

To make all this manageable, as well as to create a continuing thread through the chapters, I have focused on a few notable national examples to encompass a global history. The primary criteria for these selections are cultural power and market size or population. Population is concentrated in a few nations that constitute half the world's population, which therefore have a great global impact. China has 1.4 billion people; India has 1.25 billion; the EU member nation population is 500 million; the US is 300 million; Brazil 200 million; Nigeria 175 million.⁴⁸ This list includes the nations that historically have exercised international cultural power through media, and nations that seem poised to exercise a comparable power as well. Consequently, woven through the chapters are the histories of media developments in the US, Europe, China, India, Brazil, and West Africa, and their relationships to each other.

Film was the first screen medium. Cinema overturned the pre-screen world of live entertainment. Film shared the media spotlight of this era with the aural medium of radio. But it stood above all as *the* popular visual medium. The story of film in the first half of the century is also primarily about Western cultural hegemony. This history is explained in Chapters 1 through 4. By the mid 1950s the second screen medium, television, was established. Television became the quintessential mass medium, with nightly audiences far larger than film. Hollywood became the supplier of much prime-time programming, so television and film had a close but complicated relationship in shaping screen text. Again, the story begins with the US and Europe and moves outward, as post-colonial governments subsidized development in their own nations. Chapters 5 and 6 tell this story.

Toward the end of the century, a complex of new communication devices and infrastructure overturned the film and television worlds. Digitization tied all screen media together, so that the same texts and images were available on multiple platforms and users could shift from one to the other seamlessly. This media interconnectedness also merged industries from film and television to computers and telephone, and provided the groundwork for huge multi-media, global corporations to form. At the same time, these new media were mobile and interactive, and peoples of many nations, previously on the margins of screen media, were now active participants. Chapters 7 through 9 tell these stories.

1

American Cinema to World War I

Moving pictures projected on a screen appeared first as a novelty in the mid 1890s ~~US~~. It was one among a variety of entertainments in vaudeville halls, amusement parks, circuses and other traveling shows. Within a decade, thousands of new venues showed films exclusively, cropping up in vacant storefronts with rudimentary furnishings and equipment. They became known as nickelodeons for their cheap admission. For the first time, a commercial entertainment was becoming available almost every day, often morning to night, in almost every town, large or small, and affordable to almost every American. Such availability of commercial entertainment was new for the vast majority of people.¹ Watching entertainment was supplanting participation in it, and purchased entertainment was replacing home-made.

Movies increasingly gained a permanent place in the built environment and the culture. Within another decade, these makeshift places were being supplanted by theaters with raked floors and fixed seats, either converted from former drama or variety houses or newly purpose-built for movies. The films themselves increased in length from a few minutes to an hour or more, telling more complicated tales. They became a new form of fiction, alongside print, before radio and less expensive than stage. Millions took advantage of the new availability and the new fiction to become movie-goers.

Such widespread availability and popularity could not but influence culture. A culture specific to movies and movie-going, a screen culture would emerge from this new experience, as would broader cultural changes, propelled by great structural changes in the whole society. This new screen culture did not go unnoticed, especially when

numerous poor and untutored were flocking to the movies. Early on, journalists, reformers, government officials and elites of all sorts began to ask whether movies were changing people, culture and society for better or worse.

With a century of hindsight, we address what screen culture arose around movies and movie-going at the time, and what influence that did have on the broader culture. We will lay the groundwork for understanding screen culture by examining its development in the US, by far the largest film market at the time. Screen culture is not simply film texts and their manufacture, but a living culture that people made and expressed collectively, as audiences and more. This was especially true in this era when audiences were most active and much discussed in public discourse. Therefore, audiences and the circumstances of their audiencing will be the primary focus here. We will begin with local culture and conditions before film, then with the arrival of film and its incorporation into that context by its audiences and by the communities beyond the theater.

