

INTRODUCTION:

PARTICIPATIVE PUBLIC, PASSIVE PRIVATE?

"Perhaps, one should write theatrical history in terms of the customs of audiences" -- George C.D. Odell *Annals of the New York Stage* 1927, II, 426

"most important is the question of what it is that mobilizes opposition" -- Lawrence Grossberg, "Cultural studies vs. political economy: is anybody else bored with this debate" *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 12(1) March 1995, 75

In 1996 the American Medical Association sent out to 60,000 physicians a guide to advise their patients in children's use of television. The booklet concludes with a list of "media use suggestions for parents" which read like the warning labels on drugs and dangerous household chemicals: use only in limited amounts, for specific purposes, and under careful guidance of adults. This is just one example of the popular, professional and scholarly discourses in the twentieth century that have been concerned with mass media's dangers to audiences. Precisely what is the danger and how great may vary, but the issue is the foundation of almost all discussion about audiences. And the topic of audiences is pervasive, from popular magazines and books, to debates in Congress, to thousands of scientific studies of the effects of television, to scholarly debates about reception in the humanities.

It is the purpose of this book to provide a history of audiences, particularly one which exposes the terms of twentieth century debate by comparing them to the terms of debate in earlier eras. Popular and scholarly discussions of audiences have long lacked an historical context. Concerns about television viewing for example have almost never led to consideration of earlier concerns about radio listening or movie going, let alone popular nineteenth-century entertainments such as melodrama, minstrelsy and vaudeville. Yet the very issues at the heart of debates today have been played out repeatedly, sometimes in the very same terms, sometimes inverting these terms.

How do nineteenth-century stage entertainments compare to twentieth-century mass media? They are sharply contrasted in institutional form and in technology. Scholars who study one seldom are familiar with the work of those who study the other. And yet there is a continuity of concern about audiences, expressed in the public discourses of the times. Common to all these entertainment forms is concern about the dangers of and to audiences. Audiences have been worrisome to American elites ever since the Revolution. The written record is a continual flow of worries about social disorder arising from audiences and the consequent need for social control. While the underlying issues were

always power and social order, at different times the causes of the problems of audiences were located in different sources. In the nineteenth century the problem lay in the degenerate or unruly people who came to the theater, and what they might do, once gathered. In the twentieth century, worries focused on the dangers of reception, how media message might degenerate audiences. In the nineteenth century, critics feared active audiences; in the twentieth, their passivity.

These changes in the terms of discourse highlight the importance of historicizing the concept of audience. How public discourses construct audiences, how audiences conceive themselves and what audiences do, are historically contingent. Categories like "the audience" are socially constructed, their attributes typically described in terms of dichotomies. Such dichotomies define the current ideal, what is good, deserves reward, power, privilege. The valence of dichotomies as well as the dichotomies themselves change over time. The current ideal represents the hierarchy of power within a society at a given moment of history. In the nineteenth century the active audience was bad; today it is good. One distinction ceases to be significant and another comes to the fore. In seventeenth-century England the distinction between listening (auditing) and viewing (spectating), words and spectacle were central to debate about the worth of new drama. Other than a brief appearance in the 1950s concerning the relative merits of radio and television, this distinction has been inconsequential. Similarly, the displacement of live performance by mass media shriveled the importance of the audience-performer distinction.

Two dichotomies that persist throughout this history are the distinctions between active and passive audiences and between public and private audiences. These distinctions weave through much of the history in the ensuing chapters. Let us begin by examining these categories. I will explore the active-passive dichotomy by discussing the historical tradition of audience sovereignty, changes in the audience-performer distinction, and the concepts of attention and embeddedness from recent cultural studies of television. Then I will explore the public-private dichotomy by considering the transformation of public space from a locus of the public sphere and a ground for collective action into a marketplace of consumption. I then consider this dichotomy in its second sense of the movement of the audience from the public venue of the theater to private spaces, particularly the home.

