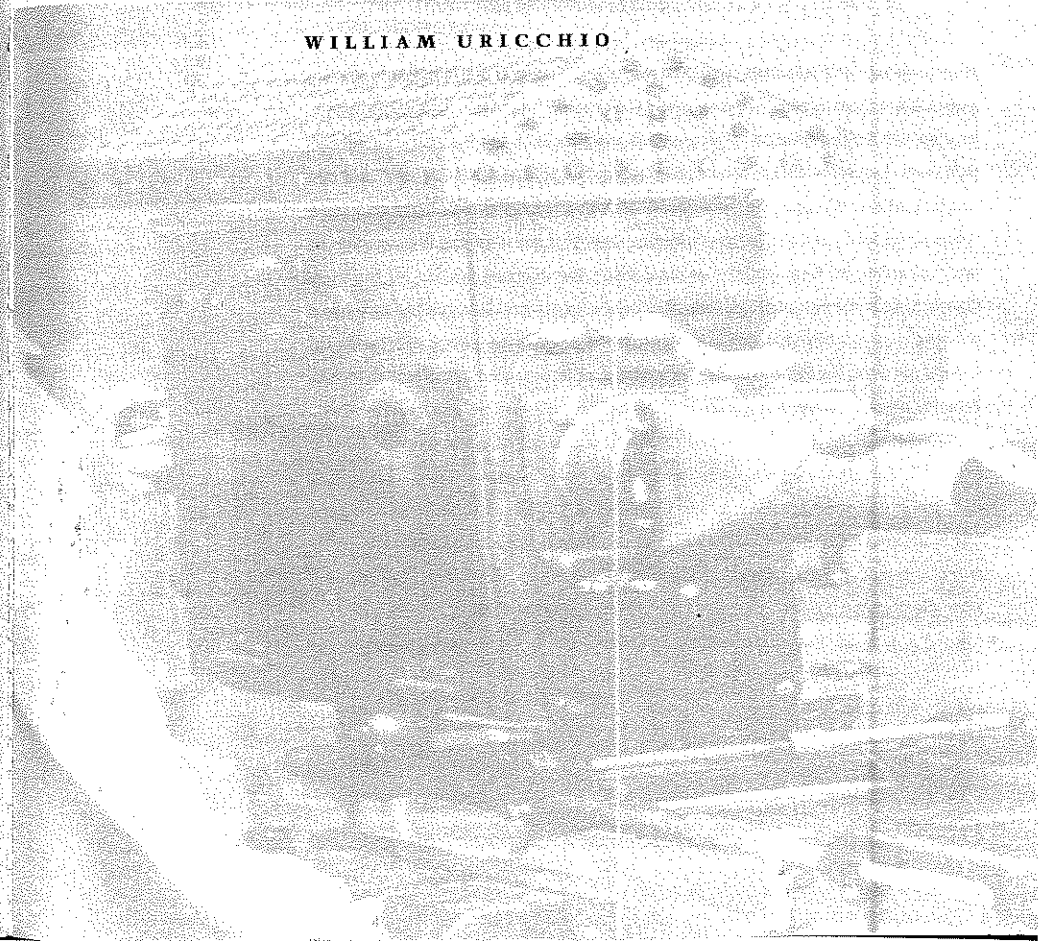


COMING TO TERMS WITH NEW YORK CITY'S MOVING PICTURE OPERATORS, 1906–1913

ROBERTA E. PEARSON AND
WILLIAM URICCHIO



In 1908, *The Moving Picture World* offered a chilling account of a projectionist's travails. Reaching into the sheet-iron cage that covered a moving-picture machine with which he was giving an exhibition, John Riker seized a bare electric wire instead of the switch. He was held fast while a current of 1000 volts went through his body. He shrieked for help. His cries, coming through the narrow aperture of the booth, sounded to the audience like a phonographic accompaniment to the blood and thunder drama that was being portrayed in the moving pictures. The audience, not suspecting the dangerous plight of the man, applauded. . . . [When he was rescued] Riker's hand still gripped the wire and had to be pried off. His hand was almost roasted by the strength of the current. [When will operators learn? We cannot understand why a bare wire was allowed to be used. Every operator ought to use only properly insulated wires, and if any bare surface shows they should be bound with tape. —Ed.]

Why do we open with this grisly story? The reader might suggest that it attests to our fundamental bloody-mindedness, but we would like to think instead that it attests to our fascination with the construction of history.¹ This anecdote is an unruly datum that refuses to fit neatly with other data in conventional categories of historical evidence. We had at first intended to relegate it to the category of "color," material that might give some sense of the "everydayness" of those bygone storefront theaters. But it dawned on us that the hapless Mr. Riker might prove more central to our enterprise. Placing the anecdote within a framework of other kinds of evidence, we suggest that it might have had a powerful communicative function in an environment where other means of communication did not work. The top end of the film industry, as represented by the Motion Picture Patents Company, joined with groups such as the fire underwriters and New York City's Department of Water Supply, Gas, and Electricity in promulgating certain "reasonable" (nonmoral, nonjudgmental) propositions: don't touch bare wires, don't smoke around nitrate film, don't hire inexperienced projectionists. But they did so in an environment where authority—statute, ordinance, or even commonsense safety rules such as using only properly insulated wires—was undermined and suspect, where every law could be seen as yet another attack on the film industry or an opportunity for graft. So how were commonsense rules to be communicated? With the discursive structure of laws and regulations invalidated, cautionary tales such as that of the ill-fated Riker were called into service. But is this a valid conclusion to reach on the basis of the available evidence? Is the Riker story an apocryphal tale designed to curb projectionists' bad habits? Or might it be interpreted as a factual report regarding a particular operator? Or even as a plea for

safer working conditions for an undertrained and overtaxed labor force? And does it tell us anything about John Riker himself or the labor force of which he was a part?

