Is any girl safe? Female spectators at the white slave films

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During the 1910s, American cinema experienced a profound transformation, perhaps the most significant and far-reaching in its history. Throughout the early part of the decade, industry figures fought hard to shed cinema’s association with cheap amusements. The often hastily converted storefront nickelodeons of five and ten years earlier gave way to larger, more lavish theatres devoted exclusively to the presentation of motion pictures. Audiences grew in increasing numbers and widening diversity as movies became the nation’s principal form of recreation. Narrative and aesthetic strategies became ever more complex as material of prestigious literary and dramatic lineage was adapted for the screen. And finally, studio production methods newly based in Hollywood ensured that filmmaking became, by the end of the decade, one of the most profitable industries in the country. The dominant note of the immediately pre-classical era, then, was the industry’s bid for greater respectability: economic respectability, aesthetic respectability, but, above all, social respectability.

A rash of sensational and – for the time – sexually explicit films on white slavery, released in the mid teens, posed a serious challenge to these efforts. With lurid titles like The Inside of the White Slave Traffic (1913), Smashing the Vice Trust (1914) House of Bondage (1914) and Is Any Girl Safe? (1916), the films fuelled an already raging nationwide panic.1 Young women were warned that ‘cadets’ recruiting for the vice trade lurked everywhere in US cities and were ready to snatch victims at every opportunity. Taking their stories from shocking case-histories of the day, the white slave films resisted

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industry uplift. In fact, *Traffic in Souls*, the earliest of this notorious craze, became the first feature-length film not adapted from literary source material when it was released in November 1913. Just as the industry promoted ‘films of quality’, movies on sexual slavery drew huge crowds and set box-office records around the nation. Not surprisingly, the films garnered an equal amount of controversy, both within the film industry striving to elevate its reputation, and within the progressive reform community already apprehensive about the merits of entertainments like cinema.

Chief amongst the concerns expressed about the ‘slavers’ was the sizeable number of young women said to have been present in screening audiences, apparently eager for tales about their onscreen counterparts who had been spirited away to brothels. The *New York Times*, not normally inclined to cover matters of the cinema at the time, gave special mention to the crowd of several hundred young women turned away from the premiere of *The Inside of the White Slave Traffic*, an extremely controversial film released on the heels of *Traffic in Souls* in December 1913. ‘A large proportion of the audience was composed of young girls from sixteen to eighteen years of age’, the *Times* reported. ‘Fully two-thirds of the audience were women.’

Variety observed early the next year that ‘vice pictures’ are attracting in the majority mostly young couples, who sit in the dark while having ‘ideas’ indelibly forced upon them from pictures on the sheet. When *The Little Girl Next Door* opened at Chicago’s LaSalle Theatre in 1916, a full-page advertisement in *Motion Picture News* quoted the theatre owner’s claim that ‘at 25 cents for all seats, [it] is doing the biggest business of any picture we ever played. We have a line of people waiting to get in all day and evening.’

An accompanying photo shows as many women as men visible in a crowd gathering outside the theatre.

That women were attracted to material of this nature at a time when industry uplift was tied in no small measure to its ability to attract ‘respectable’ middle-class women challenged inherent presumptions about female viewers. The films appealed to women not on the virtuous grounds which the exhibitors purported to uphold, but through sensationalism and titillation. The controversy surrounding women’s attendance at these films suggests that, however much coveted by exhibitors, female moviegoers still posed a challenge to the industry. Questions about women’s participation in commercial leisure sites such as the cinema surface in discussions of the white slave films, as do concerns about the very nature of female spectatorship, with its suggestion of voyeurism and visual licence. For these very reasons, the discourse generated about women’s attendance at white slave films marks a significant juncture in the pre-classical era, when narrative strategies remained in flux, and competing claims sought to define cinema’s audience. Because these films engendered controversy at a time when women’s moviegoing was an explicit topic for the
industry, the debate surrounding their exhibition provides a singular instance when female spectatorship was theorized and problematized within the industry itself. A debate about female viewers at this stage thus foregrounds notions about female filmgoing that grounded the consolidation of classical narrative and specular codes towards the latter half of the decade, as well as the potentially liberating aspects of film spectatorship open to women in this historical moment.

