Stars in the Aisles: Cinema usherettes, identity and ideology

Eva Balogh,
Portsmouth University, UK

Abstract:
This article examines the significant contribution of the cinema usherette to the pleasure of cinemagoing, particularly during the 1930s-1950s. Through analyses of oral history interviews undertaken with former cinema usherettes, archival research, personal and official photographs and related epiphenomena, this paper will show how the presence of the cinema usherette functioned as an ideologically charged mediator between the cinema audience and broader discourses of desire, femininity and identity in primarily British cinemas. This examination will also illustrate how this has shaped the now familiar image of the cinema usherette as an erotically charged female figure, which can now be seen in popular cultural representations. And finally, it will explore the somewhat unusual position that the usherette occupied as an audience within an audience, revealing insights from which to consider potential new discussions in the field of audience studies.

Keywords: Usherettes, glamour, cinema audience, Hollywood

Introduction
Keith Farley (1946-2010) was a prolific, Wolverhampton-based local historian producing numerous publications relating to the city. To celebrate The Year of the Cinema in 1996, he wrote an extremely informative booklet, At the Flicks. In it we find this evocative memory of the cinema usherette during the 1950s.

Usherettes were wonderful. I was really in love with usherettes. I was pretty young remember so I suppose it was seeing young ladies wearing uniforms and being in the dark which really affected me. It sounds a bit stupid now but I used to love going to the cinema just to see the usherettes. (1996)
He is not alone. Christopher Fowler (2009 p.113) in his autobiographical novel *Paperboy* writes:

> The bulb hidden in her white tray illuminated choc ices, Mivvis, wafers, tubs, ice lollies and ridged plastic cartons of fluorescent orange juice. Her strapped heels, her little Grecian skirt and her tray of offerings gave her the appearance of an electric goddess...

These two recollections present us with a delectable vision of desire, drawn not from the film or the stars on the screen but from a *physical*, female presence. Furthermore, the cinema usherette has been referred to, alluded to, and represented in many visual forms. Examples include, Edward Hopper’s 1939 painting, *New York Movie*, the musical, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Richard O’Brien, 1973) *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (dir. Woody Allen. 1985), *Lipstick on your Collar* (dir. Renny Rye. C4. 1993) and in advertising campaigns from *Orange* and *Sony*. She has also been immortalised as a nostalgic, collectible Betty Boop (2011) and Barbie (2007) with the accompanying description.

> The perfect job for a movie maven like Barbie® doll? An usherette in a legendary tinseltown theater of course! The Usherette Barbie® reports for work in a dark teal satin uniform featuring a short-sleeved jacket and matching tap pants. Striking golden buttons and trim pop against the brilliant blue, and a pillbox hat, black fishnets and strappy shoes pull the look together seamlessly. With “flashlight” and two movie tickets, Barbie® is ready for duty, proving that in Hollywood, even drop-dead gorgeous usherettes look like they were made for the big screen. No more than 5600 worldwide.

In essence then, her image has evolved to epitomise the glamour of cinema. And yet, within the vast literature of cinema history, women’s history and related discourses, she has been overlooked. My work redresses that imbalance and offers a potential re-balancing of such studies.

Within the canon of work produced on women working in film and cinema (Harper; 2000 Lant & Perez; 2006 Mahar; 2008 Rosen; 1973 Slide; 1996), as well as recently emerging projects on women who worked behind the scenes, (for example, Ball, M. Ball, V. Bradley, S and Galt, F - ‘A History of Women in the British Film and Television Industries’ AHRC funded research project 2014-2017) the focus is on those who have *produced*, that is, there is a recognisable, tangible artefact, from film, to wardrobe to the cutting room floor. The recognition of such *invisible* labour is needed to further understand not only women’s significant contributions to the film industry but also to wider histories of and about women’s work. The cinema usherette was also part of that *invisible* labour and thus, I argue, warrants a position in such scholarly studies.
There is also now a sizeable body of academic work that has explored the history and development of film exhibition practices. In Douglas Gomery’s (1992) classic text, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* he provides a comprehensive study of America’s changing relationship with watching movies. He begins with the emergence of the nickelodeon and ends with the arrival of home videos, mapping this alongside an ever-changing economic history. This book is concerned with the *business* of making movies and its capacity to survive and adapt to economic, social and technological upheavals but whilst there are some references to the importance of the ground level workforce, ultimately they are not a major consideration; the focus is at the top of the movie making chain. However, the varying, fleeting references to the cinema workforce, including the usherette, shed some light on the role of the workforce in U.S. exhibition practice, informing us that the Balaban and Katz theatres in Chicago in the 1920s hired primarily male college students as ushers, (Gomery 1992) and, from photographic evidence and advertising imagery from this period, we know the U.K. also hired male ushers.

The sheer size of the U.S. compared to that of the U.K. means it is difficult to provide a comprehensive, comparative study here but there is evidence to show that the female usherette did, at least in some cinemas in the U.S. have a similar function to those in the U.K. specifically because of her gender.

Citing Frank Ricketson’s 1938 *The Management of Motion Picture Theatres*, Gomery (1992 p72) draws attention to some of the sexist reasons for employing female ushers, “In show-houses where the carpets, draperies, and furnishings are worn and some of the luster of the theatre has faded, beautiful young usherettes, attractively costumed, help to keep the public’s glances off the shabby spots.”

Of particular interest to this paper is Ina Rae Hark’s 1994 essay “The Theater Man” and *The Girl in the Paybox*. This work provides an astute study on the (no less sexist) but importance of females within the structures of theatre management as the ‘seller of the movie dream’ in the U.S.A. suggesting that, ‘The girl in the box office was to use her appearance and demeanour to sell tickets in the same way the gaudy, incandescent marquee or titillating poster might.’ (2002 p148) My work offers a further development to this reading (and film exhibition studies) by demonstrating how the female image continued to be used to sell the cinema’s product after the patron had purchased their ticket.

This work has five key areas; the first section of this paper will provide an overview to the background of the project; the second will present historical information relating to the emergence of the usherette; the third will show how she was used by the industry as a mediator of glamour and desire; the fourth will explore the usherette’s own relationship to the audience and the fifth will consider the demise of the cinema usherette.