Historical Context

Sociologists Robert and Helen Merrill Lynd, in their classic Middletown studies, provide before and after snapshots of a small midwestern industrial city around 1900 and again in 1923, with which we can measure changes before and after the arrival of movies.² The population of 20,000 in 1900 was overwhelmingly white and native born. The first automobile arrived in 1900 at a time when most townsfolk walked to work and for relaxation on a Sunday afternoon; only a few well-off families used a horse-drawn carriage. Traveling players (minstrels, stock companies, circuses) occasionally arrived for a one-night stand in towns like this and nearly the whole town would attend. The Lynds commented, "To be sure, the spectacle-watching habit was strong upon Middletown in the nineties. Whenever they had a chance people turned out to a 'show,' but chances were relatively few" — fewer than 125 performances for the entire year. In small towns like Middletown across America, such shows were staged at the main street opera house, typically a second-floor room with a flat floor to facilitate multipurpose use that hosted meetings of local groups, local dances and traveling players.

In the absence of commercial entertainment, pianos and print served middle-class families for diversion in the home. Girls were expected to play the piano to entertain their family and their guests at home; and it was a common practice for one of the family to read to

everyone during the evenings. Working-class men and women had less leisure time and the Lynds noted little more than to say they read, but less.³

By the early 1920s Middletown had two passenger cars for every three families, and motoring beyond the town center became a new form of leisure which was especially popular among teens. Movies had made entertainment a permanent fixture and a regular part of the week instead of a special event. The town had grown to a population of 38,000. The Lynds reported for 1923:

... nine motion picture theaters operate from 1 to 11pm seven days a week summer and winter; four give three different programs a week, the other five having two a week; thus twenty-two different programs with a total of over 300 performances [per week] ... About two and three-fourths times the city's entire population attended the nine motion picture theaters during July 1923, the 'valley' month, and four and one-half times in the 'peak' month of December.

Movies made commercial entertainment an everyday presence even in this small midwest industrial town. Children attended more than other family members and often without their parents. The Lynds claimed that the automobile and the movies had a "decentralizing tendency" on the family, allowing children and teens to enjoy recreation without their parents. By the mid 1920s, automobiles, movies and radio were thought by local businessmen to reduce community participation, as people did things more often as individuals, families, or small groups.⁴ Film histories have documented similar stories in other regions. The trade magazine *Moving Picture World* heralded fancy new movie theater buildings even in small cities.⁵

At the same time, the change, depended upon place. Half the US population still lived outside even small towns of 2,500, and rural life in 1920 remained much as it was in 1900. Movie houses in nearby towns and cities were not readily accessible. Many rural families were still on the margins of a money economy and consumer culture, still producing much of their own food, shelter and clothing. Even those who were not poor bought few things compared to urban dwellers. For purchases, they often relied on credit from local merchants until harvest, when they were paid for their crops. While for the urban family the nickelodeon was a short walk from home, for rural families any commercial entertainment required traveling miles by horse on dirt roads that were seasonally impassable. Even mail was infrequent then. During winters, many endured long periods of isolation. For them, movies were less familiar and important than radio a decade later, which brought timely weather information and regular entertainment

into their homes. Rural families most often continued to amuse themselves, using inherited skills and resources to tell stories and make music and toys. Only as paved roads, electrification and radio brought the world into rural homes and lives, did the gap between rural and urban life begin to lessen.⁶

At the other extreme, even before 1900, big cities with sufficient populations to supply a steady stream of customers had well-established, permanent, purpose-built venues for entertainments of varied prices and tastes, in a variety of neighborhoods and even languages. By comparison, in small cities, populations were too few and cultural modernization too muted to sustain anything but intermittent visits by itinerant players. At the turn of the century, much was made of the differences between big cities and small cities and towns in rural settings far from metropolitan centers. A wide range of writers from novelists to journalists to sociologists around the turn of the century took note of the psychological impact of cities' density, constant stimulation and anonymity, and a whole genre of writing dwelt on the suffocating society of small towns and the lonely and dangerous anonymity in big cities.⁷

Some recent scholarship focusing on big cities explains the rise of cinema as an aspect of a singular larger cultural phenomenon, urban modernism or modernity. According to such theses, urbanization and industrialization created "constant sensory change, nervous stimulation, feverish stress, speed," psychological states that produced alienation and reshaped the culture. But the term elides examination of social and economic structures such as capitalism and class differences or specific cultural changes underlying the label.⁸ Around the turn of the twentieth century, compelling historical forces were bringing deep and broad structural changes to the US: industrial capitalism, urbanization and immigration. At the end of the nineteenth century, American industrial capitalism was becoming concentrated in the hands of huge corporations that matured and solidified in this era, establishing a new structural foundation to the society that would displace and gradually marginalize the agricultural, localized world that preceded it. Urbanization was increasing with it. In 1900 a quarter (26%) of the population lived in cities of 25,000 or more; in 1920 that had risen to more than a third (36%). Historian Olivier Zunz put it in his study of Detroit at the turn of the century:

