

The Film's the Thing: Moviegoing in Philadelphia, 1935–36

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Exhibition and the Feature Film

Theatrical exhibition—historically crucial to film industry economics, traditionally marginalized by film scholars—is flourishing as a focus within cinema studies. Interest in moviegoing as a social and cultural activity, in the practices associated with delivering and receiving the manifold pleasures associated with a trip to the theater, and in the spaces where audience and entertainment collide has never been greater, as the volume of books, edited collections, and articles, as well as the rise of organizations such as the HOMER (History of Moviegoing, Exhibition, and Reception) Project and the Reception Studies Association, attests. And yet the expansion of what counts as the proper objects of our attention has somewhat paradoxically been achieved at the expense of the very films that were, if by no means the sole amusement provided in American theaters from the teens through the Classical Hollywood era, at least a staple and for many years the most important element in them. Douglas Gomery's seminal work on exhibition has especially turned our attention from the feature on the screen, to the extravagant architecture of the movie palaces and the services offered therein; to the live presentations that thrived before sound films all but eliminated them from U.S. theatres; to air-conditioning in the

1930s; and even to popcorn as an important revenue stream for exhibitors.¹ The feature film was always supplemented with shorts and, for cost-conscious audiences in the Depression, often with a second feature, not to mention free dishes or a chance at a cash prize. A variety of pleasures, some enduring, some crazes, lured millions each week to an activity only inexactly referred to as “going to the movies.”

According to Gomery, there was no dominant “feature-film strategy” in exhibition until the 1950s; almost a corollary to this point is the assumption that feature films were not really that important to exhibitors and by extension to audiences before that. Thus one of the “chief lessons” of Gomery’s *Shared Pleasures*, David Bordwell tells us in the foreword, “is that the individual movie (the heart of most scholars’ inquiry) typically matters little to exhibition.”² In the introduction to *Exhibition: The Film Reader*, Ina Rae Hark argues that “the screening of the actual film was almost an afterthought for exhibitors” in “the age of the movie palace” and claims more generally: “the specific film text is of marginal importance to the package of pleasures the exhibitor offers the moviegoer.”³ “For most audiences for most of the history of cinema,” write Richard Maltby and Melvyn Stokes, “their primary relationship with ‘the cinema’ has not been with individual movies-as-artefacts or as texts, but with the social experience” of going to the theater.⁴ The feature film’s seeming irrelevance provides a context for Eric Smoodin’s provocative invitation to consider “the

possibility of film scholarship without films.”⁵

The most persuasive case for the feature film’s limited effect on attendance may well be found in the movie palace era of the teens and 1920s.⁶ Movie palaces were the largest and most expensive theaters, situated in downtown business districts and affluent suburban commercial streets in major cities. Architecturally fantastic and lavishly appointed, they strived to blend film, live entertainment, and the spectacle of the place itself into a single seamless “show.” Newspaper advertisements indicate that by the mid-1920s, live presentations overshadowed feature films as the primary formal amusement offered at such theaters.⁷ But as scholars such as Gregory Waller and Kathryn Fuller-Seeley remind us in their histories of moviegoing outside the metropolises, the movie palace experience was hardly ubiquitous or, for that matter, especially typical during its heyday, and even audiences located within their dominion enjoyed a range of theater options.⁸

Although the construction of simpler and more economical modern theaters during the Depression, along with the decline of the stage show, meant that the moviegoer’s “attention” was less readily “distracted...from the screen,” the popularity of double features and giveaways seemed to prove that the feature film as such was still insufficient to entice audiences into theaters.⁹ But is the irrelevance of the feature film really the essential meaning of these practices? Or do they not point as credibly to the inadequacy of much of the specific feature

film product coming out of Hollywood, as the term “*B*” *movie* entered the lexicon of audiences and block booking foisted unwanted pictures onto the screens of the theaters most likely to resort to these inducements? Exhibitors certainly made this case, loudly and often, as any cursory look at their trade publications makes clear. One could just as reasonably argue that the effort to attract audiences to the theater with giveaways – a practice in fact routinely reserved for the slowest nights, to offset the weakest pictures – was evidence of how much the feature film, and the quality imputed to it, mattered.

Assertions about the insignificance of the feature film are in part, as Bordwell’s parenthetical comment about “the heart [of our] inquiry” implies, the measure of its overwhelming importance – for scholars. That is, the impulse to imagine eliminating films from the field arises from the starring role they have hitherto played in it, as individual texts to be interpreted by critics, often borrowing theoretical and analytic tools from literary studies and with little regard for production and especially reception contexts. The “readings” that result may have precious little to do with the way the films were conceived by filmmakers, promoted by exhibitors, and experienced by audiences, and one of the central projects of reception studies has been to recover, as much as possible, something like their original meaningfulness for historical viewers. But the desire to move beyond the primacy of the feature film as a text, by way of affirming that most audiences did not engage with it in the way scholars do,

should not eclipse the role of the feature film as an attraction or prevent us from trying to understand it better. Declaring films unimportant is not much of an alternative to considering them all-important, especially given how little we really know about the choices that brought historical audiences into a given theater: whether they were guided by location, price, atmosphere, a gravy boat, the latest Joan Crawford film bolstered by local promotion, or a combination of enticements. Even if the decision simply to “go to the movies,” as a social activity or habitual practice, often took precedence over the decision to seek out any individual film, moviegoers nonetheless always found themselves seeing a *particular* film (or films) and not some other ones.

Indeed, the entire system of distribution and exhibition took shape in order to make the films audiences wanted most to see more available – at more theaters, for a longer time, across a range of ticket prices – than films that proved less popular. Maximizing revenue, in other words, meant a system geared toward audience interest in specific film products, one flexible enough to calibrate supply based on demand. This economic principle was at least as important to the financial stability of the film industry as structural factors such as double features, giveaways, and block booking, and it helps to explain, as the idea of moviegoing as a social activity or habitual practice cannot, the enormous disparity in revenue between box-office “hits” and unsuccessful films.¹⁰ But detailed knowledge of the system of distribution and exhibition is often limited

by a lack of information. Records are notoriously hard to come by. *Variety* reported in some detail on box office in major cities, but it focused on first-run theaters, and its figures were often wildly inaccurate.¹¹ Newspaper advertisements give us a sense of what films played locally at a range of cinemas—because, it should be remembered, theaters always promoted the title of the feature or features and usually nothing else—however, they do not tell us how the films fared at the box office.

This essay takes advantage of an extraordinary but under-used trove of material to enrich our understanding of distribution and exhibition as a system and to provide insights into how theaters accommodated diverse local preferences. The Warner Bros. Archives, at the University of Southern California, is justifiably celebrated among film historians as the most complete collection of records from any major studio. Less appreciated is the part of the collection dealing with distribution and exhibition: the records of the Stanley-Warner theater chain, approximately 750 boxes of largely uncatalogued and unprocessed material. Based in Philadelphia, the Stanley Company of America owned some two hundred and fifty theaters throughout the mid-Atlantic and was one of the nation's most important regional chains. Warner Bros. purchased it in 1928 to form the core of its theater holdings as a vertically integrated company.¹² Among the documents are weekly billing sheets for Stanley-Warner theaters in the Philadelphia exchange, which serviced theaters in Pennsylvania and New Jersey,

for the years 1935–36. Warners was the dominant exhibitor in the exchange, with approximately 120 of the 785 theaters supplied by it (the other majors accounted for about sixty).¹³ The billing sheets record the film rentals paid to distributors, including shorts, and the daily box-office totals at each cinema – how much people paid in turn to see them. These data provide an unparalleled opportunity to learn more about audience choices and how distribution and exhibition responded to those choices as manifested in the way films moved among theaters.

