

Tableaux Morts: Execution, Cinema, and Galvanistic Fantasies

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TALES OF PUNISHMENT, INCARCERATION, TORTURE, AND EXECUTION have enthralled audiences since time immemorial; even witnessing actual executions was within the realm of the possible up until the dawn of the twentieth century, as death penalties were carried out in public. A rich, macabre visual culture evolved around spectacularized executions: images of barbaric deaths have been recorded in artworks, woodcuts, paintings, drawings, photographs, lithographs, and motion pictures. This essay explores how the invention of cinema responded to the *longue durée* that is visualized executions. But rather than construct a genealogy of execution on film, I instead want to hone in on a method of execution that is virtually isomorphic with cinema's invention—electrocution. Coming of age at roughly the same time, electrocution and cinema were exemplars of technological modernity and were shaped by shared histories of popular and scientific display.¹ Thomas Alva Edison was instrumental in the development of both motion pictures and electrocution. Without his expert testimony in the legal

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¹ Kristen Whissel, *Picturing American Modernity: Traffic, Technology, and the Silent Cinema* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), 154.



appeal of William Kemmler,² a case that established electrocution as a replacement for hanging in New York State, the electric chair might have remained a blueprint and not one of the deadliest killing machines in US prison history.

Edison's role in the history of electrocution adds to our understanding of one of the earliest and most famous prison films, *The Execution of Czolgosz, with Panorama of Auburn Prison* (1901; fig. 1).³ Edison is doubly implicated in *The Execution of Czolgosz*, as filmmaker and as historical agent behind the establishment of the apparatus that took the lives of death row inmates. The film had three main use values: to transcend press accounts of Czolgosz's execution through imaginary access to the death chamber; to put to rest lingering concerns about the brutality of electrocution by supporting the mistaken notion that not only had electrocution been perfected since Kemmler's 1890 death, but it was as clean and simple as turning on a light bulb; and to implicitly defend Edison's pivotal role in the legalization of electrocution, since this film showed it working flawlessly.

On many levels, *The Execution of Czolgosz* is a recursive film, a throwback to public executions and other "plebeian sports" that roused the passions, as a writer for the *Philanthropist* noted in 1812: "To see five of their fellow creatures hanged, was as good as a horse-race, a boxing-matching [*sic*], or a bull-baiting. . . . It is a spectacle which cannot soften one heart, but may harden many."⁴ Like other public rituals, electrocution drew meaning from performance-based cultures such as the freak show, scientific and popular experiments with electricity, the Phantasmagoria, as well as civic ceremonies, the latter underscored most powerfully in the legally mandated witnesses, the former in the site of the body as locus of spectacle.

Historical accounts of cinematic representations of capital punishment and imprisonment often begin with this Edison film, a four-shot motion picture that cuts from a panorama of the exterior of Auburn Prison in upstate New York to a dramatic reenactment of anarchist Leon Czolgosz's electrocution, a reenactment that an announcement in the *Clipper* boasted was

² Kemmler was an illiterate Buffalo fruit vendor convicted in 1890 of murdering his lover with a hatchet. His death by electrocution was covered extensively in the domestic and international press, and its legal record is still cited in challenges to capital punishment legislation. While witnesses had observed the instant death that followed from the accidental electrocution of people as a result of contact with a live wire, the effect of alternating current on humans in a more controlled environment had not been observed before Kemmler's electrocution. For more on Kemmler, see Richard Moran, *Executioner's Current: Thomas Edison, George Westinghouse, and the Invention of the Electric Chair* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), 119–57.

³ Edison was initially opposed to capital punishment, refusing to consult with the Death Penalty Commission charged with finding a replacement for hanging, which was deemed too spectacular and plagued by equipment failures and mishaps. But when the commission approached Edison a second time, he agreed, explaining that while he would "heartily join in an effort to totally abolish capital punishment," adopting the "most humane method available for the purpose of disposing of criminals under sentence of death" was a legitimate cause, given its legality in New York State. But as historians of the direct- versus alternating-current wars of the late nineteenth century have pointed out, Edison's change of heart coincided with the height of competition with his rival Westinghouse Electric. Edison's initial reluctance to become embroiled in the work of the commission faded when he realized the usefulness of associating alternating current with electrocution in the public mind in order to discourage its domestic use. Even though Edison lost the current wars, he was successful in establishing the alternating-current electric chair as the chief means of execution in the United States until the rise of the lethal injection in the 1970s. Death Penalty Commission Report, 68–69, cited in Mark Essig, *Edison and the Electric Chair: A Story of Light and Death* (New York: Walker, 2005), 97.

⁴ "Remarks on a Late Execution at Shrewsbury," *Philanthropist* 2 (1812): 207–8, cited in Randall McGowen, "A Powerful Sympathy: Terror, the Prison, and Humanitarian Reform in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain," *Journal of British Studies* 25 (July 1986): 324.

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FIG. 1. Advertisement for Edison's *Execution of Czolgosz* from the *New York Clipper*, November 16, 1901.

“faithfully carried out from the description of an eye witness.”⁵ An unemployed machinist and son of Polish immigrants, Czolgosz shot President William McKinley on September 6, 1901, in the Temple of Music at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York (fig. 2). The subject of intense public interest, Czolgosz was electrocuted with three jolts of 1,800 volts at Auburn Prison on October 29, 1901, just forty-five days after McKinley's death. Following an autopsy, sulfuric acid was poured into Czolgosz's coffin and his body buried in quicklime to hasten decomposition. Czolgosz's personal possessions and clothes were also burned, to ensure that no one profited from nefarious access to the body or possessions. The *New York World* reported that a “museum keeper in a large city telegraphed an offer of \$5,000 for either the body or the garments of the murderer.”⁶

Unlike contemporary audiences, who have no historical memory of how, when, and where electrocution was first used as a legal method of capital punishment in the United States, audiences viewing *The Execution of Czolgosz* in 1901, just eleven years after the first US electrocution, would probably have had *some* recollection of the earlier public controversy over this method of capital punishment. How public opinion—at least as represented in the press—went from sharing the sentiment of Dr. George Shrady, who, upon seeing the first electrocution in 1890, declared, “I want never again to witness anything like that,” to nonchalantly watching *The Execution of*

⁵ *The Clipper*, November 16, 1901, 832, cited in Charles Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 187.

⁶ *New York World*, October 29, 1901, 3, cited in Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon*, 517n83.



FIG. 2. Drawing by T. Dart Walker depicting the assassination of President William McKinley by Leon Czolgosz at Pan-American Exposition reception on September 6, 1901.

Wikimedia Commons/LOC: <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/96521677/>
<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:McKinleyAssassination.jpg>.

Czolgosz is curious indeed.⁷ With electrocutions continuing unabated from 1890 to 1901, the public might have become inured to its brutalizing effects on the body, many people believing that it was more humane and modern than hanging, despite countless stories of botched executions, usually stemming from faulty equipment and miscalculations of the amount of current to be applied.⁸

The retributive impulse of including *Czolgosz's* name in the eponymous film afforded it a specificity and currency that linked it to the illustrated-newspaper function of early cinema (this was not *any* electrocution, but one of a presidential assassin). Mary Anne Doane argues that the meanings of *Czolgosz* are contingent on external spectator knowledge, although I contend that the film's vexed status as simultaneously a reenactment, reportage, and snuff film, coupled with the fact that the film could be purchased and shown without the opening panorama, means that *Czolgosz* could stand in for *any* prisoner's death by electrocution, imbuing the film with an instructional quality, a moving textbook illustration of a nonsensational, bloodless homicide.⁹ Notwithstanding this degree of textual openness, *The Execution of Czolgosz* is a "narrative

⁷ Deborah W. Denno, "Is Electrocution an Unconstitutional Method of Execution? The Engineering of Death over a Century," *William and Mary Law Review* 35, no. 2, article 4 (1994): 601n326.

⁸ Jonathan Auerbach, *Body Shots: Early Cinema's Incarnations* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press), 35.

⁹ Mary Anne Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

of national catharsis,”¹⁰ promising closure for the nation in the wake of the assassination of President McKinley. But the film’s sanitized depiction of state killing also intervened in a longer debate over the use of the electric chair in the United States¹¹ and justified Edison’s role in the establishment of electrocution, a topic he avoided in interviews in later years.¹² The film is fantastic for the simple reason that it constructs an idealized version of what death by electrocution should, but rarely did, look like; it vivified the fantasy of the “quick, clean death that supporters of the electric chair had long promoted, while omitting the gruesome details that marked real electrocutions.”¹³ The thirteen seconds of electrical charge delivered in three bouts of six, five, and two seconds (in reality, the current was kept on for sixty seconds), the swift stethoscope examination by two doctors that confirms death, and the warden-demonstrator at frame left who brings an end to the proceedings by turning toward the camera and speaking, all serve to transform death by electrocution into a creepy display of magic, with the final declaration of death the equivalent of the prestige.

I use *The Execution of Czolgosz* and several other execution films in this essay as a critical vantage point from which to better understand our fascination with representing execution and punishment on film. There’s an epistemic yearning in the execution film that is bound up with a deeper desire to image incarceration, to penetrate the walls of the penitentiary and show what goes on inside its darkest recesses, the death chamber. As the twentieth century’s most common method of execution in the United States—over four thousand people died in the electric chair between 1890 and 1966, New York State topping the chart with 695 executions—electrocution is by no means an anachronistic artifact from an earlier era. And while cameras have been banned—if not always successfully—from the execution chamber, journalist-witnesses speak of the trauma of the experience, as they did at the first electrocution at Auburn Prison in 1890.¹⁴ But in order to understand the execution film, a genre that includes films of actual deaths caught on camera as well as reenactments and fictional representations, we need to consider some of its informing contexts. Failure to do so occludes cinema’s indebtedness to a long line of visual practices that offered similar kinds of viewing positions and fantasmatic excesses.

Execution films derive meaning as “as ceremonials of punishment,” Michel Foucault’s term for all manner of staged public punishments and macabre visual spectacles that exploited the idea of the uncanny, of being copresent with the dead, including the waxwork exhibit, the Phantasmagoria (an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century entertainment in which ghostly apparitions were made to appear using the magic lantern, smoke, and mirrors), and the electrical wonder show (demonstrations inspired by galvanistic experiments with electricity). In this regard, *The Execution of Czolgosz* joins many other titles, including *The Execution of Mary*

¹⁰ Christopher Kamerbeek, “The Ghost and the Corpse: Figuring the Mind/Brain Complex at the Turn of the Twentieth Century” (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 2010), 202.

¹¹ The courts have continued to rely upon *Kemmler*, 136 U.S. 436 (1890), as constitutional support for all methods of execution, as well as general Eighth Amendment propositions; *Kemmler* exerted precedential force on 226 cases in the twentieth century. Denno, “Is Electrocution an Unconstitutional Method of Execution?,” 559.

