

THE TIONISTS

Richard Nicholson



Phil Fawke
Odeon Queensway
Birmingham

When I first stepped into a projection box I was struck by the claustrophobic atmosphere. It was a dark, cramped space, and, as the projector whirred into motion, it became increasingly hot and noisy. The geometry seemed out of kilter, with the projector tilted at a strange angle to properly illuminate the screen below. As I watched the projectionist wrestle with a giant spool of film, the scene reminded me of a railwayman shovelling coal into a locomotive. Other projection rooms looked like the cockpits of 1950s sci-fi spaceships, or the engine rooms of submarines.

Observing two projectionists working the changeover system (the seamless switchover from one reel to the next), I became aware of the physical rhythms of the job. There was adrenaline in the air that night as the film was going to be supplemented with live subtitles (pre-prepared, but cued in real-time to the picture). As the end titles rolled, we discussed the type of personality that is drawn to film projection. Some are motivated by a love of the machinery, whilst for others it's a love of the movies. The projectionist (like many photographers) wishes to be out of the limelight, but also at the centre of things.

At the outset of this project I made the difficult decision to work with a digital SLR instead of my beloved large format film camera. In test shoots I had discovered that to achieve the level of sharpness and depth of focus that I required, the projection boxes would need to be lit. With film this would demand a truckload of lighting, but with digital I could make do with much smaller battery-powered flashguns. As the spaces were so confined, shooting digitally was the obvious technical solution.

My aim in making these photographs is to represent the projection box in all its material detail, whilst at the same time maintaining a sense of the darkness in which the projectionist operates. Modern life, with its insistent focus on the computer screen, has become increasingly disembodied, but here is a world in which labour is enacted in the realm of tangible things. As well as accurately mapping this analogue terrain, I have sought to reference the dream factory that these machine-rooms serve – key moments in the projectionist's workflow have been staged and lit for cinematic effect.

I would like to thank all the projectionists who found gaps in their busy film schedules for me to explore their fascinating workspaces.

Richard Nicholson, March 2016



Amanda Ireland
Prince Charles Cinema
London

*The Voice of Projection:
Interviewing Projectionists*

The quotations in this catalogue and the voices that you can hear elsewhere in the exhibition have been extracted from interviews with projectionists recorded around Britain for *The Projection Project*. In Glasgow, Newcastle, Bristol, Cardiff, Birmingham, Leeds and elsewhere, we were able to make contact with all manner of projectionists. Some are still in the business, while others have retired or been made redundant. It has been a great pleasure to be shown around projection boxes of all shapes, sizes and characters. There have been sparse digital-only 'black boxes' and bright but tiny attic rooms crammed with 35mm equipment. Some boxes are like labyrinths snaking through buildings, others are neatly stacked on top of each other connected by spiral staircases. Many are no less enchanting than the films that are projected from them.

The recorded memories reach all the way back to the 1940s when two projectionists were required for every show, reels lasted 20 minutes, and the nitrate-base film was dangerously flammable; as any projectionist who worked with it will tell you, nitrate film will burn under water quite happily. The accounts cover the changes that the industry has undergone since then, from the increased safety of acetate film to the abrupt arrival of digital projectors – and the sudden removal of many projectionists.

It is an old projectionists' adage that the audience should not know that they are there. It is the tragedy of the projectionist that the better they are at their job, the more their labour goes unappreciated. The voices that you will find in this catalogue and in the exhibition are those of real people recounting their working lives. With them we hope to make visible some of the work involved in making a visit to the cinema such a magical experience, before projectionists are gone forever.

