

Early Cinema and the Public Sphere of the Neighbourhood Meeting Hall: The *Longue Durée* of Working-Class Sociability

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In his pioneering study of working-class recreation in industrialised America, Roy Rosenzweig emphasises continuity and the persistence of collective habits in ethnic communities despite the arrival of early movie theatres. “Moviegoing did not destroy all other forms of working-class leisure; it was simply an additional – albeit particularly important – recreational option. Working people continued to go to their saloon, church, or ethnic club”.¹ Cinema’s embedding within ethnic working-class culture can be explored in detail by looking at the paradigmatic place associated with the immigrant experience in America: the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Grounded in a broader analysis of Jewish communal life, I focus on the transformation of neighbourhood meeting halls into moving picture theatres to understand how the experience of cinemagoing was shaped by older patterns of working-class sociability and ethnic solidarity. This history reveals cinema’s roots in the alternative public sphere of a meeting hall culture that developed during the 1880s and 1890s, thus complicating the standard presentation of the nickelodeon era in New York City.

The Lower East Side as excavation site

The Lower East Side presents the prototypical case to examine film culture in an urban working-class context. It was the social, cultural and political hub of the immigrant community of Yiddish-speaking Jews from Eastern Europe, who made up almost twenty-five per cent of the population in New York City.² The integration of these newcomers into the mainstream of American society coincided with the development of cinema into a national mass medium. By 1908, the “Great East Side Ghetto” was literally dotted with moving picture theatres.³ The downtown Jewish neighbourhood had the highest density of nickelodeons in Manhattan and the movie-mindedness of its inhabitants was amply documented by contemporary accounts, ranging from human interest stories in mainstream newspapers to reports by social workers, city officials and the film industry itself.

The typical Manhattan nickelodeon, according to these sources, was a small and smelly storefront picture show overcrowded with poor immigrants – a naïve and uninhibited audience eager to learn the American way from the silver screen. Handed down by the

first historians of American cinema and preserved by popular legend, this scene generated the founding myth of Hollywood's democratic nature and proletarian origins. The rags-to-riches stories of Hollywood moguls Marcus Loew, Adolph Zukor and William Fox, whose humble background and poverty-stricken youth on the Lower East Side were widely publicised, further enhanced the notion that the breakthrough of the movies as the nation's favourite commercial pastime took place at the Jewish immigrants' gateway to the promised land. From Lewis Jacobs' *The Rise of the American Film* (1939), through Robert Sklar's *Movie-Made America* (1975) and Garth Jowett's *Film: the Democratic Art* (1976) to *Working-Class Hollywood* (1998) by Steven J. Ross, the nickelodeons on the Lower East Side embodied the power of the movies to change American society from the bottom up.⁴

In the context of this volume, it is somewhat redundant to point out that research in film history since the 1980s has repeatedly challenged this biased interpretation of the pre-Hollywood era, drawing attention to the significant contributions that the middle classes made to the transformation of the cinema into a mass medium.⁵ While the bulk of these studies dealt with metropolitan America, they largely ignored the specific responses of urban working-class communities to these middle-class efforts to domesticate the new film medium. Much of the so-called "revisionist" scholarship concentrates on the discourse and practices of the film industry, its allies (especially Progressive reformers) and critics (anti-vice crusaders, religious leaders etc.), but leaves out the immigrant and working class audience itself – those very people who are hailed time and again as the most fervent filmgoers in big cities. More recently, the research agenda among historians of American film has quite radically shifted to the study of cinemagoing in small-towns and rural communities in the United States. While this reorientation was much needed, it seems to go hand in hand with a wilful blindness to the fact that we still know very little about how the cinema fitted into the social and cultural structure of working-class communities in Lower Manhattan or Chicago's South Side, let alone Brooklyn or the Bronx.