As we steer ever closer to the uncharted shoals of a postmodern historiography that questions the accessibility of objective historical referents and resists the imposition of a monovocal master narrative, the Riker anecdote increases in importance.² Clearly a relatively short essay does not provide the scope for a full engagement with the challenges that postmodernism and poststructuralism pose to conventional historical practices, but

we can use this essay to examine the ways in which historiographic assumptions about the nature and interpretation of evidence crucially inflect our construction of history and hence our understanding of the working lives of New York City's projectionists.

This essay derives from a larger research project about the history of New York City nickelodeons between 1905/6 and 1913, the period during which exhibition practices were regularized and the new cinema medium integrated into existing social structures. This period saw dramatic changes in cinema exhibition, beginning with a moral panic around the motion picture as nickelodeons sprang up like mushrooms on every street corner, and ending with the cinema well on its way to becoming a mainstream mass medium as attested to by a 1913 New York City ordinance that regulated practically every aspect of motion picture exhibition. New York City embodied in the national imaginary the problems of urbanization, immigration, and the emergence of the new public sphere of the so-called cheap amusements.³ As rural workers migrated to its industries, as immigrants

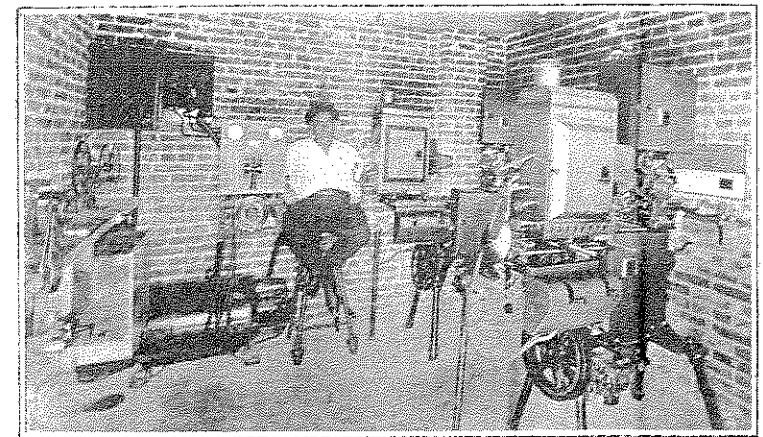


Figure 1. "Fireproof" projection booth, ca. 1917.

sought new lives in its tenements and workplaces, the city's affordable entertainments (e.g., dance halls, amusement arcades, cheap theaters) gained a massive following that social elites perceived as threatening the status quo. New York was also the center of the most notorious "cheap amusement," the cinema. The city was home to several major film studios (e.g., Edison, Vitagraph, Biograph) and trade publications (e.g., *Moving Picture World*, *New York Dramatic Mirror*). This combination made the political, social, and cultural contestation around cinema exhibition particularly salient for the rest of the country. Although not necessarily typical of exhibition in other locales around the country, New York City was exemplary, rendering research into local conditions in New York City nationally resonant.⁴

Early cinema exhibition research has to a large extent been shaped by the availability and intelligibility of relevant evidence. Several factors have conditioned (or plagued) the process of historical understanding and inscription:

- a general paucity of surviving evidence
- the hegemonically inflected nature of surviving evidence, much of which originates from dominant institutional sources such as the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC), a consortium of the leading film studios attempting to construct an oligopoly based on their control of key patents⁵
- unreliable or inconsistent evidence; data deriving from different sources can be completely contradictory, a particular problem for those seeking, for example, to ascertain the number and locations of nickelodeons in New York City⁶
- evidence, such as the Riker anecdote, that is so difficult to interpret or to verify within conventional historiographic assumptions that it is often overlooked

Early cinema historians, as well as social historians with an interest in popular amusements, have tackled these evidentiary problems with diligence and ingenuity. They have trawled through local newspapers, oral history archives, and business directories seeking to expand the categories of relevant evidence. They have used these new sources to speculate about opposition to or negotiation of dominant social practices.⁷ But some still deal with evidence as if it were a relatively transparent window into a solidly objective historical referent, and some still organize evidence into linear narratives that privi-

lege a single interpretive voice. Like many, perhaps even the majority, of historians, they just want to get on with doing history, rather than worry endlessly about *how* to do history. The extreme difficulty of writing history differently makes us sympathetic to this attitude, but we would argue that a certain degree of reflexivity concerning one's own practices can contribute greatly to the historical awareness we all seek.

As the enabler of the cinematic event, with responsibility for maintaining and realizing the investment of the cinema owner, as well as for the safety and enjoyment of audiences, the operator—the period's name for the projectionist—functioned as the central mediator between the exhibitor and the viewer, the apparatus and the event.

Although the demographic profile of the projectionists is far from clear, records indicate that many were drawn from the ranks of the working classes, the newly arrived immigrants, and from the lower middle classes. Without benefit of labor unions or professional societies, and forced to compete in an environment where the supply of licensed operators exceeded the demand of available jobs, projectionists were vulnerable to the whims of the market and motion picture managers. Our understanding of the quotidian lives of projectionists depends on the theoretical frameworks that we employ to explore the speculative resonance of the sparse available data concerning this relatively marginalized, relatively casualized labor force. Conventional historians would certainly wish to place these few remaining data within a range of much wider evidence, but the belief that some evidence counts more than other evidence combined with the urge to employ a consistent, coherent interpretive framework might lead to the construction of a historical narrative that relegated the projectionists to a relatively insignificant position.⁸ Contra usual historical practices, we present two different strands of evidence without integrating them: the evidence of record (laws, court precedents, professional guidelines, union charters) and that which remains naggingly at the margins, the anecdotal, sporadic, situated in opposition (the illegal, the forbidden, the transgressive).

