"Cheap Theater and the Nickel Dumps" (1986)[1]

Kathy Peiss

In the Vitagraph film "The Veiled Beauty," a young woman covered in a veil is approached by several male "mashers," who seek to force their attentions on her. After beating up his rivals, one suitor pursues the woman, who enters Dreamland amusement park, rides the miniature railroad and airship, and explores other attractions, all the while ignoring the young man's attentions. He finally succeeds in inviting her to dinner, Where she raises her veil, only to reveal an ugly and horrifying face. In 1907, when this movie was made, an audience composed primarily of working-class women and men would have laughed heartily at the masher's misfortune and the young woman's deception, delighting in this comic vignette of treating, heterosocial relations, and urban leisure.

Many early silent movies projected stylized images of women and men that expressed the heterosocial world of commercial recreation and urban life. Picture shows, as well as working-class vaudeville, drew upon the fads and crazes, free-and-easy sexuality, and celebration of pleasure that "Americanized" working-class youth pursued with enthusiasm. At the same time, they reinterpreted and broadcast new cultural forms for other young women and men to imitate. The general cross-fertilization between theatrical entertainment and youthful crazes is suggested by Belle Israels' observation: "The boy who is seated at the burlesque show tonight and is seeing the latest form of the Grizzly Bear...is tomorrow presenting these things as the latest smartness to the girl with whom he is dancing——perhaps at the church sociable."

The cultural commentary embedded in the early movies was all the more powerful because it was accessible to most working-class women, whatever their marital status, ethnic background, or cultural style. Attendance at dance halls and amusement parks often entailed financial dependency on men and rebellious assertions to parents, conditions that not every woman could accept. Even the cheap theater, as reformers called working-class variety and vaudeville entertainment, played to a restricted female audience. Everyone, however, went to the movies. If popular amusements can reinforce particular values and identity within a community, then the early movies, which encapsulated urban social forms popular with working-class youth, expressed and helped to legitimize a heterosocial culture.

WORKING-CLASS THEATER BEFORE THE MOVIES

Even before the rise of the movies, theater-going was a popular form of entertainment among many working-class women. Victorian melodrama was common at the Bowery theaters before 1900, with such plays as "The Two Orphans" and "East Lynne" stirring the audience with their stylized tales of dastardly villains, threats to womanhood, and the ultimate triumph of virtue. I go to the theater quite often, and like those plays that make you cry a great deal,"

[1] Kathy Peiss, "Cheap Theater and the Nickel Dumps," Ch. 6 from *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 139-162.

observed one sixteen-year-old garment worker. "'The Two Orphans' is good. Last time I saw it I cried all night because of the hard times that the children had in the play." On Saturday nights, the Grand and Old Bowery Theaters drew crowds of working-class women and men, young and old, saleswomen and factory girls: "Many of these men sit in their shirt-sleeves, sweating in the humid atmosphere. Women are giving suck to fat infants....Division street milliners, black-eyed, rosy checked, and flashily dressed sit close to their jealous eyed lovers."

Many commentators point out the intimacy and sense of community of these theaters, suggesting the cohesive cultural role they played in working-class neighborhoods. Theater-goers prompted actors, hissed villains, and warned heroines of oncoming danger, creating a sense of identity between the performers and the members of the audience. Cheap theaters were impromptu social centers, where gossip, singing, footstomping, and vendor's cries contributed to the theatrical experience. One writer observed, for example, that during intermission at the Grand Theater, "the orchestra plays 'Harrigan' and the gallery sings the chorus. There is much neighborly stepping to and fro, a hum of conversation, and no little munching of caramels."

For immigrant women and men, foreign-language theater offered an even more central focus for social life. As Irma Knecht observed, "Yiddish theater was my meat." In the late nineteenth century, Jewish theaters on the East Side performed serious dramas and realistic plays, including the classics of Western theater, productions of contemporary Yiddish playwrights, and biblical plays, as well as the lighter *lebensbilder*, or portraits from life, which dealt with the immigrant's experience in the Old World and New. These theaters, which often gave performances to benefit different societies and lodges, were closely integrated into the institutional life of the East Side. "Over six hundred organizations annually make use of 'benefits'," noted the playwright Jacob Gordin.

Marionette shows played a similar role in the Italian community. In storefront theaters in Greenwich Village and the East Side, "heroic tales of chivalry, bloody melodramas of the Italian civil wars, and morality and mystery plays" evoked serious discussion, involvement, and solidarity in the audience. While some of these were patronized only by workingmen, others attracted family groups. "The Marosi theater was a neighborhood center for three blocks around," observed a People's Institute report. "It was regularly patronized by several hundred Italians."

While both sexes attended the melodrama and immigrant theater, another popular form of theatrical entertainment——the music hall——was closely tied to the male subculture of public amusements. In the 1850's, some saloon owners converted their back rooms and cellars into small concert halls and hired specialty acts to amuse their patrons and encourage drinking. By the 1860's, over two hundred concert-saloons had spread along Broadway, the Bowery, and the waterfronts, catering to a heterogeneous male clientele of laborers, soldiers, sailors, and "slumming" society gentlemen. The conventions of polite society were put aside in these male sanctuaries, where crude jokes, bawdy comedy sketches, and scantily clad singers entertained the drinkers. Perhaps the chief attraction of these halls were the "waiter girls," who worked the tables, flirted with men, and often made assignations with favored customers. As one newspaper reported, music hall patrons "wear their hats and caps at pleasure, smoke cigars and pipes, and conduct themselves generally in accordance with the popular song of 'We'll be free and easy still.'" By the 1890's, these music halls had grown larger, but many retained their raw atmosphere.

