

# 'This is not a cinema': the projectionist's tale

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'This is not a cinema', proclaims the screen in my local Vue cinema in 2017, just before the main feature is shown. This declaration is followed by footage of sports, opera and music festivals, and the claim of a new, plural identity, 'This is big screen entertainment', which is spelled out in words and images as 'Big screen theatre', 'Big screen sports', 'Big screen opera' and 'Big screen festival'. This campaign is a branding ident with a difference for Vue cinemas, the smallest of the three major British chains.<sup>1</sup> For what is being negotiated is the identity of the medium, and the drive of the promotion is to diminish the association of cinema buildings and feature films, and replace it with an image of more diverse big screen 'content delivery'. This is not a cinema – which, as a dedicated building, might seem a bit twentieth century – but something rather more modern, like a portal. A portal – or a computer screen. However, as most of the audience will have very powerful, very small personal computers in their pockets, this association is disavowed through the repetition of 'BIG'. This is not a cinema; it is somewhere that other events can be experienced both large and loud at premium prices. This policy of the redesignation of cinema, however, is shot through with ambivalence. The short promotional film advocating the spatial and temporal transcendence now available in this not-cinema building is immediately followed by an advertisement for the benefits of Sony 4K, with an instructional edge, informing viewers that now is the time to settle down, turn everything off and enjoy the dark. To behave as if it *is* a cinema.

**1** In 2017, Vue (currently Canadian-owned) had eighty-five cinemas in the UK, also operating in Eire and the Netherlands. The company was formed in 2003 through the purchase of Warner Village Cinemas, with a series of subsequent acquisitions.

2 The Vue slogan between 2003 and 2015 was 'The future of cinema'. On the HBO slogan, see Catherine Johnson *Branding Television* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), pp. 28–35.

3 For this argument, see Charlotte Brunson, "'It's a film": medium specificity as textual gesture in *The Unloved and Red Road*', *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, vol. 9, no. 3 (2012), pp. 457–79.

4 Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Goodbye Cinema, Hello Cinephilia* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 280.

5 Francesco Casetti, *The Lumière Galaxy: Seven Key Words for the Cinema to Come* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2015), p. ix.

6 Laura Mulvey *Death 24x a Second* (London: Reaktion, 2006).

7 Rosalind Krauss, "A Voyage on the North Sea": *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999).

8 Samson Kambalu showed *Introduction to Nyau Cinema*, which draws on his childhood memories of film screenings in Malawi, at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, 23 August 2016 – 8 January 2017. Tacita Dean made a 2011 installation, *Film*, at Tate Modern in London, which is documented in Nicholas Cullinan (ed.), *Film* (London: Tate Publications, 2011), while her previous film works, such as *Kodak* (2006), have addressed the end of film-manufacturing.

The Vue chain's 'This is not a cinema' campaign, like HBO's much discussed branding claim that 'It's not TV, it's HBO', is an example of the negotiations about medium specificity that have been opened up by digital technology.<sup>2</sup> The identity of particular mediums, in an age when pretty much anything can be watched on a mobile phone, has become partly a question of nomination.<sup>3</sup> If television has become, as is alleged, more cinematic, and the living room more like a home cinema, then the cinema in this campaign has become more like television, the broadcaster of live events happening elsewhere. The slogan 'This is not a cinema', particularly when displayed in a cinema just before the screening of a feature film, poses the question of what cinema is.

The film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum observed in 2010,

when someone says, 'I just saw a film', we don't know whether this person saw something on a large screen with hundreds of other people, or alone on a laptop – or whether what he or she saw was on film, video, or dvd, regardless of where and how it was seen.<sup>4</sup>

This passage points to both the persistence and the transformation of what we understand as cinema, and this duality is characteristic of late twentieth-century/early twenty-first-century discussion of film. Francesco Casetti elegantly condenses much of what is at stake when recounting a conversation with his wife, Ornella, about whether they should be silent at home, 'where conversations are usual', when watching a movie there.<sup>5</sup> In Laura Mulvey's 2006 meditations on 'stillness and the moving image', in which she reflects on the losses and new possibilities of the transition to digital, transitions in a beloved medium herald other transitions. As cinema is a time-based medium, composed of images that disappear as you watch, the perceived end of cinema provides a metaphor for less medium-specific processes. The passing of cinema itself enacts both the movement of the film image and the irreversible movement of time. The title of Mulvey's book, *Death 24x a Second*, makes this connection explicit.<sup>6</sup>

Rosenbaum, Casetti and Mulvey are among the many critics who try to combine an apprehension of the new pleasures and possibilities of digital cinema – new cinephiliacs – with a recognition of the particularity of past cinematic pleasures. Something endures, and something is lost. What is lost can include the materiality of film and its fragility, as well as the particular relations to light and time seen as characteristic of analogue forms. These losses have dominated theorizations of the specificity of the medium in what Rosalind Krauss has characterized as 'post-medium' times,<sup>7</sup> and it is the historical materiality of the film image, as it disappears from cinemas, that has proved so eloquent to artists such as Tacita Dean, while Samson Kambalu has used digital technologies to recall older rituals of collective viewing.<sup>8</sup>

This essay seeks to document the transition to digital, and what has been lost thereby, with a different approach to the materiality of film. Rather than locating the specificity of the medium in, for example, the

physical qualities of the material substrate of film, or its disputed indexicality or its temporal passage, it examines the material and social practices of cinema film projection. These labour practices – dependent, as shall be shown, on the embodied recognition of the physical qualities of the material substrate of film, and many modalities of its temporal passages – provide a neglected arena in which to consider the question of what cinema is – and was. My argument is not that the practices of projection are the definitive site of medium specificity. This would simply mean entering a new contender into the century-long contestation of the essence of cinema. Rather, it is that attention to the labour and practices of cinema projection disturbs some of the retrospective assumptions about medium specificity entailed in discussion of the transition to digital. In this disturbance, which seeks to bring to visibility labour practices that have been understood as necessarily invisible, there is sought a shift of emphasis – an adjustment – in the understanding of both the medium and the history of cinema. In this argument, which will for most of this essay be pursued through the presentation of empirical research into practices of projection, I seek to engage with the duality referred to above, in which both the multiple disappearances and the persistence of film and cinema are recognized.

Lies Van de Vijver has recently used empirical methods to approach the question of what cinema is in the twenty-first century.<sup>9</sup> Her project occupies one side of the disappearance/persistence dualism, emphasizing the persistence of cinema as an idea. She asked young moviegoers about their modes of film viewing, arguing, from their accounts of both immersiveness and social engagement, that cinema should be understood as a set of practices. She suggests that ‘The eventfulness and the sociality of cinema are arguments for a non-foundational ontology of cinema, which defies the demise of the medium’.<sup>10</sup> Her concern is with reception: how young, digitally adept audiences discriminate between modes of film viewing and retain a notion of cinema as distinct from watching films online. In what follows I too draw on empirical material to document what cinema is, but am concerned with a different stage of the communicative event – the projection of films in the cinema building – and the articulation of what is at stake in this job by cinema projectionists themselves. While Van de Vijver’s ‘non-foundational ontology of cinema’ provides a nuanced account of the continuing role of cinema within the social imaginary, the attitudes she documents are dependent on previous modes of cinema’s existence. I look instead at particular, historical, embodied and material practices associated with one aspect of cinema in the second part of the twentieth century, practices which to a large extent have disappeared with the digital turn. While I accept many aspects of Van de Vijver’s argument about the persistence of cinema, I also want to insist that this persistence is itself founded on the way in which cinema has been defined by particular practices, in particular contexts, at particular times. What is and is not cinema is, to some extent, a question that can only be answered historically.