The link between women's recreation and vice, upon which white slave narratives turned, positioned cinema at its nexus as both site of potential entrapment and source of information. Even as films became one of the primary means by which sensational tales of the slave traffic were disseminated in the early 1910s, motion picture theatres featured prominently in warnings against the vice trade. Accounts of women being approached at and abducted from dance halls, amusement parks, movie houses and other leisure sites, or lured there on the pretext of dates, then drugged and carried off to brothels, proliferated in the white slave discourse. Although decidedly popular as recreation venues, cinemas were also cast as settings where women placed themselves in jeopardy of encountering slave traffickers.

Describing conditions under which young women made themselves vulnerable to vice ring operatives in his 1913 study of *Commercialized Prostitution in New York City*, George Kneeland warned that white slave 'procurers' 'attend steamboat excursions, are found at the sea shore and amusement parks, in moving picture shows, at the public dance halls – in fact, wherever girls congregate for business or for pleasure'.7 According to the prominent Chicago vice crusader Clifford Roe, 'everywhere girls may be easily approached [procurers] hunt them', including the nickel theatre.8 Municipal commissions charged with investigating conditions of prostitution and white slavery in many US cities during the 1910s drew similar conclusions. The Chicago Vice Commission listed motion pictures 'among the recreational conditions directly tributory to the increase of the victims of vice'.9 While Philadelphia's study reported that 'moving picture shows ... are breeding-places of vice – the rendezvous of men who entrap girls and of girls who solicit men'.10 The Rockefeller Grand Jury, charged with investigating white slavery in New York, reported of cinemas that 'many girls owe their ruin to frequenting them'.11 'Procurers and white slave traffickers watch for young girls at moving picture theatres or win their attention by inviting them to these places',12 cautioned reformer Maude Miner in her study *The Slavery of Prostitution*. In an oft-quoted indictment, women's suffrage leader, Dr Anna Howard Shaw, dubbed dimly-lit movie theatres 'recruiting stations of vice' in 1910, arguing that 'there should be a police woman at the entrance of every moving picture show and another inside' and citing a case in Chicago where, so she claimed, 'twenty-three young girls in one month were lured from a moving picture show and shipped to Texas for immoral purposes'.13 That same year, a New York magistrate

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declared that ‘more young women and girls are led astray in [moving picture palaces] than in any other way’.14 What was it about movie theatres – and women’s behaviour there – that prompted such strong admonitions?

Recreation surveys also conducted by various municipalities in these years suggest that, by the early 1910s, women formed a significant component of the motion picture audience – and in some cases comprised the majority of box-office admissions in a given week.15 The cinema offered young, single, working women a convenient, inexpensive mode of socializing with male and female friends beyond their parents’ supervision, and neighbourhood theatres served as gathering spots where their married counterparts might find companionship and an afternoon’s entertainment.16 Women had clearly integrated movies into emergent patterns of work and leisure by the early 1910s; indeed female patronage was energetically courted by exhibitors eager to enhance the cinema’s reputation.17 Yet the continuing characterization of theatres as unsafe for women suggests that their status as patrons and viewers remained to be negotiated, even as late as mid-decade.

Cinemas were described by many observers as arenas of particular carnal licence, where women were alternately preyed upon by salacious men who gathered around entrance ways, and themselves tempted to engage in untoward conduct. One report claimed that ‘vicious men and boys mix with the crowd in front of the theatres and take liberties with very young girls’,18 another that ‘around the entrance of the movies a group of human vultures usually hovers waiting to flirt or to make familiar remarks or to “pick up” girls’.19 Darkened theatre interiors ‘offer facilities for forming acquaintances which are often dangerous’.20 Screenings under such conditions posed ‘a terrible menace to the morals of young girls’, since ‘to these theatres with their atmosphere of darkness and obscurity flock the procurer’.21 Even more worrisome were reports of young women’s participation in this dynamic. Social workers observing new patterns of socializing noted that women commonly made acquaintances with unfamiliar men at movie theatres, and that in many cases these alliances led to sexual liaisons afterwards.22 Obviously troubled by such conduct, renowned reformer Jane Addams described a class of young women ‘who come to grief through the five-cent theatres’ because they ‘may be induced unthinkingly to barter [their] chastity for an entrance fee’.23 In these accounts, crowded lobby areas that permitted a panoply of eroticized looking, along with shadowy viewing spaces that afforded a measure of privacy and anonymity beneficial to romantic encounters, rendered women equally vulnerable. As one uneasy theatre owner observed, ‘works of evil multiply under the cover of darkness and the danger of a poorly lighted theatre to the weak-minded and weak-willed young people can hardly be exaggerated’.24

In such cautionary tales, venues like the cinema were perceived to have a constant sexual undertone, one in which women's presence was immediately and perilously eroticized. These characterizations articulate the contradictory position of female viewers at the time: although their presence was thought to lend 'refinement' to theatre audiences, women themselves risked endangerment there. The paradoxical nature of this equation is best expressed by Lauren Rabinovitz, who argues that just as amusements like the cinema solicited the female gaze, they also confirmed women's status as object of the gaze both on- and offscreen.25 Within the exhibition space, women maintained a delicate balance as both spectator and spectacle, customer and commodity. There as patrons and consumers, women were also looked at and traded upon in sexually charged recreation venues.

