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EDITED BY
DEVIN ORGERON, MARSHA ORGERON,
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LEARNING WITH THE LIGHTS OFF

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5 FILM EDUCATION IN THE NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM: CINEMA LIGHTS UP THE GALLERY IN THE 1920S

ALISON GRIFFITHS

In the mid-1920s the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH), located in New York City on Manhattan's Upper West Side, was "the chief source of visual aids for the city," supervising a small army of delivery men to bring lantern slides and motion pictures to elementary, middle, and high schools.¹ No charge was made for these slides and films (not even for delivery), and the AMNH received a pittance from the city's board of education to fund this enterprise. The history of cinema's relationship to the AMNH began far earlier, though, and can be traced to 1908, when the AMNH first exhibited film to visitors. Within a few years, cinema was a major part of the museum's visual educational services, consisting of exhibitions to school groups, public programs, and internal screenings to staff. The AMNH also sponsored filmmaking expeditions, including a 1912 Department of Anthropology trip to the American Southwest during which museum artist Howard McCormick made films of the Hopis.²

Given that the public museum has been largely overlooked as an institution of film sponsorship, production, and exhibition in film studies, my goal here is

My thanks to Barbara Mathé, head of the Special Collections Department at the American Museum of Natural History, for her unstinting support in accessing the archive. Thanks also to William Boddy, my research assistant Ece Ergen, and the collection editors for suggestions and editorial advice.

The Special Collections Department of the AMNH Research Library includes archival material relating to the history and operation of the museum, which is housed in the Central Archive. Documents from the Central Archive are cited below as CA-AMNH.

¹ "Education Through Schools, Colleges, and Universities," *AMNH Annual Report* [hereafter *AR*] 57 (1925): 13.

² For a discussion of this expedition, see chap. 7 of my book *Wondrous Difference: Cinema, Anthropology, and Turn-of-the-Century Visual Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 283–311.



Figure 5.1. Slide and film delivery cars outside the AMNH, waiting to take the latest shipment to New York City’s public schools, ca. 1926. (Courtesy Department of Library Services, AMNH.)

to examine the complex and competing interests of this branch of educational film activity during the period from the late teens through the early 1930s.³ The history of the role of film in the gallery at the AMNH illuminates an experience of cinema distinct from that of the auditorium model of film viewing, where films were shown at the museum either as separate events in the auditorium with no lecturer present or were integrated into public lectures. One unexplored area of the AMNH’s involvement with film concerns its role in promoting a program of visual education for New York City schoolchildren, both within the museum as part of its own public film programs and through the circulation of films to extramural screenings in public schools. How, for example, did the lantern slide and motion picture lending policies of the Department of Education at the AMNH contribute to a nascent idea of media literacy in the United States in the 1920s and 30s? How did the AMNH’s role as a supplier of free lantern slides and films to New York City schoolchildren make it possible for visual aids to be integrated into the curriculum and used in teacher training?

³ For a history of the emergence of film use at the AMNH, see chapter six of *Wondrous Difference*, 255–82. For more on the role of film in the gallery at the AMNH, see my essay “Film and Interactive Media in the Museum Gallery: From ‘Roto-Radio’ to Immersive Video,” in *Shivers Down Your Spine: Cinema, Museums, and the Immersive View* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 232–82.

This chapter investigates what the AMNH's commitment to visual education might tell us about the status of motion pictures within public education at the time, and what cinema's adoption in the classroom reveals about its place within the AMNH. Of course, the museum's involvement in cinema was not simply that of an educational film distributor. Tens of thousands of students visited the museum each year (as they continue to do), many to watch films (today, IMAX) as a part of their field trips. The museum also offered frequent lectures illustrated with lantern slides and films for its members, the general public, and schoolchildren. The AMNH was, therefore, a hub for initiatives in visual education in the late 1920s. In 1927, for example, the museum was used as a venue for a teacher development program organized by the City College of New York's dean of education, who taught a thirty-week course, "Visual Aids to Instruction."⁴

The mid- to late 1920s were exciting, if occasionally frustrating, times for advocates of film for nontheatrical purposes. Among the issues facing the AMNH were: (1) how to meet the public's appetite for film (audiences increasingly expected illustrated lectures for members, the general public, and children); (2) how to acquire suitable film content for these events; (3) how to distribute lantern slides and films to New York City's public schools; and (4) how to use the AMNH as a showcase for the technology of motion pictures itself, including the latest in color processes. (An example of the latter role is a lecture that was jointly organized by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the education departments of the museum, and New York City in 1928, during which the head of Eastman Kodak's research lab demonstrated the new Kodacolor process, the first 16mm color film stock.)⁵

Other issues under debate included the AMNH's decidedly mixed experience with film in the gallery. These included the viewer-activated Dramagraph, or "automatic projector," which allowed visitors to press a button to watch a film in a freestanding box, a sort of precursor to today's multimedia interactive exhibits where visitors watch videos and sometimes interact with computer programs. A Dramagraph was installed in the Southwest Indian Hall in 1927 and another beside the Virginia Deer Group in the Hall of North American Mammals. Despite liberating film from the AMNH's auditorium (built in 1900 at the museum), screening room, and classroom, the gallery-based automatic projector was both unreliable (it lasted no longer than a month before breaking) and difficult to

⁴ Letters from Dean Pam Klapper to George Sherwood, Apr. 27 and July 7, 1927, in file 1267f (1927), box 1267, CA-AMNH.