These two strands should not be seen as classic binary oppositions—inside/outside, hot/cold—two terms of equal weight that produce meaning through their very opposition. The secondary and, within the period's hegemonic configuration and current historiographical practices, subordinate strand does not produce meaning through the negation of the first strand. Instead, it sets up a vague uncertainty, a certain disquiet that results from reading particular data against the grain of the dominant strand. As an

example, let us return yet again to our opening anecdote, a datum from the margins. In a previous essay, we, albeit unwittingly, recouped this datum for the dominant by hypothesizing that it might have been intended as an object lesson for scofflaws made cynical by the period's pervasive corruption, which was emblemized by New York City's notorious Democratic political machine—Tammany Hall. Our construction of the discursive Riker as an object lesson denied the historical Riker subjectivity and agency. The *Moving Picture World*, allied with dominant institutions, represented the bare wire as carelessness, but Riker's act might have been an assertion of subjectivity, an attempt to exclude the influence of dominant institutions from his working life. If so, Riker most probably regretted the gesture that led to such disastrous consequences, but this should not lead us to discount those glimpses of opposition granted us by reading evidence against the grain. Let us look at the two strands of evidence over five different sites, seeking to complicate our understanding of New York City's motion picture operators.

REGULATION AND CIRCUMVENTION

From its founding by the film trade in 1907, *Moving Picture World* repeatedly called for the licensing of motion picture operators as part of its overall strategy of imposing a regulatory rationality on the industry to make it conform to existing social practices and to hasten its acceptance as a mainstream amusement. Early in that year, New York City's Department of Water Supply, Gas, and Electricity, one of the many municipal departments having jurisdiction over nickelodeons, announced new and more stringent regulations governing the licensing of nickelodeons and motion picture operators.⁹ Since projectionists were seen as a key factor in causing or preventing nickelodeon fires, the industry's defenders made much of this licensing. At the 1908 hearings held by Mayor George McClellan into nickelodeon conditions, the counsel for the Motion Picture Exhibitors, Gustavus Rogers, said that the Department of Water Supply, Gas, and Electricity certified operators after a six-month course of study and a "searching" examination. He assured his listeners that the department would suspend operators who had been "slightly careless in one respect." After the infamous mayoral nickelodeon closings of Christmas Eve 1908, the city promulgated further regulations for motion picture operators, and the insurance industry added its voice to the calls for further controls.

We could continue with chapter and verse of the various rules, regulations, and recommendations issuing from dominant institutions had we the space. Against this solid evidence stands only a single article that we have been able to find, again from the *Moving Picture World*:

Rumors are beginning to circulate that many old picture machine operators are being harried with senseless questions during their examination for a license and that the examining boards are holding back their licenses two and three weeks, preventing them from earning a livelihood. Other men who get the backing of some politician with a pull are said to get their licenses at once, after the most superficial examination. This looks very much like "graft."¹⁰

Fitting neatly with our knowledge of the corruption rampant in a Tammany-dominated city government, this description can be treated within conventional historiographic assumptions. Even though we lack further evidence of graft specifically involving the city's motion picture operators, we can nonetheless conclude that there was a vast discrepancy between written rules and everyday practices. We could integrate this report into a narrative tracing a course from chaos to regulatory rationality, in the process reducing the projectionists once again to objects rather than agents.

But what if we try to read this evidence against the grain, to employ the imaginative sympathy of the historical novelist? How did Riker and his brethren function within the structuring determinations of written regulation and unwritten practice? Did they welcome the opportunity of evading the ever-expanding network of rationality through political influence? Did they resent being forced to pay graft? We shall never know the answers, but posing the questions at least restores some degree of choice, of agency, to the motion picture operators.

TESTABLE KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE

In keeping with the tendency of rational regulatory systems to set up state-sanctioned barriers to entry into the skilled trades, by 1908 New York City already required men desiring a projectionist's license to pass an examination, the difficulty of which some, such as Gustavus Rogers, a lawyer who often defended film industry interests, thought might reassure critics. Similarly encouraging the perception of motion picture projection as a highly skilled endeavor, the trade press regularly featured detailed technical explanations of the mechanical, optical, and electrical specifications of motion picture machines. In 1910, the *Moving Picture World*, furthering this perception, announced that F. H. Richardson, who penned the journal's regular column on projector technology, was opening a school for moving picture operators.¹¹

Fairly early in the film industry's history then, the state, supported by the trade press, demanded from projectionists a high degree of technical knowledge that was

provided in standardized form as handbooks by such professional bodies as the New York Fire Underwriters and the American Institute of Electrical Engineers. We could give numerous instances of the ways in which this knowledge was produced and disseminated by regulatory and professional bodies. We could point to the way in which the production of projectionists as highly skilled subjects through the discourse of technical knowledge and the process of examination fits the Foucauldian paradigm. Instead, contra this highly persuasive interpretation that treats projectionists as discursive objects,

we seek evidence of the projectionists' own subjectivity, their own understanding of their everyday experience.

