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Perfuming devices, purifying discourses: the American trade press' fight against filthy theaters and foul air

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the guidelines, products and devices that were promoted in the American film trade press to improve sanitary conditions in early movie theaters. During the first years of the nickelodeon boom, film exhibitors seemed not to have cared much about the lack of hygiene and proper ventilation in their venues. Until 1910/11, the film trade papers also ignored the problem. However, in the context of growing public concern about health risks in movie theaters, they began to educate film exhibitors about the importance of keeping their theaters clean and fresh. At the same time, the number of advertisements for sanitary products and ventilation systems increased. In the fight against germs and bad air the editorial copy and the advertisements frequently reinforced each other. A close analysis of the trade press' discourse on hygiene revealed that it was not merely a concern about public health and attracting a better class of patrons. In accordance with their earlier response to the public debates about the moral dangers that the cinema held for its patrons, the trade papers used the campaign for 'sanitary theatres' to blame foreign elements in the industry for not conforming to American norms of respectability. In particular, they framed immigrant nickelodeon managers and their audiences as filthy. Thus the trade press aligned itself once more with the ongoing and often virulent debate over assimilation, which was rooted in a growing anxiety about the mass influx of migrants from Eastern and Southern Europe.

KEYWORDS

U.S. film history; nickelodeons; hygiene; ventilation; marketing discourse; cleanliness as social construct

The Hogan's Alley Theatre will never be perfectly ventilated until the patrons themselves are fumigated.

Moving Picture World, May 1911

From the early days of the nickelodeon boom, there was a widespread and well-documented concern about the moral danger of the cinema and its impact upon the allegedly impressionable minds of audience members, youths and recent immigrants in particular (Pearson and Urrichio 1999, 64–75). In response to this moral panic, film content and the need for censorship became a heavily discussed issue in the U.S. trade press. By contrast, it took much longer before the topic of the audience's physical health was put on the agenda, in spite of the fact that there was also a widespread public

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concern about the general lack of hygiene in the nickelodeons and the dangers that this entailed for public health. Initially, the sector as a whole seems to have cared little about cleanliness and proper ventilation. After 1910, however, film exhibitors were frequently encouraged in the trade papers to turn ‘the ill-smelling, obnoxious air’ of their theater into ‘a healthy, sweet-scented atmosphere.’ (*Moving Picture World*, hereafter *MPW*, 6 November 1912, 717). And with success: by 1915, according to *Moving Picture News*, 90% of the movie theaters in the United States used perfumes and disinfectants. The amount exhibitors spent on these products varied between 50 and 200 dollars per year per theater, with an average of \$75 (*Moving Picture News*, hereafter *MPN*, December 5, 1915, 115). Parallel to the industry-wide adoption of antiseptic deodorizers, good ventilation became understood as ‘the first essential of successful showmanship’ and with ‘a direct bearing on the profits, just the same as comfortable seats, beautiful decorations, good music and high-class pictures.’ (Sproull 1922, 78).

How were film exhibitors persuaded to invest in a cleaner and healthier environment for their patrons? To answer this question, I look at the U.S. trade press’ reports and discussions about sanitation and ventilation, examining in what semantic constellations words like ‘smell’, ‘disinfectant’, ‘pure air’ etc. were used. I also examine in the trade magazines, the publicity for deodorizers, electric fans, ozone generators and other devices to perfume and purify the air. How were these products marketed? And how did the sanitary service companies frame the responsibility of ‘Mr. Moving Picture Manager’ towards his patrons and the advantages of a clean theater?

