

EARLY CINEMA IN REVIEW
PROCEEDINGS OF DOMITOR

CORPOREALITY IN
EARLY CINEMA

Viscera, Skin, and Physical Form

Edited by Marina Dahlquist, Doron Galili,
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Contents

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CORPOREALITY IN EARLY CINEMA

most embodied period of life"; in his view, adolescence entails a form of mimetic relationship with one's environment. As Petersen shows, Hall found mimetic relationships to be an essential aspect of film viewing. For Hall, the cinema could offer everyone—not just young people—the experience of youth spectatorship, which enabled a renewed, embodied relationship to one's self through a playful exploration of actions and attitudes. In this sense, he put a positive twist on the conception of a susceptible or impressionable spectator, as the mimetic encounter with the cinema could, in Hall's view, allow for a reversal of the alienating experience of industrial modernity.

Exploring similar themes in the context of 1910s Germany, Werder's essay considers how the modern recurring topos of the "nervous modern age," which associated modernity with nervousness and sensory overload, found expressions in debates about the cinema. In these early discussions, the cinema—with its bright, flickering, and rapidly shifting pictures—was said to have shocking effects on its viewers' nerves, thus exposing them to mental and physical danger. This discourse may be understood as a variant of former cultural concerns about the effects of modern media, but as Werder argues, it could also attribute positive traits to the cinema: if the film spectator is understood to have a weak, impressionable body, the intense effect of motion pictures could also be seen as a shock therapy of sorts that may heal damaged or dull nerves.

Closing this section, Denis Condon's essay draws on another type of rare and infinitely rich historical resource that may help us come to terms with embodied experiences of film spectatorship—a detailed diary kept by Dublin architect and avid film fan Joseph Holloway, in which he kept records of moviegoing, complete with insights about the films as well as the exhibition spaces, starting as early as 1894. Condon's essay takes us on a journey around Dublin's theaters and movie houses, following the flaneur-diarist whose account offers a unique opportunity to read a firsthand meta-spectatorial commentary that proves to be particularly attuned to the working-class audiences' excitement and behavior during film screenings. With few such accounts still existing today, Condon's reading of the diary entries brings to life another impression of real bodies' encounters with projected images—as well as with one another—in early-cinema exhibitions.

19 “Keep It Dark”

The Fatale Attraction of the Female Viewer's Body

Mireille Berton

THIS ARTICLE AIMS at discussing the erotic appeal of the female spectator and the contrasting discourses generated by her nervous body, perceived as being at once excited and exciting. Blamed for disturbing the early screenings with their exuberant hats, loud laughter, interminable chatter, and breast-feeding when they came with their babies,¹ female viewers were also criticized for provoking disorder by offering an exciting distraction to male spectators. Chief among the concerns about female erotic power was the fact that the presence of women threatened to disturb other viewers, particularly men. Many scholars have examined the erotic function of dark viewing spaces that afforded privacy beneficial to romantic or sexual encounters. Competing discourses about the consequences of female (over)presence in projection sites such as nickelodeons reveal a set of fears related to the new visibility of women's bodies in the public sphere—bodies, as I would like to suggest, that were mainly conceived of as nervous organisms overloaded with contagious stimuli.

The semiobscurity of movie theaters, as well as the romantic atmosphere of some movies, led many commentators to condemn the amoral behavior not only of depraved men but also of women whose erotic appeal both distracted the audience and competed with the spicy scenes on the screen. A closer look at primary sources (articles, press illustrations, postcards, and movie pictures) from different countries (the United States, France, and Italy) reveals the anxiety related to the possibility of mimicry: that of female bodies instinctively imitating the moving images and thereby contaminating the audience. The discourse on women whose excessive visibility upset the smooth running of screenings should thus be situated within the larger context of a culture of the nervous body that feared not only the contagious effects of movies but also those male and female viewers who set a bad example for the others.

