

1 Jewish Immigrant Audiences in New York City, 1905–14

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Between 1880 and 1914 nearly two million East European Jews emigrated to the United States in search of a better life. The majority of them disembarked in New York, where first-generation Jewish immigrants and their children became the largest ethnic group in the city.¹ Their integration into American society took place for the most part in the decades during which American cinema was becoming a dominant mass medium.

On the Lower East Side of Manhattan, the East European Jews formed a dynamic, Yiddish-speaking community supporting a wide range of amusement venues, including saloons, dancing halls, nickelodeons, Yiddish variety houses and 'legitimate' theatres.² Theatre-going played a prominent role in the social and cultural life of many Jewish immigrants – intellectuals as well as uneducated workers. The popularity of the Yiddish stage and its famous actors, such as Jacob Adler, Boris Thomashevsky and David Kessler, has been impressed upon us by Jewish-American memoir literature. Few authors, however, seem to remember the presence of the nickel-and-dime theatres that were spread all over the Lower East Side. An exception is the autobiography of the playwright Bella Cohen Spewack.³ In *Streets: A Memoir of the Lower East Side*, written in 1922 when Spewack was twenty-three, she recalled how much going to the movies was part of her youth in the ghetto. As a little girl, Bella was taken to 'the Victoria Music Hall where moving pictures and Yiddish and English sketches were presented'. A few years later, on the day her mother remarried, she was packed off with fifteen cents for a pair of new silk stockings and ten cents more to take a friend to the 'nickel show'.⁴

It is significant that memoirs of Jewish immigrant life in New York rarely mention the nickelodeons. In retrospect, moving pictures seem to have been exclusively associated with American culture and hence ignored, while the 'legitimate' Yiddish theatre became the quintessence of the Old World-flavoured immigrant culture of the turn of the century and the object of nostalgic reminiscence. In reality, however, both the 'legitimate' Yiddish theatres and the East Side nickelodeons stood at the crossroad of two worlds. On the one hand, their commercial and heterosocial character represented a fundamental break with traditional Jewish culture; on the other, East Side nickelodeon exhibitors and patrons alike sought to preserve their cultural heritage just as much as did the Yiddish theatre stars and their audiences.

American Films, American Identities

Whereas, in Jewish-American autobiographies, the memories of *moving piktshur pletser* have been repressed almost entirely, the same movie houses have generated in American film and social history the founding myth of Hollywood's democratic nature. From Lewis Jacobs' *The Rise of the American Film* (1939) through Garth Jowett's *Film: The Democratic Art* (1976) to the social history survey text *Who Built America?* (1992), the ghetto nickelodeon stands as a symbol for the close affinity between the 'melting pot' ideology of early American cinema and the upwardly-mobile aspirations of its working-class and immigrant audiences.⁵ Especially by historians on the left, American cinema has been hailed as a fundamentally progressive institution, a thoroughly popular art, and a powerful Americanising agency.⁶ Jacobs, for instance, emphasised in his influential study that from the outset:

The movies gave the newcomers, particularly, a respect for American law and order, an understanding of civic organisation, pride in citizenship and in the American commonwealth. Movies acquainted them with current happenings at home and abroad. Because the uncritical movie-goers were deeply impressed by what they saw in the photographs and accepted it as the real thing, the movies were powerful and persuasive. More vividly than any other single agency they revealed the social topography of America to the immigrant, to the poor, and to the country folk.⁷

How accurate is this historical picture? To what extent did early American cinema shape the values of Jewish immigrants who lived in Manhattan's Lower East Side? During the first part of the so-called nickelodeon era (1905–9), the French firm Pathé Frères dominated the American market. According to the 1907 figures of Eastman Kodak, Pathé was selling twice as much positive film stock as all the American film producers combined.⁸ It appears that nickelodeons relied heavily on the French company's products. Hence, at least until 1909, Jewish immigrants were more likely to 'roar at French buffoonery', as *Harpers Weekly* put it, than to learn American values and virtues from American films.⁹ When, around 1907, social workers and Progressive reformers began to realise that cinema had become an important factor in city life, the popularity of the Pathé films with immigrant audiences became an issue of moral concern. Pathé's dominance in the US film market was especially undesirable at a time when hundreds of thousands of new immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe had to be Americanised. As Richard Abel points out:

At issue was whether or not, as a 'foreign' company selling 'foreign' commodities – specifically its trademark 'red rooster films' – Pathé could be 'assimilated' within the developing American cinema industry, and whether or not it should take part in circulating ever more significant representations of social life and behaviour.¹⁰

Pathé was not only embroiled in heated discussions about the construction of American identity, but its activities in the United States were also increasingly frustrated by the more powerful elements of the American film industry, headed by the Edison and Vitagraph studios. It has been argued that these American manufacturers not only intended to gain control over the domestic market, but

also tried to reposition American cinema as a middle-class entertainment rather than a cheap amusement for immigrants and workers.¹¹ Abel argues persuasively that as economic interests and the demands for social regulation converged, 'Pathé found itself more and more circumscribed in public discourse as representative of much that was "low" and "illegitimate" about the cinema'.¹² By 1913, the red rooster had been almost entirely pushed out of the mainstream US film market. I very much doubt, however, that Pathé had also lost the favour of the Jewish film exhibitors and audience on the Lower East Side – and that American cinema, for its part, had managed to secure their blessing.

