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To “Elevate Unfortunate Humanity” On-screen: Linking World War I and Protestant Missions through Silent Film

Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to examine how post-World War I American Methodists used silent film to link the progress of the U.S. military with the advances of denominational missionaries overseas. Both the American army and the largest Protestant denomination in the U.S. were on separate yet intricately intertwined missions – one to promote the extension of American “democracy” and “civilization” by rescuing foreigners from the clutches of menacing dictators, the other to promote a version of U.S. Protestantism by saving foreigners from the grasp of non-Christian religions and religious practices.

“That great open space ... is a nightly arena for the seating of 75,000 people, and the thing rising into the sky with its prodigious bridge-like backing and bracing is ... a screen upon which stalk men vaster than twenty Goliaths. And all around us are pictures, pictures, pictures, pictures; some of them painted, some of them modeled, some of them filmed, some of them done by living images... This is a kaleidoscope of the world.”

Julian Johnson, Photoplay Magazine

Columbus, Ohio - June 1919¹

During the summer of 1919 over one million American Methodists visited the Ohio State Fairgrounds in Columbus to take part in an enormous international exposition staged to promote Methodist missionary activities around the world. On July 8 high-ranking motion picture executives from the National Association of Motion Picture Producers as well as influential leaders from the Methodist Episcopal Church met at the so-called “Methodist World’s Fair” to celebrate ‘Motion Picture Day’ and to attend the inaugural Church Motion Picture Convention at the Columbus Coliseum.

At the meeting representatives from United Artists, Famous Players-Lasky, and Goldwyn Pictures shared the coliseum platform with Methodist ministers and media advocates including S. Earl Taylor, Christian F. Reisner and S.R. Vinton.²

During the sessions filmmakers and churchgoers negotiated ways in which they might work together to produce both wholesome and educational motion pictures for distribution to American Methodist churches. Vinton, serving as Director of Films and Stereopticon Slides for the missionary fair, spoke of the moral potential and religious value of motion pictures. He also advocated for an increase in the production of quality films for use in Methodist churches in the United States and for distribution to Methodist home and foreign missionary agencies in regions around the world.³

Throughout the meeting motion picture executives attempted to alleviate the anxieties of some Methodists over the production of questionable films by their Hollywood and New York-based studios. Prior to the Columbus convention, film industry representatives anticipated the concerns of some Methodist laity and offered exposition organizers a large selection of recently released popular films free of charge for the fair. This was done primarily so that Methodist constituents might reconsider their distrust of the motion picture industry and work in conjunction with film studios. To lessen any potential embarrassing moments for organizers of the exposition, a committee staffed with Methodist ministers and laity functioned as film censors whose task was to edit any material from the films they considered objectionable before the films were projected on-screen to Christian viewers.⁴

As visitors walked the grounds of the exposition they viewed an assortment of films on a giant ten-story picture screen depicting successful military missions of the American armed forces during World War I. They also watched amateur ethnographic films recorded by Methodist missionaries at denominational outposts around the world. From inside the twelve-hundred-seat Motion Picture Auditorium of the Asbury Building these short films demonstrated missionary activities of Christian workers at home and abroad.

The purpose of this essay is to examine how post-World War I American Methodists used silent film to link the progress of the U.S. military with the advances of denominational missionaries overseas. Both the American army and the largest Protestant denomination in the U.S. were on separate yet intricately intertwined missions – one to promote the extension of American “democracy” and “civilization” by rescuing foreigners from the clutches of menacing dictators, the other to promote a version of U.S. Protestantism by saving foreigners from the grasp of non-Christian religions and religious practices.

American Methodists and Silent Film

Motion picture machines had already been in use in American movie theaters and local Methodist churches since the 1890s. For many if not most Methodists at the Centenary Celebration the utilization of silent films and glass

slides for religious and entertainment purposes was commonplace – as long as the viewings took place in a church. The restrictive language found within the *Doctrines and Discipline*, the official rulebook of the Methodist Episcopal Church, did not permit Methodists to attend motion picture theaters. Yet exposition visitors could find a number of film viewing sites throughout the exposition grounds.

