



**HOLLYWOOD
IN THE
NEIGHBORHOOD**

**HISTORICAL CASE STUDIES
OF LOCAL MOVIEGOING**

**EDITED BY
KATHRYN FULLER-SEELEY**

**© 2008 UC Regents
Buy this book**

University of California Press, one of the most distinguished university presses in the United States, enriches lives around the world by advancing scholarship in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Its activities are supported by the UC Press Foundation and by philanthropic contributions from individuals and institutions. For more information, visit www.ucpress.edu.

University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.
London, England

© 2008 by The Regents of the University of California

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hollywood in the neighborhood : historical case studies of local moviegoing / edited by Kathryn H. Fuller-Seeley.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-520-23067-5 (cloth : alk. paper)—ISBN 978-0-520-24973-8 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Motion pictures—United States—History. 2. Motion picture audiences—United States—History. 3. Motion picture theaters—United States—History. I. Fuller-Seeley, Kathryn H., 1960–

PN1993.5.U6H59135 2008

791.430973—dc22 2007016242

17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (R 1997) (*Permanence of Paper*).

INTRODUCTION

Researching and Writing the History of Local Moviegoing

KATHRYN H. FULLER-SEELEY
AND GEORGE POTAMIANOS

Variously termed the new film history, film exhibition history, moviegoing history, local film history, historical reception studies, audience history, or the cultural and social context of moviegoing, innovative approaches to cinema history are some of the most vibrant and exciting aspects of media studies done in the past twenty years. These new research initiatives move outward from a primary focus on films as texts toward considerations of the contexts of their production, distribution, exhibition, and reception by viewers in particular times and spaces and more broadly to analyze the many meanings motion pictures assumed in popular culture and the social practice of moviegoing in everyday life.

Moviegoing history research is characterized by close, detailed studies of specific places, people, and chronologies. It is found at the juncture of several methodological and ideological issues—at intersections of traditional cinema studies with more data-driven research methods such as history, economics, social sciences, and history of readers in literary studies; at intersections of national and international contexts of production with local contexts of consumption; at intersections of modernity and tradition; and at intersections of the culture of the cosmopolitan urban center with the culture experienced by the small-town (and more homogeneous) rural hinterlands. It is also at the intersections of the persuasive power of movie producers, exhibitors, and film texts with the ability of viewers to make their own sets of meanings from the movies they watched. There should be room in moviegoing history for grand theories as well as specific factual evidence, of psychologically determined viewing positions as well as historically situated, specific audience members, and of examination of reaction to specific films as well as of the practice of moviegoing in which habitual attendance at a theater or exhibition space outweighed the impact of any particular film shown.¹

Robert C. Allen, Douglas Gomery, Gregory Waller, and Richard Abel have been leading figures in the development of moviegoing history; their influential works have analyzed historical and cultural shifts in film exhibition and reception in localities from rural North Carolina, Kansas, and Lexington, Kentucky, to urban New York City, Chicago, Des Moines, and Cleveland. Growing ranks of media scholars, including Rick Altman, Matthew Bernstein, Jane Gaines, Tom Gunning, Miriam Hanson, Mary Beth Haralovich, Richard Maltby, Charles Musser, Lauren Rabinovich, Jackie Stacey, and Janet Staiger, are researching many aspects of historical reception and moviegoing studies.

At the same time, investigations of moviegoing practices were being undertaken by American historians in the 1980s who studied film audiences in specific communities and the impact of motion pictures on their diverse cultures. Groundbreaking work has been done by Roy Rosenzweig on working-class audiences in the small industrial city of Worcester, Massachusetts; Frank Couvares on social surveys of amusement seekers in Pittsburgh; and Kathy Peiss on gender, ethnicity, and new forms of entertainment among young working-class women in New York City. Their studies have been joined by Elizabeth Cohen's research on immigrants and African Americans using mass culture in their process of adapting to Chicago; Lawrence Levine on the tendency of movie theaters to split American culture into highbrow and lowbrow factions; and Kathryn Fuller-Seeley on the early incorporation of movies into small-town communities. Richard Butsch's research traces similarities and differences among entertainment audiences across 300 years of American history. A steady stream of exciting new work continues to appear that combines historical and cinema studies research to deepen our understanding, and to propose new research questions.

