In 1926 Siegfried Kracauer published his famous celebration of the movie palace’s ability to distract spectators. One year later, two young American critics arrived at a conception of an ideal movie theater, antithetical to Kracauer’s, that would rivet spectators’ attention to the screen rather than its periphery. Like Kracauer, Seymour Stern and Harry Alan Potamkin looked to the cinema for an antidote to what they perceived as modernity and capitalism’s detrimental reconfiguring of experience. They did not, however, find a progressive model of spectatorship in movie palaces but in that other particularly urban brand of movie house: the little cinema or art cinema. If Kracauer thought distraction could save spectators from “sink[ing] into the abyss” of the film, Stern’s and Potamkin’s faith in little cinemas was premised on a cinéphile confidence in movies themselves.

Although French, German, and Soviet alternative modes of exhibition in the 1910s and 1920s have received considerable attention in the past two decades, the concomitant rise of little cinemas in the United States has remained relatively unexamined. Little cinemas never acquired the audience draw of French ciné-clubs or Soviet workers’ clubs, but they achieved a symbolic importance in American culture that cannot be measured by box office receipts. Few little cinemas ever existed in the United States. They appeared sporadically in the early 1920s but were unable to compete with the success of European imports. In late 1925, after imports declined sharply the previous year, the opening of the Shadowbox theater on West Twelfth street in New York started the first boom of little cinemas. Accord-
ing to Variety, by 1927 the United States had at least nineteen little cinemas in major cities, including nine in New York. This, of course, doesn’t begin to approach the sixty-six major first run houses the Film Daily Yearbook reported the same year. But the press devoted a disproportionate amount of space to the experimental programming of little cinemas—especially the growing number of film periodicals. The overexposure of little cinemas in the press indicates that their influence reached beyond the small audiences who attended the films and that the movement’s real importance is only evinced in a consideration of both film exhibition and criticism.

The following essays by Stern and Potamkin on the ideal movie theater are perhaps the clearest articulations of the philosophical position that subtended the underexplored American little cinema movement. At the intersection of cultural critique and experimental theater traditions, the little cinema movement sought to make film into art and spectators into individuals. Stern and Potamkin are unusual and incisive in their attempts to locate little cinemas’ impact in auditorium design. Below, I sketch some of the historical and theoretical background necessary to appreciate Stern’s and Potamkin’s important contributions to our understanding of the historically determined relationship between spectators and auditoria.

A THEATRICAL TRADITION
In many ways, little cinemas developed as the Other of the movie palace. They introduced a canon of non-Hollywood films, built an audience from untapped segments of the population, and, most importantly here, initiated an alternative form of spectatorship through oppositional exhibition practices. Some little cinemas competed with movie palaces’ popcorn and air-conditioning by offering counterattractions such as coffee and lobby art galleries. As these examples suggest, even the supplemental entertainment in little cinemas encouraged spectatorial attention rather than distraction.

Theater architecture, however, proved to be the most important factor in the development of an attentive audience. Little cinemas tended to inhabit buildings that had previously functioned as little (stage) theaters with very simple, black box constructions. As much as the little cinemas developed in opposition to mainstream exhibition, they followed smoothly from a trend in theater design initiated by the little theater movement (variously called “little,” “experimental” or “art” theater) which flourished in Europe, Russia, and America in the 1910s and 1920s. Rousseau, Adolphe Appia, Antonin Artaud, and many others dreamt of breaking down the barriers between performance and audience. The little theater movement attempted to collapse this distance by stripping the theater space of what was perceived as the many visual obstacles it had accumulated over centuries. These obstructions included excessive decoration, garish chandeliers, loggias, visible orchestras, and the proscenium arch. In their essays on the film auditorium, Stern and Potamkin address all of these elements of the traditional theater.

The “proscenium arch controversy,” which was at its height in the 1920s, is exemplary of the little theater movement’s attempt to forge a new model of theater space. Stern’s and Potamkin’s emphatic call for the elimination of the proscenium arch may seem the strangest proposition of their argument today. (Could a frame around the screen—especially in a darkened room—really interfere with the audience’s attention?) Yet stripping the movie theater of the proscenium arch was undoubtedly an obvious move in 1927 because its removal was a central tenet of the little theater movement.

