

Beyond the Screen: Institutions, Networks and Publics of Early Cinema

Edited by

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Introduction

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The roots of motion pictures exist as much in science and industry as in magic lantern shows and fairground exhibition. Indeed the ultimate reputation of cinema as a medium devoted to entertainment was an eventual destination and not a foregone conclusion. In the novelty era – from its origins until around 1901 – cinema performed a range of functions: it provided its viewers with increased visual awareness of the natural world, access to remote corners of the globe, and immediate reports of pertinent events, both local and international. Even as it gained institutional status, cinema continued to be exploited for educational and civic purposes, and its reach extended beyond the four walls of the nickelodeon theatre to a wide variety of venues including churches, schools, department stores and charitable organisations. In such settings, from Dublin to Brussels, Quebec to Kyoto, cinema’s impact exceeded the narrow conceptual confines dictated by its primary role as purveyor of entertainment for the masses. *Beyond the Screen: Institutions, Networks, and Publics of Early Cinema* seeks to illuminate the range of early cinema and the ways in which it influenced and intersected with realms beyond the world of entertainment. Whether deployed for medical training, enlisted by missionaries, or debated by lawmakers, cinema insinuated itself into a range of institutions, the collective force of which we still scarcely comprehend. This volume is an important step toward our understanding of how early cinema defined itself through institutional interconnections, within a network of intermedial exchange and to a series of publics united by their interest in cinema: it shows just how the variety of motion pictures’ aims and uses helped define the multi-faceted nature of the medium in its first decades.

Ironically, cinema’s potential as a medium of social effectivity found itself constrained by an American legal decision. In 1915, near the end of the early cinema period, a U.S. Supreme Court decision declaring moviemaking a “business, pure and simple” entrenched the film industry’s role as a producer of “harmless entertainment”. Together with the concurrent establishment of the feature film, the growth of the star system and the consolidation of production companies, this decision ensured that movies would become the primary form of commercial entertainment in the new century. Just prior to this moment, however, the possibilities available to film – to educate, to influence public policy, to explore the natural world – were as open as they would ever be again in the medium’s existence. The eleventh bi-annual Domitor conference held on the campuses of Ryerson University and the University of Toronto (13–16 June

2010), explored the various ways that a range of institutions, both commercial and non-commercial, shaped early cinema's cultural functions and social uses. As this volume attests, conference presenters confirmed the breadth and variety of interests that cinema served during the first few decades of its existence; in so doing, they extended the role of film far beyond that of the "entertainment" model eventually pursued by a maturing industry and championed by the Supreme Court in America.

To consider early cinema "beyond the screen" is to restore complexity to the historical account of film's social and cultural roles, its interactions with a variety of institutions and its ideological function and aesthetic impact. Examining the range of social networks in which cinematic practices operated provides insight into the many ways film was used within the domains of science, technology, education, and social uplift; it also reveals how those applications influenced the development of the medium while simultaneously shaping the public's idea of what cinema was capable of achieving. Moreover, the identification of those groups or institutions who saw the exploitation of cinema as a means to further their own aims – for Progressive – era social intervention or for capitalist expansion of industry, religious indoctrination or artistic education – gives us a clearer idea of how this new form of image production became integrated into the changing cultural landscape of the early twentieth century. One of the more striking insights afforded by this line of inquiry is the manner in which cinema's various features – its reliance on oversized images, its portability, its ability to be viewed by large numbers of people at a single screening – attracted the attention of groups just coming to terms with equally modern ideas of influencing the public on a large scale, thus aligning cinema with broad-based public policy and with the burgeoning mass media of journalism and advertising.

As much as cinema attracted the attention of groups and institutions outside the motion picture industry, those making and screening films within that industry reached out to the broader public realm in turn. Many early film producers and exhibitors explored how they could become more useful to a range of social agents, motivated either to improve cinema's public image or increase its earning potential. Projecting mainstream moving pictures in churches, convincing educators of the benefits of using film in the classroom, and collaborating with charitable organizations to produce movies meant to increase awareness of social ills – all of these gestures enlarged the role of cinema within the public sphere while also demonstrating its usefulness as a tool of instruction, advocacy and persuasion. If the Supreme Court decision of 1915 reinforced the film industry's tendency toward making frivolous films for a complacent audience, this volume's collective focus on cinema's early years of engagement with a wide range of social institutions documents a counterbalancing tendency that tested the boundaries of what was considered entertainment, and often opposed the expectations that the Hollywood studio era so forcefully created and fulfilled.