Central to the formation of modern North American society has been the growth of a vast urban industrial complex, extending from the Eastern Seaboard to the Great Lakes region, which began in the 1870s and reached maturity in the 1920s ... A modern urban world, with

new dimensions ... Simultaneously, large business corporations accomplished an organizational revolution in mass production and distribution techniques.⁹

This "industrial complex" required labor that was supplied by an equally vast wave of immigration. During 1900-1920, half of all foreign born in the US resided in the northeast and an additional 30-40 percent in the midwest where Zunz's complex arose. By contrast, the stagnant agricultural economies of the South and West attracted relatively few foreign born.¹⁰

Fear of this massive population of immigrants, so visibly congregated in dense neighborhoods of large cities, was substantial, ranging from conservatives to progressives. They and their neighborhoods became targets of moral panics and policing, racial theorizing and eugenic policies, the temperance movement, and other regimes of control.¹¹ A racial-eugenics movement applied the new tool of IQ testing to racial distinctions and advocated compulsory sterilization and restrictive immigration laws. At the same time, progressives exhibited ambivalences between sympathy on the one hand, and abhorrence of their tastes and values, on the other.¹²

It was amid these deep historic changes and moral panics about them that moving pictures arrived. Inevitably that first screen culture would be influenced by these contexts, much as they would be in other nations and times.

Early Moving Picture Exhibition

Moving pictures were first introduced as part of established entertainments, and in the context of their managerial and audience practices. While timing and details vary, film exhibition in North America and Western Europe, as well as in colonial capitals and ports around the world, originated at nearly the same time in the mid 1890s and followed similar paths of development - a prime example of a globalized market.¹³

From the mid 1890s to the early 1900s what attracted audiences was their fascination with the novelty of a moving image. Films of this period recorded mundane everyday events, documentaries of notable events, demonstrations of new inventions and curiosities, film tricks, and simple comic scenes. Films were short, often as little as five minutes, and audiences would watch several at a sitting.

Such novelties had long been a part of stage entertainment. In early nineteenth-century US drama theaters, the typical bill included brief

performances before, between and after the featured play, in part to keep audiences focused on the stage and out of trouble. Variety entertainments such as minstrelsy, vaudeville and burlesque evolved from this. When film arrived on these stages it was simply another act in a variety bill. Operators touring outside big cities exhibited the new phenomenon just about anywhere that they could obtain darkness and admission charges – in meeting halls or tents, at circuses and country fairs.

Film pioneers began exhibitions in 1896 in order to demonstrate their fascinating new moving-picture projectors. Early equipment manufacturers – Thomas Edison in the US, and George Melies, Louis Lumière, Leon Gaumont, and Charles Pathé in France – began making films in part to sell their equipment.

Anyone who had the modest initial capital to buy film-making equipment – roughly \$100 in the mid 1890s, equivalent to \$2500 in 2015 – could begin making films. Since films of this time were mostly of actual events, they required little specialization and little costs to film: no script, no sets or costumes, no writers, directors or actors, and no editing. To make a film, a single person could set up a camera at a parade, sport event, or even on a town street and start the film rolling. Slightly more complicated 'trick' films required a performer or two, a few staging tricks and editing skills to create illusions such as people disappearing or floating through the air. Production was in the artisan tradition that pre-dated industrial mass production; the artisan engaged the entire production process from conception to finished product. Early pioneers had to invent the first film-making techniques. In some cases, the film-maker was also the exhibitor, traveling from place to place with his camera, projector and collection of films.

By the turn of the century, the novelty of a moving picture was wearing off.¹⁴ In cities, big-time vaudeville houses began to drop them from their bill. If film was to survive commercially, it needed a new form of appeal. To sustain people's interests, exhibitors and producers turned to fictional narrative. Filming single-scene comic sketches typical of variety acts made the shift to narrative easier. At first, any local actors or amateurs and minimal scenery and props would suffice. But the demand for stories soon led to more narratives, taken from dramatic plays and print fiction, and to longer, more expensive films.¹⁵ Producers increased production of story films, and developed montage strategies to help audiences follow the story, inserting title and dialog boards in silent films to explain the action and announce scene shifts. By 1908, 96 percent of total American production was narrative comedy and drama.

