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Education or Entertainment?: Early Cinema as a Social Force in New York's Immigrant Jewish Community

At the turn of the 20th century America went through a deep societal crisis. Industrialisation, rapid urbanisation and the mass arrival of poor immigrants from southern and eastern Europe were profoundly transforming the nation's social, cultural and political landscape, challenging established norms and values. Stock market panics and severe economic depressions provided a context for violent labour disputes and created a breeding ground for left-wing radicalism. New commercial leisure forms and the emergence of an urban mass consumer culture cut across existing class, gender and ethnic boundaries. The rise of an immigrant proletariat and concomitant growth of poverty-stricken tenement districts demonstrated that the balance between "labour" and "capital" had been profoundly disturbed.

More than any other American city, New York symbolized for many the apparent breakdown of the social order and the excesses of the modern era. Indeed, nowhere seemed solutions to "the social question" more urgent than in Manhattan, where 47.4 per cent of the population was foreign born and 35.1 per cent first generation Americans, according to the 1910 census. The circumstances in which these recent immigrants worked and lived were often appalling. The tenements with their narrow doors and windows and small air shafts lacked direct daylight and decent sanitation. Long hours, small wages, unhealthy sweatshops and unsafe factory work were no exception. Many residential buildings and factories were death-traps in case of fire; so were many entertainment venues. In 1890, Jacob Riis' landmark publication *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* exposed the New York slums to America's middle and upper classes. Over the next decades, dozens of reports were published on the city's social problems, ranging from child labour and poor living conditions to diseases, alcohol abuse, crime and the allegedly corrupting influence of cheap amusements.

This article examines how progressive forces in New York used the cinema to address the social question and encourage social or political activism among

eastern European Jews. Jewish immigrants are singled out not only because they constituted the largest immigrant group in the city (about 25 per cent of the total population) but also because they were widely acknowledged as fervent fans of moving pictures. Considering this enthusiasm for the cinema, one might expect that the film medium was widely embraced in the Jewish immigrant milieu, either for educational purposes and uplift efforts by social reformers and other Americanizing agencies, or by the Jewish labour movement and Yiddish socialists to address the injustices of industrial capitalism. However, a close examination of the use of cinematography in non-commercial contexts reveals a more complex configuration. Settlement houses and other civic institutions repeatedly integrated moving pictures into their educational programmes and informational campaigns. Progressive Jewish leaders, on the other hand, failed to see cinema's potential as an instrument to raise awareness of social evils among Jewish workers.

First, I will discuss how two prominent Americanising agencies – the University Settlement House and the Educational Alliance – approached the film medium, whereby each example represents a particular strategy to make use of moving pictures to advance the project of Progressive social reform. Then I will address the question why moving pictures were not considered a constructive social force by Jewish socialist intellectuals and the leaders of the Jewish labour movement.

University Settlement House: Moving Pictures as a “Drawing Card”

Right from the first screenings of the cinematograph, the new film medium had been hailed as a universal language that could reach audiences across national, cultural and social boundaries. The metaphor of film as a universal language was especially powerful in the United States because a large part of the urban population was foreign-born. Institutions concerned with Americanising these newcomers favoured visual media over the written word because they typically considered the newcomers a poorly-educated lot whose “undeveloped” minds could be easily impressed by images. In *The Art of the Moving Picture* (1915), the poet Vachel Lindsay elaborated the notion of the movies as “American hieroglyphics” and stressed cinema's democratic nature and civilising potential:

The invention of the photoplay is as great a step as was the beginning of picture-writing in the stone age. And cave-men and women of our slums seem to be the people most affected by this novelty The slums are an astonishing assembly of cavemen crawling out of their shelters to exhibit for the first time in history a common interest on a tremendous scale in an art form.¹

Progressive reformers discussed in more friendly terms cinema's potential impact upon “the tired workers, overburdened men and women”, who filled “the little halls throughout the city and throughout the land”.² Influenced by the ideas of Matthew Arnold, they believed that education and reform were the answers to America's social question. More than any other civic movement,

