

**Movie-going in the Streaming Age: An Overview of Experiences and Crises in the  
History of Moving Image Exposition**

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## **Introduction**

For years, technology has posed a threat to the practice of movie-going. However, the stakes have never been quite as high as they are today in the face of the streaming age. Fear of the extinction of movie theaters along with their offerings of experience are very much present; the solutions are still in development, and the future of cinemas is still unclear. Must the recipe of theaters and their programming be altered in order to attract more people? If the production of moving images is dependent on consumerism, and that the latter is strangled by the growing streaming platforms, where does that leave filmmaking, fan culture and, as an extension, the archiving of this artform? The following essay will provide a general overview of the evolution of movie-going history via its many responses to the ongoing advent of media consumer technologies, ending with the state it is in today and some insight on potential solutions. It is to be noted that movie-going as a study, an experience, an economic pursuit and a memory, is dependent on geographic location; this analysis differs greatly in rural and urban America. For the scope of this essay, these differences will not deeply be discussed or compared, and the hypothetical solutions and outgrowths will be pulled greatly from urban histories unless noted accordingly.

## **From Vaudeville Acts (1890s) to Nickel Madness (1900s)**

Movie presentation stems from entertainment, the shared experience of watching a story or an act unfold in a delineated space. Thus, the history of such practice can be traced back to for a very long time. However, it is said that one of the earliest contexts of movie presentation in

New York that concurs with the definition introducing this paragraph, occurred in Vaudeville theatres with the use of the Vitascope and Cinématographe during the season of 1896-97<sup>1</sup>. The Vaudeville shows, aimed at middle-class audiences, were made up of eight 15 to 20 minute acts that had no thematic relationship to one another. These consisted of acrobats, trained animal acts, singing, playlet performances, etc. Though the Vaudeville theatres saw most of their success in the down-town of cities, New York (then the largest dominant American city), had a higher standard for entertainment, and managers needed to find newer acts and offer something different to attract people to their venues. This is when they turned to the visual spectacles such as puppetry, magic lanterns, etc<sup>2</sup>. This is when motion picture made its debut.

Following the growing appeal of moving pictures that Vaudeville theatres were offering, in 1904, the Gordon brothers decided to convert a Main Street Furniture store into a penny arcade, which they filled with Edison peep-show machines. By 1906, they joined forces with local theater managers (P.F Shea and Alf T. Wilton)<sup>3</sup> and opened the city's very first "movie theater", a space entirely devoted to the shared experience of viewing moving images as entertainment. "The Nickel Theatre" was the new name of the space previously known as "the Palace Museum", a 1,000-seat venue<sup>4</sup>. The wild success of Nickelodeons meant expansion, with more and more venues opening nation-wide and the practice of movie-going rising.

### **Defining the Experience – Attracting Patrons and Revenue (1911-1920s)**

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<sup>1</sup> Gomery, Douglas. *Shared Pleasures: a History of Movie Presentation in the United States*. Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1992. 13

<sup>2</sup> Gomery, 14

<sup>3</sup> Rozenweig, Roy. "From Rum Shop to Rialto: Workers and Movies." *Moviegoing in America: a Sourcebook in the History of Film Exhibition*, by Gregory Albert Waller, Blackwell Publ., 2002. 28

<sup>4</sup> Rozenweig, 28

It used to be that films could only be viewed in theaters. The ephemerality of experience became the economic drive for the business. The first dedicated movie theatres in the United States changed their programs as frequently as possible, which happened to be every other day and sometimes even daily<sup>5</sup>. Most did not need to advertise the titles or schedules, because the interest in seeing moving images in itself, regardless of the content and the appeal of experiencing something unique was incredibly high. Once a film was seen, its life depended on the viewer's mind, which was shaped by the social context and perception of individuals. Memory's ephemerality and transformative capacity was then a selling point. However, as with any new experience, novelty wears off. So, the question then became: with what appeal should moviegoing be sold? The previous curiosity basis for attraction, "pictures that move", is no longer applicable, and no longer enough. In their text "Building Theatre Patronage", written in 1927, John F. Barry and Epes W. Sargent expressed that every advertising tactic can be traced to certain human instinct such as curiosity, the social instinct, the desire to excel, self-preservation, the instinct to be admired, the instinct for personal gain.<sup>6</sup>

Themed programs began to take form in response to this, "Biograph Night", being one of them on which nothing but biograph reels were used. Another popular appeal was "Travel Night", in which the films chosen were scenic and offered a sort of escapist element to the experience.<sup>7</sup> In her chapter, "Some Picture Show Audiences (1911)", Mary Heaton Vorse notes that for the programs who catered to children, which were created in response to calls for