FROM ACTIVE TO PASSIVE

"Passive" has been shorthand for passive reception, audiences' dependence on and unquestioning acceptance of the messages of entertainment. Critics of media-induced passivity have fretted about aesthetic degradation of the culture, social or moral disintegration of the community, or political domination of the masses. The terms "passive" and "active" do not appear in nineteenth century discourses. Instead they talk about audience rights or rowdiness, both presuming an active audience. Nineteenth century audiences were, and were expected to be, very active. This active conception was rooted in a European tradition of audience sovereignty that recognized audiences' rights to control performances. Active audiences prevailed in London and Paris theaters and in

the operas of Italy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This participative tradition was shared by the privileged as well as plebeians, to use the terms of English theater historian Ann Cook. The privileged included aristocrats and untitled but wealthy gentry who were making handsome profits from land, mercantile and manufacturing enterprises. Plebeians included petite bourgeoisie as well as lesser classes.

The privileged in early modern Europe were not barred by their own moral or aesthetic sense of cultural superiority from engaging in the same practices as the lower classes. In Elizabethan theaters, courtiers and gallants treated theater as their court where they could measure their importance by the attention they received. Fops sat on stage, interrupted performances and even on occasion grabbed an actress. All of this annoyed the plebeian pit who shouted, "away with them". But pittites were hardly meek. They too ate, smoked, drank socialized and engaged in repartee with actors. Restoration theater was more expensive and exclusive. Still, merchants and professional men, civil servants and their wives, and the critics [poets, writers, and competing playwrights] sat in the pit and squabbled, shouted, teased the women who sold oranges, baited the fops on stage, and moved from pit to gallery and back. Nobility continued to sit on stage and in boxes, treating the theater as a place to chat, play cards, argue and even occasionally duel.

By the mid-eighteenth century, London theater-going was popular among all classes. The privileged continued to give scant attention to the play. Some still sat on stage until David Garrick, director of Drury Lane Theater finally succeeded in banning them in 1762. The reputation for rowdiness shifted to the gallery where journeymen, apprentices, servants (footmen) - many of whom could afford theater because they arrived after the featured play and paid only half price - lorded over those below. Instead of individual display of courtiers of the previous era, this plebeian audience expressed collective opinions, sometimes to the point of riot.

This behavior represents not only an active audience, but a discourse through which audiences insistently constructed themselves as active. Audiences asserted their rights to judge and direct performances. There were two basic traditions of such audience sovereignty, which can be characterized as those of the privileged and those of the plebeians, "the people". The privileged tradition, rooted in the system of patronage, rested on the status of performers as servants to their aristocratic audience. As with other servants, aristocrats ignored, attended to or played with actors, as they desired at the moment. It would have violated social order for aristocratic audiences to defer to performers by keeping silent and paying attention. Court theaters were more formal ritualistic examples. More rambunctious examples were the private theaters frequented by young gentry. Aristocratic audience sovereignty affirmed the social order.

Lower classes too had an honored tradition of rights in the theater, linked to street traditions of carnival and of crowd actions to enforce a moral economy. Carnival, practiced in parades, hangings and other public festivities, granted such prerogatives to lower classes on certain occasions when normal social was turned upside down. The carnival tradition extended to street theater such as *comedia dell arte* and into popular theaters, which had a rowdier tradition of audience sovereignty. Carnival, like the lesser

members of the theater audience, contained lower class rule within limits, elites to retain control of social order. But carnival also presented the threat of getting out of control.

Over-Active Audiences

English immigrants and actors imported these traditions when they came to America. As we will see, American theater managers and civil authorities continued to recognize the rights of audience sovereignty until the mid-nineteenth century. They acknowledged audience prerogatives to call for tunes, chastise performers and managers, hiss, shout and throw things at intransigent performers on the stage, even riot to enforce their will. During the colonial period, gentry exercised an aristocratic sovereignty over the nascent theater. After the Revolution, common folk employed the anti-aristocratic rhetoric of the Revolution to assert their own plebeian sovereignty in the theater.

But during the Jacksonian era in the 1830s and 1840s, the upper classes grew to fear such working-class sovereignty. Too easily such collective power might be applied to larger economic and political purposes and threaten the social order. Elites labeled exercises in audience sovereignty as rowdyism. Rowdiness is a persistent phenomenon in theater history, largely associated with young males. During the Jacksonian era, rowdyism came to be considered a mark of lower class status. Elites condemned it by redefining it as poor manners rather than as an exercise of audience rights. For different reasons, reformers and entertainment entrepreneurs sought, through the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, to contain or eliminate rowdiness in audiences.