To demonstrate the rich potential of this data for cinema scholars, we base this essay on a sample of twenty-three Warners theaters in Philadelphia and the data generated by 325 different films screened at them over thirty-three weeks, from the billing week ending Saturday, November 16, 1935 through the week ending Saturday, June 27, 1936.¹⁴ It includes all first- and second-run theaters in the downtown – the city’s most prominent theaters, judging both by revenues and by advertisements in local newspapers – through to a sample of second-, third-, and fourth-run neighborhood houses, to gauge as fully as possible the financial performance of the films that moved through the city and to study their comparative success at individual theaters (*run* refers to the temporal order in which theaters screened feature films).¹⁵ Because a film playing at a first-run house in mid-June would take a few months to materialize at the last of the fourth-runs and, conversely, a film that arrived at fourth-run theaters in

November had first played as early as mid-August, we have used billing sheets from outside the thirty-three week period of focus to track the path of each film at the theaters where it screened. Far from bidding box-office information farewell as soon as a film left its first run, then, we trace films' movement and earnings relationally and systematically, which allows us to consider the function and appeal of a variety of theaters, and the films they played, in the concrete terms that mattered most to all three branches of the industry.¹⁶

Theaters varied in the audiences – and audience preferences – they served. If we contend that movies mattered, that they mattered to exhibitors and audiences and they should matter to us, we find that other things mattered as well. The evidence suggests that non-selective or non-discriminating moviegoing practices – by which we simply mean attendance driven by factors other than the desire to see a particular film – did play a role; however, the box-office weight of moviegoers who exercised preferences for particular films was disproportionately great, and these preferences impacted the options for the rest. More generally we hope that this effort – a collaboration between a critic whose work has combined archive-based film history and textual interpretation, and an economist who has quantitatively analyzed the financial strategies of the film companies and the behavior of film consumers – will strike a chord with those schooled in the more qualitative aspects of cinema studies. We try to demonstrate the relevance and value of social science approaches, of digging into

the data, to our developing understanding of exhibition and audiences in the classical Hollywood era.

The Philadelphia Story

Philadelphia is both an ideal and anomalous case study. As the 1930s began it was the third largest city in the United States, with just under two million people, a diverse population including some 370,000 foreign-born residents, with sizable Italian and German populations, and 220,000 African Americans.¹⁷ New York and to a lesser extent Chicago have drawn the bulk of attention from historians of exhibition in the metropolises, with a focus on the nickelodeon era through the 1920s. But Philadelphia is also an important city in the history of motion picture exhibition, not least for the 1934 movie boycott by some of the city's many Catholics (roughly half the population), which despite uneven success helped persuade the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America to introduce stricter enforcement mechanisms for the Production Code.¹⁸ During the period of this study, Philadelphia was predictably packed with movie theaters. More than one hundred and thirty advertised in the *Evening Bulletin*. The Stanley-Warner circuit accounted for just over sixty of these. Apart from a four-theater chain owned by Skouras Theaters, a Paramount affiliate, the rest appear to have belonged to independent exhibitors, none of whom owned more than five theaters within Philadelphia or more than six nationally.¹⁹

Two qualities in particular distinguished exhibition in Philadelphia from most other metropolitan areas during the 1930s. First, regular Sunday film screenings were banned throughout Pennsylvania until November 1935, when a ballot measure allowed voters to decide whether to permit them locally after 2 pm. While many small towns in Pennsylvania defeated the measure, which faced opposition from clergy, it passed in all large cities. The vast majority of Philadelphia theaters began Sunday screenings on November 17.²⁰ Second, and more pertinent to the investigation at hand, Philadelphia was, as *Variety* put it, “a single feature stronghold.”²¹ The 1930s may have been the era of double features, but not in Philadelphia, a tribute to Warners’ domination of exhibition. Demonstrating the kind of cooperation that characterized the film industry, the contracts of the major distributors prohibited exhibitors from screening their films on double bills. Independent exhibitors Harry and Lewis Perelman filed a lawsuit in 1934 to end the restriction, but it took four years for a final judgment in the plaintiffs’ favor.²² If independent exhibitors sometimes violated the single-feature provision in 1935–36, as newspaper ads indicate, they by no means flouted it, and Warners succeeded in preventing most competitors from trying to attract customers with this particular movie bargain. The company’s single-feature policy made our task much easier in Philadelphia than elsewhere: we did not need to speculate on which film moviegoers had gone to see. Nor did giveaways complicate our analysis. Roughly one-fifth of independent theaters

advertised giveaways of cash and other prizes in the *Bulletin*, usually once or twice a week, but they were not part of Warners' exhibition policy.

In another show of cooperation among the majors, Warners theaters were not subject to block booking. There was also no system of clearance, a strategy that increased profits for producer-distributors and powerful exhibitors by encouraging moviegoers to pay a premium at pricier theaters, as films were temporarily withdrawn from circulation before moving to the next run. Instead, Warners theaters opted to maintain audience interest by allowing readier access to films, which generally ran continuously after their initial screening, moving on to progressively less expensive, less luxurious theaters, until they had played themselves out. It was a strategy well suited to a market dominated by one company, which generated revenue at multiple run levels. As a result, artificial conditions of scarcity did not influence how well films did at Warners theaters.

Like their counterparts everywhere, Philadelphia theaters showed shorts and newsreels, and the billing sheets note which ones exhibitors screened. We cannot know to what extent these may have been a factor in attendance. Exhibitors paid a flat rate for them, which varied across theaters. At all first-run, film-only and second-run houses, feature film rentals were based on varying percentages of gross revenues, with sometimes an occasional fixed charge for a weaker film. Only two fourth-run theaters always paid a fixed charge for feature films; three others routinely alternated between both rental arrangements, with a

majority of films secured at a flat rate. The preponderance of percentage deals, at least, implicitly linked attendance to the feature film, especially at the higher-order cinemas. Moreover, shorts and newsreels were not often advertised in newspapers. First- and second-run theaters ran the largest ads and were most likely to mention a special attraction, such as a new Silly Symphony cartoon, but this happened irregularly and even then often for a day or two only, as ads typically declined in size thereafter. Two theaters, the Aldine and Stanton, mentioned shorts more frequently. The circuit's most expensive first-run theater, the Aldine had a top ticket price of sixty-five cents, according to *Variety*, and primarily screened releases from United Artists, which specialized in high-quality, big-budget features. The Stanton, by contrast, was a second-tier theater. It typically screened new films, but these were programmers, inferior to the product at first-run houses, even though its top ticket price of fifty cents was only a nickel less than the first-run Boyd and Stanley. The Aldine's and Stanton's distinctive niches in the exhibition landscape, as the first, pricey purveyors of an ultra-classy grade of film, on the one hand, and of a somewhat déclassé product, on the other, may have prompted them to tempt patrons more regularly with a bonus short beyond the feature. But even they did not do so uniformly.

