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Samantha Barbas

University at Buffalo School of Law

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The political spectator

Censorship, protest and the moviegoing experience, 1912–1922

Samantha Barbas

In the past three decades, film scholars and historians have focused increasing attention on the moviegoing experience. Realising that the cinema as a social institution cannot be understood without an analysis of its impact on audiences, scholars have investigated both audiences’ relationship to cinematic content (theorising the deep psychological roots of spectatorial pleasure, for example), as well as the changing demographics and politics of moviegoing. As these scholars have illustrated, moviegoers were rarely passive observers; instead, they continuously appropriated aspects of the cinema for their own purposes.

Rather than accept the message of many movies at face value, for example, viewers often read their own meanings, subversive or otherwise, into their favourite films. Audiences transformed screen gods and goddesses into their own personal models for success; they made movies into dinner conversation, an excuse for camaraderie and socialising (in the form of movie star fan clubs), and a powerful outlet for fantasies. And, repeatedly, they protested. When movies or movie stars failed to live up to expectations, audiences rebelled, inflicting sometimes irreparable damage to movie theatres – and to the careers of targeted actors or directors.¹

The history of public protest against movies is punctuated by notorious milestone cases – the outrage over The Birth of a Nation in 1915, mass demonstrations against The Miracle (1949), widespread feminist protest of pornographic films in the 1970s and 1980s, and the outcry against The Last Temptation of Christ (1988) and Basic Instinct (1992), to name a few. Although all of these protests appear similar on the surface – a demonstration of grievances against a particular filmmaker or genre of film – they stem from fundamentally different attitudes towards moviegoing. As I argue in this essay, between 1912 and the early 1920s, protesting a film or an actor was considered an appropriate act, consistent with the moviegoer’s role as an active participant in the politics of motion pictures. In contrast, today, participating in a protest against a film is exceptional, if not unusual, marking the protester as decidedly more ‘political’ than the average filmgoer.²

During the 1910s, the movie theatre was a highly political site. Debates over federal, state and local censorship of motion pictures often made their way to movie theatres, and, as a result, moviegoers frequently found themselves barraged with anti-censorship slides, pamphlets and petitions. In these anti-censorship campaigns, theatre owners and film industry leaders urged audiences to take action against censorship – and for moviegoers in this period, the idea was not unusual. Because movie theatres were, for the most part, small, independently-run community institutions, many early audiences cultivated a close and participatory relationship with their local theatre managers – some-

Samantha Barbas is a graduate student at the University of California at Berkeley and is currently researching American movie fandom, 1910–1950. Correspondence to: 1798 Walnut Street #1, Berkeley, CA 94709, USA.
times constructive, sometimes antagonistic. Audiences notified theatre owners of their likes and dislikes, made requests, and levelled complaints against poor theatre conditions. The anticensorship campaigns between 1912 and 1922 only intensified the involved, active quality of moviegoing. During this period, audiences were encouraged not to see themselves as passive consumers of commercial entertainment, but instead to perceive themselves — to a far greater degree than in any other period in American film history — as participating, decision-making members of a public organisation known as American cinema.

The culmination of this style of active involvement in movie-related issues can be seen in the widespread public outcry over the Fatty Arbuckle scandal in 1921. Educated in political activism by the censorship wars of the previous decade, audiences across the country conducted a dramatic show of protest against Arbuckle, defacing theatre lobby posters, hissing at Arbuckle's movies and demanding that his films be banned. Unlike many contemporary movie protests, which are conducted outside of theatres and often directed towards fellow moviegoers (don't see this film!), the Arbuckle protests took place inside theatres and were directed squarely at theatre owners (remove all images of Arbuckle from this theatre at once!). However, once Hollywood studios began a process of vertical integration, purchasing hundreds of theatres in the early 1920s, the concept of directing protests towards theatre managers — and indeed, the idea of a politicised moviegoer whose voice carried weight at the local theatre — began to disappear. Going to the movie theatre would soon be seen as an escape from the world of conflict and politics, rather than an entry into a contested political terrain.

