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American Movie Audiences of the 1930s[1]

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Abstract

The Depression and movies with sound changed movie audiences of the 1930s from those of the 1920s and earlier. Sound silenced audiences, discouraging the sociability that had marked working-class audiences before. The Depression led movie companies to change marketing strategies and construction plans. They stopped selling luxury and building movie palaces. Instead, they expanded their operation of neighborhood theaters, displacing independents that had been more worker friendly, and instituted centrally controlled show bills and policies. Audiences also appear to have become more heterogeneous. All this, too, discouraged the voluble behavior of working-class people. Ironically, in this era of labor activism, workers and their families seem to have become quieter in movie theaters, satisfied with the convenience of chain-operated movie houses.

The 1930s were an exciting decade for labor activism in the United States and a high point for the growth of unions. Workers in steel, automobile, and other heavy industries organized industrial unions. The Committee on Industrial Organization (later Congress of Industrial Organizations or CIO) was formed with a membership of more than a million workers. Factory workers initiated new tactics in struggles with employers, such as sit-down strikes. In politics, they advanced legislation and programs in the New Deal to help employed and unemployed workers.

Ironically, at the same time that workers' collective action and class consciousness were at a high point, movie audiences became quiet. They did not act collectively to control their experience in the theater. How did this happen? Two major factors shaped the 1930s movie house: sound movies and the Depression.

Entertainment audiences have not always been quiet.[2] Working class audiences, in particular, have exhibited a good deal of "class" consciousness and activism in theaters. The highpoint of audience activism was the Jacksonian era, when young workers filled the theaters of large industrializing cities. The prototypical case is the "b'hoys" who crowded the Bowery Theater of New York and directed the show from the pit. They decided what the musicians played. They forced actors to repeat a favorite line in the middle of a scene, or to divert from the play altogether and sing a song or dance. They called actors and man-

agers before the curtain for applause or a dressing down. When not satisfied with the responses to their calls, they rioted, sometimes even chasing actors out of the theater.

In the late nineteenth century, even after the law had given managers greater authority over audiences, working-class audiences were still quite lively in cheap melodrama theaters that catered to working-class audiences. They talked and sang, hissed and booed, although they rarely rioted. Not far from the Bowery, Yiddish theaters on Second Avenue were renowned for their avid and outspoken audiences. Throughout the plays, they busily kibitzed about the characters and what would happen to them. Between acts the hubbub of their talking and arguing with family, friends, and neighbors made uptown theaters seem dead.

When nickelodeons cropped up like mushrooms shortly before 1910, working-class neighborhoods filled them with voluble audiences who again set the tone and pace to fit their own purposes. Reformers, such as Jane Addams in Chicago and Michael Davis in New York, remarked how working-class immigrants turned these commercial spaces for movies into social clubs for their own needs. Reformers likened it to the workingman's club, the saloon, without alcohol and with the wife and children.

What these lively audiences had in common were theaters in or on the edge of their own working-class neighborhoods, with relatively cheap admission. The theaters were public spaces where workers felt welcome. These were unpretentious places (the Bowery, although an impressive building, had wood benches in the pit and gallery), not requiring "proper" dress or behavior, where one could "drop in" with little planning. They made it a social space through their animated conversation and playful mood. And they were filled with familiar faces of fellow workers, a devoted following of regulars who could recognize each other at the theater. How did sound film and the Depression change all this at the movie theater of the 1930s?

Who Were Movie Audiences? Admissions and Demographics

Although different sources claim different attendance figures, the general pattern of change in the sound era is clear. (See Table 1.) Before sound technology and the Depression came crashing in on the movies in 1929, admissions had been growing steadily, as movie-going became increasingly a universal recreation. The Depression and the disappearance of silent films coincided with a slowdown in 1930–33, even though admission prices dropped to as little as a third of what they had been. But a revival began about 1934. From that point, attendance steadily rose to 1948, when postwar developments (television, suburbia) again changed movie-going habits. This was the golden era of movies, when movie going was most popular. During the 1930s and through World War Two, people spent more on movie-going than any other recreation, accounting for about twenty percent of all recreational expenditures and eighty percent of spectator amusements.[3]

Beyond gross admissions, e̶s̶t̶i̶m̶a̶t̶e̶s̶ ̶o̶f̶ ̶d̶e̶m̶o̶g̶r̶a̶p̶hic breakdowns are un-

