

SEEING IS KNOWING: THE EDUCATIONAL CINEMA MOVEMENT
IN FRANCE, 1910-1945

by

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*“Animated life awakens the curiosity of the student, retains his attention, and leaves precise recollections because it brings the visual memory into play.
‘Seeing is almost knowing.’”*

- 1920 French government report on educational cinema

“I suggest hanging all the professors of pedagogy...”

- H.L. Mencken

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For my father and in memory of my mother

Helen Jane Garner
1943-2001

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the history of the educational cinema movement in France during the 1920s and 1930s. It argues that this movement was crucial for the social legitimation of cinema and for the dissemination of films into French social and institutional life. In so doing, they were responding to charges made by public officials that the cinema corrupted young people by influencing them to commit crimes. Their effort to re-frame cinema as a pedagogical tool thus challenged the dominant meanings and associations held by the French state and the middle-class public.

Advocates justified their case in favor of a pedagogical cinema both by referring to research in experimental psychology that posited the cognitive primacy of vision in the acquisition of knowledge and by appealing to the reformism of progressive educationalists that wanted to expand educational opportunities and especially vocational training. In so doing, they were successful in building networks of supporters and an infrastructure that allowed schools and localities to acquire equipment and organize screenings in classrooms and for general audiences.

Increasingly, advocates were also faced with contradictions that resulted from the instability of the category of “educational film.” Although they attempted to demarcate instructional films for classroom use and educational films for popular audiences, it was difficult to maintain this separation. Audiences preferred programs that mixed entertaining films with more pedagogic fare. Moreover, advocates found their belief that

educational film could serve to promote cosmopolitanism and “moral disarmament” checked by the commercial imperatives of rival national industries. Finally, in the politicized atmosphere of the 1930s and 1940s, a blurring between educational film and propaganda became increasingly apparent during the Popular Front and Vichy. It was the latter’s appropriation of educational film for its reactionary political ideology that represented, ironically, the moment of the French state’s greatest involvement.

While the French educational cinema movement did not survive the Second World War, it did play a key role in endowing films with a utilitarian social legitimacy and helped to establish the infrastructural networks that would build postwar French film culture.