Institutions

All of the papers collected here contribute to what might be called a new "institutional turn" in the study of film cultures – an approach spearheaded in such work as Haidee Wasson's on the creation of MoMA's Film Library (*Museum Movies*, 2005), Peter Decherney's on *Hollywood and the Culture Elite* (2005), and Dana Polan's on the first university film courses (*Scenes of Instruction*, 2007), all of which examine how cinema has been put to use by institutions outside what is conventionally understood as the "film industry".¹ Before outlining the contents of the present volume, then, it is worth briefly considering this new emphasis in film history, and in particular its implications for the study of early cinema.

If revisionist histories of pre-1915 cinema can be said to have had a founding gesture, it was surely the relabeling of what was once dismissively considered “primitive” cinema as, instead, “early” or “pre-classical”. In great part an effort to rescue film history from a kind of Lamarckian schema – as though cinema’s historical development was to be understood as a linear, unidirectional evolution from the first “primitive” scenes (Edison, Lumière) toward increasingly complex storytelling forms (Griffith – this relabeling also placed the question of *context* firmly on the historians’ agenda). Rather than a symptom of a primordial stage of development, the oft-noted difference of early film was now to be explained as deriving from the different contexts in which early cinema’s uses and functions were first explored. Two lines of contextualizing inquiry here emerged. On the one hand, from the perspective of *social* history, there was an interest in relating the forms of nickelodeon-era cinema (1905–1912) to the needs and tastes of its largely immigrant, working-class audiences, as well as in examining cinema’s emerging storytelling norms in terms of filmmakers’ attempts to incorporate genteel cultural values into their films. On the other, from the perspective of *cultural* history, was the attempt to relate the attractions-based aesthetic of early film to the broader context of “modernity”, which, like the films themselves, was characterized by the shock effects attendant on unprecedented technological and industrial change.

Both of these approaches, however, stumbled over a shared problematic; namely, the question of how social and cultural forms – genteel cultural values or the shocks of modernity – come to be implanted in film texts. We should not assume or expect to find social realities directly “reflected” in art, since historical context always passes through a process of mediation in which its content is changed in the very act of representation. But this observation, in turn, adds a further twist to the question of context, since it requires that the film historian direct attention to the various mediating processes through which social values and intentions have shaped the uses of cinema. And here, evidently, formal institutions have a profound role to play; it is, after all, through institutions (pedagogical, religious, commercial, etc.) that specific social meanings and practices are selected and transmitted. Indeed, specific interest groups seek to exert pressures on the conditions of social life precisely through institutions as the means of governance and enculturation. At no time, moreover, was the role of institutions within film culture more varied and open than during cinema’s early period – before, that is, Hollywood and the other great national film industries had fully emerged to hegemonize the idea of film as “harmless entertainment”. From this perspective, the institutional turn in film history represents a significant paradigm shift in the study of cinema’s earliest years: it returns the study of early cinema’s varied development and uses to the specific material contents and intentions of the social organisations, pedagogical disciplines, and cultural movements that sought to harness the new medium to new ends.

Yet the historiographic challenges that this line of inquiry raises are immense. Only the most unreconstructed Althusserian could imagine that a museum does the same kind of cultural and ideological work as a department store, or that charity administrators and commercial film exhibitors would have agreed on matters of cultural taste. To quote Raymond Williams: “[I]t can ... not be supposed that the sum of all ... institutions is an organic hegemony. On the contrary ... it is in practice full of contradictions and of unresolved conflicts”.² There are, of course, variants in the intentions that different institutions bring to bear in their use of film, as well as differences in the volumes of economic and cultural capital incarnate in those institutions. To “uplift”, to “legitimize”, to “educate” – to name only some of the processes examined in this volume – these are not always synonyms, but speak to a diversity of

competing social interests and intentions of which any properly contextualized film history must take account.

Networks

The various institutions that appropriated the new technology of moving pictures at the turn of the twentieth century were typically associated with specific exhibition venues. The social context of viewing, as many of the authors assert, was instrumental in determining the uses and meanings of the films exhibited. Each of the various exhibition sites, however, gains its particularity in relation to the others as an alternative within a network of film practices. As with the work of institutions, the significance of particular audiences and their venues should neither be rigidly codified (e.g. a church leads to indoctrination) nor made synonymous through one conceptual dimension (the local). For example, animated views taken with the help of microscopes, X-rays or time-lapse photography could be framed as popular science when shown as part of a lecture or as sheer visual spectacle when screened in the commercial context of a nickelodeon. Conversely, narrative films produced to entertain a mass audience could be made to teach a moral or history lesson depending on the venue in which they were exhibited.

