

4. For a look at the broader functions of corruption in the period, see Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio, "Criminality, Corruption, and the Nickelodeon," in *Hop on Pop*, ed. Henry Jenkins, Jane Shattuck, and Tara McPherson (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming).
5. Theodore Bingham, "Why I Was Removed," *Van Norden's; The World Mirror* (September 1909): 595.
6. Bingham to McClellan, June 25, 1908, McClellan Papers, New York City Municipal Archives.
7. The dissertation research of Georgio Bertellini (New York University) on New York's Italian immigrant audiences and of Judith Thissen (Utrecht University) on New York's East European Jewish audiences is in this regard quite promising.
8. Sumiko Higashi, "Dialogue: Manhattan's Nickelodeons," *Cinema Journal* 35, no. 3 (Spring 1996): 72-74.
9. The "inclusionist" rather than "exclusionist" strategy is one that we have previously discussed with regard to seemingly highbrow film topics. See William Uricchio and Roberta E. Pearson, *Reframing Culture: The Case of the Vitagraph Quality Films* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).
10. For a fuller discussion of this position, see William Uricchio and Roberta E. Pearson, "Constructing the Mass Audience: Competing Discourses of Morality and Rationalization in the Nickelodeon Period," *Iris* 17 (1994): 43-54.

Oy, Myopia!

A Reaction from Judith Thissen on the Singer-Allen Controversy

Regarding the recent debate about Manhattan's nickelodeons, I would like to make a couple of critical remarks on Allen/Singer's use of the *Trow's Business Directory* and introduce some primary sources that can deepen our understanding of early motion picture theaters and their audiences but that were overlooked in previous film historical research on New York.

How Representative Is *Trow's*? For both Allen and Singer the primary source of data regarding the number and locations of nickelodeons in Manhattan was the list of "moving picture exhibitions" in the *Trow's Business Directory*. Robert Allen wondered in his 1979 article if the listings were exhaustive. Hence, "the 1908 *Trow's* list was compared with a similar one prepared by Edison employee Joseph McCoy in July 1908 and found to correlate highly." However, in the light of evidence such as contemporary press accounts and Police Commissioner Bingham's memo, it seems more likely that the *Trow's* lists are incomplete. Thus the question is whether or not the *Trow's* listings give a representative cross-section of motion picture exhibition in Manhattan. According to Ben Singer,

A number of factors might account for the incompleteness of the *Trow's* listing. Perhaps a respectable business directory like *Trow's* was reluctant to list hole-in-the-wall, fly-by-night ghetto theaters. A more likely explanation is that the 1908 edition probably documented an earlier phase of the nickelodeon boom in New York. There was apparently a lag between the time the listings were compiled and the time they were published.¹

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This last point can be confirmed by systematically comparing the *Trow's* list with evidence from sources such as leases, deeds, documents of the Bureau of Buildings, and advertisements in the ethnic press.² It is also possible to demonstrate on the same basis that the hypothesis that ghetto-located nickelodeons may have been underreported does *not* hold, at least not for the ghetto par excellence, the Jewish Lower East Side. I could give many examples of "hole-in-the-wall ghetto theaters" that do appear in the *Trow's*. Since I have to be concise for reasons of space, let me give just one of the many concrete examples I have found in the material I am currently analyzing for my study of the impact of moviegoing on Jewish immigrant culture.³ The following "history in a nutshell" concerns a rather typical East Side storefront nickelodeon, the Essex Street Theater. It shows the wealth of evidence that has survived, even though this is not an exceptionally well documented nickelodeon.

Just an Example. During the first months of 1908 the delivery stable of Henry and Charles Steiner on 133 Essex Street was transformed into a 250-seat nickelodeon. According to the Bureau of Buildings, the work on this twenty-three-by-eighty-six-foot building was completed on March 20, 1908, and the costs were estimated at five hundred dollars. This nickel theater appeared for the first time in the *Trow's Business Directory* of 1909 under the name of Steiner and Weiss. Charles Steiner and Alfred Weiss also appeared in the 1909 and 1910 editions of the *Trow's Copartnership and Corporation Directory*. While Charles Steiner was a newcomer in the business, his partner already had some experience, for Weiss had run a nickelodeon at 1495 First Avenue since 1907. In 1910 the Steiner/Weiss partnership ended. Charles Steiner and his father kept the exploitation of the Essex Street Theater in their own hands and, in anticipation of the future, also rented the adjacent building on 135 Essex. A few years later, in 1914, the two buildings were connected and transformed into a six-hundred-seat motion picture theater. The Palace Theater, as it was renamed, was managed by Steiner's new partners, Elias Mayer, Louis Schneider, and Max Spiro. Its doors remained open till the beginning of the 1930s.