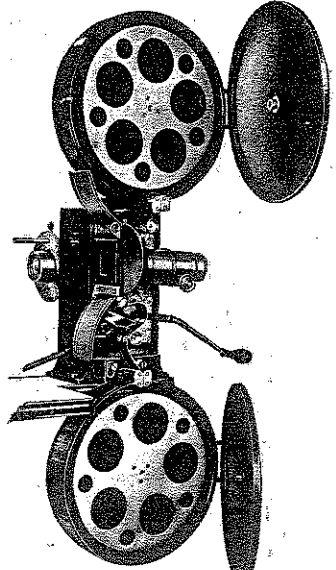
In an article in the March 1909 issue of the *Nickelodeon*, a Chicago trade magazine, Oscar B. Depue argued against operators' examinations, saying that detailed knowledge of electricity was not as important as years of experience.¹² In that same month the *Film Index* carried the dissenting voices of two union representatives, one from the Calcium and Electric Light Operators and another from the Motion Picture Operators of New York City, who claimed that the new license laws were so "strict and rigid" that about two hundred operators had been forced to give up their cards. "It is said that the examination given covers a general experience with electricity and does not give men who know how to operate picture machines a fair chance. Most affected have been operating for five years and are ranked among the best in the city."¹³ Here is evidence of an alternative route to technical proficiency—not through insertion into the discourses of professional and regulatory bodies, but rather through knowledge acquired in the process of hands-on practice. Granting such knowledge legitimacy would, however, have contravened the precepts of regulatory rationality and undermined the film industry's slowly emerging respectability. In this instance, projectionists truly were denied agency; to remain employed they had to permit themselves to be produced as discursive subjects of the professional and regulatory bodies. We have minimal evidence of individual protest against this denial of agency, but the acknowledgment by the trade press of the issue indicates that at least some projectionists felt motivated to resist.

UNIONS AND THE INDIVIDUAL PROJECTIONIST

Up to this point the essay has uncovered very few direct traces of projectionists' individual agency. The above reference to the Calcium and Electric Light Operators and the Motion Picture Operators of New York at least indicates some degree of collective agency,

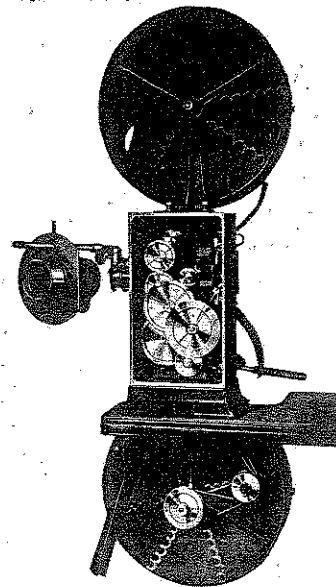
THE EDENGRAPHER

A Motion Picture Machine—Dust-proof and Flickerless



PATENTED DEC. 1, 1903.

The above illustration shows in detail the construction of the mechanism and the simple method of threading the film.



PATENTED DEC. 1, 1903.

Below a rear view of the Edengraph mechanism is shown. Note that the complete mechanism is enclosed in a practically dust-proof metal envelope.

The many radically new features are all fully described in a handsomely illustrated catalog mailed on request.

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General Film Company's Office.		

Figure 2. Advertisement for Edengraph projector.

although evidence from the projectionists' unions is scarcer than that left by more powerful institutions such as the city government: In 1905, the year when New York's nickelodeons first began to appear in any number, the International Alliance of Theatrical and Stage Employees (IATSE) specifically disavowed any interest in organizing motion picture operators, presumably considering the film industry completely insignificant.¹⁴ By 1907, as nickelodeons proliferated, the film industry began to challenge the theater as a primary source of entertainment, and projectionists in New York City began to organize themselves into picture machine operators unions. A conflict arose between IATSE and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW). IATSE asserted jurisdiction over projectionists defined as workers in the entertainment industry, while IBEW asserted jurisdiction over projectionists defined as electricians.¹⁵ In 1908, Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor with which both feuding unions were affiliated, granted jurisdiction to IATSE.¹⁶ IATSE leaders, seeing in their earlier neglect of the projectionists a threat to their potential hegemony over the film industry, stated, "We had to have this branch of the industry recognized as ours or lose control over all."¹⁷ IATSE's successful bid for jurisdiction meant that the city's projectionists were now the focus of two competing discourses: the state, through its licensing examinations, constructed them as skilled technicians, while IATSE constructed them as employees of the entertainment industry. Did these competing discourses once again deny the individual projectionists subjectivity and agency? The surviving evidence inclines us to answer this question in the affirmative. IATSE clearly saw establishing jurisdiction over the projectionists as a path to controlling the larger industry of which they were inevitably now a part, while IATSE records reveal no concern about the harsh daily regime imposed upon the projectionists by their employers. But let us once again try to read this evidence against the grain, to speculate about possible agency. Might the projectionists have deliberately allied themselves with IATSE rather than IBEW in an attempt to free themselves from the regime of technical proficiency imposed on them by the state and encouraged by the trade press? Did they hope that being defined as theatrical employees rather than electricians would lessen the technical demands on them?