The bigger issue at stake is to what extent the trade press’ discourse on sanitation intersected with broader social concerns, in particular the growing anxiety about the massive influx of migrants from Eastern and Southern Europe. Many Americans of the older stock perceived these newcomers as a threat to the nation’s core values. Italians and Russian Jews in particular were considered very different from earlier waves of immigrants. What did not help either was that they participated with great enthusiasm in the emerging commercial mass leisure culture. In the view of traditional society, the movies and other forms of cheap entertainments challenged the vested cultural and social order of White Anglo-Saxon Protestant America. Perhaps even more disturbing to those who feared the growing influence of ‘foreign’ values was the fact that most films that were shown in the nickelodeons were imported from Europe. In the *Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American, 1900–1910*, Richard Abel has convincingly demonstrated that there was a ‘conjunction of concerns about who went to the cinema, and about what and who were being constructed as “American”’ (Abel 1999, 118). It was in this particular historical context that leading American film producers joined forces with the trade press and progressive reformers in order to ensure that audiences would watch ‘clean, wholesome and moral’ films (‘Chicago Letter,’ *MPN*, 1 April 1911, 10; quoted in Abel 1999, 122–123). Abel argues that to make the cinema more ‘respectable’ according to WASP norms, foreign producers and films were increasingly stigmatized and framed as un-American. After 1907, market leader Pathé Frères in particular was outed as a ‘foreign body’ and aligned with ‘a long-standing conception of French culture as risqué deviant and morally suspect.’ (Abel 1999, 94 and 97). This brings me to my central questions: What about all those ‘foreign bodies’ in the auditoriums? Did they need to be purified too? And if so: why? Because they were

filthy or because they were considered a danger to American society – similar to the Pathé films that these new immigrants so ardently enjoyed.

The sanitary theater

In her book *Purity and Danger*, anthropologist Mary Douglas argues that cleanliness is a social construct. ‘There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder.’ (Douglas [1996] 2002, 2). More importantly, Douglas points out that ‘pollution ideas’ often work at two levels. At an instrumental level, they regulate social behavior and impose standards of conduct and hygiene. At the symbolic level, ideas about purity and impurity express a general view on the social order and good citizenship (3–4). A closer analysis of the trade press’ publications on sanitary theaters reveals that the instrumental and the symbolic level were indeed closely intertwined. The discourse on sanitation frequently overlapped with moral issues. In a nutshell: bad air came with bad movies, bad managers and tough audiences.¹ Before I look in more detail at the underlying ideological forces at work in the editorial comments, let me first examine how and when the ‘sanitary theater’ became a topic in the American trade press.

To get a broad sense of the attention paid to questions surrounding sanitary conditions and public health in movie theaters, I conducted a series of keyword searches using the ArcLight Ngramviewer of the Media History Digital Library (mediahistoryproject.org). This datamining and visualization tool provides insight in how specific subjects are covered in particular periodicals over a period of time. From the available archival material, I singled out *The Nickelodeon* (1909–1911), *Moving Picture News* (1911–1913), *Motion Picture News* (1913–1930), *Moving Picture World* (1907–1926), *Motography* (1911–1918), *Exhibitors Herald* (1917–1924), and *Reel Life* (1913–1915). The resulting statistics strongly suggest that cleanliness and ventilation were hardly debated before 1910. Sanitation in particular was hardly a subject in the early years of the nickelodeon boom (see Figure 1). However, the computational analysis reveals a sharp rise between

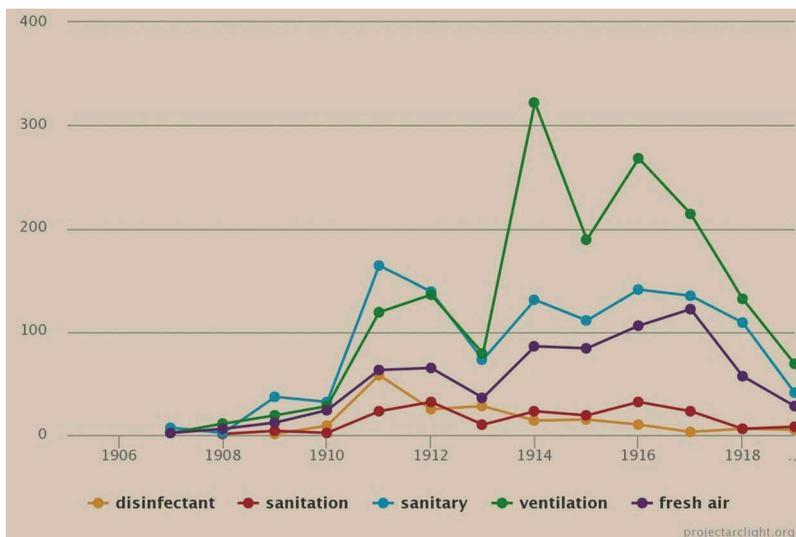


Figure 1. Arclight query results from selected film trade papers, 1905–1919.