THE EMERGENCE OF A FEMALE AUDIENCE

In the late nineteenth century, a number of showmen and impresarios sought a more broadly based, respectable, and mixed-sex audience, calling their entertainment "variety" and "vaudeville" to eradicate the connotations of the concert-saloon. As early as the 1860's and 1870's, Tony Pastor began the movement to make theatrical performance, rather than barroom drinking, the main attraction of the variety house. He sought to entice women into the theater by running matinees, sponsoring a "Ladies' Invitation Night" when women were admitted free, and offering such household necessities as coal, flour, and dress patterns as prizes. Pastor maintained a saloon inside the theater, but permitted drinking only during intermission. His "hearty and racy" shows refrained from vulgar songs and obscene skits.

By the 1890's, the active promotion of "refined vaudeville," divorced from its notorious antecedents in the concert-saloons and low variety shows, was attracting middle-class crowds. Theater owner B. F. Keith, for example, systematically cleaned up variety acts to make popular theater respectable for women and children. Keith completely removed the saloons from his theaters and constructed lavish vaudeville palaces. At the same time, he maintained greater control over his entertainment by organizing vaudeville into booking syndicates and creating a star system of performers. His theaters were known as the "Sunday-school Circuit" and censored disreputable vaudeville turns. Keith not only directed his performers to excise inappropriate language and suggestive stage business, but also instructed his audiences in proper theater behavior, Amonishing them not to talk or stamp their feet during the show.

Still, much of the patronage for variety and vaudeville came from tenement dwellers. Variety underwent a surge of popularity among working-class audiences, who increasingly turned away from the traditional "blood and thunder" dramas and plays of immigrant experiences in favor of comedy. By 1900, even the Bowery theaters had succumbed:

> Cheap variety is now about the only staple of the American Bowery theater. Time was, and not so very far back, when the spectacular melodrama, lurid, coarse grained and silly at times, but always essentially sound in its ethical teachings, was popular. But it appears to have had its day. Now it is the "smart" thing which goes.

Similarly, vaudeville besieged the foreign-language theater. Marionette shows, the live Italian stage, and the Chinese theater fell to popular variety acts. By 1900, even the vibrant Yiddish theater was challenged by the American style of comedy and sketches. Yiddish vaudeville grew so rapidly in converted saloons and reconstructed dance halls that by 1905 "every important street on the Lower East Side has its glaring electric sign which announces 'Jewish Vaudeville House' or 'Music Hall.'" According to one survey, 60 percent of the vaudeville audience in 1910 was working class, with only 36 percent coming from the "clerical" class. Many theaters were located in the commercial and amusement zones within or fringing working-class residential neighborhoods, on such streets as 14th Street, 125th Street, Eighth Avenue, Grand Street, and the Bowery.

Working-class women and girls continued to avoid the concerthalls and Bowery variety shows that maintained their links to male saloon culture, but they attended vaudeville theaters in large numbers, comprising one-third of the audience in 1910. According to a survey of young New York working women, theater-going was among the most popular of all amusements, rated the favorite by nearly one-quarter of the women interviewed. This was a more heterogeneous group than the dance hall crowds. Married women, sometimes with their children, attended an occasional matinee or evening performance. Despite the expense, a Greenwich Village study reported, "some of the women go regularly every week all winter to Proctor's, Weber and Field's, or the Fourteenth Street Theatre, but rarely to an uptown theatre." Still, women's participation remained more limited than men's. Unlike the audience for the legitimate stage, which tended to be mixed parties of men and women, in the vaudeville theater "men of all degrees come trooping in; some alone, some in batches, and some accompanied by women, or more often by one woman."

The cost of these shows precluded many women from attending more than occasionally unless they were treated. Vaudeville theater tickets ranged in price from ten cents to a dollar, with most seats costing twenty-five to fifty cents. Only higher-income families could afford to go regularly. Robert Coit Chapin's study found that over half of the working-class families earning over nine hundred dollars yearly attended theater performances, spending twenty to thirty cents on their visits each week. In contrast, only one-quarter of those families earning six and seven hundred dollars could afford such trips. The American-born were most likely to attend vaudeville and variety shows, although poor immigrant families did find ways to circumvent the high price of admission. East Siders, for example, commonly cajoled free passes to the Grand Theater from local merchants.