To be sure, I don't argue here that we have to put New York City once again at the centre of the historiographic universe. The pitfalls of "Gothamcentrism" have been more than once convincingly explained by Robert C. Allen, pointing out that "Manhattan has long been at the epicenter of the imagined map of American movie audiences and moviegoing".⁶ At the same time, by proposing to decentre historical audience studies to the American heartland, he runs the risk of throwing out the proverbial baby with the bathwater. In my view, the relation between centres and peripheries deserves more attention from film historians. For such a comparative perspective, we still need a much deeper insight into the multifaceted history of film exhibition in New York City itself. We might as well begin, then, by questioning the still stereotypical account of cinema's emergence on the mythical Lower East Side.

Around 1910, the downtown Jewish quarter in Manhattan had about thirty-five motion picture outlets – nickelodeons, family vaudeville theatres and proto picture palaces – without counting those on the adjacent Bowery and East Fourteenth Street, traditional zones of commercial entertainment in downtown Manhattan. I focus here on the history of those buildings used for film exhibition but not built as theatres. In particular, I want to document their uses and purposes before being converted into motion picture venues. This strategy of digging into the past of the actual buildings offers an empirical opening to examine how the cinema was integrated into existing cultural practices and social structures of Jewish immigrant life, thereby providing a materialist historical basis for Miriam Hansen's theoretical account of cinema's functioning as an alternative public sphere for working-class immigrants.⁷

The excavation of the material infrastructure cinema grafted itself onto reveals a double genealogy. On the one hand, was a well-known, well-documented, and rather straight-forward trajectory from an existing commercial space – a store, loft or office – into a nickelodeon. On the other hand, I found buildings with a much longer and more intricate history as recreational venues – a history that has been largely overlooked by scholars of American cinema. Let me exemplify this by zooming in on the central part of the Jewish quarter, where the nickelodeons were in “such close quarters that it seems as if the spectator could not be quite sure exactly which house he was getting into”.⁸

At the intersection of Rivington and Essex Street, four storefront theatres competed with each other: Charles Steiner’s Essex Street Theatre (133 Essex Street), the Metropolitan Theatre (134 Essex Street), the WACO Theatre operated by the World Amusement Company (118–120 Rivington Street) and the Golden Rule Theatre (125 Rivington Street). They resembled each other strongly on the surface, in terms of their façade, advertising, and film programs. All four were storefront theatres and offered for a nickel (or a dime on weekends) a continuous show that consisted of moving pictures with “a song and a dance, as an extra”, as the *Jewish Daily Forward* (*Forvertz*) explained.⁹ None of them advertised in the Yiddish-language press. The managers only used bill-boards, handouts and posters to reach the public, which according to the ticket seller of the WACO was “entirely local, confined almost within two or three blocks”.¹⁰ Yet in one respect there was a significant difference. Before opening as a nickelodeon, the site of the WACO and the Metropolitan had been used as a bank and furniture store respectively, while young Charles Steiner had transformed his father’s Essex Street stable into a picture show.¹¹ However, the Golden Rule Theatre stood out for a very different record. For several decades, it had been operated as a public meeting hall.

Focusing especially on the history of the Golden Rule Hall to fully grasp the dynamics of cinema’s integration into immigrant Jewish life, the remainder of the chapter digs deep into the past of the building at 125 Rivington Street. It is this kind of painstaking archival work and detailed evidence, combined with broader information derived from social surveys, demographic data and cultural histories, that can help us to understand “the maddeningly complex historical dynamics” of commercial entertainment as a social and cultural force in the opening decades of the twentieth century.¹² But let’s first go back to the 1880s.