There is simply not enough evidence to answer these questions, but if the operators did indeed employ such a tactic they may have had reason for regret, as another struggle around the issues of training and qualifications quickly emerged. Rational regulatory systems limit access to skilled trades in the interest of the public good; unions limit access in the interest of their current members. Reports in the trade press claimed that the supply of licensed operators exceeded demand, and evidence from non-IATSE sources shows that the union moved to correct the situation by lessening their numbers.¹⁸

The same 1910 issue of *Moving Picture World* that reported the opening of Richardson's new projectionists school also reported on the motion picture operator testing facility run by IATSE.¹⁹ In April 1911 Samuel Gompers addressed IATSE-affiliated Local 35 concerning the union's efforts to persuade New York City's aldermen to require that all tyro projectionists serve a six-month apprenticeship under a licensed operator before receiving their own license.²⁰ Later in 1911, the journalistic organ of New York City's powerful political machine, *Tammany Times*, reported that New York State's Supreme Court Justice Gavegan had held invalid an attempt to force motion picture operators to serve a six-month apprenticeship. The justice granted a writ of mandamus directing Commissioner Thompson of the Department of Water Supply, Gas, and Electricity (which licensed the operators) to let Louis Gibelmann, an applicant, take the operator's exam even though he had not served the appropriate apprenticeship.²¹

The fact that Tammany, far from being a monolithic and effective political machine, was fractured by internal divisions makes this event particularly difficult to interpret. We have found no evidence of IATSE's lobbying efforts, but the union had apparently persuaded the Tammany-dominated board of aldermen, who may have viewed cooperation with the union as an opportunity to increase their graft income, to put an apprenticeship law on the books. On the other hand, Justice Gavegan, who overturned the law, may himself have been a Tammany appointment, seeking to keep the union from poaching on Tammany's turf. Or he may have been an anti-Tammany man seeking to limit the political machine's control over the moving picture industry. Whatever the political alignments, this incident provides further evidence of the competing forces structuring projectionists' employment and also indicates that individuals might sometimes have exploited rivalries among competing factions and that cracks in the system did occasionally permit individual action. We might therefore celebrate the initiative of Louis Gibelmann, pointing to at least one clear instance of projectionist's agency.

PROJECTIONISTS DISCURSIVELY CONSTRUCTED AS DEMOGRAPHIC CATEGORIES

During the nickelodeon years, many competing notions of moving picture projectionists circulated in New York City's film culture, with the projectionists themselves usually having very little input. We have shown that the state, professional, and regulatory bodies and IBEW constructed projectionists as discursive subjects endowed with a high degree of technical competence, that IATSE constructed them as theatrical employees, and that a few dissenting voices constructed them as experienced craftsmen or laborers. Other



Figure 3. Crystal Hall,
E. Fourteenth St., New York,
ca. 1914.

factions involved in the social controversy over the new

moving picture medium produced their own, less flattering, constructions, expressing the same concerns about the social status of projectionists as they voiced about nickelodeon audiences.²² In this case, attributes such as irresponsibility and even moral degeneracy associated by some with the immigrants and working classes were extended to the operators.

The trade press wished to construct projectionists as technical experts in order to allay the fears of the industry's critics; a similarly motivated desire to construct them as stable members of the community led to the reporting of instances where this was patently not the case. In so doing, the trade press attempted to ally itself with the city's progressive reformers. These reformers—drawn from the ranks of civic leaders, social elites, clergy, and teachers—sought to ameliorate the upheaval of urbanization and immigration through the construction of a rational regulatory system coupled with educational and Americanization initiatives. Many reformers believed that a sufficiently regulated cinema could be a powerful force for the education and Americanization of workers and immigrants.²³ Accepting this agenda, the trade press called attention to the industry's problems and advocated the improvement of exhibition conditions. In March 1908, *Moving Picture World* reported that many New York City nickelodeons had been closed because of failure to comply with police department, fire department, and Bureau of

Buildings guidelines. Of the two hundred licenses granted, over 95 percent were kept by foreigners or “incompetent” persons and over 75 percent by illiterates who were unable to read the license instructions. In these latter cases, as well as in establishments where the motion picture machine operators could not maintain an intelligent conversation, the licenses were revoked. The report also noted that many boys had been hired for projectionist jobs.²⁴ In 1909, the *Film Index* reprinted an article on the film industry from *Insurance Engineering*. The underwriters seemed generally happy with the industry, making no complaints about the nickelodeon owners, but did point to the problem of the projectionists. “The hazard of the moving picture show business is comparatively mild, the chief concern being in the character of the operators, now largely young men of unsettled habits and little discretion.”²⁵

Projectionists were marginalized due to age, “lack of intelligence,” or “unsettled habits,” factors that excluded them from the respectability accorded craftsmen and professionals, but we have uncovered no evidence of state attempts to regulate these demographic characteristics. One marker of marginality seemed so threatening, however, that it prompted state intervention. In 1910, the New York State Legislature passed a law barring noncitizens from holding projectionist's licenses.²⁶ This led to the production of an extraordinary document, a petition from several immigrant projectionists to William J. Gaynor, Mayor of New York, pleading with him to prevent the loss of their livelihoods. Given the rarity of evidence produced by the projectionists themselves, we quote the document in full:

We the undersigned moving picture operators, most of us fathers and supporters of large families, appeal to your Honor, also in behalf of other unfortunate operators, for protection. In a couple of months, we will be deprived of our bread and butter, just because we have the misfortune of not being naturalized subjects of this country. We feel in our hearts to be Citizens of this great Republic, having the first papers, and furthermore, have children born in this country, who go to school, and what will become of them, when our license will be taken away from us? Your Honor knows how hard it is for any person at the present moment, to secure a new job in New York, and we leave it to your kind consideration, what the result will be, after the new law pending, which no doubt, will be passed, if your Honor does not prevent such an injustice to humanity. The new law states, that no person is eligible to work as operator of machine, unless he is a Citizen of the United States, consequently, under such conditions, many fathers of large families will lose their licenses and face starvation. The

majority of moving picture operators, have only the first papers, and we kindly call your Honor's precious attention to the fact, that various license bureaus of the City of New York, grant licenses on the first papers. Most of us have been working as operators for the last three years, and passed examinations every year that the commission of the Water Supply and Electricity imposed upon us. The last examination was January 1910, and license was granted to us to work one year. Our object in writing the present to your Honor is, that you may grant us the privilege of working under our present license until we get our full naturalization papers. We appeal to your magnanimous heart, for protection for the sake of our poor children, who need our help and support.

