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Foreword

THE 1910s : PIONEERING INSIGHTS INTO
AUDIENCES STUDIES

Frédéric Gimello-Mesplomb

This book endeavors to unearth the earliest texts, often overlooked or obscure, about the discourse on cinema audiences. We aspire to challenge the prevailing notion that views these pioneering texts from the pre-1920s era as rudimentary attempts, primarily focused on either compiling lists of cinema spectators or delineating their socio-demographic profiles. Contrary to this perception, we aim to demonstrate that these initial writings on audiences have significantly shaped subsequent endeavors, ultimately contributing to establishing a comprehensive theory of audiences—a still delineating and defining field.

Drawing from key texts such as Elsaesser and Barker's *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative* (1990), we argue that these early efforts were deeply intertwined with the immense social, economic and cultural transformations reshaping the fabric of modern life in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The rise of industrial capitalism, urbanization and new forms of industrial labor reorganized experiences of work and leisure in profound ways. Meanwhile,

technological innovations from mass printing to photography and moving pictures gave birth to new mass media forms and consumer products catering to emerging urban populations.

In this heady milieu of social flux, the introduction of cinema sparked intense debate across many spheres. On one hand, movies were embraced by some progressive reformers as a powerful potential tool for mass education, enculturation and even social control of the working classes and new immigrant populations. Advocates highlighted cinema's ability to transmit ideas, cultural values and modes of behavior in an attractive entertainment format resonant with modern urban sensibilities.

Simultaneously, moralists and conservative voices, as discussed in Hansen's *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (1991), sounded alarms about movies' potential to corrupt and degrade public tastes, spur delinquency, and undermine traditional social structures - a fear particularly potent when it came to their impacts on children and lower classes seen as susceptible to such influences. Gunning (1986) suggests that early cinema was a site of negotiation, where audiences, filmmakers, and exhibitors interacted to shape the medium's conventions and possibilities.

Musser (1990) further argues that the cinema was not just a passive receptacle for the audience's gaze, but an active participant in the construction of meaning. The cinema was a space of social interaction, where audiences could engage with the film and each other, shaping the viewing experience and the film's interpretation. Staiger (2005) highlights the role of the cinema as a site of cultural exchange. The cinema was not just a place to watch films but a space where different cultures, classes, and genders could interact, negotiate, and influence each other. This aspect of the cinema experience, often overlooked in traditional film studies, is crucial to understanding the complex dynamics of early cinema audiences.

This polarized context, situated within the birth of consumer capitalism's reorganization of private and public life, spurred sociological, psychological, cultural, and even anthropological inquiries into cinema as a vital new social force and emergent moviegoing as a pattern of modern life.

Scholars across disciplines interrogated who was attending movies, why they were drawn to this new mass experience, and what psychological, ideological or behavioral effects could result.

Starting in the 1910s, pioneering academics explored this new movie audience's social composition and motivations through ethnographic methods, providing foundational studies of moviegoing habits that would lead to more complex interdisciplinary analyses during the subsequent peak periods of widespread movie attendance in the 1930s-1940s. These later landmark studies, such as the Payne Fund research, investigated how different types of films influenced the psychology, identities, worldviews, and even delinquent behavior of specific audience groups like children/adolescents or marginalized communities. Such inquiries drew on an interdisciplinary array of emergent theoretical frameworks from sociology, psychology, anthropology, and nascent communication studies.

Notable examples include the works of sociologists like Herbert Blumer (1900-1987), as well as pioneering ethnographic studies by Emilie Altenloh and the Payne Fund Studies, conducted in the 1920s-1930s, which examined the effects of movies on children and adolescents from integrated psychological, sociological, anthropological and emerging media effects perspectives (Jowett et al., 1996; Butsch, 2000).