Another entertainment available to Philadelphia moviegoers was the stage show. Five of the Stanley-Warner sample theaters offered regular live acts. The Earle was by far the most splendid of these. One of the nation's leading theaters

during the 1930s, it combined first-rate live entertainment, with headliners such as Eddie Cantor, Benny Goodman, and Tommy Dorsey, and decidedly second-rate movies, including features from Republic as well as the major studios (thus it rented a majority of films at a flat rate).²³ Four neighborhood theaters in the sample, the State, Kent, Logan, and Oxford offered vaudeville: the Kent on Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday nights, the Oxford on Friday and Saturday nights, and the Logan and State on Saturday nights only. After January 18, 1936 the Logan and the State switched to an all-film format, and the Kent gave its last weekday vaudeville performance eleven days later. Overall, live acts were not, day in, day out, a significant challenge to the dominance of the feature film, and they became less so as 1936 progressed.

The city's remaining first-run theater, the Fox, is worth mentioning in this context. According to the *Film Daily Yearbook*, its owner was A. R. Boyd, a former Vice-President of the Stanley Company before its acquisition by Warners. The Fox offered a stage show and only screened films from the newly formed Twentieth Century-Fox. Fox films did not play at first-run Warners theaters. If its stage shows were not quite on par with the Earle's, the films were superior. Or, rather, some of them were, such as *In Old Kentucky* (Will Rogers's last film), the Shirley Temple vehicle *The Littlest Rebel*, and *Under Two Flags*, with Ronald Colman and Claudette Colbert, but such extremely popular titles were the exception. Put another way, if all Fox films had been like these, it might have

dispensed with the stage shows. But the studio simply did not make enough strong pictures to do that. And so the Fox screened many films that were more like what we find at the Earle, films made to be supported by another feature or stage show: *Charlie Chan's Secret*, for example, or *Everybody's Saturday Night*, the first of the Jones Family series. Thus while it may have been true that "on their own, most feature films simply could not fill [such] capacious theatres...throughout an entire week-long engagement, and so they were often paired with other features or with live entertainment," it would be wrong to interpret this as evidence that audiences were indifferent to feature films in general.²⁴ Rather, it points to an inadequate supply of outstanding films that could be sold to the public on their own merit. The persistence of daily stage shows was as much a testament to a production system geared toward creating films of marginal entertainment value as to the enduring popularity of live attractions.

Table 1. Cinema characteristics

Theater	Run (1)	Seats (2)	No. of films screened weeks (3)	Mode no. of feature films per week (4)	Max run (days) (5)	Max weekly revenue for 33 weeks (\$) (6)	Mean weekly revenue for 33 weeks (\$) (7)	Coefficient of variation (weeks) (8)	Max film revenue (\$) (9)	Mean film revenue (\$) (10)	Coefficient of variation (films) (11)	Percentage of films earned above the mean (12)	Percentage of films earning above the mean (13)
Aldine	1st	1416	19*	1	23	15,864	6,646	0.43	33,793	13,154	0.68	41	69
Boyd	1st	2338	26	1	16	22,125	10,332	0.40	38,569	12,577	0.69	31	58
Earle	1st	2750	33**	1	7	31,099	13,179	0.37	31,099	12,782	0.38	42	55
Stanley	1st	3009	27	1	19	23,493	11,320	0.45	54,940	14,187	0.84	33	66
Karlton	2nd	1005	32	1	24	6,404	2,429	0.54	23,728	3,121	1.26	30	62
Keiths	2nd	2300	30	1	13	6,130	3,115	0.45	9,068	3,179	0.69	34	61
Orpheum	2nd	1693	35	1	9	5,291	3,437	0.25	5,583	3,195	0.37	47	61
Palace	2nd	1100	34	1	9	6,480	4,428	0.23	7,323	4,186	0.30	50	61
Stanton	2nd	1486	27	1	21	10,165	4,678	0.37	20,403	5,407	0.78	21	47
State	2nd	3059	57	2	7.5	6,516	4,081	0.29	6,516	2,399	0.62	45	69
Victoria	2nd	987	49	2	7	4,476	3,196	0.19	5,127	2,063	0.55	45	69
Kent	3rd	1910	111	3	4	5,096	3,494	0.19	2,951	1,014	0.69	45	67
Logan	3rd	1924	58	2	7	4,875	3,371	0.22	4,875	1,856	0.62	41	66
Oxford	3rd	1600	88	3	4	3,513	2,179	0.19	2,382	742	0.75	37	70
Park	3rd	1735	113	3	4	3,816	2,813	0.17	2,365	795	0.58	44	68
Strand	3rd	1690	68	2	7	4,080	2,508	0.22	3,059	1,189	0.50	41	61
Fairmount	4th	1344	122	3 or 4	3	2,790	2,073	0.14	1,635	558	0.55	45	67
Family	4th	547	197	6	2	3,569	2,730	0.11	1,000	454	0.35	29	42
Grange	4th	499	123	4	5	1,453	1,146	0.18	979	307	0.63	46	71
Harrowgate	4th	1150	175	5	3	1,603	1,064	0.14	737	204	0.68	41	69
Holme	4th	1364	138	4	3	1,981	1,327	0.21	1,166	312	0.72	45	73
Imperial 2nd Street	4th	1040	198	6	3	1,160	947	0.12	396	154	0.54	39	61
Imperial 60th Street	4th	1474	140	4 or 5	3	1,908	1,369	0.16	944	317	0.62	45	72

Note: Unless 33 weeks is specified in column heading, figures capture all films screened in the sample set of cinemas programmed at least once during that period (weekending 16 November 1935 to weekending 27 June 1936), including playdates both before and after.

*The Aldine closed for the summer on 20 June 1936;**excludes single midnight screening of The Ghost Walks

Audiences and the Box Office

The preceding section hints at significant variation among theaters, even within the same run, and suggests that these theaters accommodated a range of audience needs and preferences. Table 1 begins to explore these differences by laying out the basic characteristics of the theaters and the magnitude and variance of revenue at each. The best films from the majors (except Fox) typically opened and ran at least a week at a Warners first-run. These theaters made films available at the highest ticket prices as long as demand warranted, and films were often held over, sometimes for two weeks or more, before heading into second run. Thus the first-run Aldine, Boyd, and Stanley together account for only seventy-two of the 325 films screened at the cinemas in the sample (column 3). The Earle is anomalous. With the exception of one midnight screening of *The Ghost Walks*, films played exactly one week, Friday to Thursday, changing with the stage show. The size and grandeur of the Earle qualified it as a quasi-first-run theater despite the second-rate quality of its films. Republic's *1,000 Dollars a Minute* took in \$31,099 there for the highest one-week gross of any film. But the real attraction was Eddie Cantor onstage; the film went straight to fourth run, where it earned only \$759 playing five days total at four different theaters. Indeed, of thirty-three week-long features at the Earle, only nine played at second-run theaters (seven at the State, one at the Victoria, and one at both theaters, which screened more films than their second-run counterparts [column

3]), while fourteen films moved to third-run theaters and another ten retreated directly to fourth run. By contrast the vast majority of films at the Aldine, Boyd, and Stanley played through all runs; only the poorly performing *Coronado* at the Stanley and *First a Girl* and *It's Love Again* at the Aldine went straight to fourth-run theaters from any of their screens.