Contemporary reservations about the cinema echo broader apprehensions about the emergence of a heterosexual dating culture surrounding commercial recreation sites. New courtship patterns caused considerable consternation among social critics of the day, who worried about the free association of single, unchaperoned young people at these locales and the romances frequently spawned there, many of which involved some sexual component. Within this turn-of-the-century dating culture it became acceptable for single working-class women to offer sexual 'favours' of one degree or another in exchange for being treated at amusement sites, as historian Kathy Peiss has charted.26 Of young women's behaviour at popular venues, Belle Lindner Israels observed, rather delicately, in her 1909 study, 'one of [a young woman's] partners of the evening may exact tribute for standing treat.'27 Since women earned considerably lower salaries than men, being treated was one of the few ways many of them could partake of commercial leisure activities on a regular basis. At recreational venues, Peiss declares, 'familiarity and intermingling among strangers, not decorum, defined normal public behaviour among the sexes'.28 The challenges such conduct posed to conventional views of courtship – not to say standards of decorous femininity – were enormous. Collier's magazine observed of the 'working girl' in 1913:

always her chastity has been protected by father and brother, by church, and by the watchful community. Now for the first time in history that chastity is intrusted to her young eager self for safe-keeping or for bartering [emphasis mine].29

The image of America's daughters 'bartering' their bodies for trifles like movie admissions and amusement-park rides, one which Jane Addams also evoked, must have been alarming indeed. It bore the unmistakable taint of prostitution. Within such a climate, misgivings about women's comportment on dates were readily transported into alarmist tales of white slavery and...
sexual abduction. In his 1915 study of Popular Amusements, Richard Henry Edwards conclusively linked ‘the amusement problem’ with ‘the vice problem’. Describing the atmosphere in venues catering to single, working-class patrons of both sexes, Edwards found that the ‘easy-going familiarity’ of such settings ‘frequently degenerates into promiscuous sociability’ in which ‘a more or less general promiscuity of relationships may emerge’, concluding that ‘these are the factors sought by the underworld in its recruiting stations’. Sexual activity led irrevocably to sexual slavery, Edwards seemed to suggest. Tales of unwilling sexual entrapment by vice rings hence served to mask anxieties about young women’s courtship activities, while tacitly recognizing the sexual undercurrent of recreation culture. The fictional procurer, always said to be hovering on the margins of these sites, personified the way leisure spaces furnished an arena for illicit gazing. Female sexuality was at once acknowledged and averted. In the end, concern over women’s safety in movie theatres suggests less any real danger of abduction – of which there is very little evidence – than the difficulty of imagining women’s wilful engagement in an eroticized milieu. In giving women’s leisure pursuits an unmistakable taint of peril, fanciful accounts of abduction registered mounting wariness about the dating culture emerging between young working-class men and women. They also evinced a growing discrepancy between middle-class reformers’ notions of feminine propriety and working women’s evolving expressions of sexuality, for outcry over white slavery ultimately licensed greater control over women’s recreational pastimes.

The persistent association of cinema with sexual danger also echoes an even older connection between female leisure patrons and prostitutes. The fact that until the turn of the century prostitutes had been among the most mobile and visible women in US cities is also central to understanding this controversy, for, long before the white slave panic gained currency, women attending leisure venues without male escort were frequently taken for prostitutes. Throughout much of the past century, most of the highly prominent women at recreation sites like saloons and cabarets had in fact been prostitutes catering to the largely male clientele. So forceful were these connotations that well into the early twentieth century women’s attendance at commercial recreation sites, particularly if unaccompanied, still carried strong suggestions of solicitation. As late as 1908, New York City’s mayor described ‘a class of disorderly women who confine their activities to the moving picture shows, which, operating with darkened rooms, afford unusual facilities for a traffic of scandalous proportions’. Such allusions inflect discussions of women attending films on white slavery, where there is a constant slippage between descriptions of prostitutes using theatres for solicitation, women sexually assaulted or abducted by traffickers, and women on dates willingly engaging in romantic and sexual liaisons. This suggests that...
the latter category – women who were voluntarily sexually active, and neither prostitutes nor victims of the slave trade – was difficult for contemporary commentators to fathom. The white slave fantasy – that trafficking rings used movie houses to procure women – simply inverted this scenario, casting women as helpless victims, while retaining the association between female patrons and prostitution. Histrionic tales of sexual abduction thus framed the growing presence of 'respectable' women at the movies in terms consistent with an older model of feminine conduct which linked their attendance to solicitation.