¹² When Edison was asked by his 1910 biographers whether he had invented the electric chair, “he grew indignant and replied, ‘I did not invent such an instrument.’” See Frank Lewis Dyer and Thomas Commerford Martin, *Edison: His Life and Inventions*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1910), cited in Essig, *Edison and the Electric Chair*, 287. Also see James S. Evans, “Edison Regrets Electric Chair Was Ever Invented,” *New York American*, February 10, 1905, cited in Essig, *Edison and the Electric Chair*, 285.

¹³ Essig, *Edison and the Electric Chair*, 279.

¹⁴ Craig Brandon, *The Electric Chair: An Unnatural American History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1999), 246.

Queen of Scots (Edison, 1895), *An Execution by Hanging* (American Mutoscope and Biograph [AM&B], 1898), *Execution of a Spy* (Biograph, 1900), *Histoire d'un crime* (Ferdinand Zecca, 1901), *The Executioner* (Pathé, 1901), *A Career of Crime* (American Mutoscope and Biograph, 1900), *Electrocuting an Elephant* (Edison, 1903),¹⁵ *Au bague* (*Scenes of Convict Life*) (Pathé, 1905), *A Reprieve from the Scaffold* (Biograph, 1905), *The Caillaux Case* (Fox Film, 1918), episode seven of *Harry Houdini's The Master Mystery* (Harry Grossman and Burton L. King, 1919), *Picture Snatcher* (Lloyd Bacon, 1933), and *The Green Mile* (Frank Darabont, 1999), to name just a few films that have transported audiences to the space of execution for over a century.¹⁶ Not all these films are set exclusively in the prison, but they all represent the apparatus of capital punishment. With varying degrees of verisimilitude, the early execution film animates scenes from the headlines, responding to what Harry Marvin, vice-president of the Biograph Company, described as the public's demand for film companies to "gather the news in a pictorial way and disseminate it at once."¹⁷

My goal in this essay is to contextualize *The Execution of Czolgosz* and other execution films within a rich field of pre-cinematic entertainments, as well as adumbrate Czolgosz's legacy in three other films featuring the electric chair that tell distinct stories about the device's fraught status within the American popular imagination and cinematic lexicon: Harry Houdini's *The Master Mystery*, *Picture Snatcher*, and *The Green Mile*. I begin with some of the earliest execution films mentioned above, tracing the depiction of execution from the scaffold dance (public hangings) to Chamber of Horrors waxwork, before reevaluating *The Execution of Czolgosz* in the context of the Phantasmagoria, the electrical wonder show, and the historical record of electrocution's effect upon the body, an account occluded—or suppressed—in Edison's film. Experiments to revivify a dead human body or make parts of it seemingly spring to life serve as an important backdrop for our understanding of films representing electrocution and for audience members witnessing electrocution in the 1890s; as historian Mark Essig argues, popular perceptions of electricity were either as "pulses zipping through telegraph wires or as surprising shocks administered by doctors or showmen."¹⁸

¹⁵ A great deal has been written about this disturbing film shot before 1,500 people at Coney Island. The elephant, Topsy, from Barnum and Bailey's Circus, had attacked a cruel keeper who had put out cigarettes on her trunk. As a public corollary to *The Execution of Czolgosz*, Edison decided to film the public electrocution of this animal. *Electrocuting an Elephant* is a relic of the pride of place afforded elephants as prized taxidermy specimens in museums of natural history and of eighteenth-century experiments with animals conducted in London's galleries of practical science such as the Electrical Society and the Royal Institution.

¹⁶ Electrocution was the twentieth century's most common method of capital punishment. In the United States, over four thousand condemned inmates have died in the electric chair over the past hundred years; the most recent, Paul Werner Powell, was electrocuted in Virginia in March 2010. There are stark differences across US states: between 1910 and 1935, southern states accounted for nearly 80 percent of all executions. Trina N. Seitz, "Electrocution and the Tar Heel State: The Advent and Demise of a Southern Sanction," *American Journal of Criminal Justice* 31, no. 1 (2006): 107.

¹⁷ Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon*, 163. For an analysis of the Biograph Company's nonfiction filmmaking, see Stephen Bottomore, "Every Phase of Present-Day Life: Biograph's Non-fiction Production," in "The Wonders of the Biograph," special issue, *Griffithiana* 69/70 (1999–2000): 147–211.

¹⁸ Essig, *Edison and the Electric Chair*, 59. Space precludes a detailed discussion of electricity's fascinating place in the salon, carnival, and medicine. This background, nevertheless, is an important part of electricity's history of display.

THE SCAFFOLD DANCE AS CROWD PLEASER: EARLY EXECUTION FILMS AND THE LEGACY OF KEMMLER

Had cinema been around in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the ubiquitous woodcuts and broadsides depicting public executions would surely have been supplemented or even replaced by motion pictures. And film would probably have been a far more convenient way to watch an execution in the nineteenth century, since crowds clamoring for a better view of the live event often swelled into the tens of thousands.¹⁹ Public hangings were overdetermined by social conventions, rituals governing representations of the state, so that as historian Pieter Spierenburg argues, “the manner in which sentences were executed was at least as important as the content of the sentences.”²⁰ The more notorious the murderer, highwayman, or burglar, wrote the authors of *The Criminal Prisons of London and Scenes of Prison Life in 1852*, the larger the crowds “of the most respected citizens . . . wending their way from all parts of the city toward the fatal tree.”²¹ Removing executions from the public view did nothing to stem a lurid fascination; indeed, one could argue it heightened the voyeurism, since it was now no longer possible to “see for yourself.” While space precludes exploring the psychological drives at play in the public desire to witness a homicide, suffice it to say that executions have a deep history in popular visual culture.²²

Public executions not only drew crowds but became spectacles where witnessing became less about actually being able to see the scaffold than being part of the event. At the Tombs prison in Manhattan in the late nineteenth century (fig. 3), New Yorkers clung to the chimneys and railings of surrounding buildings to catch a glimpse of the condemned about to be hanged. And if fear of falling impeded those eager for an eyewitness view, the Chamber of Horrors on the lower level of the Eden Musée on Manhattan’s 23rd Street served up a cavalcade of execution tableaux in its basement, including wax blood gushing from the “‘headless, writhing corpse’ of an executed Moroccan criminal, a lynched American horse thief dangling from a tree limb, and a terrified French prisoner witnessing the grisly work of the guillotine.”²³ Waxworks conventionalized representations of violent crime scenes, the clammy-looking, milky hue of the waxy flesh and the smell of the molded bodies producing a multisensory experience.²⁴ Execution waxworks transmogrified the assaulted physical senses into contemplative or spiritual ones that justified the act of witnessing and drove home the object lesson that serious crime met with serious consequences; as Kathleen Kendrick explains: “by reproducing the gory effects of contemporary

¹⁹ Whissel, *Picturing American Modernity*, 153.

²⁰ Pieter Spierenburg, “The Body and the State: Early Modern Europe,” in *The Oxford History of the Prison: The Practice of Punishment in Western Society*, ed. Norval Morris and David J. Rothman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 49.

²¹ Henry Mayhew and John Binny, *The Criminal Prisons of London and Scenes of Prison Life* (London: Griffin, Bohn, 1852), 590.

²² When the “body as the major target of penal repression disappeared” in the banning of public executions, it was because, as Foucault argues, “it is the certainty of being punished and not the horrifying spectacle of public punishment that must discourage crime.” Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 11.

²³ Kathleen Kendrick, “‘The Things Down Stairs’: Containing Horror in the Nineteenth-Century Wax Museum,” *Nineteenth Century Studies* 12 (1998): 2–3.

²⁴ As Vanessa Toulmin notes, the Chamber of Horrors was initially called the “Separate Room” until given the new name by *Punch* magazine in 1846; connotatively linked to both the judicial and legislative spheres and the more licentious bedroom, the word “chamber” summoned up a slew of associations. Vanessa Toulmin, “An Early Crime Film Rediscovered: Mitchell and Kenyon’s Arrest of Goudie (1901),” *Film History* 16, no. 1 (2004): 44.



FIG. 3. Albumen print of interior of Tombs prison, Manhattan, from Robert N. Dennis's collection of stereoscopic views, New York Public Library.

Wikimedia Commons: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Interior_of_Tombs,_from_Robert_N._Dennis_collection_of_stereoscopic_views_2.jpg.

crimes, the Chamber of Horrors offered another form of access to the shared body of information generated by mass media accounts.”²⁵

A wax effigy of Czolgosz was placed in the Eden Musée's Chamber of Horrors electric chair, an object first exhibited at the museum in 1898 in an installation that told the story of the killing and dismemberment of William Guldensuppe in 1897 and the subsequent electrocution of one of his assassins. And even though photographs and artists' sketches of the electric chair had circulated in popular culture since 1889, the waxwork gave audiences an opportunity to savor an image that was too fleeting in the Edison film and lacking in gory realism in the sketches, lithographs, and photographs. Because *The Execution of Czolgosz* was made in the aftermath of public executions, whose heyday in the United States was 1776–1865, it was just one other way of sating a desire for visual information about this notorious electrocution, and as Charles Musser observes, Edison was even prepared to pay two thousand dollars for footage of Czolgosz entering the death chamber, but when the authorities refused, he made do with the panoramas.²⁶ *The Execution of Czolgosz* thus complicates historian of execution Louis P. Masur's argument about the “shift from public, external, physical forms of punishment to private, internal, psychological modes of discipline” insofar as prison authorities clung to the idea of execution as civic ritual, no doubt a way of balancing the ignominious spectacle with capital punishment policy.²⁷

The Execution of Czolgosz was not Edison's first pseudosnuff film. In 1895 he made *The Execution of Mary Queen of Scots*, an eighteen-second film in which Queen Mary (played by a man) kneels, places her head on the chopping block, and, in an early example of stop-motion camera work, at the moment the axe descends, is replaced by a dummy (fig. 4). Historical fact

²⁵ Kendrick, “The Things Down Stairs,” 15.

²⁶ *New York World*, October 29, 1901, 3, cited in Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon*, 187.

²⁷ Louis P. Masur, *Rites of Execution: Capital Punishment and the Transformation of American Culture, 1776–1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 3.

takes a backseat to the idea of execution as fast and precise in this film, since according to the historical record, it took several attempts to sever the queen's head (death by chopping block was tricky since it demanded considerable skill and experience on the part of the executioner). The film's title announces its status as a historical reenactment, and even though historical spectators may have winced and been oblivious to the dummy substitution trick, even today's spectators often demand a second viewing in order to confirm what it is they (think) they have seen.²⁸ No different from the "if it bleeds, it leads" imperative of contemporary news, where stories of murders, accidents, fires, and human suffering drive ratings, execution films were made for the very same reason that waxworks of serial killers, gruesome murders, and electrocutions were included in chamber of horrors exhibits and dime museums. Our sensibilities may be offended by both the filmic execution and the waxwork simulacrum, but it is often hard to avert one's gaze, as Roald Dahl writes when the young boy first sees the unmasked witches in Dahl's book *The Witches*: "there are times when something is so frightening you become mesmerized by it and can't look away."²⁹



FIG. 4. Edison's *The Execution of Mary Queen of Scots* film (1895).

