Class Markers in the Mass Movie Audience: A Case Study in the Cultural Geography of Moviegoing, 1926–1932

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In the 1920s, Hollywood moved to normalize a vertically integrated industrial structure based on centralized control over film production, distribution, and exhibition. The intensity of this effort at greater corporate rationalization increased dramatically between 1926 and 1932, as major studios aggressively assumed ownership of key first-run movie palaces in cities and towns across America. Current studies of moviegoing during this period often suggest that studio control over exhibition helped standardize the contexts of film reception, thereby pressing pre-existing class specificities of moviegoing into a more easily managed and legitimized middle-class form of cultural practice. The case study presented here offers a theoretically-informed but empirically grounded investigation of film exhibition and moviegoing during this period, and argues that film exhibition and moviegoing continued to be marked by cultural distinctions that helped articulate class relations in the wider social formation.

In “Notes on Deconstructing ‘The Popular’,” Stuart Hall (1981) gives a lucid account of the political stakes involved in the historical formations and transformations of popular culture. “Throughout the long transition into agrarian capitalism and then in the formation and development of industrial capitalism,” he writes, “there is a more or less continuous struggle over the culture of working people, the labouring classes and the poor. This fact must be the
starting point for any study, both of the basis for, and the transformations of, popular culture" (p. 227). While Hall is concerned to illuminate the fundamental ways in which social relations of power intervene in popular culture, he is also careful to avoid conceptualizing this intervention in strictly dichotomous terms. Thus, he argues that "popular culture is neither, in a 'pure' sense, the popular traditions of resistance to processes" of social domination, "nor is it the forms which are superimposed on and over them" (p. 228). For Hall, critical analysis of popular culture is less a search for "pure" expressions of either cultural resistance or cultural incorporation than an investigation into the cultural dynamics through which the dialectic of resistance and containment is organized. As he puts it:

I think there is a continuous and necessarily uneven and unequal struggle, by the dominant culture, constantly to disorganise and reorganise popular culture; to enclose and confine its definitions and forms within a more inclusive range of dominant forms .... There are points of resistance; there are also moments of supercession. This is the dialectic of cultural struggle (p. 233).

Hall's approach to popular culture has bearing for a wide range of cultural forms and practices, but it may be particularly useful for enriching our understanding of the cultural politics formed at the intersections of cinema history and class history in the United States. As Robert Sklar (1975) has argued, movies were originally introduced to middle-class audiences in refined vaudeville houses at the turn of the century, but they quickly "rose to the surface of cultural consciousness from the bottom up, receiving their principal support from the lowest and most invisible classes in American society" (p. 3).1 The growing public emergence of movies and their working-class immigrant audiences did not go uncontested, however, and the frequent attempts by political, intellectual, and religious authorities to impose regulatory control over movie exhibition and content during the nickelodeon era (roughly 1905–1915) have been well documented (see, for example, Jowett, 1976, pp. 108–138). Regulatory measures were often ostensibly put forward in the interest of protecting public health and safety, or in the name of shielding children from morally corruptive influences originating either within the audience or on the screen. But they may also be understood as an attempt to intervene in the cultural practice of
America's working-class immigrants, many of whom found in their local nickelodeon a space where older ethnic traditions and class-specific practices could be successfully grafted onto the new mass cultural form of moviegoing. Thus, the battle to control movies, as Sklar (1975) has suggested, can also be seen "an aspect of the struggle between the classes. Taking place, as it did, in the realm of leisure and amusements, and in a society where to speak of class conflict was a breach of good taste, it was almost invariably masked" (p. 123).

The question of how film exhibition connected with wider relations of social class after the nickelodeon period is relatively underexplored in the film history literature, and this is partly a result of the emphasis that film scholars have tended to place on matters of movie production and representation as opposed to movie exhibition and audience formation (Gomery, 1982). As Robert Allen (1990b) has observed, the state of historical knowledge in film studies about American movie exhibition, movie audiences, and moviegoing practices has long been marked by an "appalling ignorance of the most basic facts of exhibition history: differences in exhibition practices among cities and towns, the likely audiences for the tens of thousands of exhibition venues across the country and over time, and the complexities of the relationship between moviegoing and other social practices" (p. 348).

While the amount of research that remains to be done on the historical conditions of film reception in towns and cities across America is vast, the past two decades have witnessed the growth of an important strand of historical scholarship that has made considerable progress in the difficult project of mapping the social and cultural terrain of American moviegoing. This line of work has been carried out by both social historians and film historians and has often adopted a local case-history design to illuminate the ways in which film exhibition, audience composition, and movie-going practices in different towns and cities have been variably patterned along dimensions of difference such as class and ethnicity (Allen & Gomery, 1985, pp. 202–207; Cohen, 1989, 1990; Merritt, 1985; Rosenzweig, 1983; Singer, 1995, 1996, 1997), class, ethnicity and gender (Ewen & Ewen, 1982; Fuller, 1990, 1996; Peiss, 1986), and class and race (Carbine, 1990; Waller, 1990, 1992, 1995).

Though studies such as these have dramatically advanced our understanding of the variable ways in which film exhibition and moviegoing have developed historically, they have focused their
inquiries largely on the years of film history before the normalization of vertical integration by the major Hollywood studios in the mid-late 1920s.\textsuperscript{3} Research on the post-integration period suggests that Hollywood's expansive growth in movie palace construction and national theater chaining accelerated the erosion of grassroots control over the material contexts of reception and transformed moviegoing into a more standardized—and therefore more controllable—commercial and popular cultural practice (Carbine, 1990; Cohen, 1989, 1990; Fuller, 1990, 1996).

For example, in researching the historical development of movie theaters and their audiences in 1920s Chicago, Lizabeth Cohen (1989, 1990) illuminates the significant impact that studio integration practices exerted on the material and cultural contexts of exhibition, particularly with regard to independent, neighborhood-oriented theaters catering to working-class and immigrant audiences:

Beginning in the late 1920s and increasingly in the 1930s, local groups lost their ability to control the dissemination of mass culture.... The elaboration of the Hollywood studio system and the costs of installing sound helped standardize moviegoing as well. Not only were neighborhood theaters increasingly taken over by chains, but the "talkies" themselves hushed the audience's interjections and replaced the ethnic troupes and amateur talent shows with taped shorts, distributed nationally (1989, p. 26).

Cohen is careful to point out, however, that "the extent to which this more national mass culture in the end succeeded in assimilating workers to middle class values remains an open question" (1989, p. 26). Nonetheless, the intent behind studio integration practices was clear: "In every way possible, the new Foxes, Paramounts, and Roxies sought to expunge the working class, neighborhood character from the moviegoing experience to make it more respectable in the eyes of the middle class" (Cohen, 1990, p. 125).

If Hollywood's expansion into movie palace construction and national theater chaining helped standardize the contexts of reception in large cities such as Chicago, to what degree did this pattern also obtain in other cities and towns across America? And, assuming the same tendency toward standardization did occur in other locales, how successful was it in attempting to "expunge the working class, neighborhood character from the moviegoing experience"? Investigating these questions is an important project, and not only because of the contribution that can be made to our knowledge of
possible local variations in the social history of moviegoing in America. Also at stake is our understanding of how vertical integration may have reorganized the cultural practice of moviegoing in a way that helped to legitimize a wider system of increasingly fluid social relations that nonetheless remained structured in dominance. Was exhibition during this key transitional period standardized to the point of erasing cultural distinctions between theaters or between audiences, thereby drawing all patrons, side by side, into an homogeneous middle-class space of cultural consumption that masked the reality of social hierarchy? Or, rather, did the elaboration of a vertically integrated, price-indexed, run-based system of exhibition provide a structure for reproducing dominant social relations by mobilizing corresponding cultural distinctions that "naturalized" hierarchies of taste based on class (and relatedly ethnicity)?

This study draws on a variety of primary historical documents and oral histories\(^4\) to reconstruct the cultural geography that formed over the material terrain of movie exhibition and moviegoing in a single urban environment—the city of Springfield, Massachusetts. The study covers the years 1926 to 1932, the primary period of transition during which vertical integration by the major studios was normalized on a national scale (Gomery, 1992, pp. 59–75).

