Taking the Movies to School:
Science, Efficiency, and the *Motion Picture Project*, 1929-1939

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Abstract

Recognition of the educational potential of film sparked an interest in the use of motion pictures as an effective teaching aid as opposed to their more common association with commercial public entertainment. In the interwar period, the use of motion pictures in education was becoming more popular, yet it was plagued by fiscal and technical problems and organizational inefficiencies. Due to anxieties over its wasteful misuse, during the 1930s, film in the American classroom became the focus of educational reformers looking to promote efficiency in teaching. This increased attention to the practical uses of the motion picture led to the American Council on Education's Motion Picture Project. Through teacher-training conferences, the publication of detailed film catalogues, and a project of student and teacher film surveys, the Project endeavoured to address the pedagogical difficulties associated with motion pictures, and to provide teachers with the tools necessary to use this medium more effectively in their curricula. Currently, both the social history of motion pictures and the history of educational reform ignore the important educational role films played in American schools. The decade preceding the Second World War is particularly significant to film history because it represents a crucial transitional period in which the motion picture came to be not solely an entertainment medium, but also an effective educational tool.

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Since their introduction in 1896, motion pictures have captured the public imagination. In recent decades, film has become a significant area of interest to historians examining the role of the movies in North American society and their impact upon modern culture. Film historiography has two major areas of focus. First, much of the historical analysis of motion pictures concentrates specifically on the commercial movies, the social phenomenon of movie-going, and the development of the motion picture industry in Hollywood. Second, film historians are concerned about the development of the documentary film genre, its sociological origins, its aesthetic, and its wartime role in government propaganda. Yet, both of these sub-fields ignore a significant area of American film history.

In the interwar period, the motion picture performed a third social function. Since the late 1910s, while they were steadily becoming the single-most popular form of public entertainment, motion

pictures had been simultaneously infiltrating the American school system.[1] This use began innocuously as a new type of visual aid not much different, in effect, from the more traditional maps, still photographs, and lantern slides. In the interwar period, the potential contributions of film to education became more apparent and its classroom use more prevalent as the production, distribution, and accessibility of motion pictures increased. With the introduction of the 16mm film projector and sound pictures in the 1920s, and the proliferation of film production organizations into the 1930s, motion pictures became a potentially powerful new educational medium. This conceptual shift from motion pictures as predominantly a means of public entertainment and the basis of a culture industry towards the acceptance of the educational value of the motion picture and its proliferation in scholastic instruction remains unexamined by historians of film and education.

In addition to its relevance for social and cultural history, the subject of motion pictures is an important aspect of the history of educational reform. The diffusion of motion pictures into public schools is central to the history of educational reform and to the understanding of several themes in the field of curriculum studies. In the first half of the twentieth century, a new emphasis on scientific management and social efficiency pervaded the fields of educational research and reform. Making schooling more relevant to the needs of a changing society and implementing reforms that would make the schools more efficient social institutions became primary goals for many American educators.[2] In the interwar years, they recognized the educational potential of the motion picture and its efficient use in the classroom became an important aspect of their curriculum reforms.

In the 1930s, the social history of motion pictures and the history of educational reform dovetailed. Between 1929 and 1939, a series of research studies were initiated, some by social scientists attempting to assess the corrupting influence of motion pictures on children, others by educators looking to improve efficiency and effectiveness in teaching. These studies were initially undertaken by moral reformers to gauge the effects of commercial motion pictures upon children and young adults. The findings of this research triggered the intense interest of American educators in the proper role of film in the classroom. Launching further studies, educational reformers determined that for a variety of reasons, film was not being used to its full educational potential in the American school system.

The American Council on Education (ACE) oversaw this increased attention to motion pictures by educational reformers. Formed in 1918, the ACE became a national centre of coordination and cooperation for organizations having related interests in education. It operated then as it does now, through a system of commissions and committees, to influence the shaping of educational policy and the formulation of educational practices.[3] In the 1930s, the ACE established the "Committee on Motion Pictures in Education" to investigate, and the *Motion Picture Project* (*MPP*) to address, some of the pervasive problems associated with the use of film in the American classroom.

By 1929, the motion picture had carved an undeniable and irreversible niche for itself in the pantheon of visual instruction. Elementary-, secondary-, and college-level students were learning new and valuable lessons with the aid of motion pictures. Or were they? Concerns surfaced among educators in terms of the proper use of films for educational purposes. Were teachers and school administrators aware of the educational potential of motion pictures, and if so, were they willing to incorporate them into their curricula? Were schools properly outfitted with the necessary technical

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[1] Edgar Dale, Fannie W. Dunn, Charles F. Hoban, Jr., and Etta Schneider, *Motion Pictures in Education: A Summary of the Literature* (New York: H.W. Wilson Company, 1937), 307.

[2] The term "educators" is used to describe those engaged in educational research and faculties of education. Those working with children in the classroom are referred to as "teachers."