²⁸ *The Execution of Mary Queen of Scots* was also the subject of a feature article in the first edition of Sing Sing's inmate-published newspaper, *Star of Hope*, in 1899, where an inmate recalled viewing the film projected on a temporary screen in an open-air screening in Columbus, Ohio. *Mary Queen of Scots* served as a cautionary tale about the finitude of execution and purportedly caused the prisoner to instantly reform. Clinton prisoner number 4,499, "Reformed by a Picture," *Star of Hope* 8, no. 18 (December 2001): 297–98. I discuss this article and cinema's emergence in the penitentiary in Alison Griffiths, "Bound by Cinematic Chains: Film and Prisons during the Early Era," in *A Companion to Early Cinema*, ed. André Gaudreault, Nicolas Dulac, and Santiago Hidalgo (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 420–23.

²⁹ Roald Dahl, *The Witches* (New York: Scholastic, 1983), 66.

Pathé's *The Executioner* (1901) brings the audience a lot closer to a beheading than *Mary Queen of Scots*. The film opens with a priest staring dispassionately at the camera as an executioner prances around the set and begins swinging his axe in eager anticipation once the prisoner is led into the execution chamber. A small platform with a wooden chest on top becomes a makeshift chopping block, and after some theatrical stage business involving the executioner tearing off his cloak in swashbuckler style, the prisoner is led to the block by a second priest while a third stands frame right looking on. The effect of the head being severed from the body with one swipe of the axe is sophisticated, especially the substitution shot revealing the beheaded prisoner's body sliding slowly off the block. The severed head—which shares an uncanny resemblance to the executioner—is held up in front of the camera before being placed on a platter, an explicit nod to the performative imperative of public executions. Save for the hands of the priest that spring up in shock at the moment of the beheading, this film is an exemplar of execution-as-entertainment, with the executioner becoming a poster child for what André Gaudreault calls early cinema's internal monstator, a magician demonstrator.³⁰

In 1898, AM&B cameraman Arthur Marvin filmed the hanging death of an African American at the county jail in Jacksonville, Florida. Catering to what Miriam Hansen characterized as the sadistic impulses of early cinema audiences,³¹ *An Execution by Hanging* is “probably the only moving picture that was ever made of a genuine hanging scene” and breaks the action down into four brief phases: the man mounts the gallows, an executioner places the noose around his neck and adjusts his black cap, the trap is triggered, and the body shoots “through the air, and hang[s] quivering at the end of a rope.”³² *Execution by Hanging*³³ occupies a unique place in the history of filmed executions; a throwback to the scaffold dance of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, where if you were close enough to the scaffold you witnessed death, the film is eerily contemporary, a nod to the smartphone's ability to capture the live and the immediate, as when an Iraqi soldier used his mobile phone to shoot an unauthorized video of Saddam Hussein's hanging on December 30, 2006.³⁴ The desire to represent the moment of death in execution is virtually as old as the practice of execution itself. Even last-word statements were sold as broadsides on the roads thronged with people after a public hanging.

The Execution of Czolgosz was also not the first reconstructed electrocution film. In 1900, AM&B made *A Career of Crime*, a film in five parts that shows a criminal's exploits culminating

³⁰ André Gaudreault and Timothy Barnard, *From Plato to Lumière: Narration and Monstration* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

³¹ Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in Cinema* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 31. As is the case today, African American men were executed at a disproportionately higher level than white men (see Seitz, “Electrocution,” 115).

³² Description from AFI Catalogue of Feature Films: <http://www.afi.com/members/catalog/DetailView.aspx?s=1&Movie=44301> (accessed January 24, 2013).

³³ Released just ten years after the passing of the Electrical Execution Act in the United States on June 4, 1888, the “by” in the title serves as a stark reminder that even though ten states would go on to abolish the death penalty between 1897 and 1917, hangings were routine enough that the method by which capital punishment was carried out needed to be specified. In 1905, cameraman F. A. Dobson reconstructed convicted murderess Mary Rogers's death by hanging in *Execution of a Murderess*, alternately titled *Execution by Hanging*. For more on the Rogers case, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Rogers_\(murderer\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Rogers_(murderer)).

³⁴ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Execution_of_Saddam_Hussein. For the uncensored hanging footage shot by mobile phone, see www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmlaPQOtDbQ. Both accessed February 12, 2013.

in his electrocution, ostensibly at Sing Sing Prison.³⁵ This is fast-track electrocution, the entire process taking an elliptical twenty or so seconds; the *mise-en-scène*, with a large brick wall signifying an old-fashioned prison and with a priest standing immediately to the left of the condemned man, evokes the scaffold rather than the so-called modern electrocution death chamber. Priests were never allowed to stand next to someone being electrocuted (people kept well away from the body because of the heat), and his presence in the film suggests a misperception or misremembering of what electrocution was actually like. Also, the man does not wear a mask; the wearing of such a mask was standard, at least in New York State. Like the hangman's hood, the black leather cap dispelled all hope of de-ritualizing electrocution, as the body of the condemned became monstrous and anonymous through donning the mask. Our reaction to the electrocution is cued by the embodied response of the priest, who not only removes his hat (as does a guard standing next to him) but drops to the ground in shock at witnessing death. This film delivered an unambiguous teleological object lesson; go over to the dark side of crime and be prepared to die in the electric chair. Disconcerting, however, is the fact that this man has committed, not murder, but larceny and, in the spirit of what would become California's three strikes and you're out law, is killed for failing to reform.

Coming as it did at the height of technological innovation at the end of the nineteenth century, electrocution as represented in *A Career in Crime* and *The Execution of Czolgosz* must have seemed both uncannily familiar (the *New York Herald* reported that the prototype electric chair resembled an "ordinary barber's chair," adding that there was "nothing uncomfortable about the chair save the death current which goes with it") and utterly terrifying, a cautionary tale about how the state now dispensed with its criminals.³⁶ Czolgosz's chair might well have been a table if the *Medico-Legal Society* proposal of having the condemned lie horizontally on an electric table covered with rubber cloth had been adopted; it was thought a chair would afford more dignity to the condemned, since "strapped to a table, he would be utterly helpless, resembling a bit too closely an experimental animal strapped to a laboratory table for vivisection."³⁷ A contributor to the *Medico-Legal Journal* proposed using a small room, "something like a sentry box or watchman's hut" with a metal-lined floor and electrode descending like a showerhead, a space that shares a strong affinity with the box used by magicians to reveal parts of the (almost always) female cut-in-half body.³⁸ In 1883, seven years before the first legalized electrocution in 1890, an invention of a Mr. H. B. Sheridan (of the Sheridan Electric Company), who had created an "improved device for executing criminals condemned to death," was described in an *Electrical World* article entitled "Device for the Execution of Criminals."³⁹

³⁵ The first man electrocuted at Sing Sing was Harris A. Smiler on July 7, 1891; see Lewis E. Lawes, *Life and Death in Sing Sing* (New York: Doubleday, Doran), 186.

³⁶ *New York Herald*, April 20, 1890, cited in Essig, *Edison and the Electric Chair*, 239.

³⁷ Essig, *Edison and the Electric Chair*, 226, 228.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 226.

³⁹ "Device for the Execution of Criminals," *Electrical World* 14, no. 22 (June 2, 1883): 341. Sheridan's device was an electric chair with a brass button that touched the spinal cord, two brass knobs at the end of the arms that the criminal's hands would hold, and a footrest with a brass plate. The condemned would have to wear a collar put on in the "same manner as the noose end used in hangings" (341). However, it's ironic that the degree of certitude evinced by Sheridan (death by electrocution occurred "instantly and without pain") is sharply undercut in "Electricity—What Is It?," which appeared on the following page. While physicists know something of the properties of electricity, "its origin and character are wrapped in a profound mystery" (342).

On August 6, 1890, less than two years after Edison began to electrocute animals in his New Jersey laboratory, William Kemmler became the first human victim of state-sanctioned electrocution in the United States (fig. 5).⁴⁰ During Kemmler's legal appeal of his death sentence, financed by Westinghouse at a cost exceeding \$100,000, a corporate move to prevent alternating current, which Westinghouse produced, from being associated with death by electrocution, Edison assumed the role of expert witness testifying about AC electricity's effectiveness as an agent of death. Edison's motivation for getting involved was driven by a desire to have his DC current free from association with electrocution. Edison's "curt and unequivocal" testimony, coupled with New York State's 1888 Death Penalty Commission's belief that "none can be regarded as a higher authority," made Edison a pivotal figure in the passage of the Electrical Execution Act.⁴¹ In contrast to the relatively swift demise of the twenty-four dogs (procured by local boys for twenty-five cents apiece), six calves, and two horses that had been electrocuted in Edison's laboratory in New Jersey, Kemmler's execution was a botched, gruesome disaster, "an awful spectacle and sacrifice to whims and theories of a coterie of cranks and politicians," in the words of a *New York World* journalist who titled his story "A Roasting of Human Flesh in Prison—Strong Men

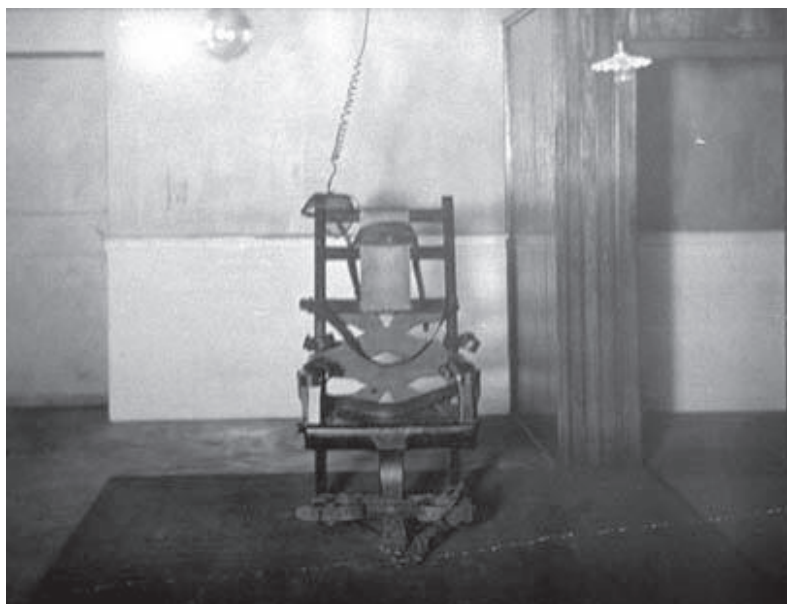


FIG. 5. Electric chair used to execute William Kemmler, 1890.

Wikimedia Commons: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Electric_chair.jpg.

⁴⁰ Essig, *Edison and the Electric Chair*, 235. Electrocuting was legalized in New York State on June 4, 1888, when Governor David B. Hill signed a bill that authorized death to "be inflicted by causing to pass through the body of the convict a current of electricity of sufficient intensity to cause death."

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 189; Brandon, *Electric Chair*, 82. The Death Penalty Commission Report provided the legal framework for the replacement of hanging by electrocution, although the bulk of the document was devoted to describing, in alphabetical order, virtually every method of capital punishment known to mankind, including one called the "Illuminated Body" in which tiny holes were bored throughout the skin, oil and tapers pushed inside, and at a given moment, simultaneously lighted" (Essig, *Edison and the Electric Chair*, 95).

