

Going to the Movies: Early Audiences

Introduction to Article

Movies were a new form of entertainment for a new century of leisure-hungry Americans. As the average work week decreased and wages rose, men and women sought new ways to spend their increased time and money – and entrepreneurs were happy to accommodate them, for a price. In large cities and small towns, the thirst for fun sparked the rise of a wide range of commercial recreations: amusement parks, dance halls, billiard parlors, vaudeville and burlesque houses, and professional sports. But none of these activities was as popular or widespread as the movies. The first nickelodeon – a term that combined the price of admission with the Greek word for theater – was opened in Pittsburgh on June 19, 1905. The low cost of attending this new institution made it accessible to all but the poorest Americans. By 1910, nearly one-third of the nation flocked to the movies each week; by 1920, weekly attendance equaled 50 percent of the nation's population. People loved the movies.

Richard Butsch looks at nickelodeon audiences and describes what it was like to go to the movies during the early years of silent film. He discusses who went to the movies, what they saw, and what they did. Butsch shows how movie theaters served as community centers for many poor urban residents. Yet, while millions of Americans eagerly

embraced them, numerous civic leaders denounced movies and movie theaters as dangerous entities that posed grave physical, moral, and sexual risks to audiences – especially the nation’s children. These moral leaders fought to censor and control what audiences could see and do at the movies. Moviegoing, then, was not a simple activity but one filled with controversy. No new amusement caused greater pleasure and fear than the movies.

Discussion Points

How did various people and groups respond to the promises and problems of the movies? Who opposed the movies and why they did judge them as dangerous? Who supported them? Consider what would happen today if a new form of popular entertainment emerged that was aimed largely at immigrants and poor workers and was located in “bad” or “dangerous” sections of a city. How would various groups – youths, parents, city leaders – respond to such an activity?

The Celluloid Stage: Nickelodeon Audiences

Richard Butsch

Source: Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750–1990* (New York and Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 139–57, 339–45

A decade after their first commercial exhibition, millions of people made movies a weekly habit. But who went to the movies in the early days and what was the character of the early movie theaters were matters of debate. Multiple images of movie theaters and audiences vied for acceptance. Reformers and *flâneurs* described movies as immigrant entertainment, yet small-town entrepreneurs promoted it as an entertainment for the middle class. The working-class nickelodeon was described on the one hand as community center and conqueror of the saloon, and on the other as a school for scandal teaching adolescent boys to steal and girls to be promiscuous. The latter image of endangered children

represented a shift from the nineteenth-century concern about women's respectability to a twentieth-century fixation on children's welfare, and from the place to the performance as the cause of the problem. This would give rise in the 1920s to research on the effects on children and the beginnings of a mass communication research tradition. In this chapter I will explore how some characterizations were contradicted by the growth of middle-class attendance, but nevertheless continued to fuel popular worries about and eventual research interest in the effects of the media on children.

From Kinetoscope to Nickelodeon

Movies were first shown commercially as a technological novelty, *moving* pictures. It did not much matter *what* was filmed, just that it *moved*. People were intrigued by films of such simple things as smoke puffing from a chimney or waves breaking on a beach. The earliest commercial exhibition was by kinetoscope, a machine through which one person at a time could view the film. For a penny one could view a film lasting about a minute. By the end of 1895 kinetoscopes were operating in most major cities and even small towns like Portage, Wisconsin and Butte, Montana. While kinetoscopes were installed in department stores, hotel lobbies, barrooms, drug stores, and so on, they became identified with penny arcades. The arcade patrons were primarily men and boys, who came to peep through the kinetoscope, often at sexually suggestive films. Movie historian Benjamin Hampton said patrons of arcades, parlors, and dime museums had an insatiable appetite for these movies and went from place to place in search of films they had not seen.

But the kinetoscope fad was brief; by 1900 projector and screen displaced it. Movie projection was commercially demonstrated first in April 1896 at Koster and Bial's Music Hall, the sporting vaudeville theater near Herald Square in New York. A newspaper lithograph shows an audience of men in tails and top hats engrossed in watching the novel demonstration. That same summer movies were included as a novelty in programs of vaudeville houses, amusement parks, traveling exhibitors and lecturers, legitimate theaters, phonograph and kinetoscope parlors, and church groups around the country.

Soon, the Keith vaudeville circuit began to feature movies and other big-time houses followed suit. Movies became the featured "act" and created a boom in "refined" vaudeville between 1898–1900, during which time vaudeville provided the main exhibition outlet for movies. But this novelty also wore off, and until films with more sustaining

interest than waves on beaches were produced, it could not hold an audience. By 1900 continuous vaudeville managers began to use the short films as “chasers” to clear the house before the next performance.

Nickelodeons became the next dominant exhibition form. As early as 1895, a few storefronts were converted into motion picture showrooms. They held from 200 to 500 people – the number often limited by theater licensing laws or building codes – who were seated on ordinary kitchen chairs not fastened to the floor. Enterprising arcade owners bought screens and projectors, and opened back rooms to audiences. *Variety* claimed it was “the natural outcome of the Penny Arcade.” In 1905, nickelodeons in converted storefronts spread across the country so rapidly that *Billboard* called them the “jack-rabbits of public entertainment” and the *Moving Picture World* said they were “multiplying faster than guinea pigs.” By 1910 there were reputedly over 10,000. Even smaller cities had several: Grand Rapids had fifteen in 1908, Youngstown twenty.¹

Shows ran from morning to night. The films changed each day, encouraging daily attendance. The films were short, about fifteen minutes, and movie projection was erratic. The picture flickered on the screen, and the projector was hand-operated. Nevertheless, the realism was a dramatic change from the sets of cheap melodrama.

Nickelodeon Demographics

Film history tradition has characterized nickelodeon audiences as urban immigrant workers who found in the nickelodeon a place to socialize, and in the movies ideas to negotiate the transition between the old country and their new home. This image derived from a turn-of-the-century fascination with the Lower East Side of New York City by intellectuals who created vivid public images of every aspect of the lives of these poor immigrants, including their attraction to nickelodeons.

Ample evidence does indicate the presence of a substantial working-class audience and of many nickelodeons in immigrant neighborhoods. Nickelodeon was one of very few entertainments affordable to working-class immigrants, and the silent films proved no barrier to their lack of English. In 1910, nickelodeons in Manhattan were concentrated in or on the periphery of tenement neighborhoods filled with immigrants. Progressive reformer Annie MacLean in 1910 found that foreigners preferred nickelodeons over theaters in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. A study of the steel-mill town of Homestead, Pennsylvania, home of many Hungarian and Polish immigrants, describes their situation.

... five cents for a show consisting of songs, moving pictures, etc., which lasts fifteen minutes or so. ... Men on their way home from work stop for a few minutes to see something of life outside the alternation of mill and home; the shopper rests while she enjoys the music, poor though it be, and the children are always begging for five cents to go the nickelodeon.² ...