[3] American Council on Education, *Selected Educational Motion Pictures: A Descriptive Encyclopaedia* (Washington D.C.: American Council on Education, 1942), Afterword.

equipment? Could schools and school boards afford the financial cost of high quality, functional motion picture programs? Did motion pictures contribute significantly to children's learning and comprehension? These questions disturbed educators and sparked an interest in the pedagogical use of film. Their ultimate question became, could the motion picture be transformed from its origins as popular commercial entertainment into an effective medium of scholastic instruction?

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The interwar history of motion pictures in education is linked to social concerns over the role of the commercial cinema in America. A discussion of the history of motion pictures in education must, therefore, mention the contested terrain they represented in American culture in the 1920s and 1930s. The interwar period witnessed a vigorous, ongoing debate regarding the cultural value of motion pictures. Post-World War I immigration had changed the demographic face of urban America. The influx of working-class Jews, and Eastern and Southern Europeans, as well as the northern migrations of Hispanics and African Americans challenged the dominant middle-class perception of the United States as an Anglo-Saxon, Protestant society. What Michael Denning describes as the "laboring of American culture" sparked nativist concerns over the appearance of foreign cultures, traditions, and moralities, particularly in urban centres, where immigrants tended to cluster in ethnic ghettos.[4] Hollywood screenwriters, directors, actors, and producers were quick to depict working-class experiences and stories on film. Film historians have attributed this phenomenon to both the ethnic and political affiliations of Hollywood producers and the demands of an increasingly working-class audience.[5] Nonetheless, the perceived glorification of underclass lifestyles such as alcoholism, gangsterism, overt sexuality, and radical socialism in Hollywood productions was thought by some to be antithetical to middle-class American values, and to encourage undesirable behaviours in impressionable audiences. This dispute over movies and movie-going sparked the interest of sociologists and psychologists in a scientific analysis of these effects.

Moral reformers led the debate over the cultural value of the movies, and they maligned the commercial motion picture as a corrupting influence on American Protestant values. Seemingly from the outset, various religiously affiliated individuals and groups, denouncing its deleterious effects upon public morals, inundated the motion picture industry with criticism. Among the movie industry's detractors was the Motion Picture Research Council (MPRC). Formerly the National Committee for the Study of Social Values in Motion Pictures, the MPRC was particularly concerned with the harmful effects of the movies upon American youth and their possible contribution to juvenile delinquency, sexual deviancy, truancy, and crime. It called for federal legislation to censor the offensive aspects of motion pictures in order to check these damaging societal effects.

Throughout the interwar period, the moral reformers were concerned that young people, particularly children, spent too much of their leisure time attending motion pictures. The American Youth Commission, for instance, expressed the opinion that, "the least that can be said against frequent attendance is that it uses up time and money."[6] In terms of "leisure hours consumed, the movies are expensive; and too often the quality of the recreation they offer does not justify this

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[4] Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996), 448.

[5] Issues of ethnicity, class and politics in Hollywood's development are explored in Steven J. Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998); and in Lary May, *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

[6] Charles Gilbert Wrenn and D.L. Harley, *Time on their Hands: A Report on Leisure, Recreation, and Young People* (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1941), 25.

expense."[7] Moreover, they believed that the movies exposed children to unsuitable material, and feared that they would copy the criminal, morally questionable, and delinquent behaviours portrayed in the movies. The moral reformers were also concerned that truancy rates would rise as children and youth absented themselves from school in order to attend the movies, and that they might resort to petty thievery as a means of financing their movie-going habits. They firmly believed that movies were a serious moral threat to American values, and that a federal program of censorship was needed in order to limit their harmful effects.

Most of these accusations, while fairly common, could not be substantiated by quantifiable data, confounding the attempts by moral reform to institute meaningful motion picture censorship. The executive director of the MPRC, William H. Short, was aware of this correlation. He claimed that

> the motion picture industry seems able to make a substantial section of the public believe that the indictment of the motion picture while supported by a great deal of weighty opinion, is "not proven." We have come to feel that until such proof is secured, it is hardly possible to obtain that united action of the great national organizations and classes — such, for example, as the parents of the Nation — that seems essential to the carrying out of any substantial program.[8]

In this climate, cries for the motion picture industry to reform were easily rebuffed, and none of the proposals for national legislative regulation of the industry were successful. In the 1920s, only Kansas, Maryland, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and New York operated state censor boards with mandates to review all movies and to "exclude films which are sacrilegious, obscene, indecent, immoral or which tend to debase or corrupt morals."[9] In Massachusetts, censorship was only applied to movies if they were shown on Sunday. In 1921, the motion picture industry established the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) to act as both an internal regulatory and a public relations body. In 1930, the MPPDA instituted a "production code" designed to address the concerns over Hollywood's perceived immorality. As a prescriptive list of "do's," "don'ts," and "be careful's," the code was generally unenforceable, easily circumvented by clever directors, and did little to appease its critics.[10] In practice, therefore, the motion picture industry continued to operate in most areas without any serious moral regulation until 1934 when the MPPDA began patrolling content more assiduously.[11]

In 1929, with the financial assistance of the "Payne Study and Experiment Fund," Short enlisted the aid of a host of professional psychologists, sociologists, and educators to obtain the requisite "proof" of the harmful effects of motion pictures on American youth. While not the first scientific research conducted into motion pictures, the *Payne Fund Studies* (1929-33) were certainly the largest and most ambitious of these projects to appear. Under the auspices of the MPRC, this multi-volume series of studies, officially titled *Motion Pictures and Youth*, attempted to link a variety of morally questionable behaviours with excessive motion picture viewing. They investigated every conceivable injurious effect of the movies, including their impact upon children's sleeping patterns, emotional

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[7] Wrenn and Harley, *Time*, 25.

