

# Cinema and Technology

Cultures, Theories, Practices

Edited by

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# Socially Combustible: Panicky People, Flammable Films and the Dangerous New Technology of the Nickelodeon

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On 16 January 1908, a 15-year-old projectionist died of burns after the film he was showing caught fire at the Hippodrome Theatorium in St. Catharines, Ontario, a small city between Toronto and Niagara Falls (*World*, 1908). Just a day later came news of another celluloid fire and panicky picture show audience in another Ontario town, Ingersoll (*Telegram*, 1908). Both incidents followed on the heels of a theatre disaster in Boyertown, Pennsylvania, where 170 people died in a panicked rush to flee a fire reportedly resulting from the explosion of a moving picture projector. Although moving pictures were ultimately cleared of culpability in Boyertown, the tragedy remains associated with the dangers of early movie-going (Smither, 2002, p. 433). Horrific details from Pennsylvania filled the front pages of newspapers across the continent including Toronto (for example, *Globe* 1908; *News* 1908), but the death in St. Catharines brought close to home the dangers of a relatively new gathering-place: the nickelodeon five-cent show, or theatorium (Figure 4.1). Reporters drew the readers' attention to the long history of theatre fires, and newspapers reviewed several tragedies of the past, most recently the Chicago Iroquois Theatre fire in 1903, which had led many cities throughout North America to enforce new fire safety bylaws for theatres (Brandt, 2003). But this time around, the cinematograph machine was singled out as the culprit, with its electric arc lamp and its combustible reels of cellulose nitrate films. Justifiably or not, the still-novel technology seemed to escape the bounds of even the most stringent requirements in the construction of theatres. Safety designs for exits, escapes, stairwells, doorways and asbestos stage curtains could not contain the explosive mix of celluloid, electricity and hot projection lamps. The *chemical combustibility* of moving picture technology only reinforced nascent notions about nickelodeon audiences being excitable

# The Daily Standard.

ST. CATHARINES, WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 15, 1908. PRICE

<p>January Offerings of <b>Black and Blue</b> Sued Suits</p>	<p><b>CLAIMING THE BODIES</b> Sad Scenes Attend the Opening of the Four Temporary Morgues at Boyertown, Pa. To-day.</p>	<p><b>EXTRA WAS</b> <b>HIPPODROME WAS GUTTED BY FIRE</b></p>	<p>Defence Ex- amined by Morning!</p>
<p>Friday, Thursday, the Last Day</p>	<p>Full Investigation into the Fatality Will Be Made—Many of the Bodies Buried Beyond Recognition.</p>	<p>Panic Follows Explosion of Film But Fortunately No One Was Seriously Injured</p>	<p>Christopher York Whit Cross Ex-</p>
<p>Requiring a suit for the old by all means take is great sale.</p>	<p>Associated Press. Special to Standard: Boyertown, Pa., Jan. 15.—With the opening today of the four temporary morgues, in which lay the bodies of Monday night's theatre tragedy, the inhabitants of the little borough began to realize the awful extent of the tragedy. The head of death has touched probably every family in the town, and in</p>	<p>from the burning building, died this morning. Coroner Utzinger is making an in- vestigation preliminary to the offi- cial inquest. "It was the worst picture I ever looked upon," he said. "No feeling could depict the scene. It was simply un- fathomable. I made a thorough in- vestigation leading to the fact that I am under the most terrible fatality that ever occurred in Boyertown's history." The coroner's attention was called to the fact that oil lamps were burned for heat lights in the upper portion of place of a stationary photo- grapher. He had to result much a discovery. But few members of the cast ap- pear as yet appeared were alive. This was due to the precaution tak- en by the theatre manager. She had a premonition that something would happen. At a luncheon given to the members of the cast in the hall several days ago she said she feared some thing. There ought to be a matter of course, she said. The last evening she saw a sign of fire and suggestion the doors were taken off the hinges so that in case of an incident actors could easily be accom- plished. Henry W. Fowler of Carlisle, Pa., the operator of the entire night show, was the related cause of the</p>	<p>Associated P New York report actu- Said at the today, and refusing to by pre-arrang where fire of them a great inter-</p>

Figure 4.1 News of the disastrous theatre fire in Boyertown, Pennsylvania, appeared next to details of a local fire and death in St. Catharines, Ontario, in January 1908.

and panicky, in part because they were disproportionately juvenile, female, foreign-born and working class, an important point I will return to shortly.