This chapter explores the history of exhibition practices in nickel-and-dime theatres on the Lower East Side between 1905 and 1914, and attempts to answer the question: what was the impact of the 'Americanisation of American cinema' on movie-going in Jewish neighbourhood theatres? The main source used in my analysis is the *Jewish Daily Forward* (*Forvertz*), at the time the leading Yiddish-language newspaper in America.¹³ Under the editorship of Abraham Cahan, a socialist intellectual, the *Forward* helped to shape the image and aspirations of many East European Jewish immigrants. It built bridges between the Old World and the New, between Jewish traditions and modern American culture. The greatest quality of Cahan's *Forward* was its relentless curiosity about the life of its own people. From their headquarters on the Lower East Side, the *Forward* staff frequently reported on the Jewish immigrant life that surrounded them. More than anyone else, they wrote about moving picture entertainment and other cheap amusements in New York's largest Jewish neighbourhood.

The Beginnings of Film Exhibition in the Jewish Quarter

Around 1906, Jews who wanted to watch moving pictures could go to the vaudeville theatres on Union Square and East Fourteenth Street, or visit the much cheaper penny arcades on the nearby Bowery. During the summer, like other New Yorkers, they could enjoy 'free' moving picture shows in Coney Island saloons. It was also possible to see films in a specifically Jewish setting, namely in the Yiddish music halls. Nearly every important street on the Lower East Side had a *myuzik hol* or vaudeville house. At least ten of them offered variety programmes that combined live acts with moving pictures for an admission price of ten to thirty-five cents.¹⁴

The history of the Yiddish music hall business goes back to 1902, when East Side saloonkeepers started offering Yiddish vaudeville shows in the backrooms of their saloons.¹⁵ Initially, no admission was charged, but clients were required to order a glass of beer for five cents. Unlike their English-language counterparts, these Yiddish concert saloons accommodated both men and women, and even families with children.¹⁶ Sometime around 1905, the more successful saloonkeepers turned nearby dance halls into auditoria with wooden galleries and facilities for the projection of moving pictures, and began to charge admission (ten to twenty-five cents).¹⁷ Their business flourished, but, starting in mid-1906, the Yiddish music halls experienced competition from the five-cent *moving piktshur pletser* that opened up in the neighbourhood. At first, there

were only a few of these specialised moving picture theatres in the heart of the Jewish quarter, although *Films and Views Index*, the trade paper for nickelodeon managers, was emphasising as early as October 1906 that this could be a very profitable venture:

At the beginning of the past summer two slot machine arcades were established on Grand Street, and having done business, one moving picture man determined to take the chance. He built a very attractive little theatre and advertised that moving pictures could be seen for five cents. The result was very gratifying. The place commenced to do a rushing business and is doing it yet. The films are changed frequently and the East Siders are willing to be kept interested. This knocked to pieces the theory that the Bowery is the only place where moving pictures would pay, yet exhibitors seem to be slow taking the hint.¹⁸

The next season, however, more and more Jewish entrepreneurs tried their luck in the booming nickelodeon business by opening storefront theatres in the tenement district east of the Bowery. Soon, the Lower East Side had the highest density of nickelodeons in Manhattan.¹⁹ On many blocks, stores were turned into nickel theatres with a seating capacity of 300 people. The managers of the Yiddish music halls also became increasingly interested in film exhibition. A bill of moving pictures, illustrated songs, and perhaps a sketch or a dance cost less to put on than a variety show, with movies as a sideline. The high turnover of the audience would largely compensate for the lower admission price of five to ten cents. Furthermore, the shift would settle once and for all the never-ending conflicts with the Hebrew Variety Actors' Union. By the end of 1907, nearly all Yiddish music halls on the East Side had been turned into moving picture theatres.²⁰

→ Despite the severe economic depression of 1907–8, the moving picture business continued to flourish. In May 1908, the *Forward* reported, 'when you go through the streets of our neighbourhood you will be amazed by the mass of moving picture houses. Four or more "shows" can be found on one street. In some streets, there are even two "shows" on one block, facing each other.'²¹ This was certainly the case in the most congested part of the Lower East Side, the Tenth Ward, where many blocks had over 3,000 inhabitants.²² On the corner of Essex and Rivington Streets, for example, three nickel theatres offered moving picture entertainment only a stone's throw from one another. The Golden Rule Vaudeville House, a former saloon and meeting hall, located at 125 Rivington Street, had offered motion pictures in combination with live entertainment since 1905–6. Inspired by the success of the Golden Rule, Charles Steiner convinced his father that they should turn their livery stable on 133 Essex Street into a moving picture house. In March 1908, Steiner's Essex Street Theatre opened its doors.²³ Two months later, yet another competitor appeared on the scene. This time the newcomer was located right in front of the Golden Rule Hall. Arthur Alexander leased two stores for his World Amusement Company Theatre, commonly referred to as 'the WACO'.²⁴ In 1910, yet a fourth nickelodeon, the Metropolitan, opened in a tenement building on 134 Essex Street.²⁵