[8] Quoted in Garth Jowett, Ian C. Jarvie, and Kathryn H. Fuller, *Children and the Movies: Media Influence and the Payne Fund Controversy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 41-2.

[9] Elizabeth Laine, *Motion Pictures and Radio: Modern Techniques for Education* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1938), 7.

[10] Francis G. Couvares, "Hollywood, Main Street, and the Church: Trying to Censor the Movies Before the Production Code," *American Quarterly* 44, 4 (1992): 584-616; Joel Spring, *Images of American Life: A History of Ideological Management in Schools, Movies, Radio and Television,* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992).

[11] See Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930-1934* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

responses, social conduct, racial perceptions, and standards of morality, as well as male criminal and female sexual delinquency.

The *Payne Fund Studies* were able to quantify some basic assumptions about the content and effects of movies on children and young adults. First, they provided some necessary statistical data on movie attendance. One of the studies "conservatively" determined that 28 million minors (37% of total audiences) attended the movies weekly and that 11 million of these were children under the age of 14 (17% of total audiences).[12] Second, they ascertained that the movies portrayed much morally questionable behaviour, including drinking, gambling, adultery, divorce, and criminality. One of the studies, for example, commented upon the prominent display of alcoholic beverages, noting that "the commercial movies are dripping wet."[13] In keeping with what they assumed to be their scientifically quantifiable approach, they found that the "Big Three" themes prominent in commercial films in 1930 were "love (29.6%), crime (27.4%), and sex (15.0%), making a total of 72 per cent of all [movie] themes."[14] It was confirmation that in the movies, "there is too much sex and crime and love for a balanced diet for children."[15] There was also some correlating evidence that movies provoked some petty theft and inappropriate sexual conduct in young adults, corroborating the fears of the moral reformers.

Ultimately, however, the findings of the *Payne Fund Studies* were not severe enough to warrant the desired legislative action against the motion picture industry, as their overall conclusions failed to associate motion picture viewing with significant harm to already well-adjusted children. The study of the links between movies and juvenile delinquency concluded:

> In recent years motion pictures seem to have become an important agency in transmitting patterns of thought and behavior. Yet peculiarly the influence that they exert in this respect seems to be in inverse proportion to the strength of family and neighborhood, school and church. Where these traditional institutions are relatively highly organized, motion pictures are seemingly of lesser influence.[16]

Such tepid criticism could not counteract the ongoing popular appeal of the commercial motion picture. Would-be reformers would have to look elsewhere for a convincing indictment of Hollywood and its products.

While failing in their reformist goals, the *Payne Fund Studies* succeeded in lending scientific credibility to some general assumptions about motion pictures. They confirmed both that children enjoyed the movies, attending on a regular basis where facilities existed, and that they were, to varying degrees, affected by what they saw. Some of their findings were of particular interest to educators. The ability of film to impart information in visual form was clearly evident. The *Payne Fund* research claimed that "children of the early age of 8 see half the facts in a picture and remember them for a surprisingly long time."[17] Moreover, "no significant sex difference appeared in the amount of information acquired or the amount remembered at later dates."[18] Not only was it established that "girls and boys remember about equally well" what they are exposed to on movie screens, but also

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[12] Werrett Wallace Charters, *Motion Pictures and Youth: A Summary* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1933), 47.
[13] Charters, *Motion Pictures and Youth,* 52.
[14] Charters, *Motion Pictures and Youth,* 49.
[15] Charters, *Motion Pictures and Youth,* 60.
[16] Herbert Blumer and Philip M. Hauser, *Movies, Delinquency, and Crime* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1933), 161.
[17] Charters, *Motion Pictures and Youth,* 60.
[18] Charters, *Motion Pictures and Youth,* 11.

that "children of all ages tend to accept as *authentic* what they see in the movies."[19] This finding concerning the perceived veracity and accuracy of visually depicted information signalled to educators that motion pictures could be used constructively for the purpose of scholastic instruction. Later research into the question of the educational value of motion pictures determined that they increased learning by 20 to 27 percent.[20] This corroborated the claim that "the motion picture is a potent medium of education."[21] Although they focused upon the moral influences of commercial movies produced for consumption in public cinemas, The *Payne Fund Studies* represented an important point of departure for educators looking to promote the use of motion pictures in the classroom.

