

The ‘Picture’ habit: Bad decorum and delinquents at the Silent Cinema

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Abstract:

To broaden our idea of audiences, in this article I will posit how we need to examine the ways that audiences were being discussed in the news press during the formative period of the cinema exhibition industry. How, where and when were audiences being written into the narrative of the cinema experience? By asking such questions, we can begin to appreciate the cinema’s supposed bad influence on the impressionable including, for instance, children, and young women. In this article I am centrally interested in how the cinema audience was represented by the news reporters across the period of the silent cinema in Australia. How did silent audiences behave? How did this behaviour (and reportage on audience behaviour) establish a social context for cinema watching? Because different showmen had different methods of convincing audiences to attend their theatres, there was no single code of decorum when it came to cinema behaviour, and as this article will discuss, there were many different ways in which cinema was experienced by audiences.

Keywords: Teenagers, Women, Newspaper, Silent Cinema Audience

Despite the important research on the Australian silent cinema, there remains little information on what audiences actually did while at the cinema. How did silent audiences behave? How did this behaviour (and reportage on audience behaviour) establish a social context for cinema watching? Because different showmen had different methods of convincing audiences to attend their theatres, there was no single code of decorum when it came to cinema behaviour, and as this article will discuss, there were many different ways in which cinema was experienced by audiences. The news press was extensive with ballyhoo from exhibitors boasting about their ‘well-behaved’ and ‘appreciative’ movie-mad

audiences, and although such puffery offers an interesting side-story on cinema promotion and advertising, in this article I am centrally interested in how the cinema audience was represented by the news reporters across the period of the silent cinema in Australia.

Notwithstanding the moving pictures being a phenomenon attracting filmgoers from many different age and class demographics, as will be discussed, the reportage had a preoccupation with the lower-class teenage troublemakers. The sensationalist news focused on the delinquent behaviour based on class, age, and gender stereotypes. Across this article, I set up two conflicting cinemas as discussed by the reporters: the middle-class *good* cinema, and lower-class *bad* cinema. Regardless of the majority of reports being filed from anonymous sources, there is an apparent generational gap between the older conservatives doing the reporting and the younger film fans immersing themselves in all things cinema. Such generational battles were not exclusive to Australia, as confirmed in cultural case studies such as F. Scott's Fitzgerald's debut novel *This Side of Paradise* (1920) which caused a sensation by revelling in the gulf between those jazz babies and their Victorian and out-of-touch parents. In this article, such a gulf presents itself with great clarity in the news reportage on how youths attended and behaved at the cinema. To broaden our idea of audiences, in this article I will posit how we need to examine the ways that audiences were being discussed in the news press during the formative period of the cinema exhibition industry. How, where and when were audiences being written into the narrative of the cinema experience? By asking such questions, we can begin to appreciate the cinema's supposed bad influence on the impressionable including, for instance, children, and young women.

The Bad Press

Despite many filmgoers in actuality wanting to watch local 'scenics' (documentary scenes of resident events and locations) of their own cities and towns – the cinema was often reported exclusively for its screenings of sinful American fictional movies. Concerning its reputation, one problem was the location of many picture theatres in heavily populated and downtrodden industrial areas of the Australian capital cities. 'Most men worked long hours during the week, perhaps riding home after 6 pm on the footboard of an overcrowded train... There being not much choice of entertainment, many did their shopping early and enjoyed a night at the flicks' (quoted in Collins 1975, p.19). When cinema audiences – especially pre-adult audiences – were discussed in the press, they were often portrayed negatively, and mostly linked to unsocial behaviour that sometimes led to bans and criminal charges. As an example, in 1924, there were a series of reports on a gang of wild young men purposely causing disturbances at a number of popular Sydney cinemas. On this matter, *The Evening News* reported on the gang's ringleader, Isaac Mason, who appeared at the North Sydney Court facing charges due to a fracas that he caused at the Orpheum Theatre. During the court proceedings, Mason was accused of roaming from cinema to cinema clashing with the cinemagoers and cinema management. 'They seemed to think they could do as they liked in those places', said the cinema manager. For his charge, Mason was given the penalty

of a 2 pounds fine or 14 days' hard labor' ('Their Noisy Habit', p 7). By the early 1930s, it had become common for exhibitors to ban teenager troublemakers from their venues. *The Strand* in Sydney in 1930 was considered the strictest of all the venues, demonstrated by the fact that on one occasion, up to 200 youths were banned from its premises. The report stated that many 'people complimented the manager on the stand he is taking' ('Youths Ejected From Picture Show', p.9).