9 Lies Van de Vijver, ‘The cinema is dead, long live the cinema: understanding the social experience of cinema-going today’, *Participations*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2017), pp. 129–44.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 129.

- 11 Film historians have documented the role of the operator in early cinema. See Timothy Barnard, 'The "machine operator": deus ex machina of the storefront cinema', *Framework* vol. 43, no. 1 (2002), pp. 40–75, and Roberta Pearson and William Uricchio, 'Coming to terms with New York City's moving picture operators, 1906–1913', *The Moving Image*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2002), pp. 73–93.
- 12 Mark Kermode, *The Good, the Bad and the Multiplex: What's Wrong with Modern Movies* (London: Random House, 2011).
- 13 On projection's many modalities, see Virginia Crisp and Gabriel Menotti (eds), *Practices of Projection: Histories and Technologies* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019).
- 14 The Projection Project 2014–18 (AH/L008033) (Charlotte Brunsdon, Jon Burrows, Claire Jesson, Michael Pigott and Richard Wallace), <<https://projectionproject.warwick.ac.uk>> accessed 1 September 2019.
- 15 Interviews for a pilot study were conducted by Charlotte Brunsdon and Richard Wallace between 2010 and 2012, and this was used to refine the parameters of enquiry for the twenty-eight subsequent interviews.
- 16 See Rebecca Harrison, "'The coming of the projectionettes': women's work in film projection and changing modes of spectatorship in Second World War British cinemas", *Feminist Media Histories*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2016), pp. 48–71, and Richard Wallace, Rebecca Harrison and Charlotte Brunsdon, 'Women in the box: female projectionists in post-war British cinemas', *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2018), pp. 46–65.
- 17 See Introduction to The Projection Issue, *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2018), pp. 1–5.

To this end, this essay uses accounts gleaned from interviews with former and current cinema projectionists to reflect on debates about the end of cinema and questions of medium specificity. It contributes to cinema scholars' century-long discussion about what cinema is by exploring the role of the cinema projectionist, arguing that this labour has been as invisible to cinema theorists as it is meant to be to audiences.<sup>11</sup> The critic Mark Kermode is unusual in beginning his exploration of contemporary cinema, *The Good, the Bad and the Multiplex*, with a prologue that takes the form of an elegy to the projectionist (and provides a very good summary of what they did).<sup>12</sup> Putting projection back in the picture – something that may ironically only be possible now that most cinema projectionists have been made redundant – shifts the emphases in the understanding of both medium and cinemagoing. Cinema as a material practice, cinema exhibition as manual labour, the sensuous and tactile qualities of film, the aesthetics of 'a good show', the spaces of cinema: all of these can be better apprehended through attention to projection. As projection continues to escape from cinema buildings into art galleries and onto city streets and landmarks, in some instances returning to its pre-cinematic modalities, the documentation of what it meant in twentieth-century cinema augments a historical understanding of cinema as both an idea and a set of practices. There are paradoxes here. While many of the projectionists interviewed understood their work as contributing to what cinema really is, and this is what I explore here, within a longer historical view the interviews may, paradoxically, seem to document best a period when projection was captured – for a few decades – within the institution cinema.<sup>13</sup>

The projectionists' voices come from a British research project (funded between 2014 and 2018 by the Arts and Humanities Research Council) to investigate projection in the context of the transformations effected by digital technologies.<sup>14</sup> Part of the project entailed twenty-eight, long, semi-structured interviews with projectionists and former projectionists undertaken by Richard Wallace in mainland Britain, in locations including Newcastle, Glasgow, Leeds, Bristol, Cardiff, the Midlands and London.<sup>15</sup> Almost all of the interviewees were white men, who overwhelmingly dominated the profession.<sup>16</sup> The participants recounted how they came into their jobs, their training, their everyday routines and how the switch to digital had affected their work and their lives. In Britain approximately eighty per cent of cinema projectionists were made redundant between 2008 and 2012, and most still in post were working in specialist, often subsidized, art-house venues.<sup>17</sup> Interviewees included working, retired and redundant projectionists, and the stories of their working lives share features with other oral histories of twentieth-century industrial labour. That is, they participate in cross-industry documentation of the interplay of human and machine in the progressive automation of industrial processes. However, projectionists' labour produces a very particular commodity form, more experience than object, and the interviewees' detailed descriptions of everyday work routines

- 18 All quotations from Bill Pearson are taken from the Projection Project interview, 21 July 2016.
- 19 Planetary Projection, <[www.caboosebooks.net/planetary-projection](http://www.caboosebooks.net/planetary-projection)> accessed 1 September 2019; Lucie Česáková, "Feel the film": film projectionists and professional memory, *Memory Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 49–62; J. O. Holmes, *The Booth: the Last Days of Film Projection*, Jen Bekman Gallery, 2014; T. Zander (ed.), *Jean-Paul Deridder Cinema* (Ostfildern German: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2007); Richard Nicholson, *The Projectionists*, The Gas Hall, Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, 9–14 April 2016, <[www.richardnicholson.com/projects/the-projectionists](http://www.richardnicholson.com/projects/the-projectionists)> accessed 1 September 2019.
- 20 Charlotte Brunson and Richard Wallace worked independently and together, coding the transcripts of the first few interviews manually to establish and test appropriate analytic categories. The resilience of anticipated categories (which were built into the interview questions), such as 'career progression' and 'professional aesthetics', were tested by this method, which also produced unanticipated new categories, such as one we initially labelled 'Jack of all trades' but eventually categorized as 'the working cinema'. All interviews were manually coded using sound recordings and transcripts simultaneously, and this coding was then digitized using Nvivo software. Our method draws on discourse analysis and what has also been called a 'grounded theory' approach – see Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2nd edn (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2014). Extracts from the original interviews are accessible through the project website at <[www.https://warwick.ac.uk/projection.project](http://www.https://warwick.ac.uk/projection.project)>, while all the interviews are deposited as sound recordings in the University of Warwick Library (WRAP). All participants have given their permission for the public

also illuminate the occluded, final processes through which this form comes to its point of realization: the film on the screen for which punters will pay money. The projectionist's labour is, as one of our interviewees put it, 'the last link', after the work of 'hundreds of technicians' who made the film.<sup>18</sup> The peculiarity of this 'commodity of the fancy' is that it is both industry and art. Film is an aesthetic object, if a fleeting and intangible one, and attracts intense emotion, involvement and critical analysis. In the project as a whole, we wanted to address this industrial/aesthetic simultaneity. In addition to asking the projectionists about what they actually did, we also wanted to inquire into the professional and practical aesthetics of this work, and how they understood the demand to put on a good show. If films are valued by audiences and critics for their meaning, their stories, their characters, their spectacle and the fictional worlds they create, how do projectionists think about the contribution their labour makes to the experience of cinema?