The Show

What did these storefront theatres offer for five or ten cents? A half-hour show that consisted primarily of moving pictures, with 'a song and a dance, as an extra'.²⁶ Most members of the Hebrew Variety Actors' Union lost their well-paid jobs when the Yiddish music halls switched to moving pictures as their main attraction. Forced by circumstance, many variety actors continued to work – but now for low wages in the former music halls and in other nickel theatres. In between the films, while the reels were changed, they entertained the Jewish audiences with skits, jokes, dances or songs.²⁷ For instance, in December 1908, the Golden Rule Hall treated its patrons to sketches by Mister Tuchband and Miss Kaplan, a popular Yiddish variety duo.²⁸ According to the Yiddish press, the moral quality of these live acts was usually low. For a few dollars a week, the professional variety actors rivalled amateurs and each other with ever lewder songs and dirtier jokes. Low-life topics and coarse language had always been a feature of Yiddish vaudeville entertainment. However, in the eyes of certain observers, the situation now went from bad to worse. In March 1909, Abraham Cahan complained in a *Forward* editorial that, in some moving picture houses, Yiddish variety actors were using 'words that three years ago even a manager of an indecent music hall would not have accepted on the stage'.²⁹ Of course, his descriptions of Yiddish vaudeville should be read with some scepticism, for they reflected Cahan's own moralistic bias rather than his readers' measurable response to this form of entertainment.³⁰

By mid-1908, movie-going had become a part of everyday life on the Lower East Side, as common as soda fountains and ice-cream parlours, and certainly more common than going to one of the three 'legitimate' Yiddish theatres. As a reporter put it, 'the moving pictures have totally revolutionised the Jewish quarter: it is heaven and earth and moving pictures'.³¹

Unfortunately, during the course of my research, I have found little information about the films that were shown in the East Side nickelodeons. Film exhibitors did not advertise in the Yiddish press until the early 1910s and, even then, advertisements for specific films were an exception. Although precise evidence is currently unavailable, Jewish neighbourhood nickelodeons appear to have been an important market for Pathé films.³² The nickel theatres on the Lower East Side programmed comedies as well as tragedies, but, according to the *Forward*, the Eastern European Jews (female viewers in particular) favoured tearjerking tragedies based on novels or historical events such as 'the life of the Roman emperor Nero, the French Revolution or the war between Russia and Japan'.³³ Hence, while the desirability of having Pathé's gruesome sensational melodramas and *film d'art* productions in the American market was extensively debated in the American trade press, such films certainly matched the taste of the Jewish immigrants who patronised the nickelodeons of the Lower East Side.

Jewish versus American Tastes

In the 'legitimate' Yiddish theatres, Jewish audiences also preferred 'tragedy and serious drama with sad endings' to comedy.³⁴ It is likely that this penchant came

from the nineteenth-century Russian theatrical tradition, in which plays almost always ended in tragedy (as did a large number of early Russian films).³⁵ Light operettas and comedies, on the other hand, were perceived as typically American. While, in the critical discourse, the European realist drama was highly esteemed and held up as an example for Yiddish dramatists, the American theatre was often regarded with contempt. According to Jacob Gordin, the prominent Yiddish playwright, Americans considered that:

Theatre[s], just as sports, races, fistic contests, 'rooster fights', and beer saloons, must be visited merely for amusement – and for the reason that after supper, to get good digestion and to avoid dyspepsia, it is advisable to do some 'giggling'.³⁶

Jews, on the other hand, it was remarked, visited the Yiddish theatre 'to think, to sigh and to cry'.³⁷ The belief that Jewish immigrants visited the Yiddish theatre to reflect on what they saw should probably be considered wishful thinking on the part of an intellectual élite which aspired to enlighten the 'uneducated' masses. Nevertheless, unlike Broadway hits, most successful Yiddish plays of this period, *shund* (trash) as well as literary drama, included numerous heartbreaking and horrifying scenes. The *Forward* cynically remarked that even

When a manager of a Yiddish theatre decides to produce a comedy, he adds a couple of pogroms, some suicides, a few poor orphans, and a deserted woman – of course – to make sure that the people will weep more than they will laugh.³⁸

In the discussions over the differences in American and Jewish tastes in terms of subject matter and dramatisation, as well as in the broader intellectual debate about 'highbrow' versus 'lowbrow' entertainment, the *Forward* frequently played on a conception of American culture as 'low' and 'other', against which to construct a Jewish difference.

Thus, when the first Yiddish music halls emerged on the East Side, a heated discussion broke out in the Yiddish press over their function in the Jewish immigrant community. In the eyes of intellectuals like Cahan and Gordin, Yiddish variety entertainment was an appropriation of the 'low' expressions of American culture and a 'wrong' kind of Americanisation.³⁹ As Nina Warnke points out, due to the 'relative weakness of community structures and social control on the Lower East Side', these prominent figures could regard themselves 'as the immigrants' cultural and political educators, as guardians of immigrant morality and as guides on the road to a cautious Americanisation'.⁴⁰ It is not surprising, then, that again and again Cahan urged his readers to boycott the Yiddish musical halls.⁴¹

When the 'moving picture craze' hit the Lower East Side at the beginning of 1908, the *Forward* described the movies as 'a popular amusement' and a novelty which 'just like the music halls, comes from uptown, from the Christians'.⁴² In sharp contrast with the *Forward's* initial reception of the Yiddish music halls, cinema did not become a contested site of Americanisation until late 1909. What made cinema's position in immigrant culture an issue in the Yiddish press at that particular moment was the increasing awareness of the growing power of film exhibitors. This, in turn, raised the question of who would ultimately exercise

control over the Jewish immigrant entertainment business, and educate and direct Jewish immigrants on the threshold of Americanisation: the American film industry or the cultural élite of the Lower East Side.

