

## SECTION 1 CULTURAL ISSUES

*Now Playing: Early Moviegoing and The Regulation of Fun.* By Paul S. Moore  
(Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008. x plus 250 pp.  
\$74.50 cloth).

In *Now Playing*, a history of early film exhibition in Toronto, sociologist Paul S. Moore explores how the cinema became a mass medium. In particular, Moore focuses on how local government officials, film exhibitors and newspaper writers transformed moviegoing, an activity that middle-class city dwellers at first considered unusual and even dangerous, into a regular habit that was safe, respectable and even patriotic. Not just another entry in the growing number of city-centered histories of moviegoing, this thoughtful work calls into question many accepted arguments about early cinema and produces new research issues that will encourage social historians to reexamine the development of film exhibition in the early 1900s.

Moore grounds his arguments in careful research on what are seemingly the most ordinary aspects of early film exhibition. For example, he devotes an early chapter to movie theater fire codes, which were adopted in many cities in 1908 after a number of deadly and widely publicized fires in Canada and elsewhere. Moore posits that many historians have understated or even dismissed the danger of theater fires for moviegoers. As a result, scholars have implied that theater fire codes were adopted because local authorities wished to close down working-class and ethnically heterogeneous spaces that threatened Progressive-era ideals of social and moral control. Contrary to these interpretations, Moore argues that the danger of theater fires, sparked by highly flammable nitrate film, was quite real. He identifies the theater as a “socially combustible” place precisely because of the age, gender and ethnic diversity of film audiences, and takes seriously the danger “panic” posed in the event of a fire. Moore argues that in giving “cinema its first legal definition,” fire codes allowed for the cinema to emerge as a safe and governmentally sanctioned place of leisure (46). Thus, fire codes ultimately encouraged, rather than hampered, the growth of theaters in Toronto.

Moore also questions the significance of the “nickelodeon era,” which other scholars have considered to be crucial for the cinema’s transition from a working-class and immigrant amusement to a mass medium. While hundreds of “nickelodeons,” inexpensive storefront neighborhood theaters, were built in other cities between 1905 and 1907, “nickel madness” did not sweep Toronto in the same way. In contrast, a single businessman, John Griffin, an Irish-Catholic and Toronto native, dominated the market by opening four “theatatoriums” in 1906. Unlike the typical small-scale and neighborhood-based nickelodeon, Griffin’s theaters accommodated hundreds of moviegoers and were located where people shopped and worked. Griffin’s theaters prevailed until the early 1910s, when other entrepreneurs began opening new and extravagant movie theaters that outshined Griffin’s theaters. In bypassing the “nickelodeon era,” Moore argues that theater

exhibitors in Toronto appealed to a middle-class audience from the start and were able to more quickly standardize and professionalize film exhibition practices.

In addition to fire codes and nickelodeons, Moore also presents a fresh look at the subject of censorship, using a broad range of archival sources, like municipal codes, newspaper articles and police records. While newspapers tended to report every instance of film censorship, when Moore turns to police records he finds that the vast majority of charges against theater owners were not related to film content. Rather, exhibitors were far more likely to be charged with violations of other rules, like a law passed in 1911 demanding that all children attending films be accompanied by an adult. While many historians have assumed that social reformers focused on theater regulations because they objected to film content, Moore shows that moralistic crusades were far more likely to target spaces of adult male leisure like billiard halls and bowling alleys. As a result of his methodological innovations, Moore is able provide nuance to commonly accepted arguments regarding the primacy of censorship in the regulation of moviegoing.

At a broader level, Moore is interested in showing how the habit of moviegoing emerges in society. Treating his key terms like sociological concepts, Moore shows how “showmanship,” “regulation,” “journalism,” and “promotion” all worked together to create the conditions for the cinema to emerge as a mass practice. Moore’s functional analysis of local newspapers is particularly productive on this front. Instead of reading newspapers only for evidence of film exhibition practices, Moore suggests that newspapers served as a cultural “menu,” alerting readers to where and when events took place, and as a result created a mass audience accustomed to thinking of themselves as such. Moore contextualizes descriptions of working class and ethnically diverse moviegoers published in newspapers by suggesting that these articles at once introduced middle-class audiences to unfamiliar people—in an example he provides, orthodox Jews—as well as the activity of moviegoing itself.

While Moore points out what is distinctive about Toronto’s experience of early cinema in the opening chapters, in the last section he shows how the city became part of a regional (and transnational) film market, no different than Cleveland or Detroit. Although the patriotism awakened during World War I encouraged the production of domestic films, Canadian interest in local product was short-lived. Instead, the imposition of an amusement tax on theater tickets in order to fund war efforts encouraged theater managers to promote moviegoing as a patriotic act, even if the films playing were largely non-Canadian.

City-specific social histories of moviegoing are in themselves rewarding because they provide new details about local and particular film exhibition practices, but *Now Playing* does more than describe the emergence of cinema in Toronto. By documenting how moviegoing in Toronto became a mass practice, Moore demonstrates that the rapid rise of Hollywood in the late 1910s was not only due to industrial reorganization at the site of film production, but was also the consequence of local changes in film exhibition. As Moore shows, government officials, exhibitors and journalists made moviegoing an acceptable everyday activity for a variety of film publics, regardless of where they lived or what theater they visited. The mass culture of moviegoing was, as he puts it, earned by exhibitors, “one nickel at a time” (224).