The many hours of interview material collected and analysed by the Projection Project provides rich descriptions of cinema in the second half of the twentieth century and early part of the twenty-first. Our data should be seen alongside other *fin-de-siècle* projectionist projects such as the Canadian-originated website Planetary Projection, Lucie Česáková's study of projectionists in Brno, Czechoslovakia, films such as *The Last Projectionist* (Thomas Lawes, 2011), *Side By Side* (Chris Kenneally, 2012) and *The Dying of the Light* (Peter Flynn, 2015), and photographic projects such as Joseph O. Holmes's New York images in *The Booth*, Jean-Paul Deridder's *Cinema*, and our own project partner Richard Nicholson's *The Projectionists*, all of which, in different ways, document a passing trade.<sup>19</sup> However, unlike the testimonies presented in websites such as Planetary Projection, where interviews with individual named projectionists are assembled in a series of portrait formats, our interview material has been scrutinized across the corpus for recurring themes and tropes.<sup>20</sup> In this our procedures have more closely resembled the account given by Annette Kuhn in *An Everyday Magic*, in that we have worked intensively with the interview material, looking for continuities and repetitions that we have coded into categories such as 'the working day', 'loving film/loving cinema', 'sensory recall' and 'change'.<sup>21</sup> Here I draw mainly on three categories of material, each of which is pertinent to debates about what cinema is and was. These categories are coded as: 'sensory aspects of the job', 'professional aesthetics' and 'the working cinema'.<sup>22</sup>

One projectionist, Chris Tweddell, told us about a form of record-keeping that was an essential part of everyday routines. He described it as follows:

we used to keep a record of what we'd done with that film – probably in a cupboard somewhere, still, till this day, because every film had, a – like an A4 sheet of what we'd done to it, what had happened to it and it's like in the cinema, it's all recorded.<sup>23</sup>

This A4 sheet for each film – which Tweddell speculates is still in a cupboard in a cinema somewhere – provides a fitting image with which

dissemination of these interviews and research which draws on them.

- 21 Annette Kuhn, *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (London: IB Tauris, 2002).
- 22 See Richard Wallace and Jon Burrows, *Slaves to the Lamp: A History of British Cinema from the Projection Box* (London: John Libbey, 2020), for a fuller discussion of the interview material.
- 23 All quotations from Chris Tweddell are taken from the Projection Project interview, 12 November 2014.

to begin an account of what we have learned about a dying trade. It is a bit of paper that is witness to both the practice of a skill ('what we'd done with that film') and to the material condition and existence of a particular print of a specific film ('that film') at a precise time. The A4 sheet was used to record the condition of each film print when it arrived at the cinema, the different kinds of interventions made by the projectionist, any subsequent damage or mishap, and the condition of the film when it left that cinema to go on to the next booking. For the projectionist, 'what it's like in the cinema' is just one aspect of the film. Both aide-memoire for the projectionists and insurance against wrongly attributed damage, the A4 sheet testifies to the behind-the-screen existence of films as particular celluloid/acetate prints, which circulate through vaults, transport and exhibition spaces, repeatedly being 'made-up' and 'broken-down', slowly deteriorating but still delivering fictional worlds. The role of the projectionist is to mediate between these two modes of the film: the heavy, fragile reels, and the ephemeral play of light, shadow and sound. Projectionists transform the one into the other.

In their accounts of cinema work, our interviews with projectionists suggest the complexity of the interpenetration of film as a medium and cinema as an institution. The interviewees were of different ages, with experience of different cinemas and organizational structures across different time periods. Some were veterans who could recall, for example, using carbon arc lights, or the strict hierarchies of the multiply-staffed projection boxes of the 1950s. Others came into the trade with the advent of multiplexes, increased automation and reduced staffing. The interviews tend to shift unpredictably across time periods and cinemas when describing what the job entails, and we do not attempt here to use this data to map out a chronology of changes in the projectionists' work. Instead, as in other memory work, we pursue what seemed most significant in these changes to the projectionists themselves, and their sense of the changing medium and institution of cinema. Our informants discuss the job of the projectionist in ways that distinguish between the film as material object and the film in performance, and the first two parts of this essay observe and explore this distinction. The third part of the analysis of interview material expands to consider the role of the projectionists within the cinema as a whole, and then finally returns to questions of what cinema is.

*The materiality of film.* As material object, film is bulky, heavy and fragile. Nearly all our interviewees referred to the weight of the film they worked with, with the words 'lug' and 'tons' recurring across the recordings (see [figure 1](#)). As Andrew Maclean puts it, 'you've got this huge amount of bloody weight coming off and going on this machine'.<sup>24</sup> While factors such as the shift from metal to plastic cans and the increased length of feature films meant that the actual weight of a film was subject to some variability across the period being recalled

- 24 All quotations from Andrew Maclean are taken from the Projection Project interview, 25 August 2015.

**Fig. 1. The weight of film. Ray Reed, Tyneside Cinema Newcastle. © Richard Nicholson.**



(approximately the last fifty years), the experience of dealing with this weight was more profoundly affected by reductions in staffing levels, cinema architecture and Health and Safety legislation.

In traditional, purpose-built cinemas the box is at the top of the building, and indeed stairs featured vividly in many projectionists' memories of work, with Mick Corfield recalling the exact number of steps. Peter Howden explains this architecture, using the example of the Rio Cinema in Dalston, a Grade II listed building, which at the time of interview retained both stalls and circle:

in most places the cinema [projection room] is right at the top of the building, up flights of stairs [laughs] and it [the Rio] has a circle so there's an even another level which you don't get in most, most places, they don't have circles, so basically you struggled to carry all this stuff upstairs [laughs].<sup>25</sup>

Chris Blower similarly recalls of another cinema: 'it was up two massive sets of stairs and dragging the films up was just a nightmare sometimes. Get blisters on your fingers from dragging them up two at a time.'<sup>26</sup>

Lugging and dragging the films upstairs was the precursor to making them up and projecting them. It was this aspect of the job that was most affected by reductions in staffing. 'Single manning', the phrase used by all our interviewees, was made possible by the move to 'platters' or 'cakestands', large reels onto which the whole film was made up. These loaded platters were both heavy and unwieldy, as Frank Gibson explains:

'Cos they didn't have any lifting gear to lift these things up you know, really when you're on these, you're single-manning so you, there's

**25** All quotations from Peter Howden are taken from the Projection Project interview, 13 November 2014.

**26** All quotations from Chris Blower are taken from the Projection Project interview, 11 August 2015.

27 Frank Gibson, interview, 14 October 2014. All quotations from Gibson are taken from the Projection Project interview, 14 October 2014.

28 It is beyond the scope of this essay to explore the complexity of the invocation of 'Health and Safety' in British culture, but it should be noted that much of the regulation exists as a result of trade union campaigning, which has been to some extent translated, particularly within the British press, into a form of enterprise-crushing, commonsense-defying, political correctness.

29 All quotations from Phil Fawke are taken from the Projection Project interview, 4 December 2014.

nobody else to help you, you know, somebody else is down there on another projector so you can't get him up to get stuff on yourself, yeh I got a hernia with that.<sup>27</sup>

While older projectionists like Gibson (a keen union member) remember the days before single-manning, and might make a point about the changed conditions, more significant within the stories we were told was the role of 'Health and Safety'. Non-British readers may not be familiar with the explanatory weight of Health and Safety within British culture, but the phrase is used to refer to the raft of legislation imposing – as its name suggests – minimum standards for practices which safeguard the welfare of workers and members of the public.<sup>28</sup> While Health and Safety is invoked in a range of tones and for varying political purposes in the wider culture, in these interviews it functions as a significant marker of change. There is a before and after of Health and Safety, a former cinematic Wild West and a more legislated present. What is notable, across the whole corpus of the interviews, is both the persistence of a past period 'before Health and Safety', and its variant characteristics and timing, as these extracts suggest. Phil Fawke, for example, recognizes the danger projectionists used to be in:

You'd always got a film more or less to make up or plate off or something like that you see. Everything had to be plated off and lugged, carried up on and on half-hundredweight boxes. I mean I don't think Health and Safety would ... but you used to go up ladders without anybody at the bottom or anything. And it wouldn't be allowed today [laughs]. I mean when I think of some of the things we used to do it's unbelievable.<sup>29</sup>

Fawke laughs here in the middle of his explanation, attempting more than once to convey the unregulated nature of the old days, and shows a perceptible ambivalence, conveying retrospective recognition of danger and a certain pride, about 'some of the things we used to do'.