The research collected in this volume further demonstrates how deeply the practices of the first filmmakers were influenced by their own and others' pre-cinematic activities: most of the lanternists, lecturers, cartoonists, magicians and scientists who are found among the early adopters of moving pictures were typically more concerned with the enrichment and expansion of their traditional activities than with the creation of a new medium or art. As André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion have claimed, cinema was "born twice": during the first decade of its history moving pictures were almost exclusively exhibited in venues primarily dedicated to other types of shows and performances, including lecture halls and legitimate or variety theatres. It took time for permanent exhibition sites to appear, gain autonomy from other theatrical networks, and develop standardised show formats. In most parts of the Western world, moving pictures' second decade – also covered by the essays collected here – saw the quick rise of a formidable network of venues dedicated primarily to cinema. Thriving on the new class of narrative films concurrently being developed, this vast theatrical network elevated cinema to the rank of leading attraction. It also, in the process, enlisted many of the established forms of entertainment in the service of cinema, maintaining the momentum of intermedial relations but reversing its direction. Magic lantern shows and vaudeville briefly became an essential part of the moving picture program through the standardised companion of the illustrated song. The advent of a theatrical network dedicated solely to film soon established the hegemony of cinema as a harmless form of entertainment, not least because the proliferation of the local picture theatre vastly outnumbered alternative venues and exhibition contexts – although, it must be emphasised, that it did not eliminate them. Nonetheless, it seems that from the moment venues dedicated to moving pictures appeared, non-fiction films such as newsreels, topicals and travelogues were routinely programmed by commercial exhibitors partly to assuage the industry's many critics by lending a degree of cultural capital and local content to commercial shows. This programming, in turn, facilitated the diffusion of the multireel fiction features cranked out of an increasingly limited number of production centres.

While the formation of a theatrical network established cinema as one of the most influential mass media of the young twentieth century, it also relegated many potentialities of film to the newly conjured non-theatrical ghetto. As part of Domitor's

ongoing rediscovery and investigation of the continued use of moving pictures in a wide range of networks dedicated to education, science, reform or propaganda, *Beyond the Screen* is especially illuminating because of the emphasis it places on the intermedial environment in which cinema kept evolving – even after the institutionalisation of theatrical commercial cinema. Outside film palaces, moving pictures were still frequently made subservient to the speech of educators or lecturers, or made to play second fiddle to musical performances, variety acts, sporting matches, or even commercial displays of industrial wares. Beyond acting as a most useful – and humbling – reminder of the importance of context in film history, the increased attention given to “useful cinema” and non-theatrical networks demonstrates just how easily the lines between entertainment, education and uplift can be blurred when it comes to performances integrating film.

Publics

While describing film’s emergence from within intermedial networks of other entertainments allows a sense of early cinema’s circulation, and outlining the variety of institutions that strategically employed cinema as it established its own institutional autonomy provides a sense of the breadth of applications for the new medium, the specificity of any local cinematic practice still needs to be conceptualized as constituting a wider cinema culture. One framework in which the various cinema practices documented in this collection characterise a cultural capacity specific to moving pictures lies in the concept of “publics”. As film historians, all of the authors in this volume give moving pictures a privileged place in modern culture, in part because it is simultaneously a commodity, technology and art form unlike others. But the unique character of the moving image perhaps can be best explored by interrogating how cinema existed as a mode of public address. To study the heterogeneous publics of early cinema is to see the moving image as not merely inscribed into other institutions, or circulating within other social networks, but rather as a novel social formation in itself – allowing a new way of being as well as a new way of seeing. The problem of defining cinema’s publics, then, lies in generalising beyond local practices, or rather taking them as coordinated through the medium and its new way of addressing audiences. Just as cinema needs to be defined institutionally as more than a transparent reflection of social realities, its social significance needs to be understood beyond the particular local situations provided by individual case studies.