The selection of Springfield as a site for this case history is based largely on two considerations. First, Springfield during this period was a fairly typical, medium-sized (roughly 150,000 residents) northeastern city that was founded on a diverse industrial base, with roughly 47 per cent of the employed population working in the manufacturing and mechanical industries (Douglass, 1926, pp. 78–79). The city was also fairly typical of northeastern industrial cities in its urban and social geography, which divided along relatively distinct class lines, with a degree of ethnic mixing in most of the city's neighborhoods, particularly the poorest ones. These social characteristics make the city a suitable site for investigating the cultural geography of class relations as these may have played out over the field of movie exhibition, audience formations, and moviegoing practices.

Second, Springfield had sixteen theaters—nine located in the downtown district and seven others located in various outlying districts—in operation between 1926 and 1932, and these theaters were marked by three different types of ownership. Five of the theaters were integrated into the national chains of three major
Hollywood studios (Fox, Warner Brothers, and Paramount), five others were amalgamated into a locally-owned and operated chain of neighborhood theaters (Springfield's Winchester Amusement Corporation), and the remaining six sites were independently-owned and operated neighborhood theaters. This range of theaters and types of ownership allows for the fullest investigation of the possible emergence of cultural distinctions at the level of exhibition.

However, because it is necessary to draw the cultural contours of movie exhibition and moviegoing in detail, the analysis presented here has been limited, for reasons of space, to six of the nine theaters located in Springfield's downtown district. To bring possible distinctions between various forms of exhibition and moviegoing into sharp relief, and to provide an accurate sense of the range of theaters available to moviegoers in just the downtown district itself (let alone in city's socially and culturally divergent outlying areas), the six theaters selected for analysis represent: (1) the three types of ownership—studio integrated, local chain, independent—identified above, and (2) the first-run, second-run, and third-run structure through which exhibition in Springfield (as well as in most other cities of similar size) was organized during the era of vertical integration in the film industry.

THE CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY OF DOWNTOWN SPRINGFIELD AND ITS MOVIE THEATERS

As one would expect, downtown Springfield was the most commercially developed area of the city, and it is not surprising that by 1932 nine of the city's sixteen theaters would be located there. The run location, ownership structure, and seating capacity of these nine theaters was as follows: First-run: The Paramount (Paramount-Publix Corporation, 3,200), The Fox-Poli Palace (Fox Theater Corporation, 2,500), The Capitol (Warner Brothers Corporation, 2,200); Second-run: The Broadway (Paramount-Publix Corporation, 2,500), The Fox (Fox Theater Corporation, 1,444), The Arcade (independent, 1,100), The Bijou (independent, 900); Third-run: The State (independent, 900), The Garden (Winchester Amusement Corporation, 500).5

In order to determine who might have been likely to attend any of these downtown theaters, it is useful first to consider the broader cultural geography of the downtown area, which a social survey
commissioned by Springfield’s Protestant churches judged as the worst of the city’s eleven districts in terms of overall “social quality” (Douglass, 1926). The survey offered a number of reasons for this evaluation. First, and perhaps foremost in the eyes of the surveyors, the downtown district had the second highest percentage of foreign born and native born of foreign or mixed parentage in the city: 33.6 per cent of the district’s residents were foreign born, and 45.7 per cent were second-generation immigrants. Italians were the most prevalent ethnic group, followed by French Canadians and Irish, and the district was also home to the city’s second largest African-American population (Douglass, 1926, pp. 406–407).

The class composition of the downtown area’s residential population appears to have been oriented toward the lower end of the socio-economic index, as the district was ranked by the survey as the most heavily industrialized section of the city. Given this proliferation of industry, it is not surprising that tenement buildings housing factory workers were spread throughout the district, and the survey indicates that 88 per cent of the area’s residents rented rather than owned their dwellings, with the average dwelling having 5.6 inhabitants. The downtown area was also marked by a high degree of intra-district mobility among its residents, which was partly a result of the large number of transient single males who lived and worked there, and nearly 40 per cent of the district’s population changed addresses in the year 1922 alone. Downtown Springfield also had the second-highest level of juvenile delinquency in the city, the largest number of school-age children at work, and the highest rate of illiteracy (Douglass, 1926, pp. 404–415).

All these indicators of social life downtown suggest that theaters located there would pull audiences primarily from the population of lower income, ethnically diverse residents that inhabited the immediate area. But the fact that downtown was the central business and shopping district for the city and was linked to outlying areas by an extensive public transportation system also meant that this area attracted people from surrounding suburbs, most of which were generally more affluent than the downtown district. Was it the case, then, that audiences for downtown Springfield’s theaters constituted a non-class and non-ethnically-defined mass? Were there no cultural distinctions between these theaters?

To answer these questions, it is necessary to add to the urban geographic analysis another layer of analysis that takes into consideration specific aspects of the cultural appeals of exhibition—location,
programming, advertising, publicity, price, and so on—that existed among central business district movie theaters. Also, it is important to consider the specific histories of these theaters, some of which were the oldest in the city and over time had accumulated social and cultural associations that continued to resonate in 1920s Springfield and which might have influenced theater attendance patterns. As explained earlier, the analysis will be limited here to six downtown theaters. These are: The Capitol, The Fox-Poli, The Fox, The Arcade, The Garden, and The State.

First-run downtown theaters: The Capitol and The Fox-Poli

By 1932, Springfield’s Capitol and Fox-Poli theaters were two of three first-run movie palaces located in the central business district. The third was The Paramount. These were the elite theaters in the city and formed the benchmark against which the relative cultural standing of all other movie houses was measured.

The 2,200 seat Capitol Theater opened in 1920 as an independent movie palace owned by the Capitol Theater Company, which was directed by Abraham Goodside of Portland, Maine and James Butler of Springfield. The Capitol was managed locally by Springfield resident M. J. Kavanaugh. The theater was located on the west side of downtown’s Main Street, adjacent to Springfield City Hall and one block north of the prestigious Court Square area (the theatrical home of the legitimate stage). From the outset, the theater sought to establish itself as one of the city’s elite enterprises, and its construction as an ornate architectural structure converged with a generalized boom in the rise of well-appointed civic and commercial institutional structures that occurred throughout the downtown area during the 1920s. The Capitol billed itself as “A Springfield Institution” committed to the “proper presentation of photodramatic art,” and a typical evening’s entertainment during the early 1920s included an orchestral overture, one musical solo, one musical duet, several short films and a feature film that was enhanced by color harmonies provided by the theater’s ambient lighting system. Such entertainment packages were presented in one week runs with changes every Sunday. Regular evening prices at this time were 25 cents for the balcony, 35 cents for the dress circle, and 50 cents for orchestra seats (Capitol Review, 1920).

In January of 1927, The Capitol introduced the city to sound films through the Warner Bros. Vitaphone system, at which time
the theater temporarily raised its evening prices to 35, 50, and 75 cents, asking patrons to "note this scale of popular prices" and "compare it with the high admission asked for Vitaphone in the larger cities" (Capitol theater advertisement, 1927, p. 9G). Such prices for special Vitaphone shows may have compared well with the bigger cities, but even the theater's regular prices were prohibitive for many of Springfield's less affluent residents. Richard McBride, for instance, recalls that "The Capitol—was an expensive one...you paid fifty cents if you wanted to go there. We used to go down and see what was on the glass, [but] we never went there. Most of the good ones [films] always ended up in the locals, it might be a month, two months, three months, but you knew eventually you were gonna see all the real good ones" (Interview by author, 1994). McBride, who at the time lived in the heavily working-class North End district (which bordered the northern edge of downtown), also explains that:

We who were in the smaller group, the lesser affluent group, we'd wait 'til they came to our theaters, ones we could walk to... It would be rare for us to go to a big one. We did once in a while, like my dad [who worked as night supervisor at a downtown restaurant near Court Square] would get passes from the managers and assistant managers [of the big theaters]. They'd call up and say they couldn't get out for supper and could he send something out, and they paid for it, and he had one of the busboys take it over. And in return he'd get those passes. We always held them, cause there was no date on 'em, so when a real good movie came, we could get there first and see it, and we could brag to the neighborhood. And then we'd sit down and try to tell the people.