While cost curtailed women's attendance, the character of cheap vandeville, which often reflected its origins in saloon culture, may have restricted the participation of some women. Working-class vaudeville was a mixture of the sentimental and the suggestive. Songs and monologues explicitly expressed the Victorian construction of gender, celebrating domesticity and women's virtue, while tests of strength affirmed men's virility and power. Particularly popular in the tipper East Side variety shows, one observer noted, were "songs concerning childhood scenes, recollections of the old home, love of mother, and descriptions of heroic deeds, conveyed to the audience by means of stereopticon views, in songs, or by dramatic sketches." These were juxtaposed, however, with sexual innuendo and raucous familiarity. At the Yiddish music halls, observed one settlement worker, "the songs are suggestive of everything but what is proper, the choruses are full of double meanings, and the jokes have broad and unmistakable hints of things indecent." While this observer noted "the number of young girls and children who are always to be found in the audience, thoroughly enjoying themselves," many parents carefully screened these shows from their daughters. "It is only recently that the Concert-Halls have been filled up with Jewesses," noted an East Side observer. "Even now most Jewish parents are particular to allow their daughters to go only to reputable places." The images expressed in the mixed-sex variety shows were subdued versions of those presented in the male world of burlesque, concert-saloons, and dime museums. Cheap vaudeville moderated the tradition of male-oriented variety as it encouraged heterosocial participation, but it retained much of its raw character. In the early twentieth century, however, there emerged a new form of theatrical

entertainment——the moving picture show——which transformed working-class women's participation in commercialized recreation.

THE ADVENT OF THE MOVIES

In the 1890's, motion pictures were shown primarily to vaudeville audiences, first as a novelty and later as "chasers," which signalled the audience to leave the theater. At this time, movie equipment was sold only to vaudeville theaters, and established booking syndicates distributed films. The impetus to develop movies as a separate form of entertainment came not from vaudeville, but from the amusement parlor and penny arcade. Around 1900, numerous arcades could be found on such commercial streets as the Bowery, 14th Street, and 125th Street, crammed with slot machines, phonographs, muscle-testing apparatus, automatic scales, and fortune-telling machines. Their most popular attraction, however, was the kinetoscope, a moving picture peep show that was often known as the "penny vaudeville." These amusement parlors drew a predominantly male clientele; as People's Institute investigator John Collier noted, "The penny arcade has resembled the saloon, from which the family has stayed away."

In the early 1900's, the owners of amusement arcades began to close off a section in the back of the hall and project movies on a screen, charging five to ten cents for admission. By 1905, small storefront theaters, or "nickelodeons," spread throughout Manhattan's tenement districts, encouraged by the peculiarities of the city's licensing laws. A "common show" license, which could be purchased for twenty-five dollars, permitted seating capacities of up to three hundred people, but did not require adherence to the rigid building and fire codes required for a regular theater license. Thus movie exhibitors could cheaply rent a storefront or small dance hall, outfit it with a projection booth, screen, and wooden benches, and charge a nickel for a show of one-reelers.

In only a few years, "nickel madness" had swept the city, drawing a broad working-class audience. A study of recreation found that almost three-fourths of all movie-goers in 1910 were working class, although a substantial minority of white-collar workers went as well. The nickel theaters sprang up in the tenement neighborhoods and commercial amusement streets of the metropolis. By 1907, two hundred nickelodeons could be found in Manhattan alone, with over one-third located below 14th Street, an area dominated by the immigrant working class. Similar trends could be observed in other parts of the city. "In one street in Harlem the writer counted as many as five to a block....They run from early morning until midnight, and their megaphones are barking before the milkman has made his rounds." In 1910, weekly attendance in greater New York was estimated at one-quarter of the city's entire population, almost 1.5 million people.

In many ways, the rise of the movies marked a decisive break in the pattern of working-class amusements, comprising, as observers were fond of reporting, the "great theatre of the masses in New York." According to George Bevans, while working-class patrons of the live theater tended to have relatively high incomes and short working days, approximately 60 percent of all workingmen, whatever their earnings or hours of labor, went to the movies. Most important, the movies required little outlay of money, even when compared to the vaudeville theater, since a nickel or at most a dime purchased an evening's entertainment. In Bevans' study,

workingmen typically spent fifteen cents a week on movies, but those who attended theaters often spent three times as much. While movie fans were permitted to sit through repeated screenings of the one- and two-reel films, most picture shows lasted only an hour, making them appealing even to workers who labored long hours. The movies attracted recently arrived immigrants of all nationalities, in contrast to the stage, which was most frequently visited by native-born workingmen. “The audiences are composite in the highest degree,” a report by the People’s Institute found. “On the Bowery we have seen Chinamen, Italians and Yiddish people, the young and old, often entire families, crowded side by side.” Language proved no barrier to immigrants’ patronage of the silent films, and all could enjoy the mimed actions and understand the simple plots.

WOMEN’S CULTURE AND THE MOVIES

Most strikingly, movies altered women’s participation in the world of public, commercial amusements. When pictures moved from the arcade’s kinetoscopes to nickelodeon screens, women’s attendance soared; women comprised 40 percent of the working-class movie audience in 1910. Unlike the commercial dance halls, movie attendance transcended generational lines and marital status. As one journalist noted, “Many middle-aged and old women are steady patrons, who never, when a new film is to be shown, miss the opening.” Another observed that “few of these modest show places, in Harlem, for instance, can be found where the entrance is not encumbered with go-carts and perambulators.” Wives with their husbands and mothers with children crowded into the movie houses, breaking down the segregated and noncommercial orientation of married women’s leisure.