Gaynor sent the petition to Henry Thompson, commissioner of the Department of Water Supply, Gas, and Electricity, who returned it to the mayor with a letter saying that he had decided that "all 1910 cards which were issued prior to the enactment of the law . . . would be good for one year from the date of issue. This will in some cases extend the time of employment for some of the operators who are not yet citizens, from one to six months."²⁷ The document reveals that the projectionists, not surprisingly under the circumstances, wished to represent themselves as integrated into existing social structures. They were de facto if not yet de jure citizens: "We feel in our hearts to be Citizens of this great Republic." They were "fathers and supporters of large families" not "young men of unsettled habits" or underaged boys. They assented to the construction of themselves as technical experts: they had "passed examinations every year that the commission of the Water Supply and Electricity imposed upon us." Their children, too, were integrated into the social structure, citizens by virtue of birth and further Americanized by virtue of going to school.

This most direct evidence from this marginalized population reveals an eager compliance with the dominant social order's construction of the projectionist as a category.

The projectionists' desire to insert themselves into existing social structures and technical discourses cannot be constructed as resistance. These men's compliance with the dominant can be seen as a thoroughly rational choice, given that they had already decided to immigrate to the United States, to raise their families there, and to support those families through their work as projectionists. Debating whether to equate this rational choice with agency opens up epistemological quandaries about the nature of

power that we cannot deal with in an essay of this length, but the way in which we have treated the evidence at least permits us to frame the question.

WORKPLACE RULES AND PRACTICES

Another cautionary anecdote from *Moving Picture World* of 1907:

Smoke breaking out from the operating box of a moving picture show . . . and a wild shriek from the operator as he broke from the room, started a panic among fifty people who were in the theater. . . . The police broke in and managed to quiet the crowd. No one was seriously injured. The fire started from a cinder in the operator's pipe lighting on the film. [To comment on the above is superfluous; it ought to be made criminal for an operator to smoke at work!—Ed.]²⁸

A few years later the National Board of Fire Underwriters put the weight of their professional expertise behind the editor's recommendation. Section 12 of the "Suggested Ordinance to Regulate the Installation, Operation, and Maintenance of Motion Picture Machines" reads, "Neither smoking nor the keeping nor use of matches shall be permitted in any booth, room, compartment or enclosure where a motion picture machine is installed."²⁹

The disastrous Boyertown, Pennsylvania, fire of 1908 had established the threat of fire and subsequent panic among the audience as the chief danger of the moving picture shows.³⁰ Imposing bodily discipline was seen as the best way to prevent such disasters. In the progressive reform journal *American City*, Boyd Fisher discussed the regulation of motion picture shows for the public good, stating that

[T]he danger from fire is the one most feared. . . . The operator himself must also be licensed, and suffer the revocation of license in case of failure to observe the rules of safety. This provision is the most important and potent one to guard against both panic and fire. The handling of inflammable films in close proximity to a kindled arc lamp requires constant watchfulness, and only by providing that the city itself may at any time take an operator's job away from him, can the municipality assure the same cooperation from him as from the manager. A whole code of rules . . . is necessary for the guidance of operators.³¹

Among New York City's rules was the requirement that "handpower only be employed in [the moving picture machine's] operation,"³² in the hopes that operators would

not fall asleep on the job.³⁵ As indicated by the 1907 anecdote from *Moving Picture World* quoted earlier, the trade press and film industry journalists enthusiastically supported the disciplinary regime. In 1909, David Hulfish, who wrote for the Chicago-based *Nickelodeon*, published *The Motion Picture: Its Making and Its Theatre*. Referring to a nickelodeon that mixed films with illustrated songs, Hulfish provided a detailed, step-by-step breakdown of the operator's duties, from "(1) lights his arc" to "(16) the operator decides the length of the intermission before repeating his routine of sixteen separate duties."³⁴ A year later, F. H. Richardson, who wrote for *Moving Picture World*, published *Motion Picture Handbook: A Guide for Managers and Operators of Motion Picture Theatres*, which contains a list of hints to operators that were in the nature of prescriptive injunctions: "Do not read while turning the crank"; "Allow no one in the booth during a performance"; "Keep your oily rags in a spring-top can"; "Keep your film in a metal box when not in use."³⁵

Hulfish and Richardson suggested the strict observation of workplace routines to insure the safety and pleasure of the audience, but neither expressed concern about the projectionists' well-being, apparently viewing them simply as extensions of the ma-

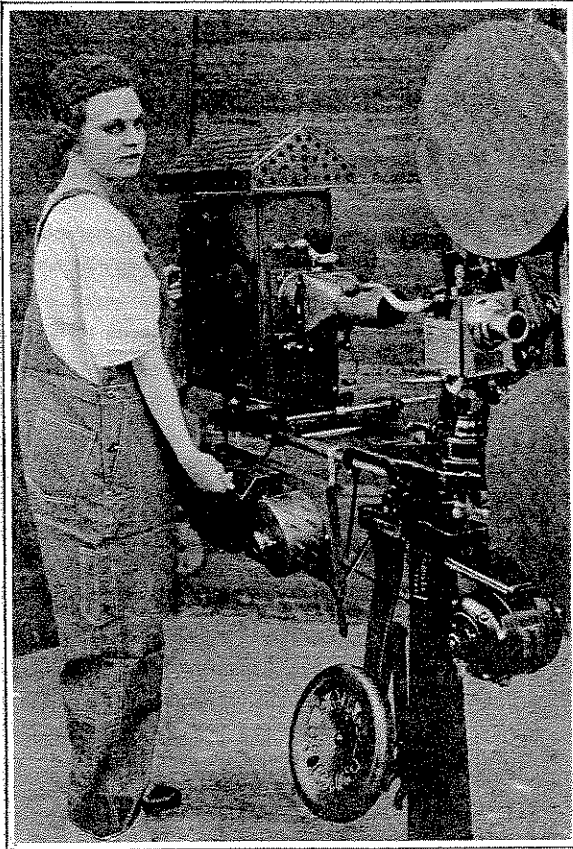


Figure 4. Female projectionist, 1910s.

