

NOW PLAYING: EARLY MOVIEGOING AND THE REGULATION OF FUN

Paul S. Moore

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Reviewed by Joan Nicks

If fun was the spirit behind early moviegoing, then regulation was the engine that turned moviegoing into a mass practice. Paul Moore argues that moviegoing had to be integrated as a collective practice in Canada to become a national entertainment industry. Accordingly, Toronto was more than a regional epicentre; it was where urban governance of moviegoing and theatre operation converged, encompassing the city's downtown and neighbourhood theatres, and the entrepreneurial showmen who built and promoted their theatres in city newspapers. (Moore uses the term "theatorium," not "nickelodeon," because it was common usage for Toronto theatres early in the twentieth century.) Moore lays out his argument clearly: the "civic aspect of showmanship and the regulation of amusement is the subject of *Now Playing*." Such was the influence of Toronto, Moore argues, that its practices established "precedents for Canadian provinces, at least implicitly forming a national paradigm for filmgoing." He concludes, "Toronto became a center of cinema production for the whole of Canada, *not by producing films but by producing a nationalist mass practice of filmgoing*" (italics his).

Moore makes American comparisons in this case study, but his archival research largely concentrates on resources documenting how Toronto's urban organization set in motion "local conditions for how film was to be handled, sold, and seen." The institutionalization of movie-going practices in Toronto led to Ontario's regulatory standards, including the establishment of the Ontario Censor Board in 1911. In Moore's words, his emphasis "is historical, looking in depth at a particular urban case in the moment [1908-1914] before the U.S. film industry was known simply as Hollywood."

This is an ambitious and detailed study that explores how the organization of urban space, the role of electric technology as a social tool, and newspaper promotion were instrumental in establishing Toronto's civic culture. The five chapter-titles chart the direction of the book: "Rendezvous for Particular People: Local Roots of Mass Culture"; "Socially Combustible: Panicky People and Flammable Films"; "Showmanship in Formation: Incorporating the Civic Work of Competition"; "Senseless Censors and Startling Deeds: From Police Beat to Bureaucracy"; and "Everybody's Going: Introducing the Mass Audience to Itself."

Tracing the initial loose control over popular public events in Toronto and the often hasty licensing of amusement businesses, Moore argues that the showmen who owned and operated early Toronto theatres created the conditions of moviegoing, which he describes as "interplay" between "showmanship and governance." Licensing fees for Toronto theatres were reasonable and "stayed constant," compared with other cities both in Canada and the U.S., and theatre

owners welcomed regulations in 1909 that licensed the operation of the city's theatres and established policy regarding standards of decency in public venues.

Formulating a typology of Toronto's early showmen, Moore examines the competitive practices that secured a place for the exhibition of film as movies eclipsed vaudeville. Though some failed in this business, many Toronto showmen became experts as "retail merchants selling ready-made products for consumption"; others became "showmen in control of corporate boardrooms," calling the shots in the "rational management" of theatre chains. Moore advances the idea that the formal conglomeration of film distribution companies "appears to have first happened in Toronto," before it was adopted by American companies.

With Toronto emerging as the model for moral, social and safety control, early licensing of public spaces became a governing tool, and Moore makes the point that licensing was an urban problem-solver that decentralized authority and placed the responsibility of governance on the business owner. With reform, the ragged sociability of Toronto moviegoing changed and preoccupation with the management of the modern city prevailed. Moore argues that municipal licensing made the owner-operator, not the patrons or clients, the "steward" over safety in theatres and businesses.

By Moore's account, the issues around fire regulation have not been given due attention in film histories. Moore uses the term "social combustibility" to describe the mood of panicking audiences in the period before licensing, when projection room fires caused by flammable celluloid film resulted in injuries. The unprecedented death of a teenage projectionist in 1908 from burns sustained in a St. Catharines theatre was a particular flashpoint for regulators. Since it was a matter of life and death, fire safety fell under theatre licensing regulation. Moore sees licensing as "the logic" underlying fire safety, specifically a *municipal* matter of "managing publics." However, the many fires in Toronto meant that provincial legislation was toughened in 1908 to clarify jurisdiction over theatre safety and moviegoing generally.

