

Useful Cinema

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Charles R. Acland

Haidee Wasson

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Patrick Russell

Useful Cinema begins on the perfect point, with the observation that films today ‘appear everywhere’, from ‘iPhone to Imax, from blog inserts to Jumbotrons’, so ‘becoming integral to our experience of institutional and everyday life’. Thus the histories of the older cultural forms to be found in this interesting anthology are pitched not merely as worthwhile objects of rediscovery in their own right but also as enlightening precursors of the media surrounding and saturating the lives of modern readers.

That any truly ample history of ‘film’, as something more than merely a technological upgrade of 19th-century literary appreciation, must embrace the full range of uses to which it has been put is a point that deserves making repeatedly, so often is it missed. And these uses both include and extend far beyond ‘art’ and ‘entertainment’ to ‘utility’ of many kinds. This book joins a select but growing body of literature, on and offline, driven by such insights to flesh out the many missing details of this more inclusive history of the screen that is waiting to be written, and to draw initial cultural conclusions from these historical findings. Among printed works, the most obvious comparable current publication is Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau’s edited collection *Films That Work: Industrial Film and the Productivity of Media*, which is cited by Charles R. Acland and Haidee Wasson in their introduction to *Useful Cinema*. However, the former book, as its title suggests, deals with the use of moving image by industry, and its focus is split between North America and mainland Europe. The latter’s greater concern is with *pedagogical* uses of film, mainly in the USA (and to a lesser extent Canada, where the editors and several of their contributors are based).

The main body of this book is divided into three parts. The first, ‘Celluloid Classrooms’, contains five close

studies of the use of film for – broadly or narrowly – educational purposes. Eric Smoodin’s opening chapter analyses, clearly and effectively, the deployment of film in American schools of the 1930s. His account of the exhibition of feature films on classroom projectors is instructively interwoven with broader histories both of the aesthetic appreciation of cinema and of the American education system itself. Smoodin’s contribution helpfully contextualises and complements Acland’s own, in a chapter in which the co-editor deepens readers’ engagement with certain themes that Smoodin has suggested, while focusing their attention on additional, unfamiliar historical details, in particular the telling career of film educationalist Mark May. The other three chapters in this first section slot a little less smoothly alongside these two, though all three contain fascinating information. Stephen Groening’s history of Western Union’s 1920s training films for predominantly female staff might have wandered in from *Films That Work*. Zoë Druick’s study of UNESCO’s post-war use of film as an educational medium is unsurprisingly the most internationalist essay in the book. Concerned with more or less the same period, Kirsten Ooster writes of American health films, and includes one of the book’s relatively few close accounts of a single work, *The Body Fights Bacteria* (1948).

Part two, ‘Civic circuits’, expressly turns its sights upon the exhibition of film and, to a lesser extent, its distribution. Gregory Waller leads with a solid history of the all-important 16mm gauge, focusing both on the technology itself and on the ways in which it was advertised to potential users, between 1935 and 1944. Those years, he argues, constituted the tipping point for 16mm’s success as the ‘killer app’ transforming access to a range of screen content in a variety of places outside commercial cinemas. Jennifer Horne, co-editor Wasson and Alison Griffiths then take turns to examine three of those non-theatrical spaces: respectively, libraries, museums and planetaria, in chapters straddling intricate empirical research and suggestive cultural theory. Griffiths, in particular, deploys an ambitious, sometimes surprising range of cultural references. One other chapter in this part of the book, by Ronald Walter Greene, is concerned as much with distribution infrastructure as with exhibition practices: specifically, the films office of the pre-war YMCA.

That production should have to wait until *after* distribution and exhibition for dedicated treatment (in the form of part three, ‘Making useful films’), is a bold and significant move on the editors’ part. It is also treated in lesser detail, as this section contains only three essays, and rather lacks for one with the breadth of Smoodin and Waller’s opening essays in parts one and two respectively. Again, however, the breadth of focus is appealingly varied. Joseph Clark gives us a closely engaged case study of the African-American *All-American Newsreel*. Charles Tepperman treats a bigger theme, and another one revealing continuities with new media: the making of ‘useful’ movies by non-professional filmmakers. The book’s final chapter, by Michael Zryd, reflects its abiding concern with the history of film as a potent introduction to aspects of the history of formal education. Noting the frequent reliance of experimental filmmaking on institutional academic support, he knowingly advances the seemingly self-contradictory hypothesis that it is the very lack of overt ‘utility’ in avant-garde film that has driven its pedagogical application in certain, admittedly intellectually sophisticated, contexts.

