

The Factual Treatment of Actuality: The Emergence of Educational Film in the 1920s and its Relation to Documentary Film Proper

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Nonfiction films produced in the United States and Europe before the 1930s vastly outnumber fictional feature films produced during the same period, and yet the scholarly work done on these films is minimal compared to the number of publications that attend to their fictional counterparts (Gunning 1997, 10). By and large, so-called educational films have been further ghettoized by the film studies discipline. What little work there is on early nonfiction cinema has been divided between an analysis of early actualities and the Documentary Film Movement of the 1930s. And while Robert Flaherty is widely recognized as one of the first documentary filmmakers with his canonical work *Nanook of the North* (1922), broadly speaking the film studies discipline has ignored other educational nontheatrical films produced during the same time period. Some notable exceptions include John Mercer's *The Informational Film* (1981), Anthony Slide's *Before Vide: A History of the Non-Theatrical Film* (1992), Ken Smith's *Mental Hygiene: Classroom Films 1945-1970* (1999), Geoff Alexander's *Academic Films for the Classroom: A History* (2010), and the recent anthology *Learning with the Lights Off: Educational Film in the United States* (2012).

There are a number of reasons for this gap. Educational films are couched within a different set of academic discourses than are typically dealt with in the field of film studies. Furthermore, many nontheatrical films, considered outdated and no longer needed for their originally intended use, have long since been discarded by the organizations and institutions that once held large collections. Additionally, cultural as-

sumptions about artistic value lead scholars to attend more closely to films made by »auteurs« and films exhibited in theaters, as opposed to films produced by anonymous filmmakers and exhibited predominantly in the classroom or the church. All in all, nontheatrical films have been marginalized for their perceived lack of aesthetic and technical quality. While documentary films have developed a certain cultural cachet, educational films have not, and are seen as mere relics of a bygone era. Their contingency on a particular cultural period, however, is precisely their value to us today. These films were viewed by millions of adults and young people; they both *depicted* daily life and *functioned within* daily lives. And, while eventually inhabiting a space that is neatly distinct from theatrical film, educational films were once part of a conversation about the fluidity of film's form and purpose.

Bill Nichols, one of the most influential scholars in documentary film studies, distinguishes between educational films and documentary proper, privileging the aesthetic properties of the latter. In his book *Introduction to Documentary*, Nichols characterizes documentaries as films that draw from the real world, but convey the filmmaker's »voice« through a rhetorical structure that makes prominent use of film form (Nichols 2010, 67–72). This contemporary definition of documentary excludes educational film, even though educational films—in both form and content—raise the same issues about representation that are raised by documentaries. While he and others certainly situate educational films under the larger umbrella of nonfiction film, educational films are still essentially ignored by the discipline for their perceived lack of aesthetic and rhetorical force. In similar fashion, film historian Tom Gunning differentiates the »view aesthetic« of early cinema, a term that I will elaborate below, from the more sophisticated evidentiary editing techniques we associate with later documentary films. His work is significant, but leaves an unexamined gap between the First World War and 1926, the year John Grierson is credited with first using the term »documentary« in a review of Flaherty's second film *Moana*.¹ By the same token,

1 Originally published in the *New York Sun*, February 8, 1926 under the pen name »The Moviegoer.«

Ian Aitken draws boundaries around the Documentary Film Movement, arguing that it began in 1929 with John Grierson's first and only film *Drifters*, and ending somewhere around 1948 with the relocation of many filmmakers who worked under Grierson into new organizations and geographic locations (Aitken 1998, 9). While there is arguably a distinct characteristic shared by the nonfiction films made during this period, limiting our attention to the Griersonian tradition obscures the many films that were made by nonfiction filmmakers who likely had no relationship to Grierson. Rather than seeing documentary as cultivated by a single historical agent, early educational films show us that documentary emerged as part of a larger cultural trend in nonfiction educational film in the United States and Great Britain. While I do not disagree that there seems to be an evolution in documentary structure from early cinema to the 1930s, I do not see this as an abrupt shift in nonfiction film style. Rather, during this period of the early to mid-1920s, there is a notable ambiguity in how nonfiction films are produced, used, and interpreted by audiences that defies neat categorizations of »view« versus »documentary« models.

How nonfiction (and even fiction) films are classified in the period before World War II is difficult to nail down. The terminology used to talk about nonfiction films—educational film, instructional film, propaganda film, scientific film, teaching film, industrial film, and newsreel, just to name a few—is prolific and indeterminate. In different contexts a single film can be classified in any number of ways, and indeed, may be associated with more than one of these terms in the *same* context. It can be argued that the slippages in the language is evidence that the categorization of film in the period cannot be reduced to subject matter or formal composition, but to institutional, exhibition, and discursive contexts. A single film can slide between categories as its interpretive framework shifts from one social context to the next, in the process revealing the nebulous perception of film's form and function during the 1920s. While John Grierson primed later film theorists and historians to view the 1930s as a pivotal decade for the development of documentary film as its own distinct mode of filmmaking, I intend to show that the so-called

educational films of the 1920s were not dramatically different from documentary films of later decades. In fact, the 1920s can be seen as a kind of gestational period for documentary, helping us to better understand the social and historical factors that contributed to the rise of documentary as a unique form of filmmaking. Furthermore, a closer look at the ignored educational films of the 1920s forces us to reconsider the privileging of fictional narrative film in film studies, considering the cultural centrality of nonfiction film of all types and its role in the active cultural negotiation of the motion picture's structure and purpose that took place during the period.