TABLE 1.   Movie Theaters and Admissions

Year	Indoor theaters Sound	Silent	Drive-ins	Weekly attendance (in millions)	Average admission price
1927	20	21,644		57	
1928	100	22,204		65	
1929	800	22,544		80	
1930	8,860	14,140		90	0.30
1931	13,128	8,865		75	0.20
1932	13,880	4,835		60	0.23
1933	14,405	4,128		60	.23
1934	14,381	2,504		70	.23
1935	15,273			80	.23
1936	15,358			88	.23
1937	18,192			88	.23
1938	18,182			85	.23
1939	17,829			85	.23
1940	19,032		—	80	.241
1941	19,645		95	85	.252
1942	20,281		99	85	.273
1943	20,196		97	85	.294
1944	20,277		96	85	.317
1945	20,355		102	85	.352
1946	18,719		300	90	.403
1947	18,059		548	90	.404
1948	17,575		820	90	.401
1949	17,367		1,203	70	.460
1950	16,904		2,202	60	.528
1951	16,150		2,830	54	.528
1952	15,347		3,276	51	.60
1953	14,174		3,791	46	.60

Sources: Theaters, admissions, and prices from *Film Daily Year Book, 1960* (New York: Film Daily, 1960), 105, 107. Admission prices for 1930–31 from Tino Balio, *Grand Design* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 13.

certain, as illustrated by continuing disagreements over the class composition of nickelodeon audiences. By the 1930s most people went to the movies, but some went more than others. In 1939, writer Margaret Thorp estimated that forty million of 130 million Americans in the 1930s were regulars, and described the audience as mostly middle-class, white, between fourteen and forty-five years old, and more adult females than males. George Gallup described the typical moviegoer just before World War Two as twenty-seven years old, earning twenty-eight dollars a week (close to the median income for American families).[4]

While most would agree that the audience was white (since segregation and poverty restricted attendance by blacks and other minorities), there is disagree-

ment over the class balance. Contradicting Margaret Thorp's impression that the middle class predominated, community studies from the 1930s indicate heavier movie-going by lower classes. A study in San Francisco found that workers and clerks with income about one third of professionals spent over twice as much per year on movie-going. A 1936 *Fortune* survey found twenty-eight percent of the "prosperous," twenty-seven percent of the lower middle class, and nineteen percent of the poor went to the movies once per week. Sociologists W. Lloyd Warner and Paul Lunt found large numbers of workers in movie houses in the mid-1930s in "Yankee City." At least some portion of the audiences were unemployed workers whiling away their idle hours.[5]

It is clear that all classes went to the movies and went more regularly than today. However, what is more important for understanding audience behavior is the makeup of audiences in individual theaters: Who was sitting next to whom? While it is hard to establish with any certainty, trends in exhibition suggest that individual theaters had audiences that were less homogeneous in terms of ethnicity and class, as compared to audiences in the famous nickelodeons. These and other changes arising from the Depression, along with the introduction of sound film, transformed movie audience behavior.

Sound Silences Audiences: 1926–1931

A simple factor in quieting audiences was the introduction of sound film. Between 1926 and 1931 movie theaters were fitted with sound systems, the overwhelming majority in 1930. By 1931, theaters without sound were in the minority; by 1934, they had all but disappeared. (See Table 1.) Between 1928 (before sound had an impact) and 1935 (after silent movies had disappeared), one-third of all movie houses, about seven thousand theaters, closed. Those that closed their doors typically could not afford to install new sound systems and were mostly independents in rural and working-class areas. One old movie-goer said, "After that, everything seemed to change with the movie business. Even the prices started to go up."[6]

Sound at first received an uncertain welcome. Donald Crafton's review of published letters to fan magazines reveals very mixed opinions, some strongly in favor while others were just as opposed. Some claimed soothing characteristics and a unique dramatic quality for silent films. Others found "talkies" a great improvement over subtitles, and liked hearing what actors were actually saying.[7] Early sound tracks and the acoustics of early theaters did not produce good sound quality for music. In small theaters, where musicians often played poorly, even low-quality recording might be an improvement over a mediocre piano player on a cheap upright. But at downtown theaters with dollar admissions, where the stage shows and orchestras had been quite elaborate, attendance dropped precipitously when musicians were fired and the shows cut back. Surveys found that most people preferred talking movies but live music. As sound improved, however, sound tracks made live music superfluous.

In the silent era, piano players in small theaters often used their music to in-

flect the meaning of the movie, e.g., making a romantic scene comic. Audiences often controlled the meaning of the movie by directing musician(s), the only live performers, to provide music preferred by the audience and different from that recommended by movie producers. Recorded sound and music standardized mood and message, eliminating audiences' control over the entertainment.[8]

Sound also changed behavior. As one report phrased it, "the talking audience for silent pictures became a silent audience for talking pictures." Talking and other noises now were distractions that interfered with listening to the movie dialogue. Audience attitudes changed accordingly. Silence was self-enforced, with audiences shushing talkers. Silenced, the audience seems to have become less assertive, more concentrated on the movie—except when there were problems with the projector. When the sound was unsatisfactory, it became customary for audiences to stamp their feet and clap in unison until something was done. Projection problems broke audience absorption in the story and re-engaged them with their fellow viewers, momentarily joining them in common interest and action.[9]