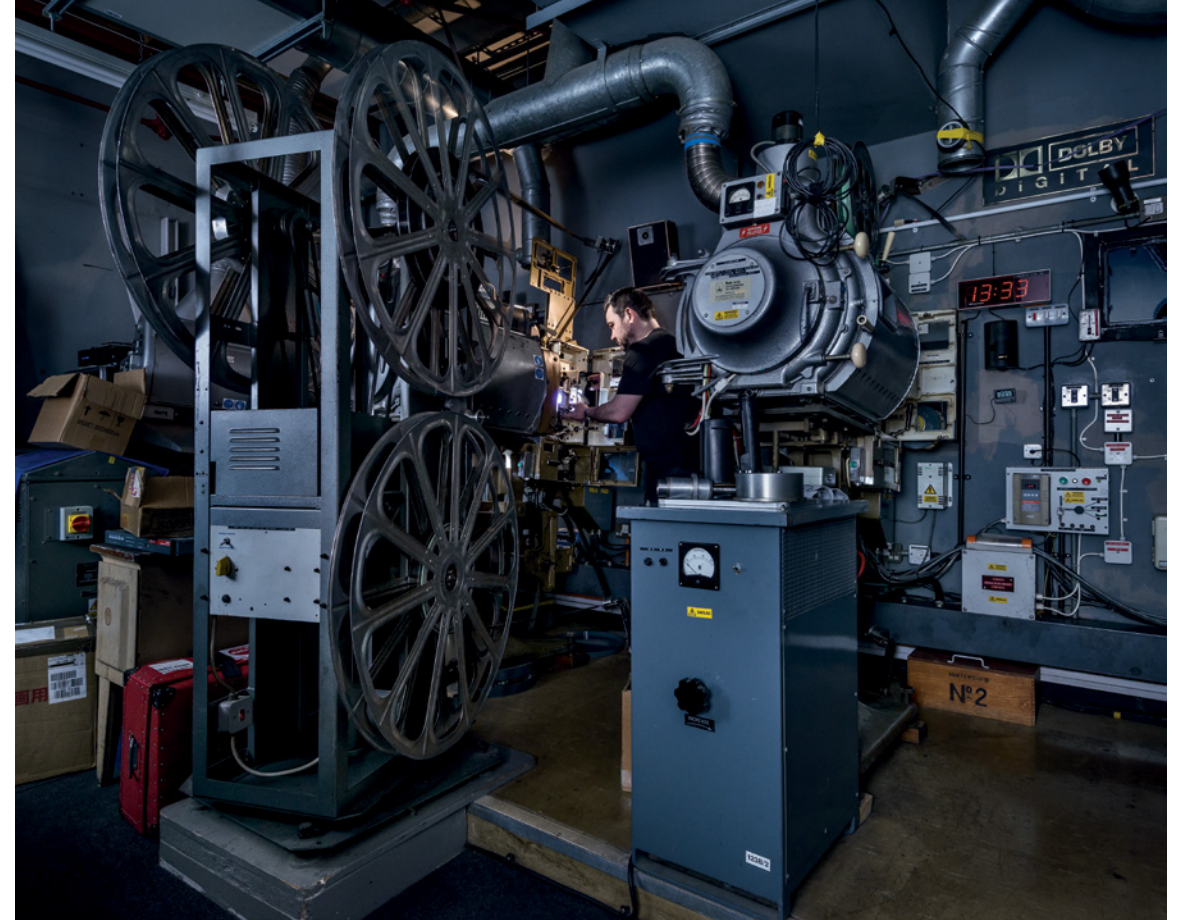
Dr Richard Wallace



Ewen MacLeod
Arncliffe, Bristol



Sam Bishop
The Electric
Birmingham



Ewan Dunford
Watershed
Bristol

“When I used to go to the cinema with my mother I was never looking at the film, I was always looking to see where it came from. In those days everybody used to smoke and so when the beam of light was coming down you’d have these pretty patterns of the smoke in the light. I’d be looking at these patterns and my mother would tell me off because she’s paid for the tickets to watch the film and I’m not watching it. I’m looking to see where it’s coming from.”

Rachel Dukes

“I like the business end of a projector. There are so many bits, and gates and little things here and there. But when you get to know it, it’s actually pretty straightforward and a really basic machine that seems to create brilliant things. It’s just a light and a bit of glass and then this happens through some polyester. It’s so simple but it can look so beautiful.”