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The publication of the *Payne Fund Studies* in 1933 left little doubt that motion pictures fascinated children and youth and that the medium demonstrated incredible educational potential. The question for educators, then, became one of encouraging the effective use of an exciting new medium in the classroom in order to yield positive scholastic results. Thus, the focus of the ensuing educational research into the use of film in the American classroom had a very different orientation from that conducted by the moral reformers. Ironically, a project grounded in a firm belief in the positive effects of motion pictures came out of research intended to demonstrate their negative societal impact. This was due at least in part to the participation of reform-minded educators in the *Payne Fund Studies* such as W.W. Charters who authored the summary volume of *Motion Pictures and Youth* and was himself a prominent figure in educational reform, an advocate of the doctrine of social efficiency, and a proponent of what Herbert Kliebard calls "scientific curriculum-making."[22] Unlike Short and the moral reformers, the educators' interests in motion pictures did not stem from anxiety over the moral corruptibility of youth but with concern over the efficient pedagogical use of the medium. Their goal was to realize the newly quantified educational potential of the motion picture.

Social efficiency and scientific curriculum-making are part of a broad trend of educational reform that emerged at the turn of the twentieth century. Educational reform is often understood in terms of the competing tensions between notions of "traditional" and "progressive" education. Time-honoured core subjects "tied to the power of reason and the finest elements of the Western cultural heritage" dominated traditional curricula.[23] The practice of traditional education emphasized reading, writing, mathematics, and the sciences. It also implied conventional teaching methods such as authoritarian teacher-student relationships, highly structured classroom organization, teacher-centred instruction, and rote memorization and recitation as the means of learning and evaluation.[24] Developments in the 1890s had placed traditional education under critical scrutiny, as competing educational philosophies emerged and gained in popularity among American educators. Three distinct strains of educational reform — developmentalism, social meliorism and social efficiency — appeared in the late nineteenth-century and would compete with the traditionalists for a place in the American curriculum throughout the twentieth century.

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[19] Charters, *Motion Pictures and Youth,* 11, 9, emphasis added.

[20] Laine, *Motion Pictures and Radio,* 40.

[21] Charters, *Motion Pictures and Youth,* 60.

[22] Herbert M. Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893-1958* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), 117-18.

[23] Kliebard, *Struggle,* 27.

[24] Larry Cuban, *How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms, 1890-1990*, second edition (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993).

Theories of progressive education emerged as both a response to the perceived needs of a changing industrial society and the rise of university-based research into child-development. The developmentalists believed that effective teaching would have to consider the different stages of childhood development. They advocated "a curriculum in harmony with the child's real interests, needs and learning patterns."[25] Heavily influenced by the field of child psychology and the example of John Dewey's laboratory school, developmentalists endorsed child-centred teaching strategies involving learning through experience, purposeful activities, and problem solving. This approach came to be known more generally as the "project method."

The second type of educational reform, known as social meliorism, is linked to social science and political activism. Disturbed by what they perceived as society's structured inequalities, the social meliorists "saw the schools as a major, perhaps the principal, force for social change and social justice."[26] Particularly in the 1930s, social meliorists advocated curriculum reforms that would make schooling play a greater role in addressing and rectifying perceived social ills.

In contrast, social efficiency educators were not inherently interested in either childhood development or social reform, but in streamlining existing educational practices. The roots of social efficiency originated in the late nineteenth century with the science-based industrial management theories of Frederick Winslow Taylor who developed the factory piecework system. Scientific management, however, quickly transcended industrial applications, as business, government, and other social institutions adopted theories of social efficiency. Social efficiency educators sought to eliminate waste in the curriculum and to gear education toward the efficient training of students for adulthood.[27] Their reform agendas emphasized testing and surveying in order to develop "practical techniques that might yield new 'efficiencies' in the delivery of instruction."[28] Thus, while the educational value of motion pictures can be seen to have had relevance for all three streams of educational reform, the interwar interest in motion pictures in education was largely pursued by the proponents of social efficiency. Armed with the belief that motion pictures represented an effective educational technology, social efficiency educators were eager to see them used profitably in American schools.

In 1936, the American Council on Education established its Committee on Motion Pictures in Education to study the "problems related to the use of motion pictures in general education."[29] Their initial findings were alarming. They concluded that, for a variety of reasons, the state of instruction by way of motion pictures in American schools was in severe disarray. The educational reformers were primarily concerned that teachers were not making efficient use of the motion picture in their classrooms. They expressed some anxiety that the educational potential of film was being ignored. One researcher attributed this to both the persistence of the traditional belief in "the power of words alone as the sole means of formal education" and "the identification of motion pictures purely as a form of entertainment which belong in the theater."[30]

The tendency of the reformers to blame teachers for pedagogical inefficiencies is a pervasive theme in the history of education and it is frequently expressed in undisguised contempt. Ellen Condliffe Lagemann traces this trend to the expansion of the teaching profession when the sudden

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[25] Kliebard, *Struggle,* 28.