The culture of the meeting halls

In the late nineteenth century, multi-purpose public halls and saloons with assembly rooms were a central institution of working-class culture and common in many immigrant neighbourhoods in urban America. They accommodated thousands of grass-roots organisations and offered an extensive infrastructure for mutual aid, social interaction and political mobilisation. In 1898, the *Trow’s Business Directory* listed twenty-five halls below East Houston Street and east of the Bowery, the area which constituted the nucleus of the Jewish quarter.¹³ The majority of these halls were converted tenement buildings. This was also the case with the Golden Rule Hall. Its ground floor served as multipurpose assembly room that could accommodate up to five hundred people. This main hall (25 x 100 feet/230 m²) was rented out on a day per-day basis for a wide variety of activities, ranging from mass meetings and political rallies to masquerade balls and wedding parties. There was a saloon and dining room in the basement of the building, which was linked by stairs to the main hall. The apartments on the upper floors of the building were divided into small assembly rooms and makeshift synagogues.¹⁴

As a neighbourhood institution, the Golden Rule Hall provided a solid basis for immigrant grass-roots organisation. The building's core users came from two groups within the Jewish community: hometown societies (*landsmanshaftn*) and trade unions, each of which represented a different public sphere with its own formative history. What these different spheres shared however was an ethic of mutuality and reciprocity as well as a strong commitment to democracy and equalitarianism, which both saw as core values of American civic culture.

Hometown societies were mutual aid cooperatives set up by migrants coming from the same town or region in Eastern Europe. Members paid a monthly due that entitled them to sick benefits, free medical care of a physician, a burial plot, funeral arrangements, and loans in cases of financial emergencies. As providers of vital material benefits and outlets for sociability, *landsmanshaftn* were at the centre of the Jewish immigrant experience.¹⁵ Although less important in terms of numbers, labour unions also played a key role in public life because their members consciously sought to shape public opinion on social evils associated with the immigrant condition (poverty, appalling working conditions etc.). A significant minority on the East Side was sympathetic to the ideals of socialism, and the saloon keeper who ran the Golden Rule Hall for nearly three decades was one of them. He maintained strong ties with labour leaders, radical intellectuals, and political activists. As a result, hundreds of labour-meetings and political rallies were held at 125 Rivington Street during the 1880s and 1890s. For almost a decade, the building served as the headquarters of the Jewish cloak makers' union, one of the largest unions in the garment industry.¹⁶

Altogether, the public sphere of meeting halls was predominantly masculine. Most Jewish immigrant women had marginal access to the daily and weekly activities of the fraternal lodges, *landsmanshaftn* and labour unions. Hometown societies typically excluded women from formal participation by restricting membership to men. Female wage-earners, mostly working-girls, were underrepresented among organised labour, except during periods of mass strikes. However, not all activities that took place in the Golden Rule Hall and other public halls were separated from the family or segregated along gender lines. Men and women attended the many balls, concerts and other festivities that lodges and unions organised during the winter season to raise money for their treasury or some charitable purpose. Dances were by far the most popular leisure-time activity. Any Saturday night from September through May, East Siders could choose from among a dozen or more "full dress and civic balls" and "masquerade balls", which were announced in the Yiddish press and by way of posters on local shop windows.¹⁷ These benefit balls gave young and old a chance to enjoy themselves with *landslayt*, colleagues, family and friends but also reinforced the in-group cohesion and the sense of solidarity derived from the material benefits that the organisation granted to their members.¹⁸

In sum, throughout the late nineteenth century, public meeting halls functioned as centres of working-class sociability where immigrant Jews created a sense of dignity in trade unions, mutual aid societies and religious congregations, thereby taking full advantage of their newly acquired American civil liberties. The culture of the meeting halls gave rise to a collective spirit of independence and grass-roots democracy as well as new forms of organisation and sociability. It led to the formation of a public sphere that remained profoundly Jewish and distinct from the dominant WASP model, but absorbed at the same time many influences from the surrounding American society, especially notions of egalitarianism and voluntary association. At stake is what happened to this alternative public sphere when cheap commercial entertainment began to colonise the East Side meeting halls.

