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Films in the Archive: Hollywood in Detroit

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Films in the Archive

Hollywood in Detroit

HANNA ROSE SHELL

Films in the Archive

The Prelinger Archives, a collection of over 60,000 so-called ephemeral films, approximately 6,500 of which are freely available online for viewing and public download, is an amazing resource for research and teaching in the history of technology.¹ Collector, archivist, writer, and filmmaker Rick Prelinger began assembling his collection in the early 1980s. Over the next decades, his collection of 35 mm and 16 mm films grew into the tens of thousands. Films designed as educational, industrial, vocational, or advertising (overlapping categories often subsumed under the term *sponsored*), along with amateur and 8 mm home movies, were gathered from far and wide.² Films from any of these genres are often referred to as *ephemeral*, a term applied based on the idea that such a film's period usefulness, in the sense of actual time being shown for the purpose for which it was created, is limited. The term's appropriateness becomes questionable once the lifespan of these films has been extended through the development of new contexts in which they are useful (for example, for scholarly research or nostalgic film series programming)³ (fig. 1).

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1. I highly recommend *The Field Guide to Sponsored Films*, a book available for download at <http://www.filmpreservation.org/dvds-and-books/the-field-guide-to-sponsored-film>. Published by the National Film Preservation Foundation, and authored by Rick Prelinger with the cooperation of an impressive group of scholars, archivists, and institutions, it provides both a general context and specific descriptions of 452 such films (including both *Coach* and *Master Hands*), a great many of which are freely available through the Prelinger Archives.

2. Industrial and other forms of "sponsored films," along with educational and vocational-training films made for use in schools, are those most likely to have been or become lost, or what many have referred to as being "orphaned."

3. On *ephemeral film* as a term, see Dan Strieble, "The Role of Orphan Films in the

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Fig. 1 Film reel canisters and reels. Industrial films produced for General Motors' Chevrolet division, by the Detroit-based Jam Handy Organization. Efforts by archivists and collectors such as Rick Prelinger in both preservation and digitization have made what otherwise might be hidden artifacts easily accessible to historians and available via archive.org for use by scholars, students, and the general public. (Source: Image courtesy of the AACA Library and Research Center, Hershey, Pennsylvania.)

Hollywood in Motor City

Out of the thousands of films from the Prelinger Archives available through archive.org, I want to highlight two, from a Prelinger sub-collection whose films have special relevance to the site of the upcoming annual meeting of the Society for the History of Technology in Dearborn. Both are sponsored films from the same year, 1936, commissioned by a single operation (the Chevrolet division of General Motors) and produced by the same company (the Jam Handy Organization [JHO]); however, they present very different views of an industry.

Detroit-based producer extraordinaire, Jam Handy made thousands of sponsored films between the 1920s and 1960s, including hundreds for the

21st Century Archive"; see also Streible's contribution to the 2012 volume he coedited (with Marsha Orgeron and Devin Orgeron), *Learning with the Lights Off*. Monograph works on industrial and other types of nontheatrical film providing a history-of-technology context include Tim Boon's *Films of Fact*, Anthony Slide's *Before Video*, and Ken Smith's *Mental Hygiene. Films that Work*, a volume of collected essays coedited by Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau, provides a range of insightful perspectives, as does *Learning with the Lights Off*.

local auto industry; the 1930s was a decade of rapid growth for his company. Industrial filmmaking was taking on an important role for all of the major players in Motor City; 1936 in particular brought a difficult year of labor strikes and failed negotiations and an American consumer public short on cash during the Depression. Handy produced films for clients ranging from the City of Detroit to Dow Chemical to General Electric. But in these years, his company's next-door neighbor, General Motors, was its best customer; before the decade was out, Handy oversaw the production of dozens of films for GM subsidiary Chevrolet.⁴ The animated short *A Coach for Cinderella* and the half-hour symphonic film *Master Hands* exemplify the power and sophistication of sponsored filmmaking as a technology of intermediation among various constituencies, in this case owners, workers, and consumers.