As film scholar Tom Gunning has noted, each historical period constructs its spectator in a new way. Different genres and narrative styles create different relationships between spectator and cinema; the quality and nature of the moviegoing experience depends greatly on the kinds of films that are being shown in any given era. In addition, I argue, the moviegoing experience is conditioned by the nature of the relationship between audiences, theatre owners, and the movie industry itself — what it means to be a film spectator in a particular historical period depends on the attitudes that audiences hold about their own involvement in the cultural, political and economic aspects of American cinema. Between 1910 and 1922, many audiences believed that, through their own initiative and action, they could directly influence the content and presentation of motion pictures. To be a moviegoer in this period was to be a responsible customer of a local business, a defender of community standards, an activist, and in the worst case, an unruly rioter or violent vigilante. How this political spectator was constructed — and, ironically, how the movie industry played a major role in fostering this kind of participatory spectatorship — is the subject of what follows.

According to Gunning, the 'cinema of attractions' — early films that actively solicited the attention of the spectator by depicting actors winking, smiling, pointing, or even shooting at the camera/audience — began to give way to a more conventional, narrative-based cinema around 1906. Yet even if audiences were no longer directly addressed by the films they watched, they were still addressed by theatre owners, who flashed slides on screen before and during intermissions, exalting the merits of their theatre and exhorting moviegoers to behave properly. A slide reading 'Ladies and children are cordially invited to this theatre. No offensive pictures are ever shown here' may have appeared on screen, for example, or 'Will the women with hats please remove them so that others may see'. Other slides urged viewers to refrain from eating, talking and rowdy behaviour: 'Please do not stamp — the floor may cave in.' In a period in which filmmakers and exhibitors struggled to rescue the motion picture from its reputation as an uncouth, working-class form of leisure, advertising a well-behaved audience and respectable program of films became a tactic to attract middle-class patrons — and to fend off reformers who hoped to censor motion pictures or ban them altogether. Theatre owners understood that their financial success, and the success of the movie theatre as an institution, depended on their ability to attract, reassure, and control their audiences.

Exhibitors had perhaps an even more compelling reason to please their patrons. In most communities prior to the 1920s, movie theatres were
locally-owned establishments, and the identity of
the exhibitor was often well-known among the com-
munity. Moviegoers often took advantage of their
familiarity with the theatre owner to request particu-
lar films or modified viewing conditions. ‘Oh man-
ger, dear manager, I pray you lend an ear, I wish
to spill a thought or two before I go from here’, a
1920 Photoplay article mocked. ‘Now while I’m in
the playhouse I thoughtfully suggest, your million
dollar organ may have a little rest … I’m not a noisy
person but I’ll give a rousing cheer if you’ll page this
tall guy and park him in the rear.’

As some unfortunate exhibitors learned, failure
to meet the demands of the audience led to declining
box office returns and a scarred reputation in the
community. Exhibitors could not hide from the pub-
clic; instead, they were held fully accountable by
their audience for the quality of the moviegoing
experience.

In the hopes of avoiding criticism, theatre
owners employed a number of different tactics, all
of which provided them greater contact and inter-
action with their patrons. Some exhibitors screened
potentially objectionable films with small preview
audiences: in 1917, for example, theatre owner
Amadeo Nicoletti of West Hoboken, New Jersey,
invited audiences to a free morning show if they
would express their opinions on the film. A woman
tried to turn the audience against the film with loudly
screamed protests, but by the end of the movie, she
remained the sole objector. Other exhibitors sol-
licited suggestions from moviegoers. Suggestions,
explained Mrs A.C.M. Sturgis of the Lafayette
Theater in Washington, D.C. were ‘the best way to
create fellowship between manager and patrons
and an effective manner of studying your attend-
ance’. Sometimes exhibitors even sponsored
special showings of films, with the proceeds used
to benefit a school or community organisation. And
on some occasions, exhibitors sped up films, slowed
them down, or showed them backwards, a sure way
to win the laughter, applause and even loyalty of
an audience. As the poet Vachel Lindsay noted in
1915, ‘The moving picture man is a local social
force … He will make himself the centre of more
social ideals than the bartender ever entertained.
And he is beginning to have as intimate a relation
to his public as the bartender.’