The Depression: Movie Palaces and Neighborhood Houses

The Depression abruptly redefined the movie-going experience. It halted the promotion of movie-going as an experience of luxury at the movie palace. In its place, price, comfort and distraction from worries became the selling point. Movie palace construction stopped and stage shows were scaled back and eventually disappeared. Many theaters, mostly independents in small towns, closed their doors in the early years, due to the double shock of sound film and the depressed economy. (See Table 1.) These were the ones with the smallest profit margin and the least able to invest in sound. The difficult times continued for them, even while national attendance figures rose to record levels. Small-town managers regularly reported poor attendance and hard times.[10]

The ones that closed tended to be theaters whose markets were smaller and in lower income neighborhoods, or poorer small towns where people could afford only the lowest admission. These neighborhoods and towns were more likely to have had homogeneous audiences, ones that shared more of a sense of community among each other. In rural areas these were probably not homogeneous in terms of class, but they probably did share a "plain folk" identity opposed, in the American tradition, to the big-city rich and powerful symbolized by the movie palace of the 1920s.

The movie palaces that survived in the 1930s redefined the evening from one of champagne to one of popcorn and soda. They drastically reduced prices, eliminated or reduced the stage shows, cut staffs, and redefined their jobs. They lowered the wages of ushers and trained them for crowd control instead of courteous assistance. Many began continuous showings of movies and emphasized double features instead of lavish live stage shows. They ended the ban on food and drinks in the theater, and opened refreshment stands to supplement income.[11]

The Depression took hold just as a handful of major Hollywood studios established firm control of the industry, vertically integrated from production to exhibition. These studios halted plans to build large and lavish movie palaces. Instead, they instituted a new wave of theater construction after 1932, building smaller theaters with sound systems in less expensive, modern architectural style on the business streets of neighborhoods, suburbs, and small towns to try to expand the market. In place of ushers, they turned up lights between movies so patrons could seat themselves. Concession stands selling popcorn and other refreshments became centers of profit.[12]

The new theaters differed from the old neighborhood houses. Vertical integration centralized decision-making, reducing the influence of the local manager. Decisions about booking movies, music, and even refreshments were no longer his.[13] This made the houses more impersonal and perhaps more anonymous, less responsive to the local patrons, less "neighborly," less like a community space.

As cheaper, old neighborhood houses closed, working-class people were more likely to see movies in the company of middle-class patrons. The Depression and vertical integration pushed theaters to seek a broader market and try to attract all classes within their vicinity. One indicator of the need to appeal to a broader market are the comments of managers writing to *Motion Picture Herald*, warning that a movie appealed *only* to women or to "high brows." These were managers of theaters in small towns where a movie that segmented the audience could not turn a profit, and therefore they were alert to the danger of homogeneous audiences of the wrong sort, i.e., too small in numbers.[14]

This shift to broader markets was part of a national pattern in economic structure, as national brands and national chains were beginning to push aside corner stores and unbranded or local products. As historian Liz Cohen has argued, working-class people were being incorporated into this mass market and shopping at chain stores. Culturally, this was drawing them away from their class and ethnic identity at the very time that many were most class conscious in work and politics.[15] In the movie house, their behavior would reflect their orientation as consumers rather than as workers. The Fordist solution of increasing worker consumption was being born at the movies.

The reformed palaces and neighborhood houses were becoming more like each other. Palaces jettisoned their aura of luxury and exclusivity in service if not in architecture; neighborhood houses were upgraded with sound and modern architecture that symbolized equality rather than hierarchy. The service in both was more impersonal and oriented to simply delivering the movie instead of a night's experience. Both were seeking audiences from a broader market in order to fill theater seats. This national mass marketing displaced earlier class-segregated movie houses that, through location, architecture, and policy, implicitly identified with specific classes and ethnic groups.

Meanwhile many of the more "community friendly" independents that might still represent specific groups were struggling. To compete with the integrated chains and to counter the hard times of the Depression, many of the

smaller independent houses began to sponsor promotional events to boost admissions. There were many variations of special nights with door prizes and reduced prices: "bargain night," "ten-cent night," "bank night," "family night," "dish night," "identify-the-star contests," "festival night," "giveaway night," and "Foto nite." Managers also arranged "tie-ins" with local businesses, with schools, and 4H and literary clubs. A *New York Times* article claimed that over two thousand theaters, mostly independent and in small towns, were using premiums to entice customers. Premiums such as "Depression-ware" dishes were designed to appeal to women and make them regular customers who would return each week (for as many as eighty-six weeks) until they had a complete set of dishes. For forty cents she got an article which would have cost twenty cents or more at a store and also saw a double feature. These giveaways filled many theaters.[16]

