

CANTON DAILY LEDGER

Movies, far more than TV, make us The People, Yes

This year looks to be a box-office boom for movie theaters, and besides good news for cinema owners, that could actually help strengthen communities and democracy.

By Bill Knight

March 9, 2015

With “Fifty Shades of Grey” following hits such as “American Sniper,” films are attracting about 10 percent more people than last year, according to Rentrak, the Wall Street Journal reported.

As to the Republic, or sense of self, the trend could start reversing years of individualism over communal enjoyment of entertainment, which range from iPads, Kindles and smartphones to the biggest medium: TV.

The 1950s expansion of television and its eventual replacing movies as an entertainment activity is a metaphor for the country, the culture. There have been other factors and consequences, such as the accessibility and affordability of air conditioning, but TV is a huge cause of the fragmentation and disengagement of U.S. society..

Others have observed this, most notably Harvard University political scientist Robert D. Putnam in his 1995 essay “Bowling Alone.” But civic involvement and membership in groups of mass constituencies lost in recent decades could undergo a revival if people begin to leave their homes and mingle with neighbors — and strangers. Movie audiences could be a start.

There, we’re strangers in the dark, but we all share an experience — laughter, wonder, dread. That compares much more favorably to the isolation of eating TV dinners off TV trays in TV rooms.

A movie theater is a gathering place, less than churches or taverns, but almost as busy as restaurants and what social groups like lodges or Legion halls once were. And once inside the cinemas — surrounded by dimness, settled into cushy seats, comforted by snacks and focused on a brilliant screen — people are brought together. Country-club types whisper next to workers; parents watch as well as kids; nerds and bullies and everyday people all laugh and cry as one.

Before television dominated, we congregated to watch soldiers and lovers, cowboys and crazies, adventures and romance, monster movies and slapstick, cartoons and musicals — all of which entertained us and shaped us — even if just for two hours — as the Audience.

The People.

As Illinois' Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, biographer and poet Carl Sandburg wrote in his epic "The People, Yes," —

"The people is a tragic and comic two-face: hero and hoodlum:

phantom and gorilla twisting to moan with a gargoye mouth:

'They buy me and sell me...it's a game...sometime I'll break loose'."

A country of couch potatoes, we have too little interaction and experience too little feeling of community confined to a room or house. Plus, there's "time-shifting," where something is recorded to view later, so we don't even watch something at the same time anymore (except for most sports and some breaking news), making conversations about some show from the night before impossible the next day.

Arguably, the nation is mired in division and denial. Americans are disconnected, miserable or morose; cynical or scared — sometimes for little reason except the fear-mongering on cable TV. Too many of us depend on TV channels that reinforce our suspicions rather than looking for a complete story or talking to others, which is like listening only to a trial's prosecution or defense and expecting to reach a just conclusion.

As to fear, the reality is that the today is probably the most peaceful time in human history, according to Steven Pinker, author of "The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined." Violent crime has dropped some 70 percent in the last 25 years, and — despite ISIS' horrors — terrorism "is today only a shadow of what it was in the 1970s and 1980s," says Paul Pillar in the conservative Cato Institute's "A Dangerous World?"

So: Reject another night enslaved to TV. Go to the cinema, enjoy some popcorn and soda, some tears and fears.

Together.

Sandburg, again, wrote, "In the darkness with a great bundle of grief the people march.

"In the night, and overhead a shovel of stars for keeps, the people march:

"Where to? What next?"