In short, in the early years of moviegoing, the
relationship between exhibitor and audience was
one of shared power and responsibility. Theatre
owners realised that their livelihood and reputation
depended on pleasing an opinionated audience, and
moviegoers knew that their privilege to see
what they wanted, when and how they wanted,
rested on their ability to communicate, negotiate and compromise with their local exhibitors. Moviegoers and exhibitors interacted on a regular basis. So, too, did moviegoers interact with each other.

Early audiences, particularly in urban nickelodeons, held conversations, ate meals and even made love in the darkened theatre. Before film showings, audiences were invited to sing popular ballads: during the intermission at New York's Grand Theater, for example, one observer noted, 'the orchestra plays "Harrigan" and the gallery sings the chorus. There is much neighbourly stepping to and fro, a hum of conversation, and no little munching of caramels.' Moviegoers during this era yelled and joked with each other, carried on conversations with the popcorn vendors that marched up and down the aisles, and hooted while exhibitors scrambled to repair the fragile film that constantly broke. Silent film audiences also interacted, often quite vocally, with the images they saw on screen. As one member of Chicago's Italian community observed, 'When the good guys were chasing the bad guys, in Italian they'd say 'getem' and 'catch-em' out loud in the theatre.' Movie theatres provided a venue in which local communities could regularly meet, converse and share a common cultural experience.8

It was from this participatory style of moviegoing, I argue, that the political spectator emerged during the 1910s. Accustomed to voicing criticisms of unpleasant viewing conditions or unsatisfactory films and to interacting with other moviegoers, audiences perceived their experience in the movie theatre as anything but passive. This fact was not wasted on the movie industry. Between 1912 and 1922, when reformers in several states began lobbying for government censorship of films, film industry officials hoped to capitalise on the participatory nature of moviegoing by launching an anti-censorship campaign based on audience involvement. Industry leaders, working through exhibitors, brought anti-censorship slides, films, placards and petitions inside movie theatres, and, as a result, audiences gained a deeper awareness of the highly contested, political nature of the motion picture. From this fusion of a newfound political consciousness with a tradition of outspoken involvement, the political spectator was born.

From the earliest days of motion pictures, audi-.
3. Keep the pictures clean and keep them out of politics. We do not believe the American people want censorship.

4. We protest against the censorship of moving pictures. Americans are the best judges of their own amusements.

5. Censorship is un-American and results in higher taxes.

6. Censorship places the people’s amusement at the mercy of cranks and politicians. Use your influence against it!

7. The sound common sense of the American public is the only necessary censorship.

8. Censorship is an unnecessary burden on taxpayers. Vote against it!

9. The management of this theatre desires the cooperation of its patrons in providing good clean entertainment. We want no ‘legalised’ censorship of motion pictures.¹⁰

Like the traditional ‘etiquette’ slides, which exhorted moviegoers to action – to behave quietly, refrain from eating, and report disrupters – NAMPI’s slides urged political action: to speak out, vote, and support the local theatre owner in the fight against censorship. Industry leaders could have never made this kind of request had they not been aware of the active, participatory style of movie-going that existed at the time. Later, when NAMPI
instructed audiences to demand that their local exhibitors show only ‘clean’ movies, in order to ward off censorship activists’ charge of sex and violence in films, it simply extended the existing dynamic of communication and interaction between patron and exhibitor to serve its own anticensorship purposes. Photoplay magazine, an obvious supporter of the industry’s fight against censorship, similarly urged moviegoers to form ‘Better Photoplay Leagues’, local organisations that would advise exhibitors on which ‘clean’ films to show and which questionable films to ban. ‘Your exhibitor will listen attentively’, Photoplay explained. ‘If he does not, hit him in the box office. He will hear you then.’