The Hollywood studios at first opposed these promotions. Warner Brothers released *Robin Hood* with the condition that no games or giveaways be used when the film was shown. Instead, they preferred promotions that built audience allegiance to the studio, not the theater. Shifting focus from the theater and its attractions, movie studios promoted their movie stars under contract. Pioneering such efforts was Walt Disney, who was a master of studio promotion. In 1929, Disney formed Mickey Mouse Clubs with weekly meetings scheduled for Saturday matinees in specific theaters. The clubs promoted Disney characters and movies as well as tie-ins for a range of Disney toys. Disney made efforts to link community organizations to this activity as well, adding a veneer that would appeal to reformers and also further enhance his product image. Loew's and Warner Brothers circuits also organized children's clubs, as did many local theater managers.[17] The major movie studios' efforts to shift allegiance is another example of the impact of national branding. Attachment to movie stars would be achieved at the cost of weakening the movie house's local attachment to the neighborhood.

Localism did not die entirely. Some small-town theaters tried to sustain themselves with live music that appealed to local identity. Historian Gregory Waller found low-budget live shows continuing in small Kentucky towns throughout the 1930s. Movie theaters became an important venue for live country music, indigenous to the regional culture, alongside Hollywood movies. These small town theaters of three hundred to four hundred seats were important sources of income to live country musicians who, though widely known for their radio performances, received little money from those broadcasts or from their recordings.[18] In contrast to the stage shows of the 1920s big-city movie palaces and the 1930s Hollywood movie shown in these country theaters, these live shows gave voice to the poorer local culture. This was a region and era in which poverty was not pejorative; being poor and working-class was a badge of authenticity, and in a sense was the *dominant local* culture. Country music of the time typically expressed the hardships of low-income people facing tough lives and tough times.[19]

Kids at the Movies

What were people *doing* at the movies? A few scattered sources give some evidence of what children were doing: It would seem the kids were by and large having a good time. Whether for the clubs or other reasons, children flocked to neighborhood movie theaters. In Middletown, Saturday matinees were popular with pre-adolescent children, at least half staying for five to six hours. Children from a working-class district of New Haven attended movies frequently, over half going twice a week or more. Movies were overwhelmingly the first preference of leisure activities of Italian working-class teenage girls in East Harlem in 1930. Two-thirds reported that they went to movies at least once a week, and another fifth went twice a week, usually alone. It was also similar to what high-school students from a range of social classes in Chicago reported, and similar to findings in Philadelphia in 1935 among junior high students. Movies were overtaking all other activities in children's preferences, including outdoor games for boys and shopping for girls.[20]

Unlike adults, children didn't change their behavior much with the coming of sound. They often came with groups of friends. Descriptions of children's matinees of the 1930s depict typical pre-adolescent crowd behavior, yelling and high jinx that managers and ushers did their best to contain. Just north of the Bronx, a cheap theater attracted a mix of black, Italian, and Jewish children for Saturday serials. One of them reported years later that the film broke regularly and the children "booed, stamped feet and often had fist fights." The mayor of Chelsea, Massachusetts, closed a theater in 1930 because "the actions of many juvenile spectators were such as to endanger their morals"—apparently a reference to necking.[21]

It appears that kids participated in what were still relatively homogeneous audiences. Most importantly, they were a theater full of kids. One of the recurring criticisms of the time is the large numbers of children without adult chaperones at the movies. In urban areas, most walked to the theater and therefore likely from the same neighborhood—even though, as at the Bronx theater just mentioned, neighborhoods may have shared a theater. Finally, many went to school together and would have seen familiar faces there. The kids' "hour" had many of the same characteristics of earlier theaters with lively audiences. *They* were lively. Adults however had quieted down.

Managers Talk About Audiences

Some information about adult behavior can be extracted from a weekly column of letters from theater managers entitled, "What This Picture Did for Me," published in the *Motion Picture Herald* through the 1930s and 1940s. Managers reviewed the film and described how well it drew attendance. Included were many brief comments about audiences' reactions to pictures. From these we can glean some sense of the audiences of the 1930s. I examined about five thousand short

reviews in the column during 1934–1936 and 1939–1940. Each review was identified by town and by category as "small town," "small town and rural," or "general" patronage. Almost all of the reviews came from theaters in small towns or cities. These were fourth- and fifth-run houses, indicated by periodic comments on the poor quality of the worn-out prints sent to them. Even the largest cities mentioned did not have a population of more than a few thousand. One March 1939 comment indicated that the town was not large enough to support matinees just for children. Many reviews noted that weather and bad roads determined attendance, much less an issue where streets were paved and people might even walk to the movie house.

The audiences were certainly not upper-class metropolitan sophisticates. Managers described their patrons as "plain folk," "common folk," "average," "very few sophisticated types," "farmers," "not high class," etc. They described movies that did *not* appeal to their patrons as being for "society class of people," "class patronage," "the class that supports opera," "high brow," and "sophisticated." These audiences were not unlike some of the nickelodeon audiences in their class composition and sophistication.