Movie producers and exhibitors were well aware of the impact of women’s attendance on their industry “The wonderful growth in numbers of so-called ‘store shows’ and ‘Nickelodeons’ in the past twelve months has been due to a great extent to the patronage accorded this class of amusement by the women and children,” observed one trade journal in 1907. Another advised exhibitors to “Play to the Ladies” by not showing objectionable films. Between reels, nickelodeon owners encouraged women’s participation, projecting such enthusiastic announcements as “We are aiming to please the ladies,” “Bring the children,” and “Ladies without escorts cordially invited.”

The popularity of moving pictures among married women was in large part due to the cheapness of the entertainment. A few nickels could be eked out of the family budget to enable a mother and her children to attend a weekly show. The movies’ widespread availability and close proximity to working-class residential districts also proved an important attraction, much as the saloons were for their husbands. At the same time, this novel form of entertainment was not intimately linked to male culture and could be incorporated into the social world of married women. Movie exhibitors encouraged and played upon this aspect of movie-going.

Despite the standardized product, the experience of the movies took on the flavor of the surrounding neighborhood. The early nickelodeons seemed extensions of street life, their megaphones and garish placards competing with the other sights and sounds of urban streets. Inside the storefront theaters, the atmosphere seemed a heightened version of life in the tenement

districts. “The majority of the fifty places examined were found to be badly overcrowded...with the aisles completely blocked by standing spectators,” wrote an inspector, whose middle-class sensibilities were assaulted by the nickelodeons. “In many places attendants went through the room with an atomizer spraying perfumery on the crowd to allay the odor.”

On a scale unmatched by the vaudeville houses, nickel theaters became community gathering places. “Certain houses have become genuine social centers where neighborhood groups may be found any evening of the week,” a journalist observed, “where the ‘regulars’ stroll up and down the aisles between acts and visit friends.” Inside the theater, friends gossiped and children played while awaiting the show. Unlike the middle-class theater audiences, the working-class crowd audibly interacted with the screen and each other, commenting on the action, explaining the plot, and vocally accompanying the piano player. Nickelodeon programs often featured vaudeville skits and sentimental or patriotic songs with illustrative slides thrown against the screen, during which the audience was encouraged to sing along. Exhibitors also targeted vaudeville acts to the ethnic composition of the audience. Thus in the Jewish lower East Side, movie house owners offered vaudeville in Yiddish, while the nickelodeons of Greenwich Village presented Italian singers and comics.

This localism helped to affirm the movie theater as a public and commercial space that married women could incorporate into their own culture of kinship, neighborhood, and church ties. Mary Heaton Vorse captured this experience in her description of Italian mothers, among the most home-centered of immigrants, who went to the movies after evening church services: “Prayers finished, you may see a mother sorting out her own babies and moving on serenely to the picture show down the road.” The casual and neighborly atmosphere of the movies contrasted to more formal occasions for leisure. One observer suggested, for example, that “mothers do not have to ‘dress’ to attend them,” an important consideration, since mothers often sacrificed their own wardrobes to ensure that their husbands and children were properly clothed.

Nickelodeons also offered an additional space in the public sphere where women could safely leave their children. Many seem to have thought of the nickel theaters as day care centers. While some West Side mothers believed that “them places is the worst thing that ever happened to New York, settin’ b’ys to gamblin’ and stealin’,” others observed that “a by’s got t’do somethin’ an’ I don’t see no harm in a good show that keeps him off the streets.” Many East Side parents similarly acceded to their children’s presence at the movies, at least their sons’: at the Windsor Theater at 10:00 P.m., for example, investigators found numerous young boys without guardians, even though this violated the law. Another survey estimated that forty thousand children in greater New York attended movies daily without a parent or guardian.

Many reformers praised the movies as the one form of commercial recreation that brought the entire family together, seeing it as a substitute for the saloon. According to movie reformer Orrin G. Cocks, there were 530 fewer saloons in New York City in 1914 than in 1909, which he attributed to the popularity of the motion picture. If the movies indeed took away saloon business, then many working-class women too must have seen wider advantages in the movies than simply their own enjoyment.

Single working women also attended picture shows, integrating them into their culture of treating and style. Like dance halls and social clubs, movie houses offered convenient places for meeting men, courting, and enjoying an inexpensive evening’s entertainment. The accepted place

of the movies in young women's pursuit of pleasure is suggested in a boardinghouse matron's description of Mary, a respectable working girl. "The other night she flirted with a man across the street," she worried. "It is true she dropped him when he offered to take her into a saloon. But she does go to picture shows and dance halls with 'pick up' men and boys." Crowds of young people milled around the theaters, and young women commonly "linger[ed] with a boy companion 'making dates' for a movie or affair." The theater's darkness and the vocal familiarity of the audience encouraged opportunities for intimacy and "spooning." As one observer wrote, "Note how the semi-darkness permits a steady's' arm to encircle a 'lady friend's' waist."