Coach and *Master Hands* appeared in 1936, the year of the first sit-down strikes in the auto industry, which would eventually lead to the solidifying of the UAW, and with it the long-term labor organization of the auto industry in Dearborn and Flint, as well as Detroit. *Coach* is a nine-minute animated film, shot in Technicolor and directed by Max Fleischer, who had made his name in the previous decade as the animator responsible for bringing the characters of Betty Boop and Popeye to cinematic life.⁵ *Coach* marked the beginning of a long collaboration between Fleischer and JHO and introduced a new kind of character to the public: an automobile with powers of salvation. Visual and conceptual devices center on an industrious animated gnome's use of a "modernizer" to transform raw materials and forest animals into a luxury vehicle to whisk Cinderella away from her evil step-relatives. Striking sequences play on scale, between live action and animation. There is no clear-cut sales pitch, only a car with a smile, looking suspiciously like the luxury 1936 Chevrolet Master DeLuxe Sedan (fig. 2).

Master Hands, another JHO film for Chevrolet, is a stark contrast to the lighthearted candy-colored animation. It is a thirty-minute black-and-white film with an entirely musical soundtrack.⁶ The different stages of producing a car, alongside the men and machines involved in each stage—from the tool-and-die making to turning the key in the ignition—are brought together; individual motions (of hands, gears, levers) and processes (the action of an assembly line as a whole) flow together smoothly. The filming and editing are beautiful; the imagery is reminiscent of the luminous photographs of the "Men at Work" series by U.S. photographer

4. For more on the early history of the JHO, as well as its founder, see Rick Prelinger's excellent "Smoothing the Contours of Didacticism: Jam Handy and His Organization"; see also Dan Oakes, "Building Films for Business."

5. *A Coach for Cinderella* is available at <https://archive.org/details/Coachfor1936>.

6. *Master Hands* is available at https://archive.org/details/0555_Master_Hands_18_27_28_00.

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FIG. 2 Chevrolet Master DeLuxe Sedan (1936). Marketing brochure for the top-of-the-line vehicle produced by Chevrolet in 1936, a year throughout which Chevrolet remained the top seller of automobiles in the United States and during which both *A Coach for Cinderella* and *Master Hands* were produced. The vehicle depicted and described (“you are attracted by smooth-flowing curves and contours blending with perfect harmony . . . you find yourself surrounded by luxury on all sides”) provided the model for the coach crafted for Cinderella through the “modernizer” machine in *Coach*. The brochure image focuses on luxury from the consumer’s perspective, whereas *Master Hands* aestheticizes both the physical labor and the economic machinery involved in the production of such vehicles. (Source: Image courtesy of the Old Car Manual Project.)

Lewis Hine, and of Alberto Cavalcanti’s symphonic city film *Rien que les heures* (1926). Visual orchestration, scored to music played by the Detroit Philharmonic Orchestra, transforms the messiness of a thousand-plus moving parts, and potentially missing pieces, into a single and ultimately triumphant symphony.

Whereas *Coach* was produced to be screened in movie theaters nationwide, *Master Hands* was a nontheatrical production; it is thought to have been initially produced for an audience of GM stockholders.⁷ The film produced for mass viewing by consumers (*Coach*) is a fantasy film about luxury, whereas that produced for executives and investors (*Master Hands*) is a fantasy about the labor force. The subtext of *Coach* has been commonly reiterated throughout the industrial era: the fantasy is that modernization and mechanization will eliminate the necessity of labor and free everyone to devote themselves to leisure and higher pursuits. Conversely, the subtext of

7. Rick Prelinger, *The Field Guide to Sponsored Films*, 61.

Master Hands is that the labor force is seamlessly and harmoniously unified with the forces of mechanization and industry. When considered in relation to one another, they reveal the potential power that industrial filmmaking had during the period in shaping human and technological systems. At the same time, they provide a taste of the rich body of archival material available for historians through venues such as the Prelinger Archives.

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WORDS

Looking Ahead

As the technologies of projection and production of these media (8, 16, 35 mm) become antiquated historical artifacts, it is increasingly vital to examine them not only in terms of the history of film or of education per se, but also in the context of the history of technology more generally. I invite readers not only to peruse the Prelinger Archives, but also to seek out other audiovisual sources (either online or in celluloid) and other types of digital media with relevance to the field. As always, please feel free to contact me with thoughts, ideas, selections, or suggestions (email hrshell@mit.edu, using the subject heading “Beyond Words”).

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