1910 and 1911. The fight against foul air and germs remained a significant issue until 1917, when interest began to decrease.

How to explain the sharp rise around 1911? A close reading of the archival documents revealed that the surge in interest in these topics did not come from the sector itself. It was caused by pressure from without. Already in May 1909, *The Nickelodeon* remarked that ‘in the past little attention has been given to proper ventilation’, but that this was rapidly changing because cities were ‘passing ordinances to enforce some kind of effective ventilation.’ The magazine hoped that ‘the comfort and pleasure of patrons would lead progressive owners to put in good ventilating equipment, aside from any compulsory regulations’ (*The Nickelodeon*, May 1909, 143) and emphasized: ‘Fresh air is not a luxury; it is necessity.’ (“Ventilation,” *The Nickelodeon*, October 1909, 102). By 1911, there was a consensus in the trade press that after the ‘suppression of immoral motion pictures’ and ‘the matter of protection from fire’ (“Notes of the Week”, *MPN*, 18 March 1911, 7) ‘the general welfare and health of the public’ was ‘becoming a vital issue’ (“Pure Air in Theatres”, *MPW*, 13 May 1911, 1592). In the words of *Moving Picture World*, ‘sanitation, good ventilation and adequate fire protection are three things that are absolutely essential to the welfare of the audience as well as to the theater’s own personnel, from usher to owner.’ (“Swelling the Box Office Receipts,” *MPW*, 6 May 1911, 998).

Although a more detailed analysis is necessary, a first examination of the evidence suggests that in the early 1910s, bad ventilation and sanitation in movie theaters was an issue of growing public concern. Across the United States local and state authorities introduced new laws to protect the health of moving picture audiences.² In 1911, New York City, Mayor Gaynor appointed a special committee to prepare an ordinance to regulate moving picture theaters with respect to public safety. Among other measures, the new law imposed a minimum of 500 cubic feet of fresh air per hour per person to be provided by way of artificial ventilation or open doors and windows, separate toilets for both sexes, floors covered with washable material, and frequent dusting, washing and scrubbing of floors, curtains, seats etc. (“New York Picture Theatre Ordinance Discussed,” *MPW*, 18 November 1911, 543). In Pennsylvania, the State Department of Health began a ventilation campaign in the summer of 1914. Because there was no more ‘uncertainty as to the lasting popularity of this class of entertainment,’ it was time to warn ‘the working men and woman who were seeking relaxation’ against the dangers that lurked in most movie theaters and to protect their health. The department not only felt that the working-classes were ‘deprived of the full measure of their recreation,’ but also held the cramped nickelodeons responsible for the high death toll from pneumonia and other contagious diseases (“Begins Ventilation Campaign in Harrisburg,” *MPN*, 4 July 1914, 32). Reform campaigns with regard to health and sanitation in moving picture theaters were launched not only on the state level and in big cities, where legislation was probably most urgent, but also in small-towns. For instance, in Marietta, Ohio (with a population of 13,000 in 1910), a municipal ordinance imposed that all picture houses were periodically fumigated.

With obvious surprise, *Moving Picture World* noted: ‘Strangely enough the residents do not see any personal reflection in this.’ (“Flickers,” *MPW*, 2 December 1911, 702). The incentive, then, to do something about the unhealthy conditions in nickelodeons came from the outside, initially from health authorities but it was endorsed at least by part of the audience.