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<sup>5</sup> Allen, Robert C. "Reimagining the History of the Experience of Cinema in a Post-Movie-Going Age." *Media International Australia*, vol. 139, no. 1, 2011, pp. 80–87. *JSTOR [JSTOR]*, doi:10.1177/1329878x1113900111. 81

<sup>6</sup> Barry, John F., and Epes W. Sargent. "Building Theatre Patronage (1927)." *Moviegoing in America: a Sourcebook in the History of Film Exhibition*, by Gregory Albert Waller, Blackwell Publ., 2002, 113

<sup>7</sup> Heaton Vorse, Mary. "Some Picture Show Audiences (1911)." *Moviegoing in America: a Sourcebook in the History of Film Exhibition*, by Gregory Albert Waller, Blackwell Publ., 2002, 60

ensorship of material in the presence of certain age groups, a talk needed to accompany the viewings<sup>8</sup>. This would help contextualize screenings to children who otherwise might be bored by the material or not comprehend its nature. As such, these are telling of early educational approaches to the realm of movie-going. The previous emphasis on escapism and entertainment, though still existent, is replaced, here by a teaching of knowledge, rendering the form of cinema a tool for learning.

“Amateur Night”, its concept perhaps borrowed from the variety spectacle showcased in Vaudeville theater, was a weekly opportunity for amateurs to entertain the audience, with a time limit of five minutes each, with whatever type of performance they choose. After the acts, all of them would need to go back on stage and the viewers were to decide which act would be the winner via applause. The winner would then receive the advertised prize of the night<sup>9</sup>. This then turned into “Specialized Amateur Night”, which was the same concept, but with a theme to be followed throughout performances. It is said that at this time, advertising was frowned upon in the theatre setting. While the aforementioned tactics were taken to attract patrons to the theater, advertising, as we know it, was a risky feat that most theatres tried to avoid. In fact, they came up with double-night<sup>10</sup> soirées, usually on Saturdays, during which patrons would pay double the 5-cent price to see a title that was deemed more important. This occurrence would attract patrons, increase revenue, and indirectly serve as advertisement for the given titles. Otherwise, managers held the responsibility of judging patrons and gaging whether or not they could handle blunt revenue tactics. If it was deemed that they were, then this would most commonly take the form of wall posters borrowed from the use of street-car advertising, or drop-down curtains. The

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<sup>8</sup> Heaton Vorse, 60

<sup>9</sup> Heaton Vorse, 60

<sup>10</sup> Heaton Vorse, 60

latter was incorporated within the space itself. People found the projecting screen to be unsightly when no image was cast onto it. Thus, it was desirable to have a second curtain drop down to cover it during intermission and off times. This was therefore an opportunity for clients to pay the theatre to have their ads on these second curtains<sup>11</sup>. This could also be integrated within the distributed program, so long as the client covers the price of printing the programs in question. Other means for revenue included selling the music sheets of the sound accompaniment of the film title of the night. In addition to this, a “Candy Kid” was hired to announce the candy being sold to the audience before the show began<sup>12</sup>. He would make light-hearted jokes and interact with the viewers to promote sales.

In order to assure the loyalty of customers, the owners and managers were very concerned with the experience of the experience that individuals had within their establishment. In fact, the architecture of the theatres, especially the lobby, had to be aesthetically pleasing so as to distract the patrons from having to wait. The better theatres are said to have had live music in the lobby<sup>13</sup>. Beyond the space itself, the atmosphere was highly dependent on the employees of the theatre. These employees each had a specific title (gendered) accompanied by a set of behavioral rules and work tasks to complete, as well as a uniform. (See Appendix A for a visual chart that shows the uniforms respective to each job title). In addition to elevator operators (when the space called for them) and door men, there were page boys. This person essentially functioned as a walkie-talkie would today. His job was to serve as a messenger within and without the theatre. Street men were required to supervise crowds outside the lobby, and footmen opened the doors to vehicles. The female personnel included nurses, in attendance in theaters that

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<sup>11</sup> Heaton Vorse, 61

<sup>12</sup> Heaton Vorse, 61

<sup>13</sup> Bullock, E.C.A. “Theater Entrances and Lobbies (1925).” *Moviegoing in America: a Sourcebook in the History of Film Exhibition*, by Gregory Albert Waller, Blackwell Publ., 2002, pp. 104–105.

were equipped with a first aid room, matrons (who were essentially janitors as we know them today), and “the girl in the box office”. According to Harold B. Franklin, in his text “Motion Picture Theater Management.”, she was required to have a refined appearance, and wears a silk blouse if working in one of the better theaters. In addition to this, there should have been flowers on the desk she works at. Her demeanor had to be cheerful<sup>14</sup>. Though theaters today oftentimes call for their employees to wear certain uniforms, the titles are not gendered, and the cheerful demeanors are most definitely not always a requisite, with more than several experiences having been tainted by less than enthusiastic teens at the ticketing booths.