In the following pages I will begin by situating my work within the ongoing conversation about early nonfiction film. In this section, I focus first on the analysis of early cinema by contemporary film historian Tom Gunning and, second, on John Grierson, whose writings about the definition and role of documentary film were originally published in *Film Quarterly* during the early 1930s. As I hope to demonstrate, both draw neat lines between early cinema and post-1930 documentary film proper, a distinction that does not work well with nonfiction films produced and circulated during the 1920s. I will demonstrate this argument with a specific case study: a series of propaganda-style films produced by the Illinois state government, including *Foster Mother of the World*, *Dawn of a New Day*, and *Illinois, the Good Samaritan* (circa 1919–1924). By describing the varying institutional, exhibition, and discursive contexts of these films according to an account published in an early educational film journal titled *The Educational Screen*, I hope to show that these films are closely related forebears to later documentary films. Yet they do not neatly fit any one category, but rather move freely between categories, revealing the cultural centrality of nonfiction films in the 1920s and the motion picture's ambiguous place along the spectrum of entertainment and education.

Tom Gunning argues that actualities, the precursors to documentary film, were rooted in the pleasure of visual spectacle. Early cinema emphasized the appeal of the image itself rather than any narrative or rhetorical structure. According to Gunning, nonfiction films made prior to

World War I were governed by what he calls a »view aesthetic« that is related, but distinct from later documentary film. Drawing from his previous argument about »the cinema of attractions,« he writes: »early actuality films were structured around presenting something visually, capturing and preserving a look or vantage point« (Gunning 1997, 14). In the tradition of the cinema of attractions, the emphasis is less on content than on the display itself. The pleasure of the moving image is the voyeuristic pleasure of looking; that is, in early actualities the »camera literally acts as a tourist, spectator or investigator, and the pleasure in the film lies in this surrogate of looking« (Gunning 1997, 15). This can be seen best in nature films and travelogues that offer unusual views not accessible to audiences outside of the cinema. According to Gunning, the simple »view aesthetic« in nonfiction films persists up through the 1920s, stagnating stylistically at a time when fiction films progressed to more complex narrative structures enabled by advances in editing techniques. In simple travelogue narratives, such as the early works by Martin and Osa Johnson,² images do not serve as evidence supporting a rhetorical point of view. Instead, the »social attitudes here are pre-existent rather than argued« (Gunning 1997, 19). He contrasts this with World War I propaganda films that take on an evidentiary function: »[t]hey employ film images in order to prove a thesis whose main claims are carried in an accompanying verbal discourse« (Gunning 1997, 21). Here Gunning reifies the distinctions held by Nichols and others between general nonfiction and early films that are more akin to documentary film proper. Significantly, he is using a distinctly Griersonian notion of documentary film, pointing to specific compositional elements—evidentiary editing, rhetorical structure and voice-of-god commentary—to retrospectively distinguish a clear lineage of documentary film that brackets

2 Martin and Osa Johnson are famous for their filmed expeditions across exotic landscapes. Their early work, such as *Jungle Adventures* (1921) filmed in the island of Borneo, employ simple editing techniques pairing intertitles containing detailed descriptions with images of various animals, people, and landscapes encountered along their journey. Their principal purpose is to show audiences the visual spectacle of exotic locales.

out much of early nonfiction filmmaking. In this account there is little discussion of the development from actualities and travelogues to the Documentary Film Movement. As a result, the World War I propaganda films seem aberrant against a backdrop of simple »view aesthetic« films that do not share some of the later techniques that we eventually associate with documentary proper. While I do not disagree with Gunning's analysis of early nonfiction cinema, I wonder how more loosely defined educational films fit within this historical trajectory from the earliest uses of evidentiary editing in the 1910s and the renaissance of documentary film in the U.S. and abroad beginning around 1929. It is not until Grierson and his contemporaries retrospectively point to the films of Robert Flaherty that we get a sense of how nonfiction cinema moved from actualities to something eventually to be called documentary. Yet the distinctions Grierson and others draw between the documentary aesthetic and earlier films oversimplify the nonfiction films circulated during the missing decades between World War I and World War II.