Self-regulation

Like in the case of the turmoil about ‘immoral moving pictures,’ the answer of the trade press was again an appeal to self-regulation. Most magazines reacted promptly to the new public pressure, though sometimes reluctantly. For instance, in May 1911, the *MPW* complained:

The fecundity of reformers and moving picture agitators is almost sublime in its infinite variety.
 [...] Another storm cloud looms in the sky; this time it is the bugaboo of ventilation.
 [...] Reports are coming to us from divergent sources that the ventilation campaign is on. Having attended the public’s eyes and ears and bodies and minds and morals, the self-constituted guardians are going to attend their noses. (“Ventilation,” *MPW*, 13 May 1911, 1055)

Such remarks, however, were exceptions. All in all, the trade magazines took a proactive attitude towards the matter of public health. For one, they regularly offered their readers practical advice, explaining the basic principles of proper ventilation and sanitation. In these articles, the editorial staff often implicitly or explicitly referred to the supply companies that advertised in their magazine.³ In fact, there is only a thin line between commercial and non-commercial information and advice because the manufacturers, for their part, often mimicked the format of the editorial note to sell their products.⁴ Second, the magazines began to praise film exhibitors who improved ventilation and sanitary conditions in theaters and singled them out as models for others. Tellingly, most movie theaters that were singled out as models were located in small-towns and medium-cities. For instance, discussing the newly-opened Apollo Theatre in Peoria, Illinois (66,950 inhabitants in 1910), *Moving Picture News* described it as ‘one of the handsomest and best equipped houses in the state’ and observed that its ‘washed air purifying system’ was an ‘asset to any house and should not be overlooked when remodeling.’ (“Apollo, a Model Theatre,” *MPN*, 14 November 1914, 77). The press also repeatedly hinted at the benefits of such improvements. The theater would not only attract more patrons, but also a better class of patrons. ‘There is, in fact, no more baleful influence on box office receipts than bad air in the auditorium,’ the *Moving Picture World* pointed out in an article devoted to ‘Swelling the box office’. Exhibitors who had implemented a proper ventilation system were advised to widely publicize the improvement and not only in the lobby of their theater and on the screen, but also by way of announcements in the entire neighborhood. By doing so, they would attract people who until then had shunned the reputedly unsanitary movie houses (“Swelling the Box Office Receipt,” *MPW*, 6 May 1911, 998).

In the fight against germs and bad air the editorial copy and the advertisements frequently reinforced each other – on the discursive level and on the ‘do-it-yourself



The Air in this Theatre is Refreshed and Enlivened
by Westinghouse Ozonizers

This Slide Brings Patrons

If you use Westinghouse Ozonizers you have refreshed air in your house to keep your audience in good humor, and we furnish this slide so you can remind them of it. Everyone likes fresh air and prefers the theatre that has it. *The output of the Westinghouse Ozonizer is adjustable so you can produce just the right amount to make the air highly agreeable.*

One Ozonizer is sufficient for a seating capacity of 150 and, at maximum output, consumes less power than a 25-watt Mazda lamp. No noise, no moving parts, no parts to renew. Contained in a neat enameled case. Attach to regular lamp socket.

Send for Folder 4277.

Westinghouse Elec. & Mfg. Co.
Dept. N. R. East Pittsburgh, Pa.
Sales Offices in All Large American Cities

Figure 2. Advertisement Westinghouse Electric, *Moving Picture World*, 6 November 1915, 1191.

level. Film exhibitors not only received information and practical advice, but also free samples and discounts (typically 10%). In 1913, the *Exhibitors Times* offered a free bottle of Rosenol (a perfumed disinfectant) with a 1-year subscription to the new magazine. Several firms gave away a colored lantern slide with an announcement advertising their product. Managers could use such publicity slides to remind their patrons that they had 'provided for their comfort' and thus distinguish their house from the competition (Westinghouse Electric, *MPW*, 10 January 1914, 210) (Figure 2). Remarkable is the convergence of the commercial and non-commercial content in terms of discourse. The same strategies of persuasion can be observed in