Indeed, the fear of female sexuality erupting at film screenings derived from the threat of women's mental and physical impressionability—as well as from the

risk of this impressionability becoming widely contagious. In each of her distracting actions during the screening, the female viewer was implicitly described as a nervous body in a context where mass culture was read exclusively through its appeal to excitability, sentimentality, and social mimicry. Therefore, in what follows I will offer some considerations about the gendered and social issues raised by the relationship between the sexualized female viewer and the cultural imaginary of the nervous body as it circulated around 1900.

Cinema as Female Space

From its earliest days, the movie theater revealed itself as a site where people belonging to groups excluded from the dominant discourse and from positions of power could have access to a new kind of collective experience.² Whether in Italy, Germany, France, or the United States, the movie theater enabled women in particular to enter public spaces where people who differed in terms of their origins, age, gender, socioeconomic status, and so on mingled together. As the study conducted by the German sociologist Emilie Altenloh shows, in a context where the status of women was being redefined, cinematography offered them the opportunity of having an independent activity, which they greatly appreciated.³ Interviews conducted with female moviegoers show that they felt perfectly safe and secure in movie theaters, in spite of arguments advanced by moralizers about the so-called dangerousness of movie screenings for "weak" subjects. This was the case of an article published in 1910 that reported the enthusiasm of a "nickelodeon fiend" who liked going alone to the cinema.⁴ Therefore, one must distinguish between the social reality within which women, who consumed a great number of moving pictures, were happy to be able to enjoy a relatively unprecedented freedom, and discourses that brandished the specter of sexual, moral, and physical depravity through the symbolic figures of female spectators who were either neurotics, adulteresses, or rape victims.⁵

The fact of the matter is that underlying the moralizing discourse of those who were alarmed by the loosening of morals, cinema was supposed to have encouraged a certain unnamed fear that modern leisure activities might be a means to emancipation for women. For this reason, discourses about female moviegoers must, above all, be considered as discourses about the newfound visibility of women in public spaces that had been dominated by men up until then. What is at stake is not only the visibility of women in movie theaters but also their visibility on the silver screen, with actresses embodying models of femininity that had no precedent and that resisted traditional norms of respectability and morality—examples that were likely to inspire the female moviegoers themselves.

The unease caused by the significant number of women going to the movies finds its source in the excessive behavior of some female spectators who,

according to documents, externalized their feelings in noisy fashion and commented constantly at full voice on the images being screened.⁶ Thus, mentioning the expressivity and emotivity of women became commonplace in statements by men fantasizing about an ideal female moviegoer who would be as silent as she was invisible,⁷ namely a mother with irreproachable moral standards or, better still, a woman escorted by a man (her brother, her husband, or her boss).⁸

One of the goals of the movements aimed at reforming cinema was precisely to create a disciplined viewer whose cognitive activity went unhindered and who respected the ritual of film screening. If during the first phase of film history, screenings were subjected to a process of hysterization in cinephobic and moralistic discourses that relegated them to the feminine sphere of mass culture, the institutionalization phase was associated with a masculinization of the model viewer (as well as exhibition venues, production modes, representation modes, etc.). The will to educate some members of the audience considered to be recalcitrant betrayed the underlying notion that before being a gaze, the female viewer was a body, desirable as well as desiring.

The Female Body and Sexual Desires

As a site fostering social interaction, the movie theater provided people of both genders with opportunities for romantic and sexual encounters.⁹ As Richard Maltby points out, "Movies, amusements parks and dance halls created a hetero-social environment that provided young women with access to a wider range of evening pleasures, and produced a commercial relationship between sexes that rendered more ambiguous the connection between the exchange of money and the granting of sexual favors than the processes of direct purchase assumed in the red-light districts."¹⁰

As illustrated by a substantial iconography, darkness and promiscuity provided ideal conditions for more or less extensive flirtations.¹¹ Postcards of the 1910s commonly depicted the movie theater as a place of sexual license, where romantic scenes playing on the screen were reflected in the thoughts of audience members. Many of these play on the idea of the movie theater as a place for sexual license because it allowed people to gather in the dark. The thoughts of the audience are then complemented by the image on the screen.¹² Romantic confusion or subterfuge among audience members was a common subject in comic postcards of the early period of cinema, as was the correlation between romantic behavior on the screen and among those watching the film—or not, because they were busy kissing each other.¹³ A man embracing his male neighbor rather than a female partner is meant to have occurred because of the darkness; it also shows the variety of sexual behavior depicted in filmic and parafilmic sources.