There is indication here of the status accorded to a trip to one of the big downtown theaters to see a film in its first run, and of the use value that could be made of that status within the social relations of the neighborhood. Nonetheless, for most working-class families, attendance at these theaters likely remained more of a special event than a regular occurrence. According to Rita Soplop, who lived at the time in the Brightwood neighborhood in the city's northwestern district (which was situated just north of the North End) and whose father was a foundry man at Moore Drop Forging, "it was a big thing to go to the Paramount, or the Polis, or Capitol..." (Interview by author, 1995).

The Capitol was sold to Warner Bros. in July 1929, and after undergoing extensive renovation was reopened to the public in
September of the same year. Prices were changed to a flat rate of 35 cents before 5 PM and 50 cents after 5 PM. Program runs were still one week in duration, but the changes were shifted from Sunday to Friday (Capitol theater official resigns, 1929). Newspaper accounts describing the interior of the new Capitol used a therapeutic discourse that emphasized the theater's tasteful and quietly-restful ambiance. Reports noted that within the theater an "artistic treatment" prevailed and an "atmosphere of quiet, good taste has been wrought." The blending of wall and ceiling decorations produced a "most charming effect at once restful to the eye, in contrast with the blaring color schemes that one finds in so many theaters, where bizarre effects prevail." Soft-toned lamps added to the "restful atmosphere" of the theater (Beautiful new Capitol theater, 1929, p. 20).

While this discourse of quietude and restfulness brings to mind Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen's (1982) memorable characterization of movie palace ambiance as inducing the "dark somnambulance of celluloid fantasy (p. 103)," it is also important to note the specific historical context within which this discourse was resonating. In 1923 the Springfield City Planning Board had called for therapeutic public recreation "compensations" for what they defined as an increasingly congested urban environment (Springfield City Planning Board, 1923, p. 142). It is thus possible to read this discourse as being culturally articulated to the larger attempts of civic authorities to quiet and "tame" the rapidly expanding city through the provision of public leisure. Interestingly, however, the compensations provided by The Capitol were not necessarily directed toward the poorest elements of the city—as is indicated by the theater's pricing structure—so much as toward the more affluent and upwardly mobile, for whom the theater could serve as a transitional portal through which one could be removed from the urban milieu and its social "problems." Thus, the theater's discourse of restful and quiet contemplation may have spoken as much about escape from something and perhaps somebody (gaudiness, loudness, excessive stimulation, industrialization, the ethnically polyglot and working-class oriented social geography of the downtown district) as about an escape into the celluloid somnambulance of the film itself.

On a more general level, The Capitol's discursive construction as a therapeutic and aesthetically pleasing site for escaping the social environment of downtown Springfield may have resonated with a detached experience of the material conditions of economic and
social life of the sort that Pierre Bourdieu (1986) argues produces a corresponding bourgeois "aesthetic" disposition. For Bourdieu, bourgeois taste distinguishes itself through an "aesthetic" disposition marked by a contemplative and formal distance in relation to cultural objects and the material world of people and things. According to Bourdieu, this "aesthetic" disposition "can only be constituted within an experience of the world freed from urgency. In other words, it presupposes the distance from the world... which is the basis of the bourgeois experience of the world" (p. 190). Thus, by encoding The Capitol as an object designed for formal "appreciation," the newspaper discourse may in effect have been inviting recognition of and valorization for the "refusal of the gaudy and tawdry"—specifically, the "blaring color schemes" and "bizarre effects" found at other movie theaters—that constitutes the very basis of the bourgeois sense of distinction. Responding to this appeal, the moviegoer could effectively recognize him or herself as a likely candidate for a visit to The Capitol. This visit, in turn, would further mark and legitimate the patron’s status as a member of the middle-class, possessed of the capital and leisure time required for the cultivation of bourgeois taste. Thus, in contrast to the working-class, which Bourdieu (1984) argues is continually ensnared in the economic urgencies of life and so inhabits a corresponding "popular" cultural disposition that logically tends toward a pragmatic search for cultural practices offering the greatest value for the money (pp. 376–379), the middle-class might have been more inclined to pay the price of a Capitol ticket, viewing it as a necessary cultural cost rather than an unjustifiable financial expense.

Social historian Lary May (1983) has also pointed to the centrality of status as a major part of the attraction of movie palaces for upwardly mobile, middle-class patrons. Reflecting on the cultural appeal of ornate forms of movie palace architecture and interior design similar to those found at The Capitol, he writes:

It was obvious that nothing brought people downtown like a first-run house which emulated the domains of the wealthy uptown. Indeed, the idea was to make aristocratic splendor a modern necessity.... Given this expanding demand, it was easy to raise prices, for managers knew that the middle-class audience would pay for prestige, as long as it was not prohibitive (p. 155).

May’s analysis of moviegoing during the palace era positions this form of leisure activity as part of a post-Victorian break with earlier
cultural traditions of public formality and restraint. He argues that the movie palace likely had a broad appeal that crossed formerly rigid class lines, serving as a site where "moviegoers tasted the life of the rich as it was brought within reach of the masses, breaking down the class divisions of the past" (pp. 165–166). Nonetheless, he concludes that the class-specificity of the movie palace was "clearly geared toward middle-class aspirations," and succeeded in attracting a "core" audience "made up of precisely those people who would have not appeared in the neighborhood of a nickelodeon" (p. 164).

Several blocks north of The Capitol on the opposite (east) side of downtown's Main Street sat (Fox) Poli's Palace, which in its original design seated 3,000. The theater opened in 1905 and was part of the Sylvester Poli chain of New England theaters until 1929. At this time the entire Poli circuit was bought out by Fox Theater Corporation, which installed larger, more commodious seats that lowered the theater's capacity to 2,500. Throughout the 1920s, Poli's was known as the city's primary outlet for vaudeville stage shows, which regularly shared the bill with feature films. Programs usually changed twice weekly (with new programs beginning on Sunday and Thursday) and ticket prices were set at 25 and 35 cents for matinees and 35 and 50 cents for evening shows, with children admitted for 15 cents to all shows.

When Fox renovated and reopened the Poli as the Fox-Poli in August of 1929, its advertising included such slogans as: "Fox-Poli: The Sign of a Good Time," "Everybody Wants to Attend the Opening... And there'll be Room Enough for All," and "It's Yours—You'll Love It" (Fox-Poli theater advertisement, 1929a, p. 8). They also advertised continuous performances and "no advance in prices" (Fox-Poli theater advertisement, 1929b, p. 8). Programs were now to be changed once weekly, with new stage shows and films beginning every Saturday.

While Fox's publicity made much of the installation of a new electric marquee and of the luxurious seats that awaited the theater patron, there were no explicit references to tastefulness, restfulness and refinement of the sort found in the therapeutic discourses surrounding The Capitol's grand opening. In fact, there was little fanfare in the newspapers regarding the architectural renovations undertaken at The Fox-Poli, and what coverage the renovations did get hardly accorded with bourgeois sensibilities of good taste, restfulness and refinement. For instance, a news report entitled "Improvements at Palace Theater" (1929) in the Springfield Union
noted that "The lobby is to be carpeted and fitted with draperies as a background for a lounge room effect to be obtained by the presence of numerous overstuffed chairs.... The men's room is to be fitted in what is perhaps best known as the hunters' style" (p. 4). One wonders if these were the sort of "bizarre effects" found in other theaters that the press report of The Capitol's grand opening found so disquieting (for more on the theater's reopening, see Fox-Poli theater to reopen August 31, 1929).