Brad Atwill

“Kensington Odeon started single-manning, where one projectionist runs all of the screens on his own. With single-manning there is no presentation. Presentation is very important to the customers, but the companies are not interested; cut down staff, that’s what it’s all about. So from six people to five people, to four people, and if you’re short you get a relief projectionist. That’s how it goes. When you are single-manning you are facing a lot of problems. You can’t give presentation, you don’t have time. So as soon as single-manning came that was it. A lot of things we cut down because we couldn’t do everything. How can you? They cut down, and you only can do what you can.”

Chandra Makwana

“When you were about to throw the film onto the screen when it was 35mm, there was always that little heart-missing-a-beat moment. You’d think, ‘Is it all going to come together? Is it going to be the right way? Is it going to be in rack? Is the sound going to be right?’ And then when it’s correct, then you can relax. It was exciting.”

John Neal

“When you start the machine up and you can hear it rat-tat-tat-tat, it makes such a noise. I don’t know how the people outside in the auditorium didn’t hear it. It was marvellous. It made you more aware of what you were doing. When you had hold of this massive film and you’re showing it on a massive screen and you had a full audience, that’s what drives you on. That’s what the adrenalin is all about. You think, ‘This film’s cost so many millions to make and it’s me that’s in charge of showing it. I’m the last link in the chain.’ Which is what I always think a projectionist is. From a story to a screenplay, then a crew’s got ready, and then they get the actors and it’s filmed, it’s processed, then it’s sent to cinemas for people to see. You’re the last link in the chain so it’s up to you to present it properly.”

Neil Thompson



Peter Bell and Alexa Raisbeck
NFT1, BFI Southbank
London



James Anderson
Duke of York's
 Brighton



Peter Bell and Alexa Raisbeck
NFT1, BFI Southbank, London

“I think it’s a wasted opportunity if you go to a cinema and it’s just a blank screen, and no curtains, with some feeble lighting and it just sort of starts. I remember going to the cinema and the lights would change colour and the organist would come up out of the floor. It’s simple and it’s effective and it would be a pity to lose that. I think it’s part of the magic of going to the cinema. Putting on a show rather than just showing a film.”

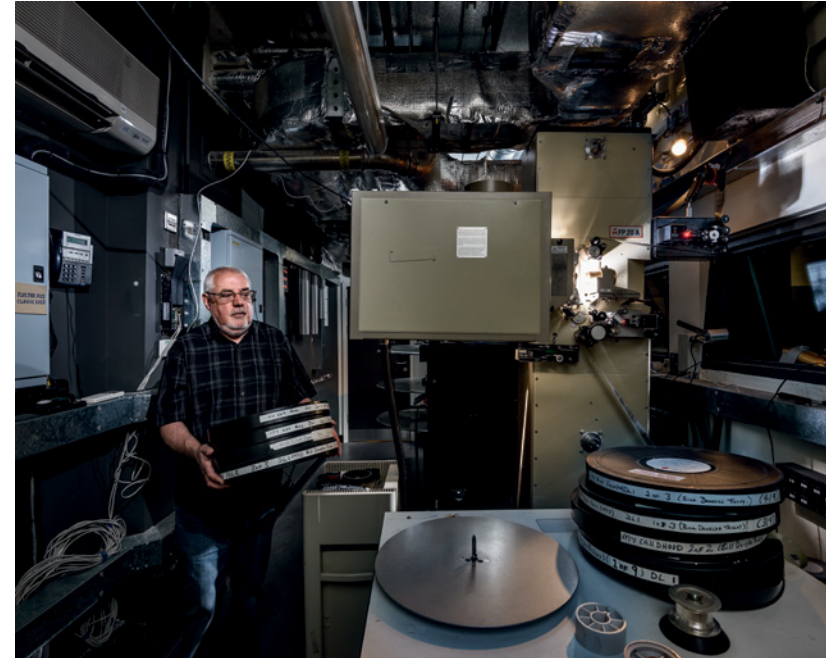
Peter Howden

“Management have always wanted people off the floor to come in the projection box to learn how to do projection. What happens is you devalue the role of the projectionist, without a shadow of a doubt. So we fought very strongly about that because we said, ‘Well we’re a profession. If there’s any damage done to a film or the film goes off, you pay for that professional knowledge. If you allow people to come up in the box and we have no control over it and someone leans over and sets a sensor off or catches the plate or does anything that affects the film or damages the film, knocks it off a roller, that’s your responsibility, not ours.’ They learnt that pretty quickly.”