In a series of essays originally published in *Cinema Quarterly* from 1932–1934, Grierson refines the distinction between documentary film and earlier nonfiction, arguing that scientific and natural actualities are mere »description« whereas documentary films are skillful »interpretation« of the world through moving images. He writes:

So far we have regarded all films made from natural material as coming within the category [of documentary film]. The use of natural material has been regarded as the vital distinction. Where the camera shot on the spot (whether it shot newsreel items or magazine items or discursive »interests« or dramatized »interests« or educational films or scientific films proper or *Changs* or *Rangos*)³ in that fact was documentary [...] They all represent different qualities of observation, different intentions in observation, and, of

3 In this passage Grierson is referring to *Chang: A Drama of the Wilderness* (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack 1927) and *Rango* (Ernest B. Schoedsack 1931), films that might be best described as dramatized travelogues falling somewhere between fictional narrativization and factual observation.

course, very different powers and ambitions at the stage of organized material. (Grierson 1947b, 99)

Here Grierson wants to make a distinction between different categories of nonfiction film. For him, these early educational films, called »interests« in the above passage, are mostly »novelties« or »tit-bits.« They are »boring« or simply »flippant« compared to the films of Robert Flaherty, Dziga Vertov, Basil Wright, Joris Ivens, and others. Conversely, in documentary »we pass from the plain (or fancy) descriptions of natural material, to arrangements, rearrangements, and creative shapings of it« (Grierson 1947b, 99). In other words, raw footage of real people and events is not enough to constitute documentary, but rather the fashioning of this footage toward an overarching rhetorical purpose. For Grierson, it is its formal qualities, not its perfect reproduction of the »real,« which constitutes documentary as its own unique form.

While I rely heavily on Grierson as one of the most outspoken figures defining the form and purpose of documentary film, he was not the only one. Others writing in the 1930s share Grierson's views on the power and necessity of documentary film, including his emphasis on form as it relates to function. Indeed, the relationship between form and function seems to be the key factor that distinguishes documentary film from both fictional narratives and »mere« educational scenics and topicals for Grierson's contemporaries. Several articles in *Sight & Sound* argue that the documentary is different than theatrical fiction film because there is »no individualised human story,« »no star to present,« and no »vulgar« emotion. Instead there are »types, types of social groups, symbols of the many.« And unlike scenics and topicals, documentaries force upon their viewers a new point of view, or »theme,« through their style of presentation (Schrire 1934, 123). This theme is a social truth revealed through shocking juxtaposition that enables the viewer to see the world anew in true Modernist fashion. These sentiments attest to the perceived direct relationship between a film's formal qualities and its social function. Cinema, it is argued, should be put in the service of uniting all people under the nation and a set of common ideals (Orr 1932, 19). In addition to differentiating documentary from narrative film, advocates of the former

also attempted to differentiate documentary from other modes of non-fiction, arguing that unlike newsreels and topicals, documentaries have a »truer journalistic sense.« The failure of the newsreel is that »There is no intentional propaganda on the part of the editors« and this is a sign of »laziness« (Fraser 1933, 89–90). For these writers, newsreels are considered nothing more than streams of unconnected information. The average citizen is assumed incapable of discerning the important from the unimportant, the truth from the lies, thereby necessitating the need for documentary to shape information into a clear argument that citizens can act upon, presumably for the betterment of society. The image, in other words, is capable of being both deceptively opaque and of revealing greater human truths; either way it shapes human perception, for better or for worse.

But these arguments are not new in the 1930s. In fact they reflect a similar tension that emerged in debates surrounding early educational film. In the preceding decades, advocates of the use of educational film oscillated between the need for films that have a serious, informative tone and the opposing viewpoint that educational films should be entertaining and narrative-driven as a part of their attraction as an educational tool. This debate was constructed around concern that educational film distinguish itself from »frivolous« fictional films exhibited in theaters. This ambivalence is one factor in the long »justification period« before the use of educational film in the United States became a staple of the American classroom after World War II (Orgeron et al. 2012, 24–26). As part of this justification period, the nature of cinema and its capacity to educate—and by extension the very meaning of the term »education«—becomes a prominent part of public discourse. In the following section I hope to show that these arguments toward defining documentary as its own unique form were not new at the time of their writing in the 1930s. Indeed, much of the language used to distinguish documentary film was used much earlier to advocate for another kind of film—educational film—and part of this project was the very redefinition of the term »education.«

As my case study I will be looking at a series of films produced by the Illinois state government during the 1920s. These silent films (explicitly designated »educational« motion pictures by the Illinois government), defy the problematic division set by film scholars between documentary films of the 1930s and nonfiction films released prior to the Documentary Film Movement. Specifically, I hope to demonstrate that the changing discursive, institutional, and exhibition contexts of the Illinois state films help slide them across categories, from »industrial films« to »educational films« to »propaganda films,« the latter designation more often associated with documentaries of the 1930s and '40s.