The image of the urban nickelodeon as an immigrant refuge made it inappropriate for middle-class clientele. Lights, posters, and a barker with megaphone outside gave the theater a circus atmosphere and inside it was dark and odorous. The *Moving Picture World* editor said “any person of refinement looked around to see if [he were] likely to be recognized by anyone before entering the doors.”³ The movie exhibition industry and trade press strove to distinguish movie houses from this disreputable nickelodeon image. *Moving Picture World* in 1909 cited the neighborhood Audubon Theater of the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan as a family theater attracting children of the “better classes” and the Parkway Theater at 110th and Central Park West as having “high class character of the patrons ... quite a family aspect.”⁴

Recent research looking beyond immigrant working-class neighborhoods finds other sites with other audiences. Movies were popular in cities with few immigrants and small working-class populations, such as Kansas City in 1912. In big cities there were a variety of opportunities for the middle class to go to movies, in better theaters, in vaudeville, or in amusement parks. Middle-class shoppers dropped into nickelodeons along Fourteenth Street and Sixth Avenue in New York – although they attended vaudeville or theater at night.

That the audiences were middle class has been inferred from the geographic location of many nickelodeons on retail streets served by mass transportation within major cities. In Boston before 1910 several movie houses had opened in the central shopping district amid the major department stores, vaudeville houses, and legitimate theaters. The Stanley theater chain began in Philadelphia in the city center, next to the largest department stores. Similarly, Milwaukee movie houses were located near transit lines and shopping streets. In New York in 1908, many were located on main thoroughfares or along transit lines. Seven were located around Union Square, near the refined vaudeville houses of Proctor and Keith. Many others were located in other entertainment streets of the city such as 125th Street and along the Second and Third Avenue streetcar lines, near lower-middle- and middle-class ethnic neighborhoods whose residents were somewhat better off than the new immigrants of the Lower East Side. Many of the earlier movie houses in Chicago were located in business districts rather than working-class

neighborhoods. The *Chicago Sunday Tribune* said in 1906 that “there is hardly a section of the city that is without this class of show house ... from three theaters in the heart of the shopping district on State Street ... to the more modest establishments well up North Clark Street.”⁵ ...

English professor Edward Wagenknecht reminisced that middle-class children attended with glee. The storefronts he described were on commercial streets in the lower-middle-class neighborhood of Lawndale around 1907. It was a German–Irish neighborhood of Chicago with a growing number of Jewish families. The nickelodeons were rather humble places with posters pasted in the windows, no wider than an ordinary city lot, and with ceilings so low that the top of the picture sometimes was cut off. He mentions his favorite nickelodeon doing badly. The owner remedied the problem by opening a saloon in the front and continuing to show movies in the rear. The remaining movie patrons deserted at once and the theater closed. Apparently the saloon was not an acceptable solution, as it might have been in a working-class neighborhood.

Small-town movie houses, which accounted for a substantial part of the audience, also contradicted this shoddy immigrant image. Small-town patterns of moviegoing varied not only from those of big cities but also from region to region. In general, however, the small-town movie house was more dependent on the middle class, as it needed broad approval not only for sufficient attendance but also to prevent attacks from moral crusaders. Here, perhaps sooner and more consistently than in cities, we find efforts to ensure the respectable nature of the movie house. One producer touring the small towns of the Northwest reassured readers of *Moving Picture World* that exhibitors were respected members of their communities and that the best class of people attended. An exhibitor of Pennsylvania in 1910 noted that small-town houses catered to the “best people” because they needed everyone’s patronage to survive.⁶

All of this indicates an early differentiation of houses: the small, dark, and crowded neighborhood nickelodeon seating only a couple hundred people; the larger houses on commercial blocks, some formerly vaudeville or drama theaters; and the spare but respectable small-town movie theater. The larger houses in downtown shopping districts were more profitable, but the neighborhood storefront dominated public imagery of movie houses.

The equating of the nickelodeon with the immigrant working class has been largely a matter of nomenclature. The term “nickelodeon” was and continues to be used synonymously with a cheap movie house with a low-income patronage, producing a tautological argument about patronage. Other movie outlets received little description in the press, making the nickelodeon by default *the* representative of movie exhibition in public discourse. Film history research continued this reduction of

exhibition to that of cheap houses full of immigrants, perhaps due to the plentiful descriptions of nickelodeons and the obscurity of others. Only recently have film historians begun to pay attention to the wide variety of other exhibition venues with similarly varied audiences.

A more complete description includes movie houses ranging from frugal to fancy and the clientele likewise. The frugal ones, in poorer neighborhoods, were called nickelodeons; the fancier ones were called theaters. Moviegoing included a variety of audiences distributed across these venues: the middle class, who had not previously patronized stage entertainments because of religious beliefs; more prosperous working-class patrons of melodrama or vaudeville, who abandoned stage entertainment for movies; and the urban working class, who seldom spent anything on entertainment until the movies.

The debate about the class of movie audiences has left in the shadows the consideration of other groups. Blacks, Indians, Mexicans, and Asians were segregated to galleries or excluded altogether. Such exclusion constituted a minimal measure of respectability for any public place in this era. However, a few black-owned theaters offered an alternative and advertised that blacks were free to sit anywhere. According to the black weekly newspaper, the Indianapolis *Freeman*, in 1909 there were 112 “colored theaters” of all types in the United States, most of them outside major cities and being combination vaudeville and movie houses. From the first, black-owned theaters in Chicago’s South Side and in the small city of Lexington, Kentucky combined live entertainment, particularly by black musicians, with movies. In both cities they advertised the “high-class” nature of their clientele, distinguishing them from the rougher patrons of black saloons and dance halls.⁷

Women were an important part of the audiences, even in immigrant nickelodeons. Low costs and convenient location made the nickelodeons accessible to women workers and shoppers. Their informality meant mothers did not have to “dress up” to attend them. A trade journal in 1907 attributed the growth of nickelodeon to women and children. A photograph of an audience in a Troy, New York movie house shows mostly women and children. Several sources noted baby carriages lining the sidewalk or cluttering the entrances to movie houses. Social reformer Mary Heaton Vorse commented, “Prayers finished, you may see a mother sorting out her own babies and moving on serenely to the picture show down the road” after evening church services.⁸

As with theater sixty years earlier, the image of mother and child in attendance would help to certify the safety and propriety of the nickelodeon. Some exhibitors and producers fostered this image by encouraging women to bring the children. Theaters in Lewiston, Maine in 1907

offered teddy-bear souvenirs, checked baby carriages, and encouraged parents to send their children unattended. Some mothers apparently agreed and let their boys go unattended.

A large percentage of the regular audience were children. Estimates of children in the audience ranged from 20 percent in Detroit and Madison, Wisconsin to two-thirds in Pittsburgh and Portland, Oregon. Reports from New York and Cleveland complained that large numbers of these children were unescorted by adults. The thought of unchaperoned teenage girls in particular raised fears of sexual promiscuity. A *Chicago Tribune* reporter in 1907 observed a downtown nickelodeon at 6 p.m. “composed largely of girls from the big department stores who came in with bundles under their arms.” The reporter’s concern was that they made “undesirable acquaintances [men] of mature age.”⁹

Young single immigrant working women enjoyed the freedom of going to the nickelodeon on their own. An Italian garment worker from New York’s Lower East Side reminisced:

The one place I was allowed to go by myself was the movies. I went for fun. My parents wouldn’t let me go anywhere else ... I used to enjoy going to the movies two or three times a week. But I would always be home by 9 o’clock.