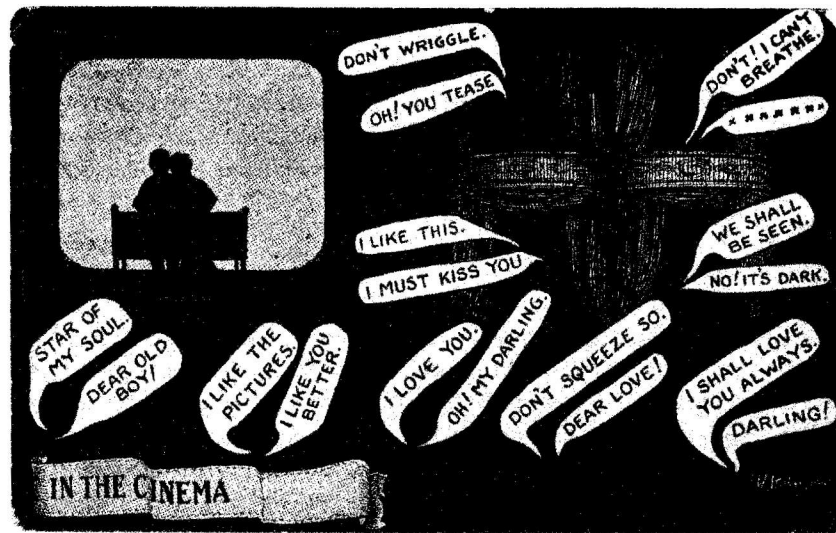


Figure 19.1. "In the Cinema," W. Stocker Shaw, postcard, ca. 1910. Nicholas Hiley Collection.

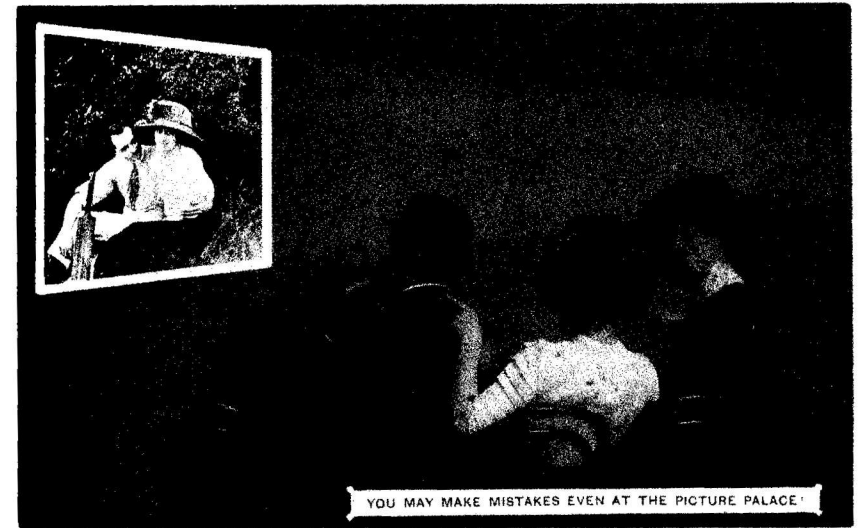


Figure 19.2. "You May Make Mistakes Even at the Picture Palace," postcard, ca. 1910. Nicholas Hiley Collection.