the advertisements and the editorial content. The main difference is that the manufacturers often addressed the exhibitors in a more direct way. ‘Have YOU tried it? It is not our fault if you haven’t a sweet, sanitary, clean-smelling house,’ a publicity for Aroma Foam told moving picture managers, implying that they needed to take their responsibility. ‘Do your patrons hesitate to leave their comfortable homes for the close atmosphere of your crowded theatre? Supposing you feature fresh air on your very next bill?’ suggested the Ideal Disinfectant Corporation, and explained ‘just before the first show – and between shows – fill the air with the fragrant essence of IDICO CRYSTALS and see how the audience takes to it.’ Other companies played more overtly on the exhibitor’s purse. Echoing editorial remarks about the economic benefits of a sanitary theater, they advertised to their products with slogans like ‘This Fan Brings the Crowds’ (Watson Ventilating Fans), ‘Fresh Air means Profits’ (Sturtevant Propeller Fans), ‘Fresh Air is Worth Money!’ (Garden City Fan Company) or ‘Everyone likes fresh air and prefers the theater that has it’ (Westinghouse Electric Ozonizers). No doubt the most aggressive publicity campaign was for the Automatic Folding Chair, the ‘only sanitary chair’ and a chair which allegedly saved lives in case of a panic. Exhibitors were accused of ‘MURDER. CRIMINAL NEGLIGENCE’ if they did not buy this life-saving ‘friend to the public.’ (Hardesty Manufacturing Company).

The products

An examination of the advertisements in the trade papers revealed that a wide range of products to improve the sanitary conditions in movie theaters became available. In the early days, an usher would typically spray the auditorium before or after each show with an antiseptic deodorizer. These sprays were available in a great variety of fragrances. Soon, manufacturers began to develop more sophisticated, automatized devices. Several firms offered small liquid containers which could be filled with a perfumed disinfectant and attached to ventilation fans. ‘Operate the fan for a few minutes and the work of purifying the air is completed,’ explained a publicity note for the Electro Air Purifier. ‘No more spray pumps to use down the aisles’, boasted an advertisement for Bijou – a small ornamental fan device (hence its name) with a similar function (Figure 3). In 1913, the latest novelty in this segment of the market was an artistic flower cone filled with a perfumed disinfectant in a range of scents including Cedar (\$2,50 per gallon), Lavender (\$3,50) and Bouquet (\$4,00). These cones required filling only once a week, according to the supplier. Again, the idea behind this new product was that it would ‘lessen the labor and expense of the exhibitor’ and improve customer satisfaction. By this time, sprayers were seen as ‘an annoyance to patrons’ and ‘immense amount of labor.’ (Advertisement Mutual Store, *Reel Life*, 1 November 1913, 29). While these deodorizing products aimed at improving the health of the patrons, many of them were in fact quite unhealthy. The germ-killing ingredient was formaldehyde (‘Perfumes and Disinfectants,’ *MPN*, 5 December 1915, 115), which is a toxic chemical that irritates the skin and eyes, and overexposure may cause cancer. Moreover, the strong scents that manufacturers used to hide the pungent smell of formaldehyde could provoke

Cheap fellows and progressive managers

Yet despite the ever growing range of products and stream of editorial recommendations, the problem of unhealthy and ill-smelling movie houses continued. The trade magazines repeatedly heralded that ‘the day of the dump’ was doomed, but also expressed their disappointment that the ‘cheap fellow’ with his ‘absolute disregard for the comfort of his patrons’ was not disappearing as rapidly as they wished (‘The day of the Dump.’ Sibley 1911, 273). If we dig deeper into the trade press’ discourse, we actually discover that the aim of the self-regulation campaign was not only to ensure a clean environment for movie audiences, but also to clean-up the exhibition business itself.

‘Those places which stink in the nostrils of the better class of people’ are under ‘improper management,’ the *Moving Picture News* complained in March 1911. ‘For the benefit of the industry [...] it would be good if these places were weeded out.’ Although in favor of self-regulation, the *Moving Picture News* insisted that ‘principles of health and building codes’ needed to be applied with great strictness to these ‘veritable breeding grounds for disease.’ (‘Notes of the Week’, *MPN*, 18 March 1911, 8). Writing in 1914, and using an even more offensive language, Stephen Bush observed in the *Moving Picture World* that the ‘cavemen’ who ran the old-style nickelodeons did not understand ‘the changes in the film business’. He predicted that in less than a year, they would be gone and added: ‘there will be few regrets for this vanishing race.’ (Bush, ‘The Cavemen,’ *MPW*, 14 March 1914, 1361).⁵ In many respects, the trade discourse about sanitation and ventilation divided the film exhibition field in two factions. On the ‘good side’, the press put the modern, ‘progressive manager.’ These were the exhibitors who cared about middle-class respectability and invested in improving their businesses to attract a better class of patrons. On the other side stood the ‘cheap exhibitors,’ who were qualified as incompetent and unwilling to modernize unless they were compelled to do so by law. The severity and persistence of criticism against these old-style nickelodeon managers recalls the somewhat earlier efforts to outcast Pathé and other foreign production companies.