Nevertheless, film exhibitors considered the youth market an important demographic and did not ordinarily want to banish them. The problem, however, was convincing the parents that their children were in safe and responsible hands while at the cinema. The consensus from the press reporters was that cases like that of Isaac Mason proved that the cinema was a reckless and destructive habit for the morally weak and immature. In the news press, such disruptive behaviour was regularly depicted as the unsocial addiction of the moving pictures, with the filmgoer (or fan) said to actively seek out on-screen themes and subject matters that celebrated the depraved and desperate: 'On with the film, the ghastlier the better' (quoted in Collins 1987, p.32).

With attendance numbers growing steadily every year, by 1920-21 the number of individual admissions to Australian cinemas totalled 68,364,016. This dwarfed theatre and racing attendances, which had totalled just 15,747,639, for this same 12-month period (Collins 1975, p.17). The general consensus was that nothing so popular, so rapidly, especially with the youth market, could be good for the soul: an epidemic sweeping Australia's youth culture. The *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate* in 1918 categorically declared the cinema responsible for directing the public mind downwards. 'When people can choose between amusements they will generally select the most blatant. The opera is superseded by the music hall, just as good money is driven out of circulation by bad' ('The Picture Habit', p 6). The panic voiced across the news press claimed youths would behave liked crazed lunatics when denied access to the cinema: like addicts denied their drug. An incident at the Princess Skating Rink (that was equipped with cinema projection) in Geelong, in 1910, reported on a number of crazed youths hurling stones onto the rink's iron roof for the duration of the picture programme. This ensued due to the youths being denied admission due to capacity restrictions ('Sunday Picture Show', p.7). How could exhibitors guarantee *good* filmgoers protection from the mad-movie-addicted fans who had demonstrated bouts of destructive violence?

Then, there was simply the problem of whether the cinema was detrimental to one's health (and eyesight). Could the watching of moving pictures make one bad and blind? A 1920 article entitled 'The Movies. Effect on Eyesight Are they Harmful?', began with the following warning: 'It is an undoubted fact that continued visits to the 'movies' are conducive to eyestrain..., to look at a screen continuously for two to three hours is not natural' ('The 'Movies' Effect On Eyesight', p.3)'. Much of the negativity regarding the damage to one's eyesight, as a result of watching moving pictures, had to do with the flicker of the screen projection, which increased with worn and used prints. (This indeed is where the term 'the flicks' emerged from.) Concerns around the flicker of the screen became such

an issue in the press that exhibitors began to promote the experience and expertise of their projectionists' ability to lessen the flickering – especially as the projection reels were changed. The most grandiose example of this was Mary Stuart Spencer (aka Eleanor Huntley), whose proficiency as a film projectionist at Cozens Spencer's cinemas in Sydney and Melbourne was reported in the news press as the *best in Australian film exhibition*. Cozens strategy was to raise the standard (and price) of how and where filmgoers went to the cinema in addition to the quality of what they watched on the screen. This had as much to do with proficiency in technology than just the movies acquired from America and Europe. Promoted (in capitals) in his regular *Sydney Morning Herald* advertisement ballyhoo as 'SEÑORA SPENCER – THE ONLY LADY OPERATOR IN THE WORLD' (p.2), the accompanying passage declared: 'Whereas the usual theatre gives one long drawn-out show in one night, Spencer reels off, perhaps four or five, without wasting time and filling in long scene-shifting gaps with dreary conversations between two alleged comic idiots...' (*The Bulletin*, p.9). What Cozens Spencer (aided by the expertise of Señora) offered his patrons was the experience of a pure and undistracted experience of movie watching.

The house staff were certainly enamoured by Señora, presenting her with a diamond and ruby brooch at the end of the 1907 Theatrescope run (*Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, p.393). Señora's celebrity was so great that she was said to have been installed as the projectionist in the dress circle, on an elevated open projection platform (Cooper 1971, p.215). This platform, Hamilton Johns believes, allowed her to give a running commentary on the films as they played to the audience (2005, pp.28-9). Such impressions, it should be noted, are historic for how they provide a positive representation of women as technologically competent, and as important identities within the 'modern cinema' and 'modern city' experience. Here women were welcomed and important to the cinema performance experience. Such realities of females working within the exhibition industry contrast the exaggerated media depiction of the exhibition space being unsafe for females.