[26] Kliebard, *Struggle,* 29.

[27] Kliebard, *Struggle,* 28.

[28] Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, *An Elusive Science: The Troubling History of Education Research* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 73.

[29] American Council on Education, *Selected Educational Motion Pictures*, Foreword.

[30] Charles Francis Hoban Jr., *Focus on Learning: Motion Pictures in the School* (Washington D.C.: American Council on Education, 1942), 6.

need to increase the pool of teachers led to the hiring of many young, untrained, and often uneducated women. As a result, university-trained male educational specialists and administrators have tended to perceive teachers as inferior in terms of education, intelligence, skills, and gender. "From the first," claims Lagemann, the history of educational research was beset by "contests tinged with issues of gender and professional status."[31] Many educational reformers also thought teachers were essentially conservative and unwilling to incorporate progressive reforms, preferring conventional methodologies instead. In turn, the teachers often perceived these attempts at reform as intrusive, forced upon them by those who did not appreciate the pressures of the classroom environment, or the realities of the classroom as a workplace.[32] Increased school enrolments in the interwar years raised student-to-teacher ratios. The demands of larger class sizes at a time of tightened school budgets resulted in teachers being asked to produce better results, to adopt experimental teaching strategies, and to generally do more with less. The hierarchical structure of the educational system exacerbated the tendency to blame unimaginative and obstinate teachers for curricular inefficiencies, poor student performance, and the persistence of traditional education. Even social meliorists, who, by definition, had the most ideological investment in members of the teaching profession, were "not sanguine" about their abilities.[33]

Yet the evidence gathered by the Committee on Motion Pictures in Education overwhelmingly showed that in many American school districts, motion pictures were being used to varying degrees of frequency and success by teachers eager to convey information through a new visual medium. This reflects what Larry Cuban has called "teacher-centred progressivism" — a hybridization of traditional and progressive methods as "teachers are beset by conflicting impulses to be simultaneously efficient, scientific, child-centred, and authoritative."[34] In the 1930s, most teachers did not reject motion pictures outright. Film had actually been used in schools for over two decades. Of more concern to the educational reformers was that it was not used constructively or effectively. In her 1936 study of educational media in New York State, Elizabeth Laine determined that, "to a great extent instruction by means of the motion picture has amounted to nothing more than exposure to unorganized and uncorrelated information."[35] Aware of the educational value of motion pictures, educational reformers were greatly disturbed by evidence of both their non-use and misuse in school curricula during the 1930s. A tacit disdain for teachers and their methods is certainly evident in these observations. Yet, by and large, the problems associated with motion pictures in education were recognized as wide-ranging and diverse and could not be attributed solely to the shortcomings of individual teachers.

Cognizant that "films definitely stimulate interest and encourage study," educational reformers believed that ideally all teachers should have ready access to projection equipment, a film library, and up-to-date and detailed film catalogues and teacher's manuals.[36] Unfortunately, less than ideal conditions prevailed in most American schools for much of the 1930s. The economic difficulties of the Depression coupled with infrastructural impediments presented a challenge for school boards wishing to incorporate the use of motion pictures into their curricula. Teachers faced almost insurmountable difficulties in acquiring films through an unorganized system of distribution. These

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[31] Lagemann, *An Elusive Science,* 17.

[32] See Cuban, *How Teachers Taught.*

[33] George S. Counts, *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?* (New York: John Day, 1932) 7. Quoted in Lagemann, *An Elusive Science*, 125.

[34] Cuban, *How Teachers Taught*, 114.

[35] Laine, *Motion Pictures and Radio,* 49.

[36] Dale et al., *Motion Pictures in Education,* 49.

problems were then exacerbated by the recent advances in film and projection equipment that left most school districts well behind technologically.

Projectors were a "serious expenditure" for a school first contemplating a curriculum involving motion pictures.[37] In 1936, "the cost for a 16mm silent projector, suitable for school use, [was] about one hundred and fifty dollars," and a 16mm sound projector could cost two to three times that amount.[38] It was, therefore, a heavy financial burden to put working projection equipment in every school. In Rochester, for example, $7,000 was budgeted to outfit the city's schools with new projectors. Moreover, schools already owning projection equipment faced the problem of the impending obsolescence of their old projectors. In 1936, "a total of 10,097 motion picture projectors were owned by American elementary and secondary schools. Of this total, 3565 were 35mm silent projectors . . . not in use, owing to the fact that no 35mm silent films are being manufactured at the present time and old 35mm silent films are no longer fit for screening."[39] By this account, only 6,532 projectors were actively being used in all American schools in 1936. Almost one-third of existing projection equipment was idle due to the steady obsolescence of 35mm silent film. Clearly, at a time when some school boards were experiencing difficulty heating their buildings and paying their staff, not all schools could afford a motion picture program.[40]