Thus far I have dealt mainly with the struggle to define a place for women at screening spaces, as paying customers and leisure consumers. Equally evident in the discourse on the white slave films is the struggle to define a place for the female spectating subject in cinema’s imaginary optical field. Commentators not only grappled with women’s participation in the visual and sexual dynamics of exhibition sites, they also sought to map out a locus for women within the fictive narrative space opened up on screen, a project certainly unique to the cinema. The voyeuristic latitude granted more than ever to spectators in the evolving cinema of narrative integration was particularly pronounced for women, viewers not normally accustomed to looking freely and openly in polite society. Negotiating a place for female viewers within cinema’s new visual topology was made all the more troubling by the white slave films: their sexually frank subject matter was assumed to repulse women, yet contemporary critics could not ignore women’s evident attraction to the material. What pleasures did these films offer which might entice women to the cinema, a site where they were, after all, supposedly at risk of encountering slave trade operatives?

Among the most explicit of their time, films on white slavery provoked heated debate about what patrons, both male and female, were paying to see. Moving Picture World’s critic, W. Stephen Bush, who had much invested in efforts to promote the industry, concluded that public screenings of the 'slaver' The House of Bondage would 'do more harm to the motion picture art than it is possible to calculate'. Despite the picture’s ties to a respected novel and stage adaptation, Bush dubbed it ‘vile and revolting’, a ‘digest of dirt’, a ‘wretchedly cheap concoction’, an ‘infernal picturing of filth’, a ‘horrible abortion’, a ‘sickening monstrosity’ and a ‘mass of corruption’ – all in the course of a single review. His scorn, though obviously excessive, typifies much of the reaction that white slave films provoked from a trade press worried that such material could ‘lower the esteem in which film plays are held’. “They are all bad”, Variety said of vice films, ‘not alone for the public, but for the moving picture industry’.

In addition to seriously undermining the industry’s attempts to bolster its reputation, apprehension about cinematic portrayals of white slavery engaged the era’s larger debate about ‘motion picture morals’,...
a sustained dialogue on the merits of moving picture scripts and their effects on viewers. By the mid teens, cinema’s already-established notoriety began to shift away from concerns about conditions at exhibition sites, emblematized of course in the December 1908 New York City theatre closings. Instead, mounting attention focused on the virtues and vices presented onscreen, as a series of popular articles investigated topics like ‘The morals of the movies’, ‘The immoral morality of the movies’, and ‘The utter hopelessness of the movies’. Were films too violent and risqué? Were cinematic characters justifiably punished for wrongdoing? Could viewers be unduly influenced by immoral acts witnessed onscreen? Although admittedly nonplussed by the conduct of unchaperoned young people at his theatre, one small-town exhibitor claimed to be far more troubled by the motion pictures themselves. There is ‘too much blood and thunder and crime on the screen’, he reported, asking for stories on more wholesome subjects. ‘The movies are endlessly preoccupied with sex’ lamented another observer. How such material might affect viewers, who could become ‘vulgarized through the eye’, was also of significant concern. ‘It is the psychology - or rather total absence of it - in the average moving-picture play that constitutes its greatest danger to the growing mind’, one writer insisted. Acknowledging that motion pictures are ‘probably the greatest single force in shaping the American character’, a 1910 magazine piece feared cinema’s ‘suggestive’ effects, citing two Pittsburgh youths who attempted to hold up a street car after watching a train robbery portrayed on screen, a Newark man who killed himself by emulating a film heroine’s attempted suicide, and a Philadelphia man who murdered his wife after seeing a similar scene enacted at the movies the previous evening.