Methodist “Media experts” promoted the use of this media in Columbus as a means to increase exposition attendance and to draw attention to the ongoing relationship between film companies and the Methodist Episcopal Church. Exposition organizers also hoped by showing these films that the Methodist Church might demonstrate its relevance in popular culture and promote missionary education. At the Centenary Celebration “the world’s largest motion picture screen” towered ten stories above the fairgrounds while dozens of oversized film machines and stereopticons projected recently released Hollywood and New York films. The studios of D.W. Griffith, Paramount Pictures and Famous Players-Lasky provided many of the films which starred popular silent film actors including Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks. Methodist missionaries and Church executives also produced a small selection of amateur ethnographic films depicting scenes of foreign peoples and landscapes. These films projected onscreen at the exposition highlighted the progress of missionaries at home and overseas and gave Methodist audiences a glimpse into the daily routine of a missionary.

The films shown at Columbus included images of the successful military campaign of U.S. forces in Europe and ethnographic films of the advances of missionary work in America and abroad. Through these films Methodist executives coupled the memories of the American victory during World War I with the global advances of Methodist missionaries on a crusade to take Christianity throughout the world under the auspices of the Methodist Episcopal Church. These films, edited by Methodist censors and projectionists into narratives of American victory and Christian advance, provided visitors with opportunities to view the work of American soldiers and Methodist missionaries at home and in foreign lands. When projected on the giant screen, these images enabled viewers to catch a glimpse of the recipients of American advance and foreign missions work through the US military and Methodist missionaries overseas. Exposition organizers also hoped through these films that fairgoers might donate money toward the Centenary Fund campaign or volunteer to serve in distant lands.

Ethnographic Films and Methodist Missionaries

Prior to the 1919 event Methodist executives from the U.S. and denominational missionaries on location in foreign lands recorded motion pictures of native peoples, cultural practices, and religious customs. The final versions of these films were completed in New York City and later shipped by train to

Columbus. Methodists at the Ohio exposition projected a number of these amateur missionary films in various pavilions during the fair.

Once on screen these motion pictures provided cultural representations of “actual” people and “moving” landscapes, allowing Methodist viewers to be “present” in unfamiliar foreign countries. These moving pictures demonstrated the work of Methodist missionaries overseas and documented the success of their current work. The films also suggested that further evangelism needed to be done once additional funding was secured by missionary agencies.

Kathryn T. Long’s essay “Cameras ‘never lie’” explores the use and construction of missionary photographs to convey certain images of missionaries to American audiences.⁵ Long explains that through the use of photography home and foreign missionary societies were able to supply visual evidence confirming missionary presence overseas. These images also validated the success of missionaries for curious viewers who imagined the progressive work being done in foreign locales.⁶ Missionary films worked in a similar fashion for visitors at the Columbus exposition. But rather than only project still images of missionaries and foreign landscapes (over 100,000 missionary photographs were shown at the Centenary Celebration) Methodist organizers of the fair believed the use of film would illustrate the successes of Methodist missions and project the need for more recruits in home and foreign missionary work.

Fatimah Tobing Rony in *The Third Eye* describes the early production and distribution of films on non-Western people, who were shown as “exotic” and “distant” in nature. The use of moving pictures to record the peoples and landscapes of the world originated in part with the late nineteenth-century work of French physician and filmmaker Felix-Louis Regnault. Along with his assistant Charles Comte, Regnault used an early camera called the chronophotographe to record the movements and gestures of peoples from West Africa at the 1895 Paris Ethnographic Exposition. Regnault believed one might compare the similarities and differences of Africans and Europeans when he recorded films of a black woman and a white man jumping, climbing, and walking side by side.⁷ The images which resulted from this recording were processed on celluloid. These films were meant to display a variety of “people” (ethnos) “written” or “described” (graphos) on film which resulted in what current scholarship calls “ethnographic film.”⁸ Once recorded on film individual actors represented what was thought to be the complete picture of an entire race and culture on film.⁹ Pictures of a man from Asia represented “a typical Asian” and in the case of the filmed events of the 1895 Paris exposition the African woman recorded on film opposite a French white male represented the movements, “typical” body structure, and mannerisms of all people of Africa.