Sickened and Turned from the Sight.”⁴² Despite such headlines as “Far Worse than Hanging” and international press coverage of the fiasco, including the *Times* of London’s suggestion that a more effective method of execution would have been to hit Kemmler with an axe,⁴³ Kemmler’s death did not result in the repeal of the Electrical Execution Act. Instead, Edison blamed the botched job on misplacement of the electrodes and questioned whether the full charge had been applied for the appropriate amount of time.⁴⁴

ELECTRICITY’S HISTORY IN SCIENCE AND POPULAR CULTURE

A history of electricity’s role in the multitude of devices and places where it could be found, “in batteries and machines, in lecture theaters and exhibition halls, in Cornish mines and Italian volcanoes,” brings important perspectives to our understanding of *The Execution of Czolgosz*, especially the idea of electricity as a multisensory phenomenon that quite literally could touch spectators.⁴⁵ Whether causing the legs of dead frogs to move in experiments conducted by Italian physician and philosopher Luigi Galvani in 1791 (fig. 6) or allowing an electric eel to stun its prey twice daily at feeding time for the amusement of the spectators at the Adelaide Gallery in London in the 1830s, galvanism was an important part of a culture of display, a popular wonder that drew a crowd, if not as large a crowd as attended public executions.⁴⁶ And yet as Craig Brandon argues, “Most laypeople, even at the turn of the [twentieth] century, did not have the slightest idea what electricity was, how it was produced or what made it perform its miracles. All they knew for sure was that it was the power of the lightning bolt, the very weapon of Zeus and Thor, that had somehow been harnessed by brilliant scientists like Edison.”⁴⁷

Almost a century before the first electrocution, physicians discovered that the appearance of death was far from a reliable indicator of someone’s corporeal demise, and even today, determining death from the cessation of pulse and respiration can be difficult, since they are not unequivocal signs of morbidity; indeed, creatures that appear dead can be revived if air is forced into their lungs, as was the case when a suffocated dog was revived in 1755 and a drowned man shocked back to life with electricity in 1775.⁴⁸ Italian scientist Giovanni Aldini, nephew of Galvani, conducted experiments to test the effectiveness of electricity as a method of resuscitation following asphyxiation, and in 1803 he procured the body of a freshly executed criminal to further his research: “When the poles were touched to the jaw and ear, the face quivered and the left eye opened, while

⁴² “A Roasting of Human Flesh in Prison—Strong Men Sickened and Turned from the Sight,” *New York World*, August 7, 1890, 1. According to Denno, the term “botched” was used to describe Kemmler’s execution and from then on became the standard refrain (Denno, “Is Electrocution an Unconstitutional Method of Execution?,” 565n20). Falsely declared dead after an initial seventeen-second current, Kemmler’s body began to twitch, and after a mad scramble and wait of several minutes as a result of a faulty dynamo, a second current was applied for seventy seconds, during which time his body began to burn. The stench was described as “unbearable” by the *New York Times* (“Far Worse than Hanging,” *New York Times*, August 7, 1890).

⁴³ Denis Brian, *Sing Sing: The Inside Story of a Notorious Prison* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2005), 52–53.

⁴⁴ Denno, “Is Electrocution an Unconstitutional Method of Execution?,” 605. For more “botched electrocutions” throughout the twentieth century, see Essig, *Edison and the Electric Chair*, 261; and Robert G. Elliot and A. R. Beatty, *Agent of Death: The Memoirs of an Executioner* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1940), 57.

⁴⁵ Iwan Rhys Morus, *Frankenstein’s Children: Electricity, Exhibition, and Experiment in Early-Nineteenth-Century London* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 12.

⁴⁶ For more on galvanism in Britain, see Iwan Rhys Morus, *Shocking Bodies: Life, Death and Electricity in Victorian England* (Stroud: History Press, 2011), 20–38.

⁴⁷ Brandon, *Electric Chair*, 18.

⁴⁸ Essig, *Edison and the Electric Chair*, 8, 41.

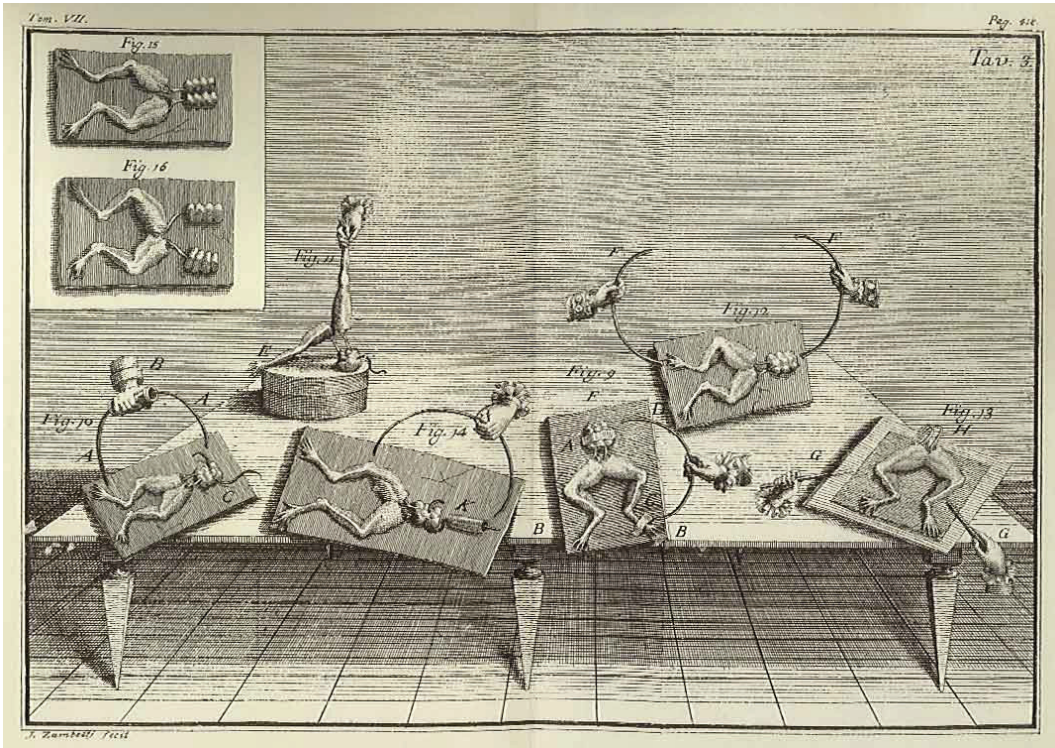


FIG. 6. Experiment with frog legs by Luigi Galvani, from *De viribus electricitatis... in motu musculari commentaries* (1791).

Wikimedia Commons: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Esperimenti_con_rane_-_Galvani.jpg.

a shock from the ear to rectum produced a reaction so strong as ‘almost to give an appearance of reanimation.’⁴⁹ This attempt to bring back the dead, satirized in the cartoon from 1836 shown in figure 7, is a devilish reversal of the path of electrocution, which permanently rids society of the criminal as opposed to bringing one back to life (the question of what Aldini would have done with his revived criminal is unanswered). Rumors abounded, too, that doctors in the rooms adjoining the death chamber were eager to experiment with electricity to see if an electrocuted man could be brought back to life. And anxiety about whether a person’s heart might suddenly start beating again following an electrocution led some to speculate that the reason that autopsies were done immediately following electrocutions (death row inmates complained about the sound of the saw) was to prevent this feared phenomenon.

Electrocution was not the first time electricity had been associated with criminals in popular culture. Mary Shelley drew inspiration from galvanism⁵⁰ in her 1818 novel *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus*, in which a monster is constructed from remains looted from charnel houses—in the words of Victor Frankenstein, from “the dissecting room and slaughter house

⁴⁹ John Aldini, *An Account of the Galvanic Experiments Performed... on the Body of a Malefactor Executed at Newgate January 17, 1803* (London: Cutchell and Martin, 1803), 8–10, 57, cited in Essig, *Edison and the Electric Chair*, 42.

⁵⁰ Aldini, *Account of the Galvanic Experiments*, 8–10. According to Essig, due to their popularity, officials in Germany banned experiments with the severed heads of criminals (*Edison and the Electric Chair*, 42).



FIG. 7. American political cartoon lithograph (1836) by Henry R. Robinson showing Jacksonian newspaper editor Francis Blair rising from a coffin following a shock from a galvanic battery. Courtesy Library of Congress, Prints and Photographic Division.

Wikimedia Commons: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:A_Galvanised_Corpse.jpg.

[which] furnished many of my materials.”⁵¹ Galvanic resurrection is important to our understanding of electrocution, for it reminds us of electricity’s long-standing association with restoring life as well as permanently extinguishing it, a dualism vividly illustrated in Shelley’s gothic novel. In James Whale’s 1932 *Bride of Frankenstein*, when Henry Frankenstein utters the words “But this isn’t science, it’s more like black magic,” and when the monster, later in the film, says, “I love dead. Hate living,” we are vividly reminded of the neo-Satanic undercurrent in all things galvanistic. If electricity could bring bodies back to life, it was natural to question how efficient it would be as a state-sanctioned method of execution, and when we place this in the context of a late nineteenth-century fear about being buried alive, public (and professional) concerns about the reliability of electricity as a method of capital punishment were not without justification.⁵²

Showmen used electricity to heighten the drama of and audience participation in shows, sometimes quite literally, as in Johann Samuel Halle’s 1784 necromancy show that gave the

⁵¹ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (London: Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mavor, and Jones, 1818), 56. Dr. Frankenstein gives life to his hybridized monster by harnessing electricity’s power in virtually the same way that doctors, EMS technicians, and even members of the public do when a medical emergency requires use of a cardiac resuscitation unit.

⁵² Essig, *Edison and the Electric Chair*, 178, 180. According to Pieter Spierenburg, burying alive was classified as a “merciful” form of capital punishment, representing a “decent alternative to hanging in France until the 16th century” (Spierenburg, “The Body and the State,” 54).

audience mild electric shocks from “wires hidden under the floor and connected to an electrical machine.”⁵³ Halle also housed his modified magic lantern in a wooden box resembling a coffin. The idea was also playfully evoked in an 1883 *Electrical World* essay entitled “Electrical Marionettes,” in which it was suggested that electrodes fastened to the arms of chairs in an auditorium could galvanize the audience by shocking people’s funny bones so that when an actor told a joke, “the audience could thus be made not only to . . . [get] it, but to explode in simultaneous cachinnation.”⁵⁴ Fast-forward to 1959, and we see a similar technique employed during Hollywood cinema’s product differentiation era (think widescreen and Smell-O-Vision). According to David A. Cook, the movie *The Tingler* employed a system called Percepto, which “meant that a seat in each theater row was wired with an electric buzzer that would cause the spectator to ‘tingle’ when the monster supposedly got loose in the theater.”⁵⁵ This occurred when Vincent Price addressed the audience from the darkened screen, under the ruse that the projector had suddenly broken and the monster was loose in the auditorium.