Hold-overs of popular films occurred at some second-run theaters as well, although less frequently. An exception was the Stanton, which, like the Stanley, played twenty-seven films. And like the Earle, it might best be described as a 1.5-run house in terms of its film offerings. A few of the Stanton's films came from first-run theaters, but the vast majority of its features were generally weaker films that played there first. The Karlton also screened new as well as successful second-run films (top ticket price forty-five cents), although it played more of the latter than the Stanton. Its new films were even feebler, more often going straight to fourth run. Less than half of the Stanton's new films, and only one of the Karlton's played at another second-run theater, with the State and Victoria again serving as a home for second-tier entertainment. That the new films at the Stanton and Karlton, with titles such as *Dracula's Daughter* and *Times Square Playboy*, bypassed first-run theaters indicates they were thought less appealing to moviegoers, a judgment whose accuracy can be measured by the difference between these theaters' mean weekly and mean film revenue and that of the Aldine, Boyd, and Stanley (columns 7 and 10).

Warners first-runs and all but two of its second-runs were located in the city center, on Market and Chestnut Streets, between 11th and 20th. The Orpheum in Germantown and the State in Dunlap advertised in newspapers with other “neighborhood” theaters, but they typically received their films just after the Palace and on par with the Victoria. Of third- and fourth-run theaters in the sample, only the Family, a legacy of the nickelodeon era, was located downtown. Apart from the palaces, lower-order theaters were not necessarily smaller than the rest, and only two fourth-run houses seated fewer than a thousand people. They were, however, cheaper and less grand (unfortunately, exact ticket prices were not advertised and are unknown). Only two second-run theaters, the State and Victoria, typically ran more than one film a week; all of the third- and fourth-run theaters did. With between two or three to six program changes a week, and the same film often screening simultaneously at multiple theaters, films moved in and out of them in anywhere from a rapid to a breakneck pace, as they were broadcast to audiences across the city.

One might reasonably speculate that the feature film would matter less to audiences at lower-order theaters, that habit or sociability played a far more significant role in attendance here than at theaters requiring a larger investment in money (higher prices) and possibly time (travel to and from downtown) and where the solicitation of audiences for particular films was most acute. We do note significant variation in weekly revenues at different categories of theater, as

measured by the coefficient of variation (column 8). The COV offers a way to assess the degree to which any set of numbers, weekly box-office totals in this case, varies around the mean. The weekly revenue COV is much greater at first-run theaters and the in-between Stanton and Karlton, as well as at Keith's, which typically received its films immediately from first run. The greater COV means the data are more characterized by extremes. The range is nicely visualized in Table 1, at the first-runs especially, by the striking difference in totals between their best week and the mean (columns 6 and 7). The greater variation in revenue correlates with screening fewer films, at the start of their release, or in the case of Keith's, close to the start but for less money. This finding suggests that audience members discriminated among films at these theaters, seeking out and establishing big favorites at the box office that were held over and also creating rejects such as *Millions in the Air* at the Stanley (\$3792 in seven days) or *The Bishop Misbehaves* at the Boyd (\$3829 in six) by staying away. Lots of people wanted to see films like *Mutiny on the Bounty* and *Top Hat* (\$54,940 and \$39,148 in first run, respectively), and they chose to see them sooner rather than later and to pay higher ticket prices to do so. If people were simply seeking a movie-palace experience, there would not be such extreme variation. This conclusion is borne out by the inevitable tendency of box-office performance to decline the longer a film was held over at a theater; *Top Hat* may have remained an attractive film at the Stanley as measured against the mean, but it was less attractive at that price

the following week (\$24,705 vs. \$14,443). The second week never equaled the opening week, and the third week always declined further. In the case of the Earle, audiences almost certainly expressed a preference for live entertainers, but they did not come out (or, rather, stay away) as strongly *against* particular stage shows there as they did against films at other first-runs; the Earle's weakest performer over the thirty-three weeks was a revue called "Bring on the Dames" with *Silly Billies* (\$8323).

It would be a mistake, however, to assume an absence of audiences who selected particular films at the lower-run cinemas, if only because a substantial number of people would have been unable or unwilling to pay higher prices for every eagerly awaited film. Week in, week out, third- and fourth-run theaters were more consistent, albeit more modest, earners as indicated by the lower COV for weekly revenue, but the COV for film revenue does not follow the same pattern (column 11). It is higher for all theaters and points to much less variability in revenue. That is, individual films performed with comparable (in)consistency in all runs; lower-order theaters had box-office champions and lousy earners too. The difference between the two COVs is likely explained by the multiple program changes per week at lower-order theaters: poorly performing programs tended to be counter-balanced by more popular ones, which resulted in more stable patterns of attendance week to week.

Again there are outliers. The Victoria had a low COV for weekly revenue,

while the Palace and Orpheum had low COVs across the board, meaning there was less variation in revenue by film as well as by week. The discrepancy may further indicate the different functions of second-run theaters. With all the competition downtown, audiences may have been keener to see newer films at theaters next door to the Palace and Victoria or willing to wait for the older ones closer to home. The higher COV for film revenues at the Victoria is likely a function of the extreme variety of playing time for its films, which ranged from two to seven days, in contrast with the standard week-long engagements at the Palace and Orpheum (and the typical three- or four-day run at the State). It is harder to understand why the Orpheum, located amidst a cluster of theaters along Germantown Avenue, would not perform more like other neighborhood theaters, unless the higher ticket price likely commanded by a second-run theater was a factor. Its numbers and location suggest that it attracted a regular local clientele.

The Orpheum and Palace also did not really share the disproportionate effect of top-earning films on overall revenue at other theaters (column 12 and 13). With an exception to be discussed below, the Earle derived the lowest amount of revenue – 55 percent – from the 42 percent of films that earned above the mean, further indication that its stage shows drew more consistently than movies alone typically did elsewhere. About one-third of films earned above the mean at the Boyd, Stanley, and Karlton, and two-fifths at the Aldine. And yet

this relatively small fraction of films accounted for 58, 66, 69, and 69 percent of revenue at these theaters, respectively. The Stanton's meager 21 percent of high-earning films (7 of 34), the lowest of any theater, contributed 47 percent to its gross. It seems logical that the theaters playing new films, which had the potential to hit big and hold on, or falter and disappear, would generate this sort of distribution. Given that thirty-two above-mean films at the Aldine, Boyd, and Stanley accounted for \$788,083, or about 20 percent of total earnings for all 325 films in the sample, it can readily be seen how important such films were to audiences and to the financial well-being of the major companies.

The strong impact of the most successful films on revenue holds for all runs, however. A higher percentage of films, between 41-48 percent at ten third- and fourth-run theaters, earned above the mean, but these films also account for a high percentage of revenue at these theaters, with figures as high as 81 percent. But it is evident that the choices of these moviegoers mattered less to the overall earnings of films. The 782 programs in which films performed above the mean at third- and fourth-run theaters accounted for only \$653,532, or about 4 percent less of the total than the thirty-two high-earning programs at the Aldine, Boyd, and Stanley.

An exception is the Family. It tied with the Imperial 2nd for most films screened, 198 in thirty-three weeks. The only way to achieve such volume was through a constant change in program, and the vast majority of films played for

one day. With the smallest COVs for weekly revenue, the Family and Imperial 2nd were the most consistent earners week to week. But the Family had the lowest COV for film revenue, which suggests significantly more consistent earnings across films as well. It is also anomalous in that only 23 percent of its films earned above the mean, a figure that puts it on par with the Stanton and closer to first-runs. Its best-performing films likewise contributed disproportionately to revenue (43 percent), but films that did not do better than average at the box office nonetheless did much better than under-performers at other fourth-runs. Apart from a half-day screening of *The Ghost Walks* (everybody's favorite one-off film, apparently), no film at the Family earned less than \$240, even though six of every seven films played for one day only. At the Fairmount, which had a higher mean and played far fewer films than the Family, mostly for two days, twenty-six films earned less than that. The Imperial 2nd screened only thirty-five films that earned *more*. These results are astonishing when one remembers that the Family had 547 seats, fewer than any but the Grange and about half or less than other fourth-runs.