1: Background to the project

As an undergraduate student in the 1990s, I worked as a volunteer researcher at *Portsmouth City Museum*, U.K. on a new, permanent exhibition, *Portsmouth at Play*. A major part of my contribution was to collate and transcribe oral history interviews on a number of
subjects relating to leisure and entertainment in Portsmouth, of which the cinema was an essential area. My interest in cinema usherettes was initially inspired by one oral history interview that I undertook with David Young, (1996) a cinema projectionist in the 1950s. During the interview the subject of usherettes came up and I asked him if they were always female. His response was, ‘Well, yes... Well, the uniforms were made for women weren’t they?!’ Post-interview, I found myself wondering why he would say that, was it true and if so, why were the uniforms made for women? Thus, I decided to research the usherette further, a journey that has continued to present day. At that point, I thought I could possibly write an essay about her to contribute to my final degree year, as much of my work focused on women’s history and the invisibility of female labour in visual culture. However, as my research progressed, I realised writings about the cinema usherette and her role in the cinema organisation were hard to find. I located one (very brief) interview undertaken by the B.F.I. to assist with their cinema exhibition at M.O.M.I. (now long gone), at The Southbank, London, U.K. and, as noted the few references in Gomery’s work. Of equal importance at that time (and still of relevance) was Jackie Stacey’s (2003) germinal text, Stargazing: Hollywood cinema and female spectatorship, in which she utilises extensive primary interview sources to identify the ‘feminisation’ of the cinema audience, Margaret O’Brien and Allen Eyles’ (1993), Enter the Dream House: memories of Cinemas in South London from the Twenties to the Sixties and, I gained endless inspiration from Deirdre Beddoe’s (1993) text, Discovering Women’s History: a practical guide to the sources of women’s history, 1800-1945 in which she suggests that to unearth histories of women, ‘Novels, hymn books, songs, criminal records, women’s magazines need scrutiny as well as such traditional historical materials as parish registers, census returns and Parliamentary Papers.’ (1993 p9) This approach has stayed with me and my research continues to draw from a diverse range of visual and textual sources, as well as seemingly innocuous popular culture items, such as Barbie and Betty Boop.

To begin this project, I decided to use oral history as a primary research method because that seemed to be the only way I would be able to obtain the missing information on them. And although there are potential problems in the use of memory as a rigorous research method, as highlighted by O’Brien and Eyles (1993 p7) ‘Recounting memories – that is, the telling of stories about the past from the vantage point of the present – is always to some extent an imaginative reconstruction,’ Jeremy Silver’s (1990 p185) words seem an appropriate response to critics and concerns:

‘The exclusion of the oral by the written has often accurately been perceived as reflecting the cultural and historical exclusion from documentation of those people least likely to contribute to printed publications (that is women, the working class and cultural minorities). Oral history has therefore often seen its goal as being to document the lives and experiences of those who would otherwise disappear from history.’

I had already interviewed some cinema workers (as noted above) but I had not interviewed any usherettes. Therefore, I placed advertisements in the local press asking for former or current cinema usherettes to contact me. This was successful and many women
contacted me; some were willing to be interviewed and some wrote their memories in letters.

At this stage, I interviewed six women, all former cinema usherettes, who had worked at different cinemas across Portsmouth, U.K. during the 1930s-1970s. The City of Portsmouth has continually been a densely populated island, which had 35 cinemas by the 1930s, making it a rich source for a case study. It comprises of various districts, Southsea, Fratton, Copnor, North End, Stamshaw and Hilsea are the most notable. However, just across the short stretch of dividing water is Cosham and Drayton, which are also zones under the umbrella of Portsmouth City Council. My interviewees worked at cinemas in all of these areas and thus provided experiences from both different cinemas and locations. All of the women gave written consent for their interviews to be used and unless stated, the names given are their own (see Acknowledgements).

These original interviews and the transcripts (along with the consent documentation) are now deposited at Portsmouth City Museum’s Archives, U.K. and form part of their oral history collection.

Since those early days, my research has continued, always framed with an overall desire to bring the cinema usherette into the limelight, to showcase her significance and importance to both the cinema audience and the cinema organisation, as well as trying to establish a global connection with usherettes in terms of their role and experiences. My journey has now reached Australia and the U.S.A, with a recent visit to California (September 2016) to both interview a former cinema usherette and unearth a previously unlooked at archive of photographs and related material at The Margaret Herrick Library in Los Angeles. I have created a (on-going) website/archive, (www.cinemausherettes.com), given public talks and have held exhibitions of my research, including a display at the Doing Women’s Film and Television III conference at Leicester (18/20 May 2016).

![Figure 1: Gosport Theatre Cinema, Gosport C.1910](image1.png)

![Figure 2: The Electric Cinema Muswell Hill London U.K. c.1913](image2.png)
2: In the beginning

To provide a specific date for the emergence of the cinema usherette in the U.K., or indeed the use of the word, is challenging. However, photographic evidence shows that some cinemas had a defined, uniformed workforce by 1910. (Figs. 1, 2, 3) And, uniforms were being designed and made for cinema workers as early as 1920. (Fig. 4)

![Figure 3: The Palace Cinema Salisbury U.K. c.1920s](image)

![Figure 4: Advertisement for Alfred Harold Uniforms 1922](image)

Equally, as Antonia Lant (2006 p579) advises, the presence of a female in the theatre itself was already being recognised as an advantageous asset in the U.S. during this period. ‘Female ushers were introduced into movie theaters as a refining element as early as 1910.’ Whilst Susanne Ellis and Phillip Smith’s (2016) work from the 1911 U.K. census reveals the first official record of working at, or being associated with the cinema as an occupation. However, there is no mention of usherette, but there is of a (female) chocolate seller. And in ‘The Cinema Girl’ by Madge Crichton published in The Girl’s Friend magazine in 1916, a serialised story centres on the ‘sweetly-prettily but rather impulsive girl’, Peggie Walton, who runs away from home and works at a cinema, not as an usherette but as a cinema attendant.¹

Clearly, these early uniforms parallel those of a domestic servant and/or a waitress, which is perhaps not surprising, as many of the early, silent cinemas had tea-shops. As James Lyons (2004 p.316) has noted, ‘On the London cinema circuit film and food were being brought together within the same venue for concurrent and allied consumption from the 1910s onwards.’ Despite these ambiguities though, it is apparent that the presence of a female worker at the cinema was prevalent from the very early days, and a link between her and the selling of foodstuffs and providing a service to the audience was firmly established.