Evidence that attention focused less on fire hazards, ventilation systems and promiscuity among theatre patrons, as it had in the early nickelodeon era, and more often on the process of film viewing itself, points to broader transformations in the pre-classical cinema. New concerns about spectator-text relations signify an evolving theorization of ‘spectatorship’ that Miriam Hansen has charted in the early teens. The movement towards classical strategies of cinematic narration throughout the transitional period enabled a modified form of film viewing, Hansen maintains, one which ‘sought more consistently to ensure the spectator’s perceptual placement within narrative space’ and, as a consequence, ‘corresponded to an increased derealization of the theatre space - the physical and social space of the spectator’. Accordingly, industry discourse moved away from generic references to the film audience around 1910, Hansen argues, and began conceiving of an abstract spectator. Film viewers were increasingly seen not just as paying customers, but as individuals structured in an imaginary visual space through the act of viewing. ‘The term “spectator”’, she writes, ‘implied a shift from a collective, plural

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38 For information on the repressive response to storefront nickelodeons in New York City between 1907 and 1913, see Uricchio and Pearson, Reframing Culture, pp. 24–33.
39 See, for example, ‘The morals of the movies’, The Outlook, no. 106, 20 June 1914: 369–4;
40 ‘The morals of the movies’, p. 662.
46 Ibid., p. 83.
notion of the film viewer to a singular, unified but potentially universal category'.

Unease about the presence of women at the white slave films noticeably registered these evolving notions of spectatorship. The way that cinema enabled a fictive remapping of a viewer’s relation to social space – although potentially liberating for women – was for the same reason threatening to many contemporary commentators. An industry actively courting female patronage also began to consider the implications of female spectatorship. Indeed, the white slave film controversy shows an industry pivoting on the distinction between the characterization of cinema’s social audience and the various spectatorial positions offered therein.

Some commentators, mostly those promoting white slave pictures, actually welcomed women in the audience at screenings. They hoped that the appearance of female patrons might lessen the taint of tawdriness that adhered to the material; that women might lend the films an air of credibility, reframing their salacious narratives as ‘educational’ vehicles; and that the female gaze might bestow upon the films an instructional purpose and merit. The producer of The Inside of the White Slave Traffic, for instance, opened the film concurrently at the relatively upscale Park Theatre on Columbus Circle in New York City and in the garment mill town of Troy, New York, claiming, ‘I was eager to get the picture in towns like Troy, because I wanted to get the picture before factory girls, the most frequent sufferers from the evil which we are fighting’. A full-page advertisement in Motion Picture News offering state’s rights to The Little Girl Next Door pledged that the picture furnished ‘what every girl should know’, simultaneously underscoring the film’s educational tone and its appeal to female viewers. A reviewer for the Minneapolis Journal went even further, advocating that Traffic in Souls should not be shown to the moviegoing public, but be reserved solely for immigrant women arriving at Ellis Island and for rural emigres entering urban railway stations: ‘if its purpose were to warn, it should be exhibited to those in need of warning’. Nevertheless, sceptical about the possible instructional value that dramatizations of the slave trade might hold, Moving Picture World remarked with obvious frustration, We have repeatedly pointed out that such [motion picture] plays do not make for good and should have no place on the moving picture screen. Proper teaching at home will furnish any young girl with the best protection against the snares of the vicious. Expressing his hope that ‘the law forbidding obscene and indecent exhibitions will come to the rescue of the public and of our women and children especially’, Moving Picture World’s Bush reinforced the notion that sexually explicit material was particularly inappropriate for female viewers.
Young women were indeed precisely those who should be kept from viewing films on predatory sexual slavery, many commentators testified. Criticizing the public exhibition of films on white slavery in general, a prominent New York reformer reserved especial horror for the prospect of young women watching such lurid fare. A class of female moviegoers 'with very little active mentality' who 'are very weak and unmoral, rather than immoral' were attracted to the white slave films, she reported, and particularly susceptible to 'what the psychologists call suggestion'. Of these viewers, she wrote, 'to [their] untrained, unbalanced and extremely susceptible mentality, the only appeal made by such pictures is one of allurement'. Comparing the impressionability of such women unfavourably to that of small children, the writer constructed a pathology of female viewing. Another observer warned of the lasting visual impact made by onscreen dramatizations of the slave trade: 'pictures, imprinted indelibly upon the minds of . . . girls by scenes portrayed in [photo]plays, have caused them to desire the same exciting experiences'. Even Variety wondered whether women could be swayed by the lavish brothel interiors pictured in one film, since 'girls seeing it . . . might find the picture a temptation instead of a warning'. The physical vulnerability attributed to women in the white slave plots became in these views a kind of mental impressionability in which the act of viewing sexually explicit material onscreen posed more harm that sexual abduction itself.