### **Advertising as Prominent Features of Early Multiplexes**

It is important to look back at advertising tools that were employed throughout the history of movie-going, as it has been integral to the survival of these establishments and thus, to the experience itself. In addition to this, with the rise of streaming, theaters need to become inventive and find new tactics to reel people in, to keep the practice alive and to make revenue. Therefore, previously employed plans of action might be insightful for the state of the practice today. In fact, whereas the exhibition phase from 1911 to early 1920s saw transparent advertising as shameful, the late 1928s invested much of their focus onto it to reel in more revenue and viewers. With early multiplexes such as Publix, it was essential to have an in-house advertising team (made up of experts from Madison Avenue and America’s top universities), to spend 5 to 10 percent of all profit on paid advertising. This included writing up ads in the newspaper/magazines promoting the show times and specific films being shown at the venue, as well as bill postings. The bill tactic, borrowed from vaudeville, would be posted days before a

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<sup>14</sup> Franklin, Harold B. “Motion Picture Theater Management.” *Moviegoin in America: a Sourcebook in the History of Film Exhibition*, by Gregory Albert Waller, Blackwell Publ., 2002, pp. 116–123.



given show throughout the entire community, assuring visibility. To illustrate the success of this approach, by 1928, the typical Publix campaign called for nearly 10,000 posters to be printed and posted<sup>15</sup>.

Perhaps the most intriguing advertising technique of the time was the use of “special stunts” as referred to by Douglas Gomery in his essay, “Fashioning an Exhibition Empire”<sup>16</sup>. This entailed expanding a film’s theme out into the theater where it was being shown. Ushers would have to dress in line with the theme of the film, and the space itself would integrate a key element of the film or its broader theme in its décor. For example, if the movie involved a steam locomotive, then a cardboard display of an engine might be constructed and integrated as part of the box office. In the case of promotion for *An American Tragedy*, a theater converted the ticketing booth of its lobby into the first page print of a newspaper, with the headline revealing the plot “Girls Body Found”, and the cast and crew mentioned. (See Appendix B for a reference images). In addition to this, special calendar days were tied into a theater’s themed experience (graduation, moving season, etc). Workers were encouraged to submit ideas on a regular basis and a cash reward of several hundred dollars was given regularly to the person with the most-clever ideas. In terms of media as a means for advertisement, the use of radio was a prominent tool for theaters, whether it would be to broadcast a premiere event, or radio-plays prior to the movie coming out in order to pique the interest of listeners and hopefully encourage them to come to the theater. Publix also famously showcased trailers for films, which is something that already existed but was perhaps not prominent and constant throughout theaters. In fact, Sam Katz (who started Publix) was so keen on the idea that he would sometimes have Publix produce

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<sup>15</sup> Gomery, Douglas. “Fashioning an Exhibition Empire: Promotion, Publicity, and the Rise of Publix Theaters.” *Moviegoing in America: a Sourcebook in the History of Film Exhibition*, by Gregory Albert Waller, Blackwell Publ., 2002, pp. 124–137.

<sup>16</sup> Gomery, 131

their own trailers for films instead of showing the ones that Hollywood sent over<sup>17</sup>. The previously mentioned programs for children were visited under the umbrella of “Saturday Morning Movies”. In fact, this was a response to complaints and calls for censorship in films not suitable for children, but also, a complaint that children were a disruption to regular screenings<sup>18</sup>. On April 25<sup>th</sup>, 1925 at the Eastman theater in Rochester, New York. 2,700 children are said to have paid their dime to enter. They were escorted by boy scouts, sang “America is Beautiful” and saw *The Hottentot*.

### **The Theatres’ response to the Great Depression**

In a 1936 essay by H.O Kussell, he stated that perhaps there is no better barometer for of the public’s financial status than its attendance at movie theaters. At the time, attendance was estimated at between 80 million and 85 million weekly, at an average admission price of 23 cents. Chains were charging 20 cents more than independent exhibitors on the claim that they had the first run of releases. During the economic crisis, when people had to budget their entertainment expenses, they were less willing to spend the 20 cents more to see their favorite stars upon release, and were more willing to wait and pay to see them at the independent venues<sup>19</sup>. As a response to this, the big chains lower their admission prices, reeling in more viewers and essentially strangling the independent venues (who could not play the films upon their release as the big production houses like RKO refused to send them their films early seeing as they owned most of the chains). The small chains were suffering, and had to come up with tactics to attract more viewers. The first restorative used was the “give-away” night. This

