

## A Little History of Sleeping at the Movies

The sleeping movie audience in *Holy Motors* is presented as the director Leos Carax's nocturnal vision—a mirage that interrupts his tranquil repose, perhaps a dream that beckons him toward a false awakening, or a nostalgic wish become a nightmare. The shot that takes us out of this movie theater cuts like a knife through its atmosphere of murky torpor. The dark auditorium is replaced by the bright outdoors, from which we behold a young girl who looks intently out of a porthole-like window. She is separated from us and somewhat blurred by a sheet of glass that reflects dark shadows against a white sky while concealing the details of the interior space. The sounds of rustling wind and a moving train that come from the projected film in the previous scene continue to be heard in this new space. It is not clear how to relate this image to that which precedes it—as a reverse shot that reveals what is playing on the screen before the picture palace audience, as the sound bridge suggests? Or is the child in the window (who is played by the director's daughter, Nastya Golubeva Carax) meant to be identified with the figures assembled within the theater? Like the movie audience, she is transfixed in place by a framed visual spectacle, a seer perched behind a window and facing the camera, whose gaze is directed at a place beyond the frame. Another consonance is suggested by the pajamas she wears, mirroring Carax's garb in the previous shot as well as placing her within range of the cinema's soporific spell, in proximity to the dozing audience. Yet in contrast to the latter, this character evinces the alert curiosity of the child, embodying not a receptive stance that is disconnected, closed in upon itself, and mired in oblivion, but rather one characterized by wonder and receptive openness to the world. As the camera tracks back, the shadows are revealed to be the leafy outlines of trees, and the girl seems to be suspended among them, hovering and caught in the reflections of her own vision. The image calls to mind a quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Sleep lingers all our lifetime about our



FIGURE 52. *Holy Motors* (Leos Carax, 2012).

eyes, as night hovers all day in the boughs of the fir-tree.”<sup>1</sup> Dreaming by the window, this pajama-clad figure evokes a visual lineage of children dreaming in bed.

The child as both an emblem of visual absorption and an actual moviegoer appears in *Weegee’s People*, a book of the New York photographer’s images published in 1946. Organized as a rotation through the city’s places of gathering and entertainment—from the Metropolitan Opera to the jazz clubs of Harlem and the East Village, from the exhibitionist parade of high society to interchanges of a more clandestine nature—*Weegee’s People* includes a chapter entitled “The Children’s Hour.”<sup>2</sup> A brief introduction identifies the chapter’s contents as photographs of a Saturday matinee screening for children at the Loew’s Commodore Theater on Second Avenue in New York City. The images are made by a camera that, like the film camera in *Holy Motors*, is positioned inside the movie theater, trained away from the screen and toward the audience. The camera’s perspective regards the filmgoers as they regard the picture playing before them, with a gaze that pierces the theater’s darkness. Children of various ages make up the audience, their faces rendered ghostly and masklike under the harsh light of the infrared flashbulbs employed by Weegee in dark settings such as this one. The expressions on their faces range from serious intensity to grinning delight to bored indifference. They watch the film with varying degrees of attentiveness—some perched at the edge of their seats, alert and rapt like the girl framed in the circular window, others slumping into soft layers of clothing and upholstery, with more distracted gazes. In one of the photos, the children’s heads droop to the side like wilting flowers, their postural laxity a sign of the incipient arrival of sleep. In another one, a boy in a more advanced state of muscular surrender curls on his side, leaning his head on the armrest; his eyes have a vacant look, as if he no longer sees what is in front of him. Pressing further along this drowsy trajectory, we discover a girl who seems to



FIGURE 53. “The Children’s Hour,” from *Weegee’s People* (Weegee, 1946).

have reached a point of enviably peaceful relaxation. She leans back into her chair, melting into its depths, her arms flopped out on the armrests in a manner that recalls the tendency of some bodies to sprawl in their slumber. Her eyelids, like her body, droop heavily, as if the camera has caught her on the very cusp of sleep, in those final seconds just before she nods off completely.

These images from *Weegee’s People* represent a subset of a larger corpus of photographs shot in New York City’s movie theaters in the 1940s and 1950s by Arthur Fellig, known by his professional moniker Weegee. Most of these photos were made with an infrared photography process that combined a flash emitting long wavelengths of light undetectable by the human eye with film stock treated to register these wavelengths. Taking advantage of the cover of cinematic darkness and the “invisible light” of the infrared flash, Weegee shot moviegoers in the act of moviegoing. The majority of these images, like those from “The Children’s Hour,” cast a surreptitious spotlight on film viewers who betray no knowledge that they are being viewed. Thus, the voyeuristic position afforded by Weegee’s camera mirrors that which has been attributed to classical cinema’s spectator. The sum result of this endeavor is a casual visual ethnography of the New York movie audience, encompassing the heights of theatrical exhibition as well as the beginning of its decline. Details such as the shape of the chairs, the pattern of their upholstery, and the layout of the theater provide clues to the settings in which Weegee made

these portraits. While he took a large number of such photographs, the details of the décor suggest that they were taken in only a handful of theaters. Only a small selection of these photographs have ever been published.