Defining a modern “public” has been subject to much consideration, perhaps most formally by Michael Warner, who articulates the concept as “a space of discourse” that comes to exist and is maintained in the very act of being addressed. A public is thus an imagined social formation, not an empirical one; a public is not necessarily addressed in a common space or time, or through a common identity. “Neither ‘crowd’ nor ‘audience’ nor ‘people’ nor ‘group’ will capture the same sense”.³ Modeled on his study of mass readerships, Warner’s definition of publics depends upon an indeterminate formation: a reader’s “partial nonidentity” with the subject being addressed, and therefore an *awareness* that masses of strangers are concurrently being addressed in the same fashion. The formulation is similar to Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities” but generalized beyond the vernacular address of nationalism.⁴ For cinema in particular, the concept of a “public” unifies the many geographically and temporally dispersed audiences for particular films for a culture of film-going by recognizing the potential for different audiences to conceive of themselves as addressed in common by the film, or again more generally by the cultural practice of cinema going. The long shadow of Habermas’ democratic public sphere and its rational debate over ideas looms large insofar as Warner’s “publics” are reading publics. Miriam Hansen proposed – in

her reading of Benjamin's "gamble with cinema" – that the key to a cinematic public sphere is "room-for-play", in part because of the very ambiguity and latitude for interpretive pleasure that viewing allows compared to reading.⁵ The essays in the last two sections of this collection especially provide the groundwork to further such an understanding of how reading publics (such as those for newspapers) were transformed into viewing publics for cinema.

While revealing, and reveling in, the historical facts of local case studies, the papers in this volume collectively propose that early cinema culture was steeped in a sensibility of public service. Addressing a sense of public good, a moving picture show could draw an audience by appealing to its own best interests. Changing institutional or exhibition contexts could better match a specific public's sense of itself, its "imagined community". The limit of that generalization, ironically, lies at the point where film becomes art and develops its own institutions for aesthetic appreciation. Here is where the viewing public may be elided, in a sense, because parts of the film industry could turn inward to attend to professional standards and aestheticism with the institutionalization of the industry. Then again, taking the audience for granted could only occur as a result of the care, labour, invention, and attention that created cinema cultures beyond the screen in the first place.

From charity to the public sphere

The tri-partite emphasis on *Institutions*, *Networks* and *Publics* informs the organisation of these conference proceedings: section titles indicate the orientation of the papers included within each section and the sections themselves have been placed under one of the three rubrics contained in the volume's title. Under *Institutions*, the papers in the first three sections devoted to "Charity and Religion", "Government and Civics", and "Education and Advocacy", demonstrate the different ways in which cinema exerted influence on social agencies, government bodies and educational groups – and found itself affected by the forces of social improvement in its turn. Encompassing social uses that range from religious indoctrination to health instruction, these papers remind us that cinema's institutional interactions incited controversy and cultivated unlikely allies even as such connections expanded and challenged prevailing ideas about the medium's proper identity.

Under *Networks*, the papers in the sections "Science and Magic" and "Art and Aesthetics", investigate cinema's relationship to realms that found themselves increasingly defined by the presence of media. Whether it was the cinema's technologically-enhanced ability to document the unseen and the invisible or the manner in which cinema infiltrated art education as one of a range of technologies capable of image reproduction, the medium operated within a growing network of media practices and devices, whose collective force helped define how one might understand art and science. The technological basis of cinema – and its intermedial connections – continues to inform its aesthetic potential in the present, not least because of the archive's role in preserving and disseminating the extant fragments of the medium's past.

The role of *Publics* in shaping the culture of cinema during this period receives its fullest rehearsal in the collection's concluding sections, "Exhibition and Showmanship" and "Community and the Public Sphere". In these papers the emphasis shifts to the manner in which the exhibition venue and the practices employed in the screening of films aided in an expanded sense of cinema's effectivity and community presence. The varied ways in which spectators viewed and made use of films proved a vital element in perpetuating tendencies already evident at the levels of production and distribution. The public's willingness to embrace cinema's diverse social and cultural roles rein-

forces how early cinema's potential for extending its purview beyond the realms of entertainment found its necessary corollary in an equally varied terrain of viewing and exhibition practices. Moreover, cinema's role in helping to create communities, whether films were projected in the neighbourhood theatre or a local meeting place, underscores the recurrent argument within this volume: that the medium's potential demonstrably extended "beyond the screen" to incorporate a series of institutional collaborators, tapping into a vast matrix of intermedial networks, and reaching an ever-changing set of publics. In our contemporary era of seemingly limitless connectivity, abetted by multiple delivery systems, social networking sites and virtual communities, the era of early cinema, with its counterbalancing examples of possibilities explored and opportunities lost, still has much to tell us.

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Notes

1. Haidee Wasson, *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Peter Decherney, *Hollywood and the Culture Elite: How the Movies Became American* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Dana Polan, *Scenes of Instruction: The Beginnings of the US Study of Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).
2. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 118.
3. Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 67.
4. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983).
5. Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema", *October* 109 (2004): 3–45.