

The Silent Cinema Reader

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BEN SINGER

MANHATTAN NICKELODEONS

New data on audiences and exhibitors

THE NICKELODEON BOOM IN MANHATTAN was an extraordinary phenomenon. At the close of 1905 movies were still a relatively marginal amusement, filling brief slots at the end of vaudeville shows or running on Sundays in melodrama theaters that aimed to evade New York's blue laws against live performance. Two years later, nickelodeons had revolutionized urban recreation and altered the commercial landscape of Manhattan. Well over 300 small storefront movie theaters, known as "nickelodeons," and converted larger theaters screened movies full-time by 1908.

Early exhibition in Manhattan holds special interest for film history, not because it was necessarily the most extensive or important (although it may well have been, since New York City was the nation's commercial and cultural capital, as well as the center of the pre-Hollywood film industry) or because it was particularly representative of the emergence of cinema elsewhere in the country (recent historians have stressed different patterns of development in different cities and towns),¹ but rather because Manhattan's nickelodeon boom so often has functioned as historical shorthand for the rise of the movies in general. For most people, even those of us who know better, the image of cramped, dingy nickelodeons in Manhattan's Lower East Side ghetto stands as a symbol for the cinema's emergence in America. This synecdoche stems largely from the superficiality of traditional survey histories and perhaps, more generally, from the ideological convenience of the notion that the birth of mass entertainment in America took place at the gateway of the promised land, welling up "from below," from the lives of new immigrants and working people.

Because Manhattan's nickelodeon boom has played such a prominent role in shaping our conception of early film history, as well as American social history, it is crucial that we derive an accurate picture of that phenomenon. How big was the nickelodeon boom in Manhattan? What was the make-up of the nickelodeon's audience in terms of both class and ethnic composition? In what kinds of neighborhoods were nickelodeons located, and what explains their distribution? Who were the exhibitors? How stable was the nickelodeon business? These questions have remained unresolved for a surprisingly long time.

The issue of early cinema's class composition and orientation has been especially pivotal in recent historical work. Whereas traditional film histories (Jacobs, Hampton, Ramsaye, etc.)² framed early cinema as a lower-class amusement patronized predominantly by immigrants and workers (at least until after World War One), revisionist historians in the late seventies stressed

the importance of middle-class audiences throughout the nickelodeon era and teens. The revisionist argument maintained that the middle class was at the cinema from virtually the very start, or at least the middle class managed to appropriate and "uplift" the cinema to suit its own tastes and objectives as soon as it realized how big the cinema actually was. Along with works by Russell Merritt and Lary May, Robert C. Allen's 1979 essay "Motion Picture Exhibition in Manhattan, 1906-1912: Beyond the Nickelodeon" deserves special recognition, in this context, as a key revisionist intervention.³ More recently, several important works on early cinema (Burch, Stead, Hansen, and Uricchio and Pearson, among others) have absorbed aspects of this class scenario into their historical narratives, suggesting that the revisionist argument has evolved from a maverick position to a comfortable paradigm.⁴

The scholarly acceptance of the revisionist argument is due, at least in part, to its clear, if unstated, compatibility with familiar models of social power. On the one hand, the revisionist focus on the middle class's importance in the cultural arena fits the concept that America, the great melting pot, transformed itself in the early part of this century into a mass culture, consolidated under common middle-class tastes and values. On the other hand, the implication that the middle class "colonized" the cinema early on supports influential Marxist models of bourgeois domination and social control.⁵ In addition to their theoretical appropriateness, revisionist histories were persuasive because they represented a new kind of film history committed to innovative empirical research. With their use of primary materials such as fire insurance maps, business directories, government documents, and daily newspapers, they seemed inherently more credible than the traditional survey histories, which tended not to bother about such things as supporting evidence or footnotes.

Primarily, however, the revisionist class argument has gained acceptance simply by default; that is, by virtue of the fact that little new evidence has surfaced to fuel debate about early cinema's social milieu. This essay aims to reopen the discussion. In several ways, my findings prompt one to reconsider the thrust of the revisionist argument. When one returns to the materials the revisionist histories draw on and takes advantage of more detailed historical data, significant problems and limitations in the revisionist research emerge. Reexamining early exhibition in Manhattan reminds us that recent film history — ostensibly historiographically aware history emphasizing primary research — cannot be taken at face value any more than the "old-fashioned" history it replaces.⁶

How big a boom?

The first step in examining early audiences and exhibitors is to determine the number and locations of movie theaters. Recently discovered evidence suggests that nickelodeons were far more abundant in Manhattan than scholars have assumed. Roberta Pearson and William Uricchio have found a handwritten memo from New York's police commissioner to Mayor McClellan dated December 11, 1908 (a couple of weeks before the mayor's famous Christmas Eve closing of every nickelodeon in the city), that enumerates the number of movie theaters in Manhattan and the other boroughs.⁷ For Manhattan, the memo counts 194 "common shows" (ordinary nickelodeons), 93 "concert moving pictures" (vaudeville theaters that had switched over to mixed bills or to movies altogether), and 28 "theaters with moving pictures" (theaters that interspersed runs of plays and films, or theaters that had switched over to movies altogether but whose more expensive theatrical license had yet to expire). In total, the memo counts 315 theaters in Manhattan.⁸

This number is significantly larger than the figure of 123 movie theaters cited in Robert C. Allen's article. Allen's primary source for locating nickelodeons was the 1908 edition of

Trow's Business Directory of Greater New York. This directory is an extraordinary historical resource, and Allen deserves credit for unearthing it in the context of film history. But in light of the police commissioner's memo, it appears that *Trow's 1908* listed only about two-fifths of the movie theaters operating in Manhattan in 1908. A number of factors might account for the incompleteness of the *Trow's* listing. Perhaps a respectable business directory like *Trow's* was reluctant to list hole-in-the-wall, fly-by-night ghetto theaters. A more likely explanation is that the 1908 edition probably documented an earlier, smaller-scale phase of the nickelodeon boom in New York. There was apparently a lag between the time the listings were compiled and the time they were published. *Trow's 1908* was probably prepared in mid-1907 and released later that year.⁹