NAMPI placed great faith in its ‘public’ anticensorship campaign. ‘One of the most effective ways (to combat censorship), both for the present and the future, is to educate public sentiment’, Moving Picture World announced in 1917. ‘Every exhibitor should use slides on his screen steadily and persistently for months and perhaps years to come.’ Yet even the most ardent supporters of this strategy realised that the mere suggestion that audiences engage in anti-censorship activity was insufficient. A more direct method of public mobilisation was necessary. Thus, in 1917, when New York State debated a Blue Law that would close all theatres on Sunday, NAMPI sent out to over 1500 exhibitors petitions to hand to audience members with their tickets or to place on tables in theatre lobbies. In addition to the petitions, exhibitors received a slide reading, ‘Do you want this theatre closed on Sunday? It provides you decent, clean amusement at a price within the reach of every pocketbook. Signify your desire by signing the petition.’

In spite of NAMPI’s vigorous efforts, little progress was made against the pro-censorship reformers. By 1920, reform organisations were vigorously pushing for legal censorship; the Temperance and Moral Welfare Board of the Presbyterian Church and the Children’s National Motion Picture League had created official ‘white lists’ of films that were distributed to the public, and several groups were fighting for a federal bill that would prohibit the interstate shipment of films that depicted the acts of ‘ex-convicts, desperadoes, bandits, train robbers or outlaws’. Meanwhile, the number of states debating censorship legislation continued to climb. By February 1921, thirty-six states had bills under consideration.

The most threatening of these, for NAMPI, was a proposed bill in New York State for the creation of a censorship commission, a panel that would consist of three censors appointed for five year terms. For industry leaders, this was serious: the success of censorship in a large and influential state like New York would incite other states, and perhaps even the federal government, to enact their own censorship laws. Something had to be done quickly. Soon after the New York bill was announced, in February 1921, NAMPI head William Brady immediately met with Jesse Lasky and Cecil B. DeMille to discuss plans for a public ‘war’. By the end of the meeting, Brady and the Hollywood producers agreed to collaborate on a campaign to prove to the American public that moviegoers, not government censors, could best ensure that moral films were shown in the nation’s theatres. ‘The public itself is the only true censor’, Lasky explained. ‘Public taste is continually being educated to demand higher and better things, and the producers are glad to respond. In the last three or four years, a very definite advance has been made, proving that this kind of censorship – the only genuine kind – operates strongly for good.’

The public was addressed, and in many cases, actively involved not only in the New York battle, but everywhere censorship was under debate. In 1921, both in NAMPI-influenced campaigns and those enacted by local exhibitors, the idea of placing the responsibility for movie standards in the hands of the public became the centrepiece of the anti-censorship movement. In Nebraska, exhibitors collected over 6500 signatures against state censorship, and in North Carolina, theatre owner William C. McIntire personally invited hundreds of clergymen, teachers and parents to a showing of the movie Dinty, in an attempt to convince them of the ‘decency’ of the average film. Meanwhile, Hollywood celebrities gave hundreds of anti-censorship speeches to audiences throughout the nation; in early March 1921, actor George Beban appeared personally at theatres in Chicago and urged patrons to demand that their local exhibitors show only unobjectionable films. During the same week, visiting movie stars in San Francisco, with the help of anti-censorship activists, turned a local
movie ball into a rally in which the public was urged to contribute to a fund to fight censorship in California.16

Yet by April 1921, in spite of NAMPI's public war, the New York bill had passed both the State Senate and Assembly. Only New York Governor Miller's signature was now required to enact government censorship into law, and a loss for NAMPI seemed imminent. Yet Brady was determined to continue the fight, with the help of his treasured 'public'. Sidney Cohen, President of the Motion Picture Theater Owners of New York State, promptly announced the beginning of a statewide campaign to enlist theatregoers against censorship, and soon moviegoers were barraged with anticensorship petitions, pamphlets and posters in their local theatres. Hollywood executive Benjamin Hampton published an article in Pictorial Review urging women to petition local theatres for 'clean pictures': the responsibility for good movies should rest 'on you, Madam, the respectable God-fearing mother of a family, and on you, Aunt Martha'. Even the highly-criticised National Board of Review published and distributed a pamphlet called 'State Censorship of Motion Pictures': 'There is no popular demand for state censorship. Awakened public opinion is the only effective guaranty of safety and decency.' Perhaps NAMPI's most dramatic weapon, though, was none other than an actual film itself.17

During the first week of April, 1921, moviegoers in New York State received an unexpected bonus: in addition to the nightly feature, they learned that they would be shown a short film featuring Douglas Fairbanks. The title? As viewers quickly discovered, 'The Nonsense of Censorship'. The title? As viewers quickly discovered, 'The Nonsense of Censorship'. As the lights dimmed, an image of writer Rupert Hughes, seated behind a desk and reading a booklet entitled 'Rules of the Censor', appeared on the screen. Hughes then put down the book and wrote, 'The moving picture is about 15 years old. Sin is somewhat older than that, yet the censors would have us believe that it was not Satan, but Thomas Edison who invented the fall of man.'