Several persons interviewed for this study remembered attending The Fox-Poli in their youth, and they were particularly attracted by the vaudeville stage shows and the length of the overall entertainment presentation. For Mary Annese, who lived in the working-class North End district of Springfield during the 1926–1932 period, The Poli was "one of the Ace theaters in the city" and she "made it a point to stay there" because she so enjoyed the vaudeville (Interview by author, 1994). Harold James, who at the time lived just east of the downtown district in the city's original industrial district, the Hill, and worked selling newspapers and shining shoes, also liked to stay at the stage show-picture house as long as he could. He remembers that "they didn't put you out, you always had a movie along with the stage show...it was a whole afternoon's affair and evening's affair. You came out of the theater fairly late at night, not like today when you go in and two hours they're throwing you out" (Interview by author, 1995). Local historian Larry Gormally, who like Harold James lived in the Hill district, has pointed out that "many local people still talk about Peg Leg Bates, the tap dancer, who danced with his peg leg" (Gormally, 1989, p. 1).

If The Capitol sought to appeal to "refined" sensibilities by offering a site worthy of—and suitable for—aesthetic appreciation amidst the vagaries of the central city, as well as a restful escape from the area's social congestion, The Fox-Poli pitched itself in less exclusive terms, basing its appeal on a more "popular" sensibility by providing a variety of exciting stage attractions in addition to films—a mix that seems predicated on the promise of a bigger show at a better value.

Second-run downtown theaters: The Fox and The Arcade

By 1932, the central business district had four second-run theaters: The Broadway, The Fox, The Arcade, and The Bijou. These
theaters all came to occupy the same middle-grade position within Hollywood’s run-zone-clearance system of film distribution and movie price discrimination. Nonetheless, an examination of the specific histories and cultural appeals of the Fox and Arcade theaters, in particular, sheds light on some of the class-based cultural distinctions that could mark two second-run theaters at the local level.

The 1,444 seat Fox theater was located just below the railroad tracks on the northern edge of the downtown district, on the western side of Main Street. The price of a Fox ticket in the late 1920s was on average 25 and 35 cents for matinees and 35 and 50 cents for evening shows, and these prices dropped to 15 and 25 cents and 25 and 35 cents as the Depression worsened. The Fox routinely showed double features, with bills changed twice weekly. Program changes usually occurred either on Thursday and Sunday or Wednesday and Saturday.

The Fox appears to have been a theater with considerable appeal for Springfield’s working-class and lower-income population, residing both within and beyond the downtown district. This appeal seems to have been rooted in the theater’s specific history, which dated back to before the turn of the century when the theater was named The Nelson and known for its continuous programs of small-time vaudeville. Motion pictures were added as a regular attraction in 1908. In *The Industrial Workers of Springfield*, a 1904 master’s thesis done for Springfield’s International Young Men’s Christian Association College, Harold Russell conducted a participant observation study of the home life and leisure habits of the city’s working-class men, and from his observations concluded “that very many [of these men] visited the Nelson.” He also noted the tendency of these men to spill out into the saloons along Lyman Street, which was just across from The Nelson on the east side of Main (pp. 40–41).

Fox Theater syndicate took ownership of The Nelson in late 1912, changing the theater’s name to The Fox-Nelson, which it remained until 1925 when it was shortened to simply Fox’s Theater. As Richard Koszarski (1990) has pointed out, the Fox chain developed slowly over the course of the 1910s and restricted its theater acquisitions primarily to “second class vaudeville houses in which films had become a major part of the bill,” largely ignoring the push to gain control over upscale exhibition sites until the mid-1920s (p. 83). The same “second class” strategy that prevailed in Fox’s purchases of vaudeville/moving picture houses also prevailed in the studio’s film production efforts. As Koszarski puts it, “Fox avoided the race for prestige driving Paramount and First
National. With Theda Bara, William Farnum, and Tom Mix, he produced melodramas and action pictures to please the patrons of his unpretentious houses” (p. 83).

The Fox’s advertising often mentioned that the theater ran “Continuous Performances from 10 AM to 11 PM.” Specific references to continuous shows, of course, resonated with older modes of working-class nickelodeon moviegoing marked by a “drop-in-anytime-and-stay-as-long-as-you-like” informality. Though The Fox was not the only second-run downtown venue to include the “continuous performance” appeal in its advertising, it did use this appeal more consistently than the others. By 1928, however, The Fox had begun to drop the reference to continuous shows in favor of listing the specific starting times for its features.

A residual air of informality lingered on, however, and the enforcement of a one-show-for-one-ticket policy could be circumvented, particularly by child moviegoers. As Mary Annese, who at the time lived in the ethnically-diverse, working-class North End district of the city, recalled of her childhood experiences at The Fox:

I remember going to the Fox’s theater. We would have a main feature, we would have world news, local news, we’d have comics, and we’d stay in there for a rerun…. They ran continuously and the ushers would usher us to wherever—we always liked to sit up in the top there cause they had these great big long running benches—and she’d see us go in, and we’d sneak under the bench and stay and see it once more (Interview by author, 1994).

By virtue of its accumulated history in downtown Springfield and the cultural appeals that can be read off its exhibition practices, The Fox seems to have been a theater with a working-class cultural status, though this does not necessarily mean that the theater was never attended by more affluent patrons. After all, if one wanted to see a particular Fox picture with a particular movie star and didn’t want to pay first-run prices, sit through assorted vaudeville acts, nor patronize a third-run neighborhood house, then The Fox was the logical choice.

And yet, lifelong Springfield resident and local historian Larry Gormally remembers that during the late 1920s and early 1930s, when the young people he knew who lived in the heavily industrialized North End went downtown to see a movie, they would go
to "The Fox theater or the vaudeville, some of your less expensive theaters, they wouldn't go to the Paramount [for instance]... because it was too expensive" (Interview by author, 1991). While economic constraints were no doubt important determinants on the selection of movie theaters by the working-class family, it is important to note that in 1932 one could pay 35 cents for either a balcony seat in The Paramount or a floor level seat at The Fox. A balcony seat at Fox-Poli's Palace, the city's primary vaudeville venue, was also 35 cents. Thus, cultural distinctions may also have had bearing on theater selection, by both working- and middle-class audiences, and in this respect it is interesting to compare the movie attendance habits of Alfred Ferrier and Clifton King.

Alfred Ferrier, who had moved to Springfield in 1923 at the age of 26 and worked as a day laborer at Westinghouse, recalled that "most of the time we went to Polis, and we really enjoyed it there, and then the other times we'd go to The Fox." Conversely, Clifton King, who lived in the relatively affluent town of North Wilbraham and was an electrical serviceman who owned his own business there, remembered traveling to downtown Springfield primarily to take in legitimate stage plays at the Court Square theater, which was a more expensive theater than any movie house in the city. Though he thought that the "legitimate stage was real acting, not movies," he nonetheless went to movies "one time a week" and his favorite downtown theaters were the first-run Capitol and Paramount, and the second-run Bijou and Arcade. In short, nearly every theater but The Fox, The Fox-Poli, and the downtown district's two third-run houses, The Garden and The State. While it would be wrong to read too much into the differences between just two oral historical accounts of movie attendance, the differences do seem consistent with other evidence in pointing to the existence of class-based cultural distinctions between Springfield's downtown movie theaters.

In 1931, a new second-run, downtown theater was constructed by local residents Nathan and Samuel Goldstein, who were brothers and co-owners of Goldstein Brothers Amusement Corporation. The 1,100 seat Arcade theater was located on State Street near the southern edge of the downtown area, approximately two blocks east of the State Street-Main Street intersection. Advertising for the theater's opening noted The Arcade was "Springfield's only locally owned and operated De Luxe theater." Adult ticket prices were 15 cents from 12:30 to 3:30, 25 cents from 3:30 to 5:30, and 35 cents
after 5:30. Children’s prices were 10 cents at all times. Film programs changed twice weekly, with changes on Monday and Thursday (Arcade theater advertisement, 1931a).