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<sup>17</sup> Gomery, 133

<sup>18</sup> deCordova, Richard. “Ethnography and Exhibition: The Child Audience, the Hays Office, and Saturday Matinees.” *Moviegoing in America: a Sourcebook in the History of Film Exhibition*, by Gregory Albert Waller, Blackwell Publ., 2002, 163

<sup>19</sup> Kusell, H.O. “Bank Night (1936).” *Moviegoing in America: a Sourcebook in the History of Film Exhibition*, by Gregory Albert Waller, Blackwell Publ., 2002, 189

involved a piece of chinaware being given to every woman in attendance on a designated night of each week. If this person became a loyal customer, she could essentially collect an entire set of dishes. As such, the feminine patronage increased from 20 to 25 % on such nights. It is said that women would shop around various theatres, finally settling their patronage to the theatre having the dish design that pleased them most. Common advertisements were as follows: “Tonight is Dish Night – Also a feature”<sup>20</sup>. However, this was not a sustainable feat, and the theatres soon had to come up with new ways to lure patrons. This shortly took form in a very popular practice, giving money to a lucky number holder in the theater. This practice did not last long, as it soon was prohibited by violation of the lottery law<sup>21</sup>. Then came “Bank Night”, conceived by Charles U. Yeager (manager for the Fox West Coast Theatre Circuit). This involves the exhibitor contracting with Affiliated Enterprises (organized by Yeager himself), which sets him up with a trailer advertising Bank Night. People then sign up on a sheet in the lobby, are given a number and then a raffle occurs, with the prize ranging from 25\$ to 1,000\$. Yeager was somehow capable of avoiding the lottery law seemingly because the participants do not have to purchase a ticket to enter the raffle, and there is no advertising for Bank Night outside of the theater<sup>22</sup>. In fact, Bank Night was perhaps the most popular feat of all and by 1937, had become somewhat of an American obsession. An industry observer noted:

“It’s got to the point where nobody can schedule a basketball game, a church social or a bridge party on a Tuesday night, because everybody is down at the Gem hoping to cop a cash prize – usually standing in the street beyond the marquee because the theatre is too small.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Kusell, 190

<sup>21</sup> Kusell, 190

<sup>22</sup> Kusell, 190

<sup>23</sup> Gomery, Douglas. *Shared Pleasures: a History of Movie Presentation in the United States*. Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1992. 70

The irony, here, is that movie-going culture fought the Great Depression's outcomes by literally offering money to patrons as an appeal for them spending money to see movies.

### **The Post-War Movie Experience – The Ozoner (1950s)**

In the 1950s, “The post-war Ozoner” also known as the drive-in theater, was booming nation-wide. This is the theater's response to the growing car culture and suburbs, who are geographically further from the downtown theaters of the time. These places served as alternatives to the more uptight engagement of going to theater, in a time when people want more than ever to be entertained, distracted, and “free”. In fact, it is said that when you looked inside people's cars as they left the Ozoner, many patrons were in their pajamas, offering a stark contrast to the very high-class uniforms that employees had to wear and the socialite attraction of the theater in the 1920s. Banking on this phenomenon, early drive-ins integrated laundries on the side. The house-wife, who might otherwise stay in to operate her laundry machine, can drop the clothes in on her way into the movie and pick them up on the way out. Some drive-ins offered warmed milk and diapers to accommodate the people who brought their babies along. Some spaces even have driving ranges for the uninterested dad, and open-air dance floors for teens.<sup>24</sup>

Though this work will avoid tracing the many societal implications of moviegoing's history, it is important to consider one aspect of the experience. In his book “Going to the Show”, Robert C. Allen notes that racial tensions inhabit the experience of and history of moviegoing in North Carolina (which is where he conducted his study). Indeed, he found no movie theatres where blacks and whites occupied the same seating areas, with the most common “accommodation” for African Americans being separate balconies (that is, for the theaters that

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<sup>24</sup> Taylor, Frank J. “Big Boom in Outdoor Movies (1956).” *Moviegoing in America: a Sourcebook in the History of Film Exhibition*, by Gregory Albert Waller, Blackwell Publ., 2002, 248

did admit African Americans). Delineating African American movie venues through the 1950s in the south, it is suggested that the location of these theatres were manifestations of black commercial development in neighborhoods away from downtown areas. However, complicating this claim is the probability that many, if not most, of these theatres were owned and managed by white people<sup>25</sup>. This is simply to restate that experience differs greatly depending on geography and individual social implications.