The Grand Scandal

In December 1909, Nathan Fleissig, the manager of the Grand Street Music Hall, announced triumphantly that the moving pictures had been defeated and that his theatre would be devoted again to 'first-class Yiddish variety'.⁴³ By presenting the shift in exhibition practice in terms of a cultural war with the moving pictures, Fleissig shrewdly linked the reopening of the Grand Music Hall with the 'Grand scandal' that had roused the emotions of the Yiddish press a few weeks earlier. In September 1909 Yiddish theatre's star and impresario Jacob Adler had sold the lease of the 2,000-seat Grand Theatre to Marcus Loew and Adolph Zukor, who turned the home of Yiddish literary drama into an English-language, small-time vaudeville house in which moving pictures were also shown. In the opinion of the *Forward*, that fact that Adler had given the Grand Theatre to a 'million-dollar trust of American theatre managers' was a dishonour for the whole East Side.⁴⁴ Cahan and his staff never mentioned that the new lessees were Jews too. Instead, they emphasised, again and again, that the Grand had been turned into a *goyish* (gentile) moving picture theatre and, as such, it began to symbolise the loss of *Yiddishkayt* in the New World.

In the aftermath of the 'Grand scandal', the staff of the *Forward* began to redefine the cultural positions within the field of Jewish immigrant entertainment. In schematic terms, cinema was constructed as the new 'low Other' and relegated to the bottom end of the cultural hierarchy, the position previously occupied by Yiddish vaudeville. The latter was legitimised as a Yiddish theatrical tradition and structurally promoted to a middlebrow position, while the 'legitimate' Yiddish stage maintained its status as a 'highbrow' institution. In fact, the redefinition of the cultural position of Yiddish vaudeville involved a set of complex and ambiguous discursive strategies that were intended to control the leisure activities of the Jewish immigrants.⁴⁵

The Appeal of Yiddish Vaudeville

The rationality at work in the *Forward's* critical discourse on Jewish immigrant entertainment should not be confused with the logic that dictated the cultural practices in the moving picture theatres on the East Side. As a matter of fact, the *Forward* was overtaken by the latest developments in film exhibition. At the beginning of the 1909–10 season, there had been a remarkable revival of Yiddish vaudeville in the nickel-and-dime theatres in the Jewish quarter. Film exhibitors had added more and longer Yiddish vaudeville acts to their bills, and most former Yiddish music halls had switched back to full-fledged Yiddish vaudeville shows.⁴⁶

Why did Jewish exhibitors decide to invest in an old-fashioned form of ethnic entertainment? How did it come about that Yiddish vaudeville was no longer programmed in the moving picture theatres out of sheer necessity to amuse the audience while the reels were changed, but that it became a substantial part of the show?

Perhaps we should consider the revival of the Yiddish music halls as the local equivalent of the emerging small-time vaudeville trend. Robert C. Allen found that the rise of small-time vaudeville had been stimulated by a number of factors, which included cut-throat competition among nickelodeons, a shortage of new films, the involvement of vaudeville managers with motion picture exhibition and the desire among certain moving picture exhibitors to attract a more middle-class audience.⁴⁷ The first two factors also played a role in the film exhibition business on the East Side. However, there appears to be no evidence suggesting that there was any financial backing for the small-scale Yiddish entertainment business other than by Jewish real estate investors. Finally, the exhibitors certainly did not programme Yiddish vaudeville to attract a better class of patrons because they knew only too well that it had a long-established reputation for vulgarity and indecency. Ever since the opening of the first concert saloons on the East Side, the Yiddish newspapers had strongly condemned the variety actors, their shows, their bosses, and even their union. Zukor and Loew might have set the trend with the opening of the Grand Theatre as a small-time vaudeville house, but, in the meantime, there was something else at stake.

According to the *Forward*, the main impetus behind the 'resurrection of the Yiddish music halls' came from the fact that, once the novelty of the movies had gone, youngsters formed the bulk of the audiences in the nickel-and-dime theatres in the Jewish quarter.⁴⁸ It was reported that film exhibitors had reintroduced 'old-time' Yiddish vaudeville – single turns, sketches, one-acters, and even three-act melodramas – to lure adults back to their theatres. Since the majority of the adult population on the East Side was foreign born, this implies that the live part of the bill was aimed specifically at first-generation Jewish immigrants. The analysis of the *Forward* was, of course, too simplistic. Movie houses were certainly among the favourite meeting places for young people, not least because the theatre's darkness encouraged opportunities for romance and sexual expression.⁴⁹ However, the *Forward's* claim that adults rarely patronised the nickel theatres is untenable, even if we take into account the fact that fewer 'greenhorns' (recently arrived immigrants who had yet to discover the excitement of moving pictures) poured into the East Side nickel theatres because immigration into the United States declined by nearly 50 per cent between mid-1908 and mid-1909.⁵⁰