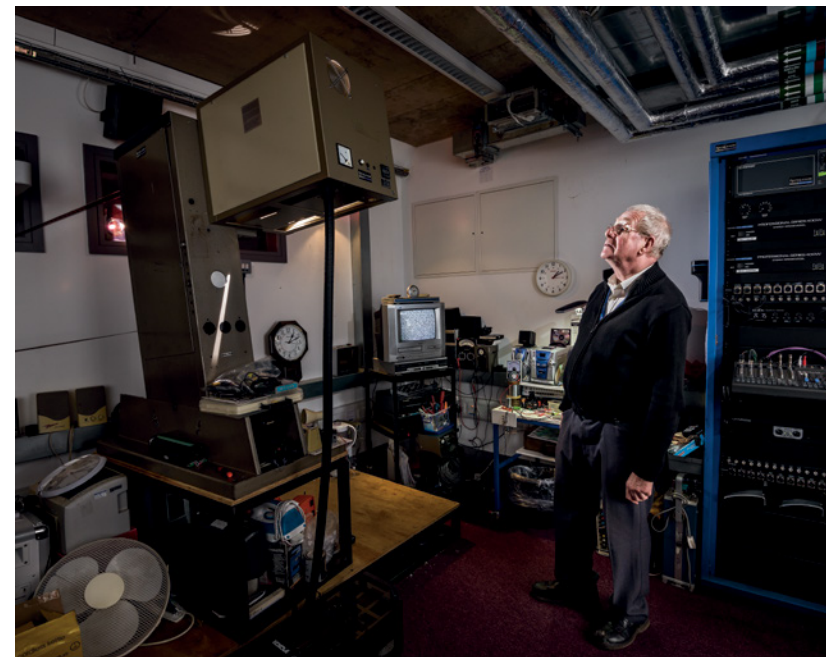
Mick Corfield

“The projector seized up and the noise was horrendous. The gears were still going round, but everything was crunching and film was spewing out of the top of the projector. I was at the other end of the projection box. You’re always at the other end of the projection room whenever there’s a problem, you’re never there as it happens, just never.”