The camera then shifted to writer Samuel Merwin, whose statement was flashed: 'This censorship, if applied to literature, would destroy Shakespeare, Dickens and the Bible itself. It puts an intolerable limitation on workers in the new art of the screen'. After testimony from other writers, Douglas Fairbanks appeared on screen. As Variety reported, 'Entering from the opposite side strolls a tough-looking individual who bumps into Fairbanks with teeth-rattling force, but the athletic Doug makes no effort to retaliate. The tough then proceeds to shove Doug all over the lot and finally Fairbanks musters a sickly grin, swallows hard, and says: 'Say, I'd like to mop up the floor with this bird, but the censors won't let me.'18

Although thousands of New York moviegoers watched 'The Nonsense of Censorship' in April 1921, neither the film nor NAMPI's other anticensorship propaganda altered the outcome of the censorship bill. On 13 May, Governor Miller signed the bill, and in August the New York State board of censors began its work, cutting boxing scenes, photos of bathing girls and other objectionable matter at a rapid pace. Yet even though NAMPI's 'public' campaign, both in New York and other states, generally failed to produce the kind of dramatic success that industry leaders had envisioned, NAMPI's persistent introduction of anticensorship literature, petitions and films into local movie theatres undoubtedly awakened audiences to the bitter, contested politics of the motion picture. As moviegoers were forced to acknowledge, motion pictures were not merely entertainment, but a social, moral and political issue of grave concern.

Moreover, NAMPI's 'public' campaign, which consisted of petitions and pamphlets handed out in theatre lobbies, as well as anti-censorship lecturers, slides and films, helped politicise the inside of the movie theatre. Although by 1915, as illustrated in the protests over The Birth of a Nation, both the interior and exterior of theatres were considered legitimate sites of protest (many angered patrons picketed in front of theatres, while one group of protesters in Boston threw rotten eggs at the screen), NAMPI's anti-censorship campaigns between 1917 and 1921, in addition to its patriotic activity during World War I – presenting newsreels, slides and patriotic speakers to audiences, and providing exhibitors with American flags and photos of President Wilson for display in lobbies – strengthened the notion that the inside of movie theatres were political sites. NAMPI urged the public to see theatres as versatile public spaces where matters of war and politics mingled easily with relaxed sociali-
sation, local gossip and chitchat about the most popular stars.¹⁹

Yet how political were these ‘political spectators’? Across the nation, audiences were urged to take part in the fight against censorship — but how many actually spoke to their exhibitors about ‘clean’ films or wrote letters to their congressmen? For the most part, we lack data on how many moviegoers became politically active on the censorship issue. We do know that thousands of moviegoers signed anti-censorship petitions at local theaters. Perhaps more important, we know that hundreds of thousands of American moviegoers were exposed to the issue of motion picture censorship, both through NAMPI’s campaign and through popular newspapers and magazines. Between 1912 and 1921, newspapers throughout the country offered regular editorials on the subject, typically adopting an anti-censorship stance: as The San Francisco Chronicle noted in 1921, “Let the people judge” seems to be the answer to the question as to whether there is the need for the establishment of censorship over motion pictures.’ Similarly, in 1920, the popular fan magazine Photoplay ran a series of articles ridiculing both censorship — and the would-be censors themselves. ‘The censor’, explained Photoplay, ‘lives in a world made not by God but by his own imagination. God made sunlight in which men and women should know joy and laughter; the censor fears happiness and shrouds his world in gloom. God’s world is a world of love and life, and the censor’s world is a world of suspicion and fear and death.’ Given such strong and persistent propaganda, it would have been difficult by the early
1920s to ignore the issue of censorship or to remain without an opinion on the subject.20

