Hippodrome Theater: Targeting Female Spectatorship

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Abstract

In this paper, I examine the composition of the Fort Wayne manufacturing community. I discuss the activities that were created for the factory girls in the city to maintain their wholesomeness. I discuss Screen Theory and its implications about female spectatorship and analyze articles in the News-Sentinel that support my thesis that women were targeted by the Hippodrome Theater with these articles. I discuss the articles and the support they provide for my thesis.
**Hippodrome Theater: Targeting Female Spectatorship**

By 1920 Fort Wayne was a thriving industrial city in Indiana and the second largest manufacturing center in the state (Seigel, 2003). Over 6,000 women and girls were employed in factories throughout the city, accounting for one-third of the industrial workforce. The number of women working in factories in Fort Wayne out-numbered female workers in both Indianapolis and South Bend, which were the two other leading manufacturing centers in Indiana. Seigel (2003) states that, “Like so many other female factory workers in Indiana and nationwide, the women and girls in Fort Wayne worked in low-paying, gender-specific jobs” (p. 231). What differed about female factory workers in Fort Wayne is that they were predominantly young and unmarried and expected by both their families and employers to only be in the workforce for a few years. Because of this ideal, business owners “assumed that factory ‘girls’ needed not better wages and working conditions, but safe, home-like lodgings and wholesome activities for their leisure hours” (Seigel, 2003, p. 232).

Another issue at the time was women’s rights. Women had been fighting for rights paralleled to those of male citizens for several decades and by 1920 they had finally earned the right to vote. As a result of the success of the women’s movement in the beginning of the 20th century, women became a valuable commodity in consumerism. One such arena was theater. Staiger (2000) claims that, “Early modern cinema was a potential public sphere with more possibilities for women spectators” (p. 15). Staiger adds that films were categorized by genre in order to “market movies to many individuals” (p. 67). I believe that audiences of the Hippodrome, particularly female movie-goers, were targeted by theater advertisements and articles in Fort Wayne. I will focus on an article that ran regularly in the News-Sentinel titled
Reel Chatter...by Mary Mae because it blatantly targets female readers and is evidence that the Hippodrome, among other theaters in Fort Wayne were targeting female spectators.

Staiger (2000) discusses Screen Theory and emphasizes that audience members were not simply passive viewers. She claims that female audience viewers found several aspects of fallen women’s narratives in films to identify with. The ideologies of fallen women were not simply impressed upon female movie-goers, but rather embraced and understood. Particularly, working-class and middle-class women identified with ideological narratives of women who were working-class, sacrificing mothers, and female characters who desired social mobility and men (Staiger, 2000). While romance films were marketed to women viewers, Screen Theory shows that they were not merely passive audience members.

Kuhn (1984) claims that “melodrama [is one] popular narrative form aimed at female audiences” (p. 18). This article supports Staiger’s (2000) claims that fallen women narratives are directed to (and enjoyed) by female audiences. Kuhn pointedly claims that a “defining generic feature of the woman’s picture as a textual system is its construction of narratives motivated by female desire and processes of spectator identification governed by female point-of-view” (p. 18). My analysis of the Reel Chatter articles support this notion and examine the truth of these claims in the films of the Hippodrome.

The artifacts I discovered that support the notion of targeting female movie-goers are articles in The News-Sentinel titled Reel Chatter...by Mary Mae. There were over 80 of these articles printed in News-Sentinel between 1920 and 1922. This regular column is geared toward the female reader. First, Mary Mae discusses narratives of people who work in the film industry and their grueling schedule. This is an emotional appeal to women and factory girls could relate to this depiction of film industry girls. Furthermore, this article would appeal to a female reader
because it discusses girls who work in the film industry and how they are accompanied by their mothers. Female factory workers in Fort Wayne had the support of their parents to be in the workforce and they had a familial environment created for them by employers. The title of this article which includes "by Mary Mae" would also appeal to the female audience because it is immediately known that it is a woman who is writing the piece and, therefore, a female take on the industry.

The *Reel Chatter* column was also a way to answer questions posed by readers. Questions ranged from questions about dating to those about famous actors and directors. One question asked whether it was a good sign when a woman cried at a movie to which “Mary Mae” answered that it meant the woman “is having a glorious time; don’t let it worry you” (1922, n.p.). Perhaps this column by “Mary Mae” and others similar to it during this time were the early catalysts for women’s magazines today that give advice about dating and celebrity gossip. This column was also juxtaposed with advertisements of films being played at the Hippodrome Theater and other area cinemas.

With evidence that there was a desire to create wholesome activities for factory girls to participate in and the artifacts that are targeted to women movie-goers, one can see that the Hippodrome Theater potentially targeted female spectators to visit their facility. At this time, women were being welcomed into the realm of consumerism and invited to spend their hard earned dollars alongside their male counterparts. Because Fort Wayne had a large industrial community that employed many women, one could presuppose that the factory girls were regular patrons at the theaters in the city.
References