The very coining of the terms "sociology of the cinema" and "sociology of audiences" by a handful of prescient academics in the 1910s reflected this inherently multidisciplinary approach to grap-

pling with the new phenomenon of movies as modern life. However, this initial caution in narrating disciplinary boundaries was rapidly transcended as audience research quickly evolved in tandem with the swiftly commercializing film industry's own economic interests and the exigencies of the World War era. Early scholars' keen observations regarding nuances of audience demographics, differing reception strategies, and the commercial importance of accurately studying and incorporating spectators' desires into marketing, promotion and narrative strategies displayed a sophisticated understanding of the emerging spectatorial dynamics at play.

Groundbreaking works like Emilie Altenloh's "Zur Soziologie des Kino" (1914) mined Veblenian theories of status and leisure consumption, ethnographic methods from anthropology, and avant-garde aesthetic concepts like the "cinema of attractions" to anatomize working-class movie spectators' experiences in Mannheim. This landmark study highlighted how movies provided an affordable escape into fantasy and insight into aspirational lifestyles, theorizing their power to both subvert and reinscribe class and gender norms. Influential texts like the British Cinema Commission Report (1917) consolidated moralistic, educational, psychological and national security perspectives in assessing the social impacts of movies and regulation through censorship (Rae, 2019; Staiger, 1992).

The overarching goal of this volume is to establish a critical intellectual genealogy linking these early, interdisciplinary attempts at theorizing the new subjective experiences and social dynamics of movie spectatorship, to the subsequent canonical works and robust conceptual frameworks advanced by pioneering film theorists of the 1920s-1930s like Hugo Münsterberg, Rudolf Arnheim, Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin and others. Too often, the

historiography of film theory leaps from recognizing Münsterberg's seminal 1916 psychological study "The Photoplay" to crediting the later Weimar and Frankfurt School philosophers with first grappling with cinema as a consequential modern art form worthy of rigorous aesthetics, perception theory and ideology critique.

However, this book seeks to recuperate and highlight the crucial, if underexplored, proto-theoretical groundwork and interdisciplinary foundation laid by the scattered writings, ethnographies, psychological studies, economic analyses and reception surveys produced in the 1910s by researchers across academia, industry and government. While inherently limited by their pragmatic aims and lack of coherent unifying frameworks, these hard-to-classify exploratory texts provided vital early framings of spectators' pivotal roles as active meaners in the cinematic experience. They advanced germinal theoretical concepts like the "attractions" model of viewer engagement, established methodologies for empirically studying audiences, and began articulating how movies could serve as dreamworlds channeling desires, shaping socialization, and constructing new cultural subjectivities beyond mere demographic categories.

A significant factor long obscuring these proto-theoretical contributions has been the decidedly uncanonical, "grey literature" nature of the primary sources - overwhelmingly comprised of doctoral dissertations, commissioned industry marketing surveys, educational pamphlets, local censorship rulings and limited-circulation reports by civic groups. Nevertheless, closely analyzing these first-hand records of how audiences were consuming, interpreting and even contesting movies in their initial decades reveals a rich genealogy of thought that should be engaged with and built upon by any comprehensive study of the dynamic

spectatorial phenomenon, rather than treated as a mere historical preface.

Over the past half-century, academic film studies and histories of cinema have produced an immense body of invaluable scholarship tracing the technological innovations, artistic movements, industry practices, and key works and figures underlying the evolutionary development of movies into a mature mass art form and commercial behemoth. However, the intellectual history charting the diverse origins and progression of theories grappling with the spectator's changing roles and relationships to those cinematic forms has remained relatively underdeveloped. This volume aims to enrich that parallel history of spectatorship theory as an interdisciplinary trajectory uniting disciplines like aesthetic philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and political economy around the pivotal social and cultural implications of movie-going as a modern experience.

This thematic inquiry engaged pioneering thinkers in tangential fields since the 1910s, accelerating after World War 1 as movies transitioned into a dominant mass entertainment tied to new practices of commercialization, marketing, and questions of propaganda. It necessarily intersected with economic interests surrounding the rapidly-consolidating and internationalizing film industry, the technological standardizations allowing for streamlined systems of production and distribution, as well as pressing institutional issues around regulating audience access and the need to empirically study movie impacts on attitudes and behaviors.

