**Video Script  
Lecture 5 – Let’s Go in to a Picture Show**

**Fa20/Sp21**

**Introduction Slide**

For the last three lectures, we’ve been thinking a lot about how films get made:

Both the technology that physically got images on film,

And the different strategies companies developed to finance and produce early movies.

Today, I want to think about moviegoing.

How and why did going to the movies become such a widespread part of American entertainment?

**Key Concepts**

Here are your key concepts for today…

…moving right along.

**Social forces of the 1890s**

Okay. Hook your jumper cables to the clocktower and harness 1.21 jigowatts of to travel back…

…to the past, sorry, we’re just going to the past.

There were some big social forces at work in the second half of the nineteenth century,

Up to and including the 1890s, when movies came to be.

**[ANIMATION**] These were three of the biggest influences on American society during that period.

By industrial capitalism, I mean the mass production of consumer goods in factories or other

Centralized locations—and not, as had previously been the case,

by small local producers like farmers, artisans, etc.

By technology, I mean the telegraph, telephone, phonograph, the railroad, electric light, and photography,

All inventions we’ve touched on in prior lectures.

And by urbanization, I mean the influx of Americans and new immigrants alike to cities,

And away from rural parts of the country.

The Great Migration, or the movement of Black folks from the rural south to cities in the North and West,

Like New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, was a slightly later phenomenon but not unrelated.

These three factors are also connected. Technology like the railroad allowed mass produced goods

To be shipped around the country.

The telegraph and telephone allowed people to stay in touch, which facilitated life at a greater distance

From family and loved ones in rural locations.

**Jacob Riis (sweatshop)**

I’m going to be focusing on examples from New York City,

Because it’s a concrete jungle where dreams are made of

And because everyday life in New York City in the 1880s was well documented

By a photographer named Jacob Riis.

Riis was interested in using photography for social progress, so he took lots of photographs

Of the working poor in New York, which he eventually published in a book

called *How the Other Half Lives*.

Here, you see that the reality of industrialization often demands poor working conditions,

Like these people and at least one child, working in a garment sweatshop.

**Jacob Riis (tenement exterior)**

Here, a photograph of people outside their homes, which for the working poor

Could be very crowded, with little light, poor air, little or no heat, etc.

**Jacob Riis (tenement interior)**

These apartments were called tenements, or small subdivisions of small apartment buildings.

Here, you see a family in their tenement.

**Astor Mansion**

In contrast, here are a few images of the Astor mansion, which stood on Fifth Avenue—

Many blocks north, of where the tenement would have stood.

The ballroom of this house could hold *1200 people*.

I show you this just to demonstrate the stratospheric wealth that existed in New York City

Alongside the influx of people with considerably less means,

Who were arriving from inside the U.S.or abroad, in search of security.

**Brooklyn Atlantics**

So, before they could go to the movies, what was available for people

(both very rich and very *not* rich) to do for fun?

What did entertainment look like in the late nineteenth century?

**[ANIMATION]** Well, there were saloons, bars and taverns which often had some kind of entertainment,

Limited organized sports like the Brooklyn Atlantics baseball team, seen here,

Circuses—perhaps the most famous run by P.T. Barnum—

Theater, by which I mean productions of traditional plays like Shakespeare,

Burlesque and vaudeville, which were more casual, more funny, and more off-color than theater proper,

Lectures (like Eadweard Muybridge gave, which is why he invented the zoopraxiscope)

And domestic activities like music and reading.

Let’s look a little bit more at some of these.

**Jacob Riis (bar)**

This is another Jacob Riis photo of an underground bar—sometimes called a morgue, or a blind pig—

in what’s known today as SoHo.

**Jacob Riis bar (with text box)**

There’s a great book about the history of lower Manhattan called *Low Life* by Luc Sante,

and in that he talks quite a bit about what bars had to offer during the the 19th century.

In that era, bars, saloons and taverns, were tightly entwined with vice.

They were dangerous, they were violent, they were almost exclusively for male patrons,

And they had some wild forms of entertainment.