By the early 1930s, it is clearly evident that the cinema usherette was an established part of the cinema workforce and part of the collective identity of the cinema. It is possible to postulate that their appearance coincides, in part, with the emergence of safety
regulations that were brought about by the 1909 Cinematograph Acts and the concerns relating to the potential risk of fire because of the flammable nitrate film stock. By the 1930s, Portsmouth Corporation minutes reveal that applications for Cinematograph Licences have to comply with a number of stringent regulations. These include the inclusion of swing fire doors and the order that, ‘not less than two attendants for the first 100 persons thereof, and one extra attendant for each additional 100 persons or part thereof beyond the first 100 attending a performance shall be on duty inside the premises...’ (1933 p1025)

With many cinemas in Portsmouth having a capacity that exceeded 1800, it is possible to speculate that the staffing levels could easily be in excess of 20 and that hiring females would have been the cheapest option.

The 1930s did, of course, also witness the rapid expansion and development of cinema eager, amongst other things, to capitalise on the new synchronised sound. The arrival of Oscar Deutsch and the Odeon, the Associated British Cinemas, J. Arthur Rank and the British Gaumont chain not only saw the advent of a quite specific formula for cinema consumption, based on an organised and international format, it also saw the demise of the small, independent cinema. In the words of Miriam Hansen (1989):

> The advent of synchronized sound and a standardized speed of projection drastically curtailed the initiative of the individual exhibitor; and the activities surrounding the film increasingly became a promotional ritual organized from above and on a national scale.

This links quite specifically to (as Gomery, 1992, p 60 observes) the emergence of the so called Big Five (Paramount, Loew’s/MGMWarner Bros, Fox and RKO) in the U.S. who controlled the vast majority of all first run movie palaces in the ninety-two largest cities in the United States... The Big Five was thus able to dictate the terms of the marketplace for movie exhibition in the United States during the 1930 and 1940s, often appropriately labelled the golden age of Hollywood.

The cinema organisations were a brand and that brand needed to be represented and sold and, crucial to this investigation, is the notion that this organised model for cinema consumption also included a defined (public) role for the cinema usherette. As Hark (2002 p.137) suggests, ‘While movie theatres incorporated audience fantasies, they also organised those fantasies along gendered lines.’

This background information reveals that the usherette has had a consistent presence in cinema since its early days, providing a service, which was inextricably linked to her gender. The following section will explore how the role of usherette was developed by
the industry to project a quite specific form of femininity, which served to reinforce the fantasies produced by both the film industry and the exhibitors.

3: How to become an Electric Goddess

It is important to note that the actual duties of a cinema usherette could change depending on which cinema they worked at and its size. Recollections tend to recall the usherette as having a dual role, that of taking tickets and being shown to a seat, as well as appearing at the interval, laden with the ice-cream tray. This was not always the case though. Many larger establishments had both usherettes and ice-cream sales girls. And ice-cream manufacturers offered a number of strategies to maximise sales in their sales literature, which show an ‘army’ of women in white uniforms, with an ice-cream tray. This was of course important because cinemas were heavily reliant on confectionary sales to maximise profits. However, all of the usherettes I spoke with usually did both. It would seem that the actual reality was somewhat different to the idealised image to be seen in official literature; a recurring point within this writing. For the purposes of this paper, I am working on the basis that the cinema usherette did both roles.

To address the questions of what was actually required to become an electric goddess, this section will draw primarily from oral history testimony and official cinema procedures.

Evidence strongly suggests that the cinema usherette did not require any formal qualifications, with many going to work in the cinema straight from leaving school at the age of 14. The first job was often that of being a ‘chocolate girl’, echoing those early days of cinema, as some of my interviewees recalled:

*Being I was 14, I could only go as a chocolate girl then. You used to have to walk round with a tray with the chocolates on. I had heart trouble at the age of 7, so I didn’t go to school no more after I was 7. I more or less taught myself... I haven’t had a proper education at all.* (Betty Weston)

*At first I was at the Ritz where I was the chocolate girl.* (Peggy Sands)

*What they had in those days was chocolate girls... I used to go round in-between while the second feature was on with a chocolate tray with bars of chocolate on and cigarettes.* (Molly Rowe)

Girls were indeed the preferred choice for this occupation, not least in part because of their more attractive frame. As Hutchinson (1937) in *The Complete Kinemanager* manual advises,

*Either a boy or girl may be used for this (chocolates and cigarettes seller) purpose, but a girl is infinitely better. For one thing the chocolate seller must usually be over sixteen to work the last interval after nine o’clock, and nothing*
looks more awkward than the average youth of sixteen years of age and over, with a tray slung round his neck.

Figure 5: Staff at the Regent Cinema Portsmouth U.K. 1933

It was possible to be promoted from a chocolate girl to an usherette, with the ultimate promotion often being that of becoming the cashier in the pay box. Molly Rowe started as a chocolate girl and can be seen in the centre of the Regent/Gaumont staff photo of 1933 distinguished by her all white uniform (Fig. 5), and was eventually promoted to the paybox in the 1940s. (Fig. 6)

Figure 6: Molly Rowe as cashier at the Regent cinema Portsmouth U.K. c 1940s

The job of the cinema usherette was undoubtedly an occupation for working class females; it was low paid and often demanded long and unsociable hours. ‘It wasn’t a lot, because cinemas had never been a well paid job, never.’ (Florence Wall) Typically, the women did not belong to a trade union (although BECTU was in existence and would have been the union
they could have joined). ‘No, I don’t think we did, no. I don’t there was trade unions in things like that. It was mostly for factories, wasn’t it?’ (Margaret Eva Hunt)

So, if an usherette needed no formal education or qualifications, what did she need?

Hutchinson (1937) states the following:

Usherettes are sometimes controlled by a head girl, and in other situations come directly under the supervision of the foreman. Cleanliness, politeness, and quietness are the principal qualities of a good usherette, and above all, the ability to refrain from answering back when a patron complains. They are sorely tried on occasions, and it is necessary to instil this into their minds from the onset. Their hair must be tidy and black shoes and stockings worn (except in cases where special shoes are part of the uniform). It is neither reasonable nor yet is it good policy to suggest that make-up should not be used, but the too liberal use of cosmetics may tend to get your girls an undeservedly bad name. Jewellery does not improve the appearance of an usherette and its use may be deprecated without laying down what might appear to be an unjust law.