We can explain the Family's numbers if we examine average revenue based on the day of the week, which in turn casts light on other reasons people would have gone to these theaters beyond a preference for specific films. Table 2 gives the average percentage of revenue earned each day of the week, derived from daily box-office totals after Sunday screenings began.

Table 2. Average Daily Box Office as a Percentage of Weekly Box Office

Theater	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Aldine	9	10	15	14	13	26	16
Boyd	8	10	14	10	14	29	15
Earle	15	14	15	12	15	27	2*
Stanley	9	10	13	10	10	28	21
Karlton	11	12	14	13	13	26	12
Keiths	10	11	13	12	11	29	15
Orpheum	9	10	14	10	16	28	13
Palace	11	12	15	13	13	24	14
Stanton	11	12	14	12	8	23	20
State	9	10	12	8	12	30	18
Victoria	12	12	13	11	13	25	15
Kent	10	9	12	11	11	27	21
Logan	9	10	12	8	11	30	19
Oxford	7	7	10	9	15	42	11
Park	9	10	11	10	15	22	23
Strand	10	10	13	10	9	27	22
Fairmount	11	10	11	10	13	24	22
Family	15	15	14	14	14	12	16
Grange	11	12	13	10	13	21	20
Harrowgate	12	9	11	10	13	27	18
Holme	11	9	11	11	11	30	17
Imperial 2nd	8	13	11	12	11	24	21
Imperial 60th	11	9	12	9	12	23	23

* Sunday shows for the Earle ran for only 22 weeks, ending April 16, 1936.

Writing in *The Management of Motion Picture Theatres* (1938), the head of the Fox Inter-Mountain Theatre chain reported that Sundays accounted for 30 percent of business, Saturdays 20 percent, and weekdays 10 percent each.²⁵ As theaters did not open until 2 pm Sundays, and Philadelphia was a Catholic stronghold with strong clerical opposition to Sunday moviegoing, we were expecting to find lower percentages on that day. We did, but we also discovered that Sunday exhibited the most extreme fluctuation, ranging from 11 percent of business (the Oxford) to 23 percent (Imperial 60th). The Earle fared so poorly without the stage

show on Sundays (2 percent) that it closed on that day after twenty-two weeks. Among first- and second-run theaters, only the Stanley and Stanton earned 20 percent or more of weekly revenue on Sunday. Apart from the Oxford, whose weak showing was likely attributable to high revenue for Friday and Saturday stage shows, third- and fourth-runs overall tended to do more business on Sundays than other theaters.

The vast majority of all theaters did 50 – 60 percent of business on weekdays, with little to distinguish Friday. Saturday was the best day, outearning Sunday in all but three instances. It made up 25 percent or more of the weekly box office at fifteen theaters. It did 30 percent at the Logan and State, which offered Saturday vaudeville for the first two months of the sample, and at the Holme, which did not. The Oxford was the only theater off-scale at 42 percent. At all theaters but one, Saturday accounted for at least 20 percent of the box office. Saturday, it would seem, was “movie day” in Philadelphia. This finding is not attributable to a preference for individual films – at higher-order cinemas where films played a week or more, the product was precisely the same as other days, and even at lower-order cinemas, films never played only on Saturday, except occasionally at the Family and Imperial 2nd. Saturdays did best because people enjoyed going to the movies on that day more than others. Moviegoers may have been slightly more inclined to patronize the most expensive downtown theaters, to make an event of it, but the attractiveness of a

Saturday trip to the theater transcended run and cost and location. By contrast, the number of lower-order neighborhood theaters that also did especially well on Sundays points to a possible predisposition toward staying closer to home on that day.

And then there was the Family. At 12 percent, Saturday brought in less than any other day, and Sunday accounted for only 16 percent. There was no other theater that came close to the Family's consistency or strong performance during the week at 14 - 15 percent each weekday. The downtown location was likely a factor: the theater would have provided cheap and ever-changing amusement for workers or shoppers who had reason to be downtown during the week. The Family did not advertise in newspapers, a sign that it was not soliciting business based on its films. The probable secret to the odd revenue distribution was revealed in an architectural history of Philadelphia theaters by Irvin Glazer, which mentioned that during the 1930s the Family operated twenty-four hours a day (from 2 pm Sundays).²⁶ This would help to explain the extraordinary equivalence in daily box office. The Family was truly a niche theater, where patrons knew they could show up any time day or night when they felt like watching a film, any film. That Saturday was its worst day indicates the degree to which it served a different function from other theaters, not really operating as a destination, a jolly-night-out kind of place. Moviegoers who liked films on demand rewarded this small fourth-run with the highest average

weekly revenue per seat, at \$4.99, of any theater in the sample (first-runs averaged \$3.76 - \$4.79). And it paid a fixed rental, usually between fifteen and thirty dollars, per film, a small fraction of its daily box office. The Family, in other words, was one of the most successful movie houses in the city.

What films did moviegoers most favor and how did they fare in various theaters? Half of the ten highest-grossing films (Table 3) are musicals, with a pair of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers vehicles at the top; two comedies, two

Table 3. Differences in the performance of films according to rank

Film Title	Studio/Distributor (1)	Total box office(\$) (2)	Booking days (3)	Opening theater (4)	Days in first run (5)	Opening week box office (\$) (6)	Total box office at opening theater (\$) (7)	Box-office ranking at opening theater (8)
Ranks 1 to 10								
<i>Top Hat</i>	RKO	97,344	95	Stanley	12	24,705	39,148	2
<i>Follow the Fleet</i>	RKO	88,515	93	Stanley	15	25,594	39,009	3
<i>Mutiny on the Bounty</i>	MGM	80,827	69.5	Stanley	19	23,493	54,940	1
<i>Rose Marie</i>	MGM	73,780	85	Boyd	15	22,125	35,102	2
<i>Mr. Deeds Goes to Town</i>	Columbia	73,584	89	Stanley	14	16,063	28,280	4
<i>Magnificent Obsession</i>	Universal	66,325	80	Boyd	14	15,713	27,444	3
<i>These Three</i>	Goldwyn/UA	61,833	80	Aldine	21	16,999	33,793	1
<i>Show Boat</i>	Universal	60,157	82	Stanley	14	15,599	24,383	7
<i>Broadway Melody of 1936</i>	MGM	57,980	69	Stanley	12	15,872	25,985	6
<i>A Night at the Opera</i>	MGM	54,028	63.5	Stanley	9	18,771	20,791	10
Ranks 52 to 55								
<i>Whipsaw</i>	MGM	23,236	43	Boyd	12	8,441	11,515	12
<i>Two Fisted</i>	Paramount	22,958	16	Earle	6	19,989	19,989	4
<i>Singing Kid</i>	WB	22,515	50.5	Stanley	7.5	8,381	8,381	22
<i>The Melody Lingers On</i>	Reliance/UA	22,514	35.5	Aldine	12	8,963	15,442	8
Ranks 126 to 130*								
<i>Sutter's Gold</i>	Universal	10,421	29	Stanton	7	4,820	4,820	8
<i>I Married a Doctor</i>	WB	10,399	25	Stanley	7	6,004	6,004	31
<i>The Amateur Gentleman</i>	Criterion/UA	10,356	18	Aldine	12	6,341	8,891	14
<i>Big Brown Eyes</i>	Paramount	10,287	12	Earle	6	9,350	9,350	34

Notes: No Sunday screenings for most of *Top Hat*; first- and second-run of *Broadway Melody*; first-run of *Two Fisted* and *Melody Lingers On*; and first week of *Mutiny on the Bounty*.