Marvin Carlson’s historical analysis of theater semiotics traces the proscenium arch to early seventeenth century European theaters; there it was used symbolically to separate the plebeian actors from the monarch who sat in a “ducal box,” which was itself framed by an arch. (Recalling this monarchical design, movie palace magnates Roxy and Sid Grauman both had ornate private boxes built for their personal use.) The proscenium arch continued to accrue connotations of psychological separation between audience and stage. In the late nineteenth century, Richard Wagner and Gottfried Semper’s Bayreuth Festspielhaus distanced its audience from the performance with two proscenium arches. One arch framed the stage; the other framed the audience. The two arches were separated by an empty, dark area—the “mystic chasm”—that replaced the orchestra pit and was intended to increase the psychological distance between spectator and performance. Seymour Stern also wanted the pit replaced by a darkened space, but he was careful, in the only footnote he added to his essay, to distinguish his motives from Wagner’s. Stern’s “chasm of darkness” was
intended to “facilitate perception” by eliminating the distracting orchestra rather than further “divid[ing] the house as does the proscenium arch.”

In pursuit of an unmediated interaction between spectator and performance, several early twentieth century little theaters liberated the stage from the proscenium arch. In 1907, the Munich Künstlertheater was constructed without a proscenium arch. More famously, Jacques Copeau’s avant-garde Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier in Paris underwent two renovations—one in 1913 and another in 1919—which successively stripped the theater of all traces of the proscenium arch and other decorative elements.

In 1924, the Vieux-Colombier was turned into “the beacon of cinema art,” devoted to screening avant-garde films and a repertory of classics. This conversion of a little theater to a little cinema was the first of many and Potamkin’s pronouncement that the Vieux-Colombier was the “French parent” of the American little cinema movement seems accurate. The Vieux-Colombier’s elimination of distractions like the proscenium arch or concealment of others like musical accompaniment signaled the connected desires of promoting film as art and encouraging a more direct interaction between spectator and screen.

An experiment like Anthology Film Archives’s 1970 Invisible Theater, with side blinders on the seats directing vision to the screen, seems like an obvious successor to the little cinemas’ cult of attention. But their influence is much more pervasive and can be detected in the unadorned, black box movie theaters that are prevalent in malls as well as museums. Often seeming to lack any design at all, the simplicity of these modern cinemas can be traced through the 1920s little cinema movement to its predecessor: the little theater movement.

A Critical Tradition
Richard Abel’s linking of French film criticism with the development of ciné-clubs and specialized theaters like the Vieux-Colombier correctly characterizes the American little cinema movement as well. As Myron Lounsbury has shown, Stern and Potamkin participated in a wave of criticism that bore a reciprocal relationship to little cinemas’ programming of old, foreign, and independently produced films. The little cinemas’ successes in the late 1920s and early 1930s were paralleled by an increase in both regular film columns and journals devoted exclusively to film criticism. Stern and Potamkin started writing about film during the initial rise of little cinemas, and they commented almost exclusively on little cinema programs.

Seymour Stern began writing film criticism for The Greenwich Village Quill and The New York Sun in the summer of 1926. His early writing drew ambitiously from Marxian, psychoanalytic and Romantic discourses which, judging from references in his essays, Stern gleaned from contemporary cultural criticism rather than primary texts. His prose was marked by an elusive jargon which Robert Sherwood objected to in Life magazine and which Stern’s fellow reviewers at the Sun mocked, responding to his article “Cinema Sense: A Definition” with the good-natured parody “Cinema Nonsense: An Indefinite Definition.” Stern’s essay on the ideal film auditorium synthesized much of his first year of writing about film but, composed for The National Board of Review Magazine, it was more serious and carefully argued than his short pieces for the daily Sun.
In the following two years, Stern published dozens of articles on American and European little cinemas. His ideal cinema essay, however, is best seen with two more written for the journal *Experimental Cinema* in 1930 and 1931 as a trilogy on “cinema as a new instrument of human consciousness. As the consciousness itself.” In the *Experimental Cinema* essays, Stern’s interest in the cognitive effects of cinema was translated from an emphasis on audience attention, imported from drama criticism, to a fascination with Soviet film theory’s analysis of film form. This series turned out to be Stern’s most sustained theoretical effort. After his involvement in the controversy over Upton Sinclair’s release version of Eisenstein’s *Que Viva Mexico* in 1933, Stern reinvented himself as the gadfly of the critical community. He viciously attacked many of his colleagues during the next forty years and devoted himself to his *Birth of a Nation* apologia published by the journal *Film Culture* in 1965.