A sample of adverts for usherettes placed in the local paper’s Situations Vacant pages from the 1930s does reveal that the usherette needed to be young and smart. But according to George Quittenbourne (1996), a cinema manager for Portsmouth Town Cinemas in the 1940s, the girls needed no special attributes, other than, ‘Well... as long as they were attractive’. Supporting this notion, in a Cinema Circuit Manager training film⁴, produced by Rank in the late 1940s we witness a manager interviewing a prospective usherette. The camera focuses on her pretty face and her figure, through the eyes of the interviewing manager. Indeed, when I showed this film to some of my students, their response was not only laugh at such formality but to also say ‘what a dirty old man...’⁵

A main part of the usherette’s job involved showing people to their seats, so why did usherettes need to be so attractive? In the U.S. as previously mentioned, this attractiveness could apparently be used to detract from ‘shabby surroundings’ and add a ‘refining element’ but these reasons, whilst insightful, are a cursory analysis. To enable a deeper understanding of this, it is pertinent to return to those uniforms that Mr Young said were only made for women.

A uniform, by its very nature, serves as a symbol of identification and, in the case of the cinema, for practical reasons, it makes sense to be able to identify the appropriate person in the event of an enquiry or emergency. The uniforms then could be seen to provide the wearer with a certain amount of authority, but there is also an ambiguity to wearing a uniform in that it can also signal the status of being servile to the company that it represents. Thus, in the case of the usherette, it is possible to see how her authoritative image could have quickly collapsed, particularly as uniforms are often subject to changes in fashion and, rather than suppressing sexuality, they often emphasise it. For example,
Elizabeth Wilson (2003 p.40) recalled how uniforms designed for the WAVES (the women’s section of the American Navy) during World War II were fashionably cut in order to attract recruits. She continues:

Uniforms … often have added sexual charges since they denote the forbidden and the forbidding, and they appear to play a significant role in pornographic fantasy. The uniform is also contradictory in that, intended to quench individuality, it may sometimes enhance it.

If we listen to some of the oral history interviewees’ comments about the uniforms, it is possible to see this in play:

*We had green [uniforms] with orange reveres and a kick pleat on each knee, which orange kicked out. A little green hat with orange round it like a pillbox… We had a wide cuff done in orange, with the gold braid on the cuff. Oh they were very smart really.* (Betty Weston)

*Well it was green, a lovely green … with gold braid. We used to feel really ‘ooohhh’, you know, really nice !… It was very smart … You felt nice in it.* (Vera Ayres)

*We started off with red uniforms with brass buttons. Gunmetal stockings and black shoes… A time later there were fawn uniforms with pale blue inserts and they had fawn pillbox hats with blue round it.* (Molly Rowe)

*It was a dress with silver/chrome buttons on, with a belt.* (Florence Wall)

A uniform alone on a hanger has little meaning because it has to have a relationship with the wearer to fully achieve it. But if one puts a rather fashionable uniform on a smart and attractive young woman, we can begin to see how the usherette could become part of the cinema industry’s own corporate identity, and help to sanction the commodity that was on sale to the audience: that of an idealised image of femininity. The uniform, then, is critical to this process. However, it was not enough on its own: there were two very important practices in place that ensured the usherette could collude with the image on the screen.

The first was the inspection parade. All of the women I spoke to commented on this procedure and all of them advised me that a male cinema manager undertook it. This is reinforced by the Rank training film, in which we see all the staff lined up for their (male) managerial inspection. This should come as no great surprise because cinema managers were (with few exceptions) male; the hierarchical structure in the cinema mirrored the imbalance of power in society. As noted by Margaret O’Brien and Allan Eyles (1993 p7), ‘The managers were top of the staffing hierarchy … women managers were very few.’
inspection parades (not unlike those undertaken in the military) involved being inspected before going on duty, and although the parades were not exclusive to usherettes (usually all of the staff took part), it was they who were specifically inspected for their quite feminine image:

*We used to have to go on parade you know... The manager would walk down and inspect you to see that you were made up properly... If he thought you had the wrong sort of lipstick on, he’d say ‘Go and take that off!’* (Betty Weston)

*And then, at 1 o’clock, we had to come back and the manager inspected us. We had to line up in front of him and we had to be very smart and you had to have stockings on with seams that went right up the back!* (Olive Durrant)

*The manager, Mr Read, was quite a strict person as regards our appearance. We had an inspection before opening, checking that we were clean and presentable.* (Peggy Sands)

The usherette, then, was being checked for her feminine desirability from a male perspective, which itself was based on a feminine image that was constructed from specifically feminine consumer goods, that is, make-up and stockings, both of which are associated with sexuality. Elizabeth Wilson (2003 p.107) comments: ‘Cosmetics, like underwear, are in one sense also “useless”, despite the claims made in some cases for their protective properties. Like underwear, too, they are associated with sexuality and eroticism’.

Indeed, this inspection of the usherette’s stockings echoes the much-used Hollywood ascending tracking shot that ensured that the stockinged leg became associated with sexual desirability. Jackie Stacey (2003 p.128) draws our attention to...

*... images of Hollywood glamour in which the stockinged leg has almost become an icon of desirability; the shot which moves up the female star’s leg from ankle towards thigh, is a favourite convention within Hollywood to introduce the desirable protagonist.*

The young, attractive female, then, with her smart uniform, stockinged legs and perfectly made-up face, ventured into the cinema theatre projecting an image of femininity, a representation of woman, that had been approved by a male. This process can be seen to correlate to that of the Hollywood star system, which was, of course, founded on idealised images of women, which became the commodities that the studios could exchange for money. To ensure this connection was strengthened, a second element came into play and this was the *shining of the spotlight* on the usherette during the sales intervals. This involved the usherette being illuminated by a spotlight that was projected from the projection room.
Again, all of the women I spoke to commented on this procedure and some of them had rather mixed feelings about it:

> There were three aisles in The Gaumont and you have one [usherette] in each aisle when the house lights came on. You’d start walking up with the spotlight. (Molly Rowe)

> You went down in the interval and the spotlight came on and you stood down the front there and served all the ice creams and then you used to walk round. (Betty Weston)

> They used to have a spotlight from the projection room and they used to put the spotlight on her. (Vera Ayres)

There are two important aspects to this. Firstly, the spotlight came from the projection room, significant because this was where the film was projected from, and secondly, it was done directly after the film had finished. The usherette then, by being placed, quite literally, in the limelight, provided a continuing link to the images of fantasy and desire that the audience had just engaged with. The desirable image of femininity that she had been inspected for could now be displayed and seen in precisely the same format that was used by the film industry which did, of course, position the female as an object of desire to both the male and female viewer. Annette Kuhn (1985 p13) suggested that:

> The desire for such perfection which, even while we love the movies of Garbo, Hayworth and others, we may well realise is hopeless, is to be displaced onto desire for the products they advertise or connote. As far as the film industry is concerned, to place the consumer of the films themselves in a constant position of desire is to bring him or her back to the cinema time and time again, to seek an unattainable fantasy life.