Far from providing enlightenment or instruction, watching white slave fare placed women in greater jeopardy than they faced from actual vice traffickers, Variety explained in a review of the 'red-lighter' Cocaine Traffic; or, the Drug Terror (1914):

There is more danger in two innocently-minded young people together watching this film, or any other of its kind, than the collar maker of Troy ever had to endure by a fellow from the city 'making a play' for her . . . the [white slave] pictures are sending more souls to hell at twenty-five cents each at the box office than were ever captured by cadets.

Here viewing itself became the treacherous act, not mingling with strangers in movie-theatre foyers, nor even tangling with slave-trade procurers. What troubled this writer most particularly was the voyeuristic freedom white slave films licensed in women. 'The enlightenment through the screen of what is, has been and always will be going on behind locked doors', he insisted, 'merely means new recruits from curiosity, for curiosity has ever been the wasting curse of pure womanhood' (emphasis mine). Although the comment seems intended to apply to matters sexual, it has the added effect of denying women access to visual pleasure at the cinema as a whole, for the logics of curiosity are precisely those which govern cinematic viewing pleasure. Spectatorship was here turned against women, framed as a
position which was hazardous for them to occupy. Not one of these writers proposed that women be prevented from seeing white slave films because the material was inflammatory or sensational, or because it catered to unjust fears. Rather, they insisted that visual licence was, in itself, incompatible with modest femininity.

Voicing similar fears, a commentary on the 1916 title Is Any Girl Safe? complained that ‘the spectator is dragged through several obnoxious scenes, such as the interiors of a house of prostitution’. The image of viewers ‘dragged’ from one scene to the next suggests at once mobility and coercion, absolving cinemagoers of the responsibility for watching salacious acts. The crowds these films garnered certainly suggest a keen fascination with the subject, yet viewers here were recast as passive, even unwilling, conspirators. Just as tales of slave ring abductions cloaked fears about sexual activity in young women, this view of female movie patrons masked their desire to see behind brothel doorways.

A discourse on female pleasure and desire is nonetheless woven throughout accounts of female viewers at these films, for one hears in discussions of ‘curiosity’ echoes of desire. Couched beneath questions of whether women ought to be exposed to this material was the knowledge that female moviegoers evidently wanted to see it, and that they apparently lined up in great numbers to do so. Issues of voyeurism and visual pleasure, which might otherwise remain tacit in examinations of female spectatorship, come to the fore in assessments of the white slave films, since the features were so brazen in their treatment of sexual matters. The white slave films posed the challenge of conceiving of a female spectator-subject positioned not only in relation to sexually explicit material, but also implicitly to pleasure and desire.

Exploring the possibility that curiosity might provide an alternative means of theorizing female spectatorship, one which combines scopophilia with epistemophilia, Laura Mulvey argues that an ‘aesthetics of curiosity’ would link ‘an active look, associated with the feminine’, with ‘the drive for decipherment’, and ‘a topography of concealment and investigation’. The opposite of fetishistic scopophilia, which engages the logics of denial and ‘is born out of a refusal to see, a refusal to know’, curiosity engages ‘a compulsive desire to see and to know’. If curiosity did lie at the root of women’s attraction to films on the slave trade, as even Variety suspected, then perhaps the films’ appeal involved precisely their promise to reveal hitherto unseen aspects of US life.

Viewed in this light, concerns about the impressionability of female viewers at white slave films might also be seen as fears about relinquishing to women the powerful position of visual mastery enabled by the cinema, a position which became all the more potent in the intricate narrative topographies created by the cinema of narrative integration, and which, in turn, the white slave film ‘exposures’
capitalized upon. In suggesting that women might see at these movies what they had not seen elsewhere, contemporary writers also implicitly questioned the imaginary mobility granted to women at the cinema. They decried, in other words, the way that white slave films might extend, visually and optically, new freedoms of movement and association experienced by women, freedoms that figured prominently in anxieties about the vice traffic. Physical mobility could at least be circumscribed through admonitions against the slave trade in ways that visual curiosity could not be curtailed – especially at the cinema.