In the *Jewish Daily Forward*, the most popular Yiddish language daily of those days, the Essex Street Theater advertised only once, in February 1913, with the following text (in Yiddish):

Essex Street Theater
133 Essex Street
The finest moving pictures
changed every day
Also fine singers and good artists
Admission 5 cents

The vaudeville and moving picture show which Charles Steiner offered to his patrons might not have been of a very high quality, but we may assume that the Jewish immigrant audience enjoyed the program as much as the ice cream, candies, and sodas that Abraham Mazel sold them during the show. Certainly *Moving Picture World* would have found this place intolerable, but many Jewish immigrants in the neighborhood considered this (or perhaps the Metropolitan across the street or the Golden Rule Hall around the corner?) to be their small-time vaudeville theater.⁴

These data, found in leases, lot files, certificates of incorporation, and so on, are relevant to my own work because they give me a better understanding of the motion picture business and exhibition practices on the Jewish Lower East Side. For many motion picture theaters in other parts of Manhattan similar information can be found. Consequently, we should be able to determine whether there were distinct patterns in the early development of movie theaters and moviegoing in the different neighborhoods or ethnic communities in New York. Furthermore, I want to stress that, except for the advertisement from the *Forward*, all the information regarding the Essex Street Theater comes from easily accessible sources.

Using Trow's. However, even if we disregard these sources, it is possible to obtain an accurate (if not adequate) account of early motion picture exhibition in Manhattan just by using the *Trow's Business Directory* data if we fully exploit the possibilities they offer. Let me demonstrate this.

Allen and Singer conclude from the *Trow's* data that the nickelodeon business was very risky and unstable with a high percentage of failures. Singer even suggests that this may have been the case for the period beyond 1909, but he does not use *Trow's* (or any other source) to support this statement. If he had included the addresses from the 1910 edition of *Trow's* (giving the numbers for 1909), he would have discovered that from 1907 to 1908 the percentage of nickelodeons that closed their doors decreased dramatically, from 45 to 26 percent.⁵ This average closure rate for 1908 suggests that the exhibition business was more stable than Singer and Allen claim. I have not analyzed the figures for the following years for all Manhattan nickelodeons but only for the Lower East Side. What they show is an even further decline of the closure rate. But that is not the main point I want to emphasize here. My main point is that the *Trow's* is by nature a serial source. If we want to draw any valid conclusions from it, we have to analyze the data over the longest possible period, that is, until the *Trow's* was discontinued in 1914.

But even if we do so, we continue to find that, because they are averages, the figures wipe out local differences within Manhattan and the dynamics of the exhibition business (turnovers, exhibitors moving to better locations, the rise of theater chains). The equalizing effect of the average may conceal distinct patterns in the development of motion picture exhibition.

Mapping the Lower East Side. I tried to avoid this trap by using Singer's data, the *Trow's* of 1910 to 1913, and a detailed contemporary map of Manhattan: the 1914 edition of *Bromley's Atlas of Manhattan*. On my map, I located all the listed theaters on the Jewish Lower East Side.⁶ Thus I was able to determine that there were differences between the development of motion picture exhibition on the Bowery, on Fourteenth Street, and in the residential blocks.

While the large majority of the motion picture theaters that were in business in 1907 on East Fourteenth Street near Union Square remained in business until at least 1913, the permanence and development of motion picture exhibition on the Bowery was quite different. Initially, the nickelodeon business on the Bowery was very risky. In 1907 the closure rate on the Bowery was 62 percent, which was considerably higher

than the average rate for Manhattan (45 percent) and contrasted strongly with the stability on East Fourteenth Street. As a result, after 1907, few exhibitors tried their luck on the Bowery. But those valiant entrepreneurs who did had little competition and must have been reasonably successful considering the fact that they remain in business for at least a couple of years (1912 or later).