The costs involved in the purchase and maintenance of the necessary screening equipment and those incurred in the update of old equipment proved prohibitive for many schools. For example, silent 16mm film had been introduced in 1923 and 16mm educational sound films became available in 1928. Primarily because it was less flammable than 35mm film stock, 16mm quickly became the preferred format for non-theatrical presentation. While much safer and less cumbersome for use in public schools, its adoption led to further confusion since each motion picture format (35mm silent; 35mm sound; 16mm silent; 16mm sound) required the use of a corresponding projector. Few schools were equipped to show all the currently available films and teachers frequently acquired films in an unusable format.[41]

Projectors were not the only physical obstacle to an integrated motion picture curriculum in the 1930s. Some schools were simply not built to accommodate motion picture viewing. Worrisome concerns over classroom size, storage, portability of projection equipment, distribution of electrical outlets, and the ability to darken classrooms plagued most schools in one form or another. An investigation into these considerations in Indiana schools, for example, found that "few schools were adequately equipped" to screen motion pictures.[42] Moreover, with respect to spatial organization, "unless special building provisions are made for placing projectors in operation readily, the teachers find it too difficult to use the materials."[43] Thus, the physical configuration of many schools and their technical equipment needed updating in order to facilitate film projection, leaving many schools, particularly in poorer rural areas, unable to incorporate motion pictures easily if at all into their curricula.

Apart from the physical and technological logistics of projection, the availability, selection, and acquisition of motion pictures were problematic for teachers. Few schools, besides colleges or universities, boasted their own film libraries. Teachers did, however, obtain motion pictures from a variety of other sources. In the 1930s, hundreds of organizations produced and/or distributed films.

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[37] Laine, *Motion Pictures and Radio,* 38.

[38] Laine, *Motion Pictures and Radio,* 33-34.

[39] Laine, *Motion Pictures and Radio,* 45.

[40] James M. Wallace, *Liberal Journalism and American Education, 1914-1941* (London: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 109.

[41] Hoban, *Focus on Learning,* 163.

[42] Dale et al., *Motion Pictures in Education,* 65.

[43] Dale et al., *Motion Pictures in Education,* 65.

These included educational institutions, government agencies, producers of educational films, and private industry. Yet, as the Committee on Motion Pictures in Education noted, "the facilities for distributing motion pictures are scattered, diverse, and, to the user, chaotic."[44] It often required significant initiative and ingenuity to locate a particular film. It was "no simple matter" for a teacher to locate and obtain "the right film for use at the right time."[45] Some school boards operated municipal or state repositories with a delivery service although there was no guarantee that a film would be available in the desired format. In 1936, "twenty-six states reported they have departments of visual education and that twenty-one of these distribute motion picture films. The majority of these film-lending libraries distribute both 16mm and 35mm silent films, while *only five* of them circulate sound films."[46] Some teachers had access to a wider variety and better selection of film libraries than others. In New York City, for example, films could be borrowed locally from the libraries of the American Museum of Natural History, the YMCA Motion Picture Bureau, and the Museum of Modern Art. Not all school districts were so ideally situated, and teachers employed in or near large urban centres usually had a distinct advantage over their rural counterparts in terms of film acquisition.

Films could also be borrowed from university and college film departments. Yale distributed its 1920s series of *Yale Chronicles of America Photoplays* which were widely used in the teaching of American history. University extension departments were particularly useful for teachers in rural districts. At the same time, American industry produced and distributed films for promotional purposes. Corporations such as The Ford Motor Company, United Airlines, and General Electric put out "industrial" films that teachers might find useful. Several government agencies also produced and distributed motion pictures, most notably the U.S. Department of Agriculture that produced the now-classic documentary films, *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1937). Similarly, newsreels and *March of Time* productions were available for classroom instruction while commercial feature films adapted from literary works were also popular aids in high school English classes although they were often edited versions of the originals.[47]

Some production companies, including the two largest: Eastman Teaching Films (Eastman Kodak), and Erpi Picture Consultants, later Erpi Classroom Films, specialized in educational motion pictures. Eastman produced silent films for classroom use while Erpi collaborated with educators from the University of Chicago to produce science and nature sound films. Most films in the 1930s could be requested directly from the producers but were also available through specialized film libraries. Negotiating this complex, extensive, and uncoordinated system of film distribution in order to locate a desired film, however, represented a major challenge for teachers. If unavailable locally or in high demand, teachers might have to wait indeterminate lengths of time to obtain a desired motion picture, substitute a less favourable one, or omit the use of film altogether.

Strictly speaking, during the 1930s, Hollywood did not have an absolute monopoly on either the production of motion pictures or their presentation. Many diverse organizations were engaged in film production and American schools represented a significant forum for public, non-theatrical presentation. The broad variety of film genres ranged from the commercial Hollywood motion picture through documentary and ethnographic films popularized by such influential figures as John Grierson and Robert Flaherty to travelogues, industrial films, newsreels, and specifically educational productions. The diversity of film genres, the complexities of film formats, and uncoordinated

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[44] Hoban, *Focus on Learning,* 159.

[45] Hoban, *Focus on Learning,* 159.