Progressive reformers inscribed the cinema with a rhetoric of uplift. Their discourses abounded with clichés like “the poor men’s elementary course in drama”, “the academy of the working man”, and “a grand social worker”. “The nickelodeon is the thing”, John Collier of the People’s Institute argued as early as 1908 in an article that appeared in *Charities and Commons, a publication for social workers*:

All the settlements and churches combined do not reach daily a tithe of the simple and impressionable fold that the nickelodeons reach and vitally impress every day. Here is a new social force, perhaps the beginning of a true theater of the people, and an instrument whose power can only be realized when social workers begin to use it.³

Progressive reformers took special interest in immigrant Jews, who they believed conformed to such native Protestant values as a drive for education, seriousness, industry, and temperance. In its 1907 yearbook, the University Settlement Society described the “Lower East Side Dwellers” as follows:

The people are industrious, they go struggling on, and their children rise, frequently moving away, mingling with the general population, and living lives of less economic stress than their parents. That is the prosaic sequel of the story of the immigrant Jewish family of the Lower East Side.⁴

In the opening decade of the 20th century, the downtown Jewish quarter, east of the Bowery and below East Fourteenth Street, was the home of over half a million immigrant Jews. It counted several settlement houses, where men and women with college degrees lived and worked among the immigrant population and sought with their scientific knowledge to improve the living and working conditions in the neighbourhood by offering education, advice and psychological assistance.⁵

With its clubs and classes, gymnasium, kindergarten, roof garden and public baths, the University Settlement at 184 Eldridge Street, strategically located opposite a public school and next door to a branch of the New York Public Library, was among the best-frequented institutions of its kind on the Lower East Side. It offered evening classes on a wide range of subjects, from cooking and sewing to city history, progressive literature and drawing. Most of its social clubs aimed at the immigrant youth. Programmes for children typically combined “little talks on the most elementary civics” with “amusing stories, songs and recitations”. The ambition was to teach them what “the little citizens *should and should not do* out of regard for his neighbourhood”. In 1907, the social workers decided to integrate moving pictures into their summer programme to lure more children to their indoor activities. As they put it, the summer clubs needed a “drawing card” that “would make the children eager to come and to come regularly”. The Miles Brothers cordially furnished the settlement with a projector and fresh films every week. The plan worked out in so far as the movies increased the attendance, but the head worker admitted in his annual report that “most children who came had little idea that they were coming to anything but the ‘moving picture show’ Very few expressed a desire for a club membership card”. Eventually many joined the indoor summer pro-

gramme but “the indoctrination of the children with Settlement ideals” remained a difficult task, he concluded.⁶

Manifestly, the University Settlement initially did not consider the film medium as an educational tool in itself but as a means to a different end: the moving pictures were primarily used to lure children *to* the Settlement House. However, as nickelodeons opened up everywhere in the Jewish quarter, the discourse of social workers on the cinema changed fundamentally. The new rhetoric centred on the potential moral and physical dangers of the five cent shows and the need to lure the immigrant youth *away* from the nickelodeons. Obviously, this was merely a renewed version of an older hegemonic discourse on low-brow entertainment that had emerged in the 19th century and now aligned the moving pictures with other forms of cheap commercial amusement that were considered harmful.⁷

Educational Alliance: Fighting fire with fire

“Too much emphasis cannot be laid upon the necessity for providing abundant, wholesome recreation and for the separation of recreation and vice”, the Committee of Fourteen concluded in its 1910 report *The Social Evil in New York City: A Study of Law Enforcement*. To avoid recent immigrants being “contaminated” by the evils of the public dance halls or falling “a prey to the vicious tendencies of cheap drama, appealing to them on all sides”,⁸ settlement houses and other uplift institutions took on the task to organise counterattractions, typically in the form of a “wholesome” variant of the commercial original. The head worker of the College Settlement on Rivington Street articulated this strategy as follows: “our close study of the dance halls, moving picture shows, and the allurements of the nearby avenues, had taught us that we must renew our efforts to provide greater attractions within our doors”.⁹ Thus, when the Yiddish music halls gained widespread popularity, some workers of the East Side Settlement tried to establish a model German Bier-Garten and concert hall.¹⁰ At the height of the dance craze, others advocated a large model dance hall in the Jewish quarter. Both the College Settlement and the University Settlement regularly organised large dances on their premises as well as smaller dancing classes on Saturday evenings. Altogether, however, most of the counterattractions organised by settlement houses on the East Side remained relatively modest initiatives.