In the early period of cinema the word »education« meant less the intellectual pursuit of knowledge than conditioning the viewer to become a productive, morally righteous, and healthy member of society. Significantly, this is the value and purpose of early (and later) educational films, while also the cultural origins of documentary. Indeed, Grierson uses the term »education« liberally in his writings in the 1930s when referring to documentary film, blurring the very distinction he is attempting to draw between documentary film proper and earlier nonfiction film styles. Early documentary films have been largely recognized as propaganda pictures building public support for the war effort abroad (as in Frank Capra's *Why We Fight* series, 1942–1945) or advocating for new social institutions and practices on the home front (as in Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke's popular film *The City*, 1939). Yet in early publications of *Sight & Sound* (U.K.) and *The Educational Screen* (U.S.) the terms »educational« and »propaganda« seem conflated. In the introduction to the first issue of *The Educational Screen*, the editors explain the significance of their publication: »The screen educates—for better or worse—wherever it hangs« (»To Our Readers« 1922, 3). In this context, »to educate« means precisely to condition the minds of viewers. This broad cultural view regarding the power of cinema is addressed in Devin Orgeron, Marsha Orgeron, and Dan Streible's opening chapter to their anthology, *Learning with the Lights Off: Educational Film in the United States* (2012). They write:

An array of theories and rhetorical tropes began circulating in the early twentieth century regarding the powers of the moving image,

especially over children. Some argued that the motion picture possessed hypnotic powers; others argued that moviegoers—especially children—were getting daily theatrical doses of harmful and corrupting ideas; others claimed that going to movies at night resulted in eyestrain and, more generally, in children being less able to learn at school the next day. (Orgeron et al. 2012, 22)

It is the power of moving images to influence and potentially corrupt that instigated the desire for more socially progressive, educational cinematic options.

The Illinois state government specifically set out to »educate« its rural public using cinema. In 1924, under the administration of Governor Len Small (1921–1929), Illinois launched the Educational Film Library »devoted to the portrayal of facts connected with various phases of state government« (Lounsbury Wells 1926, 6). Before Small, Governor Frank O. Lowden approved the making of a short silent film by the state Division of Dairy Husbandry entitled *The Foster Mother of the World* (1919) in order to promote the Illinois dairy industry. Writing in *The Educational Screen*, Maie Lounsbury Wells, Assistant Superintendent of Charities of the State of Illinois, described the film’s circulation: »Its educational usefulness extended over a period of four years, during which time it was viewed by more than two hundred thousand farmers. The stimulating educational effect of this picture was greatly evidenced by improved dairy conditions throughout the entire state« (Lounsbury Wells 1926, 6). Arguing that education does not cease with the issuance of high school diplomas, Lounsbury Wells advocates for state involvement in the continuing education of its citizens, for, as she asserts, good citizenship is directly related to education. Education, in this sense, is less about intellectual growth than about teaching the public how to be more productive, morally upright citizens. In effect, motion pictures become a means of Taylorizing citizenship training, helping to efficiently organize society for a better future. The cultural redefinition of »education« to mean something more akin to »propaganda« can be partially attributed to the larger cultural changes taking place concurrent to the evolution of cinema. Lounsbury Wells, from whom I draw most of my information on

the Illinois state films, situates educational film within the larger narrative of the Progressive Era: »Knowledge plus Understanding equals Progress« (Lounsbury Wells 1926, 6).

During the Progressive Era, many Americans believed in the inevitability of modern progress toward a better future, yet simultaneously possessed great anxieties about the rapidity of the changes happening at the turn of the 20th century. Not only were mechanical advances such as automobiles, electricity, and the telegraph speeding up human interaction, social and spatial changes such as urbanization and immigration were causing an unprecedented mixing of genders, ethnicities, and economic classes in public spaces without the supervision of moral superiors. Incidental to these developments, this period marks the rise of social sciences aimed at the study and management of the masses. Even psychology, ostensibly a science of the individual psyche, was rooted in anxieties about the »passions« that sway the public. The proliferation of mass media exacerbated the worries of progressives. Movie theaters and other forms of lowbrow entertainment, it was feared, were exposing the working and immigrant classes to images that might stimulate their lurid and criminal baser instincts. Worse, like their working class counterparts, by the 1920s the middle classes were also enjoying movie theaters and other forms of public entertainment, producing further concerns about the descending tastes of Americans at all socio-economic levels. For these reasons, while there was tremendous excitement about the educational potential of motion pictures, many people were also dubious about its application, harboring anxieties about the introduction of this new medium. In light of these concerns »visual education was being pitched as essential to the modernization of America. Indeed, the modernization of education was intimately tied to national improvement, innovation, and health« (Orgeron et al. 2012, 30). In other words, at the same time that the cinema was feared to be a corrupting force, it was simultaneously seen as a potential tool for social improvement as long as certain enlightened institutions were responsible for the creation and dissemination of films. Indeed, it is partly their institutional context that makes educational films distinct from their fictional counterparts, an aspect that Grierson would

later formalize by establishing the film division of the General Post Office in Great Britain.