Indeed, many middle-class reformers and writers expressed a concern that the nickelodeons, like the dance halls, would quickly become public spaces for undue familiarity between the sexes. This perception caused an apocryphal story to circulate in the press about "attacks on women through the use of a supposed poisoned needle with which the victim was pricked in the semi-light of a moving picture hall." While this story of "white slavery" apparently had no basis in reality, according to an investigation of the Committee of Fourteen, the idea that movie houses were arenas of promiscuity and danger for women was a strangely potent one. Helen Weinstein, a middle-class Polish immigrant, remembered this incident vividly fifty years later, associating it with a more famous sexual crime: "There was plenty killing at that time, too——plenty——Jack the Ripper——somebody who sat in a movie would give you a needle and you'd be different." Concerned civic leaders also pointed to such moral hazards as the lack of chaperonage, suggestive posters advertising the shows, and bawdy vaudeville interspersed between the films. Others feared "the likelihood that the much more easy conversational relations among spectators will lead to improvised and clandestine acquaintance with men."

However, these middle-class fears obscure some important differences between the movies and other amusements frequented by young working women. The cheap price of the nickelodeon, its appeal across generations, and its firm basis in working-class neighborhoods mitigated the potential for uninhibited familiarity between women and men. While young women often made the nickelodeons an arena of sexual expression and romance, this was developed as much in the imagery of the movies as in the social space of the theater.

The movies attracted single women of various backgrounds and cultural styles, a more diverse group than the habitues of the dance halls. The young girl who put on style in flamboyant clothes mingled with the genteel working woman concerned with respectability. The "settlement girl" or working girls' club member, who would have little to do with amusement parks and dance halls, nevertheless went frequently to the movies. The Girls' Friendly Society, a church-related organization for uplift of working women, found that our girls go to the 'movies' by thousands."

Similarly, young women of every ethnic background were moviegoers. Immigrant parents who traditionally restricted female activity agreed more readily to their daughters' attendance at the movies than at other forms of amusement. There was a widespread perception that the movies were a safe environment for daughters, in part because entire families attended in a neighborhood setting. Historian Elizabeth Ewen, for example, cites an Italian garment worker who observed that "the one place I was allowed to go by myself was the movies....My parents wouldn't let me go out anywhere else, even when I was twenty-four." The movies were also the primary form of

recreation for Italian women who lived alone, with some visiting once a week, and others attending only three or four times a year.

Other young women who could not participate in the "treating culture" of the dance halls and amusement parks found refuge in movie theaters. Ruth True observed that there were "tough girls" in the West Side neighborhood who did not go to dance halls because "they have not even the small amount of money that would take them there, nor the one suit of good clothes that would make them presentable among the others." These young women "have the two universal amusement places——the street and the nickel 'dump.'" Because of this, perhaps, movies may have had less status among young women than dance halls or theaters; True notes that the more expensive vaudeville was even more popular than the picture shows. At the same time, young women could experience the movie theater as a safe neighborhood institution, without the direct sexual risks and flirtatious interaction of the dance halls or amusement resorts. Those with little spending money could usually find the price of a movie ticket, and they did not need to depend on men friends to treat.

For these women, movie manufacturers and exhibitors played up the glamour, sensations, and romance of motion pictures. The movies quickly generated a young women's culture oriented around the adulation of movie stars and being a fan. In the movie's infancy, film makers insisted on the performers' anonymity, but movie audiences soon picked out favorite players and demanded their names and personal information about them. As Orrin Cocks observed, "The children of New York are sophisticated and among other things they know quite as much about motion picture stars and latest productions." Film companies responded to this interest with fan magazines as early as 1908. Exhibitors posted advertisements that played up the sexual attractions one could vicariously experience in the theater, a tendency that occasionally took absurd dimensions, as reformer John Collier discovered: "Why, I saw the Passion Play in moving pictures recently advertised by a poster showing the elopement of a modern couple in evening dress over a garden wall." Yet the movie stars, posters, and plots could become an important part of young women's social life, experienced without the direct intervention of men. On Eighth Avenue, observed Ruth True, the "flashing, gaudy, poster-lined entrances of Hickman's and of the Galaxy...supply the girls with a 'craze,' the same that sends those with a more liberal allowance to the matinees." For many women, movies might become a "woman's space" experienced within the heterosocial context of commercial recreation. Being a fan and adulating stars mediated heterosocial relations that were more direct, and often problematic, in the dance halls and amusement parks.

PROJECTING HETEROSOCIAL CULTURE

If the nickelodeon theaters affirmed a sense of both community and glamour, the content of the movies and its impact on working-class audiences are more difficult to interpret. In a period when thousands of one-reel films were produced, and only impressionistic descriptions of movie-goers are available, the relationship between film and audience is open to question. It is difficult to know what images and ideas the working-class audiences responded to, and how that response differed by gender, ethnicity, and age. An Italian mother and an Irish American

saleswoman might have been influenced by very different films, or even experienced the same film quite differently; a "vamp" film, for example, could offend some women, fascinate others.

Several scholars have seen a close connection between the immigrant working-class audiences and the early movies, which were filled with ordinary people and everyday street scenes. Film historian Lewis Jacobs claims, for example, that, before 1908, film comedies always featured a "common man or woman" as the protagonist and sympathized with the poor against the wealthy because "the audience and filmmakers alike were of this class . " Others have argued that although the setting of these films were the tenements and the streets, few of their images were direct reflections of labor, family life, and politics among the laboring masses. Indeed, many films with working-class themes were conceptualized as glimpses of "how the other half lives," assuming an audience unfamiliar with immigrant ghettos and tenement quarters. A Biograph advertisement for the film "The Song of the Shirt" proclaimed, for example, that "several of the scenes are decidedly interesting in the fact that they were actually taken in the thickly settled Hebrew quarters of New York City." Moreover, many early films were made in France by Gaumont and Pathé, which caused one journalist to note that "thousands of dwellers along the Bowery are learning to roar at French buffoonery, and the gendarme is growing as familiar to them as the 'copper on the beat.'" This suggests not so much a direct correspondence between the content of early movies and their audience as rather a more mediated response that played with familiar social relationships.