The movie theater photographs sit comfortably within Weegee's project of documenting the forms of sociality, the sites of diversion and distraction, and the "passion to see" that flourished in the city's public spaces. (Christian Metz's definition of voyeurism serves as an apt description for Weegee's people<sup>3</sup>). The consumers of cinema are portrayed in a manner that recalls the audiences of the other venues to which his camera was also drawn, such as the circus, opera, and jazz clubs. They find yet another direct counterpart in the onlookers who gather outside on the streets to gawk at the unfortunate casualties of violence as readily as they do at organized spectacles. For instance, in one of his most well-known photographs, *Their First Murder* (1941), a group of Brooklyn children witness a murder outside their school, craning their necks to ogle the scene.<sup>4</sup> Similar images of the spectating crowd clustering at the site of accidents and crimes recur throughout his body of work. The visual hunger evinced by the spectators across these different locations is one and the same. The mixture of reactions expressed by them—by turns distressed and astonished, exhilarated and blasé—is also remarkably consistent. These underlying commonalities even rise to the level of a sardonic commentary by the photographer himself in some instances, as in a 1942 photo taken in front of the Tudor film theater on Third Avenue. In the aftermath of a fatal car accident, a group of onlookers encircles a corpse covered in newspapers. Above them in plain sight, the theater marquee displays the titles of an Irene Dunne double feature, *Joy of Living* and *Don't Turn Them Loose*. The ogling crowd here might very well include moviegoers drawn off course as they exit and enter the theater.

Weegee's photographs capture a culture of the look specific to wartime and postwar urban America, extraordinarily attuned as they are to the social character of the passion to see. Crowds of people convene wherever there is something to watch, these images tell us, and a particular kind of urban communality comes into being at the scene of the crime as much as in venues of exhibition and entertainment. To view these images in aggregate is to gain an insight into the perceptual dynamics, states of exposure, forms of relationality, and imbrications of anonymity with intimacy that manifest across a landscape of urban spectacle—or across the city *as* spectacle, an idea suggested by the title of Weegee's most famous book, *Naked City*. Moreover, not only do his photos document this passion for seeing, but they embody it in the very conditions of their production and circulation: Weegee's successful career as a photographer was enabled by the newspapers, tabloids, and illustrated magazines that thrived in the age of the picture press by catering to the visual hunger of the reading public and fostering a robust market for photographic images.<sup>5</sup> Although he established his initial reputation as a photojournalist with an uncanny knack for timing when shadowing the police beat and capturing sensationalist images



FIGURE 54. “Joy of Living” (Weegee, 1942).

of true crime, what is most compelling in his work is not the crime itself but the reactions elicited by it, as Lucy Sante has noted. The many images he made of people caught in the act of looking, their line of vision trained on a point beyond the edges of the frame, are “in many ways his truest portraits. Not only are his subjects so absorbed in what they are viewing that they give themselves to the camera, uncomposed and naked, but by virtue of the act of looking they become avatars of the photographer himself. Weegee puts himself in their shoes, and imagines them in his. They are a city of eyes, joined together by curiosity.”<sup>6</sup>

Weegee’s interest in shooting film audiences can be construed as an extension of the broader themes and structures of the look found throughout his photography, taking into account the centrality of the movies as a popular pastime. Not only does his work situate the audience of movies within the broader context of an urban culture of visibility, but in the process of documenting this audience he also forges an immanent perspective on the experience of cinema in public theatrical settings. Indeed, Weegee’s images constitute something rare—a stealth photographic archive of film spectatorship around the midpoint of the twentieth

century. By affording access, however piecemeal and mediated it may be, to real filmgoers in real theaters, his photographs contribute important insights on the history of cinema spectatorship in the form of visual arguments about the movie audience. They constitute a photojournalistic discourse that can be usefully brought into dialogue with those that invoke the audience as a theoretical construct, an abstracted model, a textual position, or a statistical entity. Taken together, the images construct both a visual record of the activity of filmgoing and an editorial commentary on this activity from the point of view of a photographer who “understood the darkness of night as the enabling condition of his city work” and who presented his practice as a secretive art of the photoflash.<sup>7</sup> In many instances, this particular way of seeing involved pulling back the cover of night to expose the indiscretions masked by it and the nakedness underneath, in a voyeuristic or even invasive fashion. At the same time, in so doing Weegee forged a pact with darkness and obscurity. As Alan Trachtenberg describes his photography, “the light that discloses is the same light that obscures with a sense of darkness closing in,” and blackness is “the medium within which vision occurs.”<sup>8</sup>

This paradoxical entwinement of revealing and concealing is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the infrared exposures taken by Weegee in the near complete absence of perceptible light, seizing a liquid moment from the darkness without making a ripple in it.<sup>9</sup> Consider the first of the images in “The Children’s Hour,” which frames a broad section of the balcony seating area inside the theater. The projection booth is positioned in the upper left corner of the picture, at the furthest rear of its plane, so that the light from the projector shoots out diagonally through the space of the theater, drawing a cone of bright white across the width of the photograph. The brilliant electric glow of the projector’s beam obliterates everything in its path and erases all markers of dimension or depth, almost as if it were painted onto the picture’s surface. Yet the reflections it casts on the surrounding space enable the viewer to discern the audience members who fill nearly all the balcony seats (some of them haloed by the reflected luminosity) and to make out architectural features like the ornate molding on the ceiling. Even as the light erases depth and repels the gaze, the darkness acquires features and offers itself to the gaze, emerging into visibility without relinquishing its character as darkness. The matrix of illumination and obscurity, perceptibility and imperceptibility established in this image offers a critical framework in which to consider not just the other images in “The Children’s Hour,” but all Weegee’s movie theater photographs. In reminding us of just how dark were the places where he took these photos, the image crystallizes the method by which the interior blackness of the theater is made into the medium for a photographic vision, one that divulges dimensions and qualities of the cinema experience that might otherwise slip by unnoticed. The darkness provides a cover for not only the audience members but also Weegee himself, armed with his voyeuristic camera and “invisible light” (as he liked to call the infrared flash), and disguised as a concession vendor roaming the movie theater’s aisles or blending in with the audience.<sup>10</sup>