Lounsbury Wells reflects the prevailing attitude of the period in her conviction that the visual medium of motion pictures has the power to sway public beliefs and behaviors. She prefaces her discussion of the Illinois state films with this telling description: »the State Administration decided to test the power of picturization to convey to the receptive minds of Mr. and Mrs. Average Citizen, just what was taking place« in the government (Lounsbury Wells 1926, 6). Here images are said to penetrate the »receptive minds« of the average citizen. Significantly, this same belief also motivated Grierson who wrote several years later, »everywhere the new dramatic methods of appeal are being used on a colossal scale to crystallize men's sentiments and so affect their will.« He continues, »Today's propaganda concern is that we should feel this and not that, think this and not that, do this and not that« (Grierson 1947c, 251). Rather than eliminating or censoring the propaganda potential of the cinema, however, Grierson advocates that film should be an instrument of the public, whom he sees as confused and manipulated by an overwhelming amount of mostly worthless, if not destructive, visual information. By contrast, »[w]hen [film] has proceeded on the lines of explanation and elucidation and understanding, and when it has had the good sense to strike beyond party differences to the deeper loyalties of civic understanding and civic cooperation [film can become] education in a world where the State is the instrument of the public's enterprise« (Grierson 1947c, 256). I suggest this statement reflects the sentiments of Lounsbury Wells and many of her contemporaries. Indeed, in an essay titled »Propaganda and Education,« Grierson weaves together his endorsement of the documentary form, mass media as propaganda, and visual education—telling evidence of the slippages between these terms during the period. Rather than the individual pursuit of greater understanding, Grierson defines education as »the process by which the minds of men are keyed to the tasks of good citizenship, by which they are geared to the privilege of making a constructive contribution, however humble, to the highest purposes of the community« (Grierson 1947a, 229). But it is

my argument that the link between visual education and good citizenship well precedes Grierson. Educational films might be seen as a first attempt to activate this socially uplifting potential of cinema.

It is the notion of the motion picture as a powerful, manipulative tool for shaping human minds that instigates the desire for further educational films, considered more ›wholesome‹ than their fictional counterparts. Concerned about the negative effects of mass media, progressives of the period, as part of a philanthropic desire to uplift the working and immigrant classes, believed in the need for teaching the public how to discern good films from bad. Progressives who did not want to shut down theaters entirely believed that ›education-through-the-eye‹ will transform society into a new and better social order (McClusky 1923, 3). They saw educational film as naturally ›good‹ and fictional films as frequently ›bad,‹ believing educational subjects were a means of appealing to the middle classes, thus attracting this sought-after audience to the theaters while simultaneously shaping the working and immigrant classes through the guise of entertainment. Writing about the popular social hygiene film exhibited in theaters, *The Fly Pest* (1910), author Bill Marsh argues that

educational moving pictures—as highbrow alternatives to low-brow film offerings—would help gentrify an industry troubled by its ›working-class profile‹. A ›better films‹ movement in the late 1910s would formalize earlier efforts to market educational pictures as inducements to middle and upper-class patronage. (Marsh 2010, 23)

The aptly named ›better films movement‹ was taken up largely by women's organizations, such as the Women's National Democratic Club of New York City. These groups aimed not to censor films, but to help ›educate the motion picture public to the necessity of encouraging the production of better pictures of the artistic, educational and character building type‹ (›Notes and News‹ 1926, 34). In other words, film was not seen as inherently bad, but was a tool that could be used for good in the hands of the right people. Nontheatrical films became a primary means of ›educating‹ the public about proper taste, as theaters tended to

exhibit supposedly lusty romances and violent action films rather than more wholesome fare like nature films, social hygiene films, and travelogues. Bill Nichols famously described documentary films as adhering to a »discourse of sobriety,« but, as *The Fly Pest* demonstrates, pre-documentary educational pictures served a sobering function as well, setting clear precedence for the Documentary Film Movement of the 1930s (Nichols 2010, 36–37).

While many early educational films were designed to be uplifting, the Illinois dairy films were less about building audience tastes than about promoting and improving a certain industry. Still, the films were designed to indoctrinate the public in order to become more efficient, healthy, and productive for the betterment of the American body politic in the State of Illinois. Following the enormous success of their first film, the Division of Dairy Husbandry produced a second short film entitled *The Dawn of a New Day*. The film contrasts old methods of dairy husbandry with new technologies, foregrounding increased production and better care for animals. Lounsbury Wells estimates that around 400,000 people in the state of Illinois viewed this second film. According to government officials, there was an increase in the purchase of pure-bred dairy sires, a tripling of the production of butter fat in a span of five years, and the near eradication of bovine tuberculosis in the state of Illinois; for them evidence that the films successfully impacted public understanding of proper dairy production and consumption practices (Lounsbury Wells 1926, 7). It is evident the dairy films are designed to educate the general population in one basic sense—through moving pictures they can learn about the duties and responsibilities of the Division of Dairy Husbandry as a government institution. They are also educational in an important secondary sense—the films are a form of persuasion, arguing implicitly that 20th century advances in farming technology and techniques are progressive and that the dairy industry itself is necessary and beneficial for the nation. It is hoped that audiences will therefore act on this new information for the betterment of the industry and society as a whole. In this respect the dairy films are not mere »description,« as Grierson wants to define educational films of the 1910s and

'20s, but were understood as effective ›propaganda‹ tools, even though none of the Illinois state officials overtly categorized them as such.