Once nineteenth-century elites and middle class had effectively labeled working class as rowdy and disreputable, entrepreneurs had to choose between clientele of different classes. Through the development of each major nineteenth-century stage industry profitability pushed the weight of choice against working class and rowdy and in favor of middle class and respectable. Respectability meant an audience that was quiet, polite, and passive. In drama theater, minstrelsy, variety, and even early movies, each industry grew by shifting its primary market and its image to one of middle class respectability. Comparing different entertainments across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we will see how entrepreneurs who could afford the investment, repeatedly have attempted to seek a middle class audience by first attracting a female audience that signified respectability. Through this movement and with this leverage, audiences at these entertainments let slip their sovereignty and were contained if not tamed.

But, despite sustained attacks, rowdiness did not disappear. Theater entrepreneurs succeeded in segregating but not eliminating rowdy behavior. The "rowdy elements" found other, marginalized, "small time" entertainments, which still sought their patronage. Rowdies were excluded from some theaters, but there were always other, "lower class" houses where rowdiness was tolerated, and even occasionally celebrated. Several chapters of this history will show how segmented markets serving different classes and clientele allowed rowdyism to continue in smaller theaters of all sorts where admission was cheap and young men and boys could afford to attend with some regularity. They showed up as early supporters for minstrelsy in the 1840s, as the

audience for variety in the 1860s and 1870s, in small time vaudeville and 'ten-twenty-thirty' melodrama theater in the late nineteenth century, and in the new century in storefront movie shows. In the late twentieth century rowdyism continues somewhat attenuated, at rock concerts, sporting events, and movie theaters serving particular clientele such as young urban black males, or fans of cult films like *Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

Defenseless Audiences

Through the nineteenth century, public discussion focused on concerns about active audiences. Chapter 12 explores how, as movies became popular in the early twentieth century, public debate shifted from a focus on audience behavior to worry about the movies' content and its effects on audiences, particularly on children. Attention shifted from the place to the play, from effects of dangerous people in those places to effects of dangerous media messages on people. Audiences were being redefined from active to helpless, dependent, passive, from dangerous to endangered, and would remain so through the rest of the twentieth century, as we will see. Concern about what audiences were doing was superseded by what was being done to them, or more precisely what were they learning from the entertainment that they shouldn't. Some of this is evident at the turn of the century when complaints about small time vaudeville begin to focus on the lewdness of the show. With the movies however the attention on the show and its effects clearly became paramount over concerns about activity in the theater.

The focus of concern also shifted from women to children as the endangered group. Previously middle class women were the one considered endangered and warned away from theaters and the people who frequented them. Now children were the endangered group, socialized into deviant behavior by movie content. This focus on children was part of many Progressive efforts of the times, and a new middle class attention to childhood. From the 1880s onward children assumed a new prominence in the middle class family, which was restructured around child rearing. Advice in child-rearing grew as a profession. The helping professions from 1900 to 1930 grew by appropriating parental functions.

By the 1940s these concerns were elaborated in variants of a mass culture critique, formulated as passive acceptance and control by media. These theories were formulated to explain the rise of fascism in European democracies and laid part of the blame on mass media. In the liberal version, called mass society theory, functional sociologists feared the disappearance of voluntary organizations that they saw as critical in mediating between the mass of people and the governing elites. The mass would then be susceptible to demagogues who used mass media to propagandize and manipulate the mass. Left versions of mass culture critique worried that mass media "narcotized" the working class, who would become passive, develop "false consciousness", and lose the capability of acting collectively in their class interest.

Audience and Performer

The shift from active to passive audiences was complemented by a change in the way in which the entertainment itself constituted the category of "the audience" in the distinction between audience and performer. In the passive construction, the performance (the message) exists independent of the audience, suggesting a boundary as well as a one-way flow across that boundary. Even recent scholarly constructions of an active resistant audience start with a pre-existing "message", the preferred reading, and then rejoice in audience' rejection or transformation of that message. But such an image is less compatible with live entertainment, particularly when audience practices include interaction with the performers, where "the message" is more obviously a collaboration between audience and performers.