### **Television as a Threat: Cinerama, Cinemascope and 3D**

From 1948-1954, it is said that the regular movie-house attendance declined an estimated forty million as a direct effect of television. The industry's responses were a change in format and presentation, thus was born: Cinerama, Cinemascope and 3D. Similarly to early moviegoing, where the simple experience of viewing a moving image was enough to attract people into buying tickets and going to the shows, these technologies created a phenomenon of curiosity. People wanted to see what 3D looked like, along with the other visual innovations of the time. However, these technologies were also inwardly perceived as threats to the film industry. The success of the introduction of Cinerama in New York City was astounding. In fact, after two years of continuous running, seats still had to be booked six months in advance, reportedly. However, Cinerama was not an easy feat to exhibit. It called for a specific space, three projectors and projection rooms and proper synchronization of these three projectors. Cinemascope was thus more sustainable and cheaper to run<sup>26</sup>. However, the people of the industry were afraid that

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<sup>25</sup> Allen, Robert C. "Reimagining the History of the Experience of Cinema in a Post-Movie-Going Age." *Media International Australia*, vol. 139, no. 1, 2011, pp. 80–87. *JSTOR [JSTOR]*, doi:10.1177/1329878x1113900111.

<sup>26</sup> Bazin, André. "Will CinemaScope Save the Film Industry? (1953)." *Film-Philosophy*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2002, [www.eupublishing.com/doi/full/10.3366/film.2002.0002](http://www.eupublishing.com/doi/full/10.3366/film.2002.0002).

this would eliminate the market for normative moving-images. So, not only was television presenting a threat to moving images, 3D, Cinerama and Cinemascope technologies were posing a threat to the industry itself. As we know today, this proved to be unnecessary anxiety.

### **Technology as a Threat**

The decline or demise of movie-going has consistently been predicted since perhaps its inception. This began with the rise of the radio. However, following the post-war era of movie-going, the threats became more frequent and the stakes were higher. The arrival of television, or otherwise, the threat of video and its ability to offer home-viewing, for many, was a turning point for the state of cinemas and was followed by cable technology and today's streaming services. However, an important aspect to consider is that every new technology calls for the completion of a cycle for it to actually become a feasible threat. What this means is that, when television was invented, its cost was substantial and therefore only catered to an elite class of people capable of purchasing such a device. In order for television to become a true threat as it did, it had to first become so popular amongst the elite, that competition would have led to the lowering of its prices, making it accessible to middle and lower-class viewers. To use VCRs as an example, when they were first released in the 1970s, their cost was averaged at 1,200\$. They eventually plummeted to less than 300\$. By the mid 1980s, two-thirds of American homes owned a VCR, with the market continuously growing. Through this, videostores were born and thrived from the 1980s to the early 2000s. Then came cable, eliminating the need for a videocassette. At this point, laserdisc players, though offering a superior quality to videocassettes, were very expensive. In the mid 1980s, cable was in place and offered pay-per-view movie viewing. However, it became clear that the business of these new technologies was reliant on the success of movie theaters, because their release on videocassettes, laserdiscs or cable only occurred after

the movies' theater run. This created a buzz that then manifested itself within the videostores and at home; one business was actually helping out the other. And in fact, theaters were still perceived as more desirable experiences because of the quality and sociality they offered.<sup>27</sup> However, this argument is fading for a vast majority of viewers in the streaming age.

### **The Streaming Age: Sociality and Spatiality**

The experience of cinema does not exist outside the experience of space. The spatiality of the theater is being challenged by the home. In addition to space, for a century following the demonstration of Edison's Vitascope projector at Koster and Bial's Music Hall in New York on 23 April 1896, the experience of cinema in America involved a distinctive social practice: groups of people converging upon particular places to experience together something understood to be cinema<sup>28</sup>. However, this is no longer the case at all. Perhaps Barry and Sargent were right in tracing the practice back to human instinct. Here, the desire to excel and be admired is implicitly defined by human acquisition. Owning experience materially and as an extension, having the ability to control memory is one that is closely tied to the home-viewer. The power that one has in stopping and starting a movie is attractive to many, and has arguably taken over the desire to socialize. In fact, the experience has regressed to very early viewing experiences, where the individual would peer into Edison's Kinematoscope. But further than that, the ability to turn movie-watching into something mobile is one that has yet to have happened in the history of technologies as a threat to cinema. We are in a period of response, however these are up against a series of innovative platforms that are only pushing streaming to other levels of dominance.