Health and Safety regulation might specify that certain jobs could not be performed single-handedly, but the projectionist often found he had little choice, as Adrian Pearce explains, 'to move a film from one screen to the next and you do, that was a two-man job although again like I say, sometimes when we didn't have the staff you have to do it on your own'. Pearce goes into more detail about what is entailed in moving the platters, and this more substantial quotation from his interview gives an indication both of the pattern of the interview and, within that, of the functioning of Health and Safety as a talismanic standard that is both recognized and ignored.

The platters are aluminium platters, you could move them but it's ... they're an absolute nightmare. They're not heavy or anything, they're just really, really big and it's ... they're quite hard to move. So just go onto a little wooden board which they're just plywood and then, er, yeah you would have just two people would carry it along.



Interviewer: But you wouldn't, you wouldn't take the film off the platter onto a spool and then carry the spool down and then back onto another platter on a different ... ?

... That would probably be the, the safest to do but that would take, it would take ages, yeah if you were to do that for every, that was probably the ... Health and Safety would probably say that was what you're meant to do but again it's, it's um, it just take so long. You would be, you'd be there all day doing, doing that.<sup>30</sup>

30 All quotations from Adrian Pearce are taken from the Projection Project interview, 20 October 2014.

Pearce's 'you'd be there all day doing that' echoes many other observations made by the projectionists about the time pressure under which they worked. Film is not just a time-based medium because of the duration in which film worlds unfold on the screen. The conventions of continuous performance in film exhibition, and the physical transporting of film prints around the country and between screens, mean that there are constant temporal constraints behind the scenes in a cinema. This is vividly described by Bill Pearson, working in a nine-screen multiplex:

my watch had broken, and I thought, I've got to get round there, 15 seconds, then round the next one. So I get a clock off the wall which was about that size [two-handed gesture], oh no ... get a strap and hang it round my neck and I got this big clock here [points to chest], and I push a button and the projector starts, the curtains open ... and run to the next one, push that, it had all got to be timed because if you were ten seconds late it would snap.<sup>31</sup>

31 Bill Pearson, 21 July 2016.

Twentieth-century cinema is a medium of the industrial machine-age, not only because of the machines through which it is made and projected, but also because of the time-discipline it exerts on those who work with it. This translates, for the projectionist, into the awareness of seconds that Pearson displays, manifest in his decision to wear a wall-clock around his neck, and what he describes as an almost instinctive grasp of the temporality of celluloid. All the projectionists interviewed could calculate accurately the remaining minutes and seconds of a screening by simply glancing at the spool or platter. They would know for exactly how long it might be possible to attend to other demands, or even to slip clandestinely out of the box. This precise knowledge feeds into their recognition of the demands of the cinema programme as sovereign. These inexorable temporal demands are not, in an industry which has been reducing staffing levels since the mid twentieth century, compatible with the aspirations of Health and Safety legislation. As these comments in relation to working practices and Health and Safety demonstrate, projectionists work to precise time limits, and will need to cut corners in order to meet the demands of the screening schedule.

Lucie Česálková has observed, from her study of retired projectionists in Brno, that for projectionists film is nearly always a film print.<sup>32</sup> Our interviewees, too, emphasize the particular materiality of the print. It is not a matter of meaning, but a particular, often quite demanding object

32 Česálková, "Feel the film": film projectionists and professional memory', pp. 49–62.

33 Chris Tweddell,  
12 November 2014.

that has to be delivered, lifted, stored, made-up, projected, broken down or rewound, packed-up and dispatched. At each stage it has to be checked. The right film? All reels? Reels right way round? Quality of print? Return date? Tweddell's piece of A4 paper, mentioned earlier, testifies to these activities.<sup>33</sup> These cumulatively annotated sheets of paper document the life of individual film prints as they make their way around the exhibition circuit. But the actual labour of this checking and making up is mainly non-verbal, and is conducted by projectionists using touch and hearing as much as sight. Chris Blower for example, describes feeling the film:

the way I was taught was you feel, you feel the film in between your thumb and your forefinger ... You can feel pretty much anything, any, any imperfection on the film you can feel it through your fingers, if there's a join in it, if there's like a lab join in it, a cement join, you can feel it go through your fingers, you'd be like, 'Oh, what's that?' Like reel it backwards and find out what it was. You can check for split perforations as well like that. If they were new prints that was the only thing we were checking for but if they were really old prints you'd be like – there was a light underneath the rewind bench and you couldn't, obviously you were like – not going like the clappers, but you were sort of like getting a move on, you could, you could see, you could sort of see if there was anything untoward on the film and you just basically, you have to sort of just keep checking yourself.

The balance in this account, between the necessity to feel all of the film while also working fast, 'not going like the clappers' but 'sort of [...] getting a move on', shifts in an account of working in a multiplex where simultaneous screenings are more demanding:

it's a visual check and you run the film through your fingers as you're winding it on [...] So like at Showcase, quite often there'd be eight films coming in in a week so you get used to it pretty quickly on how to make a film, make it up ... you're feeling for, like the lab splices more than anything with a new print, but then you're, obviously you're checking the soundtrack, any dirt on the print, scratches'.<sup>34</sup>

34 Adrian Pearce, 20 October 2014.

I mean in those days I think just, yeah, film from all over the place, it wasn't first run films every time, um, so to make sure it was gonna run right we checked everything by hand, everything went through your hand and visually looking at it with a light underneath it, cos that was the way we did things, that was the proper way to do things, er, [laughter].<sup>35</sup>

35 Chris Tweddell,  
12 November 2014.

The projectionists must check the film print repeatedly while it is in their cinema. But they must also actually project it, and thus be attentive to the film in the projector and the mechanisms of the projectors, which they also maintain. Here too, their labour is a labour of the senses.

36 Mike Williams, 24 August 2015. All quotations from Williams are taken from the Projection Project interview, 24 August 2015.

37 All quotations from John Neal are taken from the Projection Project interview, 15 January 2015.

38 Michael Pigott 'Sounds of the projection box: liner notes for a phonographic method', *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2018), pp. 27–45.