The spectacle of self-sufficient 'city women' was something that Cozens certainly foregrounded in his own film scenics, which he began to produce with the Tasmanian cameraman, Ernest Higgins from June 1908 of the happenings of the local community. Opposed to the idea of Australian audiences being exclusively subjected to immoral stories from America, Cozens was promoting his cinemas as a venue where audiences could watch their city on the screen. Under the banner of 'Spencer's Pictures', Higgins began producing some actuality shorts and newsreels, some of which in Melbourne included the earliest surviving footage of the VFL (Victoria Football League) competition: the 1909 South Melbourne versus Carlton Grand Final at the Melbourne Cricket Ground on 2 October. Other scenics included *Fighting the Flames* (1909), which followed four horse-drawn fire-engines leaving the Adelaide Metropolitan Fire Brigade station in Wakefield Street, Adelaide, and *Hobart Carnival in Tasmania* (1909) that segmented its narrative into a series of episodes including a wood-chopping contest, and a procession of motorcars including children and adults dressed in blackface as Indians. In addition to shooting footage of happenings around

Australia, Spencer's Pictures were important and popular (in addition to being seminal) for their concentration on the audience as a public spectator of, and participant in, city life.

More than just the films that played, the Melbourne press raved about the comfort of Spencer's Olympia: 'Every patron, even in the cheaper parts, has a back to his seat' (Collins 1987, p.7). At his Sydney Lyceum, Spencer ostentatiously decked out the auditorium in magnificent red drapes and heralded, 'every one of its 3000 seats was in good view of the picture screen' (Collins, 1987, p.7). As the moving pictures played, Spencer would narrate the action in-between orchestral arrangements with staff producing sound effects from behind the screen. Obtaining the best international films that he could find (through whatever means and in whatever form), Spencer earned the reputation for showcasing programmes of the world's best and most sought-after films. As *Table Talk* trumpeted: 'Little else can be said of the pictures at the Lyceum than that they are Spencer's – a word which is synonymous with artistic selection and fine screening. Having said that much it is hardly necessary to add that the public appreciate them more and more' ('Spencer's Pictures', p.32). Through this programme, Spencer fashioned a sense of occasion and event, elevating the experience of filmgoing. Yet in the news press, such city theatres and well-behaved audiences were rarely given any reportage, beyond the promotional hype paid by the exhibitors themselves.

It was the smaller industrial venues that dominated any coverage given in the news press about the cinema exhibition industry. Press reportage attributed the picture habit to juvenile delinquency, which they deemed a cause for great concern. An article re-published on 10 October 1916 in *Tweed Daily* discussed the startling findings of a census in Liverpool, England revealing that 13 000 children under the age of 13 years, visited the cinema on a daily basis ('The Growth of the Picture Habit', p.2). Concerns were so great for the corruptible influence of the 'habit' over youthful fans around the globe that newspapers were devoting lengthy news articles to this very subject. *The Sydney Mail* in 1921 published a 6700-word article creatively (and bombastically) titled, 'The Picture Show's Enormous Influence: What Is It Teaching Us? An Investigation of the World's Latest Brain Absorbent by an Unprejudiced Observer', where it claimed that for the 100, 000,000 pairs of eyes visiting the cinema every week ('a great many very young and very bright') the choice of pictures being shown by the exhibitors was mostly dealing with immoral subjects of thieving, murder, robbery, and suicide ('The Picture Show's Enormous Influence, p.8). This 'Unprejudiced Observer' then links the influence of such moving pictures to a man charged with murder, who brought into evidence the 'picture habit' claiming that he was transcended into a hallucinogenic state and, having lost his grip on reality, acted out a killing that he had watched in a moving picture. Claiming to have interviewed a number of fans, the report observes a binge of picture watching is 'about the easiest thing in the world to become an habitual picture-maniac' (p.8). (The article also stipulates that the common slang for movie fans of the pictures was 'picktyers'.) The addictive aspect of the cinema was seen to be dragging children from healthy pursuits (and the outdoors) into a darkened subterranean environment.