What happened in the residential blocks? In 1907 there were twenty-seven "moving picture *pletzer*," as they were called in Yiddish. Nearly all were run by Jewish exhibitors except for three nickelodeons located in the northern section of the Lower East Side (between 10th and 14th Streets), which were in the hands of Italians. Before the end of 1908, five theaters had closed their doors. In 1908 thirteen new moving picture theaters were opened, bringing the total number of nickelodeons to thirty-four. Six nickelodeons went out of business before the 1910 *Trow's* was compiled. Of the newcomers in 1908, 62 percent remained open at least till 1913. From the exhibitors that had opened in 1907, 45 percent (twelve) were still in business at the same address five years later; another 11 percent (three) remained in business but at a different location on the East Side. The closure rate, around 18 percent for both 1907 and 1908, was considerably lower than the average figures for Manhattan. For the residential blocks on the Lower East Side, this figure would fall below 10 percent for the years 1909 to 1911.

There were noticeable differences in the density of moving picture theaters in the early days of the nickelodeon era in this part of Manhattan. They flourished in the central zone confined by Houston Street on the north and Grand Street on the south. The concentration of nickelodeons was highest in the extremely overcrowded blocks between Allen and Attorney Streets (a part of the notorious Tenth Ward). In the following years this concentration would only intensify: in 1912 there were about twenty theaters in this thirty-five-block section, including Loew's Delancey, a one-thousand-seat small-time vaudeville theater. In the less crowded neighborhoods in the southern part of the Lower East Side there were hardly any nickelodeons. Not a single one opened on East Broadway, by far the most stylish thoroughfare in the Jewish quarter. Two nickelodeons on Market Street and Forsyth Street were demolished for the construction of the Manhattan Bridge (1908–1909). Even in 1912 there was only a handful of cheap theaters in the area south of Grand Street. In the northern part of the Lower East Side, above East Houston Street, about ten nickelodeons were scattered along the avenues in the years 1907 and 1908. The density in the residential blocks was quite low in comparison to the central area between East Houston and Grand Street. In 1908 more than twice as many nickelodeons were located in the latter, which is only half the size of the northern part. The density remained low until a fair number of larger movie theaters opened in this section during the 1910s.

In 1909 and 1910 the number of moving picture theaters on the Jewish East Side stabilized at thirty-three; ten houses showing moving pictures opened their doors during these years. On my detailed map, which shows *lots* instead of *dots*, one would notice that among the new 1909 locations was a large theater: the Grand. What had happened? The Grand Theater, the pride of Jacob Adler, the king of the Yiddish stage, had fallen into the hands of Adolph Zukor, the king of the penny arcade.⁷ One of Zukor's Automatic Vaudeville theaters was located on 263 Grand Street, making him a

neighbor of Adler. Now, on Ben Singer's map, the opening of the Grand Theater would have resulted in an additional dot. Even worse, Zukor's ambitious move from a penny arcade to the thousand-seat Grand Theater would have counted in Singer's statistics among the "failures" of 1909, because once he had the Grand; Zukor closed the Automatic Vaudeville next door. The one who really failed, though, was Morris Boom: his Fycent Theater on 265 Grand Street was pushed out of business a year later.

In the period prior to mid-1913 few exhibitors on the Lower East Side moved into larger theaters that required an expensive theatrical license. The Grand, Loew's Avenue B, and Loew's Delancey Street Theater were exceptions. The overwhelming majority of exhibitors ran small nickelodeons with a cheap common show or concert-hall license. Fire laws and building codes restricted the number of seats in these houses to 299. Since many storefront theaters were located on the first floor of a tenement building, their size only occasionally exceeded the standard lot size of twenty-five feet wide by one hundred feet deep (e.g., when the nickel theater was located in a former church or meeting hall). In other words, the average East Side nickelodeon could hardly contain more than three hundred seats anyway.

Between 1911 and 1912 a dozen new moving picture theaters opened, while only four closed. But the maximum density was not yet reached, although by 1913 there were more than forty moving picture venues in this part of Manhattan. That same year the Board of Aldermen passed an ordinance that permitted moving picture theaters to have six hundred seats. Since the *Trow's Business Directory* was last issued in 1913 and I don't have data regarding motion picture exhibitions from other New York City business directories for the period 1914 to 1915,¹ it is difficult to measure the impact of the new regulations. However, other sources indicate that the 1913 ordinance caused a construction fever among the Jewish exhibitors on the Lower East Side. For example, between 1913 and 1914 three new six-hundred-seat movie theaters were constructed within a stone's throw of each other in the new Yiddish theater district between Second Avenue and East Houston Street. Meanwhile, a few blocks farther on, Charles Steiner transformed the Essex Street Theater into the six-hundred-seat Palace and opened the American Movies on Third Street. Was this the end of nickel theaters? Not at all. The Jewish immigrant audience continued to pay with nickels. In the advertisements in the *Jewish Daily Forward* one finds that the admission price still varied between five and ten cents, even in the newly constructed six-hundred-seat moving picture theaters.