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<sup>27</sup> Stones, Barbara. "Modern Times (1993) *Moviegoing in America: a Sourcebook in the History of Film Exhibition*, by Gregory Albert Waller, Blackwell Publ., 2002, 296

<sup>28</sup> Allen, 80

### Today's Responses to Streaming

For the average moviegoer, seeing a movie on the big screen is no longer a good enough excuse for the cost of an outing to the theater. As such, theaters are reinventing themselves. Examples of this in New York City are Videology<sup>29</sup>, Nitehawk<sup>30</sup> and Syndicated<sup>31</sup>. These three spaces seek to revive movie-going by use of their alternative programming and angle on the arguably forgotten sociality of the experience. These can be referred to as multi-purpose micro cinemas. At the front is a bar space that holds special events, as was the case in the 1930s, and offer food to be served at the table while viewing the movie. (See Appendix C for a visual representation of the tables at Nitehawk). In addition to being a bar and throwing events, Videology offers DVD rentals. You can also rent the screening spaces in these three locations. Sure, the quality might not be the same as Metrograph or other higher-brow theatres, but it this approach often allows for a lower price of ticketing (Syndicated charges 7\$ for new releases and 4\$ for older titles), and allows for alternative programming. For example, for Mother's Day, Nitehawk is showing *Mommie Dearest* and *Psycho*. While this recipe might upset film enthusiasts, one needs to remove themselves from the serious movie watching approach and accept that these spaces are intended for socializing and celebrating cinema. Though New York City is its own environment, separate from most urban spaces, it is believable that this formula can see success in other cities across the nation as well.

This multi-purpose cinema is perhaps most successfully, the case with Alamo Drafthouse theaters, started in 1997, where the concept is, once again, to offer food and beverages in a

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<sup>29</sup> *Videology Bar & Cinema*, [videologybarandcinema.com/](http://videologybarandcinema.com/).

<sup>30</sup> *Nitehawk Cinema*, [nitehawkcinema.com/](http://nitehawkcinema.com/).

<sup>31</sup> *Syndicated Bar Theater Kitchen*, [syndicatedbk.com/](http://syndicatedbk.com/)



movie-loving setting. Alamo is equipped to project film, and uses archival footage relevant to the themes or setting of the title they are showing as a preview before the show. An example of this is, before the *The Florida Project*<sup>32</sup>, which takes place in close proximity to Disney World and toys with the idealism of the American family and the culture that is born out of this theme park, they projected archival home movies of family trips to Florida. They also incorporate thematic elements of the titles into their food list, and sell original movie merchandise in the lobby. They most recently announced that they would be launching an on-site video-rental space, “Video Vortex”<sup>33</sup>, at their upcoming Raleigh, NC location. This is revisiting, and reviving, videostore culture but with an archival approach. They are stating that it would be possible to rent rare VHS tapes, including titles never released on digital formats. Anticipating the following question, they will indeed be renting out VCRs and appropriate adapters to ensure that people can watch what they rent. The video store will also have an in-house bar and sell vintage exploitation posters.

Their answer to streaming is as follows:

“Why a video store now you ask? Because streaming can only offer so much and to get the kind of variety and selection Video Vortex offers, you would need a dozen subscription services to get close. Lovers of foreign cinema will rejoice in the depth of imports and rarities from countries all over the world. Cult fanatics can dig deep into the strangest recesses of the video world while simultaneously feeding their anime addiction. Need to watch every movie by Agnes Varda or Pedro Almodovar? No problem. Every episode of the original “Dallas”? We’ve got you covered. Discover fascinating documentaries, unsung indie triumphs, and steamy film noirs. We’ve got the movies and we want the community of Raleigh to be able to watch them all.”

Therefore, it is safe to say that they want to counter streaming with a cinephilic approach. The terms are as follows, the first two rentals are free. Subsequently, each rental costs 2.99\$ for a

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<sup>32</sup> Baker, Sean, director. *The Florida Project*. 2017.

<sup>33</sup> McNary, Dave. “Alamo Drafthouse Launching Video Rental Store in 2018.” *Variety*, 18 Dec. 2017, [variety.com/2017/film/news/alamo-drafthouse-video-rental-store-1202643737/](http://variety.com/2017/film/news/alamo-drafthouse-video-rental-store-1202643737/).

week, and playback machines cost 9.95\$ a week. In addition to this, they currently have 75,000 titles in their collection<sup>34</sup>.

These multi-purpose micro-cinemas, following the cycle functionality, have returned to early moviegoing tactics of the 1920s and 1930s to reel in viewers and revenue. They've expanded titles' themes into the experience, with specially created themed drinks, the programming of older titles related to the genre, historical context or aesthetic of a new release show throughout the same week, and they have integrated events. Though they are not handing out china to the women in presence, they put on trivia nights, sing-alongs, movie-themed karaoke, etc. in their bar space. Though they are not all projecting film, they are doing something important, which is keeping the love of moviegoing alive and redefining it to suit our streaming age as well as make a profit.

