

Conclusion to Part One

Expressive Labor

On November 21, 1921, Robert M. Yerkes began a speech to the Personnel Research Federation—an organization created “to coordinate the efforts of the 250 scientific, engineering, labor, management and educational bodies which are studying personnel problems”—with the question: “Shall man be slave or master of the civilization which he has created!”¹ For Yerkes, the “slave[ry]” in question here is not a reference to American history but rather to mechanization, what he sees as transforming individuals into unfeeling, production machines. He argues that “the proper unit of industry is the person” whose singular identity must be recognized in order to have a just and stable system of industrialism.² Individuals are profoundly unequal, he continues, in body, mind, and spirit; thus, he argues that treating them as interchangeable components constitutes the heart of economic injustice. Against this approach, he envisions a future society in which employment is a mode of self-expression, in which the individual’s “particular combination of traits” is best deployed in their labor.³

At the heart of this division over personnel research at the time were two different cinematic visions of the laboring body. On the one hand, there was the micro-management and mechanization that Taylorist motion studies performed: “Time and motion studies have been made with a view to increasing earnings and industrial output, and there has developed a strong tendency to mechanize the worker himself.”⁴ Taylorists’ frame-by-frame analyses of cinematic studies of labor, which mapped and charted physiological movements to generate further efficiency, ultimately produce the laboring body as infinitely malleable and dissectible, a machine to be fitted into the industrial system of production. But Yerkes saw the working body differently—as an expression of certain indivisible principles such as race, identity, capacity, temperament, and intelligence. These phenomena could not be disassembled and reassembled through chronophotography but only deduced in

intimate contact. For Yerkes, labor was a manifestation of inner properties that needed to be inferred through an empathetic observation.

Yerkes's primate films were therefore meant to offer an alternative to Taylorist motion studies, reflecting his particular approach to labor. More than any other figure in this book, Yerkes believed in the evidentiary capacity of film to capture truth, not only by objectively relaying images of past events but also by conveying their emotional content as well. He made *moving* images, both in the sense that he captured bodies in motion and in the sense that he meant to emotionally move audiences as they studied and observed animals onscreen. These films picture anthropoid apes as complex and subtle, seemingly motivated by deep wells of affect. Yerkes's scientific apparatus allowed enough space for what were often dramatic displays of emotion, and he encouraged researchers to analyze and use their own experiences of pathos. But, these openings for agency and feeling were also the tools for structuring hierarchies, defining ability, and directing production—the very reasons for the animals' captivity. His dramatic images of caged primates reveal both the promise and the limits of Yerkes's emphasis on individual identity. Yes, these chimps were allowed to express themselves in ways that their keepers found interesting, important, and worthy of study—even of accommodation—but, ultimately, they were locked in cages, subjected to testing, and forced to remain available for invasive transformation. The films Yerkes produced in these cages were meant to model the affective labor of racial capitalism, a space where those in power might empathize with their subjects but confine and control them nonetheless.