The sexual dangers of such new social alliances were readily apparent, and middle-class progressive reform activities from different countries targeting vice can be seen in this context.¹⁴ Movie theaters appeared to be heterosocial and heterosexual places that were often described as "stations of vice,"¹⁵ encouraging depraved behavior and white slave traffic.¹⁶ The Chicago Vice Commission declared in 1911 that "vicious men and boys mix with the crowd in front of the theaters and take liberties with very young girls. . . . Many liberties are taken with young girls during the performance when the place is in total or semi-darkness. Boys and men slyly embrace the girls near them and offer certain indignities."¹⁷

In press articles about the moving picture shows, we can read that "darkness is a dangerous adjunct of propinquity."¹⁸ Among the problems the reformers condemned were those occasioned by spectators who talked during the show, whistled or clapped at the kissing scenes on the screen, or even sexually harassed women in many ways. The physical presence of women in public screening sites was disturbing not only because they wore big hats, laughed, spoke loudly, or breast-fed their babies but also because their bodies acted as magnets that aroused desire and competed with the stars on the screen.

An article with a satirical tone reveals, "Of course it is not necessary to look at the picture,"¹⁹ as there is another show going on in the movie theater itself, with women offering a display of charms and glamour. For instance, W. A. Scranton advises women to "always take your time and walk leisurely" in order to

mesmerize male viewers. Indeed, the German sociologist Emilie Altenloh points out in her investigation that whereas women went happily to the movies for the sake of the film itself, men's focus was more on their female companions: they watched them watching the movie.²⁰ Thus, not only were women supposed to be interfering with the proper screening of the film, they were also deemed to encourage, in a relatively active and willing way, licentious behavior. The female moviegoer appears thus as an object for the male gaze as well as an object of desire, on equal footing with the film that fascinates viewers; this competition highlights the implicit analogy between woman and the mesmeric power of the filmic image. As Richard Maltby reminds us, "The culture of consumption required extensive renegotiations of the ways in which women occupied public spaces, but for cinema the anxieties provoked by these renegotiations concentrated around 'realism' and 'imitation.' Films were censorially criticized for the excessive adequacy of their representations of the real, while it was their 'mesmeric' powers of influence that provoked concern over imitative behavior."²¹

The Nervous Body of Spectators

The turmoil caused by female viewers' sex appeal is but one of a set of discourses that depict cinema as an experience with the potential to feminize the viewer,

COME AND SEE THE PICTURES.

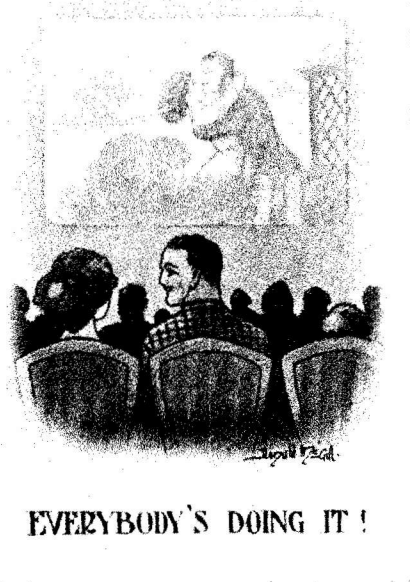


Figure 19.3. "Come and See the Pictures. Everybody's Doing It!" Donald McGill postcard, ca. 1910. Nicholas Hiley Collection.

which makes it conducive to daydreaming, being vulnerable to suggestion, and even neurosis (exposing one to the danger of a loss of contact with reality). Encouraging all manner of physical and psychological excesses, filmic projections shaped a viewer with a particular sensitivity to an environment fraught with excitement. And indeed, many primary sources describe the act of viewing films with words that connote femininity: emotivity, suggestibility, fickleness, sentimentality, and so on.²² The insistence on the excesses of moviegoing as practiced by women is in fact a transposition, enabled by the use of different words, of one of the key stereotypes of positivist culture: the hysterical woman who overreacts to external stimuli. For instance, many medical and paramedical texts of the time condemn the contagious effects of moving images, thought to exert a strong suggestive power on so-called weak subjects, such as women, children, and neurotics.²³

Rae Beth Gordon's work has shown the considerable influence that psychological theories of the imitation instinct and the cerebral unconscious had on early cinema, which integrated them through comedy, as exemplified by the *Bous-Bous Mie*, a dance with contagious effects on viewers.²⁴ The fear of female

sexuality erupting at film screenings derived from the threat of women's mental and physical impressionability—as well as from the risk of this impressionability becoming widely contagious. Although women were far from being the only category of viewers concerned, commentators frequently singled them out by talking disapprovingly about their psychological and physical excesses and their propensity to interact with their surrounding environment.