39 All quotations from Brad Atwill are taken from the Projection Project interview, 10 November 2014.

40 Mike Williams, 24 August 2015.

you can tell by the sound of your projector there's something wrong, it wasn't laced properly or there's needing oil and that just different noises told you there was something up because you get that used to the purr of the projector you could walk in and say, 'That projector's not laced up right'. Just an extra frame or an extra hole in that, just not running right you could tell right away and that's what you get used to over the years. You could tell there was something wrong with the projector.<sup>36</sup>

John Neal makes an analogy with a driver's familiarity with their own car, drawing attention to the idiosyncrasies of individual machines:

it's uncanny how you get used to a sound, it's like driving your car and you, you get to know if something's wrong with the car, it doesn't feel right, it doesn't sound right, it's the same with a projector and you think 'Why's it, why's it making that noise?' And for someone who's not used that projector before will say, 'Well what are you talking about, what is it?' 'Well it doesn't sound right, there's a little, little click or the tone isn't quite right', and sure enough if you investigate it more closely you find that maybe you've lost a bit of your loop or there's a bearing that's wearing. There's a whole range of things that you become sensitive to.<sup>37</sup>

As Michael Pigott has shown, the intensely noisy environment of the projection box is meaningful to the workers inside it, who are able to monitor the sounds of a smoothly functioning projector while also engaging in other tasks such as checking prints.<sup>38</sup> Interviewees such as Brad Atwill described the projectionist's mode of attention to sound vividly:

with that many projectors you can work off sound quite a lot as well because you can kind of hear if something doesn't sound quite right, or you can hear if a platter is kind of struggling to keep up with anything, or if a lens has just clunked rather than nicely slid into place.<sup>39</sup>

For the projectionist with any experience, these skills are embodied skills, often not easy to recall verbally in an interview context. The routines of the work seem obvious to those who undertake such work routinely, and often interviewees would qualify explanations and descriptions with comments such as, 'Well, right, you rewind the film, right, that's pretty obvious'.<sup>40</sup> But if the interviewer has convinced the interviewee of his serious interest in the routines of the work, then more detail is forthcoming, often recalling physical sensation, as in Phil Fawke's more detailed account of rewinding:

you had to be very slow, hold your finger on the film which burnt you, I can tell you ... rewinding the film you had grooves in your fingers winding the film. You know, it did really hurt you 'cause you used to

have to hold, hold, hold the film to check it all when you was making it up to make sure that the joints were all ... and you didn't have a machine to make a joint on, you used to have to scrape it with a razor blade either side and stick it down yourself.<sup>41</sup>

Interviewees shut their eyes as if imagining themselves back in the box, or moved their hands, as if along a strip of film, sometimes drawing diagrams. Memory, too, like the skills and the procedures being summoned up, was in these moments shown as embodied. Mike Williams was encouraged to explain in more detail about rewinding,

35mm film, it must run through your finger and thumb like that. [Gesture holding thumb and figure apart the width of 35mm film strip.] And if you're a qualified projectionist, or even a half-way qualified projectionist you will feel every imperfection on the film as it goes through. So as, as a joint goes through, sprocket machine goes through, you'll feel it on your fingers. When you're inexperienced it literally will rip your fingers. But after about six months of being a rewind boy you get a groove down there and a quite noticeable groove, and that's the groove you fit the film in. You can feel all the imperfections, every time you feel an imperfection you stop, have a look at it, decide whether it's sustainable and it's all right, it's not going to do any damage, or you chop it out and make a join and carry on like that.<sup>42</sup>

These projectionists' memories and skills present a vivid account of the materiality of film. It is literally written on their bodies, which become marked in service of the smoothest projection possible: 'you get a groove down there and a quite noticeable groove, and that's the groove you fit the film in'. However, it is a different materiality to that discussed by many cinema scholars, which is dominated by aesthetic qualities such as duration or image definition.

The projectionist's film is always a particular material film print, which has its own idiosyncratic flaws and weaknesses, some of which are produced by the projectionists themselves without regard to meaning: 'you chop it out and make a join and carry on like that'. Film teachers who remember teaching with 16mm and 35mm will have some recall of this form of materiality from teaching the same film year after year. Often, certainly in Britain, where print numbers were quite limited, it would turn out that each year one received the same print of certain classics. There would be the same jump at the end of a crucial scene, the same green line beginning to appear in the middle of the print, the colours would be turning a more faded red. When booking a film, I clung to the notion that I would be sent a 'film scholars' film', such as *Home from the Hill*, a film resplendent in its use of widescreen and Technicolor, a rich palette for students to explore Minelli and melodrama. Yet when it arrived and was screened, it would turn out to be the projectionists' film: the contrasts in the colours becoming slighter each year; the whole print

slowly seeming to turn the shade of Robert Mitchum's suede jacket; the sound jumping at key dialogue points and the scratchy inaudibility of the approaching reel change. The discrepancy between the film imagined when reading critical commentary and the actual film being projected in the classroom was both continually disappointing and a repeated reminder of the role of imagination and fantasy in cinema viewing. Sometimes, I have wondered, when reading accounts of the losses entailed in the switch to digital, if writers are recalling not the actual film print in circulation but their vivid memory of the world imagined in the movie.

Ben Highmore, in his book exploring the way in which moods and feelings are always material and historical, gives a fine account of the ways in which his cinephilia was assaulted by two years' work as a projectionist: 'The projection booth was like an overdose of Brechtian alienation effects by way of an ultra-materialist concentration on the filmic apparatus'.<sup>43</sup> He processes this experience into his argument that 'the work of mood very often requires the obscuring of work'.<sup>44</sup> The Projection Project's research also reveals the projection box as an environment of sensory assault in which one or more projectionists are dedicated to concealing their labour. All their efforts are devoted to making their own contribution invisible so that the audience looks only forward, at the screen, and not backwards to the origin of the image. As Sam Lavington observes, 'a good projectionist is never seen, never heard, in other words you don't make mistakes'.<sup>45</sup>

The labour these projectionists describe gives a different dimension to the spaces of the cinema. Film scholarship has tended to focus on the screen and the auditorium, the general environment of the picture palace, or else, as in Allan Eyles's painstaking documentation of the cinemas of London, on the architecture of cinema buildings.<sup>46</sup> These details of staircases and film cans, rewind benches and platters, projectionists working constantly in hot noisy environments – not 'like the clappers' but 'getting a move on' – fills up the hidden parts of cinemas with constant activity and sounds. Another, material world is revealed behind the atmospheric lighting, the usherettes and, later, the popcorn concessions.<sup>47</sup> This is to a large extent the projectionists' world, and one which is kept hidden from the audience. But the concealment of this world of work is undertaken in order to maintain the magic of the other part of the projectionists' world, the performance.

*The performance: the presentation of darkness.* Casetti, in his discussion of the persistence of cinema 'between survival and reinvention',<sup>48</sup> pays particular attention to 'the disappearance of the dark' in what he terms 'the relocation of cinema towards new environments and devices'.<sup>49</sup> Casetti's insistence on the significance of the dark as 'an essential element of the cinematic experience' is helpful in understanding the projectionists' orchestration of the space and time of the twentieth-

<sup>43</sup> Ben Highmore, *Cultural Feelings: Mood, Mediation and Cultural Politics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), p. 5.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>45</sup> All quotations from Sam Lavington are taken from the Projection Project interview, 20 August 2015.

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Richard Gray, *Cinemas in Britain: One Hundred Years of Cinema Architecture* (London: Lund Humphreys, 1996); Allan Eyles, *Gaumont British Cinemas* (Burgess Hill: Cinema Theatre Association, 1996), and *Odeon Cinemas* (London: Cinema Theatre Association, 2002).

<sup>47</sup> On usherettes, see Eva Balogh's pioneering research, 'Stars in the aisles: cinema usherettes, identity and ideology', *Participations*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2017), pp. 22–48. Both Balogh's and our research confirm that there were often romances between projectionists and usherettes.