Christoph Asendorf argues that part of the fascination with electricity arose out of the “closely related analogy to erotic attraction (or repulsion), characterized as tension between the sexes.”⁵⁶ Electra, a carnival performer and modern incarnation of eighteenth-century experiments conducted by the German physicist Georg Bose, who with his “electrica attractio” charged pretty women wearing insulated shoes with electricity, literally embodied this tension: “the cavaliers from whom they demanded a kiss received a strong electric shock.”⁵⁷ The word “carnival” is derived from the Latin *carne[m] levare*, which means the “putting away or removal of flesh,” an apt descriptor of the gruesome work of the electric chair in the prison, and for author Ray Bradbury “signifying the madness of life itself, as well as death, which looms large in the metaphor of the carnival.”⁵⁸ A carnival-like atmosphere prevailed outside Sing Sing Prison on execution day (electrocutions began at the prison in 1891), a throwback to the scaffold dance and 1890s European fairground culture, which, as Vanessa Toulmin argues, “has a long history of embracing new forms of technological innovations or innovations in exhibiting practices” and presented a wide range of new attractions, including “steam-powered roundabouts in 1861, ghost shows in the 1870s, and X-ray photography and the cinematograph in 1896.”⁵⁹ The major difference here, however, was that the electric chair was obscured from view, and verbal accounts of the execution had to make up for the missing empirical evidence or firsthand experience of the new technology. Although there was nothing to see outside the prison walls on execution day, being in close proximity offered a vicarious pleasure, akin perhaps to the experience of standing outside a freak show or ghost train at the traveling fair and getting shivers without ever stepping inside. On days with multiple executions, Sing Sing Prison officials devised a color-coded system of flags for the

⁵³ Laurent Mannoni, *The Great Art of Light and Shadow: Archaeology of the Cinema* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000), 141.

⁵⁴ “Electrical Marionettes,” *Electrical World* 12 (November 17, 1883): 192.

⁵⁵ David A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film*, 4th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 426.

⁵⁶ Christoph Asendorf, *Batteries of Life: On the History of Things and Their Perception in Modernity*, trans. Don Reneau (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 155–56.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁵⁸ Steven Dimeo cited in William F. Nolan, introduction to *The Electrocution* by Ray Bradbury (Northridge, CA: Lord John Press, 1980), xvii. Bradbury originally published *The Electrocution* under the pseudonym William Elliott in *The Californian* (August 1946).

⁵⁹ Vanessa Toulmin, “Within the Reach of All: Travelling Cinematograph Shows on British Fairgrounds, 1896–1914,” in *Travelling Cinema in Europe*, ed. Martin Loiperdinger (Frankfurt: Stroemfeld / Roter Stern, 2008), 19.

assembled press and onlookers to signal when each man had died in the electric chair. And for those not legally mandated to witness the execution or events preceding it, newspapers filled in the missing information covering the trial, conviction, and execution in a sensational manner.⁶⁰ Sing Sing warden Lewis E. Lawes, along with the Westchester County Committee for the Removal of Sing Sing Prison, explicitly recognized the carnivalesque in electrocution and began campaigning in the 1920s for the “removal of the electric chair and the horrors attached to it.”⁶¹

Electrocutions in prisons were initially huge news, even more so when the criminal was a celebrity like Czolgosz. The day of Czolgosz’s execution, Edwin S. Porter and James White tried to gain entry to Auburn Prison near Buffalo but were denied access and had to settle for footage of the prison façade, which, Kristen Whissel argues, aligns “audiences with a point of view similar to the one available to the tourists who arrived at the prison on the railway line visible within the frame.”⁶² Given that Auburn Prison ranked second to Niagara Falls as a tourist attraction in the nineteenth century, in *The Execution of Czolgosz* the opening thirty-five-second panorama of the prison that gradually reveals more of the penitentiary, including the unmistakable castle-like façade of the administrative building, would have been recognizable for American audiences.⁶³ Even the cut to a second, more portentous high-angle pan of the prison draws us in closer to the events that are about to be re-created. The dissolve from the prison building to its interior is significant, not only linking, as Musser argues, “outside and inside, but actuality and reenactment, description and narrative, a moving and static camera.”⁶⁴

CZOLGOSZ AND THE PHANTASMAGORIA

Another possible frame of reference for making sense of *The Execution of Czolgosz*’s roots in popular entertainment is the Phantasmagoria, an extravagant, multimedia magic lantern show pioneered by scientists and magicians in the late eighteenth century. Its name is derived from the Greek *phantasma*, meaning “ghost,” and *agoreuo*, “I speak” (the calling up or summoning of ghosts) (fig. 8). The Phantasmagoria gave audiences the scary sensation of being present with the dead—something actually experienced by witnesses of electrocution—through the appearance of ghostly apparitions that were sometimes projected onto a curtain of smoke rather than a traditional textile screen, providing an overall effect of blood-curdling necromancy; as Tom Gunning argues, “it exploited associations between projected images and specters of the dead—linkages that seem to have existed since the origin of lantern projections.”⁶⁵ Terry Castle’s characterization of the Phantasmagoria as trenchantly ambiguous, mediating “oddly between rational and irrational imperatives [and carrying] powerful atavistic associations with magic and the supernatural,” seems an equally apt description of *The Execution of Czolgosz*.⁶⁶ More intriguing-

⁶⁰ Essig, *Edison and the Electric Chair*, 237.

⁶¹ “Prison Removal Committee Urge Abandonment of Electrocution,” *Democratic Register*, November 16, 1928, n.p., in file 46b, Lewis Lawes Supplementary Collection, Lloyd Sealey Library, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York.

⁶² Whissel, *Picturing American Modernity*, 154; Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon*, 187; Auerbach, *Body Shots*, 37.

⁶³ Whissel, *Picturing American Modernity*, 154.

⁶⁴ Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon*, 189.

⁶⁵ Tom Gunning, “Phantasmagoria and the Manufacturing of Illusions of Wonder: Towards a Cultural Optics of the Cinematic Apparatus,” in *The Cinema: A New Technology for the 20th Century*, ed. André Gaudreault, Catherine Russell, and Pierre Véronneau (Lausanne, Switzerland: Editions Payot Lausanne, 2004), 33.

⁶⁶ Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 142, 144.



FIG. 8. Lithograph of Etienne Gaspard Robertson's Phantasmagoria in an old Capuchin chapel in rue des Champs, Cours des Capucines, France, 1797.

Wikimedia Commons: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/48/1797_Robertson_phantasmagoria_CapuchineChapel_RueDesChamps_Paris.png.

ingly, Castle's analysis of how the Phantasmagoria's semantic grounding in the occult has shifted over time, from in her words "something external and public . . . to something wholly internal or subjective: the phantasmatic imagery of the mind," raises the question of whether those few witnesses of an actual electrocution and even those who watched *The Execution of Czolgosz* with living memory of Kemmler's electrocution experienced something akin to a Phantasmagoria of the mind in the days, weeks, and months following an execution.⁶⁷

The Execution of Czolgosz is phantasmagorical in other ways as well (fig. 9). Even our first encounter with the prison at the beginning of the film has something of a phantasmagorical feel, as a fast-moving train comes between the camera and the prison and thwarts our ability to see the penitentiary (the empty passenger car directly in front of the prison had delivered the viewing party to Auburn, a nod to the film spectator's status as vicarious witness of this reconstructed electrocution). The prison exterior is eerily void of life, and yet we know that what's about to go on inside the building involves the taking of life in a thoroughly macabre fashion. For Auburn's inmates, the train was a powerful auditory sign, a way of telling the time of day and a reminder that just across the street was a fast, if unreachable way out of the prison, the Auburn railway station. For the film's spectators, Auburn Prison could be mistaken for a factory, another industrial complex that regulated and disciplined working-class and immigrant bodies, and the prison's status as tourist attraction gave the train another layer of signification.

Following the film's two opening pans, our first glimpse inside Auburn Prison reveals an actor portraying Czolgosz standing with both arms against the bars of his cell door and an

⁶⁷ Ibid., 141, 151.



FIG. 9. Execution of Czolgosz, with Panorama of Auburn Prison (Edison, 1901).

expanse of large-brick wall occupying the rest of the frame. This is among the earliest cinematic images of a penitentiary, albeit a reconstructed one, and it is ironic that it is an image of a man with minutes left to live. As the four guards approach the cell, Czolgosz steps out of the way, disappearing into the darkness for a few seconds before being retrieved by a guard and marched across the frame. Following another dissolve into the death chamber, the same set but now with white tile halfway up the wall, Czolgosz is solemnly led to the electric chair, quickly strapped in (his lower right leg is bared so that electrodes can be applied). The Edison catalog described the rest of the film as follows: “The current is turned on at a signal from the Warden and the assassin heaves heavily as *though the straps would break*. He drops prone after the current is turned off.”⁶⁸ Edison knew that the movement of Czolgosz’s body when the current was applied would serve as the film’s denouement, and this reference to the electrocuted body breaking its bonds not only introduces narrative suspense when none is needed but underscores the association of electricity with monstrous power—or, rather, the body becoming monstrous. Promotional hyperbole notwithstanding, the copy about the straining body against the leather straps was no exaggeration, since we find an almost identical description of electrocution’s effects upon the body in an account of attending an electrocution written by Sing Sing warden Lewis E. Lawes:

The body of what a moment ago was a living human being leaps forward as if to break its bonds. A thin, wisp of smoke curls slowly up from under the head and there is a faint odor of burning flesh. The hands turn red, then white, and the cords of the neck stand out like steel bands. . . . the drone increases in volume, the body is still straining at the straps. The hands grip the arms of the chair in an ever-tightening grasp. The raucous droning continues. Now there is a general subsidence and the body relaxes. One of the men, apparently a physician, approaches the inert body, applies his stethoscope, shakes his head and steps back. The droning is heard again and

⁶⁸ Cited in Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon*, 188, italics added.

simultaneously the body assumes rigidity . . . and tries to burst its bonds. Again a subsidence, another examination A voice is heard “warden, I pronounce this man dead.”⁶⁹

The forward and backward movement of the prisoner’s body as the current is applied has a corollary in the Phantasmagoria, a sensation Tom Gunning calls a “contradictory sense of emergence from the screen toward the viewer that is evoked and then disavowed.”⁷⁰ There are also galvanistic echoes in Lawes’s multisensory description of the leaping, straining, and gripping body in this unidentified electrocution. Verbs such as “leaps” and “bursts” assign agency to the condemned, as his body’s involuntary movements are interpreted as an attempt to escape. Despite being strapped into the chair, the body of the condemned in electrocution moves, sometimes quite violently (the “unseemly struggles and contortions” of executions were indeed noted by the *Medico-Legal Society*), pitching forward toward the spectator and up and down in the chair as the current was raised and lowered.⁷¹ The movement was often far more dramatic than that seen in *The Execution of Czolgosz*; for example, in 1893, the action of a man’s legs contracting during his electrocution at Auburn Prison was so violent that the front legs of the electric chair ripped from the ground, propelling him face forward into the audience. If anyone was ever in doubt as to the macabre, performative qualities of electrocution, this was a classic case of “the show must go on,” since the man’s by-now-dead body was put back in the chair and electrocuted a second time to ensure that the letter of the law had been followed. The freak show performer provides another intertextual reference, where discourses of otherness, liminality, and a breakdown of binary oppositions governing part versus whole, animal versus human, and shock versus pity evoke complex spectatorial responses. Movement, sound, repetition, and electrocution’s grisly impact upon the hands, neck, and head of the body must have made the pronouncement of death a moment of release for those suffering through witnessing.