An Italian girl met her boyfriend on the sly at the movies in the afternoon.¹⁰

Recreational surveys by reformers found that location and hours made great differences in audience profiles. Men predominated in downtown houses while women and children were more common in neighborhood houses, especially on Saturday and Sunday afternoons. A survey in Cincinnati characterized the daytime audience as being predominantly men, with an occasional woman, sometimes with children, and a few truant boys and girls; a noon audience was composed of young people from stores and factories and a downtown high school. In evenings, downtown theaters were “evenly mixed,” while the residential theaters were attended by mostly women and children. A study of Madison in 1915 reported a similar pattern. Whether movies were a male or female, children or adult pastime, depended on the time and place.¹¹

A Mass Medium

Some film historians have claimed that immigrant working-class moviegoers represented a new market for commercial entertainment. Yet, through the late nineteenth century and into the movie era, immigrants supported their own ethnic theaters. ... Lower East Side Jews were avid

supporters of Yiddish theater and Sicilians were supporters of puppet shows. Descriptions of their behavior are interchangeable with those of ethnic movie audiences. The movies benefited from the entertainment habits nurtured by the stage: avid theatergoers became avid moviegoers.

What distinguished movies from previous stage entertainments was *not* the creation of a new market of immigrants or working-class people. Rather it was the *depth* of saturation of these markets that was new. Actual data on saturation rates do not exist. But commentary and overall attendance suggest that higher proportions of all groups must have been attending movies to achieve such high numbers of admissions and receipts. Clearly more people, especially children, went regularly to nickelodeons than ever went to previous stage entertainments. Places of exhibition were numerous and admission cheap, even compared to cheap vaudeville, so that accessibility was increased dramatically for those with low incomes and those living in remote places. . . .

Many went. The *Independent* claimed in 1908 that the movies attracted “thousands who never go to the theater, and particularly [were] appealing to the children.” Surveys in the prewar period indicate that weekly attendance was approximately equal to the city’s population in most cities. More people went and more went more frequently than they had to other theater entertainments. Most movie shows in the nickelodeon era were cheap, half the price of the gallery for drama theaters or vaudeville, making frequent attendance feasible for lower-income groups and even children. Frequent moviegoers always represented a large portion of the movie audience. Many adults and children went more than once per week.¹²

Working-Class Audiences, Autonomous Publics

In contrast to the extensive literature on the *demographics* of the nickelodeon audience, there is relatively little about their *behavior*. But these descriptions, mostly of working-class immigrants, are intriguing for their resemblance to that of nineteenth-century working-class audiences, in their sociability and appropriation of nickelodeons as an alternative public space. Contemporary writers described the nickelodeons as family and community centers, contradicting the fears about unchaperoned children in the audiences. Lewis Palmer noted in 1909, “Certain houses have become genuine social centers where neighborhood groups may be found any evening of the week . . . where the regulars stroll up and down the aisles between acts and visit friends.” A 1914 Portland, Oregon study claimed, “Many of them are family resorts. Community pictures are shown, the people chat in a friendly manner, children move freely about

the house and the manager knows his patrons personally ... these houses already take in many a nickel and dime that would otherwise go over the bar [of saloons] ... people attending all kinds of theaters are orderly, quiet and courteous.”¹³

For temperance reformers the nickelodeon was a happy contrast to the “workingman’s club,” the saloon, because it was free of alcohol and reunited men with their families. According to the *Willamantic* (Connecticut) *Journal*, “Men not often seen in the company of their wives on the street were now taking whole families to the motion pictures night after night.” Many surveys noted a diminished attendance at saloons attributed to men going to movies with their families. In 1914, Presbyterian minister Charles Stelzle asserted that movies were cutting into the profits of saloons; in a 1916 article in the *Independent* he favored the movies as a substitute for the saloon. The motion picture house, he claimed, was democratic just as the saloon, where the working man could feel comfortable and at home. He could come just as he is, without dressing up. But in addition he could take his family there, where he could not to the saloon. A few years later a saloonkeeper of Middletown told sociologists Robert and Helen Lynds, “The movies killed the saloon. They cut our business in half overnight.”¹⁴

Observers described audiences, to a significant degree, as determining their own use of the space in the nickelodeon and even in the small theaters of the silent era of the 1920s. Even though film had displaced live actors, the performance was not yet standardized. Managers edited movies to fit their audiences’ tastes. Sometimes projectionists would change the speed of the film and even run the film backward for the amusement of the audience. There was a notable interaction between audiences and projectionists and managers.

Live musical accompaniment to the film also provided a rich source of interaction, akin to that for stage performers. Piano players, mostly women, took pride in their improvisational skills, through which they responded to the audience, especially in neighborhood theaters. When movie producers began in about 1910 to distribute cue sheets for musicians to accompany their movies, many musicians rejected these and continued to play according to their own tastes and that of their audiences. Musicians and audiences could thus entirely alter the mood and intent of a scene. A serious drama could be made into a farce.

Managers of small theaters attempted a delicate balance between acquiescing to their audiences’ wishes and “managing” the audience. They were generally supportive of musicians’ efforts to please the audience, regardless of the impact on the dramatic effects of the movie, and despite objections of movie producers. Managers also used sing-alongs

and sometimes giveaways to modulate and manipulate their audiences. Illustrated songs were often advertised to the less-inhibited working-class and small-town audiences. Almost all nickelodeons had a singer who led the audience, who were guided by song slides. Sing-alongs were familiar from cheap vaudeville. Almost every house used illustrated songs while the projector was loaded with a new reel of film. Reformer Michael Davis said about audience participation in sing-alongs, “no warm-blooded person can watch the rapt attention of an audience during the song, and hear the voices swell as children and adults join spontaneously in the chorus, without feeling how deeply human is the appeal of the music, and how clearly it meets a sound popular need.”¹⁵

But nickelodeons were rarely sites of political activism. A few held benefits for strikers, much as other local merchants would often advance credit to strikers. In 1911, some theaters screened an announcement supporting a campaign against a local gas company. But there is no record of the kinds of crowd actions that had been common in early nineteenth-century theaters, in which working-class audiences often orchestrated the political messages on-stage, objecting to some, demanding others. Working-class audiences exercised some autonomy in controlling the space and defining its purpose to suit their own needs. In doing so they collectively shaped the reading of both the situation and the movies to fit their own working-class experience, and thus used the nickelodeon as a site for producing an alternative culture. But they rarely expressed overt political consciousness or purpose, unlike the saloon that often had been the meeting place for unions and strikers. This perhaps made it reassuring to middle- and upper-class reformers worried about social control.

Changing Habits, for Better or Worse

If people were frequently going to the movies, what had they stopped doing, what had they previously done with this time? The citizens of Middletown told the Lynds that “movies have cut into lodge attendance” and probably the patronage of saloons and attendance at union meetings as well. Saloonkeepers’ concern over loss of business was a reason for middle- and upper-class rejoicing. But theater owners worried that people were leaving drama theater for the movies. The galleries were empty, they said, because the boys who had formerly sat there now frequented the movies. Hard times favored the nickelodeon over other entertainments. When people could not afford a theater or vaudeville ticket they could still muster a nickel for the movies. In the 1907–8 recession many theaters closed but nickelodeons were booming. *Lippincott’s* magazine

said that the movies caused decreases in box office at legitimate and vaudeville theaters and disbanding of theater companies. It claimed the nickelodeon attracted “nearly every class of those we term theater-goers” and that “it is a common occurrence to enjoy amusement by machinery in what was a regulation playhouse.” In 1910, *World’s Work* cited nine New York theaters from which “the Biograph manager has driven vaudeville and the old-fashioned first-class drama.” In 1911 the same magazine claimed movies had replaced theatrical performances in 1,400 former playhouses. Robert Grau claimed that seventy traveling theatrical companies had to fold because of the movies and that movies had “contributed principally” to the decline of melodrama. The *Jewish Daily Forward* commented on the impact of movies on Yiddish performances in 1906. “A year ago there were about ten Jewish music halls in New York and Brooklyn. Now there are only two [while at movies] hundreds of people wait in line.”¹⁶ ...