Also on the rise are new viewing experiences that encourage streaming, deepening the problem. One of these instances is "Screening Room", announced in 2016 by Sean Parker. It is a streaming service that would allow users to watch new releases that are still in the theaters without having to leave their home. The service, for one title, would cost 50\$ - 20\$ would go to the distributor, 20\$ to a participating theater chain and the remaining, to Screening Room. These first-run movies would then be available to stream for 48 hours. However, the viewer would also have to buy a device to stream these titles at 150\$<sup>35</sup>. Aside from the fact that this is a rather expensive alternative to simply going to the theater for (on average) 15\$, and ensuring better quality than the at-home experience. This brings back the question of human instinct: are people

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<sup>34</sup> "Video Rentals." *Video Vortex Bar and Video*, [videovortexbar.com/video](http://videovortexbar.com/video).

<sup>35</sup> Scott, A.O, and Manohla Dargis. "In an Era of Streaming, Cinema Is Under Attack." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 29 Apr. 2016, [www.nytimes.com/2016/05/01/movies/in-an-era-of-streaming-cinema-is-under-attack.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/01/movies/in-an-era-of-streaming-cinema-is-under-attack.html).

that desperate to avoid social interaction? In her 1996 essay, “The Decay of Cinema”, Susan Sontag emphasizes that at-home movie watching in some ways, kills the practice and the art of cinema, stating that to fully experience a title, one must be taken out of their daily set of distractions: “To be kidnapped, you have to be in a movie theater, seated in the dark among anonymous strangers. (...) No amount of mourning will revive the vanished rituals -- erotic, ruminative -- of the darkened theater.”<sup>36</sup>

### **Conclusion**

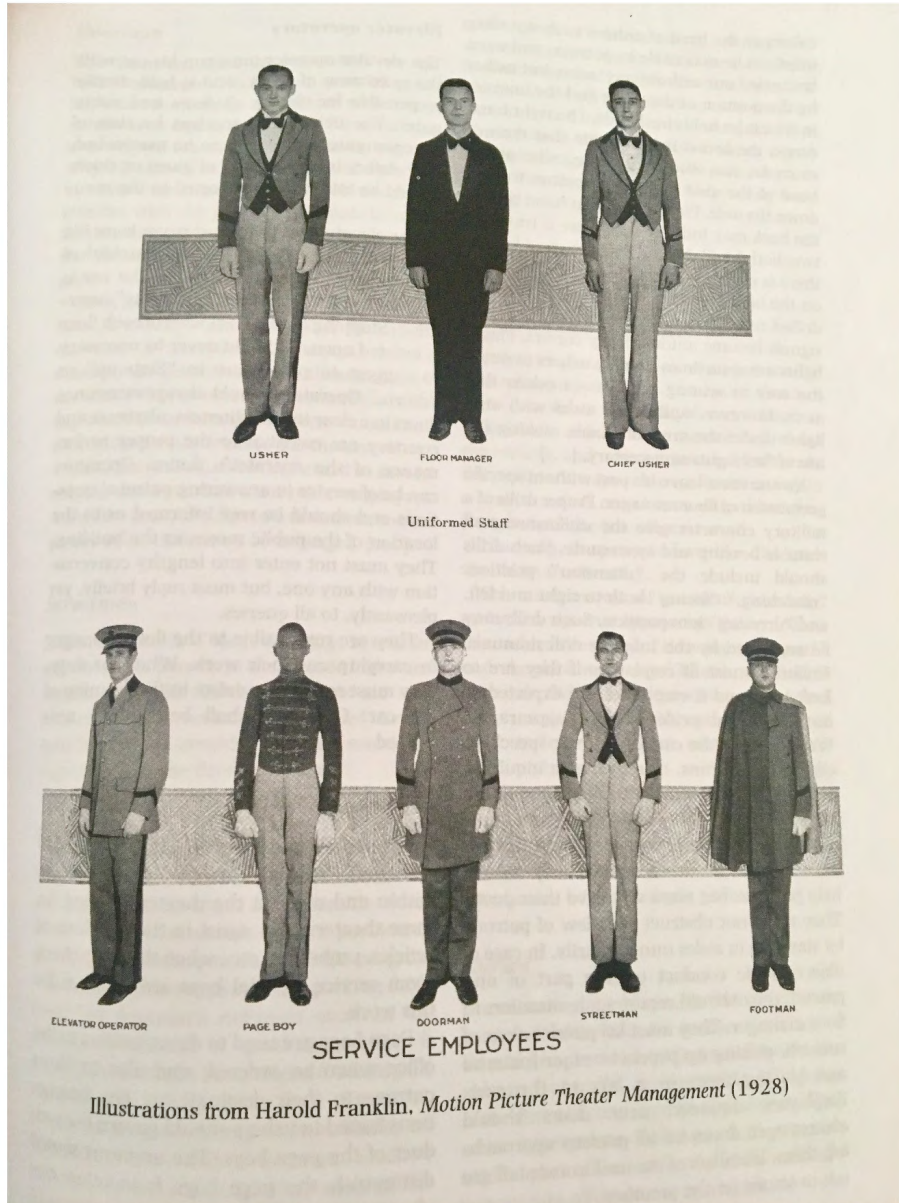
As the success of technology must be measured by its completion of a cycle: enough people have to start using it and buying it for it to become accessible in price and then potentially be widespread, so is Cinema as an art, with its many moving parts. For theaters to exist, movies have to be made, and for movies to be made, they need to be making money. In order to make money, they need to ensure that people not only see their film but pay a price to do so. In the streaming age, this line gets blurred. Yes, viewers can pay monthly subscriptions to platforms like Netflix, but are these platforms contributing in any substantial way to the industry itself, or are they only creating opportunities inwardly, with the production of their own material on the rise? In addition to this, they control our access to material; in other words, their list of titles is nowhere near complete. The ability to stream has also given increasing rise to pirating. So, arguably, if people are not going to the theatre, or purchasing their right to view titles, they are contributing to the decline of production. And this decline of production, as an extension, means the ultimate decline of Cinephilia, the study of cinema and the perhaps even its preservation. Of course, this is an extreme and bleak outcome, but none the less, one that is important to mention. It is also to be noted that the viewing possibilities that streaming offer internationally, in places