Of an entire different kind were the entertainments offered by the Educational Alliance, a large uplift institution on East Broadway that was set up in 1889 with the financial support of the German Jewish elite, to facilitate the rapid assimilation of the eastern European Jews into American society. In the words of the uptown *Jewish Messenger*, the eastern European Jews had to “be Americanised in spite of themselves, in the mode prescribed by their friends and benefactors”.¹¹ In the realm of leisure, this meant that the newcomers should not pass their evenings at the five cent moving picture shows, in Yiddish

music halls or watching 10–20–30 cent English melodrama, but favour more elevating cultural occupations.

As William Uricchio and Roberta Pearson point out, “the alliance’s literary clubs, English literature classes, theatrical performances, and free lectures constitute one of the most extensive arrays of counterattractions in New York City”.¹² As the cinema became a structural part of Jewish life on the Lower East Side, moving pictures also gained prominence on the entertainment programme of the Educational Alliance. Considering the low-brow reputation of the movies, this strategy to integrate the cinema into its cultural programming practice and uplift strategy needed some explanation. A note clarified to the Alliance’s uptown sponsors that “the ‘moving picture show’ is to the East-side what an uptown matinee is for those living on Riverside Drive”.¹³ “Because the ‘moving picture show’ is the East-Side child’s theatre we ‘fight fire with fire’ by giving a *better* show for the *same* price”. In addition, for those “who have no nickel”, every Sunday the Alliance offered a free show for 750 children.

The moving picture shows at the Alliance “consisted of dramatic stories, sometimes based on historical themes; comic stories and industrial and scenic pictures”.¹⁴ About half of the films were “of educational nature”.¹⁵ For instance, a 1910 programme featured WHALE FISHING, THE MOUNTAINS FROM HONG KONG, GLIMPSES OF YELLOWSTONE PARK, OLIVER TWIST, A TRUE PATRIOT, SNOW WHITE AND ROSE RED, HIS LAST ILLUSION GONE and THE KING’S PROTÉGÉ.¹⁶ Quality films with high cultural references figured prominently on the bill. For instance in May 1912 a “special moving picture exhibition of operas” was scheduled for Sunday evenings, with the films “preceded by short and appropriate talks on the biographies of the respective composers”.¹⁷ However the attendance was below expectation: only 271 persons attended the show in the 750-seat auditorium. In fact, finding the right balance between education and entertainment remained a difficult task, as the Board of Directors openly acknowledged:

While not wishing to fall behind in the educational results, the idea has been to make the programs of the moving pictures so varied that everyone will find in them something to his taste and that the contrast between pictures will show all of them in a better light. Every effort is being made to increase the attractiveness of the educational features.¹⁸

At the same time, comments and explanations were also provided with the fiction films to enhance their educational value and to “minimize any harmful suggestions in the pictures”.¹⁹ The entertainment committee repeatedly expressed its intention to increase the number of “purely educational films” on the programme, but typically with the proviso that this should be done “as far as it proves possible to do so and still keep our audience”.²⁰ If we look at the attendance figures, it is clear that the counterattraction strategy was only moderately successful. Only on the Saturday night did the moving picture shows fill the auditorium at full capacity. The average attendance was around 400, and with two to four shows per week the Alliance did not even equal the

box-office figures of a single nickelodeon in a neighbourhood that counted over 30 such venues with a seating capacity of 300 each.

