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

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (History) in the University of Michigan 2012

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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
For my father and in memory of my mother

Helen Jane Garner
1943-2001
Acknowledgements

During the years that I have spent working on this project – and even before - I have been fortunate to have the constant support of many wonderful individuals and organizations. First of all, I would like to acknowledge the financial backing given me by the Rackham Graduate School and the Department of History at the University of Michigan, which has included teaching assistantships as well as the Rackham Humanities and Finishing Fellowships. I also want to thank the Department of Screen Arts and Cultures for providing me with two graduate student instructor assistantships in the 2008-2009 academic year. My field research in Paris during the 2009-2010 academic year was made possible through a generous Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement Grant from the National Science Foundation.

Above and beyond the financial support, I received excellent guidance and encouragement from my committee, all of whom helped me in innumerable ways to take my piles of research notes and gigabytes of archival photographs and shape them into a coherent and compelling project. My co-chairs, Joshua Cole and Gabrielle Hecht, never stopped believing in this project or in me, always offered incisive and encouraging feedback and helped me immeasurably to see this project through. Richard Abel was unfailingly generous with his time and assistance from helping me to track down elusive sources, to responding to my innumerable queries, and to giving me a chance to co-author my first journal article with him. Geoff Eley has championed me ever since my first
literature review paper in his methods class, and I have been privileged to learn much – about history and many other things – under his direction. To all of them, I offer my sincerest gratitude.

Many other professors and staff have made my years at Michigan intellectually rich and personally rewarding. Giorgio Bertellini, *anima cortese mantoana*, has been a fount of boundless and gregarious friendship over many dinners, glasses of grappa and silent film screenings. *Molto grazie per tutti, caro amico*. Dena Goodman made studying eighteenth-century France challenging and invigorating, and her acute critical eye served to improve my writing and thinking about cultural history (and interviewing techniques). Dan Herbert and I have shared our mutual love of cinema history, and especially the films of Luis Buñuel, over many enjoyable talks while I was his teaching assistant and ever afterwards. Dario Gaggio provided gracious and friendly guidance when I was his teaching assistant. Johannes von Moltke helped me to navigate through the complexities of film theory, while Jonathan Marwil made assisting his freshman European history course an intellectually rigorous and engaging endeavor. Like all Michigan history students, I have benefitted more times that I can count from the excellent administrative support of Sheila Coley, Diana Denney, Karen Payne-Higgs, Lorna Altstetter and Kathleen King.

Bryan Skib acquired a nearly complete interwar run of the film journal, *Le Cinéopse*, for the University of Michigan Library’s collection. This gave me more time and opportunity to use this crucial source than I would have had while researching in France. The Hatcher Graduate Library also expanded its holdings of French film journals and purchased the comprehensive “The History of Cinema, 1895-1940” microform.
series, all of which proved invaluable during the writing. Paula Amad provided me with very useful comments while I was developing my prospectus and Alison J. Murray Levine graciously shared the galley proofs of her book, *Framing the Nation*, with me while I was in France. One beautiful Parisian summer day over *pain au chocolat*, Vanessa Schwartz recommended that I explore the UNESCO archives - a piece of advice that ultimately yielded a treasure trove of sources and that gave me the grounding I needed to develop the different facets of my project. It also allowed me to meet Alexandre Coutelle, the archivist at UNESCO, who befriended me, tracked down boxes long thought lost, introduced me to the stunning view on the Eiffel Tower from the seventh-floor café, and made my time there very happy and productive. One day I will take up his suggestion to read all of Jules Romains’ *Les hommes de bonne volonté* even though he is himself a perfect example of the man of good will. Eric Le Roy and Élodie Gilbert and their staff made me very welcome at the Archives Françaises du Film in Bois d’Arcy and provided me with much valuable assistance. Lise Cloitre was very generous with her time and help at the Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers although the many materials I collected there must await future projects. I also enjoyed fruitful discussions with Priska Morrissey and Alexis Martinet. Finally, François Brunet gave me the opportunity to present my research at the Université de Paris VII, helped me to make contacts at the Société Française de Photographie, and hosted me and other American graduate students for lunches and soirées. He also generously gave me his time and insights into doing research in French archives and, for all that, I thank him deeply.