⁵ The lecture, demonstrating the "possibilities of reproducing accurate color pictures for school room instruction and private use" was delivered by C. E. K. Mees of the Eastman Kodak Company. Press Bulletin, November 10, 1928, CA-AMNH.

maintain due to the challenge of locating suitable museum-owned footage to use in it.⁶

The AMNH also became an informal lobbyist for visual education in the nation's largest school system, which was confronting budget shortfalls and sprawling bureaucracy. For example, in 1927, museum director George Sherwood, in his essay "Visual Education Aids by Film," complained that it seemed "astounding that in constructing new schools" the New York City (NYC) Department of Education "should make provision for projection booths and then fail to provide projection apparatus for the booth."⁷ The museum's service to the public school system was largely charity work, since the subsidy they received from the Board of Education (a meager sum of \$3,750 in 1926) came nowhere near the 1926 operating costs of approximately \$23,000.⁸ These issues tell us a great deal about the hurdles facing advocates of visual education in the 1920s. From the mundane but essential task of keeping NYC motion-picture projection permits up to date, to the laborious but crucial job of apologizing to angry members turned away from sold-out screenings, the film activities of the AMNH provide a fascinating case study into the diverse and contested ways in which film became embedded in the museum, from visually documenting official expeditions to illustrating exhibits in the gallery. But this case study also reveals a great deal about film's role in the public sphere more generally. For example, we can find echoes of several of the issues facing the AMNH and other nontheatrical exhibition sites, such as clubs and churches. Given the AMNH's unwieldy organizational structure, nontheatrical film exhibition was especially challenging for the museum, at a time when the maturing Hollywood system of production, distribution, and exhibition made nontheatrical exhibition increasingly marginal.

From Lantern Slide to Motion Picture Library, 1869–1930

Classroom instruction in history, geography and science, more than ever before is being supplemented by the use of slides and motion pictures.

—AMNH *Annual Report*, 1925

Soon after its inception in 1869, under its founder and first superintendent Albert S. Bickmore, the AMNH began a lantern slide collection for use both in

⁶ Letter from George Sherwood to James L. Clark, June 21, 1927, box 1237, CA-AMNH. According to the minutes from a luncheon of trustees and the Educational Committee, October 5, 1927, plans were also afoot to install Automatic Projectors at the opening of the Fish Hall and the Komodo Lizard Group. For more on the rise and fall of Automatic Projectors at the AMNH, see Griffiths, *Shivers Down Your Spine*, 243–50.

⁷ Letter from Sherwood to Raymond L. Ditmars, New York Zoological Society, July 7, 1927, in file 1927 A-F, box 1290.1A, CA-AMNH.

⁸ "Rapidly Expanding School Service," *AR* 58 (1926): 18.

its public programs and on loan to New York City public schools. With the inauguration of the Department of Education at the AMNH in 1880, the museum launched an aggressive program of slide acquisition. Following the introduction of improved camera technology in 1888, the museum ensured that all its expeditions were equipped with up-to-date cameras. The earliest lecture series for members' children was in spring 1904, when six lectures were given: "Ants, Bees, and Wasps"; "Sea Beach at Ebb Tide"; "How to Study Reptiles"; "Some Common Rocks and What They Mean"; "The American Indians and How They Live"; and "The Home Life of the Birds." In 1906, Bickmore turned over responsibility for visual education to George H. Sherwood, who became director of the Department of Public Instruction, which oversaw "all the work connected with the public schools and the lecture system . . . as well as the general photographic work and the custody of all negatives, photographs, electros, and slides belonging to the museum."¹⁰ By 1911 the AMNH was regularly using motion pictures in lectures. It soon accumulated prints of appropriate commercial films, including *Paul J. Rainey's African Hunt* (1912; donated by Rainey); films of African wildlife by Martin and Osa Johnson; footage shot in the Antarctic during the Shackleton Expedition (1914–1917); and in-house films of the ceremonial life and material culture of Native American tribes. The museum's education curator Grace Fisher Ramsey offers clues about the early rationale for film use at the AMNH. In her 1938 book on museum education, Ramsey wrote: "It soon became evident that the explorer must not alone be a specialist in his line but an expert camera man as well, for the films brought back to the museum were considered an important part of his collection in that they gave a clear and comprehensive picture of life and conditions in remote corners of the globe" (see fig. 5.2).¹¹

By the end of the 1930s, the library at the AMNH contained more than 750,000 feet of film, some of it acquired as a direct result of fellow curators taking heed of Ramsey's recommendation. Despite Sherwood's ambition for the AMNH film collection to become "the finest library of natural history films," he tempered his enthusiasm by referencing the "difficulties of caring for so much film, much of which is in infrequent circulation," and argued that the "film library should be increased cautiously and that out-of-date-material should be scrapped."¹² The problem of storing flammable 35mm nitrate film stock became so acute that the museum later disposed of a significant number of films. For

⁹ Grace Fisher Ramsey, *Educational Work in Museums of the United States* (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1938), 123–24.

¹⁰ "Rapidly Expanding," 16.

¹¹ Ramsey, *Educational Work*, 182.

¹² Department of Public Education, Minutes of the Meeting of the Trustees Committee on Education, December 14, 1928, 2, file 1237.3 (1928–1929), CA-AMNH.



Figure 5.2. Lantern slide library at the American Museum of Natural History in the mid-1920s. (Courtesy Department of Library Services, AMNH.)

example, despite acquiring the copyright to photographer Edward S. Curtis's 1914 film *In the Land of the Head Hunters* in 1924, the AMNH did not keep the 35mm print and probably destroyed it during the 1950s or 60s when much of the older, flammable film stock was purged from the collection.

The AMNH first circulated its lantern slide collection in 1915, when a financial arrangement was drawn up with the New York City Board of Education, which made it possible for approximately 20,000 slides to be made available to the city's schoolteachers for classroom use. The AMNH staff were proud of this initiative, noting somewhat smugly in 1924 that it "would not have required the powers of a soothsayer to foretell how valuable this new line of Museum cooperation would prove to teachers and pupils in the city schools." The success of the program was measured by the exponential growth it enjoyed in its first quinquennium, from nearly 12,000 slides lent to 51 institutions in 1915, to more than 80,000 slides lent to 164 schools in 1920. Colored lantern slides, in huge demand, were delivered free to hundreds of schools, where they "vitalize[d] the study, not only of natural-history topics, but of geographical, economical and historical subjects as well."¹³ The AMNH identified four reasons for this expansion. The first was the growth in the number of schools equipped to project stereopticon lantern slides, due to the new stress on "visual instruction methods in teaching"; second, there was a greater