Moore mines the records and newspapers of the day to reveal how friendly compromise between moral reformers (mostly the clergy) and government resolved the contentious debates about policing theatres in a city known as Toronto the good or "Toronto the too good" according to one reporter, when, for example, the Presbyterian Church congratulated the government of Ontario for regulating picture shows, and implicitly, the public for its compliance. Moral reformers pointed to playgrounds, sports and non-commercial amusements as tools to preserve Toronto's public good. Their fear was that secular "mainstream amusements" such as cinema, with their commercial stakes in the profit motive, threatened moral values. Cheap amusements meant cheap values, demeaned family life and parenting, and did not provide up-lift or education. For the price of admission, adults and juveniles could indulge in a dubious pastime. In this climate, the Toronto-centric reform objectives of mainstream Protestant churches were "adopted as nationalist policy."

A plethora of municipal boards (prominently Toronto's Board of Control and the Police Commission) managed a public culture, which by 1914 included nearly one hundred theatres. While reformers represented various church groups and parties with interests in social betterment, the Toronto police were the foot soldiers on the beat checking public behaviour and violations against Sunday "blue laws" prohibiting drinking. Moore argues that the Toronto police made moral reform their "special vocation," but "showed they could not distinguish Shakespeare from Wild West shows." Thus, well before the establishment of the Ontario Censor Board in 1911, provincial legislation was overhauled piecemeal to make sense of the existing scattered jurisdictions, where theatre licensing in Toronto was under the municipality, policing of theatres and movies fell to the morality squad, and the showmen were "active participants in their own regulation."

Moore takes as a given that other amusements and pastimes were vital in urban development and notes that by the 1920s theatres became more than real estate holdings for motion picture companies (Famous Players, the Allen chain). They shaped the downtowns of cities and towns in Ontario and across the country. Moore gives due attention to Toronto's Jewish theatre entrepreneurs, as well as immigrant audiences and neighbourhood theatres; and he looks at how they were identified in the press. He defines moviegoing during World War I as a "latent form of citizenship" when the public developed a sense of collective connection to Canada's war effort. This observation is not in dispute, but somewhat obscures the various other uses of theatres, well before War Bond rallies, that brought people together in many regions for local events other than vaudeville and movies. Theatres had become community centres.

Moore refers to newspapers as mediators that cast moviegoing as "an ethnographic curiosity." In his words, "They introduced the mass audience to itself" and thus mapped urban life. True, but it wasn't only metropolitan newspapers in cities like Toronto that performed in this way. In smaller cities and towns in Ontario, newspaper publishers were journalistic entrepreneurs who used promotional rhetoric, at least as early as 1908, to boost movies, theatres and the development of their communities.

Moore's observation that "the local practice of moviegoing as a situated social action of cultural consumption" is neglected in critical studies that focus on film representation seems beside the point in a case study with a different and valid method such as his. *Now Playing* displays strong scholarship on its own terms. Moore's archival research gives this case study the necessary historical foundation and heft. As well, he conveys the sense that he has made it his scholarly business to know Toronto through fieldwork and walking the streets, not only by reading the records.

Studies with a historical basis invite a degree of speculation to make an argument work, and I'm left to ponder the all-encompassing sway of Moore's influential Toronto in early film culture. Readers of Moore's very resourceful

work might keep in mind that the local entrepreneurs who first built and operated theatres as businesses in smaller Canadian cities and towns also drove and served civic values and organizations, and were enmeshed in debates over movies, morals and local bylaws. Importantly, the specifics of place made each of them unique even as they conformed to wider regulation and the commercialization of early moviegoing. Moore's many references to other cities and towns prompt me to conclude that the door remains wide open for case studies of local moviegoing and theatres in other communities in different regions of Ontario and the rest of the country.

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