Within months of the Boyertown incident came a rush of laws specifically addressing the cinematograph and its flammable celluloid films. In Ontario, Massachusetts, and other places throughout North America, legislators gave cinema its first legal definition. Film was identified as a hazardous substance needing careful, bureaucratic inspection and licensing. This spate of legislation early in 1908 marked the moment when film technology achieved a broad, public persona. In North America, there had already been an entrepreneurial boom of nickel show openings around 1906, followed swiftly by public debates over their social role. Reformers, police, parents and politicians, each and all together, questioned the maturity of nickelodeon audiences and the effects of easy access to filmed depictions of crime and immoral acts. On this cultural and moral plane, there remained plenty of room for disagreement and deliberation over the commercial merits of the picture show, the moral effects of its pictures and the need to censor and supervise audiences. However, the 1908 explosion and catastrophe in Boyertown, and its many echoes worldwide, such as the death in St. Catharines, finally made one aspect of cinema indisputable: the five-cent show was a hazardous place. The volatile combination of flammable celluloid films and

panicky people crowded into nickelodeons meant movie-going was socially combustible.

A century later, decades after the urgency of the problem dissipated, it is easy to assume that fire safety regulations are merely dampers on the energy and potential of exciting, crowded gatherings in public, urban space. The police and governments, of course, could use safety codes and bylaws to discriminate or harass supposedly bothersome or indecent activities. Building codes and inspections were indeed introduced largely at the insistence of business interests and insurance companies to prevent property damage and protect land values. However, politicized efforts and abuses do not automatically turn fire safety into an ideological tool of urban governance. Following Bruno Latour (2005), we can treat celluloid *itself* as a social actor in the networks of film regulation. Respect should be paid to the *material properties of film technology* at the nickelodeon in order to understand fully the central importance safety played in guiding decisions about the best fit between this novel technology and existing local cultures. I argue that safety measures achieved perhaps the earliest consensus over regulation because of the clear benefits for the public good made stark after disastrous fire panics. Such licensing codes do not tend to ban things outright, but instead police indirectly by stipulating conditions of consumption – who can take part, when and where things can happen. For public welfare and safety, licensed and inspected businesses like picture shows became responsible for policing their own customers (Valverde, 2003). Characterizing the picture show as a socially combustible place emphasizes how fire safety instigated some of the earliest film-specific laws. These fire safety laws were soon extended into elaborate film bureaucracies encompassing inspection, censorship, taxation and restricted admissions (barring unaccompanied children from attending films, for example). The frame of social combustibility thus signifies how material safety laws, by defining the technology itself as hazardous, were simply the flashpoint for regulating a range of aspects of movie-going.

Toronto makes a widely relevant case study in this respect (Figure 4.2). Economically and commercially, this Canadian metropolis was largely integrated into a continental market. For cinema in particular, Toronto and Canada were effectively just another region in the American *domestic* mass market. Like larger American cities, at the turn of the last century, Toronto was a bustling centre of commerce and manufacturing, doubling its population through mass immigration to 400,000 in the first decade of the twentieth century. Unlike American cities, however, those immigrants were overwhelmingly from Britain and Ireland,



Figure 4.2 The cinematic spectacle of electricity began with the bright lights of the sidewalk marquee. Crystal Palace, Toronto. Photograph courtesy of the Archives of Ontario.

although there were still highly visible and important Jewish and other ethnic subcultures (Harris, 1996, pp. 23–32). Such minorities, even in a culturally British city, showed Toronto's urbanization shared much with American cities, especially when it came to moral reform issues and the 'social purity' movement (Valverde, 1991). In their legal institutions and more traditional daily routines, Toronto and other Canadian cities had a deliberately British character, or distinctly colonial at any rate (Isin, 1992). However, even as I delve momentarily into details about Toronto, this look at early film regulation applies more widely to the emergent place of cinema in urban life. Taken as a sketch, even the legislative aspects apply to municipalities in almost any part of North America, as well as Britain and its former colonies. Focusing on a specific case allows a detailed analysis of the local impact of cinema and how it was policed and regulated. This is especially important, almost necessary, as a means of understanding the character and infrastructure of early cinema before the industry became vertically integrated and known as Hollywood.