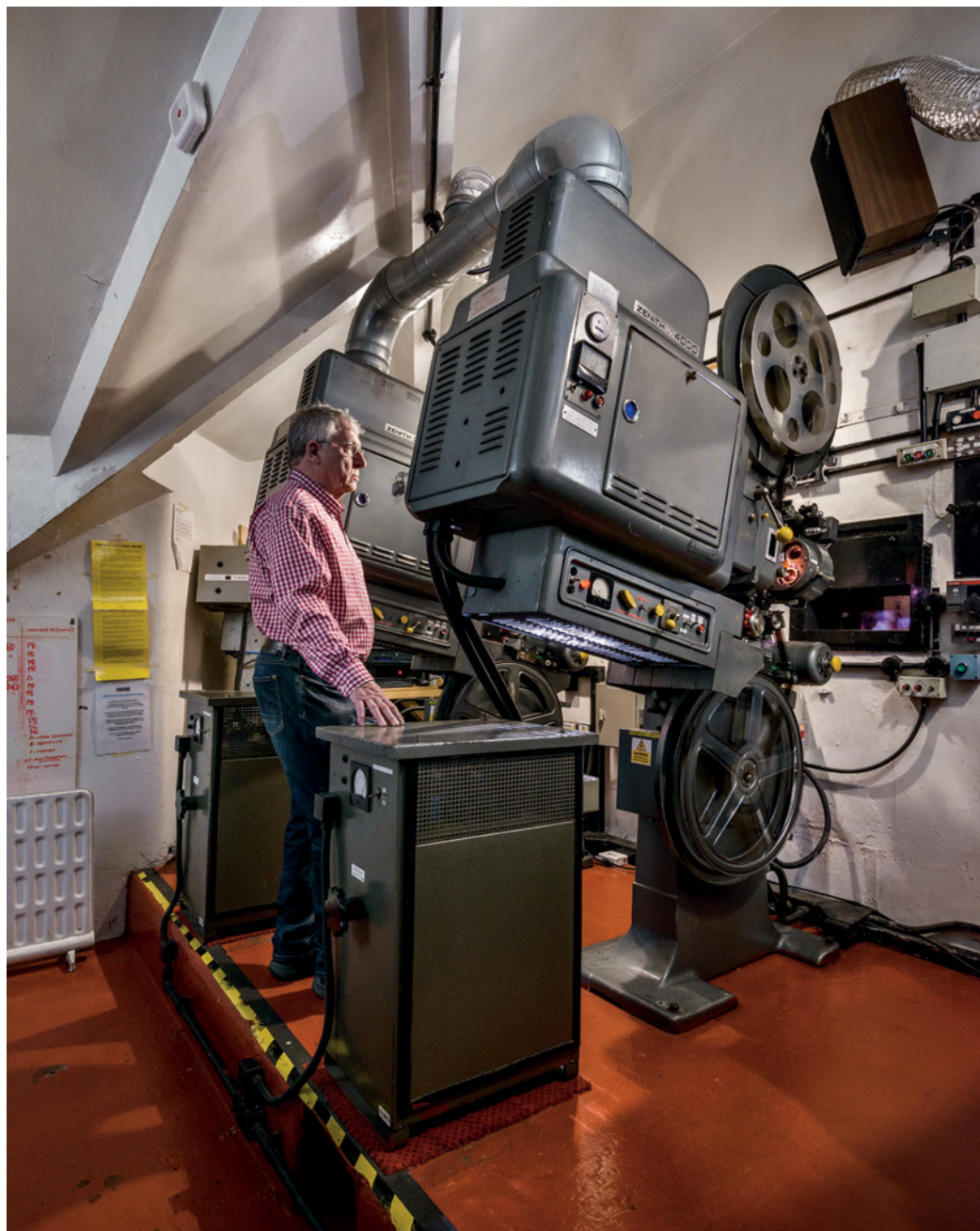
Adrian Pearce



Ray Reed
Tyneside Cinema
Newcastle



Frank Gibson
Film and Television Studies
University of Warwick
Coventry



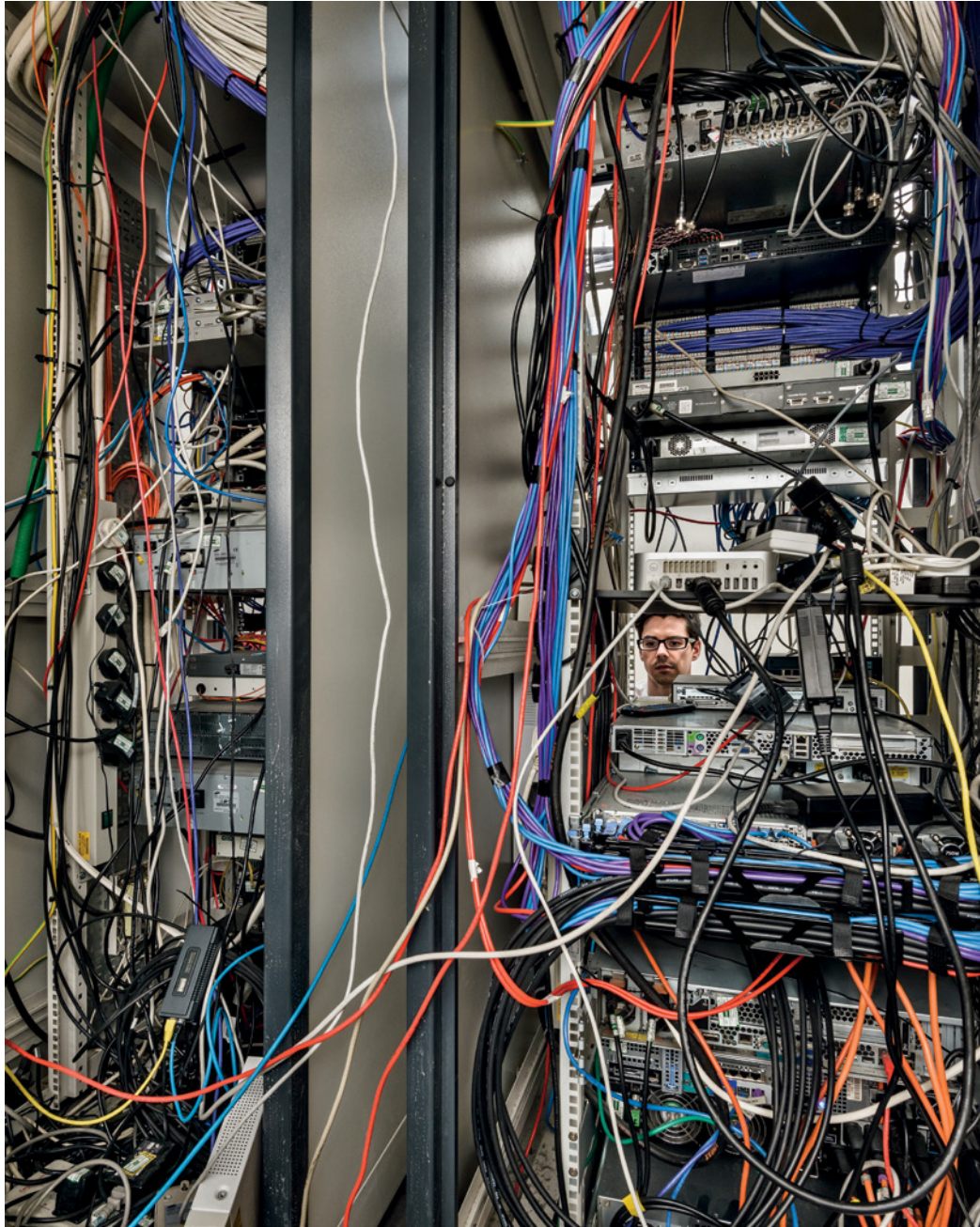
Allan Foster
Hyde Park Picture House, Leeds



Rachel Dukes
Midlands Arts Centre (mac)
Birmingham

Umit Mesut
Umit and Son
London





Richard Horner
Tyneside Cinema, Newcastle

“Nothing’s the same at all. There’s no moving parts, there’s nothing. All you hear is fans. We had two 35mm projectors left after the arrival of digital and we used to put one of them on so you could hear the projector running. Just make a loop of film up and let it run so you would hear the projector instead of all the fans.”

Mike Marshall

“In the perfect show, in the perfect cinema, the audience shouldn’t be aware that there’s a projectionist showing the film. It’s a magic window on the world, and the picture is down there in front of them. So that makes them forget what’s going on behind them. One of the greatest things as far as I’m concerned is the stopping of smoking in the cinemas, because with that beam that you always had, you knew the picture was coming from behind you. Get rid of the smoke, that window on the world is clearer. That’s what it’s all about. Feeding people’s imagination. Not letting them know that you’re feeding them, you let them think that the screen does that for them. I don’t really want to look at the man behind me, otherwise I’m going back to the days when there was a guy turning a handle. Which was most unimaginative. No, I don’t think a projectionist should get any applause. He’s doing his job and if he’s doing his job properly they don’t even know he exists. We don’t want people to know that there are little men winding the handles. We want to enjoy the film.”

Mike Williams



Paul Edmunds
Birmingham

“With film you could probably get by if there was a problem. Squeeze it through. But with digital you’re totally in the hands of someone else. You’ve got no control.”