0.5 signifies a mid-day program change.

*Ranking excludes no. 128, a Fox film that did not go through first run.

melodramas, and an action film round out the genres. MGM claimed four of the box-office winners, with stars ranging from Clark Gable to Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy to the Marx Bros. *These Three*, Samuel Goldwyn's classy adaptation of Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*, earned a place, as did three special productions from the "minor" majors: a Frank Capra film from Columbia, and two films starring Irene Dunne from Universal. Paramount and Warner Bros. are unrepresented in the top ten. Warners' top-grossing film was *The Story of Louis Pasteur* at no. 14. Paramount did poorly; none of its films ranked higher than 35. This was *Klondike Annie*, which did not even open at one of the premiere theaters but was the Stanton's most successful film with a three-week run. Fox did not make it into the top sixty because none of its films screened at first-run Warners theaters. Table 3 thus also illustrates how crucial such theaters were for the financial success of any film: at a minimum, *A Night at the Opera's* nine-day opening at the Stanley generated 38 percent of its box office, across 63.5 days playing time. Despite ranking third overall, *Mutiny on the Bounty* played at fewer theaters than any other top ten film and for fewer days than all but two, perhaps, it would seem, because it was so successful in first run, pulling in a whopping 68 percent of its total take in the first nineteen days.

If these films did so well because they earned a great deal in first run, others that made as much or more, such as *A Tale of Two Cities* at the Boyd, did not make the list. The top ten titles achieved that status because they were also

among the top ten box-office draws at many other theaters; they remained generally popular (column 10). *Follow the Fleet* ranked in the top ten at sixteen of seventeen theaters that played it, landing first in four instances. *Mutiny on the Bounty* did the same at thirteen of fourteen theaters, with six top spots.

Conventional second-run theaters did very well with the top ten overall films. Every one that played at Keith's (six), the Palace (seven), and the State (nine) ended up in the top ten at that theater; seven of eight at the Orpheum wound up on its top ten list. None of the top ten films at the Earle or Stanton were among the most popular overall; the Stanton's best earners all opened there, which implied lower revenue down the line. The Victoria played six of the highest-grossing films, but only two were in its top ten. The Victoria played films later than other downtown second-runs, and most of its top ten films played nowhere else in second run at all (*Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, *Klondike Annie*) or did not play in second run downtown (*China Seas*, *Frisco Kid*, *Fury*, *Wife Vs. Secretary*, *Prisoner of Shark Island*, also *Mutiny on the Bounty*), suggesting once again the diverse options among second-run theaters.

The top ten films overall did well at third-run cinemas, ranging from a low of four of the Kent's ten most popular to a high of eight at the Logan and Park (out of nine screened). Fourth-run theaters exhibited a stronger tendency to go their own way: only the Harrowgate and Holme had as many as six of their ten most popular films in the top ten overall, and the Family and Grange had just

one each, the ubiquitous *Mutiny on the Bounty*. But the Grange only played four of the top ten films (the other fourth-runs ran all ten). Like the Family and Imperial 2nd, it often screened films that appeared at fewer theaters, sometimes fourth-runs only; with fewer program changes, these made up a higher proportion of its programs. Of the Grange's ten most popular films, five were unique to that theater. At the remaining fourth-run theaters, only six films, or 10 percent, were unique to a theater's top ten ranking, and the Family and Imperial 2nd accounted for two each. In other words, there was significant overlap in what did well at theaters across the board, not only films like *Top Hat* and *Magnificent Obsession*, but extending to, for example, *Small Town Girl* (seven theaters), *Shipmates Forever* (six theaters), and *She Married Her Boss* (five theaters). With the exception of the Earle, the top ten films at every theater were from the major companies.

The ability to track daily revenue, and to derive an average day-of-week revenue, allows us to refine our understanding of the films' performance at individual theaters. Where films played a week, at first- and second-run theaters, it is relatively easy to ascertain their box-office appeal by measuring revenue against the weekly average. Where films did not play a full week, at third- and fourth-run theaters, a film might do well because it was particularly popular with audiences or because it played three days rather than two and ran Saturday and Sunday. In other words, a film at lower-order theaters could have earned

more while being less popular than others. Of the ten highest-grossing films at each third- and fourth-run theater, only three did not play on a Saturday or, less often, a Sunday (sometimes they ran on both days), or on a holiday, which positively impacted revenue in all runs. Overwhelmingly, the ten most popular films tended to play the longest, whether it was seven days at the Logan or two days at the Imperial 2nd. It is worth noting that the correlation between high revenue, Saturday screenings, and duration of run is less misleading than it appears. On the one hand, these films were especially successful because they played when they did; on the other, they played when they did because they were expected to be successful. Saturday was the best night, and a big film improved upon that advantage and justified extra playing time. For these reasons too, top ten films in Table 3 earned above the mean per film at third- and fourth-run theaters. *These Three* was the exception. Not only did it rank in the top ten at the fewest theaters (six), but it did not achieve mean film performance at the Kent and Oxford, failing to equal the day-of-week box-office average each day it played. At the Strand total earnings for *These Three* were above the mean because it ran a full week, even though it performed below average each day, and at the Logan it failed to meet the mean box office on four of seven days, all of which suggests that this upscale Goldwyn/UA film had more limited appeal as it moved into the neighborhoods.

Just as revenue fell from week to week in first-run holdovers, as the most

interested moviegoers went earlier, these films often performed below the day-of-week average toward the end of extended runs. Only *Magnificent Obsession* and *Show Boat* fell below the weekly mean in the second week, with the latter under-performing on each day. *These Three* fell below in week three at the Aldine. At the Palace, State, and Keith's, each top ten film earned above both weekly and film means, although films also sometimes did below average on particular days, especially toward the end of the run. At the Victoria, each one earned above the film mean except *Rose Marie*, which played three days at midweek and fell below average every day. Only two films – *These Three* again, at the Orpheum, and *Top Hat* at the Victoria (where it arrived after an unusually long seven-week run downtown) – earned less than the weekly average in second run, despite playing a full week.²⁷ With the exception of *Mutiny on the Bounty* and *Follow the Fleet*, the other top ten films screened at the Victoria often fell short of daily averages too, suggesting that the most popular films had pushed their box-office limits in second run downtown when they played there.

We find that as the top ten films moved into neighborhood third-runs they were on the whole popular. Only *Show Boat* at the Kent and *These Three* at the Strand earned well below average each day they played, while *A Night at the Opera* under-performed three of four days at the Strand. *Show Boat* at the Strand generated below-average box office five of seven days but actually made it to the theater's top ten because it played a full week. In fourth run, *Show Boat* also

performed below the mean both days at the Fairmount and Holme. It would seem that this musical melodrama, like *These Three* (which similarly foundered at the Imperial 2nd), was less popular with some audiences than its ranking implied. In fourth run, the top ten films did quite well overall at the Fairmount, Harrowgate, Holme, and Imperial 60th; they performed below average on only twelve out of eighty-eight screening days. They fared less well at the Family, Grange, and Imperial 2nd, failing to meet the day-of-week average on twenty-three of fifty screening days, or almost half the time. This should not surprise, given that so few of these films made it to these theaters' top ten. We might see in their indifferent performance another way of getting at the idea that films mattered: these theaters took turns being last to screen among all the sample theaters, and that so many people had seen these pictures elsewhere may imply a degree of market saturation. It is also possible that we see evidence of attendance driven by other factors, as we have already established at the Family, with these theaters playing more obscure and less desirable films (judging by the preponderance of bottom-ranking films among their offerings). Audiences perhaps responded less to individual films given their rapid pace in and out of these theaters, with a subset selecting individual films whose general popularity was not perceived to warrant wider bookings.