Small-town audiences of necessity included all classes from the area. But the managers consistently lump all their patrons into the "plain folk" category, distinguishing them from big-city sophisticates. This "plain folk" classification is reinforced by regular comments that films of upper-class American life, literary classics like Shakespeare, classical music, and British films (with upper-class accents) did not go over well. So while it is not clear precisely who is in each theater, these audiences seem culturally, if not economically, to identify with lower classes and the less powerful.

The managers, too, occasionally expressed some resentment of their fourth-run status. These were most likely independent theaters, unprotected by the major studios. The vertically integrated industry put these small-town independents at the bottom of the hierarchy, after the big-city theaters had rung most of the profits out of movies. Several managers complained that the biggest hits, such as *Gone with the Wind*, reached them so late and at such inflated prices that few attended. As one described it, those who could afford it went to the city to see it, and the rest could not afford it even in their town.

From Community to Consumers

Managers frequently reported considerable hearty and even uncontrolled laughter. They occasionally reported that audiences cheered or yelled in delight at movies. In a very few instances, audiences were more active. In October 1935, one manager reported an audience requesting an encore of one reel of a movie. Only three incidents of hissing or other shouting were mentioned in about five thousand reviews. In Mason, Michigan, in October 1934, boys in the gallery "razzed" *Spitfire* with Katherine Hepburn. In Frankfort, Kansas, in June 1936, "the folks razzed" a movie entitled *Yellow Dust* as poorly. In Baldwin, Michi-

gan, in October 1936, a young man from a Civilian Conservation Corps camp hollered, "Toss her a fish!" when an actress sang in a "high fallutin" style.

People typically expressed their opinion by walking out during the show or telling the manager as they left at the end of the show. The managers often reported a count of how many people "walked out." In September 1936, one reported in astonishment that "they walked out in fours with a $60 bank night." Managers stood in the lobby to observe people's reactions and overhear their comments as they left the shows. Often people volunteered comments to managers. Sometimes patrons commented when they returned to see a movie again, or called the next day to express their approval or disapproval. In one instance, people called to ask the manager to explain what the movie had meant. The frequency with which managers received unsolicited feedback is remarkable. The column gives a distinct impression that people in these small towns were on a personal footing with the managers, who were likely also the owners and long-time residents of these towns, and more readily voiced their opinions to managers than audiences do today.[22] But instead of making demands during the show, they waited to voice their opinions in private to the managers. The overall feeling of these comments is that the audiences had taken on the persona of *consumers individually registering their votes rather than groups acting collectively*.

Newsreels evoked reactions that were an exception, where people were often vocal and even collectively booed political figures during the show. Public expression of political sentiments in reaction to newsreels apparently was widely accepted. In *Motion Picture Herald*, one manager complained in November 1936 that newsreels about the upcoming election were "making for rowdy houses. They clap and boo and, boy, I will be glad when the whole damn thing [the election] is settled." *Variety* reviewed newsreels in the early 1930s at two of New York City's large midtown movie theaters, the Embassy and the Translux.[23] *Variety* sometimes reported audiences as "listless," but at the Translux some hissed and some applauded Mayor Jimmy Walker. On another occasion, people laughed along with Walker and one person hissed the inauguration of the new mayor. At the Embassy some applauded politicians favoring repeal of Prohibition. In 1932, audiences at both theaters hissed President Herbert Hoover while Franklin D. Roosevelt usually received more applause. *The New York Times* reported incidents also. Letters to the dramatic editor in the late 1930s complained of people in the audience hissing President Roosevelt in newsreels. The Mayor of Bronxville, New York, asked theater managers to put on the screen an announcement that the President should not be booed and that the audience should stand for the national anthem.[24]

So audiences booed political figures in newsreels in big cities as well as small towns. On the other hand, the *Motion Picture Herald*, *Variety*, and *The New York Times* rarely reported outspoken reactions to movies other than newsreels. *Film Daily* did report that some audiences booed in 1930 when movie producers and exhibitors added trailers that advertised products. The major studios quickly ended the practice.[25]

The trend seemed to support a norm of silence. The norm of silence was given legal sanction in 1939, when a New York court upheld the right of audiences annoyed by talkers in the audience to give them a "Bronx cheer."[26] This is notable because the decision effectively favored a right to silence rather than to free expression, and condoned audiences policing their members for silence.

Audience behaviors more commonly reported were inconsiderate violations of manners. *The New York Times* published articles and letters complaining about the manners of adult audiences. Letters in 1936 complained of women not removing their hats and of people talking or crumpling candy wrappers during the movie. Parodying such complaints, an article in 1940 listed suggestions for audience members to make themselves more comfortable: to take off one's shoes, wear a loose collar, and close one's eyes for a few seconds at slow points in the movie.[27]

Overall, the audiences depicted in these reviews are rather sedate compared to the ones described in reports on working-class nickelodeons around 1910. Audiences expressed themselves almost exclusively in reaction to movies. This may be that writers failed to report other behavior, but I found *no* comments, absolutely *none*, about talking, socializing, and moving about, of the sort commonly noted in the earlier era among working-class audiences. This was equally true of urban movie palaces and small-town houses, and apparently across class and gender.