ASK the average hardheaded man his opinion, and he will say that his grievance against the picture show is that it takes the children away from healthy out door exercise on Saturday afternoons. They are in school all the week, and on Saturday afternoon should be playing football in the winter and cricket in the summer, or (if they live near the sea) be learning to swim. Which is better for the boy, say, of 10 or 12 years? Sitting in the close atmosphere of a picture hall absorbing the thrills of the screen, or playing about a beach? Watching Buffalo Bill shooting Indians (in front of a camera) or playing vigorously on a suburban paddock with a football? (p.8)

Pressured to listen to the danger with which many associated the picture habit, but not wanting to stunt a growing economic market, in 1917 the Cinema Commission of Inquiry was set up by the National Council of Public Morals. Hearing evidence at a number of sittings in regard to the negative effects of the cinema on its youthful audience, the Commissioners concluded that the 'indecent behaviour in the darkened buildings has been greatly exaggerated, and that the connection between the cinema and imitative juvenile crime is limited' ('Influence of the Cinema', p.31). Not entirely siding with the cinema exhibitors and film fans, the news press picked up on the Commissioners concluding remark that the sensationalism and frightfulness of subject matter in many cinema programmes was an issue of 'national importance'. But so too was the cinema as a vibrant and growing economic institution and therefore frightening parents that their children will be corrupted by the cinema was counterproductive to the industry, especially considering the 'national importance' being flagged here of youths seeing ideas and identities of themselves in moving pictures. To deny children the cinema would be to deny them such positive representations of 'national importance'.

The Good Fan

Beyond the press reporters, for those picture fans, their story of the cinema was not one of decrepit habit. Jill Matthews's book, *Dance Halls & Picture Palace* (2005), which surveys the cinema exhibition industry in Sydney between the 1890s to the 1930s, investigates juvenile female filmgoers and the liberating effect that the cinema had on their otherwise humdrum world. In one passage, Matthews discusses the 15-year-old middleclass schoolgirl, Dorothy Parker, from one of Sydney's prominent professional families who through the Sydney film programme was experiencing international theatre culture from London, Norway, Germany, Austria, Ireland, and Hollywood (Matthews, 2005, p.192). For Parker in 1915, the cinema programme presented 'the universal project of civilisation' (2005, p.193). Despite historians in the following century looking back at individuals like Miss Parker and seeing the positive effects that the cinema had on the new women of the twentieth century, the reality at the time of cinema's formative period was its poor media reputation as a dangerous space for women.

Any instances involving the ill-treatment of females were given an over-saturation of reportage in the printed press. For instance, an article from the United States, which was republished in most leading and regional Australian newspapers in January 1914, tells of a criminal ring that had men inject opiates into attractive girls during the darkened screenings in moving picture theatres, and then pose as relatives who carry them out of the theatres and into their waiting transport. One victim, Mrs Marjorie Gaff, a bride of two weeks, tells of her ordeal where she felt a strange piercing, pricking sensation in her wrist shortly after the house lights faded ('Girls Drugged in Cinema Shows', p.5). Crime in the darkness of the cinema continued to cause great anxiety for cinema proprietors worried about bad press and potential boycotts and bans by female audiences who continued to account for around 60% of the filmgoing public (Collins 1975, p.106). This particular article circulated in the Australian press for a solid month, and although the article barely altered, the headline became more lurid as the days and weeks went on. The headline that on 15 January read 'Girls Drugged in Cinema Shows Chemist Arrested in America', by the 27 January became 'White Slaves Girls Drugged in Cinema Shows Chemist Arrested in America' (my emphasis) ('White Slaves Girls', p.1). The article's opening line was re-written as 'A new method practiced by white slavers to secure victims is believed to have been discovered by the police of Newark, New Jersey'. Although there was no reportage of this criminal activity occurring in Australia, the view was that cinema culture was something directly imported from America. Therefore, like the popular movies that would reach Australian shores, so too would cinema behaviours and misconduct. Such articles read not so much as cautionary tales but as evidence of the unsocial nature of the cinema.

In addition to this, more than newspapers reporting on criminal activities putting women in perilous situations at the cinema were the wowsers boycotting the cinema as an institution to corrupt the weak and impressionable minds. These wowsers, who in reality were quite small in number, had a strong and present voice in the popular press on account of being associated with prominent religious organisations. In reality, though, they were merely feeding into the sensationalist media depiction of the cinema as the twentieth-century symbol of technological advancement debasing the minds of its audience (Matthews 2005, p.198). More generally, the wowser groups would vocally oppose any policy or decision that could be reasoned as modern progress. In 1928 they did protest the decision, reported in the *Northern Territory Times*, of the Health Officer Dr Cook to approve (for just one week), '... the aboriginals to attend the pictures on both Saturday and Tuesday night next. It is understood the Health Officer will censor the films from time-to-time and if they are suitable he will give his permission for the blacks to attend' ('Picture Ban Lifted', p.10). Predictably again, the wowsers applauded in 1916 the Commonwealth Treasurer Mr W. G. Higgs's consent to deny the formation of new picture and amusement companies: 'My present view, is that during the war it will be a waste of time for anyone to approach me with a request for my consent to the formation of amusement companies' ('Picture Ventures', p.3). The Treasurer's consensus was that the cinema was growing at a rate that could not be maintained and sustained, especially during times of economic adversity.