More people came out to see the top ten films than others, and hence they were made more available. In the case of *Show Boat* and *These Three*, it was their

availability that helped them to become top ten earners despite palpably lower enthusiasm; they played many more days than *Broadway Melody* and *A Night at the Opera*, which had its box office boosted by enormously lucrative holiday screenings (Thanksgiving opening at the Stanley, New Year's Eve and Day at the Orpheum and Palace, giving ritual an important place in the success of this comedy). The other films from Table 3 illustrate the impact of availability.

Rankings were chosen to capture the performance of films that opened at four different theaters from four different studios (excluding Fox). The difference in number of theaters screening the films (column 9) is small, except for *Two Fisted* and *Big Brown Eyes*, which both opened at the Earle and bypassed second- and third-run theaters, respectively, and *The Amateur Gentleman*, the first film from Douglas Fairbanks, Jr.'s British production company, which stopped briefly at the Logan before heading to fourth-run ignominy. By contrast, the number of booking days (column 3) varies significantly from the top ten, with *The Singing Kid* at the Stanley coming closest at 50.5. Total box office (column 2) plummets, although that trend is already evident in the spread between *Top Hat* and *A Night at the Opera*; the earnings difference among films flattens the farther down the ranking one goes.²⁸

Of the last eight films, three were held over, but this was not necessarily a sign of box-office success upon opening. *Whipsaw*, an MGM crime drama that paired Myrna Loy and Spencer Tracy for the first time, played twelve days and

came in twelfth among the Boyd's films, but it earned below the theater's weekly and film mean and well below the daily average on all but one day of its run. *The Amateur Gentleman* did poorly in first run at the Aldine, earning above average its first three days but then sinking well below, an indication of unfavorable word-of-mouth. Both films lingered as place-holders: *Amateur Gentleman* departed with the midweek opening of *These Three*, and *Whipsaw* left to make room for *A Tale of Two Cities*, which opened on Christmas Day. The replacements were the highest-grossing films at their respective first-run theaters. *The Melody Lingers On*, a classy, classical music-oriented film from prolific independent producer Edward Small, with a no-name cast, enjoyed its world premiere at the Aldine and ranked eighth among its films. Its extended playing time there was justified: it earned above the film mean and above the weekly mean during its first week (and came close the second), performing above average every day but one.

The success of *Melody Lingers On* did not, however, follow it into subsequent run. It did not play so long as a week at any of the three second-run theaters that screened it and did very poorly there. It performed below and often well below average on its later subsequent-run playing days, earning above average only five days, two of which were New Year's Eve and Day, when theaters always did some of their best business. As with *These Three*, these figures suggest the Aldine's special appeal to moviegoers who wanted a classier product

than the standard Hollywood fare, which did not draw nearly as well as it filtered into neighborhood theaters. The more conventional *Whipsaw* did well in subsequent run, with the exception of its sole second-run stint, at the Orpheum, where it performed above average its opening weekend but fell below the remaining five days. Perhaps because it missed an audience in first and second run *Whipsaw* picked up steam thereafter, earning above average on twenty of twenty-four playing days. *Two Fisted* did top business at the Earle because it played with the highly popular Major Bowes's Amateurs, from the radio, and killed New Years Eve at the Family, but otherwise it failed. *The Singing Kid* must have come as an unpleasant surprise. Starring Al Jolson, this film had Warners' fourth-highest production budget for 1935-36 but earned above average on just one of its forty-three days in subsequent run, and generally earned far below, after performing badly at the Stanley. Its extra booking days were not justified and may have signaled a degree of cooperation between different branches of the company to support an expensive flop. Unsuccessful films can be as meaningful as lucrative ones, and what we see clearly here is audiences staying away from or de-selecting this movie.

The third cluster of films had less favorable playing days, only three Saturdays after the first run. In second and third run, the films performed below average each day (*Big Brown Eyes* went straight to fourth-run theaters). They often did well below average, indicating that moviegoers on the whole did not

seek out these films, and many would likely have been drawn to the theater based on other factors. In fourth run these films tended to perform below average too, although not always, with three of six fourth-run screenings of *I Married a Doctor* doing at or above average, three of five for *Big Brown Eyes*, and one of three for *Amateur Gentleman*. It is possible that the films' poor performance elsewhere, or the lack of screenings in the case of the latter two, opened up a space for selection of these films among bargain-seeking audiences. But they were also simply not very popular, and factors such as habit and sociability may have accounted for a greater share of attendance too.

Conclusion

Our article makes a case for the importance of the feature film, and of a number of specific films, to moviegoers in the mid-1930s. By using mean film and day-of-week statistics, we have created a benchmark measure of performance that enables comparative analysis of films at a range of theaters. We have shown considerable overlap among the most successful films, and even when films faltered, such as the overwhelmingly unpopular *Singing Kid* or otherwise box-office "hits" like *These Three* and *Show Boat*, they often did so repeatedly, suggesting audiences resisted as well as sought out certain films across theaters. At the same time, our analysis has demonstrated significant diversity among theaters, even within the same run. There was no "standard"

second- or fourth-run theater, nor did neighborhood theaters perform identically. Rather, theaters appear to have responded to diverse needs and preferences of audiences.

We hope to learn much more about these audiences in the future. Our ultimate goal is to process, digitize, and make generally available the information in the thousands of Stanley-Warner weekly billing sheets. We anticipate the creation of a demographic digital map of theaters in Philadelphia and environs that would allow scholars of classical Hollywood exhibition and reception to consider, really for the first time on such a scale, how individual films performed with diverse ethnic, racial, religious, and socio-economic groups based on neighborhood location of theaters. Such a map would provide a nuanced sociological account of the audience that was not possible here.

Although we argue that preferences for certain films played an important role in attendance, more so than scholars have recently assumed given their understanding of, say, the movie palace experience or the habit-forming proximity of the “nabes,” moviegoing decisions were based on other factors as well. People were drawn to movies on Saturdays; holidays at the theater provided a popular entertainment painstakingly designed for the whole family. Even the least promising films found their smaller audiences at one or more fourth-run theaters. The lowest-earning film in the sample, no. 325, was Universal’s *The Affair of Susan*, starring Zasu Pitts, a fact worth mentioning

because her “B” pictures from 1935 were routinely paired with giveaways and offered on double bills at the independent theaters in Philadelphia that resorted to these practices. Without such inducements it earned a mere \$40.75 during its only playdate in the sample, at the Harrowgate on December 24. Christmas Eve was the one holiday in this Catholic town that gutted box office. Booking this obscure film was an acknowledgement of inevitable defeat. Among the few who found themselves at *The Affair of Susan*, it is hard not to imagine people with no other place to go, for whom “the movies” as such, as pleasure, as escape, brought them there. But some moviegoers may have been fans of the comedienne, and that was why they attended this theater rather than the Iris, Lafayette, Allegheny, Midway, or Casino, all within a mile of the Harrowgate. It is impossible to tell, but it is important to remember that metropolitan moviegoers did not merely choose between a special trip to the downtown palace and the local theater but often among two or more convenient neighborhood houses.