¹³ "The Museum and School Service," *AR* 58 (1926): 99.

availability of slides made possible by the multiplication of lecture sets and the arrangement of slides into 170 different groups; third, there was increasing integration of slides into curricular themes; and the final factor was the promotion of the visual education movement by the NYC Board of Education, under the tutelage of the director of Public Education and Visual Instruction, Ernest L. Crandall.¹⁴

However, similar success could not be celebrated regarding the museum's use of motion pictures in public schools, which, the same *Annual Report* complained, "still remains small because of the limited size of our motion picture library, and because so few of the school buildings, comparatively, are equipped for the use of motion pictures." Visual instruction via motion pictures had therefore developed slowly "because of the great cost of production in relation to the demand for its use, and on account of the great expense to the schools of projection equipment, booth, etc." Initially, only a small number of schools could take advantage of the opportunity to request films; however, as word spread among the principals that "free films, useful in geography, history, nature study and biology could be secured from [the] museum, they made a great effort to have their schools equipped with standard projection apparatus in a booth which would satisfy all requirements of the fire laws."¹⁵

By 1922, the AMNH was devoting considerable resources to lantern slide production, allocating the fourth floor of its building to the storage of "files of our negatives and photographs, photographic dark rooms, preparation rooms, studios and laboratories." The motion picture library was housed in the museum's attic, a bizarre choice for the flammable films. The museum employed a delivery crew of four messengers and four automobiles to distribute the slides, films, and nature collections to New York City schools.¹⁶ The museum also adjusted its program of lectures in 1921, including courses where only motion pictures would be shown and experimenting with the format (the suggestion to show only films apparently came from the teachers). Parallel with growing slide circulation, attendance at museum lectures doubled in 1921, from 75,000 to 150,000 children.¹⁷ Over the years, slide collections were assembled that complemented films and that could address key curricular themes. By 1924, the museum had at its disposal 95,618 feet of motion picture film; 309 reels were lent and used in 316 screenings with a total of 115,849 pupils in attendance.¹⁸

¹⁴ "Public Education in the Museum and in the Schools," *AR* 56 (1924): 133.

¹⁵ Ramsey, *Educational Work*, 183.

¹⁶ The messenger service at the AMNH was severely stretched due to a shortage of vehicles and messengers. The years 1922 through 1925 saw a reduction in the number of natural history specimens delivered to schools, a result one assumes of the increased demand for slides and motion picture shipments to the five boroughs; *AR* 57 (1925): 80.

¹⁷ *AR* 54 (1922): 41.

¹⁸ "Public Education," 133; "World Photographic Life Records," *AR* 56 (1924): 15.

The mid- to late 1920s were years of exponential growth in moving picture activity at the AMNH, both in terms of supplying films for school use and acquiring films for internal screenings. Film work at the museum can be broken down into four types of activities, starting with acquisitions, consisting mostly of films donated to the museum by production companies and individuals. For example, in 1917, 254 colored lantern slides and 1,830 feet of 35 mm film of American naturalist and essayist John Burroughs were donated by photographer Albert Houghton Pratt; and in 1923, Martin Johnson donated a copy of his extremely popular adventure animal safari film released that year, *Trailing African Wild Animals*. Other notable acquisitions included: an anonymous 1925 gift of two sets of *Chronicles of America*, a forty-seven-reel series distributed by Yale University Press; eight reels of *The True North*, a 1925 record of Captain Jack Robertson's trip across Alaska and Siberia; two prints of *Nanook of the North* (1922) from Pathé; footage shot in the Nile region by George D. Pratt; and films of Arthur Vernay and John Faunthorpe hunting animal specimens in India (1922–1923).¹⁹

The second museum film activity involved borrowing prints. For example, in 1918, the State Conservation Commission, General Electric, and Prizma (producers of color film) all loaned films to the AMNH, and we see significant growth between 1922, when 76 reels of film (63 screenings) were borrowed, and 1924, when that number increased to 309 reels (316 screenings). Organizations credited in AMNH's *Annual Report* with lending films in 1922 included the New York State Conservation Commission, the U.S. Navy Recruiting Bureau, the Roosevelt Memorial Association, and the New York City Board of Water Supply. The AMNH also rented films from 12 exchanges in 1922 (rising to 91 by 1926).²⁰ The number of pupils watching films at the AMNH in 1922 totaled 18,286, growing more than sixfold in just two years.²¹

The third activity was coproduction. At times the AMNH would be asked to “furnish suggestions and illustrative material for motion picture films of a popular educational character,” such as the invitation from Bray Studios in 1918 to produce films on mineralogical subjects.

The final area involved AMNH-sponsored expeditions.²² Two notable expeditions from the 1920s that used film were the 1927 Woodcraft Indian

¹⁹ “Lending of Motion Pictures,” *AR* 58 (1926): 19.

²⁰ “Public Education,” 49.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 126.

²² *AR* 50 (1918): 37; and *AR* 51 (1919): 62 and 68. The Bray Studio project resulted in the late teens in the production of *Gem Cutting and Polishing*, *Mysteries of the Snow, Dew, In Nature's Treasure House*, and *Window Frost*.

expedition (cosponsored by the League of Woodcraft Indians, a youth organization founded by Ernest Thompson Seton) and the 1926 Asiatic Expedition led (and funded) by William J. Morden and James L. Clark. The latter expedition returned with “not only a fine series of skins, complete skeletons and full scientific measurements of the large game of the country which they visited, but a complete record of the trip in motion pictures [actually only 2,300 feet of film], still photographs and field notes.”²³ The Woodcraft Indian expedition was led by education curator Clyde Fisher and famous naturalist Ernest Thompson Seton, cofounder of the Boy Scouts of America. The expedition produced four reels of film as part of the summer visit to the Southwest, with Fisher operating the camera.²⁴ The film depicts a variety of Native American dances (buffalo, hood, war, eagle, corn, deer, and snowbird) performed by members of the Tusque, Taos, Acoma, and Santa Clara Pueblos. Fisher also filmed other activities of the local peoples, including an intertribal ceremony in Gallup, New Mexico. He recorded the dances, material culture, and cultural practices of several tribes in a systematic way, foregrounding some of the most popular dances as important cross-cultural events within the community. Some of the dances, especially those featuring children, were performed for the camera, while others were part of large public celebrations.