Though smaller in scale and more modestly appointed than the first-run movie palaces, the Arcade’s grand opening occasioned a discourse of refinement, tastefulness, and personalization similar to that for The Capitol. In “Arcade Theater Formally Opens” (1931), an unnamed Springfield Daily Republican reporter’s account of the grand opening, the theater was described as “enchanting:”

From the fine lobby finished entirely in antique Italian marble, the patron enters the spacious auditorium, richly decorated in a color scheme of gold and red which was further enhanced last night by a profusion of beautiful flowers. The crystal chandeliers are elegant, the rows of seats skilfully placed to give added room and the handsome silk curtain covering the screen equipment is elaborately and tastefully decorated (p. 4).

The Arcade’s opening bore testimony to the Goldstein brothers’ high standing within the local community, and a Springfield Evening Union report entitled “Arcade Theater of State Street Formally Opens” (1931) indicated that the opening was attended by “a large representation of county and city officials, theater managers from local and out-of-town theaters and many personal friends” (p. 8). As was evident in this news account, discourses of status formed a significant element of the grand opening, beginning with Nathan Goldstein’s ironic commentary on the relative standing of the new theater within the local market:

Mr. Goldstein secured an unanimous vote accepting an opinion he had overheard in the foyer. He said that an acquaintance had declared the Arcade the most beautiful motion picture theater of recent times. He asked those who agreed with the statement to stand, and everyone stood while the organist played. The tune happened to be “The Star Spangled Banner,” but the circumstances only caused the members of the audience to smile as they registered their votes (p. 8).

If the status of the theater, as a personalized extension of the Goldsteins as local showmen, structured the discursive context of the grand opening, so too did the status of the audience. For instance, the Evening Union report noted that Springfield Chamber of Commerce Executive Vice President Frederick J. Hillman delivered
an introductory address that expressed his appreciation for the "Empress Eugenics note in the upper layer of that audience" (Arcade theater of State Street, p. 8). Though the "Empress Eugenics" upper layer of the opening audience likely did not constitute the theater's everyday patronage, that patronage was nonetheless probably predominantly middle-class, drawing from the more affluent and upwardly-mobile residents living in the higher income districts surrounding the downtown area. This view is partly supported by the fact that The Arcade regularly advertised in the Forest Park Times, which was a community newspaper that served the highly upscale residents of Forest Park, which abutted the downtown district on the southern side (Arcade theater advertisement, 1931b).

Though The Fox and The Arcade both came to occupy the same second-run position within the run-zone-clearance system of film distribution, there seems some evidence—based on their specific histories, their locations within the downtown district, the cultural appeals of their exhibition practices, and oral historical discourses—that The Fox carried more distinctly working-class cultural connotations than the Arcade. While working-class movie patrons were certainly likely to have attended The Arcade, their experience at this theater may have been more circumscribed and formal than was the case at The Fox.

Third-run downtown theaters: The Garden and The State

First opened in 1917, the 500 seat Garden Theater operated under the ownership/management team of Springfield residents Abraham, Roxor, and Asa Cheffetz until late 1925 or early 1926, when it was sold to Harry Cohen, also of Springfield. Cohen and his local partner Louis Cohn were already in the early stages of forming the Winchester Amusement Corporation—a local chain of five neighborhood theaters that would by 1932 include The Garden, The Jefferson, The Strand, The Phillips, and The Liberty (Springfield City Directory, 1917–1932). The Garden was located on the west side of Main Street just south of State Street, in close proximity to a large population of primarily working-class Italians who lived in the neighborhood known as the South Side. The South Side was part of the downtown district and started just below the intersection of Main and State Streets and ran to the southern boundary of
the district. Because of its location, as Herman Maillet (1959) recalls, The Garden "enjoyed the not too enviable nickname of 'The Garlic Theater.'"

The Garden advertised its prices of 10 cents for children and 15 cents for adults as the "smallest prices in town," and the theater's small prices may have helped attract lower-income patrons of Italian heritage not only from the South Side but from other districts as well. Mary Annese, for example, remembers The Garden as the site of one of her first moviegoing experiences around 1926 or 1927, an experience that required her and her father to make a roughly one-mile walk to the theater from their home in the heavily immigrant and working-class North End (which abutted the downtown area to the north and was one of the city's oldest tenement districts) (Interview by author, 1994).

The precise extent to which The Garden attracted residents from other districts remains unclear, though some indication exists that the theater may not have been particularly popular among people in outlying areas. For instance, The Local Enterprise, a small newspaper that advertised local businesses and reported community news happening outside the downtown area in the city's neighborhoods, routinely advertised films showing at four of the Winchester group's five theaters, with The Garden being conspicuously and consistently absent from these listings (see Winchester Amusement Corporation advertisements, 1932a).

Before converting to sound, the theater's local management attempted to appeal to their South Side audience by showing films with an Italian connection, such as the silent film Nobody's Children (1930), which was advertised as having a "cast of all Italian artists" (Nobody's Children advertisement, 1930, p. 12). After the installation of sound was completed on June 28, 1930 (The Garden was the next to the last theater in the city to be converted for sound, with the third-run State being the last), the theater showed foreign films that continued to appeal to its Italian regulars, but there were also films designed to court a broader ethnic patronage as well. As remembered by Richard McBride, who at the time lived in the heavily working-class North End district of the city and whose father worked near the theater, The Garden "used to have one a month. They were French films, with French dialogue, but they always had English subtitles underneath; then they might have Italian, or Jewish" (Interview by author, 1994). Such films most likely were intended to appeal to the Italian and French Canadians who were
the dominant ethnic groups in the downtown district, as well as to the large Jewish community that resided just north of the railroad tracks in the North End.

If The Garden occasionally showed foreign films, its mainstays were nonetheless the American "B" picture and the subsequent-run "A" picture, which were routinely presented in a double feature format with four changes of program per week (programs ran on Sunday; Monday and Tuesday; Wednesday and Thursday; Friday and Saturday). The Winchester group's advertising, which when placed in Springfield's three major papers usually promoted all five of its theaters in a single block, indicates that in the mid-to-late 1920s these theaters regularly showed entirely different programs of films. But by the early thirties, there was a clear pattern of overlapping programming among the theaters, such that at least one of The Garden's features would also be playing at another theater in the chain. Unlike the chain's other theaters, however, The Garden seems not to have adopted a policy of "give away" gifts and premiums to its patrons. Whereas the Winchester chain's advertising might specifically identify Monday night as "vendy ware nite" at The Liberty, and not list that theater's ticket prices, The Garden would be specifically identified by its prices, "10 and 15 cents tonight," which were lower than other theaters in the chain, and no premiums would be indicated (Winchester Amusement Corporation advertisements, 1932b).

The downtown district also had, for a brief time, another third-run movie house. The 900-seat State Theater was located near the railroad tracks on the north side of the downtown area on Taylor Street, one block east of the Taylor Street–Main Street intersection. The State was housed in a building that originally opened in 1910 as The Plaza theater—a motion picture/vaudeville house that was owned and operated by Nathan and Samuel Goldstein, both of whom resided in Springfield. Both college educated, the Goldstein brothers were among the earliest movie entrepreneurs in the city, having started a penny arcade in 1906 that was changed into a small nickelodeon named the Pictorial Subway Theater in 1909. The Plaza was the Goldstein's second local theater and was part of their growing amusement business, which included several amusement parks and an expanding regional chain of movie theaters (Broadway Theater Magazine, 1913).

Around 1921, the Goldsteins changed The Plaza's policy from combined movies and vaudeville to burlesque, which they tried to
fit with a genteel middle-class discursive cloak through the use of advertising slogans such as “Good clean entertainment at a price that appeals to your pocketbook,” and even going so far as to advertise the number of women (3,102) who had attended their burlesque shows for a given week in 1921 (Plaza theater advertisement, 1921, p. 7).

To whatever extent these female attendance figures were accurate, the perceived need on the part of the Goldsteins to use these numbers to appeal to middle-class sensibilities of gentility reflects something of the “low other” status of burlesque (and by extension of the theater itself) as a primarily male working-class form of popular culture. As Robert Allen (1990a) has argued:

Safely removed from the spotlight of bourgeois culture, burlesque was consigned to the ghettos of working-class culture, where it did not have to be eliminated but rather could be contained, kept out of sight, and its potential transgressiveness policed. It became part of the urban slum. Thus positioned, burlesque for the most part could be dismissed as the regrettable but inevitable consequence of working-class culture: burlesque became emblematic of the congenital qualities of the lower classes: it was impudent, uncontrolled (pp. 59–60).