Scholars are at work in the trenches, mining historical details for analysis of moviegoing in scores of communities. We are amassing a cornucopia of moviegoing histories of specific villages, towns, cities, and regions across the nation, uncovering diverse audience groupings, and investigating the impact of a wide variety of film genres and forms (including amateur, art, educational, documentary, and exploitation films) across a range of historical contexts. Moviegoing histories have the potential to turn traditional film histories on their heads, moving outward from the studies of a few key films and great auteurs toward uncovering newly discovered details and new explanations and understandings. Their findings may add fresh nuances to long-standing issues in American film history, such as the longevity of the cinema of attractions; the chaser theory of film's declining popularity on vaudeville theater bills after 1900; the chronology of the nickelodeons' spread and transformation into "vaudefilm" and classical Hollywood-style movie theaters; and patterns of cinema's reception as marked by region, race, ethnicity, gender, class, religion, age, generation, income, or education. The ex-

tent to which New York City was a cultural power across a wide, diverse United States may be further uncovered; the mechanisms through which concepts like modernity translated to the hinterlands, and modernity's impact on different types of communities will be explored. The gap between box office favorites and the canons of critically acclaimed films may be wider or narrower in various places across the nation than scholars had previously assumed. Accounting for a significant uniformity of cinema's impact across divergent communities, and/or many fascinating local variations, may be the ultimate outcome of these case studies.

At the Margins of Modernity?

Local Moviegoing and Cinema History

For more than a decade, a number of film historians have explored the many interconnections between cinema and the appearance of "modern life." Emerging at the turn of the twentieth century along with an array of new communication forms and technologically mediated mass experiences (telephone, phonograph, electric light displays, mass-circulation magazines, amusement parks, radio, etc.), early motion pictures seemed to some observers to embody the same "shock of the new" that viewers experienced with the rise of modernity.² Modernity was a crisis-like change of Western human experience occurring around 1900, shaped by many facets of the Industrial Revolution, or, as Tom Gunning notes, "a transformation in daily life wrought by the growth of capitalism and advances in technology: the growth of urban traffic, the distribution of mass produced goods and successive new technologies of transportation and communication."³ Because the sites of early filmmaking were urban, their creation and distribution controlled by corporate capital, and the most visible sites of their consumption metropolitan, some cinema historians have argued that the "modern event" of film production and film's cultural reception was overwhelmingly urban—something that was by, for, and of the big city. Cinema in the "modernity thesis" seems to transform viewers and their culture, the surrounding theaters and streets, into a vast, anonymous, homogeneous mass audience in an equally vast, skyscrapered, fragmented, rapid-paced urban milieu. It is a powerful thesis that goes far to explain the angst and bustle of city life that are well documented in the art, music, film, and literary cultural expressions of the period.

What happened, however, when that same cinematic modernizing force left the big city and ventured into other, less cosmopolitan localities? As Ronald Walters notes in his chapter in this collection, at this point a hitch in the "modernity thesis" seems to occur, for residents of hinterlands locations such as Des Moines, Iowa; Wilmington, North Carolina; Placerville, California; and Lebanon, Kansas, experienced the movies, too. Did early cinema

impact them in ways demonstrably similar to or different from what their city cousins experienced? Did change occur as quickly, more slowly, or not at all? Did the towns and their citizens remain as caught between traditional culture and “modern life” as they were before? Robert Allen asks in his chapter on “the ‘problem’ of the empirical,” where and with what theories and methods can we explore these issues?⁴

We have not yet expanded our theorization of the transformative forces of modernity enough to account for variations in audience experience, and we have tended to minimize specific historical moments and contexts of cinema’s spread across the United States. The exclusive analytical focus on urban cinema has tended to flatten out the results by leveling all experience into modernity; the narrow focus leads toward broad generalizations that begin to look less solid when we observe cinema’s emergence from other angles, those of the local, the peripheral, through specific, empirical case studies. This collection certainly does not wish to criticize the “cinema and modernity” thesis or the excellent work of our fellow scholars, but it does wish to complicate and enrich our understanding of how film and cultural change intersect with and influence each other. These chapters bring magnifying glasses to issues in the early exhibition and reception of motion pictures in local places. We focus on smaller cities, large towns, villages, and rural crossroads. We pay attention to regional variation in customs and racial attitudes—to the complex interplay of social class, gender, and ethnicity.

Modernity: Is It Always a Good Thing?

In *Keywords*, Raymond Williams notes the changing cultural meanings of the term *modern*, which up through the 1800s was used in an unfavorable sense to mean that something historic (such as old buildings, language, clothing styles) was altered in infelicitous ways. At the turn of the twentieth century, the meaning of the term changed dramatically “until modern became virtually equivalent to improved or satisfactory or efficient” and was “normally used to indicate something unquestionably favorable or desirable.”⁵ The practices of cultural studies urge us to scrutinize the entire range of attitudes and ideas that our culture holds to be natural, inevitable, or “unquestionably favorable or desirable,” however. Episodes of resistance to dominant social and ideological norms intrigue us as moments where subordinate groups argue with large institutions about structure and meaning of cultural forms, and historians of early cinema may be lagging behind scholars who have been investigating the struggles that met other media and technological forms when they were first introduced into rural and small-town communities. Enlightening studies include Michael Berger’s examination of farmers’ ambivalence toward the first automobiles that came tearing down their