So who exactly are the ‘cheap fellows’ who ran the ‘Poverty Row picture houses’ that the trade magazines loathed so much? And who were their patrons? It will come as no surprise that the scapegoats were the metropolitan nickelodeon managers and their audiences, many of whom were recent immigrants. New York in particular was repeatedly singled out as the city where the film exhibition sector was lagging behind. In October 1910, the *Film Index* noted:

In every other part of the country theatres have been improved and a better class of patrons have been gained, but the New York exhibitor is no better off than he ever was where the character of his house and his entertainment is concerned. He does not advance, he does not improve; there is nothing attractive or inviting about his house, either inside or out. (‘Casual comment,’ *The Film Index*, 22 October 1910, 2)

In particular, the press pointed its accusing finger at the nickel theaters that were located in working-class, immigrant neighborhoods, like Manhattan’s Lower East Side and South Halston Street in Chicago (the Hull House neighborhood). Generically, these were defined as ‘Hogan’s Alley’ theaters – a nineteenth-century

reference, which connoted a tough working-class district where poverty and crime went hand in hand.

However, as *Moving Picture World* explained to its readers, the ‘evil-smelling’ picture houses were not just a problem of bad management:

It is easy enough to keep a house sweet and clean and purify the air, if the patrons are themselves sweet and clean. But... how is it possible to keep the air pure in an east side picture house without compelling each patron to take a bath upon entering, while his clothes are being fumigated? Perhaps they can pass a law to that effect, but we would like to have a moving picture of anyone attempting to enforce that law. (“Ventilation,” *MPW*, 13 May 1911, 1056)

Although there was no explicit reference to the ethnicity of these unwashed patrons, contemporary readers of the *Moving Picture World* understood only too well that the writer was talking about Jewish immigrants. The article refers to ‘east side picture houses’ and a visit to a Hester Street nickelodeon (‘no doubt the place would have smelled even if the roof had been taken off’). In the eyes of many Americans of the older stock, Hester Street with its pushcarts and immigrant crowds in foreign garb epitomized everything that was ‘wrong’ with the modern metropolis. The fact that there was not a single picture show on Hester Street was of little importance. Except for slumming parties, no respectable reader would venture into such immigrant quarters. It is significant that the trade press avoided to explicitly mentioning the ethnicity of the ‘cheap’ exhibitors or their ill-smelling patrons. Most likely, they realized that a considerable part of their readers were first and second generation immigrants who were active in the metropolitan movie business. Hence, ‘foreignness’ and un-American behavior were either implied by referring to the location of the theater (street or neighborhood) or by referring to food habits, notably eating garlic and onions. The garlic eaters were the Italian immigrants.⁶

Conclusion

In the 1910s, the film trade magazines paid a significant role in educating American exhibitors about proper sanitation and ventilation, supported by the manufacturers who advertised on their pages. In this context, they often blamed immigrant nickelodeon managers for not embracing the industry’s strife for middle-class respectability and thus hampering its development. For obvious reasons, the trade press did not see it as its task to educate the ‘Great Unwashed’ about the basic rules of hygiene in order to turn them into a sweet-smelling audience. The cinema did play a role in this respect, albeit in a different way as we know from Marina Dahlquist’s research on the use of moving pictures for health instruction by the New York City Health Department (Dahlquist 2012). In the longer run, however, the industry’s greatest instrument to familiarize new immigrants and other working-class Americans with middle-class notions of cleanliness and modern hygiene were the fan magazines. By the late 1910s, the advertisements and columns in *Photoplay* and its competitors began to promote all sorts of health and beauty products, and they often explained how to use them – from soap bars to tooth brushes. Thus, movie fans of all social

backgrounds, including middle-class readers, could learn how to smell sweet and clean when going to a photoshow ("Etiquette at the Photoshow," *Motion Picture Story Magazine*, October 1912, 138) (Figure 4).