**[ANIMATION]** One thing you might see at a bar is a sport called rat-baiting.

*Rat-baiting was the premier betting sport of the nineteenth century. Its prestige can be gauged in economic terms, circa 1875: admission to a then illegal prizefight between humans cost fifty cents, to dogfights and cockfights $2, while a fight pitting a dog against rats ran anywhere from $1.50 if the dog faced five rats or fewer, up to $5, in proportion to the number of rats.*

Bars would pay boys to find rats—they made 12 cents per rat,

which wasn’t bad in terms of terrifying jobs you could have as a working child.

**[ANIMATION]** There were also concert saloons.

*Harry Hill’s concert saloon had two doors: a free entrance for women, who were understood to be one sort of prostitute or another if they visited Hill’s, and the other for men, who were charged twenty-five cents. A bar stood at one end, and at the other was a stage. On this stage, farces were sometimes mounted, or Punch and Judy shows in a box set, or, by and by, boxing matches. On most evenings, however, the stage held an orchestra…and patrons were expected either to dance to it with paid female partners or leave.*

So, concert saloons were a place to see live music, live puppet shows, and boxing,

Provided you were willing to buy marked-up fake alcohol for a dancing girl who would

Quite often, put knockout drops in your drink and steal your wallet for her boss.

That was the real business model of many of these saloons.

But at least you got to hear some music.

**Niblo’s Garden**

There was also live theater, sometimes staged at a huge space like Niblo’s Garden,

Which operated from 1829 to 1895.

**Interior, Niblo’s Garden**

Here you can see the grand scale of this venue.

Niblo’s might be a place where you would go to see Shakespeare, or an opera,

Or some other sort of spectacular but relatively fancy production.

**Hurly-Burly extravaganza**

Burlesque and vaudeville were also forms of live theater,

but they were more casual, more affordable, and quite often edgier than theater proper.

If you’ve never really heard the term before, vaudeville is a style of theater that’s like a variety show.

You’d pay to see a bunch of acts—comic skits, singing, dancing, musicians,

magic, acrobats, all kinds of things!

You might have heard the term burlesque before—now, it kind of means, like, old-timey stripping?

But back then, burlesque meant shows that parodied serious shows…

…and while the term eventually encompassed a lot of different kinds of theater,

The idea behind burlesque is that it’s kind of campy, kind of silly, sometimes kind of sexy theater.

**Lydia Thompson**

Cross-dressing and other performances that turned gender topsy-turvy were a staple of burlesque.

One of my favorite burlesque troupes was Lydia Thompson’s British Blondes;

She would often perform in drag, doing men’s roles (called a breeches role)

while her all-female troupe played female roles.

Here, you can see her in two of her masculine costumes.

**The Menken**

But if there’s anyone I want to mention from the burlesque world, it’s Adah Isaacs Menken,

Or, as she was known to everyone in her time, simply “The Menken.”

She was *fascinating!* She was the highest paid actress of her time and died very young,

And while alive she lied about virtually every detail of her past so it’s hard to sort out who she was.

Scholars who have researched her believe she was a mixed-race woman from Louisiana.

She was a prolific writer during her short life, writing all about politics, women’s rights, and Judaism…

…which she simply seemed to admire, but never actually converted to.

As you can see in this picture, she wore her hair provocatively short her whole life

And cultivated an androgynous persona. She was a bohemian and an artist.

The reason why I’m bringing her up is because of the play you see advertised here, called *Mazeppa!*

**Mazeppa!**

This was a play about a soldier who, at the climax of the play, is stripped of his clothing,

Tied to his horse, and sent off to his death.

Lots of productions of *Mazeppa!* Were staged with men in the lead role, and the horse part

Was always what everyone waited for…even though it was kind of a buzzkill.

Like yes, it was a live horse, but it was usually a dummy strapped to the horse and a handler would

Kind of lead it off stage with sugar cubes.

Not exactly death-defying.

**Menken**

Menken, on the other hand, wanted to perform the stunt herself

She was actually lashed to a horse that galloped full-tilt across the stage.

As the horse rocketed from one wing to the other, people were *positive* they saw her nude.

It was scandalous. People were clutching their pearls about it but also showing up in droves.

In actuality Menken was in a nude body suit, but it still caused a sensation.

**List (for women)**

Okay, so, we’ve got saloons, vaudeville, burlesque, all kinds of very old-school entertainments.

But what do your options look like if you’re a middle-class white lady?

**[ANIMATION]** Well, they’re somewhat constrained.

Bars and saloons are explicitly out. It’s not that there weren’t women in those places,

But rather that they were sex workers and any woman on the premises was assumed to be the same.