Yet the link which the *Forward* made between the revival of Yiddish vaudeville and movie-going among first-generation immigrants does turn out to be revealing when we consider what modern film historians believe to have been occurring at this point. The managers of the East Side nickel theatres began to include more ethnic entertainment in their shows in order to attract first-generation immigrants at a crucial moment in the history of American cinema – that is, when it was becoming 'Americanised' and transformed into a vehicle for middle-class ideals of respectability, upward mobility and assimilation into mainstream culture.⁵¹ In the process of creating a mass-cultural audience that submerged all

social and cultural distinctions under the banner of middle-class values, non-filmic activities which aimed at building audiences on the basis of a shared ethnic or class identity were largely eliminated. The 'real' social, cultural and physical space of the movie theatre became increasingly subordinated to the fictional world on the screen and the film text became the prime site of meaning.⁵² Initially, however, exactly the opposite happened in the Jewish nickel-and-dime theatres houses on the Lower East Side, where early film-viewer relations, determined less by the film itself than by the context of reception, were preserved by the integration of more Yiddish vaudeville acts into the moving picture shows.

The revival of Yiddish vaudeville can therefore also be explained as a grass-roots resistance to the increasing influence of mainstream American culture, which threatened the cohesiveness of Jewish immigrants as a community. Yiddish vaudeville jeopardised the part cinema might have played in the process of assimilation on the part of Jewish immigrants. For one thing, it reinforced feelings of belonging to an ethnic community with shared values and pleasures, based on a communal language and history. For another, Yiddish vaudeville shaped the reception of the films that were shown, thus reducing the Americanising tendency of the silver screen.

By allotting more time to live acts, exhibitors could continue to offer a product that corresponded with the sensibilities, values and expectations of the Jews who lived on the Lower East Side. If they did so, it was not because these exhibitors, who shared their customers' ethnic and social background, believed in defending Jewish culture against Americanisation, but because they expected to make more money with the music hall format. In this respect, it would be very useful to know whether the exhibition practices also changed in moving picture theatres which were located in the more middle-class Jewish neighbourhoods of greater New York. Did the upwardly-mobile Eastern European Jews, especially the American-born second generation, demand more *Yiddishkayt* too in their neighbourhood theatres?

On the Lower East Side, the bulwark of Yiddish culture in New York City audiences and exhibitors alike sought to preserve the conditions that encouraged manifestations of ethnicity, not only at the level of content, but also in terms of spectatorial behaviour. The Yiddish music hall format authorised a 'participatory, sound intensive form of response' and 'active sociability' similar to that of the early nickelodeons.⁵³ This convivial mode of reception, which deviated from that of the American middle classes, had been a feature of Jewish immigrant entertainment since the beginnings of Yiddish theatre in America in the 1880s. For three decades, the intellectual élite of the East Side had tried to domesticate *Moishe*, the peanut-cracking and boisterous Jewish immigrant audience of the Yiddish theatres, but without success. As it turned out, only the feature film was finally capable of imposing the 'discipline of silence' on the Jewish immigrant audiences of the East Side nickelodeons.

Feature Films and Ethnic Experience

Although the introduction of feature-length films (around 1912–13) meant that there would be less time available for Yiddish vaudeville in a programme, the

trend towards longer films was received with enthusiasm by many motion picture exhibitors on the East Side, and for good reasons.

As early as 1910, the Yiddish music halls had sought to differentiate their product from that of the mixed-bill nickelodeons by programming three-act melodramas and short operettas. They thus hoped to secure a competitive position in the entertainment market, but the managers of the nickel shows followed the latest developments in the music hall business without much delay.⁵⁴ Within a year, most 'vaud-pic' nickel theatres were presenting two new three-act productions a week, in addition to their regular bill of moving pictures and vaudeville acts.⁵⁵ During the 1911–12 season, the managers of the Yiddish music halls turned to four-act plays (the standard of the 'legitimate' stage), even though the cut-throat competition with the nickel-and-dime theatres had forced them to reduce their prices. Although business was thriving, exhibitors were hard pressed to keep their houses profitable – especially after the Hebrew Variety Actors' Union managed to impose better working conditions for its members, including a maximum workload of five turns a day (instead of ten to twelve).⁵⁶ With costs up, box-office takings down and additional competition from three new 1,000-seat houses (Loew's Delancey Street Theatre, the Odeon Theatre and the National Winter Garden), some managers began to view the feature film as a welcome alternative to long plays. In February 1912, just a few weeks after the deal with the Hebrew Variety Actors' Union, the Grand Music Hall began to programme feature films. For ten cents, the audience could watch 'the biggest sensation of the century, the \$100,000 production of *Dante's Inferno*'.⁵⁷ After this, the entertainment business on the Lower East Side changed rapidly.

In 1913, Loew curtailed his activities on the Lower East Side in order to concentrate on the operation of his Delancey Street and Avenue B theatres. The Grand Theatre was turned into a Yiddish-language vaudeville house which offered feature films as its main attraction. Many Yiddish music halls, especially the smaller ones, closed their doors for good. Others became playhouses, presenting programmes which were almost entirely devoted to four-act plays, just as in the 'legitimate' theatres. In fact, in terms of repertoire, the distinction between these vaudeville houses and the 'legitimate' theatres became increasingly blurred during the early 1910s since both favoured light comedies and operettas for their staple entertainment.⁵⁸ Apparently, Jewish immigrant audiences no longer cultivated a 'Russian' preference for tragedies.