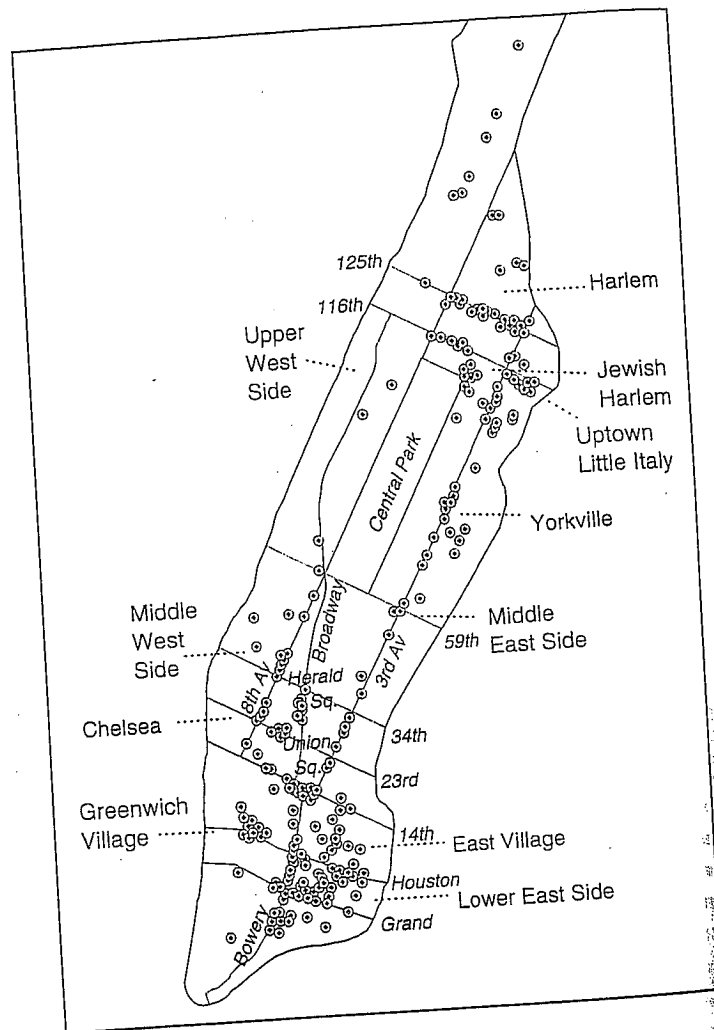
Unfortunately, one cannot simply turn to the police commissioner's memo as the basis for research into the early theaters, since the memo lists no addresses, theater names, or other information — just a single sum next to each type of theater. One can compile a fairly comprehensive record of Manhattan nickelodeons in 1908, however, by supplementing the *Trow's 1908* listings with the directory's 1909 listings and then also including information found in ledgers of building permits maintained by the New York Bureau of Buildings.¹⁰ In addition, trade journal articles and books from the period contain scattered information on theater locations. Using all these sources, I have been able to locate 221 movie theaters. This number is still only about 70 percent of the 315 theaters counted in the police commissioner's memo. Moreover, unlike the police commissioner's count (which one presumes was up-to-date as of the time it was compiled), my enumeration does not give us a snapshot of exhibition at any one point in time. The data I use reflect listings of theaters made over a two-year period, and, as I will discuss later, many of the theaters recorded in the early part of that period had gone out of business by the time others opened up.¹¹ I will assume, however, that my expanded list provides a reasonably faithful representation of the exhibition situation between mid-1907 and mid-1909. The information we have on the 221 theaters constitutes a rich basis for a more accurate historical analysis of early movie theaters and their audiences. (Figure 7.1 gives an overview of theater locations.)¹²

A middle-class audience?

[. . .] At the heart of the image of nickelodeons in traditional histories is an assertion about class: movies were a proletarian amusement; proper middle-class types stayed away, at least until after World War One. A passage from Lewis Jacobs's 1939 survey *The Rise of the American Film* exemplifies the traditional scenario: "Concentrated largely in poorer shopping districts and slum neighborhoods, nickelodeons were disdained by the well-to-do. But the workmen and their families who patronized the movies did not mind the crowded, unsanitary, and hazardous accommodations most of the nickelodeons offered."¹³ How accurate is this historical sketch? Descriptions such as this one prompt Robert C. Allen to contend that the "accounts of early motion picture exhibition contained in secondary sources are grossly inadequate." Allen argues that neither were nickelodeons and larger theaters (often overlooked in traditional film histories) concentrated primarily in ghetto neighborhoods, nor did they cater solely to a proletarian audience. Movies, he suggests, attracted a middle-class audience throughout the nickelodeon era and early teens.

Allen bases his argument largely on research into the location of early movie theaters in Manhattan (as well as research on the role of vaudeville in early exhibition). Using *Trow's 1908*, Allen finds that, contrary to the impression generally given by traditional histories, the majority of nickelodeons were located outside the Lower East Side ghetto, many in putatively middle-

Figure 7.1
Map of Manhattan
nickelodeons, 1907-1909



class neighborhoods or in traditional entertainment districts that presumably served a variety of social types. "In terms of social class," he argues, "more nickelodeons were located in or near middle-class neighborhoods than in the Lower East Side ghetto."¹⁴

In one respect, Allen's statement is correct: theaters in the Lower East Side and Union Square area, while by far the thickest concentration, constituted only about 40 percent of Manhattan's total number of movie theaters. Allen's research is more centrally interested in the remaining 60 percent, however, since he believes these call into question the traditional characterization of the nickelodeon's working-class and immigrant foundation. Allen maintains that "nickelodeons were not just located in working-class neighborhoods. They seemed to be clustered in middle-class sectors, as well as *certain* poor neighborhoods."¹⁵

The key areas in question are four uptown neighborhoods: Little Italy, Jewish Harlem, the Upper East Side (or Yorkville), and Harlem proper. Allen implies that these neighborhoods were middle class and, by implication, that the nickelodeons found there were frequented by middle-class patrons. Unfortunately, Allen may have been a bit hasty in characterizing as middle-class immigrant neighborhoods whose class compositions in 1908 were ambiguous at best. For example, solely on the basis of a brief 1899 description of the picturesque qualities of uptown