So the desire for the ‘unattainable, fantasy life’ that the audience engaged with through the film became displaced on to a desire for a tangible manifestation of the star’s glamour, in this case, the usherette. By appearing in a physical (representative) form of an idealised woman, it must have seemed as if the star herself had been magically transported from the screen into the theatre. The usherette, in her commodity form, paralleled the desires on sale from the film industry, thus functioning as a mediator of this to the audience.

It is perhaps no surprise that Keith Farley was ‘so in love with the usherette’ and Christopher Fowler referred to her as an ‘electric goddess’.
4: Are these your panties, Miss?

I have proposed that the cinema usherette was part of the spectacle, arguing that her presence functioned as a mediator of desire to the audience, colluding with both the glamour projecting from the screen and the business of the cinema. She was, in essence, a core character in the picture palaces’ performance. However, whilst this addresses the public performance of the usherette, the one defined for her from a male dominated organisation, it reveals little about her view of this perceived control over her image and function, and when she returned to her usherette’s seat, invisible again in the shadows, her experiences of a spectator who was, ultimately, at work. This section will explore this rather unique position that the usherette held as both spectacle and spectator, to show how she negotiated and managed such demands.

Edward Hopper’s painting, New York Cinema (Fig. 7) (1939) is a rare example (albeit a representation) of a view of an usherette looking, quite simply, bored.

![New York Cinema (1939) Edward Hopper](image)

She appears to not be engaged with her sumptuous surroundings, the film on the screen, or the audience. She is presented as a worker, and apart from being bathed in a spotlight like glow, is isolated from the entire cinematic experience; she occupies a different space, her space. I do not intend to discuss this image in great detail but it is a useful starting point when considering the perspective of the female whose occupation was to serve the audience as an object of their spectatorship, while also serving as a custodian of the audience, which involved her looking at them, often surreptitiously, affording her a powerful, voyeuristic position. A key question to arise from this is; was the usherette’s experience of going to the movies the same as that of the paying audience? Furthermore, we might ask whether the actual reality of the work matched her pre-conceived view of it being such a ‘glam’ job?
To address these questions, it is useful to firstly consider why an usherette became an usherette because this provides some insight to their perceived expectations of the job. There are varying accounts confirming that one of the main reasons for wanting to work at the cinema, particularly during the 1930s-1950s, was its links to glamour and Hollywood cinema. ‘It was considered to be quite glamorous to be an usherette’ (Maureen) ‘This (being an usherette) was perceived as very glamorous work because of its association with Hollywood films, and there was fierce competition for these jobs’ (Beddoe, D, discussing an image of her mother who was a cinema usherette, 1998, p115) ‘I always wanted to be a film star, that (being an usherette) was the closest I could get to it!’ (Florence Wall) ‘I wanted to work at the cinema because I loved the movies, I mean, I really loved the movies.’ (Constance Guidotti)

And recollections from two successful actresses, Lily Tomlin (1939-) and Val Jellay (1927-) firmly confirm this notion.

I was desperate at age 13 to be involved in theatre, any theatre. Being tall I was able to convince Hoyts management that I was 17. My enthusiasm and outgoing approach was probably the decider. Hoyts de Luxe was my first venture into being an usherette, a very prestigious occupation. Wearing a gold-braided uniform gave me a sense of authority and presentation...It was even better ushering late comers, in the dark, as I could smile to myself, exaggerate my swinging hips and pretend all sorts of things.

The Capitol Theatre had a huge upstairs foyer, which overlooked the stalls from its well-like structure at one end... After the house settled for the feature movie; it was an opportunity for me to indulge my restless urges. Just being in attendance like a guarding sentry demanded extreme self-control when I could hear the musical sound-track wafting up. It never entered my mind as I danced and whirled all over that upstairs foyer, that anyone would, or could, ever see me... (Jellay, V, 1994 pp 30-33)

To say movies had a big influence on me is an epic understatement. When I got the job as an usherette my movie-mania reached a feverish pitch. I was thirteen (I lied about my age) and star struck. Each night I would fix myself up to look like the star on the bill that week in the Avalon Theatre in Detroit...I could leave my blue-collar home environment for spectacles so spectacular, action so action-packed, romance so romantic that I actually fainted on one occasion as I was transported from bleak industrial Detroit to Hollywood’s silver screen under some kind of celluloid spell I never fully came out of. (Tomlin, L. 1983. p 38)
And this idea was reinforced by the industry (certainly in the U.K.) with events such as, Miss Cinema of Great Britain contests, where the usherette was indeed the star. A local Portsmouth newspaper article (1956) informs us that,

‘*Cosham usherette is “Miss Cinema of Great Britain”*’

After a breath-taking visit to London this week where she won the title ‘Miss Cinema of Great Britain’ and met British and American film stars, Mrs Sylvia Abraham is back in her job as an usherette in the Odeon Cinema, Cosham (Portsmouth). But if 23-year-old Sylvia’s dreams come true, she won’t be an usherette much longer. When she walked across the floor of London’s Lyceum Ballroom on Monday evening, in front of a panel of celebrity judges and curtsied, she may have been taking the first steps to becoming a film actress in her own right... she has already been invited to attend the Royal Command film performance in London next Monday. She will be taken under the wing of the J. Arthur Rank Organisation and receive much the same limelight during the evening as a starlet... Film star Zachary Scott kissed her hand, Julia Arnell kissed her hand and Stanley Baker kissed her lips... Now the young woman who has lived in Portsmouth all her life is looking ahead to a future that may hold for her a career in films. If her dream does come true, then Sylvia, the usherette, may one day become Sylvia, the star.

