

Gregory A. Waller

Beyond the Movie Theater: Sites, Sponsors, Uses, Audiences

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For a long time, the history of silent cinema exhibition in the United States has accounted for the ways motion pictures were delivered to seemingly undifferentiated audiences, in purpose-built venues loosely associated with broad terms such as “nickelodeons” or “movie palaces”. The institutionalisation of American cinema in the first two decades of the twentieth century, marked by the flourishing of commercial movie theatres all over the United States, has been the object of many studies concerned with industrial, economic, political or sociocultural issues. But while, on the one hand, the New Cinema History approach has expanded this field by considering the historical variables that determined the cinematic experience lived by empirically grounded spectators in equally grounded projection sites, on the other, much is to be written about the presence of films in circumstances that cannot be considered in terms of profit or entertainment. This is precisely the aim of *Beyond the Movie Theater*, an outstanding monograph on the non-theatrical use of moving pictures in the U.S. during the 1910s, written by a leading scholar in the field of cinema history, Gregory A. Waller. This contribution to the history of American cinema in the years of its full affirmation as an industry decisively broadens the picture of the uses and social significances assigned to films by public and private institutions, associations, companies,

and audiences.

As Waller states in the volume’s introduction, the term *non-theatrical*, used by the author to describe the wide array of non-commercially driven cinematic experiences in the period under scrutiny, is not to be understood as a homogeneous whole that is clearly distinct from the more traditionally conceived exhibition network. In fact, the most apparent feature of non-theatrical cinema as conceptualised by Waller is its unsystematic, acephalous, unorganic quality, that itself calls for a careful and specific historical approach to the matter. This lack of holistic coherence in this historical phenomenon is reiterated over and over throughout the chapters of the book. It is also what basically drives the astonishing archival research conducted by the author, in turn consistently presented as such, i.e., as a heterogeneous reconstruction of numerous microhistories, which derives its methodological justification and its overall strength from the very heterogeneity of this other cinema. It could be argued that the most striking aspect of this volume is the extremely wide range of case studies taken into consideration and examined through a plethora of diverse, yet rigorously and convincingly recalled archival sources, which provide us with a complex picture of what the movies meant in 1910s American society. The vast coverage of non-theatrical events along the decade by local

newspapers and periodicals, especially motion picture trade press and magazines, tells us that even the sources most traditionally associated with commercial cinema exhibition history have much more to say about a medium that was omnipresent but also extremely varied in terms of discourses and practices. Both these aspects are constantly examined and contextualised by Waller, whose in-depth research extensively relies on, but is not limited to, digitised press articles, advertisements, and reports. Other sources are recollected as well, ranging from ephemera to official government reports, from postcards to magazines like *Scientific American*, which had little to do with cinema as an entertainment industry.

At first glance, it may seem that such a multifarious array of sources and case studies discussed throughout the pages of *Beyond the Movie Theater* (which begins with the occasional private exhibition of the educational film *Twilight Sleep* in Wilmington, North Carolina, and ends with the ubiquitous presence of film screenings in “non-theatrical theaters” at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition held in San Francisco) could not be structured to give a macro-historical insight into this fragmentary cinematic reality. Indeed, even if we look at the numerous examples of non-theatrical cinema provided, some are just tangentially cited while others are discussed in depth, within specifically devoted paragraphs. However, as the author states, the aim of this volume is neither to simply catalogue the various instances of this kind of cinema, nor to understand them under a theoretically comprehensive master narrative. Rather, Waller structures his volume according to four leading features which could in principle be found in any non-theatrical occasion, but which also had countless internal variations, depending profoundly on historically specific variables. These four features are discussed in the volume’s first four chapters, each of which, in describing the peculiarities of this sponsored, multi-purpose, multi-sited and audience-specific

cinema, gives us invaluable information on the historical status of cinema as a whole.

The first two chapters focus respectively on the various actors who sponsored and controlled non-theatrical cinema, and on the various practical uses of film projections other than simply entertaining, strongly emphasising the social role of the movies in the Progressive Era. This utilitarian, morally uplifting use of moving pictures, as intended and promoted by a host of subjects concerned with shaping public life, gives a broader picture and deepens our perception of the harsh debate which in the same period spread over the legitimacy of films as an entertainment form and of movie theaters as part of the public sphere. The volume scrutinises not only the social functioning of non-theatrical cinema, both imagined and put into practice, but also its complex relationship with commercial exhibition. For example, Waller considers the “municipal”, free and unsegregated public screenings held in St. Louis’ parks, contested and labelled as unfair competition by theatre owners; a case study that, although singular, is telling about the lack of clear-cut distinctions between theatrical and non-theatrical public events. Another point is made clear and repeatedly stressed over the following chapters (“Multi-sited Cinema” and “Targeted Audiences”); even though multi-purpose, sponsored cinema was promoted as ubiquitous, in the service of the entire society and virtually adaptable for any use, in reality its presence was exclusive, uneven, and strongly dependent on factors which ranged from economic and logistic availability to safety regulations varying from State to State. Waller discusses cinema experiences that were by no means “egalitarian” or “democratic” (words often loosely assigned to nickelodeons), but aimed at homogeneous, specific, preemptively targeted segments of the audience. Moreover, such extensive use of films was not affordable by everyone; this point is further discussed in the final chapter, which delves into heavily advertised major events such as Land Shows and International Expositions.

In conclusion, *Beyond the Movie Theater* stands as an intriguing, enlightening, much needed contribution to American cinema history. Although the title may suggest a specific focus on exhibition, every aspect of non-theatrical cinema is considered, from production to distribution, from promotion and advertising to censorship and reception—and, of course, also exhibition. A whole microcosm of non-profitable, useful,

educational, or promotional cinematic events held in schools, fairs, hospitals, public halls, both inside and outside the U.S., is yet to be discovered, to understand better what “cinema culture” could have been over the past century; Waller’s volume represents a valuable step in this direction.

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