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<sup>36</sup> Sontag, Susan. “The Decay of Cinema.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 25 Feb. 1996, [archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/00/03/12/specials/sontag-cinema.html?\\_r=1](https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/00/03/12/specials/sontag-cinema.html?_r=1).

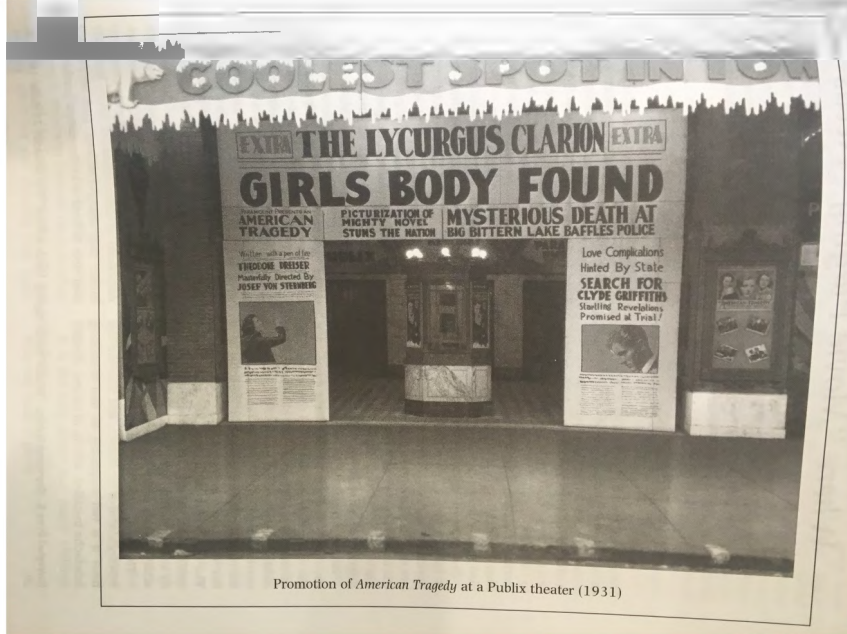
that do not have theaters necessarily or where people cannot afford to pay the 15\$ price for a ticket, the access that streaming presents is one that should not be dismissed. So then, what are the solutions? How do we keep Cinema and movie-going alive in the age of streaming? Perhaps an answer to keep in mind, and what has been learned from this essay, is that movie-going has never been just one thing. It has redefined itself and taken many shapes, meant different things for different viewers and given rise to new art forms, technologies and social activities itself. So perhaps the answer is combining the different digital tensions of today and creating a new experience, as is the case with Alamo Draft-House, who, all the while being equipped to project good quality film, is addressing the fact that for most viewers, movie-going needs to be more than seeing a title so that they can justify choosing an outing over-seeing the same title for free at home. Or even, the multi-purpose micro cinemas that integrate bars, themed programming, and create a new experience for the viewer.

### Appendix A: Employee Uniforms



<sup>37</sup> Barry, John F., and Epes W, Sargent. "Building Theatre Patronage (1927)." *Moviegoin in America: a Sourcebook in the History of Film Exhibition*, by Gregory Albert Waller, Blackwell Publ., 2002, 119

**Appendix B: Special Stunt for *An American Tragedy* and *White Zombie***



Promotion of *American Tragedy* at a Publix theater (1931)

38



Youngsters with *White Zombie* display in theater lobby (1932)

<sup>38</sup> Gomery, 137

**Appendix C: Nitehawk's table chart (catering to the food service)**

**TABLE DIAGRAM**



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