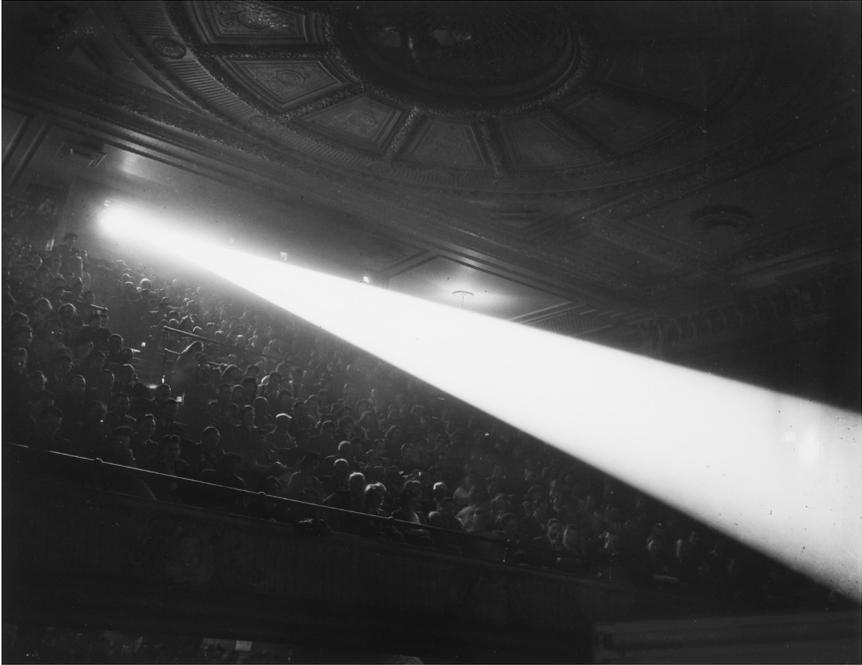


FIGURE 55. “The Children’s Hour,” from *Weegee’s People* (Weegee, 1946).

If these photographs accomplish a kind of seeing in the dark, it is nonetheless a seeing that proceeds blindly by way of sending out probes toward what is shrouded from sight. In Weegee’s account of the making of these images, he describes aiming his camera at the audience and pressing the shutter release in response to the sounds he heard, often without knowing exactly what he was shooting.<sup>11</sup> With this technique, he enlists the camera for what Eluned Summers-Bremner calls a project of “nocturnal literacy,” naming a historical and critical endeavor “to recognize the complex interaction of unconscious or invisible activities.”<sup>12</sup> The cultivation of nocturnal literacy can be described in similar terms as an endeavor to see in the dark, reaching for discernment of those modes of agency and states of being that are specific to obscurity in its different forms. Applying this photographic vision and nocturnal literacy to the scene of film projection opens up new perspectives on the film audience and the experience of spectatorship in shared public spaces. It paves the way for a recognition that those aspects of reception that are withheld from visibility are not perforce extinguished, obliterated, or negated. To construe darkness as a force of derealization on the basis that it erases things from sight, as many have argued, is to neglect a valuable opportunity to enlist the other senses for an understanding of the cinema experience. Weegee’s photographic archive of filmgoing points beyond the oblivion thesis toward another view of the theater and what it contains. They construct a vantage point on the cinema situation wherein

a rubric of invisibility that prioritizes the faculty of sight gives way to a rubric of opacity that captures the haptic and multisensory dimensions of reception.

Within Weegee's archive are several photographs that frame the theater auditorium in a long view, thus conveying the large size of the audience and implying the cultural status of movies as mass medium. They differ from Weegee's other pictures of the cinema audience in that they appear to be taken before the commencement of the screening (or perhaps during an intermission), in an auditorium that is still at least partially lit. The amassed filmgoers fill the frame and extend beyond its borders, their faces visible although not distinguishable in much detail. The camera is typically positioned on a tripod near the front of the room, at a slightly high and transverse angle, as if on the stage or in a box. From here it can be spotted by the people in the room, as suggested by one photo in which several members of the audience who are closest to the camera look directly at it, returning its gaze. These images compose a portrait of the moviegoing masses that we have seen before. They recall *Holy Motors*, which refers to a golden age of theatrical exhibition much like the one documented by Weegee; or the graphic renderings of an earlier era, such as the printed illustrations of the *foule immobile* that Jennifer Wild reads in connection with the rise of absorptive spectatorship as a gentrified mode of reception in France; or, more proximately, other photographic images of actual moviegoers, such as those taken by J. R. Eyerman at the 1952 Hollywood premier of *Bwana Devil*, the first commercial feature-length motion picture exhibited in 3D.<sup>13</sup> In one of these photos, published in *Life* magazine in that same year and circulated widely thereafter, we behold a sea of filmgoers all seated in a uniform grid-like formation, looking in the same direction, and wearing Polaroid glasses rimmed with bulky white cardboard. The 3D glasses render them uncannily similar in appearance while also serving as a visual reminder of the purpose that joins them together, such that this photo has come to stand as the paradigmatic image of cinema's mass audience and even, more broadly, of the "society of the spectacle."<sup>14</sup> As the *Life* caption stated, "the audience itself looked more startling than anything on the screen."<sup>15</sup>

Across such representations of the audience, the construction of cinema as a medium of "simultaneous collective reception" necessarily emphasizes certain features of the theatrical experience at the expense of others.<sup>16</sup> To depict the audience as a unitary mass is to call attention to the commonalities within which the individual viewers are bound—from the uniform orientation of their bodies, evenly fixed in place in the rows of seats, to the synchronicity of their reactions. The long shots of the movie audience adopt a distant view wherein the particularity of the detail recedes into the totality of the pattern. Stepping back to grasp the whole, they relinquish a clear sense of the spectator as an individual body, along with variations and distinctions that mar the total effect. This distance also has a critical edge, charged with the intimation that the viewer of the photograph, like the man in *Holy Motors*, sees the spectators as they cannot see themselves. Here



FIGURE 56. “An Eyeful at the Movies” (J. R. Eyerman, 1952).

what Sante calls the “city of eyes” converges with the community of “eyes without bodies” that Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gillece associates with the black box theater. The very composition of the photographs implies the process by which audience members leave their identities behind in the act of joining together in a collective visual experience.