To be sure, the views of the wowers did not represent their religious organisations. When it came to official statements from the religious unions themselves, they rarely declared any dispute with the cinema as a venue of amusement – for they were more concerned with the films dealing with religious content. While most, by and large, encouraged stronger censorship of American movies, the subject of religion on the screen was not condemned and the cinema was often implored to do more with the educational nature of communicating religious stories to the masses. For instance, the Protestant church welcomed the showing of *The King of Kings* (Cecil B. DeMille 1927), ‘despite its crudities and melodramatic appeal – as a welcome advance on the usual American film’ (Collins 1975, p.164). A point repeated throughout the *Royal Commission on the Moving Picture Industry 1927-28*, was that religious groups were campaigning for more direct involvement in the regulation of the exhibition industry in Australia. Demonstrated by their affiliated journal, *The Congressionalist*, the Protestant church was in support of the cinema – even criticising Sydney’s Good Film League for insisting that *King of Kings* be banned for its ‘commercialisation of a sacred subject’ (*The Congregationalist*, 10 May, p.4). In addition to printing glossy full-page advertisements, the journal endorsed a wide range of movies. Paramount Pictures seemed their favourite with the famous tagline, at times, inserted into their film commentary: ‘if it’s a Paramount Picture it’s the best in town’ (*The Congregationalist* 10 October, p.6). Irrespective of this (blatant) self-promotion from the Paramount marketing department, the journal did not yield to other studios quite like it did Paramount. One reason, perhaps, was Paramount being the contractual home of DeMille, and his box-office sensation, *The Ten Commandments* (1923). Even DeMille’s racy bedroom melodramas—*Old Wives for New* (1918) and *Don’t Change Your Husband* (1919) – were immune to the usual cries of blasphemous adultery. DeMille’s epics drew religious groups to the cinema, even the often-offended Presbyterian filmgoers, who reported no (official) complaint. To the Royal Commission, the Presbyterian’s considered DeMille the exception, but generally rejected the subject of biblical adaptation fearing its attempt to replace religious learning. ‘True preaching’, it avowed, ‘means not only instruction, and that is the limit of the cinema, but also the contact of soul with soul ... it is not the cinema that is needed but a spirit-filled ministry and a spirit-filled membership’ (quoted in Collins 1975, p.170). Religious content at the cinema, however, amounted to very little with the real issue being its corrupting influence on pre-adult audiences, and especially for those without parental supervision.

How much of the filmgoing demographic the juveniles accounted for was not entirely known. According to exhibitors (opposing stricter censorship laws), it was just 8%-12% of admissions (H. J. Harvie, Exhibitor, *Royal Commission*, p.123), yet the press were almost exclusively concerned with this demographic alone. As an example, the Melbourne newspapers gave a tremendous amount of coverage to Victoria’s 1920 law, under the Censorship of Films Act, to exempt children between the ages of six and sixteen from any film given only ‘conditional approval’. However, even in the company of parents, children were a contentious issue for minors at the cinema were considered a nuisance and constant

distraction for filmgoers wanting to enjoy their programme uninterrupted. In 1921, *South Western Times* reported it was quite common at the Lyric Theatre for audiences to yell 'Drown him' at the parents of restless children and babies ('The Silver Screen', p.2).

The importance of such reports is how audiences and film exhibitors together were establishing decorum of movie-watching and moviegoing that opposed particular bad-behaviour and misconduct at the cinema. Although some like to think of the cinema as a place void of any restraint and decorum, as the news press from this formative period suggests, bad audience members have always been frowned upon and removed from the cinema if and when they disturb the enjoyment of others. This is true for misbehaving and banned juveniles as much as it is for parents unable to control the cries of their infants. During this nascent period, however, as this article has discussed, the press seemed less interested in the movies that played than sensationalising how the juvenile audiences were conducting themselves while at the cinema, and ruining the experience for others. Although not explicitly, the press reports seem concerned with questions about for whom the cinema was actually meant. And, further to this, how the exhibitors and police should deal with the teenage troublemakers. Despite the drastic changes to the cinema that technology has provided in how and where movies are watched, the cinema auditorium, as an institution, has continued to remain a conservative space with rigid social mores about how audiences are expected and allowed to conduct themselves. And juveniles continue to be the subject for much decries, sensationalism and over exaggeration when it comes to cinemagoing.

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