

- 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 the 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

“The Nickel Madness,” by Barton W. Currie, was published in *Harper’s Weekly* on 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 nickolet 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 kinoscope 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 nickelets 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.

*Robert O. Bartholomew, Report of Censorship of
Motion Pictures and of Investigation of Motion
Picture Theatres of Cleveland (1913)*

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.