country roads, and investigations by Claude Fisher, Carolyn Marvin, David Nye, Ronald Kline, and Jane Adams of the diverse reactions of rural people to the introductions of telephones and electricity. Pamela Grundy and Derek Vaillant, writing on early radio audience reception, suggest that rural audiences did not simply accept what was broadcast “for them” over the airwaves but actively shaped the programming through buying sponsors’ products, writing letters, and showing their preference for some types of shows (regional sports events) over others (Shakespearean lectures). In American rural history, Hal Barron analyzes the persistence in rural communities of those families and individuals who chose to resist the siren call of urban modernity by remaining on the farm, and Katherine Jellison uses lenses of gender and consumer culture to argue that farm women fought hard to bring the technological advances of domestic modernity within their reach. All these rural and small-town people actively took bits and pieces of “modern life” and melded them with a mixture of traditional community ideologies to invent their own hybrid versions of modernity. Doesn’t it stand to reason that small-town movie audiences, at certain times and places, acted similarly?⁶

Let us consider several challenges for investigating early movies, modernity, and nonurban audience contexts. Unlike documented scattered protests against creeping industrialization and commercialization in rural America (resistance to automobiles, electrification, or the telephone), few people outside the big city seem to have rejected the movies outright, at least initially. Histories of moviegoing have not turned up reports of gangs of pitchfork-waving villagers chasing itinerant cinema showmen out of town. No Luddites burned projectors; no frightened rural audiences fled the screened oncoming Black Diamond Express. (Although having not yet located evidence of such occurrences does not mean they never took place, and it would be intriguing to find an instance!) Motion pictures seem to have been well tolerated wherever they were shown in villages and towns across the nation. Many itinerant rural showmen were successful, and nickelodeons cropped up as quickly in smaller towns and cities as they did in Manhattan. Rural individuals may have voted with their feet by not attending movie shows, but this was apparently not done with much organization. Perhaps because cinema was a public entertainment and not a technology meant for the home, workplace, or farm field, rural people were less concerned about the intrusiveness of movie shows into their communities than other technologies. Perhaps because they were outside the large metropolis, the movies appeared only occasionally, brought by itinerant show people to opera houses and church halls, giving communities more of a chance to accept motion pictures as “harmless entertainment” before they became a fixture as regular movie shows in buildings along the small-town Main Streets. Perhaps people outside the major urban centers were more accepting of the movies because there

was a dearth of other entertainments that were *not* locally produced. The movies came to rural crossroads that vaudeville, circuses, melodramatic stock companies, and even some medicine shows rarely touched. Perhaps early instances of film censorship instituted by community groups and town governments could be seen as local protests against the encroachment of urban or modern motion pictures into their more traditional cultures.⁷

Without visible early rejection or initial protests against the movies, how can we gauge the extent of audience interest in them (or the lack thereof)? This absence of data creates research challenges for historians of early film reception, questions that Robert Allen raises in his essay: How do we study the people who did *not* go to the picture show? How do we account for competing cultural and social influences on early audiences—a rural population so scattered and poor that gathering even 100 people for a show was too difficult, a local band concert or baseball game drawing more viewers than the one-night-stand movie show? In some communities, conservative religious groups raised objections to movie shows, but, as Terry Lindvall shows us in his chapter, in other localities the church establishment welcomed cinema as an entertainment alternative to the town's saloons and brothels.

Studying Local Audiences: Bringing Diversity to Cinema and Modernity

If the term *modernity* has generally been met with wide approbation, in contrast, the term *globalization* and far-flung audiences' experience of globalized media have been cause for scholarly concern. For years, academics worried that globalization of media content and control would inevitably lead to a vast homogenization of audience experiences, significant cultural leveling, and reduction of cultural identity and sense of place. A growing number of cultural studies scholars in anthropology and geography investigate the local reception practices of globalized media. They study how the local still operates—products are manufactured centrally for global distribution, but in many important respects have been (and remain) experienced locally; they are made sense of within communities, neighborhoods, and regions.⁸ While in other areas of reception studies, scholars utilize the specific case study, ethnographies of fan communities, or studies of Web site communities on the Internet, in cinema studies, scholars have relied for much longer on sweeping generalizations about the mass audience, the urban audience, the urban working-class audience, or the female or male audience.