Most managers of mixed-bill nickelodeons cut out vaudeville altogether. The city's new building code for moving picture theatres gave them the opportunity to enlarge their seating capacity from 300 to 600, if they invested in new buildings. The ordinance caused a genuine construction fever among the more enterprising film exhibitors on the Lower East Side. The new nickel-and-dime theatres that they opened were generally equipped with two projection machines.⁵⁹ This not only facilitated the showing of multi-reel films, but it also meant that vaudeville acts and songs were no longer needed to divert the audience while the reels were changed.⁶⁰ In short, this time Yiddish vaudeville had lost the battle on nearly all fronts.

Had the Jewish cultural heritage also been defeated? Let me use the case of the

American Movies, a 600-seat cinema that opened in April 1914 on East Third Street, as a historical shorthand for the condition of film exhibition on the Lower East Side at the eve of the First World War. Considering the name Charles Steiner gave to his new theatre, we could expect that he offered his patrons American films. So he did, but he also showed foreign films and, more importantly, his selection of films was rather biased. Between 11 April and 24 July 1914, Steiner advertised in the *Forward* for the following features: *Esther and Mordechai* (Gaumont, 1910?), 'a wonderful Biograph production: the biblical story of *Judith and Holophernes*' (*Judith of Bethulia*, Biograph, 1914), *Samson the Hero* (*Samson*, Universal, 1914), *Joseph's Trials in Egypt* (Eclectic Film Co/Pathé, 1914), *Mendel Beilis*,⁶¹ 'Jacob Gordin's greatest drama *Di shkhite* made in Russia with the greatest Jewish actors, such as Ester Rochel Kaminski and Sam Adler' (*The Slaughter*, Kosmofilm, 1914), *Bar Kochba* (*Bar Kochba – The Hero of a Nation*, Supreme, 1913), 'Should a woman tell?', performed by the Imperial Russian Company of St. Petersburg with the beautiful Olga Tshernova' (Apex, 1914), and 'Uriel Acosta performed in moving pictures by the best actors of the Yiddish stage' (Great Players, 1914).

Of course, this overkill of Jewishness is to a large extent the result of a carefully planned marketing strategy. On the one hand, Steiner only promoted titles dealing with Jewish subject matter and films that had strong ties with Eastern Europe. On the other hand, he provided no information whatsoever about the single and double reels which were offered in addition to the special feature films and which might have shown more American subjects.⁶² Advertisements from other movie theatres on the East Side confirm that local exhibitors continued to build audiences on the basis of ethnic identity. The ethnic experience of movie-going was no longer organised around Yiddish vaudeville, but embedded in a specific selection of films. This shift marked the end of the first-generation film exhibitors, those who had started out as saloonkeepers and whose vernacular had been Yiddish. The lead was taken up by a second generation of exhibitors, American-born Jews like Charles Steiner, who had started out during the nickelodeon boom and who were certainly more assimilated than the previous generation. Yet, the programmes of their moving picture theatres kept an ethnic flavour.

The First World War brought immigration from Eastern Europe to the United States almost entirely to a halt. During the war, only a few thousand Eastern European Jews arrived each year at Ellis Island. The export of European films to America also declined drastically. Hence, for the managers of the movie theatres in the Jewish quarter, it became difficult to maintain their ethnically specific programming practices. However, Yiddish vaudeville did not revive a second time. It appears that Jewish immigrants who went to the movies no longer appreciated active sociability and vocal familiarity in their neighbourhood theatres. On 28 July 1914, a few days before the outbreak of war, the *Forward* depicted how the Jewish audience amused itself at the moving pictures on the East Side. The audience was 'totally absorbed by the show', a feature film about a young man who had abducted his sweetheart from her father's house. Followed by the father and the police, dogs and cars, the lovers tried to escape over mountains, fields, roads and rivers. At the most critical moment of the film, when the couple fell from a mountain into a river, the 'strenuous silence' in the auditorium was suddenly inter-

rupted by an 'excited man' screaming: 'Oy, vey, she has fallen into the water'. In other words, a viewer who was not yet used to the middle-class standard of reception brought back the 'real' space of the theatre to an audience that was completely absorbed by the story on the screen, and his cry caused a blunt interruption of the classic film-spectator relationship. Was the man a greenhorn, a newcomer recently-arrived from Russia? Perhaps, but, in any case, it is more relevant to know what the reaction of the audience was: 'sharop!'⁶³

Notes

I wish to thank Peter Kramer and Derek Rubin for their extensive comments and helpful suggestions. All translations from the Yiddish are my own.