<sup>48</sup> Casetti, *The Lumière Galaxy*, p. 214.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 203, 205.

century cinematic performance.<sup>50</sup> Projectionists discuss film screenings in terms of presentation. Evidently, the projectionists we interviewed were self-selected as people interested in the job; this selection was recognized within the interviews through a distinction invoked by many interviewees between their own practice and practices in other cinemas, differentiated as ‘suburban’ or ‘nowadays’, or just ‘some cinemas’. The skills of presentation are the counterpart to the mechanical and technical skills utilized in the box. These are, as the following accounts suggest, dramatic and theatrical skills associated with lighting, atmosphere and timing: the making of an experiential context in which the audience member can abandon the cares of their everyday life and enter the world of the film. Projectionists’ recall of their procedures was minute:

We would start off, we would just turn the house lights a little bit down, that was telling the people, ‘Please be quiet now, we’re starting the show’. Then we would start the projectors up and then just tickle the lights a little bit more so that you’re bringing the level down and the noise, the chatter and they know it’s starting so those rushing to the toilet get seated. Anyway, then we would ... The film would start on the Censor and we’d start that on the curtains,<sup>51</sup> then the lights would go even dimmer. Press the button, curtains would open, and then as the curtains were opening we used to turn the lights completely down and then hit the sound.<sup>52</sup>

This detailed recall reveals a carefully calibrated and expressive use of colour:

in the winter you used a red ‘cause it made it much warmer. In the summer you use a lighter colour but in the winter you always use your red house lights and then just when you’re going to start you faded them, changed them, just changed them over and you could see just a slight change and they would go green and people got used to that as well. They’d know it was just about time to start when you change them to green; not every cinema would do that but that was at The Odeon Coatbridge I used to do that.<sup>53</sup>

These are skills, to recast Casetti’s emphasis on the experience of the audience, which establish the darkness of the cinema as a deliberate darkness, a darkness in which something willed, but not completely known, is going to happen.

Presentation was a key topic in the interviewer’s script, and the interviewees responded at length and in detail, introducing terms such as ‘showmanship’ and ‘performance’ into their accounts. Some also defined presentation as part of a much broader cinemagoing experience, as Brad Atwill, an active trade unionist, does:

I think presentation doesn’t just come from projection either, I think that has to be a, a sort of an effort from across the board ‘cause it is from, you know, your box office staff, if you have any, these days ...

51 The certificate from the (then) British Board of Film Censorship (now British Board of Film Classification) which certifies to which audiences the film may be exhibited.

52 Sam Lavington, 20 August 2015.

53 Mike Marshall, 22 June 2015. All quotations from Marshall are taken from the Projection Project interview, 22 June 2015.

54 Brad Atwill, 10 November 2014.

which again is another ... it's totally overlooked job, you know, everyone knows that projection's going, people forget that box office is also going which I think is a real key, it's the first thing you're supposed to see when you're coming in the cinema. And so I think, you know, having good, knowledgeable staff that are cared for and therefore care about what they do and, you know, not everybody's gonna have the passion for it.<sup>54</sup>

The key elements of presentation are constant and involve the fading and dimming of music and lighting, the opening of the curtains and the commencement of the film programme, as described by John Neal:

good presentation would be to make sure that the film was in focus and to make sure that the sound level was correct and prior to the film going on you had to create the right mood and, and atmosphere. So there'd be background music playing so that had to be appropriate and at the right level and then fade the background music and because we have, we have curtains and that as cinema, um, we can open the curtains ready for, for them to be shown. And I think it's important to fade the, er, to, to dim the lights, allow people to acclimatise to that lighting, new lighting and then, um, to fade the music, because I think there's nothing worse than, um, background music suddenly being strangled by the Pearl & Dean, um, er, music that comes in straight away after.<sup>55</sup>

55 John Neal, 15 January 2015.

At the end of the screening these processes are reversed. In each case, minute variations in sequence were seen by individual projectionists as significant, while some cinema chains insisted on signature styles, as Peter Douglas notes:

Well there was a house style in, in effect, of all the records were provided by Head Office and things like that, and things you had to plug were, were dictated from Head Office, er, but, but, umm, in the main, especially in the earlier days, umm, a lot of it was left up to you.<sup>56</sup>

56 All quotations from John and Peter Douglas are taken from the Projection Project interview, Glasgow, 24 June 2015.

Historical changes in the pattern of the film programme (main and B features; inclusion of newsreel; use of slides to advertise local businesses; cinema organs; intervals before the main feature) were also reflected in the discussion of particular conventions, and it was in this area that automation was most regretted. Projectionists recalled their role in choosing music (played on records) to precede the programme, as well their often quite inventive patterning of the lighting:

Well before the, the automation it, it was far better. You had ... your own presentation; before you started a film what you would do if you had different colours on house lights you would adjust your house lights. Say ... it was summer you would go from a blue to a green change and that would be because it used to be, the Odeon adverts, and it used to be a green triangle so you would just fade them down a fraction then you would go and start your machine up, get everything

57 Mike Marshall, 22 June 2015.

58 Ibid.

59 Peter Howden,  
13 November, 2014.

60 William Paul gives an illuminating account of 'the strangeness of curtains in movie theaters', in *When Movies Were Theater* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016), pp. 226–29.

organised, get set, get your curtains open, open up and then straight open, take your house lights down, worked in perfectly. Again see with the music you would pick a track that was suitable for the type of film that was starting so you'd just get it faded out or if you were lucky if you timed it you were lucky you got it, it finished spot on.<sup>57</sup>

Pride was taken in the choice of music that was seen as contextually – and here seasonally – appropriate, and our interviewees evidently enjoyed and valued this part of their job. 'It had to run right, it had to give people entertainment. It had to feel as though they moved into a magic kingdom ... that's the showmanship, you just felt satisfaction with the job.'<sup>58</sup> It was the moment in which their earlier labour was realized – and realized, in all accounts, *for* an audience. As Peter Howden describes it, 'putting on a show, rather than just showing a film'.<sup>59</sup> Individual interviewees had very pronounced views on what was proper and appropriate, although the precise constitution of the ritual varied. In all cases, however, projectionists agreed that lights should be dimmed gradually and that the curtains ('tabs') should not be opened onto a blank screen. This is an orchestration of darkness. The blank screen was abhorred by the projectionists we interviewed because it reveals that behind the curtains there is only the screen.<sup>60</sup> The blank screen exposes the illusion that committed projectionists saw themselves as creating. The gradual dimming of the auditorium and the use of sound to prepare the audience for what will happen next, so thoughtfully discussed by many of our interviewees, was a key part of the projectionist's contribution to that consensual abandonment of the everyday world that is cinema. Their role was understood as leading the audience out of their everyday life – light – into a zone of immanence into which the film world will be revealed, waiting behind the curtains. The abhorrence of the blank screen – the emotion in the voices with which it was repudiated – shows the way in which professional codes contain and recognize aesthetic assumptions.

*Jack of all trades: the working cinema.* There have been several occasions recently when the heating has failed in my local cinema. I count myself lucky to be able to walk to a six-screen theatre in the small town where I live, and this cinema is one of the places in which we conducted a pilot interview just before the rapid and rather brutal transition to digital. Before undertaking this research into the labour of projectionists, seeing a notice on the cinema door informing us that there was 'no heating' would not have signalled 'no projectionist' to me. But now, whenever I see such a notice in a cinema – anywhere – I have a fantasy exchange with Big Cinema: 'you didn't plan for that when you made all the projectionists redundant, did you?' For one of the findings from our interviews with projectionists was how very many other jobs they did in the cinema.