On two occasions in 1927, Fisher screened at least some footage, which he called *Camping Among the Indians*. The first was part of a “Saturday Afternoon Program for Children and Parents” at the museum and the second included in the “Free Lectures for the Children of Public Schools” series. His lecture was one of eight that fell under the rubric “Nature and Industries” and was entitled “The American Indian of Today.” The AMNH’s promotion read: “Visit the Indian Reservation from North Dakota to Arizona with Dr. Fisher, Ernest Thompson Seton and their friends. Learn how the Indian talks by signs, put up their tipis, make pottery, and bake their bread. See the Navajo, Pueblo, and Sioux Indians do their ceremonial dances in fantastic dress of beads and feathers.”²⁵ The three active verbs—*Visit*, *Learn*, and *See*—position virtual travel, knowledge, and vision as the pedagogical payoff and offer us clues as to how the lecture was organized. The first two parts of the lecture—native sign language and tipi building—could not, however, have been illustrated by footage from *Camping Among the Indians* since there is no footage of these activities in the extant version of the film. The reference made to sign language and tipi making in the

²³ “Morden-Clark Expedition,” *AR* 59 (1927): 72.

²⁴ For more on *Camping Among the Indians* and the Woodcraft Movement, see my essay “The 1920s Museum Sponsored Expedition Film: Beguiling Encounters in All But Forgotten Genre,” *Early Popular Visual Culture* 9 (Dec. 2011).

²⁵ “Free Lectures for the Children of Public Schools,” Spring 1928 brochure, description of lecture on page 6, box 1267, CA-AMNH.

lecture, suggests one of three possibilities: that footage of these cultural practices *was* shot by Fisher and Seton but edited out of the extant twenty-one-minute version; that magic lantern slides were substituted for film at this point in the lecture; or that footage acquired by the AMNH or a film made by another curator was used instead.

But how did Fisher's lecture and *Camping Among the Indians* fit into the museum program of visual education? Why, for example, was the film never screened on its own, as many other films were at the museum, but instead submerged within lectures or excerpted in the Dramagraph? We don't know with certainty how much of the footage Fisher shot was used in any of the lectures at the AMNH or elsewhere—the extant film, at just twenty-one minutes, could easily have been screened in its entirety. But the footage brought home from the field was obviously edited to suit the needs of the event, as indicated by a reference in the 1927 *Annual Report* to the motion picture's having been “edited and used in several lectures for the public schools.”²⁶ What *Camping Among the Indians* makes clear is that the filmic text is far less precise (or useful) an arbiter of meaning in contexts such as museums—where lecturers and curators inserted the film into customized programs that integrated slides, music, and the spoken word, thus sharing more in common with ephemeral performances—than it seems to be in traditional theatrical screenings.

The museum's employees received sneak previews of AMNH-sponsored expedition footage, such as *Camping Among the Indians*, as well as a broad mix of other films that wound up at the museum and that were linked, sometimes only tangentially, to the work of the various departments. Memos to heads of departments announcing daytime screenings in either the auditorium, which accommodated 1,500 people, or more commonly in the Education Hall in the School Service Building, which accommodated 500 people, were sent out sometimes only a day before or on the day of the screening. The sources of the films shown were varied, from the latest footage shot by a famous commercial travelogue exhibitor, such as Burton Holmes; by the museum's own taxidermist-explorer Carl Akeley; or by individuals who were presented as experts in their specific fields. For example, in September 1927, department heads were informed that a special screening of a film made in Africa by naturalist M. P. Greenwood Adams would be shown, depicting “accurately and in detail the life of David Livingston as missionary, doctor, and explorer in Africa, including his rescue by [Sir Henry Morton] Stanley” in Tanzania. While there doesn't appear to be much information on this film other than this terse description, its focus on a famous historical event of 1871 and link to a colonial Africa that was certainly

²⁶ “Distribution of Motion Pictures,” *AR* 25 (1927): 99.

represented in the museum, and to which expeditions had traveled, gives us some sense of the broad mission the AMNH cast for film. Here was a film that came the way of the museum by a credentialed individual; the decision to screen it may simply have been motivated by a “why not” mentality, perhaps a demonstrative display of politeness not to offend Adams. Given the relatively large number of these internal screenings, this was not an ad hoc policy decision but more likely an attempt to expose curators to the possibilities of cinema as a research and pedagogical tool, to showcase film that had been shot both by AMNH curators and by affiliated professionals, and maybe even to provide a welcome respite from the daily grind. The museum also regularly scheduled films for its staff, heralded by free public lectures that were also organized at the AMNH under the auspices of the Board of Education and that served as a forum where professional lecturers could show their latest slides and films. In the fall of 1927, for example, Harry C. Ostrander showed his colored stills and motion pictures of Italy; August Post exhibited “aviation views” and films; and Burton Holmes delivered a lecture on “Angkor the Great,” featuring stereopticon and motion picture views of the fortified city of Angkor Thom located on the Mekong River in Cambodia.²⁷

In fall 1921, the museum inaugurated its “film only” program, screening eight motion pictures illustrating literary classics, including previews of *Silas Marner* (Frank P. Donovan, 1922) and *The Last of the Mohicans* (Clarence Brown and Maurice Tourneur, 1920). The AMNH found such commercial feature films attracted “a larger attendance than usual at other lectures.” Henry Fairfield Osborn, president of the museum from 1908 to 1933, opined that while the movies “were not all that could be desired, the experiment [showing films without a lecture] proved very much worthwhile.”²⁸ Aside from establishing the museum’s stance on the value of stand-alone screenings, the comment about the films not being “all that could be desired” is telling. It points up a longstanding concern among curators about the relevance of certain film topics to the mission of the museum; they argued that it had no connection to the institution’s overarching mission. We find additional ambivalence toward film in the 1924 annual report, where the problem again concerns the difficulty of securing appropriate content. According to the “Report of the President,” “our lantern slide and film work has been handicapped because of the lack of the right kind of pictures to portray the life of the people of foreign countries, even the countries of Europe . . . it is not easy to find good pictures of historical buildings, famous streets, or important shrines in the cities of foreign countries, it is not easy to find good pictures

²⁷ Announcement of Free Public Lectures in file N-O1927/1267H, box 1267, CA-AMNH.