chines they operated and serviced. We have, however, uncovered one piece of evidence from a dominant institution that reveals cause for concern about the projectionists. Writing in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Dr. Howard D. King spoke of the health hazards posed by the moving picture shows springing up throughout the country. Referring to nickelodeon employees, King said, "Poor ventilation produces not only discomfort and loss of energy, but greater susceptibility to disease, especially tuberculosis. . . . The film operator who is confined in a small cubby-hole at an exceedingly high temperature falls an easy prey to tuberculosis."³⁶

Dr. King's article suggests that he might have been more concerned about projectionists as potential disease carriers, as demographic units, than as individuals, but his comments impel us to speculate about the workplace routine from the perspective of the workers themselves. If projectionists followed the rules and injunctions about proper practice, the job must have been boring and physically taxing as they hand-cranked the projector to show films they had already seen several times. They were not permitted to relieve the tedium by reading or talking to fellow employees. Nor could they take solace in a smoke or a snooze, although being confined in a small cubbyhole at an exceedingly high temperature must have induced sleepiness, a conclusion that the imposition of hand-cranking supports.

As far as we know, no projectionist recorded his impressions of his daily routine; the best approximation of the physical realities of the projectionists' lives derives from reading the evidence of dominant institutions against the grain, a historical procedure that some readers might dismiss as overly speculative. While we acknowledge the limits of such speculation, we believe that it produces better historical understanding than a simple replication of the period's own written evidence. This essay has acknowledged the fragmentary evidence nagging at the margins of the dominant in order to open up cracks between the disciplinary discourses and permit glimpses into the lives and motives of individual projectionists. In so doing, we have sought to restore some sense of agency to the operators, even though the weight of evidence presented supports a Foucauldian vision of projectionists as subjects produced through disciplinary regimes. We do not favor one of these interpretations over the other, instead permitting them to oscillate back and forth, rather like the optical illusion that shifts rapidly from duck to rabbit and back again, despite the viewer's best attempts to fix a single image.

Such oscillation violates some of the fundamental precepts of conventional historiography. Wary as we are of constructing historians as a monolithic category, it seems that many historians are trained to weave evidence from various sources into a coherent

narrative that they believe best represents the events and causality of the past. They are trained to believe that there are better and worse interpretations and better and worse stories to be made of the same evidence. As Robert Berkhofer says in *Beyond the Great Story*, "That two or more stories can be told about the same set of events deeply disturbs even sophisticated normal [nonpostmodernist] historians."³⁷ Such historians resist the relativistic chaos precipitated by the oscillation between (among) two or more stories. Yet, as we argued at the outset,

the evidence available for the study of early cinema history (and for many other potential histories as well), exhibits a pattern of selective survival and filtration that structures the stories that can be told.

Historians' training might incline them to accept certain textual forms (underwriters' recommendations, city ordinances) as solid, hard evidence, while dismissing other forms (the anecdote, the oblique reference, or the structured absence) as questionable. The former texts, those endowed with institutional endorsement and "objectivity," seem frequently to represent the forces that reigned dominant within the period; they represent the views articulated by and later archived by dominant institutions. Historians' dependence upon these sources, and thus their tendency to reproduce dominant narratives, stems from several preferences and prejudices regarding the construction of history:

- the desire to establish hierarchies of consistency, preferring the more consistent to the less
- the desire to avoid contradiction, seeking instead mutually reinforcing data and conclusions
- the desire to see history as transparent rather than constructed, as an object rather than a text
- the desire to engage in holistic analyses and construct integrated narratives

In contrast to conventional historical practices, we have tried to be sensitive to evidence, however scarce or inconsistent, that restores some agency to dominated factions and to construct a narrative that gives the dominated a voice. The nagging question of this approach's general applicability remains, particularly since we have based our argument on evidence from the geographically specific locale of New York City. But with

historical topics that centrally involve socially marginalized subjects, such an approach offers a means by which the readily available record of the dominant classes can be interrogated and complicated.