Manhattan's Little Italy (an area roughly bounded by Third Avenue and the East River between 100th and 120th Streets), Allen suggests that this area was "much more affluent than the immigrant ghettos of Lower Manhattan." The quotation, from E. Idell Zeisloft's monumental book *The New Metropolis*, describes Little Italy as "one of the most flourishing and picturesque Italian colonies in New York . . . The tenements that line these streets are not much to look at in themselves, but the quaintly furnished rooms in them . . . the gay lines of wash, the small shops and street scenes make up a picture that never loses interest . . . These are the peaceful Italians from the north of Italy, and the stiletto is rarely brought into play here."¹⁶ While Zeisloft found the neighborhood colorful, quaint, and unthreatening, there is nothing in the description to establish Little Italy as a middle-class area. The passage is typical of a bourgeois touristic interest in the "old world charm" of immigrant community life.¹⁷ But elsewhere in the book Zeisloft takes a different stance, stating that Little Italy's "tremendous population is increasing every year, and promising to engulf the neat dwellings and drive out the better population . . . Reformers and philanthropists regard this growing colony with dismay . . . This uptown foreign colony bids fair to present extreme difficulties in the near future."¹⁸ Other descriptions and statistics are even more decisive in portraying the area as an out-and-out slum. Harlem historian Gilbert Osofsky, for example, writes:

In the less attractive areas of Harlem on the periphery of the middle-class community lived people by-passed by Harlem's late nineteenth-century affluence. Italians crowded in "common tenements" . . . In the 1890's the poverty of "Harlem's Little Italy" seemed a glaring incongruity in a neighborhood known as the home of "the great middle-class population" . . . Italians were the first New Immigrant group to come to Harlem and a source of embarrassment and displeasure to the richer people who lived nearby. The smells that emanated from their "vile tenements," one critic said in 1894, "annoyed their brownstone neighbors" . . . "Here can be found the refuse of Italy making a poor living on the refuse from Harlem ashbarrels," a caustic reporter commented.¹⁹

Thomas Kessner's *The Golden Door: Italian and Jewish Immigrant Mobility in New York City 1880-1915* gives information about uptown Little Italy's class profile. Drawing on federal census data, Kessner found that in 1905 over 85 percent of members of Italian households in the neighborhood worked in blue-collar jobs. One person in seven worked in a low white-collar occupation (such as small shopkeeper or salesperson), and only one person in one hundred held a high white-collar professional or business position.²⁰ Uptown Little Italy was also very densely populated, containing as many as 637 people per acre. The enclave was, in fact, considerably more crowded than any part of Lower Manhattan's Italian sections.²¹ These findings hardly convey the image of a middle-class community. The class composition of moviegoers in uptown Little Italy was probably very similar to that generally assumed for nickelodeons in the downtown ghetto.

The characterization of Jewish Harlem as a middle-class neighborhood is more understandable, since in the 1890s many of the more affluent Russian Jews did in fact leave the Lower East Side and settle in this area surrounding the northeast corner of Central Park, between 98th and 118th Streets. But the neighborhood's class profile changed so rapidly during the next decade that by the time nickelodeons sprouted there, it was probably no longer thought of as a middle-class area. Jeffrey S. Gurock, in his scholarly history of Jewish Harlem, notes the influx of poorer Jews from the Lower East Side and the simultaneous exodus of the middle class:

Once-ideal or acceptable residential areas were almost overnight beset with problems common to all heavily populated areas, and lost much of their glamour. Such was the case with [the area] that had attracted most of Harlem's early more affluent Russian-Jewish settlers. It was inundated by thousands of poorer Jewish settlers; they settled in the new tenements built on previously vacant lands or which replaced the small private dwellings that had dotted Fifth and Madison Avenues' landscape. By 1910, this once moderately populated section of uptown contained population densities in excess of 480 and 560 persons per acre. As the neighborhood began to be weighed down by overcrowding, East Harlem's white-collar class began leaving for new, better accommodations . . . And their old neighborhood was quickly proletarianized. The basic shift both in general neighborhood composition and in the Russian-Jewish economic profile was well under way as early as 1905.²²

Gurock's sample of census data reveals that working-class residents outnumbered middle-class residents in 1905, and one can assume the blue-collar proportion continued to grow rapidly thereafter as the middle class fled to better neighborhoods. Its population was made up mainly of tailors and various kinds of garment workers (by far the largest occupations among the Jewish residents), cigar makers, upholsterers, carpenters, masons, small shopkeepers, clerks, salespeople, and peddlers. Very few residents held professional or high white-collar positions (about one household head in ten in the blocks near Central Park; about one in fifty in the blocks farther away from the park).²³ Statistics do, however, show a relatively high number of low white-collar workers — somewhere between one-quarter to two-fifths of Jewish Harlem's household heads were classified as such in 1905. The presence of these low white-collar workers might lead one to infer that Jewish Harlem had a degree of affluence approaching middle-class status. But two points contradict such an assessment. First, Jewish Harlem's occupational/class breakdown evidently was not very different from that of the Lower East Side ghetto,²⁴ and second, most of these low white-collar positions were socioeconomically closer to high blue-collar jobs than to high white-collar professions. Most clerks, bookkeepers, small merchants, cashiers, dealers, and peddlers (which, strangely enough, are listed as low white collar in the standard occupational classification) earned roughly the same (and often less) than their neighbors in skilled blue-collar trades (such as textile workers, carpenters, and masons) or even than those in semiskilled jobs (like teamsters, longshoremen, and janitors).²⁵ Although perhaps not a bona fide ghetto, Jewish Harlem could be described as a predominantly working-class neighborhood, with some lower middle-class pockets.

The third ostensibly middle-class area Allen discusses is Yorkville, an area between Third Avenue and the river roughly between 69th and 94th Streets.²⁶ The only evidence Allen gives to suggest this area was middle class is a single-line secondary-source quotation stating that "many of the residents were small merchants or tradesmen."²⁷ Considering that the same could be said of the Lower East Side ghetto, this description is not enough to establish Yorkville as a middle-class neighborhood. Zeisloft's *The New Metropolis*, which gives an almost street-by-street account of the city, reveals a rather mixed and unstable class profile for the area, at least in 1899. Third Avenue, bustling with small shops, restaurants, and pubs in the shadow of the elevated railway, he describes as "several degrees above the slums, with many prosperous businessmen and much gaiety." But Second Avenue, also under an elevated railway, was a "characterless street of insignificant shops, and the homes of mechanics and laborers," while First Avenue was "from start to finish, an avenue of the poor [primarily] German and Hebrew working people." As for the cross streets, respectable tenements and apartments prevailed between 69th and 72nd Streets. But the next nine blocks, between 73rd and 81st Street

contained "tenements, varying from poor to good," with those near Third Avenue "having a general likeness to the downtown slums." The tenements on the next three blocks "could not be called slums and are yet commonplace." 89th Street all the way to 103rd Street was comprised of "tenements of the poorest class."²⁸ If Zeisloft's descriptions were still accurate in 1910 (as we have seen, a neighborhood could change a lot in ten years), it seems fair to call Yorkville a mixed-class area, predominated by the working class but also containing a fairly significant lower-middle-class minority.²⁹ [. . .]