If such images nod to familiar conventions of portraying the audience of cinema, however, they in fact stand out as anomalies in Weegee’s body of work. For the vast majority of the photographs he shot inside movie theaters disregard these conventions, rejecting a distanced totality in favor of more intimate and fragmentary views. The camera seems driven by a principle of idiosyncratic selectivity, relinquishing its grasp of the whole in order to fixate on the singularity of this body or that group of spectators, this particular pose or that facial expression. An impulse to get up close and inside of the scene of reception is also implied

in Weegee's way of printing the photographs. In his archive are many shots that consist of a blown-up and cropped portion of another photograph capturing a larger section of seats in a wider framing. By selecting and extracting specific figures, he creates portraits of filmgoers singly or in pairs.<sup>17</sup> Thus, certain audience members are singled out and pointed to as targets of visual interest, set apart from the larger crowd. In other instances, Weegee hones in on certain figures during the process of shooting, as if compelled to linger on them for a while to capture their expressions in their multiplicity—whether by framing them from different angles or by creating a series of snapshots across an interval of time. An example of the latter can be found in a group of photos of two women (sisters to judge from their likeness to each other) who react to the film they are watching with unrestrained delight. The photos show (and we can sense, exult in) the shifts in their expressions, from the facial to the full-bodied, as they move between amused smiles, open-mouthed laughter, and exuberant hand gestures. Implied in Weegee's approach, then, is a process of zooming and cutting in, one that proceeds along both a spatial and a temporal axis, drawing us deeper into the space of the auditorium, further into the duration and rhythms of the screening, and into close proximity with individual moviegoers. Such an approach also constructs a different relationship between the photographer and the subject, who now occupy the same space rather than disparate positions vis-à-vis the scene of projection, the one uncritically absorbed and the other critically distant. What results is another kind of portrait, one that departs from the conventional iconography of the spectating mass welded together in simultaneity and fixation.

For Weegee, as much as for Metz, the view from inside the theater produces ample material “for a socio-analytic typology of the different ways of attending a film screening.”<sup>18</sup> The audience captured by his camera defies reduction to a city of eyes without bodies or to an undifferentiated series of punctual subject positions. Rather, it wears the corporeal and sartorial signs of its historicity and sociological variety. In closer views, the homogeneous surface of the uniformly arranged mass becomes rippled by the heterogeneity of different ages, races, ethnicities, classes, and genders. Among the audience we see middle-aged businessmen in suits, who appear to have come to the movies directly from their offices; other workers who seem driven into the theater by exhaustion as much as visual desire; couples on dates; solitary filmgoers; groups of friends; sailors; people in fancy evening dress as well as casual street clothes. They include African American and Asian American filmgoers; children, teenagers, and the elderly. (In one of the photos, a woman in dark sunglasses can be seen, suggestive of how vision-impaired filmgoers may have experienced the cinema as an aural medium.)

Besides such demographic differences, the photographs also construct a strikingly multifarious catalog of all the activities that can possibly transpire during a screening, proceeding in parallel or at cross-purposes with the watching of a film. On the one hand, some of the viewers conform with the standard image of the



FIGURE 57. Girls Watching Movie (Weegee, ca. 1943).

immersed spectator oriented toward the screen, fully involved in what it depicts, and paying no heed to their surroundings. On the other hand, we also discover filmgoers who eat, drink, feed one other, gaze at each other, huddle with and lean on their neighbors, talk, laugh, lock lips and fondle (or repel their companion's attempts at physical contact), close their eyes, sink into positions of rest, and nap. Sometimes a variety of responses come together within a single frame, as in a remarkable shot of a group of young filmgoers. One of them has upstaged the film with a demonstration of her bubble-gum-blowing prowess, amusing those seated around her; the child directly in front of her appears to be out cold in a deep sleep, having twisted herself in her seat to repurpose the armrest as a pillow; meanwhile, others in their vicinity remain undistracted in their viewing. The juxtaposition of such diverse activities within the same composition makes for a portrait of the movie audience that stands in stark contrast to the examples discussed above. The perspective on film reception offered here complicates the prevailing historical account of spectatorship as a progressive refinement of a dispositive for controlling and binding the viewer's consciousness, whose lock hold on its subject is broken only with the decline of the theatrical exhibition of moving images and, concomitantly, the advent of platforms, media, and spaces that usher in more distracted, fragmentary, and mobile practices of reception.

The threat that cinema began to face in the 1950s with the rise of television, and its subsequent endeavor to maintain its audience numbers by means of technological innovations such as 3D, are noted in the text that accompanies several of Weegee's movie theater photographs published in the October 1953 issue of *Brief*. A commission from the magazine's editor for a pictorial report on the current state of moviegoing, entitled "Movies Are Better Than Ever," provided the photographer with another occasion to bring his camera into the film theater—in this case, one of the all-night venues of Manhattan's West 42nd Street "jungle."<sup>19</sup> The collation of several of the resulting images into a seven-page story marks another instance in which individual views of audience members come together as a visual argument about the cinema experience, now framed by an editorial voice that speaks directly to the historicity of this experience. The article begins with a question: "Why do people keep going to the movies, instead of staying home to watch television?" A different answer is proffered in each of the three subtitled sections that follow: "It's a good place to eat," "It's a fine place to sleep," and "It's a wonderful place to make love."<sup>20</sup> The first of these sections recalls the pictures of the children's matinee screening from *Weegee's People*, presenting images of children snacking as they watch the film (including a cropped close-up of the bubble-blowing girl). The second section compiles views of filmgoers asleep in their chairs, along with a shot of a startled-looking man who has just been awakened by the usher. The final section is illustrated with six photos of a man and woman sitting on a balcony, embracing and kissing. The distance between their bodies shrinks across the series of shots, while the cropping of the images also becomes tighter, ending with a close-up of the couple locking lips. The article concludes with a brief addendum that includes two images of people actually watching the film (including a photo of the laughing sisters), accompanied by text that follows "It's a wonderful place to make love" with the phrase, ". . . and, incidentally, to see a feature film or two."