[46] Laine, *Motion Pictures and Radio,* 31, emphasis added.

[47] The Commission on Human Relations of the Progressive Education Association was involved in a project of editing commercial feature pictures for school use.

distribution systems proved to be more problematic for teachers because no comprehensive film catalogues were available. The inability to determine the appropriateness of format and genre for specific teaching goals further hindered the effective pedagogical use of the motion picture. Considering the many difficulties associated with using motion pictures in the classroom during the 1930s, it is a wonder that already overworked and underpaid teachers chose to make use of them at all. That they did testifies to film's pervasive societal influence and the willingness of teachers to experiment with film.

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The educational reformers identified a number of factors contributing to what they perceived as the ineffective use of the motion picture in schools. While little could be done in the short term to alleviate the problems of physical planning and inadequate school budgets, the educational reformers determined that inefficiencies attributable either directly or indirectly to the teachers themselves could and should be rectified. Finding ways to promote and facilitate "the wider and more effective use of films in the classroom" became a principal objective of the *MPP*.[48]

The *MPP*'s primary focus was to provide the classroom teacher with the necessary pedagogical tools. First, teachers needed training in the proper technical, instructional, and educational aspects of motion pictures. This included instruction in the proper handling of film, the use of projectors, how and when to use which motion pictures most effectively within a lesson plan, and the advantages of motion pictures for children's learning. To this end, the *MPP* initiated a series of teacher training conferences. The first of these, held in Florida in early 1937, confirmed one of the concerns of the educational reformers. Upon reviewing a selection of travelogues used in elementary geography classes, "*none* was found to be of excellent quality, *only two* were found to be 'good,'. . . [and] seven were reported as of *no* geographic *value*."[49] This was a dramatic illustration of the assessment that teachers had been choosing films that were generally inappropriate for teaching purposes. These poor selections, however, were attributed mainly to the inefficient, *ad hoc* system of distribution and a lack of reliable, detailed film catalogues.

The *MPP*'s second enterprise was to create a useful reference guide for teachers. This developed into a much more complicated and ambitious venture than the one initially proposed. When "it became apparent that, without any attempt to sort the good from the poor, a list of films available to schools might be more harmful than helpful," the *MPP* embarked upon a project to assess and evaluate the films in current use in American school curricula.[50] Consistent with the trend towards large-scale school surveying that became a popular technique of educational research in the 1920s and 1930s, a program of in-class film surveys was developed which solicited input from both teachers and students. The reliance on active participation of teachers illustrates "what came to be known as 'process' in the curriculum world."[51] This should not, however, be confused with an increased respect for the teachers themselves, as it was, rather, an admission that teacher input was necessary for accurate research into educational practices.

Evaluating the pedagogical value of motion pictures became the main activity of the *MPP*. In an attempt to be inclusive, the *MPP* borrowed the sociological methodology of the "representative sample," a research method that uses a relatively small sample group, consciously representative of a larger population distribution. Participants for the surveys were selected to reflect "school systems

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[48] Dale et al., *Motion Pictures in Education,* 106-7.
[49] Dale et al., *Motion Pictures in Education,* 250, emphasis added.
[50] Hoban, *Focus on Learning,* v.
[51] Kliebard, *Struggle,* 212.

throughout the country — rural and urban, . . . Negro [sic] and white, 'progressive' and 'traditional'."[52] The actual participants consisted of elementary schools, secondary schools, and colleges from Delaware, Minnesota, Denver, Santa Barbara, Minneapolis, Rochester, Pittsburgh, and a group of unidentified schools in the southeastern states serviced by the University System of Georgia Division of General Extension.[53]

Teachers and students from the participating schools engaged in a one- to three-year exercise of film surveys. Prior to screening a film in the classroom, teachers filled out a "Film Rating Form" and recorded the title, format, source, and subject matter of the film. They were also asked to record the grade level of the class to whom the film was being shown and to identify the "educational purposes expected to be achieved in using this motion picture." After a screening, the students were asked questions such as: "What did you *learn* from this motion picture?" and "What incidents, parts, or features of the picture did you *like* best?" They were also requested to indicate their gender. Both teachers and students were asked to judge the film on a scale from "excellent," through "good," "fair," "poor," and "useless."[54] This exercise provided the *MPP* with valuable information about which films were being used to the best advantage in the classrooms of America.

The research yielded some important findings which were described by the *MPP*'s director, Charles Hoban, Jr. The most salient finding was that in order to maintain interest in a subject presented visually, children needed the establishment of a familiar connection: a "bridgehead of interest."[55] Age appeared to be the most significant of these factors as students were found to be "most interested in personalities of their own age, shown doing the things that children of that age generally do."[56] Similar bridgeheads existed for factors such as gender, race, and class. The *MPP* also found that students preferred sound pictures and consistently rated them higher than silent films regardless of the actual instructional value. The teachers' submissions most frequently remarked that both the opportunity to preview films and access to detailed study guides significantly improved the classroom value of motion pictures. These were important findings for educational reformers, confirming their belief that for films to be most effective, they must be intelligently selected for the individual classroom.

