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.

That is why "popular culture" matters. Otherwise, to tell you the truth, I don't give a damn about it.

– Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing 'The Popular'" in Raphael Samuel, ed., *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London: Routledge, 1981), 239.

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" that reads like the warning labels on drugs and dangerous household chemicals: use only in limited amounts, for specific purposes, and under careful guidance of adults.[1] 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 it is 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 that 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 a historical context. Concerns about television viewing, for example, have almost never led to consideration of earlier concerns about radio listening or moviegoing, 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 after inverting these terms.

How *do* nineteenth-century stage entertainments compare to twentieth-century mass media? They differ sharply 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 forms of entertainment 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 had 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 messages, 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.[2] 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 the debate about the worth of new drama. Other than a brief appearance in the 1950s of debate concerning the relative merits of radio and television, this distinction has been inconsequential. Similarly, the displacement of live performance by mass media shriveled debate about 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 as 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.[3] The terms "passive" and "active" do not appear in nineteenth-century discourses. Instead critics talk about audience rights or rowdiness, in all cases 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.[4]

The privileged in early modern Europe were not barred by their own moral or aesthetic sense of superiority from engaging in the same practices as the lower classes.[5] 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.[6] 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 wandered 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.[7]

By the mid-eighteenth century, London theatergoing 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 the 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.[8] Instead of the individual display of courtiers of the previous era, this plebeian audience expressed collective opinions, sometimes to the point of riot.[9]

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.[10] 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 of this. More rambunctious examples were the private theaters frequented by young gentry. Aristocratic audience sovereignty affirmed the social order.[11]

Lower classes too had an honored tradition of rights in the theater that were linked to street traditions of carnival and of crowd actions to enforce a moral economy.[12] Carnival, practiced in parades, hangings, and other public festivities, granted such prerogatives to lower classes on certain occasions when normal social order was turned upside down. The carnival tradition extended to street theater such as *commedia 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 and elites to retain control of social order. But carnival also presented the threat of getting out of control.

Overactive 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 men. During the Jacksonian era, rowdyism came to be considered a mark of lower-class status.[13] 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 the middle class had effectively labeled the 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 respectability. 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. 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* audi-

ences, 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, and passive, 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 they were learning from the entertainment that they shouldn't. Some of this was evident at the turn of the century when complaints about small-time vaudeville began 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 ones 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.[14]

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.[15] 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.[16]

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 preexisting "message," the preferred reading, and then rejoice in audiences' 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 *commedia dell'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 theatergoing.

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' desire for 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.[17]

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.[18] 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.[19] 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 reintroduction 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 audiences 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 "Diamond 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.[20]

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, and so on. 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 Asia.

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.[21] 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 house-