Responding to the death in St. Catharines and the disaster in Boyertown, the first Ontario law addressing the cinematograph in any way was based on a similar piece of legislation introduced to Massachusetts weeks earlier. The April 1908 law amended the existing regulation of safety exits in

public buildings, which had previously meant churches and theatres, but now applied to 'all places of amusement' as well (Ontario, 1908). The amendment went further than its nominal interest in exits, however, with additional clauses specifically addressing celluloid film. There were provisions for a provincial licence of all moving picture machines and also their projectionists, still known as 'operators' – both instituted a year later in 1909. But the law *immediately* required the inspection and approval by municipal police of every 'cinematograph or similar apparatus' and all locations handling or storing 'combustible film more than ten inches in length'. From this time forward in Toronto, moving picture machines would be strictly regulated as part of urban policing. Promptly in May 1908, John Griffin, the showman who then controlled a majority of Toronto's picture shows, wrote to the city's chief constable, inviting inspections for his new amusement licences (Letterbooks, 1908).

By 1908, cinema had already existed in Toronto for over a decade, but the fire safety issue was hardly the first attempt at regulation. Debates over the morality of cinematic images occurred within a year of the apparatus's debut on 31 August 1896 (Bossin, 1951). Some aldermen on city council in August 1897 tried to prohibit 'Veriscope' moving pictures of the Corbett-Fitzsimmons prize-fight that took place in Nevada in March that year (Craik, 1961; Gutteridge, 2000, pp. 73–74). The argument was simply that the films should be banned because professional boxing matches were themselves prohibited (*Telegram*, 1897). At this point, however, the attempt to censor cinema failed and there was no easy consensus over how to regulate and police the content of moving pictures (*Star*, 1897). Despite continuing debates over the moral and social problems arising from cinematic technology, long-established licensing procedures and laws policing indecency sufficed for another decade. The rapid proliferation of nickel shows upset the balance of regulation, prompting governments to replace policing on the beat with a modern, bureaucratic system to match the modernity of cinema.

The social apparatus of cinema, the exhibition site and its network of commerce, regulation and sociability is as important as the optical apparatus in defining the technology. Within even the first months of the first projected moving image in 1896 (in Canada), there were already several places to see films: in the context of the industrial exhibition, as part of a variety show programme in an established theatre downtown and on their own in the temporary space of a leased store on the main shopping street (Morris, 1978, pp. 1–13). As elsewhere, films soon became a daily part of the vaudeville bill. Had film remained peripheral to existing, already instituted practices, it might have been

treated as unproblematic, as a secondary device, an instrument without ends in itself. However, beginning in 1906 in Toronto, and more or less simultaneously everywhere else in North America, thousands of entrepreneurs opened five-cent picture theatres. They built an institution around the technology. Nickelodeon, theatorium, penny gaff: the picture show gave the technology of cinema a social institution of its own in movie-going. Before long came concerns about its social regulation.

Conventionally, film histories began with the debut of the apparatus: August 1896 for Toronto. Such origins are rarely cultural epiphanies, however. An early account of cinema's debut in Toronto joked that 'in those days X-rays were more popular' (Bossin, 1963). Perhaps the best measure of how 1896 was a moment of social continuity, rather than rupture, can be found in the city licence schedule, the primary municipal device for managing and monitoring business operations. The division where movie theatres eventually ended up was the general category for entertainments charging admission, which were subject to an annual licence fee of \$50 long before cinema arrived (for example, Toronto, 1890). This licence category – the fee itself – was well defined decades before the first nickel show.

Nickelodeons made moving pictures more affordable than prior public amusements and thus accessible especially to children and the working class. Greater access did not stop there, as picture shows happened every day and spread rapidly to every shopping street in cities like Toronto. No longer were they merely commercial amusements limited to special carnival occasions, nor were they corralled downtown. Nickelodeons became part of domestic neighbourhood life; they were the amusement equivalent of corner stores. Their appeal to children, and their profit *from* children, brought nickel shows quickly to the attention of progressive reformers urging stricter and more transparent policing and regulation. In Chicago, the matter flared into public view in April 1907, in newspapers and among reform agencies like Jane Addams' Hull House (Grievson, 1999). Simultaneously in Toronto, police confiscated a film called *The Unwritten Law*, a semi-fictionalized depiction of the well-known Thaw-White murder trial (*News*, 1907). This sparked several weeks of debate in daily newspapers over the censorship of plays and pictures, the licensing procedures for nickel shows and the police reports of children who were stealing to get nickels to see shows (for example, *Star*, 1907; *World*, 1907). It became evident that picture showmen were treading on the spatial and demographic terrain of churches, schools and families. Nonetheless, at this point city politicians and the police claimed the legal status quo was sufficient. One newspaper echoed this

official restraint in its headline about an investigation of the city's theatres: 'Five Cent Theatre Harmless Here; Merely Creates Taste for an Entertainment' (*Mail and Empire*, 1907).