The relationship between audience and performance, as well as the permeability of the boundary between the two, have varied historically. The separation between audience and performance is of modern origin. In the past the distinction between performer and audience was less clear and more open. Just as the line between work and leisure was less clear, so too the line between entertainment and other, more participative leisure. Plebeian entertainments, with the exception of a few theaters in the major cities of London and Paris, in early modern Europe were street events, part of fairs and markets. Street theater, such as *comédie del arte* and forms of carnival, and amateur theater blurred the lines between performer and audience. Community celebrations and parades, games and parlor theatrics were more common and participative than theater-going.

Even in professional theater, the boundary between the two was porous. Playwrights and performers constructed an active audience through the conventions of their art. They expected and played upon audience participation, a lively dialog across the footlights. In the Elizabethan public theater, the stage was designed to advance this style, surrounded on three sides by the pit, not behind a proscenium arch. Asides and other addresses to the audience were intended to play upon and satisfy audiences' involvement. Performers such as Richard Tarlton became well known for speaking out of character and taking the audience into their confidence. Such required a "knowingness" shared between audience and actor, about the topic and about theater conventions. It is equivalent to the type of humor which was essential to vaudeville three centuries later, and probably continued a practice common in street entertainments. In more exclusive Restoration theater the privileged audience also delighted in repartee. Prologues, epilogues and asides were written to provoke reaction from the audience.

As late as the Jacksonian era in America, the ability to come to the front of the stage and speak one's lines directly to the audience was considered a mark of good acting. It was only after the Civil War that this "rhetorical style" faded, though some began to criticize it in the late eighteenth century.. It was replaced by the "fourth wall", the front of the stage framed by the proscenium, through which the audience silently and without intervention, observed the lives of the characters. Neither actors nor audience were to penetrate this invisible wall. Actors remained behind the proscenium, audiences quiet on their side. As realism replaced rhetorical styles of dramatic acting in the nineteenth century, the separation of audience from performer became paramount. Realism also required silencing audiences, making them passive. The "well-behaved" audience became

preferred among the middle and upper classes, to audiences exercising sovereignty which became a mark of lower class.

Changes in the relationship between live performance and audience prepared the ground for mass media. In the twentieth century, the boundary has been maintained not by policing audience behavior but by the shift from live to recorded performance, which severed audiences absolutely from performance. The possibilities of audience behavior and how it may be conceived differs from live to recorded performance. People sometimes talk back to the screen but it does not have the same effect. Live performance is a process to which the audience is integral, in contrast to the finished product of movie, broadcast or recording, delivered as a *fait accompli*. The re-introduction of real or artificial "studio audience" reactions into television programs, illustrates the significance of this process. With media this process is transformed into a cause-effect chain, product-response-new product. Any impact of the audience is on changing the next product, not shaping this one.

Inattention and Embedded Entertainment

Twentieth century worries about the passive audience are contingent on the assumption that people pay attention to media messages. However, the history presented in this book shows that once people have become accustomed to new media, their behavior as audiences is notable for their lack of attention. Inattention has been an aspect of audience autonomy and a disproof of passivity. Moreover inattention is not unique to mass media. Inattention weaves through the chapters of this history of American entertainment, changing in significance with different periods. Inattention to live performers in the early nineteenth century was intimately related to matters of sovereignty and rowdiness. Long before mass media, inattention typified upper class audiences at theater and opera. Complaints and comments about inattentive theater audience were perennial. Theater was not a novelty for them, but a place to be seen and see others of their class. This was especially the case at European court theaters, but also among elite American audiences, such as the "Golden Horseshoe" of New York's Metropolitan Opera, the ring of first tier boxes reserved for founders of the house, where the new upper class of monopoly capital preserved the aristocratic tradition. Among elites inattention was a mark of their status, as masters to servile performers. Inattention at live performances then was a manner of certifying not only audience autonomy, but audience sovereignty.