As movies moved out of storefronts into regular theaters, they demonstrated their greater profitability even in drama’s own home. Movies provided a greater profit even on Saturdays, the traditional theater night. Drama theaters that traditionally closed for the summer began to show movies instead. Movie companies began aggressively buying and closing theaters or pressuring local governments to tax or restrict licensing for drama productions. The result was a greater difficulty for touring companies to find a theater at an affordable rent. By 1914, movie palaces were being built in Times Square that were equal in comfort and luxury to those of drama theaters, with admission of 25 cents instead of 2 dollars ...

Children, Movies, and Reformers

The movies stirred new concerns among moral reformers. Even though children attended theaters in the nineteenth century, reformers directed their concerns toward the dangers to young men and women and to the general moral climate of the community as a whole. The central issue about nineteenth-century audiences had been respectability, which applied to adult behavior and especially to women. The primary focus of criticism was the behavior in the audience, the rowdiness, drinking, and prostitution. Even in the concert saloons the primary concern was not the entertainment, but the alleged licentious behavior of the waiter girls with the clientele.

By the turn of the century, women’s respectability was no longer the issue. This older fear was overshadowed by concerns about the safety and socialization of children. Children were being redefined sympathetically

as innocent and impressionable, a departure from earlier Calvinist conceptions of children as evil barbarians in need of discipline. Adolescence was being defined as a distinct developmental period, subject to many pitfalls. Charitable organizations began to direct attention to lower-class child abuse and neglect; juvenile delinquency was distinguished from adult crime, and states instituted the first juvenile courts. Children were defined as endangered creatures.

Accompanying the shift in focus from women to children was a shift in attention to class. The primary concern in the era of respectability was its certification of the class credentials of the middle and upper classes. The new concern about children was centered on the lower classes. Society women's charities as well as middle-class professionals focused on socializing lower-class children, especially the growing numbers of urban-dwelling immigrants, who they believed lacked adequate parenting.

Almost from the first, what drew the attention of movie crusaders were the large numbers of unchaperoned adolescents and children in nickelodeon audiences. Reformers feared that moviegoing led to delinquency among boys and sexual immorality among girls. For the first time, reformers concentrated their attention on the effect of the show rather than on the behavior in the audience as the primary concern, although audience behavior continued to be part of the discussion. Previous New York state laws focused on theaters (1839) and concert saloons (1862) as *places* of delinquency, but not on the performance. But in the nickelodeon era the movie itself became a central focus and censorship the means to control its dangers.

Jane Addams, settlement house founder and reformer, in a series of essays published in 1909 as *Spirit of Youth*, worried about the many children who seemed addicted to the motion pictures. She cited a group of young girls who refused a day's outing in the country because they would miss their evening at the nickelodeon; and four daughters of a shopkeeper who would steal movie admission from his till. Addams identified movie *content* as the root cause of the children's misbehavior. She called the nickelodeon the "house of dreams" to indicate movies' inducement of fantasies in children's minds.¹⁷ She told a tale of boys nine to thirteen years old who saw a movie of a stagecoach holdup and mimicked it themselves. They bought a lariat and a gun and, one morning, lay in ambush for the milkman, nearly killing him. Addams was only one among many writers at the time who publicized stories of children imitating movie crimes.

As a result, censorship became an early instrument of reform. Chicago enacted the first movie censorship ordinance in 1907, followed by dozens of other cities. By 1913 several states and cities had laws prohibiting children's attendance without an adult after a certain hour. In a cover

letter to a report on movies, the mayor of Cleveland in 1913 cited movies of crime as the major evil of movie exhibition and urged censorship in that city. *American Magazine*, citing the Cleveland report, urged industry self-censorship over government censorship. To protect themselves from government regulation the Motion Picture Patent Company, an organization of movie producers, formed a censorship board for New York and enlisted the cooperation of the People's Institute. This soon became the voluntary National Board of Censorship. Producers hoped to counter criticism that might threaten their efforts to capture a middle-class market.

Reformers claimed censorship markedly improved the moral quality of movies. Louise de Koven Bowen, wealthy friend and patron of Jane Addams, claimed the Chicago ordinance of 1911 which her Juvenile Protection Association of Chicago advocated, had made a difference. Similarly, Michael Davis credited the Board of Censorship, with which he was involved, for much improvement from 1908 to 1910.

Censorship blunted but did not stop criticism. Many continued to object to movie content, whether or not censorship had been instituted in their city. In a 1914 debate in the *Outlook*, some letter-writers still worried that girls might be led into prostitution by what they called "white slave" films, which they said did not depict the awful consequences for girls. Another article expressed fear that movies would give immigrant children unrealistic expectations of what they could have and accomplish in America, leading to their disillusion and dissolution: "The version of life presented to him in the majority of moving pictures is false in fact, sickly in sentiment, and utterly foreign to the Anglo-Saxon ideals of our nation. In them we usually find this formula for a hero: He must commit a crime, repent of it, and be exonerated on the ground that he 'never had a mother' or 'never had a chance' – or perhaps that he was born poor."¹⁸

Fears of the effects of movies were accompanied by a belief that movies were unusually effective in "implanting" – a word often used at the time – ideas in children's minds. In an address to the People's Institute in New York, Reverend. A. Jump in 1911 expressed the theory that movies operated through "psychologic suggestion" to put ideas in the viewer's head without his knowing it. He therefore wanted to make sure, through censorship, that these ideas were what he considered good. The same sentiments were expressed at the Conference of the National Child Labor Committee by a Birmingham Alabama Boy's Club superintendent. Making the same claim in more "scientific" garb, Harvard professor Hugo Munsterberg concluded in *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study*, "The intensity with which the plays take hold of the audience cannot remain without social effects . . . the mind is so completely given up to the

moving pictures.”¹⁹ These were the first expressions of what would later be called “hypodermic” theories of media effects.

Critics did not entirely ignore the atmosphere within the storefront theater itself. The two concerns were sometimes intermingled in the same article. They related many “horrors” perpetrated therein, some reading like a tabloid front page. Censorship was no guarantee of the conditions within the theater. Theater ownership was not centralized, leaving each to compete in the market as he chose. Critics were dismayed at the darkness in the storefront theaters, which they saw as encouraging and enabling sexual encounters. Louise de Koven Bowen cited as an example of the dangers a case in which a Chicago proprietor had enticed young girls into his theater and molested them. She claimed that “boys and men in such crowds [outside nickelodeons] often speak to the girls and invite them to see the show, and there is an unwritten code that such courtesies shall be paid for later by the girls,” and that “darkness afforded a cover for familiarity and sometimes even for immorality.” *American Magazine* reiterated to its nationwide readership the dangers of darkness, “indiscriminate acquaintance,” and foul air in the theaters.²⁰ ...