An examination of the content of the earliest movies suggests that their images were filtered through the traditions of the cheap theater. The routines common in variety and popular melodrama formed the kernel of many movies in the years from 1898 to 1910, when they were exhibited primarily to a working-class audience. Many were simply filmed versions of vaudeville turns, replete with stock characters, ritualized routines, and painted backdrops. A few films even positioned the movie camera in the seats of a vaudeville theater, so that the film-goer had the sensation of being in an audience viewing a variety skit. While movie-makers quickly learned to manipulate the new technology to create special effects and trick sequences and to develop narratives through cutting and arranging a series of shots, thematically they drew upon the familiar territory of the cheap theater.

The reliance on theatrical traditions is evident in the early films that depicted the social relations between the sexes, a popular theme present in about one-third of the movie comedies made between 1898 and 1910. Particularly before 1905, many films duplicated the salacious sexual imagery and risque humor common in working-class variety. Photographs of women disrobing, glimpses of ankles and limbs, prolonged embraces, and kissing were not unusual. "A Busy Day at the Corset Models'," for example, showed women in undergarments and various states of undress, while "Soubrettes in a Bachelor's Flat" featured a man carousing with three scantily clad chorines, who don Salvation Army costumes when the apartment is raided by the police. Such films were originally projected in peep shows and kinetoscopes in the male world of the penny arcade.

Production of risque films declined as the kinetoscope gave way to the nickelodeon and movies developed a female audience. Still, sexuality transformed into flirtation and suggestiveness continued to dominate the plots of film comedies. The "peeping tom" was a common device that accentuated the position of the audience as voyeur through the film medium.

In “The Boarding House Bathroom,” for example, two male boarders peer through a keyhole to catch a glimpse of a comely young woman. In another film, “It’s a Shame to Take the Money,” a boy shines the shoes of a woman who pulls her skirts up above the ankles. The boy, believing that was payment enough, refuses her proffered money. Finally a policeman, who had been watching the proceedings behind a wall, comes out and congratulates the boy.

Sexual intrigue formed the basis of numerous comedies, many of which derived directly from the popular stage. Familiar stories of the maid pursued by the master of the house, or the cook romancing the local milkman, appeared again and again. Just as common, however, were films depicting encounters between the sexes in the context of the modern city. These employed the situations of everyday urban life, heightening the expression of social familiarity and sexual innuendo. As in “The Veiled Beauty,” many film producers used the beaches and amusement parks of Coney Island as a location for unrestrained fun and humor. Other films were set in businesses where women and men came into close physical contact, such as doctors’ offices, shoe stores, dancing academies, beauty parlors, and manicurists’ shops. A 1905 film, for example, entitled “The Broadway Massage Parlor,” depicts a mother and daughter at a physical culture gymnasium. When the daughter goes off to have a facial, the masseur makes advances to her; the mother rushes in and scolds her daughter, while the masseur’s wife beats him on the head.

Similarly, women’s search for employment carried sexual connotations, which movie-makers quickly exploited. Although audiences were dominated by blue-collar workers, films about factory employment were less common than those involving office romance. This theme received a particularly interesting treatment in a 1904 movie, “The Story the Biograph Told,” in which the sexual snares of women’s wage-earning combined with a commentary on the nature of the movies. The film opens in a business office, where a man is explaining the operation of a movie camera to an office boy. The boss and an attractive female secretary then enter his office and begin embracing, while, unbeknownst to them, the boy cranks the camera. The scene shifts to a theater, where the boss and his wife are watching a movie, when inexplicably the intimate office encounter is thrown on the screen. The next day, the incensed wife marches into the office, discharges the secretary, and replaces her with a man. While stressing the dangers of the heterosocial business world, the film unconsciously comments on the movies’ ability to place people in compromising situations for the amusement of an audience. Like Tilyou’s Steeplechase Park, the early movies marketed titillation, voyeurism, and vicarious sexuality in the context of an “Americanized” culture. Although their endings often asserted the immorality of such behavior, their action assaulted the conventions of respectability. As Mack Sennett, a master of film comedy, put it, “I especially liked the reduction of authority to absurdity, the notion that sex could be funny, and the bold insults hurled at Pretension.”

Many early films also delighted in street-smart women who could repel sexual advances, defend themselves in dangerous situations, and devise ingenious strategies to attain their goals. A popular genre of movies about “mashers,” for example, often depicted quick-witted women outfoxing male harassers. In the 1908 Vitagraph film “Mashing the Masher,” two women conspire with their brothers to punish a man who has been sexually harassing them. They arrange a meeting on a street corner, the expectant masher arrives, a load of rubbish is dumped on his head, and “the masher thus is mashed.” “The Broker’s Athletic Typewriter” more graphically

celebrates the modern working girl. In this film, a stenographer who has been pursued by her lascivious boss picks him up and throws him about the office, aided by trick photography.