Perhaps the best evidence of the politicisation of moviegoers in this period, however, can be seen in two simultaneous events that occurred in 1921–1922: the widespread national protest over actor Fatty Arbuckle’s alleged rape and murder of a young actress, and a referendum on movie censorship held in Massachusetts. In both of these cases, audiences illustrated their willingness to speak out, protest and vote on movie-related issues — and in the rowdy and violent outcry over the Fatty Arbuckle case, to do so without prompting by the film industry. Between September 1921 and November 1922, the political spectator was at the centre of a nationwide controversy over the ethics of the cinema. After this turbulent year, though, the potential opportunities for such outspoken political involvement began to decline, as did the cultural acceptability of this kind of participatory spectatorship. When tearing down Fatty Arbuckle posters in theatre lobbies or voting ‘no’ against censorship, average moviegoers were transformed into political spectators.

In the wake of NAMPI’s defeat in the battle over censorship in New York, Moving Picture World announced on 3 September 1921 that a new industry-based organisation called ‘The Freedom for the Screen Committee’ would fight for the repeal of the New York censorship law. ‘The warfare will be continuous and will extend throughout the nation with New York as the first battleground. Slides, cartoon, news pictures, publicity posters and speakers will be some of the weapons’, Moving Picture World explained. But NAMPI’s proposed war never happened. Only a week after announcing the Freedom for the Screen Committee, the industry found itself in another war, one that made the conflict in New York seem like a minor skirmish.

The public response was immediate. On 11 September, Hollywood theatre owner Sid Grauman withdrew Gasoline Gus without comment, and the following day, theatres in Chicago, Detroit, Omaha, Toledo, Oklahoma City, Memphis and several other major cities had all enacted bans on Arbuckle. In Medford, Massachusetts, the mayor ordered all Arbuckle films banned from the city. On 14 September, audiences at a Manhattan movie theatre ‘briskly applauded’ when they learned that the evening’s film, Fatty and Mabel Adrift, would be replaced with a different feature.21

Many of these bans on Arbuckle resulted from vocal and even violent protest. On 13 September, The New York Times reported that films and slides depicting Arbuckle were met with ‘hisses and hooting that would not still until the offending slides had been withdrawn. Each attempt to show a film in which Arbuckle appeared resulted in its forced withdrawal.’ Outraged patrons vented their anger on posters and photographs of Arbuckle in theatre lobbies: there were ‘several instances described where every bit of advertising bearing Arbuckle’s name or photograph was torn down.’ As a result, the six-hundred member New York City Exhibitor’s Chamber of Commerce resolved that it would suspend all Arbuckle films until final charges were determined. In Thermopolis, Wyoming, a mob of about 150 men and boys entered the Maverick Theater, where an Arbuckle film was being shown. They shot up the screen and seized the film, which they took into the street and burned.22

These and other similar protests around the country reveal the deep faith that audiences held in their own political power as moviegoers. Many angered audience members sincerely believed that by defacing posters, hissing and hooting, and speaking out against Arbuckle, they could eradicate the offending comedian’s image from the screen. And in many cases, they were right. By mid-September 1921, in response to the widespread public outrage, the Motion Picture Theater Owners of America recalled all films starring Ar-
buckle or Virginia Rappe. Soon afterward, Paramount Studios suspended Arbuckle’s contract, and studio head Adolph Zukor ordered all plans for future Arbuckle films scrapped and rewritten for other actors. Movietoons in 1921, repeatedly reminded by NAMPI’s anti-censorship campaign of their capacity to affect legal and social change, had internalised their roles as political spectators. Only this time they fought against the film industry, urging Hollywood to hasten the demise of one of its most popular and profitable celebrities.