Paralleling the development of narrative film, several factors coalesced to support exhibition spaces dedicated exclusively to moving pictures: Sufficient production and a system of rental exchanges or wholesalers could supply enough new films for continuous showings and frequent program changes. With this supply source, a small entrepreneur could rent a vacant storefront on a busy street and install a projector, a screen and a couple of hundred chairs, all available at relatively modest costs. A nickel admission was modest as well, about a quarter of a laborer's hourly wage and thus affordable even to the working class.

Nickelodeons spread so rapidly and created such demand that they fueled further development of narrative films. Narrative films were better suited to rationalizing production and deliver on the regular schedule needed by nickelodeons, since they could be manufactured on schedule. Such mass production required increased speed and efficiency. But at first, American film producers could not keep up with the growth of nickelodeons. A shortage in 1906 enabled European film companies, who were pioneering longer narrative films, to expand their US market. In 1907 two thirds of films released in the US were European, with the French company Pathé alone accounting for a third of the entire market. They briefly established hegemony in the American film industry and across the world, making film into a global industry, as described in Chapter 2.

Urban Nickelodeons and Neighborhood Audiences

For many, the nickelodeon's sheltered space in crowded urban neighborhoods had its own attractions, aside from the moving pictures. A Progressive reformer noted in 1909 that "Certain houses have become genuine social centers where neighborhood groups may be found any evening of the week [and] where the regulars stroll up and down the aisles and visit friends." Such stories reporting the animated behavior, talkativeness and sociability of audiences in working-class nickelodeons, were frequent in the popular and trade presses. American social historians have documented many examples of working-class audiences adapting nickelodeons to their own needs and purposes, including community meetings as well as sociability.¹⁶

However, such sociability in theaters pre-dated nickelodeons. Before film, it was common at cheap theater entertainments, particularly at drama, variety and puppet shows that working classes could afford. Audiences often included women and children, as well as men. Immigrants from a wide range of cultures, including East European Jews, Poles, Italians, and Chinese, reportedly were lively and vocal in their

favored haunts. Drama critic and writer John Corbin, slumming at a cheap theater in New York's Little Italy in the 1900s described their habits, "They would speak to you on the slightest pretext, or none, and would relate all that was happening on stage." Sicilian men were avid and vocal attendees at puppet theaters that performed Renaissance Italian epic poems about crusades and other battles, one episode each night running for months. Arts critic Carl Van Vechten described Yiddish theater audiences too as busily talking, eating and drinking. A cartoon of the time contrasted the 'uncouth' behavior of Lower East Side, Yiddish-speaking Jews in disarray at a theater to respectable uptown audiences sitting quietly. Chinese audiences in San Francisco were described in similar ways in books published in the late nineteenth century. At the venerable Bowery Theater in 1911, then called the Thalia, playwright and critic Channing Pollock reported the same sociability. Before they became nickelodeons, urban buildings were used as meeting halls for working-class inhabitants. The informality and familiarity of the storefront and its furnishing contributed to an at-homeness for audiences. Moveable chairs were familiar from saloons and one's own kitchen. Minimal and inexpensive decoration, lax management policies and few employees to police behavior, as well as cheap admission, further cued attendees that sociability fitted the situation.¹⁷

Sociologist and urban designers have long observed the importance of public spaces in the cityscape where people could congregate for sociability.¹⁸ Sociability is an asset of the community as a whole, which increases trust among residents, likelihood of public discussion of community issues and collective action to resolve those, as well as overall desirability as a place to live.¹⁹ European plazas, arising as destinations in organically developed cities, served such functions. But most American cities in the nineteenth century adopted a grid street system whose straightaway avenues favored un-hindered movement and transportation over congregation and sociability. They lacked plazas, small parks and playgrounds. In tight-packed tenement districts' even street space itself was at a premium. By the end of the century, the Progressive playgrounds movement argued that immigrant children especially lacked public spaces in their neighborhood to make them into 'good citizens.' The reformers planned to supervise the children's play and shape them into the white upper-middle-class American ideal.²⁰

In large American cities, space was scarce. Men had their saloons; nickelodeons offered space for women and children as well. Nickelodeons had several attractive features over playgrounds, parks, settlement houses and other public spaces offered by upper-middle-class

WASP reformers: first, they were more numerous and convenient; second, they were indoors sheltered from cold and rain; third, they were not supervised by well-meaning reformers trying to Americanize these immigrants; fourth, adults could converse among themselves while supervising the children; and fifth, they could enjoy the movies.