NOTES

1. "Audience Applauds His Shrieks of Agony," *Moving Picture World*, February 22, 1908, 138; editor's note in original. For a detailed analysis both of this anecdote and of the larger issue of the construction of the nickelodeon's history, see our "Corruption, Criminality, and the Nickelodeon," in *Hop on Pop: The New Cultural Studies*, ed. Henry Jenkins, Jane Shattuck, and Tara MacPherson (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002).
2. In *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), Robert Berkhofer discusses "what history can be, both as a real past and as a discourse about it." Interdisciplinary in nature and deconstructive in approach, the book challenges traditional hierarchies of evidence, meaning, and interpretation while embracing the plurality of historical insights and possibilities.
3. For a fuller account of the centrality of New York City, see chapter 1 of our *Reframing Culture: The Case of the Vitagraph Quality Films* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).
4. Exhibition patterns in New York City have become a point of debate among early cinema historians. See Ben Singer, "Manhattan Nickelodeons: New Data on Audiences and Exhibitors," *Cinema Journal* 34, no. 3 (spring 1995): 5–35; Robert Allen, "Manhattan Myopia, or, Oh! Iowa!" *Cinema Journal* 35, no. 3 (spring 1996): 75–103; and Ben Singer, "New York, Just Like I Pictured It . . ." *Cinema Journal* 35, no. 3 (spring 1996): 101–28. Also see William Uricchio and Roberta E. Pearson, "New York? New York!"; Judith Thissen, "Oy, Myopia!"; and Ben Singer, "Manhattan Melodrama," all in *Cinema Journal* 36, no. 4 (summer 1997): 98–102, 102–7, 107–12.
5. The MPPC brings with it another complication, particularly when considering film exhibition. The "trust" attempted to dominate exhibition (as well as production), pressuring non-trust-aligned nickelodeons with a variety of tactics that included legal harassment, intimidation, and, on occasion, physical violence. The MPPC worked for what it perceived as the benefit of the industry, an effort that included not only ousting the competition, but also upgrading the industry by allying with city officials, insurance companies, and progressive civic societies. Working with these entities, the MPPC endorsed a number of measures to improve the safety of their theaters including the regulation of projectionists. Non-MPPC-aligned or independent nickelodeon operators were, not without reason, suspicious of MPPC-supported regulations. Perceiving a pattern of collusion between the trust's interests and the actions of the city and insurance regulators, independent operators were prone to dismiss regulatory efforts as a front for MPPC competition. Thus projectionists like Riker, if from a non-MPPC nickelodeon, would have had added reason to be suspicious. For the present-

day historian, the situation is complicated because the MPPC's interests tended to find a place in the public record, whereas their independent counterparts were less likely to have their voices recorded, skewing the record.

6. In 1908, New York City's several departments responsible for aspects of moving picture exhibition variously numbered Greater New York's shows at 550, 675, and 800. For more on the implications of unreliable data in the evaluation of New York's nickelodeons, see Uricchio and Pearson, "New York? New York!"

7. See, for example, Kathy Piess, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); and our own *Reframing Culture*.

8. On the challenges posed to conventional historical practices by poststructuralist theory, see F. R. Ankersmit, *History and Topology: The Rise and Fall of Metaphor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Richard Evans, *In Defence of History* (London: Granta Books, 1997); Alan Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (London: Routledge, 1997); and Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

9. "New York Operators Taken in Hand," *Film Index*, January 25, 1908, 4.

10. "Editorial Notes," *Moving Picture World*, May 16, 1908, 436.

11. "A School for Operators," *Moving Picture World*, January 29, 1910, 124.

12. "Popular Defense of Picture Theaters," Oscar B. Depue, *Nickelodeon*, March 1909, 67.

13. *Film Index*, March 1909.

14. *IATSE Yearbook*, 1905, 188-89.

15. *IATSE Yearbook*, 1907, 239.

16. *IATSE Yearbook*, 1908, 265.

17. *Ibid.*

18. "Editorial Notes and Comments," *Motion Picture World*, May 16, 1908, 436; and "Observations by Our Man about Town," *Motion Picture World*, April 16, 1910, 594.

19. "Union Operators to Have a New Examination," *Motion Picture World*, January 29, 1910, 124.

20. "Local 35 Holds Big Meeting," *Film Index*, April 1, 1911, 7.

21. *Tammany Times*, September 30, 1911, 6.

22. See our "Constructing the Audience: Competing Discourses of Morality and Rationalization during the Nickelodeon Period," *Iris* 17 (autumn 1994): 43-54.

23. On the other hand, other reformers, of more repressive inclinations, simply wished to shut down the nickelodeons and ban film showings.

24. "Lines Being Drawn Tighter in New York City," *Motion Picture World*, March 14, 1908, 208. The *Moving Picture World* here reflects the general xenophobic discourse of the day that constructed as inferior and suspicious the new emigrants from southern and eastern Europe who flooded into the country after 1880.

25. "Fire Risks," *Film Index*, April 10, 1909, 10-11.

26. National Board of Review Records, September 1, 1910, New York Public Library, Manuscripts Department.

27. Letter from Henry S. Thompson, commissioner, Department of Water Supply, Gas, and Electricity, to mayor William J. Gaynor, October 3, 1910, GWJ 21, New York City Municipal Archives (letter from operators attached).

28. *Motion Picture World*, August 10, 1907, 359; editor's note in original.

29. "Suggested Ordinance to Regulate the Installation, Operation, and Maintenance of Motion Picture Machines," adopted by the National Board of Fire Underwriters and the National Fire Protection Association, November 1912.

30. It is important to note, however, that the fire took place in an opera house, not a nickelodeon, and was not caused by motion picture equipment.

31. Boyd Fisher, "The Regulation of Motion Picture Theaters: Provisions for the Physical, Moral, and Intellectual Control of a Form of Popular Entertainment Possessing Great Educational Possibilities," *American City*, December 1912, 520.

32. "Fire Risks," reprinted from *Insurance Engineering*, *Film Index*, April 10, 1909, 10-11.

33. David Hulfish, "Some Questions Answered," *Nickelodeon*, December 1909, 174.

34. David Hulfish, *The Motion Picture: Its Making and Its Theatre* (Chicago: Chicago Electricity Magazine, 1909), 65-66.

35. F. H. Richardson, *Motion Picture Handbook: A Guide for Managers and Operators of Motion Picture Theatres* (New York: Moving Picture World, 1910), 169.

36. Howard D. King, "The Moving Picture Show: A New factor in Health Conditions," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 53, no. 7 (August 14, 1909): 519.

37. Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story*, 24.