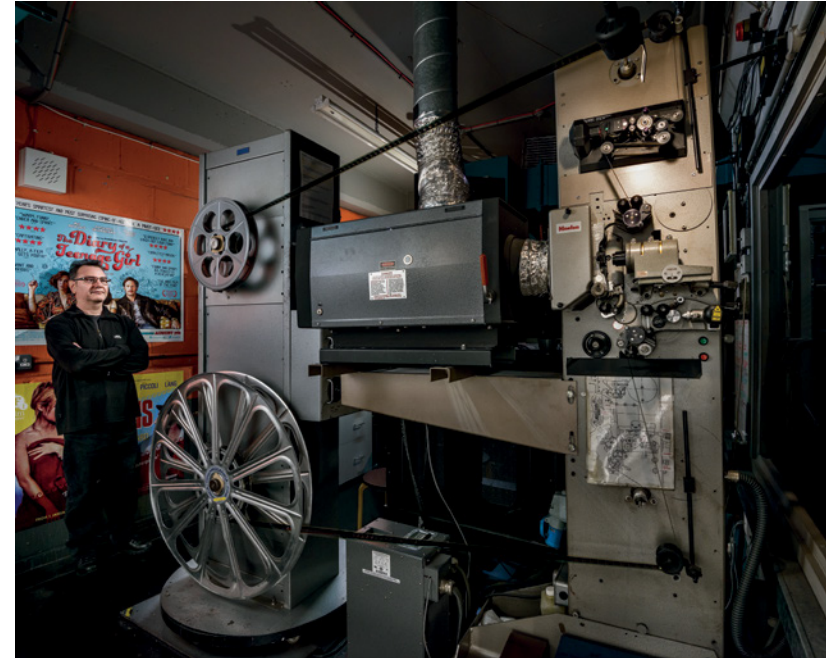
Ray Reed

“All the digital equipment arrived one night and it was all just standing, waiting to be put in. And within two days all the 35mm projectors had been pushed to one side and the digital machines had been put in. All the plugs were ready to be put into the wall; they had all been rewired weeks before. Screen eleven was the last one to be put in. We had an afternoon show and I was the last one to lace up a 35mm projector in that place and I said, ‘When this has finished you’re carting this out aren’t you?’ And there was a digital projector right behind, ready to put in its place. Once the film finished I went down the bottom end to do something, and when I came back it was all just pushed out of place. Four of them just got hold of it and pushed it to one side, the plinth, the lot, and the digital was in its place and I just couldn’t believe it.”