The emphasis placed by the article on eating, sleeping, and lovemaking offers a clue to the question of why these activities are depicted with such frequency in Weegee's movie audience photographs. Given the orientation of *Brief* as a pulp magazine addressing a heterosexual male readership, combining topical stories with photographs of female pin-up models, the build-up to a voyeuristic glimpse of the amorous exchanges among couples in the audience is not surprising. The issue includes another such glimpse on its inside back cover, a full-page high angle shot of lovers kissing in a crowded theater, and in the sleep section of the article, which incongruously includes an image of a sailor clutching the chest of the woman next to him. What stands out most about the couple here and the one spotlighted in the final section are the disturbing signs that these are not consensual exchanges: the woman with the sailor holds herself in a stiff, self-protective pose, while the other woman attempts to repel her companion's advances. Curiously, the most unreservedly passionate embraces caught on film during the shoot—such as that of a couple whose bodies turn away from the screen to intertwine as they kiss, with



FIGURE 58. Weegee, “Movies Are Better than Ever,” *Brief*, October 1953.

the woman’s bare feet propped up on the seat in front of her—did not make the final cut for publication.<sup>21</sup>

Setting aside the prurient interest of what is masked by the darkness of the theater, however, it is notable that “Movies Are Better,” in its rhetoric and visual evidence, affirms in no uncertain terms the enduring attraction of the theatrical film experience. This attraction resides least in the film itself, to which the article refers only as an afterthought. The position constructed in Weegee’s photographs rejects the supposition already emerging at this time that audiences could be reliably enticed into the theater by a bigger picture and richer sound. These photos, the article declares, prove “why Hollywood doesn’t need 3-D, super-screens or stereophonic sound to keep the customers coming.”<sup>22</sup> Indeed, reflecting this stated position, although Weegee took several photos of a 3D film screening for this assignment (including that of the passionately kissing couple), none of the 3D shots appeared in the magazine. In this respect, the *Brief* photographs differ from Eyerman’s photograph of the *Bwana Devil* audience—a contemporaneous example of cinema’s collective of viewers itself viewed in the pages of the illustrated magazine—in their manner of depicting the movie audience, in their downplaying of the appeal of new exhibition technologies, and in their undercutting of the very notion that the audience’s involvement with cinema is primarily visual.



FIGURE 59. Weegee, "Movies Are Better than Ever," *Brief*, October 1953.

For one thing, these images seem to insist, the gratifications of cinema are oral just as much as, or even more than, they are visual. They compose a multifaceted taxonomy of this cinematic orality: chewing, blowing, munching, sucking, and licking, on gum, popcorn, candies, ice cream cones, fingers, and lips. The figures singled out for attention—like the boy in the baseball cap whose entire face blissfully contracts around the lollipop that he holds carefully with both hands—defy the reduction of the film spectator to a disembodied gaze. From the abstract ideal of the pair of eyes fixated on the screen, we arrive at the photo-documentary image of a pair of lips suctioned to a blob of sugar. To the extent that the photos offer a glimpse into the history of spectatorship, it is from a perspective that seeks out and magnifies dimensions of the experience that are elided by accounts of film reception as "a particular system of consciousness limited to a single sense," to recall a phrase from Jean Epstein.<sup>23</sup> In calling attention to the multisensory indulgences afforded by the movie theater, they verify those competing accounts that redefine reception on the basis of its tactile and corporeal engagements.<sup>24</sup>

Weegee's depiction of moviegoing anticipates not only film theory's turn toward phenomenologies of the body, but also film histories that turn to the specific spaces in which films were commercially projected as the starting point from which to build an account of reception. Such spaces play as determining a role in shaping

the audience's experience as the films and the qualities of the projection, these images tell us, as they endeavor to grasp the unique character and affordances of the black box theater. At the same time, what emerges across the photos is a running counterargument to the characterization of the movie theater as a machine for oblivion—or to put it differently, a qualification to this notion, in the sense that the viewer rendered “oblivious of self” can just as easily become oblivious to the film. If theater designers strove for an architecture of dematerialization and purified presence, inheriting from the nineteenth-century concert hall an aesthetic ideal of transcendence along with a modern political project of discipline, Weegee's photographs attest to—and celebrate—the shortcomings of this regulatory model. They present the movie theater less as a perfect viewing dispositive than as an undisciplined zone in which the unified orientation of the viewing collective is just as prone to unravel and dissipate. Within its walls, spectators can both come together and pull apart, uncompliant bodies occupy space in their particular fashion and for their own purposes, and the hum of social life persists despite the code of silence. Weegee's perspective aligns with the views of writers who have challenged the notion that the conditions of film exhibition automatically bring about a dampening of cinema's publicness in favor of isolation. He confirms Wolfgang Schivelbusch's insight that, notwithstanding the extinguishing powers of the darkened theater, the audience will not readily give up its social experience.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the things that people do inside the movie theater are not so different from what they do in other urban spaces. The pleasures of cinema are coterminous with, not cut off from, a larger continuum of public leisure.