The fourth uptown neighborhood Allen points to is Harlem proper. Harlem's main artery, 125th Street, was, as a contemporaneous travel guide noted, "the busiest business and theatrical center in Manhattan, north of Central Park."³⁰ Seventeen nickelodeons and larger theaters showing mixed bills of vaudeville and movies crowded along 125th Street between Third and Eighth Avenues. Most of these theaters were between Third and Lenox, a strip in which, according to the guidebook, "most of the shops are small and a large proportion of the dealers, and also of the purchasers, are Hebrews." In 1910, Harlem was a neighborhood in transition. In the 1880s and 1890s it was widely recognized as a genteel middle-class neighborhood offering a balance between suburban openness and urban convenience. Many middle-class families – largely native-born Americans, along with Irish, Germans, and German Jews – still lived there in 1910 (although they would not remain there long).³¹ But already by 1899, Zeisloft noted the emergence of "cheap tenements," particularly below 125th Street, and bemoaned that "there is little left to remind one of old Harlem." "Eventually," he predicted, "this region will be given over to the poor."³² The neighborhood's transformation was hastened when the speculative real estate fever that seized Harlem between 1900 and about 1905 (catalyzed by the planning of subway lines) suddenly went bust. Developers realized too late that Harlem was overbuilt, that the rents they sought were too high, and that the demand for middle-class houses and apartments was simply insufficient to fill all the vacancies. The recession of 1907–8 made matters worse. Forced to compete for tenants, landlords reduced rents and accepted working-class and immigrant tenants. In addition to the expansion of the Italian and Russian Jewish population below 125th Street, an African-American center grew rapidly a few blocks above it. Already by 1913, white businessmen and residents were declaring, "Harlem has been devastated as a result of the steady influx of Negroes"; "The best of Harlem is gone"; "We are approaching a crisis: it is a question of whether the white man will rule Harlem or the negro."³³

Harlem in the nickelodeon-boom years was a socioeconomically mixed neighborhood, comprised of a residual middle-class and an emergent working-class population. The nickelodeons along 125th Street thus raise a methodological question about our ability to infer the composition of nickelodeon audiences from the composition of the population at large. While it seems reasonable to assume some degree of correspondence between the kind of neighborhood a nickelodeon inhabited and the kind of patrons it drew, it is hard to know how close such correlations actually were. [. . .] The composition of movie audiences may not always have exactly mirrored the composition of the outside neighborhood. This uncertainty is particularly pertinent in business and entertainment centers like Times Square, 23rd Street, and Union Square – and 125th Street – where the population was relatively transient and socially heterogeneous. It is difficult in such cases to know whether the middle class ventured into the nickelodeons with any regularity.

This review of the socioeconomic character of uptown neighborhoods suggests that Allen may have misconstrued the nickelodeon's social context. While his initial point is worth underscoring – traditional histories were misleading in suggesting that movie exhibition was simply

a phenomenon of the Lower East Side ghetto – the broader implication that many theaters were located in middle-class areas may be equally misleading.

Why were nickelodeons where they were?

A range of factors shaped the distribution of nickelodeons in Manhattan: neighborhood class, population density, ethnic concentration, municipal codes and regulations, transportation patterns, the availability of commercial space, rent rates, and so on. These factors, among others, combined in different ways in different neighborhoods to create conditions that either fostered or discouraged the opening of nickelodeons.

Although a multidimensional approach is needed, population density appears to be the best predictor of nickelodeon distribution. Nickelodeons invariably clustered in the densest areas of the city – densest either in terms of residential concentration or volume of pedestrian traffic. The constant stream of potential customers in commercial districts like Union Square, Herald Square, 23rd Street, and 125th Street obviously accounts for the abundance of nickelodeons and larger movie theaters found there. As for neighborhood nickelodeons (by far the majority of movie theaters in Manhattan), they were almost always located in neighborhoods with high residential densities (at least 300 persons per acre) spread over a substantial number of blocks (at least fifteen or twenty). The greater the density and the wider the area, the greater the number of nickelodeons. Areas that did not meet these minimum requirements (the Upper West Side, for example) contained only a few nickelodeons here and there. [. . .] Market forces appear to have found a level of nickelodeon saturation that was commercially sustainable under the demographic and logistical conditions of these neighborhoods.³⁴

Two neighborhoods had significantly fewer nickelodeons relative to their populations. The middle part of the East Side contained 7 nickelodeons scattered along Third Avenue, translating into 1 for every 13,000 people. The neighborhood just north – the Yorkville area (between 69th and 94th Streets) – contained quite a few nickelodeons along Third and Second Avenues (at least 14), but this number was relatively low in light of the area's large and dense population. The ratio translates to 1 nickelodeon for every 13,500 people.

The discrepancy between these East Side neighborhoods and the others in Manhattan indicates that population density was not the only factor determining the location of nickelodeons. Social class may be crucial in explaining why the East Side had relatively few nickelodeons per capita. As I mentioned earlier, Yorkville was a socially mixed neighborhood and as such it may well have had a greater proportion of lower-middle- or middle-class individuals than those areas with greater concentrations of nickelodeons. Perhaps there were fewer nickelodeons there because these classes tended to steer clear of them, viewing them as a somewhat unsavory lower-class haunt. Such a hypothesis would obviously run counter to the revisionist emphasis on the nickelodeon's multiclass appeal.

Who went to the movies? Ethnic composition and variation in movie-going

We know very little about the ethnic composition of early audiences, although the generalization that "new" immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe comprised a large proportion of moviegoers is common. Two basic questions need to be explored: Who formed the primary audience for nickelodeons? And were there significant differences in movie attendance among different ethnic groups, that is, did the values, attitudes, and other social and cultural

circumstances relating to ethnic identity influence how different ethnic groups responded to the nickelodeon?

Since, as far as I know, there are no survey data on the ethnic composition of New York movie audiences in the nickelodeon era, another approach to the issue is necessary. Presumably, as with the question of class composition, one could gain insight into the ethnic makeup of movie audiences (at least at neighborhood nickelodeons) by determining the ethnic makeup of the areas in which nickelodeons were located. Although neighborhood ethnic composition may not automatically have translated into movie-audience composition, it is probably fair to assume a relatively close connection in most cases. [. . .]