During the weeks of the 1919 Methodist exposition local Columbus newspapers reported on an ethnographic film project taking place in Africa under the auspices of the Smithsonian Institution and Universal Film studios. The motion picture was given the title “*The Smithsonian African Expedition*” and reporters publicized the film as “the largest in scientific scope since the famous Stanley expedition that went in search of Livingston.” The *Columbus Citizen* picked up on this story and published a report under the title “Big Exploring Party Sails” and included photographs of those involved on the trip. The purpose of the expedition was to collect images of the people of African tribes and to film animals and insects native to Africa. These images were shipped back to America and produced into motion pictures to illustrate “races and tribes, many never seen by white men.”¹⁰

Similar in nature to the work of Regnault, Methodist filmmakers recorded the movements and activities of the racially “exotic” Other. Yet, the films at the Centenary Celebration went beyond demonstrating the gait and physical characteristics of the foreigner by producing films largely for purposes of educating viewers on Methodist missions and the advance of Christianity around the world. These films not only projected images of the racialized Other, a person of color from a distant and often non-Western country, but more importantly the films illustrated the Christianized Other, a person from a foreign land converted or in need of conversion to Christianity through the ministry of Methodist missionaries.

Through the use of these films exposition organizers hoped to recruit more missionaries and to receive more donations through the "direct appeal of film" by showing viewers the conditions of needy missionaries, foreign peoples, and distant landscapes.¹¹

Maynard Owen Williams, a staff correspondent and photojournalist for *National Geographic Magazine*, visited the exposition and noted the importance of missionary pictures and films. In the *Columbus Evening Dispatch* Williams declared, "The Centenary Celebration ought to point a great lesson to every missionary – that one human interest picture is worth a score of missionary addresses and that pictures reach influential persons who never attend missionary meetings."¹² For Williams, whose images of foreign lands were printed in the popular *National Geographic Magazine*, the use of films and photographs to illustrate the peoples and landscapes of foreign countries was more effective than any formal lecture presentation. The thoughts of Williams resonated with exposition organizers who intended for these films and photographs to be viewed by persons interested in a career in missions or by influential persons with money to contribute toward the spread of Christianity around the world.

Two types of ethnographic film programs were shown at the Columbus exposition. The first involved the travelogue, a program of short films and lantern slides which highlighted the people, landscapes and industries of foreign lands. At

these showings traveling exhibitors such as Lowell Thomas or Burton Holmes “who traveled through Europe with a Kodak” would project still photographs or moving images for audiences interested in people and scenery of distant lands.¹³ Exhibitors of illustrated traveling lectures shaped and reshaped the way viewers looked at foreign people and distant landscapes. As Deborah Bright points out, the presented image of a “landscape” is limiting and selectively constructed by those who create the image for viewing. Often, a viewer does not ascertain the values and “actions imposed on the land” which lie beyond the range of the image.¹⁴

As a result, the foreign “landscape” as presented does not include missing elements of a filmed area. One does not see the foreigner who was not interested in Christianity on film, nor do those in the audience see how each individual scene was directed, sliced, or re-shot. In this way, traveling exhibitors who presented films and photographs of distant lands were able to portray foreign peoples and foreign landscapes as they desired them to be seen by viewers. Thus, the production of films and illustrated lectures which exhibitors believed would interest church members often portrayed visual representations of the “heathen” in need of Christianity. This type of program was especially important for viewing at a missionary exposition.