Nevertheless, after censorship, reformers often preferred movies to other entertainments, particularly cheap vaudeville. As a neighborhood and family institution, the nickelodeon was much less threatening than more anonymous entertainments farther from the reach of family and neighborhoods. By contrast, reformers sometimes condemned cheap vaudeville’s sexual immorality, in terms reminiscent of the criticisms of concert saloons in the 1860s, except now the attention was on stage acts. The Cleveland study referred to cheap vaudeville acts as “positively degrading,” and in describing an audience of one indecent dancer stated, “the ladies in the audience hid their faces ... many of the older men turned their heads while the young men and boys stamped their feet, clapped their hands, many of them rising out of their seats, waving their hats, at the same time shouting vulgar suggestions to the performer.” A few simply condemned its very low intellectual level and deadening effects educationally.²¹

Reverend H. A. Jump, in his address to the People’s Institute, the home of the National Board of Censorship, praised the movies as “the cleanest form of popular entertainment being given indoors today” and thanked the Board for this. He claimed those who thought movies immoral did so on the prejudice that cheap admission implied immorality. Yet movies had a high standard which “would never be allowed to apply to the drama patronized by the well-to-do.” He considered movies to have a good educational and moral effect upon the “common people.”²²

A Madison, Wisconsin report in 1915 expressed a definite change in attitude since censorship – “of course there is nothing alarming in children going to movies in the afternoon unattended by elders” – and accepted the claims that movies have “substituted good recreation for many less desirable forms” and “tended to draw families together by giving them a common interest.” It too complained of the worst types of vaudeville, the mixed bill of vaudeville acts and movies. A recreation survey of Cincinnati 1913 described the movies as “unobjectionable and provided clean recreation . . . films of distinctly educational and high recreational value are frequently shown. . . . There can be no doubt that the quality of recreation offered by the moving picture show has vastly improved in the last few years and is still improving.”²³

Later in the 1910s women’s groups began to pressure local exhibitors to offer special showings for children in neighborhood theaters. Local civic groups in several cities organized Saturday matinee movies for children in the mid-1910s. While these often were located in movie houses, the theater managers were not the initiators but simply cooperators. The Women’s Press Club of New York sponsored Saturday morning movies in two commercial theaters in 1916–17. The Club selected the films for moral education. They excluded films that depicted crimes, convicts, fighting, saloons, gambling, and sex. They also chose films with an eye to their entertainment value to ensure the theater owners of some profit. A women’s club of Chicago organized a Better Films Committee to advise local groups on how to organize children’s or family programs and what films to show. If local exhibitors would not cooperate they advised groups to buy a projector and show films in schools. Such programs were not commercial but reform efforts, often directed at working-class children. Organizations and businesses sometimes bought blocks of tickets to distribute free to poor children or to their employees. Programs were “planned for clean entertainment, making education secondary.” However, the results were mixed, as some children still preferred to see the more exciting adult movies.²⁴

The thrust of almost all of the discussion, although ostensibly about children, when examined more closely, is about class. Middle- and upper-class reformers worried about the lower classes absorbing dangerous ideas from movies, many made by immigrants themselves. Lists of topics to be avoided in movies included workers’ strikes. The recreational surveys quoted above were sponsored by private elite groups and directed primarily at gathering data on working-class neighborhoods and working-class children. Michael Davis looked in depth at three tenement districts in Manhattan, and the Cincinnati study targeted similar districts for closer examination. Cover letters, introductions, conclusions, and

recommendations typically reveal a fear of working-class juvenile delinquency. They proposed funding public recreation facilities for these working-class neighborhoods, since such neighborhoods could not afford private clubs. There is almost complete absence of comment about middle- and upper-class youths' recreation. Such attention might have raised questions about the surveyors' own child-rearing practices.

Magazine articles also reveal the same concerns. In one expression of this attitude, some reformers equated uneducated adults with children, claiming they could not discern reality from fiction and were more susceptible to movies than the better educated. One reformer in 1909 claimed "the constant picturing of crime . . . is a harmful and degrading thing, especially when a large percentage of the patrons of such theaters is made up of minors, or adults without education." The *Outlook* stated, "Undeveloped people, people in transitional stages [i.e., immigrants] and children are deeply affected [by movies]." The quote reveals what lay behind these fears of the movies, that these immigrants would not learn to behave like the middle- and upper-class "Anglo-Saxon" reformers. It considered sympathy for the circumstances of the poor to be misplaced and not a suitable explanation for crime.²⁵

More optimistic reformers saw movies as potentially being a great educator for adult poor and immigrants. Mrs. W. I. Thomas considered movies not inherently bad but "an educational medium that is historic" in its potential, which had been "turned over to these mere 'promoters of pleasure.'" The *Outlook* similarly contended that movies "could be made as effective a means of instruction in such social problems [as white slavery] as either fiction or the stage." They hoped to harness this great resource and use it as a tool of social control.²⁶

But whether pessimists or optimists, their concerns were often rooted in class-based fears of lower-class disorder, the underlying concern of much Progressive reform and the overt fear of conservatives in efforts such as the eugenics movement. While the subject was ostensibly children, this discourse was part of the larger concern about the huge wave of lower-class immigration into the nation in this era.

Notes

- 1 "Nickel Vaudeville," *Variety* (March 17, 1906), 4; "Moving Pictures," *Billboard* 18: 41 (October 13, 1906), 21; "The Nickelodeon," *Moving Picture World and View Photographer* 1: 9 (May 7, 1907), 140; Kenneth MacGowan, *Behind the Screen: The History and Technique of the Motion Picture* (New York: Dell, 1965), 129, on number of nickelodeons.

- 2 Annie Marion MacLean, *Wage-Earning Women* (New York: MacMillan, 1910), 143–53, on Pennsylvania mining towns; Margaret Byington, *Homestead: The Households of a Mill Town* (New York: Charities Publication Committee, 1909), 40.
- 3 Elaine Bowser, *The Transformation of the Cinema, 1907–1915* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 1, for quote from *Moving Picture World*.
- 4 Bowser, 122–3, on Audubon Theater.
- 5 Musser, 421–4, on Chicago.
- 6 Bowser, 37.
- 7 Bowser, 9–10, for estimated numbers.
- 8 Peiss, 150, on Mary Eaton Vorse quote.
- 9 Lauren Rabinovitz, 73, on Chicago; also Peiss, 151–3, on unchaperoned girls.
- 10 Elizabeth Ewen, “City Lights,” 55.
- 11 “Recreation Survey of Cincinnati,” (1913), 26–7.
- 12 Robert E. Davis, “Response to Innovation; A Study of Popular Argument About New Mass Media” (Ph.D., University of Iowa, 1965), 55, on *Independent* quote.
- 13 Lewis Palmer, “The World in Motion,” *Survey* 22 (June 5, 1909), 356; Foster, “Vaudeville and Motion Picture Shows,” 27–8.
- 14 Bowser, 2, on *Willamantic Journal*; Lynd, *Middletown*, 265; also Bartholomew, 7.
- 15 Michael Davis, 24.
- 16 Lynd (1929), 265; Day Allen Willie, “The Theatre’s New Rival,” *Lippincott’s* 84 (October 1909), 458; *World’s Work* (1910 and 1911), on closings cited by Robert E. Davis, “Response to Innovation,” 467–8; Grau (1910), 172; Lary May, *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 35, on *Daily Forward* quote.
- 17 Addams, 92.
- 18 “‘Movie’ Manners and Morals,” *Outlook* (July 26, 1916), 695.
- 19 Reverend H. A. Jump, “The Social Influence of the Moving Picture” (New York: Playground and Recreation Association of America, 1911); quote of Munsterberg in Garth Jowett, “Social Science as a Weapon: The Origins of the Payne Fund Studies, 1926–1929,” *Communication* 13: 3 (December 1992), 213.
- 20 Bowen, 2, 4–5, 9.
- 21 Bartholomew, 13–15.
- 22 Reverend H. A. Jump, 8.
- 23 “Madison Recreational Survey,” 52, 54, 59; “Recreation Survey of Cincinnati,” 27–9.
- 24 Richard DeCordova, “Ethnography and Exhibition: The Child Audience, The Hays Office and Saturday Matinees,” *Camera Obscura* 23 (May 1990), 91–106.
- 25 R. E. Davis, 234, for 1909 quote; “‘Movie’ Manners and Morals” (July 26, 1916), 694.
- 26 Mrs. W. I. Thomas, 147; “The White Slave Films: A Review,” *Outlook* (February 1914), 345.