The commercialisation of working-class leisure

In the opening decade of the twentieth century, the entertainment preferences of immigrant Jews rapidly shifted from predominantly non-commercial recreational activities towards cheap commercial amusements. The process is exemplified again by looking at the main hall on the ground floor of 125 Rivington Street, which was successively turned into a commercial dance hall (around 1900), a Yiddish vaudeville theatre (1905), and a moving picture house (1907).

In the context of increased competition and severe restrictions on the liquor trade, following the introduction of the Raines Law in 1896, many East Side hall managers and saloonkeepers turned their ground floors or adjacent rooms into commercial dance halls or dance academies open to all who paid admission.¹⁹ In 1901, a social worker of University Settlement Society counted thirty-one commercial dance halls in the central part of the downtown Jewish quarter.²⁰ The Golden Rule was one of them. Under its new management, selling commercial leisure became the hall's core business. In 1904, the first two floors of the building were consolidated into one large dancing hall with a balcony that contained tables and chairs for patrons to relax. The upper floors remained in use as small meeting rooms and synagogues, but there was no longer space downstairs for mass meetings, sponsored balls and other large scale not-for-profit activities. Most revealing in respect to the hall's new function and its intended clientele is the information that the building application provides about the sanitary facilities in the new dance hall. Prior to the renovation, the Golden Rule Hall lacked special facilities for female visitors. After the renovation, women were accommodated with ladies' toilets on the first and second floors of the dance hall. These new restrooms reflect the growing participation of women in public life that was fostered by the emergence of new forms of commercial leisure.²¹

In 1905, the manager of the Golden Rule Hall took up the latest trend in Jewish ethnic entertainment by switching to family vaudeville in Yiddish. The dance hall was turned into a makeshift theatre with a small stage and dressing rooms in the basement, and subleased to a vaudeville company led by Abraham Tantzman, a veteran comedian-actor of the Yiddish legitimate stage. On Friday, 1 September 1905, the 250-seat Golden Rule Vaudeville Theatre opened its doors, promising prospective customers "first class variety: sketches and *vodevils* by the greatest dramatists and actors".²² Shows were given every night, with matinee performances on Saturdays and Sundays (the bill changed on Friday night). Admission prices ranged from 10 to 25 cents. A year later, the Lower East Side and Brooklyn boasted about a dozen Yiddish family vaudeville houses. "Today every important street has its glaring sign which announces 'Jewish Vaudeville House' or 'Music Hall,'" a contemporary observer noted.²³ With the exception of the People's Music Hall on the Bowery, all were converted meeting halls.

The emergence of Yiddish *myuzik hols* signalled the beginning of a profound transformation of the theatrical infrastructure and paved the way for the nickelodeon boom.²⁴ However, moving pictures did not become a regular feature in this ethnic version of family vaudeville until 1906–07. Initially, pictures were presented by self-acclaimed professors who operated as itinerant film exhibitors and toured the local Yiddish vaudeville circuit with their own projector and a set of films. In September 1905, for instance, one professor Mayer appeared at the Irving Music Hall on Broome Street, and, two weeks later, at the People's Music Hall on the Bowery ("an extra just for this week: Prof. Mayer's moving pictures").²⁵ The following year, Mayer became a more or less regular feature on the bill of Irving Music Hall, while a competitor by the name of professor Gold frequently presented his moving picture program at the Grand Street Music Hall.²⁶