Many friends made my research year in France memorable as well as productive. I want to express my deepest appreciation to John Gingrich whose friendship extended
from sharing his Paris apartment with me, to playing *pétanque* during Paris-Plages, and finally to our excursions to Verdun and the Normandy beaches. His kindness and generosity enabled me to spend the entire academic year in France and to make my stay as fulfilling as possible. I can honestly say that he made it possible for me to complete the research necessary to realize this project. Camille Kerrand, a.k.a. “Mme. Suchard,” regaled John and me with harrowing stories of her childhood during the Occupation and as a military wife in 1950s Algeria and also tried, ever so sweetly, to convince us that everything that has happened in France since May 1789 has been a mistake. She is a reminder that history is first about individual lives and experiences before it becomes footnotes and literature reviews. My friends Nicolas Fouilleroux and Sandrine Labat housed me during an earlier research trip to Paris and have shared their love of wine, classical music, and American humor with me every time I visit. The Fouilleroux family has welcomed me into their homes and their lives more times than I can justly account for. The same is true for the Koper family who introduced me to French life and shared their hospitality when I was first living in and learning about France.

I have enjoyed much intellectual banter and personal camaraderie from my graduate school colleagues and other friends in Ann Arbor. Graham Nessler has been a truly generous friend and offers an admirable example of diligence and commitment to historical research. Pete Soppelsa possesses a scholarly creativity that is awe-inspiring, and he has taught me much about technology, continental philosophy, public works, turn-of-the-century France, the Paris Archives, and techno music over many animated conversations. Juliet Guzzetta and I spent many pleasant hours discussing cinema, modernity, performance theory, and life while walking her dog, Stella, around the main
campus and through Ann Arbor’s many parks. Amy Rodgers shared her endless good humor and, with along her husband, Kenston Bauman, taught me how to enjoy the ride. Emily Klancher and I spent many hours in Ann Arbor cafés productively discussing our research and she has been very generous in sharing her ideas and insights with me. I also benefitted greatly from the feedback I received in Leslie Pincus’ Winter 2011 dissertation workshop. I want to thank especially Andrew Ross, Susanna Linsley and, above all, Kirsten Leng, whose detailed and thoughtful comments allowed me to rework and to strengthen considerably my first chapter. Barbara Hodgdon, Gina Morantz-Sanchez, Paul Hébert, Stephen Sparks, Nafisa Essop Sheik, Sarah McDermott Thompson, Emily Price, Jessica Fripp, Rebecca Grapevine, Isabelle de Rezende, Sarah Miller, Elise Lipkowitz, Kristy Rawson, Sandra Palaich, Jordan Weinberg and Minayo Nasiali also made my years in Ann Arbor both intellectually rich and personally rewarding. Among my non-Michigan colleagues, Brian Jacobson and Catherine Clark shared ideas on visual culture with me over many pleasant evenings in Paris. Catherine also kindly alerted me to the Paris Chamber of Commerce archives that so informed my discussion in chapter three. I also profited from many discussions with Joshua Yuhimbe, Marie Caillot and Shane Hockin about everything from ethnographic films, to UNESCO cultural policies, and to finding a decent fondue in the Latin Quarter.

Robin Chaustowich sent me daily word-count reminders to help me through the writing. Marcelo and Coreen Marandino shared their love of Argentinian cuisine with me and showered me with encouragement as well as empanadas and red wine. J. Sanford Dugan, formerly of Eastern Michigan University, generously translated the official documents for my French visa in record time. David Merchant made Thursday nights at
the Earle, or evening shows at the Michigan Theatre, pleasant breaks from the daily pressures. My former supervisor and old friend from EMU, Morell Boone, kindly met with me at least twice every term at Sidetrack’s in Ypsilanti to offer insights from his experiences as a non-traditional older student in a doctoral program. EMU’s then-Associate Provost, Michael Harris, also encouraged me to return to graduate school and has graciously given me his support ever since. In addition, my old friends from the University of California at Davis, Charles Hammond, Thomas Burr, and Eberle Anderson still provide me with as much bonhomie as they do memories of a sunnier clime.