Visited by a huge number of people considered to be vulnerable to the physical and psychic effects of moving images, movie shows became sites that were seen as being at once female and feminizing; in other words, they fostered hysteria and regression. The presence in the audience of large numbers of women and children, the very subjects deemed to be the most penetrable to the influence of the filmic image, is not unrelated to this process of feminization of the cinematic apparatus. The latter can even be said to be the subtext of the moralizing discourses that urged the development of regulatory strategies in the effort to transform cinema into a morally respectable art and the viewer into a disciplined subject. In order to regain control over filmic projections, the reform movements would impose rules of conduct more in keeping with the ideals of masculine subjectivity: temperance, moderation, and rationality. Thus, one of the goals of the movements aimed at reforming cinema was to absorb, as much as possible, the nervous body of the viewers—a sensory, mimetic, and desirable body that hindered the consumption of film.

Conclusion

However, female sexuality as it revealed itself at early film screenings was not simply feared as an obstacle to the progressive constitution of a disciplined show; rather, it also functioned as a modality for accessing new kinds of social and aesthetic experiences. Many discursive and iconographic sources depict the figure of the seductress who seeks to take advantage of the particular context of film screenings to entice men. As Shelley Stamp Lindsey points out, all female viewers were considered at once to be soliciting and solicited: "Cinemas were described by many observers as arenas of particular carnal license, where women were alternately preyed upon by salacious men who gathered around entrance ways, and themselves tempted to engage in untoward conduct."²⁵ According to Sharon R. Ullman, "In the world as on the screen, women came to be incorporated into a vision of desire and lust, both as object and participants."²⁶

Many films showed women available to male desire, such as *Love in a Ham-mock* (Edison, 1901), *The Adjustable Bed* (American Mutoscope and Biograph, 1905), or *Always Room for One More* (American Mutoscope and Biograph, 1905), comedies where men and women try to occupy a physical space that is too small

or too fragile at the same time. Inevitably collapsing on top of each other, the characters always end up laughing and then embracing and kissing each other. As Ullman notes, "many of the movies are remarkable in showing not only the sexual possibilities available to women but also the responsibility of initiation placed upon them. . . . [Thus,] the women and men viewing these short comedies could happily share responsibility for sexual encounters and enjoy the effects together."²⁷ We can see that "from the inception of film until the rise of serious censorship, a period encompassing the years 1896 to 1910, motion pictures demonstrated a surprising recognition of female desire and sexual availability."²⁸ These images created the impression of an active female sexuality and helped establish women as agents of desire; moreover, these movies "presented images of woman that rang true with many in the audience."²⁹ Therefore, moviegoing offered women the possibility of becoming eager participants in sexual desire, as this short text from 1910 illustrates: "How did it happen that these five men who were so angry with the woman in the nickelodeon for not taking off her hat became so friendly with her afterward? It was raining like fury when the show was over and she invited them to take shelter with her under her hat."³⁰

This anecdote implicitly acknowledges the emancipatory power of female scopophilia, since the female viewer in question is not merely the object of the gaze but also its subject, a subject who moves autonomously in a public space and is sexually proactive. Finally, the "hysterical" sexual appeal of female spectatorship was seen not only as an obstacle to the progressive constitution of a disciplined show based on the masculine values of individualism, control, and temperance but also as an opportunity for living a new kind of social and aesthetic experience determined by the highly sensorial environment of modernity.

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Notes

1. Women disturbed the screening in various ways, such as keeping their hats on or standing up to look for friends. We can read in articles written in an ironic tone, "When you reach your seats, do not sit down immediately. Stand up and look around for your friends. It is dark, I know, but if you wait long enough your eyes become accustomed to the darkness, and you may then recognize the backs of some acquaintances. The people in back of you have X-ray eyes and can move to some other seat if they don't like it. When you sit down, be sure and do not remove your hat. That is only necessary in legitimate theaters and is not expected

here." W. A. Scranton, "Etiquette. On the Proper Way for Two Women to Spend an Evening in a Movie Picture Theater," *Motion Picture Magazine* 4 (May 1916), 67.