Before we examine how the cinema developed into the most popular leisure-time activity on the East Side, we need to address the question if and how Yiddish music halls incorporated elements of the earlier public sphere of the meeting hall culture. For that we need to get a sense of the ways in which Jewish immigrant audiences engaged with this new form of commercial entertainment. Put differently, did the music halls develop into an arena for political expression and the articulation of alternative cultural and social values? As Miriam Hansen has eloquently argued, the variety format offers structural conditions around which “working-class and ethnic cultures could crystallise, and responses to social pressures, individual displacement, and alienation could be articulated in a communal setting”.²⁷ Vaudeville acts and sing-alongs encouraged a participatory mode of reception and active sociability between audience members. In addition, the use of Yiddish certainly reinforced feelings of belonging to an immigrant community with shared values and a communal history. More importantly, perhaps, Yiddish vaudevillians – very much like today’s stand-up comedians – often tapped into the current political affairs for their material, addressing strikes, immigration policies etcetera, as well as the everyday hardships of tenement life and sweatshop work.²⁸ In combination with the participatory quality of the variety format, these acts permitted the audience to demonstrate their commitment to notions of equalitarian democracy and nurture a different interpretation of “America” than that of the nation’s vested social and cultural authorities. This is exactly what explains the anti-vaudeville discourse articulated by conservative forces and progressive reformers alike. Back in 1849, the Astor Place Riots had already shown that the rowdy behaviour typical of working-class theatre audiences might under certain conditions lead to more overt political action. Uricchio and Pearson make the point clearly: “The specter of labourers and immigrants liberated from the regimentation of the workplace and congregating freely to revel in crude, vicious and lascivious entertainments struck fear into the hearts of many Americans, who saw little difference between a mob of strikers and the unruly patrons of cheap amusements”.²⁹ As a result, the repeated efforts on the part of moral uplifters and city officials to strictly regulate working-class leisure and impose a discipline of silence on working-class audiences.³⁰ The struggle for middle class hegemony took a new turn when the cinema began to conquer the allegedly “underdeveloped” and “easily excitable” minds of the masses, immigrants in particular.

In November 1906, the Golden Rule Theatre was one of the first music halls to switch to moving pictures as its main fare. However, live entertainment was not entirely abandoned. In between the films, when the reels were changed, vaudevillians continued to divert the audience with skits, jokes, songs. The new format was an instant success. The *Views and Films Index* reported in the summer of 1907:

The Golden Rule Theatre, 125 Rivington Street, New York City, had a record of 4,038 patrons to their theatre on Saturday, 13 July. On Saturday, July 20th, 3,356, and during the past weeks the average has been 14,000 tickets sold. The seating capacity is not quite 300.³¹

Within a year, the weekly take of the 300-seat Golden Rule Theatre had mounted to \$1,800, according to *Variety*.³² Other entrepreneurs quickly copied this success formula. Yiddish music hall managers invested in film projectors and incorporated movies permanently into their programs. Dozens of newcomers also tried their luck in the booming nickelodeon business. Moving picture shows “are spreading like mushrooms after the rain”, the *Jewish Daily Forward* reported in May 1908.

Cinema and working-class sociability

In the 1910s, cinema soon became the nation’s primary form of popular entertainment.

Lavish picture palaces were built to attract a “better class” of patrons and dissociate the experience of moviegoing from its roots in working-class culture. The aesthetics and content on screen were also gentrified to conform to middle class taste and notions of respectability. In particular, filmmakers increasingly sought to enhance the viewer’s absorption in the imaginary flow on the screen in order to impose a discipline of silence on the movie audience and make the viewing experience an individual experience rather than a collective one.³³

Despite these radical changes in film style and ideological orientation, film exhibitors on the Lower East Side continued to report boom conditions. The most enterprising among them entered into partnerships with more affluent investors to expand their activities by building new medium-sized movie theatres. By the end of the decade, a large locally-owned independent chain operated more than a dozen medium-sized “photoplay houses” on the Lower East Side alone and had a near monopoly over the business of moviegoing in Jewish working-class New York. A pivotal figure in this M & S circuit was Charles Steiner, who had started out in 1908 around the corner from the Golden Rule Hall. In 1914, his old Essex Street nickelodeon gave way to the brand-new Palace Theatre (133–135 Essex), which seated six hundred. A year later, he renovated and enlarged the WACO Theatre on behalf on the M & S circuit. In the early 1920s, the Golden Rule Theatre closed its doors, but this was not a sign of market saturation. The opening of the 600-seat Ruby Theatre in 1925 brought the total seating capacity in the immediate vicinity of the intersection of Essex and Rivington Street to eighteen hundred (an increase of 50 per cent compared to 1910). Well into the 1930s, independent film exhibitors like Steiner drew their patronage from that segment of the public that could not afford to pay much more than a nickel or a dime for an evening’s entertainment. In other words, Mike Gold’s “Jews without money” made up the bulk of their clientele.³⁴