Compare this to comments of observers around 1910 in nickelodeons. At an immigrant nickelodeon in the small city of Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1912, for example, the people treated it as "the gathering place of the women of the neighborhood with their babies and little children, a crude sort of tea-room gossiping place." In 1909, New York City regulars "stroll up and down the aisles between reels and visit friends." The same year in Chicago, Jane Addams described a nickelodeon as "less formal than the regular theater, and there is much more gossip and social life." In response to a movie, children's "shouting, whistling and stomping combine in a demonstration which at times is most remarkable." In a sing-along, the *crowd*, not the manager, chose the songs as people shouted out different requests.[28] The descriptions uniformly depict an audience acting rather than reacting. Initiatives came from the audience rather than from the manager or cued by the movie.

In some instances, nickelodeons were used for political and union activities. As with other small neighborhood entertainment businesses, owners tended to support the causes of the local community; in working-class communities this might mean socialist speakers or union meetings. Some houses showed suffragist or socialist films, other slides to publicize union activities, or hosted fundraisers.[29] While these were not frequently mentioned in the 1900s and 1910s, I found no references to such uses of movie houses in the 1930s, despite the high level of union and political activity of the Depression.

Movie-going in the 1930s was distinctly different from both nickelodeon and movie palace audiences. The working-class neighborhood nickelodeon had been typified by audiences that adopted the space for socializing and other uses

beyond watching movies. Mostly middle-class movie palace audiences, on the other hand, had chosen a "special night out" to indulge in a relatively expensive evening of fantasy and luxury in plush surrounding, with lavish lounges and restrooms and other amenities, served by an army of solicitous ushers, and presented with a full program of spectacular live as well as film entertainment.[30]

Because the 1930s audiences were more heterogeneous, they were less likely to act collectively than those of the working-class nickelodeons. Heterogeneous audiences would mean fewer familiar and like-minded faces; they would feel less at home and more constrained. The new modern theaters that replaced many old neighborhood independents lacked those characteristics that had fostered the "social club" atmosphere in the nickelodeons.

People in the 1930s were drawn to the movie house not to socialize nor for a night's indulgence in luxury. Rather, they sought an inexpensive and relaxed leisure activity that was convenient and comfortable, and maybe a bonus of a free dish or winning a raffle. Perhaps working people in the 1930s satiated their need for collective action outside the movie house, in this exceptional era of union activity and public demonstrations for government response to workers' needs. They seem to have come to the theater to get away from worries and struggles outside, or to send their children and use the movies as a baby sitter. Overt acts of audiences occurred only when newsreels reminded patrons of the world outside.

The shift in attitude is illustrated by the habit of arriving at the movie house at one's own convenience instead of at the beginning of the show, and of leaving when the movie had reached the point "where we came in," which reappeared in the 1930s.[31] This was a habit common in the classic early working-class nickelodeon and cheap vaudeville with continuous showings, but supposedly had waned after the introduction of the feature film and the movie palace. At the movie palace it was common practice to hold audiences in vast lobbies—where they often were entertained with live music—until the current show ended and the next performance began.

Late arrival and early departure have a long tradition, but have always been a mark of the relative affordability and ready availability of entertainment. Before cheap entertainment was widely and regularly available, only urban upper classes treated them with such nonchalance as to arrive when they chose. When cheap entertainment reached the level of a nickel in the nickelodeon and was regularly available even in small cities, even working-class people might drop in for a brief respite, whenever convenient.

Who's in Control?

Another change that contributed to a more "passive" audience was the growth of numerous inventive audience participation events organized by theater managers in the 1930s, always carefully orchestrated and supervised by management. Prices were reduced for matinees and on "bargain nights." On "bank nights," managers gave away fifty dollars or more—often a family's weekly income.

Managers gave away a variety of "premiums," the well-known dishes, photos of stars, and many other things people were hard pressed to justify purchasing in those days. Managers recruited other business and nonprofit groups to draw customers, offering a special night for local stores, schools, and clubs to promote their products and causes.

In all these instances, participation by audiences was planned and initiated by managers and under their supervision. Patrons were invited to play games, but the games were controlled by managers and required little from audiences. This was different even from the sing-alongs in the nickelodeons when patrons called the tunes. Now managers called the tunes, and the sing-alongs were led by the "bouncing ball" on the screen and the organist that remained from the live shows and music of earlier days. Thomas Doherty points out how 1930s movies sometimes orchestrated audience reactions. Opening credits included shots of the stars that were timed for applause. Actors paused for laughs.[32]

Not that patrons seemed to mind following rather than leading. This seems consistent with the new attitude of sitting back and *being* entertained, to have delivered to them what they had purchased, and, if they were lucky, with a bonus, not to *do* something and exercise control. One is reminded of television audiences who, unlike their critics, are not passive, but simply choose television to relax, *not* act.