Things like habit and social factors are more difficult to measure than preferences, which is perhaps a way of saying that we should not be in a hurry to choose between a taste for particular films or stars and a taste for “going to the movies,” as though they are somehow incompatible. In the early 1940s, market researcher Leo Handel surveyed moviegoers in New York City and found that half were “non-selective” – they had not been guided by a desire to see a particular film on their most recent trip to the theater.²⁹ Handel noted that his

first survey did not analyze the degree of selectivity of the half who did attend for the film and suggested that these respondents might have been less discriminating than they had claimed. He declined to reflect that he never pursued the degree of non-selectivity either, taking that response at face value. The non-selective impulse also requires illumination, however, if we wish to understand exactly how people who wanted to “go to the movies” ended up seeing one movie in particular among the myriad options to be found every day in cities like New York or Philadelphia. The billing sheets compiled each week by the management of the Stanley-Warner theater chain offer a fresh perspective on the choices that audiences made.

Notes

¹ See Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), and “The Economics of U.S. Film Exhibition Policy and Practice,” *Cine-Tracts* 12 (Winter 1981): 36-40.

² David Bordwell, foreword, Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, xii.

³ Ina Rae Hark, “Introduction,” *Exhibition: The Film Reader*, ed. Hark (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 2, 7.

⁴ Richard Maltby and Melvyn Stokes, *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema*, eds. Maltby, Stokes and Robert C. Allen (Exeter: University

of Exeter Press, 2007), 2. See also Annette Kuhn, *Dreaming of Fred and Ginger: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (New York: NYU Press, 2002).

⁵ Eric Smoodin, "Introduction: The History of Film History," in *Looking Past the Screen: Case Studies in American Film History and Method*, eds. Smoodin and Jon Lewis (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), 2. Mark Glancy and John Sedgwick likewise argued previously, based on box-office reports from *Variety*, that "a single feature film might be a secondary or even an incidental consideration" at the cinema ("Cinemagoing in the United States in the mid-1930s: A Study Based on the *Variety* Dataset," in *Going to the Movies*, 155).

⁶ See Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928* (1990; rpt. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), chapter 2.

⁷ See Charlotte Herzog, "Movie Palaces and Exhibition," *Film Reader 2* (1977): 185-97, and Maggie Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk: An Architectural History of the Movie Theatre, Starring S. Charles Lee* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1994).

⁸ See Gregory A. Waller, *Main Street Amusements: Movies and Commercial Entertainment in a Southern City, 1896-1930* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995); Kathryn H. Fuller, *At the Picture Show: Small-Town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996); and *Hollywood in the Neighborhood: Historical Case Studies*

of *Local Moviegoing*, ed. Kathryn H. Fuller-Seeley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

⁹ Lary May, *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 117. See also Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk*, 95.

¹⁰ See John Sedgwick and Michael Pokorny, "The Risk Environment of Film Making: Warner Bros. in the Inter-War Years," *Explorations in Economic History* 35, no. 2 (1998): 196-220; Sedgwick and Pokorny, "The Film Business in the United States and Britain during the 1930s," *Economic History Review* 58, no. 1 (2005): 79-112; and Sedgwick and Pokorny, "Consumers as Risk Takers: Evidence from the Film Industry during the 1930s," *Business History* 52 (February 2010): 74-99.

¹¹ In fact, our box-office data, discussed in detail in the next paragraph, compels skepticism of theatrical revenue reports found in *Variety* and the *Motion Picture Herald*. By comparing the actual box office recorded by theaters with the estimates from trade journals, we find that the latter could be off by 50 percent or more. While actual totals sometimes were higher than the estimates, inflated estimates were more common.

¹² See Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 38-40, 62-63.

¹³ 1936-37 *Motion Picture Almanac* (New York: Quincy Publishing, 1936), 990.

¹⁴ A previous analysis of a similar dataset formed the basis of an economics article on consumer behavior, distribution, and the risk environment of the film industry, as viewed through the lens of early market research on film audiences (Sedgwick and Pokorny, "Film Consumer Decision-Making: The Philadelphia Story, 1935– 36," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 12 [2012]: 323-46). The dataset has since been completed, reorganized, and in many places corrected, allowing new questions to be asked about audience preferences and the various ways theaters met them.

¹⁵ Weekly billing sheets do not specify the run of theater, and we rely upon revenue and screening patterns as well as film dates in assigning theaters to a run.

¹⁶ Records for the Oxford begin the last week of November, 1935, when the Stanley-Warner chain acquired it; records for the Aldine end June 20, 1936, the last screening date before it closed for the summer.

¹⁷ From 1930 census data, summarized in Philip Jenkins, *Hoods and Shirts: The Extreme Right in Pennsylvania, 1925 – 1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 63.

¹⁸ In 1899 Siegmund Lubin opened the Cineograph Theater in Philadelphia, possibly the world's first theater built for film exhibition. He went on to own a reported one hundred theaters, which became the nucleus of the Stanley Company's extensive regional chain after Lubin's involvement in the Motion

Picture Patents Company necessitated their sale. See Linda Woal, "When a Dime Could Buy a Dream: Siegmund Lubin and the Birth of Motion Picture Exhibition," *Film History* 6, no. 2 (1994), 152-65. On the Philadelphia boycott, see Frederick S. Lane, *The Decency Wars: The Campaign to Cleanse American Culture* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2006), 90-91.

¹⁹ See the *Film Daily Yearbook* (New York: 1936). We have turned to the *Evening Bulletin* because *Variety's* annual "Community Showmanship Survey" noted that it had the highest circulation in the city (523,486), almost double that of its nearest rival (*Variety* [30 October, 1935]).

²⁰ See "Pulpits Oppose Sunday Movies," *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* (2 November 1935): 7; "Many Surprises in Pennsy Sunday Pix Voting; All Big Towns Go 7 Days," *Variety* (13 November 1935): 12; and "Sunday Shows Will Rule on Many Screens," *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* (16 November 1935): 5.

²¹ "Philly's Court Ruling Okaying Duals Will Jazz Up WB Stronghold," *Variety* (22 January 1936): 35.

²² On the double feature lawsuit, see "News from the Dailies," *Variety* (5 February 1935): 61; Mike Wear, "Growth of Double Bills," *Variety* (6 January 1937): 12; and "Fourth Time Upheld," *Variety* (16 March 1938): 21.

²³ See Irvin R. Glazer, *Philadelphia Theatres, A-Z: A Comprehensive, Descriptive Record of 813 Theatres Constructed since 1724* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1986), 99-100.

²⁴ Glancy and Sedgwick, "Cinemagoing in the United States in the Mid-1930s," in *Going to the Movies*, 161.

²⁵ Frank H. Ricketson, Jr., *The Management of Motion Picture Theaters* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1938), 33.

²⁶ See Glazer, *Philadelphia Theatres, A-Z*, 109.

²⁷ *Top Hat* played a six-day week at the Victoria, as its playdates preceded Sunday screenings in Philadelphia.

²⁸ This tendency is analyzed in Sedgwick and Pokorny, "The Philadelphia Story," 333-34.

²⁹ Leo A. Handel, *Hollywood Looks at Its Audience: A Report of Film Audience Research* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1950), 152-53.