Documents

Introduction to Documents

The rise of the movies spurred intense debates over their character: Did these new forms of entertainment exert a positive or negative influence on audiences? Were they to be feared or embraced? Much of the early public debate over these questions was conducted by elites. However, the following sources offer us insights into how people of the time felt about these new moving images and the moviegoing experience. Barton W. Currie describes the appeal and attraction that nickelodeons held for ordinary Americans in 1907 and offers a sense of what it was like to go to one of these new “movie” theaters and experience the wondrous sights of a world most audience members would never get to see in person. Social surveyor Robert Bartholomew takes us outside of New York City and describes the pleasures and perils of moviegoing in Cleveland, Ohio. The last document from the *New York Call*, a popular working-class newspaper, tells how inexperienced – and sometimes even experienced – early moviegoers could get so caught up in the action on the screen that they lost all sense of reality.

The Nickel Madness

Barton W. Currie

Source: *Harper's Weekly*, August 24, 1907

The Amazing Spread of a New Kind of Amusement Enterprise Which is Making Fortunes for its Projectors

The very fact that we derive pleasure from certain amusements, wrote Lecky, creates a kind of humiliation. Anthony Comstock and Police-Commissioner Bingham have spoken eloquently on the moral aspect of the five-cent theatre, drawing far more strenuous conclusions than that of the great historian. But both the general and the purity commissioner

generalized too freely from particulars. They saw only the harsher aspects of the nickel madness, whereas it has many innocent and harmless phases.

Crusades have been organized against these low-priced moving-picture theatres, and many conservators of the public morals have denounced them as vicious and demoralizing. Yet have they flourished amazingly, and carpenters are busy hammering them up in every big and little community in the country.

The first "nickelodeon," or "nickelet," or whatever it was originally called was merely an experiment, and the first experiment was made a little more than a year ago. There was nothing singularly novel in the idea, only the individualizing of the moving-picture machine. Before it had served merely as a "turn" in vaudeville. For a very modest sum the outfit could be housed in a narrow store or in a shack in the rear yard of a tenement, provided there was an available hallway and the space for a "front." These shacks and shops are packed with as many chairs as they will hold and the populace welcomed, or rather hailed, by a huge megaphone-horn and lurid placards. The price of admission and entertainment for from fifteen to twenty minutes is a coin of the smallest denomination in circulation west of the Rockies. . . .

An eloquent plea was made for these humble resorts by many "friends of the peepul." They offered harmless diversion for the poor. They were edifying, educational, and amusing. They were broadening. They revealed the universe to the unsophisticated. The variety of the skipping, dancing, flashing, and marching pictures was without limit. For five cents you were admitted to the realms of the prize ring; you might witness the celebration of a Pontifical mass in St. Peter's; Kaiser Wilhelm would prance before you, reviewing his Uhlans. Yes, and even more surprising, you were offered a modern conception of Washington crossing the Delaware "acted out by a trained group of actors." Under the persuasive force of such arguments, was it strange that the Aldermen befriended the nickelodeon man and gave impetus to the craze? . . .

Already statisticians have been estimating how many men, women, and children in the metropolis are being thrilled daily by them. A conservative figure puts it at 200,000, though if I were to accept the total of the showmen the estimate would be nearer half a million. But like all statisticians, who reckon human beings with the same unemotional placidity with which they total beans and potatoes, the statistician I have quoted left out the babies. In a visit to a dozen of these moving-picture hutches I counted an average of ten babies to each theatre-et. Of course they were in their mothers' or the nurse-girls' arms. But they were

there and you heard them. They did not disturb the show, as there were no counter-sounds, and many of them seemed profoundly absorbed in the moving pictures.

As a matter of fact, some mothers – and all nurse-girls – will tell you that the cinematograph has a peculiarly hypnotic or narcotic effect upon an infant predisposed to disturb the welkin. You will visit few of these places in Harlem where the doorways are not encumbered with go-carts and perambulators. Likewise they are prodigiously popular with the rising generation in frock and knickerbocker. For this reason they have been condemned by the morality crusaders.

The chief argument against them was that they corrupted the young. Children of any size who could transport a nickel to the cashier's booth were welcomed. Furthermore, undesirables of many kinds haunted them. Pickpockets found them splendidly convenient, for the lights were always cut off when the picture-machine was focused on the canvas. There is no doubt about the fact that many rogues and miscreants obtained licenses and set up these little show-places merely as snares and traps. There were many who thought they had sufficient pull to defy decency in the choice of their slides. Proprietors were said to work hand in glove with lawbreakers. Some were accused of wanton designs to corrupt young girls. Police-Commissioner Bingham denounced the nickel madness as pernicious, demoralizing, and a direct menace to the young. . . .

But if you happen to be an outlaw you may learn many moral lessons from these brief moving-picture performances, for most of the slides offer you a quick flash of melodrama in which the villain and criminal are always getting the worst of it. Pursuits of malefactors are by far the most popular of all nickel deliriums. You may see snatch-purses, burglars, and an infinite variety of criminals hunted by the police and the mob in almost any nickelet you have the curiosity to visit. The scenes of these thrilling chases occur in every quarter of the globe, from Cape Town to Medicine Hat.

The speed with which pursuer and pursued run is marvellous. Never are you cheated by a mere sprint or straightway flight of a few blocks. The men who "fake" these moving pictures seem impelled by a moral obligation to give their patrons their full nickel's worth. I have seen a dozen of these kinetoscope fugitives run at least forty miles before they collided with a fat woman carrying an umbrella, who promptly sat on them and held them for the puffing constabulary.

It is in such climaxes as these that the nickel delirium rises to its full height. Young and old follow the spectacular course of the fleeing culprit

breathlessly. They have seen him strike a pretty young woman and tear her chain-purse from her hand. Of course it is in broad daylight and in full view of the populace. Then in about one-eighth of a second he is off like the wind, the mob is at his heels. In a quarter of a second a half-dozen policemen have joined in the precipitate rush. Is it any wonder that the lovers of melodrama are delighted? And is it not possible that the pickpockets in the audience are laughing in their sleeves and getting a prodigious amount of fun out of it?