Before the proliferation of street lights, middle-class white women were highly discouraged

From being out on the streets alone.

So while there were women in the audiences of circuses, burlesque, vaudeville, and lectures

Those women were usually escorted by men.

Middle-class white women were instead encouraged to enjoy domestic entertainments,

Like music, reading, or other domestic arts.

Women wealthy enough to have free time often organized themselves into clubs during the 19th century,

To do activities like “armchair travelling” together.

Armchair travel included looking at pictures, hearing lectures,

And even preparing recipes or wearing clothes from other countries.

**List (working class, immigrants, and people of color)**

So what does entertainment in the 1890s look like for the working class,

immigrants, and/or people of color?

**[ANIMATION]** It looks like a spotty mix of unequal access to available entertainments.

There were both Black men and white men in Jacob Riis’s photograph of the underground bar,

And they likely served very cheap drinks and had free entertainment,

But that didn’t mean anything if you were a Black woman regardless of how much money you had.

And if you were a recent immigrant who’d found employment and had enough money

To hit up a vaudeville show, theater owners might not welcome you with open arms,

And you might not be able to speak the language anyway.

**Spectacle and realism**

If we wanted to sum up 19th century entertainment though,

there are two characteristics that people found uniformly fascinating

**[ANIMATION]** The first is spectacle, or “a visually striking performance or display.”

The circus is a great example of visual spectacle, with huge animals and sparkly costumes

And people flipping and flying all over the place

**[ANIMATION]** The second characteristic is realism, or “representing familiar things

as they actually are.”

Our romance with photography is the greatest example of the 19th century fascination with realism.

Here, you see a what I find to be quite a striking cyanotype print

from the collection of the National Museum of African American History in Washington D.C.

It depicts a porter from the Hotel Palomares, likely from the 1885-1899 period.

Photography let people capture more of “real life” than paintings could, and people in the 19th century

Were fascinated with this reflection of the world.

**Tableau Vivant**

There were a couple of 19th century amusements that combined spectacle and realism to great effect.

The first was the tableau vivant, or, basically, live people posing in a scene.

Like a painting made out of living people, the tableau combined the real, embodied humans

Into a spectacular composition.

Here, you see a tableau depicting “a sage leading two young men to manhood.

One looks toward virtue, the other looks toward vice.”

**Gilmore Girls**

If you’ve ever seen the *Gilmore Girls* episode “The Festival of Living Art,”

You’ve seen a bunch of tableaux vivant.

**Mermaid**

The second amusement are the “oddities” displayed by P.T. Barnum and others,

like this supposed mermaid made out of paper mâché and nightmares.

The idea that you could stand in front of a real “mermaid,” a creature of fantasy,

combined spectacle and realism to potent effect. And while this is a relatively harmless hoax,

I think it’s important to note that Barnum and others also displayed humans in the same way,

including disabled people, people with rare conditions, and sometimes even just non-white people.

**Eastman & Edison**

All of this is to say that in the late 19th century, we have social forces conspiring

To move people into cities, a growing working class in those cities,

Many amusements that were available to too few of those working class folks,

And widespread enjoyment of visual spectacles and photographic realism.

It certainly sounds like movies scratch an awful lot of those itches!

So, by 1896, Edison has realized that the market potential of films is *mass* audiences,

not individuals watching in kinetoscopes.

And the public is in love with the spectacular, moving realism of film.

**Nickelodeon**

Enter the nickelodeon!

Your reading for today, “Let’s Go into a Picture Show” by Kathy Fuller-Seely

Discusses the rise of the nickelodeon in detail.

**Nickelodeon (definition)**

Nickelodeons were the first operations we might call movie theaters.

They were mostly storefront operations that show films all day on a loop.

They showed whatever films they could get, as quickly as they could get them.  
Entry cost just a nickel (obviously), which is where they get their name.

And the era of the nickelodeon is relatively short—just ten years, from 1905 to about 1915.

Nickelodeons spring up all over the country seemingly overnight, like mushrooms,

And just as quickly they’re gone as more elaborate theaters owned by Hollywood studios arise.

By 1909, there are more than 10,000 nickelodeons in the U.S.

And more than 30 million Americans go to the movies each week.