Women who enjoyed high living were not seriously condemned in many early film comedies, and some displayed a subculture of women——chorus girls, burlesque queens, and soubrettes——who freely smoked and drank, wore lavish clothing, and lived in opulent surroundings. While films depicting the joys of conspicuous consumption and sexual abandon became popular in the late 1910's and 1920's, particularly in the extravaganzas of Cecil B. DeMille, similar themes were developed, although less ostentatiously, in the earliest movies. Even ordinary women were not censured for their interest in dating, men friends, and pleasure. In "Oh, Those Eyes!," a Biograph film of 1912, a father attempts to stifle his daughter's flirtatiousness by conspiring with two of her suitors. They fight a duel and pretend to die, but the flirt remains blasé and unrepentant.

The early movie-makers seem to have been quite aware of the cultural and class divisions marking the terrain of popular amusement, and they consciously ranged themselves against middle-class morality and manners. While the Victorian woman was idealized and celebrated in the famous films of D. W. Griffith, she received a more ambiguous treatment in the mass of films cranked out for the working-class audience. Many films delighted in poking fun at the earnest efforts of moral reformers, temperance advocates, and other uplifters. A one-reeler entitled "Committee on Art," for example,depicts a man gazing longingly at several risque burlesque posters, when the local squad of do-gooders arrive and pin blouses and skirts on the offending manikins.

At the same time, movie producers mocked self-styled "New Women" who advocated political equality and the blurring of gender roles. Dress reform, for example, was attacked in "The Newest Woman," which pointed out the unnaturalness of the female bloomer costume by comparing it to effeminate male dress. Another film, presaging the "companionate marriage" schemes of the 1920's, followed a man's trial marriages to a number of women, each of which ended in some form of domestic violence; as the Biograph advertisement crowed, "All the world is laughing at the humorous possibilities involved in the scheme of 'Trial Marriages' recently proposed by a prominent young New York society matron." In the face of the suffrage movement, movie producers wondered "Will It Ever Come to This?" and replied by reaffirming female domesticity.

Thus the early movies responded primarily with humor to the challenges turn-of-the-century feminism posed to the patriarchal order. Many of them affirmed a heterosocial culture that incorporated some aspects of the "New Woman" without subverting the institutions upholding male power and control. Movie-makers delighted in the young woman capable of navigating her way through urban territory and sexual pitfalls, and who found pleasure in men's company and commercial amusements, not reformers' schemes and feminist utopias. Linking personal freedom with the culture of consumption and heterosociality, these films undercut feminist demands, not simply through direct criticism and humor, but by refashioning the socially appropriate behavior and norms that governed gender relations. Visually and thematically, these films constructed a notion of modern American womanhood that reaffirmed the flamboyant cultural style popular among many young American-born working women and, as Elizabeth Ewen suggests, created new aspirations among the foreign-born.

REGULATING GENDER RELATIONS IN THE MOVIES

As the nickelodeons achieved unparalleled popularity among the masses, they came under attack from public officials, clergy, and reformers, who assailed the condition of the theaters and the content of the shows. Quickly the early movies became a terrain of cultural and political conflict. Movie-makers and exhibitors, themselves working-class but with upward aspirations, clashed with various representatives of the middle class, the elite, and the state. One aspect of the public discourse surrounding the motion pictures concerned the images of sexuality and their potential effects on impressionable youth. The interaction of these groups after 1907, played out in the movement for censorship, recast the movies' earlier projection of a heterosocial culture.

By 1907, the burgeoning numbers of storefront theaters in New York had begun to attract public notice. In that year, several nickelodeon owners were arrested and charged with violating the Sunday closing laws, showing indecent pictures, imperilling the morals of youth, and creating public disturbances. In December, Mayor George McClellan responded to violations of the city's blue laws by closing all places of amusement on Sunday. The Protestant clergy, while decrying Sunday amusements in general, particularly attacked the movie houses. "The cent and five-cent theatres, in particular, should be closed," proposed Rev. Charles Goodell. "There are far too many of them, and children on their way to Sunday school are lured and dragged into them." A massive uproar ensued, crossing class lines. German organizations and the Central Federated Union protested, movie exhibitors sought injunctions, and citizens packed the city council chambers while it debated the issue. Joining in the protest, German women "cheered as vociferously as the men at the attacks on the new Sunday observance ruling." During hearings, many observed that the attacks on cheap theaters and Sunday entertainment were directed primarily at the working class.

The following year, city officials and clergy again battled the storefront theaters. After a balcony collapsed in an overcrowded Rivington Street nickelodeon, the mayor revoked all licenses and held another round of hearings. Defensive movie exhibitors agreed to improve the physical and moral conditions of the theaters. By 1910, an examination of movie shows indicated that the "proprietors display a commendable desire to keep order and to have the proprieties observed. Many of them direct attention against rowdyism, profanity, and smoking." The investigator concluded, "There is an evident desire to secure the patronage of the better people of the neighborhood."