Socializing in urban nickelodeons, as various ethnic groups did, was a practical adaptation of a new public space to the needs of residents. In neighborhood theaters, one was more likely to know others in the audience. Such neighborhoods tended to be more homogeneous and self-contained, due to the fact that immigrants who did not speak English found it easier to live, shop and even work within their own native-language communities. Consequently, they more likely knew their neighbors, not by virtue of longevity – there was significant turnover, people leaving to seek work elsewhere – but by virtue of a native-language social network. One might be inclined to talk to a stranger in this circumstance, as they may have the neighborhood, acquaintances and home country in common. Thus, in Corbin's experience, "they would speak to you on the slightest pretext."²¹

Spellbound in Darkness

If nickelodeons were an opportunity for sociability, then what did moving pictures mean to their audiences? We need to distinguish impact on cultural practices from readings of movie text. As a place, nickelodeons constituted a substantial expansion of the availability of entertainment from an occasional event to a part of daily life, the female equivalent to the homosocial saloon. Early cinema audiences defined that in itself as positive enough that they would pay for it from meager incomes. As cultural texts, moving pictures constituted the first great leap into the virtual reality of moving images, beginning a century of screen that substantially increased mediated visual experience. They made the unfamiliar familiar. They enabled audiences to visualize places and witness events that previously they could only read about. The film brought a wider view of the world within their financial, geographical and social reach.

What then was the cultural impact of film texts? As a general rule, we may expect that the more activity reported among audiences, the less they are attending to and absorbed in the text, and thus are likely to be less influenced by it. In the nickelodeon era, working-class patrons frequently went for the 'place' more than the 'play.'²² On the other hand, the middle and higher classes did not need movie theaters for sociability; for that they could afford other spaces, such as clubs and their more spacious homes. Yet the films themselves still held an

attraction which, combined with middle-class norms of propriety, made these audiences less sociable and more attentive to the films. For them, the 'spell-binding'²³ effect may have been more noticeable, especially as narrative films grew to feature length that required sustained attention. Class difference in attention-span is not at issue here, especially as immigrants from rural cultures were accustomed to extended story-telling during long winter nights.²⁴ Thus audience differences in sociability versus attention to the film would seem to derive from social contexts, not from audience attention span. Nevertheless, a darkened room invited movie-goers' immersion in an alternative reality and heightened the experience of 'being there.' It could stimulate imagination, hope, ambition, discontent or resistance, depending on audience members' inclination or social location.

Darkened theaters originated before moving pictures, at electrically lit drama theaters that the upper and upper-middle classes frequented, enabling the introduction of dramatic realism and the 'fourth wall' separating audiences from actors. This experience was heightened in movies by the fact that actors were mere light images, not living persons with whom audiences could interact. Moreover, it created a disjunction between inside and outside the cinema that segregated the screen culture experience from everyday reality. For movies, the fourth wall was not the proscenium, but the doors to the theater.

Grander, purpose-built theaters also promoted a subdued audience more absorbed in the film. By the 1910s, American movie theater managers sought a 'better class' clientele and employed larger staffs to police and prevent any disturbance. Higher admission also announced this as a formal event calling for appropriate behavior. Even lower-income clientele would have considered it a special occasion, not to be spoiled by the noise and spontaneity of sociability. These several developments helped to shift movie-going expectations away from sociability to silence in the theater.