As we will see, working-class audiences too were inattentive, sometimes busily socializing among themselves, whether in 1830s theater or 1910 nickelodeon. The rowdy, resistant audience of the heyday of sovereignty, while often deeply engaged in the entertainment, also was wont to distract and be distracted by conversations, pranks, cards, prostitutes etc. As with elites, inattention was partly a matter of sociability. In the early days of movies, working class nickelodeon audiences interspersed watching with socializing, eating and caring for children. Conviviality, mistaken by the righteous and respectable as rowdyism, was a hallmark of almost all ethnic theaters (for drama, puppet, variety and movie) in the years of great immigration. Immigrants brought with them old-world habits of socializing whether from Europe or China.

Inattention may be an oversimplified, even misleading description. Rather than being inattentive, people might be more accurately described as exhibiting intermittent attention. That is, they may indeed be engaged in the story and even have an aesthetic knowledge of the genre and place aesthetic demands upon practitioners. At the same time, their attention may be divided, moving back and forth from the entertainment to conversation to other activities, and back again to the show. When radio and television were new people listened and watched attentively. Once they became commonplace, even in working class homes, people did not sit riveted to the set but mixed viewing with other activities.

Recent communication and cultural studies researchers have emphasized that most television viewing takes place within the household or family, and that intermittent attention is a normal aspect of family communication. They focus on the embedded nature of viewing in the home as the fundamental characteristic of viewing that produces inattention. Radio and television became so embedded in the domestic routines in homes, that they took on features of furnishings, and listening and viewing became inseparable from other household activities. This pattern applies not only to families but to many types of households. People living alone use radio and television as a kind of background, sort of pseudo family to "people" the household. The principal reality that defines the situation in households is the relationships among its members, even when they are engaged in parallel activity rather than joint activity. Even withdrawal into lone activities presumes the preexistence of the household relationships.

We can extend the idea of embeddedness to understand nineteenth-century theater audience practices for comparison to radio and television at home. Entertainment was embedded in the larger practice of attending theater that included socializing with one's peers. While television is embedded in the family, stage entertainment was embedded in the activities of a community of peers. In the European tradition for example wealthy Italian families took their staff and servants with them to the opera so that they could take meals, entertain guests, send and receive messages and conduct business in their box. (Then the family was embedded in community.)

The factor of novelty applies as well. As a general rule, audiences attend to, even are absorbed by an entertainment when curious about some novelty, a star, a new technology, or an entertainment that they cannot afford regularly or that arrives infrequently. Upper class nineteenth century American audiences known for talking during performances, typically fell silent in the presence of European stars. Working class audiences often were more attentive or engaged, even when boisterous, because for them entertainments were more novel, cost more and they could go less.

Embeddedness contextualizes viewing and listening in the larger category of audience practices, and leads us to understand that underlying the distinction between active and passive is a question of whether we should formulate the audience as a collective body or a collection of individuals. When viewing is embedded in some larger enterprise like family or community interaction, audiences are not singularly focused on the entertainment, and more on each other. The distinction of passive presumes a singular

focus on the entertainment. When people define entertainment as embedded in a situation in which the paramount interaction or relationship is among audience members rather than between audience and entertainment, then we have what has been conceived as an active audience. Also, when the boundary of that interaction is communal rather than family or household, the activity is constituted as a public sphere and a foundation for collective action. Applying the idea of embeddedness to radio and television use in homes, has highlighted the dispersed nature of these audiences. Researchers have begun to question whether it even makes sense to discuss such people as an entity called an audience. Applying the idea to nineteenth century audiences highlights just the opposite, the degree to which these gatherings do constitute self-conscious groups which might act collectively.

To realize the aspects of a public sphere and of collective action, requires going beyond inattention, more than immunity from the message, resistance to the message, or what has come to be called reading against the grain of the preferred reading. Audience practices gain a larger significance when they are rehearsals for collective political action. Collective action theorists argue that such habits and skills, what they call a repertoire, as well as self-consciousness as a group, are necessary resources to mobilize collective action. When practices are embedded in self-conscious membership in the audience and the audience as a group acts collectively, such practices foster the repertoire for collective action. Bowery b'hoys of the 1840s, rock concert fans of the 1960s, soccer fans of the 1980s mobilized actions beyond the entertainments themselves.