In this respect, it should be emphasised that the “civilizing” activities organised by the Educational Alliance and settlement houses met quite some resistance and suspicion. As one contemporary observer noted “the Jew does not readily avail himself of opportunities whose sources appear to him as of a charitable nature, no matter how well meant, or how democratically managed such efforts to benefit him may be”.²¹ In particular, many East Siders resented the Educational Alliance because it was financed by the wealthy “uptown” German Jewish community. In the garment industry, where many immigrant Jews were employed, German Jews were among the leading manufacturers and they controlled most of the downtown factories and sweatshops where many immigrant Jews toiled under oppressive working conditions. There was little doubt that the well-established German Jews provided much-needed material aid on the East Side, but at the same time, many “downtown Jews”, especially those engaged in the labour movement, argued that philanthropic undertakings would not be needed if the bosses would pay better wages and keep workers employed during the slack season.

The Jewish Daily Forward: Theatre versus Moving Pictures

The uplift efforts of Progressive reformers and their German Jewish allies were paralleled by the efforts of Jewish socialists and labour leaders, who devoted much of their time and energy to improving the conditions of the Jewish working classes. Within the progressive immigrant milieu, the main media platform to address the social question was the Yiddish-language labour press, in particular the *Jewish Daily Forward* (*Forvertz*). Under the editorship of Abraham Cahan, this newspaper had developed into one of the most influential institutions in the immigrant Jewish community, with a reach far beyond the organized working class. The *Forward* not only served as a platform for labour activism but also operated as a cultural force. Thus it offers the historian a keen insight into the ways in which entertainment was used as an instrument for social change.

The socialist position towards commercial entertainment should be understood as part of a broader effort by the Russian-Jewish intelligentsia of newspaper editors, writers, labour activists and other left-wing “radicals” to raise the cultural standard of the “uneducated” Jewish masses.²² From the 1890s onwards, this cultural elite sought to transform the Yiddish legitimate theatre from a lowbrow entertainment into a highbrow institution for cosmopolitan art and enlightenment. As Yiddish theatre historian Nina Warnke points out, they condemned melodrama and historical operettas as stupid and stupefying amusement, and demanded the elimination of this *shund* (trash) from the Yiddish stage. At the same time, they “postulated realist plays and natural acting style as true art and exhorted both actors and audience to embrace their artistic values”.²³ Drama with realist character development and psychologically mo-

tivated action was to make working-class audiences aware of social ills and thus would reinforce the revolutionary demand for change. Well into the 1910s, the Yiddish labour press targeted theatrical entrepreneurs, actors, and audiences for giving preference to spectacle and attractions rather than to content and drama as art.

How then did the *Jewish Daily Forward* respond to the cinema, a commercial entertainment based on visual spectacle? Somewhat surprisingly, Cahan and his staff initially took a neutral stand towards the *muving piktskurs* as they were called in Yiddish. This attitude stood in sharp contrast with their reception of Yiddish vaudeville entertainment, which was condemned as the wrong kind of Americanisation as soon as the first Yiddish music halls opened their doors.²⁴ For several years, *Forward* railed against the “*shmutz*” on the vaudeville stage and warned “respectable” workers to stay away from the Yiddish music halls. There was no such reaction when the first nickelodeons opened in the Jewish quarter. The *Forward*’s first article on the nickelodeon boom, published in March 1908, simply commented:

Popular entertainment renews itself time and again, and art is becoming less and less expensive, not more than a *groshn*, to fit the taste and purse of small children and the poor, uneducated big children who are their parents. And once again the *goyim* start with it and the Jews get carried away.²⁵

The *Forward* explained that the nickelodeons did not show any offensive fare. In the past, “scenes of the secret relations between the sexes” and “scenes of prize fights” had been “feature hits” in Bowery arcades and Coney Island saloons. Now one could now “sit through an entire program in a moving picture gallery without a blush of shame”. Even so, the reporter still showed some concern about the effects of movie-going on children:

The moving picture galleries are managed by ignorant and reckless people who are only interested in business. These people never consider whether or not a particular show is dangerous for children. And because children are very impressionable, they let the picture turn their heads and their fantasy, thoughts and character take a turn which the parents do not want at all.²⁶

The *Forward* reassured its readers, however, that “the moving pictures are not a bad thing as long as they are in qualified hands”. To make his point, the reporter gave the example of the picture shows presented at the University Settlement.