Historians working on New York City around 1910 are fortunate because a progressive philanthropist named Walter Laidlaw paid for a team of thirteen clerks to spend a year rearranging and recounting the federal census data into aggregates covering about eight city blocks each. *Statistical Sources for Demographic Studies of Greater New York*, published in 1913 by the New York Federation of Churches, divides Manhattan into 224 tracts and gives the population of over 35 different immigrant groups for each, along with figures for "Native Whites of Native Parentage" and "Negroes." (This extraordinary source also provides statistics on sex, population density, literacy, education, and voter registration, among other things.)³⁵ With this detailed picture of Manhattan's ethnic landscape, one can infer the ethnic breakdown of moviegoing in Manhattan as a whole, as well as in specific neighborhoods.

The majority of nickelodeons were in overwhelmingly Jewish areas (the Lower East Side and East Harlem), so one can assume that Jews constituted the largest sector of Manhattan's nickelodeon audience. This fact probably had much less to do with any inherently greater receptivity among Jews than with the commercial logic of putting nickelodeons in thickly populated areas. These areas were the two largest and most densely populated residential neighborhoods in the city. But Jews by no means had a monopoly on moviegoing. As I will discuss shortly, many nickelodeons catered to Italian customers, both in Lower Manhattan and in Uptown Little Italy. Moreover, both the Middle West Side and the East Side contained a diversity of ethnic groups and so too, presumably, did the nickelodeons located there.

An examination of the East Side's ethnic makeup brings into focus the second question posed above, concerning whether certain ethnic groups were significantly more or less receptive to early movie exhibition than others. To what extent did the ethnic character of the East Side (both Yorkville and the Middle East Side) account for the fact that proportionately fewer nickelodeons were located there? Is it possible that ethnicity helps explain why the East Side had a relatively low number of nickelodeons per capita?

The East Side's ethnic composition was very different from the main areas where nickelodeons were clustered. For one thing, it was much less homogeneous. The nickelodeon-rich Jewish and Italian neighborhoods tended to be extremely homogeneous (as high as 90 to 95 percent), whereas in the East Side no one ethnic group constituted more than 20 percent of the population. Furthermore, a very different assortment of ethnic groups lived in the East Side. The area was composed of a mix of Germans (20 percent), Irish (18 percent), Austrians (probably from Bohemia, now part of the Czech Republic) (13 percent), and Americans ("Native Whites of Native Parents") (12 percent). Italians, Hungarians, and Russians (probably Russian Jews) each constituted about 6 or 7 percent.³⁶ One is tempted to conclude, therefore, that the ethnic groups on the East Side were somewhat less avid moviegoers than the Jews and Italians in Lower Manhattan and East Harlem. But such a conclusion is hardly clear cut, since one still wonders whether the area's class profile, rather than its ethnic makeup, was primarily responsible for its relatively low number of nickelodeons.

This question might be answered by comparing the populations of the East Side and Middle West Side. The residential core of the Middle West Side had many more nickelodeons per capita than the East Side. But its ethnic mix resembled the East Side's in certain respects. Like the East Side, the Middle West Side was comprised largely of Irish (26 percent), Americans (18 percent), and Germans (13 percent). Since these ethnic groups inhabited both areas, the difference in the number of nickelodeons per capita between the two areas probably resulted more directly from the fact that the Middle West Side (which contained the notorious "Hell's Kitchen" section, as well as a number of predominantly African-American blocks) was a much poorer neighborhood than the East Side. This comparison points to class, rather than ethnicity, as the key factor.

The issue is still open to argument, however, since the Middle West Side's population was not simply a carbon copy of the East Side. One of every three inhabitants of the East Side was German or Austrian/Bohemian, whereas in the Middle West Side fewer than one in seven was. Perhaps the "upright" German immigrant community found the nickelodeon unappealing, particularly in light of its association with newer and poorer immigrants such as the Italians and East European Jews. On the other hand, according to Zeisloft, the "frightfully clannish" Bohemians "refuse to mingle with any but their own . . . [and are] almost untouched by the [Americanizing] influences that are refining most of the other foreign colonies."³⁷ Perhaps they stayed away from nickelodeons due to an antiassimilationist cultural attitude. These hypotheses remain speculative at this point. It may be prudent simply to conclude that while there is no overwhelming evidence of ethnic variation in moviegoing, differences in ethnic identity may have had at least some influence on the distribution of nickelodeons in Manhattan. The topic needs further research.³⁸ [. . .]

Who got into the nickelodeon business? The ethnicity of exhibitors

The mythology of early cinema has traditionally emphasized the prominence of Jews as exhibitors, in part because a number of Hollywood moguls (such as William Fox, Adolph Zukor, and Marcus Loew) began as small-time nickelodeon owners in New York City. As far as I know, however, no study has tried to substantiate this notion with statistics on the ethnic makeup of exhibitors. The information in *Trow's* 1908 and 1909 directories gives us a clearer picture of the ethnic makeup of New York exhibitors. While the *Trow's* listings do not, of course, overtly specify the ethnicity of exhibitors, they do list most of them by name. Using standard genealogical reference tools, one is able to determine ethnic descent with reasonable accuracy.³⁹

The results confirm that the large majority of early exhibitors in Manhattan were indeed Jewish. Of the 189 exhibitors listed by name in *Trow's*, Jews accounted for 112, or 60 percent. Italians follow with 18 percent of the named exhibitors, individuals of English/American descent 14 percent, and Irish 7 percent. A handful of exhibitors of French, German, and Scandinavian descent make up the remaining 2 or 3 percent.⁴⁰ These numbers differ in interesting ways from the ethnic breakdown of Manhattan's population at large, in which Jews comprised only about 25 percent; English and "Native Whites of Native Parentage" constituted about 17 percent; Italians and Irish 13 percent each; and Germans 10 percent.⁴¹ We thus see that Jews became exhibitors in disproportionately large numbers. Italians and English-Americans got into the exhibition business in numbers that roughly reflected their relative proportion of the total population (Italians a bit more, English-Americans a bit less). Irish were under-represented among exhibitors; and Germans were not at all inclined toward nickelodeon entrepreneurship.