Yet while the “low other” status of burlesque in the eyes of the refined classes required that it be kept out of sight, it nonetheless constituted the middle-class’s “identity in difference,” and thus by the 1920s had become “the object of male middle-class slumming parties” (Allen, 1990a, p. 60).

In 1924, for reasons that are not entirely clear, the Goldstein brothers changed the theater’s name from The Plaza to The State. Between 1924 and 1930, The State remained primarily a burlesque house, though it occasionally showed silent films—such as Naked Truth (billed as “The Picture that Boston Barred”) and the Public Safety Picture Fools of Passion—that were deemed scandalous enough to require male and female audiences to attend separately on different days of the week (see Naked Truth advertisement, 1926, p. 4, and Fools of Passion advertisement, 1928, p. 2). One film, Damaged Souls, was restricted to male audiences only and was subject to censorship by the local police, who edited out one of its scenes (Damaged Souls advertisement, 1930, p. 2).

On June 10, 1930, having already sold their other local theater (The Broadway) to Paramount-Publix, the Goldstein brothers temporarily removed themselves from the movie business altogether.
by selling their entire chain to the Paramount-Publix Corporation (Theater chain of Goldsteins sold, 1930). Perhaps because they had no use for a theater that over the years had accumulated a host of "low other" associations, Paramount Publix chose not to attempt to resignify The State, which was closed down in late 1930.

The State reopened as a sound-equipped movie theater (the last in the city to make the conversion to sound) on September 7, 1931—Labor Day—under the ownership and management of Max Tabackman of West Springfield. Perhaps to help separate the theater from its prior negative cultural connotations, Tabackman's initial publicity promised "good clean entertainment above criticism" and vowed that "the theater from now on will be known as the downtown theater of the city that will have the facilities and prices offered by the so-called neighborhood theaters of the city" (Dressler & Moran, 1931, p. 4). In an appeal to lower income working-class families of the downtown district, Tabackman offered to admit free the first one hundred children who attended the theater's opening (State theater will cooperate, 1931). Also, he strongly publicized the State's policy of three-hour shows running continuously from 10 AM to 10:30 PM, and his advertising emphasized the slogan "All Seats 10 Cents. Why Pay More?" (State theater advertisement, 1931, p. 5C).

Like The Garden, programs at The State were changed four times each week, with new bills running on Saturday; Sunday and Monday; Tuesday and Wednesday; and Thursday and Friday. Thus, whereas The Garden reserved Sunday as the day for presenting a program that would not run on any other day, The State reserved Saturday for this purpose. The Garden's interest in keeping Sunday's programming fairly flexible may represent a strategy designed to cater to an adult audience for whom Sunday was a primary day of leisure, while The State may have opted to keep the Saturday shows flexible in order to attract the child audience that usually attended on that day.

Though Tabackman's decision to open on Labor Day may have seemed a good way of connecting with working-class family audiences, it proved ill-fated since Tabackman had chosen not to employ motion picture projectionists from the Moving Picture Operators Union, Local 186, and his inaugural shows were accompanied by pickets and stink bomb attacks organized under the direction of Central Labor Union President John Gatelee. A Springfield Daily News article entitled "Pickets and Bombs Fail of Purpose at State Theater: House Open for Business in Face of Union Labor's
Opposition” (1931) described the scene as follows: “With the disagreeable odor of the bombs still permeating the showhouse and with pickets marching up and down the street in front of the theater, the box office was thrown open” (p. 2). Yet though the paper suggested that the “pickets and bombs failed of purpose,” what is entirely missing in the story is any sign of an audience. There was no mention of the “waiting throngs” or “eager patrons” that were invariably present in newspaper accounts of other theater’s grand openings.

The newspaper article did point out, however, that Tabackman had previously owned a non-unionized theater in West Springfield that had been targeted for similar stink bomb attacks by the union and which had gone out of business rather quickly as a result of union action. Within less than six months after opening in September 1931, The State too had closed, though the precise degree to which this was a result of union activity or simply the effect of a worsening Depression—or both—remains unclear.

In this respect, Springfield may present a different case than that found in Rosenzweig’s (1983) study of Worcester, Massachusetts. Rosenzweig discusses an example of a national theater chain (Loews) that bought out a local theater in 1930 and refused to hire union workers. A full-scale picket and boycott operation went to no avail as Loews policy was not reversed, and Rosenzweig notes that the union’s failure was due in part to the fact that the national theater company was not as responsive to local pressures as had been previous locally-owned theaters and leisure enterprises. Thus, he sees the episode as symptomatic of a “waning of control of the working-class over its recreational institutions” (p. 219). In Springfield, not only did all the big national chains feel compelled to employ union labor (Union Label Bulletin, 1934), but the small independent owner who sought to cater to a working-class audience but chose to pay theater employees sub-union wages could also be extremely susceptible to union actions.

In March of 1932, The State reopened under new management, showing “Always 10c” double features—a price the management suggested was “in keeping with the times” and the “lowest in the area for this type of entertainment” (State theater advertisement, 1932a, p. 2). By November of the same year, however, The State had reverted back to a burlesque policy, showing performers such as Tramp McNally in his Nite Life in Paris, with Gay Gladys Clark (State theater advertisement, 1932b).
Overall, Springfield’s two third-run downtown movie theaters likely drew their core audiences from the densely ethnic and less affluent social population inhabiting the immediate environment of the downtown district. Given the cultural appeals that can be read off their exhibition practices, it seems very unlikely that these theaters attracted many patrons from outlying suburbs, though one might plausibly imagine a scenario in which former residents of the downtown district would return to their former neighborhoods to visit friends and family and possibly make a trip to The Garden or The State.

CONCLUSIONS: MAPPING THE CLASS CONTOURS OF MOVIEGOING

I would like to argue here that the contours of moviegoing that formed over the six theaters examined in this analysis were broadly patterned in relation to both economic and cultural markers of social class.

Any historical interpretation of the class contours shaping moviegoing remains inescapably conjectural, of course, given the inherent ephemerality of film audiences. But as Crafton (1990) observes:

The audiences may have vanished but not without traces. As signified subjects they are not necessarily lost, although their recovery may be enormously difficult, depending on the availability and legibility—in a broad sense—of the documents of their existence. The ingenuity of the modern historical researcher lies in his or her ability to turn material traces into metonymic signifiers of absent viewers (p. 11).

The 10 or 15 cent ticket charges at the third-run, neighborhood-oriented State and Garden theaters, for instance, were by far the lowest of any of the downtown houses, and these prices would have been the best bargain for moviegoers operating on strained personal or family budgets. As Jowett (1976) has documented, American households averaged three trips to the movies per week in 1930 (p. 475). The low price of admission to The State or The Garden, combined with these theaters’ policies of offering four program changes per week, meant that three or four members of a single household could individually attend entirely different programming bills at either of these third-run theaters for the price of
a single adult ticket to an evening's show at one of the downtown district's first-run movie palaces (The Capitol charged 50 cents for evening shows, while The Fox-Poli charged 35 and 50 cents for evening shows). By the same token, a family of four could make a collective trip to The State or The Garden for a combined total expenditure of 40 or 50 cents, which would be roughly equivalent to a single adult ticket for one of the first-run theaters and just slightly higher than the 35 cent adult tickets charged at second-run theaters like The Fox and Arcade.