Michael Curtin demonstrates that in television studies scholarship, the emphasis on globalization of experiences such as the modernity provided by mass media, or “media imperialism,” has been tempered by a variety of studies in a variety of approaches that emphasize local context of media consumption, local industrial structures that mediate the centrally produced

media product, and “how audiences make unanticipated uses of television programming, often reworking the meanings of transnational texts to accommodate the circumstances of their local social contexts. . . . Rather than simply absorbing U.S. capitalist ideology, ‘active audiences’ fashion meanings and identities that are hybrid and complex.” He concludes that “the play of power in global TV is to be found in the ways that media conglomerates attempt to set structural limits on the production and circulation of meaning and contrarily on the ways in which viewers both comply with and defy these semiotic limits. This play of power requires an understanding of industries and audiences, as well as the diverse social contexts in which the contest over meaning arises.”⁹

Here is where moviegoing histories can provide important new insights into the intersections, conflicts, refashionings, and adoption of the mass, the national, the modern, and the urban into the far reaches of the American hinterlands. The chapters in this collection focus on the local, on specific historical developments that both demonstrate the unusual and unique aspects of film consumption in their case study towns and make valuable analytical connections of qualities that those historical experiences have shared with other locations—from big city to small town—across the nation. Contributors to this volume have helped build on this base with research on a variety of local exhibition practices and case studies of reception histories, to make the continual growth of this area of cinema history rich and exciting.

Some Background on Local Places, Towns, and Small Cities in U.S. History

Because this volume’s historical and geographic focus is on the first fifty years of moviegoing in small towns and regional centers across the nation, it is useful to provide some background on the place of the “hinterlands” in American history in the first half of the twentieth century. Small-town America was as notable for its economic and cultural distance from New York City in 1900 as for the many ways that distance was closed by the 1960s and 1970s. Changes in mass culture (with the movies at its center) were just as influential as economic and mobility shifts in reshaping the United States across the century. We want to argue that, in the period we find most important for moviegoing, small-town America was a very different place from New York or Chicago.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, there were wide disparities between how everyday life was experienced in the largest cities of the United States and in its small towns and rural areas. In 1910, about 12 percent of Americans resided in the major metropolitan centers of 500,000 or more people, while five times as many people, or 63 percent, lived on farms or in villages with populations smaller than 10,000.¹⁰ New York City, Chicago, Philadelphia, and other great cities had dazzling electric lights, telephones,

subways, skyscrapers, and scores of vaudeville theaters. They also had vast differences of social class and ethnicity separating the cities' elites from the immigrant populations that overflowed the working-class districts. The smaller settlements scattered across America's hinterlands, on the other hand, had few urban amenities, and many cultural and economic problems of their own. Nevertheless, they shared at least one thing—an abundance of movie shows.

The vogue for motion pictures spread quickly across the land after their introduction in 1896, appearing everywhere from big-city theaters to small-town opera houses and rural church halls. Of all the new technologies becoming available to American consumers early in the twentieth century (electricity, telephones, automobiles, radio), the movies diffused across the nation the most quickly and thoroughly. Film projectors were portable and relatively easy to operate—without electricity, a projector's light source could come from limelight, or even the headlights of a Model T Ford. The films themselves were mass-produced and could be easily obtained through purchase or rental. Movies found enthusiastic audiences in nearly every corner of every state and territory. A magazine advertisement from 1917 (“And They Both Show the Same Pictures!”) emphasized the far reach of the movies across America: “Whether you attend a million-dollar palace of the screen in the big city, or a tiny hall in a backwoods hamlet, you will find that it is always the best and most prosperous theater in the community that is exhibiting Paramount Artcraft Pictures.”¹¹ Although urban places have always been privileged, across the twentieth century, the movies were as much a part of the popular culture landscape of rural and small-town areas as of the nation's largest cities.

However, cinema historians have examined the medium and its audience primarily in a metropolitan context. In a lively debate with Ben Singer in the pages of *Cinema Journal* over the typicality of New York City as a site of early film exhibition, Robert Allen cited population data and concluded, “If we were forced to choose only one locality to represent the way the movies became a part of most communities in America, we would have more reason to choose Anamosa, Iowa than New York, New York.”¹² Was the movies' modernizing influence only a phenomenon of the city? The scholars contributing to this anthology argue that it was not. However, then, we must ask, what forms or degrees of impact did the movies have on the less-metropolitan, rural, and small-town Americans, their society and culture? We believe that establishing a nonurban context is crucial to complete our understanding of the birth and growth of the cinema and of American social and cultural history. We find that nonmetropolitan audiences and exhibitors encountered and shaped mass culture in their own ways, in continuing patterns of moviegoing practices that were sometimes similar to and often different from those of their counterparts in large cities. Small-town residents simultaneously engaged mass culture on their own terms and were limited by the contexts

established by the business, aesthetic, and institutional practices of mass culture itself.