As I have already shown, the issue of fire safety shifted the terms of these debates over cinema's effects from the individuated morality of particular persons in the audience to the specific idea of a *mass* audience. By foregrounding the scenario of a theatre fire, it was evident that nickelodeon audiences could act as a crowd – panic. Fire safety issues highlighted panic as a possible audience effect of movie-going. In a sense, the chemical combustibility of celluloid films dramatically crystallized the problem: the picture show audience was a mass audience, and the picture theatre was a socially combustible space.

### Safety tames the social whirl

Just as the Ontario legislature was debating the April 1908 fire safety law regulating cinema, a new roller coaster called the Social Whirl was operating in Chicago and being promoted for sale to fairground operators in the show business magazine *Billboard*: 'This is not a dream, but a real live one; occupying space, 60 × 150 ft'. Although as a roller coaster the Social Whirl might have been constrained to occupying just 9000 square feet, urban space more generally was a type of social whirl, one that, in the view of the authorities, required as careful an installation and management as any amusement park ride. A constant problem for urban order was the threat of a major conflagration, as great city fires levelled acres of built urban real estate throughout the nineteenth century (Rosen, 1986; Novak, 1996). In 1904, a large part of the centre of Toronto had been destroyed in a major fire, and proper supervision of the material construction of buildings in the central area of the city was a key part of the plan to ensure such a disaster did not recur. The well-being and livelihood of the city, in all of their aspects from real estate value to the very life of each person, were seen to depend in no small part on fire safety. The particular form that this concern took in theatres, churches and public halls addressed the additional prospect of deaths caused not by any material danger but the social danger of a fire panic.

Urban everyday life could never be experienced as a pleasurable social whirl as long as the threat of everyday combustibility was foregrounded. All novel materials deemed hazardous because of their flammability required adjustments to routine fire safety measures, not least those suggested by insurance adjustors and fire chiefs (Novak, 1996, pp. 56–59; McSwain, 2002). But along with flammable industrial materials, there

was a sense that certain practices were inherently combustible as well, that in certain contexts people themselves could collectively burst into panic. Fire safety was as much about managing what was seen as a social combustibility in practices like film-going as it was about securing the explosive materials that were involved in creating the scene of gathering. Put simply, fire safety legislation was an important public educational measure, instructions for the public on how to inhabit the order of the act by acting orderly should a fire actually erupt in a public building. A fine line seemed to separate amusement from panic.

Many thorough social histories of the nickelodeon, however, are practically befuddled by the persistence of fire safety as a key concern at the time. I risk exaggerating the significance of passing comments, but my point is that the issue of fire safety in my study of Toronto cannot be merely a passing comment. Consider, for example, how Richard Abel (1999, pp. 32–33) notes with surprise how *Billboard* magazine kept harping on the dangers of moving picture fires even as it reported all the new and profitable storefront shows. Fire safety issues are elsewhere seen as an ideological mask on the part of authorities wishing to control ethnic or working-class social gatherings. Urrichio and Pearson (1993, p. 31) point out that keeping buildings up to code was a costly venture that surely drove out of business marginal, immigrant showmen whose nickelodeons were cast as most offensive. While in the same passage they grant that ‘many physical hazards’ were part of going to the nickel shows, Urrichio and Pearson still call zoning and safety codes ‘thinly veiled attempts at suppression’ with an ‘ideological agenda’. It is admittedly important to note that safety codes had unequal effects, but I would be gravely misrepresenting the situation in Toronto if I accounted for discriminatory judgments against working-class and ethnic audiences without taking seriously the validity of concerns for the material conditions of film-going. In other words, sympathies with marginal audiences can have the unfortunate and unintended consequence of assuming physical safety was of no concern to anyone but the propertied class. The effect is to continue subscribing to an oversimplified and condescending image of early audiences, dating back to at least Lewis Jacobs’ (1967, p. 56) comment that working-class families did not mind the crowded, unsanitary and hazardous conditions.