The Illinois state films were not just about industrial promotion; they were also couched within a socially progressive philosophy similar to many of the canonical documentary films of the 1930s. With the success of the dairy films, Governor Small ordered all Illinois state departments to produce films explaining the workings of government to the public. Films produced by the state between 1920 and 1925 include: *Mining Coal*, *Mining Flurspar*, *Deep Waterways of Illinois*, *The Last Visit of Lafayette to Illinois*, *Charm of the Mississippi Valley*, *The ›Egypt‹ of Illinois*, *The Country of Lincoln*, and *Starved Rock and Rock River Valley*. From these titles it is clear that these films are meant to be both informative, illustrating Illinois' primary industries and natural resources, while also propagandistic, mythologizing Illinois as part of the grand American narrative. For example, as part of this initiative the Department of Public Welfare produced a film titled *Illinois, the Good Samaritan* under the supervision of Judge C.H. Jenkins. The film sutures the Biblical story of the Good Samaritan with the expected role of Illinois citizens, specifically their duty to pay for special institutions designed to help the poor and disenfranchised by paying state taxes. Quoted from an unknown Illinois newspaper, one editorial reads: »The taxpayers who saw the picture ›Illinois the Good Samaritan‹ will meet the tax gatherer more cheerfully this spring because of their new appreciation of the work being done by the state for our unfortunates« (Lounsbury Wells 1926, 9). This quote, whether fabricated by the film advertisers or not, situates the film within a left-leaning socially progressive atmosphere that values state welfare initiatives, much like the films of Pare Lorentz or Basil Wright produced a decade later, while simultaneously adhering to a more conservative narrative of nation-building that defines what constitutes good citizenship.

According to accounts in *The Educational Screen*, the film *Illinois, the Good Samaritan* depicts the practices of care at the Illinois state hospital and the state penal system where »the prisoner is taken through the different forms of identification, period of observation, final classification and assignment of work needed to cope with the particular form of the pris-

oner's behavioristic problem« using a so-called »Progressive Merit System« (Lounsbury Wells 1926, 8). The film then depicts the State School for the Blind, the School for the Deaf, the Illinois Soldiers Orphans Home, and finally a state training school for »delinquents.« An assemblage of social hygienic institutions devoted to controlling deviancy in the spirit of the Progressive Era, this film is clearly doing ideological work in the guise of education. Itself a form of education-as-propaganda, the film can be seen as a continuation of the work being done by the institutions it depicts. In other words, the film is designed not only to depict the machinations of a progressive society, but also to reinforce these ideals.

Unfortunately we must rely on written descriptions of the Illinois state films. However, other films produced around the same time period, such as the film *General Health Habits* (1928) produced by DeVry School Films, Inc. (also in Chicago, Illinois), are illustrative of the type and complexity of the work that was being done by educational films before the emergence of documentary proper. *General Health Habits* is an appropriate comparison because it most likely exhibits a similar tone and formal aesthetic as *Illinois, the Good Samaritan*. The film visually contrasts urban and rural living environments, advocating the social and individual health benefits of living in rural settings. Juxtaposing images of jostling, crowded cities with sunny, pastoral farm scenes, the film asks of the viewer in intertitles: »What is lacking here?« or »What conditions promote health here?« The intertitles are accompanied by handwritten health tips such as »sleep with the window open« and »hike once a week,« which are drawn in real time in black marker on a white background emulating the procedure of a teacher writing on a chalkboard in a school classroom. Concerned with juvenile delinquency and urban blight, the film advocates a certain set of lifestyle practices to promote good social hygiene. For example, in one segment of the film, scenes of teenage boys fighting in a back alley are contrasted with a group of boys hiking and camping in an open forest. Through the technique of visual contrast and direct address, the film insinuates that young boys in urban

environments do not have fresh air and active lifestyles to channel their energy, leading to some of the delinquent behaviors we see in the film.

The film *General Health Habits* is striking in its similarity to the canonical documentary film *The City* (Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke, 1939). The film displays some of the evidentiary editing techniques described by Gunning, while at the same time making implicit ideological assumptions not stated outright. The movement of the camera borrows conventions from the »view aesthetic,« such as the slow pan of an otherwise stationary camera, or mounting the camera on a moving vehicle to capture people on the sidewalk as the vehicle passes by. Yet the use of intertitles that pose open-ended rhetorical questions evoke the direct address style exhibited in later documentary. Stylistically, the editing technique is not nearly as sophisticated as the avant-garde »city symphony« films being made during the same period in Europe, such as *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (Walter Ruttmann, 1927) and Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), which are already recognized as influential to the Documentary Film Movement.⁴ In *General Health Habits*, the style is less experimental and dynamic, but the social purpose and institutional context is explicit. In the ways I have just described, educational films seem to straddle the divide between actualities and documentaries. *General Health Habits* illustrates the way in which educational films of the 1920s were educational in two senses: the film is working to be both informative and persuasive, while it is also civically and socially engaged, both reflecting and attempting to augment prevailing attitudes about public health and well-being in its style of propaganda. It is not simply novelty or mere description of the world, but is clearly interpreting the world for viewers according to a socially progressive ideological world view.