Although, for decades, scholars have argued for the predominance of urban culture in the United States by quoting the statistic that in 1920 the U.S. census first showed that 50 percent of Americans lived in urban places, they have less often taken into account that the government's definition of *urban* included *all* settlements of 2,500 people or more. For example, the village of Cooperstown, the town of Poughkeepsie, and the borough of Brooklyn were hardly interchangeable places in terms of population and culture, but all were lumped together by the census demographers as equally urban places in New York State. Historical population statistics across the twentieth century tell a more complex story about the size of settlements in which various Americans resided.¹³

The more dramatic story of population change in the twentieth century actually is found in the countryside rather than in the big cities, for residents of the largest regional centers have not represented more than one-third of the nation's total population at any time in the past hundred years. On the other hand, rural and small-town people predominated at the turn of the century—they represented 70 percent of the nation in 1900, but then about half of the population in the 1930s and 1940s, and only about one-third in the latter half of the century. The proportion of Americans who farmed full-time fell from 60 percent in 1900 to 2 percent in 2000. It is easy to oversentimentalize the history of small-town life as a lingering remnant of a mythical past, as a return to some imagined homogeneity, and as representing a conservative sense of community and order. In reality, at the turn of the twentieth century, a great many rural residents were delighted to leave the limited economic horizons and often stultifying social atmosphere of small-town society for the freedom, anonymity, and opportunity of the big city. As cities became larger and more culturally dominant, new urban Americans arrived not only from foreign lands but also from the countryside. After all, Hal Barron has characterized rural residents not as any progressive cultural force but as “those who stayed behind.”¹⁴

Examining only nationwide population averages also obscures significant settlement and cultural variations among geographic regions of the United States, particularly before the 1950s. The Mid-Atlantic States' coastal regions were the most densely populated and were defined by their large cities. Closely spaced small towns, villages, and farms predominated across much of northern New England, upstate New York, and Pennsylvania and outside the industrial centers of the Midwest. Most of the Southeast and Southwest was less densely settled than the North, containing fewer towns and more rural isolation, much more poverty, and sharp racial conflicts that limited everyone's access to the movies. Especially in the years before the Great Depression, midwestern small-town dwellers and farmers tended to be more prosperous

than their southern counterparts and had higher rates of automobile ownership (which enabled more of them to attend movie shows on Saturdays). The vast expanses and rugged terrain of the Mountain States and Pacific States affected settlement patterns there; the West contained very large, isolated ranches and small towns spread far apart, but more of its population was concentrated in larger cities than in the Southeast, a situation that created for some residents very limited access to movies, while others had plenty. Hence it was much more likely that farmers in Nebraska and the Dakotas attended the movies than either white or black sharecroppers could in Alabama or Mississippi. Extremely few communities entirely rejected motion pictures, although significant numbers of people in many towns attended only rarely. (As Robert Allen notes in his chapter, this should be an important aspect of our studies of moviegoing, especially in the South, where transportation and expendable income were in short supply, racial conflict created unequal access to theaters, and religious animosity to public amusements was strong.)¹⁵

Turning to specific local case studies, especially of nonmetropolitan audiences and their moviegoing practices, enables us to address larger debates and issues surrounding the history of cinema and its audiences. As Ronald Walters discusses in his concluding chapter, especially pertinent is the prevailing “modernity thesis,” which sees cinema as a product of and agent promoting a perceptual change at the turn of the twentieth century linked to the rapidity, diversity, and anonymity of urban living. Scholars use this thesis to argue that cinema emerged as an amusement especially tailored to the growth of cities. The chapters in this anthology, explicitly and implicitly, question this hypothesis in many ways. For instance, how can we explain cinema’s acceptance by rural Americans, situated well outside the allegedly “modern” milieu of the city? Did these Americans undergo the same kinds of perceptual changes that made cinema so attractive to urban audiences, or did rural Americans see something different and put to different uses this mass entertainment than did their urban counterparts? If so, can scholars continue to make such an ironbound connection between cinema and modernity?

Local Moviegoing Case Studies in This Collection

In the opening section of this anthology, Robert Allen establishes a larger context within which the other chapters in the volume fit. Allen makes the case for the importance of giving small towns a prominent place in our understanding of the history of the cinema. He claims that the traditional focus on the largest American cities has resulted in significant misperceptions of cinema history as a whole. Recognition of the importance of rural, small-town, and local moviegoing practices will force scholars to rethink traditional concepts and interpretations common to the standard film histories.

The next four chapters offer an analysis of the itinerant and early phase of cinematic exhibition in rural areas. Diverse geographic locations are represented in this collection, from the South (Gastonia and Wilmington, North Carolina; Norfolk, Virginia) to the Midwest (Des Moines and Anamosa, Iowa; Stevens Point, Wisconsin; the fictional Hilltown, Indiana; Lebanon, Kansas; and rural Ontario, Canada) to the West (Placerville, California; and rural Colorado). Despite geographic and regional differences, however, many of the case studies of early film exhibition follow similar patterns—starting with the historian’s search for “the first” local film exhibition or the earliest development of moviegoing practices. These chapters show stages of growth, from a period of itinerant show people to the establishment of nickelodeons whose owners struggled to make connections with their local communities and to work with censors over film and racial issues. The era of traveling amusement shows lasted only a short time in large urban areas, as nickelodeons quickly replaced these exhibitions by 1905. Yet in small towns, itinerants not only brought the first motion pictures to local audiences but also remained an important interface between audiences and moving pictures well into the 1920s (and in some cases, like central Kentucky and the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, into the 1950s). The late Calvin Pryluck examines the role of rural traveling exhibitors and their audiences before 1910 in a variety of regions of the United States. He calls into question the dominant paradigm of film’s origins in an urban, ethnic, working-class milieu.