Harry Alan Potamkin’s first articles on film began to appear just one month after Stern’s. Potamkin had been inspired to write about the cinema after encountering the Parisian alternative cinema network on a trip to France in 1926. Before his untimely death in 1933, Potamkin contributed numerous articles to a diverse group of popular magazines and specialized journals. An active political organizer, Potamkin quickly became the foremost voice of Communist Party-USA film criticism, developing a sophisticated Marxist theory of production and reception. His earliest film criticism aspired to a New-Critical engagement with the medium, a position that falls within the purview of pre-Depression American communist thought. As a result, in “The Movie Palace,” one of his first pieces on cinema, Potamkin imagined an ideal film auditorium that would foster direct interaction between film and spectator.

In later writings, Potamkin continued to revise his prescriptive statements about exhibition to match his rapidly changing theory of cinema. Just a few years after publishing the essay that follows this introduction, Potamkin saw the movie theater as an inescapably coercive instrument. He no longer thought a direct experience of films was possible. Instead, he argued, little cinemas merely replaced one type of “film cult,” based on a ritualized experience of total entertainment, with another based on the fetish of individual films or stars. In the early 1930s, shortly before his death, Potamkin lost interest in commercial film theaters altogether and he began to advocate film clubs or even a film school devoted to the education of audiences through the encouragement of informed spectatorial reflection.

Stern’s and Potamkin’s revision of their early work on spectatorship was a result of the influence of European and Soviet film theory. Their 1927 essays, however, are indebted primarily to an individual theorist: Alexander Bakshy.

In the first year of their careers, both Stern and Potamkin published ar-
articles in *The National Board of Review Magazine* in which they attempted to situate their writings in a critical tradition. They both seized on the handful of film articles written a decade earlier by the Russian-British drama critic and translator Alexander Bakshy.\(^{21}\) It isn’t clear why these young critics simultaneously discovered Bakshy, but their attempts to resurrect him were premature. That same year, Bakshy was to emerge as one of the most prominent voices in the American film press, beginning a five year stint as the *Nation*’s film reviewer and contributing a series of important articles on cinema and Russian theater to *Theatre Arts Monthly*. But it was the more theoretically-inclined Bakshy of the 1910s that proved to be, as Potamkin dubbed him, “a prophet among movie critics” or, as Stern saw him, “the father of film-aesthetics.”\(^{22}\) Bakshy’s writing, grounded in theater history, greatly influenced Stern and Potamkin. I will briefly outline Bakshy’s theory of spectatorship and auditoria because it provided the framework for the two essays that follow.

**Conceiving Up the Position of the Spectator**

In Bakshy’s work, Stern and Potamkin found a theory of spectatorship informed by nineteenth century “discoveries” of the physiology of consciousness.\(^{23}\) After temporarily losing vision in one eye, Bakshy initiated a phenomenological investigation of his “monocular” experience and, through this analysis, he thought he had discovered the exact role vision plays in constructing the perception of individual identity. His book *The Path of the Modern Russian Stage* drew on his theory of vision to describe the range of individual and collective subjectivity available to theater and film spectators.\(^{24}\)

Bakshy rejected both scientific and abstract philosophical theories of perception because neither could account for, “how we actually feel space and how it affects our experience of the world.”\(^{25}\) Rather, Bakshy divided perception into degrees of “continuity” and “discontinuity.” Continuity, as Bakshy used the term, refers to a lack of depth perception and discontinuity refers to the differentiation of planes in space; this distinction further connotes for him a continuity or discontinuity between spectator and performance/film.