Moreover, both the pro and anti-censorship campaigns had taught audiences that the motion picture was a form of entertainment with tremendous impact on social and cultural life. While pro-censorship reformers had argued that movies corrupted the nation, anti-censorship activists claimed that the cinema had a positive effect. As the Reverend Percy Stickney Grant argued in Photoplay in 1920, ‘If Christ went to the movies, he would approve. Could the Divine Master who lightens our heavy burdens and refreshes our weary minds give any but entire approval to an agency like moving pictures that makes for the happiness of His people?’ During the 1910s and early 1920s, Americans were repeatedly reminded that attacking—or supporting—motion pictures was an ethical duty, a commitment to protecting the nation’s morals. Thus, when Fatty Arbuckle was accused of committing a morally offensive crime, moviegoers, both pro and anti-censorship, perceived a deep threat to the public good. Anti-Arbuckle activism emerged from the realisation, fostered during the censorship wars, that movies (and movie stars) held the power to shape and define American culture—and that the only way to control or direct their overwhelming influence was to take political action.

Industry leaders were horrified by the mass public outcry against Arbuckle. In October 1921, a large white square appeared in the pages of Moving Picture World. Above the square read a small caption: ‘Enclosed in the following space is our idea of what should be said by everybody in the moving picture business about the Arbuckle case from now forth until the entire matter is settled.’

Yet even as industry leaders attempted damage control—avoiding discussion of Arbuckle and in December 1921, hiring Will Hays to ‘clean up’ Hollywood’s public image—they worked swiftly to turn the political energies unleashed in the Arbuckle scandal towards their own purposes. In early 1922, as the Arbuckle case went to trial, new movie ‘czar’ Hays (head of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, the organisation that replaced NAMPI) turned his attention to winning public support for a Massachusetts referendum on censorship to be held that November.

Drawing on the repertoire of tactics honed during the industry’s previous anti-censorship campaigns, Hays developed a strategy of public mobilisation more extensive than any conducted under NAMPI. In addition to convincing newspapers throughout the state to publish editorials against censorship, Hays hired public speakers to lecture inside of movie theatres, in front of women’s clubs and to street crowds. Hays also created ‘citizens committees’, local groups which urged their friends and neighbours to vote against the bill. Hays’ MPPDA headquarters provided volunteer ‘fieldmen’ who coordinated the work of the citizens’ committees with the work of theatre owners and employees. The fieldmen were to follow a strict program:

1. Arrange to have wives of employees of theatres and their friends call up neighbours and friends urging a vote ‘no’.
2. In some instances, theatre owners could get telephone girls to mention it to their friends on the line.

The election day strategy was even more elaborate:

1. Have one or more persons at each voting place urging voters to vote ‘no’.
2. Cards will be furnished, for workers to pass at points 150 feet from polls.
3. Let each worker know or learn the estimated total of his or her precinct, then proceed to get 51 per cent or more to vote ‘no’. Urge each precinct worker to make his quota and go over the top in his sector.
4. Have our workers get on friendly terms with workers for candidates and get their help. At least keep them from combining against our referendum.
5. Get automobiles carrying voters to carry our placards.25

On election day in November 1922, after nearly eight months of the Hays campaign, votes told the story: 208,252 in favour of censorship and 563,173 against. According to some sources, the MPPDA spent well over $150,000 to finance its victory in Massachusetts, and distributors and exhibitors throughout the state may have used a similar amount. After nearly a decade of campaigning against censorship, the motion picture industry scored its first triumph based on the voices and votes of the American public.26

The end of 1922 marks a watershed in the history of the political spectator. According to Garth Jowett, the defeat of the Massachusetts bill marked a turning point in censorship history, as no major censorship laws were enacted after 1922. Moreover, between 1922 and 1933, Hays worked unceasingly to enact industry self-regulation, a tactic that may have contributed to the decline of state and local attempts at censorship legislation. Although the MPPDA continued to battle pro-censorship reform groups into the 1930s, the majority of these debates centred on federal censorship. During this period, Hays dealt with his opposition largely by creating alliances with various reform groups and overseeing a multifaceted public relations campaign designed to present movies in the best possible light. The days of the ‘public’ campaign, aimed at involving moviegoers in the fight against censorship, were over. And with the gradual withdrawal of the censorship issue from movie theatres, audiences were presented with fewer reminders of how controversial motion pictures could be.