In setting forth a definition of movies as, above all, a *place*, “Movies Are Better” echoes a comment by Roland Barthes: “When I say cinema, I can't help think ‘theater’ more than ‘film.’”<sup>26</sup> The position constructed by Weegee's photographs bears comparison with the standpoint of Barthes's essay “Upon Leaving the Movie Theater.” Both inquire into the specific color of the theater's obscurity. Both proceed from a recognition that darkness acts upon the bodies assembled in this space not only as a force of erasure and dislocation, but also as a substance that solicits, envelops, and penetrates the spectator. Bringing his own practice of nocturnal literacy to bear on the scene of reception, Barthes discovers that the theater's darkness “touches me in a much more intimate way than the clarity of visual space.”<sup>27</sup> If the absence of light operates as a constraint upon the audience's sight, it also offers them a remission from the gaze of others, hence a momentary release from the burden of being seen. Attuned to the ways that not just eyes but also bodies adjust to these conditions, Barthes takes note of how he and those around him respond with a “relaxation of postures.” They do not take their seats so much as they “slip” into them, as if easing into a bed and drawing the darkness around them like a blanket.<sup>28</sup> The bodily lexicon of theatrical space described by Barthes finds a correlate in Weegee's presentation of the movie theater as a space in which “an inclination for idleness” takes over, and where self-monitored comportment devolves into relaxed

disportment.<sup>29</sup> Here, too, the filmgoers respond to the invitation of ease by hanging up their coats, propping up their feet, and sinking into their seats. Conspicuously unguarded in their facial expressions and bodily postures, they make themselves at home while being surrounded by strangers, discovering a reprieve from the public crowd even while remaining in its midst. In the images of filmgoers eating and smooching, slouching and sleeping, we encounter the most vivid evidence of the curious amalgam of privacy and publicity that Barthes identifies as the movie theater's unique property. And even if cinematic darkness provides the assurance of a cover, it nonetheless asserts a crucial difference from the enclosures of the domestic sphere. Peopled with other bodies, "anonymous, crowded," it retains the charge of the unfamiliar. In this tension between intimacy and anonymity resides the cinema's clandestine quality, its obscurity becoming "the color of a very diffuse eroticism."<sup>30</sup>

The diffuse eroticism named by Barthes takes root in "the idleness of bodies" that are unoccupied—which is to say, not in the aroused bodies of filmgoers busy at foreplay. To understand his view of cinematic reception, then, we should look to the most idle of the audience members captured by Weegee, the spectator who dozes off. This figure clearly held a special fascination for Weegee, surpassing even the voyeuristic appeal of kisses in the dark, as evidenced by the sheer number of such images he left behind. The shots of drowsy children from the matinee screening of "The Children's Hour" are recalled by the photograph in *Brief* of a young boy who dozes with his head leaning back on his seat, his body pushed to one side so that he can curl up his leg on the cushion. Multiple shots of this boy upon whom sleep lays the lightest of touches can be found in Weegee's archive, showing him from various angles and attesting to his intrigue for the photographer. Among them too are numerous images of other sleeping children that never appeared in print—a girl slumping down into her chair as if pulled by the weight of her unconscious body, a boy curling around himself in a semi-fetal fashion, a teenager who makes her rest more comfortable by propping up her feet on the seat in front of her. Bodies teeter off the axis of verticality in an endless variety of ways, composing an archive of spectatorial disorientations.

Weegee's slumbering spectators range in age from youth to teenagers to adults, speaking to the reach of sleep's seductions. The lack of self-consciousness expressed by young audiences in other ways is matched by the apparent ease with which they relax their limbs and surrender wakefulness. Turning to the adult filmgoers in this corpus, we encounter additional qualities of sleep and different degrees on the spectrum between fatigued deprivation and pleasurable excess. The lightness of posture in the boy pictured in *Brief* contrasts with the heaviness of the middle-aged woman whose photo is next to his. With her rumpled coat, crinkled paper bag, and slack jaw, she radiates a palpable exhaustion; for her, the theater is perhaps a much-needed respite as much as a diversion. Less burdened is the slumber of a male office worker, his tie neatly tucked and his fedora balanced on his lap,



FIGURE 60. Sleeping at the Movies (Weegee, ca. 1943).

as if to carefully guard against any tell-tale signs of truancy. He maintains an air of composure even while stealing a nap—unlike the man in another of the *Brief* images who has completely let himself go, sprawled in an ungainly fashion across a row of seats. Another photograph, in contrast to the innocence of the sleeping children, has a seedier, even postcoital quality. Looking down from a balcony, the camera captures an unconscious man in worker's garb. His shirt disheveled, and his belt strap dangles loosely. The sleep pictured by Weegee comes in numerous varieties, wavelengths, and weights. It can be soft and floating, or leaden and profound. Its arrival exposes the postural inclinations of individual bodies, and sets into relief the physical traces of their relationship to work and rest, necessity and indulgence. It is an index of phases of spectatorship and the ways that time leaves its imprint on immobilized bodies.