It’s to be hoped that cohesive longitudinal national histories not just of the American but of other ‘useful cinemas’ will come along in due course. In the meantime, collections like these serve the cause well by harvesting so much generally unfamiliar material. Though edited collections always run the risk of being excessively fragmentary, it’s a hazard that this volume steers reasonably clear of. The cumulative impact of its largely self-contained studies of particular periods, themes and institutions must rest in part on the extent to which, without over-obvious editorial contrivance, interesting resonances emerge in the spaces between them. Important recurring themes do indeed surface to make this collection rather more than the sum of its parts. Perhaps the most notable is the extent to which American educationalists were served not just with film content expressly designed for their professional use but also with Hollywood entertainments repurposed for their ‘utility’, whether in the cultivation of film appreciation itself or in the teaching of other subjects. The complex historical and theoretical relationships between the divergent forms occupying (roughly) the ‘same’ educational space is a potent theme that should lend itself to much further work. That several essays, notably Smoodin’s, should extensively refer to mainstream as much as to specialist films, in

the context of specialist *use*, should also help to attract a few readers who know they're interested in the former but don't – yet – know that they might become hooked by the latter.

(In parenthesis, it's worth pointing to a contrast between the relationship of mainstream to specialist productions on either side of the Atlantic. Industrially speaking, there is a fairly, if not a uniformly, sharp contrast to be drawn between Hollywood studios and specialist educational – and industrial – producers and distributors. Here in Britain, however, and in some other European countries with middle-sized rather than massive commercial film industries, there was considerably greater crossover, especially across the middle decades of the last century. Not only was the sponsored film integral to the British film business: arguably its vitality was the very thing that stabilised the infrastructure supporting the national film industry as a whole).

As with the Hediger and Vonderau book mentioned earlier, the unity of a work such as this must also depend in part on the extent to which the editors succeed in using their introduction to establish a cohesive conceptual framework for the rest of the book. As already noted they start on a strong note. A little too much of what they go on to say, however, takes the form of tortuous academic prose, obscuring or weighing down concepts (not least, that of 'useful cinema' itself), whose explanatory power and potential impact should rest not on convoluted complexity but on self-confident simplicity. Sample sentence: 'We offer useful cinema as a provocative paradigm that is meant to be neither theoretically nor ideologically unidimensional'. While both editors write more straightforwardly in their own individually contributed essays, the book as a whole is somewhat let down by a heavily 'academic' feel – and look. This is a common failing of books stepping outside the canon to tell relatively unfamiliar film-historical stories, especially when those stories primarily revolve around unglamorous non-fiction genres. Elizabeth Lebas' 2011 book *Forgotten Futures*, about British municipal cinema, is a good (if undoubtedly expensively produced) recent example of how to make a similar, and similarly obscure, subject visually appealing and hence much more accessible.

Useful Cinema is itself, then, a most useful text but one that clips its own utility a little more than it needed to. Being so intimately and correctly concerned with the clarity, the width of dissemination, and the popular penetration of knowledge and ideas, it is ironic that its own persuasive power should be so unlikely, in the short term, to extend far beyond an already-committed specialist audience. As already implied, the latent power of this book derives from its repeated recognition of undeniable facts too long obscured, or absurdly overlooked. 'Useful cinema', it makes abundantly clear, was a formative facet of the screen childhoods of today's older generation of North Americans. That it should prove precursor, to boot, of so much of what's now taken for granted by their grandchildren, as fixtures of *their* surrounding audio-visual landscape, only adds to its fascination. So why limit the appeal of so resonant a story to a readership of fellow professional academics? It would be unjust to end a review of this absorbing book on an unduly critical note, however. These limitations notwithstanding, *Useful Cinema* can confidently be recommended to anyone interested in the intricacies of the relationship between the media and the society of the 20th century – and those of the 21st.

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