The hunted man travels the first hundred yards in less than six seconds, so he must be an unusually well-trained athlete. A stout uniformed officer covers the distance in eight seconds. Reckon the handicap he would have to give Wefers and other famous sprinters. But it is in going over fences and stone walls, swimming rivers and climbing mountains, that you mount the heights of realism. You are taken over every sort of jump and obstacle, led out into tangled underbrush, through a dense forest, up the face of a jagged cliff – evidently traversing an entire country – whirled through a maze of wild scenery, and then brought back to the city. Again you are rushed through the same streets, accompanying the same tireless pack of pursuers, until finally looms the stout woman with the umbrella.

A clerk in a Harlem cigar-store who is an intense patron of the nickelodeon told me that he had witnessed thief chases in almost every large city in the world, not to mention a vast number of suburban towns, mining-camps, and prairie villages.

"I enjoy these shows," he said, "for they continually introduce me to new places and new people. If I ever go to Berlin or Paris I will know what the places look like. I have seen runaways in the Boys de Boulong and a kidnapping in the Unter der Linden. I know what a fight in an alley in Stamboul looks like; have seen a paper-mill in full operation, from the cutting of the timber to the stamping of the pulp; have seen gold mined by hydraulic sprays in Alaska, and diamonds dug in South Africa. I know a lot of the pictures are fakes, but what of that? It costs only five cents."

The popularity of these cheap amusement-places with the new population of New York is not to be wondered at. The newly arrived immigrant from Transylvania can get as much enjoyment out of them as the native. The imagination is appealed to directly and without any circumlocution. The child whose intelligence has just awakened and the doddering old man seem to be on an equal footing of enjoyment in the stuffy little box-like theatres. The passer-by with an idle quarter of an hour on his hands has an opportunity to kill the time swiftly, if he is not above

mingling with the *hoi polloi*. Likewise the student of sociology may get a few points that he could not obtain in a day's journey through the thronged streets of the East Side.

Of course the proprietors of the nickellets and nickelodeons make as much capital out of suggestiveness as possible, but it rarely goes beyond a hint or a lure. For instance, you will come to a little hole in the wall before which there is an ornate sign bearing the legend:

FRESH FROM PARIS

Very Naughty

Should this catch the eye of a Comstock he would immediately enter the place to gather evidence. But he would never apply for a warrant. He would find a "very naughty" boy playing pranks on a Paris street – annoying blind men, tripping up gendarmes, and amusing himself by every antic the ingenuity of the Paris street gamin can conceive.

This fraud on the prurient, as it might be called, is very common, and it has led a great many people, who derive their impressions from a glance at externals, to conclude that these resorts are really a menace to morals. You will hear and see much worse in some high-priced theatres than in these moving-picture show-places.

In some of the crowded quarters of the city the nickelet is cropping up almost as thickly as the saloons, and if the nickel delirium continues to maintain its hold there will be, in a few years, more of these cheap amusement-places than saloons. Even now some of the saloon-keepers are complaining that they injure their trade. On one street in Harlem there are as many as five to a block, each one capable of showing to one thousand people an hour. That is, they have a seating capacity for about two hundred and fifty, and give four shows an hour. Others are so tiny that only fifty can be jammed into the narrow area. They run from early morning until midnight, and their megaphones are barking their lure before the milkman has made his rounds.

You hear in some neighborhoods of nickelodeon theatre-parties. A party will set out on what might be called a moving-picture debauch, making the round of all the tawdry little show-places in the region between the hours of eight and eleven o'clock at night, at a total cost of, say, thirty cents each. They will tell you afterwards that they were not bored for an instant. Everything they saw had plenty of action in it. Melodrama is served hot and at a pace the Bowery theatres can never follow. In one place I visited, a band of pirates were whirled

through a maze of hair-raising adventures that could not have occurred in a Third Avenue home of melodrama in less than two hours. Within the span of fifteen minutes the buccaneers scuttled a merchantman, made its crew walk the plank, captured a fair-haired maiden, bound her with what appeared to be two-inch Manila rope, and cast her into the hold.

The ruthless pirate captain put his captive on a bread-and-water diet, loaded her with chains, and paced up and down before her with arms folded, *à la Bonaparte*. The hapless young woman cowered in a corner and shook her clankless fetters. Meanwhile from the poop-deck other pirates scanned the offing. A sail dashed over the horizon and bore down on the buccaneers under full wing, making about ninety knots, though there was scarcely a ripple on the sea. In a few seconds the two vessels were hurling broadsides at each other. The *Jolly Roger* was shot away. Then the jolly sea-wolfs were shot away. It was a French man-of-war to the rescue, and French men-of-war's men boarded the outlaw craft. There were cutlass duels all over the deck, from "figgerhead" to taffrail, until the freebooters were booted overboard to a man. Then the *fiancé* of the fair captive leaped down into the hold and cut off her chains with a jack-knife.

Is it any wonder, when you can see all this for five cents and in fifteen minutes, that the country is being swept by a nickel delirium? An agent for a moving-picture concern informed the writer that the craze for these cheap show-places was sweeping the country from coast to coast. The makers of the pictures employ great troops of actors and take them all over the world to perform. The sets of pictures have to be changed every other day. Men with vivid imaginations are employed to think up new acts. Their minds must be as fertile as the mental soil of a dime-novelist.

The French seem to be the masters in this new field. The writers of *feuilletons* have evidently branched into the business, for the continued-story moving-picture has come into existence. You get the same characters again and again, battling on the edges of precipitous cliffs, struggling in a lighthouse tower, sleuthing criminals in Parisian suburbs, tracking kidnapped children through dense forests, and pouncing upon would-be assassins with the dagger poised. Also you are introduced to the grotesque and the *comique*. Thousands of dwellers along the Bowery are learning to roar at French buffoonery, and the gendarme is growing as familiar to them as "the copper on the beat."

And after all it is an innocent amusement and a rather wholesome delirium.

*Report of Censorship of Motion Pictures
and of Investigation of Motion Picture Theatres
of Cleveland*

Robert O. Bartholomew

Source: Robert O. Bartholomew, *Report of Censorship of Motion Pictures and of Investigation of Motion Picture Theatres of Cleveland* (Cleveland, 1913), 6, 10, 11–12, 13, 17, 18, 28

Fifteen down-town theaters open at 10 o'clock in the morning in which continuous programs are exhibited until late in the evening. All other theaters are open in the evening beginning at 6:30. ... Small neighborhood theaters close between the hours of 9 and 10 and all other theaters are closed by 11 p.m. The very nature of the entertainment in all theaters excepting those presenting vaudeville performances, tends to relax the muscles of the hard-working person and to prepare him for complete rest so that he is glad to leave early. ...

At one theater in the city three cents is charged for admission; at 111 theaters five cents is charged during the week with a ten-cent charge for Sundays, holidays and occasions when special feature pictures are shown. The other [19] theaters charge ten cents or more. For the above fee one can have from one to three hours entertainment consisting of four or five photoplays, good music, and in a few instances, the added vaudeville acts.