PUBLIC TO PRIVATE

The concept of the audience as a group capable of acting to assert its will was not a theoretical exercise for nineteenth century elites, but fed real fears of underclass rebellion. The shift in discourses documented in the following chapters, from a concern about active to passive audiences occurred as the audience itself was tamed. Taming was achieved by re-constructing audience practices from public to private, collective to individual. The shift from public to private was a shift from community to family and ultimately to individual. It occurred in two phases.

In the first, nineteenth century phase, public places like theater were redefined from places of community conversation and civic participation to places of private shopping and consumption; from a forum to a marketplace. The shift to consumption was simultaneously a shift from a collective/communal experience to a familial/individual experience. The person in public changed from a citizen and community member to a consumer and family member or individual. Gatherings were no longer a community with shared fate, but impersonal crowds of families or individuals with private interests. Public space was domesticated. The gatherings were impersonal since people were no longer interested to engage others outside their primary group.

The second, twentieth century phase dismantled the gathering upon which conversations of the public sphere depended. The sense of "public" here is simply in contrast to private,

though it has significance for the previous sense of "public" as a group engage in debate about the polity. Making the gathering impersonal weakened the reasons to linger in public spaces. Radio and television broadcasting privatized entertainment and provided a reason to stay home. The home became increasingly a center of entertainment, and the family replaced the community as the gathering sharing the experience. This carried the process of privatization beyond domesticating public space to withdrawing to private space, raising greater barriers to community identity and participation.

Public, Participative and Collective

The English theater tradition was public in more senses than that they were open to the public by admission. They were sites of assembly, a physical gathering being, until recently, a necessary pre-condition for public discussion or collective action. More particularly they were used as places of discussion, or space of discourse as literary theorists Peter Stallybrass and Allon White phrase it, and of collective action. Theaters were public in the sense of a carnival gathering, and in the sense of a public sphere. The carnivalesque while not qualifying as and even contrasted to the bourgeois public sphere, clearly held political possibility through the potential for collective action arising from the collective celebration of "the world turned upside down" in which lower classes exercised an unaccustomed power.

The tradition of participation across the footlights and within the audience, by virtue of its nature as a public conversation, was collective, as well as active. It thus represented an exercise in practices of the public sphere as well as ground and rehearsal for collective action. Lewd and disgusting, or politically charged, either constituted public dialog. Participants on both sides of the footlights joined in impromptu performance that the rest of the audience heartily enjoyed and to which they often gave a collective cheer. Actions for and against performers and (almost always) against managers were collective expressions. And often there were discussions among the audience and debates between factions about the performance or sometimes entirely unrelated matters. All these represent forms of public discussion, of collective identity and even collective action.

They were abetted when audiences were composed of regular theater-goers, and performers were a resident stock company whose members and biographies were familiar to the regulars. Familiarity with the place, the performers, the plays and the fellow audience members produced a community which was inclined to claim collective rights of audience sovereignty and to act collectively to enforce their rights, even when there may have been disagreements between factions within the audience. Such a community was more prone to be familiar with each other, to speak their minds, to be invested in this community and therefore prepared to speak up to defend or merely to participate. Neighborhood entertainments, where the sense of community persisted longer among audiences, continued to exhibit such public and collective character long after such were banished from downtown theaters or major theaters with national reputations.

From Politics to Consumption

The nineteenth-century chapters spell out how, over decades, audiences were redefined from public and collective to private and personal. The American theater audience before 1850 was conceived as a body politic and acted collectively, particularly during the early republic and the Jacksonian era. In the early republic the audience in the theater was sometimes referred to as "the town" since all (politically significant) sectors of the community were present, and despite the fact that some groups were not represented or present but without voice. Fitting the revolutionary rhetoric of egalitarianism, the audience was conceived as a body of equal citizens all of whom held rights. These were fiercely asserted as rights of a free citizen, linking rights in theater to larger political rights. Thus the theater was defined as a public space in which the body politic deliberated. Thus early theater audiences, or often factions within the audience, constituted themselves as political bodies for debate or collective action, making theater an arena for public discourse and public action.