Mark Jancovich (2003, p. 38) argues that the safety regulations of the 1909 Cinematograph Act in Britain effectively set up a way of zoning amusement, while downplaying the explicit goal of fire prevention because fire hazards were often exaggerated. ‘Even when fires did break

out, few people were killed by the fires themselves, but rather by the panic which ensued’. Fire safety regulations, however, were *intended* to prevent the problem of theatre panic as well as fires. This is ultimately key to a full understanding of how the regulation of the space and its materials also ordered the audiences, such as when Pearson and Urrichio quote an investigation by New York’s fire commissioner: ‘It is a panicky crowd which patronizes the moving-pictures houses of our city – mothers and children in the predominance – many of them foreign born’ (Pearson and Urrichio, 1999, p. 66). The argument that the nickelodeon audience was perceived as immature and uncivilized, feminine, juvenile and foreign is important, and it provides an opportunity to more strongly consider how fire safety might be more than merely a matter of physical safety. It begins to reveal why fire safety in moving picture shows would be essential, because the immature audience was seen as easily panicked. Such aspersions against the early movie audience were hardly restricted to moralistic reformers. Andreas Huyssen (1986) reminds us that cultural critics, too, have regularly revealed an elitist streak by associating mass culture with women and minorities. The idea that moving picture audiences were especially panicky is hardly restricted to fire hazards – the ‘train effect’ where some rube runs, startled, away from the oncoming animated locomotive has been called the ‘founding myth of cinema’ (Bottomore, 1999).

A fire panic in a public building only implied the chaos of a crowd suddenly threatened, experiencing fear. The cause of mass death in theatre panics was not fear but the uniquely social danger that came from the peculiar mass behaviour of a panicking crowd. Investigations following the Iroquois Theatre fire in Chicago discovered with horror that most deaths were caused by people rushing *as a crowd* in a confined space. The modern problem of crowds in urban space, let alone a panicking crowd in a confined urban space, is key to understanding why theatre and film audiences would be cast as immature. Indeed, immaturity was literal in the worst theatre disasters. As in Boyertown’s Sunday family show, most of the victims at Chicago’s Iroquois were children and women because the fire broke out during a holiday matinee. Bodies were piled ten feet high from the rush of the fire panic. While some died from blindly following the rush of the crowd, unable to find their own way in the fire panic, others died because of their inability to avoid that rush: people were trampled and crushed (Brandt, 2003, pp. 52–58). If the thought of burning to death or dying from smoke inhalation was not bad enough, the spectre of death caused by mass panic invoked the fragility of civilized, sociable public conduct on which the modern city ordered its

everyday life. The very possibility of this type of irrational social behaviour called attention to the need for regulation.

Georg Simmel provides a key sociological theory of the fragility of sociable public conduct in modern civil society. The tenuousness of modern, urban sociability among crowds of strangers is distinct from political theories of the social contract (Macpherson, 1962). Simmel's particular contribution to knowledge of the social character of modernity proposed there was a danger of sociability leading to overly formal and rationalized, and thus dispiriting, conduct. Sociable modernity mismatched the formality of actions and the need to feel like an active participant (Simmel, 1950, pp. 40–57). On the other hand, Simmel's characterization of the modern metropolis and the modernity of his day, as noted by David Frisby (1986), emphasized the fleeting and transitory contingency of everyday urban life. Despite being at odds with a subjective sense of self, sociable routines and a blasé attitude helped make sense of a modern, urban environment that barraged the senses with constant change. Altogether, the mental life of the metropolis was at odds with its built situation, at the nickelodeon just like anywhere else. The juxtaposition of amusement and hazard at the nickelodeon was not exceptional, nor was the effort to manage the hazard once it came to attention.

The conduct of an audience as a group of strangers in a confined space is a prime example of the tenuous balancing act of sociability. If the norms that made being part of an audience enjoyable were so brittle that alienation could be a result, then a corresponding danger was the easy way sociable spaces could be abandoned altogether. The instability of crowds led to disaster when sociability dissipated all together in a panic. It was similar, but contrasted in effect, to the way a mob could result from a mass political gathering. But a panicking crowd in a theatre was not even as understandable and ordered as a mob incited by a charismatic speech to riot. Advertising for nickel shows emphasized how people could come and go as they pleased. In Toronto, a high-class nickel show affiliated with B. F. Keith's in January 1908 used the phrase 'Come when you like, Stay as long as you like' in ads run in all of the city's daily newspapers. In the early days of continuous shows, film showmen nurtured the audience's urge to enter and leave at will. However, the urge to leave happened all at once and involuntarily in a fire panic. The problem was how to make exiting in case of fire a rationalized act, something an audience did collectively rather than in a rush as an irrational crowd. This required people to retain sociable, mannered control of their bodies, even in the event of a hasty exit during a fire. Norbert Elias (2000)