The Lowell Thomas travelogues at Columbus arrived from a successful recent showing at the Century Theater in New York City. The viewings included

programs such as *Freeing Palestine* which depicted the story of the twentieth century "crusade" of World War I allies who freed the "Holy Land" from German aggressors and Muslim occupants. Another film, *The German Revolution*, demonstrated the work needed to be done in order to restore stability and grant democracy to lands and peoples of Europe and the Middle East.¹⁵ *An Airplane Pilgrimage to the Holy Land*, a pamphlet printed to advertise the travels and cinematography of Lowell Thomas showed on its front page an airplane "Nose diving over Jerusalem." In the brochure, Thomas received accolades as "An American, who saw more of the World War than any other person." The travelogue impressed one Methodist minister from New York City who declared, "It is the most marvelous historic portrayal I have ever seen or heard. I would have sent a whole fleet of battleships to bring Mr. Thomas back safely, because every Christian in the world should go with him on this holy crusade."¹⁶

The thought of Christians on a "holy crusade" to free Palestine from German and Islamic aggressors would resonate with early twentieth century Protestants at the Methodist exposition. Melani McAlister suggests in *Epic Encounters* that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries American Christians were fascinated with travelogues and exhibits depicting the landscape and peoples of the Holy Land. McAlister notes these viewings enabled Americans

to connect their Christian heritage with the land and people associated with the region where the Jesus of history walked and performed miracles.¹⁷

Through this association U.S. Christians were able to connect the notions of America as God's chosen land and Americans as direct inheritors of God's blessing with the people and places of Palestine. Methodists who gathered in front of movie screens at the Centenary Celebration to watch a travelogue depicting the removal of Germans and Muslims from the historic Holy Land were encouraged to think about how they might be more involved with the establishment of freedom and democracy in such places as Palestine. By viewing these films American Methodists could imagine their own missionaries, money, and resources going to assist Palestine and the Palestinian people. By assisting the people located in the land of the Bible, Methodists could help restore the region where it was thought Jesus began work toward the salvation of humanity. Methodist organizers promoted the travelogues of Lowell Thomas and Burton Holmes as "genuine" and "self-evidently authentic" which the Columbus Evening Dispatch reported made viewers feel as though they "were actually seeing the original scenes" of the people and landscapes of Palestine.¹⁸ Thus it seemed some viewers in the theater of the Asbury Building imagined themselves as actual participants of the production crew who filmed the people and lands where Jesus walked.

Travelogues such as *China* (1919) explored the progress of the people and industries of China following World War I. In addition the documentary *Hawaii* (1919) featured hand-tinted colorized images of the peoples and landscapes of the Hawaiian Islands. Viewing the work of missionaries in both mainland China and in the islands of Hawaii was likely a familiar sight to exposition audiences. Both regions had been the recipients of Methodist missionary activity since the nineteenth century and indigenous speakers from both areas visited the Columbus exposition to give reports on the progress of Methodist missions in their countries.

Yet, many Methodists at the Columbus exposition were unable to travel to these areas in order to view the various scenes of cultural, industrial, and Christian progress. The travelogues at Columbus served as windows into the global arenas impacted by missionary organizations. By showing these films and slides Methodist organizers hoped audiences might imagine themselves (or their money) in foreign lands among U.S. missionaries.

A second type of motion picture projected at Columbus was the ethnographic missionary film. From 1917 until the spring of 1919 Methodist missionaries and Church executives filmed a series of amateur motion pictures on location in missionary outposts throughout the world. These films portrayed foreign peoples and landscapes and helped shaped the way viewers visualized lands inhabited by Methodist missionaries. The use of film to display the work of

missionaries also provided audiences with the opportunity to relate with the American Christian volunteer who left the safety of the United States to travel to foreign lands often portrayed as “dangerous” and “exciting”.

Leaving America to travel overseas to unfamiliar locations concerned some missionaries and a few motion picture directors who demonstrated on film how missionaries dealt with this geographical and cultural transition. In *The Photoplay* (1916) early twentieth century German psychologist and silent film theorist Hugo Munsterberg noted how directors used film to project the minds of American missionaries for silent film viewers,

We see the jungle, we see the hero at the height of his danger; and suddenly there flashes upon the screen a picture of the past. For not more than two seconds does the idyllic New England scene slip into the exciting African events...¹⁹