Moreover the fact of live entertainment and the conventions of theater of the time furthered this constitution of audiences as political groups acting collectively. In live theater, meanings from text (the play) and from social interaction (performers with audience) merge, since audiences interacted with actors as both text (the characters) and as social beings (actors). In the prevailing rhetorical style of acting at the time, actors would step to the front of the stage and speak their parts directly to the audience rather than to other characters, thus denying any fourth wall between actors and audience. This style combined with the tradition of audience sovereignty to assure a significantly active audience. Thus we can speak of early theater as public sphere for both debate and for collective action.

Critical to any conception of public sphere and also to any potential for collective action is conversation, for the opportunity to assemble and discuss and come to consensus about what to do. Suppressing theater audience expression therefore eliminated the theater as a political public space. Quieting audiences privatized audience members' experiences, as each experienced the event psychologically alone, without simultaneous sharing the experience with others. During the middle of the nineteenth century managers in many theaters (and the courts) began to strip audiences of their 'sovereignty' and to prohibit vocal and rowdy behavior, to bolt chairs to the floor, and in other ways restrict audiences' actions and movements. The changes culminated in the latter part of the century with darkening the theater during performances, a 'benefit' of electric lighting.

The combined changes quelled audience interaction. Social and physical restrictions and darkness left the audience only the stage to focus on, and here the focus was increasingly on sumptuous spectacle, a celebration of materiality and an advertisement for consumption. In theaters this translated into a further reduced identity with the rest of the audience and into consumption of entertainment as an individual experience. The establishment of middle class decorum as the norm privatized the experience of theater-going. The audience of late nineteenth century legit drama, went as self-contained couples or groups. Interaction was inward to the group, rather than outward toward the crowd. Such small groups had aspects of a pseudo-household perhaps with invited guests, transported to the theater, placing boundaries between each group within the theater.

Moreover, they sat in a darkened room that enhanced this privacy and left the theater to discuss the experience in private. Theater-going was redefined as a private "household" experience in distinction from its former public communal nature.

In addition to the negative prohibitions, the reformed theaters of the mid and late century offered a positive new focus, consumption. From mid century, theaters were increasingly surrounded by and part of shopping districts, a new public space, defined as domestic and feminine in contrast to the earlier public spaces that were masculine and either work related or examples of the traditional public sphere. Previously, purchasing was a bourgeois male responsibility, and shops were mixed among factories, offices and other precincts out of bounds to middle class women. Public space was less and less considered a forum, and instead a marketplace. Even the streets, which traditionally had been important gathering places for politics were drawn into the service of consumption through the new practice of the promenade. Political discussion retreated to private clubs, fraternal associations, union halls, and political party halls like Tammany Hall.

Not all theaters and audiences however underwent quite the same transformation. While entertainment generally became part of this new commercial culture, some types of theaters continued to service working class men, who continued to exercise collective authority over the stage, albeit less so than before 1850. Within these theaters they sustained an autonomous public sphere. Miriam Hansen argues that working class immigrants constituted nickelodeon entertainment as an situation of autonomous public sphere, through their convivial socializing in the movie houses. This however is another example of imputing too much political significance into this, unless one can demonstrate some carryover to more overt political action.

From theater to home

As we will see, a second historical change important to collective action was the increased delivery through the twentieth century of entertainment directly into the home, the implications of which are described in the chapters on radio and television. Recorded music technology might have brought this change earlier, but it was slow to develop and was overtaken by radio. The phonograph, marketed as early as the 1870s, spread slowly and did not become widely available in homes until the 1920s. Radio spread much more rapidly and provided more variety of uses. It therefore pioneered the new home entertainments of the twentieth century. But radio did not create a "crisis" in the public sphere. From the 1920s through the 1940s, worries about privatization were not part of the public discourse on radio. This was the era of movies, when people went out to the movies weekly. City centers and urban neighborhoods were vital and vibrant. The public sphere was alive and healthy, at least as a consumptive public sphere. In rural areas radio was even seen as the solution to isolation, linking families to the world beyond their farm.

It was not until the post-war era that commentators began to notice and decry the withdrawal of Americans into their suburban homes. Television viewing displaced movie going, suburban shopping centers replaced downtowns and suburbs replaced urban

neighborhoods. The 1950s and 1960s spawned doomsday theories about mass society and mass culture. Americans were retreating to their cocoons, and leaving the democracy high and dry.