Three community studies offer a more detailed glimpse at early exhibition. Anne Morey discusses itinerant exhibition and the evolution of stationary theaters in Wilmington, North Carolina, a small regional center in which entertainment stood at the intersection of race and culture. Residents of southern communities mediated mass culture through the lens of analytical dichotomies not prevalent in urban areas at the time. In rural Placerville, California, itinerant exhibition was popular, but the local population would not support a regular diet of motion pictures well into the new century. George Potamianos maintains that for movies to become a dominant amusement in Placerville, an exhibitor had to go to great lengths to shape motion pictures and the theater as an institution worthy of regular local patronage. The exhibitor positioned his theater as a business that would be an important part of Placerville’s community identity, not simply a site in which to show films. Rural motion picture theaters differed significantly from urban nickelodeons, in part because local residents expected the theater space to serve a variety of community functions. Finally, Terry Lindvall argues for the importance local religious leaders in actively shaping the acceptability of film exhibition in Norfolk, Virginia, for both white middle-class and black viewers; the context he presents has been largely overlooked in urban analyses or, at best, discussed only in the context of censorship or battles over film content in the second decade of the twentieth century.

Eventually, established motion picture theaters replaced traveling show people. The five contributions to the next part of the book explore the multiplicity of roles these movie theaters played in specific rural communities, with special attention paid to how exhibition in smaller towns fit into state, regional, and national contexts. Richard Abel explores rural movie audiences in Des Moines, Iowa, and the overall discourse surrounding the cinema by scrutinizing the local press, city directories, and magazines. He is interested not only in the types of films exhibited in the community but also in the larger issue of how motion pictures were presented and discussed in the small city. The provincial government of Ontario, Canada, used film as a way to “modernize” rural areas of the province. Charles Tepperman analyzes how rural Ontario residents accepted and occasionally subverted state efforts to shape the countryside through movies. Focusing on the town of Stevens Point, Wisconsin, Leslie Midkiff DeBauche examines three cinematic “moments” in 1916 to explore how the local community interfaced with national discourses: *Birth of a Nation* was exploited locally as part of a national “fashion week” campaign; the new Lyric Theater opened in the context of national “urban beautification” discourses; and national and local advertisements promoted the serial *Gloria’s Romance*. Finally, Gregory Waller uses fictional representation of the Lllamarada Theater in a series of articles published in the *Saturday Evening Post* and in the film industry trade press to uncover how the national discourse incorporated and regularized the culture of rural theaters and audiences at the edge of late-1920s prosperity as small-town midwesterners entered the 1930s.

Two contributions to the subsequent part explore the impact of the Great Depression on small-town moviegoers and theater managers. Academic examination of film exhibition in the era of “classical Hollywood cinema” (1915–60) has focused for the most part on the largest theaters, the approximately 2,000 lavish urban picture palaces like the Roxy, Strand, and Paramount in New York and the luxurious Balaban and Katz theaters in Chicago, which were owned or controlled by the film studios and which provided the bulk of studio income (as opposed to the more than 12,000 smaller theaters across the nation that were independently owned but nevertheless indirectly controlled by the studios’ block booking contracts).¹⁶ Kathy Fuller-Seeley uses letters published in an exhibitors’ forum in the industry trade journal *Motion Picture Herald* to argue that the economic collapse imposed greater hardships on rural theater owners who had to employ different strategies than their urban counterparts to retain audiences during a decade of poverty, drought, and pre-Production Code films and block booking. Paige Reynolds details a specific practice common to exhibitors in rural communities in the 1930s, the controversial Bank Night, and positions that practice in the context of changing ideas about the American Dream and ideologies of success.

After a return to prosperity in the World War II era, movie theaters began to close across the nation in the 1950s—both old, worn theaters, in decaying big-city commercial centers, and those that had been at the heart of small-town Main Streets. Everywhere, movie attendance rates dropped by half or more. Big cities reached out into the surrounding countryside through suburbanization. Farmlands turned first into drive-in movie theaters, and then later into subdivisions. Television also spread in the 1950s as a competing form of entertainment, although more isolated farmlands and small towns had to wait years (until the late 1950s) to be within range of TV signals. The new generation of movie theaters built in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s were concentrated in suburban shopping malls and commercial centers. Both urban downtowns and a great many rural areas lost all their movie theaters. Typical was Lebanon, Kansas, which in the 1930s was a village of 800 people with a 250-seat theater, the Owl (operated by Gladys McArdle). There were eight to ten other competing movie shows within a forty-mile radius of Lebanon. The Owl closed at the end of World War II. Today the town has only about 300 residents, mostly older people; the younger generations have moved away in search of economic opportunity, and residents have to drive forty to fifty miles to find a movie show.