The phrase offered to us by projectionists to describe their contribution to the working cinema was often that of 'Jack of all trades'. Setting up



projectors properly often demanded ancillary skills, such as carpentry and, to some extent, optics. Platforms had to be built to raise projectors or rewind benches; shelves were needed to store films, and different types of alterations required for the windows and to block light sources; sound had to be wired up properly; curtains had to keep swishing smoothly; aperture plates must be filed. All of these tasks – many of which contributed more generally to cinema maintenance – were normally done by projectionists. The ingenuity and range of their problem-solving is attested to in the pages dedicated to projectionists in *Kine Weekly* between the 1930s to the 1960s. These pages are mostly composed of contributions from working projectionists, writing in to share practical tips on how to mend things, build things, bodge things or improve on flawed design. Suggestions include making tray attachments for cleaning brushes and cable systems to allow a single operator to open the shutters on two projectors simultaneously, and there is lively debate on whether rounded or square corners are better for screen surrounds.<sup>61</sup>

61 'Fug preferable to fog', *Kinematograph Weekly*, 12 February 1953, p. 10.

The diverse mechanical and electrical skills necessary to maintain and repair their own machines were transferable to other cinema systems, most notably the lighting, heating and ventilation, and this explains why projectionists were Jacks of all trades. It was overwhelmingly to projectionists that overall interior building maintenance was delegated, particularly on a one-off emergency basis. One of our few female interviewees, Joan Pearson, gave a graphic account of taking a delivery of heating oil on a snowy day, when the oil, 'whoosh just like a geyser', 'came straight over the tank'. With great ingenuity she then 'sent a lad over to the chemist with all those big rolls of cotton wool and use[d] them as wicks' to soak the diesel oil – in which they were standing 'up to their ankles' – back up into requisitioned cleaners' buckets.<sup>62</sup> Other interviewees described the evidently dangerous maintenance and replacement of lighting – 'before Health and Safety' – using ladders to reach inaccessible houselights with difficult fittings.

62 Joan Pearson was interviewed in July 2016, with her husband Bill, after they responded to our exhibition, *The Projectionists*, in Birmingham, April 2016. See Wallace, Harrison and Brunson, 'Women in the box', pp. 46–65.

But there were other tasks, beyond heating and lighting. Bill Pearson recalls an arduous journey to work in a snowstorm:

I struggled to work, didn't I, there were no buses, I came off [my bicycle] twice and I was the top man, I was important, I was the Chief [the highest grade Projectionist]. And I struggled into Coventry, walk up the main steps and the doorman says, 'Bill I'm glad you've come, the ladies' toilet doesn't work'. And, you know, you think 'I'm so important, aren't I, that's all they want me for, to put the toilet right'.<sup>63</sup>

63 Bill Pearson, 21 July 2016.

In addition to unblocking toilets, projectionists were called on to deal with invasions of mice and rats, fix vacuum cleaners and deal with another problem – now rarely remembered – of fog in the auditorium. In addition to the fug of cigarette smoke through which all films were watched, two of our Glaswegian interviewees recounted strategies to deal with mid twentieth-century fogs, and this was a topic that recurred in the

64 'Fug preferable to fog', p. 10.

65 Roland Barthes, 'En sortant du cinéma', *Communications*, no. 23 (1975), pp. 104–07.

66 Gilberto Perez, *The Material Ghost: Films and their Medium* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), pp. 1–2.

67 Susan Sontag, 'The decay of cinema', *New York Times Magazine*, 25 February 1996, pp. 60–61, and Thomas Elsaesser, 'Cinephilia or the uses of disenchantment', in Marijke de Valck and Malte Hagener (eds), *Cinephilia: Movies, Love and Memory* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), p. 27.

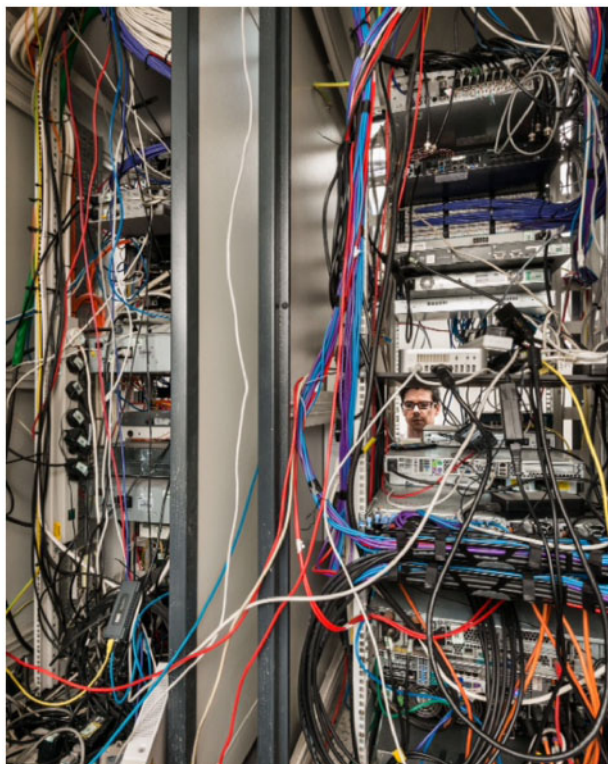
68 Elsaesser, 'Cinephilia or the uses of disenchantment', pp. 28–29.

69 André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion, *The End of Cinema? A Medium in Crisis in the Digital Age*, trans. Timothy Barnard (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2015), pp. 2–3 (emphasis in original).

specialist periodicals of the 1950s, with one article headlined 'Fug preferable to fog'.<sup>64</sup>

These stories show projectionists as part of a team who maintain the working cinema, and provide the context for the vivid, situated memories with which scholarly cinephiles have recalled their formative cinemagoing. Much of this writing is notable for the eloquence of its evocation of past pleasures, and its insistence on the sensory particularity of cinemagoing. Roland Barthes anticipated this genre in his 1975 essay, 'On leaving the cinema', which makes the comparison between the anonymity of the film theatre and the familial domesticity of television.<sup>65</sup> Gilberto Perez recalls his 'favorite movie theatre, the Capri' in 1950s Havana, and that his father was his 'abiding movie going companion [...] all through my childhood and adolescence'.<sup>66</sup> As Thomas Elsaesser has observed, Susan Sontag in her 1996 essay titled 'The decay of cinema' is actually mourning the way that New Yorkers used to watch movies.<sup>67</sup> Elsaesser himself recalls 'the dandified rituals strictly observed' when moviegoing.<sup>68</sup> These audience memories of cinemagoing, of being in the auditorium watching the film, are given a different kind of materiality when the labour of keeping the building going, in addition to the work of projection, is made visible. The cinema building as a living machine, a place of performance, with its own fabric and rituals of maintenance, emerges from the shadows, and these mainly undocumented contributions by projectionists to non-projection labour demonstrate something of this history. The unrecognized range of the projectionists' contribution to the working cinema as a whole also explains why the large-scale redundancy of projectionists between 2008 and 2012 could be proposed and executed by cinema chains with little understanding of the effects it might have, not on the projection of films but on the very functioning of cinemas. The notice at my local cinema when the heating fails is one that has surely appeared on the doors of more cinemas than the Leamington Spa Vue.