The large majority of exhibitors appear to have been small-time businessmen (and a few women)⁴² running only one theater. But signs of consolidation were already apparent before 1910. About one-fifth of Manhattan's movie theaters belonged to small- to medium-sized chains. Several of the early theater moguls are well known: William Fox owned eight theaters; Marcus Loew owned eight as well (most under the People's Vaudeville name); Adolph Zukor owned six (most named Automatic Vaudeville); F. S. Proctor owned four (most named Bijou Dream). But others have been totally forgotten: J. Valensi owned five theaters; the partnership of McCarn and Weissman owned five; and Morris Boom owned four. A few other exhibitors, such as Lawrence Bolognino, Tomasi Cassesi, Stephen Scherer, and Adolph Weiss, each operated two or three nickelodeons.⁴³ [. . .]

How volatile was the nickelodeon business?

While the phrase "nickelodeon boom" conveys a sense of unmitigated commercial expansion, the nickelodeon business was in fact extremely risky and unstable. For the 1907 to 1910 period (and probably later as well), the phrase "nickelodeon bust" would better apply to the experience of many fledgling exhibitors. The notion that anyone with the wherewithal to rent a store, a projector, and some chairs could capitalize on the movie craze is mistaken, at least regarding Manhattan. Scores of exhibitors went out of business every year, while at the same time dozens of others ventured into the game. The nickelodeon business was in a state of constant upheaval during these years.

In June 1908, the trade journal *Moving Picture World* began noting the large number of nickelodeon failures in Manhattan:

Each week brings to light a list of moving picture places that have passed into the hands of the sheriff . . . Poor locations, bad management and a score or more of other contingencies develop in the picture line with the same frequency that they do in any commercial business. In many cases, failures are due to a bad start. Too many people imagine that all they need is sufficient money to fit up a place and pay the first week's expenses. They count upon the receipts to do the rest. The men who win out on this policy are few.⁴⁴

In September of that year, *Moving Picture World* estimated that in just three months over 100 nickelodeons had gone out of business in New York. The journal suggested that most of these failures were suffered by "people who rushed into the business, selecting poor locations where the audiences were not to be had."⁴⁵ These conditions were still being noted eight months later, in May 1909: "A number of picture places in Greater New York are steadily falling by the wayside," the journal observed. The writer pointed to increasingly stringent building and fire department regulations as a major cause, but he also stated that "a good many people who were in the game solely for the coin have justly been driven back to their peanut and lemonade stands."⁴⁶ One wonders what motives for getting into the game other than "the coin" the writer had in mind; in any case, he appears to have been stressing the high failure rate among small-timers drawn to movie exhibition as a get-rich-quick scheme.

The *Trow's* data reveal a clear picture of the nickelodeon business's extraordinary instability. By comparing the addresses listed in the 1908 and 1909 editions, one can determine the number of exhibitor failures, start-ups, and turnovers. Of the 117 exhibitors listed in *Trow's* 1908, only 52 (44 percent) were also listed a year later. Unless other reasons explain why certain exhibitors were not relisted, it appears that more than *half* of all nickelodeons open in

mid to late 1907 had gone out of business by mid to late 1908 (when the 1909 listing was probably compiled). Interestingly, only a handful of theaters appear to have changed hands from one owner to another. The vast majority (93 percent) of the nickelodeons that went out of business in 1908 appear to have gone under for good, rather than reopening under new management. This may suggest the bare-bones quality of the failing nickelodeons: perhaps so few continued as movie theaters because they really were not theaters in any real sense of the word — just storefront rooms with folding chairs.

At the same time that so many nickelodeons were closing, scores of new nickelodeons were continually opening and a number of preexisting theaters were converted into movie houses. *Trow's* 1909 directory contains seventy-one locations that were not in the previous year's listing. Thus, even with the disappearance of half the 1907–8 nickelodeons, the total number of movie theaters in Manhattan had increased by about 10 percent by 1908–9.

Conclusions

The evidence brought to light in this essay gives us a picture of the commercial, socioeconomic, and ethnic dimensions of early exhibition in Manhattan different from those conveyed in previous histories. (1) Census data on the composition of Manhattan neighborhoods call into question the revisionist argument about the importance of middle-class audiences in the nickelodeon era and early teens. While traditional survey histories were indeed "grossly inadequate" due to their superficiality, their emphasis on the immigrant and working-class foundation of early exhibition may not have been as far off the mark as revisionist historians maintain. (2) Demographic data on Manhattan's population and more detailed (but still not complete) information on the locations of nickelodeons suggest that population density and social class were major factors determining the concentration of early movie theaters. Ethnic identity was also a factor, but it is still unclear how much influence it exerted. Although the majority of nickelodeons were located in areas inhabited mainly by Jews (due mainly to population density), there is only limited evidence to suggest any significant variation in moviegoing among different ethnic groups. [. . .] (3) There was, however, significant ethnic variation in patterns of nickelodeon entrepreneurship. Jews became exhibitors in disproportionately high numbers, and Germans steered clear of the business. (4) A comparison of theater addresses in listings from 1908 and 1909 indicates that, contrary to the popular conception, the nickelodeon era was an extremely unstable period for exhibitors: there was an almost fifty-fifty chance that a nickelodeon operating at the end of 1907 would be out of business a year later.

Until further research is undertaken, we have no way of knowing how closely other American cities paralleled the commercial, socioeconomic, and ethnic patterns of the Manhattan nickelodeon boom. What is apparent from this case study, however, is that future research must delve deeper into demographic data and commercial records than have previous generations of film history.

Notes

This essay has been abbreviated from the *Cinema Journal* original. The original essay also included neighborhood-level maps showing nickelodeon locations.

1. Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985), 202–7; Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990), chap. 13; Gregory Waller, *Main Street Amusements: Movies and Commercial Entertainment in Lexington, Kentucky 1896–1930* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995).

2. Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1939); Benjamin Hampton, *A History of the Movies* (New York: Covici, Friede Publishers, 1931), reprinted as *History of the American Film Industry: From Its Beginnings to 1931* (New York: 1970); Terry Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights: A History of the Motion Picture through 1925* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1926).
3. Russell Merritt, "Nickelodeon Theaters 1905-1914: Building an Audience for the Movies," in Tino Balio, ed., *The American Film Industry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976, rev. ed. 1985); Lary May, *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Robert C. Allen, "Motion Picture Exhibition in Manhattan, 1906-1912: Beyond the Nickelodeon," *Cinema Journal* 18, no. 2 (spring 1979): 2-15, reprinted in John Fell, ed., *Film before Griffith* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983). Allen recapitulates the main points of his essay in Allen and Comery, *Film History*, 203-5.
4. Noël Burch, "Business Is Business: An Invisible Audience," in *Life to Those Shadows* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Peter Stead, *Film and the Working Class: The Feature Film in British and American Society* (London: Routledge, 1989), chaps. 1 and 2; Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), chap. 2; William Uricchio and Roberta Pearson, *Reframing Culture: The Case of the Vitagraph Quality Films* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Anton Kaes, "Mass Culture and Modernity: Notes toward a Social History of Early American and German Cinema," in Frank Trommler and Joseph McVeigh, eds, *America and the Germans: An Assessment of a Three-Hundred-Year History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), Vol. 2: 317-31. All of these works appear to accept the revisionist argument about class more or less as a given. Uricchio and Pearson, however, base their discussion primarily on their own research on a body of "uplift" films.
5. Robert Sklar makes this observation in "Oh! Althusser!: Historiography and the Rise of Cinema Studies," in Sklar and Musser, eds, *Resisting Images: Essays on Cinema and History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).
6. My critique of revisionist film history emphasizes Robert C. Allen's work on early exhibition in Manhattan. I should stress that I single it out as a target of criticism simply because of its importance as the only prior serious work on this topic. Allen's study was a pioneering effort in empirical film history and has inspired a generation of scholars to dig deeper into primary historical documents. My study could not have been written without Allen's initial contribution.
7. George B. McClellan Jr Papers, Container 4 (1908), Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. I would like to thank Pearson and Uricchio for sharing this item of evidence with me. Their forthcoming book on the municipal regulation of movie exhibition in New York will illuminate mechanisms of social control from both empirical and theoretical perspectives.
8. The police commissioner's count of common shows is more or less corroborated by a municipal audit I have found indicating that the Bureau of Licenses issued or renewed 238 common-show licenses in 1908 for nickelodeons in Manhattan and the Bronx (grouped together in this report). It seems reasonable to assume that at least 194 of these common-show nickelodeons were in Manhattan proper. Commissioners of Accounts of New York City, "A Report on the Bureau of Licenses, an Audit of Receipts for the Period from July 1, 1907, to Dec 31, 1908" (New York: December 22, 1909), 37. The report lists issues and renewals of common-show licenses for all boroughs, broken down into three six-month periods. It is in the New York City Municipal Archives. Throughout this essay, I use the word "nickelodeon" to refer to any movie theater, including large theaters that converted from stage shows to movies. It could be objected that this general usage of "nickelodeon" obscures the distinction between cheap storefronts and grander venues. In the 1907 to 1909 period (and perhaps beyond), however, most of the larger theaters that switched, such as the 14th Street Theater or the Grand Opera House, were playing popular melodrama and had already lost any refinement they once might have had. The difference in theater size would probably not have pointed to significant differences in the audiences or qualities of the show.
9. In support of the publication-lag hypothesis, one notes that the 1907 edition of *Trow's* lists only a handful of exhibitors, although the nickelodeon boom was already in full swing by then. I've also found that most of the nickelodeons cited in trade journal articles or city records from 1908 don't show up in *Trow's* until the 1909 edition.
10. Bureau of Buildings, Annual Ledgers for Alterations and New Buildings. Located in the New York City Municipal Archive. These city records, for both alterations and new construction, indicate the kind of buildings involved (moving picture theaters are named as such), addresses, owners, architects, dimensions, durations, and costs of the construction activity.

11. If the police commissioner had counted all nickelodeons that had ever operated in Manhattan between 1907 and the end of 1908, instead of just those that existed the week he made his report, the count would have been significantly higher than the 315 his memo records. One assumes that the police commissioner had relatively accurate information on the number of nickelodeons actually in operation in mid-December 1908; however, his memo gives no indication of how he made his count. If he relied on records of the Bureau of Licenses (now, sadly, destroyed), which probably would not have been kept up to date about nickelodeon closings, the information might not have been so accurate.
12. Space limitations unfortunately prevent me from including full information on the 1907 to 1909 theaters. I have created a database table including theater names, addresses, cross-streets, exhibitor names, exhibitor ethnicity, and source of documentation. [. . .]
13. Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film*, 56.
14. Allen, in Allen and Gomery, *Film History*, 202.
15. *Ibid.*, 204.
16. E. Idell Zeisloft, *The New Metropolis* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1899), quoted in Grace Mayer, *Once upon a City* (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 138, and by Allen, "Motion Picture Exhibition in Manhattan," 167.
17. Compare, for example, the opening paragraph of Emily Wayland Dinwiddie, "Some Aspects of Italian Housing and Social Conditions in Philadelphia." Before turning to a discussion of the neighborhood's congestion and poverty, Dinwiddie writes, "Philadelphia's 'Little Italy' is one of the most picturesque sections of the city. For about thirty-five blocks the Italians are closely packed together. One can walk the streets for considerable distances without hearing a word of English. The black-eyed children rolling and tumbling together, the gaily colored dresses of the women and the crowds of street vendors all give the neighborhood a wholly foreign appearance." *Charities*, May 7, 1904, 48.
18. Zeisloft, *The New Metropolis*, 528.
19. Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem, the Making of a Ghetto: Negro New York, 1890-1930* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 82.
20. Thomas Kessner, *The Golden Door: Italian and Jewish Immigrant Mobility in New York City 1880-1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). Census statistics, 124, table 24. Little Italy corresponds to Assembly District 32. A map indicating assembly district boundaries in Manhattan is included in Edward Ewing Pratt, *Industrial Causes of Congestion of Population in New York City* (New York: Columbia University, 1911), 29. Throughout this paper, I assume that statistics about an area's occupational breakdown can tell us about the class composition of its population. This seems logical, given the primacy of economic factors in determining class. But I should stress that social class is a function of numerous factors having to do not only with jobs and income but also with education, values, and living conditions (which branches off into other issues such as family size and structure, religious practices, etc.), and, more generally, social stratification derives not only from class but also from social status and social power (as Max Weber argued). The basic dimensions of social stratification are discussed in Daniel Rossides, *The American Class System: An Introduction to Stratification Analysis* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1976), 18-29. Criteria for evaluating the social status of particular occupations are discussed briefly, with useful references, in Stephan Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians: Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis, 1880-1970* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 293.
21. Walter Laidlaw, ed., *Statistical Sources for Demographic Studies of Greater New York, 1910* (New York: New York Federation of Churches, 1913).
22. Jeffrey S. Gurock, *When Harlem Was Jewish, 1870-1930* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 50.
23. *Ibid.*, 175, table A.5; 177, table A.9.
24. Thomas Kessner's census sample of Russian Jewish households shows that the uptown neighborhood did have a somewhat higher proportion of skilled laborers (relative to semiskilled) than the downtown area, but neither had any unskilled laborers to speak of, and, interestingly enough, parts of the Lower East Side actually had a higher proportion of Jews in white-collar positions. Kessner, *The Golden Door*, 184, table 25.
25. For information on the incomes of different occupations in this period, both by total family income and earnings of father, see Robert Coit Chapin, *The Standard of Living among Workingmen's Families in New York City* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1909), 46-7, 49-52, tables 3, 4, and 6. The standard socioeconomic grouping of occupations into five classes derives from census statistician Alba M. Edwards, "A Social Economic Grouping of the Gainful Workers of the United States," *Journal of the American Statistical Association* 27 (1933): 377-87. A detailed list of occupations within different classes is found in Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians*, appendix B, 289-92.