Like in the case of Yiddish vaudeville, the key question is the extent that cinema continued to provide a basis for manifestations of class and ethnic solidarity. There is no simple answer. Clearly, the shift from locally-produced live entertainment to motion pictures – an “imported” industrial entertainment product – meant that the programs in Jewish neighbourhood theatres were to a considerable degree shaped from the outside by corporate capitalist forces that sought to eliminate all class distinctions to create a standardised homogeneous commodity that could be consumed across social, ethnic, and cultural boundaries.³⁵ However, at the same time, there is ample evidence to suggest that the social experience of the cinema remained a profoundly working-class and Jewish experience because entrepreneurs and audiences alike resisted top-down efforts to control the local entertainment business. On the basis of my empirical research, then, I call into question the prevailing notion that cinema in the United States successfully ensured the integration of socially and ethnically differentiated audiences into a national mass audience. Let me demonstrate this in further detail by returning once again to the Lower East Side to explore how the cinema sustained Jewish working-class sociability.

Movie theatres in the Jewish quarter catered primarily to first and second generation immigrants who lived or worked nearby. By and large, they maintained popular prices and egalitarian seating policies. With the exception of a handful of neighbourhood picture palaces, like Loew’s Avenue A and Delancey Street theatres, there were no ranks and all patrons who entered at a particular moment paid the same price. Prices varied according to the moment of admission. During the nickelodeon era, the admission was five cents except on weekend nights and public holidays, when exhibitors charged ten cent to profit from the increased demand. The low admission fee gave women and

children unprecedented access to cheap amusement and thus enhanced the neighbourhood character of the audience. Housewives broke up their daily routine to sneak into the storefront around the corner. During day-time when business was slow, managers would let customers stay as long as they liked. Visiting the East Side nickelodeons in 1908, a reporter from the *Forward* remarked:

You may ask: who has the time to go to see moving pictures during the day? Actually, during the day it is not that busy. In fact, during the day it is another trade, as the owners would say. As most customers are women and children, it resembles very much the women's section in a synagogue. They gossip and eat sunflower seeds.³⁶

Mothers often brought their smallest children with them. Typically, daytime photographs of nickelodeons show empty baby strollers in front of the box office. Candy store owners complained in the Yiddish press that their business was suffering from the motion picture craze because children saved their pennies to go to the nickel theatre.³⁷

Because patrons often knew each other, the movie theatre was a homey place where one could chat with one's neighbours and friends. There was no effort to ensure a discipline of silence. Neither the managers nor their patrons cared much about genteel codes of respectability. Although the architecture and interior furnishing of the larger neighbourhood movie theatres offered the trappings of bourgeois culture, this was merely a matter of decoration and a suggestion of luxury without the pressures of having to behave like a middle-class American. Snacks, sweets, fruits and drinks were peddled inside and outside all theatres on the East Side. Tiny dairy restaurants such as Ratner's and Yonah Shimmel's knish bakery – "original since 1910" – opened near movie theatres to provide the moviegoing crowd with inexpensive kosher refreshments.

Film exhibitors made sure that their clients got an entertainment program attuned to local taste. Well into the 1920s, live entertainment ranging from Yiddish vaudeville to performances by Cherniavsky's Hasidic-American Jazz Band gave moving picture shows on the East Side a distinctive Jewish flavour. Features with a Jewish theme or star who had a Jewish or alleged Jewish background were guaranteed box-office hits. These films were often independent productions or imported from Europe. In general, working-class Jews preferred comedies, serials, sensational melodrama and stories with an unhappy "Russian ending". Whenever film exhibitors had some say in what they obtained from their exchange, they would favour these genres.

