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“Public Forum of the Screen”: Modernity, Mobility, and Debate at the Newsreel Cinema

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In 1936, the *New Yorker* featured a cartoon by renowned illustrator Peter Arno depicting two well-heeled couples calling to their friends through the open window of a New York townhouse. The caption read: “Come along. We’re going to the Trans-Lux to hiss Roosevelt.”¹ The Trans-Lux was one of approximately thirty theaters in the United States exclusively dedicated to showing newsreels and other short films in the 1930s and 1940s.² These theaters were relatively small—usually fewer than 500 seats and sometimes as few as 100—and they offered a continuous program that allowed patrons to enter at any time. Typical programs ran for an hour or 90 minutes and included a selection of the “best of” the week’s newsreels, as well as travelogues, comedy shorts, and cartoons. Introduced as a way of capitalizing on the burgeoning popularity of news films, these cinemas often featured architecture and interior design that emphasized the global reach of the news camera as well as the audience’s shared modernity and common American identity. But as Arno’s cartoon suggests, audiences regularly ruptured any apparent consensus: they hissed, booed, cheered, and applauded the newsreel. Despite—or perhaps because of—its emphasis on modernity and mobility, the newsreel cinema created a forum where audiences could engage with both the news and one another. Theaters such as the Trans-Lux were shared spaces in which audiences did not simply consume the news as an image on screen, but instead reveled in the collective experience of seeing and debating the news in public.

By the early 1930s, the Hollywood studio system had transformed the newsreel business and the experience of newsreel spectatorship. Once a patchwork of short-lived producers, independent companies, and local reels, by 1931 most cinemas in the United States screened newsreels from one of Pathé, Fox, Paramount, Universal, or MGM/Hearst.³ Although punctuated by dramatic and sensational news stories, the studio newsreel system’s efficiency was premised on centralization and standardization—a Fordist model of production that turned to human-interest stories, sports, and public ceremonies such as parades, to provide predictable and visually compelling content. This mode of production was reflected in the format of the newsreel itself. Unrelated items followed one another without narrative or logical connection, organized instead as a continuous procession of the news, stressing predictability and regularity.⁴ It is no coincidence that both Hollywood studios and the trade

press referred to the newsreel as a news parade.⁵ The processional mode of the news parade addressed its spectator as part of a virtual crowd watching as the world passed by on the screen. Moreover, the newsreel's frequent portrayal of real crowds attending parades, rallies, and sporting events, linked the spectator in the theater to the masses represented in the films. By encouraging audiences to identify with these onscreen crowds, the newsreel offered them a sense of shared identity as well as a privileged vantage point from which to watch the world. The crowd, once identified with the visual spectacles of the street, now became a global and technologically enhanced spectator position mediated through the screen.⁶ The newsreel brought exotic images from distant places to the local theater. Close-ups and multiple camera angles allowed audiences to get closer and to see more of the news than ever before, while still holding it at a safe distance. In doing so, the newsreel elevated the pleasure and privilege of watching the news over the news itself.

The newsreel cinemas of the 1930s offer unique insight into how audiences took up the privileges of looking on offer in the news parade. Much of the scholarship on the newsreel in the United States and elsewhere has emphasized its consensus-building role and even its uses in propaganda before and during World War II.⁷ No doubt the news parade and its focus on the crowd helped build a shared sense of identity for spectators, but vocal newsreel audiences show that viewers refused to sit and watch passively. Like the newsreels themselves, news theaters framed the viewing experience within discourses of technology, transportation, and globalized vision, using architecture and design to highlight the audience's power to see the world in new ways. Moreover, while unruly audiences alarmed the studios and others, the newsreel cinemas embraced audience debate and controversy as part of the show. For these cinemas and their audiences, the theatrical space was not just a place to see the newsreel but served as a public forum where viewers could engage with the world and each other. The well-to-do New Yorkers of Arno's cartoon didn't go to the Trans-Lux to see Roosevelt, they went to hiss him.