The inherent “danger” of being a missionary demonstrated the commitment of Methodist missionaries. While many viewers of ethnographic missionary films were unable to travel to Asia or to the jungles of Africa, these films provided exposition visitors with an “eye” to visualize “peculiar” people and landscapes and to procure needed funds for world evangelization.²⁰

Through motion pictures, audiences were not only made aware the work of American Methodists bringing Bibles and Christian salvation to the world, they also watched as Americans brought their own cultural practices and assumptions to Africa, Asia, and South America. These films showed how Americans were bringing foreign people clothing and Christ – two important pieces toward the civilization of a culture as understood by early twentieth century Methodist missionaries. Amateur ethnographic missionary films displayed at the Centenary Celebration included an assortment of foreign films dedicated to one particular area of the world where Methodist missionaries worked. One foreign film titled *Methodized Cannibals* illustrated the work and successes of Methodist workers to the African people, portrayed as uncivilized and unconverted cannibals. The title of the film suggests that through the missionary work of Methodists cannibals learned about Jesus and were introduced to Western cultural practices.

Another film, *Women of the Orient*, was shown in the Asia Building and visualized the work of Methodist missionaries in Japan, Korea and China.²¹ Asia Building organizers intended the film to provide a snapshot of Asian women for American viewers. These films illustrated the work of Methodist missionaries who were helping the “peoples in foreign lands” advance “mentally, morally and spiritually.”²² Through the work of American Methodist women missionaries the

women onscreen were in the process of being liberated from cultural and gendered oppression.

A selection of films also portrayed the work of home missionary agencies toward American Indians, African-Americans, and European immigrants. Films on home missionaries emphasized the work and progress of Methodists assisting African-Americans in transition from Southern to Northern U.S. states. Motion pictures such as *Methodism and Negro Immigration* highlighted the activities of the Methodist Church in assisting black Americans moving to Northern states for jobs and to escape from discriminatory Jim Crow laws in the South. Other films at the Centenary addressed the concerns involved with the mass migration of European and Asian immigrants into the United States.

The process of making U.S. citizens out of foreigners was also shown on screen in *Americanization: the Problem of the Hour*. In this film audiences viewed the activities of social workers and home missionaries at immigration centers such as Ellis Island. After watching these films on the involvement of the Board of Home Missions and Church Extension toward African and Asian Americans in transition, audiences at Columbus were urged to assist missionary agencies through volunteer work and by financial contribution.

These ethnographic missionary films were well received at the exposition. *The Official Report of the Centenary Celebration* recorded that crowds “erupted in applause” when the films showed success in actual missions work.²³ Though only a small number of missionary films had been recorded and projected at the exposition, the motion pictures helped viewers visualize the problems encountered by Methodist missionaries. Yet following the exposition organizers expressed concern over the lack of amateur missionary films. As a result, Church leaders sought to procure qualified cinematographers and “trained men in missionary propaganda” willing to invest themselves in the recording of peoples in distant lands.²⁴ With the assistance of professionals trained to record and market missionary motion pictures the Methodist Church hoped to be able to further its quest to take Christ to the world. By 1921, the Church had established its own Chicago-based film production company which would provide Methodist churches and missionary outposts around the world with the latest educational and ethnographic films for viewing in church sanctuaries and foreign fields.

Methodist minister S.R. Vinton recognized the great interest of audiences at the exposition in motion pictures depicting missionaries and argued for the continued production, distribution and exhibition of ethnographic missionary films at film studios and within the local church. In the *New York Christian Advocate* Vinton remarked, “There are great stories of missionary effort and achievement that

would thrill millions if they could be properly screened...how the message of the Centenary could be made to live if the story of the great pioneers, Stewart, Cox, Butler and others, could be made to live on the screen!”²⁵ For Vinton, the excitement generated by the use of missionary films at Columbus which showed “missionary effort and achievement” confirmed the need for the Methodist Episcopal Church to produce, distribute, and exhibit more films on the lives of missionary heroes such as John Stewart. Making Methodist movies which illustrated “live on the screen” courageous missionaries successful in their task of spreading Christianity around the world linked the successes of past missions workers with the present work at hand – the evangelization of the world for Christ.