Conclusion

In the early 1900s – before the nickelodeon – market forces increasingly penetrated the leisure culture of working-class communities in New York City and profoundly altered its traditional structure, which had been governed by strong ties between recreation, mutual aid, and labour activism. While the impact of this commercialisation process on social life should not be underestimated, it is also important to acknowledge that pre-existing ideals of reciprocity and solidarity persisted within the realm of commercial entertainment, thus reinforcing the emancipatory potential of cheap amusements like the cinema, especially in respect to women and the poorest among the working-classes. From the days of the nickelodeon well into the early sound era, East Side Jews successfully resisted the hegemonic efforts to standardise film exhibition and reception. Their passion for the cinema was an expression of their commitment to an American mass culture that cut across class, religious and ethnic lines. In this respect, they did not differ from the Jews who ran the major Hollywood studios. At the local level,

however, the social experience of the cinema was not only inscribed in mainstream consumer patterns but also defined by the legacy of the early immigrant public sphere of the meeting halls. As a result, in the neighbourhood movie theatres on the Lower East Side the capitalist logic of individual consumption never fully prevailed over the logic of ethnic community building and the strife for a more democratic social order.

Notes

1. Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 216.
2. For example, see Irving Howe, *The World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life they Found and Made* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976; reprint Schocken 1990); Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York's Jews, 1870–1914* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962); Gerard Sorin, *A Time for Building: The Third Migration, 1880–1920* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1992).
3. For a detailed map, see Ben Singer, “Manhattan Nickelodeons: New Data on Audiences and Exhibitors”, *Cinema Journal* 34, no. 3 (1995): 10.
4. Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film: A Critical History* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1939); Garth Jowett, *Film: The Democratic Art* (Boston: Little Brown, 1976); Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Random House, 1975); Steven J. Ross, *Working Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).
5. The notion of cinema’s proletarian foundation was first challenged in the late 1970s by Russell Merritt and Robert C. Allen: Merritt, “Nickelodeon Theaters, 1905–1914: Building an Audience for the Movies”, in Tino Balio (ed.), *The American Film Industry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), 59–79; Allen, “Motion Picture Exhibition in Manhattan, 1906–1912: Beyond the Nickelodeon”, *Cinema Journal* 18, no. 2 (Spring 1979): 2–15.
6. Robert C. Allen, “Decentering Historical Audience Studies: A Modest Proposal”, in Kathryn H. Fuller-Seeley (ed.), *Hollywood in the Neighborhood: Historical Case Studies of Local Moviegoing* (Berkeley: University of Los Angeles Press, 2008), 20. Another example of Allen’s argument is “Manhattan Myopia; or Oh! Iowa!”, *Cinema Journal* 35, no. 3 (Spring 1996): 75–103.
7. Miriam Hansen, *Babel & Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), especially chapter 3.
8. Quoted in *Views and Films Index*, 25 December 1909.
9. “Vu zaynen ahingekumen di yidische myuzik hols?”, *Forward*, 24 May 1908.
10. *Views and Films Index*, 25 December 1909. In 1902, the Tenement House Department found that almost ten thousand people (1,800 families) lived in the four blocks forming the intersection of Rivington and Essex streets. The residential density in the immediate vicinity exceeded 900 persons per acre.
11. Office of the City Register, Pre-1917 Conveyances, Section II, liber 154 cp 222 and liber 157 cp 445 (1906); liber 179 cp 43 and liber 180 cp 25 (1908). Office of the City Register, Pre-1917 Conveyances, Section II, liber 137 cp 269 (1905). Bureau of Buildings, City of New York: Annual Ledgers for Alterations and New Construction, Alteration Docket for Manhattan 1908, application no. 83.
12. Allen, “Manhattan Myopia”, 99. See also Richard Maltby, “How Can Cinema History Matter More?”, *Screening the Past* 22 (2007).
13. For a description, see John M. Oskison, “Public Halls of the East Side”, *Yearbook of the University Settlement Society of New York* (1899), 38–40; Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 17–21.
14. Bureau of Buildings for the Borough of Manhattan, lot-file B358-L22 at the New York City Municipal Archives and Records Center (hereafter NYC-MARC).
15. Daniel Soyer, *Jewish Immigrant Associations and American Identity in New York, 1880–1939* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). A comprehensive survey carried out in New York