²⁸ *AR* 54 (1922): 44.

that will show the common, homely, everyday activities of the people at large—their industries and their children.”²⁹ This complaint testifies to the improvised status of ethnographic filmmaking in the 1920s, resulting in museums being forced to rely upon either commercially produced films or footage that had been shot as part of their own expeditions in support of lectures and other public programs. However, Osborn’s tepid response to film-only programming in the early to mid-1920s can be contrasted with his enthusiasm for classroom-based film years later. “In the teaching of many subjects,” he wrote, “the motion picture is of much greater value than the lantern slides or pictures in a book, provided that the motion pictures are good, that they are suitable, and that the story is well told.”³⁰

As part of its commitment to civic uplift in the early 1920s, the AMNH also began showing a series of motion pictures during the Christmas holidays, the purpose of which was twofold: to give children “wholesome entertainment to keep them off the streets, and second, to get them into the habit of visiting the museum.”³¹ The museum’s broader mission of acculturating the lower classes and immigrants to museumgoing as a vital tool in self-education and betterment can be considered a third goal of these free motion picture screenings. Like other museums, the AMNH worked toward the ideal of “rational entertainment” and a self-defined role as a civilizing instrument for New York City’s burgeoning population.³² But the AMNH’s decision to show films during the holidays also brands the institution as a place of fun, relaxation, and free movies, where young people would have to walk past exhibits to reach the auditorium. The AMNH took no chances with the programming, showing a print of Robert Flaherty’s hit *Nanook of the North*, which Revillon Freres (the French fur company and film’s sponsor) and Pathé Exchange donated to the AMNH. A staggering 2,915 people turned up the first day to see the film, making it necessary to screen it three times and to show it again the next day, when 3,083 children were admitted. Any fears the AMNH might

²⁹ “Report of the President,” *AR* 57 (1925): 80. The report goes on to identify the progress made in this area, including films made by Philip H. Pratt and his wife Gladys L. Pratt, who “very kindly volunteered to go to France last summer [1924] and take pictures of this character.” The Pratts’ trip to France was underwritten by the French Consul General in New York, the General Secretary of the Compagnie Général Transatlantique, and the Office Francais du Tourisme. The AMNH was very pleased with the fifteen reels (of positive and negative film) entitled *Everyday Life of People in France*, stating that “for the first time we were able to give the school children of New York a true idea of the life of the people of Brittany, Normandy, the Provinces of Central France, the Pyrenees, and along the Mediterranean coast.”

³⁰ “Report of the President: Public Education in Schools,” *AR* 56 (1926): 100.

³¹ “Public Education,” 44.

³² For more on this see Tony Bennett’s book on late-nineteenth-century museum culture, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

have had about unruly behavior at these capacity film screenings were entirely mitigated: “Although the auditorium was repeatedly crowded to overflowing, there was no disorder. On the contrary, the children were more quiet and gave better attention than when they were accompanied by their teachers.”³³ Here was filmgoing powerfully resignified by the reputation and physical architecture of the museum (which perhaps accounts for the good behavior). The rules and etiquette of reception were redrawn—there was no popcorn or soda, for one thing—and the free admission to the film might have precipitated a longer stay at the museum, to wander the galleries or perhaps visit the museum shop on the way out. Invoked here also is the idea of more decorous behavior and serious response to the film being more likely outside the context of an organized school trip, with the “mob mentality” of the class somewhat abated.

The AMNH was also used as a venue for lectures in media education, often spearheaded by outside organizations, such as the “Visual Aids to Instruction” series mentioned earlier. Fisher delivered the second lecture in the series (the first meeting in December 1926 was held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art)³⁴,



Figure 5.3. Children attending a lecture, AMNH Auditorium, 1916. (Courtesy Department of Library Services, AMNH.)

³³ “Public Education,” 44.

³⁴ For more on film’s role within the Metropolitan Museum of Art, see Elias Katz, “Educational Possibilities of Motion Pictures in Art Courses,” *International Review of Educational Cinematography* 6 (1934): 29–35. Also see Haidee Wasson, *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 78.

“The Future of Motion Pictures in Education,” and though this was six months before he shot *Camping Among the Indians*, it is likely he made some reference to the role of expeditionary filmmaking in public education.³⁵ Motion pictures had become such an accepted part of the institution’s public service mission by the mid-1920s that when groups requested an introduction to the museum and its work, as the Municipal Club of Brooklyn did in November 1928, the AMNH rounded off the evening’s activities with a screening of Martin Johnson’s films showcasing the museum’s role in sponsoring expeditions. In a letter asking Johnson for loan of the films, Sherwood thanked him for “making a program for this group of business men from Brooklyn attractive and interesting,” a sentiment mirrored in the thank-you letter from Municipal Club secretary Almet R. Batson Jr., in which he praised the film for “illustrating the explorations conducted under the auspices of the museum in a little known region of the world.”³⁶

The AMNH obviously had to deal with the cost of securing, storing, and maintaining films (by 1927 the film library contained 463 reels). The problem of flammable film stock became such a serious challenge by this time that the museum was renting space for 100 reels at Lloyds Film Storage in Manhattan, paying a monthly rate of \$2 per reel for the first 5 reels and \$1 per reel thereafter. The problem of film storage at the AMNH is a refrain in a great deal of the internal memoranda compelling overseers of film at the museum to cull the collection for what was generically referred to as “poor material.” A memo from October 5, 1927, recommended that they “pass on film which may be presented to the Museum in the future.” In an attempt to resolve the flammable film stock issue, the AMNH hired a motion picture operator (with added responsibility for the physical care of films) at a cost of \$2,500.³⁷ Such expenses were nevertheless not a disincentive to the museum’s acquisition of new film material, as gleaned from the fact that almost every expedition underwritten by the AMNH involved someone responsible for documenting the expedition cinematographically.