Rub its cleansing, antiseptic lather in!

A skin you love to touch

Have you ever used a soap prepared by a skin specialist?

IF not, you do not know how beneficial a soap can be. For thirty years John H. Woodbury made a constant study of the skin and its needs. He treated thousands of obstinate skin diseases; made countless skin tests, always emphasizing to everyone the following big fact: Your skin is changing every day! As the old skin dies, new skin forms in its place. This is your opportunity. You can keep this new skin so active that it cannot help taking on the greater clearness, freshness and charm you want it to have. The best way to do this is by proper cleansing with a soap prepared to suit the nature of the skin. It was to meet the need for such a soap that this famous skin specialist evolved the formula for Woodbury's Facial Soap.

Begin now to get its benefits

Just before retiring, wash with Woodbury's Facial Soap, in the following way: With warm water, work up a heavy lather of Woodbury's in your hands. Then work this cleansing, antiseptic lather into your

skin—always with an upward and outward motion. Rinse with warm water, then with cold—the colder the better. Finish by rubbing your face lightly with a piece of ice. Use this treatment *persistently*, and before long your skin will take on the greater loveliness of "a skin you love to touch." A 25c cake of Woodbury's is sufficient for a month or six weeks of this treatment. For sale by dealers everywhere.

Send now for sample cake

For 4c we will send you a "week's size" cake of Woodbury's Facial Soap. For 10c samples of Woodbury's Facial Soap, Facial Cream and Powder. Write today! Address, **The Andrew Jergens Co., 1724 Spring Grove Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio.**

If you live in Canada, address The Andrew Jergens Co., Ltd., 1724 Sherbrooke St., Perth, Ontario.

Tear out the cake shown here and put it in your purse as a reminder to ask for Woodbury's today at your druggist's or toilet counter

JOHN H. WOODBURY'S FACIAL SOAP For Skin, Scalp and Complexion

When answering advertisements kindly mention **MOTION PICTURE MAGAZINE.**

Figure 4. Advertisement Woodsbury's Facial Soap, *Motion Picture Magazine*, March 1916, 16.

Notes

1. E.g. (“Change must come,” *MPW*, 30 November 1912) refers to a picture house ‘heavy laden with disinfectant to mask the lack of ventilation and as evil in the moral tone’ (872).
2. Local and state legislature that pressured film exhibitors to invest in better ventilation and sanitation in their movie theaters was part of a much broader effort on the part of public authorities as well as progressive reformers to improve health standards and living conditions, especially in urban working-class neighbourhoods. A turning point in the middle- and upper-class awareness of the filth and degrading poverty that the lower classes endured was Jacob Riis’ book *How the Other Half Lives* (1890). This account of the squalid working and living conditions in New York’s Lower East Side paved the way for new regulations and reforms. During the nickelodeon boom, the Lower East Side was the neighbourhood in New York City with the highest density of storefront movie theaters, many of which lacked basic sanitary facilities and were ‘death traps’ in case of (false) fire panics.
3. E.g. “Ventilation of Moving Picture Theatres,” *The Nickelodeon*, May 1909, 143; “Theatre Deodorizers and Disinfectants for the Summer,” *MPN*, 5 June 1915, 114.
4. E.g. “Aroma Foam,” *MPN*, 15 April 1911, 45; “Ozonators for Motion Picture Theatres,” *MPN*, 20 December 1913, 45, and “An Electric Disinfectant,” *MPN*, 12 April 1919, 2339.
5. Such vocabulary was not unusual in the period. Cf. *Vachel Lindsay* ([1915] 2000, 116 and 139).
6. E.g. “Theater Shuts out Odor and is Sued,” *The Nickelodeon*, July 1909, 31; “Repairing a Theatre’s Reputation,” *MPN*, 7 November 1914, 21.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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