This interpretation differs from the usual one that middle-class decorum restrained theater audiences. It is suggesting rather that relaxation more than restraint may explain "passivity." Images of the nineteenth-century middle class depict a group obsessed with respectability and conformity to proper behavior in order to protect their status. They repressed their urges and constrained their actions, including in theaters. This does seem to explain the "taming" of audiences for middle- and upper-class forms of entertainment during the mid- to late nineteenth century.[33] Similarly, the movie palaces of the 1910s and 1920s called for middle-class decorum, proper dress, appropriate behavior, and the exclusion of children who could not be counted on to behave themselves.

Manners and decorum distinguished the middle class from a disorderly working class. The traditional image of working-class men and boys depicts them letting go rather than restraining themselves in their leisure pursuits in public places. The nickelodeon afforded working-class audiences an opportunity to make themselves at home and they exhibited less concern for what others thought of them, especially others outside their own community.

The sketchy descriptions of audiences in the 1930s suggest that the middle and working classes were both more concerned with the relaxing qualities of movie-going, although not in the sense of earlier working-class audiences. Movie audiences were not as vocal, lively, and communal as working-class nickelodeon audiences, but were rather pursuing their individual consumer comfort. They seem less concerned with both propriety and community. Comments about manners, tearing open candy wrappers, talking, leaving hats on, and so forth suggest that they were more concerned with personal comfort than good impression, and

focused more on their own small group than the "community" surrounding them in the theater.

During the 1930s, then, movie going settled into a form familiar to us today. The movie, not the place, and comfort and convenience, not luxury, were the attractions. The audience was cross-class, more anonymous, less a community of friends and neighbors. Behavior was less distinguished by class. The same comments made in the 1930s about movie audiences can often be found in comments today. Talking and other noises became annoyances to adults in the audience. Working-class movie-going seems to have been transformed from a community experience into private consumption.

NOTES

1. I thank Douglas Gomery, Kathryn Fuller, Lizabeth Cohen, and Ava Baron for their help. I especially thank Thomas Doherty for generously sharing information about primary sources on audience behavior.

2. The following synopsis is distilled from Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences from Stage to Television, 1750–1990* (Cambridge, UK, 2000).

3. On admissions, see A. D. Murphy, "Trace Recession's Impact on Pix," *Variety*, August 6, 1980, 1, 32; Donald Crafton, *The Talkies: America Cinema's Transition to Sound, 1926–1931* (Berkeley, 1999), 190–91, 263, 355; Lary May, "Making the American Way: Modern Theatres, Audiences and the Film Industry, 1929–1945," *Prospects* 12 (1987):92, 107–111. On movies as percent of expenditures, see Bruce Austin, *Immediate Seating: A Look At Movie Audiences* (Belmont, CA, 1989), 36. Movies' share declined rapidly after the war to about five percent at the end of the 1950s. See Garth Jowett, *Film: The Democratic Art* (Boston, 1976), 473. On dispute over admission numbers, see Douglas Gomery, "Toward a New Media Economics," in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. David Bordwell and Noel Carroll (Madison, WI, 1996), 413–15.

4. Margaret Thorp, *America At The Movies* (New Haven, 1939); "Boy Meets Facts," *Time*, July 21, 1941, 73.

5. Jowett, *Film: The Democratic Art*, 265, 285; W. Lloyd Warner and Paul Lunt, *The Social Life of a Modern Community* (New Haven, 1941), 412. On the unemployed, see "Plenty of Idle Time," *The New York Times*, April 12, 1938, 22; and the response: "Respite from Trouble," *The New York Times*, April 16, 1938, 12.

6. May, "Making the American Way," 92, 108, estimated that almost half closed between 1929 and 1932. On independents, see Crafton, *The Talkies*, 255. Quote from John Margolies and Emily Gwathemey, *Ticket to Paradise: American Movie Theaters and How We Had Fun* (Boston, 1991), 44.

7. Crafton, *The Talkies*, 485–89.

8. Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, "Sound Comes to the Movies," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 68 (1994):14–28.

9. Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (Cambridge, UK, 1990), 128; "Stamping at Movies," *The New York Times*, October 20, 1929, IX-17; "Audiences and Sound," *The New York Times*, January 4, 1931, VIII-6.

10. Managers' comments on attendance and reactions to movies were published in the weekly column, "What the Picture Did for Me," in *Motion Picture Herald* throughout the 1930s. It provides a glimpse of audiences and movie exhibition in small town America.

11. Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison, 1992), chapter 4; Tino Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930–1939* (Berkeley, 1995), 26–30.