This fixation on slumbering spectators at the movies is consistent with the leit-motif in Weegee's larger body of work of the tired body that takes relief wherever it may be had. Both of his books *Naked City* and *Weegee's People* devote entire sections to sleepers *en plein air* and in public—nodding off in their workplaces, bars, and nightclubs; crashed out on park benches and in cars; and huddling under storefronts with cardboard and newspapers as bedding. One of his most famous photos, taken in 1941 and reprinted in *Naked City*, shows a group of children curled up together on the fire escape of their Lower East Side tenement apartment on a hot summer night. Taken together, these images compose a portrait of sleep that pushes against social acceptability by dislocating it from the proper place to which it is assigned. In this shift from the unseen sanctuary of the private bedroom to the exposed spaces of public life, sleep becomes the image of the city at its most



FIGURE 61. Sleeping at the Movies (Weegee, ca. 1943).

naked and vulnerable. Viewed in these contexts, the act of sleeping is shadowed by implications of vagrancy, illicitness, and disorder. Weegee refers to the proscriptive forces that threaten to disturb these vagrant sleepers while also positioning himself as their ally, looking upon and watching over them: “So sleep on stranger . . . no one will bother you . . . not even the cops . . . Sunday is a good day for sleeping—so is any other day—when one is tired.”<sup>31</sup> In *Weegee’s People*, he even inserts himself among them: the book’s frontispiece is a portrait of the author dozing on a park bench in Washington Square.<sup>32</sup> Across these images, the representation of sleep as a natural need shared by all bodies intertwines with the recognition of sleep as a resource that is unevenly distributed and differently accessed in a stratified society. For the unhoused, poor, and ethnic and racial minorities whose nocturnal existence Weegee documented, the guarantee of shelter is as precarious as the satisfaction of other material necessities.

Bringing this wider perspective on public sleeping into the spaces of filmic exhibition, Weegee’s photographs remind their viewer that the movie theater endured as a haven for vagrants and loiterers—or at the very least, those for whom the price of admission was not an insurmountable barrier—as much as a magnet for cinephiles. In many ways, the evolution of film reception from the early period to the classical, from the cinema of attractions through the ages of the nickelodeon, picture palace, and neutralized modern theater, traces a trajectory defined by gentrification, the disciplining of the corpus of film viewers, and, as Miriam Hansen has argued, the “invention” of the spectator as a “potentially universal” and “ostensibly classless” consumer.<sup>33</sup> But just as Weegee’s movie audience photos cut against the grain of a familiar iconography of the faceless moviegoing masses,

so they also display an attunement to illicit modes of reception that persist even despite the best efforts of cinema's producers, exhibitors, designers, and reformers. From the vantage point of those who take their rest wherever they can find it, the movie theater sells more than just a visual commodity or experience; it provides a temporary shelter.

The checked-out filmgoers that he brings to our notice call attention to an undeniable aspect of the movie theater as a commercial establishment that, in the words of John David Rhodes, "effectively sells very short-term leases (what we euphemistically call movie tickets) for very small parcels of real estate (movie seats)."<sup>34</sup> This aspect was also observed by Samuel Delany in his essay "Times Square Blue," an account of the West 42nd Street jungle at a later juncture that likewise offers a glimpse into the movie theater (in particular, the porn theaters that thrived in the 1970s) as a "humane and functional" public space, "fulfilling needs that most of our society does not yet know how to acknowledge."<sup>35</sup> Along with stories of sexual and social contact, Delany shares his recollection of an elderly homeless man who for many years lived "permanently" at one theater.<sup>36</sup> The status of the filmgoer as a leaseholder is typically eclipsed by their status as a viewer, engaged in a transaction centering on the film as a visual commodity. Nonetheless, it comes to the fore in certain circumstances, as demonstrated here, injecting into the history of filmgoing a revived awareness of differences of class. As an enterprise of short-term tenancy, the movie theater—and, especially, the all-night venues that Weegee frequented—sits on a continuum with the flophouses and hotels that he also photographed.<sup>37</sup> Even if the prohibitions against public sleeping on the streets apply equally inside, as we are reminded by the presence of the usher patrolling the aisle in the *Briefs* spread, the darkness nonetheless harbors the possibility of escaping the eyes of authority, and the passivity of the captivated viewer might serve as a camouflage for other insensible states.

For Barthes as well, the cinema is a fine place to sleep or just to slouch along the slippery slope from which waking consciousness drops off. Setting off from his own movie experiences, he arrives at an account of reception that considers how a mood of indolence can readily detour the currents of attention to the point of decentering the film as its primary object. "Upon Leaving the Movie Theater" begins with the writer's apprehension of his languid state as he exits the cinema. Referring to himself in the third person, he writes, "His body has turned into something soporific, soft, calm: limp as a sleepy cat."<sup>38</sup> Thus, Barthes joins his contemporaries Jean-Louis Baudry and Metz in singling out the special relationship between cinema and somnolence in this essay, which represents his own contribution to the 1975 issue of *Communications* on "Psychoanalysis and Cinema."<sup>39</sup> "Upon Leaving the Movie Theater," like the essays alongside which it appeared, places the filmgoer within the ambit of sleep as well as a host of adjacent conditions such as hypnosis, vacancy, reverie, and dream. In contrast to these other discussions, however, it stops short of framing its observations within a regressive thesis that understands narcosis

to be the expression of an ideological relation to the apparatus defined by deception and confusion. Instead, Barthes disjoins the spell of ideology from the spaces of exhibition. Thinking further back, he identifies the beginnings of his mood of lethargy before he even steps foot inside the theater. It is not the hangover of the cinema's trance that Barthes detects, but rather "as though, before even entering the theater, the traditional prerequisites for hypnosis were met: a feeling of emptiness, idleness, inactivity." And just as hypnosis does not begin upon entering the dark theater, neither does it terminate with the exit into daylight. On leaving the movie theater one finds oneself in yet another cinema, "the Cinema of a society."<sup>40</sup> Who, asks Barthes, can fully escape ideology?