2. Silvio Alovio, "La Spettatrice muta. Il pubblico cinematografico femminile nell'Italia del primo Novecento," in *Non solo dive, Pioniere del cinema italiano*, ed. Monica Dall'Asta et al. (Bologna: Cineteca di Bologna, 2008), 269–88; Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Sabine Hake, *The Cinema's Third Machine: Writing on Film in Germany, 1907–1933* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993); Andrea Haller, "Diagnosis: 'Flimmeritis': Female Cinema-going in Imperial Germany, 1911–1918," in *Cinema, Audiences and Modernity: New Perspectives on European Cinema History*, ed. Daniel Biltreyest, Richard Maltby, and Philippe Meers (London: Routledge, 2011), 130–41; Miriam Hansen, *Babel & Babylon: Spectatorship in America Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); Frank Kessler and Eva Warth, "Early Cinema and Its Audiences," in *The German Cinema Book*, ed. Tim Bergfelder, Erica Carter, and Deniz Görktürk (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 121–28; Luca Mazzei, "Il cinematografo da sole. Il cinema descritto dalle donne fra 1898 e 1916," in Dall'Asta et al., *Non solo dive*, 257–68; Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1986); Veronica Pravadelli, *Le Donne del cinema. Dive, registe, spettatrici* (Lecce, Italy: Editori Laterza, 2014); Lauren Rabinovitz, *For the Love of Pleasure: Women, Movies and Culture of in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Heide Schlüppmann, *The Uncanny Gaze: The Drama of Early German Cinema* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2009 [1990]); Heide Schlüppmann, "Cinema as Anti-Theater: Actresses and Female Audiences in Wilhelmanian Germany," in *Silent Film*, ed. Richard Abel (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 125–41; Janet Staiger, *Bad Women: Regulating Sexuality in Early American Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996 [1995]).

3. Emilie Altenloh, *Zur Soziologie des Kinos. Die Kino-Unternehmung und die Sozialen Schichten ihrer Besucher* (Jena, Germany: Eugen Diederichs, 1914).

4. Adriana Spadoni, "An Interview with a Nickelodeon Fiend. What the Pictures Mean to a Lonely Woman," *San Francisco Call*, August 21, 1910, 12.

5. Pravadelli, *Le Donne del cinema*, 12–14.

6. Haller, "Diagnosis," 134; Pravadelli, *Le Donne del cinema*, 15.

7. Haller, "Diagnosis," 135. See also A. Walter, "Erzieht die Kinobesucher," *Lichtbild-Bühne* 8, no. 45 (November 6, 1915): 46–48.

8. Alovio, "La Spettatrice muta," 283–84.

9. Mary Heaton Vorse, "Some Picture Show Audiences," *Outlook*, June 24, 1911, 441–47.

10. Richard Maltby, "The Social Evil, the Moral Order, and the Melodramatic Imagination, 1890–1915," in *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen*, ed. Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook, and Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1994), 218.

11. "Moving Picture Shows," *Los Angeles Herald Sunday Magazine*, August 7, 1910, 16.

12. "In the Cinema," W. Stocker Shaw, ca. 1910, from the Nicholas Hiley collection; "What Could Be Nicer?" Fred Spurgin, ca. 1917, from the Nicholas Hiley collection; "They That Go in Darkness," Fred Spurgin, "Cinema" series no. 250, November 1915, from the Nicholas Hiley collection. Dr. Nicholas Hiley is head of the British Cartoon Archive at the Templeman Library, University of Kent, Canterbury.

13. "You May Make Mistakes Even at The Picture Palace," postcard, ca. 1910, Nicholas Hiley collection.