Well before figures like Münsterberg, Walter Benjamin, or the Frankfurt School thinkers, interdisciplinary scholars had initiated research programs theorizing moviegoing habits through ethnographies and surveys, studying Hollywood marketing's appeals to spectatorial desires, analyzing censorship rulings for how they con-

structed systems of representation, and attempting to map cinema's ideological dimensions by examining its effects on specific demographic groups. While limited by empiricist methods, localized data sets and lack of unifying paradigms, this scattered proto-theory cumulatively displayed an emerging recognition that movies necessitated understanding the spectator's critical role in constructing experiences and meanings.

For instance, the pioneering works of figures like the poet Vachel Lindsay in "The Art of the Moving Picture" (1915) and Terry Ramsaye's seminal history "A Million and One Nights" (1926) explored cinema's artistic, cultural and industrial dimensions through the lens of emerging fan cultures and shifts in working-class leisure patterns enabled by Fordist capitalism - foreshadowing theoretical interest in ideology, reception and media's socio-economic contexts (Koszarski, 1994; Staiger, 2005).

By excavating and interweaving these historically overlooked or marginalized sources, the present volume reconstructs an archaeology of early interdisciplinary efforts to account for the subjective experiences, psychological dynamics and socio-cultural impacts of cinema as an unprecedented media-technological phenomenon provoking fascination and anxiety. Collectively, these writings by academics, educators, social critics, journalists, policymakers, and industry insiders laid the vital conceptual groundwork for theorizing the spectator's pivotal positionality and meaning-making role before such inquiries cohered into more sustained disciplinary paradigms.

The book's three-part structure illuminates how interdisciplinary strands coalesced into tendrils of audience theory:

- Part I chronicles the perceptual shift from conceiving spectators as passive recipients to recognizing their agency as

interpreters actively co-creating cinematic meaning, as delineated through early script manuals, writings on visual pleasure by figures like Vachel Lindsay, and psychological studies of film's immersive effects on attention and identification.

- Part II explores how public institutions' concerns around cinema's potential social impacts catalyzed initiatives to regulate and educate audience behavior, merging discourse strands from public policy, educational theory, cultural criticism, religious censorship advocacy and other normative spheres contending with movies' semiotic construction of representations.
- Finally, Part III's case studies showcase pioneering attempts at systematic, empirical audience research transcending purely demographic surveys, as in sociological fieldwork on moviegoing cultures and studies of films' ideological functions across marginalized communities. Works like Emilie Altenloh's pathbreaking "Zur Soziologie des Kino" and the exhaustive survey "The Audience" presaged central methodologies and theoretical paradigms of later reception studies and effects research.

By critically recuperating these buried genealogies, the book elucidates how scattered, uncoordinated lines of interdisciplinary inquiry coalesced into the intellectual foundations for theories of audiences, spectatorship, subjective engagement, and reception that remain vital for comprehending the viewers' pivotal role in constructing meanings, ideologies, and identities within evolving media experiences. While inherently rudimentary, limited by empiricist methods, and lacking unifying theoretical architecture, these pre-disciplinary investigations laid the conceptual bedrock

for grappling with cinema as a new modern phenomenon necessitating new analytical frameworks for the spectator's meaning-making agency as an active, interpreting subject within larger social, economic, technological and ideological matrices. Recognizing and building upon such overlooked proto-theoretical origins enriches understanding of the diverse, interdisciplinary roots informing subsequent traditions of audience and reception theory and media studies.

Notes:

- Elsaesser, Thomas, and Adam Barker, eds. *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*. London: BFI, 1990.
- Gunning, Tom. "The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde." *Wide Angle* 8.3/4 (1986): 63-70.
- Hansen, Miriam. *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991.
- Musser, Charles. *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.
- Staiger, Janet. *Media Reception Studies*. New York: NYU Press, 2005.