4 For a discussion of city symphony films and their relationship to the Documentary Film Movement, see MacDonald, Scott. 2010. »Avant-Doc: Eight Intersections.« *Film Quarterly* 64 (2): 50–57.

In this final section I will elaborate on how the distribution and exhibition of early educational films demonstrates their liminal status between actualities and the Documentary Film Movement. Notably, before the more famous government-sponsored films of the 1930s, the U.S. Federal Department of Agriculture produced 28 educational motion pictures in 1925, bringing their film library up to a total of 1,862 reels available for distribution to public institutions throughout the country. A »conservative« estimate is that some *nine million people* had viewed these films by the end of 1925 (»Notes and News« 1926, 25). Based on this figure, it seems that educational films were primarily distributed by government institutions at the state and federal levels, though not necessarily exhibited in government spaces. The fact that these so-called educational films are being produced and circulated by a government institution is further evidence that education and propaganda are closely intertwined during this period, and that educational films and documentary films are closely related.

Significantly, the purpose of the circulation of the Illinois state films was not just to convince audiences of the proper practices of dairy husbandry or social behavior. Part of the state project was to teach audiences *how to be persuaded*. Put differently, it was an effort to expose the public to motion pictures, which were seen as powerful new tools of mass persuasion. Lounsbury Wells explains the role of cinema as a state tool for social management: »we believe in the State of Illinois that the logical and efficient method of disseminating facts essential to good citizenship—and after all individual good citizenship is the foundation upon which rests our American supremacy—is by means of the cinematograph« (Lounsbury Wells 1926, 61). The article estimates that in 1921, at the time *Foster Mother* would have been circulating, 60 percent of rural audiences had never before seen a motion picture (Lounsbury Wells 1926, 7). For these audiences, their first exposure to the new medium was not the Edison nickelodeons, nor D.W. Griffith's heavily studied *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), but educational films that have been virtually ignored like those that would have been shown via portable suitcase projectors in rural exhibition spaces. One can therefore make the argument that *Foster*

Mother and *Dawn* were simultaneously propaganda pictures using artful arrangement of images in order to advocate for state industries, and a kind of ›cinema of attractions‹ viewed by virgin audiences who may have consumed the films as pure spectacle, minimizing their educational purpose and taking pleasure in the novelty of the moving image itself. In other words, exhibition context and audience reception within those contexts can help determine whether a film can be more appropriately categorized as ›view aesthetic‹ or ›documentary,‹ and not exclusively a film's form and function. This blurs the boundaries between distinctions currently made in the film studies discipline.

Exhibition spaces for nonfiction film in the early 1920s would have been very diverse and ephemeral, making them difficult to track down today. Yet exhibition context is very important for understanding the way early audiences might have encountered these films, and in fact Grierson himself felt very strongly that non-theatrical spaces help shape how audiences perceive nonfiction subjects. When looking at Grierson's contribution to the development of documentary film, most scholars discuss the production history and the formal composition of early documentary. A notable missing piece of the discussion is Grierson's belief that institutional context is significant for both the production *and* exhibition of nonfiction film. Grierson firmly believed that documentaries should not be seen in theaters, but in public spaces. It is imperative, he argued, for documentaries to leave the theater and go out »into the factory and the field« (Grierson 1947a, 237). For him the theater is a space of entertainment where the masses are more susceptible to passivity, whereas the classroom and the church prime viewers with a collective consciousness. He writes:

The degree of civic conscience varies with classes and theater types and with the sense of duty on the part of exhibitors. An industry based on mass entertainment has to be cautious. [...] This gives the theater only a limited place in the educational picture [...] happily, men are creatures of mood. The very people who are united in relaxation inside the theaters are otherwise united in terms of their professional and specialized interest outside the theaters. It is

in this latter field that the educational picture is filled out: in schools and colleges, in civic social services, trade unions and professional groups of all kinds. (Grierson 1947c, 262–263)

Documentary films, he believes, should only be shown in public, civically associated spaces, otherwise audiences will not be engaged and the films will not have their intended impact. Notice too, in this passage Grierson refers to his documentary films as »educational pictures,« further demonstrating that educational purpose, propaganda form, institutional context, and exhibition space are all intertwined during the gestation period of documentary film prior to World War II. But films had been exhibited outside of the theaters well before documentary film. Indeed it is documentary film's relationship to previous educational films that may have made it difficult for documentary filmmakers to get theatrical distribution for their films. Many theater owners were wary of nonfiction topics, fearing that audiences would not pay for informational or persuasive documentary features (»See 'Topical Films« 1940, 12). It wasn't until the emergence of art house theaters in the late 1950s that documentary films would start to be regularly exhibited in theaters in the United States.