Conclusion. *Trow's* is a good start, but there is a lot more evidence to explore. Furthermore, I would like to emphasize the importance of studying very limited geographical spaces. To paraphrase Allen's 1979 conclusion, I would say that the Lower East Side might well turn out to be typical only of the Lower East Side; factors quite alien to the situation there might prove to be decisive elsewhere. But there too, an extremely myopic look may turn out to be quite revealing.

Notes

1. Ben Singer, "Manhattan Nickelodeons: New Data on Audiences and Exhibitors," *Cinema Journal* 34, no. 3 (Spring 1995): 7.

2. I found that the *Trow's* lists must have been compiled until mid-December of the year preceding the year of publication. The new edition was probably released in the first months of the year. Consequently, Singer's database table and maps, for which he used *Trow's* 1908 and 1909, do not reflect the situation in the period 1907 to 1909, as he claims, but only in the years 1907 and 1908.
3. "Moishe Goes to the Movies: The Struggle for the Jewish Immigrant Audience in New York City (1907–1917)" (forthcoming). Research for this study was made possible thanks to a Fulbright grant from the Netherlands America Commission for Educational Exchange and the 1995 Award of the Netherlands Fulbright Alumni Association. I also wish to thank the Department of Cinema Studies of New York University for being my host during my stay in the Big Apple. Anyone who is interested in my work or who wishes to react to this article can contact me via e-mail at Judith.Thissen@let.ruu.nl.
4. New York County, Office of the City Register: Conveyances, Section II, 137: 269, 193: 432, 194: 479, 225: 443, 445, 226: 186, 230: 130, 231: 72, 233: 281, 237: 16, 19, 20, 236: 19, 237: 16, and Deeds 3328: 23 and 3330: 181 (the first figure indicates the liber, the second the page); Bureau of Buildings, Borough of Manhattan, City of New York (Municipal Archives): Lot file Essex Street 133–35, block 411, lots 66–67, contains the applications regarding the construction and alterations of the Palace Theater; Bureau of Buildings, Borough of Manhattan, City of New York (Municipal Archives): Annual ledgers for Alterations and New Construction, Alteration docket for Manhattan 1908; County Clerk's Office, New York County, Department of Old Records: Certificate of Incorporation Emaness Amusement Company, September 15, 1914; *Trow's Business Directory*, 1906–1913; *Trow's/Polk's Copartnership and Corporation Directory*, 1908–1917.
5. My figure for 1907 is lower than the 55 percent Ben Singer gives. I counted as follows: out of 117 addresses in the 1908 edition, 52 were also listed in the *Trow's* 1909 under the same exhibitor, 4 under different exhibitors, and 6 addresses reappeared in the 1910 edition.
6. The area is confined by the Bowery/Fourth Avenue on the west, the East River and its nonresidential zones on the east, East Fourteenth Street on the north, and Market Street on the south. Allen uses roughly the same borders to define the Lower East Side. For a description of this neighborhood I refer to Allen (1979). Singer divides this area into Lower East Side and East Village. I prefer not to exclude the area between East Houston and East 14th Street since it became predominantly Jewish during the period under consideration.
7. Advertisements in the *Jewish Daily Forward* of September 1909 provide us with the information that the Grand was turned into a five-and-ten-cent moving pictures and Yiddish vaudeville theater. The lease reveals that Marcus Loew was also involved in the taking over of the Grand (New York County, Office of the City Register: Conveyances Section I, 125: 165).
8. No edition was issued in 1914. R. L. Polk bought the *Trow's* in 1915 and continued to publish New York City directories under the name of *Trow's*. The business directory was integrated into *Trow's General Directory of New York City* (see entry "city directories" in Kenneth T. Jackson, ed., *The Encyclopedia of New York City* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995], 230). For the years 1915 and 1916, the microfilm of *Trow's General Directory of New York City*, which I consulted at the New York Public Library, lacked the business directory section.

Manhattan Melodrama

A Response from Ben Singer

It is a pleasure to see this debate continue if for no other reason than to enjoy the downward spiral of metacornball titles. Judith Thissen offers some useful clarifica-