

Cultural History as an Almanac of Regional Ephemera | Browsing as Method for New Cinema Histories

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From the perspective of local experience, early film culture is as ephemeral as yesterday's news. Indeed, a surprising variety of local cinema practices are remarkably well archived in newspaper notes of everyday happenings alongside amusement advertising for film exhibitions. Research that begins on the margins can thus amass disparate local film histories in relation to each other. The resulting compendium of ephemera and marginalia contributes to a comparative, new cinema history, but resembling entries in an almanac more than case studies in an authoritative textbook. In compiling entries for a hypothetical almanac of early local filmmaking across Canada through graphs, maps, charts, and miscellany, I articulate principles for writing new cinema histories as contributions to a cultural almanac that potentially serves as a comparison of regional and local miscellany on a global scale—"world cinema", to extrapolate from Moretti's conception of the "atlas" of world literature, a compilation of visualized "distant readings" across case texts, rather than close readings of texts. Methodologies for amassing local ephemeral knowledge and cultural trivia retain the indeterminate, partial character of local experience, emphasizing the precarious status of local mass cultures. Regional cinema history as part of an "almanac" would be based on curious facts gleaned from browsing—the chance hit of online search engines and web browsing, the eclectic mix of microfilmed newspapers, the improbable or incredible memory from an interview or diary, and the rare gem of detail amidst the bureaucratic or random collection of archived files. To the researcher of ephemeral film culture, such browsing turns up a miscellaneous event, at first out of context, equivalent to the orphaned film print, unlabelled in an archive, basement, or flea market. Yet, the un-methodical character of ephemeral searching contains its own methodology, turning up new notes, new bits of information—each new curiosity allowing iterative, more methodical browsing in the archives. In providing a sample from my search for entries in an almanac of early filmmaking across Canada, I will define ephemeral film research as sideshow: an ongoing, gradual research project that only through repeated searching comes together into narrative or biographical form. Only at the end of the process is any claim of methodological rigour possible. My papers aims to synthesize past HoMER presentations that used a variety of discursive, geographic and statistical methods, with the 'almanac' now a unifying rubric of variety and comparison. The presentation will act as an epistemological investigation into the benefits of browsing, drawing upon theories of spatiality and cognitive mapping from Fredric Jameson and experiments in cultural mapping and the literary atlas-making of Franco Moretti. The argument is that a systematic record of trivia leaves the indeterminacy of marginalia intact, prompting the reader to complete their own meaning out of quantities of facts perused at leisure.

Biographical Statement: Paul S. Moore is Associate Professor of Communication & Culture at Ryerson University in Toronto. His histories of newspaper-cinema intermediality in North America have appeared in *Explorations in New Cinema History*, *A Companion to Early Cinema*, *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, and the book *Now Playing*, a history of the early movie theatres in Toronto. He recently served as President of the Film Studies Association of Canada and moderator of the Toronto Film Seminar.