- 1 By 1910, 1.2 million Jews from different backgrounds lived in New York, where they accounted for almost a quarter of the city's population. This essay focuses exclusively on the Jews of East European descent, who made up the bulk of the city's Jewish population.
- 2 By 1910, just over half a million Jews lived on the Lower East Side. Gerard Sorin, *A Time for Building: The Third Migration, 1880–1920* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), pp. 70–1.
- 3 Bella Cohen Spewack, *Streets: A Memoir of the Lower East Side* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1995).
- 4 *Ibid.*, pp. 51, 70.
- 5 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); American Social History Project, The City University of New York, *Who Built America?* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), vol. 2, pp. 182–3, 283–4.
- 6 Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 67–8.
- 7 Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film*, p. 12.
- 8 Richard Abel, 'The Perils of Pathé, or the Americanization of Early American Cinema', in Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz (eds), *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 190.
- 9 Barton W. Currie, 'The Nickel Madness', *Harpers Weekly*, 24 August 1907, quoted in Abel, 'The Perils of Pathé', p. 188.
- 10 Abel, 'The Perils of Pathé', p. 184.
- 11 See, for example, William Uricchio and Roberta E. Pearson, *Reframing Culture: The Case of the Vitagraph Quality Films* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 41–64.
- 12 Abel, 'The Perils of Pathé', p. 199.
- 13 During the teens, the *Forward* became America's largest-selling foreign-language newspaper. Its circulation increased from 72,000 in 1908 to around 140,000 at the beginning of 1914.
- 14 For contemporary descriptions of the Yiddish music halls see, for example, Paul Klapper, 'The Yiddish Music Hall', *University Settlement Studies Quarterly*, vol. 2, no. 4 (1906), pp. 19–23; Khayim Malits, 'Yidishe myuzik hols in nyu york', *Der amerikaner*, 30 November 1906, p. 13; Abraham Cahan, 'A shpatsir iber di yidishe myuzik hols', *Tsaytgayst*, 13 October 1905, p. 24. See also 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), pp. 321–5.
- 15 Jacob M. Gordin, 'The Yiddish Stage', *Yearbook of the University Settlement Society of*

- New York* (1901), pp. 29–30; ‘Di yidishe muzik hols zaynen a skandal ohn an “ober”’, *Forward*, 17 March 1902.
- 16 Warnke, ‘Immigrant Popular Culture as Contested Sphere’, p. 326.
- 17 Klapper, ‘The Yiddish Music Hall’, p. 20.
- 18 ‘An Unexploited Field and Its Possibilities’, *Views and Films Index*, 6 October 1906. The two mentioned moving picture venues are most likely Adolph Zukor’s Automatic Vaudeville on 263 Grand Street and Morris Boom’s Fycent on number 265. I would like to thank Richard Abel for drawing my attention to this article.
- 19 For exact figures, see Ben Singer, ‘Manhattan Nickelodeons: New Data on Audiences and Exhibitors’, *Cinema Journal*, 34; no. 3 (Spring 1995), pp. 5–35; and Judith Thissen, ‘Oy, Myopia!: A Reaction from Judith Thissen on the Singer–Allen Controversy’, *Cinema Journal*, 36, no. 4 (Summer 1997), pp. 104–6.
- 20 ‘Vo zaynen ahingekumen di yidishe myuzik hols?’, *Forward*, 24 May 1908.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York’s Jews, 1870–1914* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 79. For the residential block density in the Rivington–Essex Street neighbourhood, see *Fifteenth Annual Report of the College Settlement, 1903–1904*, plate no. 1 (based on the *First Report of the Tenement House Department of the City of New York*).
- 23 Pre-1917 Conveyances Section II, liber 137 cp 269, Office of the City Register. Alteration Docket for Manhattan 1908, application no. 83, Bureau of Buildings (at the New York City Municipal Archives). See also Judith Thissen, ‘Oy, Myopia!’, p. 103.
- 24 Pre-1917 Conveyances Section II, liber 179 cp 43 and liber 180 cp 25, Office of the City Register.
- 25 Pre-1917 Conveyances Section II, liber 196 cp 322, liber 199 cp 266, Office of the City Register.
- 26 ‘Vo zaynen ahingekumen di yidishe myuzik hols?’, *Forward*, 24 May 1908.
- 27 ‘Vo zaynen ahingekumen di myuzik-hol “stars”?’, *Forward*, 26 November 1908.
- 28 *Forward*, 13 December 1908, p. 1; *Dos yidishes tageblatt*, 13 December 1908, p. 1.
- 29 ‘Di ekelhafte shmuts fun gevise muing-piktsur pletzer’, *Forward*, 15 March 1909.
- 30 In previous years, Cahan had led several moral crusades against the *shmuts* (filth) in the Yiddish music halls. See Warnke, ‘Immigrant Popular Culture as Contested Sphere’.
- 31 ‘Vo zaynen ahingekumen di yidishe myuzik hols?’, *Forward*, 24 May 1908.
- 32 Abel, ‘The Perils of Pathé’, p. 201.
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 ‘Farvos hoben di amerikaner lieb komedyes un yiden nit?’, *Forward*, 13 May 1908.
- 35 Yuri Tsvian, ‘Some Preparatory Remarks on Russian Cinema’, in Paolo Cherchi Usai and Yuri Tsvian (eds), *Silent Witnesses: Russian Films 1908–1919* (Pordenone: Edizioni Biblioteca dell’Immagine and London: British Film Institute, 1989), pp. 24–5.
- 36 Gordin, ‘The Yiddish Stage’, p. 29.
- 37 ‘Farvos hoben di amerikaner lieb komedyes un yiden nit?’, *Forward*, 13 May 1908.
- 38 *Ibid.*
- 39 Gordin, ‘The Yiddish Stage’, pp. 29–30; Warnke, ‘Immigrant Popular Culture as Contested Sphere’, pp. 324–8.
- 40 Warnke, ‘Immigrant Popular Culture as Contested Sphere’, p. 323.
- 41 See, for example, Cahan’s editorials in *Forward* 17, 18, 20 and 28 March 1902, as well as 4 April 1902; Cahan, ‘A shpatsir iber di yidishe myuzik hols’, *Tsaytgayst*, 13 October 1905, and ‘Di klipe fun di myuzik hols in yidishe kwartal’, *Tsaytgayst*, 20 October 1905. See also Fanny Reinhardt, ‘Wegen di unanshtendige lieder in di muzik hols’, *Forward*, 21 December 1905 (a letter to the editor, written by a variety actress in reaction to Cahan’s negative campaigns in the *Forward* and *Tsaytgayst*).
- 42 ‘Di muing piktsur geleris’, *Forward*, 4 March 1908 and ‘Vo zaynen ahingekumen di yidishe myuzik hols?’, *Forward*, 24 May 1908.
- 43 Advertisement, *Forward*, 13 December 1909.