Primarily located in the busy downtown areas of major cities, usually close to entertainment, shopping, and transit hubs, newsreel theaters were the product of modern urban life as well as symbols of modernity itself. Unlike the elaborate grandeur of movie palaces, Trans-Lux theaters offered an efficient movie-going experience, designed for the pace of the modern city and to be easily accommodated between appointments. Minimal staff, small theaters, and the continuous newsreel program created a sense that the Trans-Lux was a kind of automatic cinema; one observer called it a "coin-in-the-slot newsreel theatre."⁸ Trans-Lux adopted architectural elements in each of its cinemas that spoke to the newsreel's place in the technologically advanced city. Designed by Thomas W. Lamb, the chain's theaters were a distinctive blend of Art Deco and the more populist Streamline Moderne aesthetic. By incorporating machine-age materials such as aluminum and black vitrolite (a type of opaque glass) into signage and exterior facades, Lamb created a "Trans-Lux look" that made the company's theaters instantly recognizable (Fig. 2.8a).⁹ Together, streamlined design, technological innovation, and a new kind of movie experience reinforced Trans-Lux's slogan and reputation as "The Modern Theatre."¹⁰

Along with the discourse of modernity, strong associations with speed and travel offered audiences at the Trans-Lux and other newsreel cinemas a privileged view of the news. For many newsreel audiences, the trip to the newsreel theater started in a train station. Newsreel cinemas opened in Cincinnati's Union Station in 1933, Boston's South Station in 1936, New York's Grand Central Station in 1937, and across the street from Pennsylvania Station in 1938. News film exhibitors also drew on long-standing associations between film and transportation to stress the mobility as well as the modernity of the newsreel spectator.¹¹



Figure 2.8a Façade of Trans-Lux Twin Cinema at Broadway and 49th Street, New York City. Photographic History Collection, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, catalog number 88.74.4.

The regular addition of travelogues to newsreel theater programs as well as the global reach of the newsreel itself gave audiences a chance to travel the world virtually. While the newsreels ostensibly focused on current events, they also included frankly ethnographic stories on exotic festivals and customs in addition to more timely news items from its cameraman around the world. Images of globes, maps, zeppelins, airplanes, and trains dominated the promotional materials for the newsreel and were regularly incorporated into murals and other design elements within newsreel theaters. California architect S. Charles Lee's proposed Town Theatre took these motifs to new heights with a massive globe dominating the building's exterior (Fig. 2.8b).

Echoing the monumentality of the *Perisphere* of the 1939 World's Fair in New York—itsself a machine for looking—Lee's design simultaneously emphasized the enormity of the world, the power of the newsreel to represent it, and the privileged position of the American spectator to see it all. This imagery, along with slogans like the Newsreel Theatre's "World around, in sight and sound," helped to reinforce the link between modern technologies of transportation and a new privileged mode of vision.¹²



Figure 2.8b Sketch for proposed newsreel theater, by architect S. Charles Lee. S. Charles Lee Papers, Collection 1384, *Library Special Collections*, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

While the architecture and design of newsreel cinemas served to emphasize the modernity and global vision of newsreel spectatorship, it is only by looking at what Miriam Hansen calls the “public dimension of cinematic reception” that we can understand the ways in which audiences took up this privileged position.¹³ When audiences booed or cheered the images on screen, they demonstrated that the shared experience of newsreel spectatorship was not simply an occasion to watch the world from their seats.

The technologically enhanced global spectatorship on offer in the newsreel may have invited audiences to join a virtual crowd, but the responses of viewers in the theater remind us that real crowds saw the newsreel, and that their experience was local and particular. These vocal audiences transformed the theatrical space into a kind of public forum where audiences could respond to the news. Lively audiences were by no means unique to the newsreel theater, but they took on special meaning in this context; both because of the newsreel's reference to real world events and politics, but also because audiences used the newsreel as an opportunity to engage with one another as well as the film.¹⁴ Moreover, while film studios and conventional theater managers worried about such responses, the newsreel theaters embraced controversy and debate.

Booing and jeering at the newsreel in the 1930s was frequent enough to warrant comment in the press. Foreign leaders such as Mussolini and Hitler were by far the most popular targets for the so-called boo birds, but they voiced their displeasure with various American politicians as well. Unsurprisingly, election campaigns sparked particularly partisan expressions.¹⁵ Such was the frequency of this opinionated interjection that journalists sometimes turned to the newsreel audience as a kind of microcosm of public opinion. *Washington Post* columnist Alice Hughes described going to the newsreel theater "whenever in doubt as to how the public [felt] about this or that."¹⁶ Noting how responses to politicians changed over time or by neighborhood, Hughes drives home the specificity of newsreel reactions. While Roosevelt was hissed on the Upper East Side, he was cheered across town.¹⁷ The newsreel may have offered the spectator a privileged position from which to view the news, but this by no means created consensus.