**Why do nickelodeons succeed?**

Why are nickelodeons such a successful business model? There are a whole host of reasons.

They don’t cost much to open.

All you need is a storefront, a screen, and some folding chairs, aside from your projector and your films—

The latter of which can be purchased, but more often rented, from film and equipment exchanges.

We’ll talk a little bit more about those on Monday.

Nickelodeons also succeeded because they advertised.

Long before studios provided advertising for their films, nickelodeons were painting their own banners

And running their own advertisements in newspapers.

On the audience side of things, they were *cheap*! A nickel wasn’t too hard to come by.

Films ran all day and changed often, so the schedule worked for you.

The public regarded nickelodeons differently than live entertainment;

It wasn’t inappropriate for women or children to attend a nickelodeon,

even if it wasn’t so-called “high” art.

For immigrants who didn’t speak English or didn’t speak English well, the silent nature of the films

Meant that even with a language barrier you could probably you could probably glean most of the plot.

Nickelodeons also succeeded because it was dark, and I say that with a wink wink and a nudge nudge.

Nickelodeons provided a perfect location for teens to go and make out

Solitary moments might be few and far between if both of you lived in tiny, cramped

tenement apartments with your parents.

And finally, the theaters worked to draw people in off the street with music

(I believe the sort of porthole looking things above the door at the New Prince are speakers)

And electric lights, which were still new at the turn of the century.

**Advertisement**

Electricity itself was something of a draw.

Here, General Electric advertises that a device called a “mercury arc rectifier” was both

A money-saving purchase *and* a draw for nickelodeon owners.

**Rectifier film**

**[Play video]** A mercury arc rectifier is a device that converted alternating current into direct current

And, as you can see here, it threw off kind of an otherworldy blue-ish glow.

Who wouldn’t want to see what the heck this thing was?

**Stuart Hall**

Like I said, your reading by Dr. Fuller-Seeley will talk more about nickelodeons,

But I wanted to close out our lecture by very briefly touching on the lens we used today to look at history.

You might remember that last week we looked at technology,

And early this week we looked at industry.

Today, our perspective is most closely aligned with cultural studies.

British scholar Stuart Hall (pictured here) is highly associated with this field, which he described not as

**[ANIMATION]** the study of classical music or fine arts, but

*simply, “experience lived, experience interpreted, experience defined.” And it can tell us things about the world, he believed, that more traditional studies of politics or economics alone could not.”*

Cultural studies is the study of everyday life.

We can see how politics, society, culture, economics, etc. work, and how people resist those forces,

By looking at how people live.

Most importantly, cultural studies says that popular culture isn’t produced *by* the entertainment industry.  
It’s produced by *people*, who select what they like, ignore the rest, and make their own meanings

From the products of the entertainment industry.

**Cultural determinism/social construction**

Last week we thought about technological determinism,

or the idea that technology causes changes in society.

There’s an inverse theory called cultural determinism,

Which says that culture is the central causal element in processes of social change.

Underneath that is the idea of the social construction of technology, or the belief that

“technology matters, but social forces shape the ways in which technologies develop and are used.”

Okay, sure, but in practicality, what does that look like?

**Radio (social construction)**

Let’s take this old timey white family gathered around the radio.

**[ANIMATION]** The social construction of technology says that this radio is in this living room,

And this family is gathered around it

Because of the economy, which allowed them to have enough money to buy this radio

Government regulation, which allowed for civilian broadcasts of entertainment

Customer preferences, which wanted at-home entertainment

And other cultural norms.

Cultural conditions allowed the radio to flourish instead of other technologies.

**Radio (technological determinism)**

If we were to look at this same scene through the lens of technological determinism,

**[ANIMATION]** we might say that *because* the radio is here, social and cultural changes happen.

The radio causes the family to listen together;

It changes how we set up our homes;

It changes our sense of being connected to other places in the world;

It changes our perceptions of sound;

It changes gender dynamics (we’ll talk more about this in a few weeks);

And it changes our consumption practices, as we’re constantly being advertised to.

Neither viewpoint is right, per se. And very few scholars are all one thing and not the other.

But just as I wanted us to learn this week about the history of early cinema,

I wanted us to be able to practice a few different ways of telling that story.

Next week, we’ll be moving on to transitional cinema, and one of the most infamous films of all time.