Surely part of the appeal white slave films held for women lay in their ability to ‘transport’ viewers through various regions of urban life. The illicit, but comprehensive, surveillance of the modern cityscape promised in titles like *The Inside of the White Slave Traffic* and *The Exposure of the White Slave Traffic* (1914) might have been particularly fascinating to women, those for whom certain corners of the metropolis remained most unavailable or unsafe. Indeed, advertisements promoted the films’ visual breadth, one vowing to reveal the ‘inner workings of the organized vice interests’, another promising ‘VICE as it actually existed in the dens of iniquity in our cities and towns’, and a third pledging ‘a graphic and thrilling film on the subject that has aroused the world’, while a poster for *Traffic in Souls* guaranteed viewers ‘a daring expose of American vice and treachery’. Repeatedly warned about menacing vice rings, female filmgoers were – at the movies – free to tour urban red-light districts, to peer inside brothels, to spy upon procurers entrapping unsuspecting women, to gaze upon ‘the inside of the white slave traffic’, and finally to ‘traverse’ the streets in safety. It might also be reasonable to suspect that middle-class women, those most coveted by film exhibitors in the early teens, could be especially curious about commanding views of districts like New York’s Tenderloin, where they would have little reason to venture otherwise. Despite plots which emphasized women’s victimization, then, white slave films promised a sense of visual latitude and freedom of access to the nether regions of the urban underworld.

Particularly interesting in this visual economy are scenes contained in several of the films which allow viewers to observe as operatives recruiting for the slave trade spy upon unknowing potential victims: a slave ring ‘cadet’ watches Little Sister while she works behind the counter at Smyrner’s candy store in *Traffic in Souls*; lurking behind a pillar, procurer George Fischer first spots the heroine Annie leaving a shop in *The Inside of the White Slave Traffic*; and Elsie Welcome is eyed by white slaver Martin Druce outside the factory where she works before he approaches her in *Little Lost Sister* (1917). These scenes, all of which take place at public sites where young women were said to be most vulnerable, might seem to reinforce the notion that women attending venues like the cinema were often objects of unwanted visual attention. However, watching these episodes on the
screen, female viewers were given a sense of omnipotence — a knowledge of events that superseded that of both victim and procurer. Because these sequences are shot without point-of-view editing, in several of the scenes procurer and intended target stand in the same frame, both watched over by film viewers. While in the onscreen dramas women are preyed upon by slave rings employing various means of covert surveillance, female spectators at the cinema could reverse the dynamics of this controlling gaze.

The traffickers’ additional command over modern technology furthers their associations with visual surveillance in both Traffic in Souls and The Inside of the White Slave Traffic. A magic writing pad imagined in the first film as a link between the vice gang and its leader, secretly posing as head of the ‘International Purity and Reform League’, is an added indication of the slave ring’s omnipotence, as is a system of coded telegraphic messages used by the white slave syndicate in The Inside of the White Slave Traffic. Yet viewers are again given access to these covert machinations before diegetic characters: the dictagraphic apparatus used by ring leaders in Traffic in Souls is unveiled for viewers before the heroine herself discovers it; and the gang’s cryptic codes are transcribed in intertitles for viewers of the second film. Traffickers’ associations with visual surveillance and technology are thus potentially recouped by women in the act of film viewing: glances unseen by film heroines are visible to theatre viewers, and procurers’ coded communiques are decoded for spectators.

Of all the white slave titles, The Inside of the White Slave Traffic perhaps best exemplifies the specular horizons that these films opened for women. Candid footage shot in the red-light districts of notable US cities is interwoven with a dramatized white slavery plot in a film which relied heavily on its documentary credibility. An extremely controversial and relatively explicit film, it is unique among other offerings in the way that it exploited the cinema’s specific documentary capacities. The film claimed its evidence of white slavery was not based upon an adaptation of sociological research, but was derived from footage gathered by its own cameras. Exploiting the specific photographic properties of cinema, the film presented the camera as an investigatory tool, a revelatory machine, capable of unmasking the hidden substance of covert vice operations.

Reports that many of the film’s sequences had been shot on location around the country were touted in advertisements and advance publicity. In September 1913, two months before the release of Traffic in Souls, The Inside of the White Slave Traffic generated notice about the crew’s activities filming in urban vice districts. A prominently displayed piece in the New York Dramatic Mirror very nearly bragged that members of the production had been arrested while filming in El Paso, Texas. ‘Between interruptions’, the story claimed, ‘they secured a film the likes of which, so report says, has never been approached
before.' A week earlier in New Orleans, the item went on to claim, the crew had been admonished for filming the city’s vice district rather than its scenic locales. How much of this sensationalist publicity is true cannot be known. Nonetheless, it illustrates the emphasis that producer Samuel H. London placed on the project’s ‘authenticity’ as much as its scandalousness; if camera crews were arrested while shooting, as the account claimed, then the final film promised wholly illicit views.