- City listed 1,016 mutual aid societies, 617 Yiddish-speaking congregations and several hundreds fraternal lodges (many of which were *landsmanshaftn*) in 1917.
16. Abraham Cahan, *Bletter fun mayn leben* (New York: Forward Association, 1926–1931); Bernard Weinstein, *Fertsig yohr in der yidisher arbeyter bavegung* (New York: Farlag veker fun sotsyalistishen farband, 1924).
 17. Belle L. Mead, “The Social Pleasures of the East Side Jews”, MA thesis (Columbia University, 1904), 16.
 18. Soyer, *Jewish Immigrant Associations*, 105.
 19. For a detailed analysis, see Judith Thissen, “Liquor and Leisure: The Business of Yiddish Vaudeville”, in Joel Berkowitz and Barbara Henry (eds), *Inventing the Modern Yiddish Stage: Essays in Drama, Performance, and Show Business* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012).
 20. Verne M. Bovic, “The Public Dance Halls of the Lower East Side”, *Yearbook of the University Settlement Society of New York* (1901): 31–32. See also, Oskison, “Public Halls of the East Side”, 39.
 21. Bureau of Buildings, lot-file B353-L22, “Application to Alter etc.”, no. 1066, 17 June 1904, and amendments (NYC-MARC).
 22. Advertisements, Golden Rule Vaudeville House, *Forward*, between 22 August and 15 September 1905.
 23. Paul Klapper, “The Yiddish Music Hall”, *University Settlement Studies Quarterly*, vol. 2. 4 (1906): 20. See also, David Bernstein, “Di yidishe theaters un di yidishe myuzik-hols”, *Tsaytgayst*, 8 September 1905.
 24. For a discussion of the relation between Yiddish vaudeville and the business of Yiddish legitimate drama see Judith Thissen, “Reconsidering the Decline of the New York Yiddish Theatre in the Early 1900s”, *Theatre Survey* 44, no. 2 (2003): 173–197.
 25. Advertisement, Irving Music Hall, *Forward*, 5 September 1905; Advertisement, People’s Music Hall, *Forward*, 15 September 1905.
 26. Advertisements, Irving Music Hall, *Forward*, 30 January and 10 March 1906; Advertisements, Grand Street Music Hall, *Forward*, between 10 March and 4 April 1906.
 27. Hansen, *Babel & Babylon*, 94.
 28. Mark Slobin, *Tenement Songs: The Popular Music of the Jewish Immigrants* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), chapters 5–6. During prolonged strikes in the garment industry or other Jewish trades, Yiddish music halls and legitimate theatres typically organised well-publicised benefit performances for the support of the strikers and their families.
 29. William Uricchio and Roberta Pearson, *Reframing Culture: The Case of the Vitagraph Quality Films* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 24.
 30. Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750–1990* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2000), chapters 3–11.
 31. *Views and Films Index*, 3 August 1907, 4.
 32. *Variety*, 14 December 1907, 12.
 33. Hansen, *Babel & Babylon*, 94–96.
 34. Gold’s 1930 novel, *Jews Without Money* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2004) was a semi-autobiographical, popular account of the hard-knock life of the Lower East Side.
 35. Hansen, 84–85.
 36. “Vu zaynen ...”, *Forward*, 24 May 1908.
 37. “Vu zaynen ...”, *Forward*, 24 May 1908.