Although they had no role in this dissertation, I would be remiss not to mention how much I learned from Ted Margadant, Paula Findlen, and Michael Saler while I was at UC-Davis or how grateful I still am to them for endorsing my return to graduate school. My thanks also go to Al Agosti, from Schoolcraft College, for being a great sociology professor and an irrepressible raconteur.

There are some individuals who deserve a special mention here. First, Christopher H. Johnson, former professor of history at Wayne State University, has been a mentor and dear friend for over twenty years. As kind and self-effacing as he is brilliant and deeply learned, Chris revealed history to me as a calling and as a way of seeing the world. His wife, Lois, and he have introduced me to so much - cuisine, art, cinema, politics, France - that any description of what they mean to me would be pitifully inadequate. The same holds true for Richard N. Osborn and his wife, Judy. A former professor from Wayne State’s Business School, “Oz” taught me how to organize conferences, to edit manuscripts and textbooks, and much else when I was his undergraduate student employee. Since then, our friendship has included sailing in Puget
Sound, endless red-vs.-blue political debates, and preparing Copper River salmon over alder plank boards. Once I made the decision to go back for the Ph.D., Chris, Lois, Judy and Dick have been upbeat, unyielding and tireless advocates and motivators. As much as any student’s professors can be like family, they are – and this dissertation is, I hope, some small fulfillment of their faith in me.

My cousin, Bryan Chapman, valiantly proofread this dissertation on a very short deadline. He did an excellent job and I thank him immensely for his hard work and for his lifelong friendship. His daughter, Katie, and his niece, Ashley, have also offered their affectionate support throughout my years in grad school. Sean Sinclair and I have been discussing history, politics, movies and the Beatles for a quarter-century now. Along with his wife, Jeannie and their children, he has been a truly kindred spirit (right down to the number of books on our respective shelves and songs in our iTunes folders), and an unfailingly sympathetic and generous friend. Rahul, Varsha and Annika Bhandari have made me a part of their family, introduced me to the wonders of Indian culture and cuisine, and have provided me with much tea and sympathy over many years. Mike Murphy has been a comrade-in-books ever since we met in our first freshman history class at Schoolcraft College in 1988 and he has been an inspiration to me ever since. I also want to acknowledge all the support from the Chapman family, Nicol Shamey, Joe and Jonah Musial, Ruby Lewis, Lee and Bonnie Lewis, Tom and Julia Hanson, Marcy Plunkett, Serge and Carol Kavalhuna, Marilyn Sinclair, and finally Jim Sinclair and Kris Piper and their families.

To this long list of friends and colleagues, I must add a few who made a crucial impact on my life though they are no longer here to receive my thanks. Many students at
Plymouth-Canton High School had their eyes opened to modern art, foreign films, and experimental writing in Barbara Masters’ Approaching the Arts class. Everything that I have done since as a student and as a teacher has stemmed from the initial influence she had on me. David and Michael Kavalhuna left us while each was in pursuit of his dreams – in film studies and in opera, respectively. Their zest for life, their friendship and their personal examples have motivated me to realize mine.

The influence of my parents has been incalculable, of course. My father and my late mother’s unconditional love and unwavering encouragement made it possible for me to pursue my interests as I saw fit and convinced me that I could achieve any goal I set for myself. My brother, Tom, has been a confidant, a friend and a sounding board all of my life. His partner, Tiffany, their children and he have been never-ending sources of resilience and affection. My grandmother, Violet Allan, and my aunt, Julie Allan, have been there for me from literally day one and still inquire about my academic endeavors with good humor and genuine interest. My sister, Theresa, and her family have added a great deal to my life in the past decade – through their good spirits, their generosity and, above all, through Theresa’s introducing me to Tera.

Midway through my journey in the history program, Tera became my guide and partner, steering me back onto my path when all seemed dark and lost, picking me up after tilting at too many windmills, and loving me in spite of the books and notes littering our home. Words really cannot express the depth of my love and my gratitude for all that she has given to my life, so I’ll keep it simple: Thanks, Ter, for seeing me through…. 
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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.