Who Goes to the Movies?

Writing in the *New York Review of Books* (Mar. 23, 1995), Louis Menand, a professor of English at Queens College, City University of New York, contends that the movies are not as much of a mass medium as most people think.

One of Hollywood's best-kept industrial secrets is that the movies are entertainment for educated people. . . . This was a finding that surprised the studios when, in the 1940s, they first undertook to analyze their audience: frequency of movie attendance increases with income and education. Even today, when people complain that they don't make movies for grown-ups anymore, the percentage of people who say they are "frequent moviegoers" is more than half again as great among people who have gone to college (31 percent) as it is among people who have only finished high school (19 percent). . . . Movie-going is a lot more expensive than television-watching, of course, and no doubt this helps to account for the difference. But the numbers make it clear that film is not truly a mass art form to anything like the degree that television and popular music are. Movies since the 1930s have been designed for the people who have the money and the leisure to afford them.

After the 1920s, Eliot increasingly turned to drama, rather than poetry, "as a way of bridging the cultural divide." Still, in his poetry up through *The Hollow Men* (1925), Chinitz says, "popular culture was significant as both influence and subject." In the original version of his most famous poem, Eliot drew extensively on popular song, including the lyrics from a George M. Cohan show. Had fellow poet Ezra Pound not persuaded Eliot to delete most of the references to contemporary popular culture, *The Waste Land* (1922) would have looked very different, Chinitz points out. And so, perhaps, would have the literary high culture of the decades that followed.

A Critique of Pure Bile

"Céline: The Problem" by Renee Winegarten, in *The American Scholar* (Spring 1995), 1811 Q St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

Among the literati, French novelist Céline (1894–1961) is seen as a great writer ("a very great writer," according to Philip Roth). The claim, contends Winegarten, author of *Writers and Revolution* (1974), raises the question of what literary "greatness" really is.

Born Louis Ferdinand Destouches in the lower-class Paris suburb of Courbevoie, Céline adopted everyday working-class speech for his literary purposes. From his first and best novel, *Journey to the End of Night* (1932), Winegarten observes, he deliberately set out "to break the classical, rational mode of the French literary language, freely manipulating it and creating new words of his own, transforming the vulgar tongue into a powerful instrument of mocking challenge to convention and hypocrisy. This is the sphere in which his influence has been the most marked and enduring."

The major themes of Céline's works, Winegarten notes, are present in that first novel, in the wartime and African episodes of the "journey toward death" of his alter ego, Ferdinand Bardamu, and in his next novel, *Death on the Installment Plan* (1936), about a nightmarish childhood. "For Céline, the supreme truth is death, or more specifically, 'my own death.' Christianity, Catholicism, religion itself, together with optimistic illusions, such as progress and 'the American way of life' (to which would later be added Soviet 'utopia'), are smoke screens, futile attempts to conceal this bitter truth." Céline was also a vile anti-Semite, whose oeuvre includes "three notorious hate-filled anti-Semitic tomes": *Trifles for a Massacre* (1937), *School for Corpses* (1938), and *A Pretty Pickle* (1941). A staunch admirer of Adolph Hitler, Céline was unfazed by revelations after

World War II about the Nazi Final Solution.

Céline's admirers, such as Frédéric Vitoux, author of *Céline: A Biography* (1988), see the writer's style "as a kind of grace that somehow redeems all." But does it? Winegarten asks. "Can this steady outpouring of bile, this blinkered self-righteousness and self-concern, this unwavering baseness and nihilism be accounted great? Where are the moments of joy in nature, the counterweight of decency, the deeds of supererogation that can be found in common experience? In an age when such French writers as Malraux, Montherlant, [and] Camus were seeking a ground for humanism and human values, Céline stands aloof."

Art Attacks

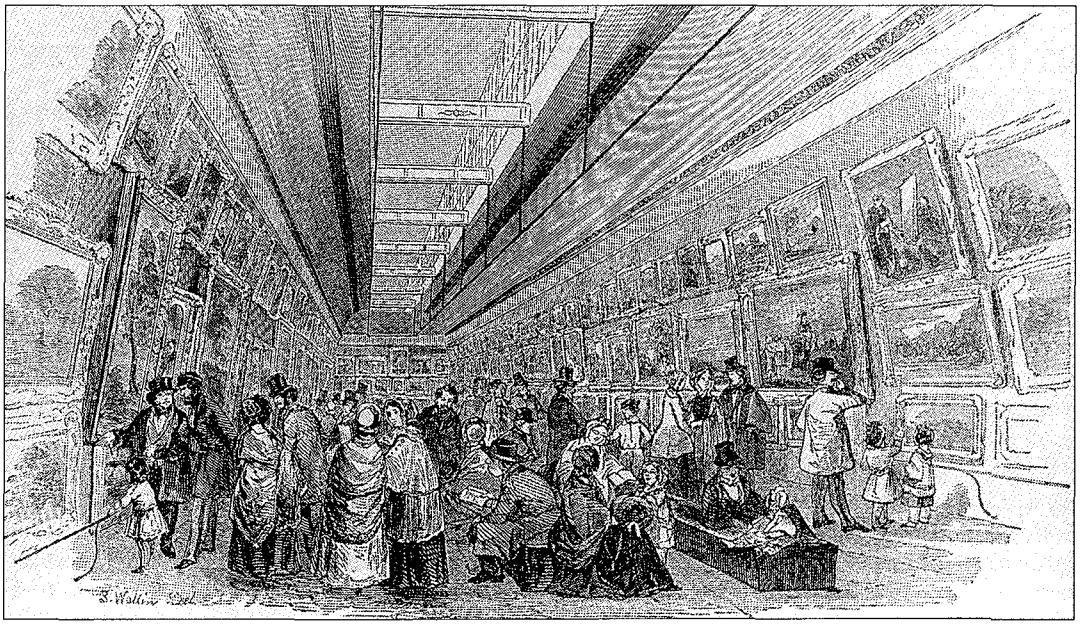
"Art and Authority in Antebellum New York City: The Rise and Fall of the American Art-Union" by Rachel N. Klein, in *The Journal of American History* (Mar. 1995), 1125 East Atwater Ave., Bloomington, Ind. 47401–3701.

The National Endowment for the Arts is not the first institution to aid American artists, promote appreciation of art—and become embroiled in controversy. In the case of the American Art-Union, founded in New York City in 1839, the storm proved fatal.

The Art-Union, writes Klein, a historian at the University of California, San Diego, "represented a particular adaptation of a general transatlantic phenomenon. Early European art unions sought to liberate artists from dependence on private patrons while enlisting art in the reformation of public life. Rather than serving the pleasure of the few, art would foster moral improvement among the many." The American organization added a patriotic dimension, aiming to create "an uplifted, unified sense of national identity."

In return for $5 a year, the nonprofit Art-Union offered subscribers its publications, at least one engraving, and a chance to win a work of art in the lottery it sponsored. With the subscription funds, the union bought paintings by American artists and displayed them in its gallery; then, at the end of each year, it distributed the art works by lottery to the subscribers.

By the late 1840s, the Art-Union boasted



The popularity of the American Art-Union public gallery is evident in this 1849 depiction.