

Jews and the Invention of the Movies

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/jews-and-invention-movies>.

Introduction

It is a fascinating historical coincidence that movies were invented and popularized at the same time that Jews were immigrating to America in astonishing numbers, roughly between 1895 and 1915. Even before the rise of the Hollywood studios, Jews were already being represented in this compelling medium, and they also were responding to the movies as a new, powerful force in their lives. The material in this resource kit will help teachers educate their students about the role of Jews in the first decades of cinema and Jewish immigrants' reactions to the new medium.

Subjects

Anti-Semitism, Film, Immigration, New York, United States

Reading and Background:

- An accessible illustrated guide to the role of Jews in American popular culture in general is Jeffrey Shandler and J. Hoberman's *Entertaining America* (2003).
- David Robinson's *From Peepshow to Palace: The Birth of American Film* (1998) is a deep, richly illustrated introduction to the invention of cinema.
- For background on Jewish immigration to America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and to the Lower East Side in particular, see Ruth Gay's *Unfinished People* (2001), Gerald Sorin's *A Time for Building* (1995) or Irving Howe's beloved *World of Our Fathers* (1976).

Resources

1: Map of the Lower East Side of New York ca. 1910, Adrian Kitzinger and Ben Singer.

This map shows the locations of nickelodeons, early movie theaters that charged a nickel for admission (allowing you to watch as many short movies as you wanted). These small theaters were popular in the early years of the 20th century.

Suggested activity: Showing the first slide, give a brief explanation of the Lower East Side—a place where millions of Jewish immigrants lived, many in crushing poverty—and ask the students what they imagine the dots on the map represent. Students will often say “synagogues” or something similar.

Source: Adrian Kitzinger (cartography) and Ben Singer (research), “Nickeloden theaters on the Lower East Side, c. 1910,” in *Entertaining America: Jews, Movies, and Broadcasting*, eds. J. Hoberman and Jeffrey Shandler (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 25.

2: Detail of map of the Lower East Side of New York ca. 1910, Adrian Kitzinger and Ben Singer.

Close-up view of the many locations of nickelodeons dotting the Lower East Side.

Suggested activity: Finally explain that these points on the map are movie theaters. Ask students to think about why there would be so many of them—dozens within a few city blocks.



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Source: Adrian Kitzinger (cartography) and Ben Singer (research), "Nickeloden theaters on the Lower East Side, c. 1910," in *Entertaining America: Jews, Movies, and Broadcasting*, eds. J. Hoberman and Jeffrey Shandler (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 25.

3: Illustration, Władysław T. Benda's "They were permitted to drink deep of all the oblivion in the world," 1911.

As a young man in the late 19th century, Benda immigrated to the United States from his native Poland. This illustration is one of five that appeared alongside an essay depicting film as a great escape from the squalor and tumult of everyday life in New York (excerpted in the following resource). All of the drawings depict scenes at the cinema and in the lives of its working-class, chiefly immigrant audiences.

Suggested activity: Discuss the picture and its caption, reflecting on what they might tell us about early 20th-century attitudes toward the movies and motivations for flocking to them. What does the caption even mean?

Source: Władysław T. Benda, "They were permitted to drink deep of all the oblivion in the world," in Mary Heaton Vorse, "Some Picture Show Audiences," *The Outlook*, June 24, 1911, 444. Retrieved from <http://www.unz.org/Pub/Outlook-1911jun24-00441>, accessed February 22, 2016.

4: Essay, Mary Heaton Vorse's "Some Picture Show Audiences," 1911.

Vorse, a journalist, describes what it felt like to sit watching movies among the Jewish population of the Lower East Side. *The Guardian* was a weekly magazine published in New York from 1870 to 1935.

Suggested activity: Read aloud. Ask students to rephrase what Vorse is saying about the appeal of early movies to Jewish immigrants. Does this help explain why there would have been so many movie theaters on the Lower East Side?

Source: Mary Heaton Vorse, "Some Picture Show Audiences," *The Outlook*, June 24, 1911, 445. Retrieved from <http://www.unz.org/Pub/Outlook-1911jun24-00441>, accessed February 22, 2016.

5: Film, Edison Manufacturing Company's "New York City 'Ghetto' Fish Market," 1903.

Thomas Edison's studios produced this brief film in the era when movies were still in the phase referred to as the "cinema of attractions." Very short films depicting familiar and unfamiliar landmarks, customs, activities, and creatures were common.

Suggested activity: Play the film, and while it plays, ask students: What do you notice about the people in the movie? How do they seem to be reacting to being filmed? Why would Jews have wanted to see a movie like this? Why would non-Jews have wanted to see it?