³⁵ Letter to Sherwood from Pam Klapper, Apr. 27, 1927, in file 1267F (1927), box 1267, CA-AMNH.

³⁶ The evening consisted of a behind-the-scenes tour; dinner in the restaurant; a lecture by Sherwood on the museum’s School Service; a lecture by Dr. Kingsley Noble, curator of Herpetology and Experimental Biology; and the Johnson films. Quotes from letter to Johnson from Sherwood, November 19, 1928, and letter from Batsob to Sherwood, November 27, 1928, both in file I-M 1928/1267M, box 1267 (1928–1931), CA-AMNH.

³⁷ Minutes from Luncheon Meeting of Trustees and the Educational Committee, October 5, 1927, 1, box 1237.3; George Sherwood, “Report to the Committee on Education,” 1927, 2, both in CA-AMNH.

“By-Products of the Entertainment Film”: Cinema and Visual Education in the 1920s³⁸

[M]ake every classroom and every assembly hall a movie show, a show where the child learns every moment while his eyes are glued to the screen.
—*School Life*, 1919³⁹

By the mid-twenties, the concept of visual education had gained sufficient traction in educational and museum discourses that coming to its defense was no longer necessary. Books and articles targeting educators, policymakers, curators, and public intellectuals had appeared in print. As Haidee Wasson notes, “Museums themselves were being reshaped through a pervasive set of ideas and discourses catalyzed particularly from the 1920s forward through a range of mass media.”⁴⁰ The National Education Association (NEA) had a Committee on Visual Education that worked closely with Eastman Kodak, targeting the fourth through eighth grades and honing in on geography, health and hygiene, civics, fine and practical arts, and general science.⁴¹

In May 1928, Kodak established Eastman Teaching Films, Inc., which would develop a program of motion pictures to be used “for instruction in schools, colleges, universities, technical institutions, and medical schools.” The development of cheaper, safer, and more portable 16mm prints had a significant impact on the educational possibilities of film. In 1925, Eastman Kodak and the NEA enlisted 176 teachers and 12,000 pupils from cities across the United States to take part in a study on the impact of motion pictures in education. Not surprisingly, the study authors concluded that “films contribute elements to the experiences of the children which it is difficult and often impossible to secure by any other method available to the school.”⁴² A letter from philanthropist John L. Porter, trustee of the Carnegie Institute, to AMNH president Osborn in 1926 referred specifically to the impact of the past ten years on young people:

³⁸ The phrase “by-products of entertainment” is from Carl E. Milliken, “Increasing General Usefulness of Films,” *Motion Picture* 4, no. 8 (Aug. 1928): 6.

³⁹ “Edison Urges Educational Use of Motion Pictures,” *School Life* (Feb. 1919): 5.

⁴⁰ Wasson, *Museum Movies*, 71. According to F. Dean McClusky, by 1931 “the reports of a total of thirty-six important research studies of visual instruction” had been published. McClusky, *Visual Instruction: Its Value and Its Needs; A Report* (New York: Mancall Publishing Group, 1932), 16. McClusky was president of the National Academy of Visual Instruction. The report was completed for Will H. Hays, head of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA).

⁴¹ Letter to Sherwood from Jason S. Joy [director of the MPPDA’s Studio Relations Committee], July 15, 1928, 1, box 1237, CA-AMNH.

⁴² “A Climactic Development in Education,” *Movie Makers* 3, no. 6 (1928): 380.

Education in the past decade has taken on so much of the visualizing methods, that our Museums are fast becoming the greater and greater adjuncts, annually to our educational program, and if I judge rightly, it will not take more than a generation to bring most of our younger element to a point where there will be very little of Natural History, which will be to them a wonderland, such as it has been to most of us, as the knowledge they will gain during their school days will have started them off on their own journey, through the universe, with a very broadened conception of it.⁴³

Porter's point, if a bit buried in this wordy proclamation, seems to be that museums of natural history will be beneficiaries of the stellar job schools are doing introducing students to the natural world through visual means, implying that the introduction to natural history via film and lantern slide will trigger a lifelong, self-guided, and expansive journey of discovery. Porter's letter casts the AMNH's relationship to the larger visual education movement in an interesting light, suggesting even a circularity where the AMNH promotes film to schools by providing free films, the films shown in classes ignite a lifelong interest in natural history, and this development in turn draws people back to the source of the impetus, the AMNH. If the AMNH was never entirely explicit about what was in it for them in terms of a motivation for using film (we can identify a cluster of reasons in the presidential summaries in the *Annual Reports*), it would be remiss to assume that the AMNH wasn't aware of how film shown both behind its own doors and distributed through its lending service would ultimately cast the institution in a favorable light and further the museum's mission through visual educational means.

However, the substantial increase in slide and motion picture loans made to schools during the 1920s had a deleterious effect on the circulating collection of natural history specimens. The 1924 *Annual Report* offered that "the important branch of the work [in this area] has fallen off this year on account of a lack of messenger service for transferring the collections. . . . As has been true during the past two years, the lending of lantern slides has taken precedence over this work, although in visual instruction it is believed that *the real object is of greater service than any still picture of it.*"⁴⁴ And yet the real object, what Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett calls "first order" materials, could not reach as many students as still or moving pictures, nor could these material objects reveal much about culture in the absence of explanations as to their use, context, and symbolic significance. Museum extension work began with the circulation of collections of objects,

⁴³ Letter to Osborn from Porter, July 14, 1926, box 12.4.8.1 1925, CA-AMNH.