A 1941 audio recording of a Radio City Music Hall audience watching *The March of Time* short news film "Peace by Hitler" testifies to the ways in which audiences used the shared space of the theater to engage with one another as well as the news itself.¹⁸ The film, which detailed the various broken promises of Hitler in the run-up to the war in Europe, elicited ironic laughter at the transparency of German propaganda and applause as it highlighted British defense efforts and the arrival of American aid. The audience's reaction was more complicated when the film turned to the issue of American war preparations and the isolationist stance of people such as Charles Lindbergh. At this point, boos and applause competed with one another, as the audience apparently divided over the question of US participation in the war. Crucially, the timing of the responses suggests that people were not just reacting to the images on screen, but to one another. It was not Lindbergh who was jeered, but the other patrons who had applauded him. The recording reveals factions of the audience clearly engaging with each other. While the newsreel invited its audience to join the virtual crowd of the news parade, audiences like this one were apparently just as interested in the real crowd in the theater with them.

Not everyone embraced these lively newsreel audiences. As early as 1931, Fox sent an order to managers of its theaters instructing them to censor controversial subject matter in the newsreels, insisting that it was their "business to show entertainment—and nothing else but entertainment" and that managers should ensure "nothing is presented to [their] audiences that [could] in any manner cause demonstrations or irritation inside of [their] theatres."¹⁹ The memo specifically mentioned instances where various personalities had been both booed and applauded by audiences, arguing vehemently against encouraging such behavior. Others questioned the propriety of audience dissent. Theater managers, newspaper columnists, and letter writers complained about the booing of presidential candidates in particular, calling it disrespectful and in one case "un-American."²⁰

In stark contrast to these denunciations, the managers and owners of several newsreel theaters embraced debate. Courtland Smith, head of the Trans-Lux theater chain, and one-time newsreel editor

for both Fox and Pathé, told reporters he believed the American public was interested in controversy and he regularly visited theaters to gauge the audience's reactions to specific stories and personalities.²¹ French Githens, president of the Newsreel Theatres chain, was emphatic about the policy of his theaters:

We will show without fear or favor news which comes to us from any recognized American producer, no matter how controversial the subject matter may be. We show all the news impartially, take no sides and play no favorites. In short, our embassy newsreel theatres are the public forums of the screen.²²

Unlike traditional movie theaters, where the newsreel was a footnote to the main program, newsreel houses relied on the news—and on the controversies it could ignite—to attract their audience. While Fox managers worried newsreel subjects might be “too interesting,” Githens understood that controversy and debate were central to the newsreel's appeal and, invoking Adolph S. Ochs, aligned the newsreel cinema with the putative impartiality of the *New York Times*. Conventional exhibitors saw their theaters as offering an escape from the world and naturally worried that when audiences reacted negatively to controversial subjects, they adulterated that fantasy with the real world of politics. Githens recognized that the newsreel theater was different. Rather than offering an escape from the world, the newsreel theater constituted a “public forum of the screen.”

As a public forum, the newsreel theater did not simply package the news for its audience to consume passively. Audiences consumed and contested their position as spectators by interacting with the images on screen as well as other theater-goers. The newsreel was neither a simple instrument of propaganda nor a manufacturer of consensus. Instead, newsreel audiences felt fully able to watch the news and voice their opinions about it. These responses remind us that, despite the global vision and shared identity of the virtual crowd on offer in the newsreel, the shared public dimension of newsreel reception was distinctly local and transpired in actual spaces. As a public forum of the screen, the newsreel cinema reflected a tension between competing notions of news consumption, between the mass-mediated crowd of the news parade and the vocal debates of the actual crowd in the theater.