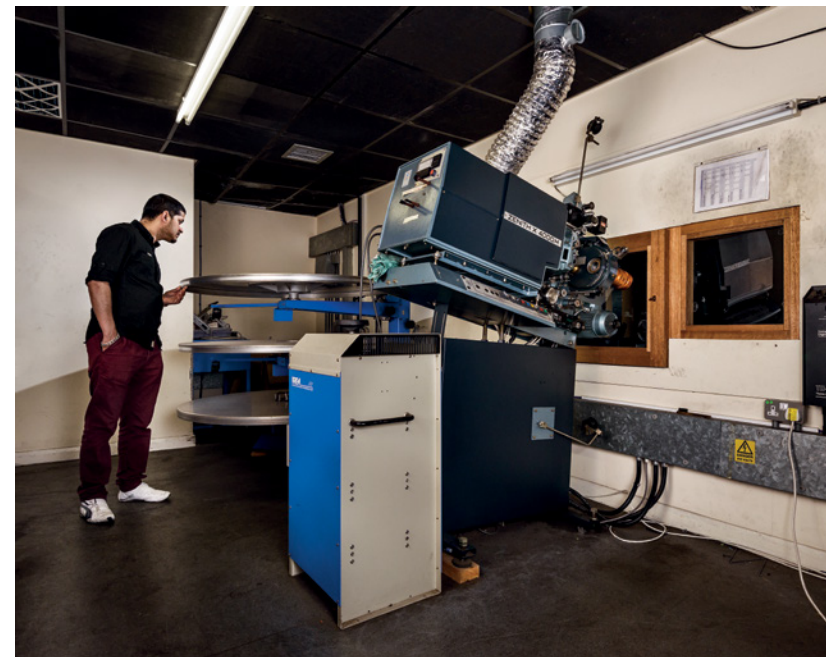
Neil Thompson

“I knew that we were finished when there was a problem with a digital projector and I was standing with my projectionist and we dialled in on the ISDN line, and the engineer on the other end sorted it out and said to me on the phone, ‘All I’ve got to do is press start, shall I press start?’ And I went, ‘I don’t think that’s a good idea, do you?’ And he went, ‘No actually.’ So I pressed start and then I turned round to my colleague and went, ‘If he can press start remotely we’re finished.’ So that was when we knew we were on our way out. The writing was on the wall.”

Mick Corfield



David Powell
ICA
London



Abdul Kahar
Genesis Cinema
London

The Photographer

Richard Nicholson is a photographic artist based in Bethnal Green, East London. He has an MA in Philosophy from the University of Warwick and an MA in Photography from the London College of Communication. His photographic practice is concerned with materiality and the passage of time. His work has been exhibited at Riflemaker, The Photographers' Gallery, Four Corners, Photofusion, Somerset House and the V&A. In 2013 he was awarded The Royal Photographic Society Postgraduate Bursary to complete his series on the demise of the photographic darkroom. He is represented by Riflemaker, London.

richardnicholson.com

The Interviewer

Dr Richard Wallace is Research Fellow on the AHRC-funded *Projection Project*. As well as interviewing cinema projectionists he is also exploring archives for projection-related material for the project. He has other research interests in British film and television history and screen documentary.

The Projection Project Team

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The Projection Project

Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. Project partners are Flatpack Film Festival, the British Film Institute and Richard Nicholson. To learn more about the project, hear more interviews and explore our *Virtual Projection Box*, visit projectionproject.warwick.ac.uk

The Projectionists

We are very grateful to all who have helped us with this project, particularly those who were willing to be interviewed and/or photographed: James Anderson, Brad Atwill, Ken Bagnall, Peter Bell, Sam Bishop, Chris Blower, Martyn Butler, Luke Capitani, Mick Corfield, Mark Cosgrove, John Douglas, Peter Douglas, Rachel Dukes, Ewan Dunford, Paul Edmunds, Phil Fawke, Allan Foster, Frank Gibson, John Gore, Peter Howden, Richard Horner, Amanda Ireland, Abdul Kaher, Sam Lavington, Tom Lawes, Andrew MacLean, Ewen MacLeod, Chandra Makwana, Mike Marshall, Umit Mesut, Ross More, John Neal, Chris O'Kane, Adrian Pearce, David Powell, Alexa Raisbeck, Ray Reed, Neil Thompson, Chris Tweddell, Michael Williams, Derek Young, John Young, Roger Young

The Projectionists by Richard Nicholson

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19-24 April 2016
as part of the Flatpack Film Festival

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Between 2010 and 2012,
approximately 90% of projectionists
in Britain were made redundant
when cinemas replaced their 35mm
projectors with digital ones.
The job of the cinema projectionist
has almost vanished except in
specialist cinemas and most films
are now shown using digital files.
The Projection Project in the
Department of Film and Television
Studies at the University of Warwick
seeks to record and investigate the
history of cinema projection
in Britain.

I invited the photographer
Richard Nicholson to work with
us after seeing his images of
photographic darkrooms in the 2011
exhibition *Analog* at Riflemaker,
London. *The Projectionists* is
the result of this collaboration.

These portraits of cinema
projectionists, taken all over
England, show some still working
and some who are now retired
or unemployed. The exhibition
documents a moment of transition,
showing skilled workers with
machines currently rarely used,
soon to be obsolete, or already
removed from cinemas.

As part of the research project,
Richard Wallace has also
interviewed working and former
projectionists and some of their
stories feature in this catalogue and
other parts of the exhibition.

Charlotte Brunsdon
Principal Investigator
The Projection Project

THE PROJECTION