embeds his understanding of state formation in a history of manners, explaining that sociable citizenship is rooted in the ideal of continually being in control of bodily functions. Civilized interaction depends on embodied discipline and self-regulation, strongly linked to the awareness of *becoming* civilized and in turn the process of civilization (Quilley and Loyal, 2004). In this sense, one small part of state formation could be fire safety at moving picture shows, or at least conversely the possibility of panic in a theatre fire could undermine, in a small way, the very basis of the protective authority of the state. Again, the prospect of losing all sense of mannerism, acting with fear and panic, is the looming shadow of the civilizing process, frighteningly cogent in the prospect of a fire in a crowded, confined space.

Theories of crowd psychology from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most famously Gustave LeBon's theory (2002), proposed how group action could be both collective and irrational at the same time, but nevertheless, all too predictable even when reacting to a moment of surprise. This informed Robert Park's (1972) sociological definition of the crowd as a directed, engaged collective temporarily sharing space, whether or not composed of strangers. Indeed, a collective focus is what distinguished the crowd from the masses (for example, of workers and shoppers) populating public urban space in American downtowns. Park's description of the crowd is remarkable for how it applies to audiences, perhaps more than any other crowd. But then it is all the more troubling that an audience has its attention held by an illusion, by projected moving images, engaged through only a technological apparatus. The focus of a modern, urban crowd could be instituted without a charismatic authority figure and no longer depended on embodied leadership. This space, after all, was commercial, and the congregated people were largely strangers to each other: a temporary, voluntary crowd of people paying nickels and dimes to see a show. In a sense their commitment was *to the show*, not to each other. Add to this the darkness of the auditorium. Heap on top, finally, the electricity used to operate the picture machine, often supplied by a portable gas generator, and finally the chemically unstable celluloid film.

The chemical combustibility of celluloid can thus be a flashpoint igniting wider recognition of the social combustibility of film-going crowds. The material part of the fire hazard could be handled through protocols designating jurisdictions to supervise handling film. The public act of legislating supervision also worked towards handling theatre panic – the social part of the fire hazard – by supporting the sociability of the film-going crowd, which was seen as fragile. Proper policing of

fire safety in public buildings, including the expert advice of the city architect and the professional wisdom of the chief of the fire brigade, openly exhibited how actions were taken to make these establishments safe. This exhibition of safety was as important as any safety code for managing the threat of panic, not just the possibility of fire in itself. Regulation was needed for social psychological reasons as well, to assure the public at a theatre that smoke did not necessarily mean fire and further that fire did not require panic. Rational measures could replace irrational fear and prompt a rational response to fire instead of panic. Cleared aisles and conspicuous exits were thus soon required in moving picture theatres just as they were in large playhouses, churches, schools and office buildings. The regulation of theatres had to ensure not just that fires did not start, but also that panic did not result if one did take hold. In the years following 1908, there are scattered stories of panics averted and audiences calmly clearing picture theatres as the projectionist controlled a fire in his booth. At times, the pianist even played a march to give rhythm to the emergency exit (for example, *World*, 1911; *Billboard*, 1910; *American*, 1913).

Once the Ontario law regulating moving pictures was enacted in April 1908, municipal police forces were mandated to inspect every operation of a moving picture machine and storage of films. In Toronto these police duties were extended to municipal licensing as well, and the letters of the chief constable show that the Board of Police Commissioners proceeded with complete autonomy over the decision to licence shows. The novelty of cinematographic vision was coming to require a complex rational-legal supervision as it took on a place of its own in the range of urban practices of amusement and shopping. The way that fire safety, of all the possible aspects of film technology, precipitated clarity in regulations only highlights how the meaning of film was articulated iteratively through social conditions, through efforts to assign film an order as problems arose. Film-going came into view as something problematic and hazardous, but at every point was treated as something within the means and jurisdiction of governments. Every additional layer of regulation – censorship, taxation, the exclusion of children – responded to a slightly different but still problematic social effect of film technology. Treated in this way, the technology of cinema includes its local regulation and showmanship as equals with the invention and distribution of the apparatus itself. All were necessary to manage film-going as a social practice, to bring it into being and make it meaningful and understandable as a mass medium that gathered all of the public within its practice.

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