Electrocution always threatens to be more than the senses can bear, transforming the freakish occurrence of being struck by lightning into a perverse inversion of nature’s mysterious energy force. Here was technology doing the devil’s work, both in the Phantasmagoria and in the early twentieth-century electrocution. Despite concerted efforts at the actual electrocution to “minimize the opportunity for notoriety or sensationalism on the part of the prisoner as well to insure that *his taking off* should be effected in an orderly and dignified manner,” execution is by definition a sensational and traumatic event to behold, something disavowed in the *Philadelphia Medical Journal* reference to Czolgosz’s “taking off,” as if he were leaving a dinner party instead of being killed by the state.⁷² If advocates for electrocution were looking for a nonspectacular substitute for hanging (a key factor in New York State’s rationale for selecting electricity over more reliable, though messier methods such as a firing squad or the guillotine), they were unsuccessful in their choice of electricity.

⁶⁹ Lewis E. Lawes, *Twenty Thousand Years in Sing Sing* (New York: Ray Long and Richard Smith, 1932), 8, italics added. To mitigate the stench of burning flesh at the double execution of Kenneth Hale and John Leak in 1925, the sheriff lit a cigar in the small North Carolina execution room (Seitz, “Electrocution,” 114).

⁷⁰ Gunning, “Phantasmagoria and the Manufacturing of Illusions,” 35.

⁷¹ “Report of the Committee of the Medico-Legal Society on the Best Method of Execution of Criminals by Electricity,” *Medico-Legal Journal* 6 (1888–89): 278, cited in Essig, *Edison and the Electric Chair*, 228.

⁷² Carlos F. MacDonald, “The Trial, Execution, Autopsy and Mental Status of Leon F. Czolgosz, Alias Fred Nieman, the Assassin of President McKinley,” *Philadelphia Medical Journal* 9 (January 4, 1902): 33, italics added.

HARRY HOUDINI, PICTURE SNATCHER, AND THE GREEN MILE: ELECTROCUTION IN THE POPULAR IMAGINARY

I am ready to ride that thunderbolt boys.

—Sing Sing inmate number 77,681
before being electrocuted⁷³

Harry Houdini (born Erik Weisz) performed regularly in prisons across the United States and Europe at the turn of the last century, offering local constabularies and precincts the opportunity to bet on his escape and turning the prison into a carnivalesque, topsy-turvy world where Houdini flouted governance and regulatory protocol.⁷⁴ Houdini became close friends with Sing Sing warden Lewis E. Lawes (Houdini's widow, Beatrice, donated thirty books from Houdini's library to Lawes after her husband's death), and on Christmas Eve 1924, he performed at the prison, escaping from a hangman's noose and from a packing case that convicts had nailed him into. As a finale, he "produced personal spirit messages from notorious departed inmates at Sing Sing and from Ben Franklin and performed diverse 'spirit' manifestations."⁷⁵ Audiences went wild when Houdini unmoored the semantic fixity of methods of incarceration such as handcuffs and straitjackets; escaping from objects of oppression was a snub to the authorities even if they, too, were cooperative agents never overly concerned about Houdini inspiring a legion of prison breakers. As Fred Nadis argues, "in identifying himself with lock pickers, jail breakers, and other thieves, Houdini took on the aura of the heroic antihero appropriate to the age of the muckrakers."⁷⁶

In 1910, Houdini paid \$6.70 to Hubert's Museum in New York City to acquire the electric chair used to execute William Kemmler.⁷⁷ Citing "sentimental reasons" and plans to use the electric chair in his stage show, Houdini kept the chair in his home, and according to biographer Harold Kellock, "his wife was never able to get this gruesome and unlovely relic out of the house. Whenever she had it quietly removed to the cellar, Houdini missed it and had it brought upstairs again."⁷⁸ Houdini used an electric chair (most likely the one he owned) in the cliffhanger ending of episode seven of the fifteen-episode *The Master Mystery* serial, when in the role of Department of Justice undercover agent Quentin Locke, he must escape before the current is turned on and

⁷³ Sing Sing inmate number 77,681, cited in Lawes, *Life and Death*, 180–81. For more on unusual, often macabre inmate behavior prior to electrocution and ironic factoids about the *Death House*, see *ibid.*, 176–81.

⁷⁴ Houdini broke out of several DC jails, even electing to be locked in the federal prison cell that housed President Garfield's assassin, Charles J. Guiteau. For more on Houdini's jail escapes, see Harold Kellock, *Houdini: His Life-Story* by Harold Kellock from the *Recollection and Documents of Beatrice Houdini* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1928), 188–90.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 344; Ralph Blumenthal, *Miracle at Sing Sing: How One Man Transformed the Lives of America's Most Dangerous Prisoners* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004), 152.

⁷⁶ Fred Nadis, *Wonder Shows: Performing Science, Magic, and Religion in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 125.

⁷⁷ Andrea Stulman Dennett, *Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 58; Kellock, *Houdini*, 122.

⁷⁸ Kellock, *Houdini*, 64. For more on Houdini's magic in relation to cinema, see Matthew Solomon, *Disappearing Tricks: Silent Film, Houdini, and the New Magic of the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

before he is attacked by a giant robot, the mysterious Automaton Q (fig. 10).⁷⁹ The last-minute escape from the electric chair is unremarkable, and the image of Houdini struggling to escape from the restraining straps is a far cry from the more typical cinematic image of the stoic death row inmate. The straps don't look especially tight, Houdini does not wear the leather mask, and on a scale of difficulty, it has none of the tension of Houdini's famous underwater or aerial stunts. The economic benefits of staging an escape within a fictional narrative—shot on a sound stage, Houdini is not in any real danger—rather than an elaborate location stunt where if something goes wrong the magician might die, lessen the corporeal impact of both the chair and Houdini's escape.⁸⁰

Houdini's talent and the electric chair's terror are neutralized by cinema, and even though Houdini reached a far larger audience via the globally distributed films (and escaped the grind of live stunts and the stage), the melodramatic demands of the serial overshadowed the prowess of the escapology (which was often the result of cinematic effects). The fact that the electric chair can be added to the list of both spectacular and more prosaic objects from which Houdini escapes is testimony to electrocution's more settled place within the American imaginary by the late teens. Houdini's escape from an electric chair is also a fascinating reversal of the narrative of *The Execution of Czolgosz* (fig. 11).



FIG. 10. Pathé poster for *The Master Mystery*, starring Houdini, 1919.

⁷⁹ I thank Matthew Solomon for this information on *The Master Mystery* serial. Houdini also made *The Grim Game* (Irvin Willat, 1919) and *Terror Island* (James Cruze, 1920), both featuring his escapology; neither film was financially successful.

⁸⁰ Interestingly, one key element of the staged nature of electrocution is missing from Houdini's film: the mask worn by the condemned, which was a black leather band with an opening for the nostrils that both hid the face and held the head against the headrest. An electrode attached to a skullcap was placed on top of the head.



FIG. 11.

An African American man strapped into an electric chair at Sing Sing in 1901. Photograph taken by William M. Vander Weyde, George Eastman House gift to New York Public Library.

Wikimedia Commons:
http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Electric_Chair_at_Sing_Sing.jpg.

The legacy of the electric chair in *The Execution of Czolgosz* and *The Master Mystery* has survived in two distinct tendencies in twentieth-century cinema. In the version indebted to Czolgosz (though disavowing that film's relentless frontality), the film *Picture Snatcher*, from 1933, reenacts the death of convicted murderess Ruth Snyder, known in the press at the time as "Ruthless Ruth." Cameras had been successfully kept out of the death chamber until this infamous execution on January 12, 1928, when *Chicago Tribune* photographer Tom Howard was hired by the *New York Daily News* and finagled a way to join other journalists in the death chamber and take a photograph with a hidden camera. Seated in the front row of witnesses with a miniature camera strapped to his left ankle and a shutter release concealed in his jacket pocket, Howard lifted up his pant leg and secretly took a photograph of Snyder in the throes of electrocution.⁸¹ Snyder's straining body appeared on the front page of the *New York Daily News* under the headline "DEAD!" (her crime was the inspiration for James M. Cain's novel *Double Indemnity*, which was brought to the screen by Billy Wilder in 1944). James Cagney plays the fast-talking sardonic ex-con Danny Kean in the pre-Code newspaper drama *Picture Snatcher* (fig. 12), a stereotype of the ruthless journalist that Hollywood milked for its box-office appeal to working-class and immigrant audiences.⁸² Egged on by his editor's plea that he'd "give a thousand dollars and my right eye for a flash of that woman in the chair," Cagney persuades Sing Sing Prison guard Captain Pat Nolan to grant him access and take the heat if anything goes wrong, and he joins a half dozen or so other press men and witnesses in the death chamber.

Our experience of electrocution in *Picture Snatcher* is mediated entirely by the journalists, some of whom are dreading the prospect of watching an electrocution: "I'd rather take a beating

⁸¹ Efforts to prosecute Howard and the *Daily News* were unsuccessful; the photograph caused a sensation and became a rallying cry for death penalty opponents. Howard became an overnight star photographer and went on to become head of photography for the White House. See <http://iconicphotos.wordpress.com/2009/05/13/an-execution-at-sing-sing/>.

⁸² See John E. Drewry, "Presidential Address: The Journalist's Inferiority Complex," *Journalism Quarterly* 8 (1931): 12–23, cited in Matthew C. Ehrlich, "Facts, Truth, and Bad Journalists in the Movies," *Journalism* 7, no. 4 (2006): 504.