26. Allen locates Yorkville as being between 74th and 89th Streets. Statistics on population density and ethnic makeup suggest that by 1910 the neighborhood stretched from 69th Street to 94th Street, at which point it began to give way to Jewish Harlem and Little Italy. This slightly broader definition of Yorkville better corresponds to the location of the theaters I have found in this area.
27. Allen, "Motion Picture Exhibition in Manhattan," 167, quoting Thomas M. Henderson, *Tammany Hall and the New Immigrants* (New York: Arno Press, 1976), 17-19.
28. Zeisloft, *The New Metropolis*, 612, 633-35.
29. Germans and Irish were the largest ethnic groups in Yorkville. A paragraph on the class composition of these groups in other cities at the turn of the century has been omitted.
30. *Rider's New York City, a Guide-Book for Travelers* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1916), 340.
31. Laidlaw, ed., *Statistical Sources*.
32. Zeisloft, *The New Metropolis*, 636.
33. Osofsky, *Harlem, the Making of a Ghetto*, 87-123. Quotations on 107 and 121.
34. A paragraph and long footnote analyzing the consistent ratio of residents to nickelodeons among the key neighborhoods has been omitted.
35. Laidlaw, ed., *Statistical Sources*. Something of a demographics zealot, Laidlaw was frustrated that the Census Bureau presented its population data in units that were too big to be of value to social workers and planners interested in issues such as neighborhood population densities. For Manhattan, the book summarizes census data into 224 tracts of about 43 acres each - a big improvement over the government Census Abstracts, which cluster the data only in terms of assembly districts, of which there were 29 in Manhattan, of widely varying sizes. Laidlaw's recategorization, in other words, provides seven times more specificity to a demographic picture of New York in 1910. *Statistical Sources* is included, along with similar sources for later censuses, in a ten-reel microfilm series: Benjamin Bowser *et al.*, eds., *Census Data with Maps for Small Areas of New York City, 1910-1960* (Ithaca: Cornell University Libraries, 1979; distributed by Research Publication, Woodbridge, Conn.). A separate microfilm copy is at the New York Public Library, and the original hard copy is at the Library of Congress. Laidlaw also compiled a volume based on the 1920 census.
36. The remaining 15 percent or so was made up of various other ethnic groups (English, Scandinavian, etc.), none of which comprised more than 1 or 2 percent of the population. My assumption about the "Austrian" population is based on Zeisloft's description of the area (*The New Metropolis*, 527). Unfortunately, it is impossible to tell, using Laidlaw's census data or other descriptions, what proportion of Germans were German Jews.
37. *Ibid*, 526.
38. A long section challenging "The Italian Thesis" - an argument concerning ethnic variation in nickelodeon attendance - has been omitted.
39. Patrick Hanks and Flavia Hodges, *A Dictionary of Surnames* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Elsdon C. Smith, *New Dictionary of American Family Names* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973); Heinrich W. Guggenheimer and Eva H. Guggenheimer, *Jewish Family Names and Their Origins: An Etymological Dictionary* (Ktav Publishing House, 1992); George F. Jones, *German-American Names* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1990).
40. In cases where a theater was owned by two people, I figured both names into the percentages. In cases where the same person owned more than one theater, I calculated using two methods: first, by counting each person only once, and second, by recounting the owners. I found that the ethnic breakdown percentages were virtually the same using either method. Along with the 187 theaters listed by personal name, 16 theaters were listed only by corporate names (e.g. Pastime Amusement Co.) that give no clue about owners' ethnicity, and 16 other theaters lack any information whatsoever about ownership.
41. This ethnic breakdown is adapted from Laidlaw, ed., *Statistical Sources*, summary page. Since the census enumerated people by country of origin rather than ethnicity, it is difficult to determine an exact number for the Jewish population, which was recorded under such nationalities as Russian, German, Hungarian, Austrian (Galician Jews), and Romanian. My estimate is based on analyses in Erich Rosenthal, "The Equivalence of United States Census Data for Persons of Russian Stock or Descent with American Jews: An Evaluation," *Demography* 12, no. 2 (May 1975): 275-90, and Simon Kuznets, "Immigration of Russian Jews, Background and Structure," *Perspectives in American History* 9 (1975): 35-126. Two excellent primary sources provide statistical and historical data on Jewish immigration: Samuel Joseph, "Jewish Immigration to the United States, from 1881 to 1910" (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 1914); and Edmund J. James *et al.*, *The Immigrant Jew in America* (New York: B. F. Buck and Co., 1906).

42. *Trow's* 1908 list of exhibitors shows Minnie Stafford at 687 9th Street, between 47th and 48th Streets, and Caroline Sirignano at 196 Grand Street, in the Lower East Side (however, I am unsure whether Caroline might not have been a man's name). The 1909 edition shows Catherine McCormack as owner of the Arena theater on First Avenue between 75th and 76th Streets and Louise Meyer as an exhibitor at 249 Third Avenue, in Chelsea.
43. I am using the term "owner" to denote owner of the business. Many of the actual theaters were leased from other property owners.
44. "Failures of Nickelodeons," *Moving Picture World*, June 13, 1908, 1908 [sic].
45. "Greater New York Notes," *Moving Picture World*, September 19, 1908, 214.
46. "Observations by Our Man about Town," *Moving Picture World*, May 8, 1909, 589.