But to be successful the Methodist Episcopal Church needed volunteers willing to serve in the outposts of America and overseas. Vinton hoped the use of ethnographic films might illustrate “great missionary stories of full dramatic power” and promote further interest in missions.²⁶ For Methodist executives such as Vinton, the medium of film worked as a tool to illustrate the work of missionaries whose purposes were to “elevate unfortunate humanity.” Yet showing Christian converts on screen was not enough. More home and foreign missionaries were needed and through the projection of ethnographic films the Methodist Church hoped to recruit more volunteers and provoke in viewers an outpouring of financial assistance to help pay off the \$160 million dollar Centenary Fund.²⁷

¹ Johnson, J. 1919, "Let There Be Light!" *Photoplay Magazine* 16, 46.

² Representatives from Hollywood and New York included William A. Brady, President of the National Producers' Association, William McAdoo representing the newly formed United Artists, John C. Flinn with Famous Players-Lasky, and Gabriel L. Hess of Goldwyn Pictures.

³ "Discuss Movies," *The Columbus Citizen*, 8 July 1919, 1. Hollywood director D.W. Griffith planned to use his film of the Centenary Celebration, *The World at Columbus* (1919), to raise a half million dollars for the Methodist Episcopal Church.

⁴ "To Offer Free Movies," *Columbus Evening Dispatch*, 7 June 1919, 2.

⁵ Long, K. T., December 2003, "Cameras 'never lie': The Role of Photography in Telling the Story of American Evangelical Missions," *Church History* 72:4, 820.

⁶ Long, 823.

⁷ Rony, F. T., 1996, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle*, Durham: Duke University Press, 14.

⁸ Rony, 6-9.

⁹ Rony, 25.

¹⁰ "Big Exploring Party Sails," *The Columbus Citizen*, 15 July 1919, 4.

¹¹ "Official Reports and Records of the Methodist Centenary Celebration. State Fair Grounds, Columbus, Ohio, June 20- July 13, 1919." Compiled by Wilson, A. E., Director, Division of Special Days and Events, 85.

¹² "Explains Why Centenary is Great Success," *Columbus Evening Dispatch*, 8 July 1919, 6.

¹³ Musser, C., 1990, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 39.

¹⁴ Bright, D., 1992, "Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men: An Inquiry into the Cultural Meanings of Landscape Photography," in Bolton, R., ed., *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, Cambridge, MA: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 126-127.

¹⁵ "Shows Revolution Film Thursday," *The Columbus Citizen*, 26 June 1919, 4; "Announcement," *The Columbus Citizen*, 28 June 1919, 5; "Freeing Palestine," *The Columbus Citizen*, 20 June 1919, 11.

¹⁶ *An Airplane Pilgrimage to the Holy Land*, Chicago: Cahill Printing Company, 1919), 1-4.

¹⁷ McAlister, M., 2001, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 13-20.

¹⁸ "Centenary Movie to Show Allies' Success in East," *Columbus Evening Dispatch*, 18 June 1919, 6.

¹⁹ Munsterberg, H., 1916, *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study*, New York: D. Appleton and Company, 94-95.

²⁰ Brabner Smith, J. T., 1 April 1920, "Visualizing the Truth: Motion and Stereopticon Pictures in Churches," *The (New York) Christian Advocate*, 457.

²¹ The author has been unable to locate copies of either film.

²² "Centenary Celebration Columbus," *The Columbus Citizen*, 7 July 1919, 3.

²³ "Official Reports and Records of the Methodist Centenary Celebration," 85.

²⁴ "Discuss Movies," *The Columbus Citizen*, 8 July 1919, 1.

²⁵ Vinton, S. R., 31 July 1919, "Reporting the Facts: What the Camera Contributed to the Centenary," *The (NY) Christian Advocate*, 978.

²⁶ "Wide Use For Film," *Columbus Evening Dispatch*, 7 July 1919, 2.

²⁷ "Centenary Celebration Columbus," *The Columbus Citizen*, 7 July 1919, 3.