Public Reactions

With the appearance of low-priced, store-front theaters on neighborhood shopping streets in large cities in the 1900s, movies quickly gained a reputation as the 'working man's amusement.' Most of urban American stage entertainment was already class-segmented into separate markets, such as melodrama versus legitimate theater and small time versus refined vaudeville. Specifically, nickelodeons became identified with immigrant working classes in urban tenement districts of the largest cities, notably New York, Philadelphia and Chicago, principal destinations for immigrants and where early film production

first flourished - and incidentally where opinion-makers and print media were concentrated. Muckraking journalist and future publisher of the *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York Daily News*, Joseph Medill Patterson characterized the new phenomenon in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1907, 'The nickelodeon is tapping an entirely new stratum of people, is developing into theatergoers a section of population that formerly knew and cared little about the drama ... foreigners attend in larger proportions than the English speakers.'²⁵

Outside large cities, film audiences typically included the whole community, a mix of classes within a single exhibition space, just as stage audiences had been in the nineteenth century.²⁶ But in the largest cities, a lower-class image stuck to nickelodeons and was persuasive to many contemporaries, be they reformers or film investors and producers. Consequently, there were significant calls for and efforts to 'improve' nickelodeons, their films, and their reputations, by attracting respectable middle-class audiences.

Such reactions were not new. Nineteenth-century commercial entertainments, from drama to vaudeville, and print from illustrated news to the yellow press, aroused hopes and fears when they first became popular. Parents, religious leaders, cultural authorities and others feared these as challenges to their influence and authority and to accepted values and beliefs about reality, life, morality, justice, and equality, shaking the foundations of social norms and social order. Moreover, such fears typically involved higher classes, who had the power to impose their own social norms upon lower classes.²⁷

Reactions to the popularity of movies at the turn of the twentieth century in the US occurred in the context of broader elite concerns about growing urbanization, immigration, and commercialization causing 'hyper-stimulation' among the 'anonymous masses,' as described above. Adding to this around 1900, rapid diffusion of new consumer technologies, such as electricity, automobiles, and telephone, was changing the daily lives of the affluent. Movies epitomized the consumer culture and, even more concerning to elites left and right, they were affordable to working classes and their children.

Movies arrived amid a major shift in moral panics, from concerns about women to concerns about children. Through much of the nineteenth century, upper and upper-middle-class women symbolized the respectability of their families, husbands, and fathers. Numerous books depicted city streets as dangerous places; etiquette manuals advised women what to avoid and how to behave to shield themselves in public. However, around the turn of the century, concern shifted to children, particularly working-class children, and their parenting. This shift also was spurred by concerns that immigrant children would be

future citizens and voters, and therefore it was important to 'Americanize' them into the values of the upper-middle class.²⁸

The working-class response to these concerns, by and large, was to choose entertainment over uplift. Marketing won over reform, continuing the general failure of Progressive reform attempts to regulate, plan, and control the leisure of the working class; the fun offered by commercial entertainment was more attractive. This further cemented the image of movie-going as a habit of the working classes and immigrants.²⁹

The association with the working class made nickelodeons and moving pictures disreputable in the eyes of the middle and upper classes. In the US, concerns first arose about *where* movies were viewed. Reformers focused on the potential for immorality in darkened nickelodeons, especially by men preying upon teenage girls. Quite soon concern about place was supplanted by concerns about immoral ideas in films 'implanted' in the minds of 'youths,' i.e. teens, leading to crime and ruinous sex. Elites critical of cinema typically imagined the audiences as crowds of uneducated, impressionable working-class and immigrant adults as well as children, all susceptible to ideas suggested by movies, and contrasted them to the respectable and higher-class, 'well-behaved' good citizens of strong character who could resist such suggestions. These concerns gave rise to regimes of control, such as licensing and censorship.³⁰

Pursuing the Middle Classes

In 1908, *Moving Picture World* (MPW), editorialized that, "... manufacturers must watch carefully the quality of their pictures or the better class of patrons will turn against the motion picture and the profits seriously reduced." Decision-makers in the film industry, including producers, distributors, exhibitors, and trade journalists, were aware that the 'respectable' public perceived nickelodeons as working-class establishments and considered them disreputable. Industry leaders also believed that the upper middle class was a more profitable clientele. Therefore they pursued a marketing strategy to seek the respectability and profits of the middle class. This strategy had recurred from drama theater to minstrelsy to vaudeville since the 1840s. The movie industry repeated this strategy not only for profits, but also to avoid government regulation and censorship.³¹