Although cinema’s influence upon child audiences and uneducated workers was one of the most recurring obsessions of the period, the subject was not further developed by the *Forward*. The popularity of movie-going in the Jewish quarter was primarily discussed in terms of cinema’s economic impact on the Yiddish legitimate theatre and the Yiddish vaudeville business. It seems as if the Jewish socialists were unable to articulate their ideas about the new film medium other than in terms of the vested discourse on the Yiddish stage or as a general critique of commercial entertainment. Thus, when the East Side mourned the casualties of a balcony collapse in a five cent theatre on Rivington

Street, Cahan addressed the unsafe conditions of the nickelodeons as a result of capitalist greed and social inequality more generally:

The masses that are squeezed together in the tenements do not know where to go during the cold evenings. In the gloomy buildings where they sleep and have their sacred homes, there is no space to live. They are forced to go outside. They cannot afford real amusement, so they pass their time for five cents in a moving picture show. This business is booming thanks to the sorrowful life of the masses. These places are crammed like the rooms where they live. Who cares when this human merchandise is crushed? One more person squeezed inside, one more nickel earned.²⁷

The moral impact of movies on Jewish workers was not an issue at all. This is striking considering that the *Forward's* reports about the audiences of East Side picture shows frequently underscored how spellbound Jewish immigrants were by what they saw on the silver screen. It is clear that Jewish socialists and labour leaders did not consider the cinema as an agency for class struggle, unlike for instance the American Federation of Labor, which realized early on that labour-friendly movies could help the cause of the unions and that anti-labour films did not help the cause of the organised labour. Thus in 1910, AFL delegates urged local unions to “use all legitimate means ... to discourage the exhibition of such moving pictures that falsely pretend to represent instances in connection with our movement”.²⁸ I found no such calls in the *Forward*.

By 1910, however, the Jewish socialist appreciation of the cinema had fundamentally changed. As the cinema became a serious rival to the Yiddish stage and thus undermined its influence as an institution for enlightenment, we witness a clear shift in the discourse from a neutral stance towards straightforward denunciation. The turning point came in September 1909, when the 2,000-seat Grand Street Theater, a major venue for Yiddish literary drama, fell into the hands of Marcus Loew and Adolph Zukor and reopened as a small-time vaudeville house. In the aftermath of the takeover by these future Hollywood moguls, the *Forward* relegated the cinema to the bottom end of the cultural hierarchy, a position previously occupied by Yiddish vaudeville entertainment. Henceforth, the paper repeatedly wrote about the moral dangers that the nickelodeons held for young people, especially young women. In addition to highly sensational front page stories, which associated movie-going with the sex trade, short back page news items with titles such as “break into a home because of moving pictures” and “movies turn children into gangsters” depicted local movie houses as schools of crime where murder, shoplifting, robbery and holdups were illustrated. Admittedly, such articles highlighting the moral dangers of movie-going were commonplace in the English-language newspapers too. Yet, in the mainstream press, cinema's critics often used these stories to illustrate the need for regulation and censorship. Many argued that if immoral movies could turn children into criminals, moral subjects might just as well turn them into good citizens. This type of reform discourse was absent in the comments of the *Forward*.

But there is more to it than criminalisation alone. In the aftermath of the takeover of the Grand Street Theater, the entire Yiddish press – left and right – redefined the cinema as a fundamentally *goyish* (gentile) entertainment and a *Fremdkörper* (foreign body) to Jewish culture. Thus across the political spectrum, cinema’s potential as an educational instrument and a vehicle to address social evils was blocked. For the Jewish socialist intellectuals as well as the Orthodox leadership the cinema was simply not compatible with a continued Jewish identity. This idiosyncratic response should be understood within the context of ongoing power struggles within the immigrant Jewish community, in which the community’s self-appointed elites sought to maintain their authority over the “uneducated” masses.²⁹