Threatened with official government intervention, movie manufacturers agreed to submit their films to a board of civic leaders and reformers, who would excise unacceptable scenes. The Board of Censorship of Motion Pictures, later called the National Board of Review, was established in 1909 and became the leading agency reviewing motion pictures for the American public. The National Board fought continuing demands of many officials and reformers for stricter censorship while moderating the movie-makers' often lurid efforts to appeal to popular taste. Calling movies a "novel, entrancing and far-reaching form of expression, a purveyor of ideas and symbols and secrets," the National Board recognized that film was a form of communication unlike any other, able to convey to the masses information that previously had

been available only to the privileged. While it considered many subjects for censorship, including violence, drugs, and crime, many decisions involved the sexual and social relations between women and men. In regulating gender relations in the movies, the National Board attacked images it defined as immoral, but gave free rein to most “matters of taste,” even when they assaulted middle-class sensibilities.

In defining immorality, the National Board drew the line at what it considered suggestive behavior and heightened sensuality in the movies——”the details of immoral sex relations; over-passionate love scenes; stimulating close dancing; unnecessary bedroom scenes in negligee; excessively low-cut gowns; undue or suggestive display of the person.” It advised against using homosexual characters or extramarital relationships as a basis for humor and warned that “all loose, suggestive comedy ‘business’ between the sexes should be removed.” The National Board’s reviewers accepted flirtatious and sensual comedy scenes if there were no indecent intentions or if they were necessary to the plot. One reviewer, when questioned about “common handling” between the sexes, distinguished between suggestive behavior “apt to arouse unclean thoughts” and “funny horseplay, as Charley Chaplin.” The latter, he noted, “is an essential and keeps more young folks from the saloon and dance hall than its possible harm.“ In controversial subjects such as white slavery, the “social evil,” and birth control, the National Board insisted that the films be educational and moralistic, rather than entertaining. The producers of “House of Bondage,” a white slave film, eliminated scenes in a brothel and argued that “all suggestiveness such as kissing, embracing, and carousing has been done away with,” but the National Board still condemned the picture as too sensationalistic for the public.

Defending themselves against state censorship and acceding to the changes demanded by the National Board, the movie-makers dreamed of attracting a larger middle-class audience. As Russell Merritt has shown, the desire to gain a “class” audience led exhibitors to build movie palaces in business districts that fringed white-collar shopping areas. Such efforts began in New York as early as 1908, with the construction of the Unique on 14th Street, which seated almost twelve hundred in plush surroundings. The defensive posture of the movie industry toward its working-class audience, and its desire for upward mobility, may be seen in the early trade journals of the movie industry. “With the exhibitor and manufacturer progressing in harmony, who can tell to what a high degree of class the cheap amusement may be advanced?” one journal boasted. Ambivalently, they continued to suggest Bowery-style advertising techniques for the storefront shows, while urging exhibitors to label their theaters with more exalted names: “Why so many ‘Vaudettes,’ ‘Nickolets,’ ‘Dimes,’ and ‘Nickelodeons’? Why not ‘Empire,’ ‘Majestic,’ ‘Grand,’ ‘Washington,’ etc.?”

The film manufacturers and exhibitors, for their part, pushed and played with the social definition of “acceptable” gender relations under the scrutiny of the National Board. In the initial response to censorship, some movie-makers turned to literary plots and middle-class settings that affirmed Victorian morality for their expanding audience. Others, however, continued to create sensual and titillating images. Polling theater owners, Carl Laemmle, the president of Universal Films, claimed, that “Instead of finding that 95 per cent. favored clean pictures, I discovered that at least half, and maybe 60 per cent., want the pictures to be ‘risque.’...They found their patrons were more willing to pay money to see an off-color than a decent one.” Arguing that “one after

another [exhibitor] said that it would be wise to listen to the public demand for vampire pictures," he asserted that Universal was not the "guardian of public morals."

Pressured by demands for censorship and desiring to extend their audience, movie-makers developed new images of women and men in the 1910's that transcended Victorian morals and manners and were acceptable to middle-class audiences. As film historian Lary May has shown, such popular stars as Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks celebrated wholesome sexuality, personal freedom, athleticism, youth, and romantic companionship, placing these values in the context of an upwardly mobile consumer society. These movie stars, viewed in opulent picture palaces, helped to legitimate a heterosocial and expressive culture for an eager middle-class audience in search of new models of behavior. Working-class women too, Elizabeth Ewen has argued, discovered in the movies of the late 1910's and 1920's a dream world of American pleasures, consumption, and romance, a world in which immigrant and familial traditions had little place.

Yet these envisionings were not entirely new to many working-class women, although their opulence and elite pretensions were. The screen stars and filmmakers of the 1910's reformulated cultural patterns that were familiar to the earliest viewers of the movies. Comedians like Mack Sennett and Charlie Chaplin drew upon the early one-reelers' celebration of suggestiveness, physicality, urban sexual encounters; and romance, which often turned Victorian morality into absurdity. Even Mary Pickford, the most famous actress of her day, linked herself culturally to the independent working woman. A think I admire most in the world the girls who earn their own living," she observed. "I am proud to be one of them." As the movies developed a middle-class audience, they transformed the cultural traditions of cheap theater and nickelodeons, which had played with the sexual expressiveness and heterosocial practices of "Americanized" working-class youth, into a new ethos of romantic companionship and mass consumption.