Furthermore, by the end of 1922, public response to the Arbuckle case had all but nearly died out, except for one last protest. When Hays, in December 1922, removed a ban on Arbuckle’s films that he had enacted that April (in spite of Arbuckle’s acquittal in March), angry audiences sent letters to Hays urging that the ban be reinstated. And, once again, moviegoers protested in front of and inside theatres. At the Park Music Hall in New York City, for example, several people complained to owner William Minsky about Arbuckle’s films and lobby pictures, in which Arbuckle was seen embracing co-star Mabel Normand. Members of the Ku Klux Klan also threatened to ‘set a match’ to Arbuckle’s films if they were not removed from the theatre. After this last wave of protest, though, the Arbuckle case began to recede from public view, and by mid-1923 had disappeared.27

There were other reasons, however, for the decline of the political spectator. Between 1919 and 1921, Paramount Studios acquired nearly six hundred theatres around the country in a process of vertical integration that continued into the 1920s. Other studios soon followed suit. The local theatre owner who responded to audience complaints was quickly replaced by the chain theatre exhibitor, whose film program was determined by its affiliated studio, and by the mid-1920s, the relationship between theatre owner and spectator had become increasingly impersonal.

In addition, the arrival of sound in the late 1920s, like the creation of ‘movie palaces’ that catered to middle-class audiences, supported a more formal, less interactive style of moviegoing. In place of a noisy audience that carried on conversations, ate and yelled at the images on screen, emerged a relatively quiet audience intently focused on absorbing the spoken dialogue. As Robert Sklar has written, ‘The talking audience for silent pictures became a silent audience for talking pictures’.28 In short, as audiences began to see exhibitors as less responsive to community needs than to studio demands, and as moviegoing became a less participatory experience, movie spectatorship was gradually depoliticised. The interior of movie theatres came to be seen less as a site for political protest and debate and more as a retreat from the politics of the ‘outside’ world.

For a brief period of time, moviegoing was highly politicised. Encouraged by the local, independent nature of early exhibition to communicate regularly with theatre owners, and later urged by the film industry to take action against government censorship, audiences between 1912 and the mid-1920s saw moviegoing as a participatory experience. Although not all moviegoers in this period shared the same outlook on motion picture politics – some audience members were undoubtedly less interested in censorship or scandal than others – as a whole, American audiences most likely perceived the movie theatre, particularly the inside of the
theatre, as a site of multiple possibilities: a place for gossip, entertainment and education; for political protest, argumentation, even violent riots. Anyone who has attended modern-day chain theatres, with their relatively depoliticised atmosphere, will understand how different a world moviegoers occupied in the first two decades of this century. Committed modern protesters may picket the outside of theatres, write letters to the owners of theatre chains or take out ads in newspapers, but the extreme behaviour of the 1910s and 1920s—throwing eggs at movie screens, ripping down posters in theatre lobbies and stealing films—are not in the repertoire of even the most adamant activist. The political spectator began to disappear when controversy was seen as anathema to the moviegoing experience.##

Notes


5. ‘Complaints and Suggestions’, *Photoplay* (June 1920), 68.

6. During World War I, for example, a theatre owner who refused to allow flags or patriotic songs in his theatre was forced by the local sheriff to kiss the flag in front of a wildly applauding audience. See Leslie Midkiff Debauche, *Reel Patriotism: The Movies and World War One* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), Chapter three.


12. ‘Anti-Censorship Slides’, *Moving Picture World*.


19. As Lawrence Levine has suggested, during the nineteenth century, theatregoers may have similarly viewed the inside of theatres as political space: audiences angered at bad performances, or at the personality or background of an actor (as in the famous Astor Place Riot of 1849), often threw eggs and rotten fruit at the stage and sometimes destroyed theatre property. See Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), Chapter one; also David Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), Chapter three. Public attitudes towards the interior space of movie theatres may be a carryover from this involved and participatory style of theatregoing. For *The Birth of a Nation* protest, see ‘Egg Negro Scenes in Liberty Film Play’, *The New York Times* (15 April 1915): 1; ‘Negroes Mob Photo Play’, *The New York Times* (18 April 1915): 15.


28. Sklar, 153.