Exactly how much of the footage included in the final version could be called ‘documentary’ is difficult to determine from surviving reels. Many dramatized sequences appear to have been shot on location outdoors, but few explicitly candid scenes of urban prostitution remain. Still, Variety’s critic identified several noted vice districts visible in the release print: ‘The setting is real, the girls actual, the “sailors” apparently caught by the camera... under the broad glare of disillusioning mid-day’, he concluded. With the inclusion of such scenes, Motion Picture News surmised, The Inside of the White Slave Traffic was ‘probably the most authoritative of the white slave films, as it shows actual scenes in the underworld’. London boasted that the film ‘is as near a photographic representation as possible of the great evil’.

Evident throughout such accounts, especially in the Variety commentary, is a manifest tension between the galling visibility of urban prostitution, conducted outdoors ‘under the broad glare of disillusioning mid-day’, and the cinema’s act of exposing such matters in movie theatres where they might be seen by a wider audience. If streetwalking and open solicitation brought private acts of sexuality into public view, The Inside of the White Slave Traffic continued this enterprise, bringing activities confined to hidden recesses of the nation onto the screen. The film’s figuration of urban space thus rewrote the ‘sexual geography’ Joanna Meyerowitz finds characteristic of urban life in the early part of the century, one in which different regions of a city might permit more open displays of sexuality than others. By bringing acts tacitly condoned in certain quadrants of US cities into more general view, The Inside of the White Slave Traffic reconfigured cityscapes in a manner that may have been particularly appealing to female spectators, many of whom, for reasons of both ‘respectability’ and safety, could not traverse these regions except in the cinema’s imaginary visual field. If, in the words of Griselda Pollock, ‘modernity was experienced spatially in terms of access to the specular city’, then films like The Inside of the White Slave Traffic provided women with the means for a unique – even liberating – perspective on metropolitan life.

Ultimately, then, the experience women might have enjoyed at the white slave films – the pleasures they might have derived from what, to all intents and purposes, was quite reactionary material – exemplifies characteristics of female spectatorship that both Miriam...
Hansen and Giuliana Bruno have identified in the transitional period. As Hansen points out, ‘more than any other entertainment form, the cinema opened up a space – a social space as well as a perceptual, experiential horizon – in women’s lives’. Bruno stresses in particular the specular mobility women were granted at the movies, arguing that ‘the female subject’s encounter with the cinema constructs a new geography, gives licence to venturing... Female spectatorship triggers, and participates in, women’s conquest of the sphere of spatial mobility as pleasure.’ The imaginary locomotion experienced by women at the movies held particular resonance in the white slave films, as I have suggested, because the glimpses they provided of urban life were so risqué, and because the films’ alarmist storylines sought to curtail the latitude women were just beginning to enjoy in urban culture.

Watching white slave narratives on screen, women were offered the possibility of circumventing prohibitions against both their physical mobility and their visual licence. They might watch unseen as procurers spied upon intended victims, crack codes used by the nefarious slave rings, and, most significantly, traverse hidden regions of the nation’s sexual geography in cinema’s screenscape. Yet, competing discourses that surround these films – about commercial recreation, female patrons and movie morals – reveal the degree to which women’s filmgoing remained entangled with sexual danger in the teens, because of young women’s participation in a dating culture that surrounded the cinema, and, more obliquely, because of the specular mobility they were granted there. Precisely because they confronted presumptions about female viewers, white slave films challenged women’s place in both the space of entertainment and the illusory narrative space onscreen. The emphasis that Hansen and Bruno place upon the latitude accorded to women in pre-classical cinema needs to be tempered, therefore, with the recognition that, for this very reason, women’s filmgoing remained at issue well into the teens.

The contested field I have charted only points to the need to study further the role of female filmgoers in the immediately pre-classical period – an area of remarkable change in film form and content, in the economic structure of the industry, and in the composition of motion picture audiences. Because so much remained in transition, the era frames crucial issues like female spectatorship in clear relief. Only by studying the historical inscription of female viewers in particular moments such as these, might we also begin to understand the challenges posed by women’s filmgoing in other contexts.