Marketing to higher-income classes was linked to the development of purpose-built movie theaters. It also added to the trend to feature-length films that met aesthetic and moral standards of respectability.³² By 1910, MPW claimed that a transformation had begun. In 1911,

an article noted that, "Not since the moving picture became the photoplay has there been released in a similar space of time more truly notable pictures than those in the past six months." A MPW editorial asserted: "It is the unanimous experience [of exhibitors across the nation] that the picture is ascending higher and higher in public favor and the better class of people are being attracted to it, and that there is a growing distaste for that which is not elevating and refining." MPW also claimed that better movies enabled theaters to charge higher prices. In 1912 a columnist claimed that movies were thriving in scores of theaters that showed pictures exclusively, charging 15 to 25 cents. Consequently, the first 'movie palaces' were sited in middle-class neighborhoods near commuter lines. Exhibitors redefined their audiences as patrons and themselves as good members of the neighborhood community.³³

The success in seeking respectability and the middle class had significant consequences. The toll on stage entertainment was striking, contributing to the decline of most live stage entertainment that might have competed with the movie industry for audiences and dollars. The impact was greatest on companies touring outside the major cities. American theater impresario Robert Grau claimed that "conditions in the one-night stands are simply unbelievable; cities of 50,000 are without a single legit place of amusement, the regular theaters all being used for moving pictures or what is called 'pop' vaudeville." *Billboard* estimated that, in 1910, there were approximately 1,500 theaters of the one- or two-night stop for road shows; by 1925, only about 600 remained. Between 1909 and 1915, the number of touring companies plummeted from about 300 to 100 per year and never recovered. By 1913 movies also were affecting big city theaters. Three of the biggest investors in stage entertainment, the Shubert Brothers, Klaw and Erlanger, and F. F. Proctor announced shifts to the movie business.³⁴ All this represented the loss of jobs for thousands of performers, stage hands, and ancillary workers.

Film Text and Culture

Film introduced a new scale of audiences, measured in millions, instead of thousands. Given the sheer numbers of people and their frequent attendance, it would seem that the collective representations and narratives of early films was likely to influence culture. Such influence would be greater if the same theme recurred across many films, repeating the same representations again and again. Repetition makes an idea seem pervasive and persistent, suggesting that everyone thinks

it, so it must be true. Film scholars have focused primarily on the influence of single films, actors or directors upon film texts. But in order for film to have a broader impact, pervasive themes must be shared by numerous films over extended periods of time.³⁵

Some film historians have placed American films within the context of American cultural history and argued for it as an expression of that culture, as well as an influence upon that culture.³⁶ In the Hollywood studio era, studio moguls cautiously avoided taking any lead in cultural change and preferred to follow the mainstream culture. The nickelodeon era, however, may have allowed more flexibility and openness in shaping film text. This was the era of director and director-unit production, before the specialization and assembly line production of the Hollywood studio system. The director had full authority in making decisions and played a significant part in the actual work, from script-writing to camera work to editing. Films were cheap to make, under \$1,000, so bad decisions were less costly, allowing directors greater leeway as they invented this new medium and conceived ways to tell stories on film. Because production was less centralized, this enabled them also to make films suited to their audience constituency, which often was working class rather than mainstream middle class.³⁷

Representing Class and Gender

One factor influencing film texts during this era was the particular social lens through which directors told the stories. Many of them were familiar with working-class experience. Often they were mechanics accustomed to working with their hands. Several, such as D. W. Griffith, could not only draw upon this experience for stories, but also had a personal interest in doing so. For this and other reasons, films of the nickelodeon era more often told their stories from the view-point of working-class or less powerful people, rather than from that of people in positions of authority or affluence.

Many films of this era featured a working-class protagonist, set in working-class workplaces or neighborhoods, who challenged authority, according to historian Steven Ross, who examined some 600 movies made between 1905 and 1917. Comedies frequently chose as the butt of humor upwardly striving, middle-class husbands and their wives, and pompous bosses, owners, and authority figures, while working-class characters were often the irreverent pranksters bursting their balloon and getting away with it. The working class was portrayed as unburdened by the stuffiness of their 'betters' and as escaping

their authority. Moreover, comedy was the most popular genre at nickelodeons, so these subversive texts had large audiences.³⁸

Second in popularity was melodrama, including all its permutations, such as the evil landlord, the chase films, westerns, and a variety of serials. These films frequently depicted the gross inequity between extravagant, often immoral, rich villains and honest, hard-working poor. In addition, these melodramas depicted the working-class "as middle-class people without money ... idealized versions of how the middle class ought to behave ... clean, respectable, hard-working, virtuous, kind, and supportive of family."³⁹ In other words, working-class people were imagined as sharing the same values as the middle class, making them seem less threatening and more appealing to middle-class audiences. As we will see in later chapters, such positive depictions of the working class in comedy and melodrama would not last in film or television. Gender and class were interwoven in movie serials. In the 1910s, American producers introduced serials as a new form of melodrama targeting young women workers, as well as some for an even younger market of pre-adolescents.⁴⁰ These serials presented stories of adventure and featured heroines rather than male heroes. Serial films were about twenty minutes long and typically adapted from popular serialized stories in magazines and dime novels. Sometimes, film and novel were promoted, published and screened simultaneously.