Of course, Hollywood's run-zone-clearance system of distribution insured that neither The State nor The Garden could program quality "A" films in either their first- or second-runs. Yet both theaters did attempt to distinguish themselves in the downtown exhibition market by offering their neighborhood patrons quantitatively more theater time—through policies of continuous shows and double features—for the money. This strategy, viewed from the perspective of Bourdieu's (1984) conceptualization of a working class "popular" cultural disposition, might have created the opportunity for less affluent moviegoers to translate their experience of financial necessity into a marketplace advantage and cultural virtue. Thus, from the standpoint of cultural value defined in largely pragmatic terms, the more intangible "added values" that a movie palace like The Capitol could provide in terms of access to films in their first-runs, architectural refinement, aesthetic ambiance, and cultural status may have carried little weight (to recall The State's advertising slogan, "All Seats 10 Cents. Why Pay More?"). As former Springfield resident Richard McBride recalls:

We liked the local theaters 'cause you would get so much more! Sometimes you went to the big ones, and you'd get a new Pathe, or RKO, or whatever, and you'd get maybe a travelogue of what the movies to come, and then you'd get a cartoon, one cartoon, and then maybe a double feature if they had double features there, or maybe a real class A one. And that was it! Two and a half hours and you were out of there. Where if you went to the local ones, you generally got about four hours of hootin' and hollerin', and everybody always sat in one area (Interview by author, 1994).

Financial constraints placed on moviegoers by the unequal distribution of income through the class structure appear to have coalesced with Hollywood's run-zone-clearance policy to mark Springfield's two third-run downtown theaters as economically and
culturally logical sites of attendance for less affluent working-class moviegoers. But the historical evidence pertaining to general patterns in working-class moviegoing at second-run theaters presents a more complicated interpretive dilemma.

Unlike the two third-run theaters, which shared both similar prices and cultural appeals, The Fox and The Arcade had the same admission charge (35 cents) but tended to exhibit somewhat different characteristics of cultural appeal. From well back into the early cinema era, The Fox had earned a reputation as a distinctly working-class theater—a reputation the theater made no attempt to change through its publicity and advertising during the 1926–1932 period, even as it appeared to be formally abandoning older practices such as continuous programs. By contrast, when The Arcade opened in 1931, its inaugural program was attended by members of the Springfield elite, and it was described, similarly to The Capitol, through a discourse designed to mark the theater as a suitable one for middle-class patrons who had come to expect “tasteful” decor and architectural ambience as valuable elements of the moviegoing experience. Thus, presuming that working-class patrons could fit the 35-cent cost of a trip to either theater into their limited budgets, the question arises as to whether both of these theaters might have been generally preferred on an equal basis by this audience. The best available evidence seems to suggest that The Fox may have been marked as a more popular second-run choice for working-class audiences than The Arcade, given the former theater’s continuing resonance with older working-class traditions of public recreation based on informality, openness, and conviviality. With a specific history of catering to workers, a location in the north side of downtown near the heavily ethnic and working-class North End, a studio ownership that emphasized “unpretentious houses,” and an exhibition appeal that prior to 1928 had stressed continuous shows, The Fox was the theater (of the two) that economically, socially, and culturally marginalized residents of the downtown area were probably most likely to attend, even after the onset of vertical integration. This is not, of course, to insist that individual workers and poor immigrants never went to The Arcade, for the more emotive and “enchanting” interior environment of this theater might have had a powerful appeal of its own for less affluent persons seeking an intensified experience of film fantasy. Nor would I maintain that The Fox was never attended by relatively affluent patrons. Rather, my point here is simply to suggest the
possibility that moviegoers may have been as attracted (or not) to a theater because of its class-based cultural appeals as by the specific nature of the film product being offered there.

An examination of the economic and cultural appeals that marked the first-run Capitol and Fox-Poli theaters can also help illuminate the ways in which class may have influenced the general contours of moviegoing in downtown Springfield during the 1926–1932 period. I have suggested that the downtown district’s third-run State and Garden theaters shared both similar prices and broadly working-class cultural appeals, while the second-run Fox and Arcade theaters shared similar prices but evinced differing cultural appeals. Here I want to argue that the first-run Capitol and Fox-Poli theaters had not only differing price structures, but also differing class-based cultural appeals, both of which may have marked The Fox-Poli as the more popular theater for working-class audiences.

When Warner Bros. purchased The Capitol in 1929, it introduced a flat rate pricing structure in which all tickets for evening shows (after 5 PM) cost 50 cents. After the transition to sound films in 1927, this price would have purchased access to a program of newsreels, short films, and a first-run feature, in addition to the pleasures of an ornately appointed theater environment. While this is, in a sense, an egalitarian approach to pricing, with all seats available at the same cost to everyone, the lack of a cheaper seat option effectively meant that a great many working-class persons would have been excluded from the audience, except perhaps on a special occasion basis. To recall former Springfield resident Richard McBride, “The Capitol—was an expensive one…. We used to go down and see what was on the glass, [but] we never went there.”

At the Fox-Poli, a tiered pricing structure prevailed, with evening shows costing 15 cents for children, 35 cents for balcony seats, and 50 cents for floor level seats. When Fox Theater Corporation purchased the house from the Poli chain in 1929, advertisements emphasized that there would be “no advance in prices.” Certainly, this pricing policy opened up access to a wider variety of less affluent working-class moviegoers than did the flat rate policy of The Capitol. By the same token, middle-class moviegoers who chose to attend The Fox-Poli could, through purchase of a 50-cent ticket, gain the advantage of securing a presumably better class of seat, as well as a degree of separation from the 35-cent gallery crowd. Whatever ticket price the Fox-Poli patron paid, they were insured a long and varied program of entertainment that included
not only newsreels, shorts, and first-run features, but also live vaudeville stage performances. And this program was delivered on a continuous show basis. Returning to an observation from former resident Harold James, “they didn’t put you out, you always had a movie along with the stage show...it was a whole afternoon’s affair and evening’s affair.” For working-class moviegoers like James, a trip to The Fox-Poli, with its combination of vaudeville and film presentations, offered a much better value for the money than did The Capitol.

If the two theaters had differing pricing policies, I would also argue that they carried differing class-based cultural appeals that may have tended to make The Capitol a more exclusively middle-class house and The Fox-Poli a more mixed-class house, but one with a working-class accent. As was noted earlier, press releases, advertisements, and newspaper reports stressed The Capitol’s “atmosphere of quiet good taste” and “artistic treatment.” Conversely, the same sorts of materials emphasized The Fox-Poli’s lack of harmonious effects (its “lounge room effect” lobby and “hunters’ style” men’s room) and its commitment to providing the popular audience with the best, most varied and exciting “show” for their money. In this respect, The Fox-Poli may have served as a condensation of what Bourdieu (1984) identifies as a working-class “popular” cultural disposition that is “inspired by an intention unknown to economists and ordinary aesthetes, that of obtaining maximum ‘effect’...at minimum cost, a formula which for bourgeois taste is the very definition of vulgarity” (p. 379).

The importance of The Fox-Poli’s regular vaudeville shows as a contributing aspect to the theater’s big “effect” and possible cultural appeal for working-class audiences is well worth considering. In his work on the vaudeville aesthetic in early sound comedies, Jenkins (1992) argues that the vaudeville aesthetic, in both its live and cinematic variants, constituted a “low” comedic form that was popular with working-class audiences because it satisfied “a hunger for immediate gratification and intense stimulation [that] grows from an insistence on the ultimate return on one’s investment and a need for an immediate, though short-lived release from the rigors of one’s environment” (p. 45). Thus, by offering vaudeville shows such as “Circus Days,” which promised all the “thrills of the Three-Ring Circus...Clowns, Acrobats, Elephants ‘n’ Everything,” The Fox-Poli’s could differentiate its product from The Capitol and offer working-class patrons an exciting added attraction that was
delivered with "no advance in prices" (Fox-Poli theater advertisement, 1931, p. 7).

I would argue, then, that many working-class moviegoers were more likely to choose The Fox-Poli over The Capitol partly because of the availability of a 35 cent ticket, but also because it appealed more closely to what Bourdieu identifies as the "popular" cultural disposition, a cultural logic that develops as a function of a life experienced under the strain of economic urgency.