⁴⁴ "Public Education," 133.

specimens, and models, usually accompanied by descriptions and suggestions for classroom use. The AMNH clearly felt that these were more valuable as introductions to natural history and related scientific areas than lectures with drawings or no illustrations at all.⁴⁵

By 1927 the AMNH felt completely at ease appropriating industry-driven motion picture marketing in its *Annual Reports*, even when referring to slides; the rhetoric used, for example, in “Report of the President” in the *Annual Report* from that same year about the distribution of lantern slides could very well have been lifted straight from *Moving Picture World* or any other industry magazine: “Thousands of pupils,” we are told, “are enabled to visit the haunts of birds, mammals, and other creatures; to see how their neighbors live in other hemispheres as well as their own, and to grasp, in a more comprehensive way, the story of life, past and present, the world over.”⁴⁶ Noting an “ever-increasing demand for motion pictures,” the president described the films as supplementing the slides, a clear indicator, I believe, of the added difficulties of exhibiting films in schools where projectors were less readily available in classrooms versus lantern slides.⁴⁷ While it would be shortsighted to slight the differences between lantern slides and films as circulating objects, they were viewed through a very similar epistemological lens by the AMNH, discursively constructed as legitimate alternatives to habitat groups in the museum, hugely expensive diorama-type displays where fauna and flora would be exhibited in illusionistic glass cases. Both slides and film provided cheap alternatives to these 3-D displays that contextualized objects in their proper environment.

We therefore see considerable investment by the AMNH in the lure of indexicality, the idea of film “stopping short only of the actual experience” in the words of *Educational Screen* contributor Annette Glick. For Glick, this indexicality shares an affinity with the experiences of children—she says that the motion picture is rendered “almost with childlike naiveté,” since its reality amounts to a “vicarious experience,” and in her mind, “children who come from a motion picture have lived the scenes portrayed, not merely viewed them.”⁴⁸ Of course, given the often inflated rhetoric surrounding the pedagogical uses of motion pictures at this time (and even earlier during the silent cinema period), we should interpret cinema’s lauded status as driven as much by self-serving agendas as by genuine beliefs in its elevated status above the other related arts. In some instances, the hyperbole is part and parcel of a broader industry-driven effort to recuperate film from its lowbrow, mass culture connotations and to legitimize

⁴⁵ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Objects of Ethnography,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 394.

⁴⁶ “Museum and School Service,” 98.

⁴⁷ *AR* 59 (1927): 98–99.

⁴⁸ Annette Glick, “The Habit of Criticizing the Motion Picture,” *Educational Screen* 8, no. 1 (1934): 10.

film use in schools. The AMNH doubtless felt quite comfortable appropriating this rhetoric to further its institutional mandates and in many respects had few other options given its status as a high cultural institution of refined entertainment; all of the films shown under the auspices of the AMNH had to confer a set of brand associations to the public, because otherwise the stakes in appropriating the medium to further the AMNH's mission would have simply been too high, especially if it meant alienating some of the museum's wealthy stakeholders.

Even Thomas Edison threw his weight behind the aggrandizing of film (for obvious reasons), entering the fray to extol the virtues of cinema as both an illusionistic *and* an educational tool, describing it as the "closest possible approximation to reality" and "almost the same as bringing that object itself before the child or taking the child to that object."⁴⁹ In addition to the convenience of neither having to bring the object before the child nor the child before the object—although paradoxically, this was precisely what museums did—other virtues were bestowed upon cinema, including Glick's argument that it was "through the power to supply experience as well as simply to convey ideas and thoughts and emotions, that the motion picture accomplishes what the poet or sculptor cannot do."⁵⁰

One advantage the natural history object had over film was its ability to be used in the classroom as opposed to the auditorium, as Ramsey explains: "A great drawback to the more common use of the thirty-five millimeter film as a teaching aid was the necessity of providing a licensed operator and taking the prescribed fire precautions. This practically prohibited the classroom use of films and restricted their showings to assemblies where both teachers and pupils thought of the films more often as a form of entertainment than as an integral part of a lesson."⁵¹ To address this problem, in 1914 the museum inaugurated lecture centers in New York City high schools with large-capacity auditoriums that could be used to host illustrated lectures for elementary schoolchildren (Washington Irving High School was among the first to allow its 1,500-seat auditorium to be placed at the disposal of local elementary schools).⁵² Whether viewing the film in a high school auditorium or an assembly hall in an elementary school made any difference in how students perceived the screening is obviously hard to assess, although the expense of transporting students across the city surely played a role in curtailing this practice. With the introduction of 16mm film stock by Eastman Kodak in 1923 the situation improved, as the AMNH was able to lend the narrow-gauge films to those schools that were equipped with portable 16mm projectors, which could be used in classrooms, as opposed to 35mm, which could only be shown in school auditoriums. This clearly had an impact on both the circulation of AMNH-owned films, which exponentially increased, as well as on

⁴⁹ "Edison Urges," 5.

⁵⁰ Glick, "Habit of Criticizing," 11.

⁵¹ Ramsey, *Educational Work*, 183.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 188.

museum-sponsored expeditions that used the Akeley camera, described in the 1924 AMNH *Annual Report* as “so perfect that the small film negative one inch square is capable of being enlarged to display the finest details of an animation in full motion [such as] as animal moving at a speed of 40 miles per hour.”⁵³

According to Ramsey, the AMNH “kept pace with the changes in visual education . . . which resulted in the extension of its film circulation to schools and other educational organizations all over the country [except Pacific coast states].” In 1937, the AMNH circulated “34,700 reels to 1,706 borrowers in forty-five states, with an audience of 13,102,368 people reported at the 80,532 showings.”⁵⁴ Despite these impressive numbers and the not inconsiderable research on film that had taken place by 1937, it was still difficult to know with certainty how film was being used in schools, an issue raised by J. Frederic Andrews, who argued that “nowhere is there any great uniformity of practice, nowhere does there exist any significant scientific research to guide these organizations.” Drawing upon data generated by 241 questionnaires sent to public schools known to be using visual aids in 241 cities (with a 59 percent response rate) in 1934, Andrews concluded that 83 percent of these schools were using motion pictures in the classroom; 86 percent in assembly halls; and 70 percent in special meetings or activities (slides exceeded films only in the classroom [89 percent]).⁵⁵

Museums such as the AMNH and the Field Museum in Chicago were pivotal in providing the infrastructure for free motion pictures and slide distribution to public schools from the teens through today. Cinema was the darling if controversial child not only of an emerging visual education movement but also in other fields such as religion and medicine that were keen to experiment with film either as a recruiting device in the case of churches or to train medical students. Another reason to use film was simply to appear modern and “with the times.” For the natural history museum this was obviously a less pressing concern (recall that the AMNH had shown no interest in cinema whatsoever until 1907); permanent galleries were literally that, fixed spaces where little changed. Film therefore entered the AMNH on the back of lantern slides, which created the conditions of possibility and a framework of reassurance that the visual experience would be similar yet different.

