.<sup>66</sup> The following month, Keith announced plans for a dedicated “cinema artistes” section of the VAF, formed expressly to protect the interests of professional film actors, and to advocate greater restrictions on bogus cinema schools. Such places, Keith argued, appealed primarily to two classes: “those who have ample means and seek to enter the profession for vanity’s sake, and those who only have a little money and really need the work”. In either case, he concluded, only “about one in every thousand” aspirants was likely “to be of the slightest use to a film producer”.<sup>67</sup>

For the LCC and many commentators, then, cinema schools were indicative of the exploitation that young, “screen-struck” women were likely to encounter in the metropolis. For the film industry and trade organisations like the VAF, such schools, and the popular fantasies of stardom that they stood for, were obstacles in the path to securing professional and cultural legitimacy for the British cinema and its performers. At the end of the 1920s, cinema schools could still provoke knowing contempt from writers as different as Edgar Wallace and Evelyn Waugh, who continued to associate them with delusional ambition and fraudulent business practices.<sup>68</sup> As MPs prepared to debate the terms of the Cinematograph Films Bill in

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1927, bogus cinema schools were deemed a live enough issue to be raised in Parliament, and to require reassurance from the Home Office that sufficient measures existed to keep cinema schools in check.<sup>69</sup>

Representatives of the British film trade also remained active in policing the threat that cinema schools posed to their reputation. In 1927, Patrick Mannoek, the editor of the fan magazine *Picturegoer*, wrote to the LCC requesting that the Public Control Department refuse a training schools licence to the Victoria Cinema College on the grounds that its managers were not qualified to teach film acting and that the school was “entirely discredited by the production industry”.<sup>70</sup> For Mannoek, this was part of a long-standing crusade, as he had raised similar objections to the LCC against other cinema training schools earlier in the decade.<sup>71</sup> Witnesses were assembled against the college, including some of the young women who had passed through its doors, but its managers were let off with a caution.<sup>72</sup> However, similar complaints were raised against the school the following year, and the Public Control Department issued a final caution to the company’s managers not to mislead the women who came to them for tuition, or else face losing their LCC licence.<sup>73</sup> Possibly as a result of this ultimatum, the school ceased trading shortly afterwards.<sup>74</sup>

Meanwhile, the *Picturegoer* issued its own warning to potential cinema school students by publishing a thinly veiled attack on the Victoria Cinema College in an article by Victor Hilton entitled “That Film School”. While the article’s main purpose was to parody the inflated claims of cinema school publicity, an accompanying illustration, which depicted a young woman reclining with a copy of a cinema school prospectus as pound signs floated above her head, intimated that part of the blame for fraudulent schools lay with young women’s unrealistic fantasies of wealth and leisure (Fig. 6).<sup>75</sup> As Shelley Stamp has noted of similar portrayals of American “movie-

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struck” fans in the 1910s, there is a distinct irony in the hostility that fan publications like *Picturegoer* expressed towards cinema schools, given their own active involvement in advertising such services over the preceding decades and their formative role in marketing the attractions of film stardom to the British public.<sup>76</sup>

### **Conclusion**

While, by the end of the 1920s, Hollywood had become the primary international destination for would-be cinema stars, aspiring film actors in Britain were also catered for by an array of local publications and practices. The responses to these activities intersected with debates about women’s place in the labour market and the public space of the city, as well as fuelling concerns about the reputation of the domestic film industry. But what about the would-be stars themselves? Caricatured images of “screen-struck” audiences circulated widely in Britain in journalistic, literary and instructional discourse to the extent that further attempts to recover the lived experience of aspiring film performers would require negotiating a range of assumptions and prejudices about the cinema, its audiences and working women. Nevertheless, more could be learned about the early working conditions of film actors in Britain, and other film-producing nations beyond the United States, by looking at attempts to organize and regulate film acting as a profession and at the day-to-day running of those legitimate employment agencies that supplied workers to local studios.

Despite the anxieties over young women’s changing expectations and ambitions that undoubtedly underpinned early discussions of would-be film actors in Britain, it is also worth taking seriously the warnings given by voices within the trade press to the effect that the British production sector simply couldn’t accommodate the vast

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numbers of people attempting to “break in” to the industry. In 1919, the theatrical paper the *Era* doubted if there were more than forty people in Britain who were able to make a living solely from film acting. They suggested that “even those who are fortunate enough to get good many engagements do not, apart from the tiny minority in regular stock companies, make much more than a bare living at it”. The mismatch between the popular perception of cinema as a vast new field of opportunity and the reality of an industry struggling to get a hold in the world market continued to be a source of tension in trade discourse. “If British production occupied the position it should do”, the *Era* asserted, instead of “two-score” professional film actors, “there would be hundreds”.<sup>77</sup> In retrospect, then, the dream that was being sold by British “how-to” manuals, star contests and cinema schools in the silent era was not just one of individual fame and fortune. It was also the fantasy of a domestic film industry expansive enough to support so many willing workers.

### Notes:

This article draws on research originally undertaken at the University of Cambridge. I would like to thank the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council for funding that research, and the anonymous *Film History* reviewer for their comments.

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### Illustration captions and credits:

Fig. 1. “The Craze for ‘Getting on the Films’”, *Daily Mirror*, 20 January, 1922. Image

© Mirrorpix.

Fig. 2. A visual guide to registering emotions, from Violet Hopson’s “Hints for the

Cinema Actress” in *Cinema Acting as a Profession* (ca. 1919). Image © the Bill

Douglas Centre, University of Exeter.

Fig. 3. “On the First Rung of the Ladder of Fame”. Finalists in the 1919 *Sunday*

*Express* cinema star competition prepare for their screen tests at the Stoll Film

Company studios. Image © the British Library Board.

Fig. 4. The main office of the Victoria Cinema College in London, from the school’s

prospectus (ca. 1917). Image © the Bill Douglas Centre, University of Exeter.

Fig. 5. Students at the Victoria Cinema College rehearse a scene in the college studio.

Image © the Bill Douglas Centre, University of Exeter.

Fig. 6. “That Film School”. A would-be cinema star dreams of making money in the

movies, as imagined by the *Picturegoer*, May 1928. Image © the British Film

Institute Reuben Library.