12. Crafton, *The Talkies*, 264, 265; May, "Making the American Way"; Douglas Gomery, "The Popularity of Film Going in the U.S. 1930–1950," in *High Theory/Low Culture*, ed. Colin McCabe (New York, 1986), 71–79.

13. Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, chapter 4; Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 125–29.

14. From "What the Picture Did for Me," *Motion Picture Herald*, 1934–1940.

15. Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 125–29.

16. Many special nights and tie-ins mentioned in "What the Movie Did for Me," *Motion Picture Herald*, 1934–1936, 1939–1940; Thomas Pryor, "The Audience at Play: Games and Premiums Rival Hollywood's Stars as Box Office Attractions," *The New York Times*, April 24, 1938, X, 4. See also Gomery, "The Popularity of Film Going," on premiums and bingo.

17. Richard de Cordova, "Tracing the Child Audience: The Case of Disney, 1929–1933," in *Prima dei codici 2. Alle porte di Hays* (Venice, Italy, 1991), 217–221; and Richard de Cordova, "The Mickey in Macy's Window: Childhood, Consumerism and Disney Animation," in *Producing the Magic Kingdom*, ed. Eric Smoodin (New York, 1995).

18. Gregory Waller, "Hillbilly Music and Will Rogers: Small Town Picture Shows in the 1930s," in *American Movie Audiences from the Turn of the Century to the Early Sound Era*, ed. Melvin Stokes and Richard Maltby (London, 1999). Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 72–73, found that big name bands played occasional dates in some downtown movie palaces as well. Visiting headline performers, however, differed from the musicians permanently employed by movie theaters in the 1920s.

19. On country music, see Bill Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.* (Austin, 1985). Tim Patterson, "Notes on the Application of Marxist Cultural Theory," *Science and Society* 39(1975):257–291.

20. Robert and Helen Lynd, *Middletown in Transition* (New York, 1937), 260–62; on New Haven, see Frank Shuttleworth and Mark May, *The Social Conduct and Attitudes of Movie Fans* (New York, 1933), 7,8; Dorothy Reed, "Leisure Time of Girls in a 'Little Italy'" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1932); on Chicago, see Kenneth Lewis Heaton, "A Study of the Recreational Life of High School Students" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1933), 222; on Philadelphia, see Elmer Cressman, "The Out-of-School Activities of Junior High School" (D.Ed. diss., Penn State College, 1937).

21. Alice Mitchell, *Children and Movies* (Chicago, 1929), 42; "Mayor Sees Audience's Antics and Closes Bay State Theatre," *The New York Times*, February 13, 1930, 21; Margolies, *Ticket to Paradise*, 100.

22. Also see Waller, "Hillbilly Music and Will Rogers," 167–168.

23. I searched *Variety*'s reviews at large urban houses from October 1930 to April 1933.

24. "Hissing the President," *The New York Times*, April 10, 1938, IV, 9; "Curb on Hissing Suggested to Movie Theatre Managers," *The New York Times*, August 11, 1940, IV, 9; "Hissing not Illegal," *The New York Times*, August 15, 1940, 18; "Hissing: Silence Preferred," *The New York Times*, August 18, 1940, IV, 7; and "Bars Bronx(ville) Cheer," *The New York Times*, October 19, 1940, 11. Hissing newsreels was not new. Movie producer Rob Wagner noted hissing of newsreels in 1920. See Rob Wagner, "You—at the Movies," *American Magazine*, December, 1920, 211.

25. *Film Daily*, July 17, 1930, 1; *Film Daily*, September 8, 1930, 1; "No More Screen Advertising Allowed in Fox Theaters," *Film Daily*, November 18, 1930, 1.

26. "Bronx Cheer for Kibitzers in Movie Upheld by Court," *The New York Times*, November 2, 1939, 27.

27. "A Woman on Women's Hats," *The New York Times*, April 1, 1936, 24; "Nuisance," *The New York Times*, April 5, 1936, IV, 9; and "Weekly Round-up of Screen Events," *The New York Times*, June 23, 1940, IX, 3.

28. Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870–1920* (Cambridge, UK, 1983), 202.

29. Steven Ross, *Working Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America* (Princeton, 1998), 26–27.

30. Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 121–22; Douglas Gomery, "Movie Audiences, Urban Geography, and the History of the American Film," *The Velvet Light Trap* 19 (1982):23–29.

31. Thomas Doherty, "This is Where We Came In: The Audible Screen and the Voluble Audience of Early Sound Cinema," in *American Movie Audiences*, ed. Melvin Stokes and Richard Maltby, 145–146.

32. Doherty, "This is Where We Came In," 143–44.

33. John Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York, 1990); Richard Butsch, "Bowery B'hoys and Matinee Ladies: Re-Gendering Nineteenth-Century American Theater Audiences," *American Quarterly* 46 (1994):374–405.