Finally, it should be emphasised that there is no indication that Jewish immigrant workers shared the denunciation of the cinema as a *Fremdkörper* to Jewish culture. On the contrary: in the public mind, the cinema was synonymous with Jewish upward social mobility. Movie moguls like Loew and Zukor – already powerful entrepreneurs before their rise as captains of the American film industry – were role models for many Jewish workers. Accounts of their entrepreneurial success “from rags to riches” functioned as Horatio Alger stories within the immigrant Jewish community, and their names were a shorthand for the Jewish pursuit of the American Dream. This too may have made the moving picture medium a rather unlikely candidate to address the social question.

Notes

1. Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture* [1915] (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 116 and 139.
2. Mary Heaton Vorse, “Some Picture Show Audiences”, *The Outlook* (24 June 1911): 445.
3. John Collier, “Cheap Amusements”, *Charities and Commons* (11 April 1908): 76.
4. Charles S. Bernheimer, “Lower East Side Dwellers”, *Yearbook of the University Settlement Society of New York* (1907): 32; see also David Blaustein, “The Inherent Cultural Forces of the Lower East Side”, *Yearbook of the University Settlement Society of New York* (1901): 20–25.
5. For the range of activities see Robert A. Woods and Albert J. Kennedy, *Handbook of Settlements* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1911).
6. “The Inside Summer Work at the University Settlement”, *Yearbook of the University Settlement Society of New York* (1907): 17–20.
7. See Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988).
8. *Thirteenth Annual Report of the President and Board of Directors of the Educational Alliance* (1905): 52, quoted in William Uricchio and Roberta E. Pearson, *Reframing Culture: The Case of the Vitagraph Films* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 37.
9. Elizabeth S. Williams, “Report of the Head Worker”, *Twenty-first Annual Report of the College Settlement* (1909–1910): 7.
10. *University Settlement Studies Quarterly* (1906): 23.
11. *Jewish Messenger* (25 September 1891): 4.
12. Uricchio and Pearson, *Reframing Culture*, 37.
13. “East Side Cameo”, May 1912. Records of the Educational Alliance. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York, reference R.G. 312.23.

14. Meeting of the Board of Directors of the Educational Alliance, 13 March 1911, YIVO RG 312.2. All dates have the same YIVO reference.
15. Ibid., 13 May 1912.
16. Ibid., 10 June 1910.
17. Ibid., 13 May 1912.
18. Ibid., 8 May 1911.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid. See also the meeting of 13 May 1912.
21. Blaustein, "Inherent Cultural Forces", 21.
22. See Judith Thissen, "Reconsidering the Decline of New York's Yiddish Theater in the Early 1900s", *Theatre Survey* 44.2 (2003): 173–197.
23. Nina Warnke, "Reforming the New York Yiddish Theater: The Cultural Politics of Immigrant Intellectuals and the Yiddish Press, 1887–1910", Ph.D. Dissertation, Columbia University (2001), 63.
24. Nina Warnke, "Immigrant Popular Culture as Contested Sphere: Yiddish Music Halls, the Yiddish Press, and the Processes of Americanization, 1900–1910", *Theatre Journal* 48 (1996): 321–335.
25. "Di muving pikktshur geleris", *Jewish Daily Forward* (4 March 1908).
26. Ibid.
27. "Der ungluk oyf Rivington Strit", editorial, *Jewish Daily Forward* (15 December 1908).
28. Quoted in Steven J. Ross, "The Revolt of the Audience: Reconsidering Audiences and Reception during the Silent Era", in Melvin Stokes and Richard Maltby (eds), *American Movie Audiences: From the Turn of the Century to the Early Sound Era* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), 96.
29. For a detailed analysis, see Judith Thissen, "Next Year at the Moving Pictures: Cinema and Social Change in the Jewish Immigrant Community", in Richard Maltby and Melvin Stokes (eds), *Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007), 113–129.

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Miss Thomas' Asylum for Orphan and Destitute Indian Children,
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