This image of glamour was further reinforced by visits from film stars to the cinemas. For example, in *Figure 8* we see an usherette greeting and welcoming a starlet; this was not an unusual occurrence and my research has found many photographic examples of this type of interaction.

Therefore, as these testimonies reveal, her perceptions of being an usherette were firmly grounded in her experiences of being a cinema-goer and/or a compelling desire to become one of those stars on the screen. As Jackie Stacey (2003 p80) notes, ‘The significance of the cinema in women’s lives in the 1940s and 1950s cannot be over-estimated.’ And, generating the female cinema spectator was a serious strategy for the Hollywood movie-makers, as Leo Handel, (1950), cited in Stacey, J (2003) argued, Hollywood studios believed women made up the highest proportion of cinema audiences and thus went to great lengths to produce films which appealed to women.

If we consider further the historical context of young, working class females, it is perhaps no great surprise that to work at a cinema was such a desirable occupation. A P Jephcott’s (1944, p79) study of young working girls proposed that, ‘The majority of elementary-school girls, when they are thinking of work, have in mind four types of employment; shopwork, or possibly office work (although this is more likely to demand a secondary school education), domestic work, and factory work.’
Thus, employment opportunities for these women were extremely limited. None of my interviewees had a secondary school education. Shop work, whilst appearing to be a potentially favourable option had little redeeming benefits. As Deirdre Beddoe (1989 p70) explains in her study of women between the War years (1918-1939)

Shop work, no matter what the type of shop, was characterised by long hours. Shop owners were happy to see the shop stay open late at night; even large stores would open until after 9pm... Shop assistants suffered from flat feet, varicose veins, anaemia, menstrual troubles and frequently uterine displacements as the result of long hours of standing.

Factory jobs were repetitive and monotonous, with factory owners being renowned for employing females at cheap rates. To work in a factory also meant to wear overalls. The final option of domestic service, of which much can be said about its demeaning and exploitative nature, is perhaps best explained by A P Jephcott (1944):

Most domestic jobs deprive the girl both of the recreation and the opportunities for formal and informal education which are available for the majority of her friends. Her cap and her apron, in her own eyes, and those of her friends, are often the symbol of a despised job.
The cinema however, offered a world where working class women could indulge in femininity, wear smart and attractive clothes, mingle with film stars, perhaps even become one, all within a glorious feminine space that the industry had created.

The title of this section references a saucy postcard, (Fig. 9) which acknowledges the usherette’s rather less than glamorous role, as well as her embarrassment and humiliation at the expense of the courting couple. In another postcard (Fig. 10) we see the usherette being the subject of a male joke about the size of her breasts. However, in two other postcards (Figs. 11 and 12), she is represented in reprisal mode, exerting control over the audience. In Figure 11, she is shown as a facilitator for respectability through both her commanding stance and use of the torch. This would have ensured this public display of amorous behaviour would have been seen by the majority of the audience and, through the use of the torch, which we know should never be used in such a way, shows her defiance, as well as a tantalising vision of the exercising of retribution. In Figure 12, she has again fought back, this time to sexual advances, with a shrewd manoeuvre in the form of an ice-
cream as weapon. In both instances, these images allude to the usherette’s actual role, that is, showing people to their seats and selling ice-cream but equally use these roles to show a powerful negotiation between both being a spectacle and being a worker, a job, which for much of the time, demanded she also be a spectator, not to the film, but to the audience.

And whilst these images are representations, they are based on reality, as Molly Rowe said:

Some of the men thought we were there for their entertainment. We had to stand our ground with some of them. (Molly Rowe)

Usherettes were usually expected to remain in the cinema during a performance but not to watch the film. The specifically created seats for them, often positioned at the end of aisles and/or at the back of the theatre in the form of the tip-up seat ensured the usherette commanded a far-reaching view of the audience, watching them for not only signs of misdemeanour but also in a variety of other roles; for example, as a temporary parent, a job which was not an easy task!

Saturday was more or less the worst day because of the kids on a Saturday morning! They couldn’t always get the girls. A lot of the girls used to make excuses not to go in on a Saturday morning...They (the kids) used to ride the
back of the seats as cowboys and everything else! And throw things at one another. It used to be murder! (Betty Weston)

But you can’t keep children still for long can you? Of course, with the long aisles they used to love running up and down! We used to have extra staff to try and make them keep still! Sometimes you’d get the Wild West Show and they were doing the galloping as much as the horses on the screen! (Molly Rowe)

Figure 12: Saucy Postcard, c.1960s

The usherette also had the difficult role as the warden of particular protocols:

In the interval, when the lights were up, we had to stand on the line. That was to stop the people in the cheaper seats jumping back to the dearer seats! (Florence Wall)

And catering to the needs of regular cinema viewers certainly (as Hutchinson, 1937, had advised) tried the patience of many an usherette.

We used to have a couple come in regularly every Monday. The lady would come in first and her poor husband would follow behind. Then they’d go in and you had two pillars either side in the stalls where you had two single seats.
They always had those two single seats. One day they were quite late coming in and when she went inside someone was sitting in them. She came out in quite a temper! “They’re sitting in my seats!” she said. We couldn’t turn the other people out so fortunately there were two seats on the other side so we managed to get her to those! But she was most annoyed that someone was in ‘her’ seat! (Molly Rowe)

In addition, the usherette was also an indispensable carer of her audience, delivering a calm comfort, and an authoritative presence in extraordinarily fearful situations.

Winifred Horrabin writing in The Tribune (London) in 1940 confirms:

I have now been in about ten cinemas when the banshees have wailed their weary warnings. And I would like to add my little chirp of praise to the chorus of admiration going up for all workers in London – and the provinces – who carry on. Cinema usherettes have much to put up with, not the least being the silly costumes they have to wear. But I shall never see one of those extravagantly cocked hats, or a pair of those baggy breeches covering a jaunty behind, and want to giggle again. I shall remember the time when, as synthetic drama unfolded inside the cinema, suddenly real drama came in through the window and there was no ducking for cover, no trembling of those attractive knees, just an added reassuring swagger down the center aisle, and encouraging normality about the flick of a torch, even a friendly, if tremulous whisper of, ‘You are safer in here’. I give Priestly cinema attendants to add to his list of those little women who will ultimately help to defeat the Nazis. (cited in Lant, A, 2006, p678)

These recollections suggest that the appeal of working at the cinema, with all its perceived glamour was often surpassed by the actual realities of the job. And even the prospect of seeing films for free, often faded.