At other points in the essay, Barthes conspicuously refrains from placing the filmgoer on either side of a binary opposition between the murky consciousness of unreflective immersion and the illuminating clarity of a more resistant stance. Such a schema does not exhaust the range of orientations to the theater's darkness. In the midst of a situation that contrives by every available means to ensnare its audience, to "glue" their eyes and ears to the screen, Barthes discovers yet another stance, a means of unprying himself from the rectangle of light that also leads him toward "another way of going to the cinema."<sup>41</sup> To be sure, he concedes the efficacy of those filmmaking approaches that "loosen the glue's grip," awakening the viewers from hypnosis with an appeal to their critical faculties, as in the Brechtian alienation effect.<sup>42</sup> But Barthes does not want to break the somnolent spell or to unravel the "cinematographic cocoon" that it spins around him.<sup>43</sup> Sinking further into his drowsy haze, he finds that it generates a distancing effect of its own. It dislodges his identification with the film and returns him to his body, to his situation, and to the place he occupies in this tactile setting of sounds and textures, mingling with an "obscure mass of other bodies."<sup>44</sup> If a body can easily be lost or left behind in the depths of the movie theater, it can just as easily be found again, inhabited with newfound luxuriance. The black box is not a void, Barthes demonstrates, but rather a proximate space of corporeal qualities. In this darkness, I "shine" with the fortuitous discovery that I might even inhabit "two bodies at once"—a "narcissistic body" lost in its gaze and a "perverse body" caught up in that which exceeds the image.<sup>45</sup> The pleasures he takes from the cinema are not solely of a narcissistic order, deriving from a phantasmatic identification with the film, for they have to do with everything besides the image. He will not readily renounce these pleasures for the sake of knowledge and demystification; rather, he reasserts his claim to them in the name of amorousness and perversity. From his perspective, too, sleepiness marks the insistence of the body that occupies space in its own fashion and for its own purposes.

The problem of how to awaken the hypnotized spectator is therefore supplanted by a more intriguing and open-ended question, as articulated by Victor Burgin, of "whether somnolence itself may not be the spectator's best defence before the spectacle of the Law."<sup>46</sup> Within a milieu dominated by a theoretical definition of cinema

as “a perfect lure” capturing the consciousness of the viewer, Barthes expresses his dissent from such a definition by performing and recollecting a mode of distracted, disoriented, and deviant spectatorship.<sup>47</sup> For him the appeal of cinema resides less in the attributes of the filmic image than in the capacity of the theater to play host to a diffuse gaze, to a decentered and vagrant mode of attention, and to gratifications of a tactile nature. If these receptive dynamics elude programmatic control, they also prove evasive for the filmgoer who would place them under the harsh light of scrutiny—and all the more so for the theorists who, in striving for absolute presence of mind, force themselves into “a regime of maximal wakefulness.”<sup>48</sup> The insights to which they lead are reserved for the dissipate filmgoer incarnated by Barthes and fleshed out with his own history of going to the movies, who is exposed to these dynamics in his torpor, prehypnotic reverie, and ensuing “state of great porosity.”<sup>49</sup>

As demonstrated elsewhere in the pages of *Communications*, the prospect of sleep can trigger an alarm, warning of the dangers that follow from lapses into insensible states and sounding a call to action. Throughout the history of cinema, the figure of the sleepy spectator has served as an evocative signifier for an absorption so total that it leaves nothing of the audience behind. Closed eyes stand for a blindness that is indicative of the deceiving pleasure of visual mastery. The sleepy spectator is a specter lurking at the periphery of the audience’s attentive gaze, the mirror image from which they avert their awareness. To confront this figure directly, to wage a battle against the cinematic trance “armed with the discourse of counter-ideology,” would be tantamount to embarking upon an awakening with no end in sight.<sup>50</sup> For as Jacques Rancière has pointed out, the project of unmasking illusions is by its very nature an endless one.<sup>51</sup>

Conversely, to shift from a stance of active confrontation to passive surrender is to discover a way out of the bind of spectatorial attention by means of a fundamental reorientation. Effortlessly abiding rather than resisting his condition, Barthes makes himself open to the comings and goings of somnolence. Sinking into torpor, he finds himself swept up in the peculiar currents subtending its static surface. His unfocused drowsiness delivers him to a sensuous awareness of being absorbed in a particular kind of space; this atmospheric absorption runs counter to the pull of diegetic absorption, leading to his uncanny sense of having more than one body. Barthes’s self-examination discloses the unsettled quality of the filmgoer’s immobility, along with the extent of their passivity. (As Rancière observes, “This isn’t a theory about the spectator’s activity; it’s a theory about the spectator’s delicious, erotic passivity.”<sup>52</sup>) Neither fully asleep nor awake, he hovers in a state of suspension, held in an unstable equilibrium between discrepant dynamics and crosscurrents. The effects of cinematic narcosis lead Barthes to the same place where Metz ultimately arrives—a sense of the filmgoer’s radical impressionability as the result of a momentary and tenuous coexistence of what would otherwise be considered disparate regimes of consciousness. “Upon Leaving the Movie Theater,” like Metz’s

“The Fiction Film and Its Spectator,” paints a picture of the intrinsic volatility of spectatorship as a condition marked by ebbs and flows. Absorption is incomplete and permeable, defined by its fluctuations in time and its fraying edges.

The spectator who hovers at the edges of sleep is as much in danger of disconnecting from the projected image as from the physical environment. Nodding off, this spectator loses the thread of immersion and sets off along receptive pathways other than those ordained by the dispositive. Sleep breaks up the cinema’s stranglehold on its audience by introducing divisions, intermittencies, and irregular rhythms that interrupt and divert the trajectory of absorption. Thus, it attests to the differences and residues that persist even despite the drive toward uniformity and totalization. In this regard, sleep focalizes a strand of thought that associates filmic reception with scattered, dispersive forms of attention that stray from aesthetic and disciplinary norms of absorption. It is such a mode of reception that Barthes performs and recollects, and that Weegee documents by means of photography. Their perspectives converge around the sleepy moviegoer whose deviance is exemplary, embodying simultaneously the model and counter-model of spectatorial attention.