Like documentary films of the 1930s, there was no single space that audiences might have encountered the two dairy films discussed above. *Dawn*, for example, was screened at numerous agricultural meetings for local farm bureaus, breed associations, dairy conventions, public meetings of the Division of Dairy Husbandry, and state educational exhibits at various county fairs. Yet all of these spaces carry institutional meanings that helps shape the ways in which audiences would have interpreted the film along the spectrum of education to entertainment. In the case of *Illinois, the Good Samaritan*, the Illinois Educational Film Library lent the film to women's clubs throughout the state who would rent auditoriums to hold special screenings for public exhibition. These could be in town halls, schoolhouses or churches. Other organizations exhibited the film for their members, such as the Elks Lodge, Kiwanis Club, Lions Club, and various Chambers of Commerce. These non-theatrical spaces would presumably cue the public to be in a civic mindset as they watched, ready to be persuaded by the film's content.

Furthermore, films such as *Illinois, the Good Samaritan* were also exhibited at county fairs throughout the state. Surprisingly, Lounsbury Wells indicates that there were 80 state educational exhibits at fairs in 1925 alone (Lounsbury Wells 1926, 8). These exhibits took the form of a large black tent that covered a space 30 feet by 70 feet. The state provided the county fair with chairs, a silver screen, two portable projectors, and electric fans for ventilation.⁵ It is estimated that 200,000 people viewed *Illinois, the Good Samaritan* in this setting (Lounsbury Wells 1926, 9). Indeed, state fairs were one of the major ways that nonfiction films reached audiences in the 1920s. It is important to consider how the fair setting shapes how audiences understand films. Fairs have always been a mixture of education and entertainment, emphasizing the pleasure of curiosity, novelty, and spectacle paired with the Modern pursuit of scientific knowledge with an eye toward the advancement of society. In short, these films weren't just educational, they were also *fun*. What does it mean when propaganda becomes a source of innocent pleasure, placed next to other informational exhibits, visual spectacles, interactive games, food, and crowds? When these films become a small slice of everyday life as it is lived? In this exhibition context audiences may have enjoyed the films as pure visual spectacle or seen them as convincing propaganda within a setting promoting other socially progressive state projects. Regardless, exhibition space—like formal composition or production history—is a factor that should be considered in the evolution of American nonfiction film from 1920s educational films to the 1930s Documentary Film Movement.

In summary, I hope this paper has shown how Tom Gunning's distinctions between the early ›view aesthetic‹ and later documentaries and John Grierson's unconvincing distinction between educational films as mere ›description‹ and documentary proper as complex ›interpretation‹ both

5 At the time many, people feared the threat of fire from overheating projectors, particularly when screening educational films in schools or churches. This is one reason that educational film did not take off in public schools until the 1940s, when flame-resistant film became much more prevalent.

fail to fully account for the complicated ways that American nonfiction film evolved from the 1920s through the Second World War. Looking at a specific case study, the Illinois state films produced between 1919 and 1924, it is clear that educational films of the period share many defining features with Griersonian documentary films of the 1930s, and much of the discourse surrounding educational films preempt the appeals made by Grierson in his 1932–34 papers. I have demonstrated four significant factors that challenge the distinctions drawn between early educational films and documentary film proper:

- (1) Educational films, like the first documentary films, were based on the assumption that moving images are a powerful tool for shaping the human mind.
- (2) Educational films, like the first documentary films, emerged out of a Progressive Era ethos that sought to align public attitudes and behaviors with middle class morality and the social expertise of the educated elite.
- (3) Educational films, like the first documentary films, were largely funded and distributed by government institutions.
- (4) Educational films, like the first documentary films, would have been encountered by audiences in varied and short-lived exhibition spaces that would help shape their interpretation of the film, either as entertainment and visual spectacle or as persuasive social propaganda (or perhaps as some mixture of the two).

The very discourses used by Grierson in order to separate documentary film from earlier nonfiction were iterated nearly verbatim by Maie Lounsbury Wells, several years before his most famous writing. Indeed, it is the conversation started by Lounsbury Wells and others that would establish the cultural and technological foundations for the Documentary Film Movement to come, including a redefinition of the term «education» as it relates to motion pictures. Despite this continuity between 1920s and 1930s nonfiction film production and distribution, the cinema of the 1920s was in a period of dynamic change. While we can retrospectively draw a connection from the Documentary Film Movement to the Illinois state films, it is important to acknowledge that the Illinois

state films transformed their meaning and purpose as they shifted from one viewing context to the next. Rather than isolate the films in any single category, I argue that it is necessary to look at how these films defy categorization in their everyday use—precisely because they are situated within a larger network of diverging social concerns influencing Americans during the period.

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