You’d get fed up with them [the films] because we’d seen it yesterday and we’ve got to see it again today! There used to be little seats, those little round seats that came out from the wall and you’d just sit on them and have a little ‘quiet’ chat, you know, when the film was on. (Vera Ayres)

You saw bits and pieces of the film but you picked it all together. By the end of three or four days you got the whole gist of the film. (Margaret Hunt)

It seems that it was only whilst in spectacle mode that any glimmer of stardom emerged and her experiences of watching the film and the wider social pleasures associated with going to the pictures was ultimately fragmented and thwarted. It is perhaps no surprise then
that the usherette in Hopper’s painting is presented as bored and distracted from the audience’s experiences. The prospect of glamour and stardom became dissipated, her audience often proved to be problematic and ultimately, it was a tiring profession, demanding long, unsocial working hours.

The end of an era
The 1950s saw a post-war shift in the position of women in society. The independence gained for many women during the War years was now seen as a threat to the social order. The Cinema was no exception. Women were trained to be projectionists (nicknamed projectionettes) in the absence of men during this period but few stayed in the projection room post-war.

Men needed work; women should return to the home. Domestic glamour was promoted in this new era of consumption both in and outside of the cinema. The advent of television and changing patterns of leisure and entertainment both in the U.S. and the U.K. fuelled the cinema industry to create new forms of spectacle. Wide screen, Technicolor and a revised form of the screen goddess (and screen god) all played their part in the cinema’s efforts to retain their audiences. For example, Marilyn Monroe, Jane Russell, Audrey Hepburn and Elizabeth Taylor were now referred to as sex symbols. Within this change, the cinema usherette was still pivotal to that presentation of fantasy and desire spilling forth from Hollywood’s studio system but it was, as with the Hollywood Studio System itself, in gradual decline.

The Picture Palaces that emerged during the 1920s and 1930s offered a world far removed from the cinema-goer at that time, (Richards, J 2010) not just through the film but through the architecture, the interiors and the service, of which the usherette, of course, played a significant role but by the 1960s and 1970s the age of the picture palace reached its nadir. Cinema closures that had been so prevalent in the 1950s continued well into the 1960s. Some were converted into alternative entertainment venues such as bingo halls and nightclubs. By the 1970s, many of the old picture palaces were being split up into multi-screen cinemas, which, though smaller in capacity, could make money from multiple screenings. Those that survived were often in a major state of disrepair, and Fowler’s (2014) ‘electric goddess’, had disappeared as these great palaces were slowly turning ‘from cathedrals into crypts.’ (Fowler C, 2014, p117)

There is evidence emerging to support the proposal that by the late 1960s to the 1970s, the cinema usherette was, more often than not, an older woman, frequently one who had worked in the cinema for many years, finding herself adapting to the changes in both cinema exhibition practices and the audience. For example, Florence Wall returned to working at the cinema in the early 1970s and recalled Portsmouth’s changed cinematic landscape. For a time, she worked at the Tatler on Fratton Road, Portsmouth, U.K. a cinema famed for showing some of cinema’s less tasteful offerings. On her first day, she was told that she would not have to go into the auditorium, ‘when the films are on, because this is a sex thing.’ And although the role was still similar, that is, selling ice-cream and showing
customers to their seats, her function as a mediator of desire had all but disappeared, as well as her role as a custodian of, and for the audience. Indeed, the Picture Palaces and their modes of exhibition, including the usherette, were being viewed as old-fashioned and redundant in an apparent new age of modern and cool thinking. In the 1968 promotional literature of the British Cinecenta Company, it was stated that, ‘Ossie Clark and Alice Pollock are helping turn the old, dowdy cinema usherette into the smart hostess essential to the cinema of today.’ (Cinecenta 1968)

Whilst we may lament such commentary, particularly for the older woman, (discussions on notions of ageing femininity are outside of the scope of this writing) we can observe that the presence of a young, smart and stylish female was still seen to be an important element of the identity of the cinema. And, there was an expectation that she would serve to promote the brand. The new, modern cinema, it seemed, still used the appeal of the uniform to attract prospective employees whilst intimating a link between cinema worker and, if not glamour, then certainly style and elegance.

The renaissance of the cinema from the 1990s and its multiplexes provided a new form of cinema experience and a different mode of cinema workforce, and audience. A more casual approach to the worn attire was perhaps one of the most significant changes. Baseball caps, tee shirts and casual trousers were donning the modern female and male cinema worker. Cinema-goers were no longer patrons but customers, and there was no intermission in which to buy an ice-cream from an ‘electric goddess’. That dream had dispersed, both for the usherette and the audience.

Conclusion
This paper set out to demonstrate that the usherette played a feature role in both British cinema consumption and identity whilst providing an enduring image of feminine glamour and desire, as seen in numerous popular cultural representations (highlighted at the beginning). I have suggested this occurred because the image of the cinema usherette paralleled that of the Hollywood star system, specifically during the 1930s, 40s and 50s. She acquired a cultural status that corresponded to that of the female starlet because she was used by the cinematic organisation to collude with the screen image; an image that was loaded with fantasy and sexual appeal. In utilising female desires associated with the cinema, the organisation initially seduced her in her role as a movie-watcher but then steered her into an agent for their business. Usherettes though, found effective ways to ensure their agency was not inequitable by negotiating with the terms, conditions and requirements demanded of her from the cinema industry by, amongst other things, creating a quite exclusive and enjoyable female culture not to be found in any other employment available to them. This was an identity based on ‘femininity’, which served both the industry and the women. There was an exceptional amount of (genuine) pride and pleasure gained from both working at the cinema and being a symbol of it. In particular, the wearing of the uniform (despite its re-cycled and somewhat less than glamorous elements) represented an
important feminine status, whereas the uniform of a domestic servant commanded no status at all, particularly amongst other females.

An exploration into the views and perspective of the usherette illustrated how her position as both spectator and worker provided her with a space to move beyond that of just spectacle, to that of empowerment. This was achieved through those aspects of the job, which afforded her to have an authoritative command of her audience in the form of; wearing a uniform, engaging in reprisals for being treated as an (sexual) object of desire, as an upholder of moral principles, as a custodian of the audience’s secrets, and also as a genuine carer and guardian in times of crisis. And whilst her actual job could often be the complete opposite to that of the Hollywood dream by being repetitive and rather lacklustre, as well as being isolated from the pleasures of the cinema audiences’ movie-watching experiences, recollections from usherettes from different eras, cinemas and geographical locations, are united in stating:

It was the best job I ever had.