Motion picture theaters form neighborhood social centers. They are very generally scattered among all nationalities represented in the city and in all neighborhoods. They do in a real sense provide a means of reasonably priced, wholesome recreation for the man of small or average means without the necessity of his going from the neighborhood for necessary relaxation.

One hundred and one Motion Picture theaters are located adjoining or within one-half block of one or more saloons. ... As one daily attends theaters scattered hither and thither in the city and sees the thousands of young people who would, but for the motion picture theaters probably be spending their recreational hours in saloons, he is tremendously impressed with the good that the motion picture theaters are doing by saving young lives from the degrading companionships formed when innocent young people and those trained in unscrupulous practices

gather in questionable places without other attractions for thought than the vile inventions of their silly minds. ... [T]he Motion Picture theater is today the greatest competitor and one of the strongest enemies of the saloon with its degrading companionships. ...

[I]t would seem that about 115,000 men, women, and children attend motion picture theaters [daily], while the average for Sundays is about 200,000, or in other words, one in every six of our citizens attends a motion picture theater each week day and one in every three when such leisure time as Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays is granted. ...

The opinion has prevailed among the managers of Motion Picture theaters during the past that it was necessary to have the theater dark in order that the motion picture might appear clear and distinct. This belief has been responsible for conditions in the theaters that have justified criticism. There in the darkness of the rooms young people, many of them mere children, are thrown close together where uncontrolled affections soon lead to serious excesses. These young people begin by slight familiarities and are soon embracing each other in the dark during the progress of the entertainment. This condition can be best illustrated by a case taken from the records of our juvenile court. A young girl, 16 years of age, frequented a certain very poorly lighted motion picture theater in this city. A flirtation with a strange man considerably her senior soon sprang up. Soon they were daily attending the theater sitting in the dark recesses of the room and embracing each other. Later an illegitimate child resulting from this association was thrown over the back fence by the irate mother and the case became a court record. The girl who had always been known as decent up to the time she started on her downward path, became incorrigible and is now detained in one of our public institutions because of her gross immorality which she claims she cannot live without. ... The numerous cases found where young people were unduly familiar with those of the opposite sex indicates the necessity of requiring adequate lighting of theaters. In one instance three young men were handling one girl in a most vulgar manner. The manager's attention was called to the case but he failed to correct the performance.

The condition of the air in the theaters is best described in the words of a little fifth grader when he says: "Some moving picture shows are unhealth [*sic*] to go in because it smell bad and they need funigating [*sic*]." The matter of proper ventilation has been greatly overlooked. ... [In many theaters] the air is changed only as patrons come to or leave the theater. It was found that attendants in one or two instances, by the use of large atomizers, squirted a solution around the room to ally the odor of the foul air. ... In ten theaters the air was found to be so foul that the investigators

could not stay more than a few moments and even this short stay resulted in sneezing, coughing and the contraction of serious colds. . . .

Good music is to be heard in most Motion Picture theaters. . . . At eighty of the Motion Picture theaters there is first-class piano music. There are first-class orchestras in thirty-five and organola music in twelve theaters while only four do not have music. At only a few of the theaters can one hear cheap and trashy tunes.

In passing upon the moral tone of the Motion Picture theaters principal emphasis has been laid upon the attitude of the managers in their endeavor to eliminate objectionable conduct. . . .

The investigation shows that in fifty-eight of the theaters the moral tone is most excellent; in forty-six the moral tone is good and in twenty-seven theaters the moral tone is bad. . . .

Tables compiled covering investigations at twenty-two theaters visited show that two-thirds of the young children attending motion picture theaters in the evening are unaccompanied. The largest period of attendance of unaccompanied children is from 7:30 to 8:15 in the evening. The facts show that practically all of the children leave the theater before 9 o'clock. . . . The chief objection to children going to the Motion Picture theaters in the evening comes from the school teachers who complain that the children are dull and sleepy in school the following day if allowed to remain out late in the evening. It must be remembered in this connection that there are thousands of fathers and mothers who pay little if any attention to their children during the evening hours, it would seem that children should not be prohibited from attending Motion Picture theaters unaccompanied after a certain given hour in the evening, rather should the theaters be made wholesome places of recreation and the children be encouraged to attend, for only in this way will thousands of children, living in the congested sections of the city, be kept from the streets.

House Fly Panics Pittsburgh Movie Audience

Source: *New York Call*, February 7, 1914

A common house fly, magnified several hundred times, which had in some manner made its way onto the lens of a moving picture machine in a [Pittsburgh] North Side nickelodeon, was the cause of a panic among the audience last night which, but for the prompt action on the part of a

few cool heads, would have turned into a tragedy greater than was being depicted on the screen.

The machine operator had barely begun to run off the “thriller” of the night when there appeared on the screen a monster with legs like the limbs of a big tree, eyes as big as saucers, a huge body covered with hair that looked like standing wheat. At the first appearance of the monster women and children screamed in terror, and a rush was made for the door by the panic-stricken audience.

Suddenly some one, guffawed and yelled, “It’s only a flying machine.” This brought the panic stricken people to their senses and quiet was quickly restored. Several people, however, were severely bruised during the rush.

Readings and Screenings

There has been a great deal of innovative work on movie audiences since the first edition of this volume. For a sweeping look at the cultural and political history of theater, movie, and television audiences from the nineteenth century to the present, see Richard Butsch, *The Citizen Audience: Crowds, Publics, and Individuals* (New York: Routledge, 2007). For overviews of nickelodeons, movie theaters, and early movie audiences, see Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby, eds, *American Movie Audiences: From the Turn of the Century to the Early Sound Era* (London: British Film Institute, 1999); Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby, eds, *Hollywood Spectatorship: Changing Perceptions of Cinema Audiences* (London: British Film Institute, 2001); Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby, eds, *Identifying Hollywood’s Audiences: Cultural Identity and the Movies* (London: British Film Institute, 2008); Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes, and Robert C. Allen, eds, *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of the Cinema* (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2008). Older works that are still useful include, Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992); Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1990); Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema: 1907–1915* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1990); Richard Kozarski, *An Evening’s Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915–1928* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1990). Moviegoing experiences outside large urban centers are explored in Gregory Waller, *Main Street Amusements: Movies and Commercial Entertainment in a Southern City, 1896–1930* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995); Kathryn Fuller,

At the Picture Show: Small Town Audiences and the Creation of the Movie Fan (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996); Kathryn H. Fuller-Seeley, ed., *Hollywood in the Neighborhood: Historical Case Studies of Local Moviegoing* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2008). For a close look at ethnic, racial, gender, and working-class moviegoing habits, see Jacqueline Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2005); Shelley Stamp, *Movie-Struck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture After the Nickelodeon* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1986); Lauren Rabinovitz, *For the Love of Pleasure: Women, Movies, and Culture in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours For What We Will: Workers in an Industrial City, 1870–1920* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Steven J. Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998). For collections of essays and documents that survey filmgoing patterns from the silent era to the 1990s, see Richard Abel, *Americanizing the Movies and Movie-Mad Audiences 1910–1914* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2006) and Gregory A. Waller, ed., *Moviegoing in America: A Sourcebook in the History of Film Exhibition* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001).

Although films such as *The Crowd* (1928) feature scenes of audiences at the movies, there are no silent films about going to the movies that I would recommend.