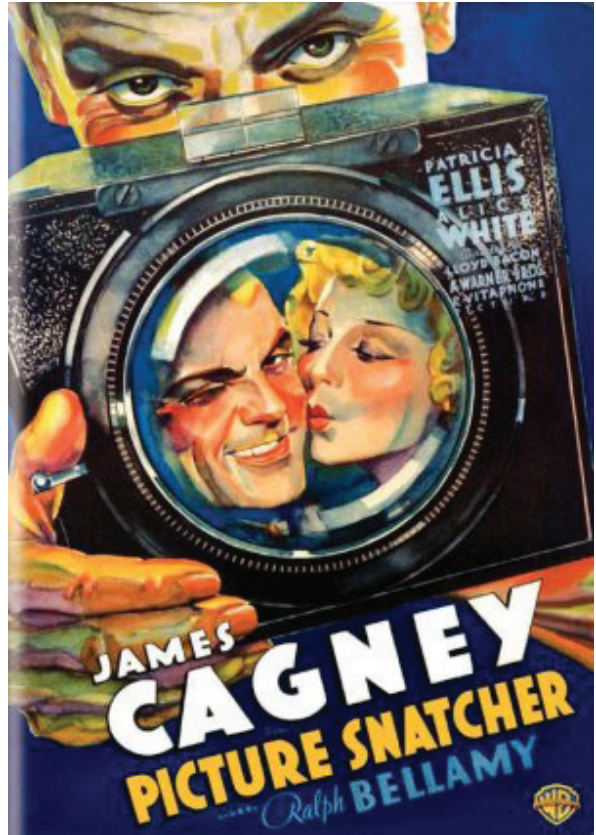


FIG. 12. Poster for *Picture Snatcher* (Lloyd Bacon, 1933), starring James Cagney.
 Wikimedia: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/a/a2/Picture_Snatcher_FilmPoster.jpeg.

than do this,” says one. Others appear nonchalant: “These things don’t faze me at all.” By denying the audience a visual representation of the electric chair and the condemned woman, the director, Lloyd Bacon, re-creates the brutality of electrocution through a set that is a facsimile of Sing Sing’s actual death chamber and the reaction shots of the journalists. The image of the witnesses slowly entering the room and removing their hats as if they’re entering a place of worship, followed by a pan of their faces as the camera moves slowly down the pews to the front row where Cagney is seated, foreshadows exactly how we are going to experience electrocution (one of the men vomits shortly after taking his seat). Following a quick cutaway to Captain Nolan declaring that he’s going to “sit this one out,” we cut back to a medium long shot of the death chamber and a prison officer walking over to pull the lever. Refusing to show us the chair, let alone the condemned, the point of view never waivers; we see neither a shot from the perspective of the female convict nor a journalist point-of-view shot. Staying at an oblique angle to the witnesses, the intensity of the scene is heightened by the auditory intrusion of footsteps and heavy chains, a sound occurring over close-ups of Cagney’s hand on the shutter cord and his pant leg lifting slowly up to expose the camera. It is to the embodied reactions of the journalists, however, who seem to undergo a collective shudder as their bodies mirror the contortions of the executed, that we return for the final shot of the scene.

This has been a harrowing experience even for journalists who had seen it all before. One cannot, it seems, become inured to the horrors of witnessing an electrocution, especially when a woman ends up in the chair. Once safely back at the newspaper, Cagney’s verbal description of

what he saw in the death chamber doesn't jive with our memory of his physical appearance at the prison; speaking in rapid-fire street slang, Cagney fills in the missing visuals like a braggadocio: "There it was, right under my nose, the hot seat. They pop her into the chair, put a hood over her head, and strap her in. One guy gives the offee [sic], the other one throws in the works, and the dame fries." In most respects, the representation of electrocution in *Picture Snatcher* is nothing like that in *The Execution of Czolgosz*; in the former, reaction shots carry the burden of representation, the spectator's imagination forced to fill in the missing visuals, our gaze that of a witness of the witnesses, a disembodied, omniscient presence. Michael Moore chose a similar strategy when representing the carnage of 9/11 in his documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11*, opting for a blank screen and audio of the impact before cutting to slow-motion reaction shots of people crying and staring in total disbelief at the horror of what's unfolding around them. Moore never shows the planes hitting the Twin Towers, only debris falling from the sky, which takes on a tragic beauty since it resembles a winter snowfall or spring cherry blossoms floating to the ground.

The second tendency in the representation of electrocution on film is more indebted to electricity's use in the wonder show⁸³ and Houdini's melodramatic imagining of the electric chair and can be found in films such as *The Green Mile* (directed by Frank Darabont, 1999), an adaptation of Stephen King's eponymous serialized novel. The film fits squarely within the prison film genre, which for over a century of cinema has entertained audiences with stories of escape, inmate culture, wrongful convictions, reform, religious conversion, and capital punishment. *The Green Mile's* representation of race, incarceration, and death row in the fictitious Louisiana Cold Mountain State Penitentiary in 1935 divided critics, and many scholarly readings coalesced around its problematic representation of blackness, hypermasculinity, and a white supremacist imagination.⁸⁴ Tania Modleski accused the film of constructing "offensive racial stereotypes," while Linda Williams situated the film in the "mainstream of the negrophilic Tom tradition," stretching our credulity of white beneficence in the Jim Crow South; ethnic and minority press reviews read the film as a "counter-memory of past race and ethnic oppression."⁸⁵ Pivotal to the narrative, if not the main character, is John Coffey, a seven-foot-tall African American man who has been wrongfully imprisoned for the death of a young girl and who is discovered to have supernatural powers of healing. Meek, infantilized, and echoing the traditional Uncle Tom figure, Coffey is an example of what Christopher John Farley calls MAAFS (Magical African American Friends), a symptom of Hollywood screenwriters' ignorance of the experience of blackness.⁸⁶

⁸³ For more on the history of the wonder show in America, see Nadis, *Wonder Shows*, 6–81. For electricity at a world's fair, see Judith A. Adams, "The Promotion of New Technology through Fun and Spectacle: Electricity at the World's Columbia Exposition," *Journal of American Culture* 18 (1995): 44–55.

⁸⁴ Linda Williams, "Melodrama in Black and White: Uncle Tom and *The Green Mile*," *Film Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (Winter 2001): 17.

⁸⁵ Tania Modleski, "In Hollywood, Racist Stereotypes Can Still Earn 4 Oscar Nominations," review of *The Green Mile*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 3, 2000; Williams, "Melodrama in Black and White," 17. According to Williams, *The Green Mile* reenacts "all the worst anti-Tom scenarios of the paranoid white racist imagination in order to disavow them," "rescu[ing] white Americans from the guilt of putting the innocent black man to death" (20). The Christian press constitutes a third interpretive community that identified with the film's anagogic themes, viewing John Coffey as a redemptive Christlike figure and the film as an allegory of the Christian Passion. For a discussion of different readings of the film, see A. Susan Owen and Peter Ehrenhaus, "Communities of Memory, Entanglements, and Claims of the Past upon the Present: Reading Race Trauma through *The Green Mile*," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 27, no. 2 (June 2010): 131–54.

⁸⁶ Heather J. Hicks, "Hoodoo Economics: White Men's Work and Black Men's Magic in Contemporary American Film," *Camera Obscura* 18, no. 2 (2003): 27.

Set during the peak of executions in the United States, *The Green Mile's* representation of three electrocutions, each one of which is very difficult to watch, even from the psychic safety of a fictional story, can hardly be accused of exaggerating the frequency and relative normalcy of electrocution, especially in the Deep South. The film is essentially one long flashback by former chief prison guard Paul Edgecomb (played by Tom Hanks), who narrates the story from a retirement home set in the present. Constructed as a "memory project" by the film's protagonist, the film was also viewed through the memory lens of slavery, with some reviewers arguing that John Coffey could be seen as a "historically authentic representation of black experience during Jim Crow," especially those wrongly convicted of murder and lacking adequate legal representation.⁸⁷

What makes *The Green Mile* especially interesting for our purposes is that cinema and electrocution are conjoined in reflexive, somewhat surreal ways in this film. On the eve of Coffey's execution, when asked by Edgecombe if there's anything he'd like, Coffey replies, "Ain't never seen me a flicker show." The close-up of Coffey's face cuts immediately to a shot of the back of his head (fig. 13) as he watches Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers singing "Heaven, I'm in Heaven" from the "Cheek to Cheek" sequence in Mark Sandrich's 1935 *Top Hat*. The death chamber has been transformed into an improvised motion picture theater, the screen set up in the location usually reserved for the electric chair (fig. 14). Coffey, in a reverse angle of where he will sit during his execution, takes a seat in the area reserved for witnesses. The projector beam not only backlights Coffey but shores up his mystical, "Suffering Servant" identity and foreshadows the "negative sublimity of the Passion" when he is electrocuted the following day (his initials, JC, support this idea) (fig. 15).⁸⁸ The image of the inmate temporarily released from the psychic burden of incarceration also refers to the sequence in Preston Sturges's *Sullivan's Travels* (1941) in which prisoners watch a film.⁸⁹ And given that cinema and electrocution coexisted in prisons in spaces that looked strangely similar (spectators sat on pews facing the front of a room in both the chapel, which doubled as the place where most prisoners first watched films, and the death chamber at Sing Sing), they circled around similar ideas of the uncanny, liminality, and the grotesque.

Coffey's execution takes place during an electrical storm, which suggests both nature's wrath at the killing of an innocent who has supernatural powers of healing and also the ungodliness of electrocution, which in this scene is near apocalyptic.⁹⁰ Devices sanctioned and, in the case of motion pictures, invented by Edison are aligned in *The Green Mile*, reminding us of electrocution's and cinema's histories in the traveling showman's arsenal of popular gimmicks. Indeed, as peripatetic devices, early cinema and electric chairs could become mobile deliverers of spectacle. Mississippi's newly adopted electric chair in the early 1940s was "trundled from county to county on the back of a truck," and in miniaturized form, the electric chair was a macabre toy, which in the case of the three-inch version owned by John Blackburn, former warden of Louisiana's Angola

⁸⁷ Owen and Ehrenhaus, "Communities of Memory," 132, 136.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁸⁹ For an analysis of this sequence and a discussion of the earliest exhibition of cinema in prisons, see Alison Griffiths, "A Portal to the Outside World: Motion Pictures in the Penitentiary," *Film History* 25:4 (2013): 1–35.

⁹⁰ There are two additional electrocutions in *The Green Mile*. The first, while difficult to watch, has no obvious mistakes or equipment malfunctions. The second is horrific beyond words and reminiscent of the blood-curdling fiasco that was William Kemmler's electrocution. The procedure is sabotaged by a sociopathic guard, who places a dry, instead of a wet, sponge on the condemned man's shaved head, which causes the prisoner's body to burst into flames and be charred beyond recognition.



FIG. 13. *The Green Mile* (Frank Darabont, 1999) in which inmate John Coffey watches the film *Top Hat* in the prison's death chamber.



FIG. 14. *The Green Mile* showing the death chamber transformed into a movie theater.



FIG. 15. *The Green Mile* showing Coffey transformed into a messianic figure by the backlit beam of the film projector.

Prison, delivered a small electric shock whenever it was touched.⁹¹ Like Blackburn, who would roar with laughter when an unsuspecting visitor received a shock, Edison also saw humor in electricity's ability to surprise, using it to play pranks with an induction coil in his days as a peripatetic telegrapher. And when Edison entertained the idea of opening a "Scientific Toy Company," one of the devices he hoped to sell was a "Magneto-elec-Shocking-Machine" that, like the electric chair, would shock those who had the misfortune to come into contact with it.⁹²

ACCOMMODATING ELECTROCUTION: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Despite garnering significant publicity for the prison, Sing Sing's annual theatrical show, put on entirely by members of the prisoners' Mutual Welfare League, was always trumped by the attention associated with a scheduled electrocution, which brought the media out in droves and provided a different kind of "wonder show" for an assembled audience of state-mandated witnesses and journalists. When it came to scheduling, however, the theatrical show took precedence over an electrocution, as evidenced by the two-hour delay of the execution of Peter A. Seiler and George Ricci in December 1927 to accommodate the revival of Gershwin's 1924 hit *Sweet Little Devil*⁹³ and the postponement of the December 1932 execution of Charles Markowitz and Joseph Brown from the traditional Thursday night slot to 12:30 A.M. Saturday, immediately following the final performance of the Sing Sing annual review.⁹⁴ The annual show was pivotal in projecting an image of reform at work, in which convicted men showed off their artistic skills and raised money for the Mutual Welfare League benevolence fund. Electrocution, however, closed down the possibility of reform, and for this reason was always bracketed off from the penitentiary's potential as a regenerative force.