Bakshy observed that when one views the world through only one eye: “our sense of distance [becomes] considerably weakened, whilst surrounding objects will seem to fuse into one continuous mass.”\(^{26}\) In a vivid passage, Bakshy wrote that dim light exaggerates this condition (an important detail when theorizing theater illumination) so that, “as we walk, we should suddenly discover that the street itself moves straight against us, with its houses, railings, and passersby flowing in one incessant stream and suddenly growing in size the moment we approach them, and with the lamp-posts, in particular, springing up before our eyes when we least expect them. Speaking from personal experience, I may say that this sensation of continuity is not in the least amusing. Rather it is apt to depress our mind by the feeling of loss of individuality which overtakes us amidst the numberless objects clinging to us on all sides, giving no elbow-room for free movement, drawing us in to dissolve and merge in their insane mass.”\(^{27}\)

If monocular vision created what might be seen as an anti- *Flâneur/Flâneuse*, unable to distance him/herself from the objects of his/her gaze,\(^{28}\) “binocular” vision had the opposite effect; it increased the perception of individuation, encouraging the impression that “we are no longer part of an indefinite and unwieldy conglomeration of objects, but stand opposed to them all—independent individualities and masters of our movements and actions.”\(^{29}\) Increased depth perception, then, not only led to the conscious and physiological impression of individual identity, it allowed the perceiving subject an increased sense of mastery and agency.\(^{30}\)

This theory of perception had direct applicability to the theater and film auditorium. Bakshy wrote in a climate divided between, on one hand, the heightened realism and three-dimensional staging epitomized by David Belasco’s Broadway productions and, on the other, avant-garde experiments with painted backdrops and flattened stage space that characterized German Expressionist theater and the work of Adolphe Appia and Gordon Craig. Reacting to the increased radicalization of this opposition, Bakshy overdetermined the visual presentation of stage performance (ignoring the auditory aspect altogether). He defined spectatorship as a function of “the relationship between the stage and the auditorium, expressed in terms of space.”\(^{31}\)
In *The Path of the Modern Russian Stage*, Bakshy developed a précis for a history of theater space. This history, he argued, was determined by “two forces—one coming from the spectator, and the other from the performance.” Together they dialectically drove the theater’s “method of construing up the position of the spectator.” The auditorium naturally became the major focus of Bakshy’s work, because, in his schema, the auditorium was the container for the negotiation of spectator positions. If the exchange between performance and spectator occurred through vision, then the auditorium’s influence on the field of vision must be crucial.

*The Path of the Modern Russian Stage* ends with a chapter on the cinema. Bakshy believed film to be on the verge of a bifurcation similar to the one he had observed in the theater: between two- and three-dimensional presentation or, put another way, between continuity and discontinuity. In a few brief and enigmatic passages he draws on his knowledge of stage history to suggest the different auditoria that each type of film would require if his theory of vision was extrapolated. Three-dimensional films, Bakshy argued, should be presented using the traditional architectural conventions of the theater (proscenium arch, chandeliers, etc.) which separated the audience from the film. This would increase the distanciating effect of the three-dimensional film which already caused the spectator to see him or herself as distinct from the diegetic world (i.e. in a state of discontinuity). Two-dimensional films, he argued, produced a continuity between spectator and screen similar to monocular perception. In order to heighten this continuity, all vestiges of theater architecture that might obstruct the line of vision needed to be eliminated.

Bakshy’s theory of visuality and his speculations about the future of cinema are at once idiosyncratic and in dialogue with major discussions of theater design, including those of the little theater movement. Through Bakshy, Stern and Potamkin inherited a philosophical tradition that examined the effects of theater space on spectator subjectivity. Consequently, many of their prescriptive statements, which seem rooted in a 1920s aesthetic purism, make much more sense if we consider them as extensions of Bakshy’s theory of spectatorship.