*Conclusion: a genealogy and archaeology of cinema.* André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion, in their book *The End of Cinema?*, are militant in their insistence on the digital 'turn' (not revolution) as an eighth crisis for the medium. They argue for the recognition that '*cinema's entire history has been punctuated by moments when its media identity has been radically called into question*'.<sup>69</sup> Cinema has repeatedly been a medium in crisis. This view of cinema's history as composed of innovation, disruption and transformation is one which also underpinned our investigation of projection. The twentieth-century journey from showman/operator through projectionist to technician is evidently a story of successive radical transitions (see figure 2). One of our research questions concerned the nature of the *order* of cinema's transition to digital. Should it be considered as equivalent to, for example, the transition to sound, or the availability of video-playback, or is it a quite



**Fig. 2. Digital materiality.** Richard Horner, Tyneside Cinema Newcastle. © Richard Nicholson.

different order of historical change for cinema? Gaudreault and Marion, while arguing against an apocalyptic ‘end of cinema’ view, do also recognize that the most recent change has been profound. They imagine themselves in conversation with André Bazin, declaring: ‘*For what has changed with digital formats are not the films, nor every film, nor every part of a film, but first and foremost cinema itself*’. In this context, they call for a ‘genealogy and archaeology of cinema’ as ‘essential to an understanding of present-day media’.<sup>70</sup>

The voices of the projectionists collected here are perhaps best understood as a contribution to this ‘genealogy and archaeology of cinema’. On the one hand they provide a micro-history of cinema projection, which can be conceptualized within a longer *durée* of projection, as explored by scholars such as Tom Gunning and Sean Cubitt.<sup>71</sup> On the other hand these memories thicken the description of what cinema was when it was identified with the viewing of celluloid/acetate films projected to paying audiences in purpose-built buildings. The projectionists’ testimony of their hidden labour amplifies the understanding of cinema as a material practice. The weight and the fragility of film; the contrast between the hot, dark, noisy box and the silver screen; the temporal constraints of the labour of exhibition; the rituals of presentation; the constant, everyday housework of maintaining

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9, 12 (emphasis in original).

<sup>71</sup> Tom Gunning, ‘The long and short of it: centuries of projecting shadows, from natural magic to the avant-garde’, in Stan Douglas and Christopher Eamon (eds), *Art of Projection* (Ostfildern: HatjeCantz, 2009), pp. 23–35, and Sean Cubitt, *The Practice of Light: A Genealogy of Visual Technologies from Prints to Pixels* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014).

machinery and cinema building. These are all aspects of what cinema was, and must be put alongside the historical attention to the film audiences of the twentieth century that has proved so fascinating to the new cinema history. The work of projectionists, both directly and indirectly related to projection, was a constitutive element in twentieth-century cinema. The projectionists' transformation of the film in the can to the story on the screen and their orchestration of darkness form essential, albeit often forgotten, moments of mediation. The labour of projectionists is the pivot that brings together film as a medium and cinema as an institution during cinema's twentieth century. On this pivot turns what Casetti has called the 'consolidated form of experience' that is cinema.<sup>72</sup>

Gaudreault and Marion suggests that the contemporary transformation is not in film, but 'in cinema itself'. John Belton, approaching the same issue, argues differently, suggesting that theatrical viewing conditions are more significant in the definition of cinema than the digital or analogue source of the images displayed.<sup>73</sup> Belton thus reserves the term 'cinema' for 'the projection on a screen of life-size – or bigger than life-size – images before an audience', rejecting the inclusion of 'iPads, tablets and smartphones' within the category.<sup>74</sup> His conclusion is paradoxically congruent with that of Van de Vijver, even though Belton's technologically attentive history takes a quite different route from the empirical audience research through which Van de Vijver arrives at her 'non-foundational ontology of cinema'. Her cinema is an idea and a social practice; his is an actual historical exhibition context. In each case cinema exceeds questions of analogue or digital delivery.

This Projection Project research contributes to these debates in a way that both enhances historical understanding of what, in particular, twentieth-century cinema was, and points to the persistence of cinema when it is no longer that. The interviews document lives lived, and labour undertaken, during the second half of the twentieth century, when going to the flicks and watching a film meant more or less the same thing. Film was, for the most part, housed in cinemas. The interviews provide rich and nuanced accounts of the materiality of film, its off-screen existence and the way in which the specificity of the medium, in this historical and institutional context, was written on the bodies of those who projected it. Film, in this sense, is passing, and will be a little further away from cinemas, even though, by the time this essay is published, it may be a little more present in art galleries. But the interviews also bring to prominence the notion of 'presentation', film within the exhibition context of cinema. Presentation – the projectionists' name for the engagement with audiences in their site-specific, time-sensitive and text-attentive labour – in their view makes the occasion that is cinema. Presentation, in this sense, is blind to the origin of what is projected, but still cannot be digitally programmed in a one-size-fits-all manner. As a recent social media spat about the British exhibition of *Call Me by Your Name* (Luca Guadagnino, 2017) revealed, cinema chains such as Vue

72 Casetti, *The Lumière Galaxy*, p. 16.

73 John Belton, 'If film is dead, what is cinema?', *Screen*, vol. 55, no. 4 (2013), p. 467.

74 *Ibid.*, p. 470.

75 Tim Walker, 'When should cinemas turn on the lights at the end of a film', *The Guardian*, 6 November 2017, p. 2, <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/shortcuts/2017/nov/05/when-should-cinemas-turn-on-the-lights-at-the-end-of-a-film>> accessed 1 September 2019.

76 Rob Walker, 'Wine, weddings and ballet: new star role for indie cinemas at the heart of high streets', *The Observer*, 22 January 2017, p. 12, <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/jan/22/indie-cinema-at-high-streets-heart-brighton-blackpool>> accessed 1 September 2019.

now have automatically sequenced lighting programmes, which pay no regard to the idiosyncrasies of individual films' inclusion of post- and under-credit scenes.<sup>75</sup> Sound levels, the position of the image, masking and screen size all suffer without the interventions of projectionists. Ironically, these difficulties are often most pronounced in the premium-priced 'live' theatre and music performances through which the cinema chains seek to diversify their offering and maintain revenue in an age of downloads. In these one-off performances, when the cinema is 'not a cinema', unanticipated overtures and intervals in which the houselights stay on or go off at all the wrong times leave the premium – and often elderly – audience marooned in their seats or stumbling in the aisles. And without projectionists, this neglect of the audience cannot be rectified. It is not the digital-ness of the image and the projection that makes so much contemporary cinemagoing a miserable experience. It is the loss of presentation.

Upmarket chains like the Everyman and Picturehouse recognize the significance of presentation in their reconfiguration of cinema as an evening out, offering sofas, menus and live-streaming. Digital projection and live-streaming, along with 'event-diversification' (weddings, birthday screenings, and so on) have recently improved the viability of some smaller independent venues, which pay specialist attention to presentation – as reported by the British Film Institute in 2017.<sup>76</sup>

The Projection Project research, undertaken just at the point when Britain's transition to digital was in its final stages, demonstrates that the projectionist's role as pivot, holding together film and cinema as a unity, has pretty much disappeared; or where they retain employment, the role has been reconfigured to that of 'technician'. Film has migrated to the art gallery, projection (enabled by new digital affordances) into the streets through lights festivals and displays, and cinema buildings have indeed become more like portals for a range of collective nights out. So when my local (sofa-less) cinema declares 'this is not a cinema', in some ways it is right. But something persists, something of cinema which cinephiles and fans and scholars will continue to argue about, something that is not necessarily confined to these buildings that are no longer cinemas. This essay has attempted to restore the often-occluded figure of the projectionist and their contribution to the 'consolidated experience of cinema', which informs such discussions, to the history of cinema and of film as a medium.

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