By the time electricity had been fully integrated into American homes in the 1920s, picture palaces dominated big-city filmgoing and cinema had won the respectability battle.⁹⁵ One thousand or so electrocutions were carried out annually in the United States in the 1920s.⁹⁶ Electrocution using alternating current was the industry standard around the country from 1890 until the 1980s, when it was largely replaced by lethal injection.⁹⁷ The public outcry following Kemmler's execution was by then a distant memory. And perhaps many had forgotten just how pivotal a role Edison had played in the establishment and acceptance of electrocution (when asked how quickly electricity could kill a man, Edison replied: "In the ten-thousandth part of a second"). In the words of an 1890 *New York Times* reporter, "it was Edison's testimony

⁹¹ Seitz, "Electrocution," 104.

⁹² Essig, *Edison and the Electric Chair*, 46.

⁹³ Blumenthal, *Miracle at Sing Sing*, 160.

⁹⁴ Elliot and Beatty, *Agent of Death*, 133. *The New York Times* recently ran a story about one of the few remaining arts-in-corrections program, the Actors' Gang theater program, which presented Molière's *Tartuffe* at the California Rehabilitation Center in Norco. See Adam Nagourney, "An Actors' Studio behind Bars Energizes Inmates," *New York Times*, July 1, 2011, A1, 11, 15.

⁹⁵ For more on the reformation of theater space and shifts in representational practices to reflect the influence of women's domesticity, see Lee Grieveson, *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early Twentieth Century America* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 78–120.

⁹⁶ Essig, *Edison and the Electric Chair*, 290.

⁹⁷ Texas and Oklahoma were the first states to change to lethal injection, quickly followed by several other states. The Georgia Supreme Court deemed electrocution "unconstitutionally cruel" in 2001 (Essig, *Edison and the Electric Chair*, 284–85).

more than any other factor that led the courts to rule that the electric chair was neither cruel nor inhuman.”⁹⁸

Edison’s *Execution of Czolgosz* was responding to a public fascination with execution that was at its height between 1890 and 1905, with hundreds of individuals writing letters to prison wardens either volunteering to pull the lever or asking for permission to attend as witnesses. According to New York State executioner Robert Greene Elliot, who replaced John Hulbert as New York State’s executioner in 1926 (he also worked in a similar capacity for neighboring states), multiple executions increased the requests from would-be witnesses, with one applicant declaring, “The more there are, the better the show.”⁹⁹ For at least some, watching *The Execution of Czolgosz* was the next best thing to being at the actual event.

For Elliot, attending motion pictures served a therapeutic function before a scheduled execution: “the feature [in Charlestown, Massachusetts] was a light, sparkling comedy, and helped me to forget the task which lay ahead of me,” Elliot recalled in his memoir.¹⁰⁰ Having seen firsthand the reactions of thousands of witnesses to electrocutions, Elliot could speak with authority on the topic of spectator response: “I have seen them turn pale, tremble, or gag as they watched life depart from a human being. I have seen them stare off into space; cover their eyes with their hands . . . , fidget nervously with some piece of clothing. I have heard them groan feebly or cry out. . . . some try and peek into or enter the autopsy room after it is all over. Officers have actually had to order a few to leave . . . so insistent were they on remaining.”¹⁰¹ We see some of those reactions among the depicted journalists in *Picture Snatcher*.

The closest most people would come to these sensations is the movies, where horror, albeit of a fictive kind, might scare and sometimes traumatize those purchasing the experience. And while the outcome of an electrocution is known, how it plays out generates an element of narrative suspense—as it did in hanging—a factor that nudges electrocution even further into the realm of the cinematic.¹⁰² Kemmler, who “dreaded the long drop and thought he’d rather be shocked to death,” was transformed into a circus act on the morning of his electrocution, and Edison tapped into this sadistic horror in both *The Execution of Czolgosz* and *Electrocuting an Elephant*.¹⁰³ Houdini’s name can be added to the ranks of countless actors who sat in electric chairs in filmed renditions of electrocutions; some inmates have also come perilously close to taking their seat before a last-minute reprieve arrived. And the world of fiction and drama documentary is the only legal space for the representation of execution, given that US law, holding that the news media have no First Amendment right to televise executions, still bans cameras from recording them.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁸ The phrase “cruel and unusual punishment” is from the Eighth Amendment, which states that “excessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines, nor *cruel and unusual punishment*.” Cited in Denno, “Is Electrocutation an Unconstitutional Method of Execution?,” 557n24, italics added. The phrase was appropriated from the English Bill of Rights (1689), where it was intended to inhibit a return to such inhumane methods of killing as drawing and quartering and burning alive (Essig, *Edison and the Electric Chair*, 133, 81).

⁹⁹ Elliot and Beatty, *Agent of Death*, 230.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 223.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 237.

¹⁰² For more on the unpredictability of hanging, see Brandon, *Electric Chair*, 32–38.

¹⁰³ *Buffalo Evening News*, May 10, 1889, cited in Essig, *Edison and the Electric Chair*, 167. In Brandon’s words, Kemmler was introduced to the witnesses as if by “a master of ceremonies announcing an act” (Brandon, *Electric Chair*, 26).

¹⁰⁴ Dane A. Drobný, “Death TV: Media Access to Executions under the First Amendment,” *Washington University Law Quarterly* 70 (1992): 1180.

The Execution of Czolgosz might have been doubly fascinating for European audiences since here was a film that marked the United States as distinct from Europe in its use of electrocution. And while most Europeans were broadly united in their horrified reaction to Kemmler's electrocution, doubtless there were others who wished that the method could have been exported to European soil. In defining the American experience, the electric chair provided a metacomment on European modes of dealing with society's criminals: here was a putatively modern killing machine, offered as less bloody than the guillotine and more precise than hanging, although neither of these claims proved true. The death chamber represented in *The Execution of Czolgosz* was not a hermetically sealed space untainted by popular culture or rituals appropriated from scientific and pseudoscientific practices but a nexus of influences where the pre-cinematic came face-to-face with one of the twentieth century's most brutal inventions.

By creating what might be considered a textbook electrocution, and one that can be infinitely repeated via the cinematic loop, Edison used Czolgosz's electrocution to expunge the historical record and possibly expurgate any lingering guilt he might have had about his role in legalizing death by electrocution in New York State. Edison's cinematic faux eyewitness testimony supports the efficacy and legality of this form of capital punishment. Witnessing electrocution's effect upon the body—albeit acted rather than real—*Czolgosz's* spectators, like the spectators of all electrocution films, shared a curious historical legacy with those of electrical wonder shows, the Chamber of Horrors waxwork, the Phantasmagoria, and salon-based scientific experiments, displays involving electricity that swept Europe in the 1740s, such as the Venus Electrification, whose kisses threw sparks at spectators, and countless experiments at London's Royal Society.¹⁰⁵

Edison was doing nothing new when he decided to combine the actual location of Czolgosz's execution with re-created footage. The British crime reconstruction film *Arrest of Goudie* (1901), made by the Mitchell and Kenyon Company and exhibited by Ralph Pringle, also used actual locations but in this instance re-created the crime exactly where it had taken place and included the arrest of gambling-fraud victim Thomas Peterson Goudie, who was accused of embezzlement. Like *Czolgosz*, the *Arrest of Goudie* was also timely, released, remarkably, only two days after Goudie's arrest, and it also drew, as Vanessa Toulmin has argued, on a Victorian fascination with crime reports and the waxwork. Unlike *The Execution of Czolgosz*, however, the film leveraged meaning from the local-interest film—a specialty of the Mitchell and Kenyon Company—and reenacted the event of the *arrest* rather than the event of the execution.¹⁰⁶

Execution films have contributed to a carceral imagination about what goes on in the darkest recesses of the penitentiary. And while none of the films, save the no longer extant *An Execution by Hanging* (AM&B, 1898), are of an actual execution, they are part of a death penalty film genre comprising documentaries about incarceration, such as *Fourteen Days in May* (Paul Hamann, 1988), *The Thin Blue Line* (Errol Morris, 1998), and *The Trials of Darryl Hunt* (Ricki Stern and Anne Sundberg, 2006); and fictional films, such as *Angels with Dirty Faces* (Michael Curtiz, 1938), *Dead Man Walking* (Tim Robbins, 1995), *In Cold Blood* (Richard Brooks, 1967), *Executioner's Song* (Lawrence Schiller, 1982), and *Monster's Ball* (Marc Forster, 2001). Watching a film like *The Execution of Czolgosz* today, we are reminded of the fact that as incarceration activist

¹⁰⁵ Morus, *Frankenstein's Children*, 43–98.

¹⁰⁶ Toulmin, "An Early Crime Film Rediscovered," 37. *The Arrest of Goudie* actually consists of two rolls of negative film, the first lasting four minutes and showing eight scenes; the second lasting about 100 seconds and showing four scenes that lead up to Goudie's arrest (41–43). For more on the Mitchell and Kenyon collection, see Vanessa Toulmin, *Electric Edwardians: The Films of Mitchell and Kenyon* (London: BFI, 2008).

and feminist theorist Angela Davis argues, prisons have remained “one of the most important features of our image environment,” causing us to take their very existence for granted.¹⁰⁷ There is nothing “everyday” about an execution, however, as testified by the reaction of *Czolgosz*’s twenty-first century spectators, some of whom are not quite sure (especially if they have no knowledge of early cinema) if what they are witnessing is real. This was less likely to have been the case for *Czolgosz*’s contemporaneous spectators, who had undoubtedly heard of the infamous assassin and knew that the film was a reenactment. But *Czolgosz* defies easy explanation, even as an example of what the Biograph Company called “News Happenings.”¹⁰⁸ It might have afforded us virtual access to the penitentiary’s death chamber, but it also laid bare the “trace of ‘torture’ in the modern mechanisms of criminal justice,” the paradox of the noncorporal penal system.¹⁰⁹ *Czolgosz*’s legacy is not simply that of cinema’s role as illustrated newspaper or of the cruel and unusual punishment that is electrocution but a fascination with the magic that is electricity and its ability to give and take away life, properties shared by the cinematograph. A

¹⁰⁷ Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 18.

¹⁰⁸ G. W. Bitzer, *Billy Bitzer: His Story* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), cited in Bottomore, “Every Phase of Present-Day Life,” 159.

¹⁰⁹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 16.