The last two chapters draw out elements of the bigger picture presented in this volume. Kevin Corbett examines the recent efforts of local exhibitors, preservationists, and community activists to keep the remaining historic small-town theaters viable entities for the present and future. He conducted a series of interviews with small-town central Michigan residents who relayed their experiences at the movie theaters in their communities. Corbett's ethnographic reconstruction argues that there has been a distinctive "rural" practice of moviegoing, a sense of community and shared culture, which preservationists seek to marshal in their efforts to keep old theaters open. In the concluding chapter, Ronald Walters sums up some of the larger themes raised in the volume and offers fruitful directions for future thought and research. He argues that one of the central questions posed by this anthology is the question of what constitutes audiences of popular culture and whether or not the relationship between audiences and cultural texts can be discussed in general terms. Can we ever, in short, make meaningful statements about audiences of popular culture, or is that audience so diverse that nothing systematic and general can be said at all? In particular, he discusses how the contributions to this anthology put the "modernity thesis" to the test. The study of moviegoing practices outside major metropolitan areas paradoxically both clarifies and obfuscates our understanding of the history of the cinema.

Local moviegoing research can be conducted in a variety of ways, with outcomes other than conventional academic articles, and we heartily encourage

readers to undertake their own studies into the cinema history of their communities. Our research has developed from interests in the specific and local, in asking questions about how people interacted while attending the cinema, and in uncovering what was unique or unusual in a community's moviegoing practices, and what were parts of larger regional and historical patterns. The range of sources researchers can mine is wide—fire insurance maps, architectural surveys, newspapers, scrapbooks and diaries, county records, newspapers, local histories, and interviews with senior citizens and families of theater workers can all yield information. Library reference and special collections departments may have old theater clippings or photographs. Flea markets, antique dealers, and Internet auctions of old postcards and paper ephemera may offer unusual materials. There is also a growing shelf of scholarly and popular books on local moviegoing history.

Moviegoing history research projects can take a wide variety of forms. Project director Karan Sheldon of the nonprofit moving image preservation organization Northeast Historic Film, in Bucksport, Maine, researched and created an ambitious and multifaceted traveling museum exhibition on the history of moviegoing in northern New England. It was based on extensive archival, oral history, and architectural research, and it received substantial funding from agencies such as the National Endowment for the Humanities. The "Going to the Movies" exhibit has toured several states and is installed in the NHF restored theater/headquarters building (see information on this and other exhibits at <http://www.oldfilm.org>). David Guss of Tufts University involved graduate and undergraduate students in the research and creation of an exhibit for the Somerville (Mass.) Museum, "The Lost Theaters of Somerville" (<http://www.losttheatres.org>). Gregory Waller (*At the Picture Show*, 1993) and Kevin Corbett (*Little Palaces: Michigan's Historic Small Town Movie Theaters*, 2000) have created insightful film documentaries on local moviegoing history.

Robert C. Allen of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, has developed a graduate seminar on the history of the social experience of moviegoing, which he has co-taught several times with Kate Bowles of the University of Wollongong, Australia. The course is an experiment to see what challenges and opportunities might arise in trying to use new teaching technologies (especially the "course environment" software packages) to bring together research students around the world with "traditional" on-campus students to study the history of moviegoing. By announcing the course opportunity on film listservs and Web sites, we attracted more than a dozen interested graduate students from around the world: the United States, Great Britain, the Netherlands, and New Zealand. Students were motivated to participate for a number of reasons: some were already doing original research in the field; most were at universities where there were few or no opportunities to take a dedicated course on the history of movie audiences, reception,

or moviegoing. One of the course's subsidiary goals was to allow these students to hold a conversation with scholars whose work had shaped the field of the history of movie audiences and reception, and numerous scholars joined them for a week at a time for online discussion of their work. Student research groups in the program have uncovered significant variations in North Carolina film exhibition patterns, who operated theaters and why, how censorship was applied or evaded, and how racial issues shaped moviegoing experiences through segregation. Arthur Knight of the College of William and Mary is working with students to implement the Williamsburg Theater Project (<http://www.wm.edu/amst/wtp>, designed by Robert K. Nelson), a searchable online database that documents all film programs shown at Williamsburg theaters from the 1920s through the 1960s in the context of local culture.