**The Supplement**

Like Kracauer, Stern and Potamkin analyzed the film auditorium in response to the new form of mass spectatorship cultivated by movie palaces. Both Stern and Potamkin embraced Bakshy’s streamlined continuity model as an alternative to the baroque designs and multimedia presentation of the palaces. The continuity model supported Stern’s Romantic and Potamkin’s New-Critical desire for each spectator to have a unique experience of the film. In theory, by eliminating distractions and focusing attention on the flat screen, the continuity model immersed the spectator in the diegetic world and minimized reflective contemplation. The psychological manifestation of this visual effect was the collapse of any individuating, critical distance from the film. At the same time, however, the spectator’s absorption in the film resulted in
the abandonment of his or her connection to the surrounding audience members and in an unmediated experience of the work of art. Stern and Potamkin interpreted and utilized Bakshy’s complex theory differently but, throughout their essays, Bakshy guided both the questions they posed and the terms of their arguments.

Writing about the film auditorium one year earlier, Kracauer had directly addressed many positions similar to those expressed by Stern and Potamkin. He agreed that, “The two-dimensionality of film produces the illusion of the physical world without any need for supplementation… it should be wrested from every three-dimensional surrounding or it will fail as an illusion.” But Kracauer considered the Romantic nostalgia for illusion, premised on concepts like “personality, inwardness, tragedy” (more obvious in Stern than Potamkin) as anachronistic and “insincere” when applied to modernity. By contrast, he approved of movie palaces’ use of “supplementation” to interrupt spectatorial attention and the subsequent creation of a “homogeneous cosmopolitan audience.”

Kracauer’s perspicacious conclusions have been examined in many other places. What has been remarked upon less, and what is thrown into relief by a comparison with Stern’s and Potamkin’s essays, is a discourse on supplementation that all three essays presuppose. Remarkably, Kracauer, Stern, and Potamkin all share the assumption that supplements to screen entertainment alter the presentation in a way that contributes to a mass rather than an individualistic mode of spectatorship. Additionally, they all identify four supplemental elements that interrupt the rapt attention necessary for individual engagement: musical accompaniment, theater illumination, live performance, and décor. As I have been suggesting, the theory and experimental designs of the little theater movement clearly contributed to this shared assumption which so specifically linked visual attention to the spectators’ identity.

Kracauer’s analysis of audience attention in movie palaces has been privileged as a lone primary document on the subject. The following essays by Stern and Potamkin both reinforce and challenge Kracauer’s reading of the film auditorium by revealing that movie palace spectators are only fully grasped when paired with their counterparts in little cinemas.

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3Variety (October 29, 1937) 13, cited in Guzman 263.
5For a collection of reviews of little cinema programs see the Herman G. Weinberg Scrapbooks, Film Study Center, Museum of Modern Art, New York. Guzman and Lounsbury also discuss a wide range of little cinema criticism and publicity.
6Gomery provides a history of supplemental entertainment in both movie palaces and little cinemas. Guzman’s dissertation adds many more examples and a nuanced history to Gomery’s and Horak’s accounts of the little cinema movement.


Abel, *French Cinema*.


For a brief biography of Stern and an unreliable bibliography of his writings see Ira Gallen “Notes on a Film Historian” (1979), unpublished manuscript in Film Study Center. Museum of Modern Art.


See “Film Cults,” “The Ritual of the Movies,” and “A Proposal for a School of the Motion Picture” all in *The Compound Cinema*.


Bakshy was especially influenced by Herrmann von Helmholtz’s 3-D experiments. See Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990) on attention and vision in the nineteenth century.

My understanding of Bakshy is greatly indebted to Ben Singer, “Alexander Bakshy: The Emergence of Modernist Formalism and Early Spectatorship Theory” Society for Cinema Studies, annual meeting, La Jolla, CA, April 1998 and conversations with Ben.


Bakshy 129.

Bakshy 130.

Bakshy’s generalized discussion of agency and the spectator is applicable to both the flâneur and flâneuse, though they occupied very different social positions.

Bakshy 131.

Bakshy hypothesized further that large animals like elephants whose apperception permitted a greater degree of depth perception might be, “more inclined to the asserting of their individuality than are the smaller animals.” Bakshy 132.

Bakshy xvii.

Bakshy xvii.

Bakshy xix.


Kracauer 328.

Kracauer 328, 325.