Notes

- 1 Peter Arno, “Come Along, We're Going to the Trans-Lux to Hiss Roosevelt,” *New Yorker*, 19 September 1936: 16.
- 2 “War News Brings Boom to Newsreel Theatres,” *Motion Picture Herald*, 24 January 1942: 21.
- 3 Raymond Fielding, *The American Newsreel, 1911–1967* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972): 132.
- 4 In this respect, the newsreel resembled less the “disorganization” of the printed newspaper described by Richard Terdiman and more the variety of Tom Gunning's “cinema of attractions” and the “flow” of television broadcast described by Raymond Williams. Cf. Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde,” in Thomas Elsaesser, ed., *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative* (London: BFI, 1990); Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, Routledge Classics (New York: Routledge, 2003); Richard Terdiman, *Discourse/counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).
- 5 “The Newsreel Parade,” *Motion Picture Daily*, 15 September 1937: 3. *Hearst Metrotone News*, Synopsis sheet, 6.226, 1934, in Hearst Metrotone News Collection, UCLA Film and Television Archive, Los Angeles, CA.
- 6 On the crowd, visual culture, and the street see Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Lauren Rabinovitz, *For the Love of Pleasure:*

- Women, Movies and Culture in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998).
- 7 Richard M. Barsam, *Nonfiction Film: A Critical History*, vol. revised edn (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); Raymond Fielding, *The American Newsreel, 1911–1967* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972); Sumiko Higashi, "Melodrama, Realism, and Race: World War II Newsreels and Propaganda Film," *Cinema Journal* 37, 3 (1998): 38–61; Luke McKernan, *Yesterday's News: The British Cinema Newsreel Reader* (British Universities Film & Video Council, 2002).
- 8 Terry Ramsaye, "The Short Picture—Cocktail of the Program," *Motion Picture Herald*, 14 March 1931: 59.
- 9 James L. Holton, "Trans-Lux to Move Its Theatre Block North on Madison Ave.," *New York World-Telegram*, 7 September 1933.
- 10 Trans-Lux Movies Corporation, "The Modern Theatre," Promotional brochure in clipping file, Theatres: US: NY: Trans-Lux, Billy Rose Theater Collection, New York Public Library.
- 11 See Jennifer Lynn Peterson, *Education in the School of Dreams: Travelogues and Early Nonfiction Film* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Lauren Rabinovitz, *For the Love of Pleasure: Women, Movies and Culture in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: Trains and Travel in the 19th Century* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979).
- 12 Promotional Pamphlet in clipping file, Theatres: US: NY: Newsreel Theatres Inc, Billy Rose Theater Collection, New York Public Library.
- 13 Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991): 7.
- 14 On the lively film audience see Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York: NYU Press, 2000); Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby, *Hollywood Spectatorship: Changing Perceptions of Cinema Audiences* (London: British Film Institute, 2001); Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes, and Robert C. Allen, *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007); Kathryn H. Fuller-Seeley, *Hollywood in the Neighborhood: Historical Case Studies of Local Moviegoing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).
- 15 "Fox Warns Mgrs to Keep an Eagle Eye on Newsreels," *Motion Picture Herald*, 7 March 1931: 54; "Movie Audiences Cool to Walker," *New York Times*, 12 September 1932: 2; "War News Films Stir No Demonstrations, But Applause and Hisses Greet Some Pictures," *New York Times*, 4 September 1939: 12; Jimmy Fiddler, "On Hollywood: 10 Best in Newsreels," *The Washington Post*, 3 February 1937:11; Alice Hughes, "A Woman's New York," *Washington Post*, 10 July 1937: 12; Arthur Krock, "The Paramount Issue: Roosevelt," *New York Times*, 4 October 1936, SM1; H. I. Phillips, "The Once Over: Interview with a Hisser," *Washington Post*, 29 August 1936, X7 15.
- 16 Hughes, "A Woman's New York," *Washington Post*, 10 July 1937: 12.
- 17 Hughes, "A Woman's New York," *Washington Post*, 10 July 1937: 12.
- 18 Audience Reaction to "Peace by Hitler," *March of Time*, 7.13, recorded at Radio City Music Hall, 13 August 1941. In Jack Glenn Papers, Collection 9059, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.
- 19 "Fox Warns Mgrs to Keep an Eagle Eye on Newsreels," *Motion Picture Herald*, 7 March 1931: 54.
- 20 Fiddler, "In Hollywood: 10 Best in Newsreels," *Washington Post*, 3 February 1937: 11.
- 21 Lucius Beebe, "The Man Who Edits the News Reels," *New York Herald Tribune*, 24 June 1934; Creighton Peet, "Trans-Lux," *Outlook and Independent*, 25 March 1931.
- 22 "Githens Takes Charge of Newsreel Theatres," *Motion Picture Herald*, 31 August 1935: 41.