With television the idea of audience passivity melded with the concerns over privatization. Passivity became firmly established, even an obsession, in discourses on audiences. The drug metaphor became commonplace. Viewers were addicts, "narcotized" by the "plug-in drug" television. People became thoughtless in front of the "boob tube". Such passive victims controlled by television were not capable of civic participation. The "couch potato", merely lazy or uninterested, did not leave his home to participate in the community and democracy. The imagery contrasts starkly with that of the nineteenth century characterization of audiences.

A NOTE ON MY CHOICE OF ENTERTAINMENTS

This history spans six different forms of drama and variety entertainment over two centuries. I have chosen these six because each was the dominant - or nearly so - commercial entertainment of its time; and because drama and variety have been the predominant genre in each, constituting a hereditary lineage traced back through the mass media of television, radio and movies into the nineteenth century stage entertainments of vaudeville, minstrelsy and drama theater. These different forms have succeeded and displaced each other as the most widely available and popular forms through American history. The perennial genre of drama and variety provide continuity across the forms. The combination of change and continuity make these six forms ideal for making comparisons and tracing developments, and explains why other popular entertainments such as circus, music concerts and spectator sports are less useful.

Each form has borrowed and adapted from its predecessor. In some senses earlier forms gave birth and nurtured the new forms that displaced them. In other senses the newer forms often succeeded by mimicking their predecessors. Minstrelsy began as *entre acte* entertainment in theater and incorporated dramatic burlesque in its developed form. Vaudeville adopted the variety form from minstrelsy and some of its performers too. High-priced or refined vaudeville too incorporated condensed one-act plays. Early talking movie comedy borrowed the vaudeville aesthetic. Radio stole stars and variety format from vaudeville and melodrama from cheap theaters. Television in turn raided radio.

Each of these forms has occupied a similar -- although sometimes differentiated -- niche in the array of leisure activities of their time. The similar niche is evident in their competition for audiences, with the result that each has displaced another as the most popular entertainment form. All forms of entertainment from circus to drama to opera to novelties were staged in the same theaters to mixed audiences before 1840s. In the 1840s, the upper classes in the largest cities began building opera houses and drama managers began in earnest to seek respectability through female audiences. Other audiences less concerned with respectability, particularly working class men, shifted their allegiance to the new form called minstrelsy that continued to allow the rowdiness being suppressed in

some theaters. Minstrelsy however also spawned variants, as some successful troupes drew broader audiences out of curiosity and offered respectable venues for the middle class. From the 1840s to the 1870s minstrelsy was the most widely available and popular form of stage entertainment. Minstrelsy established variety as a distinct format, with unrelated acts succeeding each other. Variants of this variety format appeared in many settings, including saloons. Once cleaned and made respectable, variety became vaudeville. By the 1880s vaudeville had displaced minstrelsy as the predominant stage entertainment and maintained its dominance through the 1900s.

Movies in their turn crippled cheap vaudeville and melodrama theater. In the 1910s movies began to take over darkened drama and vaudeville theaters, at first blending vaudeville with movies to broaden appeal, but soon dispensing with live entertainment as an unnecessary and expensive partner. With the arrival of sound in the late 1920s, movies had triumphed, while vaudeville and drama theater withered. The sound of radio nicely complemented silent movies in the 1920s. But the music industry as well as theater managers worried about radio stealing their audiences. During the 1930s a few feared that radio would reduce people's participation generally in community activities outside the home. After World War II television quickly supplanted both radio and movies as the principal mass medium. The attraction to television in the 1950s, combined with movies' loss of three-quarters of its audience, fed fears of privatization and theories of mass society composed of isolated families linked to the larger society through their television sets.

As popular entertainments each of these was entertainment of the "common people", but each too had its privileged constituency, and actively sought such a constituency. The story that plays out over time then is a recurring movement of markets and patrons and transformations of the entertainments themselves in pursuit of these markets. They cannot be solely understood as belonging to the common people or working class, except at certain moments and in certain sectors of the industries. Indeed the dynamic interplay between constituencies and the pursuit of these is necessary to understand audience practices.