The episodes in magazines and films appeared weekly or monthly and were first produced in the waning years of nickelodeons before Hollywood took hold of the industry. In 1914 a reformer noted that, while New York City girls from affluent families were filling the seats for stage matinees, young working-class women were 'crazed' about the movies and particularly these serials. The 'matinee idol,' the lead in romance plays, was the object of affection of more affluent playing girls. However, working-class girls were reading dime novels and watching movie serials starring adventurous working heroines - whose romance was secondary to her overcoming dangers and striving for success. Serial titles themselves advertised the excitement: *Hazards of Helen*, *Perils of Pauline*, *Adventures of Kathryn*, all releases in 1914. Young women were portrayed as civil-war spies, detectives, telegraph operators, and railroad workers. They endured and overcame chases, fires, and villains. The actress who played Helen was known for her risky stunts, such as running atop a fast-moving train.⁴¹ The appeal to working-class girls would seem to be not only the adventure, but the underlying independence of the characters, since their own autonomy was circumscribed by low wages and persisting patriarchal

traditions.⁴² At the same time, the heroines often ended up married, a realistic outcome for the era.

In New York City, these serials were part of a distinct working-class 'ladyhood' constructed by young working-class women. The young women in the audiences were striking for better wages and work conditions, wore cheap high heels that middle-class women shunned, and forged their own style culture from commodities within their income reach. Dime novels and movie serials complemented this assertive femininity. It also was a collective culture. As with any serial form, fans would end up consuming episodes out of order, which likely heightened the importance of the participative experience. They talked among themselves about the stories and shared their fashion sense with their workmates. They also used the nickelodeon as a place to meet and talk with young men as well as friends. The heroine characters contradicted the middle-class notion of femininity as passive, probably both reflecting and contributing to cultural changes in gender and affirming working-class women's own definition of femininity.⁴³

Screen Culture and Culture

When movie exhibition was a business of small-scale independent nickelodeon operators, requiring little capital to enter the business, audiences had more say in their use of the spaces. When film was easily and cheaply made, and distributed by the foot, the film was not paramount and audiences' need for sociability defined the situation. Moreover, its definition as a working-class space also succeeded in demanding film topics suitable to this circumstance. The screen culture was of the audiences' making more than of business manufacture. From nickelodeon to nickelodeon, the experiences and subcultures were as similar or different as the cultures of the various neighborhoods or towns. Yet in places as different as ethnic urban neighborhoods and small towns in rural countryside, they shared common needs for diversion and sociability, and similar audience spontaneity and volubility established the place as their own. Likewise, during hours when they predominated, women and girls bent the definition to suit their particular needs, and films depicting heroines followed suit.

As the business began to develop and institutionalize, the voices of audiences were less strong, and the industry more. The move from nickelodeon to theater and from short one-reelers to feature films, the moral panic and the re-branding, together transformed screen culture from a creation by working-class audiences into one fashioned for the

American upper-middle class. The principal places and their representations, and their enforcement of certain values and norms changed from ones welcoming working-class people to ones disciplining them.

The principal films paralleled this, changing from frequent positive representations of working-class characters to themes preferable to upper-middle class clientele. Theaters and films serving working-class clientele – still a large source of income and profits for the industry – continued, but were limited, compared to the nickelodeon era.

Ironically, this marginalization of working-class movie-goers' influence occurred in the same decades in which these workers were forming stronger unions and gaining higher wages, shorter hours and better working conditions. But it also was a time of growth of the upper-middle, white-collar class of professionals and managers and the size and power of the corporations that employed them. Also, it was a time of an emerging culture of consumption built on and by these corporations to draw the population increasingly into purchasing rather than making their lives.