- 44 *Forward*, 3 September 1909, p. 1.
- 45 For instance, prostitution, white slavery and loose sexual behaviour – vices of urban America that had been associated with the Yiddish music halls – were now regularly linked with the moving picture houses on the East Side. See '2 yidishe boys fershikt in Sing-Sing als kadeten', *Forward*, 31 January 1910, p. 1; 'Vider di gefahr fun di muving piktschurs', *Forward*, 2 February 1911. Also see Janet Staiger, *Bad Women: Regulating Sexuality in Early American Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), pp. 44–52, 99–103, 120–8.
- 46 These variety shows lasted a whole matinee or evening, for an admission price of ten to thirty cents. Admission remained continuous and moving pictures were still part of the programme. See, for example, advertisements of Atlantic Garden, Grand Street Music Hall and Houston Hippodrome in the *Forward*. Also see 'Tkhies-hame'ysim fun di myuzik hols', *Forward*, 25 December 1909 and 'Vos hert zich in di muzik hols?', *Forward*, 26 August 1910.
- 47 Robert C. Allen, 'Motion Picture Exhibition in Manhattan, 1906–1912: Beyond the Nickelodeon', *Cinema Journal*, 18, no. 2 (spring 1979), reprinted in John Fell (ed.), *Film Before Griffith* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 171; *idem*, *Vaudeville and Film 1895–1915: A Study in Media Interaction* (New York: Arno Press, 1980), pp. 230–50; *idem*, 'Manhattan Myopia; or, Oh! Iowa!', *Cinema Journal*, 35, no. 3 (Spring 1996), pp. 84–95.
- 48 'Tkhies-ham'ysim fun di myuzik hols', *Forward*, 25 December 1909.
- 49 Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), p. 151.
- 50 Eastern European Jewish immigration to the US declined by nearly 50 per cent from 103,387 to 57,551. Immigration figures from Commissioner General's reports, in *American Jewish Yearbook* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1913), p. 429.
- 51 Abel, 'The Perils of Pathé'; Uricchio and Pearson, *Reframing Culture*, pp. 41–64.
- 52 Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, pp. 76–89.
- 53 Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, p. 95.
- 54 For a detailed analysis, see Judith Thissen, 'Charles Steiner's Houston Hippodrome', in Gregg Bachman and Tom Slater (eds), *A Slightly Different Light: Exploring Marginalized Issues and Forces in American Silent Film* (Southern Illinois University Press, forthcoming).
- 55 For example, advertisements of Steiner's Theatre, the Metropolitan, Monroe Theatre, Rutgers Theatre, Suffolk Theatre and Thalia Music Hall, *Forward*, 16 January 1911.
- 56 'An erklehrung tsu alle rekhtdenkende menshen! di hibru verayeti ektors yunion lok. 5', *Forward*, 16 January 1912.
- 57 Advertisement, *Forward*, 17 February 1912.
- 58 Warnke, 'Immigrant Popular Culture as Contested Sphere', p. 334.
- 59 See, for example, the clause regarding the erection of a projection booth for the operation of two machines in the lease of the New Law Theatre, 23 Second Avenue, built in 1913. Pre-1917 Conveyances Section II, liber 225 cp 2, Office of the City Register.
- 60 Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema: 1907–1915* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 199.
- 61 Three films were made about the Mendel Beilis case: *The Black 107* (Ruby, 1913), *Terrors of Russia* (Italian American Film Co, 1913) and *The Mystery of the Mendel Beilis Case* (Germany, 1914). Patricia Ehrens, *The Jew in American Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 59–60; Jim Hoberman, *Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film Between Two Worlds* (New York: Schocken Books/MoMa, 1991), pp. 28–9.
- 62 In 1914, the bulk of the films released on the American market still consisted of single and double reels. Bowser, *Transformation of Cinema*, p. 213.
- 63 'Vi azoi der yidishe oylem amuzirt zikh in muving piktschurs', *Forward*, 28 July 1914.