An international group of cinema scholars has formed the History of Moviegoing, Exhibition, and Reception Project (HOMER). As the group's Web site explains, it "aims to promote understanding of the complex, international phenomena of film going, exhibition, and reception through several means: the collection, scholarly vetting, and sharing, via the world wide web, of new data on film going, exhibition, and reception{ . . . }and dissemination of new models of collaborative research in the humanities that incorporate faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates in long-term projects, and the development of new ways to incorporate such research into cinema studies and cultural history classrooms." The group's Web site (www.homerproject.org) and its links will provide readers with portals through which to explore archival data, case studies, and teaching materials for future potential moviegoing research projects.

Notes

1. Robert Allen, "Relocating American Film History: The 'Problem' of the Empirical," *Cultural Studies* 20 (2006): 44–88.
2. See, for example, Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz, eds., *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995).
3. Tom Gunning, "Tracing the Individual Body: Photography, Detectives and Early Cinema," in Charney and Schwartz, *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, 15.
4. Allen, "Relocating American Film History."
5. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 208–9.
6. Claude Fisher, *America Calling: A Social History of the Telephone to 1940* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992); David E. Nye, *Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology, 1880–1940* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992); Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking about Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press,

American Rural and Urban Population, 1900–1980

Settlement	Percentage of U.S. Population in Each Decade								
	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980
Size									
Farm and rural	52.1	45.5	40.4	36.4	36.4	29	24.3	21.2	21.4
Small towns									
1,000–10,000	16.2	17.5	17.3	16.1	16	16.7	15.5	15.5	15.7
Larger towns									
10,000–50,000	9.4	10.4	11.4	12.6	13.2	13.6	18.1	19.3	22.5
Regional city centers									
50,000–500,000	11.7	14.1	15.4	18	17.5	17.7	20.2	20.3	21.6
Big cities									
500,000+	10.6	12.5	15.5	16.9	16.9	17.6	16	15.6	12.5

1990); Michael Berger, *The Devil Wagon in God's Country: The Automobile and Social Change in Rural America, 1893–1929* (New York: Archon Books, 1979); Ronald R. Kline, *Consumers in the Country: Technology and Social Change in Rural America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Kline, "Resisting Development, Reinventing Modernity: Rural Electrification in the United States before World War II," *Environmental Values* 11 (2002): 327–44; Pamela Grundy, "'We Always Tried to Be Good People': Respectability, Crazy Water Crystals and Hillbilly Music on the Air, 1933–1935," *Journal of American History* 81 (1995): 1591–1620; Derek Vaillant, "'Your Voice Came In Last Night but I Thought It Sounded a Little Scared': Rural Radio Listening and 'Talking Back' during the Progressive Era in Wisconsin, 1920–1932," in *Radio Reader*, ed. Michelle Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (New York: Routledge, 2002), 63–86; Hal S. Barron, *Mixed Harvest: The Second Great Transformation in the Rural North, 1870–1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Katherine Jellison, *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913–1963* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Jane Adams, *The Transformation of Rural Life: Southern Illinois, 1890–1990* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994). For a European context, see Ted W. Margadant, "Tradition and Modernity in Rural France during the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Modern History* 56 (1984): 667–97.

7. Ted Ownby argues that conservative Christian rejection of motion pictures and other aspects of commercial popular culture only came in the second and third decades of the twentieth century, when the initial period of acceptance in a technological novelty hardened into criticism of the sexual or modern-tinged topics that movies increasingly displayed. Ownby, *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation and Manhood in the Rural South 1865–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

8. Scholars use the term *glocal* to describe a process of the "contested impact of globalization as resulting in combination rather than conquest" for outcome in specific localities "that is both globally connected and locally loyal." Robert Eric Livingston, "Glocal Knowledges: Agency and Place in Literary Studies," *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association* 116 (2001): 145–57; E. V. Swyngedouw and M. V. Kaika, "The Making of 'Glocal' Urban Modernities," *City* 7, no. 1 (2003): 5–21.

9. Michael Curtin, "Globalisation," in *Television Studies*, ed. Toby Miller (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 43–46.

10. Donald J. Bogue, *The Population of the United States: Historical Trends and Future Projections* (New York: Free Press, 1985), 112–13, table 3.11.
11. “And They Both Show the Same Pictures!” Paramount Artcraft advertisement, *Saturday Evening Post*, September 20, 1919, 9.
12. Robert Allen, “Manhattan Myopia; or, Oh! Iowa!” *Cinema Journal* 35 (1996): 96.
13. Bogue, *The Population of the United States*.
14. Hal Barron, *Those Who Stayed Behind: Rural Society in Nineteenth-Century New England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
15. Kathryn H. Fuller, *At the Picture Show: Small-Town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 28–46.
16. See Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992); Richard Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema*, 2nd ed. (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2003).