For the many usherettes (and audiences) at cinemas, particularly during the height of the Golden Age of Hollywood, it was perhaps fortuitous, that the uniforms were indeed made for women.

Biographical note:
Eva Balogh (http://www.port.ac.uk/school-of-art-and-design/staff/eva-balogh.html) is a senior lecturer in visual culture in the School of Art and Design at the University of Portsmouth, Hampshire, U.K. where the focus of her teaching is the relationship between history, theory and practice, through primarily the politics of identity. This writing, as well as bringing the cinema usherette into the limelight, also aims to demonstrate the importance of such inter-disciplinary approaches and methods to academic research. She welcomes comment at eva.balogh@port.ac.uk.

Acknowledgements:
I am indebted to many, many people. The original interviewees/contributors were:

Charlotte Allen, usherette (early 1940s) at The Odeon, North End, Portsmouth. U.K.
Vera Ayres, usherette (1940-1942) at The Ambassador, Cosham, Portsmouth. U.K.
Olive Durrant, usherette (1940-1942) at The Carlton, Cosham Portsmouth. U.K.
Margaret Eva Hunt, (1943-1951) at The Shaftesbury, North End, Portsmouth. U.K.
George Quittenbourne, cinema manager (1940s) for Portsmouth Town Cinemas, Portsmouth. U.K.
Molly Rowe, chocolate girl, usherette, cashier and secretary (1933-1978) at The Regent/Gaumont, North End, Portsmouth. U.K.
Peggy Sands, chocolate girl and usherette (1940s) at The Ritzy, Gosport, Hampshire. U.K. and The Forum, Gosport, Hampshire. U.K.


David Young, projectionist (1950s) at The Gaiety, Southsea, Portsmouth. U.K.

And the following have been indispensable:
The Cinema Theatre Association, Kevin Wheelan, Portsmouth City Museum and the numerous local history projects in the U.K. and beyond.

And, Dr Olly Gruner, friend and colleague who (amongst other things) came up with the rather apt title, Stars in the Aisles.

References:
Ayres, Vera (1996), Primary source, Interviewed in Portsmouth, U.K.
Cinema Circuit Manager’s Training film, produced by Rank, c.1940s. Courtesy of Keith Wilton.
Cinecenta Promotional literature 1968, obtained from The Cinema Theatre Archives, London. U.K.
City of Portsmouth Council Minutes for the year 1933.
Durrant, Olive (1996), Primary source, Interviewed in Portsmouth, U.K.
Fowler, Christopher 2014), Film Freak, London: Doubleday.
Guidotti, Constance (2006), Primary source, Interviewed in Cupertino, California, U.S.A. August.

Hunt, Margaret Eva (1996), Primary source, Interviewed in Portsmouth, U.K.


Kine Sales and Catering Review in *Kinematograph Weekly*, 17/12/53.


*Portsmouth News* 25th October 1956.

Quittenbourne, George (1996), Primary source, Interviewed in Portsmouth, U.K.


Rowe, Molly (1996), Primary source, Interviewed in Portsmouth, U.K.

Sands, Peggy (1996), Primary source, written correspondence, Portsmouth, U.K.


Smith, Phillip & Ellis, Susanne (2016) *Chocolate sellers, clerks and movie palaces in a subordinate industry: Women’s work and descriptions of cinema in the 1911 census*. Conference paper presented at, Doing Women’s Film and Television Histories III: Structures of Feeling. Leicester. 20/05/16.


Weston, Betty (1996), Primary source, Interviewed in Portsmouth, U.K.


Young, David (1996), Primary source, Interviewed in Portsmouth, U.K.

**Image references:**


Figure 3: The Palace Cinema Salisbury U.K. c.1920s. Cinema Theatre Association archives. London. U.K.

Figure 4: Advertisement for Alfred Harold Uniforms 1922. Trigg, David *Cinema Uniforms: Sartorial elegance at the Picture Palaces*, London: The Cinema Museum. 2013

Figure 5: Staff at the Regent Cinema Portsmouth U.K. 1933. Personal collection
Figure 6: Molly Rowe as cashier at the Regent cinema Portsmouth U.K. c. 1940s. Personal collection
Figure 7: *New York Movie* (1939) Edward Hopper, [https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79616](https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79616)
Figure 8: Usherette with starlet at the Troxy cinema London U.K. c. 1950s. Cinema Theatre
Association archives. London. U.K.
Figure 9: Postcard, c.1960s, courtesy of Kevin Wheelen.
Figure 10: Postcard, c.1960s, courtesy of Kevin Wheelen.
Figure 11: Postcard, 1951, courtesy of Kevin Wheelen.
Figure 12: Postcard, c.1960s, courtesy of Kevin Wheelen.

**Notes:**

1 Many thanks to Chris O’Rourke for sending this to me.
2 The Kinematograph Weekly often included a Kine Sales and Catering review supplement, which included various tips on how to maximise sales of ice-cream and confectionary.
3 Please note: oral history interview excerpts are in italics.
4 Many thanks to Keith Wilton for providing me with a copy of this.
5 I showed this extract to 50 students in February 2017 during seminar sessions, in which we were discussing the role of the female worker in the cinema.
6 An ABC staff manual (n.d. but probably from the 1940s) obtained from The Cinema Theatre Association's archives states: ‘The bulb end of your torch must NEVER be raised higher than the BACK-REST of a seat... Flashing a light in patron’s eyes will be regarded as gross inefficiency and thoughtlessness.’ The use of capitals is as written in the manual.
7 For a fantastic paper, which examines the role of the projectionettes, see Harrison (2016) ‘The coming of the projectionettes’.
8 In Hutchinson’s (1937) invaluable manual, he advises re the uniforms: ‘Two pairs of dress-preservers, costing a few coppers per pair, should be issued to all usherettes for use under the armpits. These should be changed and washed frequently and employees notified that it is a serious offence to be without... All uniforms should be periodically dry-cleaned, but this should not be done too frequently, as each cleaning tends to affect the body of the cloth to a slight degree, until the cumulative effect of a number of cleanings causes the uniform to lose shape and detracts from its appearance.’