The *MPP*'s intensive film surveys resulted in the publication of the American Council on Education's *Selected Educational Motion Pictures: A Descriptive Encyclopedia*. This was a comprehensive reference guide that listed only the films rated "excellent" or "good" for instructional purposes and included detailed content descriptions for approximately 500 16mm silent and sound films. The catalogue covered all genres, included acquisition information for each film, and indicated the appropriate educational levels from kindergarten through college. The *MPP* was confident that armed with this new catalogue, teachers could now make intelligent motion picture choices to supplement their curriculum.

The mandate of the *MPP* had been to address the problems associated with the use of film in education. As a result of its endeavours teachers who participated in technical training courses obtained better working knowledge of the educational uses of motion pictures, a catalogue of quality films became available, and several schools across the nation participated in a hands-on motion picture evaluation project. Educators were particularly satisfied with the results in the schools that participated in the surveys. At Tower Hill High School in Wilmington, Delaware, the school principal was pleased to report that "as a result of our experience, films are now used more profitably and

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[52] Hoban, *Focus on Learning,* vi.

[53] Hoban, *Focus on Learning,* vi.

[54] Hoban, *Focus on Learning,* Appendix C, "Film Rating Forms" emphasis in original.

[55] Hoban, *Focus on Learning,* 44.

[56] Hoban, *Focus on Learning,* 46.

better films are secured more frequently."[57] Further, the teachers displayed a new "sense of discrimination, of appreciation, and of confidence in the role of motion pictures in education." Their attitudes had "shifted from interest in a new medium and vague awareness of potentialities to a competent acceptance of the motion picture as a powerful medium of communication with important and unique functions in education."[58] This represented the efficient use of motion pictures in schools for which social efficiency educators had been striving. With the proper training, tools, and information made available to teachers, audio-visual instruction through film could now truly be termed "education." It remained to be seen whether this efficiency in the use of motion pictures would extend to American classrooms more generally or whether the work of the *MPP* would get lost in the "cacophony" of educational research and reforms that was threatening to overwhelm American teachers.[59]

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In the 1930s, many American children and young adults encountered motion pictures not only as a form of entertainment at the local cinema but also as an educational experience at school. This would have ramifications in later decades as governments became skilled at using film for its propaganda value. Meanwhile, with the onset of war, the social and educational impact of the visual media would become even more apparent.

In retrospect, the work of the American Council on Education to promote the use of motion pictures in schools seems particularly significant against the onslaught of wartime propaganda and the proliferation of postwar mass media and communications technologies. The educational reformers certainly understood and portrayed their mission as having broad nationalistic implications:

> America must not only be right; it must also be efficient. For America to be efficient, America's schools must be efficient . . . Motion Pictures are efficient social tools, and their effective use can contribute to the nation's war and peace efforts . . . [The] need to understand the role of motion pictures as a medium of education and to use them effectively is greater today than ever before.[60]

In the 1940s and 1950s, television would emerge as the next exciting new educational technology and a new era of postwar educational research and reforms would focus on television's role in curriculum delivery.[61] This should not detract from the importance of the research done by educational reformers in the 1930s to promote the use of motion pictures but make that work more historically valuable. If anything, the *MPP* and the efforts of the social efficiency educators deserve to be re-examined in that they laid the groundwork for research into the pedagogical use of visual technologies in the classroom.

Moreover, the ACE research highlights several existing themes in the history of educational reform. The drive for social efficiency, the scientific testing and research methods that led to educational reforms, and the professional tensions between educators and teachers in the efforts to institute progressive education are central and ongoing themes in the history of educational reform. Few historians, however, have looked at them through the lens of motion pictures in education.

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[57] Hoban, *Focus on Learning,* 147.

[58] Hoban, *Focus on Learning,* 147.

[59] Lagemann, *An Elusive Science,* 100.

[60] Hoban, *Focus on Learning,* 22.

[61] Larry Cuban, Teachers and Machines: The Classroom Use of Technology Since 1920 (New York: Teachers College Press, 1986).

Similarly for film historians, preoccupations with the commercial monopoly of Hollywood and the interest in the history of documentary film have overshadowed this important venue of American motion picture viewing.

The efforts of the educational reformers to promote the use of motion pictures in schools created a generation of citizens familiar with the notion of film as education and public information. The decade before the Second World War is particularly significant to this historiography since it represents a crucial transitional period in which the motion picture came to be recognized not solely as entertainment but as an effective educational tool. Viewed in this light, educational reformers and classroom teachers made a distinct contribution to the emergence of modern film culture. Enthusiasm for the instructional potential of motion pictures encouraged their use in the American classroom and helped to establish the educational value of motion pictures not just for schooling but also for civic purposes. The research and efforts to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of visual instruction via the motion picture reflected broader socio-historical developments. As such, the relationship between motion pictures in education and the social history of the motion picture calls for further study by film historians.

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