Source: "New York City 'Ghetto' Fish Market," camera by James Blair Smith (Edison Manufacturing Company, 1903; Library of Congress <<https://www.loc.gov/item/00694374>>, accessed February 22, 2016), video.

6: Film, Edison Manufacturing Company's "Cohen's Fire Sale," 1907.

This thirteen-minute film was directed by one of the most important early innovators in narrative film, whose most famous works include "The Great Train Robbery." The representation of a Jewish business owner is typical of vaudeville and older stereotypical representations of Jews. In the film, the milliner Cohen, to make up for some lost merchandise, devises a scheme to win money from his insurance company through setting an "accidental" fire in his shop. At the end of the film, he gleefully holds his insurance policy and slides a glittering ring onto his wife's finger.

Suggested activity: Watch the film (or excerpted clip). Have students describe what they think is happening in it. Ask them what they notice about Cohen and his wife. How does the film portray them? What in the clip might have been expected to delight audiences of the day? What in it might make audiences today—say, in your own classroom—shudder?

Source: "Cohen's Fire Sale," directed by Wallace McCutcheon and Edwin S. Porter (Edison Manufacturing Company, 1907; Kino on Video and the Museum of Modern Art, *Edison: The Invention of the Movies*, disc 3), DVD.

7: Article, Ephraim Koplan's "Jews Who Spit in Their Own Faces," 1908, translation from Yiddish.

This article from a major American Yiddish daily newspaper was a response to "Cohen's Fire Sale," and specifically to the fact that Jews themselves were responsible for the popularity of the film.

Suggested activity: Read the excerpt out loud. Ask students to argue both sides of the question. Ask them whether there are similarly controversial representations of Jews in contemporary culture and how Jewish audiences respond to them. How can we understand these responses?

Source: Ephraim Koplan, "Jews Who Spit in Their Own Faces," *Yidishes tageblat*, September 1, 1908, trans. in *Entertaining America: Jews, Movies, and Broadcasting*, eds. J. Hoberman and Jeffrey Shandler (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 32-33.

8: Comic strip, Samuel Zagat's "Abie's Moving Pictures," 1913, Yiddish.

Samuel Zagat was one of the most popular cartoonists for the Yiddish press and the creator of the most beloved Yiddish-language comic strips, including "Gimpl Benish." This strip, "Abie's Moving Pictures," focusing on two young brothers and their experiences with the newfangled art form of moving pictures, ran about fifty times between 1912 and 1913 in *Di varhayt* (*The Truth*), a New York Yiddish daily.

Suggested activity: Each strip appears first on its own, then in the next resource alongside a translation. Try showing each strip first without its translation. Can students figure out what's happening? (Either do or don't tell them that Yiddish comic strips run from right to left, rather than left to right.)

Source: Samuel Zagat, "Abie's Moving Pictures," *Di varhayt*, January 31, 1913. Retrieved from microfilm at the Harlan Hatcher Graduate Library, University of Michigan <<http://mirlyn.lib.umich.edu/Record/005148788/Description#tabs>>.

9: Comic strip, Samuel Zagat's "Abie's Moving Pictures," 1913, Yiddish with translation.

Suggested activity: See how well the students have guessed at the content of the strip. Once the students have been able to summarize the strips, ask them: Why would Yiddish-speaking newspaper readers be interested in a comic like this? What does this comic say about the relationship between movies and real life?

Source: Samuel Zagat, "Abie's Moving Pictures," *Di varhayt*, January 31, 1913, trans. Josh Lambert and Mikhl Yashinsky, 2016.

10: Comic strip, Samuel Zagat's "Abie's Moving Pictures," 1913, Yiddish.

Another amusing adventure for Abie and Izzy.

Source: Samuel Zagat, "Abie's Moving Pictures," *Di varhayt*, May 11, 1913.

11: Comic strip, Samuel Zagat's "Abie's Moving Pictures," 1913, Yiddish with translation.

The boys take a tumble.

Source: Samuel Zagat, "Abie's Moving Pictures," *Di varhayt*, May 11, 1913, trans. Josh Lambert and Mikhl Yashinsky, 2016.

12: Comic strip, Samuel Zagat's "Abie's Moving Pictures," 1913, Yiddish.

The fans become the stars...how will it turn out?

Source: Samuel Zagat, "Abie's Moving Pictures," *Di varhayt*, March 29, 1913.

13: Comic strip, Samuel Zagat's "Abie's Moving Pictures," 1913, Yiddish with translation.

Abie and Izzy see a real terjerker.

Suggested activity: Having read this last strip in the kit, ask: Does this one tell us something different about the relationship between what happens in real life and what we see on screen?

Source: Samuel Zagat, "Abie's Moving Pictures," *Di varhayt*, March 29, 1913, trans. Josh Lambert and Mikhl Yashinsky, 2016.