Few would dispute the pivotal role played by the AMNH in audiovisual-based education in the 1920s. The museum stuck with a costly program to promote the AMNH’s collections, vouchsafe cinema as a legitimate mode of educating young people, and advance such vital tenets of American progressivism as anthropologist Franz Boas’s theory of cultural relativism. The Depression slowed the museum’s activities down but did not halt the development of film at the AMNH, and sponsored expeditions were cut more deeply than public programs.

⁵³ *AR* 56 (1924): 15.

⁵⁴ Ramsey, *Educational Work*, 184, citing *AR* 69 (1937).

⁵⁵ Milliken, “Increasing General Usefulness of Films,” 6.

Generations of children growing up in New York City saw the AMNH delivery vans and motorcycles pulling up at their schools, bringing the magic of the cinema into the classroom. In 2009, I saw one of the AMNH's mobile museum buses stopped at a red light in Brooklyn and thought about some of the wondrous objects that lay inside. The "Moveable Museum Program," launched in 1993, has four buses providing educational outreach to "schools, libraries, camps, and community centers in the New York City area." Buses are devoted to paleontology, anthropology, and astronomy; parked outside schools, they offer "state-of-the-art, walk-in exhibition spaces."⁵⁶ Given the focus of this chapter, it is ironic, though hardly surprising, that they no longer deliver film (and don't even bring objects into the classroom) but instead attempt to recreate a miniature AMNH on the doorstep of the school. The Moveable Museums have provided a new lease on life for the taxidermy specimens and other objects, which, while highly valued as artifacts, were displaced on the New York City school circuit by cinema during the 1920s and 30s. While the AMNH no longer delivers films to schools (although films housed in Special Collections can be borrowed via interlibrary loan), the museum has consolidated its interest in cinema into four enterprises: IMAX films screened in the Samuel J. and Ethel LeFrak Theater (a lucrative funding stream in the repurposed 1900 auditorium); the annual Margaret Mead Film and Video Festival (which no longer has access to the auditorium during the festival since it would cut into the weekend IMAX box office); the production of high-definition natural history video programming for the *Science Bulletins* division of the Education Department; and gallery-based plasma screens and video interactives. As for the place of film in New York City's public schools, except for the occasional documentary on a specific curricular topic such as the history of slavery, the civil war, or the Depression, film has taken on something of a Foucauldian role, used during inclement weather to keep large numbers of children under control in the auditorium. Who knows what Ramsay, Osborn, and Fisher would make of a hundred or so elementary schoolchildren sitting watching *SpongeBob SquarePants* and *High School Musical*, a far cry from the "broadened conception of the universe" envisioned by Porter in his 1925 letter to Osborn about the relationship between museums and visual education.

Filmography

Camping Among the Indians (1927) 22 min., 16 mm

SPONSOR: American Museum of Natural History. PHOTOGRAPHER: George Clyde Fisher. Documents the AMNH Woodcraft Indian trip to the American Southwest, led by Ernest Thompson Seton. ACCESS: AMNH Library Special Collections, Film collection no. 22; on ¾" U-matic videotape.

⁵⁶ "Moveable Museum," AMNH website (2009), www.amnh.org/education/school_groups/program.php?id=33.

***The Chronicles of America: The Pilgrims* (1924) 30 min., 35mm**

PRODUCTION: Chronicles of America Picture Corp.
 DIRECTOR: Edwin L. Hollywood. WRITER: William B. Courtney. CAST: Robert Gaillard, Harry Simpson, John Hopkins.
 ACCESS: Library of Congress (LOC).

***The Chronicles of America: The Puritans* (1924) 30 min., 35mm**

PRODUCTION: Chronicles of America Picture Corp.
 DIRECTOR: Frank Tuttle. WRITER: Evangeline Andrews. CAST: Arthur Hohl, Audrey Hart. ACCESS: LOC.

***Jungle Life in India* (1923) 20 min., 16mm**

SPONSOR: AMNH. PHOTOGRAPHER: Commander George M. Dyott. Documents the Faunthorpe-Vernay Indian Expedition to India, Nepal, and Burma (1922–23). Made for designers of dioramas in the Hall of South Asiatic Mammals. ACCESS: AMNH Library Special Collections, Film Collection no. 198; on ¾" U-matic videotape.

***The Morden-Clark Asiatic Expedition* (1926), 73 min., 16mm**

SPONSOR: American Museum of Natural History. PHOTOGRAPHER: James Lippitt Clark. Documents the AMNH Morden-Clark Asiatic Expedition, which crossed the Himalayan and Karakoram mountains to a restricted territory called the Pamirs (in Tajikistan). ACCESS: NARA (Records of the Central Intelligence Agency, under the title *Morden-Clark Asiatic Expedition of the American Museum of Natural History, India*); Internet Archive, www.archive.org/details/gov.archives.arc.617938.r1 (reel 1) and www.archive.org/details/gov.archives.arc.617938.r2 (reel 2).

Related Films

Every Day Life of People in France (1924). Directed by Philip H. Pratt and Gladys L. Pratt.

The Last of the Mohicans (1920). Directed by Clarence Brown and Maurice Tourneur.

Nanook of the North (1922). Directed by Robert Flaherty.

Silas Marner (1922). Directed by Frank P. Donovan.

Trailing African Wild Animals (1923). Directed by Martin and Osa Johnson.