At The Capitol, and to a lesser extent at the more refined second-run Arcade theater, a more socially formal and phenomenologically tasteful experience of moviegoing could be found, an aesthetic experience both detached from and compensating for the increasingly congested social and cultural climate that marked the heavily industrialized and ethnically polyglot downtown area as an area of low "social quality." In this context, perhaps, a shopping excursion downtown might turn into a nerve-wracking experience that called for a time-out spent within the restful and quieting environment afforded by the proper movie theater. Or, if the trip downtown was itself motivated by a desire for an aesthetic experience, the proper movie theater might also provide a "touch of royalty" and a public space in which to be seen and to socialize with others with whom one shared the stage in an ongoing cultural drama of class mobility and relative standing. In this sense, the social agenda of dominant cultural groups could not simply have been to extend to workers and immigrants access to the middle-class cultural stage in order to "bring them up" to bourgeois standards and sensibilities, thereby ensuring their cultural containment. To do so would have eliminated the very social differences upon which the bourgeois sense of cultural distinction is founded.

Rather, what may have been realized over the popular cultural terrain of moviegoing during the 1926–1932 period, was a system of exhibition stratified by price and cultural distinction that allowed for the existence of multiple theaters, in different parts of the downtown area (as well as in other parts of the wider city), attended by people who could freely choose their theaters and through their choices reveal their "natural" taste or lack thereof. True enough, vertical integration of this exhibition system insured that all theaters, chain-owned or not, would increasingly have to draw standardized film product from the studios, which meant that eventually even the poorest moviegoers would see the very same films as the more affluent patron who could afford first-run
theaters. As Lea Jacobs (1992) noted in her study of classical Hollywood cinema:

The distinction between high and low culture can be applied to the classical Hollywood cinema only with difficulty..., since, like most forms of mass culture, it seems to have reached people of diverse classes, and ethnic and national traditions.... Those patrons who could not afford to see [the A picture] Gunga Din at Radio City Music hall at an admission price of at least 40 cents, could have waited to see it at the Albee in Brooklyn a month later for 25 cents. But while Hollywood did not make specific kinds of films for specific classes, it did mobilize cultural hierarchies in the distribution and marketing of features (p. 12).

In terms of the cultural politics of class relations during the 1926–1932 period, however, the cultural distinctions between films may ultimately have been less significant than the class-based cultural distinctions between the local theaters in which these films (and audiences) were seen. After all, could all the education and money in the world possibly help the poor souls who seemingly of their own volition chose to demonstrate their “bad taste” by attending the likes of The “Garlic” Theater?

In attempting to make sense of the class politics involved in and over the popular cultural terrain of moviegoing and the consumption of cinematic mass culture, we might usefully keep in mind Bourdieu’s (1984) observation that “consumption...is a stage in a process of communication” (p. 6). Because the social structure produces differential relations to the experience of economic necessity and distributes unequally the cultural knowledges through which the experience of class relations will be understood, we can expect to find class politics continually masked within a hierarchy of cultural tastes communicated through acts of consumption. As Bourdieu puts it:

Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed (p. 6).

In this sense, the ideological effectiveness of film as a mass cultural industry may hinge less on the implantation of bourgeois consciousness within the masses than on the hierarchically organized
provision of "something for everyone"—which in practice requires discursively articulating the distribution of "class-marked" cultural forms (both films and theaters) in a way that reproduces the vertically organized economic and cultural relations of the wider social formation.

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NOTES

1. Sklar's assertion of an overdetermined cultural link between early movies and working-class immigrant populations is in keeping with traditional historical accounts of moviegoing during the nickelodeon period (roughly 1905–1915), such as those put forward by Grau (1914) and Jacobs (1939). Recent empirical research by "revisionist" film historians has questioned the extent to which the development of early movies was intertwined with the cultural needs and dispositions of working-class immigrant audiences, and this work has generally argued that the growing middle classes played a more determinant role in shaping the form and content of early cinema and cinema-going practices during the nickel era (Allen, 1979; Thompson and Bordwell, 1983; Staiger, 1992, pp. 101–123). The traditional account, however, has received further empirical support of its own from Singer's (1995) work on moviegoing in Manhattan, which concludes that working-class immigrant groups did indeed provide the cultural foundation for audience and exhibition practices during the nickel era, at least in the case of Manhattan. For the most recent writing in this ongoing dialogue about the class characteristics of early cinema, see Allen (1996), Higashi (1996), Singer (1996), Singer (1997), Thissen (1997), and Uricchio and Pearson (1997). For a larger philosophical discussion of "revisionism" as it pertains to film history generally, and to early cinema specifically, see Klenotic (1994).

2. This point is drawn from Hansen (1991), who argues that the structural conditions of some nickelodeon theaters allowed for an overlapping of two different types of public sphere—the alternative proletarian public sphere and the industrial commercial public sphere—that could create an unstable layering of cultural space where aleatory conditions of film reception might prevail. Because this space allowed a degree of cultural and discursive autonomy on the part of marginalized social groups experiencing displacement from older cultural traditions, it became subject to increasingly aggressive forms of suppression from forces located within the bourgeois public sphere (see pp. 1–19 and pp. 90–125, especially).

3. Vertical integration refers to the form of oligopolistic power achieved by five major film studios (Paramount, RKO, Loew's/MGM, Warner Bros., Fox) in the mid-late 1920s through control of the production, distribution, and exhibition of motion pictures. For the purposes of this study, integration practices refer to those initiatives enacted by the major studios, by virtue of their domineering position in the industry, that impacted the ways in which movies were exhibited and experienced. Such practices include the increase in movie palace construction, the formation of national theater chains through the subsumption
of regional chains and independent theaters, and the expansion of a run-zone-clearance system of film distribution based on price discrimination (Gomery, 1992, pp. 57–69). The innovation of mechanized sound films around 1927 is also a practice connected to studio integration, as the innovation of sound technology by Warner Bros. was part of the studio’s plan to expand its theater holdings and thereby compete with larger studios (Balio, 1985, pp. 128–131; Gomery, 1992, pp. 62–63 and 215–225).

4. Oral historical discourses were obtained in two ways. First, an ongoing oral history project conducted and archived under the aegis of Springfield’s American International College provided a collection of nearly 500 audio-recorded oral histories of non-elite citizens in Springfield. Focusing on elderly citizens, these recordings afforded first person recollections of life in Springfield dating back to the late 1800s, and sporadic portions of these recollections dealt with local leisure activities including moviegoing. Second, the author formally interviewed numerous individuals from different social backgrounds who in the 1920s and 1930s lived in different parts of the urban geography. These individuals were located through arranged visits to nursing homes/rehabilitation centers in Springfield, as well as through arranged visits to a social center run for the elderly by a Springfield church. Interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the participant, and conducted using a face-to-face format. Following Fortner and Christians (1989), interview questions were asked using an open-ended unstructured design. Full transcriptions were made of the audio tapes, and quotations included in this manuscript are verbatim from these transcripts.

5. Information on run location, ownership structure, and seating capacity was obtained and corroborated through a review of several sources of data including local newspapers, the Film Daily Yearbook, Price and Lee’s Springfield City Directory, building permits, and oral histories.

6. The study was largely motivated by anxiety on the part of this “old stock” population, which felt its cultural authority in the city rapidly diminishing as a result of increasing immigration and industrialization. To get a handle on these changing conditions, it mapped out the city’s social and urban geography during the 1920s into eleven hierarchically organized districts distinguished according to an index of “social quality” that was measured along a number of criteria that formed the basis of contemporaneously “popular distinctions between ‘desirable’ and ‘undesirable’ sections of the city” (Douglass, 1926, p. 265).

7. The first-run Paramount was located right next door to the second-run Fox. Prior to 1932, The Paramount did charge a single 50 cent admission price for evening shows, while matinee prices were 35 cents.

8. Oral historical accounts by Alfred Ferrier and Clifton King are archived at American International College’s Oral History Center in Springfield. Ferrier’s oral history was collected by Gretchen Geigel and is found on cassette recording #1154A; King’s oral history was collected by Cynthia Jordan and is found on cassette recording #1171.

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