14. Lee Grieveson, *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early-Twentieth Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).
15. "Recruiting Stations of Vice. A Libel on Moving Picture Theaters," *Moving Picture World*, March 12, 1910, 370–71.
16. "Mothers' Responsibility," *St. John Review*, February 2, 1913, 1: "The moving picture show is another source of downfall, not that the show of itself is bad but that the influence at work there. The white slavers gather here and watch her, and little by little lead her on until ruin is accomplished. Then, rather than face her parents and friends, she enters this den of vice and becomes dead to the world"; "Des femmes enlevées grâce à des injections de somnifères," *L'Impartial*, January 8, 1914, 1; "Stockades Where Girls Are Sold into White Slavery," *The Press* (Spokane, WA), May 5, 1910, 1.
17. Chicago Vice Commission, *Social Evil in Chicago* (Chicago: Gunthorp-Warren, 1911), 247.
18. "Moving Picture Shows," *Los Angeles Herald*, August 7, 1910, 16.
19. Scranton, "Etiquette," 67.
20. Altenloh, *Zur Soziologie des Kinos*, 95.
21. Maltby, "The Social Evil," 220.
22. Silvio Alovio, *L'occhio sensibile. Cinema e scienze della mente nell'Italia del primo Novecento* (Torino: Kaplan, 2013); Mireille Berton, *Le corps nerveux des spectateurs. Cinéma et sciences du psychisme autour de 1900* (Lausanne: L'Âge d'Homme, 2015).
23. Amalia Campetti, "Il Cinematografo nell'educazione," *Rivista di Pedagogia* 5, no. 3 (1910): 73–79.
24. Rae Beth Gordon, "Les galipettes de l'Autre burlesque ou la mécanique corporelle du Double," 1895 61 (September 2010): 129–48; *Why the French Love Jerry Lewis: From Cabaret to Early Cinema* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).
25. Shelley Stamp Lindsey, "Is Any Girl Safe? Female Spectators at the White Slave Films," *Screen* 37, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 4.
26. Sharon R. Ullman, *Sex Seen: The Emergence of Modern Sexuality in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 28.
27. *Ibid.*, 23, 27.
28. *Ibid.*, 19.
29. *Ibid.*, 42.
30. "How She Conciliated Them," *Carrizozo News*, August 26, 1910, 26.

20 "The Best Synonym of Youth"

G. Stanley Hall, Mimetic Play, and Early Cinema's Embodied Youth Spectator

Christina Petersen

WHILE STUDIES OF early cinema's relationship to the spectator's body have long engaged with issues of gender, race, class, and sexuality, early cinema spectatorship and embodiment in relation to age, particularly adolescence and youth, continues to be a developing area of study.¹ As this essay will discuss, the concept of adolescence as a distinct life stage between childhood and adulthood came of age with the emergence of cinema. First defined in detail by child psychologist G. Stanley Hall, modern adolescence came to represent the most embodied period of life, marked by a mimetic relationship to one's environment. In this era, Progressive reformers and legal officials' attempts to reshape transitional-era American cinema popularized Hall's conception that America's young were susceptible to mindlessly imitating what they saw at the cinema. It is less well known that Hall also explicitly linked film to the distinction between adolescence as a delineated life stage and youth as a modern structure of looking and feeling.²

In 1904, Hall asserted that youth comprised a feeling of play, and in 1915 he explicitly connected this idea to the somatic experience of film spectatorship. This was one year before fellow psychologist Hugo Münsterberg published *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* and twenty years before critical theorist Walter Benjamin explored the concept of playful mimetic innervation through cinema.³ For Hall, with the rise of film as a mass medium and the advent of World War I, the cinema offered a cure for the sedentary lifestyle not only for the modern adolescent but for the spectator of any age who could return to a more primitive and embodied relationship to one's body. In this sense, moviegoing was considered akin to sports spectatorship. At first it represented the recreational equivalent of Taylorist modes of physical labor, namely an enervating and alienating experience that enforced a strict divide between spectator and participant. However, Hall's views eventually shifted toward an expanded notion of recreation in which a spectator could also be revitalized by watching other bodies at play. Hall's ideas thus formed the basis for the concept of what I term the "youth spectator," an